



# Introduction to Special Issue on “Divorce and the Life Course”

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With the severe upswing in divorce experienced by developed nations in the last fifty years, social scientists in many disciplines are intensifying their focus on marital dissolution and its implications for society, families, and individuals. Though divorce rates have stabilized and even fallen somewhat in recent decades, the profile of divorcing couples has shifted, with emerging trends, such as “gray divorce” ([Brown and Lin 2012](#)) and divorce for same-sex couples ([Golderberg and Romero 2019](#)), raising important new questions about this social and family phenomenon. This Special Issue of *Social Sciences*, “Divorce and The Life Course,” includes ten papers, each implicating key principles from a life course perspective ([Elder 1995](#)) to advance our insights into critical issues that still exist in our understanding of divorce.

The articles in this volume primarily reflect on the life course principles of *linked lives* and *lives in time and place*. The concept of linked lives addresses interconnections that exist for individuals involved in a social relationship, such that conditions and events experienced by one relational partner influence outcomes and shape the life of the other partner. In this volume, how marital partners’ personal characteristics impact their marital relationship, divorce risk, and post-divorce partner choices is highlighted, as well as how parents’ interactions and decisions impact their children’s lives. Lives in time and place is a second theme highlighted in several articles, considering cross-country comparisons in divorce outcomes for adults and children. Additionally, a few papers consider attitudes about divorce as they are shaped by place (and distinct cultural norms) and individual life timing—in particular the period of emerging adulthood when intimate relationships take on added salience. Overall, the papers in this volume reflect the multiple levels of influence that shape individuals’ lives and experiences with divorce, from historical, structural and institutional factors (that vary across countries) to interpersonal and family influences, as well as personal conditions and traits.

Two articles address the personal characteristics of marital partners and how they impact divorce risk and post-divorce relationship choices. [Latham-Mintus et al. \(2022\)](#) test whether basic care disability experienced among older adults impacts their risk for marital dissolution, and whether couples’ marital quality (measured as enjoyment of time together) or the gender of the disabled partner moderate this association. Their main finding, that partner disability, especially a wife’s disability, predicts greater risk of divorce, is particularly important given population aging in developed countries and the higher disability rates of aging women than men ([Hosseinpoor et al. 2012](#)). Additionally, these authors revealed that the significant connection between disability and divorce exists in marital contexts characterized by low couple enjoyment/marital quality, but not those displaying higher enjoyment. Such nuanced findings are an excellent example of the insights gained by considering risk factors for divorce at multiple levels—herein individual and couple factors. The paper by [Spikic et al. \(2021\)](#) also focuses on partner characteristics, as they examine whether the personality traits of ex-spouses are replicated in the new partners that divorced individuals choose. Two hypotheses they consider underscore the value of the life course perspective’s linked lives principle, as well as the notion that early life events link to and influence future experiences. Each hypothesis contends that divorced adults base their re-partnering choices on past relationship experiences. One



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possibility is that in forming new relationships, partners are “fixed” in their attraction to particular personality types, replicating earlier choices in later relationships. Conversely, individuals possibly learn from their former experiences by selecting a new partner with more stabilizing personality traits than their ex-spouse. Spikic and colleagues also recognize that partner selection may be influenced by factors beyond individual personality, so their third hypothesis is that the marriage market may also be important. In this case, they posit that individuals’ efforts to form new stable partnerships after a divorce, by choosing partners with more relationship-stabilizing personality characteristics, may be constrained by the potential partners available in the marriage market. They find no support that individuals are fixed in the personality traits they choose in their partners. Their results reveal stronger support for the marriage market hypothesis, especially for women. Thus, they conclude that when divorced persons re-partner, they face an increasingly limited marriage market in both the number and quality (persons possessing fewer marriage-destabilizing traits) of potential partners, a finding that highlights the import of social context and conditions in life course experiences.

Three contributions to this Special Issue systematically analyze place effects by using harmonized data from multiple countries. These comparative studies allow for the consideration of culture, policy and other macro-level influences on the occurrence of divorce, as well as outcomes of marital disruption for parents and children. [Lee \(2022\)](#) examines how views regarding marital gender roles, at the individual and country levels, contribute to adults’ approval of divorce and marital and family satisfaction. Of central interest is the role played by support for the male bread-winner norm, which, at the societal level, predicts reduced marital quality, especially among persons holding non-egalitarian views. Lee also finds that adults possessing egalitarian views of marital roles, on the other hand, report the greatest family satisfaction, despite being more approving of divorce. These results illustrate the complexity of family life and satisfaction, shaped by personal values and attitudes, but also moderated by cultural and social conditions at the macro level.

Place also assumes a central position in the pieces by [Thielemans and Mortelmans \(2022\)](#) and by [Rasmussen et al. \(2022\)](#), which focus on adult divorce outcomes: poverty risk and maternal depression, respectively, as they vary across countries. In comparing transient and persistent poverty outcomes for families in seven different nations with varying social policies, Thielemans and Mortelmans found fairly similar associations between divorce and poverty across countries. Women experience a greater risk of poverty than men, though the decrease in poverty over time for women is more extreme in some countries than others. While these authors were not able to test possible explanations for these cross-national differences, the results suggested a more fine-grained analysis of policy elements in relation to divorce outcomes, which requires new multi-level datasets. In assessing depression outcomes for mothers, Rasmussen and colleagues document cross-national variations in how family structure transitions impact mothers’ depression, with stronger effects in the U.K. than in the U.S. and Australia. This result suggests that public policies and governmental safety nets that vary across countries likely influence such outcomes. Again, in this study, the dual influence of macro-level contexts and more proximal conditions are apparent as the authors found that maternal depression was also linked to mothers’ access to financial resources and stress exposure. These two studies and Lee’s work reveal limitations presented by the lack of data on detailed conditions within the various countries that are compared, whether those conditions are cultural attitudes and norms, or specific features of social policies and programs.

[Parisot’s \(2021\)](#) examination of contemporary Austrian family law, which is fairly distinct from many other developed countries in that it still includes fault-based divorce, provides detailed case-study descriptions showing that fault-based divorce proceedings are grounded in normative and legal ideas of marriage. This paper’s analysis captures the animosity, criticism and conflict that permeate fault-based divorce cases. Though it was outside the scope of this paper to link this aspect of the divorce process to adult or child outcomes, one can certainly picture how such policies and the interpersonal dynamics

emerging from their practice could impact the post-divorce lives and adjustment of ex-partners and their children.

How the interpersonal dynamics of the marital and parental units affect the lives of children post-divorce is the topic of two papers included in this volume. Based on data from Germany, [Langmeyer et al. \(2022\)](#) reveal that whether children experience a shared physical custody arrangement after parental divorce is associated with the quality of co-parenting practiced by their parents. Moreover, for children in such shared custody situations, high quality co-parenting can reduce the risk of poor child adjustment. This paper highlights how country-specific policies and practices, in this case Germany's limited institutional support for shared physical custody following divorce, may determine children's living situations, which are known to shape a wide variety of life course opportunities. The second paper analyzing relational dynamics, by [Smith-Etxeberria and Eceiza \(2021\)](#), is based on a study of Spanish young adults. Because Spain legalized divorce much later than most countries, how families experience this transition and the adjustment of divorcing adults and their children may be somewhat unique given that societal acceptance and stigma associated with divorce is likely to shift over time. What this paper shows is that the interpersonal dynamics (i.e., conflict) between divorced parents have an extended influence on their children—into their young adult life course. These researchers found that while parental divorce predicted negative, protracted effects for the quality of parent-young adult relationships, parental conflict was a more salient factor. Thus, even for parents and young adult children, lower levels of trust and communication, and high alienation, were more strongly linked to inter-parental conflict than divorce, a finding that has been documented in other developed countries. The results of these studies and that of [Parisot \(2021\)](#) underscore the importance of divorce policy and processes for the everyday lives and relationships of family members well after the legal divorce has occurred.

The remaining two entries in this volume examine proximal influences on individuals' views regarding divorce, revealing how childhood upbringing—in particular religious training and socialization, and sexual orientation factor into attitudes about divorce. These studies capitalize on the 'lives in time' tenet of the life course by exploring the views of emerging adults who are typically grappling with the establishment and expression of their personal identities, reassessing attitudes and values, and experiencing greater involvement with intimate relationships than younger children. These experiences suggest that as emerging adults, thoughts on divorce, especially its acceptability, may be particularly relevant at this point in their lives. [Ochoa \(2022\)](#) explores the attitudes expressed by Protestant female college students, in light of their early religious socialization, which for many focused strictly on Biblical teachings. Ochoa asks specifically whether these women consider interpersonal violence as an acceptable reason for divorce, although it is not stated as such in scripture. Ochoa's finding that these contemporary women fully supported the view that divorce is acceptable in cases of interpersonal violence highlights how attitudes are reshaped across the life course in response to life stages (i.e., lives in time), as well as through the salient life concerns and new experiences encountered as one develops over time. This theme also applies to the work conducted by [Hoy et al. \(2021\)](#), where they examined the views that unmarried, sexual minority young adults have about divorce. Unlike studies based on samples of heterosexual youth, this study found little evidence of personal anxiety over the potential consequences of divorce among sexual minority young adults and nearly unanimous agreement that divorce is an acceptable alternative when problems or partner unhappiness occur in marriage. These two studies suggested that young people moving into adulthood today are open to divorce as a necessary option for addressing relationship hardships and pursuing personal happiness. How these attitudes contribute to their future relationship behaviors will be important to observe in years to come.

In summary, this Special Issue covers a wide array of issues surrounding divorce that are highly relevant and timely, yet they are still unsettled despite the vast social science literature on divorce that has accumulated in the last 50 years. Applying the life

course perspective to this work may provide new insights for framing research questions, selecting or gathering necessary data, making methodological decisions, and advancing social policies pertaining to divorce.

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