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Research Article

Age at marriage and the risk of divorce in England and Wales

Richard Lampard

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Richard Lampard[1]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
A well-documented association exists between age at marriage and the risk of divorce. However, substantial gaps in our knowledge and understanding of its origins, nature, and implications still exist.

OBJECTIVES
This article documents the relationship between women's ages at first marriage and marriage cohort divorce rates, assessing the importance of *relative* ages at marriage (based on rankings within marriage cohorts) and of *absolute*, chronological ages at marriage, and evaluating the contribution of changes in the age at marriage distribution to observed divorce rates.

METHODS
Direct standardisation and logistic regression analyses are applied to published marriage and divorce data for the 1974-1994 marriage cohorts in England and Wales.

RESULTS
Changing ages at marriage appear to have constrained the rise in divorce across the cohorts examined. However, the results suggest that much of the impact of age at marriage is linked to relative ages, reducing the extent of this 'braking' effect. It also appears that a positive effect of relative age at marriage on the risk of divorce for later marriages is outweighed by the negative effect of absolute age at marriage at higher ages.

CONCLUSIONS
Both explanations relating to 'maturity' and explanations focusing on 'selection' or 'marriage markets' appear of relevance to the association between age at marriage and divorce.

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COMMENTS

The data source provides over five million cases; however, it does not provide any scope to control for cohabitation, education, etc., and the analyses are restricted to divorces within about ten years of marriage. Further, related studies would be useful.

1. Introduction

Various recent studies have focused upon the impact that changes in the ages at which demographic life-course events occur can have on period-based measures relating to those events. For example, Bongaarts and Feeney (1998) and Schoen (2004) have examined, and proposed ways of correcting for, the impact of delayed childbearing upon period fertility rates; Bongaarts and Feeney (2003) and Goldstein and Wachter (2006) have examined the relationship between cohort life expectancy and period measures of life expectancy; and Schoen and Canudas-Romo (2005, 2006) have examined both the impact of delayed marriage on a period measure of the proportion ever marrying and also the impact of the timing of divorce upon period divorce rates.

An important feature of these studies is that, in showing period rates to be subject to distortions, in effect they set up cohort rates as a 'gold standard'. However, short-term trends in cohort rates can be affected by closely related forms of demographic change in a way that may similarly create a false impression of the likely nature of longer-term trends. More specifically, a decline in the marital dissolution rate in the US in the 1980s-1990s can be attributed primarily to rising ages at marriage (Heaton 2002: 402–403; see also Goldstein 1999: 411). Similarly, Amato et al. (2007: 96) note that rising ages at marriage compensated for the majority of an underlying negative trend in marital quality during the period 1980–2000, for various measures.

This article examines the impact of trends in women's age at (first) marriage on cohort divorce rates in England and Wales, in the context of a broader examination of the relationship between women's age at (first) marriage and the risk of divorce. According to White (1990), the literature theorizing this relationship, as opposed to simply documenting it, is relatively limited; Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010: 788) characterise this existing literature as consisting of several "theoretical fragments", albeit providing some relevant perspectives. Heaton (2002: 395) also suggests that surprisingly little attention has been paid to identifying the causal mechanisms linking age at marriage and marital instability. Like Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010), this article focuses on the distinction between ages at marriage viewed in absolute and in relative terms, with relative age at marriage being defined with reference to the proportion of ages at marriage that are lower than a specified age.

As discussed below (in Section 1.1), studies like this article which focus on the overall impact of age at marriage typically acknowledge that this impact will in part reflect selection effects arising from other socio-economic and demographic factors. However, the existing literature indicates that the age at marriage effect tends to be altered relatively little by the inclusion of the most obvious controls. Furthermore, a supplementary analysis by the author of data from the 2005 General Household Survey (GHS: ONS 2007a), corresponding to the marriage cohorts examined here, suggests that socio-economic controls can only account for a small minority of the age at marriage effect; controlling for children born or conceived before marriage increases it slightly, as does controlling for earlier (cohabiting) relationships. Nevertheless, a particularly important factor to consider, given its substantial growth across the cohorts examined here (Murphy 2000), is pre-marital cohabitation. Its implications for this article's findings are discussed further in the concluding section.

1.1 Age at marriage and the risk of marital dissolution

To help contextualise a subsequent review of theoretical literature, this section reviews empirically orientated literature relating to the association between age at marriage and the risk of marital dissolution. The importance of age at (first) marriage as a predictor of divorce has featured in the US literature for a number of decades (Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Martin and Bumpass 1989; White 1990). The primary finding is that early marriage is associated with an increased risk of divorce; furthermore, the effect of age at marriage on marital outcomes has been found to be non-linear, with the impact of a year's difference being most marked at younger ages (e.g. Heaton 2002: 404; Amato et al. 2007: 78).

While Becker, Landes, and Michael (1977: 1160) reported an upturn in marital dissolution for ages at marriage of over 30, Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010: 787) note that this has not in general been replicated by other studies. However, their own research identified a downturn in "marital success" as age at marriage increases (2010: 798), and an earlier study found an upturn in "marital instability" for later ages at marriages (Booth and Edwards 1985: 71). Conversely, Amato et al. (2007: 78) found that the effects of age at marriage on measures of divorce proneness, marital interaction, and marital problems, continued to be monotonic beyond age 30. Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010: 787) suggest that a lack of focus on ages at marriage beyond 30 reflects small sub-sample sizes for such ages at marriage, identifying an ongoing need for research focusing on the outcomes for relatively late marriages (2010: 799).

Research focusing on Britain has also identified a decline in the risk of marital dissolution as age at first marriage increases (Murphy 1985; Ermisch and Francesconi

1996; Berrington and Diamond 1999; Chan and Halpin 2005). In US studies age at marriage has often been operationalised as a single, interval-level variable, giving a linear effect (e.g., Heaton 2002: 401), whereas in British studies a quadratic term has typically been added, to take account of any levelling of the divorce risk as age at marriage increases (Murphy 1985; Ermisch and Francesconi 1996; Chan and Halpin 2005). Although an implication of the parameter estimates reported in these British studies is that the impact of increasing age at marriage on the risk of dissolution eventually becomes positive, the studies do not explicitly report an increased risk for higher ages at first marriage.

Age at marriage is sometimes viewed as capturing the effects of other, uncontrolled factors (Lehrer 2008: 468), with some authors suggesting that its impact on marital outcomes could be a selection effect (Glenn, Uecker, and Love 2010: 789). However, in the US controlling for correlated factors such as educational level has been found to have little impact on age at marriage's effect on marital outcomes, including dissolution (Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Heaton, Albrecht and Martin 1985; Teachman, 2002; Heaton 2002: 401-4). British studies have identified a similar persistence in the effect of age at marriage, controlling for various socio-economic characteristics, childbearing histories, aspects of the marital formation process, and personal and family background characteristics (Murphy 1985: 448; Berrington and Diamond 1999: 34; Chan and Halpin 2005: 19); they have also indicated that the effect does not vary with marital duration, even after long durations (Murphy 1985: 459; Berrington and Diamond 1999: 36). Similar findings can be found in US studies[2], although Becker, Landes, and Michael (1977: 1159) found the effect of men's age at marriage to diminish with increasing marital duration.

Despite the potentially important implications of trends in age at marriage for the nature of the relationship between marriage timing and marital instability (Booth and Edwards 1985: 67–73), there have been few published analyses of how the impact of age at marriage has varied over time. A US study suggested that the effect of age at marriage did not vary for women for marriages taking place from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s (Teachman 2002: 340); a UK study indicated that the effect of age at marriage was stronger for 1960s marriages than thereafter, but implied relative stability in the effect across 1970s and 1980s marriages (Chan and Halpin 2005: 13).

[2] e.g., Booth and Edwards (1985: 72–73) observed that the negative consequences of early marriage for marital stability were not contingent upon duration.

1.2 Theorising age at marriage and its impact on the risk of marital dissolution

Whether one would expect rising ages at marriage like those observed in Britain since 1970 (OPCS 1977; ONS 2007b; see also Table 3) to be accompanied by changes in the effect of age at marriage on the risk of dissolution depends in part upon how the effect of age at marriage is theorised (Glenn, Uecker, and Love 2010: 792), and, specifically, whether it is thought to be a reflection of the absolute characteristics or of the relative characteristics of different ages at marriage. Becker, Landes, and Michael (1977: 1182) commented that a secular trend in age at marriage may not lead to a trend in the risk of divorce if the risk reflects relative characteristics[3].

Glenn, Uecker, and Love reflected in some detail on the ways in which specific theoretical interpretations of the relationship between age at marriage and marital outcomes tend, often implicitly, to view effects as reflecting *either* absolute *or* relative ages at marriage, with the former typically being the case for maturity-related explanations and the latter for interpretations focusing upon marriage markets or upon selection effects (2010: 789–790)[4].

Moving on to a more detailed consideration of theoretical explanations of the relationship between age at marriage and marital outcomes, Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010: 788) discuss the commonly posited 'maturation thesis'. While they refer to this primarily in terms of psychological maturation, they also mention the development of relationship skills and of earning ability, and the stabilization of expectations (see also Amato et al. 2007: 77–79). Similarly, Booth, and Edwards (1985) paint a picture of maturity as a multi-dimensional explanation of the relationship. Achieving maturity before marrying is often viewed as reducing the likelihood that an individual will change in some pertinent way, or that their assessment of the suitability of their partner will change (Oppenheimer 1988; Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977: 1156). It is also frequently suggested that individuals who marry early may be disproportionately likely to perform marital roles ineffectively, lacking familiarity with these roles and adequate role models. Booth and Edwards found that marital instability within early marriages reflected inadequate role performance for relationship features linked to communication and intimacy, and in relation to sexual exclusivity (1985: 68–73).

An important body of theoretical ideas has a socio-economic, employment-related focus (e.g., Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Oppenheimer 1988; Becker 1991). Oppenheimer emphasises the importance of men's career development and, in particular, their transitions into stable work and achievement of career maturity

[3] Similarly, Martin (2006: 539-545) notes that a change in the marital dissolution rate for a particular educational level may be induced by change over time in the educational rankings of individuals at that level.
[4] Glenn, Uecker, and Love view their own findings as most consistent with it being absolute age that is most important, while acknowledging that relative age may also be of relevance (2010: 798).

(Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim 1997: 313), but acknowledges that the increasing similarity of women's labour market involvement to men's will have increased the importance of the point at which a woman's career has stabilised enough for her long-term economic characteristics to be apparent (Oppenheimer and Lew 1995: 108-109). In Britain, Kiernan and Eldridge (1987) found that, for most occupational groups, "the timing of [women's] marriage is compressed into a narrow range of years" (1987: 56), with this range depending upon the occupational group, suggesting a marked impact of career stage upon marriage timing.[5] Their findings also suggest that stratification-related differences should not necessarily be attributed to *socio-economic* maturity; they found higher *qualifications* were associated with delayed marriage, and that highest qualification was a stronger predictor of age at marriage than terminal age of education (1987: 54–55)[6].

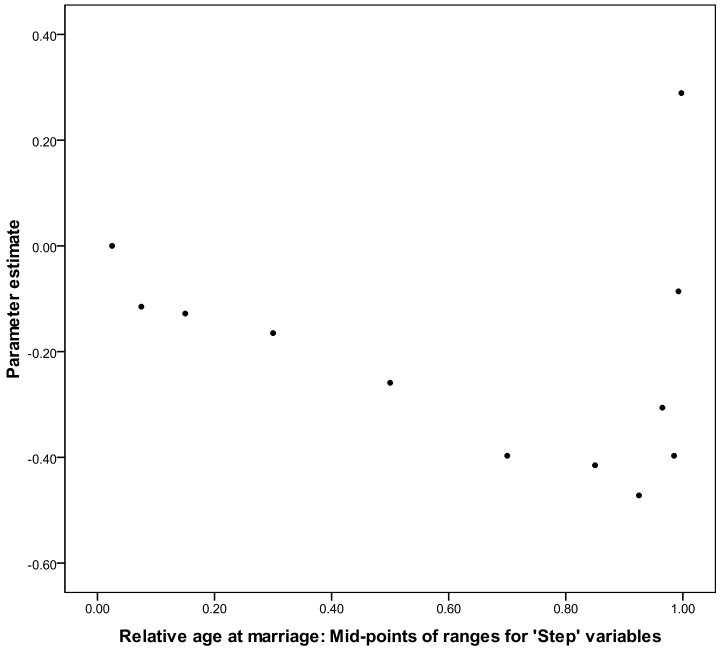
Theoretical analyses of marriage timing often view a lack of maturity as increasing the likelihood of a poor match, reflecting, for example, a shortfall in relevant information (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977: 1156). The concept of mismatches also resonates with theoretical ideas relating to the search process and length of search involved in acquiring a partner (Glenn, Uecker, and Love 2010: 789): individuals for whom search costs are high may, initially, be more likely to accept a mismatch (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977: 1151). Despite being sceptical about the impact of women's growing economic independence on age at marriage trends (Oppenheimer 1988, 1994; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim 1997), Oppenheimer nevertheless suggests that greater economic resources may subsidise lengthier searches, encouraging women to risk setting a higher level of minimum acceptability for a partner's characteristics (Oppenheimer and Lew 1995: 107).

Notwithstanding their advocacy for the relevance of inadequate role performance when evaluating theoretical explanations of the relationship between age at marriage and marital stability, Booth and Edwards (1985: 67) found little empirical support for explanations focusing on maturity or on poor matches. They also considered a number of context-related explanations: it has been suggested that the marriage market may provide those marrying early with more opportunities to form relationships with alternative partners, and that their social networks may provide more reasons to leave marriages than barriers to doing so (1985: 68). However, in practice they found neither of these explanations useful.[7]

[5] However, Kiernan and Eldridge's study focused on the late 1960s and early 1970s marriage cohorts, thus predating extensive changes to women's working lives in Britain (1987: 62).
[6] See also: Thornton, Axinn, and Teachman (1995); Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim (1997).
[7] South (1995) further undermines the former explanation, demonstrating that "the impact of age at marriage on divorce is significantly *weaker* in marriage markets containing abundant remarriage opportunities" (1995: 432).

Figure 4 provides a striking visualisation of the parameter estimates for the step variables, plotted against the midpoints of the ranges to which they correspond. The implications of the plot are, in broad terms, that the impact of relative age at marriage on the log odds of divorce takes the form of an approximately linear decline in log odds as relative age at marriage increases, up as far as the 0.90-0.95 range, with some evidence that the decline is steeper for the youngest ages at marriage. After the 0.90-0.95 range the log odds increase substantially and rapidly.[25] Thus the observed pattern appears consistent with those theoretical accounts, including some which focus on poor match or selection effects, that suggest that an increasing relative age at marriage should be associated with a decreasing risk of divorce, but also that for the highest relative ages at marriage this association should reverse. More specifically, the findings suggest that there may be something particularly distinctive about the earliest 5% and latest 5% of marriages.

Figure 4: The impact of relative age at marriage on the log odds of divorce: Parameter estimates from Model 5



[25] While the parameter estimates for the ranges 0.95–0.98 and 0.98–0.99 appear to buck the trend, the difference between them is statistically non-significant.

While the step variables provided a useful and relatively straightforward way of establishing, empirically and in broad terms, the nature of the impact of relative age at marriage on the log odds of divorce, they have the disadvantage of not allowing the impact to vary *within* the range corresponding to each variable, resulting in discontinuities in the effect at the boundaries between ranges. Therefore, using the pattern in Figure 4 as a point of reference, a linear spline was constructed to represent the impact of relative age at marriage. Representing the impact as a spline with a single segment is mathematically identical to using the median ranking measure (see Section 2.2) as a variable; adding this measure to Model 2, giving Model 7, accounted for about two-thirds of the improvement in fit that was achieved by Model 5 using the step variables (see Table 5). Further segments were added to the spline: (a) to model a steeper decline in risk across the youngest 5% of ages at marriage, (b) to model a mild increase in risk across the oldest 12.5%, and (c) to model a substantial increase in risk across the oldest 1%.[26]

Figure 5 shows the spline obtained using the median ranking measure in combination with amendments (a) to (c) above. Adding this representation of the impact of relative age at marriage to Model 2, giving Model 8, results in a greater improvement in fit than achieved by adding the step variables to give Model 5 (see Table 5).[27] Note that there is only a shallow upwards trend in the segment between 0.875 and 0.99; superficially, this suggests that the fluctuations in the estimates for the step variables corresponding to the range 0.8-0.99 may create a misleading impression of how early it is that relative age at marriage starts having a marked *positive* impact on the risk of divorce, an issue revisited later in the article.[28]

The parameter estimates for age at marriage from Models 2 and 8 (see Table 4) demonstrate what happens to the impact of the age at marriage categories when the linear spline representing the impact of relative age at marriage is introduced. As Figure 6 makes evident, the overall range of the parameter estimates does not change much, but the balance of importance shifts away from differences between the categories for younger ages at marriage towards differences between the categories for older ages at marriage, with the first three differences decreasing in magnitude by about 40% and the last two increasing in magnitude by more than 50%. In other words, a substantial part of the overall age at marriage effect at younger ages can be attributed to relative ages at marriage, whereas, at older ages, relative ages at marriage suppress some of the impact of absolute age at marriage.

[26] 5%, 87.5%, and 99% as turning points provide a close to optimal representation of the effect, but were also chosen because they mark out relatively straightforward proportions (i.e. 1 in 20, 1 in 8, and 1 in 100).

[27] The consequences for model fit of the spline's lower number of parameters must therefore be outweighed by its capacity to allow variation in the impact of relative age at marriage within each of its segments.

[28] Replacing the segment of the spline between 0.875 and 0.99 with a segment starting at any higher value leads to a non-significant improvement in model fit and/or does not lead to a markedly steeper upwards trend.

The above findings provide support for the argument that both age at marriage viewed in absolute terms and age at marriage viewed in relative terms make important contributions to the overall impact of age at marriage. In turn, this provides a degree of support for the different kinds of explanations that have typically been linked to these two alternatives, i.e., maturity-related effects on the one hand and marriage-market-related or selection effects on the other.

Figure 5: The impact of relative age at marriage on the log odds of divorce: Parameter estimates from a linear spline (Model 8)

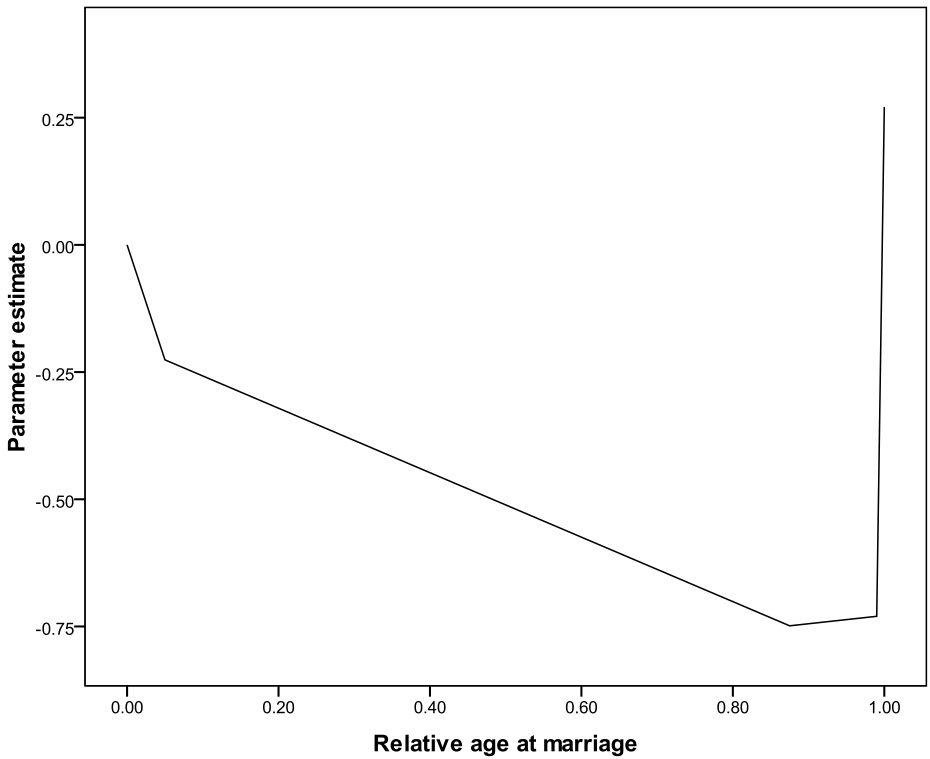
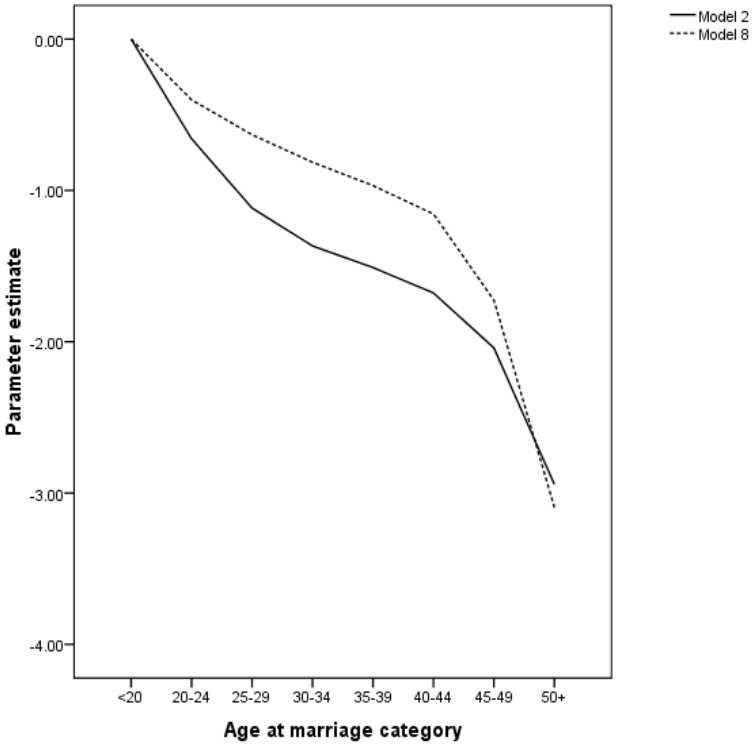


Figure 6: Age at marriage effects on the log odds of divorce: The impact of including the linear spline



The Model 8 parameter estimates also show that introducing the linear spline to represent the impact of relative age at marriage has implications for the effect of controlling for age at marriage on the change in the log odds of divorce between the 1974 and 1994 cohorts. Specifically, compared to the difference between Models 1 and 2, the increase in this change is reduced by more than 40% (see Table 4)[29]; the change in the odds of divorce once age at marriage has been controlled for is now a multiplicative factor of 2.03 (Model 8) rather than 2.41 (Model 2), as compared to the starting point of 1.60 (Model 1). In other words, controlling for age at marriage still reveals a steeper underlying upwards trend in the odds of divorce, but the 'damping' effect arising from increasing age at marriage is less marked when a substantial

[29] (0.880 – 0.710) / (0.880 – 0.468) = 0.413.

proportion of the age at marriage effect on the risk of divorce is interpreted as relating to relative rather than absolute age at marriage.

A further, substantial improvement in model fit can be obtained by adding to Model 8 the same interaction between age at marriage and year of marriage as in Model 4 (giving Model 9; see Table 5). This improvement in fit largely reflects the convergence of the risks for the categories corresponding to the age ranges from 30-34 to 45-49, with the vast majority of the improvement in fit relating to the cohorts from 1986 to 1994. Model 8 predicts a *divergence* of risk for these categories across the cohorts in question. However, if a term is added to Model 8 (giving Model 10; see Table 5) which represents an additional upwards slope within the spline, starting from zero in 1986 and becoming steeper thereafter, and corresponding to an increasing, positive impact on the log odds of divorce for the highest 5% of relative ages at marriage, then all but a small part of the improvement in fit offered by Model 9 is accounted for.

The implication of this additional, cohort-specific component of the spline within Model 10 is that the positive impact of relative age at marriage on the log odds of divorce for the top 5% of ages at marriage increased across the 1986 to 1994 cohorts. Note that the proportion of marriages at ages of 30 or more only rose from 6.5% to 8.6% between 1974 and 1986, but had risen to 19.0% by 1994 (see Table 3). This period of rapid change may have disrupted the meaning of the highest 5% of relative ages at marriage, perhaps, for example, meaning they no longer corresponded to the same extent to couples who were particularly socio-economically advantaged. If that was the case, then an increased risk of divorce arising from other, different selection effects, or from marriage market effects, could then have become dominant among the highest 5% of relative ages at marriage.

In other words, the shallow upwards trend of the spline in Figure 5 over the range 0.875 to 0.99 may reflect the effects of different factors associated with high relative ages at marriage cancelling each other out within the 1974-1986 cohorts: this serves as a useful reminder that the couples marked out by the highest 5% of ages at marriage may be quite heterogeneous. It is possible that, up until 1986, this heterogeneous mix of couples contained two substantial sub-groups: first, highly socio-economically advantaged couples and, second, couples selected into late marriage because of less advantageous characteristics, but that after 1986 the 'damping' effect on the overall risk of divorce for late marriages provided by the first sub-group declined, as its importance within the broader group decreased in proportional terms, perhaps because of an influx of individuals marrying late after relatively long periods of pre-marital cohabitation.

4. Discussion

As noted in the introduction, short-term trends across cohorts do not always give a valid impression of underlying trends. A key finding of this article is that an upwards shift in the age at marriage distribution in England and Wales between 1974 and 1994 resulted in the odds of divorce (within approximately a decade after marriage) only rising by a factor of 1.60, rather than the factor of 2.03 that would have applied if the age at marriage distribution had remained unchanged. Thus the upward trend in divorce suggested by cohort rates is markedly weaker than the underlying trend.

A crucial feature of the above finding is that it takes account of the extent to which the impact of age at marriage on the risk of divorce is a reflection of the ranking (relative position) within the age at marriage distribution of women marrying at a particular age, as opposed to a reflection of their age at marriage in chronological (absolute) terms. Hence the 'damping' effect of the changing age at marriage distribution, as identified above, is *not* an artefact of a false assumption that it is chronological age at marriage which matters, rather than relative age.

However, while this article's findings indicate that chronological ages at marriage do matter, i.e., that they are associated with the risk of divorce, the findings also suggest that changing age at marriage patterns have resulted in a transfer of 'higher risk' women from lower to higher ages at marriage. This mixture of absolute and relative effects has implications for an evaluation of the relative merits of the various possible theoretical explanations of the impact of age at marriage on the risk of divorce, as outlined earlier.

The finding that absolute, chronological age at marriage has a substantial effect on the risk of divorce suggests that the more plausible explanations of the increased risk of divorce for those marrying young in absolute terms are of salience. Authors such as Berrington and Diamond (1999) suggest that explanations focusing upon a lack of preparedness are inconsistent with the increased risk persisting as marital duration rises. If one accepts this view, then the most persuasive explanations would seem to be those focusing on a lack of maturity. Possible consequences of this lack of maturity include a greater likelihood of change, whether in terms of self-identity or of socio-economic status and prospects, and a greater likelihood of entering into a relatively unsatisfactory relationship, reflecting a greater risk of misjudgements about potential partners or about the marriage market more generally.

The finding that relative age at marriage is also of relevance suggests, more specifically, that women with a higher risk of divorce are over-represented both at younger ages at marriage and also at the latest ages. As noted earlier, Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010) report that authors typically link such relative effects to marriage market and selection-based explanations. More specifically, a broad set of hypotheses about women who marry relatively young, which appear consistent with both this

article's findings and also Becker's analytical framework, can be constructed: on average, women marrying relatively early are less accurate in their assessment of partners and of the marriage market, are more likely to accept a partner of any given degree of appropriateness and consequently more likely to have searched for a partner over a relatively short period of time, do not demand as good a fit between a prospective partner and their own self-identity, and may not demand as high levels of emotional intimacy and communication with a partner as other women do.

A relatively unusual feature of this article is that it generates useful findings relating to the other end of the age at marriage spectrum. It is only for the very latest marriages that there seems to be an increased risk of dissolution, suggesting that the marriage market and selection-based explanations of an increased risk of poor outcomes for late marriages are only applicable to a very narrow band of marriages. However, as suggested below, such explanations may until recently have been counter-balanced across a rather broader range of marriages by a competing, *negative* impact of relative age at marriage on the risk of dissolution.

The convergence of the observed risk of divorce for ages at marriage between 30 and 49 reflects an overall weakening of the discriminatory power of age at marriage within this age range. However, it appears from the findings in this article that this convergence may reflect an increased positive effect of *relative* age at marriage on the risk of divorce for later marriages, cancelling out some of the negative effect of *absolute*, chronological age at marriage within this age range. This increased positive effect in turn may reflect a decreased negative effect, arising from a declining association between marrying relatively late and other pertinent characteristic(s), such as socio-economic advantage. This finding serves both to highlight the probable complexity of the effects of age at marriage and also to highlight the desirability of controlling for other, related factors, notwithstanding the limited impact of such controls within both earlier studies focusing on the effects of age at marriage and also the author's own exploratory analyses.

Since the fit of Model 10 (see Table 5) can be improved very little by including a term corresponding to changes between cohorts in the impact of absolute age at marriage, the terms within Model 10 which correspond to the impact of relative age at marriage account for virtually all of the difference between the 1974 and 1994 cohorts in the form of the overall age at marriage effect. Assuming that the substantial impact of absolute age at marriage on the risk of divorce reflects maturity-related explanations, there thus appears to have been minimal secular change in the salience of such explanations. Consequently, while a process of individualisation and an increase in women's economic autonomy in the latter part of the twentieth century may each have led to an increase in the *broad* risk of divorce, any changes relating to the ages at which individuals attain a relatively stable self-identity or reach economic maturity do not

appear to have been echoed by changes in the *relationship* between absolute age at marriage and the risk of divorce. This may indicate that the form(s) of maturity of most relevance to the risk of divorce are ones that have remained relatively unaffected by the economic and socio-cultural changes accompanying the Second Demographic Transition. More generally, the apparent absence of secular change in the impact of absolute age at marriage acts as a reminder that, in the context of couple relationships, the substantial changes that have taken place over recent decades have been accompanied by considerable continuities.

A limitation of this article is that it focuses on divorce by the end of the tenth calendar year following the year of marriage, since examining a longer period after marriage would not necessarily result in identical findings. Similarly, focusing on men's ages at marriage might not generate equivalent results. Furthermore, controlling for various relevant socio-economic and demographic factors is, in principle, also desirable, although in practice some of the most obvious factors appear to have limited implications for this article's findings.

However, a key limitation, of increasing importance across the cohorts, is that this article's focus is restricted to legal marriage, rather than co-residence more generally. The late twentieth century saw a substantial growth in both pre-marital and other forms of cohabitation in Britain (Murphy 2000): this has implications both for the relevance of focusing on age at marriage, rather than at initial co-residence, and also for the validity of divorce trends as an indicator of trends in the dissolution of co-resident couple relationships more generally, since couples with a high risk of dissolution may now disproportionately contribute to *cohabitation* dissolution rates.

Assessing the impact of the changing marriage/cohabitation balance is not straightforward (Goldstein 1999: 413). For example, given that an unknown, varying proportion of cohabiting relationships constitutes, in some sense, the contemporary equivalent of non-resident relationships among members of earlier birth cohorts, a focus on all co-resident relationships would not necessarily ensure an appropriate form of comparability over time.[30]

Nevertheless, further exploratory analyses of the 2005 GHS data mentioned earlier were carried out, primarily to establish the broad effect of controlling for pre-marital cohabitation on the age at marriage effects and trends. In fact, controlling for pre-marital cohabitation *increased* the impact of age at marriage, and consequently increased the divergence of the log odds of divorce, for ages at marriage of under 40, across the cohorts. This suggests that the relative age at marriage effect derived from the trends documented here may under-estimate the actual effect, and that the balance of importance of the relative and absolute effects may consequently lean more towards

[30] Rindfuss and Vandenheuvel (1990) provide interesting insights on a similar theme.

the former than is implied by this article's findings, but without the substantive importance of either effect coming into question.[31]

5. Acknowledgements

GHS data generated by the Office for National Statistics were accessed via the UK Data Archive; neither bears any responsibility for my analyses and interpretations. I am grateful to the reviewers for their constructive comments on the earlier version of this article.

[31] The data also suggested that, by 1994, only about a tenth of first marriages were preceded by a different, cohabiting relationship.

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