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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Collection on Separation, Divorce, Repartnering, and Remarriage around the World

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Introduction to the Special Collection on Separation, Divorce, Repartnering, and Remarriage around the World

Andrew J. Cherlin¹

Abstract

BACKGROUND

This is an introduction to a special collection of articles that, in earlier versions, were presented at the International Seminar on Union Breakdown and Repartnering around the World, in Montreal, Canada, in 2015, sponsored by the Panel on Nuptiality of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population.

METHOD

This introduction synthesizes the contributions of the articles in the special collection and in the research literature.

RESULTS

The rate of formal divorce is negatively correlated worldwide with indicators of social class such as education, as William J. Goode (1963, 1993) predicted. But the stable high-divorce societies he noted have disappeared, and stable low-divorce societies are rare. Rates of formal divorce have leveled off and even declined in nations that used to have some of the highest levels. However, the increase in the number of dissolutions of cohabiting unions and the increase in the formation of higher-order cohabiting unions means that total rates of union dissolution and repartnering, including both marital and nonmarital unions, have probably not declined over time and may even be increasing. Moreover, the negative correlation between education and divorce is not apparent for the dissolution of cohabiting unions.

CONCLUSIONS

In terms of formal divorce, we may be seeing a partial convergence internationally to levels below the highest rates ever observed but still relatively high. The rise of cohabitation, however, means that total rates of dissolution and repartnering remain high.

CONTRIBUTION

This special collection provides a broad international overview of trends in union dissolution and repartnering.

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1. Introduction

In 1993, William J. Goode wrote *World changes in divorce patterns* (Goode 1993), the most recent comprehensive treatment of international trends in marital dissolution. Thirty years earlier, he had written his magnum opus, *World revolution and family patterns* (Goode 1963). In that book, he argued that families around the world were converging toward the model of the Western marriage-based nuclear family of husband/father, wife/mother, and children. He boldly predicted that this convergence would strengthen as nation after nation industrialized. In a few areas of the world, such as East Asia, Goode's prediction proved prescient. But in most Western nations the prediction failed (Cherlin 2012): Cohabiting unions, single-parent families, and stepfamilies became common (Lesthaeghe 2010). By the time Goode wrote his 1993 book on divorce, his focus on world convergence had disappeared. He predicted a continuing rise in dissolution while hedging his bets by noting that at some point the weakening of the family would generate counterforces that would curtail the increase.

He also noted some important historical regularities. In nations where divorce is difficult to obtain, as it was historically in many areas of the world, wealthier people are more likely to divorce than are the less wealthy. For instance, in England prior to 1858 one could only receive a divorce by asking Parliament to pass an act granting it (Phillips 1991). But Goode asserted that as barriers to divorce fall because of changes in the law and social norms, rising standards of living, and the greater economic independence of women, divorce would become more common among the poor than the wealthy. This reversal of the social class gradient, he argued, reflects the greater stress on marriages that do not have firm economic support. Thus, the relationship between divorce and social class changes when nations with a history of low dissolution rates experience rapid increases.

Moreover, in both books, Goode noted the instructive case of societies with what he called stable high-divorce systems. They were found primarily in Malay Muslim cultures, in the largely Muslim nations of North Africa, and in Japan through the end of the 19th century. In high-divorce societies one might expect that families perform their functions poorly and that many parents and children suffer. But that is not the case, Goode argued, because high divorce rates become institutionalized: Societies evolve laws and customs that regulate potentially contentious issues such as who gets the children after a divorce or how much of the bride price is returned. Moreover, remarriage rates tend to be high, and remarriages in high-divorce societies, Goode noted, are generally less likely to end in divorce than first marriages. In short, stable high-divorce societies evolve ways of coping with divorce. By comparison, he argued, in nations that have only recently seen large increases in divorce, few institutionalized solutions are available for the difficulties that divorce and remarriage can bring.

Much has been published on the demography of divorce and remarriage in the quarter century since Goode's 1993 work, yet few observers have attempted to take a broad look at divorce and remarriage patterns around the world. (But see McKenry and Price 2006.) To fill this gap, the Panel on Nuptiality of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population sponsored a conference in Montreal, Canada, in 2015, the "International Seminar on Union Breakdown and Repartnering around the World." Participants presented 23 papers, ten of which are included in revised versions in this special collection edited by Benoît Laplante – the organizer of the seminar – and me.² Two contributions are cross-European (Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, and Berrington 2017, [SC21-2](#); Kreyenfeld et al. 2017, [SC21-3](#)); one compares the United States with several other countries (Bennett 2017, [SC21-4](#)); three present findings from Canada (Laplante 2016, [SC21-5](#); Le Bourdais et al. 2016, [SC21-6](#); Pelletier 2016, [SC21-7](#)); and the others report on Belgium (Pasteels and Mortelmans 2017, [SC21-8](#)), Burkina Faso and Togo (Thiombiano 2017, [SC21-9](#)), the Philippines (Abalos 2017, [SC21-10](#)), and Spain (Garriga and Cortina 2017, [SC21-11](#)). No single conference, however, can provide a comprehensive review of what is now a large research literature, so in this introduction I will draw not only from the articles in the collection but also from other recently published scholarship.

The title of the special collection suggests demographic changes that Goode did not foresee. In addition to 'divorce' one finds the word 'separation,' and in addition to 'remarriage,' one finds the term 'repartnering.' The added terms reflect the rise of cohabitation and the decline of marriage as a context for partnering, unpartnering, and repartnering in many nations in the world. Although Goode did mention the importance of new forms of cohabitation (as opposed to traditional forms in regions such as Latin America), he gave it less attention than a scholar of family change would today. He did not anticipate societies in which 80% to 90% of partnerships begin as cohabiting unions and in which many dissolutions occur without a marriage having preceded them. Yet that is the situation one finds today in much of Northwestern and Northern Europe as well as in the predominantly Francophone province of Quebec, Canada (Laplante 2016, [SC21-5](#)). Consequently, if today we were to study only formal divorce, we would miss the many dissolutions of intimate unions that were never formalized as marriages and are therefore never registered as divorces. Similarly, if we were to study only remarriage, we would miss the many new postdissolution unions of couples who do not remarry and indeed may never have married.

The conference revealed the great diversity of patterns of union dissolution and repartnering not only among regions of the world but also within regions. No single demographic regime holds for an entire continent, let alone the entire planet. And yet

² The seminar took place at the Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, Institut national de la recherche scientifique, Montreal, Canada, May 4 to May 6, 2015.

from the articles in this special collection and other recent contributions to the literature, some regularities can be discerned:

- The social class differential that Goode predicted for divorce does now exist: In most nations today the rate of formal divorce appears to be negatively correlated with indicators of social class such as education. The rate of dissolution of cohabiting unions, however, is less clearly tied to education.
- It is difficult to find a contemporary example of the type of stable high-divorce society Goode described. Nearly all such societies have seen a decrease in divorce rates. Some have bottomed out and are experiencing increases.
- Conversely, it is difficult to find a region with stable low divorce rates, with the possible exception of parts of South Asia.
- After a period of sharp increases, rates of divorce have begun to stabilize or even decline in nations with some of the highest levels, a phenomenon that suggests the possibility of a widespread stabilization of divorce at a moderately high plateau. However, it is not clear whether the total dissolution rate (including both marital and cohabiting unions) has decreased.
- Whereas rates of remarriage after divorce may have declined in many nations, rates of repartnering (including both higher-order cohabiting unions and formal remarriages) may be nearly as high as in the past.
- Institutionalized procedures for dealing with the consequences of divorce and remarriage, such as legal determinations of joint custody of children, have strengthened. But the increasing proportion of dissolutions that occur to cohabiting unions rather than marriages may have undercut this trend in many countries.

2. The social class gradient

Goode's hypothesis about the social class gradient of divorce would lead us to expect that in societies where divorce is very difficult to obtain and in which attitudes toward divorce are on the whole negative, women and men with higher education (an indicator of social class) would be more likely to divorce than would women and men with lower education. But are there any such societies anymore? Abalos (2017, [SC21-10](#)) provides us with the example of the Philippines, which in 2016 was the only nation in the world (except Vatican City) where divorce was illegal (Conde 2011). Unless they are Muslims, who are subject to a separate code of personal law, Filipinos can end a marriage only through a legal separation, which does not allow for remarriage, or through an annulment (a ruling that the marriage was not validly begun), which does

allow for remarriage. An annulment may cost several thousand dollars in legal fees (Santos 2015).

Abalos (2017, [SC21-10](#)) shows that the number of annulments is small but has increased from about 4,000 in 2001 to about 10,000 in 2012. Some liberalization of attitudes has also occurred, according to the article: In a national survey, the proportion of respondents who agree that “married couples who have separated and cannot reconcile anymore should be allowed to divorce so that they can legally marry again” increased from 45% in 2005 to 60% in 2014. National data shows the expected positive educational gradient of marital dissolution, albeit over a modest number of cases: The proportion of ever-married women with tertiary education who are separated or divorced is 50% greater than the proportion among women with primary education or less (4.5% to 3.0%). Thus, the Philippines provides one of the few remaining examples of a positive social-class gradient of marital dissolution.

In contrast, as rates have risen in Europe, the positive educational gradient that existed in some countries – most prominently in Southern Europe – has weakened, and a negative gradient has strengthened in most countries (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Matysiak, Styrce, and Vignoli 2014). The transformation in Spain in recent years is striking, as Garriga and Cortina (2017, [SC21-11](#)) show. Until 1981 divorce was forbidden in Spain. In 2005 the government enacted a more liberal divorce law that did not require a period of separation. The result was an almost immediate doubling in the number of divorces and separations. Garriga and Cortina (2017, [SC21-11](#)) analyze changes in single motherhood in recent Spanish censuses. In 2001, the probability that a mother was living as a single parent or in a stepfamily was modestly negatively related to her educational attainment; by 2011 the probability had become substantially more negative among mothers younger than age 40; for mothers age 40 to 49, the educational gradient had changed from positive to neutral. It appears that as divorce has become more easily available, it is has become increasingly common among the less educated.

The strengthening of the negative educational gradient has been reported elsewhere, most notably in East Asia. In Taiwan the gradient has reversed over time: In the marriage cohorts of the 1940s through the 1960s, women with relatively higher education were more likely to divorce than women with low education, but in the marriage cohorts of the 1980s and 1990s, women with more education were less likely to divorce (Chen 2012; Cheng 2016). In Japan, women who had completed a two-year or four-year college degree were 30% to 50% less likely than high school graduates to divorce (Raymo, Fukuda, and Iwasawa 2013). In Korea, the negative educational gradient increased between the 1993 and 2002 marriage cohorts (Park and Raymo 2013). Direct evidence linking the negative gradient in these and other countries to developments such as the increase in women’s labor force participation is still limited.

The increase in cohabiting unions in many countries, however, complicates the finding of a negative educational gradient. In a meta-analysis of European studies, Matysiak, Styrac, and Vignoli (2014) found that while the negative gradient had emerged for the probability of divorce, it was not apparent with regard to the dissolution of cohabiting unions. In Latin America, where cohabitation among the less educated has long been common, there has been a more recent growth in ‘modern’ or ‘new’ cohabitation among the better educated as well, perhaps as a partial convergence to the European pattern of the Second Demographic Transition (Covre-Sussai et al. 2014; Esteve, Lesthaeghe, and López-Gay 2012). That growth has coincided with a substantial rise in union dissolution, much of it due to separations rather than formal divorces. The increase in dissolution-prone cohabiting unions among the better educated in Latin America may be lowering the negative educational gradient of dissolution. It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that in most areas of the world a negative educational gradient of divorce can be discerned, whereas the educational gradient in the dissolution of cohabiting unions is more varied.

3. The demise of stable high-divorce societies

Divorce rates were not uniformly low in the past. Goode (1963, 1993) noted the existence in the past of stable high-divorce societies and presented evidence of their decline. These societies were important theoretically to Goode because they were examples of societies where high divorce rates had been institutionalized – that is, places where the social structure had adapted to a high divorce rate in order to minimize its negative effects. For example, in these societies there was little disapproval of divorce; a mother’s kin helped to raise the children resulting from the dissolved marriage; and remarriage was allowed. Goode (1993) argued that Western nations in which divorce had risen in recent decades should follow this example and institutionalize the means of mitigating the harmful effects of divorce.

In North Africa, traditional Muslim law allowed men to divorce their wives with few restrictions, and rates of divorce were high, but by the 2000s the rates had been substantially reduced (Tabutin et al. 2005). The Malay Muslim populations of Indonesia and Malaysia constituted another classic example of a stable high-divorce society; in the 1950s they may have had the highest divorce rates in the world (Jones 2015). Marriages were arranged by parents when girls were young to guard against premarital pregnancies and against being left with an unmarried daughter; but divorces were allowed if the couple proved to be incompatible. The high divorce rates among Malay Muslims declined as older ages at marriage became common and as economic development proceeded. Now, the rates may even be rising again, although not to the

high levels of the past (Jones 2015). The decline of stable high-divorce societies appears to be virtually complete around the world.

4. The demise of stable low-divorce societies

Conversely, stable low-divorce societies seem less common than in the past. Over the last few decades, divorce has been legalized in nearly all of the nations that had held out against the international trend toward legalization, such as Ireland, which legalized divorce in 1997, and Chile, which legalized it in 2004. In addition, the increase in cohabiting unions in many countries has raised the total rate of dissolution (combining formal divorce and informal dissolutions). The main exception is South Asia, and India in particular, where divorce has been rare, at least until recently. Goode (1993) reluctantly excluded India from his book on divorce because of a lack of information; that lack may have reflected the rarity of divorce at the time. Even now, no reliable national statistics exist (United Nations 2014). But based on regional information available in the 2000s, two demographers concluded, “while changes have taken place, it can be said that in most of India today, and more broadly in South Asia, divorce is not a feasible way out of a disharmonious marriage” (Dommaraju and Jones 2011). This is particularly true for the majority Hindu population, among whom divorce still carries much stigma (Bose and South 2003; McKenry and Price 2006). Although media reports of anxiety over rising divorce are common (e.g., Dutt 2015), the rate of divorce still appears to be well below that of other regions. Outside of South Asia, one cannot find a large area comprised of stable low-divorce family systems.

5. Stabilization at moderately high levels

While public concern about the rise in divorce is still apparent, divorce rates have stabilized or even declined to moderately high levels in several nations that experienced sharp rises in divorce starting in the 1960s, such as the United States, England and Wales, Sweden, France, and West Germany (Härkönen 2014). In the United States, for example, the divorce rate peaked around 1980 at 5.3 per 1,000 total population (Carter et al. 2006) and has since declined to 3.2 per 1,000 total population in 2014 (excluding five states that no longer report divorce totals) (US National Center for Health Statistics 2015). The last time this rate was as low as 3.2 was in 1969. Divorce rates appear to have peaked between 2002 and 2003 in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and were between 2.0 and 3.0 per 1,000 total population in 2012 (Jones 2015). (These so-called crude rates of divorce are not directly comparable from nation to nation due to

variations in age structure and in the proportion married.) In France the total divorce rate, a measure of projected number of lifetime divorces per 100 marriages if current marital-duration-specific risks remain the same, has been virtually constant from 2004 to 2013 at about 45 (Institut National d'Études Démographiques 2016). To be sure, these rates still imply high lifetime risks of divorce for married couples: perhaps a 40% lifetime risk in the United States (Cherlin 2010) and a 33% lifetime risk for Japan (Raymo, Fukuda, and Iwasawa 2013). Nevertheless, they suggest a leveling-off of divorce that no one anticipated during the period of sharp increases.

Why might we be seeing a moderation of trends in divorce in nations where steep rises have occurred? The authors of two articles (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015) argue that we are witnessing the emergence of a new gender-egalitarian equilibrium in marriages and long-term cohabiting unions in the Western world. Whereas the older, mid-20th-century partnership bargain was based on the specialized roles of the breadwinner husband and the homemaker wife, the new 21st-century partnership is based on the sharing of both paid work outside the home and housekeeping and childcare within the home. In between these two poles was a half century or so of conflict between intimate partners over the division of labor, with a rise in divorce as one consequence. Today, in the new egalitarian partnerships, role expectations are once again clear and divorce is no longer rising. The high level of women's economic independence in the egalitarian partnership means that divorce rates are unlikely to return to the low levels seen in the past, but some moderation of the end-of-century high points is to be expected – and in some places it appears to have already occurred.

Nevertheless, it must be said that the egalitarian partnership may be specific to the more privileged classes. In the United States the fall in divorce rates has been much larger among the university-educated than among Americans with less education (Cherlin 2016). The best-educated women and men have been able to take advantage of their privileged place in the globalized economy to obtain well-paying, stable employment and to pool their incomes. They are best positioned to create and sustain an egalitarian partnership. Those with less education have seen the labor market opportunities diminish and are not in a position to easily establish the new style of partnership. To be sure, in nations with more generous social welfare systems, such as the Nordic countries, less educated young adults may have the income support and childcare and family leave policies they need to establish stable partnerships. But elsewhere in the global economy, the new mode of partnership may only be obtainable by well-educated and highly skilled young adults.

6. Union dissolution

One can no longer, however, restrict attention to dissolution and repartnering in marital unions. Cohabiting unions have become much more common in many countries, particularly in Europe (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008), North America (Manning and Stykes 2015), and Latin America (Esteve, Lesthaege, and López-Gay 2012), but also in other nations such as Japan (Raymo, Iwasawa, and Bumpass 2009). Studies of Europe and the United States suggest that cohabiting couples have a substantially higher risk of dissolution than do married couples (Dronkers 2016), either because cohabiters tend to have different characteristics than people who enter directly into marriage or because of the nature of cohabitation itself. In contrast, couples who begin their union by cohabiting but then marry do not appear to have higher risks of marital dissolution compared to couples who marry directly (Manning and Cohen 2012).

Canada presents an interesting case study in union dissolution due to the presence of two different demographic regimes. In the French-speaking province of Quebec, lifetime levels of marriage are much lower, and far more children are born into cohabiting unions than in the English-speaking rest of Canada (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004). In 2011, 38% of Quebec couples were cohabiting compared to 14% in the rest of Canada (Statistics Canada 2015). The proportion of Quebecers who start their unions without marrying approaches 90% in recent cohorts (Laplante 2016, [SC21–5](#)). The Quebec civil code also treats cohabiting couples at separation differently than in the rest of Canada (Le Bourdais et al. 2016, [SC21–6](#)). Three articles in the special collection provide us with a better understanding of the Canadian case.

Pelletier (2016, [SC21–7](#)) examines the consequences of the dissolution of cohabiting unions for children. He argues that the effects should depend not only on the child's family but also on how common cohabitation is in the area where they live. Where it is more common, cohabiting families are likely to be less distinctive in their characteristics, and cultural mechanisms for dealing with the breakups of cohabiting unions may be more fully developed. Therefore, the consequences of a breakup should be less negative. Consistent with his predictions, Pelletier (2016, [SC21–7](#)) finds that the more widely cohabitation has diffused through a province, the lower is the risk that a child in a cohabiting union will experience the dissolution of the parents' cohabiting union. Laplante (2016, [SC21–5](#)) examines the intergenerational factors that may have produced the large surge in cohabiting unions and the concomitant increase in union dissolution among Francophone Quebecers. He finds that having experienced a family disruption in childhood raises the likelihood that in adulthood a person will have a higher risk of union dissolution. However, it does not matter whether the person's parents were married or not – it is the separation in childhood, not the legal status of the parents, which matters for later-life risks of union dissolution. This conclusion suggests

that the marital status of one's parents is not an important factor in the increase over time in union dissolution.

Le Bourdais et al. (2016, [SC21-6](#)) study whether the economic consequences of the breakup of a woman's union vary according to whether that union was a married or an unmarried partnership. They compare two birth cohorts, and they also compare women in Quebec with women in the rest of Canada. Their expectation is that when cohabiting unions are more common, both cross-sectionally by province and longitudinally by birth cohort, the negative economic effects of the dissolution of a cohabiting union on women's economic position will be more similar to the economic effects of the dissolution of a marriage on women's economic position. The regional differences that they find are relatively modest, but the cohort difference is large: In the recent cohort, women who have experienced the dissolution of a cohabiting union recover from the economic shock more quickly than women who have experienced the dissolution of a marriage, a finding that holds true throughout Canada. Previous studies have also found a lower impact of union dissolution on women in cohabiting unions, perhaps because of their greater labor force participation (Avellar and Smock 2005).

7. Union dissolution in sub-Saharan Africa

Relatively little is known about union dissolution and repartnering in sub-Saharan Africa. The lack of data caused Goode to omit the region from his books. The best recent information comes from a heroic effort to employ data from 110 Demographic and Health Surveys in 33 sub-Saharan African countries since the 1980s (Clark and Brauner-Otto 2015). Using a series of methodological assumptions to correct for limited information, the authors reach three conclusions. First, there is considerable variation in divorce from country to country; in fact, the authors claim that the variation is comparable to that of European nations. Second, divorce is not rising in sub-Saharan Africa overall, despite some progress toward economic development. Rather, it appears to be declining in about half of the countries. Third, the strongest correlate of declining divorce is rising female age at marriage. A five-year increase in age at marriage predicts a nearly 10% fall in divorce rates. A rise in age at marriage in a region where ages at marriage have been low usually implies a smaller age gap between husbands and wives, a larger role for the woman in the choice of spouse, and quite likely an increase in the autonomy of wives. Although Goode contended that a rise in women's autonomy would increase divorce rates, the opposite appears to have occurred, perhaps because women who marry at higher ages tend to select more compatible partners (Jones 1997).

In this collection, Thiombiano (2017, [SC21-9](#)) reports on Burkina Faso, which is at the edge of the Sahel region that Clark and Brauner-Otto (2015) found to have some

of the lowest rates of union dissolution in sub-Saharan Africa. In Burkina Faso, an estimated 11% of first unions end in dissolution within 20 years, according to Clark and Brauner-Otto, with little change in divorce levels observed since the 1980s. Thiombiano (2017, [SC21–9](#)) confirms that the rate of union dissolution is low in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, even compared to nearby Lomé, Togo, where rates are modest in comparison to many other sub-Saharan countries. Formalization of the union makes a large difference: Unions that were formalized by two or more of the three common marriage ceremonies (civil, religious, and traditional) were substantially less likely to disrupt. In a previous article Thiombiano and colleagues reported that children of divorced parents in Burkina Faso experience higher estimated mortality risks under age 5 and a lower probability of entering school (Thiombiano, LeGrand, and Kobiané 2013).

8. Repartnering and remarriage

After surveying the available statistics, Goode (1993) concluded that rates of remarriage after divorce were falling in most Western nations. But he was writing in an era when analysts were focused on legal marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Since then, of course, we have seen large increases in the formation and dissolution of cohabiting unions. We must now focus more broadly on repartnering, by which I mean coresidential unions that are formed either by marriage or cohabitation by individuals who have had a previous union that ended in dissolution. And we can define stepfamilies as unions in which at least one partner brings children into the household from a previous relationship. A consequence of the increase in cohabiting unions is that rates of repartnering, including new nonmarital unions, appear to have increased throughout most Western countries in the past few decades (Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, and Berrington 2017, [SC21–2](#)). An increase is to be expected, if for no other reason than the barriers to dissolution and repartnering are lower for those who are operating outside of the legal system; for instance, they do not need to obtain legal divorces nor to register new legal partnerships (although many countries offer some form of a registered nonmarital partnership). In the United States, nearly one-quarter of first unions are stepfamilies (the majority of them cohabiting unions rather than marriages), a counterintuitive development that reflects the relatively large percentage of children born to lone mothers who later form a first partnership with someone other than the biological father. Nearly two-thirds of second unions are stepfamilies (Guzzo 2016).

Working from this broader view of partnership, the authors of three papers in this collection have studied recent developments in repartnering in Europe. Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, and Berrington (2017, [SC21–2](#)) present data on the demographic

characteristics that are associated with repartnering for women who have ended a previous partnership in 14 countries. In line with prior research (e.g., De Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Ivanova, Kalmijn, and Uunk 2013), they find that the likelihood of repartnering is higher for women who do not have resident children and for women who are younger at the time of separation. Although women who are raising children after a partnership dissolution may have a greater need for a partner than do childless women, it seems that they are less attractive as partners to prospective spouses. The authors also hypothesized that the kind of dissolution – a separation from a nonmarital union versus a separation from a marriage – would make a difference for union formation, perhaps because cohabiting women differ from married women in their gender-role and family attitudes. But they did not find support for that hypothesis. To be sure, women who had separated from marriages tended to be older and to have children, which reduced their chances of repartnering. But once age and the presence of children were included in their models, the type of separation did not make a difference. In addition, strong differences among the countries persisted after all demographic characteristics were taken into account, suggesting important variation in culture, women’s labor force participation, and/or social welfare policies.

In a detailed analysis of Belgian data, Pasteels and Mortelmans (2017, [SC21–8](#)) find that men with high incomes are more likely to repartner and that both men and women with labor incomes are more likely to repartner – which they refer to as an emerging “two-tiered” repartnering system that favors people with higher incomes.

Kreyenfeld and colleagues (2017, [SC21–3](#)) examine the consequences of rising repartnering due to cohabitation on fertility, specifically on the interval between a first and a second birth. Overall, they find that women who have a dissolution followed by a new partnership have a 50% to 100% longer interval between a first and second birth than do women in ongoing unions. It is too early to know what the consequences of this longer interval are for lifetime fertility. Perhaps it will result in the same lifetime number of children born but merely spread them out; however, a longer interval between births in a population often leads to some forgone births. In addition, the authors find large national differences within Europe, from Finland, where 20% of second children are born in new unions ten years after a first birth, to Italy and Spain, where only a negligible percentage of second children are born in new unions.

Beyond the Western nations, we know little about repartnering and stepfamilies (Pryor 2014). In China, the percentage of all marriages that were remarriages increased from 3% in 1985 to 10% in 2007 (Wang and Zhou 2010). But the small literature suggests that stepfamilies are stigmatized in China, as well as in Japan, where no good national statistics exist. The negative perception of remarriage may be connected to the cultural importance of the intergenerational continuity of the family line, which stepfamilies disrupt by substituting a stepparent for a biological parent. East Asian

stepfamilies, observers claim, sometimes attempt to pass socially as if they were biological families: Postdivorce joint custody is not legally allowed, and the typical stepfamily model is for the noncustodial parent to withdraw from the children's lives and for the custodial parent to form a nuclear-like stepfamily in which the stepparent effectively replaces the noncustodial biological parent (Nozawa 2015). The word for 'stepfamily' was not in the Japanese dictionary until the 2000s, when a term derived from the English word was adopted (Pryor 2014).

9. Discussion

Studies in this collection and elsewhere in the literature suggest that if we restrict our attention to formal divorce (by which I mean legalized dissolutions of legal marriages), there may be less cross-national variation today than Goode found when he gathered information in the early 1990s. One searches fruitlessly for stable high-divorce societies of the type that historically existed in North Africa, Indonesia, or Japan. These societies experienced declining divorce rates in the mid to late 20th century, and none now fit the stable high-divorce profile. Indeed, after falling for decades, divorce rates in Japan have trended upward to levels similar to Western Europe. The number of stable low-divorce societies appears to have diminished as well; divorce has been legalized in most of the nations that were holdouts a generation ago. The important exceptions are the Indian subcontinent – where divorce is legal but still seems to be culturally unacceptable, even if increasing from a low base – and some African nations in the Sahel region where union dissolution is relatively low and does not seem to be increasing. In addition, the runaway 20th-century increases in the United States and some other Western nations, which worried policy makers and academic experts, have now slowed or stopped. The American divorce rate peaked about 1980 and has declined noticeably since then, particular for the university-educated population. The rate of increase has also slowed in some European countries as well as in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

These developments raise the possibility that we are witnessing a partial convergence of divorce rates internationally to a level below the highest rates ever observed but still high enough to touch the lives of many adults and children around the world. I raise the idea of convergence with some trepidation because of Goode's (1963) failed prediction of worldwide convergence to the conjugal family. To be sure, the trends we are seeing could conceivably reverse direction in the near future. Still, in the domain of formal divorce, convergence may be occurring at a moderately high level across most regions of the world.

Nevertheless, in studying the dissolution of intimate partnerships, one can no longer focus solely on formal divorce. It must now share its function of ending

partnerships with the dissolution of cohabiting unions. The percentage of all intimate unions that are nonmarital has risen greatly in many countries in the Americas, Europe, and East Asia over the past few decades. And with that rise has come a surge of union dissolutions outside of the framework of legal marriage and divorce. Nearly everywhere, the rate of dissolution among cohabiting unions is higher than the rate of formal divorce. That is to say, the chance that a union will dissolve within a given period of time is higher for cohabiting unions than for marriages. Thus, as cohabiting unions become more common, union dissolution (counting both formal divorce and the dissolution of cohabiting unions) may be stable or increasing even in countries in which formal divorce rates are declining. For instance, in Mexico we have seen a rise of cohabiting unions among the better-educated young adults – a phenomenon sometimes referred to as ‘modern cohabitation’ to distinguish it from the older, established pattern of cohabitation among the less educated – and also a rise in union dissolution rates (Esteve, Lesthaeghe, and López-Gay 2012).

But are cohabiting unions equivalent to marriages in commitment and plans for the future? The barriers to dissolution and to repartnering are considerably lower for individuals who form and dissolve them outside of the legal framework of marriage and divorce, which almost certainly allows less committed individuals to move in and out of them. We might ask, then, whether we are measuring the same phenomenon: Can cohabiting unions be viewed as committed relationships that the partners expect to last if not for a lifetime than at least for an indefinite period? The answer is that there is much variation in the level of commitment in cohabiting unions. In the Western world they vary from short-term low-investment relationships among less-educated Americans to long-term marriage-like relationships in Quebec and Northern Europe. Ideally, a demographer interested in union dissolution might wish to exclude short-term low-commitment unions from calculations of the rate of dissolution and to focus exclusively on the more committed forms of cohabitation as well as on formal divorces. But it is not possible to determine which cohabiting unions are of the low-commitment variety until after they end in either dissolution or marriage; therefore, one cannot exclude them a priori. As a result, the dissolution rates that we estimate for all cohabiting unions are probably higher than the underlying risk of dissolution among committed cohabiters. For the near future, demographers interested in the breakup of unions may need to calculate both the more restrictive indicator, the rate of divorce, and the less restrictive indicator, the rate of union dissolution. The true rate of dissolution among committed partnerships may be somewhere in between these two indicators.

We know even less about repartnering. Goode believed that remarriage rates were decreasing in many areas of the world, and he may have been correct. But just as divorce has been superseded by the broader concept of union dissolution, remarriage has been superseded by union repartnering. And it is not clear that rates of repartnering,

including both divorce and cohabiting unions, have decreased. What is more, the same limitations on our understanding of commitment apply. For instance, unions formed outside of marriage by individuals who are rearing children from previous relationships may not require the same level of commitment from the noncustodial partners as remarriages require of new spouses. Although we refer to all of the noncustodial partners as ‘stepparents,’ in practice not all would deserve, or even accept, the title. At one end of the commitment spectrum are noncustodial partners who will indeed take on a parent-like role and remain in their stepchildren’s lives indefinitely; at the other end are partners who will carry on a short-term relationship with the custodial parent and barely engage the children at all. In an American survey, mothers and their adolescent children disagreed about whether a cohabiting stepparent was living in the household; in about half of the households where mothers with children from previous unions listed a cohabiting partner as living there, the children, when interviewed separately, did not include the partner as living with them (Brown and Manning 2009). Perhaps in some of those households the new partners were present only half the week and the children considered them to be visitors; or perhaps the children rejected them as parent-like figures. It may be unclear in some cases, then, whether a partnership constitutes a stepfamily.

More generally, the trends in union dissolution and repartnering, along with other important developments such as the legalization of same-sex marriages, have greatly increased the diversity of family life and made the work of demographers more complex, as Bennett (2017, SC21–4) notes. He contrasts that diversity with the uniformity of the family patterns of the mid-20th century. But the mid-20th century is the historical outlier. Therborn (2004, 2014) has argued that contemporary family patterns represent a return to the historical complexity of family life that was present prior to the 20th century. Yet complexity can take different forms. In the past, when most of the dissolution of unions occurred because of the death of a parent, issues of custody and visitation were moot. If the surviving parent remarried, the stepparent did not have to compete with a noncustodial parent living elsewhere. Boundaries were sharper, and the demarcation of events was clearer.

The forms of complexity that are present today pose a challenge not only for demographers, as Bennett (2017, SC21–4) notes, but also for the legal system. At a time when the law in many jurisdictions has finally begun to modernize in response to contemporary divorce, the rise of the dissolution of cohabiting unions with children presents new dilemmas. Legal scholars in the United States maintain that laws concerning issues such as child custody, child support payments, and maintenance payments to former partners remain unsettled for cases in which the separation occurs to a cohabiting couple (Carbone and Cahn 2014). And there is little consensus on the legal situation of couples who repartner without marrying. For instance, does the

noncustodial cohabiting partner have any rights and responsibilities as a stepparent? In these and other ways, we have seen the deinstitutionalization of intimate unions (Cherlin 2004). Goode noted that stable high-divorce societies had developed institutionalized ways of resolving difficult issues involving divorce and remarriage. It has been difficult enough for contemporary nations to institutionalize methods of coping with high rates of divorce and remarriage. It is even more challenging for them to establish procedures for dealing with the dissolution of nonmarital partnerships and the nonmarital repartnering that may follow. A necessary step is to better understand the nature of these developments. As this collection and the work of other scholars indicate, demographers are helping to meet that challenge through detailed studies of union dissolution and repartnering around the world.

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