Divorce and Social Class During the Early Stages of the Divorce Revolution: Evidence From Flanders and the Netherlands

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Abstract

In times of low divorce rates (such as the nineteenth century and early twentieth century), the authors expect higher social strata to have the highest divorce chances as they are better equipped to break existing barriers to divorce. In this article, the authors analyze data from marriage certificates to assess whether there was a positive effect of occupational class on divorce in Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands. Their results for the Netherlands show a positive association between social class and divorce, particularly among the higher cultural groups. In Flanders, the authors do not find this, but they observe a negative association between illiteracy and divorce, an observation pointing in the same direction.

Introduction

Research has shown that in several western countries, there is currently a negative association between divorce and someone's position in the stratification system. The risk of divorce tends to be higher among the lower than among the higher educated and higher among lower than among higher income groups.[1] Various pieces of research show that lower social groups in the nineteenth century had a lower chance of divorcing than higher ones. Several explanations for this inverse association have been suggested. One explanation argues that lower strata experience more financial problems. Financial problems can lead to tensions in a marriage and in doing so can increase the risk of divorce.[2] A second explanation lies in cognitive abilities. People with more cognitive abilities

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may be better able to solve relationship problems, they may be less impulsive in decision making, and they may be more aware of the possible negative consequences of divorce for themselves or their children.[3] A third explanation lies in health and behavioral problems. Examples of such problems are depression, the use of drugs and alcohol, and partner violence. Such problems are more common among lower strata and increase the risk of divorce.[4] Finally, it should be recognized that class is related to a range of other demographic variables that affect divorce, such as age at marriage and urbanization. These factors are not so much explanations of the class gradient, but merely confounders that need to be taken into account in assessing the class gradient in the first place.

Although there is increasing evidence for an inverse association between divorce and social status, the question is whether this relationship is typical of contemporary society.[5] The well-known family sociologist, William Goode, has argued in several essays that the association was initially—that is, when divorce began to increase—reversed. Goode argued that in times of low divorce, that is, the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it would be the higher social strata that were most likely to divorce.[6] Marriages in the higher strata were not necessarily of lower quality and neither would the husbands and wives be unhappy in these marriages. Instead, Goode argued that couples in higher strata were better able to break normative and legal barriers to divorce and hence, would be more likely to end a marriage when it was unhappy.

Social Class and Divorce

Implicit in the reasoning of Goode's theory is a notion of diffusion.[7] When there are strong legal and normative barriers against divorce, a divorce can be considered a cultural innovation. Because it is usually the more secure and more enlightened groups in a society who are the early adopters of an innovation, Goode expected a positive effect of class on divorce in the preindustrial and early industrialization period, a period which also is characterized by low rates of divorce. This innovation would eventually trickle down to the lower classes because the barriers to divorce became weaker. That divorce would eventually become more common among the lower classes during the industrialization process was not part of the theory, but was explained in different terms, especially by referring to the greater social and economic problems in lower class families—Goode spoke of "family strain."[8] In sum, Goode argued that the association between divorce and status would reverse over time. Martin and Parashar call this the "education crossover" of divorce, a still ongoing trend that will create new forms of social inequality.[9]

So far, there have only been a few tests of Goode's theory. In one of the more comprehensive analyses of trends in the determinants of divorce, Teachman compared marriage cohorts in the United States who married between 1950 and 1984.[10] He found stability in the effects of education on the risk of divorce. South also found no change in the effect of wife's education over time,[11] but McLanahan, citing unpublished research by Martin, found an increase in the effect of education, with a higher risk of divorce for high school dropouts than for high school graduates in the most recent period.12 Using Swedish register data and comparing cohorts of women born between 1944 and 1964, Hoem found that in the low-divorce period, educational groups did not differ in their risk of divorce.[13] The trend toward an increase in divorce occurred in all educational categories but was stronger in the lower educational categories. This resulted in an increase over time in the effect of education on the risk of divorce. A similar result was found by De Graaf and Kalmijn, who compared cohorts married between 1942 and 1999 in the Netherlands.[14] They found that the effect of education on divorce becomes more negative across cohorts. Finally, in a multiple country analysis of the Family and Fertility Survey, Härkönen and Dronkers found that the educational effect becomes increasingly negative in nine countries, including the United States.[15] Note however, that Härkönen and Dronkers also found contemporary societies in which the gradient is positive, such as France, Italy, and Greece. Italy and Greece are also characterized by low rates of divorce.

Although the trends at first appear more or less in-line with Goode's theory, few authors have found positive effects of status indicators on divorce. Authors often found that the effect becomes more negative but they did not find that the effect was positive initially. Hence, in contrast to one of Goode's assumptions, the data do not seem to suggest that the higher strata were innovators in the divorce revolution. At the same time, however, the finding of positive divorce gradients in low-divorce societies such as Italy and Greece may still provide some support for Goode's hypothesis. But, there are also other reasons why a rejection of Goode's theory would be premature. One reason why no positive status effects have been found may lie in the limited historical perspective of past trend studies. The earliest marriage cohorts in most of these studies were from the 1940s and although divorce was indeed not common in those early cohorts, this was not the start of the actual divorce revolution. Historical research suggests that the postwar increase in divorce is in fact a continuation of a longer term increase in divorce. In other words, for a good test of Goode's ideas, we probably need to go back further in time. Goode specified that the class gradient would be positive when divorce rates were low and/or when industrialization was in its early phase. For the Netherlands and Flanders, this would mean that if there ever was a positive class gradient, we would need to find it in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is not fully clear, however, whether industrialization is the most important factor for determining the periods or whether it is trends in the rate of divorce. For all practical purposes, however, this amounts to more or less the same period and we are unable with the current design to separate such effects.

Research Question

In this article, we do not conduct a new analysis of (trends in) the determinants of divorce, but we analyze historical data for an early period to assess whether there initially was a positive effect of status on divorce. The status indicator we look at is occupational class, since this yields the most complete data on a person's status position. The time period we focus on is the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. The countries we analyze are Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands. Since the legal divorce regime was quite different between the two countries, finding similar results with regard to divorce chances indicates that social and cultural effects operate partly independent of the juridical system. After Belgium's independence in 1830, the country maintained the relatively liberal legislation (a result of the French Revolution). Almost no changes were made to the legislation during the whole nineteenth century. The fact that this liberal legislation did not change in Catholic Belgium is a real curiosity in the European history of law. Other countries, including the Netherlands, returned to a more conservative legislation, for example, by abolishing divorce with mutual consent. The fact that few changes were made in the Belgian law had probably to do with the very low divorce rates, as a consequence of which there was no urgent need to be more restrictive.[16]

As to the incidence of divorce, the two countries have experienced partly similar partly different trends. Figure 1 shows that during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century the divorce rate was much higher in the Netherlands than in Belgium. Roughly between 1950 and 1995, the two countries experienced a parallel, increasing trend. From 1995 onwards, the divorce rate is higher in Belgium than it is in the Netherlands. Since one decade, Belgium has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe.

Past historical research on divorce has occasionally included indicators of status. Van Poppel finds in one city in the Netherlands (The Hague), for marriage contracted in the period 1850–1882, the divorce rate was higher among white collar workers than among lower skilled blue collar workers.[17] Although this is in-line with Goode's theory, the differences were not very large. In a more detailed analysis of the higher strata, Van Poppel also finds that divorce rates were actually quite low in the bourgeoisie whereas they were high among artistic occupations. A possible explanation for this is that only the cultural segments of the elite were able to break conventional norms, such as the norm against
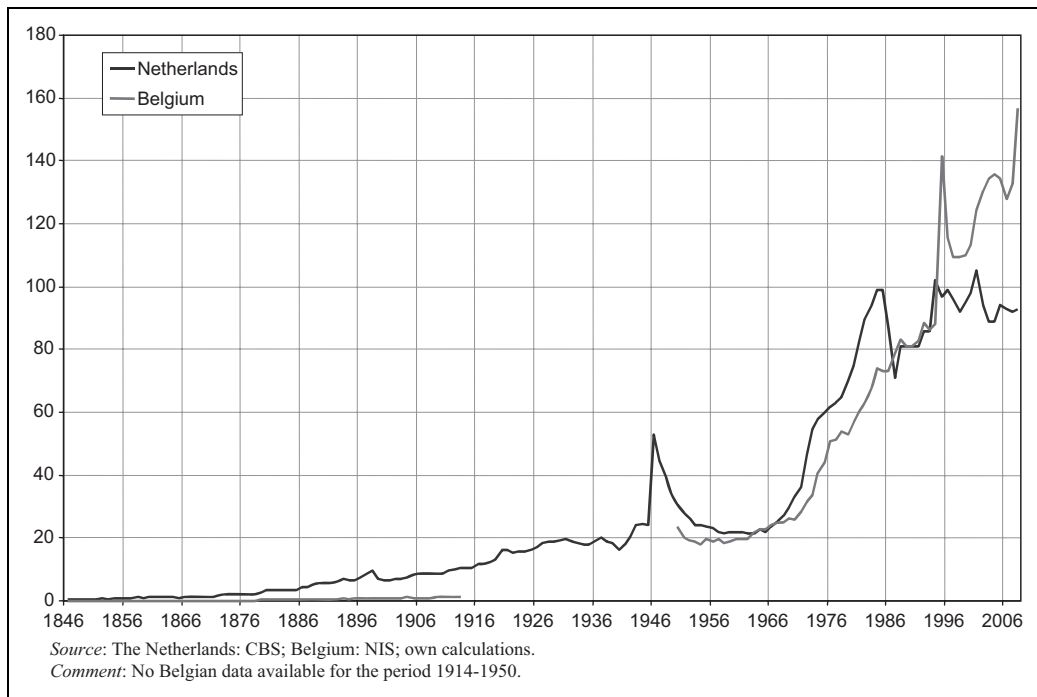
Figure 1. Number of divorces per 10,000 married women (Belgium and The Netherlands, 1846–2008).

divorce, whereas the economic segments of the elite would instead be jeopardized socially by breaking conventional norms.[18]

We note that the analysis is focused on formal divorce and not on the dissolution of a couple. Especially in times where the divorce threshold is high, it may be that partners look for other ways to resolve their marital conflict. In the most extreme case, desertion may be a solution. Desertion occurs when one of the spouses breaks the union by leaving permanently from the household. Since desertion and separation went unrecorded, there is "a grey area of marriage dynamics that occurred under the radar of the law."[19] Desertion has often been studied for the early twentieth century[20] and for earlier period.[21] Although a possible class gradient in divorce has not been documented systematically, desertion was often called *the poor man's divorce*. If this is true, it would also mean that the lower divorce risk among lower classes was compensated by a higher desertion rate. This is not in contradiction with Goode's theory because Goode only argued about the threshold of divorce. In times of a strong threshold to divorce, social classes may not so much have differed in the quality of their marriage but more in the solutions they sought when their marriage was poor.

We also have to take into account the fact that the Belgian Civil Code provides the so-called "separation from bed and board," a kind of factual separation (which eventually could lead to a divorce). It is a weaker kind of divorce: the marriage is not dissolved, but there is no longer the obligation to cohabit. After a certain period (three years) this separation from bed and board could be converted into a divorce. Separation from bed and board is often called "the Catholic divorce," as it was recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. Especially in Catholic Flanders this procedure was frequently used.

Data and Methods

The goal of the present article is to examine whether there was a positive association between social class and divorce risks in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Belgium and in the

Netherlands. To test this, we use historical register data. We present separate but comparable analyses for the two countries. The concrete measurement of economic and cultural factors is confined in the research to what is mentioned on the marriage certificates. Both the Dutch and Flemish data are compiled from marriage certificates. This certificate is an administrative document which legally establishes the marriage. As well as information about the date of the marriage, there are also data about the marriage partners: their age, place of residence, date of birth, occupation(s), literacy, and previous marital status. Information about the parents of the marriage partners is also on the marriage certificate but, for the Dutch data, there is also information on parents in the birth certificates which can be matched to the marriage licenses. Finally, there is information about the witnesses who attended the marriage: their age, occupation, relationship to the bride or bridegroom, and literacy. Literacy is deduced from whether or not they are able to sign their names. If someone was unable to do this, this was mentioned on the certificate, or an *x* was marked.

The Dutch data are obtained from the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN). HSN is an ambitious project, which proceeds from a random sample of birth certificates and reconstructs life courses from cradle to grave with the use of marriage and death certificates, as well as the population registers. The purpose of HSN is the construction of a representative database which covers the Dutch population in the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century (1812–1922, $N = 78{,}000$). These data for this study are based on a sample of births between 1850 and 1922. Before 1883, only three provinces (Zeeland, Friesland, and Utrecht) and the city of Rotterdam were included, after 1883, all provinces were included. Within this data project, all the available vital statistics for these births were collected. In this article, we use all the available marriage licenses. There are 21,775 licenses. The average year of marriage is 1897. Of these marriages, 538 ended in divorce, which amounts to 2.5 percent.

The Flemish data are obtained from a research that collected marriage certificates in five municipalities: Aalst, Bierbeek, Appelterre, Ghent, and Leuven. These municipalities have different socioeconomic structures and a different cultural climate. The choice of regions is thus used to include macrosocial and cultural factors in the research. The research period was 1800–1913. In Leuven and Aalst, a random sample was taken of one in three certificates and in Ghent of one in twelve, while in Bierbeek and Appelterre the data from all certificates were input. A weighting coefficient is used to correct for this different sampling strategy. The total number of marriages amounts to 26,398. Of these, 279 ended in divorce (1.1 percent). The average year of marriage is 1866. The marriage period in the Flemish data is somewhat earlier than it is in the Dutch data. It is not clear what consequences this will have for the results. If our hypothesis of a declining positive class gradient is true, the class gradient should be somewhat more pronounced in the Flemish data than in the Dutch data.

Class Variables

A marriage certificate contains a considerable amount of information about occupations. As well as the occupations of the bridegroom and the bride, it also states those of their fathers and mothers (if they are still alive, in any case). Although there were precise rules about what had to be recorded on the certificates, there are differences between the regions and the municipalities even so. The inputting and classification of historical occupation data is often difficult, as the description is often very general. To give a couple of examples: where day laborer is indicated, there is usually no indication of whether the person in question worked in agriculture or industry, and sometimes there is no clear distinction between self-employed and paid work, or between machine and manual work. In terms of registration of occupation, there is also clear gender difference: the bridegroom's occupation is almost always shown, that of the bride far less often. Perhaps some officials did not regard women's work outside the home as sufficiently important to mention on official documents. There will also

have been cases where women deliberately withheld their occupation from the attention of the officials. There were also women who stopped working straight after their marriage, as a result of which their occupation was no longer relevant in their eyes, so that they did not mention it to the official. The indication housekeeper rarely appears; apparently this was not regarded as an occupation *sensu stricto*. One problem is the meaning of the indication no occupation. This may refer to a high social level on the part of the people concerned (who were so wealthy that they did not need to, and did not even wish to work, and wished this to be explicitly registered as such), but it may equally apply to unemployed people looking for work, to housewives not looking for work, or to people who worked at home but who did not state their work as an occupation (for example, lace-workers).

In the present analysis, the measurement of class was based on occupation. The groom's occupation at the time of marriage was used. Because this information was sometimes missing, we also used the father's occupation at the time of marriage, or, if that was missing too, the bride's father's occupation. This reduces the number of missing cases for class to 14.3 percent in the Netherlands and 7.3 percent in Flanders. The grouping of occupations in classes is based on HISCLASS.[22] For the current purposes this grouping was further reduced to the following classes: (a) farm laborers, (b) farmers and fishermen, (c) unskilled manual, (d) skilled manual, (e) lower nonmanual, (f) lower and higher managers, and (g) lower and higher professionals and clerical.

The differences between this classification and the original HISCLASS are as follows: higher managers and lower managers are combined (in *f*), foremen and medium-skilled manual workers are combined (in *d*), lower skilled and unskilled manual workers are combined (in *c*), and lower skilled and unskilled farm workers are combined (in *a*). A problem with the original classification was that there were too few higher professional workers to find statistically significant effects on a relatively rare event such as divorce. One of the other original groups, however, contains lower professional workers and it was decided to combine these with the higher professionals. Examples of lower professionals are teachers, musicians, and technical drawers. To do this, the medium skilled group of "lower professionals, clerical, and sales" (HISCLASS Category 4) was split up into lower professionals and medium-skilled clerical workers on the one hand, and sales workers on the other hand. The former were combined with the higher professionals (*g*), the latter were put in lower nonmanual (*e*).

Table 1 presents an overview of the frequencies in each class in the two regions. Although the number of marriages is quite large in both data sets, the number of divorces is not. Focusing on the elite only would then yield too little statistical power. Note that the coding schemes were exactly the same in the two countries (they both relied on original HISCO-codes and we recoded these in the same way to HISCLASS).

Control Variables

As far as possible, we include other possibly confounding variables in the analysis. Most of these variables are present in both countries and are coded identically. The concrete measurement of economic and cultural factors is confined in the research to what is mentioned on the marriage certificates. Table 1 gives an overview of the means and standard deviations of the variables used.

The first control variable is the year of marriage. In this way, any period effect is measured. This is a broad and vague definition, but if this variable has a net effect after controlling for the effect of the other variables, this points to an underlying trend. Via the place of marriage variable (city versus countryside), regional social and cultural differences are measured, and hence indirectly the uneven industrialization and urbanization.

An important variable is the age at marriage and the age difference between the partners. A distinction is made between three types: marriages in which the man is older than the woman, those in which the woman is older than the man, and those where the man and woman are the same age. The marriage partners are said to be older or younger where the difference is three years or more.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Netherlands		Flanders	
	Mean or Proportion	SD	Mean or Proportion	SD
Divorced	.025		.011	
Class variables				
Farm worker	.081		.009	
Farmer	.161		.114	
Unskilled manual	.224		.322	
Skilled manual	.213		.308	
Lower nonmanual	.097		.074	
Higher/lower manager	.040		.040	
Higher/lower professional	.041		.059	
Class missing	.143		.073	
Control variables				
Year of marriage (−1800)	96.9	28.1	66.3	31.9
City (place of marriage)	.244		.885	
Wife's age at marriage	26.4	6.5	28.1	8.0
Husband older (3+ years)	.457		.419	
Wife older (3+ years)	.128		.206	
Second marriage	.125		.183	
Husband no signature	.048		.245	
N marriages	21774		26398	

Source: The Netherlands: Historische Steekproef Nederlandse bevolking; België: Centre for Population and Family Studies, K. U. Leuven.

A rudimentary measurement of education is taken on the basis of literacy or illiteracy, which is deduced from whether or not the person concerned is able to sign the marriage certificate. We use here information only for the husband. Also, we include whether or not the marriage is the first or a higher order marriage (for either the husband or wife). Because the number of divorcees who marry is relatively small, we ignore information on how the previous marriage was dissolved (widowhood or divorce).

An important divorce-related control variable that we could not include in our analysis is the religious background of the spouses, as we do not have full information on religion in our databases. Although religion by itself is undoubtedly an important determinant of divorce, we think that omitting this factor is not causing a problem to test our research question, that is, the association between social class and divorce chance. Concerning religious differences between specific regions in the Netherlands and Flanders, both Protestant and Catholic marriage guidelines stressed the fact that marriage was for life and could only be ended by the death of one of the spouses.[23]

Design

Because divorce is an event that occurs at a certain point in the marriage, we use event history analysis to analyze the determinants of divorce. This is similar to most contemporary studies of divorce. More specifically, we analyze the risk of divorce in year *t* of the marriage given that the marriage is still intact in year *t*–1. The effects of independent variables on this risk reflect both timing and occurrence effects. In other words, when a certain factor increases the risk, it leads not only to divorce more often but it also leads to divorce sooner rather than later.

To estimate these models, we use so-called discrete-time models.[24] We first converted the data into a person-year file where each marriage is represented with a single case for each year the

marriage is intact. We construct a variable divorce which is coded 0. If a divorce occurs, the divorce variable gets a code of 1 in the year of divorce. For the years after the divorce, the marriage is no longer represented in the data. If a marriage does not dissolve, the divorce variable has a code of 0 all the time. The divorce variable in the person-period file is subsequently analyzed with a logistic regression model. In an event-history model, it is also important to model the degree to which the divorce risk depends on duration. To do this, we include a set of dummy-variables for the number of years the marriage survived up to that point. We distinguish five-year duration groups and used the first five years as a reference point.

The beginning of the risk period is the year of marriage. The ending of the risk period is the year in which the marriage was dissolved by the death of one of the two spouses, or the year of divorce if a divorce occurred. We know the age at death for part of the data in the Netherlands but it is unknown for 6,812 Dutch cases and for all Flemish cases. For Flanders and for the other part of the data in the Netherlands, we estimated the age at death for husbands and wives. This was done by calculating a regression model for the age at death using the data for which we do have this information using class, urbanization, and year of marriage as independent variables. Regressions were run separately for husbands and wives. For the data where we do not have information on the age at death, we then estimated this age using the parameter estimates of the regression model.

We present two logistic regression models for each country: one containing only the class variables and duration, and one containing the class variables and all the control variables. By comparing these models, we can see to what extent observed differences among classes are due to class-differences in urbanization, marriage order, age at marriage, and illiteracy. Table 2 presents the regression models. We used skilled manual workers as the reference point in the model. We also test overall differences in the risk among classes using a chi-square test (see bottom of Table 2).

Results

We begin with describing the way the risk of divorce depends on the duration of the marriage. We see remarkably similar patterns in the two countries. The risk of divorce is quite low in the first five years, increases the second five years and then again in the third five years. After fourteen to fifteen years of marriage, the risk declines again. Usually, this pattern is understood in terms of the increasing selectivity of the surviving group: the more divorces occur, the better the quality of the remaining marriages. That the risk increases in the early period of the marriage is usually explained in terms of learning effects: couples learn that they have differences and disagreements, and this leads to an increased chance of divorce as the marriage progresses. Although the patterns are similar, the steepness of the curve is more pronounced in Flanders, especially in the beginning. This is most likely the result of the fact that divorce is extremely rare in the first few years. This has to do with the fact that initially the requirements were very restrictive, both with regard to the age of the involved partners as to the duration of marriage. In Belgium, divorce by mutual consent was not permitted for males younger than twenty-five years and women younger than twenty-one years. Divorce was also not allowed for marriages of less than two years and more than twenty years, neither when the woman was older than forty-five years. In sum, to be able to divorce, marriage may not have been too short or too long and both partners may not have been too young and the women not too old.

We next discuss the differences between classes. As the test at the bottom of Table 2 shows, class differences in the risk of divorce are statistically significant in the two countries. Note that this applies to the total class differences and not to the class differences after taking into account the influence of other variables (the net class differences).

The class patterns in the Netherlands are clear: compared to skilled manual workers, unskilled manual workers and to a lesser extent also farm workers, have a considerably lower risk of divorce. Lower nonmanual workers on the other hand, have a higher risk of divorce than skilled manual

Table 2. Event History Analysis of Divorce: Logistic Regression on Person Period File

	Netherlands		Flanders	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Duration dependency				
Duration 0–4 (reference)	0	0	0	0
Duration 5–9	.458*	.470*	2.015*	2.009*
Duration 10–14	.704*	.728*	2.531*	2.522*
Duration 15–19	.145	.183	2.159*	2.133*
Duration 20+	−.978*	−.976*	1.145*	.852**
Class variables				
Farm worker	−1.301*	−.758*	−2.283*	−1.679**
Farmer	.413*	.232**	.193	.223
Unskilled manual	−2.366*	−1.611*	−1.053*	−.317
Skilled manual (reference)	0	0	0	0
Lower nonmanual	.630*	.333*	.530*	.304
Higher and lower manager	.011	.057	.221	.165
Higher and lower professional	.807*	.608*	−.251	−.255
Class missing	−.239	.225	−.742**	.207
Control variables				
Year of marriage − 1800		.033*		.050*
City (place of marriage)		1.164*		1.282*
Wife's age at marriage		−.105*		−.154*
Husband older (3+ years)		−.106		−.183
Wife older (3+ years)		.656*		.800*
Second marriage		1.380*		.972*
Husband no signature (illiterate)		.492		−1.457*
Constant	−7.259*	−9.005*	−9.646*	−11.564*
Chi-square test for class differences	124.7*	49.3*	18.4*	8.06
N marriages	21774	21774	26398	26398
N events	538	538	279	279

Source: The Netherlands: Historische Steekproef Nederlandse bevolking; België: Centre for Population and Family Studies, K. U. Leuven. Flemish results weighted.
* $p < .05$,
** $p < .10$.

workers. These patterns are in-line with a positive class gradient in divorce. When we focus on the highest groups, however, we see a difference. Professional workers have a higher risk of divorce than skilled manual workers, but managers do not have a higher risk. This appears in-line with the notion that it is often the cultural groups which are forerunners in new demographic behavior. At the same time, however, we also see that there is hardly any difference between professionals and lower nonmanual workers. We will see later that this is different when net class differences are observed.

Total class differences are in some respects similar in Flanders. Unskilled manual workers and especially farm workers have a lower risk than skilled manual workers and lower nonmanual workers have a higher risk than skilled manual workers. In contrast to the Netherlands, however, we do not see a higher divorce risk for professionals. Like the Netherlands, we also see that managers do not differ significantly from skilled workers.

When we control for the influence of the control variables, the class differences change. In the Netherlands, net class differences are still significant, given the chi-square test at the bottom of the table in Model 2. However, the chi-square test has a lower value than in the first model, which shows that class differences are reduced when control variables are added. For Flanders, net class

differences are no longer significant after control variables are added, except for the lower divorce risk of farm workers compared to skilled manual workers. This means that most class differences we observed in Model 1 were due to differences in the composition of classes with respect to year of marriage, urbanization, age at marriage, and literacy. More detailed analyses show that urbanization plays an important albeit not exclusive role in this.

How do the remaining class differences look like in the Netherlands? First, we see that the magnitude of the effects becomes smaller, suggesting that in the Netherlands too, some of the class differences are due to compositional differences. The pattern has become clearer, though, with the farm workers and unskilled manual workers having the lowest risk of divorce. Skilled manual workers have a higher risk of divorce and the lower nonmanual workers are not significantly different from this group. Professionals have the highest risk of divorce, in-line with our expectations. Managers are again not different from skilled manual workers.

We end by discussing the effects of the other independent variables. Year of marriage has a positive effect in both countries. This confirms that in the regions we analyze, the risk of divorce has increased over time in the Netherlands and Flanders (compare with Figure 1). City dwellers have a much higher risk of divorce than people marrying in rural areas. This is in-line with previous historical research[25] and modern studies of divorce.[26] Note that this difference exists while holding constant rural–urban differences in class structure. Hence, we believe this is primarily a cultural effect with the urban areas being forerunners in divorce. We also have an additional indicator of cultural status, that is, illiteracy. Although this variable primarily distinguishes at the lower end of the cultural status scale, it can still be informative for our hypothesis. In the Netherlands, we find no significant effect of the husband's literacy on the risk of divorce. In Flanders, however, we see a strong effect. When the husband is illiterate, the couple's odds of divorcing are 77 percent lower than when the husband is literate ($1 - \exp(-1.457)$). This suggests that in Flanders too, cultural status matters, although this is probably in a different way than originally argued. We come back to this in the conclusion.

We also see that the wife's age at marriage has a negative effect on the risk of divorce. People who marry early tend to divorce more often. This is also a contemporary pattern and has traditionally been interpreted in terms of the poorer quality of the search process for those who marry young.[27] Age differences between spouses also matter. One would expect that age differences are associated with a greater likelihood of divorce. Table 2 partially confirms this. When the husband is (two or more years) younger than the wife, the couple is more likely to divorce than when they are of more or less the same age. When we consider the other type of age heterogamy (i.e., the husband being three or more years older) we do not find a disruptive effect. This direction of an age difference is more normal and more accepted and probably therefore not disruptive. These results are in-line with analyses of contemporary marriage certificates.[28] We also see, finally, that second marriages are more likely to dissolve. This finding too, is well-known.

Conclusion

The main question in this article is whether there was a positive association between social class and divorce in the early stages of the divorce revolution. If so, this would be the opposite of the class gradient in contemporary times, where divorce appears to be more common among the lower classes. In an analysis of marriages formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we found indeed a positive association between social class and divorce in the Netherlands. Unskilled manual workers and farm workers have a lower risk of divorce than skilled manual workers and professional workers have a higher risk of divorce than skilled manual workers. This is in-line with our expectations but it also suggests that particularly the higher cultural groups and not the higher economic groups are more prone to divorce. Examples of cultural occupations are doctors, teachers,

musicians, and technical drawers. In these groups, traditional norms about marriage and family probably could be broken more easily, whereas in higher economic groups, such as managers, the norms and values may remain quite traditional. A possible explanation for this finding is that the occupations in the higher cultural groups are often characterized by more professional, individual, and expressive freedom, allowing them more to act in an atypical, controversial way (e.g., by divorcing), while the position of the economic elite is more dependent on the approval of the social environment. The cultural elite, enlightened and having a quite secure position, is therefore the perfect group for cultural innovation, in this case as initiators of divorce. Subsequently, when divorce becomes more and more common, we could expect this behavior to become more widespread within the lower social strata, who are, due to the factors described in the introduction part, intrinsically more vulnerable for marital stress factors and divorce.

In Flanders, we do not find this association, in contrast to the Dutch case. Perhaps the lower number of divorces may play a role here, which makes it more difficult to find significant class effects. We do, however, find clear effects of illiteracy. Marriages in which the husband was illiterate were less likely to breakup than marriages in which the husband was literate. Although one could be tempted to interpret this in terms of Goode's perspective on cultural innovation, there may also be other reasons for this effect. For example, the illiterate may not have the skills to formally end their marriage, as divorce was a difficult and expensive matter. Such an interpretation has less to do with the breaking of traditional norms. The fact that we do not find a similar illiteracy effect in the Netherlands could be caused by the different time period of both data samples, and the fact that in that period almost everybody in the Netherlands was literated (see Table 1).

Finally, we consider some limitations of our study. A first one concerns the lack of information on the religious background of both the individuals and regions in our sample. It would be very interesting to evaluate how the inclusion of religion affects our results. Although the class effect reported in the Netherlands seems too strong to be fully explained by religious differences, there surely was an association between religiousness and social class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unfortunately, the available data do not allow controlling for this association. Religious composition could also be causing differences in divorce chances between regions and countries. The two dominant religions in the Netherlands and Flanders were opposed to divorce, so we do not expect major differences in our results between the countries caused by differences in religious background. A second limitation of our study is the fact that we do not have information on unofficial divorces or marriages that broke up without a formal divorce. For example, Van Poppel estimated for the city of Amsterdam that in 1925 there were 8,454 married men and women who did not live together with their spouse. Inclusion of this group in the divorce figures would increase the divorce rate substantially.[29]

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Notes

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