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*Research Article*

**European views of divorce among parents of  
young children:  
Understanding cross-national variation**

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## **European views of divorce among parents of young children: Understanding cross-national variation**

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**Aart C. Liefbroer<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

#### **OBJECTIVE**

We examine differences across Europe in attitudes towards divorce involving children under the age of 12. We hypothesize that these attitudes are less favourable in countries where poverty among single parent households is common than in countries where such poverty is rare. We also expect that divorce involving young children is more accepted in countries where enrolment in child care is high.

#### **METHODS**

Our sample consists of 37,975 individuals from 22 countries, obtained from the European Social Survey (2006). We conduct multilevel regression analyses including individual-level and country-level variables.

#### **RESULTS**

Findings confirm our main hypotheses: the lower the poverty rate among single parents and the higher enrolment in childcare, the lower the disapproval of divorce when young children are involved. These findings remain when taking into account the crude divorce rate and secularisation at the country level, and when controlling for differences in the composition of populations with regard to individual characteristics that are associated with divorce attitudes. Additionally, cross-level interactions indicate that poverty among single parents has the strongest impact on mothers' divorce attitudes.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Divorce attitudes appear to be related to people's assessment of the consequences of divorce for the children involved. Cross-European differences in attitudes towards divorce involving young children are associated with two aspects of welfare states that

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are indicative of the consequences of divorce for children and the parent that takes care of them: poverty among single parents and child care.

## **1. Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed a strong research interest in attitudes on divorce. Both American and European studies have examined trends in divorce attitudes (Thornton 1985; Van den Akker, Halman, and De Moor 1994; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Liefbroer and Fokkema 2008). In addition, studies have examined individual determinants of divorce attitudes (e.g., Thornton 1985; Trent and South 1992; Martin and Parashar 2006), and to a lesser extent also cross-national determinants (Gelissen 2003; Toth and Kimmelmeier 2009). Such research is relevant, not only because attitudes influence behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein 1977, 1980), but also because widespread negative attitudes may lead to stigmatization of divorcees (Kalmijn and Uunk 2007; Kalmijn 2010). For instance, in European regions where attitudes on divorce are negative, men and women experience a stronger reduction in social contacts after divorce than in regions where attitudes on divorce are less negative (Kalmijn and Uunk 2007).

Almost all existing studies focused on people's attitudes towards divorce in general. One could, however, argue that attitudes towards divorce may strongly depend on the conditions under which a divorce occurs. One of the most relevant aspects in this regard is whether or not children are involved. For instance, Liefbroer and Billari (2010) showed that in 2000 only 9% of the Dutch population disapproved of divorce if no children were present, whereas 44% disapproved of divorce when the divorcees had young children. At least two important reasons for this finding could be given. First, the costs of a divorce for the partners involved are considered to be higher if they have children (Lillard and Waite 1993), as a divorce will result in either increased care responsibilities (usually for women) or reduced contact with their children (usually for men). Second, the impact of a divorce on the children might be an important element in considerations about a divorce (Thornton 1977). Research has shown that experiencing a parental divorce and growing up in a single parent family have, on average, negative consequences for children (e.g., Amato and Keith 1991; Cherlin et al. 1991; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

The main aim of the current paper is to extend our knowledge about the cross-national determinants of differences in attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children. Whereas much research has focused on factors that influence individual differences in attitudes towards divorce, much less is known about the societal factors

that could explain cross-national differences in divorce attitudes. The literature on European attitudes and values is largely descriptive, as noted by Halman (1995) and Kalmijn and Uunk (2007). Of the relatively few studies that tried to explain cross-national value differences (Hofstede 1980; Gundelach 1994; Halman 1995; Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Toth and Kemmelmeier 2009), almost all are macro-level studies that related aggregated data on attitudes to aggregate-level country characteristics. Gelissen (2003) constitutes an important exception, as he performed a thorough multilevel analysis of the cross-national determinants of attitudes towards divorce in Europe. As do most studies, though, his research focused on attitudes towards divorce in general rather than on attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children. He found, among other things, that people in countries with a social-democratic welfare regime show the highest acceptance of divorce.

Against this backdrop, our research question is how differences between countries in attitudes towards divorce in the presence of children can be explained. Our main focus is on testing the idea that cross-national differences in these divorce attitudes are related to the expected consequences of a divorce for the children involved. In particular, we expect attitudes towards divorce in the presence of young children to be more tolerant in countries where poverty among single parents is relatively rare than in countries where poverty among single parents is relatively widespread. We further expect attitudes to be more tolerant if the level of enrolment in formal child care is high; first, because child care could act as a buffer against negative influences of diminished parenting after a divorce, and second, because child care might prevent financial hardship among single parents by allowing them to work. Additionally, we examine other country-level factors that might influence divorce attitudes in general, such as the prevalence of divorce and the level of secularization.

We examine these issues by conducting multilevel regression analyses, with 37,975 individuals nested in 22 European countries. This way we can account for compositional effects (Snijders and Bosker 1999); differences in the composition of the populations of European countries with regard to individual characteristics might partly explain cross-national variation in attitudes. The multilevel design also allows us to test interactions between individual and country characteristics. The data are from the third wave of the European Social Survey (2006).

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1 Country-level determinants

Existing studies on macro-level determinants of divorce attitudes examined a number of quite different types of country-level characteristics, including welfare state typologies (Gelissen 2003), economic factors (Toth and Kemmelmeier 2009), and cultural factors (Gelissen 2003; Toth and Kemmelmeier 2009). We selected a limited set of country-level factors that we expect to be particularly relevant in understanding country differences in the attitudes towards divorce involving young children. In particular, we focus on two factors that are related to welfare systems, namely; the level of poverty among single parents and the level of enrolment in formal child care. These factors might be associated specifically to attitudes towards divorce *when children are present*. It is likely that, in forming an attitude towards behaviour, people will take the potential consequences of that behaviour into account (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein 1980). Welfare systems can affect the consequences of divorce for divorcees and their children. A very important potential consequence of divorce – that may help shape these divorce attitudes – is financial hardship. The degree of poverty among single parents in a country depends, among others, on their labour market participation and on welfare support for single parents. Another potential consequence is a deteriorated care situation for children of divorced parents.

In addition, macro-factors that influence attitudes towards divorce in general might influence attitudes towards divorce involving children. We therefore also take into account two country-level determinants that are expected to correlate with general divorce attitudes, namely: societal prevalence of divorce and level of secularization. Whereas poverty among single parent households, enrolment in child care, and societal prevalence of divorce are targeted specifically at explaining divorce attitudes, secularization theory (Martin 1979, 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2004) is a general theory that is often used to explain temporal and spatial variations on family related attitudes.

*Poverty among single parent households.* In general, children in single parent households, which are mainly headed by single mothers, are much more likely to live in poverty than children in households with two parents (Eurostat 2009a). The extent to which divorce leads to a single parent household's sinking into poverty, however, varies strongly across countries. Such effects will probably be relatively weak in countries where most mothers are active on the labour market and in countries where generous welfare support for single parents exists. The likelihood of a drop into poverty after divorce will be much higher if few mothers are active on the labour market and welfare support for single parents is rudimentary or non-existent. In the latter context, the

evaluation of the financial consequences of divorce for the children involved will be much more negative, and we expect that this will lead to a less favourable assessment of divorce with young children. Hence we hypothesize:

H1) The higher the degree of poverty among single parent households in a country, the stronger the disapproval of divorce involving young children.

It is important to realize that it is also possible that in societies where divorce is more accepted by the population, policymakers might respond by support for single parents, resulting in lower levels of single parent poverty. Thus, there might be a reciprocal relationship between poverty levels and attitudes towards divorce. Clearly, cross-sectional data will not allow a test of the exact causal relationship.

Additionally, we investigate whether all people are equally likely to base their attitude towards divorce in the presence of young children on the potential financial consequences for these children. Studies on the economic consequences of partnership dissolution have shown that women (and their dependent children) are often the losers of divorce; they experience a considerable loss in adjusted household income, whereas men experience only moderate income losses, or even improve their economic status (e.g., Poortman 2000; Uunk 2004; Andreß et al. 2006). Therefore women might be more aware of the potential negative consequences of divorce than men, and thus the poverty levels of single parent households may affect the attitudes of women more than those of men. This might be true for mothers in particular, because they are most likely to end up with the care for the children after a divorce and might be more able to identify with single mothers. Hence we expect that the effect of the degree of poverty among single parents on divorce attitudes depends on gender and parenthood. Therefore we additionally hypothesize:

H2) The effect of the degree of poverty among single parent households on attitudes towards divorce involving young children is strongest for women with children and weakest for men without children. Childless women and men with children take up an intermediate position.

*Enrolment in child care.* Literature on the effects of divorce on children suggests that one of the causes of negative child outcomes is a deterioration in parenting investments by both residential and non-residential parents in the first years following a divorce, when they are preoccupied by their own emotional response to divorce (Amato 1993, Kelly and Emery 2003). A number of studies indicated that divorced custodial parents invest less time, are less supportive, provide less supervision, use harsher discipline and engage in more conflict with their children than married parents do (Astone and

McLanahan 1991; Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992; Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin 1992; Simons and Associates 1996; see also Amato 2000 for an overview).

Child care outside the home, however, might act as a buffer against such negative effects of divorce. A small-scale American study (Jacobs, Guidubaldi, and Nastasi 1986) found hardly any differences in social and cognitive functioning of pre-school aged children from divorced and intact families who were enrolled in child care. The authors suggest that these findings may reflect the positive contribution that day care centre experiences make towards stabilizing the lives of children from divorced families. Therefore, in countries where use of formal child care is common, people might generally be less worried about negative effects of divorce on children. After all, in those countries child rearing is partly taken over by professionals, and the daily experiences of children from divorced and from intact families are more similar than in countries where use of child care is rare. Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

H3) The higher the level of enrolment in formal child care in a country, the weaker the disapproval of divorce involving young children.

Levels of enrolment in formal child care might not only influence attitudes towards divorce involving children because child care acts as a buffer against diminished parenting, but also because child care allows mothers to participate on the labour market, and therefore potentially reduces financial hardship after divorce. Hence, child care may influence attitudes towards divorce involving young children as well as the level of poverty among single parents. Therefore, including poverty among single parents and enrolment in child care results in better estimates of the associations between each of these variables and divorce attitudes.

In addition to these macro-level factors that are deemed particularly relevant to understanding cross-national variation in attitudes towards divorce in the presence of young children, we include in our study two other macro-level factors that have been found to be important predictors of general divorce attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

*Societal prevalence of divorce.* People's attitudes towards divorce are socially constructed. One element that may be particularly relevant in this respect is exposure to the behaviour in question. First, approval of a certain type of behaviour is more likely if a person has expressed that behaviour him or herself (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (2003) found that persons who are divorced hold

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<sup>3</sup> We discuss how the level of secularization and the crude divorce rate, as well as individual level variables (see 2.2) might be associated with divorce attitudes, but do not formulate hypotheses about these variables. We only formulate hypotheses about poverty among single parents and enrolment in child care, as the associations between these societal factors and divorce attitudes are central to our study.

more liberal attitudes towards divorce. These cross-sectional studies do not preclude the possibility of selection of people with more liberal divorce attitudes into divorce. Yet, Thornton's longitudinal study (1985) indicated a clear effect of divorce on attitudes towards divorce. Hence, in countries with higher proportions of divorced people, the opinions of the people will be more tolerant on average (compositional effect). In addition, a contextual effect might be operative, as exposure towards a certain type of behaviour, for instance among relatives, friends or colleagues, might also result in more liberal views towards that behaviour (Seltzer 2004). In societies with high divorce rates, people are more likely to know people who are divorced, and therefore we assume they hold more liberal views towards it. Thus we expect that the higher the prevalence of divorce in a country, the weaker disapproval of divorce involving young children.

*Secularization.* Secularization is a process through which religion loosens its hold on the behaviours and attitudes within a society. It is a multifaceted process (Dobbelaere 1981; Berger 1990) that includes aspects such as a decline of the proportion of people within a society who adhere to a religious outlook or are a member of a religious denomination, and a decrease in the moral authority of religious denominations within society at large and among its adherents. The decrease of a religion's moral authority among its adherents may change the content of doctrine itself and the extent to which individual believers feel bound by these doctrines (Dobbelaere 1981). The secularization process has consequences for attitudes towards divorce as Christian doctrine has long opposed divorce. Although the process of internal secularization may have relaxed the negative stance of the Church and of religious people towards divorce, it can be expected that their view on divorce is still rather negative, in particular when a divorce involves young children.

There are at least two ways in which religiosity can help to explain differences between countries in divorce attitudes. First, a compositional effect may be operative, with countries with higher proportions of religious people having—on average—a more negative view on divorce in the presence of young children. Several studies have shown that religious beliefs and behaviour are associated with lower degrees of support for divorce (Thornton 1985, 1989; Larson and Goltz 1989; Krishnan 1994; Schovanec and Lee 2001; Martin and Parashar 2006). Second, there could be a contextual effect; in countries with a large proportion of religious people the Church may be more effective in propagating its teaching throughout society as a whole than in countries where a small minority of the people is religious. Hence, the level of secularization might influence the divorce attitudes of believers as well as of nonbelievers. We therefore expect that the higher the level of secularization in a society, the weaker disapproval of divorce involving young children.

It is not only interesting to disentangle the individual and the contextual effect of religiosity on divorce attitudes, another reason to include the level of secularisation in this study is that it might confound the association between poverty among single parent households and divorce attitudes. The level of secularization may not only affect divorce attitudes, but also poverty among single parents. In countries with low levels of secularization, a rejection of other family forms than the traditional family might lead to less supportive policy for single parents and therefore higher single parent poverty.

## **2.2 Individual-level determinants**

As we noted in the introduction, existing research on general attitudes towards divorce largely focused on individual determinants. Although our main interest in the current study is on the influence of country-level indicators, individual determinants are also relevant, because of the possibility of compositional effects (Snijders and Bosker 1999). Existing theory and research on the individual-level factors that influence attitudes in the domain of personal relationships stressed that these attitudes partly are formed via socialization processes during childhood and adolescence (Axinn and Thornton 1993; Cunningham 2001), and partly result from important experiences in the adult life course (Cunningham and Thornton 2005; Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). Therefore, we focus on individual-level variables that either signify socialization influences (such as religiosity and educational attainment) or relevant experiences in adult life (such as the experience of cohabitation), and have been found to be correlated to relationship attitudes in earlier research. Individual effects of religiosity and divorce on divorce attitudes have already been discussed above. In addition, we discuss correlates of divorce attitudes with age, education, employment, gender, having children, cohabitation, divorce, and urbanisation.

Age might influence attitudes towards divorce because of cohort and life course effects. Studies by Thornton (1985), Trent and South (1992), and Gelissen (2003) indicated a negative effect of age on the acceptance of divorce. The effect of age on divorce attitudes could be nonlinear though; very young adults might hold more idealistic views of marriage than adults who gained more relationship experience, and therefore young adults might be less approving of divorce than older adults. Such a pattern, with young adults and aged people being more traditional than middle-aged people, was found in the Netherlands for the attitudes on divorce involving young children and for gender role attitudes (Kalmijn and Scherpenzeel 2009). Liefbroer and Mulder (2006) found that young adults have stronger feelings of family obligations than older people.

Education is also likely to be relevant. It might be expected that higher educated people are more approving of divorce, as they generally hold more liberal social values than lower educated people (Hyman and Wright 1979). Trent and South (1992) found a positive effect of educational level on approval of divorce involving children. Thornton (1985) and Krishnan (1994) studied only women and also found a positive association between education and liberal views towards divorce. Yet, a trend study of divorce attitudes of young adult women in the United States between 1974 and 2002 gives evidence for an educational crossover: Women with 4-year college degrees, who previously had the most permissive attitudes towards divorce, have become more restrictive in their attitudes towards divorce than high school graduates and women with some college education, whereas women with no high school diplomas have increasingly permissive attitudes towards divorce (Martin and Parashar 2006).

Evidence for the effect of employment is even less clear (Trent and South 1992). Trent and South reasoned that labor force participation might expose individuals to more diverse attitudes and therefore employed individuals should have more liberal family values. They indeed found that employed people hold more liberal attitudes towards divorce. This was also found by Gelissen (2003). Thornton (1985), however, did not find an effect of employment on divorce attitudes in his female sample. A Canadian study of first time married women (Krishnan 1994) showed that employed wives are more likely to see marriage as a permanent union than unemployed wives. As an explanation, the author suggests that employed wives experience less stress caused by economic hardship and therefore value marriage more.

Women generally benefit more from marriage in financial terms than men (Goldscheider and Waite 1986), hence it could be expected that women are more disapproving of divorce than men. Yet, it has also been suggested that men benefit more from marriage than women with regard to mental and physical health and overall well-being (Bernard 1972; Hu and Goldman 1990; Delphy and Leonard 1992; Kapinus and Johnson 2002), and therefore women might be more approving of divorce. The latter was confirmed by Thornton (1985), Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (2003).

People with children might be expected to hold more intolerant views of divorce involving children, because they are more aware of the negative consequences of divorce for them (and for parents). Yet, Krishnan (1994), Trent and South (1992) and Gelissen (2003) found no effect of having children or the number of children on divorce attitudes. Thornton (1985) did not find an effect of the number of children either, but his sample only included mothers.

Research has shown that people who (have) cohabitate(d) are more accepting of divorce. This is partly due to a selection effect, but it has also been argued that the experience of cohabitation makes people more accepting of divorce (Axinn and

Thornton 1992). Finally, Trent and South (1992) found people living in urban areas to be more approving of divorce than people living in rural areas.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Data**

In this study we used data from the third wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), a repeated cross-sectional survey designed to measure social attitudes and values using face-to-face interviews. The ESS aimed to be representative of residential populations aged 15 years and older, regardless of their nationality, legal status or citizenship. Strict guidelines were used to obtain a high-quality dataset. The third wave was held in 2006 and 2007 in 25 countries (N = 47,099). Switzerland, Russia, and Ukraine had to be omitted for the current paper, because our indicators for the degree of poverty among for single parent households and enrolment in child care were not available for these countries. Response rates per country varied between 46% and 73%. The (unweighted) average response rate was 64%. Our sample consisted of 37,975 individuals nested in 22 countries. The total number of respondents in these 22 countries was 40,856, hence 7% of the respondents were removed from our sample due to missing values on one or more variables (3.6% missing values on the dependent variable).

#### **3.2 Measures**

*Dependent variable.* The dependent variable is the degree of disapproval of divorce when young children are involved and was measured with the following item: “How much do you approve or disapprove if a woman/man gets divorced while she/he has children aged under 12?”, with a split ballot design: The version of the item referring to a woman was randomly assigned to half of the respondents, and the version referring to a man to the other half. Answer categories ranged from 1 (strongly disapprove) to 5 (strongly approve). We reversely recoded the answers, so that a higher score implies more disapproval of divorce.

*Country-level variables.* The level of poverty among single parents in 2005 was measured as the percentage of single parent households (households consisting of one parent and dependent children) with an equalized disposable income below the poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equalized disposable income (Eurostat 2009a). This percentage ranged from 18% in Sweden to 45% in Ireland.

Because we included cross-level interaction effects with this variable, we centred the values around the mean (Snijders and Bosker 1999: 74). This facilitates the interpretation of the main effect coefficients of the interacted individual-level variables, which are to be interpreted as the effect for cases with a score 0 on the degree of poverty among single parents. After centring, these cases are (fictional) persons living in a country with an average degree of poverty among single parents.

We measured enrolment in child care as the percentage of children aged between 3 and compulsory school age who are enrolled in formal child care, including child care at day care centres and at centre-based services outside school hours, and education at (pre-)school. This percentage ranged from 28% in Poland to 99% in Belgium (EU-SILC 2006). We did not take into account child care enrolment of 0-2-year-old children because cross-national differences in child care enrolment of this age group partly reflect cross-national differences in the length of parental leave.

To measure the level of secularization we constructed an aggregated measure of religious involvement (using individual religious involvement measured as described below) not only on the basis of the third wave, but also of the first (2002) and second (2004) waves of the ESS—as far as countries participated in these waves. First, we calculated the mean religious involvement per country per wave, and for each country we used the mean of the three waves.

To measure societal prevalence of divorce, we used the crude divorce rate of 2006 (Eurostat 2009b), which refers to the number of divorces in that year per 1000 of the population. It ranged from 0.8 in Ireland to 3.2 in Latvia. An overview of these country-level variables is presented in Columns 3, 4, 5, and 6 of Table 1.

*Individual-level variables.* Cross-national differences in attitudes on divorce might partly result from differences in the composition of populations with regard to individual characteristics that influence divorce attitudes. Therefore, we included a set of individual-level control variables. We included age and age squared, measured in years; educational level, ranging from primary education not completed (0) to tertiary education completed (5); employed (0 = no, 1 = yes); and urbanisation, ranging from farm or home in the country side (1) to big city (5). We combined gender and parenthood into one variable, distinguishing mothers (reference category), women without children, fathers, and men without children. Parenthood is based on whether the respondent ever had one or more children. Furthermore we included whether the respondent ever cohabited (0 = never cohabited, 1 = ever cohabited) and was ever divorced (0 = never divorced, 1 = ever divorced).

**Table 1: Country characteristics: Descriptive statistics  
(N = 39,975 individuals from 22 European countries)**

Country	<i>n</i>	Poverty rate among single parents <sup>1</sup>	Enrolment in formal child care <sup>2</sup>	Mean religious involvement <sup>3</sup>	Crude divorce rate <sup>4</sup>	Mean disapproval of divorce <sup>5</sup>	Percentage disapproving of divorce <sup>6</sup>
Austria	2,103	27	71	0.14	2.5	3.23	33
Belgium	1,785	33	99	-0.22	2.8	2.86	29
Bulgaria	1,165	25	38	-0.19	1.9	3.63	56
Cyprus	935	35	81	0.81	2.3	3.00	27
Denmark	1,448	21	96	-0.35	2.6	2.13	14
Estonia	1,431	40	85	-0.50	2.8	3.59	52
Finland	1,882	20	77	-0.00	2.5	2.77	27
France	1,960	26	94	-0.43	2.2	3.15	36
Germany	2,727	25	90	-0.21	2.3	3.28	32
Hungary	1,353	27	71	-0.21	2.5	3.26	33
Ireland	1,426	45	93	0.74	0.8	3.32	38
Latvia	1,638	31	60	-0.25	3.2	3.28	36
The Netherlands	1,836	26	89	-0.11	1.9	2.76	25
Norway	1,722	19	81	-0.36	2.3	2.54	28
Poland	1,629	40	28	0.95	1.9	3.39	51
Portugal	2,105	31	75	0.41	2.3	3.03	27
Romania	1,897	27	57	0.82	1.5	3.63	54
Slovak Republic	1,538	32	73	0.37	1.2	3.10	50
Slovenia	1,364	22	81	-0.01	2.4	3.55	40
Spain	1,832	37	91	-0.06	1.7	3.06	35
Sweden	1,868	18	92	-0.50	2.2	2.78	18
United Kingdom	2,331	37	89	-0.25	2.6	3.17	28

<sup>1</sup>Percentage of single parent households with an equivalized disposable income below the poverty threshold in 2005. Source: Eurostat 2009a. <sup>2</sup>Children between 3 years and compulsory school age who are enrolled in formal child care as a percentage of all children in the same age group. Formal child care includes child care at day care centres and at centre-based services outside school hours, and education at (pre-)school. (For Norway and Romania the figures for 2007 are included, because earlier figures are not available.) Source: EU-SILC 2006. <sup>3</sup>Mean factor score. Source: ESS, wave 1, 2, 3. <sup>4</sup>Number of divorces per 1000 of the population in 2006. (For Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom the 2005 rates are included because the 2006 rates are not available.) Source: Eurostat 2009b, p. 157. <sup>5</sup>Mean score on disapproval of divorce while children under age 12 are involved, scale: 1–5. Source: ESS, wave 3. <sup>6</sup>Percentage that (strongly) disapproves of divorce while children under age 12 are involved. Source: ESS, wave 3.

We measured religion by the degree of religious involvement and religious denomination. Religious involvement was measured as a factor score on the basis of three items. First, self-evaluated level of religiosity, measured with the question: “Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?”. The response scale ranged from not at all religious (0) to very religious (10).

Second, frequency of church attendance, measured with the question: “Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?”. Response options ranged from every day (1) to never (7). Third, frequency of prayer, measured with the question: “Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?”, with response options also ranging from every day (1) to never (7). If one item was missing, it was substituted by the average value of respondents with the same score on one of the other two items (in 1.9% of the cases such a substitution was made, mostly because of a missing on frequency of prayer). A factor analysis showed one clear factor underlying these items. The higher the factor score, the higher a person’s religious involvement. Regarding religious denomination, we distinguished the following categories: no denomination, Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, other Christian denomination, and non-Christian denomination.

Finally, we took into account whether the respondent had to report disapproval of a woman or of a man divorcing while he/she has children under age 12, by including the dummy variable female version split ballot (0 = version referring to a man, 1 = version referring to a woman). An overview of the descriptive results on the individual-level variables is presented in Table 2.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2: Individual characteristics: Descriptive statistics  
(N = 39,975 from 22 European countries)**

Variable	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Disapproval of divorce		3.11	1.03
Strongly approve	6.59		
Approve	19.40		
Neither approve nor disapprove	39.71		
Disapprove	25.03		
Strongly disapprove	9.28		
Age <sup>1</sup>		46.68	18.24
Educational level <sup>2</sup>		2.94	1.43
Employed	53.96		
Urbanisation <sup>3</sup>		3.08	1.22
Ever cohabited	30.46		
Ever divorced	12.77		

<sup>4</sup> Another individual characteristic that is likely to influence divorce attitudes is the experience of divorce of one’s parents; those whose parents divorced tend to have more positive attitudes towards divorce (Coleman and Ganong 1984; Amato 1988; Amato and Booth 1991; Jennings, Salts, and Smith 1992). We could not include this variable, as this information is not provided in the data.

**Table 2: (Continued)**

Variable	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender and parental status			
Mother	39.62		
Men without children	16.36		
Father	29.55		
Woman without children	14.47		
Religious involvement <sup>4</sup>		-0.05	1.03
Religious denomination			
No denomination	38.42		
Catholic	32.14		
Protestant	15.48		
Eastern Orthodox	9.73		
Other Christian	2.20		
Non-Christian	2.03		
Female version split ballot	50.13		

Note: All values are weighted, to correct for sample design and the fact that country sample sizes are not proportional to population sizes. <sup>1</sup>In years. <sup>2</sup>Scale: 0 (primary education not completed) – 5 (tertiary education completed). <sup>3</sup>Scale: 1 (countryside) – 5 (big city). <sup>4</sup>Factor scores.

Source: ESS, wave 3.

### 3.3 Method of analysis

Multilevel regression analyses were conducted in which both individual-level characteristics and country-level characteristics were included. In the first step, an empty variance-partitioning model (intercept only) was estimated to examine how much of the total variation in attitudes towards divorce can be attributed to the country level. In the second step, country-level variables were included in the model. In the third step, individual-level characteristics were included. This was done not only in order to examine their effects on divorce attitudes, but also to investigate whether including these individual-level effects reduced the effects of country-level variables. This could be the case if cross-national differences in divorce attitudes reflect differences in the composition of national populations regarding our individual-level variables. Finally, we included cross-level interactions between the national poverty rate of single parents and the dummy variables that indicate gender and parental status. In this model we included random slopes for these dummy variables. Analyses were conducted with the `xtmixed` command in Stata10, using the maximum likelihood option.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> One might argue that ordinal logit models are more appropriate because the dependent variable is measured on a 5-point scale. We also conducted ordinal logit analyses, resulting in outcomes similar to those presented

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Cross-national differences in divorce attitudes: Descriptive statistics

Clear differences across Europe in the attitudes towards divorce involving young children can be observed. This is illustrated in Columns 7 and 8 of Table 1. In Column 7, the mean country score on disapproval of divorce is presented (1–5), ranging from 2.13 in Denmark to 3.63 in Bulgaria and Romania. To facilitate the interpretation of the country differences, in Column 8 the percentage of respondents who disapprove or strongly disapprove of divorce involving children under age 12 is presented. This percentage ranges from 14% in Denmark to 56% in Bulgaria. More generally, these descriptives show that disapproval of divorce involving young children is highest in Eastern Europe and lowest in North-Western Europe (except for Ireland). The Southern and Continental Western European countries are in the middle. Yet, the level of disapproval does not strictly follow geographical lines.

### 4.2 Multilevel regression models

In Table 3, the results of five multilevel regression models are presented. Models 1, 2, and 3 are random intercept models. Model 1, the empty variance partitioning model (intercept only), shows that the individual differences in attitudes between people within countries (indicated by the variance of the residuals) are much larger than differences across countries (indicated by the variance of the constant). Still, the intra-country correlation indicates that 12.2% of the total variation can be attributed to the country level.

In Model 2, we added the country-level variable poverty among single parents. It has a positive effect, indicating that the higher the percentage of single parents with an income below the poverty threshold in a country, the more disapproval of divorce involving children. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Including poverty among single parents in the model reduced the variance of the intercept (i.e. the variation in divorce attitudes at the country level) by 24%.

In Model 3, we added the other country-level variables. Enrolment in formal child care has a negative effect; the higher the proportion of children in child care, the lower the disapproval of divorce. This supports Hypothesis 3. Mean religious involvement does not affect divorce attitudes. The crude divorce rate has a negative effect, as

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in the next section. The cut-off points indicated that the effect of the independent variables on moving from answer category 1 to 2, from 2 to 3 etcetera, were roughly equal, therefore we decided to present the results of models in which our measure of divorce attitudes was treated as a normally distributed continuous variable.

expected, but this effect is only statistically significant at an  $\alpha$ -level of .10 ( $p = 0.095$ ). The b-coefficient of poverty among single parents in Model 3 is only slightly different from the b-coefficient in Model 2, which means that the effects of enrolment in formal child care, the crude divorce rate and mean religious involvement hardly confound the effect of poverty among single parent households. Adding these country-level variables further reduced the variation at the country-level by 41%, compared to Model 2. There is a significant increase in model fit between Model 2 and 3 ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 11.67$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In Model 4, individual-level variables were added. The effects are largely in line with expectations. The effects of age and age squared indicate that the effect of age is nonlinear: Both relatively young and relatively old people are less approving of divorce involving children than middle aged people. The effect of age squared is very small, though. The negative effects of educational level, employment status, urbanisation, ever cohabited, and ever divorced<sup>6</sup> indicate that the highly educated, the employed, people living in urban areas, people who have ever cohabited, and people who have been divorced are least disapproving of divorce involving children. The effects of the dummy variables (man without children, father, and woman without children) represent the attitudes of these categories relative to mothers' attitudes towards divorce involving young children. Fathers appear to be most disapproving of divorce. Men without children are also more disapproving of divorce than women with and without children. As is the case for men, women without children are a little more approving of divorce than mothers are. Religious involvement has a positive effect, indicating that the higher people's religious involvement is, the more they disapprove of divorce when children are present. Furthermore, Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox people do not seem to hold different attitudes towards divorce than people with no religious denomination, whereas people with another Christian denomination or a Non-Christian denomination hold more traditional attitudes. Perhaps the finding that Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox do not differ from respondents with no religious denomination seems surprising. This is because we control for religious involvement. If we drop the latter variable from the model, people of all denominations would hold more traditional attitudes of divorce than people with no denomination. Finally, the effect of split ballot implies that respondents report less negative attitudes towards divorce if it concerns a woman (i.e. if they were assigned the version of the question referring to a woman) than if it concerns a man.

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<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that one should not include an individual-level effect of being divorced in our models, as this variable is potentially endogenous. We also estimated our models without this individual-level variable. The results were almost identical to the ones presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Multilevel model results predicting disapproval of divorce involving children under age 12 from individual and country-level variables (N = 39,975 individuals from 22 European countries)**

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	B	SE								
Constant	3.114***	0.078	3.108***	0.068	4.518***	0.413	4.922***	0.418	4.925***	0.432
Country level										
Poverty rate single parents, centred <sup>1</sup>			0.024**	0.009	0.026**	0.008	0.024**	0.008	0.027**	0.009
Enrolment in child care <sup>2</sup>			-0.012***		-0.012***	0.003	-0.011**	0.003	-0.012**	0.003
Mean religious involvement <sup>3</sup>			-0.275	0.178	-0.275	0.178	-0.448*	0.179	-0.442*	0.185
Crude divorce rate <sup>4</sup>			-0.201†		-0.201†	0.120	-0.185	0.121	-0.169	0.126
Individual level										
Age <sup>5</sup>							-0.014***	0.002	-0.014***	0.002
Age squared <sup>5</sup>							0.000***	0.000	0.000***	0.000
Educational level <sup>6</sup>							-0.062***	0.004	-0.062***	0.004
Employed <sup>7</sup>							-0.085***	0.012	-0.085***	0.012
Urbanisation <sup>8</sup>							-0.019***	0.004	-0.019***	0.004
Gender and parental status (Ref. cat. = Mother)										
Man without children							0.134***	0.016	0.129***	0.026
Father							0.209***	0.012	0.209***	0.019
Woman without children							-0.060***	0.017	-0.061**	0.019
Ever cohabited <sup>9</sup>							-0.129***	0.012	-0.129***	0.012
Ever divorced <sup>9</sup>							-0.231***	0.015	-0.228***	0.015
Religious involvement <sup>9</sup>							0.172***	0.006	0.172***	0.006
Religious denomination (Ref. cat. = No denomination)										
Catholic							-0.001	0.016	-0.002	0.016
Protestant							0.013	0.017	0.016	0.017
Eastern Orthodox							-0.048†	0.029	-0.051†	0.029
Other Christian							0.156***	0.034	0.152***	0.034
Non-Christian							0.303***	0.035	0.301***	0.035
Female version split ballot <sup>7</sup>							-0.199***	0.009	-0.199***	0.009
Cross-level interactions										
Man without children * poverty rate single parents									-0.006†	0.003
Father * poverty rate single parents									-0.005†	0.003
Woman without children * poverty rate single parents									-0.002	0.002
Variance Constant ( $\sigma_e^2$ )	0.132***	0.040	0.100***	0.030	0.059***	0.018	0.060***	0.018	0.064***	0.019
Variance Man without children									0.009*	0.004
Variance Father									0.005*	0.002
Variance Woman without children									0.002	0.002
Variance Residuals ( $\sigma_e^2$ )	0.947***	0.007	0.947***	0.007	0.947***	0.007	0.826***	0.006	0.824***	0.006
Intra-country correlation ( $\rho$ )	0.122	0.096	0.086	0.058	0.058	0.067	0.067			
Log likelihood	-52,900.670		-52,897.674		-52,891.837		-50,308.483		-50,282.176	

Note:  $\rho = \sigma_e^2 / (\sigma_e^2 + \sigma_t^2)$   
<sup>1</sup>Percentage of single parents households with an equivalized disposable income below the poverty threshold in 2005. <sup>2</sup>Children between 3 years and compulsory school age who are enrolled in formal child care as a percentage of all children in the same age group. Formal child care includes child care at day care centres and at centre-based services outside school hours, and education at (pre-)school. <sup>3</sup>Mean factor score. <sup>4</sup>Number of divorces per 1000 of the population in 2006. <sup>5</sup>In years. <sup>6</sup>Scale: 0 (primary education not completed)–5 (tertiary education completed). <sup>7</sup>0 = no, 1 = yes. <sup>8</sup>Scale: 1 (countryside)–5 (big city). <sup>9</sup>Factor scores, centred around the grand mean.  
 †p < 0.10, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.  
 Source: ESS, wave 3.

Including the individual-level variables only slightly reduced the country-level effects of poverty among single parents and enrolment in formal child care. This implies that these effects are hardly due to compositional differences between national populations. The effect of the crude divorce rate has also reduced slightly, but is not statistically significant anymore. The effect of mean religious involvement has strongly increased and is now statistically significant. Surprisingly, the effect is negative, implying the higher the mean religious involvement, the lower disapproval of divorce. Note that this contextual effect of religiosity is in the opposite direction of the effect of individual religiosity. Adding the individual level variables did not further reduce the country-level variation in divorce attitudes.

In Model 5, we included the cross-level interaction effects between the poverty rate of single parents and the dummy variables man without children, father, and woman without children. We therefore included random slopes for these dummy variables. The main effect of poverty rate of single parents now represents the effect on mothers' attitudes towards divorce while children are young. The three interaction effects are all negative, which indicates that the positive effect of the national poverty rates on disapproval of divorce is strongest for mothers. The attitudes of men without children are least influenced by the level of poverty among single parents. This finding is in line with Hypothesis 2. However, the difference between mothers and women without children is not statistically significant. The differences between mothers and childless men, as well as between mothers and fathers are only significant at an  $\alpha$ -level of 0.10 ( $p = 0.061$  and  $p = 0.052$ , respectively).

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed at increasing our knowledge about cross-national differences within Europe with regard to attitudes towards divorce if young children are present. We did so by focusing on the effect of two welfare-state related country-level characteristics that are indicative of the consequences of divorce for the children and the partner that takes care of them (usually the mother), namely; the degree of poverty among single parent households and the level of enrolment in child care. In addition, we took into account the effects of the crude divorce rate and the degree of secularization at the societal level and examined compositional effects by including individual-level variables.

Our study supports the hypothesis that the degree of poverty among single parents positively affects the disapproval of divorce. Hence, people in countries with higher poverty rates among single parent households are more disapproving of divorce. This seems to indicate that when forming attitudes towards divorce, people take into account

the financial consequences for mothers and children, although we cannot be completely sure of the causal direction of the association. Perhaps in countries where divorce (involving children) is more accepted by the population, policymakers respond by financial support for single parents or stimulation of their labour participation. Yet, disentangling these reverse effects empirically is complicated. One would need longitudinal cross-national data to investigate whether divorce attitudes change after levels of poverty among single parents have changed. It will be difficult, though, to rule out other societal changes that affect divorce attitudes and might occur at the same time.

In addition, our findings suggest that the effect of the poverty rate among single parents on attitudes towards divorce involving children is strongest for mothers, which is in line with our hypothesis. The reason for this might be that women, and especially mothers, can more easily identify with single parents, and therefore take into account their situation when forming attitudes on divorce involving children. Where the prevalence of co-parenting and single fatherhood increases, men's and especially fathers' awareness of the problems of single parenthood might increase as well. In such a situation, the effect of the poverty rate among single parents on attitudes towards divorce involving children might be more similar for men and women.

The findings of this study also support our hypothesis that higher levels of enrolment in child care are associated with greater acceptance of divorce involving young children. A reason might be that in countries where many children go to child care centres, people worry less about potential deterioration of children's upbringing after a divorce. Also, child care enables single mothers to work, leading to a reduction of the negative financial effects of divorce. However, adding the level of enrolment in child care to the model caused only a small reduction of the association between poverty among single parent households and divorce attitudes, suggesting that the indirect effect via poverty among single parents is not substantial. We cannot be certain whether the effect of child care on divorce attitudes is partly spurious though: In countries with modern family attitudes, people might be more positive towards outsourcing child care and more accepting of divorce.

No effect was found for the crude divorce rate, once individual characteristics were controlled for. Yet, people who are divorced are more accepting of divorce. Hence, the only effect of the divorce rate at the country level is a compositional effect. The expected contextual effect that higher divorce rates lead to more tolerance towards divorce in the presence of children was not confirmed. This is in accordance with the findings of Gelissen (2003) on attitudes towards divorce in general. The idea that the more one is exposed to a type of new behaviour, the more tolerant one's attitudes towards this type of behaviour become, may not be applicable if the behaviour is evaluated as largely negative. Perhaps some people become more tolerant towards divorce by experiencing divorce in one's network, especially if they see its positive

aspects, whereas other people become less tolerant, especially if they see the negative consequences of divorce.

One could argue that the using the number of divorces per 1,000 married women would be a more meaningful divorce statistic for cross-national comparison than the crude divorce rate, as the proportion of the population that is married varies across the countries. This refined divorce rate is not available cross-nationally, therefore we calculated it ourselves using data from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and national statistical offices on the number of divorces and the number of married women in the population. Using the refined divorce rate did not change our results. Yet, another methodological reason for the lack of effect of divorce rates could be that these divorce rates do not tell us how many divorces in the country involve young children. Unfortunately, this latter type of information is not available in a cross-national comparative fashion.

The relationship between the level of religiosity in a country and divorce attitudes turns out to be complex. At the bivariate level, the correlation is positive: The higher the average level of religiosity in a country, the less tolerant people in general are towards divorce involving young children. The same relationship holds at the individual level: The more religious, the less tolerant towards divorce a person is. After controlling for other macro-level factors and for individual-level religiosity, however, the macro-level relationship between religiosity and divorce attitudes becomes negative. Thus, all other things being equal, there is a lower level of disapproval of divorce involving young children in countries with a high proportion of religious people. This is an unexpected finding. We think that part of the explanation could be linked to the *ceteris paribus* clause mentioned above. Usually, not all things are equal. In highly religious countries, poverty levels of single mothers are higher and child care enrolment is lower than in other countries, and this could partially be a result of the embracement of traditional family norms by the Church. In such religious societies, it is less likely that structural solutions that improve the situation of parents and children after divorce will be implemented. In such unfavourable circumstances, people will generally be quite negative about couples who decide to divorce, in particular if they have young children. At the same time, the absence of structural solutions could lead to sympathy with those involved in a divorce, following the logic that it is the “sin” rather than the “sinner” that needs condemnation. As a result, the negative effects of the lack of institutional support systems in highly religious countries is partially buffered by a heightened level of interpersonal sympathy. Another explanation could be that in religious societies, those who are not religious are a very selective group and more liberal on average than non-religious people in secularized societies.

All together, the country-level variables explain 55% of the country-level variation in divorce attitudes, the largest share being explained by the degree of poverty among single parents and enrolment in child care.

Interestingly, once the level of personal religious involvement is taken into account, belonging to one of the three largest denominations in Europe (the Catholic, Protestant or Eastern Orthodox church), does not lead to more traditional divorce attitudes than not belonging to any denomination, suggesting that individuals' level of religiosity is a more important predictor of divorce attitudes than the specific denomination to which these religious people belong.

Furthermore, we found that education, employment, urbanisation, and having cohabited are negatively related with the disapproval of divorce if young children are present. Generally speaking, these effects are in line with earlier studies. Age generally has a positive effect on disapproval of divorce, as was found before, but very young adults disapprove more of divorce than adults that are somewhat older. Clearly, the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow us to determine whether this is an age effect or a cohort effect. Furthermore, women without children are least disapproving of divorce and men with children are most disapproving. This is in line with earlier studies that found that men are more disapproving of divorce than women (Gelissen 2003; Thornton 1985; Trent and South 1992). Our findings also suggest that having children results in more disapproval of divorce, which is in contrast with other studies that found no effect of children (Trent and South 1992; Krishnan 1994; Gelissen 2003). An explanation might be that in our study, respondents were asked about disapproval of divorce in the presence of children under age 12, whereas Krishnan (1994) and Gelissen (2003) studied divorce attitudes in general. The study by Trent and South (1992) did include an item on divorce if children are present, but the effect of the number of children was examined, instead of the effect of having children or not (dichotomous), as we did.

Our study is innovative for several reasons. First, divorce attitudes are studied taking into account individual and country-level characteristics by using a multilevel design. This has, to the best of our knowledge, so far only been done in one study (Gelissen 2003). Second, whereas the study by Gelissen and most other studies of divorce attitudes examined attitudes towards divorce in general, we studied the disapproval of divorce if children under age 12 are present. This specific circumstance might be important for people's attitudes, as the presence of children increases the impact of a divorce. Third, we tested the effect of two country characteristics that have very specific relevance for attitudes of divorce involving children: the degree of poverty among single parent households and enrolment in child care. In addition, we included cross-level interactions between poverty among single parent households and the gender and parental status of the respondent.

A drawback of a multilevel study including 22 countries is that only few variables at the country level can be included. This makes it difficult to unravel the effects of the country characteristics in our study from other country characteristics to which they might be related. Rather than opting for an inductive approach in which the contribution of a large number of potentially relevant macro-level factors is tested, we opted for including a small set of theoretically-inspired macro-level variables.

The limitation of the number of country-level variables that can be included in the analyses does not only show the need for cross-national comparative datasets including many countries, but also the need for comparable indicators of country characteristics. The lack of comparable data on the degree of poverty among single parent households forced us to exclude three ESS-countries from our analyses.

Finally, we would like to note that in many European countries, having children in cohabitational relationships has become more and more common. In the European Union, over one third of all children are born to unmarried parents. In some countries, this percentage is over 50% (Eurostat 2011). Although many cohabiting couples get married after they have had children, some see cohabitation as a substitute for marriage (Kiernan 2001). Therefore, it would be interesting to study attitudes towards dissolution of cohabitation unions if young children are present, and compare these with attitudes towards marital dissolution involving children. At the moment, no such cross-national data are available.

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