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Editorial on the special issue "Research on Divorce: Causes and Consequences"

Paul B. Hill, Johannes Kopp

"Of all changes in family life during the 20th century, perhaps the most dramatic – and the most far-reaching in its implications – was the increase in the rate of divorce", *Paul Amato* (2000: 1269) wrote in a review. Amato's thesis can undoubtedly be approved; separation and divorce have certainly received a lot of attention in the sociology of the family. However, these topics are not as prominent in research as one would expect and as they surely deserve to be – especially in Europe and Germany. This is all the more surprising, considering that general sociology also refers to these phenomena and thereby shifts the focus to the question of how the – putatively or actually – rising instability of romantic relationships can be explained. The instability of close relationships is often seen as a consequence of modernisation and individualisation processes or even as a manifestation of the postmodern loss of solidarity and community spirit. With these speculative considerations, increasing divorce rates are often hastily taken as empirical evidence. The fact that this increased dissolution of close relationships is not historically unique – existing even in tribal, estate-based and pre-modern industrial societies – is often ignored. In the past, separation and divorce were less frequent in total numbers, but this was due rather to specific individual circumstances than to the social system. Therefore, it is not surprising that even in pre-modern societies the instability of close romantic and long-term relationships was particularly observable in those social groups whose resource level made separation and divorce possible, as well as the support of those who were left behind (like children and women). Thus, it is not the needs, the integrity or the bonding capacity of individuals that have changed, nor the influence of society with its framework of norms and values, but rather the allocation of resources and the additional possibilities for individuals.

Confirmed by this reasoning, micro-sociological approaches dominate the explanation of separation and divorce. Recent reviews (*Arránz Becker* 2015a; *Braver/Lamb* 2013) on theory development only discuss approaches based on action theory. Four theories are featured in nearly all lists: exchange theory, New Home Economics as well as its theoretical extensions, the vulnerability-stress-adaption model and the cascade theory. Undoubtedly, exchange theory provides the central arguments for the explanation of separation and divorce and for the prior processes of partner choice and the institutionalisation of the relationship (*Thibaut/Kelley* 1959; *Lewis/Spanier* 1979). Its key advantage is its applicability to a whole range of famil-

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ial decisions and developments. New Home Economics, which provides important amendments to exchange theory and thereby emphasizes the relevance of market mechanisms and decision-making calculations, can be considered as quite "related". Within the same theoretical context, two other additional theories have to be mentioned: On the one hand commitment theory (*Rusbult* 1980) which emphasizes the "sunk costs" or, in other words, the investments in relationships as stabilising factors, and on the other hand – in accordance to the action-theoretical assumptions of the two perspectives mentioned above – the framing model which provides another (additional) perspective, namely the theoretical integration of norms into the rational-choice-approach (*Esser* 2002; *Kroneberg* 2007).

Finally, stress theory and the "trajectory toward divorce" approach have been established. Stress theory focuses on the social and psychological consequences of actions by partners (*Karney/Bradbury* 1995). The handling of stress-provoking interactions, dealing with stress and coping strategies in relationships provide important arguments for the causes as well as the consequences of divorce. The cascade theory analyses the paths leading to separation (*Gottman* 1993, 1994), and explains how destructive interactions operate, spread, reinforce and finally lead to the dissolution of a relationship.

Altogether, these different theoretical approaches do not compete directly. Some are based on action theory; others focus on the emotional and communicative consequences and their dysfunctional perpetuation. Criticism has been raised with regard to all theoretical perspectives mentioned, but without a doubt they have lost little of their persuasive power so far. Put more defensively, a superior theoretical alternative is not within sight. However, research on separation and divorce has a solid and coherent theoretical foundation.

We mentioned at the beginning that empirical research on divorce, however, is not particularly elaborate. The number and the degree of sophistication of present analyses do not do the public significance and the sociological definition of the phenomenon as a "common indicator" of social change justice. For Germany, there merely exists one research study that compares married and divorced individuals on the basis of a large random sample and thus can also be classified as a theory-testing survey, namely the "Mannheim Divorce Study" from the 1990s (*Klein/Kopp* 1999). This over twenty years old survey has clearly increased the knowledge about relationship dissolution, but it is (unfortunately) still an exception in its comprehensiveness. Its universal theoretic foundation corresponds to the action-theoretical tradition of the sociology of the family. In its specific configuration, it is influenced (among others) by *Lewis* and *Spanier* (1979) and their utility theory.

The lack of suitable studies is also connected to the methodological requirements they carry. Due to the lack of a register, sampling among the population of divorced people, which consists of the currently divorced and the remarried divorced, is difficult. In practice, the sampling can almost only be run through a screening procedure. If restricted to the currently divorced, a bias is to be expected, because they probably differ systematically from the remarried. Additionally, problems of retrospective memorising arise. Besides methodological challenges, there are also restrictions in terms of content, because one single survey cannot reveal the full

variety of processes including all relevant aspects of separation or divorce. The Mannheim study could have been the starting point of increased empirical research on divorce, but the opportunity was not seized. However, it could at least answer questions which were, up until the 1990s, subject to speculation (for an overview see the empirical research of *Wagner/Weiß* 2003 as well as *Klein et al.* 2013).

The "German Family Panel" (pairfam), which includes questions on the quality, satisfaction and stability of relationships, was planned as a continuation of the Mannheim study. But in this case – due to the large number of topics included and the variables of different fields of marriage and relationships – only a limited systematic test of theoretical hypotheses is possible. The research design as well as panel attrition are also problematic. Overall, the number of recorded divorces is relatively low and hardly allows for causal analysis. Other data sources (the "German Socio-Economic Panel Study" (SOEP), the "German General Social Survey" (ALLBUS) and data from the "International Social Survey Programme" (ISSP), the "Generations and Gender Survey" (GGS) etc.) allow for – more or less limited – analysis of separation and divorce. But such valuable studies only exist unrelated to each other and suffer from a lack of central explanatory variables and methodological restrictions. Separation or divorce were not central topics in the conception of these and other surveys, they were rather viewed as marginal processes.

In spite of these data limitations, empirical determinants for relationship dissolution can be isolated. Some effects are to be mentioned: The risk of divorce rises with the urbanity of the living environment, the divorce of parents or parents-in-law (transmission of divorce), a lower marriage age, a non-religious wedding and increasing educational heterogamy of couples. Children are probably the main risk-reducing effect (see for example *Klein/Kopp* 1999; *Wagner* 1997; *Brüderl et al.* 1997; *Kopp* 2000; *Hill/Kopp* 2013; *Babka von Gostomski et al.* 1998). Besides children, who are viewed as "marriage-specific capital", other investments, such as a shared bank account, shared land or home ownership also act as stabilising factors (*Wagner* 1997). Infidelity, drifting apart as well as alcohol and drug abuse are individual causes that foster divorce (*Amato/Previti* 2003). *De Graaf* and *Kalmijin* (2003) prove the relevance of communication behaviour, such as a lack of attention and empathy among partners. The impact of interaction styles and conflict resolution strategies has also been empirically proven. Accordingly, openness, intimacy and trust strengthen the stability of relationships (*Arránz Becker* 2004; *Arránz Becker/Rüssmann* 2004). The effect of premarital cohabitation on stability is positive (see for example *Lois* 2008). Experiences of unemployment – especially among men – and ensuing financial problems reduce the stability. The employment of women shows ambivalent effects (*Arránz Becker* 2015a; *Wagner/Weiß* 2003).

However, in the last two decades, the focus of research on divorce has changed (*Amato* 2010; *Arránz Becker* 2015a). Roughly from the turn of the millennium onwards, the consequences of relationship dissolution are being addressed more often than its causes. This shift in research can be explained by the increase of divorce rates all over the world (*Goode* 1993) and the assumed and empirically proven negative consequences. To mention only one example, the results of *Holden* and *Smock* (1991) proved that a divorce poses the greatest risk of impoverishment to women in

the US. Another study points out drastic psychological and social consequences of divorce for parents and their children (*Amato* 2000). Consequently, the majority of articles in this volume concentrate on the consequences of separation and divorce.

However, there is no homogeneous perspective of theory in this field of research. Rather, there is a coexistence of theories and hypotheses. Whereas the dissolution of relationships is treated as the explanandum in all approaches mentioned above, quite different explanatory phenomena operate under the heading "consequences of divorce". Still, the research is characterised by a common cause, namely the increasing instability of relationships. Implications of separation vary substantially: social isolation, identity problems, economic deprivation and the loss of contact with one's children, to name only a few. In this context, a stringent theory can hardly be expected and probably would not be very useful. The articles in this volume emphasize these facts and circumstances.

There is no universal theoretical framework for post-divorce research, instead, specific explanatory approaches focus on individual issues. The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective of *Amato* (2000) is a particularly influential approach on which many empirical studies of the psychological consequences of relationship dissolution are based. According to this approach, separation and divorce are dramatic life events, which drastically influence the lives of those involved, carrying short- and/or long-term consequences. On the level of psychological implications, a variety of results prove the negative consequences. *Braver* and *Lamb* (2013: 493) summarise the relevant research results as follows: "It is not surprising that divorced parents are more likely to suffer psychological and emotional problems than married parents, although most parents are not permanently damaged by divorce. Divorced parents have higher risks of depression, anxiety, and unhappiness, physical illness, suicide, motor vehicle accidents, alcoholism, homicide, and overall mortality." The adjustment to new life conditions is, in the most cases, easier for women than for men, because they have better support networks, initiate divorce more frequently than men and often have more effective coping strategies.

Besides the psychosocial and personality-related consequences addressed above, other research priorities can be identified. Economic consequences, for example, make up a very important research area, as mentioned (*Weitzman* 1985). Separation and divorce are often connected with a reduced financial scope, while women are the losers in most cases (given the fact that role division is often arranged traditionally between the genders). The magnitude of economic consequences also depends on legal and socio-political circumstances, which leads to difficulties when it comes to international comparisons. For Germany, economic effects have been examined by *Hans-Jürgen Andreß* and *Miriam Bröckel* particularly (see for example 2007, as well as the article in the present volume). Family dissolution also often negatively affects the raising and socialisation of children, which might have consequences on their educational careers.

Changes concerning the frequency and intensity of contact between former partners and their children are perhaps the most important research areas. Contact between former partners is especially relevant and almost inevitable when both still are in touch with the child or the children and share childrearing duties ("parallel

parenting"). The main intent is often to reduce negative psychosocial consequences for the children. According to US studies (*Braver/Lamb* 2013: 499-500), about 20 percent of children whose parents are divorced show adaptive and developmental disorders, whereas the respective number for stable families is only about 10 percent. The omission of interaction or clearly diminished communication with a parent – especially at the age of approximately one to three years – can lead to the formation of an unfavourable attachment style, which can negatively influence behaviour in adolescence and adulthood. In summary: "The quality of both mother- and father-child relationships remains the most reliable predictor of individual differences in psychological, social, and cognitive adjustment in infancy, as well as in later childhood" (*Braver/Lamb* 2013: 498).

This similarly applies to the methodological side of post-divorce research as well as to the analyses of the instability of relationships. Surveys which focus exclusively on the diverse consequences of the separation process, which are theory-driven and include a sufficient number of cases are rare. In the case of relationship instability, as well as the process of divorce, panel studies should ideally be carried out, because they are the only adequate means that is able to illustrate the consequences of divorce in their processuality. In this respect, pairfam might be a good starting point for initial analysis, although methodological problems such as high panel attrition exist. For the analysis of specific effects – for example changes of financial resources as a result of separation and divorce – other data sets are also suitable, as demonstrated in the article by *Bröckel* and *Andreß*.

The contributions to the present volume provide important research findings focussing on prominent topics in Europe and Germany. The results provide new insights, complement and contrast recent American findings and point to open questions.

The first article by *Ingmar Rapp, Thomas Klein, Sebastian Fronk* and *Johannes Stauder* deals with the determinants of divorce decisions. The authors take up well-known considerations of exchange theory, according to which the opportunities on the so-called "marriage market" – meaning the availability of alternatives to the existing relationship – determine the stability of the relationship. Allegedly, better alternatives theoretically have a destabilising effect, even if marriage quality is high. For the first time in divorce research, the authors do not only try to use proxy variables for the analysis of market structures, but rather integrate the actual social contexts (as *Scott Feld* (1981) described in his focus theory) into the analysis and can therefore prove respective effects. With recourse to the latest "German Marriage Market Survey", the results of older surveys can be critically discussed with regard to the new data (*Rapp et al*. 2015).

The following articles then turn to the consequences of separation and divorce. Father-child relationships after divorce, for example, are the issue of the survey by *Matthijs Kalmijn*. By focussing on living arrangements after divorce, the amount of contact with the father, and the perceived quality of the father-child relationship, he addresses questions which have hardly been taken into consideration in research so far. He analyses the dependence of contact frequency and the intensity of the father-child-dyad on demographic and socio-economic variables. The author uses

different data sets, allowing for an international comparison between England, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. Results show that the national context also matters for understanding father-child relationships (*Kalmijn* 2015).

Miriam Bröckel and *Hans-Jürgen Andreß* focus on the economic consequences of divorce. As the New Home Economics approach points out in particular, material gain can also be achieved by pooling resources during a cohabitation or marriage. When the advantages of a shared household break away due to separation, the expenditures for two separate households will typically be higher in total. Specialisation gains resulting from the division of labour between the partners will also disappear. In consequence, greater restrictions regarding the available income are to be expected after divorce (*Bröckel/Andreß* 2015). The survey, based on almost 30 waves of the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), directly draws on comparable analysis (*Andreß* 2003; *Andreß et al.* 2003; *Andreß/Bröckel* 2007). Over this period, the socio-structural, socio-economic and legal conditions as well as the division of gender roles in relationships have clearly changed. The analysis shows the effects of these changes on the financial situation of men and women after divorce. Overall, the results prove that the financial consequences of divorce are still more negative for women than for men.

In his article, *Oliver Arránz Becker* analyses in which way parent-child relationships change after a divorce or union dissolution, examining the differences between mother-child and father-child relationships. The focus is on adolescents and adults (of the offspring generation) and the relationships to their parents. The author bases his analyses on pairfam data and tests several competing hypotheses. According to the spillover hypothesis, stress and conflict that parents experience between each other might be transferred to their children and consequently harms their well-being. However, a compensation of conflicts might also be possible through a more intensive and empathetic communication between children and both parents, or one parent (the "compensation hypothesis"). So far, little is known about the situation in Germany. The main innovation of this article, compared with earlier studies, is the analysis method used. A rather methodical conclusion from the analyses is that the fixed-effects regressions based on variance within respondents offer a different picture than earlier studies based on cross-sectional data. Conclusions drawn in American studies are certainly very helpful; however, comparisons with results gathered in other national contexts allow conclusions on the relevance of family politics, economic and social normative arrangements. *Arránz Becker* is able to point out that there are evident indications for the influence of such contexts (*Arránz Becker* 2015b).

Sabine Walper, Carolin Thönnissen and *Philipp Alt* examine the effects of family structure and the experience of parental separation on adolescents and their well-being. They also base their analyses on data of the pairfam panel. The data set allows a systematic comparison of four different family structures: stable nuclear families, single mother families, step-families and a group of prospective separators whose parents separated between the two waves taken into account here. Adolescents' satisfaction with different domains of life and their self-esteem were used as indicators of well-being. Contrary to findings from international studies, the data

do not suggest that adolescents raised in a stepfamily are similarly or even more strained than adolescents living in a single mother family. Generally, effects of family structure did not differ for boys and girls, but maternal education moderated the effects of family structure on adolescents' life satisfaction. Overall, the findings are in line with other evidence from Germany which suggests only limited disadvantages for adolescents from separated/divorced families (*Walper et al.* 2015).

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