

Explaining Municipal Differences in Union Dissolution Rates Among Married and Cohabiting Couples

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Introduction

Earlier research has shown that divorce rates do not only differ between countries (Wang & Schofer, 2018; Wagner & Weiß, 2006), but also that there are large variations within countries (Kulu, 2012; Su et al., 2018; Robert-Nicaud, 2014; De Graaf & Kalmijn, 1999). This spatial variation has been linked to spatial differences in various underlying factors, such as financial uncertainty, norms, social cohesion and the availability of other potential partners (Glass & Levchak, 2014; Kulu, 2012; Su et al., 2018; Robert-Nicaud, 2014; De Graaf & Kalmijn, 1999). With unmarried cohabitation becoming an increasingly popular alternative to marriage (Eurofound, 2019; Yu and Xie, 2015; Cherlin, 2020; Manning, 2020), it is important to examine whether union dissolution rates of cohabiting couples show a similar spatial variation. Likewise, it is not known whether the effects of the various underlying factors are similar. Therefore, this study aims to (a) explore how spatial patterns in the union dissolution risks of married and cohabiting couples differ and (b) examine how the effects of key factors in explaining spatial patterns in union dissolution risks differ between married and cohabiting couples. Making use of Dutch register data we determine union dissolution risks of married and cohabiting couples at the municipal level. To date, knowledge on the spatial spread of union dissolution risks of cohabiting couples and associated factors is sorely lacking.

Theoretical background

To understand variation in union dissolution rates between municipalities, we distinguish between five sets of factors. Three factors relate to differences between municipalities in the composition of couples living in these municipalities: financial uncertainty, gender norms and union formation norms. Two factors relate to the differences in the municipal context in which couples live: social cohesion and the availability of other potential partners. A first factor that may explain differences in municipal divorce rates is financial uncertainty. Higher levels of financial uncertainty can lead to more financial disagreements, which are an important cause of union dissolution (Dew et al., 2012). On the other hand, costs associated with divorce and the poorer financial perspectives afterwards may limit engagement in divorce. Yet, considering that the costs of divorce may matter relatively little in the Dutch context because of the extensive social welfare system, we expect that relational stress is more important in explaining the link between financial uncertainty and union dissolution: divorce risks are higher when municipal levels of financial uncertainty are higher. Union dissolution risks of cohabiting couples may be even higher, as the lower levels of financial integration of cohabiting couples allow for easier union dissolution. The study conducted by Stoeldraijer & De Beer (2021) support this idea that the link between financial instability and union dissolution risk differs for married and cohabiting couples. However, this earlier research has been conducted on a national level, and differences in regional level variations still await to be revealed.

A second factor that can be linked to union dissolution reflects *gender norms*. Municipalities in which residents have a more egalitarian division of labor are expected to have higher divorce rates. This is

because couples may still follow the traditional pattern of union formation, but they no longer follow the traditional pattern of labor division, in which men are the sole breadwinners. This disparity may indicate that women have already started to swap traditional gender norms for non-traditional gender norms, while men have not. As a result, couples in these municipalities may experience more conflict. This increase has been shown in many prior studies (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). In cohabiting couples, both partners have decided to follow a non-traditional pattern of union formation. These modern and more egalitarian norms are also likely to apply to labor divisions – with men and women both expecting more egalitarian labor divisions. As such, we expect that municipalities in which residents have a more egalitarian division of labor have lower divorce rates.

A third factor linked to union dissolution reveals the role of *union formation norms*. Municipalities in which residents have more traditional union formation norms are likely to have lower divorce rates. In the Netherlands, municipalities in which union formation norms are more traditional often have more religious residents. Those are mostly located in the Dutch Bible Belt (Schmeets, 2016). These residents follow traditional union formation norms because of their religion, which dictates that people in serious relationships should marry and will only be able to dissolve their union under very specific circumstances (Yarhouse & Nowacki, 2007). Despite this, we expect the effect of more traditional union formation norms on the union dissolution risk of cohabiting couples to be non-existent. By cohabiting, religious cohabitants have already shown to disregard religious norms. Moreover, cohabiting couples are less likely to be religious.

Social ties – Municipalities in which the population has stronger social ties are likely to have lower divorce rates, as relationship conflicts are more likely to be detected and resolved earlier. While we expect stronger social ties to decrease the union dissolution risks of both married and cohabiting couples, the decrease in union dissolution risk may be smaller for cohabiting couples as these couples may receive less social support. After all, cohabiting is still frequently seen as a trial period before marriage (Hiekel et al., 2014) in which some relationships will inevitably fail. Moreover, the social networks of cohabiting couples may have more individualized norms, leading to a stronger focus on individual wellbeing than couple survival.

Alternative opportunities – Earlier research on the availability of viable alternatives to the current partner has mostly focused on sex ratios (e.g. Ugglå & Andersson, 2018; Obersneider et al., 2019), but results are inconclusive: some studies have reported higher divorce risks when sex ratios were less balanced, while others have reported similar or lower divorce risks. This may partially be because sex ratios may not be the best indicator for subjective partner availability (Filzer & Preetz, 2021). As such, we hypothesize that the availability of more viable alternatives in a municipality may still increase the risk of divorce.

Data and methods

In this study, we examined the spatial spread of union dissolutions that occurred between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2018 among Dutch couples aged 25 to 65 who lived together on 1 January 2017. We were able to construct municipal union dissolution risks for both married and cohabiting population by combining register data on the residence and civil status of Dutch couples. Because couples in longer lasting relationships are less likely to dissolve their union than couples in shorter lasting relationships, we used a life table approach to be able to compare union dissolution risks across municipalities. In this study, the dependent variables are the 15-year union dissolution rates of newly formed cohabiting couples and the 15-year union dissolution rates of newly wed couples.

All five different factors considered to be linked with union dissolution have been quantified using multiple independent variables. *Financial uncertainty* was measured by the median income of couple-households and the proportion of couple-households earning less than the minimal income. *Gender norms* were measured by the difference in the proportion of women and men with income and the proportion of municipal council members who were women. *Union formation norms* were measured by the proportion of individuals aged 30 to 40 years who were married and the proportion of the adult population who were religious. *Social ties* have been measured by the population density and the proportion of adults who volunteer. *Alternative opportunities* were quantified as the proportion of residents between the age of 25 and 65 who lived alone, the municipal sex ratio and the proportion of residents over the age of 65. All variables were drawn from publicly available sources at Statistics Netherlands.

Spatial regressions were estimated separately for the union dissolution risks of cohabiting and married couples. All models control for educational attainment, the proportion of couples without kids and the average age difference of partners.

Results

15-year union dissolution rates of newly cohabiting couples in the Netherlands (2017)

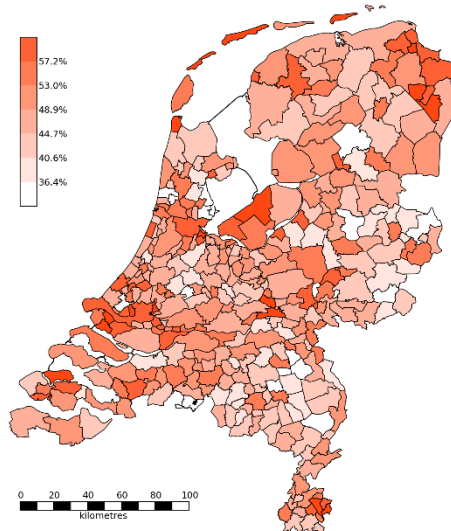


Figure 1a % cohabiting couples who dissolved their union 15 year after the start of cohabitation

15-year union dissolution rates of newly married couples in the Netherlands (2017)

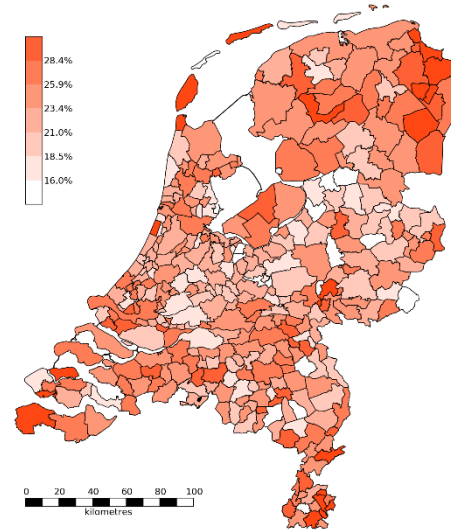


Figure 1b % married couples who dissolved their union 15 year after marriage

When we compare the differences in municipal union dissolution rates of cohabiting couples in Figure 1a to differences in municipal union dissolution rates of married couples in Figure 1b, it is difficult to spot any clear similarities or differences: both union dissolution rates do not have a high level of correlation. One thing that does stand out is that union dissolution rates among married couples seem to be relatively high in the north-east part of the country, whereas these seem relatively lower for cohabiting couples. Results from our preliminary analyses in Table 1 show that there are differences between the effects of gender roles and social ties on union dissolution rates of married and cohabiting

couples. Whereas union dissolution rates of married couples are lower when men earn more than women, there is no effect on the union dissolution rates of cohabiting couples. When more adults in a municipality do volunteer work, the municipal union dissolution rates of both married and cohabiting couples decrease, but this effect is less strong for cohabiting couples. Both of these observations are in line with our expectations. With regard to the availability of alternative opportunities, only the proportion of people over age 65 shows a significant effect.

Table 1 Spatial regression estimates of union dissolution risks: effects of municipal variables. [refer to me]

	Cohabiting couples		Married couples	
	mean	se	mean	se
m couple households; Σ income partners	- 0.008 ***	0.002	- 0.002 *	0.001
prop. couple households; under min. income	- 0.001	0.005	0.008 *	0.003
prop. female; income - prop. male; income	0.966	0.702	- 1.721 ***	0.468
prop. female; income - prop. male; income ²	1.013	7.075	- 20.236 ***	4.663
prop. municipal council; female	0.001	0.036	0.023	0.024
prop. population 30-40; married	0.464 ***	0.050	- 0.028	0.028
prop. population; religious	- 0.087 **	0.027	- 0.004	0.002
population density (x 1000 people / km ²)	- 0.390	4.147	- 3.589	2.354
prop. population; volunteer	- 0.260 **	0.083	- 0.376 ***	0.044
prop. population 25-65; male	- 0.319	0.518	0.158	0.308
prop. population 25-65; male ²	42.857	23.646	- 14.140	15.074
prop. population; age > 65	- 0.756 ***	0.193	- 0.235 *	0.108
prop. population 25-65; single	- 0.239	0.125	- 0.006	0.079
Constant	- 0.028	0.130	0.236 **	0.071
r ²	0.568		0.443	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. All models control for the proportion of couples without kids, the proportion of the population that is higher educated and the average age difference between partners.

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