



Regional value differences in Europe and the social consequences of divorce: A test of the stigmatization hypothesis [☆]

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Abstract

In this paper, we develop a novel way of testing the stigmatization hypothesis. The stigmatization hypothesis argues that people who break traditional norms, experience sanctions from the people that surround them. We apply this hypothesis to the case of divorce and examine whether higher normative intolerance toward divorce in the region of residence lead to declines in social contacts after divorce. To test the hypothesis, we match data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) to data from the European Values Study (EVS). The ECHP data are used to model individual changes in social contacts after divorce. The EVS data are used to develop measures of individual attitudes against divorce in 65 European regions. Multilevel analyses are used to link the two, where individuals are nested in regions. The results provide partial confirmation for the stigmatization hypothesis. We first find that attitudes about divorce not only differ significantly between countries, they also differ significantly between regions within countries. Second, in regions where there is more disapproval of divorce, women experience greater declines in contacts with friends and relatives after divorce, men and women experience greater declines in neighborhood contacts, and men are more likely to end their club memberships. Third, we find that the stigmatization effect is primarily present for divorcees who did not move after divorce. Our analyses provide more direct evidence for the operation of social norms than previous studies on family behavior have done.

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1. Introduction

The values that people have, vary both among countries and among regions within countries. Countries in the north and west of Europe are more liberal in a number of life domains, for example, than countries in the south of Europe (Arts et al., 2003; Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Within countries, there exist differences as well: people in the south of Italy are more traditional than people in the north of Italy, people in Bayern in Germany are more traditional than people in other *Bundesländer*, and people in Murcia in Spain are more traditional than people in Asturias (Gubert, 1995). In this paper, we argue that such value differences go together with divergent regional normative climates that may have consequences for individual behavior. More specifically, we argue that when a social norm exists in a certain geographic area, the people who break this norm in that area will experience sanctions.

To examine this argument, we focus on regional differences in traditional family values in Europe and we link these differences to the social consequences that individuals experience when they divorce. Our expectation is that in regions where divorce is less accepted, changes in social contacts will be greater after divorce and it will be more likely that divorcees experience a loss in social contacts. We call this the stigmatization hypothesis. To test the stigmatization hypothesis, information on regional values is obtained from multinational cross-sectional data (i.e., the European Values Studies). Information on the social consequences of divorce for individuals is taken from multinational prospective panel data (i.e., the European Community Household Panel). Both datasets have information for a large number of European countries and include detailed regional information. By combining the two multinational datasets in a multilevel analysis, we are able to test our ecological hypothesis.

There are several reasons why our approach is novel. First, our paper adds to the literature on European values. This literature has described in detail how values differ between countries, but it has said little about how regions differ within countries (for an exception, see Beugelsdijk and Noorderhaven, 2003). In addition, the literature on European values is largely descriptive (Arts and Halman, 2004; Arts et al., 2003). Little attention is paid to the question of whether value differences have consequences for individual behavior. We try to assess in a systematic fashion whether regional climates matter for one aspect of an individual's life chances, his or her social contacts.

Second, our paper adds to the literature on marriage and divorce by emphasizing the contextual level. There have been several studies examining how divorce affects the social contacts and social networks of individuals, but these have primarily examined the issue from an individual perspective and have not yet incorporated explicit measures of community characteristics (Amato, 2000). There are studies that relate family behavior—and divorce in particular—to other regional characteristics, but these studies do not consider the individual level and are therefore purely aggregate (Lester, 1999; Lester and Abe, 1993; Yang and Lester, 1991).

Third, our paper tries to come closer to establishing the existence of social norms. Most research on social norms is experimental and it has been difficult to establish the operation of norms using large-scale survey data (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Prior survey analyses of

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