



# Irreconcilable differences? Ethnic intermarriage and divorce in the Netherlands, 1995–2008

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses population data of the Netherlands (municipality registers) between 1995 and 2008 to describe and explain the occurrence of divorce among recently newlywed interethnic and mono-ethnic couples ( $N = 116,745$ ). In line with homogamy theory, divorce risks are higher for interethnic couples, in particular if the spouses were born and raised in countries that are culturally distant from each other. In addition, the effect of cultural distance is smaller for second generation immigrants than for first generation immigrants. There is no evidence for a higher risk of divorce among Black–White marriages. In line with convergence theory, results show that the higher the divorce propensity in the wife's origin country, the higher the divorce risk of a couple is.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on marriage between members of different ethnic groups can be traced back to the roots of sociology as it refers to one of its core problems, namely the problem of cohesion. Ethnic intermarriage, also known as ethnic exogamy, indicates strong links between members of different ethnic groups within society and is therefore considered to be an important indicator of the social integration of ethnic groups (Gordon, 1964; Kalmijn, 1998; Monden and Smits, 2005).

From this perspective, it is important to consider divorce of ethnic intermarriages because ethnic exogamy does not have the same value for societal cohesion if a large proportion of these marriages end in divorce (Zhang and Hook, 2009). Generally, studies showed that interethnic couples are more likely to divorce than mono-ethnic couples in the United States (Fu, 2006; Jones, 1996; Zhang and Hook, 2009), Australia (Jones, 1994) and the Netherlands (Janssen, 2002; Kalmijn et al., 2005). Nevertheless, exceptions to this pattern have been found. Several specific types of interethnic couples appeared to have more stable marriages in comparison to mono-ethnic marriages (Jones, 1996; Schwertfeger, 1982; Zhang and Hook, 2009).

In this study, we aim to describe and explain the occurrence of divorce among interethnic couples in comparison to mono-ethnic couples. Therefore, we address the general research question: to what extent and why does the ethnicity of partners affect the risk to divorce?

We aim to contribute to existing literature in four ways. First, theoretically: we test old and new hypotheses from existing theory to broaden our understanding of interethnic divorce patterns. Scholars have relied on homogamy theory and convergence theory to guide their research (Kalmijn et al., 2005; Zhang and Hook, 2009) and we extend previous research by arguing that effects proposed by the theories should be less strong for second generation immigrants.

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Second, conceptually: we study divorce patterns of (almost) every national origin group in the Netherlands, including immigrants as well as the native Dutch. In other studies, in particular in the United States, pan ethnic identity measures of ethnicity are often used. In these studies, immigrants are classified into large groups, such as Asians, Hispanics, Blacks and Whites. As a consequence, interethnic marriage (and divorce) within such panethnicities go unnoticed. In a pan ethnic categorization, for example, Blacks from Suriname (Dutch speaking post-colonial immigrants) would be classified together with Blacks from Somalia (non-Dutch speaking refugees), although these groups differ in terms of language, religion, and traditional norms and values. Hence, our national-origin concept of ethnicity captures the more fine-grained group boundaries in the Netherlands in comparison to pan ethnic concepts of ethnicity.

We distinguish between 124 national origin groups, allowing us to examine patterns of divorce risk among various combinations of national origin groups. We provide descriptive information about divorce risks among and between the most important ethnic groups in the Netherlands. Our hypotheses, however, are about interethnic divorce within and between all 124 groups in general instead of between only the largest groups in the Netherlands.

Third, methodologically: we contribute to existing literature by using longitudinal data on the entire Dutch population. Previous research has been mostly of static nature, thereby relying on cross-sectional data to examine the risk of divorce. A major problem with these static data is that they start with a selective sample of (surviving) marriages. The longitudinal design of the data we use circumvents this problem because we start our observations with newlyweds. We follow couples over a 13-year period and use event history techniques to examine the annual risk of divorce while correcting for two-way clustering in our data on the husband's and wife's origin country.

Fourth, descriptively: little is known about recent divorce rates of interethnic and mono-ethnic couples in the Netherlands. Most Dutch studies relied on data until 1999 (Janssen, 2002; Kalmijn et al., 2005). This study contributes to the literature by providing up-to-date descriptive information on the linkage between national origin and the risk of divorce in the Netherlands, by covering the period between 1995 and 2008.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

Two theories have been used in interethnic divorce literature: homogamy theory and convergence theory. In homogamy theory it is argued that interethnic couples are more likely to divorce than mono-ethnic couples (Kalmijn et al., 2005; Zhang and Hook, 2009). Convergence theory predicts the divorce rate of interethnic couples (e.g., Dutch-Surinamese couples) to be in between the divorce rates of the endogamously married couples involved (e.g., mono-ethnic Dutch and Surinamese couples, respectively) (Jones, 1996). Although the theories' predictions seem to contrast each other, we argue in line with Jones (1996) that their mechanisms could work simultaneously.

### 2.1. Homogamy theory

According to homogamy theory (Kalmijn et al., 2005) two mechanisms play a role in the likelihood of divorce.

First, it is argued that individuals who marry across ethnic boundaries experience difficulties in dealing with different preferences. Interethnic partners disagree more often on important relational (e.g., how to raise the children) and general issues (e.g., worldviews), while it is also more likely that they share fewer interests and activities together than mono-ethnic partners do. For example, Hohmann-Marriot and Amato (2008) show that interethnic couples report more conflict and less shared values (although the influence on divorce risks was moderated by negative third party influence). Following homogamy theory, it is therefore more problematic for interethnic partners to live in marital harmony than it is for mono-ethnic partners who were raised with similar cultural norms and values (Gaines, 1997; Janssen, 2002; Kalmijn, 1998).

Second, homogamy theory considers the influence of *third parties* to result in additional challenges for interethnic couples (Gaines, 1997; Janssen, 2002; Kalmijn et al., 2005). Third parties, such as friends and family, are likely to prefer ethnic endogamy over exogamy in order to maintain internal group cohesion and protect the ethnic identity of their group (Kalmijn, 1998; Tolsma, Lubbers and Coenders, 2008). Thus, third parties may exert control over individuals by posing sanctions on undesired marriage behavior. For example, they may express direct disapproval or refrain from social support to the couple (Hohmann-Marriot and Amato, 2008; Killian, 2001). Following the arguments of preferences and third parties, homogamy theory expects that *partners from different origin countries have a higher divorce risk than partners from the same origin country (H1)*.

Based on homogamy theory, we derive additional hypotheses. To begin, interethnic marriages are not alike in terms of cultural distance. For example, partners in a Belgian-Dutch couple are more alike than partners in a Moroccan-Dutch couple. The religion of the Dutch and Belgians is for instance often the same (Christianity) and both come from relatively individualistic countries (Hofstede, 1980), whereas the religion of the Moroccans and the Dutch is most likely to be different (Christianity versus Islam) and the degree of individualism in the countries differs to a large extent (Hofstede, 1980). A larger cultural distance relates to more diverging preferences, norms, and values, which indicates larger incompatibility in turn. Also, a larger cultural distance between groups is likely to denote a stronger boundary between them, which increases third party opposition to exogamy (Kalmijn et al., 2005). Therefore, we hypothesize that *the larger the cultural distance between the wife's and husband's origin country, the higher the divorce risk (H2)*. Note that although this hypothesis refers to the origin country of husbands and wives, it does not imply that immigrants from particular origin countries are all the same (e.g.,

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