

# *From Liberation to Failure?*

*An explanation for decreasing divorce risks*

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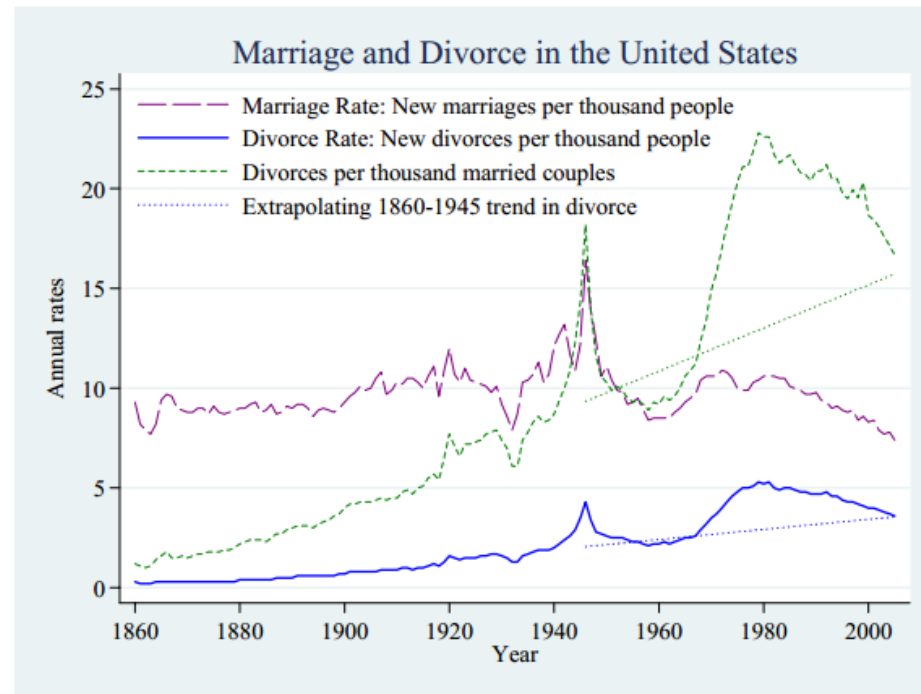


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*European University Institute*

Presentation for the  
Divorce Conference, 3rd of October 2014, INED Paris

# Context: Declining Divorce Rates? (1)

Figure 1: Marriage and Divorces per Thousand People 1860-2005

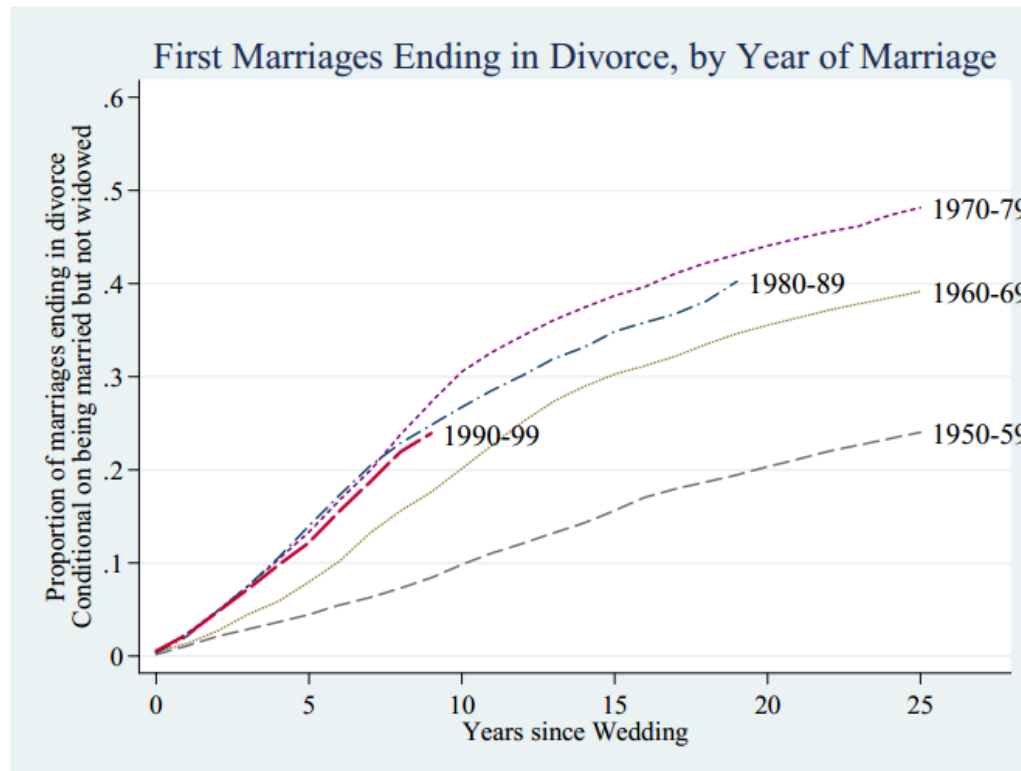


Sources: For the United States, data for 1860-1919 are from Jacobson (1959); 1920-1998 from Carter et. al. (2006), *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millenium Edition*; 1999-2005 from *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007

# Context: Declining Divorce Rates? (2)

Figure 2

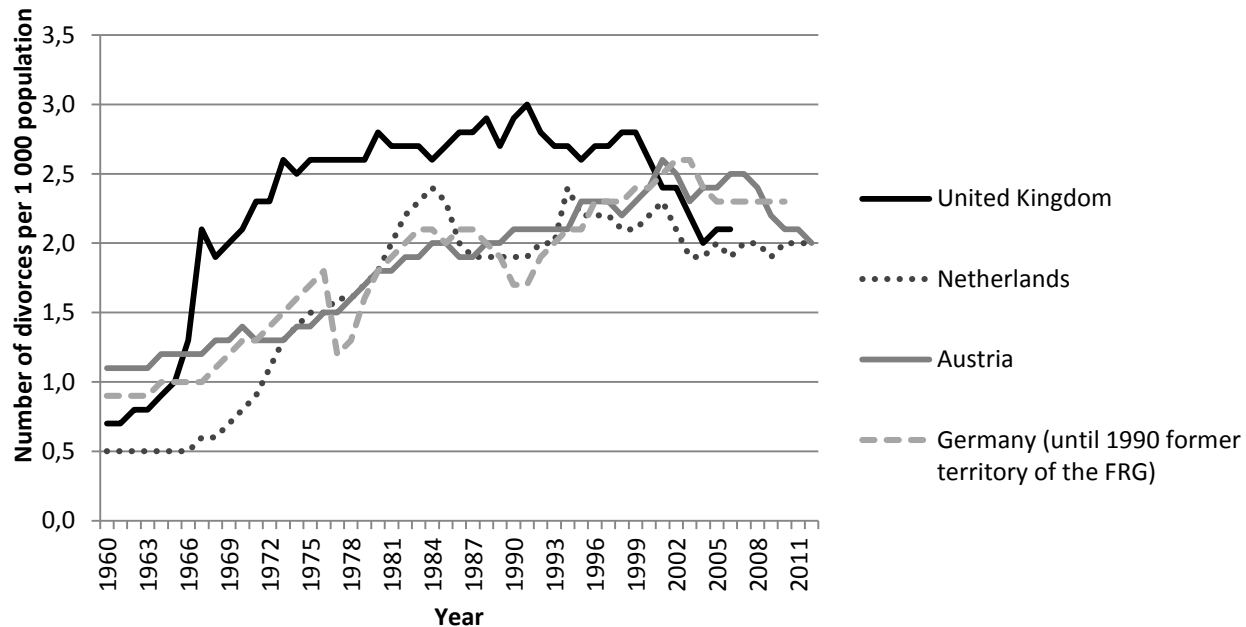


Source: Retrospective marital histories recorded in the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007

# Context: Declining Divorce Rates? (3)

Figure 1. Crude divorce rates over time for select countries



Source: Eurostat, accessed 24/01/2014.

# Research questions:

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- 1) Can declining divorce rates be observed beyond the US context?
  - 2) How could possible drops in divorce risk be explained?
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# Costs/benefits

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Two main categories of explanations:

- 1) Change in the average perceived benefits from marriage compared to alternatives
  - 2) Change in the average perceived costs associated to divorce
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# Quality of marriage increased?

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- 1) Increased role sharing (dual breadwinnership)?
  - 2) Less conflict about sharing domestic tasks?
  - 3) Attractiveness of alternatives decreased?
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# Costs of divorce increased?

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- 1) Declines in religiousness
- 2) No signs of less approval



# An explanation based on perceived consequences of divorce

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## 4 Central Assumptions

- 1) People are less likely to decide to divorce if they expect the well-being of those involved to be negatively affected
- 2) It is hard to predict the consequences of a future divorce, and people therefore base their expectations on consequences observed in other cases of divorce
- 3) Divorce has a larger negative effect on well-being if it ends a relatively satisfying marriage compared to a conflictive one. Empirical Evidence: Several studies find supporting evidence for the 'escape hypothesis, but not uniformly so
- 4) The share of divorces that ends relatively satisfying marriages increases as divorce becomes more common. Empirical Evidence: One study on Sweden found this pattern

*Main implication:*

**As divorce rises people will increasingly observe divorces with relatively more negative impacts on well-being, which can eventually lead to a decline in divorce risk.**

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# Main hypotheses to be tested

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- 1) Divorce risk has been decreasing beyond the US context
- 2) The average reported satisfaction with marriages has gone up
- 3) People who 'escape' from an unsatisfying marriage experience relatively less negative consequences
- 4) Average consequences of divorce are inversely related to average divorce risk

**In direct contrast with social stigma explanations**

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# Data and method



# Data

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## British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)

- Representative for the British population
- Longitudinal data for 1991-2009

Only prospective data and sample for England used to secure a representative picture of the same target population

- Robust to exclusion of sample weights

N = 3 147 marriages (33 056 marriage-years)

2 461 persons for well-being analysis (26 551 person-years)

- Left censored cases included as well as duration of marriage
  - Multiple imputation of missing values on independent variables
  - Results robust to using listwise case deletion
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# Measures & Procedure

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Discrete-time event history models to look at change over time in divorce risk

Growth curve models to look at change over time in marital satisfaction trajectories

Graphs of life satisfaction trajectories pre-ceding and following divorce to see if these differ over time and by pre-divorce marital satisfaction

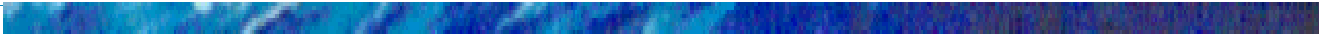
**Divorce:** Divorce or separation reported in consolidated marital history file  
Average yearly hazard 1.25; 395 events

**Benefits of marriage:** Satisfaction with spouse on a scale from 1 to 7  
Average: 6.09; SD: 1.27

**Well-being:** Satisfaction with life overall on a scale from 1 to 7  
Average: 5.12; SD: 1.21

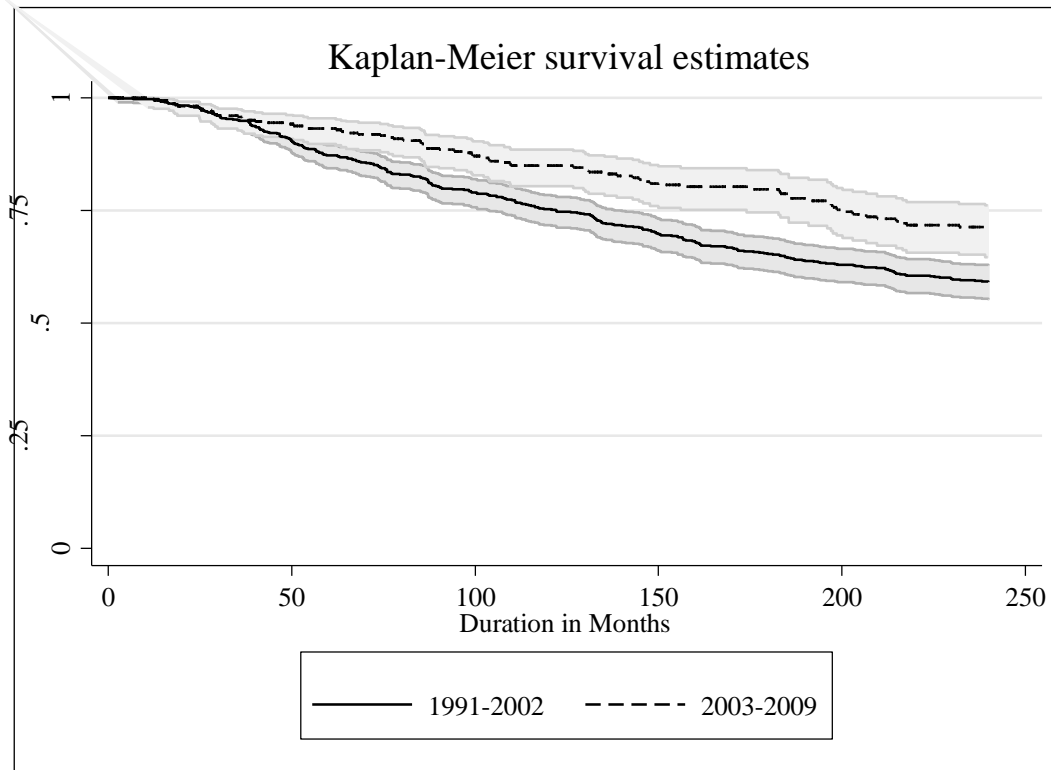
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# Results



# Results (1): Divorce risk

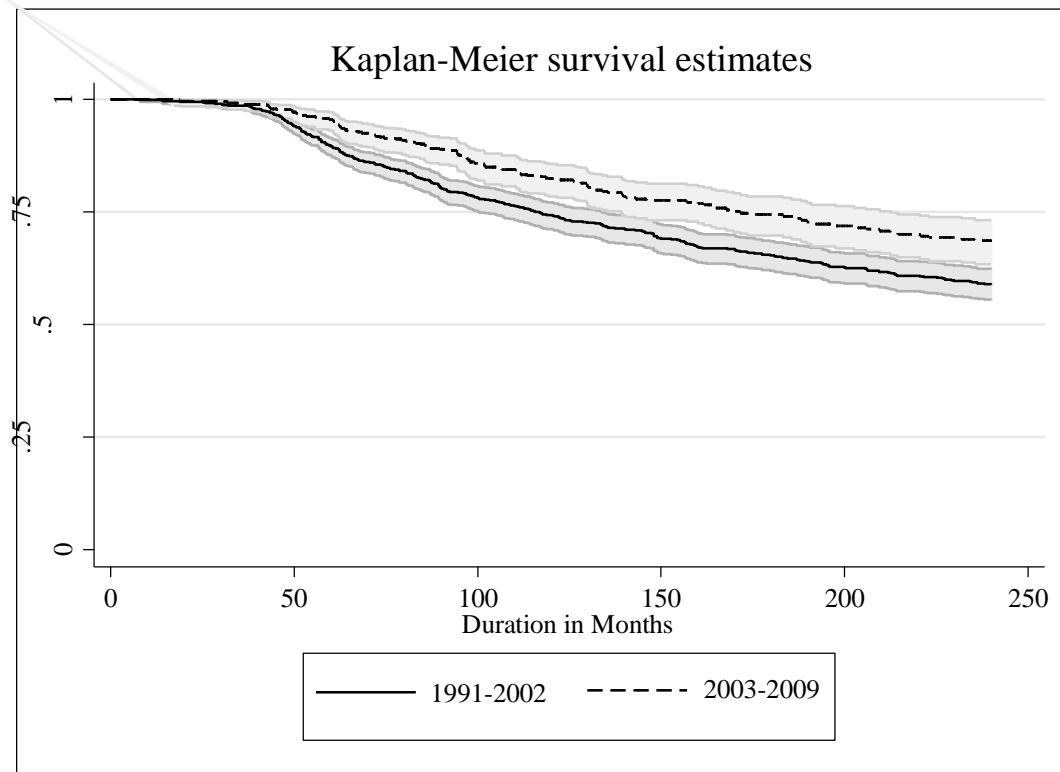
Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier Estimates of Survival into Marriage by Time Period



Grey areas refer to 95% confidence intervals

# Results (2): Separation risk

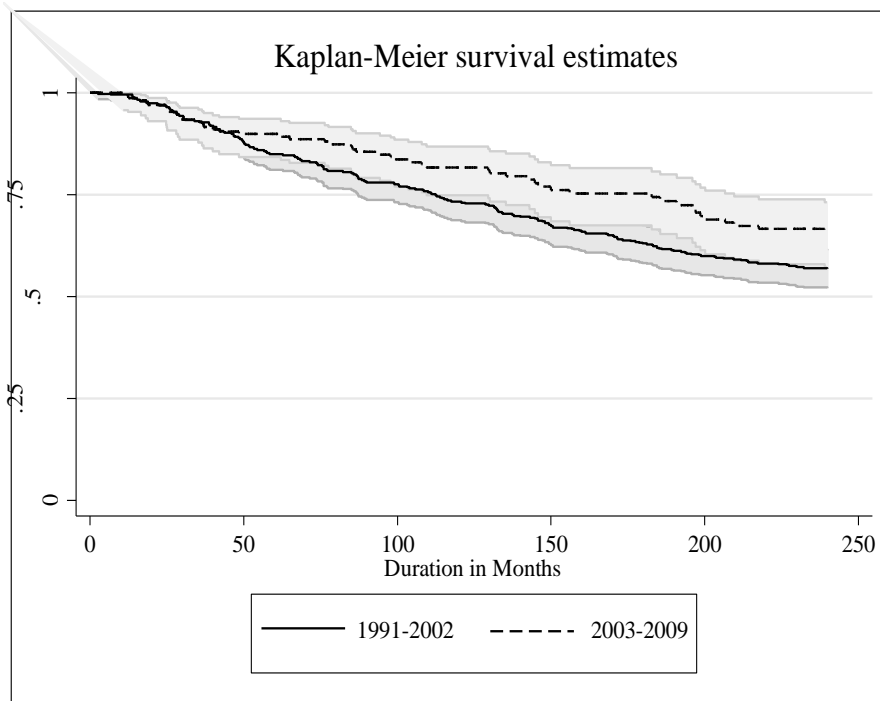
Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier Estimates of Survival into Cohabitation or Marriage by Time Period



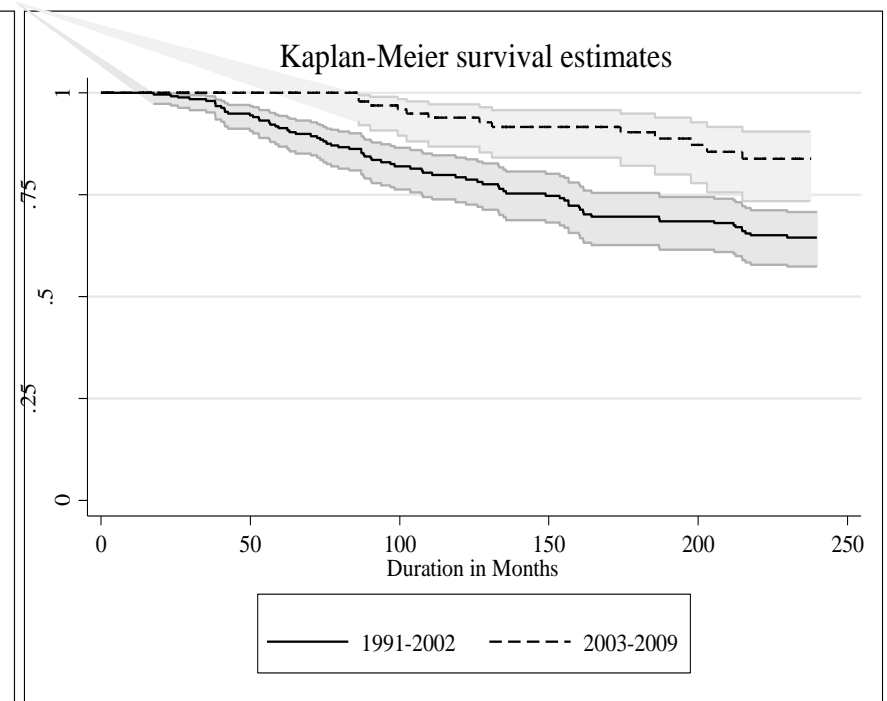


# Results (3): Divorce risk by education

Lower and mid educated; ISCED 1=4

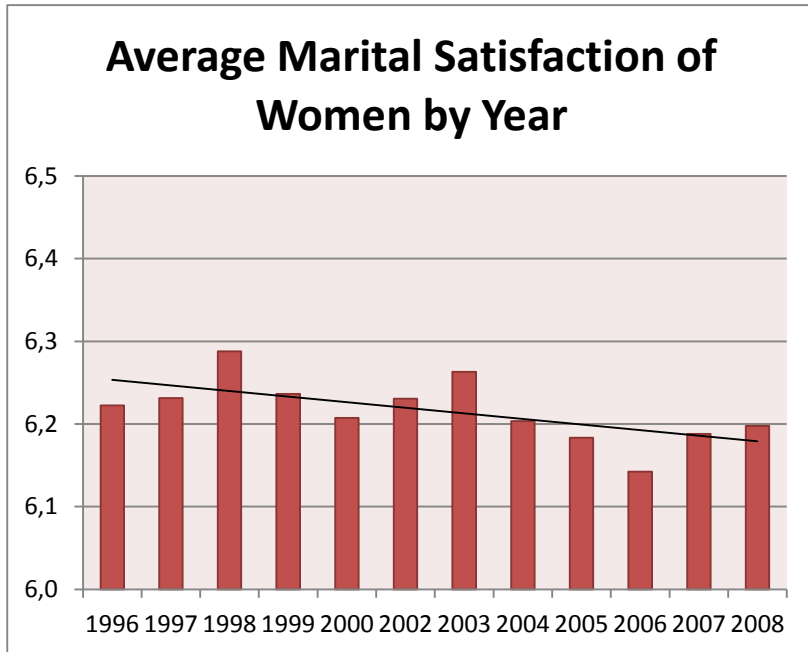


Higher educated; ISCED 5-6

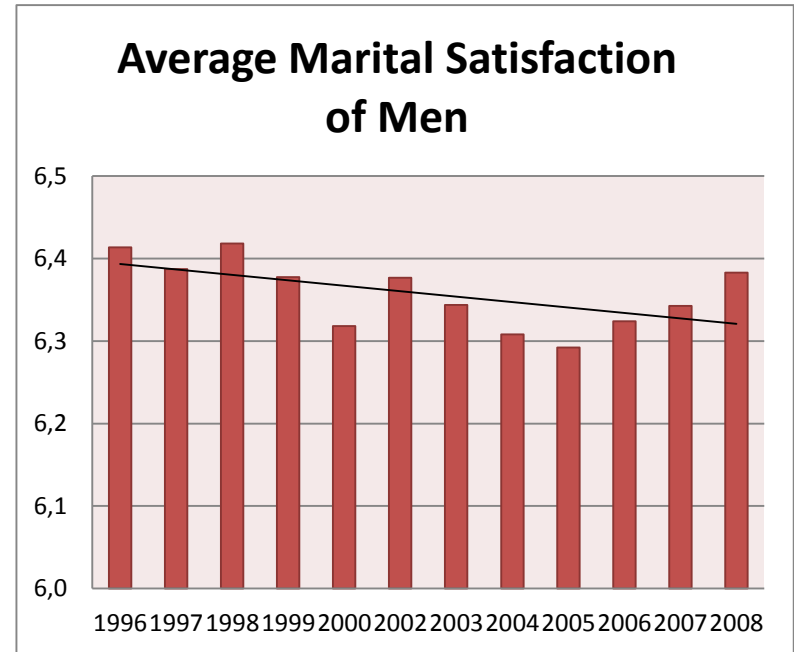


# Results (4): Marital Satisfaction by Year

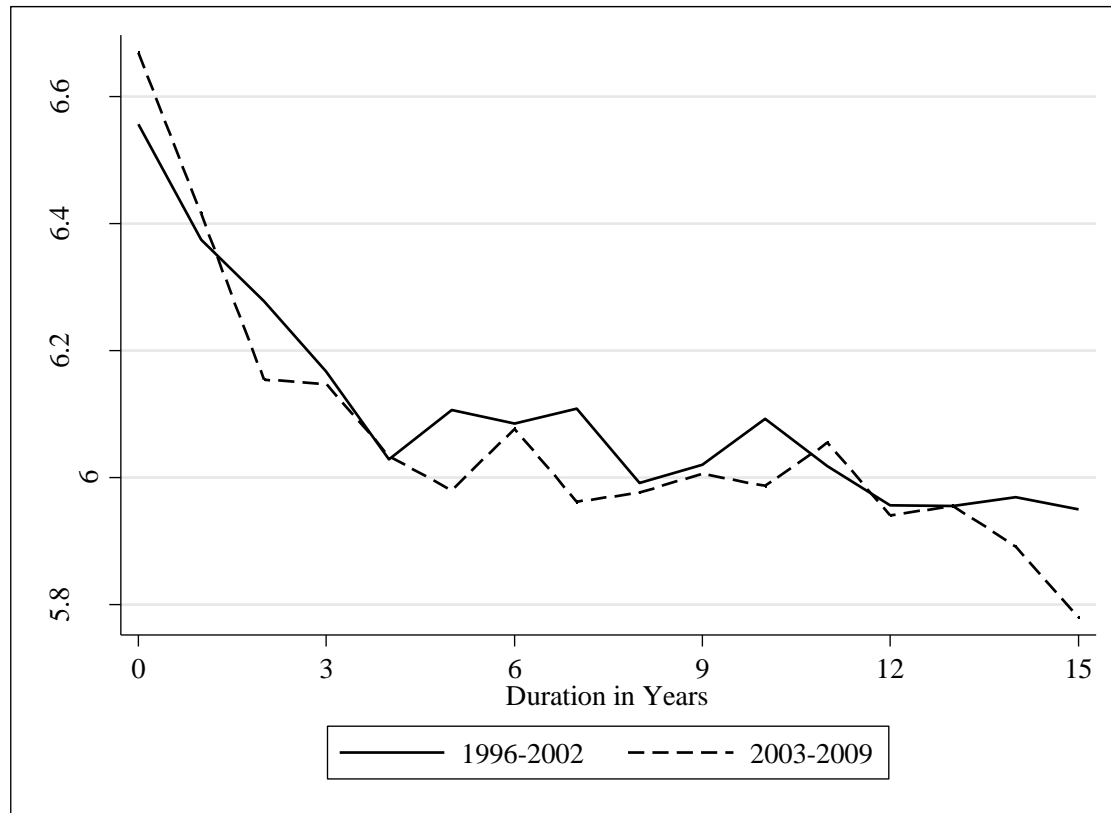
Women



Men

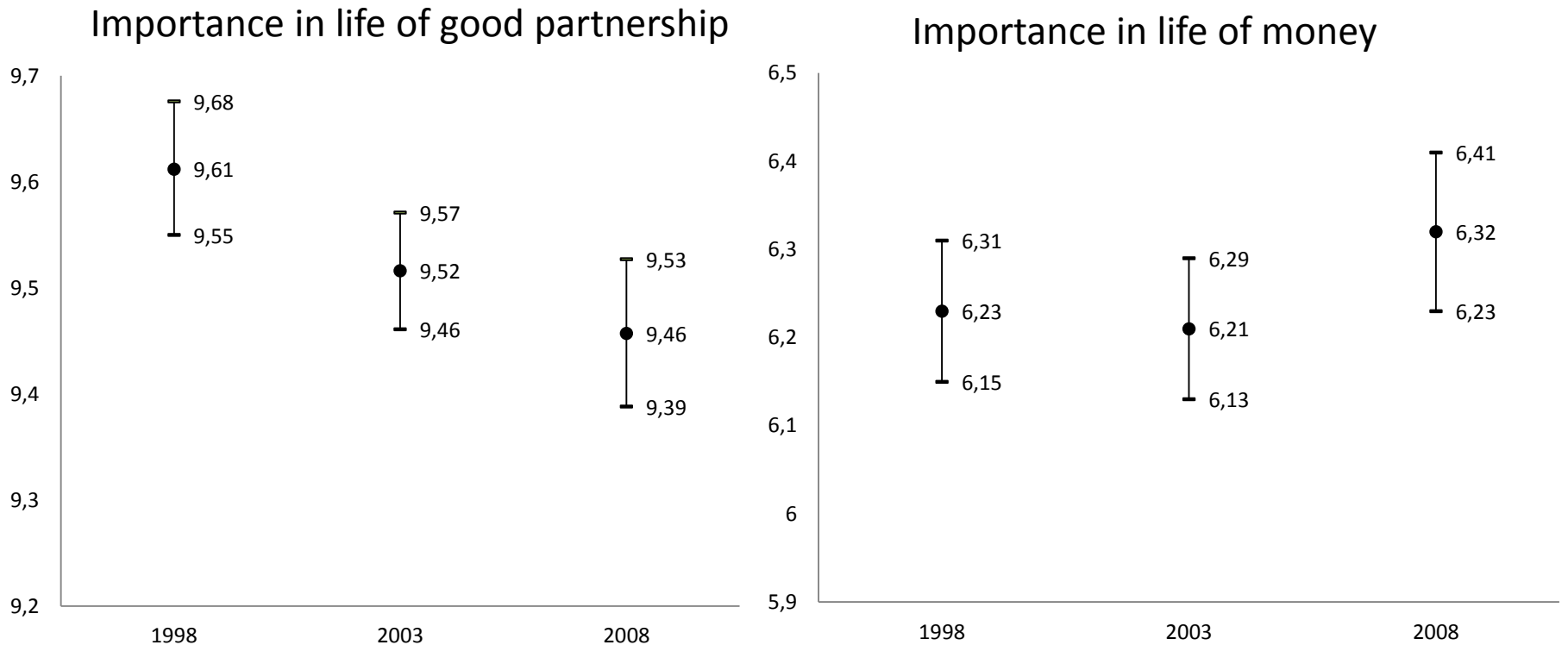


# Results (5): Average marital satisfaction by duration



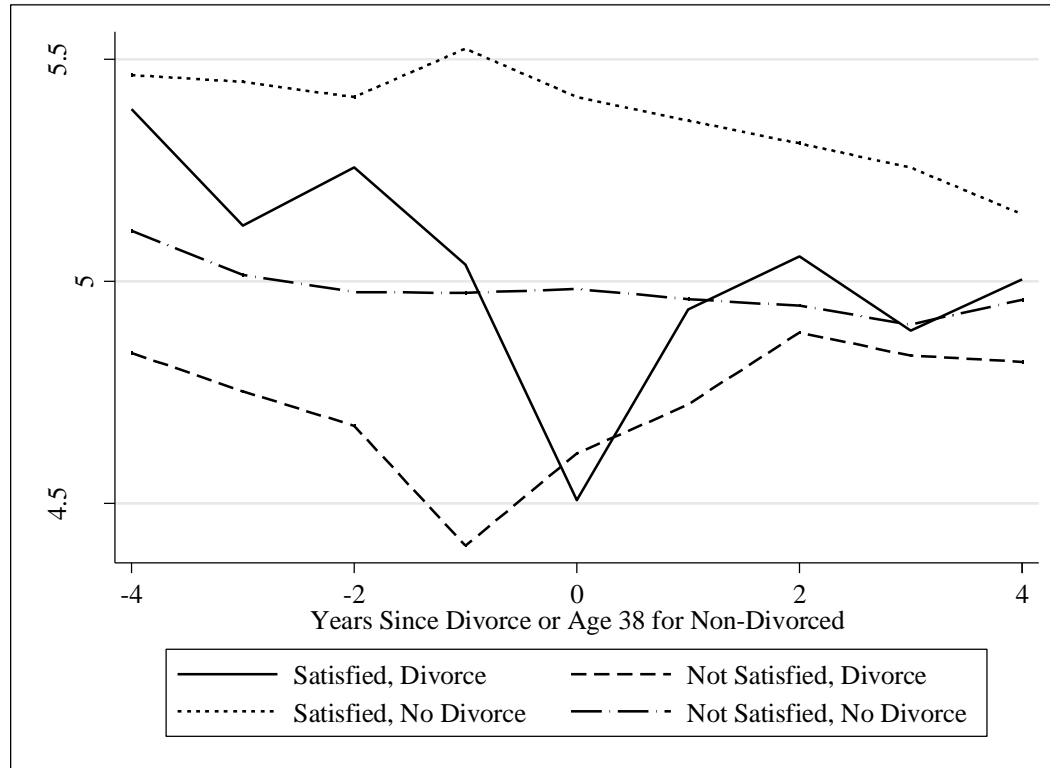
Marital satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 7

# Results (6): Preference for marital satisfaction



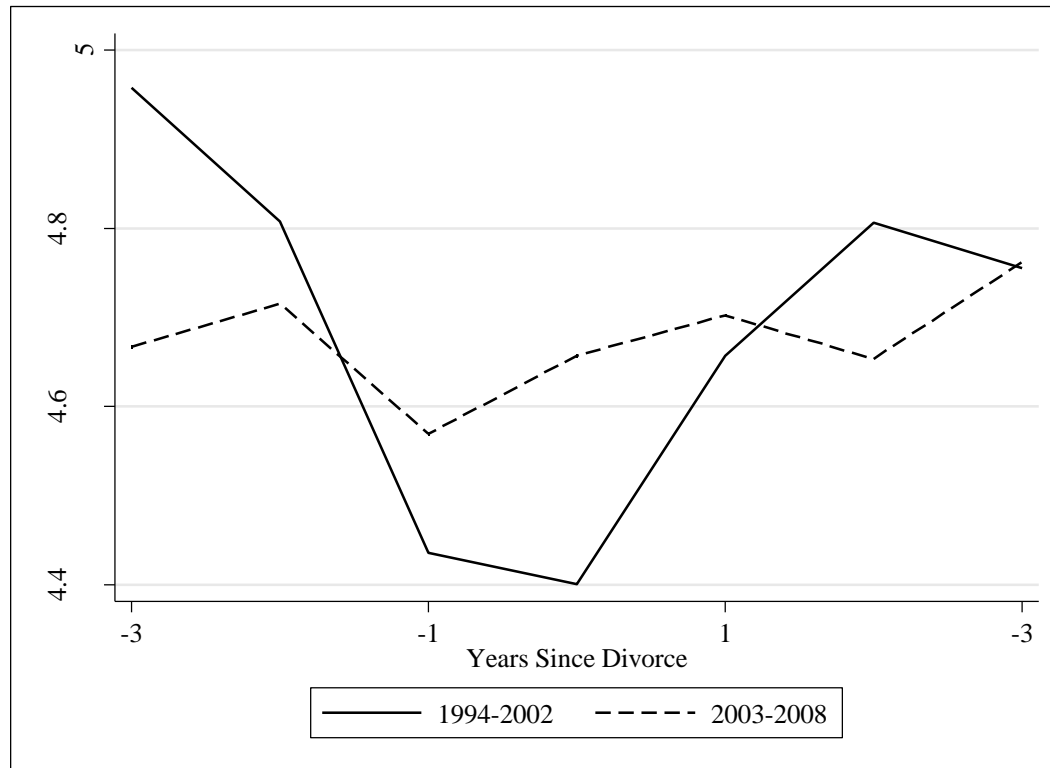
Measured on a scale from 1 to 10  
Points are averages, and stripes are 95% confidence intervals  
N = 4 392

# Results (7): Life Satisfaction Trajectories around Year of Divorce



Marriages marked as satisfied if the year before divorce a 7 out of 7 was reported for marital satisfaction

# Results (8): Life Satisfaction Trajectories by Divorce Year

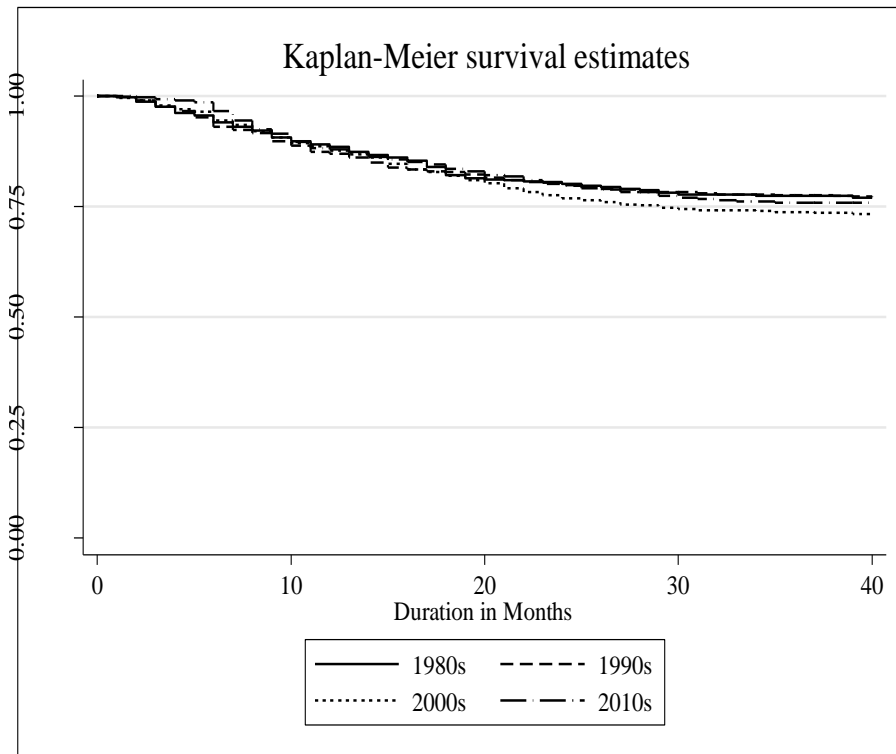


Additional evidence?

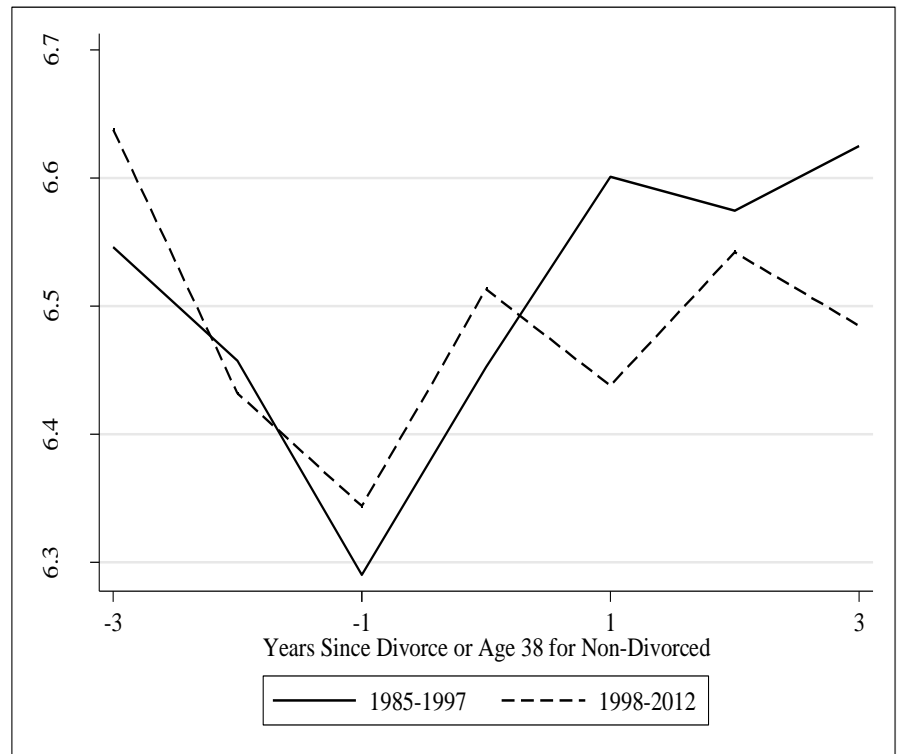


# West Germany?

No change in divorce risk



No change in life satisfaction trajectories in the years around divorce





# Conclusion



# Conclusion

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1. Divorce risk is going down in Britain (and seems stable in Germany)
  2. Increased quality of relationships does not seem to be the story
  3. Importance of good partnership has declined
  4. The consequences of divorce declined with divorce risk
  5. Those who 'escape' an unsatisfying spouse suffer less
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# Missing evidence

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## Do the assumptions of the explanation hold?

- 1) People are less likely to decide to divorce if they expect the well-being of those involved to be negatively affected
- 2) It is hard to predict the consequences of a future divorce, and people therefore base their expectations on consequences observed in other cases of divorce
- 3) Divorce has a larger negative effect on well-being if it ends a relatively satisfying marriage compared to a conflictive one.
- 4) The share of divorces that ends relatively satisfying marriages increases as divorce becomes more common

Did consequences of divorce increase when divorce risk increased?

Is the share of satisfying relationships the underlying mechanism?

Other factors that increased perceived costs of divorce?

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# Future Research

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Consolidate evidence that consequences of divorce fluctuate with its prevalence

Look at consequences of divorce in a context of increasing divorce rates

Look at the importance of underlying mechanisms

Is a rising share of unsatisfying relationships breaking up responsible for the patterns?

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