

## Women's Changing Attitudes Toward Divorce, 1974–2002: Evidence for an Educational Crossover

*This article examines trends in divorce attitudes of young adult women in the United States by educational attainment from 1974 to 2002. Women with 4-year college degrees, who previously had the most permissive attitudes toward divorce, have become more restrictive in their attitudes toward divorce than high school graduates and women with some college education, whereas women with no high school diplomas have increasingly permissive attitudes toward divorce. We examine this educational crossover in divorce attitudes in the context of variables correlated with women's educational attainment, including family attitudes and religion, income and occupational prestige, and family structure. We conclude that the educational crossover in divorce attitudes is associated most strongly with work and family structure variables.*

The spread of nontraditional family values in the United States has slowed since the 1970s, and some observers now argue that a shift back to conservative attitudes is under way, portending significant change in family behaviors and outcomes. Blankenhorn (2002) summarizes this trend by asserting that:

(O)n the core social question of whether family fragmentation is a bad thing or a not-so-bad

thing, a steady shift in popular and (especially) elite opinion took place over the course of the 1990s. Denial and happy talk about the consequences of nuclear family decline became decidedly less widespread; concern and even alarm became much more common. As a society we changed our minds, and as a result we changed some of our laws. And now, it seems, we are beginning to change some of our personal behavior. This is very encouraging news.

Blankenhorn's argument is particularly salient in light of growing evidence of class differences in family fragmentation. Two-parent families remain the norm among highly educated couples but are increasingly uncommon among less educated couples (McLanahan, 2004). Since the 1970s, marital and union dissolution rates (Raley & Bumpass, 2003) have diverged by women's educational attainment, as has the prevalence of divorce among mothers (Elwood & Jencks, 2004). If attitudes toward divorce diverged across women's educational levels at the same time as divorce behaviors were diverging, then such a pattern might help researchers and policymakers understand divergence in family outcomes.

No previous studies have looked for growing class differences in attitudes toward divorce. Overall, divorce attitudes have stabilized in recent decades after a period of liberalization (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), but no studies have studied trends for separate educational groups. Also, the causal relationships between divorce attitudes and divorce behavior are not clear. There is evidence that divorce attitudes can affect marital behavior as Blankenhorn suggested (Amato & Rogers, 1999), but the causal relationships

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between family attitudes and behavior can be complex and endogenous (Rindfuss, Brewster, & Kavee, 1996).

This analysis has two parts. In the first part, we determine whether women's attitudes toward divorce are indeed diverging by educational attainment. In the second part, we use a multivariate analysis to identify variables for social values, women's work, and family structure that correlate with educational trends in attitudes toward divorce. We avoid drawing conclusive causal inferences from the multivariate analysis, but we offer arguments about the extent to which attitudes toward divorce might be independent of variables linked to divorce behavior.

### *Trends in Education and Attitudes Toward Divorce*

An analysis of trends in education and attitudes toward divorce faces some initial difficulties. The overall level of educational attainment has changed in recent decades, as have divorce rates and laws governing divorce. Under certain conditions, an observed educational crossover in divorce attitudes could simply be an artifact of these trends.

College graduates increase from year to year as a percent of women in each survey sample. This trend could produce a spurious pattern of increasingly restrictive attitudes toward divorce among college graduates and less restrictive attitudes among nongraduates. If attitudes toward divorce have a humped distribution across educational levels with the least restrictive attitudes at both ends and the most restrictive attitudes in the center of the distribution, then we would expect increasingly restrictive attitudes toward divorce among college graduates as they take up more of the conservative middle of the education distribution. To determine whether such a problem exists, we supplement an analysis of attitudes by educational level with an analysis by educational percentile.

Across the survey years of this analysis, divorce rates rose, then declined, and laws governing divorce changed as states passed no-fault divorce laws. The General Social Survey (GSS) asks respondents whether divorce should be easier or more difficult to obtain. Overall trends in responses therefore reflect changes in divorce laws as well as changes in people's attitudes toward those laws. It is unclear whether changes

in divorce laws might affect the attitudes of some educational groups more than others. To address this problem, we briefly refer to sensitivity analyses that restrict the time span to more recent years when divorce rates and divorce laws have been relatively constant.

### *Interpreting Trends in Attitudes*

One way to interpret an educational divergence in attitudes toward divorce would be as a shift in value orientations of educated women toward family solidarity and away from individualistic beliefs that underscore freedom and autonomy. Such an interpretation has some support. College graduates have historically been more liberal than individuals of other educational levels, but this pattern has recently diminished or disappeared for several family-related attitudes such as gender ideologies (Brewster & Padavic, 2000) and nonmarital sex (Treas, 2002).

A *lagged diffusion* of family values could produce conservative shifts in value orientation among highly educated women relative to other women. College graduates have historically adopted new attitudes and behaviors that diffused to individuals of other education levels (Sorokin, 1947). Given evidence that the liberalizing trend in American attitudes is indeed slowing down or stopping (Harris & Firestone, 1998), it is arguable that the highly educated have completed their transition toward liberalization, whereas the less educated groups are catching up. Furthermore, family attitudes do not always move toward greater individual freedom but may ebb and flow across time periods (Lestaege & Surkyn, 1988). College graduates may be beginning to adopt more conservative family attitudes even as less educated individuals are still moving toward more liberal attitudes.

In a broader context of social values, college has been a place for liberal thinking (e.g., anti-Vietnam protest in the 1960s) encouraged by a progressive faculty (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991). As tuition and the earnings premiums of education have increased in recent decades, however, it is arguable that students may be attending college for more economic reasons, pursuing job-oriented majors, and experiencing fewer liberalizing influences.

An alternative interpretation of educational trends in divorce attitudes would emphasize social structures over social values. In this

interpretation, we begin with a rational choice perspective that a woman's expected utility of divorce affects her decisions about divorce and we conjecture that her expected utility of divorce also affects her attitude toward the accessibility of divorce.

College graduate women typically have high incomes and labor force participation rates (Blau, 1998). Analyses of family change informed by the *new home economics* of Becker (1981) and others have focused on women's growing economic independence, which might predispose women with high incomes to want to preserve the option to divorce in case the need should arise. By this argument, highly educated women should have the most permissive attitudes toward divorce. Recent studies, however, indicate that women's incomes improve the quality of marriages and the gains to staying married (Rogers & DeBoer, 1999; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Schoen, Astone, Rothert, Standish, & Kim, 2002) and presumably lower the salience of divorce for groups of women with the highest earning power.

High incomes for women also increasingly predict a high likelihood of marrying (Sweeney, 2002) perhaps because more men now view earning potential as a desirable characteristic of a marriage partner. Women with high earning potential can be increasingly selective about marriage partners and can presumably also prolong their marriage searches (Oppenheimer, 1994). In contrast, women with lower educational attainment and lower earning potential face high levels of uncertainty about the economic prospects and economic stability of young adult men (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997; Wilson, 1987).

An argument from the expected utility of divorce can be applied to family structure as well as income and earning potential. Women whose current family patterns entail considerable uncertainty about their future probability of divorce should have the most permissive attitudes toward divorce. This may be particularly true for single mothers, who are often strongly motivated to marry to support their children, yet who might have difficulty entering a marriage because men are often reluctant to marry women who already have children (Lichter & Graefe, 2001; Upchurch, Lillard, & Panis, 2001). Most of the increase in single-mother families in recent decades has been among women of lower educational attainment

(Elwood & Jencks, 2004; McLanahan, 2004), so shifts in family structure could also be contributing to an educational divergence in attitudes toward divorce.

Note that a high expected utility of divorce is not incompatible with a strong willingness to marry. A woman might face expected gains from marriage (averaged across all possible futures) that are less than zero but may still choose to marry if some part of the distribution of possible futures for the marriage has gains that exceed zero, *and* if she has access to divorce in case the marriage does not work out as hoped.

We now have two distinct frameworks—one based on the diffusion of values and the other based on the changing expected utility of divorce—both of which predict an educational crossover in divorce attitudes. To evaluate these two possible frameworks, we turn to the rich set of demographic, social, economic, and attitudinal measures that are available in the GSS's three decades of reports of social attitudes.

## METHOD

### *Data*

The GSS, conducted annually or biennially by the National Opinion Research Center, is a useful data set for examining trends in social attitudes because of its large sample size and long time series. It is a face-to-face survey of the English-speaking population aged 18 and older in the United States. To best capture trends in the attitudes of successive cohorts, we restrict the sample to young adult respondents of age 25–39 ( $N = 4,999$  women). In sensitivity analyses, we used different age restrictions with no effect on the substantive results.

Our measure of attitudes toward divorce is the single question "Should divorce in this country be easier or more difficult to obtain than it is now?" This question was asked in most of the survey years from 1974 to 2002. The three categories of valid answers were *easier*, *stay the same* (volunteered by 20% of respondents), and *more difficult*.

We code three categories for educational attainment at interview: *no high school diploma*, *high school diploma* (including some college and General Equivalency Diploma; GED), and *4-year college degree or more*. Splitting these groups to create categories for

*some college* and for *master's or professional degree* did not affect our substantive results. Regression models include demographic controls for 5-year age groups, race, and nativity of the respondent.

In addition to demographic controls, the statistical models include variables to control for important social trends that might be related to shifts in attitudes toward divorce. As we previously discussed, these social trends include variables for social values, women's income and labor force participation, and family structure.

As one measure of social values, we construct a traditional gender ideology scale from three statements that measure the respondents' agreement with statements about working mothers. The three statements are the following: "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works," "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family," and "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work." Each statement has four possible responses (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), which we combine into an overall scale of 0–9, with 9 being the most traditional attitudes toward working mothers. Brewster and Padavic (2000) provide a more detailed discussion of these and other measures of gender ideology. Scores for the gender ideology variables are not available for some survey years; for these and other variables, we use imputation flags for missing observations.

Other variables provide a broader measure of social attitudes. One such variable is conservative political views, in which the respondent is asked to place herself on a 7-point scale from *extremely liberal* (0) to *extremely conservative* (6). Other variables include level of church attendance transformed into *number of times per month* the respondent attends religious services (for a discussion of this variable, see Call & Heaton, 1997) and a recoded measure provided by the GSS that assigns respondents' religious denominations to a three-level fundamentalism scale: *fundamentalist*, *moderate*, or *liberal*. The GSS also includes variables for attitudes toward extramarital and premarital sex, with four possible responses for each variable ranging from *not wrong at all* (0) to *always wrong* (3).

Variables for women's income and labor force involvement include a dichotomous vari-

able for whether the respondent received any income in the past year, respondent's income in 1982–1984 constant dollars (respondents in open-ended income categories were scored at 150% of the base income for that category), and respondent's occupational prestige score. Occupational prestige is scored on whether the respondent was currently working and whether the respondent previously held a job for 1 year or more (for a detailed discussion of occupational prestige scoring in the GSS, see Nakao, Hodge, & Treas, 1990). Occupational prestige is a particularly useful socioeconomic measure for young adult women, whose current incomes may not reflect their long-term earning potential, and who may often be outside of the labor force at the time of interview because of childbearing or other reasons.

Family structure variables include dichotomous categories for individuals who are never married and childless; never married, with children; married and childless; married, with children; and separated/divorced. Separated/divorced women are not distinguished by parenthood status because few separated and divorced women are childless at interview. Widows are grouped with the small number of cases with missing information. A model using divorce as a predictor of attitudes toward divorce clearly raises concerns about reverse causality, but models without a dichotomous variable for divorce produced substantively equivalent results.

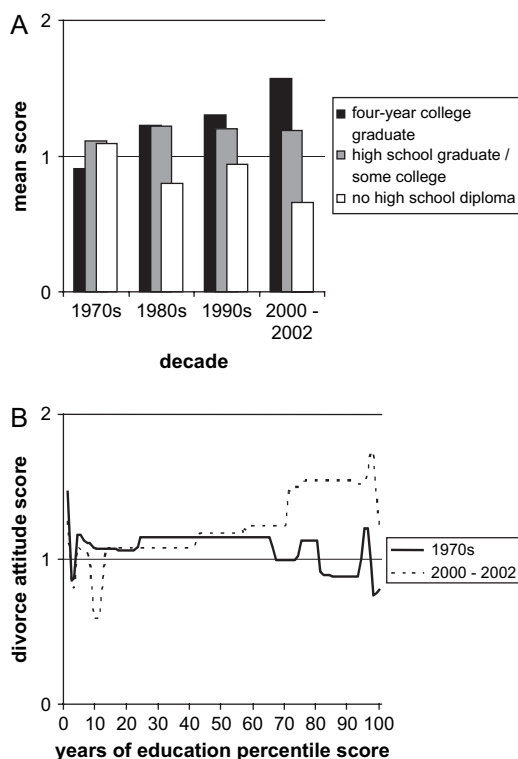
For the regression analysis of attitudes toward divorce, we use an ordered logit model of the level of restrictiveness in a respondent's attitudes toward divorce. We score level 0 = *easier*, 1 = *stay the same*, and 2 = *harder*. The ordered logit coefficients reflect the change in the log odds that a predicted response will be one level higher, given a unit increase in an explanatory variable with all other explanatory variables held constant. All statistical models include flags for missing values on each variable, but we do not show the coefficients for missing value flags. In the statistical analysis, we use unweighted scores. Robust ordinal logit procedures using weighted scores give substantively equivalent results. For the descriptive cross-tabulations and figures, we use scores weighted by post-stratification weight and the number of adults in the household.

## RESULTS

*Divergence in Attitudes Toward Divorce*

Figure 1A shows clear evidence for educational divergence in attitudes toward divorce. In the 1970s, of all education groups of U.S. women aged 25–39, 4-year college graduates had the least restrictive attitudes toward divorce. By the 2000 and 2002 interviews, 4-year college graduates had the most restrictive attitudes. At the other end of the educational continuum, women with no high school diploma have moved from being essentially neutral to having the least restrictive attitudes toward divorce.

FIGURE 1. (A) RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "SHOULD DIVORCE BE EASIER OR MORE DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN THAN IT IS NOW?" BY EDUCATION AND DECADE FOR U.S. WOMEN AGED 25–39. (B) RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "SHOULD DIVORCE BE EASIER OR MORE DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN THAN IT IS NOW?" BY SELECTED DECADES AND YEARS OF EDUCATION EXPRESSED AS A PERCENTILE SCORE FOR U.S. WOMEN AGED 25–39



Note: Source: GSS 1974–2002.  $N = 4,999$ . Scoring: 0 = easier, 1 = stay the same, 2 = more difficult. Averages are based on weighted scores.

College graduates increase as a percent of the sample, from 16% in 1974–1978 to 26% in 1998–2002. To determine whether this shift in educational attainment distorted the observed results, we converted respondents' years of completed education into percentile scores. The results, shown in Figure 1B, indicate that shifts in educational attainment do not explain the educational crossover in divorce attitudes.

Along with overall education levels, state divorce laws also changed across the time span of this analysis in ways that could distort the results. We repeated all descriptive and multivariate analyses restricting the span of years to 1985 and later (by which time 49 states had passed no-fault divorce laws) and to surveys after 1991 (when Arkansas became the final state to enact no-fault divorce). The results, available on request, were substantively the same as those for the entire time series but with larger standard errors.

*Multivariate Analyses*

Descriptive statistics in Table 1 show how social values, income and occupational prestige, and family structure have changed across the time span of this study. The variables that measure social values, such as attitudes toward women's work roles, extramarital sex, and religious involvement, generally moved in a traditional or conservative direction for college graduate women. For women with no 4-year college degree, each measure showed less of a movement toward traditional values or some movement toward liberal values. Hence, the educational crossover in divorce attitudes was concurrent with an educational convergence or crossover in a number of variables measuring social values, although the crossover in divorce attitudes appears to have been more pronounced than the other shifts in social values.

The middle and lower rows of Table 1 show descriptive statistics for variables for women's work and family structure. Throughout the time period of the study, women with a 4-year college degree reported higher levels of labor force activity, higher incomes, and higher occupational prestige than women with no 4-year college degree. Labor force involvement, income, and occupational prestige have generally increased for all women throughout the time period. Among measures of family structure, the proportion married with children declined

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS FOR WOMEN AGED 25–39, BY EDUCATION AND YEAR

	Four-Year College Degree		No Four-Year College Degree	
	Survey Years		Survey Years	
	1974–1978	1998–2002	1974–1978	1998–2002
Variables for social values				
Mean traditional gender ideology (0–9)	2.9	2.9	4.5	3.6
Disapproval of premarital sex (0–3)	0.9	1.1	1.2	1.1
Disapproval of extramarital sex (0–3)	2.2	2.8	2.5	2.7
Level of religious fundamentalism (0–2)	0.7	0.8	1.2	1.2
Times per month attending religious services	2.2	2.2	2.0	1.7
Conservative political views (0–6)	2.6	3.1	2.9	3.0
Income and occupational prestige				
Percent reporting any income	73	88	54	75
Median income for those reporting any income (in 1982–1984 constant dollars $\times$ 1000)	14.1	20.4	9.3	11.0
Mean occupational prestige score	54	54	36	40
Family structure variables (%)				
Never married and childless	18	25	5	12
Never married, with children	0	3	2	16
Married and childless	23	17	6	7
Married, with children	75	62	80	53
Divorced or separated	6	9	11	18
Widowed	1	0	1	2

Note: GSSs for 1974–1978, 1998, 2000, and 2002. Total  $N = 4,999$ . Averages are based on weighted scores.

for all women but most dramatically for women with no 4-year college degree (from 74% to 47%). Women with no 4-year college degree had the sharpest increases in the most nontraditional family categories: never-married women, with children (from 2% to 16%) and divorced or separated (from 11% to 18%).

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the variables in the main statistical analysis.

Table 3 shows results from ordinal logistic regression models of attitudes toward divorce, where positive coefficients reflect a higher proportion of responses that divorce should be more difficult to obtain. The education  $\times$  year coefficients (in the fourth and fifth rows of each model) measure the educational crossover in divorce attitudes that comprises the main finding of this study.

Model A is the simplest multivariate model. It includes main effects of education, trend effects of education, and demographic controls for age, race, and nativity. The 4-year college graduate  $\times$  year coefficient (+0.034) reflects a statistically significant yearly increase in restric-

tive attitudes toward divorce for 4-year college graduates relative to the omitted educational group (high school graduates or women with some college) after 1974. The no high school diploma  $\times$  year coefficient (–0.034) confirms that women with no high school diploma have increasingly reported less restrictive attitudes toward divorce compared to women with a high school diploma or some college. The main coefficient for 4-year college degree (–0.48) indicates that, as of the year 1974, 4-year college graduates had less restrictive attitudes toward divorce than high school graduates.

Model B in Table 3 includes variables for social values—political views, gender ideology, and religious involvement—plus a trend (year) interaction for each variable. The education  $\times$  year interaction coefficients remain large and statistically significant in Model B (at 0.027 and –0.030), though somewhat smaller than the corresponding coefficients in Model A. The difference between the education  $\times$  year coefficients in Model B and the coefficients in Model A reflects the portion of the educational

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE SAMPLE OF WOMEN AGED 25–39

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attitudes toward divorce		
Should be more difficult to obtain	0.46	—
Stay the same	0.22	—
Should be easier to obtain	0.32	—
Education level at interview		
Four-year college degree	0.22	—
High school diploma (includes some college)	0.64	—
No high school diploma	0.14	—
Year of interview	1987.2	8.5
Demographic controls		
Age (years)		
25–29	0.34	—
30–34	0.34	—
35–39	0.31	—
Race	0.81	—
White		
Black	0.16	—
Other	0.04	—
Foreign born	0.06	—
Social values variables		
Traditional gender ideology (0–9)	3.2	2.0
Disapproval of premarital sex (0–3)	1.0	1.1
Disapproval of extramarital sex (0–3)	2.6	0.5
Fundamentalist religion	0.33	—
Moderate religion	0.43	—
Liberal/no religion	0.21	—
Times per month attending religious services	1.9	2.1
Work and income variables		
No reported income	0.29	—
Income of those with income (1982–1984 constant dollars)	\$12,300	(9,500)
Occupational prestige score (0–86)	39.0	16.9
Family structure variables		
Never married, childless	0.12	—
Never married, with children	0.07	—
Married, childless	0.09	—
Married, with children	0.51	—
Separated or divorced	0.20	—

Note: GSSs for 1974–2002. *N* = 4,999.

crossover in divorce attitudes that is predicted by shifts in variables for social values.

Statistically significant main coefficients for most social values variables in Model B indicate that traditional value orientations and religious involvement were strong predictors of restrictive attitudes toward divorce in the 1970s. For example, the coefficient for *times per month attending religious services* is +0.19, suggest-

ing that (all else equal) for each time per month a woman attended church, her predicted odds of reporting a more restrictive attitude toward divorce increased by  $\exp(0.19)$  or about 1.21 times. The year interactions for most social values variables, however, have negative signs. For example, the coefficient for *Times per Month Attending Religious Services*  $\times$  *Year* is  $-0.004$ , indicating that the relationship between

TABLE 3. ORDINAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL FOR ATTITUDES THAT DIVORCE SHOULD BE MORE DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN; U.S. WOMEN AGED 25–39 AT INTERVIEW IN 1974–2002

	Model A		Model B		Model C		Model D	
Year (main effect)	0.011	(0.007)	0.032	(0.022)	0.009	(0.012)	0.028	(0.025)
Four-year college degree	–0.48**	(0.13)	–0.28	(0.14)	–0.27	(0.15)	–0.12	(0.16)
No high school diploma	–0.10	(0.13)	–0.14	(0.14)	–0.19	(0.14)	–0.20	(0.15)
Four-Year College Degree $\times$ Year	0.034**	(0.008)	0.027**	(0.009)	0.017	(0.009)	0.009	(0.010)
No High School Diploma $\times$ Year	–0.034**	(0.010)	–0.030**	(0.010)	–0.024*	(0.010)	–0.020	(0.011)
Social values variables								
Traditional gender ideology (0–9)			–0.01	(0.05)			–0.01	(0.05)
Disapproval of premarital sex (0–3)			0.39**	(0.06)			0.36**	(0.06)
Disapproval of extramarital sex (0–3)			0.39**	(0.08)			0.37**	(0.08)
Level of religious fundamentalism (0–2)			0.28**	(0.08)			0.29**	(0.08)
Times per month attending religious services			0.19**	(0.03)			0.19**	(0.03)
Conservative political views (0–6)			0.12*	(0.05)			0.11*	(0.05)
Traditional Gender Ideology Score $\times$ Year			0.004	(0.003)			0.004	(0.003)
Disapproval of Premarital Sex $\times$ Year			–0.006	(0.004)			–0.005	(0.004)
Disapproval of Extramarital Sex $\times$ Year			–0.003	(0.006)			–0.001	(0.007)
Fundamentalism $\times$ Year			–0.017**	(0.005)			–0.016**	(0.005)
Times per Month Attending Religious Services $\times$ Year			–0.004*	(0.002)			–0.005*	(0.002)
Conservative Political Views $\times$ Year			–0.001	(0.003)			–0.001	(0.003)
Work and family structure variables								
Any paid work in past year (1 = yes, 0 = no)					0.19	(0.14)	0.23	(0.14)
Occupational prestige score/10 (0.0–8.6)					–0.06	(0.04)	–0.06	(0.04)
Yearly income/10,000					–0.13	(0.08)	–0.05	(0.08)
Never married, childless					–0.48*	(0.19)	–0.30	(0.20)
Married, childless					–0.47*	(0.19)	–0.39*	(0.20)
Never married, with children					–0.54	(0.30)	0.05	(0.31)
Separated/divorced					–0.81**	(0.14)	–0.45**	(0.15)
Any Paid Work $\times$ Year					–0.020*	(0.009)	–0.018*	(0.009)
Occupational Prestige Score $\times$ Year					0.006*	(0.002)	0.006*	(0.002)
Income $\times$ Year					0.006	(0.004)	0.004	(0.005)
Never Married, Childless $\times$ Year					0.003	(0.011)	0.007	(0.012)
Married, Childless $\times$ Year					0.007	(0.012)	0.011	(0.013)
Never Married, With Children $\times$ Year					–0.023	(0.016)	–0.043**	(0.016)
Separated/Divorced $\times$ Year					–0.006	(0.009)	–0.016	(0.009)
Demographic controls								
Age = 30–34	0.19	(0.12)	0.05	(0.12)	0.13	(0.12)	0.03	(0.13)
Age = 35–39	0.33**	(0.12)	–0.01	(0.13)	0.29*	(0.13)	–0.01	(0.14)
Black	–1.37**	(0.15)	–1.53**	(0.17)	–1.24**	(0.16)	–1.54**	(0.17)
Other non-White	–0.41	(0.42)	–0.73	(0.43)	–0.49	(0.42)	–0.79	(0.44)
Foreign born	–0.11	(0.28)	0.01	(0.30)	–0.14	(0.28)	–0.03	(0.30)
Age 30–34 $\times$ Year	–0.012	(0.008)	–0.005	(0.008)	–0.012	(0.008)	–0.005	(0.008)
Age 35–39 $\times$ Year	–0.012	(0.008)	0.001	(0.008)	–0.014	(0.008)	–0.000	(0.009)
Black $\times$ Year	0.013	(0.010)	0.011	(0.010)	0.019	(0.010)	0.022*	(0.011)
Other Non-White $\times$ Year	–0.004	(0.022)	0.007	(0.022)	0.004	(0.022)	0.014	(0.023)
Foreign Born $\times$ Year	0.012	(0.016)	0.001	(0.016)	0.010	(0.016)	–0.001	(0.016)
Cutpoint 1	–0.84	(0.11)	1.29	(0.32)	–1.28	(0.20)	1.00	(0.38)
Cutpoint 2	0.13	(0.11)	2.35	(0.32)	–0.28	(0.20)	2.08	(0.38)
–Log likelihood	5091.2		4786.8		4987.5		4727.6	

Note: GSSs for 1974–2002.  $N = 4,999$ . Scoring for dependent variable: divorce in the United States should be *easier to obtain* = 0; *stay the same* = 1; *harder to obtain* = 2. Omitted categories are year = 1974; education = high school graduate or some college; age = 25–29; race = non-Hispanic White; family structure = married, with children. Control for widowed status is also not shown.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



attitudes toward divorce and attendance of religious services has weakened over time. Hence, college graduates are reporting more socially traditional values compared to other women, but such a pattern has less effect on divorce attitudes than it might have in the past.

Model C replaces the variables for social values with variables for women's work status and family structure. The Education  $\times$  Year interaction coefficients retain the same signs as in Models A and B (at 0.017 and  $-0.024$ ) but are considerably reduced and have lost some statistical significance. Hence, a relatively large portion of the educational crossover in divorce attitudes is predicted by shifts in variables for women's work and family structure. This finding is somewhat surprising, given that the work variables in Model C have lower levels of statistical significance than the social values variables in Model B, and given that the statistically significant family structure variables in Model C are dichotomous variables that apply only to a small proportion of the sample.

Finally, Model D includes all explanatory variables. The Education  $\times$  Year interaction coefficients are no longer statistically significant in Model D (at 0.009 and  $-0.020$ ), though the signs of the coefficients suggest that some part of the educational crossover in divorce attitudes is not explained by the variables in this model. One possible explanation for this residual educational trend is a shift in divorce attitudes predicated on information about divorce rather than social values in general. Highly educated women might learn about the negative consequences of divorce before other women and might adjust their attitudes first in response to this information. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is impossible to test directly because we have no information on women's knowledge of the consequences of divorce. Our general finding of the strongest educational differences in the 2000–2002 sample, however, indicates that such a diffusion of information is quite slow in spreading across educational levels, if it is occurring.

In sensitivity analyses, we examined the variables in the multivariate models one by one and found the *occupational prestige* and *never married, with children* variables to be particularly important contributors to the overall educational trends in attitudes toward divorce. For both of these variables, we found increasingly disparate distributions of the variable between college graduates and other women, along with increasing

correspondence over time between scores on the variables and attitudes toward divorce. In other words, highly educated women have high occupational prestige and low proportions of never-married motherhood, factors that increasingly predict restrictive attitudes toward divorce, whereas less educated women have declining occupational prestige and rising levels of never-married motherhood, factors that increasingly predict permissive attitudes toward divorce. Note also the negative coefficients for Any Paid Work  $\times$  Year in Models C and D ( $-0.020$  and  $-0.018$ , respectively) imply that women who do *no* paid work also have increasingly restrictive attitudes toward divorce, leaving *working* women with low incomes and low occupational prestige as the group with the most permissive attitudes toward divorce.

We can compare the Education  $\times$  Year coefficients in Model A to the corresponding coefficients in Models B, C, and D to see how much each set of variables explains the educational crossover in divorce attitudes. The result of this exercise is shown in Table 4. These results suggest that work, occupational prestige, and family structure are more important factors driving educational shifts in divorce attitudes than family attitudes, religion, and political views. All these factors, however, have contributed to some extent to changes in attitudes toward divorce.

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in the analyses, an educational crossover in divorce attitudes among young women has clearly occurred between 1974 and 2002. An important social implication of this finding is that in contrast to the 1970s, divorce attitudes now correlate with divorce behavior at the macrolevel. Highly educated women, who traditionally had the lowest divorce rates, now also have the most restrictive attitudes toward divorce, suggesting that the link between attitudes and behavior may be strengthening.

Although our findings suggest that divorce attitudes and divorce behavior are becoming more strongly linked at the aggregate level, the causal order of that link is not clear. On the one hand, broad shifts in social values account for little of the specific shifts in divorce attitudes across educational groups. On the other hand, high incomes and occupational prestige (more common among college graduates) are becoming strong predictors of restrictive attitudes

TABLE 4. DECOMPOSITION OF EDUCATION  $\times$  YEAR INTERACTION COEFFICIENTS FROM MODELS IN TABLE 3

	Four-Year College Degree Versus High School Diploma or Some College	No High School Diploma Versus High School Diploma or Some College
Education $\times$ Year coefficient (from Model A)	0.034	-0.034
Odds ratio across education and time span: more restrictive versus less restrictive attitudes toward divorce, 2000/1976	2.26	0.45
Percent odds ratio predicted by social values variables in Model B	22	11
Work and family structure variables in Model C (%)	51	30
Total percent odds ratio predicted by all variables (Model D)	73	41

Note: GSSs for 1974–2002.  $N = 4,999$ .

toward divorce, whereas (usually less educated) women who are single mothers, divorced, or separated consistently have the most permissive attitudes toward divorce.

Our interpretation of the multivariate models is that divorce attitudes are complexly related to the expected utility of divorce. Highly educated women's decreasing uncertainty about stable marriages *lowers* the personal salience of divorce for them. Furthermore, increases in economic and social inequality have made uncertainty about marriage *more* salient for the middle and lower educational groups. The reader should be cautioned, however, that this interpretation is largely conjectural. We have estimated no formal statistics to prove that the observed differences between the model with social values variables and the model with work and family structure variables are statistically significant. In addition, the variables in the multivariate analysis could be conceptualized in ways other than those we described.

Consistent with Blankenhorn's (2002) conjecture, we find that highly educated women are adopting restrictive attitudes toward divorce in American society. We also agree that changing attitudes toward divorce might also be reducing divorce rates for those groups of women who are adopting more restrictive attitudes toward divorce. Furthermore, this top educational stratum can have a disproportionate ability to promote family change by shaping laws or influencing the social acceptability of divorce, compared to those in the middle educational levels who are more ambivalent about the avail-

ability of divorce, or disadvantaged groups at the lowest education levels who clearly want divorce to remain accessible.

The recent passage of covenant marriage laws in some states (Sanchez, Nock, Wright, & Gager, 2002), along with other proposals for increasing marital commitment (cf., Scott, 2000), are all consistent with the idea that individuals (or at least those who are able to affect public policy) are indeed starting to "change their minds" about divorce. We do not expect policies promoting commitment to marriage, however, to necessarily change attitudes toward divorce. It is difficult to imagine poor, employed single mothers changing their attitudes about divorce in the absence of significant improvements in their marriage opportunities. Instead, our findings suggest a more pessimistic outlook: Increasing women's labor force involvement, along with diverging family outcomes, are contributing to a growing social and attitudinal divide between the "haves" who experience a diminishing probability of entering and the "have-nots" who face a relatively high and increasing probability of entering an uncertain marriage.

In summary, we do not mean to imply that attitudes favoring permanent marriage among college graduates are socially undesirable. This is clearly a welcome trend to the extent that it strengthens marriages for families with highly educated parents. If a low probability of divorce reduces the personal salience of divorce for college graduates, however, they might increasingly view divorce and its attendant hardships

as a social problem caused by other people's behavior. If this occurs, trends in divorce attitudes could exacerbate family inequalities and sharpen class delineations in the "culture wars" over the future of families.

#### NOTE

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