

# **Union dissolution and divorce among ethnic minorities in Britain**

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## **Abstract**

An increasing body of literature studies native-immigrant intermarriage across Europe as an indicator of immigrant integration. However, less is known about the stability of mixed marriages. We study divorce among mixed marriages in Britain. We extend previous research by examining the effect of exogamous unions on union stability in the UK and using a rich longitudinal dataset. We test three competing hypotheses regarding divorce among mixed marriages: the dissimilarity/exogamy hypotheses, selection hypothesis, and convergence hypothesis. The likelihood of divorce varies by ethnic group; it is highest among the Caribbean and lowest among the South-East Asian group. Ethnic endogamous marriages are the least likely to end in divorce whereas native endogamous, native exogamous, and ethnic exogamous marriages are equally likely to dissolve. This remains the same after we control for education. We speculate why our findings do not support any of the three hypotheses and set out our further plans.

## **Background**

There is an increasing body of literature on native-immigrant intermarriage in Europe as the spread of mixed marriages is an important indicator of immigrant integration. However, less is known about the stability and fate of mixed marriages. This study investigates the effect of ethnic intermarriage on separation in the UK. We extend previous research in two ways. First, we examine the effect of exogamous unions on union stability in the European context. Most studies have been conducted in the US, and have focused on race and ethnicity rather than place

of origin and migrant background. There have only been a handful of studies conducted in Northern and Western Europe with a focus on the marriages of post-war immigrants (Kalmijn et al. 2005; Eeckhaut et al. 2011; Dribe and Lundh 2012; Feng et al. 2012; Milewski and Kulu 2014). Second, we use a rich longitudinal dataset, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, which allows us to control for many individual and couple characteristics when investigating the effect of intermarriages on divorce. It is highly likely that individuals who marry across ethnic lines are different in their socio-economic and cultural characteristics from those who marry within the same ethnic group.

### **Intermarriage and Divorce**

Studies on marital divorce show that dissimilarity between the partners increases the risk of divorce: the risk is high when there is a large age gap between the partners, or when they have different educational levels or religious backgrounds (Landis 1949; Burchinal and Chancellor 1963; Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Becker et al. 1977; Tzeng 1992; Kulu and Gonzalez-Ferrer 2014). If dissimilarity between the partners increases the risk of divorce then native-immigrant marriages may have a higher divorce risk than marriages between two natives or between immigrants of the same ethnicity. The *exogamy hypothesis* states that mixed marriages between natives and immigrants have a higher likelihood of separation than intra-group marriages for respective groups. This is due to the following factors (Milewski and Kulu 2014; Kulu and Gonzalez-Ferrer 2014). First, natives and immigrants come from different socialisation environments and usually belong to different ethnic groups. Therefore, it is likely that their preferences, values, and norms also differ. Dissimilarity in preferences, values, and norms reduces the time spent on joint activities, increases misunderstandings and is a constant source of conflict (Kalmijn et al. 2005; Zhang and van Hook 2009). Second, exogamous marriages receive less support from social networks of the spouses than endogamous unions. Marrying

outside the ethnic or cultural group means crossing a social boundary; this may be tolerated, but is usually not welcomed and/or supported by members of the respective groups. As a result, the couple may feel neglected by their families and this may put a strain on their relationship. They may also lack support during difficult times that each partnership faces from time to time. Third, mixed marriages have a higher likelihood of experiencing discrimination in their daily lives; they may be confronted with disdain by the general public (e.g., occasional verbal abuse by strangers). Previous studies have shown that such experiences are not uncommon for couples of mixed marriages, particularly when the spouses come from different racial groups (Zhang and van Hook 2009). Exogamous couples' negative experiences may increase marital instability and lead to divorce (Milewski and Kulu 2014).

The exogamy hypothesis has been supported by several studies on intermarriage in European countries. Kalmijn et al. (2005) investigated native-immigrant intermarriage in the Netherlands. The analysis of marriages formed between 1974 and 1984 showed that partnerships between Dutch and other nationalities had a higher risk of divorce than endogamous marriages. A subsequent Dutch study by Smith et al. (2012) on register data from 1995 to 2008 supported previous findings. Milewski and Kulu (2014) examined the effect of native-immigrant intermarriage on divorce in Germany. They showed that marriages between German-born individuals and immigrants had a higher likelihood of separation than marriages between two German-born individuals or between immigrants from the same country. Dribe and Lundh (2012) reached similar conclusions in their study on Sweden and Eeckhaut et al. (2011) in Belgium. Mixed marriages faced higher dissolution risks than endogamous marriages. Based on the analysis of female birth cohorts 1924–1973, Katus et al. (2002a) reported similar findings for native-immigrant unions in Estonia.

While these studies showed that exogamous marriages had higher divorce levels than endogamous marriages, further analysis revealed that the divorce risk increased with an

increase in the cultural dissimilarity between the spouses; marriages where spouses came from distant cultures had a higher divorce risk than those unions where partners originated from similar cultures. The studies thus also supported the *cultural dissimilarity hypothesis* – an extension of the exogamy hypothesis. The reasons for an elevated risk are similar to the exogamy hypothesis (Milewski and Kulu 2014). First, dissimilarity in values and norms is expected to be greater for spouses from distant cultures than for partners who have similar cultural backgrounds. This makes the former marriages more prone to conflict and more fragile than the latter ones. Second, it is expected that marriages where cultural dissimilarity between the partners is large receive less support from the spouses' respective social networks than marriages with culturally similar spouses. Third, marriages with culturally dissimilar spouses are also more likely to experience discrimination.

Cultural dissimilarity may be an important reason for elevated divorce risks for native-immigrant marriages, but there may also be other reasons (Milewski and Kulu 2014; Kulu and Gonzalez-Ferrer 2014). First, couples in mixed marriages may differ from spouses in endogamous unions regarding their demographic or socio-economic characteristics; they may have married at younger ages or people from specific social strata might be overrepresented among them, e.g., unemployed individuals or people with high income – all these factors are associated with elevated divorce levels. Second, it is likely that individuals who intermarry have liberal values and may thus be less committed to the norms of their respective groups (Bumpass and Sweet 1972). Third, the partner selection itself may have resulted in marriages with further dissimilarity between the spouses, which potentially increases marital instability; e.g., there may be a large age gap between the spouses in mixed marriages or the partners may have different educational levels. Therefore, if we were able to control for all important traits of spouses in mixed marriages, native-immigrant marriages should not necessarily be more

likely to end in divorce than intra-group marriages of natives and immigrants (*selection hypothesis*).

Most studies in Europe have provided some support for the selection hypothesis; once the characteristics of spouses and marriages are controlled for, the exogamy effect significantly decreases. However, exogamous marriages still exhibit a significantly higher likelihood of separation than endogamous marriages (Kalmijn et al. 2005; Andersson and Scott 2010; Dribe and Lundh 2012; Smith et al. 2012; Milewski and Kulu 2014). Interestingly, Feng et al. (2012) reached somewhat different conclusions in their study on mixed-ethnic marriages in Britain. Their large-scale longitudinal study showed that mixed-ethnic unions had a higher risk of dissolution than co-ethnic unions, as expected. However, after controlling for partners' characteristics, most importantly the younger ages of people in mixed unions, the risk of divorce for mixed-ethnic unions was no longer higher than that for two constituent co-ethnic unions.

The *convergence hypothesis* is the main competitor to the hypotheses described above. It argues that as a result of mutual adaptation between the spouses, the initially different values of spouses will converge. Thus, it is expected that mixed marriages should have divorce levels that are in-between the divorce levels of the two immigrant groups that the spouses come from (Zhang and Van Hook 2009). Several previous studies have found support for this hypothesis (Jones 1994; 1996, Zhang and Van Hook 2009).

## **Hypotheses**

Based on the above arguments, we formulate and test the following competing hypotheses regarding the dissolution of inter-ethnic marriages:

*Dissimilarity/exogamy hypothesis:* native-immigrant marriages will be more likely to end in divorce than native-native or co-ethnic marriages.

*Selection hypothesis:* any observed differences in the likelihood of divorce between mixed-marriages and endogamous marriages will disappear once we take into account individuals' socio-economic and demographic characteristics. In other words, native-immigrant marriages will not be more likely to end in divorce than native-native or co-ethnic marriages.

*Convergence hypothesis:* divorce levels of native-immigrant marriages will be in-between that of native-native and co-ethnic marriages.

## **Data and Methods**

We use data from seven waves (2010-2016) of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), often referred to as Understanding Society. Understanding Society is an annual longitudinal household panel survey of the United Kingdom, which started with 40,000 individuals in 2009/2010 (Knies, 2018). Currently, seven waves of data are available. Understanding Society collects high quality longitudinal information on individuals' partnership and family life experiences as well as on other life domains such as employment, education, income, and health. Moreover, it collects unique data on ethnic minorities in the UK through an Ethnic Minority Boost Sample, which was designed to provide at least 1,000 individuals from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Caribbean, and African origin (Knies, 2018). This allows us to carry out a detailed investigation of ethnic minorities in the UK.

In this study, we follow individuals between age 16 and age 60 who were married at least once during the observation period (2010-2016). First, we estimate a discrete-time multi-level hazard regression to study the risk of a divorce among ethnic minorities. We compare the

divorce risks of UK natives and ethnic minorities from the following ethnic groups: Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, African, Other White, and Other. Additionally, we control for marriage duration (0-1 year, 1-3 years, 3-5 years, and 5 years or longer), and individuals' age (16-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49, 50-54, 55-59) and sex (male and female). Second, using information on individuals' and their partners' ethnicity, we estimate divorce risks by marriage type. To measure marriage type, we define two variables. First, marriages can either be endogamous (marriage between two partners of the same ethnic origin) or exogamous (marriage between two partners from different ethnic groups). Second, we define a more detailed marriage typology and distinguish between endogamous and exogamous marriages by whether one or both of the partners is a UK native. This way, we define four different marriage types: native endogamous (marriage between two UK natives), ethnic endogamous (marriage between two people from the same ethnic group), native exogamous (marriage between a UK native and someone with a non-UK ethnic background), and ethnic exogamous (a non-native married to a non-native from a different ethnic group than the respondent). Lastly, level of education is measured as high (university degree), medium (A levels of equivalent), and low (GCSE, other, or no qualifications) levels of education.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows the number of divorces (events) and number of person-years by marriage duration, age, sex, the ethnicity of the respondent, and marriage type. In total, we observe 17,299 individuals who contribute 76,465 person-years and experience 540 divorces during the observation period. The large number of person-years at long durations (5+ years) is related to the study design; we have also included marriages in the analysis, which were formed before the study began in 2009 (and had survived until then). Sensitivity analyses (not shown) indicate

that when we exclude marriages with very long durations (i.e., 35 years or longer) the results remain unaffected.

Table 1. Number of events and person-years in the analytical sample (N=17,299 individuals).

	Events	Person-years
Marriage duration		
0-1 year	3	1,575
1-3 years	25	3,493
3-5 years	24	4,749
5+ years	488	66,648
Age		
16-24	3	684
25-29	36	3,930
30-34	77	9,100
35-39	101	12,414
40-44	116	14,308
45-49	114	13,632
50-54	58	12,345
55-59	35	10,052
Sex		
Male	211	37,202
Female	329	39,263
Ethnicity		
UK native	402	51,379
Other white	32	3,974
Caribbean	18	1,264
Indian	11	5,344
Pakistani	15	4,561
Bangladeshi	17	3,271
African	22	2,519
Other	23	4,153
Level of education		
High	210	34,634
Medium	125	13,069
Low	193	25,999
Marriage type		
Native endogamous	376	48,005
Ethnic endogamous	86	19,610
Native exogamous	59	6,814
Ethnic exogamous	19	2,036
Total	540	76,465

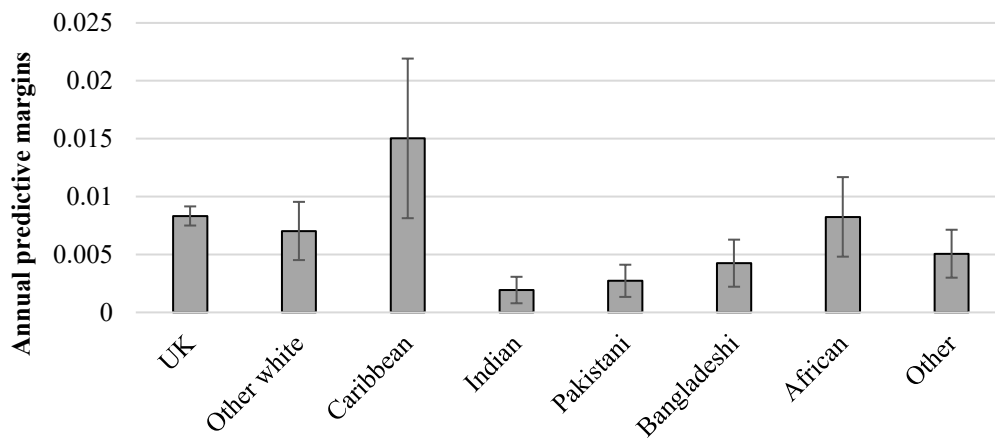
Source: Authors' own calculations using data from UKHLS Understanding Society waves 1-7

Next, we present multivariate results in the form of annual predictive margins. Figure 1 shows the likelihood of a divorce by the ethnicity of the respondent. Individuals of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi origin have a significantly lower probability to experience a divorce than UK natives. Additionally, although the confidence intervals are large, individuals with



Caribbean descent are more likely to experience a divorce than other ethnic groups and UK natives. Individuals of African, ‘other white’, and ‘other’ origin have similar divorce risks to UK natives.

Figure 1. Annual predictive margins of divorce by ethnicity of the respondents.



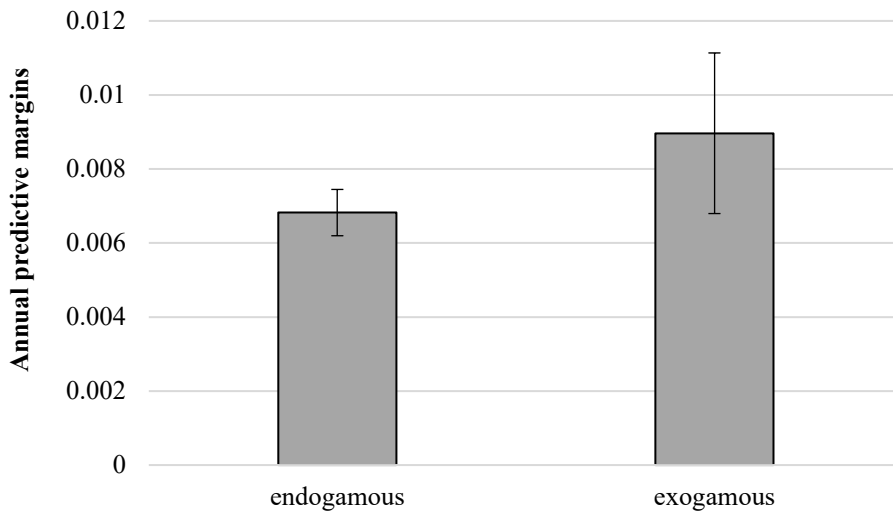
Authors’ own calculations using data from UKHLS Understanding Society waves 1-7. The analysis is controlled for marriage duration, age, sex, and marriage type.

In the second step, we study the predicted probability of a divorce by marriage type using two different measures for marriage type (as explained above). Figure 2 shows annual predictive margins of a divorce among endogamous and exogamous marriages. We find that exogamous marriages are more likely to end in divorce than endogamous marriages although this difference is not statistically significant.

This finding may lead us to conclude that we found some evidence for the dissimilarity/exogamy hypothesis. However, when we study the predicted probabilities of a divorce using a more detailed measure of marriage type (Figure 3), we find that ethnic endogamous couples are the least likely to divorce whereas the other three marriage types are equally likely to end in divorce. In other words, couples where both spouses are from the same ethnic group are the least likely to divorce but the argument of similarity between the spouses does not hold for couples where both spouses are UK natives. Additionally, it is interesting that

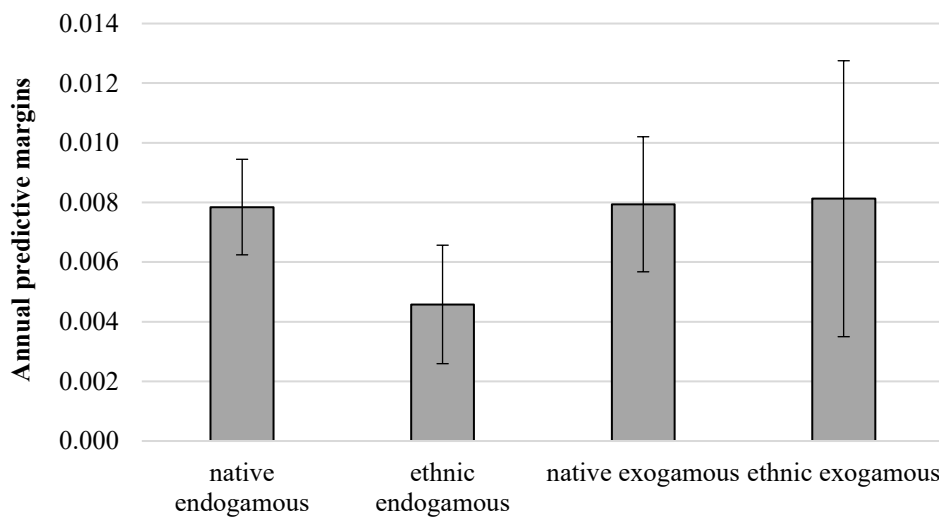
couples where one partners is from the UK and one from a non-native ethnic group are as likely to divorce as ethnic exogamous and native-native couples.

Figure 2. Annual predictive margins of divorce by marriage type.



Authors' own calculations using data from UKHLS Understanding Society waves 1-7. The analysis is controlled for marriage duration, age, sex, and ethnicity.

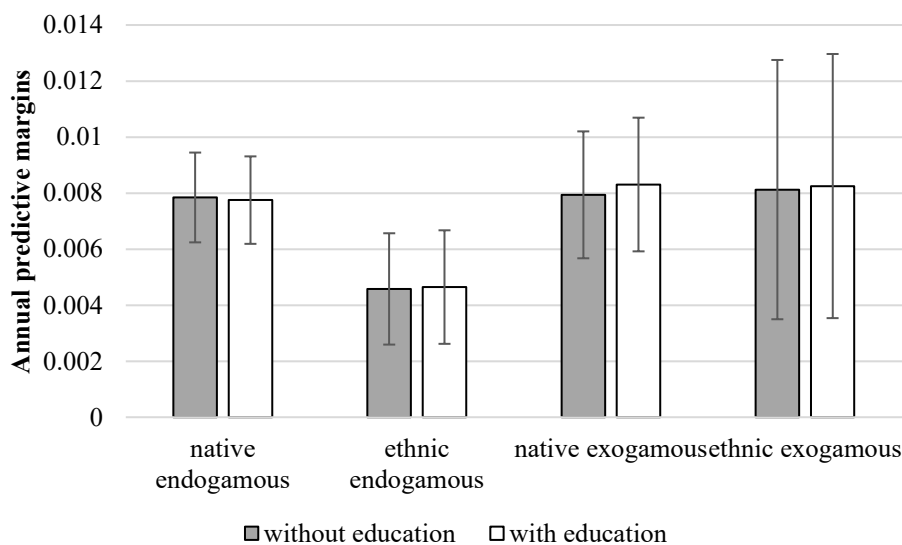
Figure 3. Annual predictive margins of divorce by more detailed marriage type.



Authors' own calculations using data from UKHLS Understanding Society waves 1-7. The analysis is controlled for marriage duration, age, sex, and ethnicity.

Next, we add level of education to this model to test the selection hypothesis which states that once we control for individuals' socio-economic characteristics (as measured here by level of education), any initial differences in the divorce risks of endogamous and exogamous marriages should disappear. Figure 4 shows that we do not find proof for this hypothesis; when we control for level of education, the annual predictive margins remain virtually identical to when we did not include level of education in the analysis.

Figure 4. Annual predictive margins of divorce by marriage type, with and without controlling for education.



Authors' own calculations using data from UKHLS Understanding Society waves 1-7. The analysis is controlled for marriage duration, age, sex, and ethnicity.

## Conclusion

This paper investigated the stability of mixed marriages in the UK. We analysed the probability of a divorce among different ethnic groups as well as by marriage type (based on the ethnicity of the spouses). We tested expectations from three competing hypotheses regarding divorce among mixed marriages to better understand the likelihood that ethnically mixed marriages would end in divorce. First, the dissimilarity/exogamy hypotheses argues that native-immigrant

marriages will be more likely to end in divorce than native-native or co-ethnic marriages due to cultural and other dissimilarities between partners who come from culturally different groups. On the contrary, the selection hypothesis argues that observed differences in the likelihood of divorce between mixed marriages and endogamous marriages can be explained by individuals' socio-economic and demographic characteristics. This means that once we take into account these characteristics, native-immigrant marriages should not be more likely to end in divorce than native-native or co-ethnic marriages. Finally, the convergence hypothesis argues that due to mutual adaptation between the spouses, divorce levels of native-immigrant marriages will be in-between that of native-native and co-ethnic marriages.

To test these hypotheses, we compared the divorce risks of endogamous and exogamous marriages and found that endogamous marriages are less likely to end in divorce than exogamous marriages although the difference was not statistically significant. This provides partial support for the dissimilarity hypothesis. However, when we break down these two types of marriages by the composition of the couple (native-native, co-ethnic, native-ethnic, and mixed-ethnic marriages) we do not find support for the dissimilarity hypothesis, which would expect that native-immigrant marriages have the highest levels of divorce. Instead, we find that native-native, native-immigrant, and mixed-ethnic marriages all have very similar divorce probabilities whereas co-ethnic marriages are less likely to end in divorce. Thus, our findings do not support the dissimilarity hypothesis. Additionally, these results are also not in line with the convergence hypothesis according to which the divorce levels of native-immigrant marriages would be in-between that of native-native and co-ethnic marriages. Last, when we control for level of education, these results remain virtually the same providing no support for the selection hypothesis.

To conclude, we did not find support for any of the three competing hypotheses. If the dissimilarity hypothesis holds, we would also expect native-native marriages to be less likely

to end in divorce than native exogamous or ethnic exogamous marriages. Although it is indeed the case that marriages where spouses are from the same ethnic group are the least likely to end in divorce, we did not expect native exogamous and ethnic exogamous marriages to have divorce levels as high as that of native-native marriages. A potential explanation for high levels of divorce among native exogamous marriages might be that when one of the partners is from the UK, the partner who is from an ethnic group might be more assimilated, and might have more similar values to that of UK natives than those who did not marry someone from the majority population. Alternatively, it could be that in such a couple what matters is that the UK native partner's preferences or values would take precedence meaning that they will be more likely to divorce regardless of the ethnicity of their partner.

To further investigate possible explanation for what we observe, we plan to extend our analyses in the following ways. First, we will add more covariates to adjust for individuals' socio-economic background (e.g., employment status) and the area of residence. Second, we will not only model the dissolution of marriages but also the dissolution of cohabiting relationships among ethnic minorities and by union type (i.e., co-ethnic vs mixed-unions) to gain a better understanding of whether mixed cohabitations are more/less likely to end in union dissolution. Third, we plan to distinguish between immigrants and their descendants to improve our understanding of the role of assimilation vs. acculturation. Last, we plan to explore whether and how we can increase our sample by using retrospective information on union formations and marriages collected in wave 1 and wave 6. We plan to explore whether multiple imputation can be used to determine the type of a union (endo- vs exogamous) for the pre-panel unions for which we have no information on the partners' ethnic origin.

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