

Religion and union stability: How religious affiliation alters age-related divorce risks in Sweden

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Age-related factors and divorce risks

Age at marriage

- Younger age at marriage is a well-established predictor of higher divorce risk (Glenn et al. 2010, Lampard 2013)
 - Non-linear: risk is steepest at the youngest ages (Lehrer 2008, Lampard 2013)

Explanation. *The Maturation thesis:* older spouses are more emotionally and economically equipped (Glenn et al. 2010)

Age difference

- Larger spousal age gaps are associated with higher divorce risk (Kalmijn & Poortman 2006, Manning, Brown & Stykes 2016).
 - Non-linear, positively concave: effect intensifies with larger gaps

Explanations. Mismatched life-course stages, differing fertility preferences, power imbalances

Religion and divorce risk

Religious couples divorce less

- Marital commitment norms, congregational networks, and social costs of exit (Mahoney 2013; Marks 2005)
- Religious individuals marry earlier on average, yet their marriages are more stable (Rendon et al. 2014)
- Larger age differences among religious individuals (Casterline et al. 1985, Kolk 2015)

What we don't know

- Whether religion moderates the age-divorce gradient has not been examined

How religion can alter age-related divorce risks

Expectation: Religiosity acts as a *protective buffer* against age-related divorce risks, yielding a weaker association for religious individuals

Direct pathways

- Commitment norms (Perry 2018, Vermeulen et al. 2023)
 - Religious teachings frame divorce as morally costly
- Higher social cost of divorce (Casterline 1986)
- More deliberate partner choice (Cherlin 2010, 2020)
- More social support (Mark, 2005)
 - Embedded in network and contexts providing practical and emotional aid

Indirect pathways

- Higher fertility and earlier parenthood (Adsera 2006, Schnabel, 2021, Schulz 2022)
 - Parenthood is linked to lower divorce risk (Svarer & Verner 2008; Zahl-Olsen 2022)
- Better marital quality
 - Religious individuals report greater sexual satisfaction and lower infidelity (Dollahite & Lambert 2007, Peri-Rotem & Skirbekk 2023)
 - Determinants of marital stability

Purpose

Background

- Age at marriage and age differences are established predictors of divorce and vary along religious line
 - Despite this we don't know if the role of age-related divorce risk operates similarly for secular and religious sub-populations
- Matters because Western countries are rapidly secularizing (Stolz 2025)

Research question

- How does religious affiliation moderate the association between age-related divorce risk factors?
 - Focus on age at marriage and spousal age difference

Empirical setting: Sweden and the Church of Sweden

Sweden as a “least-likely” case

- High divorce rates: ~1 in 2 marriages dissolve (Schmidt et al., 2012)
- Strongly postponed marriage (SCB, 2020)

The Church of Sweden

- Former state church (full separation 2000)
- “Nordic paradox”/“fuzzy fidelity” (Bruce, 2002; Voas, 2009)
- Have experienced a dramatic membership decline

If Church of Sweden affiliation moderates age-related divorce risks, it likely does so in other, more religious contexts

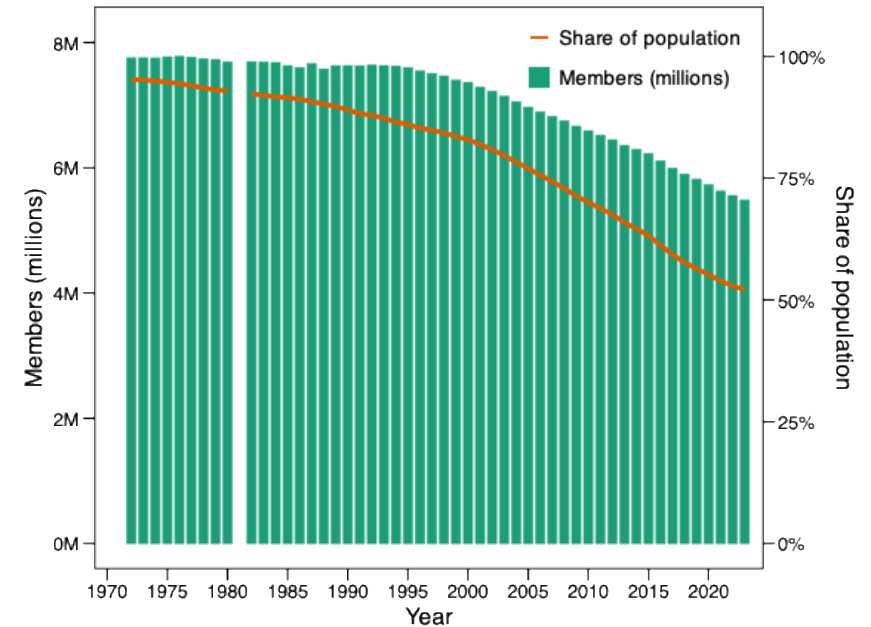


Figure taken from Carlberg Larsson (2025)

Data

Swedish administrative register data

- Longitudinal individual-level data covering marriage cohorts 2000–2012
 - N = 216,038 heterosexual first marriages
 - Excluding couples with a foreign background and with other affiliations than the Church of Sweden

Measures

- **Outcome:** divorce within 10 years of marriage (binary)
- **Predictors**
 - **Age at marriage:** couple's mean age
 - **Age difference:** husband's age minus wife's age
 - **Religious composition:** Church of Sweden membership at time of marriage
 - 4 couple-level categories
- **Control variables:** education, employment, income, previous cohabitation, fertility before and during marriage

Analytical strategy

Logistic regression model with marriage year fixed effects

- Estimating the likelihood of being divorced 10 years after getting married
- **Age at marriage** and **age difference** are the main predictors
- Couples' religious composition is modelled as a moderating factor

$$D_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AgeMar_i + \beta_2 AgeDiff_i + \beta_3 (AgeMar_i \times RelAffi_i) + \beta_4 (AgeDiff_i \times RelAffi_i) + X_i' \gamma + \delta_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

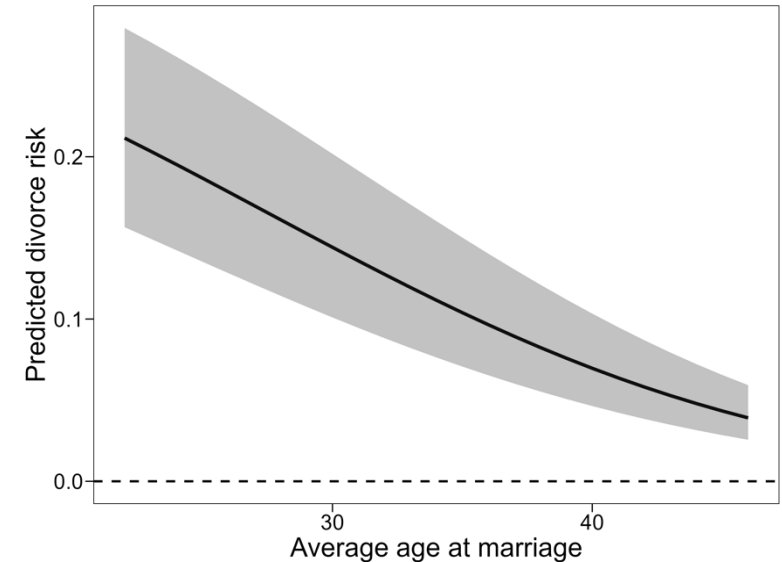
Age at marriage & age difference on divorce risk

Age at marriage

- Strong inverse relationship: older = lower divorce risk
- Non-linear association; gets weaker for older ages

Age difference

- Larger gaps raise divorce risk monotonically
- Non-linear association; stronger as gap increases



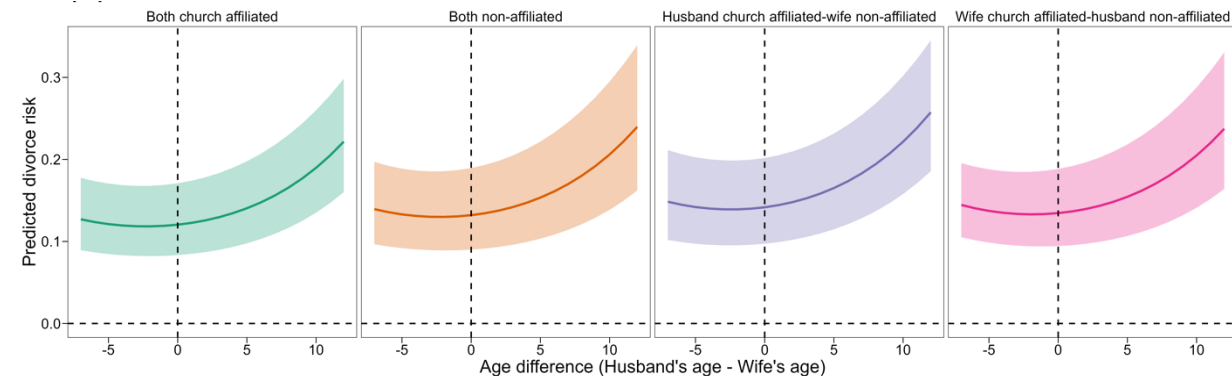
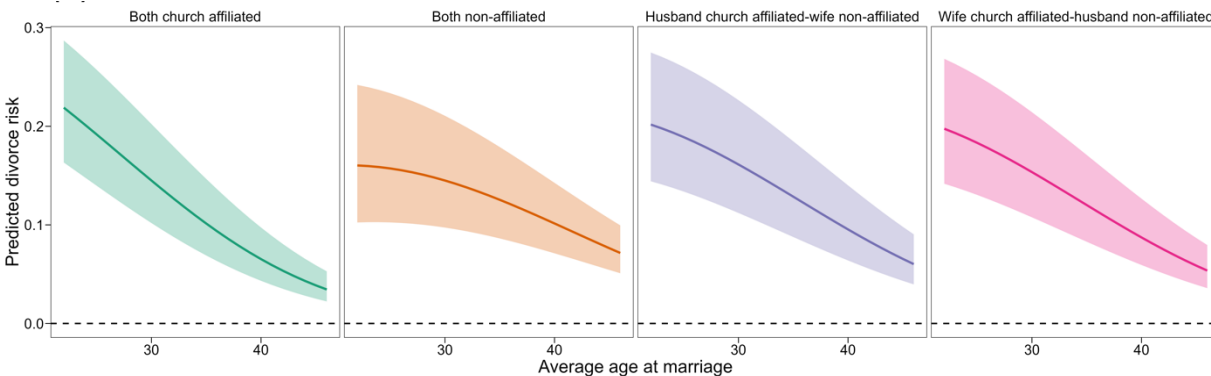
How religion moderates age-related divorce risks

Age at marriage & religious affiliation

- *Religiously-affiliated couples*: strong protective effect of later marriage
- *Non-affiliated couples*: the protective effect of later marriage is attenuated
- *Mixed couples*: intermediate protective effect

Age difference & religious affiliation

- No significant interaction
 - Age-gap penalty is universal: religion offers no buffer



Summary and conclusions

Summary of findings

- As expected, age at marriage and age differences both predict divorce
- The protective effect of later marriage is conditional on religious affiliation: attenuated for secular couples
- The age-gap penalty is universal, not moderated by religion

Conclusions

- Against expectations: religious affiliation amplifies the age-at-marriage effect
- The age-gap penalty, however, is universal — unaffected by religious affiliation
- Is the maturation thesis less valid in a secular world?
- Secularization partly explains the rise in divorce rates in Sweden

Thank you for listening!



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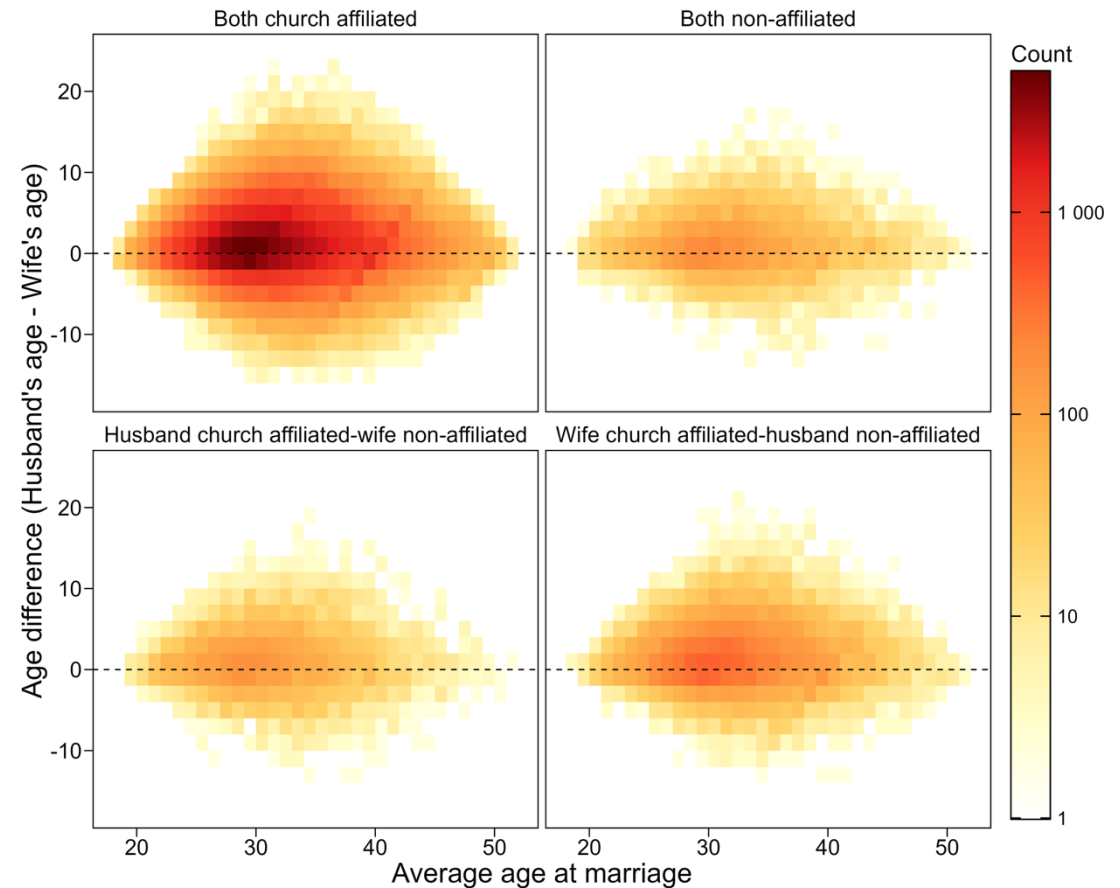
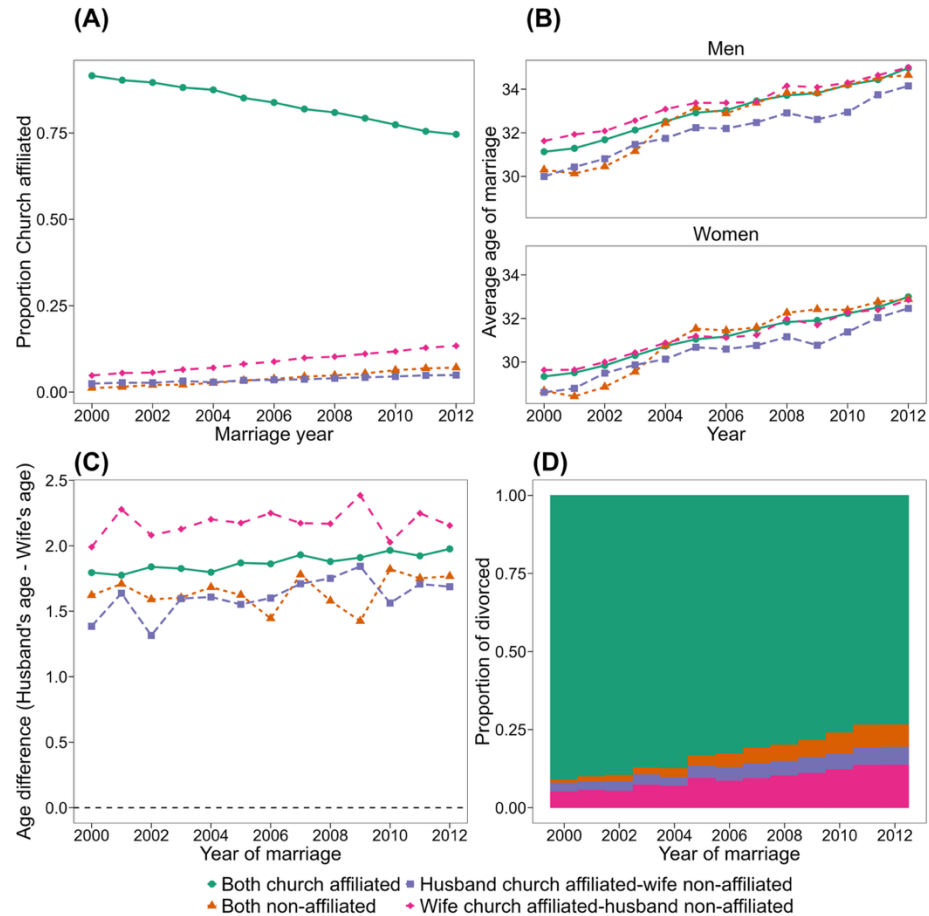


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Extra material

Descriptive figures



Regression output

Table 2. Age at marriage, couple's church-affiliation composition, and the odds ratio of divorcing within ten years after entering marriage. Cluster-robust standard errors (in parentheses) are grouped by marriage year. Asterisks denote significance levels (+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001)

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Age at marriage	0.781*** (0.009)	1.007 (0.007)	1.008 (0.007)	1.009 (0.007)	1.012+ (0.007)	1.009 (0.007)	1.012+ (0.007)
Age at marriage ²	1.003*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)	0.999*** (0.000)
Age difference (husband's age – wife's age)	0.998 (0.002)	1.016*** (0.002)	1.017*** (0.002)	1.035* (0.015)	1.017*** (0.002)	1.017*** (0.003)	1.017*** (0.003)
Age difference ²	1.007*** (0.000)	1.004*** (0.000)	1.004*** (0.000)	1.004*** (0.000)	1.004*** (0.000)	1.004*** (0.000)	1.004*** (0.000)
Religious affiliation (ref: Both church affiliated)							
<i>Both non-affiliated</i>			1.111** (0.038)	1.110** (0.038)	0.237*** (0.072)	1.115** (0.039)	0.237*** (0.070)
<i>Husband church affiliated-wife non-affiliated</i>			1.179*** (0.036)	1.179*** (0.036)	0.480*** (0.079)	1.177*** (0.041)	0.479*** (0.079)
<i>Wife church affiliated-husband non-affiliated</i>			1.124*** (0.024)	1.124*** (0.024)	0.511*** (0.073)	1.131*** (0.027)	0.514*** (0.072)
Interaction terms							
<i>Age at marriage × Age difference</i>				0.999 (0.000)			
<i>Age at marriage × Both non-affiliated</i>					1.049*** (0.009)		1.049*** (0.009)
<i>Age at marriage × Husband church affiliated-wife non-affiliated</i>					1.029*** (0.005)		1.029*** (0.005)
<i>Age at marriage × Wife church affiliated-husband non-affiliated</i>					1.025*** (0.005)		1.025*** (0.005)
<i>Age difference × Both non-affiliated</i>						0.998 (0.008)	1.000 (0.008)
<i>Age difference × Husband church affiliated-wife non-affiliated</i>						1.001 (0.007)	1.001 (0.007)
<i>Age difference × Wife church affiliated-husband non-affiliated</i>						0.998 (0.007)	0.997 (0.007)
Control variables	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed effect: Age at marriage	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R² Adj.	0.017	0.095	0.096	0.096	0.096	0.096	0.096
N observations	216,038	216,038	216,038	216,038	216,038	216,038	216,038