

## ***Between traditionalism and egalitarianism. Non-linear divorce dynamics.***

Extended abstract PAA

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The Second Demographic Transition encapsulates ongoing changes in family behavior and gender roles (Laesthaghe, 1983; van de Kaa, 2001). Marriage is declining while both cohabitation and divorce rates are on the rise; fertility has declined and childbearing is postponed to later ages. In parallel, women have begun to outperform men in terms of educational attainment, and a lifetime attachment to employment is becoming the norm. This, of course, challenges the traditional gender division of labor within the family.

The macro-level correlation between women's increased female participation and divorce trends suggests that changing gender roles may explain the rise in marital instability. At the individual level, however, the relationship between female employment and divorce still remains unclear (Özcan and Breen 2012). According to the *economic independence theory*, Wives' employed raises the risk of divorce by diminishing the gains from specialization (Becker 1981, Parsons 1959). In line with the neoclassical theory of marriage, the *equal dependence thesis* posits that the risk of divorce is especially high when partners have similar economic resources (Nock 1995, 2001). Oppenheimer (1997), to the contrary, argued that specialization is a risky arrangement and that couples with two earners should enjoy more stable marriages.

Empirical research on the issue has not yet provided firm answers to this question (see Özcan and Breen 2012 for a review). For one, the effect of wives' employment on divorce varies across countries (Cooke et al. 2013) and also historical periods (South 2001, Poortman and Kalmijn 2002). The *first aim* of this study is to provide an additional test of the relationship between female labor supply and partnership instability. We compare across Western Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Our main focus is on the relative share of the wife's working hours.

There are several moderating factors that may influence the relationship between wives' employment and divorce (Rogers 2004) that a crude measure of relative employment effects does not take into account. A growing body of literature indicates that inequity in the partners' division of domestic work is an important source of marital conflict, especially when female partner is employed. Research shows that equitable arrangements in terms of both paid and unpaid work can reduce divorce risks (Bellani and Esping-Andersen 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Equity may reduce the risk of divorce by inducing a sense of fairness for both partners: the main proposition here is that stable relationships need to be founded on principles of equity (DeMaris and Longmore 1996; Frisco and Williams 2003). Therefore, the *second aim* of our research is to analyze whether equity, as defined above, influences partnership stability across countries.

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<sup>1</sup> For couples, equity can be defined as a situation where the wife and husband share in an equal manner the combined load of paid and unpaid work. Accordingly, both female and male breadwinner couples can be defined as equitable, also when each spouse specializes in either paid or unpaid work. Also, a dual-earner couple in which spouses equally participate in both the labor market and in domestic tasks is considered as equitable.

Gender ideology theory suggests that inequities may actually help stabilize relationships. The argument here is that couples who deviate from existing gender norms may attempt to stabilize the relationship by reenacting traditional gender roles -- 'doing-gender' (Bertrand 2012, Brines 1994, Bittman et al 2003, Cooke 2004, Cooke 2006). For instance, if the wife commands greater economic resources than her husband, a way to re-establish traditional gender roles would be by doing more than her fair share of housework (Bittman et al 2003, Cooke 2006, Greenstein 2000). Hence, we expect that the association between equity may produce different consequences if it is associated with traditional role specialization or with female full time employment.

The *third aim* of our study consists in the analysis of non-linearities in the link between equitable couple arrangements and divorce across the division of paid work. We explore these relationships in three different institutional and normative contexts, Western Germany, Great Britain and the United States. The analyses are based on the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the U.S. Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP). All analyses apply event history methods to panel data for partnerships between 1981 and 1997 in the United States<sup>2</sup>, and between 1991 and 2007 in Western Germany and Great Britain. The analyses incorporate time varying measures of the female share of paid work hours and also an innovative indicator of equity based on the division of paid and unpaid work.

These countries differ due to institutional factors and normative constraints which influence both women's employment decisions and family behavior. Following Esping-Andersen (2009), we assume that in societies where there are no policies reinforcing traditional gender roles, men's greater participation in domestic tasks will help produce more stable marriages regardless of women's employment (Cooke, 2006).

To anticipate our conclusions, we find strong support for the economic independence hypothesis for Western Germany and Great Britain and only a partial validation for the US. Moreover we show that equity decreases divorce risks albeit not powerfully so. More interesting, its effect is non-linear across the distribution of the relative female share of paid work. Furthermore, the nature of these non-linear relationships varies between the countries. In West Germany, equity stabilizes partnerships at the two extremes of wives' labor supply: when they adopt a traditional division of labor, or when the woman is the prime earner. We find the opposite effect for dual earner couples. In Great Britain, this relationship only holds for traditional couples. And in the United States we find that the equity effect is strongest within dual earner couples.

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, from 1997 onwards, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics has conducted surveys every other year. As a consequence, we cannot use data after 1997 because information on paid work is collected for the previous year while for unpaid work it is asked for the current year. We chose the years of observation in order to have a comparable number of years between the three datasets.