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Within-couple specialisation in paid work: A long-term pattern? A dual trajectory approach to linking lives



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ABSTRACT

Research on the division of labour has mainly focussed on transitions between individuals' labour market states during the first years of parenthood. A common conclusion has been that couples specialise – women in unpaid and men in paid work – either due to gender ideologies or a comparative advantage in the labour market. But what happens later in life? The German Socio-Economic Panel now provides researchers with a continuous measure of working hours across decades of couples' lives, enabling a dual trajectory analysis to explore couples' long-term specialisation patterns. I focus on the career trajectories of West German couples, and specifically, due to the relatively low institutional and normative support for female employment during its members' early years, on the 1956–65 female birth cohort. Even in this setting and with a conservative estimate, a surprisingly small number of couples – only a fifth – adopt full specialisation in later life. A sizable proportion – a third – moves into dual full-time employment. This trend is even more common among highly educated couples: half of those couples move into dual full-time employment. I find that highly educated women are not only less likely to permanently specialise but also more likely to try working full-time, possibly because their partners' comparative advantages are lower. But despite high opportunity costs, 45% of highly educated parents never try to pursue a dual career either because of a satiation of material wants or because of low societal support for maternal employment. The latter phenomenon is further underscored by the finding that many couples' increase in working hours occurs only when a youngest child is a teenager.

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1. Introduction

The question of how couples divide their paid and unpaid working hours has taken particular prominence in scholarly debates since Becker's *A Treatise on the Family* (1991). According to Becker's economic argument, couples divide paid and unpaid work according to who has the comparative advantage or who is relatively more efficient in each sector (either market or household) in order to

maximise a joint household utility function (Becker, 1985, 1991). Both economists' and sociologists' analyses have supported the conclusion that women opt out of work or reduce their career investments whilst men invest more heavily in their careers. Two very different reasons are put forward: first, women are more likely to have a comparative disadvantage; and second, women may pursue different goals due to gender ideologies.

What may have been forgotten in the debate is that for very sound practical reasons couples may choose not to specialise in the long term. If one moves away from assuming that income-maximisation will be the major couple-level goal, further possible motivations for choosing

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not to specialise emerge. For example, a woman may desire to pursue a career, irrespective of its short-term economic rationality, which will allow her to attain a status which reflects her past achievements. Moreover, the couple may be reluctant to let go of one partner's pre-birth human capital investments for practical reasons. (Doctors, for instance, may be required to refresh or maintain their human capital in order to demonstrate a continuous record of professional development which is needed for their professional registration.) Even when viewed from the perspective of economic rationality, a comparative advantage might vanish once unpaid work has decreased in importance or once one partner has maximised his or her potential in the labour market. In this case, couples may decide that it is more sensible to take turns (i.e. prioritise the other partner's career). *Becker and Moen's* (1999) qualitative work supports this "taking turns" approach to life course work hour investment. Moreover, a couple may lower their financial risks by investing in both partners' careers. Additionally, a woman's individual-level financial risk – in the case of divorce, for example – can be decreased if the woman does not opt out of her career.

Against the backdrop of these sound alternatives available to couples, it is more likely that the division of labour is dynamic throughout the life course, with short-term inequalities based on a comparative advantage of one partner in the labour market not resulting in long-term specialisation. Because of these alternatives and also because of the methodological advances outlined below, the time has come to re-think the way in which the question "Do couples specialise?" is analysed.

Previous analyses have not been adequately designed to address this question. Methodologically, despite theoretical claims to the contrary, couples' lives have traditionally been de-linked or the longitudinal dimension has been simplified. This was mainly due to a lack of appropriate data. As a consequence of the long lead-time required for prospective data, researchers often had to settle for retrospective data to cover the life course, which relies on the recall of the interviewee. As a result, only a categorical measurement (part-time, full-time, non-employed) of previous levels of engagement in paid work was feasible. In turn, due to the categorical nature of the variable, researchers tended to focus on *transitions* between *states* rather than the life course *trajectory dynamics*. Whenever panel data was used, the analytical approaches applied to retrospective data or a two time-point comparison was used. Furthermore, the longitudinal dimension was often explored only partially by focussing on the time around the first childbirth rather than later life course stages (e.g. *Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2001*). Interesting differences in labour distribution tend to occur after the couples' youngest child moves beyond its first years.

Straightforwardly, one would operationalise the question of how couples divide their paid working hours throughout their lives as a set of *linked pairs of alternative work-hour trajectories* – one for each partner – spanning the life course.

Working with these two curves, the question of couples' life course work hour strategies becomes a question of

- (a) Opening the *vertical black box* of how working hours are divided between partners [linking lives at the cross-sectional level].
- (b) Opening the *horizontal black box* of how the division of labour between partners develops over time [life course analysis].
- (c) Understanding *variations* in the vertical and longitudinal dimensions depicted through the seven different ideal-types of couples [exploring heterogeneity] (see Fig. 1a).

In looking at explanatory factors for which type of couple might end up in either pattern, the first one to turn to is educational level. This variable in particular has been found to be associated with labour market investment in the work-family literature in the past (*Blossfeld & Drobnic, 2001; Brynin & Schupp, 2000; Dex, Ward, & Joshi, 2008*).

The German Socio-Economic Panel,¹ which covers up to 30 years of peoples' lives *prospectively*, can shed new light on which *different types of long-term* work hour strategies couples pursue. Since both partners are interviewed across their lives, it allows the life course developments of husband and wife to be linked together (see (a)) via two trajectories (see (b)). The relatively large number of observations further enables the assessment of the heterogeneity of couples' joint over-time work hour trajectories (c) to find out how many couples pursue distinct long-term work hour strategies other than within-couple specialisation. Surprisingly, these recent possibilities have remained unused.

A study on West Germany by Kühhirt did address the longitudinal dimension. His research looked at how the share in female pre-birth income was linked to *either men's or women's* subsequent work hour investment. This did not allow for drawing conclusions about how the *two partners'* work hour investment trajectories were *linked over time* (*Kühhirt, 2012*). In contrast, I examine how men's and women's work hour trajectories evolve jointly. This allows me to make inferences about how *joint career trajectories* are shaped by joint education. More importantly however, I build *heterogeneous groups* of joint work hour trajectories (i.e. I group based on the dependent variable), before looking at how these different patterns are related to the independent variable (education). In contrast, Kühhirt looks at how the *average* work hour curve changes depending on the independent variable.

West Germany is a particularly interesting case. On the one hand, ever more women have entered the labour market, as they have across the Western world (*Simonson, Gordo, & Titova, 2011*). On the other hand, former West Germany differs from other countries in several important respects. First, approval of maternal employment has been particularly low: in 2005/2006 48% were against full-time maternal employment if the child was younger than three. In comparison, only 12% of the Danish sample was against maternal employment at that life course stage (*Steiber & Haas, 2010*). Second, the attitudes in former West Germany

¹ The data used in this publication were made available to me by the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), Berlin.

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