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Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

The dynamic relationships between union dissolution and women's employment: A life-history analysis of 16 countries



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 January 2013

Revised 4 June 2014

Accepted 27 June 2014

Available online 9 July 2014

Keywords:

Cross-national comparison

Gender role norms

Women's employment

Role specialization

Selection

Union dissolution

ABSTRACT

The specialization theory from Gary Becker is often used to explain the effect of women's work on the risk of divorce. The main argument is that women with little work experience have higher economic costs to exit marriage. Using the Fertility and Family Surveys, we test for 16 countries to what extent women's employment increases the risk of separation. We also more directly examine the role of economic exit costs in separation by investigating the effect of separated women's work history during the union on women's post-separation employment. The results imply that Becker was right to some extent, especially in contexts with little female employment support. However, in settings where women's employment opportunities are more ample, sociological or psychological theories have probably more explanatory power to explain the causes and consequences of union dissolution.

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1. Introduction

Several scholars have found that the more women engage in domestic work and the less they participate in paid labor during their partnership the lower their risk of divorce (e.g., [Bracher et al., 1993](#); [Brines and Joyner, 1999](#); [Cherlin, 1979](#); [Poortman and Kalmijn, 2002](#); [Rogers, 2004](#); [South, 2001](#); [Tzeng and Mare, 1995](#)). This effect is generally attributed to the higher economic exit costs of married women who were not specializing in paid work in the union. The less women work for pay during the union, the more their human capital depreciates, and the fewer economic resources they will have outside the union. Moreover, specialization is assumed to lead to higher economic gains of the partnership for both men and women, and therefore also results in higher economic costs when the union dissolves ([Becker, 1981](#)). Although this reasoning is often used as an interpretation, it is rarely empirically tested. Do women who separate indeed have better economic resources, and thereby, work more hours after separation? And do women who invested more in paid work during the partnership indeed have better employment chances after separation? By asking these questions we combine two lines of research: Research on the economic causes of divorce and research on the economic consequences of divorce. Scholars have investigated the effect of women's employment within marriage on the divorce risk as well as the effect of divorce on women's post-divorce employment (e.g., [Covizzi, 2008](#); [Jenkins, 2008](#); [Van Damme et al., 2009](#)). So far, no study has combined the two lines of research into one study.

To address these issues, we use the retrospective data of the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) of 16 countries. The data of these countries have life histories of about 67,000 women covering 20 years of history on average. We analyze data for

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50,790 women who married or cohabited in the period 1955–1999. Of these partnered women, 25 per cent separated at least once in the period 1957–1999. After a descriptive comparison of partnered and separated women's working hours over time, we examine two relationships: First, we examine the effect of women's employment on the probability that women separate. Second, we investigate if separated women's work history during the union increases post-separation working hours. In examining this last issue, we take into account that the women who separate are a selective group (see below).

That we analyze 16 European countries will not only provide more general evidence on the validity of the underlying hypotheses, but also allows us to examine whether there are systematic differences among countries. Such differences can in part be expected because there are large differences in women's economic roles in the various European countries (Blossfeld and Hofmeister, 2006; Stier et al., 2001). For instance, some scholars have pointed out that the relationship between wife's work and divorce may be weaker in non-traditional societies (Blossfeld and Müller, 2002/2003; Oppenheimer, 1997), although others claimed the opposite to be true (South, 2001). Our general expectation is that the economic exit costs of marriage are lower in more egalitarian countries.

2. Theory and hypotheses

To what extent is the underlying theoretical mechanism explaining the relationship between women's employment and separation empirically valid? That is, do women who were working more hours during the union indeed have lower economic exit costs – they work more hours after separation – than non-working women?

2.1. The effect of women's employment on separation

Although a few studies have shown that women's employment reduces (e.g., Ono, 1998) or has no effect (e.g., Sayer and Bianchi, 2000) on the likelihood to divorce, most studies have suggested that women's employment increases the divorce risk (Bracher et al., 1993; Brines and Joyner, 1999; Cherlin, 1979; De Rose, 1992; Jalovaara, 2003; Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006; Poortman and Kalmijn, 2002; South, 2001; Tzeng and Mare, 1995). This 'positive' effect of women's employment on divorce is often explained from an economic perspective, either based on the loss of specialization or on obtained economic independence. As for the first argument, neoclassical theories of marriage assume that family members make rational decisions and that they want to maximize their utility or (economic) well-being. The main argument is that if couples specialize in the household tasks in which they are the most productive (compared to their partner), they maximize their income (Becker, 1981). Given that there are wage differences between men and women and given women's greater role in child rearing (Becker points to both biological and socialization differences between the genders), women are considered to be the most productive in doing domestic work, whereas men are more productive in performing paid work. Both women (and men) are thus dependent upon their spouse. Under the assumption that women are less productive in paid work than men, an increase in wives' paid working hours (while husbands do not decrease their paid working hours and start to do more household tasks) decreases marital gains and thus increases the risk of divorce. The second argument entails that women with few labor market experience have relatively large exit costs (Cherlin, 1979, 1992; Oppenheimer, 1997). Because women's work during marriage is less often paid market work, they have less work experience and therefore fewer economic resources outside the marriage than within compared to men. Becker refers to domestic work and other investments during the marriage that are not paid work as marital specific capital. For earning their own income on the market, women are thus more dependent upon their husband than men upon their wives. Hence, for women the economic costs to exit marriage are higher than for men.

Scholars have raised some arguments against theories on the benefits of economic dependency within the household (Oppenheimer, 1997). The most important of these arguments is that the concept of economic dependence is rather vague; it may refer to both absolute and relative dependence. The specialization theory focuses on *relative* dependency, meaning dependence upon one's partner and implies that not only a wife's, but also her partner's working hours or income are important in her divorce decision. This argument relies on the assumption that within a household all economic resources are pooled and equally shared. This is proved to be an unrealistic assumption, however (Vogler and Pahl, 1993): Spouses often do not pool all of their resources and because it is usually the husband who keeps more for himself, the economic dependency of wives upon their husbands is overestimated (Sørensen and McLanahan, 1987).

We rather measure women's *absolute* economic independence, meaning that we examine the financial costs that women will (perceive to) have after a dissolution of their relationship. Put differently, we define women's economic exit costs as the extent to which women are able to earn a living independently as an individual or as a single head of a household with dependent children (even though it would be at the minimum income level). Women's total number of working hours during the union is a good and often used indicator of their absolute economic independence and it has been showed to have a significant influence on the risk of divorce (Johnson and Skinner, 1986; Poortman and Kalmijn, 2002; South, 2001). It reflects to what extent women have the potential to earn an own income after a divorce, while the extent of dependence upon their spouse during the union does not give any indication about her independence after the union has been dissolved. Two women may both be equally relatively dependent upon their spouse (if $[\text{income}_{\text{husband}} - \text{income}_{\text{wife}}]$ is similar for both women), but the woman who is working more hours, is more economically independent in absolute terms. Hence, we

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