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Women's Part-time Employment and Marital Stability in West Germany, Great Britain, and the United States

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Women's Part-time Employment and Marital Stability in West Germany, Great Britain, and the United States

Many hail wives' part-time employment as a work-family balance strategy, but theories offer competing predictions as to the effects of wives' employment on relationship stability. We use panel data to test these competing hypotheses among recent cohorts of first-married couples in West Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. We find effects of wives' employment on marital stability varies in its socioeconomic context. In West Germany with its high-quality part-time employment, couples where the wife works part-time are significantly more stable. In the more liberal GB and U.S. labour markets, neither wives' part- nor full-time employment significantly alters divorce risk. In the United States, however, mothers working part-time had significantly lower divorce risk. West German and British husbands' unemployment proved more detrimental to marital stability than wives' employment. These results highlight the importance of the normative context in structuring optimal household employment participation in post-industrial economies.

Key words: divorce, international comparisons, longitudinal analysis, work-family balance

Women's Part-time Employment and Marital Stability in West Germany, Great Britain and the United States

Introduction

Dramatic increases in female employment have placed work-family balance¹ atop personal and policy agendas. In the United States, policy makers are reluctant to interfere in either the private sphere or the market, resulting in little state assistance for balancing work and family obligations (Gornick and Meyers 2003; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). In European countries, however, policy makers often encourage part-time work as one avenue towards work-family balance. Part-time employment enables more women to join the labour force, increases households' financial security by facilitating dual-earning, and in turn reduces child poverty (Fagan and Walthery 2007; Kamerman *et al.* 2003). Consequently part-time work might be regarded as a panacea, providing benefits to employers, employees, and the state through workers' tax contributions and reduced claims for transfers.

Most research on part-time work explores gendered labour demand and supply factors. Part-time jobs are overwhelmingly taken up by women rather than men, with women comprising 80 percent of part-time workers in OECD countries (OECD 2002). But the quality and popularity of part-time employment varies across national contexts (Kalleberg, Ruskin and Hudson 2000; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998). High-quality part-time employment can facilitate women's further career development, whereas poor-quality part-time employment represents an impediment (Joshi, Pachi and Waldfogel 1999; Drobnič, Blossfeld and Rohwer 1999). Part-time employment frequently offers inferior wages (Gornick and Jacobs 1996; McGinnity and McManus 2007), limited occupational progression (Bardasi and Gornick

¹ The term "work-life balance" is increasingly used in GB over "work-family reconciliation" to indicate the multiple spheres in which we participate (Cummins 1996) and to underscore the potential gains for all spheres when balance is obtained (Voyandoff 2005; Greenhaus and Powel 2006). Yet it also implies that work is not a part of life, so we use the term work-family balance instead.

2008), and limited access to benefits relative to full-time employment (Connolly and Gregory 2008; O'Reilly and Fagan 1998). These disparities in part-time work quality have led to a great deal of scholarly debate as to whether structural constraints and continued incompatibility between home and market force women into part-time employment (Crompton 2002; Crompton and Harris 1998; Gash 2008; McRae 2003; Walters 2005), or whether women freely choose it as a matter of preference for balancing the two (Blossfeld and Hakim 1997; Hakim 2000).

Here we take the debate a step further to assess family outcomes of wives' employment level in its socioeconomic context. The dynamics should also apply to partnered women in *de facto* relationships so we use the terms "wives" and "partnered women" interchangeably, although our subsequent analysis will be limited to *de jure* couples. Some sociologists have argued wives' employment increases divorce risk in industrial societies (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977; Cherlin 1992). Others countered that in post-industrial societies, wives' employment enhances family economic flexibility (Fraser 1994; Oppenheimer 1997), which should lend greater stability to relationships. More recent multi-country analyses reveal that effects of partnered women's employment on relationship stability might vary by the degree to which it is institutionally supported (Cooke 2006; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006). This suggests wives' part-time employment might enhance marital stability, particularly in countries promoting it as a means for achieving work-family balance.

We select three countries with varying institutional support for different levels and quality of part-time employment. The U.S. unregulated labour market and reliance on corporate provision of welfare encourages greater female employment participation, but returns vary widely depending on women's educational attainment (Western, Bloome and

Percheski 2008). U.S. married women are more likely to be employed full-time than in many other countries and part-time work is generally poorly paid with no benefits (Kalleberg *et al.* 2000). West German and UK policies historically supported different types of male breadwinner models, and also varying quality of the part-time work taken up by a sizeable proportion of employed married women. The more compressed West German wage structures supports greater earnings equality, and West German ordinary part-time work also provides relatively good wages and access to benefits (Drobnič, Blossfeld and Rohwer 1999). In contrast, wage inequality is greater in the more liberal British labour market, and British part-time work in particular has historically been precarious and poorly paid (McKnight, Elias and Wilson 1998). By comparing divorce risk of recent cohorts of first-married couples across these countries using longitudinal data, we explore whether effects of wives' employment levels on marital stability vary in the policy context.

Competing Theories of Marital Stability

A household's level of employment clearly is not the only element of work-family balance, or necessarily the major factor predicting marital quality and risk of breakdown (Johnson and Booth 1998; Previti and Amato 2003). In their discussion of work-family balance, however, Jacobs and Gerson (2004) argued long work hours in dual-earner households might create tensions that disrupt marriage. Earlier, Becker (1985) applied a market model to family time allocation to argue a gendered division of labour increases the mutual dependence between husbands and wives. If instead women have independent income, they might be less willing to work out marital problems (Cherlin 1992). These perspectives yield what has become known as the *independence hypothesis*: women's employment invariably increases the risk of marital dissolution.

Time strains or the independence hypothesis suggest that divorce risk should increase as wives' employment hours or earnings increase. If these individual-level effects were universal, in all countries we should observe the smallest divorce risk among couples where the wife remains out of the labour force, somewhat greater risk among couples where she works part-time, and the greatest risk among full-time dual-earner couples.

Oppenheimer (1997), however, noted that a specialization model within the family is a high-risk strategy leaving households vulnerable to economic downturns. It relies on men earning a "family wage" and in stable employment, two aspects increasingly unlikely in post-industrial economies (Blossfeld, Mills and Bernardi 2006; Daly and Valetta 2006; Machin 1996). Under more volatile post-industrial labour markets, partnered women's employment represents a source of family economic security. Greater financial security should lessen economic problems within marriage that can increase instability. We term this the *flexibility hypothesis*, wherein wives' employment should not lead to greater marital instability, and instead increasingly predict greater stability.

With these competing theoretical predictions, it is not surprising that the growing body of cross-national empirical evidence of the direct relationship between partnered women's employment and relationship instability has been mixed. When assessing women's independence with relative earnings, most country studies find couples less stable when wives earn more than their husbands (Chan and Halpin 2002 for the United Kingdom; Cooke 2006 for West Germany and the United States; Henz and Jonsson 2003 for Sweden; Jalovaara 2003 for Finland; Lynstad 2006 and Hansen 2005 for Norway).

The models used in the studies to date, however, have not always included measures to capture the range of pertinent employment-related effects. For example, effects reflected in wives' higher earnings might derive from husbands' unemployment, a variable

not consistently included in models. British men's unemployment significantly increased dissolution risk (Sigle-Rushton 2005). In Finland (Jalovaara 2001) and Norway (Hansen 2005), unemployed men *or* women had the greatest dissolution risk. Fischer and Liefbroer (2006) found that a bad economy generally increased dissolution rates in the Netherlands.

Relative earnings also combine possibly competing effects of wages and work hours. The income from wives' earnings might be welcomed by households (Oppenheimer 1997), whereas long work hours in dual-earner households might create tensions that disrupt marriage (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Cooke (2006) found the negative effect of U.S. wives' earnings on stability was countervailed when husbands' participated more in housework. This suggests household time strains might matter more than relative earnings. The optimal mix of economic flexibility and work-family balance, therefore, might well be when wives pursue part-time employment.

Yet recent cross-national longitudinal analyses have found the effects of partnered women's employment vary in context. Using the UN Family and Fertility surveys, Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006) found partnered women's employment (defined with an indicator variable as compared with being out of the labour force) significantly *increased* the risk of dissolution among couples in Austria, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and West Germany; *decreased* dissolution risk in France and Latvia; and had no significant effect in the Czech Republic, East Germany, Flanders, Hungary, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. These countries differ in the level and type of female employment, differences that cannot be captured in the dichotomous employment variable available in the data. The country differences in the magnitude, direction, and significance levels of individual effects suggest the socioeconomic context of female employment structures its possible impact on relationship stability.

The premise we put forward here is that wives engaged in normative levels of employment should not have a greater risk of marital instability, and the normative level varies across countries. A normative argument was first suggested by Goode (1970) vis-à-vis the liberalization of divorce laws. Others have applied a similar argument to the increase in women's educational attainment (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006), and the diffusion of cohabitation (Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006) on attenuating the greater divorce risk these individual factors historically predicted. We next outline three contrasting country cases in terms of how policy has structured wives' normative employment.

Wives' Employment in Context

West Germany

West German policies put in place after World War II reinforced women's domestic responsibility and economic dependence on a male breadwinner earning family wages within the coordinated wage structure (Cooke 2006). Men's wages were unilaterally set higher than women's under a 1955 ruling allocating women's jobs to "light" wage groups (*Leichtlohngruppen*) (Frevert 1989). When labour shortages occurred, West Germany relied on immigrants from Eastern Europe, then Southern Europe, then Turkey rather than use women as a reserve work force (Trappe 2000).

During the 1950s and 1960s, however, West German women's exit from employment upon marriage created shortages in female occupations such as teaching and nursing, occupations deemed too socially important to be filled by immigrants (von Oertzen 1999). This led to a shift in policy to encourage married women's labour force participation without challenging the male breadwinner model (Ostner 1992). Efforts to improve part-time civil service opportunities for women across the *Länder* made their way into a 1969 federal civil

service reform bill, amended in 1971 to enable fathers to apply for part-time civil service work, although very few did (von Oertzen 1999). The 1994 Second Act on Equality for Men and Women expanded public employees' right to work part-time (Töns and Young 2001).

Other state provisions, however, have not expanded to support married women's employment. Public childcare is available for only 19 of every 1000 children aged 0 to 3, as compared with 311 places per 1000 children in East Germany (Cooke 2007: 939). Employed single mothers received tax allowances for childcare costs; employed married mothers only gained the same right if the husband is sick, disabled and unable to work (Drobnič *et al.* 1999).

Nonetheless, West German women in part-time jobs benefit from the centralized industrial relations undergirding the male breadwinner system. Most West German part-time workers are incorporated into the social security system and have a statutory right to proportional pay and allowances related to working time (Drobnič *et al.* 1999). Consequently, most part-time jobs do not incur the wage penalty associated with UK and U.S. part-time work (McGinnity and McManus 2007). In contrast to the United Kingdom and the United States, a large proportion of part-time jobs in West Germany are professional public-sector positions that do not marginalize workers. More than one-third of employed West German women work part-time, with the gender wage ratio the highest of the three countries at 81 percent (OECD 2002).

Great Britain

British policy also developed around a male breadwinner model, but within a more unregulated labour market that never provided family wages (Cooke, in press). In post-war

provisions, the architect of the British welfare state declared married women's unpaid care work important to the family and the nation (Beveridge 1942: 50). Until 1977, employed married women could opt out of paying contributions to social insurance and forego entitlement to benefits, a strategy pursued by the vast majority of working wives (Pascall 1997). After the insurance system changed to require full contributions, the low-paid, part-time work dominated by women often fell below the Lower Earnings Limit so that many women still remained uncovered by contributory insurance (Pascall 1997).

Until 1999, the British tax system also encouraged development of low-wage part-time jobs of less than 15 hours a week (Dex and Shaw 1986; McKnight, Elias and Wilson 1998). As long as an employee's weekly take home pay was lower than the Lower Earnings Limit, employers were not required to pay social security contributions. Even when women work more than 15 hours per week, those who move to part-time employment from full-time employment experience occupational downgrading (Connolly and Gregory 2008) and pay penalties (Joshi, Paci and Waldfogel 1999).

These factors suggest that working fewer hours to obtain greater work-family balance comes at a considerable professional and financial cost in the United Kingdom as compared with West Germany. Not surprisingly, British mothers increasingly pursue full-time employment because of rising wages and more generous maternity provisions (Gregg *et al.* 2007). Government policies under New Labour, however, have continued to promote women's part-time employment as a work-family balance strategy. For example, the 1998 National Childcare Strategy created more than a half million new part-time, rather than full-time, public childcare places (Eurydice 2009). The single measure introduced in 2003 to promote work-life balance is that GB employers are asked to consider requests for flexible

employment arrangements “seriously.”² Flexible employment remains an option taken up by mothers rather than fathers.³ Consequently, a larger proportion of British women work part-time than in West Germany, despite suffering the largest gender wage gap of the three countries (OECD 2002).

United States

The United States has the most liberal labour market of the three countries, with liberal tenets embedded in the Constitution (Lipset 1990). In contrast to Germany and the United Kingdom, the American Federation of Labor during the late 19th and early 20th centuries rejected legislative coordination with the state, choosing instead to fight for employee benefits via traditional market-based actions (Skocpol 1992). This led to the development of corporate rather than state welfare (Kalleberg *et al.* 2000). A corporate welfare system draws more people into employment in order to be eligible for medical, sickness, and disability benefits. The United States has no paid parental leave program,⁴ although the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act requires all employers with sickness and disability policies to include pregnancy within them. In the context of corporate welfare, women's part-time employment remains less desirable. It is more uncertain, pays lower wages, and frequently carries no disability program, health insurance or pension (Kalleberg *et al.* 2000).

² “Delivering on Gender Equality: A Progress Report on the Gender Equality Public Service Agreement 2003-2006,” Women and Equality Unit, March 2005.

³ In 2003, 27 percent of employed women and 18 percent of employed men reported working under some kind of flexibility arrangement (Women and Equality Unit, March 2005).

⁴ Not until the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act were all U.S. parents eligible for up to 12 weeks unpaid parental leave, the least generous leave provisions among the OECD countries (Jaumotte 2003: 31).

Of the three countries analyzed here, part-time work extracts a particularly high cost in the United States (McGinnity and McManus 2007). Consequently, U.S. women's part-time employment as a share of women's employment has been steadily declining since the mid-sixties (Drobnič *et al.* 1999). The U.S. gender employment gap is similar to that in the other two countries, and the gender wage ratio similar to the United Kingdom's, but only 12 percent of employed U.S. women work part-time (OECD 2002).

Hypothesized Effects of Employment on Divorce Risk in Context

We argue the normative aspect of partnered female employment affects marital stability, not women's relative independence per se. Women's employment more generally has become the norm, so we do not expect the independence hypothesis to be supported when looking at more recent cohorts of couples. Yet different levels of female employment have been supported by policies across these three countries. We therefore expect that part-time employment should predict more stable marriages in the United Kingdom and West Germany.

But the nature of the employment imparts its own risks. Good quality employment can improve workers' well-being (Gash, Mertens and Romeu-Gordo 2007), enhance marriage quality, and reduce instability (Conger *et al.* 1990). In contrast, poor quality employment with low wages or irregular work hours disrupts family schedules and might increase marital instability. Warren (2004) found British women working part-time reported more leisure time but greater financial strains than women pursuing full-time careers. Unfortunately, we have no direct measures of employment quality available in the datasets. But given the higher quality of West German part-time employment, its effects on marital stability might be more positive than those in the United Kingdom.

In the United States, full-time female employment is more normative, but in a context of expanding weekly work hours. Among U.S. dual-earner couples, 12 percent work more than 100 hours per week (Jacobs and Gornick 2002). From this we infer that two full-time earner families face particular difficulty in finding work-family balance (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Data from the 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce revealed that U.S. women and men working full-time would both prefer to work between nine and 10 fewer hours per week (Jacobs and Gerson 2004: 64). This evidence indicates that even if female employment is normative, U.S. couple stability might be enhanced if mothers, or hypothetically fathers, can reduce their paid work hours.

Method

Data, Sample and Analytic Strategy

Individuals' work hours and the risk of divorce vary across the marital life course, making event history analysis the most suitable method for assessing these dynamic relationships (Allison 1984). For these analyses we select the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), German SocioEconomic Panel (GSOEP) and the U.S. Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), three longitudinal datasets that follow individuals in households over time. The BHPS began in 1992 with a representative sample of 5,500 households covering 10,300 individuals drawn from 250 areas of the United Kingdom. However, as the Northern Irish sample began in 2001 we exclude these cases from our analysis. The GSOEP began in 1984 with a representative sample of 12,290 German-born people in 5,921 households in the former West Germany. In June 1990, sampling extended into the former East, but East Germans are excluded from this analysis as that region historically reinforced women's full-time

employment, not a male breadwinner model (Cooke 2007). The PSID began in 1968 with a representative sample of 4,800 U.S. families.

The first challenge is to select comparable samples of couples from these three panel sets. Research across many societies highlights the maximum risk of divorce consistently occurs two to four years after marriage (Fisher 1993). In light of this, we select only couples observed from their entry into marriage, as including all married couples at any point in time biases results with marriages of longer duration. Because the panels started in different years it is impossible to draw all samples from the same years. From the German and U.S. datasets, we select couples marrying for the first time between 1985 and 1995 where the wife is less than 50 years of age. The PSID changed in 1997 to be conducted bi-annually and the core sample was reduced by almost 30 percent. This created substantial missing data in 1999 and between waves, so it was decided to end the U.S. observation window in 1997. We follow West German couples until 2000, slightly longer because the average length of marriage is longer than in the United States (OECD 2007). As the British panel began in 1991, we select similar couples marrying between 1992 and 2004 and follow them until 2007. The periods are therefore somewhat staggered, but we observe couples in all countries across the 1990s and the first marriages are followed for approximately the same length of time from their beginning.

In the dataset, each year of a couple's marriage is a distinct observation, beginning with the first year of marriage and concluding with either divorce or a separation of more than one year, or the final observation year in the panel. Longer-term separated couples are included because of differences in required waiting periods for divorce, including differences across U.S. states. Constructing couple-years automatically incorporates the time-varying

aspects of marriage, and we use robust standard errors to control for any correlation in error terms.

The selection criteria yield a sample of 666 GB, 559 West German, and 502 U.S. first-married couples. The outcome of interest is whether or not a couple reports a divorce or separation in a given year. Once this occurs, the couple is removed from analysis, as they are no longer at risk of divorce. During the time period, 106 GB, 201 West German, and 223 U.S. couples reported separating for more than one year or divorcing. We conducted various sensitivity analyses to ensure results are stable across different reduced models. Unweighted data are used for analysis, although substantive effects when weighting or not are negligible.

Factors Affecting Divorce Risk

We include several time-varying employment-related variables to control for competing effects of wives' work hours, relative earnings, and male unemployment. Wife's employment level is measured with two indicator variables, against a referent of wives out of the labour force: one when she works part-time, defined as 30 or fewer hours per week, and one when she works more than 30 hours. Histograms of women's work hours across the three countries reveal variation in the distribution of number of hours, but using different categories did not change substantive interpretation. Continuous measures and their square fit the data less well because of the large proportion of women reporting zero employment hours in any given year.

We also include a measure of a wife's financial contribution to the household, calculated as her earnings as a percent of the couple's total labour income. We tried other constructions of her financial input such as absolute or log of hourly wages, but substantive

effects proved the same once controlling for work hours. To control for the household's overall economic situation, we include a control of log of total household income. Similarly, we include an indicator variable for when the husband is unemployed or otherwise out of the labour market (excluding retirement).

In the panels, participants are interviewed in a given year to ascertain information about their lives over the past 12 months. To ensure that causes of divorce are differentiated from effects, values of the time-varying independent variables are lagged by one year. Otherwise, if a woman anticipates needing to establish her own household, her hours of work or share of household earnings might rise in the year of divorce, leading to the erroneous conclusion that her greater employment or earnings caused the transition rather than resulted from it.

We include a control variable when the couple has children younger than 12 years of age against a referent of having no children in the observed marital year (Yamaguchi 1991). Traditionally, having children had been considered an on-going couple investment in a marriage and therefore predicted lower divorce risk (Becker 1985). More recent evidence suggests the effects of children on divorce risk vary across countries (Böheim and Ermisch 2001; Cooke 2006; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006). In a second model we include an interaction term for children less than 12 and mothers' part-time work, to assess whether this particular work-family balance strategy—the one most frequently supported by policy—has beneficial effects on marital stability.

People who search longer for partners or have more education reflecting greater possible gains to marriage theoretically have lower risk of divorce (Becker *et al.* 1977), so we include control variables for the woman's age at marriage and indicators for when the wife or the husband completed some post-secondary education. The passage of time can change

divorce risk regardless of individual factors, so we include a measure of years since marriage along with its square to capture the higher divorce risk early in the marital life course.⁵

Wives' Employment and Divorce Risk in Context

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. British wives are slightly older at marriage than the wives in the other two countries, but these relative ages are consistent with national averages in the sampled decades.⁶ For the time-varying variables, displayed are averages across all observed years the couple are in the dataset. A little more than one-third of the first-married West German wives were employed at some point during the observed years of marriage, with most working full- rather than part-time. In contrast, 42 percent of U.S. wives were employed. In the more recent British sample, the majority of women reported employment during the marriage. These differences from the aggregate employment statistics presented earlier stem from the specific samples drawn. These couples are younger and more likely to have both partners in employment until the birth of the first child, after which women's work hours might change. The averages reflect the sum of these dynamic changes across the early stages in the marital life course.

⁵ Historically, the rate of marital dissolution has been greater for U.S. Black couples (Hoffman and Duncan 1995), but a control in the U.S. models was neither statistically nor substantively significant and did not alter the effects of the other variables. Others have also found this reversal in the trend in Black divorce, caused in part by their simultaneously declining rates of marriage (Ruggles 1997). A broad range of ethnic or racial minorities are present in the GB and West Germany, but comprise in total a much smaller percentage of the population (about eight percent), too small to discern significant effects. Consequently, to keep the models harmonized across countries, we excluded ethnicity controls.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, UK National Statistics Office, and Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland. See also <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005061.html>, http://www.germanculture.com.ua/library/facts/bl_marriage.htm, and <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/xsdataset.asp?More=Y&vlnk=5279&All=Y&B2.x=60&B2.y=7>, accessed 6 November, 2007.

Effects of the independent variables on risk of divorce are presented as odds ratios in Table 2 under two models. The first model presents the main effects, whereas the second adds the interaction term of wives' part-time employment and having children younger than 12. As predicted, wives' employment level has differing effects on marital stability across the three countries. In the main effects model (Model 1), couples where wives are out of the labour force (the referent) are not significantly more stable in any of the countries. West German marriages are most stable when the wife works part-time, in line with the normative prediction. Among GB and U.S. couples, wives' employment does not appreciably alter divorce risk regardless of whether it is part- or full-time. Controlling for work hours, wives' relative earnings also do not significantly alter risk of divorce, as effects are substantively and at best marginally statistically significant. This evidence lends no support to the independence hypothesis, and modest evidence for the importance of the normative context.

Other effects varying in significance across countries derive from husband's unemployment, his education, household income, children, and the passage of time. Husbands' unemployment significantly increases the dissolution risk in the United Kingdom, with a similar direction in its effect in the other two countries that did not reach statistical significance. Greater household income in West Germany significantly reduces dissolution risk. Again the magnitude of this effect in the other countries follows suit but does not reach statistical significance. Having children predicts significantly lower divorce risk in West Germany and the United States. The statistically nonsignificant effect of children in the United Kingdom substantively diverges, a result reported by others (Böheim and Ermisch 2001; Chan and Halpin 2002). British and U.S. husbands with post-secondary education have significantly more stable marriages, but this effect does not reach statistical significance for

West German husbands. Other recent research also found effects of each partner's education vary across countries (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). As found by Fisher (1993), marriages in two of the three countries are at greater risk of dissolution in the early years, though the effect is insignificant for Great Britain.

In Model 2, inclusion of the interaction term reveals no significant effect among West German and British couples. Yet the statistical significance of the main effect of West German wives' part-time work attenuates when including the interaction. In contrast, effects in the United States are more dramatic. The interaction indicating a mother working part-time predicts a significant reduction in the dissolution risk simultaneous with a sharp increase in the risk of dissolution among wives without children who work part-time.

Discussion

Many governments promote part-time employment as a means of achieving greater work-family balance in industrial societies, but it remains an option taken by women rather than men (Fagan and Walthery 2007; Jaumotte 2003). Consequently, some people question whether part-time work represents a sufficient advance away from a gender hierarchy in which women remain economically dependent upon men (Crompton 2002; McRae 2003). Despite the debate, no one to date has explored whether wives' part-time employment improves work-family balance as indicated by enhanced marital stability. The two primary schools of thought on the matter offer competing predictions. The independence hypothesis predicts any female employment destabilizes marriages (Becker 1985), whereas the flexibility hypothesis suggests female employment increases family economic security (Oppenheimer 1997), which in turn might enhance stability.

Given the diversity in female employment intensity and its returns across countries, however, we argued these dominant hypotheses are too simplistic for modelling risk among current cohorts. Instead, we suggested that more important than an individual wife's employment per se is whether or not her employment level is normative. Government policy in each of our three country cases has reinforced different levels of female employment. Within the *laissez-faire* U.S. context, couples must find their work-family balance solutions in the market. Both West German and UK policies encourage married women's part-time employment under the banner of promoting work-family balance, yet its quality differs. In West Germany, many women find high-quality, well-paid part-time jobs in the public sector. In Great Britain, many married women take low-wage, precarious part-time employment.

Following recent cohorts of couples after they first married using longitudinal data, we found no support for the independence hypothesis in any of the countries. In no country did a wife's full-time employment significantly increase the risk of dissolution. Couples where a wife remained out of the labour were no more stable, and a wife's greater relative earnings did not increase dissolution risk. Yet we did find other employment-related effects varied in context. West German couples where the wife works part-time were significantly more stable than other couples, including those where the wife was out of the labour force. In contrast, we found no prophylactic effect associated with British wives' part-time employment. This suggests the quality of part-time work is more important than its availability. Our data provided no measures of job quality, so this possibility must be explored in future research.

Somewhat surprisingly, only in the U.S. did a *mother's* part-time employment predict lower divorce risk. As noted by Han and her colleagues (2008), the option of taking time off

following birth is available only to U.S. women with greater resources. This suggests another fruitful area for future research would be exploration of class and possibly other group differences in predictors of more or less stable relationships. Even Germany has more recently introduced “mini-jobs” similar to British part-time positions for marginal male workers (Wanger 2006), indicative of growing class disparity within that economy (Palier and Thelen 2009). We had too few cases over time to explore within-country effects, just as we had too few husbands working part-time to study gender differences in effects. These areas of inquiry must be left as a priority for future research as suitable data become available within and across more country contexts.

The significance of other traditional risk factors also differed across the countries, suggesting that what helps or hurts modern couples varies in its socioeconomic context (see also Cooke and Baxter, forthcoming). For example, husbands' unemployment proved deleterious in Great Britain, and marginally so in West Germany. Over the period observed, these two countries have frequently experienced higher unemployment than the United States (see Figure 1). In addition, Great Britain is unique in that men's unemployment rate tends to be higher than women's, with many policies introduced over the past decade encouraging more female employment to ameliorate the family effects of male unemployment (Walby 2001). The GB effects of a husband's unemployment on dissolution risk, however, suggest this is not an effective “fix” for the eroding economic position of men. Within the current global economic circumstances we might find similar effects emerging in other countries. In any event, continuing to focus only on family effects of wives' employment not only theoretically perpetuates the gender hierarchy, but also potentially obfuscates the true family dynamics in modern societies.

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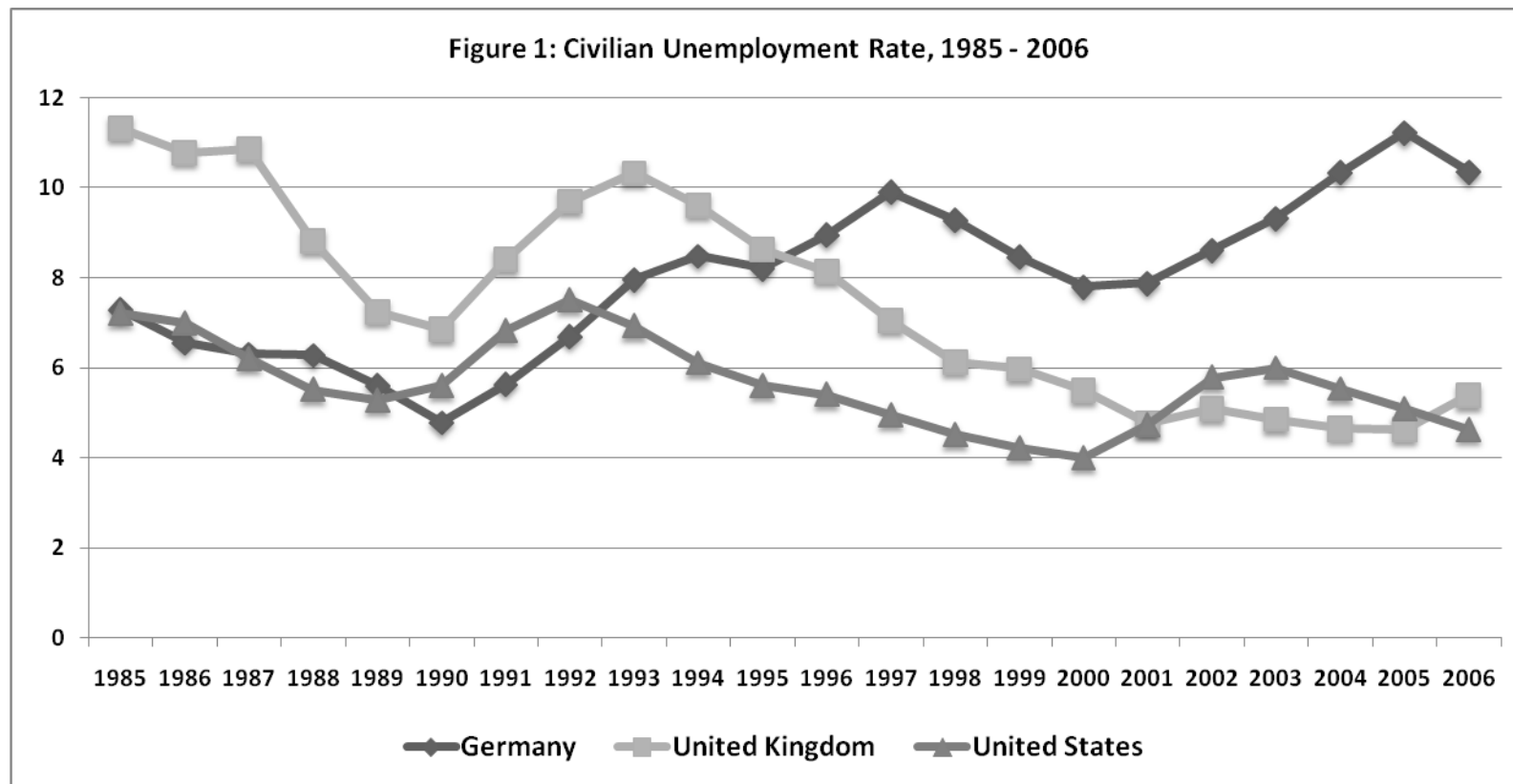
TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MARRIED WEST GERMAN, UK AND U.S. COUPLES FROM FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE UNTIL SEPARATED OR CENSORED (SD NOT REPORTED FOR DICHOTOMOUS VARIABLES)

	WEST GERMANY		GREAT-BRITAIN		UNITED STATES	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Wife works part-time (≤ 30)	0.08		0.29		0.15	
Wife works full-time (> 30)	0.26		0.50		0.27	
Wife with tertiary education	0.09		0.21		0.44	
Husband with tertiary education	0.17		0.23		0.47	
Husband non-employed	0.11		0.03		0.11	
Children	0.82		0.58		0.66	
Wife's % couple earnings	20.93	28.34	29.61	22.15	32.64	23.91
Wife's age at marriage	23.99	3.98	27.41	4.82	23.91	4.37
Log total household income	10.96	0.83	7.95	0.48	10.45	0.80
Duration of marriage	8.66	4.04	3.94	3.41	6.88	3.37
<i>n couple-years (couples)</i>	4,473 (559)		4174 (666)		2,535 (502)	

TABLE 2: RISK OF DIVORCE FROM YEAR OF MARRIAGE IN WEST GERMANY, UNITED KINGDOM AND THE UNITED STATES

	WEST GERMANY				GREAT BRITAIN				UNITED STATES			
	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>RSE</i>
Wife works part-time (<=30)	0.57*	0.15	0.50	0.29	0.74	0.27	0.85	0.31	1.38	0.50	3.34**	1.56
Wife works full-time (>30)	0.66	0.19	0.66	0.19	0.94	0.45	0.95	0.44	1.04	0.45	1.26	0.53
<i>Ref: housewife, out of labor force</i>												
Wife's % couple earnings	1.01+	0.01	1.01+	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
Husband non-employed	1.47+	0.34	1.47	0.34	2.74**	0.99	2.73**	1.14	1.71	1.03	1.63	0.95
Wife with tertiary education	0.59	0.21	0.59	0.21	0.56	0.22	0.56	0.26	1.17	0.29	1.16	0.30
Husband with tertiary education	0.71	0.17	0.71	0.18	0.40*	0.16	0.40*	0.17	0.39**	0.12	0.39**	0.12
Children (0 = none)	0.27***	0.05	0.27***	0.05	1.18	0.32	1.21	0.34	0.42***	0.11	0.69	0.20
Children*women part-time			1.17	0.72			0.85	0.61			0.24**	0.12
Log of total household income	0.80***	0.04	0.80***	0.04	1.10	0.28	1.10	0.28	0.79	0.12	0.79	0.11
Wife's age at marriage	1.00	0.02	1.00	0.02	0.94*	0.02	0.94*	0.03	0.92*	0.04	0.92*	0.04
Years since marriage	1.24**	0.10	1.24**	0.10	0.96	0.09	0.96	0.09	1.69**	0.29	1.78***	0.32
(Years since marriage) ²	0.99**	0.01	0.99**	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.96*	0.02	0.96**	0.02
<i>Pseudo log-likelihood</i>	-777.65		-777.61		-418.18		-418.14		-357.93		-353.33	
<i>Wald chi-square</i>	96.40***		96.64***		33.55***		33.45***		56.36***		61.86***	
<i>n couple-years (couples)</i>	4,473 (559)		4,473 (559)		4,174 (666)		4,174 (666)		2,535 (502)		2,535 (502)	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. (two-tailed tests)



Source: OECD Labour Force Data, accessed 21 July 2009: <http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DatasetCode=KEI>