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

Forthcoming, *Sociology*

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Word count: 7,723

Acknowledgements: This research was supported by the EQUALSOC Network of Excellence funded under the European Union's Framework Programme 6, and benefited from feedback from participants at the Fifth Annual European Divorce Network Conference, London School of Economics, 17-18 September 2007, and the summer meeting of RC28 at Yale University, 2-6 August 2009. Thanks go to Marco Albertini and three *Sociology* reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions, and particular thanks to Torkild Hovde Lynstad and Rob Mare for advice on the statistical modelling.

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Abstract

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 Great Britain, West Germany and the United States. We find effects of wives' employment on marital stability vary across the countries. 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 British and US labour markets, neither wives' part- nor full-time employment significantly alters divorce risk. In the United States, however, mothers working part-time have significantly lower divorce risk. West German and British husbands' unemployment proves more detrimental to marital stability than wives' employment. These results highlight the importance of the socioeconomic context in structuring the optimal employment participation of both partners.

Key words: divorce, international comparisons, longitudinal analysis, women's employment, work-family balance

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Introduction

Some governments promote wives'[1] part-time employment as a work-family balance strategy (Fagan and Walthery, 2007; Plantenga and Remery, 2006). Yet part-time employment frequently offers inferior wages (Gornick and Jacobs, 1996; McGinnity and McManus, 2007), limited occupational progression (Bardasi and Gornick, 2008; Gash, 2007, 2008), and limited access to benefits relative to full-time employment (Connolly and Gregory, 2008; O'Reilly and Fagan, 1998). Consequently, wives' pursuit of part-time rather than full-time employment narrows but does not eliminate gender economic inequality within households (Crompton, 2002; McRae, 2003). This leaves women more economically vulnerable than men if the relationship dissolves, perpetuating the greater poverty risk found in single-parent households (Rainwater and Smeeding, 2004).

This economic vulnerability is all the more problematic because researchers differ in the predicted effects of wives' employment on relationship stability. On one hand, some argue wives' employment increases dissolution risk (Becker et al., 1977; Cherlin, 1992). Under this hypothesized scenario, government promotion of wives' employment might reduce the risk of current child poverty (Kamerman et al., 2003), while simultaneously increasing the risk of future poverty if the relationship breaks down. On the other hand, the inverse relationship consistently found between household income and divorce risk (Conger et al., 1990; White, 1990) suggests that wives' part-time employment might lend greater stability to modern relationships. The debate continues as recent comparative analyses found that the direction of the effect of partnered women's employment on relationship stability varied across countries (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006).

We synthesize the debates and evidence to argue that the institutional context shapes the relative divorce risk associated with wives' employment. It is not wives' employment per se that affects divorce risk, but whether her level of employment is normative to that country context. To explore this assertion, we select three countries with varying institutional support for different levels of wives' employment. In the United States, 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 British policies supported a modified male breadwinner model, with part-time work taken up by a sizeable proportion of employed wives. Yet West German ordinary part-time employment provides relatively good wages and access to benefits (Drobnič et al., 1999), whereas British part-time employment is more precarious and poorly paid (McKnight et al., 1998). We use national panel data to compare the effects of different levels of wives' employment on marital stability across these differing employment contexts.

Competing Theories of Marital Stability

Each partner's employment level is not the only factor affecting work-family balance, or necessarily the major factor predicting marital quality and divorce risk (Conger et al., 1990; Johnson and Booth, 1998; Previti and Amato, 2003). Yet in their discussion of work-family balance, Jacobs and Gerson (2004) argued that long work hours in dual-earner households might create tensions that disrupt marriage. Similarly, Cherlin (1992) argued that wives with an independent income have less incentive to work out marital problems. These perspectives yield what has become known as the *independence hypothesis*, wherein a wife's employment is predicted to increase the risk of divorce (Becker et al., 1977). Independence effects are tacitly assumed universal and linear: In all countries we should

observe the smallest divorce risk among couples where the wife remains out of the labour force, a 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 gendered division of paid and unpaid labour within the family is a high-risk strategy leaving households vulnerable to economic downturns. It relies on men earning a "family wage" in stable employment, which is less likely in post-industrial economies (Blossfeld et al., 2006; Daly and Valetta, 2006; Machin, 1996). In today's more uncertain labour markets, wives' employment represents a source of family economic security. Greater financial security reduces the economic problems associated with marital instability (Conger et al., 1990; White, 1990). We term this the *flexibility hypothesis*, wherein wives' employment over more recent time periods should predict greater marital stability.

The cross-national empirical evidence has been as mixed as the theories. Studies assessing the independence hypothesis with relative earnings found that couples were less stable when wives earned more than their husbands in Finland (Jalovaara, 2003), Norway (Hansen, 2005; Lyngstad, 2006), Sweden (Henz and Jonsson, 2003), the United Kingdom (Chan and Halpin, 2002), and West Germany and the United States (Cooke, 2006). Yet a measure of wives' relative earnings masks other effects that may be the causal factors, such as husbands' under- or unemployment. Finnish (Jalovaara, 2001) and Norwegian (Hansen, 2005) couples where either the man *or* woman were unemployed had a greater risk of dissolution. In a world of dual-earner families, models should control for the employment status of both partners when assessing marital outcomes.

A measure of wives' relative earnings also combines possibly competing effects of wages and work hours. The income from wives' earnings might be welcomed by households

(Oppenheimer, 1997), whereas her long work hours in a dual-earner household might create tensions that disrupt the marriage (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; White, 1990). These competing factors underscore the need to include separate measures of wives' employment hours and earnings.

Recent cross-national longitudinal analyses also suggest individual effects vary in context (Cooke, 2006). Using the United Nations Family and Fertility Surveys, Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006) found a partnered woman's employment (defined as being employed 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.

The country differences in the magnitude, direction and significance levels of individual effects suggest the socioeconomic context of female employment structures relationship stability. Countries differ in the rate of female labour force participation, as well as wives' average employment hours and relative wages (OECD, 2009). We put forward that what proves disruptive to marital stability is not an individual wife's employment per se, but when her employment hours differ from the norm of the society. A normative argument has been found to explain some of the cross-national variation in other individual risk factors, such as cohabitation (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006; Wagner and Weiß, 2006), women's greater educational attainment (Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006), and parental divorce (Lyngstad, 2006). As the incidence of each becomes more prevalent in a society, the associated individual-level effect on divorce risk attenuates.

Similarly, as more wives across societies remain in employment, wives' employment becomes more normative and the divorce risk associated with it should attenuate. A

normative argument further suggests that as wives' employment becomes the norm, those couples where the wife remains out of the labour force should face a greater risk of divorce. Married women's normative employment levels vary across countries, and so, too, should the effect of this employment on dissolution risk. To test this assertion, we select three countries that differ in how policy has structured wives' normative levels of employment: Great Britain, West Germany and the United States.

Wives' Employment in Context

Great Britain

William Beveridge, architect of the British welfare state, declared married women's unpaid care work was vital to the family and the nation (Beveridge, 1942: 50). Initial maternity entitlements were generous, but employed wives' work-related entitlements were less than men's and single women's (Land, 1976). Until 1977, employed wives could opt out of paying social insurance contributions and forego benefit entitlement, a strategy pursued by the vast majority of working wives (Pascall, 1997). This policy support for a male breadwinner model, however, did not go so far as to ensure British men earned family wages. By the 1970s, three times as many two-parent families would have been poor had they relied solely on the father's full-time employment (Land, 1976).

In addition to having inferior work-related welfare entitlements, British wives also became over-represented in inferior jobs that proliferated after World War II (Dex and Shaw, 1986). Until 1999, employers were not required to pay social security contributions for employees whose weekly take home pay was lower than a Lower Earnings Limit. This policy made it less expensive for employers to offer several low-wage jobs of less than 15 hours per week rather than a full-time position (McKnight et al., 1998). Even when women

work more than 15 hours per week, part-time jobs are associated with pay penalties (Joshi et al., 1999), and women who switch from a full-time job to a part-time job often experience occupational downgrading (Connolly and Gregory, 2008). Regulations to protect part-time workers were introduced in 2000, but their effect remains unclear.

Consequently, working part-time comes at a considerable professional and financial cost in Great Britain (Warren, 2004). Not surprisingly, British mothers today increasingly pursue full-time employment (Gregg et al., 2007). New Labour policies, however, continued to promote part-time employment among mothers as a work-family balance strategy. Only two weeks of paternity leave are available to fathers (Jaumotte, 2003). Mothers are entitled to 90% of their pay during the first six weeks of their maternity leave, which then decreases to a modest flat-rate benefit. During the period analysed here, mothers were entitled to the flat-rate benefit for 18 weeks, which increased to 26 weeks in 2002. The 1998 National Childcare Strategy created more than a half million new part-time, not full-time, public childcare places (Eurydice, 2009). In 2003, the single measure introduced to promote work-family balance is for British employers to *consider* requests for flexible employment arrangements seriously (Women and Equality Unit, 2005). As of 2005, 43 per cent of employed British women worked part-time, a slightly smaller percentage than in 2000 (OECD, 2009).

West Germany

After World War II, the compressed West German wage structure enabled more men to earn a family wage and support a dependent wife who was legally responsible for the domestic sphere (Cooke, 2007). When labour shortages occurred, West Germany relied on immigrant guest workers (Trappe, 2000). West German married women's exit from

employment, however, created shortages in occupations such as teaching and nursing that were deemed too socially important to be filled by immigrants (von Oertzen, 1999). This led to the passage of a 1969 federal reform bill to improve part-time civil service opportunities for women. The bill was amended in 1971 to enable fathers to apply for part-time civil service jobs, but 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).

This policy support for wives' part-time employment does not fundamentally challenge the West German male breadwinner model (Ostner, 1993), as other state provisions have not expanded to support wives' equal employment. For example, West Germany offers 156 weeks of paid parental leave that is overwhelmingly taken up by mothers (Jaumotte, 2003). 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 receive tax allowances for childcare costs, whereas employed married mothers only gain the same right if the husband is sick, disabled and unable to work (Drobnič et al., 1999).

Nonetheless, a large proportion of part-time jobs in West Germany are professional public-sector positions that do not marginalize workers. West German women who work part-time also have a statutory right to proportional pay and other allowances related to working time (Drobnič et al., 1999). As a result, most West German part-time jobs do not incur the same wage penalty as British and US part-time work (McGinnity and McManus, 2007). As of 2005, a similar percentage of employed West German women worked part-time as in Great Britain (44 per cent), but this reflected an increase of six percentage points from 2000 (OECD, 2009).

United States

The United States has the most liberal labour market of the three countries and a system of corporate rather than state welfare provision (Kalleberg et al., 2000). A corporate welfare system draws more people into employment in order to be eligible for medical, disability and other benefits. Some supports for women's employment are included in corporate welfare. For example, the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act required all employers with sickness and disability policies to include pregnancy within them. It was not until 1993, however, that all US parents were entitled to 12 weeks of unpaid parental leave, the least generous leave provisions among the OECD countries (Jaumotte, 2003: 31).

In the context of corporate welfare, US wives' 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). Of the three countries analyzed here, part-time work extracts a particularly high penalty in the United States (McGinnity and McManus, 2007). Using Luxembourg Income Study data, Bardasi and Gornick (2008: 45) calculated that the part-time wage penalty as of the mid-1990s was 22% in the United States, as compared with 15% in Great Britain, and just 8% in Germany. Not surprisingly, US women's part-time employment as a share of women's employment has been declining since the 1960s (Drobnič et al., 1999). In 2005, only one-quarter of employed US women worked part-time (OECD, 2009).

Hypothesized Effects of Wives' Employment on Divorce Risk

Despite the country differences noted above, about two-thirds of married women without children are employed in all three countries (Luxembourg Income Study Gender Key Figures, 2009: Table 3i). These similar percentages indicate that dual-earner, not male breadwinner

couples are now the norm. Our normative argument therefore leads to the first prediction that negates the independence hypothesis: Couples where wives remain out of the labour force will not have a lower risk of divorce in any of the countries.

The normative context in each country diverges after wives give birth. British and West German mothers remain out of the labour market for longer periods of time following a birth and then are more likely to take up part-time rather than full-time employment (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Gregg et al., 2007). In 2000, more than 45% of British and German mothers with one child worked part-time, as compared with just 16% of similar US mothers (OECD, 2002: 78). Almost two-thirds of British and German mothers with two or more children worked part-time, as compared with less than one-quarter of US mothers with two or more children (OECD, 2002: 78).

Under a normative argument, we predict that British and German couples where wives and mothers work part-time should be the most stable in those countries. But the nature of employment imparts its own risks. Good quality employment can improve workers' well-being (Author G), enhance marriage quality and reduce instability (Conger et al., 1990). In contrast, low wages or irregular work hours disrupt family schedules and might increase marital instability. Other than wages we have no direct measures of employment quality, but given the higher quality of West German part-time employment, its predicted positive effect on marital stability might be of greater magnitude than in Great Britain.

US wives, in contrast, are more likely to take short leaves following a birth and return to full- rather than part-time employment (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Han et al., 2008). This suggests that wives' and mothers' full-time employment is more normative in the United States than in the other two countries. Under a normative argument, US couples where the wife is employed should be significantly more stable than male breadwinner couples. Yet

the United States also has a long work-hours culture that leads to more time pressures among dual-earner couples (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). Jacobs and Gornick (2002: 175) reported that 12 per cent of US dual-earner couples worked more than 100 hours per week. Data from the 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce revealed that US women and men working full-time would both prefer to work between nine and 10 fewer hours per week (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004: 64). Han and her colleagues (2008) found that US mothers with greater resources take more time off following a birth, despite the career penalties for doing so. This evidence suggests that even if US wives' full-time employment is normative, couple stability might be enhanced if mothers, and hypothetically fathers, spend fewer hours in employment.

Methods

Event history analysis of longitudinal data is the most suitable method for assessing the impact of time-varying characteristics such as wives' employment hours on risk of divorce (Allison, 1984). We therefore selected the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), German SocioEconomic Panel (GSOEP) and the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to assess our normative hypotheses. The PSID began in 1968 with a representative sample of 4,800 US families. The GSOEP began in 1984 with a representative sample of 12,290 German-born people in 5,921 West German households. Sampling extended into the former East in 1990, but East Germans were excluded from this analysis as that region historically expected and supported women's full-time employment (Cooke, 2007). The BHPS is the most recent panel, beginning in 1991 with a representative sample of 5,500 households covering 10,300 individuals throughout the United Kingdom. We excluded the Northern Irish sample because

of that region's Catholic restrictions on divorce, so our analyses were limited to Great Britain.

Research across many societies has shown that the maximum risk of divorce occurs during the first five years of marriage (Fisher, 1993). We therefore selected only couples for whom we had data from the beginning of their marriage. Including all married couples at any point in time would have biased results with marriages of longer duration. The national panels started in different years, so we selected first-married couples from slightly different time periods. From the German and US datasets, we selected couples marrying for the first time between 1985 and 1995. The PSID changed in 1997 to be conducted bi-annually and the core sample was reduced by almost 30 per cent. This created substantial missing data in 1999 and between waves, so we decided to end the US observation window in 1997. We followed West German couples until 2000, slightly longer because the average length of marriage is longer than in the United States (OECD, 2007). From the more recent British panel, we selected couples marrying between 1992 and 2004 and followed them until 2007. The time periods were therefore somewhat staggered, but in all countries we observed couples across the 1990s and followed marriages for approximately the same length of time.

We constructed the datasets such that each year of a couple's marriage was a distinct observation, beginning with the first year of marriage. Constructing couple-years automatically incorporated the time-varying aspects and we used robust standard errors to control for any correlation in error terms. These criteria yielded a sample of 666 British, 559 West German, and 502 US first-married couples. Once a couple reported divorcing or separating for more than one year, they were removed from analysis as they were no longer at risk of divorce. We included the longer-term separated couples because of differences in

required waiting periods for divorce, including differences across US states. During the observed time periods, 106 British, 201 West German, and 223 US couples separated or divorced. Unweighted data were used for the analyses, although substantive effects when weighting or not were negligible.

Factors Affecting Divorce Risk

We included several time-varying employment-related variables to assess the effects of wives' work hours and relative earnings, as well as any effects of husbands' unemployment. We included an indicator variable for when the husband was unemployed or otherwise out of the labour market (excluding retirement). The distribution of wives' employment hours in all three countries was bimodal, with sharp peaks at zero and around 40 hours per week, and further differences across the rest of the distribution in each of the countries. It is unlikely that whatever induces a wife to change from zero employment hours to one hour per week is the same as what might lead her to change from 20 to 21 hours, an underlying assumption when using a continuous measure. Consequently, we constructed indicator variables for wives' employment hours: One when she worked 30 or fewer hours per week (part-time), and one when she worked more than 30 hours (full-time), against a referent of wives out of the labour force.[2] Further differentiating part-time work into shorter and longer hour categories did not alter overall results.

We also included 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 measures such as absolute or the log of her hourly wages, but substantive effects proved the same once controlling for her work hours. We included the log of total household income to control for the family's overall economic situation.

In the panels, participants were interviewed in a given year to ascertain information about their lives over the past 12 months. To ensure that causes of divorce were differentiated from effects, values of the time-varying independent variables were lagged by one year. Otherwise, if a woman anticipated needing to establish her own household, her hours of work or share of household earnings might have increased 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 included an indicator variable for when the couple had children younger than 12 years of age, against a referent of having no children in the observed marital year (Yamaguchi, 1991). Children have been considered a couple investment in marriage that predicts lower divorce risk (Becker et al., 1977), but more recent evidence suggests the effects of children on divorce risk vary across countries (Böheim and Ermisch, 2001; Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006). In a second model we included an interaction term for when mothers of children younger than 12 were employed part-time, to assess whether this work-family balance strategy that is frequently supported by policy has beneficial effects on marital stability.

We also included controls for the woman's age at marriage and indicators for when the wife or the husband had completed post-secondary education. We explored but rejected including a control for ethnicity. Although the rate of marital dissolution has historically been greater for US Black couples (Ruggles, 1997), an ethnicity measure in the US models was not statistically significant and did not alter the effects of the other variables, and there were too few ethnic minority couples in the British and German samples. Our final control measures were years since marriage along with its square to capture the higher divorce risk in the early years of marriage net of other factors.

Results

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Because couple-year data were used, the displayed averages for the time-varying variables reflect averages across all the early years of marriage, not necessarily the percentage of wives in or out of employment during a given year. 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 per cent of US 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 represent the life course of the specific samples drawn. These are young couples and more likely to have both partners in employment until the birth of the first child, after which wives' work hours are more likely to change. The averages thus reflect the sum of these dynamic changes across the early years of marriage and childbearing.

[TABLE 1 about here]

Effects of the independent variables on divorce risk are presented as odds ratios in Table 2 under two models. Model 1 presents the main effects, whereas Model 2 adds the interaction term of wives' part-time employment and having children younger than 12. As predicted, wives' employment level had differing effects on marital stability across the three countries. In the main effects model (Model 1), couples where wives were out of the labour force (the referent) were not significantly more stable in any of the countries. Among British and US couples, wives' employment did not significantly alter divorce risk regardless of whether it was part- or full-time. Controlling for work hours, wives' relative earnings also did not significantly alter risk of divorce, as effects were substantively and at best marginally

statistically significant. This evidence supports our first hypothesis that the independence hypothesis does not hold as wives' employment has become more normative.

West German marriages were most stable when the wife worked part-time, in line with the normative prediction. British couples where the wife worked part-time were somewhat less likely to divorce, but the effect did not reach statistical significance. The evidence therefore lends only partial support for our second hypothesis that part-time work would reduce divorce risk in both West Germany and Great Britain. At the same time, our assertion that these effects would be more pronounced in West Germany is supported.

The significance of other effects varied across countries. Husbands' unemployment significantly increased the dissolution risk in Great Britain. The direction of this effect was similar in West Germany and the United States, but it was not statistically significant. Controlling for each partner's employment, greater household income in West Germany significantly reduced dissolution risk. The magnitude of this effect in the United States was similar but not statistically significant. Greater household income in British households predicted a slightly elevated risk, but not a statistically significant one. Having children lowered divorce risk in West Germany and the United States. In Britain, children predicted greater instability as found by others (Böheim and Ermisch, 2001; Chan and Halpin, 2002), but the effect among these first-married couples did not reach statistical significance. British and US husbands with post-secondary education had significantly more stable marriages, but the effect did not reach statistical significance for West German husbands. Other research also found that education effects varied across countries (Härkönen and Dronkers, 2006). West German and US marriages were at significantly greater risk of dissolution in the early years, an effect not found among the more recent British marriages.

[TABLE 2 about here]

The interaction term in Model 2 that indicated mothers who worked part-time was not significant for either West German or British couples, and attenuated the significance of the main effect of part-time employment among West German wives. In contrast, effects of the interaction term among US couples were more dramatic. US couples where mothers worked part-time were significantly less likely to divorce than all other couples. At the same time, including the interaction term for US mothers altered the main effect of US wives' part-time employment. US couples without children where the wife worked part-time were significantly more likely to divorce.

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 more 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). This economic dependency leaves women and their children at greater risk of poverty in the event of marital dissolution. Given that wives' employment more generally has been predicted to increase divorce risk (Becker et al., 1977; Cherlin, 1992), policy support for wives' part-time employment might ultimately be policy support for greater future child poverty. Despite these theoretical risks, no one to date has explored the effects of wives' part-time employment on marital stability.

Given the diversity in female employment participation across countries, we argued the dominant hypotheses are too simplistic for modelling divorce risk among current cohorts. We suggested instead that normative levels of wives' employment determine its

impact on marital stability. We used British, West German and US panel data to assess this assertion. Within the *laissez-faire* US context, both partners in a couple are more likely to work full-time. In contrast, West German and British policies supported wives' part-time employment of differing quality. Many West German wives can find high-quality, well-paid part-time jobs in the public sector. British part-time employment, in contrast, tends to be more precarious and pays lower wages (McGinnity and McManus, 2007).

We selected recent cohorts of first-married couples from each country panel and followed them for the first 12 to 15 years of marriage when dissolution risk is the greatest. In no country did a wife's employment or relative earnings significantly increase the risk of dissolution. This evidence offers general support for the normative argument. In addition, West German couples where the wife worked part-time were significantly more stable than other couples, including those where the wife was out of the labour force. The direction of effects for part-time employment was similar in Great Britain, but did not reach statistical significance. These two findings lend further support for the normative argument, and also suggest the quality of work might be important in structuring effects. Our data provided no measures of job quality, so this possibility must be explored in future research.

Somewhat surprisingly, only in the United States did a *mother's* part-time employment predict a lower divorce risk. As noted by Han and her colleagues (2008), the option of taking time off following birth is available only to US women with greater resources. This suggests another fruitful area for future research would be to explore class and other group differences in factors affecting divorce risk. Germany has introduced "mini-jobs" for marginal male workers that are similar to British part-time positions (Wanger, 2006), indicative of growing class disparity in 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 countries.

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. For example, husbands' unemployment proved deleterious in Great Britain, and marginally so in West Germany. Over the period observed, these two countries frequently experienced higher unemployment rates than the United States (OECD, 2009). 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 female employment to ameliorate the family effects of male unemployment (Walby, 2001). Given we found British men's unemployment predicted greater marital instability, this policy might not be an effective "fix" for the eroding economic position of some British men. With the current global economic circumstances, similar effects might emerge in other countries. A continuing theoretical and empirical focus on the family effects of wives' employment rather than household employment not only perpetuates the gender hierarchy, but also obfuscates true family dynamics and risks in modern societies.

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End Notes

1. The basic dynamics discussed should apply to women in either *de jure* or *de facto* couples, but as dissolution risk varies depending on legal partnership status (Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006) and our empirical analyses are limited to legally married couples, we refer to 'wives' throughout the text.

2. Modelling effects using a continuous measure of wives' employment hours, controlling for wives out of the labour force, would have necessitated different functional forms for each country: A simple linear model for West Germany; a quadratic model for Great Britain; and a third-order polynomial for the United States. That the functional form differed further supports our contention that the effect of wives' employment on divorce risk varies across the countries. The selected indicator categories captured the same effects in a single model that could be applied to all three countries.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of married British, West German, and US Couples from first year of marriage until separated or censored (standard deviations not reported for dichotomous variables)

	WEST GERMANY		GREAT BRITAIN		UNITED STATES	
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*
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 per cent 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
n couple-years (couples)	*4,473 (559)*		*4174 (666)*		*2,535 (502)*	

Table 2 Relative risk of divorce from year of marriage in Great Britain, West Germany, and the United States

	WEST GERMANY				GREAT BRITAIN				UNITED STATES			
	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
	Odds Ratio	*RSE*	*Odds Ratio*	*RSE*	*Odds Ratio*	*RSE*	*Odds Ratio*	*RSE*	*Odds Ratio*	*RSE*	*Odds Ratio*	*RSE*
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
Ref: housewife, out of labour force												
Wife's per cent 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
Pseudo log-likelihood	*-777.65*		*-777.61*		*-418.18*		*-418.14*		*-357.93*		*-353.33*	
Wald chi-square	*96.40****		*96.64****		*33.55****		*33.45****		*56.36****		*61.86****	
n couple-years (couples)	*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)