

Job and stable marriage: Does context matter?

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Short abstract

This study contributes to the recent discussion on the role of the context for the relationship between women's employment and marital stability. This literature presupposed that women's employment is more likely to stabilise marriages if women's employment is state supported and socially accepted. To this end we compare Italy and Poland – two countries which share a number of similarities, like strong attachment to family and Catholic values and delayed diffusion of new family behaviours, and at the same time display key differences with regard to women's labour force participation, household living standards and gender roles. Using recent representative surveys, the Italian Multipurpose Household Survey and the Polish Generations and Gender Survey, we estimate a joint multiprocess model of marital disruption and paid work participation which allows us to account for the common unobserved factors affecting the two processes and to estimate an unbiased effect of employment on marital disruption.

Extended abstract

The role of women's social and economic independence for marital stability has been of interest for social scientists for several decades in response to growing female labour force participation and marital disruption. It is still unclear, however, whether an increase in women's socio-economic status has indeed a destabilising impact on marital unions at the time of changing gender roles (Jalovaara, 2003; Sigle-Rushton, 2010) and a social shift from household production to household consumption (Cherlin, 2000; Stevenson, & Wolfers, 2007; Raz-Yurovich, 2012).

The view that women's employment destabilises marital unions is derived from the influential Becker's theory (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977). The economic model of marriage was built upon an assumption of a *role specialisation* within a couple, and presupposed that the gains from marriage are higher if both spouses specialize – one in income provision and the other in home production. Due to gender gap in wages and culturally rooted gender norms a woman usually gets specialized in the housework and a man in breadwinning (Lyngstad, & Jalovaara, 2010). The negative relationship between women's employment and marital stability was also envisioned by psycho-social theorist who argued that woman's involvement in paid work might be indicative of man's poor performance as an income provider, which might further lead to strains between spouses (Cherlin, 1979; Jalovaara, 2003).

Recently, however, as women have been increasingly present in the labour market, the negative effect of women's employment on marital stability has come in doubt. It has been increasingly argued that in modern societies decisions to remain married depend more on satisfaction from the quality of the union than on pure exchange of income and household labour between partners (Ross & Sawhill, 1975) and that similarity of economic activities and interests may improve understanding between spouses (Simpson, & England, 1981). Furthermore, it was presupposed that the increasing earning potential of a woman leads to higher living standards and thus should reduce marital strains, particularly at the time of the changing household organisation from role specialisation to income pooling (Oppenheimer 1997, Cherlin, 2000). Finally, the change of the gender norms leaves men fewer possibilities to find a partner who would be willing to specialise in household production (Sigle-Rushton, 2010).

Empirical research usually finds a negative association between women's employment and marital stability (for review see Spitze, 1988, and Lyngstad, & Jalovaara, 2010). Nevertheless, some recent studies found that this effect weakens or even disappears after

accounting for the level of satisfaction with marriage (Schoen et al., 2002), commitment of spouses to each other and acknowledged gender ideology (Sayer, & Bianchi, 2000) or men's involvement in housework (Sigle-Rushton, 2010). Furthermore, a cross-country comparative studies by Cooke (2005, 2011) revealed that the effect of women's employment on marital stability depends on the country context and is more likely to be negative in countries with traditional gender roles.

This study aims at deepening our understanding of how the context mediates the relationship between women's employment and marital stability. To this end we compare two European countries – Italy and Poland. These two countries offer a stimulating setting for a comparative analysis as they share a number of similarities but also display key differences. On the one hand, Italians and Poles are on average very strongly attached to family and Catholic values. Religiosity and tradition are likely one of the reasons for a delayed diffusion of new family behaviours, including marital dissolution, which started to spread in both countries only recently (Vignoli and Ferro 2009, Styrz 2011). On the other hand, the two countries differ in the current and past levels of women's labour force participation, household living standards and the perception of women as income providers. In Italy women's labour force participation has been rising gradually since the 1970s and despite a serious progress in that respect women are still mainly perceived as care providers. In Poland, by contrast, the increase in women's labour force participation started earlier and it was much more rapid (Matysiak and Vignoli 2010). Moreover, Poland adopted a so called dual earner – female double burden model, typical of the post-socialist countries (Siemieńska 1997, Pascall and Manning 2000). This means that Polish women are socially expected to provide care as well as earn income. Against this background, we will test whether the sex role specialisation model is better suited to explain women's employment and divorce behaviours in Italy than in Poland.

In order to test our hypotheses we use data from two data sources. For Italy, we rely on data stemming the Multipurpose Household Survey on “Family and Social Subject” conducted the Italian National Institute of Statistics in 2009. The survey covers a large-scale sample of 24,000 households (for a total of about 50,000 individuals). For Poland, we use the first wave of the Polish Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). It was conducted at the turn of 2010 and 2011 on a representative sample of 20,000 women and men aged 18-79. A strong advantage of the two datasets is that they collect full employment histories of respondents and cover the most recent period when marital disruption was spreading rapidly in the two societies.

Using these data we estimate event-history model for marital disruption with employment status as our main explanatory covariate. The mutual effects of the labour market and partnership careers may be biased in the conventional applications of event history analyses, because of non-random decisions to separate and to participate in paid work. The unobserved characteristics of women, for example their family orientation or gender attitudes may influence women's proneness to work and their willingness to dissolve an unsatisfying union. We overcome this problem by estimating a joint multiprocess model of marital disruption and paid work participation. In such models, a heterogeneity component is included to the equation that estimates each process, and the possible correlation between these heterogeneity components allows to account for the existence of common factors. Furthermore, the outcomes of the endogenous parallel process enter as a time-varying covariate in the estimation of each process, making it possible to estimate their net impact.

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