

The Educational Gradient in Divisions of Household Labour and Divorce Risk in Britain and Germany

Rossella Icardi*
r.icardi@bath.ac.uk

Mariña Fernández-Salgado
m.fernandezsalgado@uah.es

Lynn Prince Cooke
l.p.cooke@bath.ac.uk

BACKGROUND

There is a tension between an ideal of gender equality in household divisions of labour (England and Kilbourne 1990; Gerson 2002; Oppenheimer 1997), and the theorized risk of fracturing couple interdependence if partners do not specialize in paid and unpaid work (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977; Becker 1981). Yet we know that context shapes the relative risks because it shapes normative expectations of how couples should “do” gender (Cooke 2006). The impact of greater equality in household divisions of labour on the risk of divorce is lower in countries with more institutional supports for gender equality (Cooke 2006; Cooke and Gash 2010; Cooke et al. 2013) and has lessened for more recent cohorts within them (Cooke et al. 2013; Killewald 2016). Less is known, however, about whether the impact of egalitarian divisions of paid and unpaid work varies among women and men. We expect so, and may contribute to the well-documented educational gradient in divorce (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). For example, Kalmijn (2013) speculated divorce risk is lower among more the more-highly educated because such men support more the more egalitarian household divisions desired by their partner. No one to date, however, has tested this assertion directly.

This paper therefore contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we theorize an educational gradient in the effect of relative gender equality in household divisions of labour on dissolution risk. As Kalmijn (2013) asserts, highly-educated individuals usually espouse more gender egalitarian ideology, whereas less-educated couples often espouse a preference for more gender-conservative couple arrangements (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Deutsch 1999; Kan 2008; Sullivan 2010). Hence the preference for different couple arrangements differs by education, reflecting the “stalled” gender revolution along class lines (England 2010). At the same time, there are tensions between the educational ideologies and economic reality. On the one hand, less-educated couples may prefer more gendered divisions, but struggle economically on the single, low-wage income of an unskilled husband (Cherlin 2014; Cooke 2011). On the other, highly-educated couples face stronger employer expectations of an “ideal worker” that can force highly-educated women to assume more traditional divisions of household labour (Blair-Loy 2003; Coltrane 2004; Williams, Blair-Loy and Berdahl 2013). In all, however, we expect that greater equality in household divisions of paid and unpaid labour will reduce the risk of dissolution among highly-educated couples, whereas a male breadwinner configuration reduces the risk for less-educated couples. We focus primarily on the wife’s educational attainment, but will control for different couple educational configurations.

Second, we also contribute to the comparative literature by testing our hypotheses among British and German couples. Institutional arrangements in both countries historically reinforced a male breadwinner model, but German labour market institutions enabled more men to support dependent wives (Cooke 2011). Germany also provides more family financial supports that reduce the economic imperative for wives' employment, simultaneous with limited public and private childcare options (Hook 2015). In contrast, British couples face less policy support and greater earnings inequality, the latter providing a large low-wage service sector from which higher-earning couples can purchase supports for domestic work (Cooke, 2011; Hook 2015). We suspect the UK context of greater inequality and more meagre policy support increases the educational gradient in effects, primarily by increasing the dissolution risk among the less-educated. The paper consequently provides important insights into differences in "optimal" gender-class household arrangements in context.

DATA AND METHODS

To study the risk of divorce, we select 1995 to 2015 waves of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (British Household Panel Survey + Understanding Society). These are large-scale panel survey representative samples of the British and German population that allow studying changes in market and domestic work in dual-earner couples. As the focus of our study is on divorce risk between couples, only partnered respondents were selected at each wave. Partners within the same household were matched based on information on partnership status and partner identification number in the household grid. We restrict our analyses to couples where both spouses are aged 18 to 55. We only include couples that marry during the observation period so to follow a couple from the beginning of the marriage until they separate/get divorced (whichever is stated first) or until observations are right-censored. In addition, we refined the sample based on key variables of interest. Given the interest in the effect of housework division on divorce risk, we needed to identify both spouses' hours in housework, especially in the years prior to the year of separation. Further exclusions are the person-years with no valid information on any of the controls, yielding a sample of 1,811 couples (15,849 couple-years) in Germany and 1,804 couples (15,074 person-years) in Britain. In Germany, we observe 19% of couples to divorce, in England, 20%.

Event history analysis of longitudinal data is the most suitable method for assessing the impact of couple's division of time spent on housework or paid work on the risk of divorce (Allison, 1984). In details, we use the Cox Proportional Hazard model to assess the relationship of predictor variables to the survival time. In addition, we check results are robust to different specifications by using also Weibull Hazard models and we combine the latter with Frailty to account for potential unobserved heterogeneity in the choice of divorce. The predictor variables used are the number of employment hours and the number of housework hours. In UKHLS, the number of employment hours is asked as "How many hours are you expected to work in a normal week?" whilst the housework variable is based on numerical responses to the question "About how many hours do you spend on house-work in

an average week, such as time spent cooking, cleaning, and doing the laundry?” In SOEP, the question about working hours is asked as follows “How many hours do your actual working-hours consist of including possible over-time?” whereas the number of housework hours is based on the response to the question: “What does a typical weekday look like for you? How many hours per day do you spend on the following activities?” Housework: washing, cooking, cleaning, doing errands. For comparability, hours in housework in the German data were transformed into weekly hours. We use these variables to construct three groups of wife and husband’s proportions of time spent in housework. The proportions are defined as 0 to 40%, 40 to 60%, or more than 60%. Traditional labour division: wife's housework proportion is larger than her income proportion; Egalitarian: wife's and husband's shares are virtually the same; Non-traditional: wife's housework proportion is larger than her income proportion. Similarly, we construct three groups of wife and husband’s proportions of time spent in paid work: Traditional division: wife's work hours proportion is smaller than the husband; Egalitarian: wife's and husband's shares are virtually the same; Non-traditional: wife's work hours proportion is larger than her husband. Control variables include age at marriage, age difference between partners, total number of hours in work, total number of hours in unpaid work, number of children, hourly wage of both, education level, region, period.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Table 2 shows preliminary results of how division of paid and unpaid work within couples affect divorce risk. Model 1, which only includes measures of time spent in housework, shows that the hazard of divorce is higher for egalitarian and non-traditional family models, in both countries. Once we account for time spent in the labour market, the division of time spent in housework loses significance in UK, but not in Germany. This suggests the relevance of time spent in the labour market in the UK, potentially because of a lower availability of other forms of economic support, compared to Germany. Results are robust to different specifications.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the sample of couples, Germany and UK.

UK				
Variables	Cox 1	Cox 2	Weibull	Weibull-frailty
Total housework	0.9914* (0.0051)	0.9880** (0.0053)	0.9839*** (0.0054)	0.9838*** (0.0054)
(Wife >60%)				
Equal split	1.3085* (0.2095)	1.1427 (0.1862)	1.1718 (0.1913)	1.1831 (0.1937)
Husband >60%	1.7568*** (0.3510)	1.2682 (0.2694)	1.3227 (0.2824)	1.3407 (0.2896)
Total work hours		1.0010 (0.0039)	1.0033 (0.0039)	1.0035 (0.0037)
(Husband >60%)				
Equal split		1.3614* (0.2198)	1.3455* (0.2141)	1.3613* (0.2197)

Wife >60%		2.2404*** (0.6040)	1.9484** (0.5248)	1.9782** (0.5273)
GERMANY				
Total housework	0.9949 (0.0054)	1.0029 (0.0056)	1.0092 (0.0056)	1.000 (0.0056)
(Wife >60%)				
Equal split	1.8331*** (0.2194)	2.2312*** (0.2546)	2.3212*** (0.2546)	2.3247*** (0.2616)
Husband >60%	2.1079*** (0.3890)	1.8152*** (0.3775)	1.1852*** (0.3775)	1.8723*** (0.3713)
Total work hours		1.005* (0.0027)	1.005* (0.0027)	1.0070*** (0.0022)
(Husband >60%)				
Equal split		1.8057*** (0.2345)	1.0857*** (0.2345)	1.7725*** (0.2054)
Wife >60%		1.3402 (0.2789)	1.4302 (0.2789)	12.072 (0.2205)

REFERENCES

- Becker, Gary S. 1981. *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Becker, Gary S., Elisabeth M. Landes, and Robert T. Michael. 1977. "An Economic Analysis of Marital Instability." *Journal of Political Economy* 85 (6): 1141–88.
- Blair-Loy, M. 2003. *Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cherlin, Andrew J. 2014. *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Coltrane, Scott. 2004. "Elite Careers and Family Commitment: It's (Still) About Gender." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 596: 214–20.
- Cooke, Lynn Prince. 2011. *Gender-Class Equality in Political Economies*. Perspectives on Gender series. New York: Routledge.
- Cooke, Lynn Prince. 2006. "'Doing' Gender in Context: Household Bargaining and the Risk of Divorce in Germany and the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 112(2): 442–472. DOI: 10.1086/506417
- Cooke, Lynn Prince and Vanessa Gash. 2010. "Wives' Part-time Employment and Marital Stability in Great Britain, West Germany, and the United States." *Sociology* 44 (6): 1091–1108. DOI: 10.1177/0038038510381605
- Cooke, Lynn Prince, Jani Erola, Marie Evertsson, Michael Gähler, Juho Härkönen, Belinda Hewitt, Marika Jalovaara, Man-Yee Kan, Torkild Hovde Lyngstad, Letizia Mencarini, Jean-Francois Mignot, Dimitri Mortelmans, Anne-Rigt Poortman, Christian Schmitt and Heike Trappe. 2013. "Labor and Love: Wives' Employment and Divorce Risk in its Socio-Political Context." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 20(4): 482–509. DOI: 10.1093/sp/jxt016
- Davis, Shannon and Theodore N. Greenstein. 2009. "Gender Ideology: Components, Predictors, and Consequences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 35(1): 87–105.
- Deutsch, Francine M. 1999. *Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- England, Paula. 2010. "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled." *Gender & Society* 24: 149–66.
- England, Paula and Barbara S. Kilbourne. 1990. "Markets, Marriages, and Other Mates: The Problem of Power." Pp. 163–188 in *Beyond the Marketplace: Rethinking Economy and Society*, edited by R. Friedland and A. F. Robertson. New York: Aldine Publishing.

- Gerson, Kathleen. 2002. "Moral Dilemmas, Moral Strategies, and the Transformation of Gender: Lessons from Two Generations of Work and Family Change." *Gender & Society* 16(1): 8-28.
- Härkönen, Juho, and Jaap Dronkers. 2006. "Stability and Change in the Educational Gradient of Divorce: A Comparison of Seventeen Countries." *European Sociological Review* 22 (5): 501–18.
- Hook, Jennifer L. 2015. "Incorporating 'Class' into Work-Family Arrangements: Insights from and for *Three Worlds*." *Journal of European Social Policy* 25(1): 14-31. DOI: 10.1177/0958928714556968
- Kalmijn, Matthijs. 2013. "The Educational Gradient in Marriage: A Comparison of 25 European Countries." *Demography* 50: 1499-1520.
- Kan, Man-Yee. 2008. "Measuring Housework Participation: The Gap between 'Stylised' Questionnaire Estimates and Diary-Based Estimates." *Social Indicators Research* 86: 381 – 400.
- Killewald, Alexandra. 2016. "Money, Work, and Marital Stability: Assessing Change in the Gendered Determinants of Divorce." *American Sociological Review* 81(4) 696–719. DOI: 10.1177/0003122416655340
- Lyngstad, Torkild Hovde, and Marika Jalovaara. 2010. "A Review of the Antecedents of Union Dissolution." *Demographic Research* 23 (10): 257–92.
- Oppenheimer, Valerie K. 1997. "Women's Employment and the Gain to Marriage: The Specialization and Trading Model." *Annual Review of Sociology* 23:431–53.
- Özcan, Berkay, and Richard Breen. 2012. "Marital Instability and Female Labor Supply." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 463–81.
- Sullivan, Oriol. 2010. "Changing Differences by Educational Attainment in Fathers' Domestic Labour and Child Care." *Sociology* 44:716-33.
- Williams, J., Blair-Loy, M. & Berdahl, J. L. 2013. "Cultural Schemas, Social Class, and the Flexibility Stigma." *Journal of Social Issues* 69: 209-234. DOI: 10.1111/josi.12012