On the Stability of Individualistic Marriages

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Problem

Although a large body of research has identified numerous factors that are associated with the risk of marital dissolution, the sharp and nearly continuous increase in divorce rates in many developed countries is far from being understood. The upward trend of divorce rates set on in the late 19th century, continued over a hundred years and only began to level off in some high-divorce countries towards the end of the 20th century. More and more it is discussed whether in some countries the increase of divorce rates has not only come to an end but even turned around into a trend of decreasing divorce rates (e.g. Kennedy and Ruggles, 2014). A number of studies have shown that rising divorce rates cannot be explained by changes in the socio-structural composition of the married (for instance, Wagner et al. 2015). Until today, there is no consistent explanation for the long-term trend of rising divorce rates and there exist only few studies addressing this problem. Several scholars have suggested that the changing meaning of marriage towards more individualism may challenge the stability of marital unions (Amato et al. 2007, Cherlin 2004, Giddens 1992; Lesthaeghe 1992). Only very few studies investigated cultural factors increasing divorce risks (e.g. Kalmijn et al 2004) and especially, empirical studies linking the societal diffusion of individualism with upward trends in marital instability are still missing. In this paper, we deliberately take an explorative approach and investigate a number of hypotheses on different dimensions of individualistic marriages in their association with marital stability. We focus on Germany for two reasons. First, like in many other countries there has been a long-term rise of divorce rates that was only interrupted by World War I and II, the reform of the divorce law 1977/1978 in West Germany and 1991/1992 in East-Germany. Divorce trends in Germany do not seem to be very peculiar, so one can assume that empirical findings for Germany can be generalized to other Western countries. Second, we have particularly suited and recent data on younger birth cohorts that formed their marriages in a cultural climate that supports individualistic marriages. These data include rich measures on several dimensions of individualistic marriages, such as norms and practices regarding specialization within the marriage, dimensions of power and dominance as well as measures of intimacy and autonomy in these marital unions. The longitudinal design of these data allows us to follow stablished marriages of younger birth cohorts over a period of six years.

The role of cultural factors in the explanation of trends in divorce rates has been emphasized by proponents of the second demographic transition model. Processes of individualization, secularization (van de Kaa 1987) and post-materialism (Lesthaeghe 1992) have been argued to increase divorce rates. These processes have also been argued to have changed the meaning of marriage. On the one hand, norms to get married have weakened (Amato et al. 2007) and alternatives to the institution of marriage fulfil largely similar functions, such as unmarried cohabitation (Kiernan 2001). On the other hand, the process of the deinstitutionalization of the marriage (Cherlin 2004) describes a shift from the institutional marriage to the companionship marriage and finally, to the individualistic marriage. The type of individualistic marriage has a number of distinct features. First, interpersonal commitment

based on an emotional bonds and a satisfying intimacy is central to this type of marriage. A marriage that is no longer considered as emotionally fulfilling is prone to dissolve. Another feature of individualistic marriages is the low degree of specialization within the couple. Traditional gender roles are replaced by the valorization and practice of a gender equal division of labor and family work. A further consequence of the low degree of institutionalization of this type of marriage is these couples negotiate their social roles in a "democratic process" (Lauer and Yodanis 2011). Finally, individualistic marriages are distinct in the extent to which partners pursue individualistic interests and goals in their marriage to the expense of collectivistic goals. Self-development and personal fulfillment are important sources of mutual satisfaction and efforts (Amato et al. 2007: 16). To summarize: we assume that modernization and the accompanying trends in divorce patterns goes along with a shift from institutional to individualistic marriage. This process can be observed by indicators that are related to four dimensions of marital life: the significance of emotional and intimate bonds (1), the degree of the division of labor (2), the role of negotiations and a widely absence of dominance among the partners (3), the value that is placed on self-development, personal fulfillment and attainment of individual goals (4). Although these dimensions are not completely independent from each other, we will investigate to what extent indicators of these dimensions affect the dissolution risk of marriages.

Data, sample and methods

Study design and sample

We use survey data from six waves of the German Family Panel 'Panel analysis of intimate relationships and family dynamics' (Pairfam) (Nauck & Arránz Becker 2012). Pairfam, conducted annually, is a national sample of the population in Germany (eastern and western Germany) that is representative of the members of three birth cohorts: 1971-73, 1981-83, and 1991-93 (Huinink et al. 2011). The first wave was conducted in 2008/09 with 12,402 respondents. Our analytical sample consists of the two older birth cohorts, because there were virtually no married individuals among respondents in the age groups 15 to 17 years. For this study, we include women and men born between 1971 and 1973 and between 1981 and 1983, who—at the time of the first interview—lived with an opposite-sex partner to whom they were married and who were married for the first time. Our total analytical sample comprises 3,278 individuals of the two older birth cohorts because in 2008 (the time of first wave), respondents born between 1991 and 1993 are below the legal age of getting married.

Measures

Dependent variable

For the purpose of this extended abstract submitted to the EPC 2016, we use the perceived stability of a marriage as a proxy measure for actual divorce and present some preliminary results based on the cross-sectional analysis of the first wave. The subjective marital stability has been measured by a question in which respondents have been asked whether, during the previous year, they seriously considered to end their relationship. The answer categories were *yes, no, don't know* and a *refusal* to answer that question. We include this measure as a dummy variable (1= yes).

Core variables of individualized marriage

In individualized marriages, spouses maintain autonomy in the context of their relationship. In order to avoid arrangements that would increase dependence within these relationships, spouses in individualized marriages avoid specialization in tasks, prefer to come to agreement by negotiation rather than enforcement and highly value the pursuit of own goals and interests.

<u>*Avoidance of specializations in tasks*</u>: Whereas individualized gender beliefs assume that both men and women are members of paid labor force and families, family-oriented gender beliefs suggest that women are primarily responsible to fulfil family roles whereas men should specialize in paid labor (Esping-Anderson 1999). Pairfam comprises four measures of individualized versus family-oriented gender beliefs using a 5-item Likert scale ranging from 1 "disagree completely" to 5 "agree completely". We combine each respondents' answers to the following four questions into one additive value measuring gender beliefs:

To what extent you personally agree with the following statements?

1. *Men should participate in housework to the same extent as women.*
2. *Children often suffer because their fathers spend too much time at work.*
3. *A child aged under 6 will suffer from having a working mother.*
4. *Women should be more concerned about their family than about their career.*

In addition to prevalent gender beliefs we moreover measure the couples' level of specialization in the labor market. We distinguish couples with *a single earner* from couples in which both partners are employed by further distinguishing whether *both are working fulltime (or part-time)*, whether *one works fulltime whereas the other less than fulltime or* both are not working fulltime.

Negotiation: In order to grasp whether the relationship is characterized by negotiation with the goal of agreement between the partners we use a measure that grasps dominance in the decision making process of a couple. It is an imperfect measure because it only measured dominance from one partner's perspective. Respondents have been asked how often it happens that their partner enforces his or her interests with answer categories ranging from *1=never to 5 all the time*. The corresponding question reads as follows:

1. *How often does your partner get his/her way when you can't agree on something?*
2. *How often does your partner make you do things his/her way?*

Pursuit of own interests: One idea behind the concept of individualized marriages, is, that partners stay two individuals who pursue their own interests and goals rather than merging into one marital unit. At the level of expectations about the pursuit of own interests and goals in the context of a relationship we use two measures of autonomy from a range of items that aim at grasping the perceived benefits and costs of being in a relationship. The answer reflects the strength of a positive (negative) expectation of the dimension "autonomy" on a five-item scale (*1= not at all, 5= very strongly*). Although these questions are formulated in such a way that respondents are asked to formulate their relationship expectations *in general*, we argue that their answers reflect at least to some degree the experiences they have made in their current marriage. The corresponding questions read as follows:

One can have different positive or negative expectations regarding a partnership. How about you? How strongly do you expect, to obtain the freedom to follow your own interests through a partnership? How strongly do you worry about being constrained by a partner?

Additionally, respondents have been asked about the degree to which a number of statements apply to their current marriage. From this collection of items, we select five items that form a so-called *autonomy scale* that is part of a broader set of the so-called Couples Climate Scales and indicates the degree of autonomy within the marriage (Schneewind & Kruse 2002). The original 8-item scale has been implemented as a five-item scale in the Pairfam Questionnaire whose answer categories range from *1= not at all to 5= absolutely*, Cronbachs alpha=0.69).

1. *When you think about your partnership, to what extent do the following statements apply to your situation?*
2. *Name of current partner] finds it quite all right if I stand up for my own interests in our partnership.*
3. *In our partnership I can usually do what I want.*

4. *In our partnership I can follow my own interests without [name of current partner] getting upset.*

5. *I can settle my personal matters by myself without causing conflicts with [name of current partner].*

Other variables related to divorce

In order to avoid a spurious relationship between our explanatory variables and the experience of a divorce due to selection effects, we control for several characteristics that might select individuals into an individualized marriage or might be associated with the risk of divorce. Individuals who view marriage as the only legitimate social institution to live permanently with a partner and to have children are expected to be less likely to be in an individualized marriage as well as to divorce. Therefore, we include a scale grasping a *strong belief in the superiority and permanency of marriage*. The items measure agreement to three statements related to the permanency and moral hegemony of the institution of marriage ranging from *1= do not agree at all to 5= agree fully* (Cronbachs alpha=0.69).

1. *Marriage is a lifelong union that should not be broken.*

2. *You should get married if you permanently live with your partner.*

3. *Couples should marry at the latest after a child is born.*

Individualized marriages are characterized by a high valuation of satisfaction and happiness derived from being married to this particular partner. It is argued that such types of marriage would be dissolved as soon as spouses do not feel their expectations to be satisfied. At the same time, it is obvious that happy couples are less likely to dissolve their marriage. Therefore, we include measures of *commitment to the marriage* because they indicate the willingness to maintain the relationship in the future. On the one hand, we include a measure of *relationship satisfaction* that ranges from *0=not at all satisfied to 10= completely satisfied*.

Moreover, we include a measure of *relationship specific investments*, namely the *presence of joint children in the household* (as a dummy variable) as joint children are increasing the costs to end the marriage. This variable is implemented as a time varying covariate. Furthermore, we take into account respondent's *age at union formation* (cohabitation or marriage, linear and squared, time constant), *gender* (time-constant), his or her *level of education* (ISCED, time constant), *marriage duration* (time-varying) and *religiosity* (a combination of religious denomination, and frequency of church service attainments, time-constant).

Preliminary results

Distributions of the core variables of individualized marriage

Regarding beliefs about the role of men in the family and the labor market, we observe that the vast majority of respondents (strongly) agrees that men should do as much as housework as women (78%). More than half of all respondents also feel that children suffer from a father being too much focused on work. Beliefs about the role of women are less polarized. There are as much respondents agreeing with the statement that women should prioritize family over a career than respondents disagreeing (roughly 30%) and a large proportion of respondents who seem to be unsure about that statement who chose the middle category (neither agree nor disagree). This distribution is mirrored in the question whether children under age 6 would suffer from a working mother, although disagreement with that statement is more frequent than agreement.

Relatively few marriages are characterized by an avoidance of specialization in family versus labor work. Not more than 455 couples contain two full-time employed partners (14%). Whereas the other couples employ some kind of specialization (one partner fulltime, other partner less than fulltime). Note that the latter group includes couples in which one partner may only temporarily retreat from the labor market (parental leave, unemployment, military service) or did not yet have entered the labor market (enrolled in education, vocational training).

Dominance as the antipode of negotiation is experienced by a minority of respondents at a regular (more than "sometimes") basis. Every fourth respondent experiences the partner enforcing his opinion and every third respondent is forced to do things the way his/her partner wants them to be done.

The vast majority of our sample, roughly 60 percent, reports (very) strong expectations to experience personal autonomy within a relationship. Only a small minority (8%) worries about being constrained in their autonomy. A majority of married couples in our sample actual experience a high level of personal autonomy in their relationship. The mean score on the autonomy scale ranging from 1 (no autonomy) to 5 (high autonomy) is at 3.6, the median at 3.5, indicating a slight right skewedness of the distribution. We therefore z-standardize this variable for the multivariate analysis.

Distributions of other variables

The response pattern on the scale measuring beliefs in the superiority and permanency of marriage is slightly right-skewed with roughly half of all scale scores being situated within one standard deviation from the mean score (3.1), roughly 30 percent of the respondents being strongly or very strongly oriented towards a traditional marriage and 20 percent of the respondents being strongly or very strongly opposed to that idea. We therefore z-standardize this variable for the multivariate analysis.

Half of the married respondents in our sample are satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship. The distribution thus is extremely right-skewed. We therefore z-standardize this variable for the multivariate analysis. In total, 255 respondents (8%) seriously thought about getting divorced in the year preceding the first interview. Another 50 respondents declined to answer this question.

The vast majority (81%) of respondents in our sample have at least one biological child with their spouse living in the common household. The mean age at union formation (the moment starting to live together, either unmarried or married) is roughly 23 years (SD=4.6). Our sample contains more women than men (59%). Most respondents have at least secondary education and are not very religious.

A preliminary multivariate analysis

We focus on a cross-sectional analysis of statistical associations between our core independent variables of interest and perceived marriage stability as a proxy of actual divorce. The presented analysis is thus of preliminary nature. Therefore, we refrain from reporting effect sizes and significance levels at this point. Moreover, not all the independent variables are yet operationalized in a satisfying way and are therefore missing from the overview below (Table 1).

These first results make us confident that it is worth examining different dimensions of individualistic marriages in their association with union dissolution using longitudinal data from Germany. Married unions in which gender equal attitudes are valued and practiced and personal freedom is expected, divorce thoughts are more prevalent. In a next step, we want to refine our measures and study their association with actual union dissolution behavior from a prospective perspective. We are particularly interested in analyzing the complex relationship

between autonomy on the level of expectations versus practice as these measures are differently associated with divorce thoughts.

Table 1: Direction of the associations between dimensions of individualistic marriages and subjective marital stability at Wave 1, based on a preliminary logit analysis, controlling for sex, age, marriage duration, joint children, religiosity.

	Direction of the effect on subjective marital stability
Holds gender equal attitudes	+
Expects personal freedom in a relationship	+
Worries about being constrained in a relationship	+
Autonomy-scale (large value, higher autonomy)	–
Respondent is not ruled over by partner's will	–
High relationship satisfaction	–

Outlook

In a next step, we will make use of the longitudinal nature of our data. All independent variables are measured at the first wave of data collection. We will study their association with experiencing a divorce in any of the following waves. We will estimate a discrete time binary logistic regression model to investigate the *probability to divorce*. Divorce as the event of interest is considered a function of respondents' individual characteristics in a given month. The data were organized as a person-month file (Allison 1984). When respondents entered the observation window (risk set) at first interview, they differed in the time since they were married. Half of the individuals in our sample had been married for at least 83 months (SD=60 months). We will take the marriage duration as the clock in our competing risk model because we assume that the timing of the interview was irrelevant in separation decisions (Guo 1993). We will include the duration (time) variable of our hazard models as months of marriage duration and update this value at each successive month of observation until the event occurred or right-censoring applied. In the majority of right-censored cases, this is the moment of the sixth wave of data collection. We will thus follow married relationships that were formed prior to the first interview over up to six consecutive waves (roughly six years). We expect marriage duration to have a reversed u-shaped effect divorce. The risk of divorce is expected to initially increase with marriage duration and start to decrease at a given time. Therefore, we will include the squared term of marriage duration into our model.

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