

**Panacea or pitfall? Women's part-time employment and marital stability
in West Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States**

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Panacea or pitfall? Women's part-time employment and marital stability in West Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States

Part-time employment, overwhelmingly the purview of women, has been advocated as a means of achieving greater work-life balance, but to date we have no evidence of its impact on marital stability over other household divisions of labour. Here we use British, German and US panel data to explore whether women's part-time employment enhances or detracts from the work-life balance indicated by a stable relationship across countries representing different earner-carer and part-time work regimes. We hypothesized any stabilizing benefits of part-time employment would most likely be evident in Germany and the UK where policy has promoted it, particularly Germany where the quality of part-time employment is higher than in the UK. In contrast, we expected greater stability among dual-earner full-time couples in the United States. We found that British and West German couples where the woman works full-time, not part-time, were least likely to divorce. US women's employment level did not alter divorce risk, but being childless predicted far more stable marriages. Together the evidence suggests the challenge for policy makers concerned with future economic growth is not how to reinforce the work incentives embedded within market economies, but how to promote the importance of care and kinship despite the market economy.

Key words: work-life balance, divorce, comparative policy

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Introduction

Work-life balance¹ or work-family reconciliation sits atop many policy and personal agendas. Policy makers view work-life balance as the way to achieve both greater labour force participation and gender equity. In principle, greater work-life balance could fuel economic growth, increase the proportion of the population who are economically active, raise household income and thereby reduce child poverty. Employers view work-life policies as a means of ensuring employee commitment and productivity (Hogarth et al. 2001).² Employees view it as a means of enjoying multiple facets of life, both the satisfaction and economic security derived from paid work, as well as the emotional satisfaction derived from partnership and parenthood.

Achieving balance entails making the public and private spheres more compatible than they have grown to be in industrialized societies. Policy initiatives to reintegrate the two include public provision of childcare, parental leave schemes supporting both fathers' and mothers' time in care work, and the encouragement of workplace flexibility through reduced hours, telecommuting, job sharing and the like (Behning and Pascual 2001; Jaumotte 2003). In the absence of employer policy, the dominant means of achieving work-life balance at the family level remains women's part-time employment providing a supplement to a male breadwinner's income while ensuring her time for domestic and caring tasks. Hakim (1997, 2000) argues this reflects women's preferences within a growing range of life choices. Others express concern that women's part-time employment is less about choice and more about social constraints (Crompton 2002; McRae 2003) or making the best of limited options (Crompton and Harris 1998; Walters 2005). Warren (2004) suggests an exploration of the

role of part-time employment in women's satisfaction across a full range of life domains, but to date there has been little research on its effects on family stability.

If part-time employment allows women to balance employment and family demands better, then it should enhance relationship stability relative to other household divisions of paid labour. There are costs associated with this strategy, however, with part-time work widely regarded as inferior in quality and less secure than a full-time job (O'Connell and Gash 2003; O'Reilly and Bothfeld 2002). So, if part-time employment proves no more or less stabilizing than either staying at home or working full-time, women's part-time employment leaves them, and their dependent children, economically vulnerable in the event of a divorce. Less accrued work experience leads to lower earnings and less career advancement, increasing the risk such divorced women will need financial assistance from the state. Under these circumstances, women's part-time employment would appear less a silver bullet and more a stake in the heart for women's life chances as well as the welfare state.

We do not expect this conundrum to operate equally across countries, however, with different countries providing different quality part-time employment (Gash 2005). For this reason, we select three countries using Fraser's (1994) earner-carer typology and use panel data to explore the association between women's employment levels and divorce risk. The United States increasingly represents a market-based *universal breadwinner* regime where adults tend to be employed regardless of marital status. 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, Reskin and Hudson 2000). Yet there is little policy support for work-family balance and couples rely on market services to manage competing time demands. West Germany represents a *male breadwinner* regime relying historically on women's caring role with a coordinated wage structure supporting a family wage for men. A

shortage of teachers and nurses during the 1960s, however, led to a series of provisions modifying the male breadwinner model to encourage married women's part-time employment, generally of higher quality in terms of wages and benefits than in many other countries (Drobnic, Blossfeld and Rohwer 1999). Finally, the United Kingdom is representative of a *caregiver parity* regime where a range of policies actively encourages women's part-time employment as well as somewhat financially supporting her motherhood role with maternity and family allowances. In contrast to West Germany, UK part-time employment tends to be poorly paid and until recently most employed married women fell below the earnings thresholds qualifying them for employment-related benefit schemes. By comparing divorce risk of women at different levels of working-time across the three countries, we aim to reveal whether part-time work enhances or detracts from the work-life balance indicated by a stable relationship.

Balancing work and family in context

Earner-carer regimes

Historically, women's employment intensity has varied according to temporal, macro-economic and policy contexts (Pfau-Effinger 2004). Nancy Fraser (1994) suggests classifying different household divisions of paid and unpaid labour under three earner-carer regimes: male breadwinner, universal breadwinner and caregiver parity. In the male breadwinner regime, women retain primary responsibility for caring tasks within the family and remain economically dependent upon a male breadwinner (Lewis 1992). This model is frequently found where Roman Catholic or other religious precepts reinforce *pater familias*. Government policies reinforcing a male breadwinner model include restrictions on women's night work, family wages assuming men's responsibility for dependents, maternity provisions rewarding women for leaving paid employment after childbirth, legislation

preventing married and(or) pregnant women from working in specific or all industrial sectors, high marginal tax rates and dependent tax allowances (Jaumotte 2003; Lewis 1992). The primary risk surrounding a male breadwinner model is a family's economic vulnerability given its dependence on a single income. Also non-earners—women and children—are particularly vulnerable to exploitation or desertion given their financial dependence on the sole breadwinner.

The universal breadwinner regime lies at the other extreme. Employment is expected among all able-bodied adults and, within Fraser's typology, maternal and paternal employment is supported through the public provision of childcare and shared parental leave schemes as found among some Scandinavian countries. Universal breadwinning is also supported where a second income is not penalized by high marginal tax rates, equitable educational and employment structures minimize gender inequities in paid employment, and the service sector is sufficiently developed so that domestic production might be commodified in the absence of public provisions under a 'total organisation of labour' (Glucksmann 1995). In the latter case, gendered class differences are exacerbated as high-earning couples rely on the domestic work of low-skilled primarily female service workers (Soskice 2005). While families with two full-time earners exhibit greater income and interpersonal equity as well as a decreased poverty risk, they also tend towards time poverty. This time poverty concerns policy makers to the extent that it might discourage couples from having more children and blunt future economic growth. None the less, recent evidence suggests that fertility tends to be higher in liberal regimes where women's employment rates are higher despite little public policy support for maternal employment (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000). But the universal breadwinner model also reinforces what Fraser terms an 'androcentric bias' for labour market participation over unpaid care work (see also Pateman 1988).

Between these two extreme divisions of labour lies the caregiver parity regime, where women remain responsible for unpaid caring work but also retain some engagement with the labour market. Supportive policies include widely-available part-time employment, employer incentives and tax breaks for hiring part-time employees, maternity provisions with, at most, modest transfer right for fathers, and social transfers such as family allowances payable to the mother to ameliorate economic differences associated with her otherwise unpaid care work in the home. The caregiver parity model is a slight improvement on the male breadwinner model in that it increases, though does not equalize, women's access to economic resources. In so far as paid employment remains more highly regarded than caregiving, unpaid care work remains marginalized.

Fraser assesses the regime types in terms of their effects on poverty, exploitation, income, leisure time, equality within the family, equality of respect, as well as the extent to which they have an androcentric bias or marginalize women's caring activities (1994: 612). While her assessment is clearly thorough, it overlooks the effects these factors might have on the stability of the family itself.

Earners-carer configurations and marital stability

Some argue that capitalism undermines the family form by rewarding individuals unhindered by familial relations (Beck 1992: 116) and remaining indifferent to the private lives of the labour power purchased (Secombe 1993). In contrast, others contend a gendered division of paid and unpaid labour under a male breadwinner model optimizes couples' ability to balance productive with reproductive activities in industrialized societies (Becker 1981; Parsons 1942, 1953). The corollary prediction within the latter theoretical framework is that women's increasing economic independence, not capitalism more generally, decreases the advantage of marriage and therefore leads to a rise in divorce.

Empirical evidence of the direct relationship between women's employment and marital instability remains mixed. In the US, Sweeney (2002) found employed women more likely to marry than unemployed women and Hoffman and Duncan (1995) reported women's higher wages decrease the likelihood of divorce. In The Netherlands, a woman's work hours increase the risk of women-initiated, but not men-initiated divorce (Kalmijn and Poortman 2006). Research in other countries also finds women's employment, measured in different ways, to increase the risk of divorce (see Bukodi and Robert 2003 for Hungary; Chan and Halpin 2002 for Britain; Henz and Jonsson 2003 for Sweden). More recent cross-national comparisons find the relationship varies in context. Cooke (2006) found male breadwinner couples have a lower risk of divorce in West Germany where they have been institutionally supported. In contrast, equitable distributions of the household division of paid and unpaid labour appear optimal in the United States where policy remains silent on the private sphere. So the optimal division of household labour varies by sociopolitical context. To date, however, most analyses compare effects of women's employment versus non-employment. Here we differentiate it further to assess effects of different levels of women's working-time supported under work-family reconciliation initiatives.

Work-family reconciliation or work-life balance policies developed in an attempt to gain the benefits of women's employment in terms of family economic flexibility and child poverty reduction, while minimizing the competing time demands within dual-earner families that might lead to either a reduction in the number of children or greater stress and higher risk of family breakdown (Crompton 2002). Yet public childcare, extended paid parental leave and similar provisions are expensive state programs not easily adopted by welfare states during a time of rising dependency ratios and the uncertain future economic growth which some argue typifies the globalisation process (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). Consequently, many government initiatives supporting greater work-family balance expand

less expensive provisions, such as out-of-school programs or part-time pre-school care, while encouraging the private sector to offer greater employment flexibility. One key strategy across the European Union has been the further development of part-time employment opportunities, primarily taken up by women rather than men (Behning and Pascual 2001).³ Both the earner-carer strategy and quality of part-time employment vary across the three countries we have chosen to analyse.

West Germany

After World War II, Christian Democratic Union leader Konrad Adenauer successfully expanded West German policies supporting a male breadwinner, such as income splitting, dependent tax credits or allowances, and universal maternity allowances (Ostner 1992) while men garnered superior wages under the 1955 ruling allocating women's jobs to "light" wage groups (*Leichtlohngruppen*). Rather than use women as a reserve workforce, West Germany relied on immigrants from the East and later from Southern Europe to ease labour shortages (Trappe 2000). Yet women's exit from employment upon marriage created shortages during the 1950s and 1960s in predominantly female occupations. This led to a shift in policy to encourage married women's labour force participation without challenging the male breadwinner model (Ostner 1992; von Oertzen 1999). 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. Other provisions did not expand to support married women's employment. For example, only employed lone mothers receive tax allowances for childcare costs; employed married mothers only gain the same right if the husband is sick, disabled and unable to work (Drobnic et al. 1999). Further, the central coordination of wages that strengthens West German men's ability to earn a

family wage also minimized the wage dispersion that has frequently encouraged the development of low-cost private childcare services in liberal market economies (Soskice 2005).

West German part-time work is defined as any work less than the agreed full-time hours specified in the collective bargaining agreements regulating most of West German employment. Once part-time hours exceed 18 per week, workers are incorporated into the social security system and have a statutory right to proportional pay and allowances related to working time (Drobnic et al. 1999). So in contrast to the UK and the US, a large proportion of part-time jobs in Germany do not marginalize workers, although Soskice (2005) claims the quality of these jobs traps women into segregated, dead-end occupations that tend to encourage her employment exit for family demands.

United Kingdom

Outlining the basic structure of the British post-war welfare state, Beveridge suggested equalizing insurance benefits between single women and all men, but married women were to remain reliant on their husbands given the importance of their unpaid care work to the family and the nation (1942: 50). Maternity benefits were initially set 50 per cent higher than single women's or married men's unemployment benefit, although Conservatives reduced this in 1953 to the level of men's unemployment benefit. So the UK began as a strong male breadwinner state, but the erosion of the male breadwinner's wage created a greater family reliance on women's earnings than in West Germany. By the 1970s, three times as many British two-parent families would have been poor if relying solely on the father's full-time employment (Land 1976).

The assumption of female responsibility for housework was underwritten in policy. For instance, working married women's entitlement to disability benefit was only allowed

once it was determined that she could not engage in normal household duties. Because of restrictions on employed married women's entitlements, many chose the option of paying reduced contributions rather than qualify for full benefits (Land 1976). It was not until 1977 that women were required to pay full social security contributions or husbands became subjected to a 'housework test' to qualify for disability benefit (Pascall 1997).

There was, until 1999, an incentive for employers to generate marginal part-time jobs of less than 20 hours a week. As long as the weekly take home pay was lower than the Lower Earnings Limit, employers were not required to pay social security contributions. This has led researchers to conclude the tax structure provided incentives for employers to offer poorly paid part-time jobs not covered by contributory insurance (Dex and Shaw 1986; McKnight, Elias and Wilson 1998).⁴ Part-time work also meant differential access to maternity rights. Pressure from the European Union led to 1994 policy revisions ensuring all women, both full-time and part-time, were covered as soon as they began employment. After New Labour came into power in 1997, maternity allowance was extended to those falling below the Lower Earnings Limit, but remains more a woman's than man's entitlement (Gambles et al. 2006). New Labour also promoted work-life balance with the 1998 National Childcare Strategy, creating more than a half million new part-time, rather than full-time, public childcare places.

United States

The United States remains the quintessential liberal welfare regime, with an ideological rejection of state interference in private lives or market mechanisms (Esping-Andersen 1990). During the Progressive Era, US employers exploited the separation of powers of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, using the courts to overturn legislative gains won by labour. As a result, the American Federation of Labor

under Samuel Gompers ideologically severed itself from what it considered a paternalist state, instead choosing to fight for employee benefits via traditional market-based actions (Mink 1986; Skocpol 1992). This led to the development of corporate rather than state welfare (Kalleberg et al. 2000).

Within this system, however, policy effects on married women's employment remain uneven. In 1939, the US federal income tax program expanded in order to fund the war effort, resulting in a ten-fold increase in the number of taxpayers between 1939 and 1945. To reduce the impact of this on middle-class families, interest paid on home mortgages and related property tax became tax deductible. If a married women's income goes to pay the mortgage, it becomes essentially free from federal tax (Cooke 2006). Yet other tax policies penalize dual-earner couples. In 1948, US married couples could split income much as in West Germany, offering substantial tax savings when only one partner was employed. A 1971 change to reduce single earners' tax penalty created a marriage penalty in that two single earners would find their total tax bill increased upon marriage. In 1981, the law changed again so that 10 per cent of the earnings of the lower-earning spouse could be deducted when computing the income subject to tax, but dual-earning married couples still tend to pay more tax than two commensurate single earners.

Other policies or legislation passed during the 1970s encourage or support mothers' employment through market services. The Childcare Tax Credit provides a sliding scale tax credit for up to 35 per cent of childcare costs. The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 prohibits discrimination against pregnancy in all aspects of employment and required employers with disability policies to include pregnancy under these. Not until the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act were all US women eligible for up to 12 weeks unpaid parental leave, the least generous leave provisions among the OECD countries (Jaumotte 2003: Table 5).

Under this corporate-driven welfare, 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). Although women are more likely than men to hold part-time positions, US women's part-time employment as a share of women's employment has been steadily declining since the mid-sixties (Drobnic et al 1999).

Contrasts and conjectures

According to 2000 OECD data, the gap between the percentage of employed women and men aged 25 to 54 is similar across the three countries: 14 per cent in the UK, 15 per cent in the US and slightly larger in Germany at 16 per cent, but British and German women are much more likely to be employed part-time than US women. One-third of British employed women work part-time, as do about 30 percent of German women, compared with 12 per cent of US women (OECD 2002: Table 2.5). British women also endure the greatest gender gap in wages, with a female-to-male wage ratio of 75, followed closely by the United States at 78, while the benefits of wage coordination in Germany are evident in a gender wage ratio of 81 (OECD 2002: Table 2.15). So the various policy incentives are apparent in the aggregate female employment statistics.

If part-time employment allows partnered women to contribute to family economic security, while simultaneously meeting caring responsibilities, one would expect it to decrease the stresses surrounding financial dependency on a sole breadwinner as well as the time squeeze two full-time earners can face (Warren 2004). Consequently, we would expect part-time employment to predict more stable marriages in the UK or West Germany than in the United States, where other pressures tend to encourage full-time employment of both partners. As West German part-time employment is of better quality than UK part-time employment and pays higher wages, it might be associated with a further decline in divorce

risk in that country than in the UK. Given the US status as the poster child of liberalism, employment there more generally should be crucial to marital stability.

Data, sample and analytic strategy

Wives' work hours and the risk of divorce vary across the marital life course, making event history analysis with longitudinal data the most suitable way to assess these dynamic relationships (Allison 1984). The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), German SocioEconomic Panel (GSOEP) and the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) are selected, three longitudinal datasets that follow individuals in households over time. The PSID began in 1968 with a representative sample of 4,800 US families. Changes in ethnic minority sampling have made it possible to contrast main results with Black respondents during the time frame selected here, but not other ethnic groups. Historically, the rate of marital dissolution has been greater for US Black couples (Hoffman and Duncan 1995). 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 (Trappe and Rosenfeld 2004). 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.

Only couples that can be observed from their entry into marriage are included, as including all married couples at any point in time biases results with marriages of longer duration. In contrast, research across many societies highlights the maximum risk of divorce consistently occurs two to four years after marriage (Fisher 1993). From the German and US datasets, we have sufficient waves of data to select couples marrying for the first time between 1985 and 1995 to eliminate any bias associated with divorced persons remarrying.

The shorter duration of the British panel yields a smaller total sample of couples marrying, so we select couples marrying between 1992 and 2000 and include an indicator variable for those couples reporting they had not been married before. Because the panels started in different years it is impossible to draw all from the same decade, although the years do overlap. Couples are followed through 1997 in the United States and 2000 in the UK and Germany.⁵

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 US states. Constructing couple-years automatically incorporates the time-varying aspects of marriage but violates the assumption that error terms not be correlated. Robust standard errors correct for this, providing the most conservative estimates.⁶ The selection criteria yield a sample of 796 UK couples, including 315 first-married couples; 559 West German first-married couples, and 506 US first-married couples (388 Caucasian and 118 Black). The West German couples report an average marriage duration of nine years, as compared with seven for the US couples. The shorter observation window of UK couples results in that average marriage duration being only four years.

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, 71 UK (22 per cent of the sample), 201 West German (36 per cent of that sample) and 223 US couples (153 White and 90 Black, representing 44 per cent of the US sample) reported separating for more than one year or divorcing.

Factors affecting divorce risk

Women's employment, relative earnings, total household income, educational attainment, age at marriage, children, and duration of marriage have all been shown to alter the risk of divorce. Here we capture effects of women's employment level with two indicator variables: one indicating when she works part-time, defined as 30 or fewer hours per week, and one when she works more than 30 hours. This allows us to compare any effects of different levels of employment on divorce risk as compared with women out of the labour force.⁷ More than one-quarter of first-married West German and US wives in the sample work full-time while a smaller proportion work part-time (Table I). Because the British sample reflects a shorter marital observation period and includes some higher-order marriages, a larger proportion of women report working full-time.

A woman's financial contribution to the household is calculated as her earnings as a per cent of the couple's total labour income.⁸ British women in the sample contribute 40 per cent to household labour earnings, whereas US women contribute about one-third and West German women one-fifth.⁹ Higher-income couples tend to be more stable as compared with couples under more economic strain, so 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 such as for schooling. Very few of the slightly older British men are out of the labour market, whereas 11 per cent of the younger German and US couples report the husband is not employed.

[Table I about here]

Historically, economists argued children represent 'accrued marital capital' that should decrease the risk of divorce, but more recent analyses suggest effects of number of children vary across countries (Cooke 2006), or the risk now increases as the number of children increase (Chan and Halpin 2002). The changing effect of children could reflect the

strain of the time trade-off between market and reproduction. Consequently, we would expect children to destabilize marriages in the US where women's employment is strongly encouraged more than in the other countries where male breadwinner policies have historically reinforced women's domestic responsibilities. To assess this, we include an indicator variable for childless couples. As noted in Table I, more than one-third of the US couples have no children, as compared with 18 per cent of the West German and 17 per cent of the UK couples.

People who search longer for partners or have more education reflecting greater possible gains to marriage theoretically have lower risk of divorce (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977), so we include control variables for the woman's age at marriage and indicators for when the woman or the man has schooling beyond secondary. The passage of time also changes divorce risk regardless of individual factors, so we include indicator variables in a piecewise constant model that assumes the risk varies over time, but remains the same within a given time period: one for couples married less than three years, one for couples married five to seven years, and a third indicator variable for couples married more than seven years, against a referent of couples married three to five years.

Work-life balance and divorce risk

Table II presents the effects of the individual factors on couples' risk of divorce during the early years of marriage expressed as odds ratios. The odds ratio indicates the change in relative risk associated with the variable: an increase in divorce risk if greater than one and a decrease if less than one (1.00). As found by Fisher (1993), marriages in all three countries are at much greater risk of dissolution in the first three years, with the risk falling dramatically after five. This underscores the importance of analysing the risk of divorce from

very early in the marriage. Women who are older at marriage also consistently have a lower risk of divorce in all three countries. Otherwise, effects vary in context.

[Table II about here]

Central to the question posed here is that in none of the three countries does women's part-time employment significantly enhance marital stability. In the United States, a woman's part-time employment as compared with being out of the labour market predicts a greater risk of divorce, but not a significant one. In West Germany and the UK where policies encourage women's part-time employment, women working part-time have slightly lower odds of divorce than housewives, but the effect also fails to reach statistical significance. Most important to note is that in the two part-time regimes women's *full-time* employment significantly lowers the odds of divorce as compared with women who are out of the labour force. In her analysis of British women's satisfaction with life domains, Warren (2004) found full-time employment increased women's financial satisfaction whereas part-time employment increased women's satisfaction with their time with their children. Drobnic and her colleagues (1999) found that despite a male breadwinner ideal, German women with more children were more likely to remain in full-time rather than part-time employment because of the financial pressures of larger families. The results here suggest further that the effects of women's employment on couples' financial circumstance might be more important to stabilizing relationships than having more non-work time. The importance of household finances is also evident in that higher household income lowers the divorce risk in West Germany whereas a US or UK husband's unemployment significantly raises it.

The benefits of a wife's full-time employment to marital stability appear to be countermanded in West Germany, however, if her earnings trump the husband's historical male breadwinner role. Each percentage point increase in her earnings relative to the household increases the odds of divorce by one per cent. As her earnings exceed half the

household income, the divorce risk becomes greater than among German couples where the wife is out of the labour force or works part-time. This relative earnings effect is not evident in the UK or US. Consequently, the thrust toward labour force activation prevalent within market economies makes a male breadwinner model sub-optimal by placing gender ideology in conflict with economic reality, leading to stress over possible family solutions for greater economic flexibility.

Market-based universal breadwinning is not costless in terms of family outcomes. In the US, women's employment does not vary divorce risk, but being childless significantly reduces it. This suggests US couples can resolve work-family conflict by minimizing family demands. Childless British couples are neither more nor less likely to divorce. In contrast, a childless West German couple would be much more likely to divorce. One might counter that public support for maternal employment such as found in Scandinavian countries ameliorates the trade-off, but suitable longitudinal data are not available for exploring the questions as done here, and aggregate data suggest total fertility rates in the Nordic countries are lower than the English-speaking countries, whereas divorce rates are slightly higher.¹⁰

Together this evidence suggests little support for the functionalist claim regarding women's employment effects on marital stability, but highlights the importance of her financial contribution to successful modern households. At the same time, greater support for pure market mechanisms such as in the US leads to a shift in what comprises a successful family indicative of greater individualism (Beck 1992; Seccombe 1993). In post-industrial capitalist societies, support for women's part-time employment seems to provide little sustainable value to either the family or the individual.

Conclusions

Many policy makers and some academics promote part-time employment as a means of achieving greater work-life balance in industrial societies (Behning and Pascual 2001; Hakim 1997, 2000). Others question whether part-time work represents a sufficient advance away from a gender hierarchy (Crompton 2002; McRae 2003) or meets women's financial and leisure needs (Warren 2004). To date, however, we have no evidence whether women's part-time employment enhances work-life balance sufficiently to be a stabilizing influence on marriage as compared with other household divisions of labour. Here we use panel data to explore whether women's part-time employment alters British, West German or US couples' risk of divorce during the early years of marriage across countries representing different earner-carer and part-time work regimes.

Early West German policy reinforced a male breadwinner model, but labour shortages ultimately led to greater support for higher-quality part-time employment opportunities for women. The early UK welfare state similarly promoted the importance of women's unpaid care work, but erosion of the male wage led to greater family reliance on women's earnings in a tax structure that encouraged employers to offer low-wage part-time rather than full-time opportunities. The US represents a market-based universal breadwinner regime as part-time work is similarly low-paid and frequently carries no benefits in a country with primarily corporate rather than state welfare programs.

Given these varying sociopolitical contexts, we hypothesized any stabilizing benefits of part-time employment would most likely be evident in Germany and the UK where policy has promoted it, particularly Germany where the quality of part-time employment is higher than in the UK. In contrast, we expected greater stability among dual-earner full-time couples in the United States. These hypotheses contrast with the dominant functionalist

model suggesting male breadwinner couples are the optimal family form in industrial societies (Parsons 1942, 1953).

None of these working-time hypotheses were borne out—neither the functionalists' nor ours. US women's employment level has no significant effect on a couple's likelihood of divorce, although US couples are generally more likely to divorce. In West Germany and the UK, couples where the woman worked full-time are least likely to divorce. These results suggest an androcentric bias toward paid work, even if modified by encouraging part-time employment. Where market capitalism provides incentives for individual employment, reducing family demands rather than reducing market engagement more readily achieves work-life balance. A greater proportion of US couples are childless and these couples are significantly less likely to divorce, with a similar trend possibly emerging in the UK as well. Only in Germany did more children predict greater marital stability as has been the theorized case under neoclassical economic models of family (Becker et al. 1977).

Taken together, the evidence suggests the functionalist fear that women's rising labour force participation bodes ill for marriage proves untrue. As economies evolve from industrial to post-industrial societies, women's employment now appears to increase the stability of marital relationships. This provides little reason for continuing to allow any gender inequity in paid work under a guise of work-life balance. At the same time, evidence that children now might destabilize marriage gives credence to concerns that the individualism reinforced by capitalism erodes kinship ties across society (Polanyi 1944) and in the home (Beck 1992). The greater challenge for policy makers concerned with future economic growth is not how to reinforce further the work incentives embedded within market economies, but how to promote the importance of care and kinship despite the market economy.

Notes

1. The term 'work-life balance' is increasingly used over 'work-family reconciliation' to indicate there are multiple spheres in which we participate (Cummins 1996), but Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport (2006) point out this suggests work is not a part of life.

2. Recent research found considerable variation between companies in their provision of work-life balance policies, such as home working entitlements, part-time to full-time job flexibility, job sharing schemes and childcare benefits. Bloom and colleagues (2006) report that companies that provided work-life balance policies also tended to have higher productivity, although this correlation was considered to be a function of good management practice rather than the work-life balance policies specifically. They also found that firms with higher proportions of female managers had significantly higher provision of work life balance.

3. The Commission of the European Communities (2006) has recognised the imbalance in the male and female part-time employment rate, and recommends a series of work-life balance policies to tackle a range of gender inequalities in labour force participation.

4. The proportion of workers whose earnings fall below this level is considerable, representing 2.6 million workers between 1994 and 1995, the majority of whom, 2 million, are women. This represented 19 per cent of all female employees in the UK, and 5.5 per cent of male employees, 94 per cent of whom are part-time workers (Gash 2005).

5. The PSID changed in 1997 to be conducted bi-annually and the core sample was reduced by almost 30%. This created substantial missing data in the 1999 and between waves, so it was decided to end the US observation window in 1997.

6. This provides the most conservative estimates because although information on some variables is included for multiple years, the outcome of divorce occurs only once if at all to any given couple.

7. Histograms of women's work hours across the three countries reveal variation in the distribution of number of hours, but subsequent analyses trying further differentiation of part-time employment into low intensity (less than 20 hours) versus high intensity (20 to 30 hours) provided no additional substantive information.

8. We used other constructions of her financial input such as her absolute or log of hourly wages, but substantive effects proved the same.

9. 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 covering employment hours and earnings are lagged by one year. For example, if a woman anticipates needing to establish her own household, her hours of work or share of household earnings would 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.

10. As of the late 1990s, the total fertility rate across Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden averaged 1.68 as compared with 1.80 for Australia, Canada, the UK and US, whereas the number of divorces per 100 marriages averaged 50 in the Nordic countries as compared with just over 48 in the English-speaking ones (calculated with data from EUROSTAT NewCronos Database 2000 for Europe and Canada, and data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (*Social Trends and Yearbook 2000*) and US Census Bureau (*Statistical Abstract of the United States 1999*)).

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TABLE I: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MARRIED WEST GERMAN, UK AND US COUPLES FROM FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE UNTIL SEPARATED OR CENSORED

	WEST GERMANY		UNITED KINGDOM		UNITED STATES	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Women work part-time (<=30)	0.08	0.27	0.26	0.44	0.15	0.36
Women work full-time (> 30)	0.26	0.44	0.56	0.50	0.27	0.44
Women's % couple earnings	20.93	28.34	37.12	27.28	32.64	23.91
Women with tertiary	0.09	0.28	0.50	0.50	0.44	0.50
Woman's age at marriage	23.99	3.98	30.21	5.02	23.91	4.37
Men with tertiary	0.17	0.38	0.48	0.50	0.47	0.50
Husband non-employed	0.11	0.32	0.03	0.18	0.11	0.32
No children	0.18	0.38	0.17	0.38	0.34	0.47
Log total household income	10.96	0.83	7.47	0.50	10.45	0.80
Duration of marriage	8.66	4.04	4.14	2.01	6.88	3.37
No previous marriage (UK)			0.43	0.50		
Husband Black (US)					0.23	0.42
<i>n couple-years (couples)</i>	<i>4,865(559)</i>		<i>3,513(796)</i>		<i>2,622(506)</i>	

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

	WEST GERMANY		UNITED KINGDOM		UNITED STATES	
	<i>Odds</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds</i>	<i>RSE</i>	<i>Odds</i>	<i>RSE</i>
Woman works part-time (≤ 30)	0.76	0.23	0.53	0.27	1.11	0.45
Woman works full-time (> 30)	0.60**	0.15	0.36*	0.18	0.96	0.46
<i>Ref: housewife, out of labour force</i>						
Woman's % couple earnings	1.01*	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.00	0.01
Husband non-employed	0.98	0.22	3.61*	2.37	3.87*	2.33
Woman with tertiary	0.92	0.21	1.92*	0.55	2.07**	0.49
Men with tertiary	0.86	0.14	1.73*	0.53	0.42***	0.11
Woman's age at marriage	0.97*	0.01	0.96*	0.02	0.92*	0.04
Couple has no children	1.31*	0.16	0.98	0.43	0.57**	0.12
Log of total household income	0.86*	0.06	1.37	0.35	1.14	0.20
Married less than 3 years	3.28***	0.36	1.55*	0.29	12.95***	3.44
Married 5+ to 7 years	0.19***	0.03	0.19***	0.07	0.38**	0.11
Married more than 7 years	0.06***	0.01	0.01***	0.00	0.08***	0.02
<i>Ref: married 3 to 5 years</i>						
Never married before (U.K. only)			0.48***	0.10		
Husband Black (US only)					1.06	0.24
<i>Pseudo log-likelihood</i>	-642.26		-136.81		-299.96	
<i>Wald chi-square</i>	802.84***		283.01***		314.35***	
<i>n couple-years (couples)</i>	4,865(559)		3,513(796)		2,622(506)	

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