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Spouses' division of labor and marital stability: Applying the multiple-equilibrium theory to cohort trends of divorce in East and West Germany

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Abstract

Objective: In comparing East and West Germany, we investigate task specialization and its association with marital stability twofold: (1) Has the association between women's employment and divorce risk changed across marriage cohorts? (2) Are men's levels of engagement in domestic tasks associated with divorce risk?

Background: While older theories assumed that women's employment destabilized marriages, newer theories suggest that men can re-stabilize marriages by changing their behavior and engaging in housework.

Method: We analyze data from the SOEP using discrete-time event history models in a historical and a dyadic perspective.

Results: Our results show that the associations between women's employment and the risk of divorce have been changing across marriage cohorts, and that this trend began earlier in East Germany. Husbands' relative contribution to division of housework is not found to stabilize marriages in East and West Germany, but we find differences between marriage cohorts in West Germany.

Conclusion: Our findings confirm that the traditional male breadwinner model is no longer associated with a stable equilibrium in marriage in Germany. It appears that either the German society is still in the transitional stage, as men's contributions to housework are shown to be irrelevant for marital stability; or that gender equality is not associated with the new stable equilibrium in marriages.

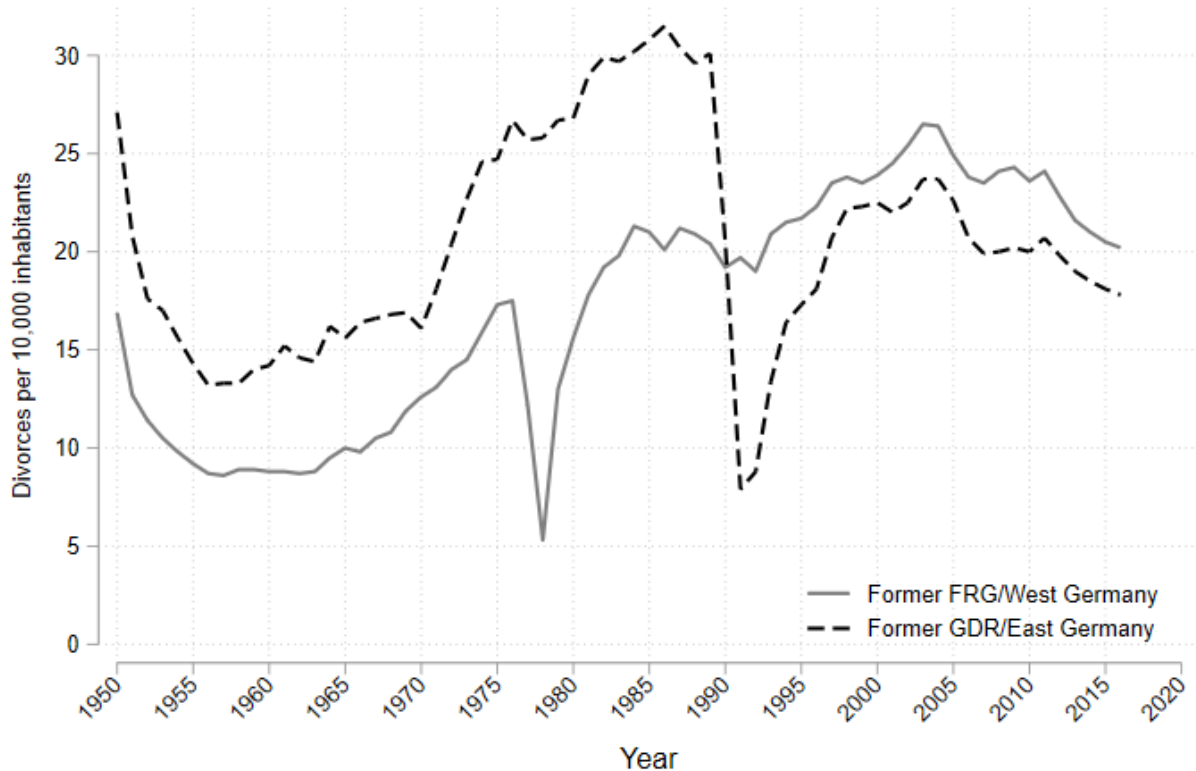
Key words: relationships, domestic tasks, employment



1. Introduction¹

In Germany, the divorce rates were increasing in the last decades of the 20th century (BiB, 2019), a trend that is still not completely explained (Wagner, 2020). Since the middle of the 2000s, this trend has stalled or may have even ended (BiB, 2019). Prior to reunification, the crude divorce rates in East Germany were higher than in West Germany and started increasing in the 1970s (see Figure 1). A change in the divorce law caused a dip in the crude divorce rate in West Germany in the late 1970s (Grünheid, 2013). After reunification, West German divorce laws became valid in East Germany. This transition sharply decreased divorce rates in East Germany after 1990 (Grünheid, 2013).

Figure 1: Crude divorce rate in East and West Germany: 1950 to 2016



Source: (BiB, 2019)

In contrast to the observed divorce trends in Germany, previous research on marital stability has mostly expected that it is steadily declining and, thus that divorce rates will remain at a very high level. For decades, this research was based on the new home economics (Becker et al., 1977). This approach assumes that marital stability is decreasing due to a non-efficient division of labor caused by an increase in women's labor force participation. It argues that women's greater participation in education and employment has increased their independence from their partners and marriage, which has resulted in rising divorce rates (Cooke & Gash, 2010; Özcan & Breen, 2012; Teachman, 2010). However, the empirical evidence supporting this model is mixed. Several studies have found that the relationship between women's employment and the risk of divorce depends on the country context (Cooke et al., 2013; Kaplan & Stier, 2016; Vignoli et al., 2018). Since the beginning of the 21st century, divorce rates have no longer been increasing not just in Germany (BiB, 2019) but in Northern European countries as well (Eurostat, 2016), even though the participation of women in the labor market has not declined (Brenke, 2015; Grunow, 2019).

Whereas the new home economics model focused on task specialization, newer theoretical perspectives have emphasized the relevance of gender equality in the family domain in seeking to explain the development of divorce rates at the macro level (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015).

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Although both older and newer perspectives argue that marital stability depends on couples' arrangements, research on divorce often explored how women's characteristics affect marital stability while ignoring the role of men. In this paper, we outline the multiple equilibrium theory (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015), which has argued that a gender imbalance has led to a temporary decline in family stability that could come to an end if men and women were to rearrange their family roles. This paper aims to explore divorce trends in East and West Germany across marriage cohorts. First, we investigate whether the association between women's employment and the risk of divorce has changed across marriage cohorts. Second, we investigate whether men's engagement in domestic tasks increases marital stability. Our study adds to previous research by testing the multiple equilibrium theory regarding marital stability for the East and West German contexts while considering the findings of a recent study that compared marital stability in West Germany and the US (Bellani & Esping-Andersen, 2020). As Germany has a divided political history that is still reflected in differences in attitudes towards maternal employment (e.g., Zoch, 2021) and family norms in East and West (e.g., in East Germany, the share of non-marital births is much higher (Klärner, 2015), while the mean age at first birth is lower than in West Germany (Goldstein & Kreyenfeld, 2011)), the German context is of special interest. In West German families, the male breadwinner model has a long-standing dominance. In East Germany, by contrast, the dual earner family was common until reunification (Trappe et al., 2015), and social stratification was less pronounced than in West Germany (Pollak & Müller, 2004; Ziefle, 2016). Thus, we expect that the diffusion of new gender norms and the reversion of divorce trends occurred earlier in East Germany than in West Germany. Besides comparing these trends within Germany, we add to previous studies by exploiting newer data to analyze marriages formed between 1940 and 2017.

We first outline the theoretical arguments of Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015) on the macro-level divorce trends and link them to dominant family arrangements in the German context. Second, we discuss possible micro-level mechanisms and the previous research on the effects of women's employment and the division of housework on divorce risk from a historical perspective. After estimating event-history models using the SOEP data, we address our research questions and draw conclusions regarding the trends in marital stability in East and West Germany.

2. Background

2.1 *Macro-level trends in divorce: the multiple equilibrium model*

The multiple equilibrium approach (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015) assumes that, from a historical perspective, there are different stages in levels of marital stability. The authors distinguish the traditional, transitional, and modern stages, which differ in their dominant normative setting regarding family and gender roles. Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015) argue that the increase in divorce rates is a temporary trend attributable to changes in women's behavior in employment, leading to normative confusion, which will reverse in gender-egalitarian societies in which men's behavior in domestic tasks has also changed. In line with the new home economics (Becker et al., 1977), the authors' core assumption is that family arrangements have a stable equilibrium that leads to Pareto-optimal outcomes and reproduces itself (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). The traditional male-breadwinner model of a homemaking wife and an employed husband represented a stable normative equilibrium in which both spouses benefited the most (traditional stage). External shocks, such as reunification in the case of East Germany, or major societal changes, such as women's increased participation in the labor market, can destabilize this equilibrium, leading to instability until a new equilibrium is established. Applying this assumption to marital stability implies that high divorce rates are part of a transitional stage. In this transitional stage, the increase in women's labor force participation has made following the formerly dominant norms of the male-breadwinner model less attractive. Therefore, the traditional gender equilibrium has become unbalanced (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). However, as many women and men still wanted to have a family and children during this transitional stage, they often have formed suboptimal matches, leading to unstable marriages. A new gender equilibrium will not be established until men change their roles in the family by participating in housework. As the share of people in a society who hold gender-egalitarian attitudes

increases, the divorce rate should decline, with potential partners having similar values and enjoying substantial benefits from their relationships (modern stage).

2.2 *The theorized stages in contexts: East and West Germany*

At least until the end of the 1970s, family policies in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) promoted a male-breadwinner model that discouraged women from participating in the labor market. Since then, the male-breadwinner with a homemaking wife was modified towards a male-breadwinner with a female part-time worker model. The female part-time worker model was valid until 2005 (Trappe et al., 2015). Besides the change in the dominant family model, there was also a normative change toward gender-egalitarian attitudes. Lois (2020) has found that since the 1980s, gender ideology has liberalized in West Germany, particularly in birth cohorts between 1930 and 1970. He suggested that this change was grounded in the New Women Movement in the 1970s. In the 1990s, Lois (2020) observed a stalled trend, with the second wave of liberalization that began in the 2000s.

In contrast, family policies in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) since the early 1960s have promoted a dual earner model that encouraged women and mothers to participate in paid work (Trappe et al., 2015). In the GDR, full-time employment among mothers was normatively accepted starting in the 1970s. Since the reunification in 1990 in East Germany, the once-dominant dual-earner arrangement has largely been superseded by the modified breadwinner model (Trappe et al., 2015). The change in norms toward gender-egalitarian attitudes also started earlier in East Germany and ended in the 2000s (Lois, 2020). Since 2004, there has been a stalled trend in liberalization (Lois, 2020). Although East Germans still hold more gender-egalitarian values than West Germans nowadays, East and West Germany have converged (e.g., Ebner et al., 2020; Lois, 2020; Zoch, 2021). Concerning the attitude toward an equal division of household tasks between women and men, East and West Germans born between 1990-1993 do not differ anymore (Zoch, 2021). There is empirical evidence that more gender-equal attitudes are related to more gender-equal division of housework (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2006).

When examining time trends in divorce, one has to decide whether to analyze trends induced by period or by cohort. Previous studies on time trends have provided inconclusive answers to whether these trends are period or cohort phenomena (Heaton, 2002; Ono, 1999; Thornton & Rodgers, 1987). As we are solely interested in describing time trends and do not attempt to disentangle period and cohort effects, we decided to measure time trends as cohort effects. The theoretical arguments in the multiple equilibrium model regarding imperfect partner matches formed within the transition toward a new gender equilibrium seem to support this approach. Particularly, Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015) have argued that during the transition from a traditional to a new gender equilibrium, men and women have more difficulties finding an optimal partner, which leads to imperfect partner matches in these marriage cohorts. Moreover, as Wagner (2020) has pointed out, analyzing time trends in divorce as period effects is misleading if the timing of divorce has changed. According to vital statistics, the timing of divorce has changed as divorce has become more common among marriages of longer duration in East and West Germany (Grünheid, 2013). Thus, for analyzing time trends in divorce, estimating cohort effects seems to be appropriate.

As an initial hypothesis, we expect that the divorce rates have been increasing across marriage cohorts but have been declining among younger marriage cohorts (H1). Drawing on the multiple equilibrium approach of Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015), we distinguish three historical stages in the divorce trends. For marriages formed before 1975, when the traditional male-breadwinner model was dominant (traditional stage), marriages that fulfilled these norms have been stable. With the change in gender attitudes and the loss of the dominance of the male-breadwinner model, marriages formed between 1975 and 2000 may fit into the transitional stage with an increased risk of divorce, as outlined by Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015). For the younger marriage cohorts (modern stage), who married at a time when a new gender equilibrium had been established, marriages have been more stable than those who married during the transitional stage. Due to another trend towards more gender-egalitarian values in the 2000s in West Germany, marriages formed since then may fit into the modern stage and are less likely to end in divorce.

Due to the reversed development in the family model from the early adopted dual-earner model to the modified male-breadwinner model after the reunification, it seems to be less clear when the theorized stages took place in East Germany. As the dual-earner model was dominant in the 1970s, a transitional phase may have already ended in the mid-1970s. However, vital statistics show that trends in divorce are somewhat parallel in East and West Germany, but they differ in levels (see Figure 1).

2.3 *The link between the division of labor and divorce at the individual level*

At the micro level, the exchange and bargaining models (e.g., Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996) offer fruitful perspectives on the link between the division of labor and marital stability, as these models can serve as a theoretical approach in each of the abovementioned historical stages.

The exchange and bargaining models assume that, depending on individual resources, alternatives to the current relationship or separation become more attractive. While specialization in domestic tasks or (caring for) children are a non-transferable investment into a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998), economic resources are transferable, increase the alternatives to the current relationship and provide the power to bargain for more favorable solutions with regard to non-preferred tasks, such as housework (Cooke, 2006a). From this perspective, the division of labor is negotiated within couples based on bargaining powers offered by wages, preferences, and others (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). In couples where spouses are mutually dependent due to a single-earner arrangement, the spouse with the paid job has more bargaining power and will negotiate an agreement where his/her spouse is (primarily) responsible for domestic tasks. In dual-earner couples, the divorce risk increases if spouses are not able to negotiate a fair division of labor for both spouses.

In the *traditional stage*, spouses mutually agreed on a highly specialized division of labor, which was normatively accepted. Historically, this specialization of the spouses usually led to a gendered arrangement in which the man was working in the labor market to earn the financial resources needed to support the family, while the woman was responsible for the private sphere, which included doing unpaid housework and created a mutual dependence. Due to their little own economic resources and the prevailing traditional norms, women were likely to face several disadvantages in case of a divorce, particularly the risk of becoming poor and societally stigmatized as a divorced women. That means women who are not employed stabilize the marriage, as their lower bargaining position implies responsibility for domestic tasks as normatively accepted. In contrast, women's employment increases the risk of divorce in the traditional stage due to the deviation from the dominant gender roles.

Studies on the German context that have considered paid and unpaid work to investigate marital stability are rare to the best of our knowledge (Bellani & Esping-Andersen, 2020; Cooke, 2006a). However, based on two empirical studies on the German context, a meta-analysis referring to studies published before 2001 has concluded that women's employment increased the risk of divorce (Wagner & Weiß, 2003). Similarly, in a comparison of married couples in East and West Germany based on data from the Family and Fertility Survey from 1992, Böttcher (2006) has found that women's full-time employment was linked to marital instability but that this association was weaker for East Germany.

Furthermore, Cooke (2006a) has argued that the husband's efforts in domestic tasks also reduce the spouses' mutual dependence and bring the marriage at risk of divorce in traditional contexts. In an analysis of SOEP data until 2000, she has shown that among West German couples married between 1985 and 1995, husbands carried out a greater share of the domestic tasks, increased the risk of divorce.

In the *transitional stage*, the male-breadwinner model is still normatively most accepted, but women entered the labor market and deviated from their role as a housekeeper. Resources from employment offer women more bargaining power within the marriage and alternatives to the current marriage increase. If spouses' gender attitudes differ, this might cause issues within the marriage and reduce marital quality. In the transitional stage, women's employment can increase the risk of divorce if the gender attitudes of the spouses differ. However, women can compensate for their deviation from their prescribed role behavior regarding paid work by renouncing their increased bargaining power about domestic tasks and still doing the majority of the domestic tasks.

In US female-breadwinner families, a compensating engagement of women in housework is likely to stabilize marriages (Cooke, 2006a). Without investigating the interplay of the division of housework and women's employment on the risk of divorce, some studies found no effect of women's employment on divorce (Cooke et al., 2013; Vignoli et al., 2018). Vignoli et al. (2018) have found that women's employment had no effect on the risk of divorce in observed marriages between 1971 and 2011 in Germany. Without differentiating between East and West Germany, the authors have attributed this finding to the selection of women with weak family orientation into employment. This null-finding on the link between women's employment and marital stability is in line with results from Cooke et al. (2013) for marriages in Germany that started between 1990 and 2008.

In societies in the *modern stage*, women's employment increases the divorce risk if the wife is not able to negotiate a fair division of domestic labor (Cooke, 2006a). An equal division of domestic tasks should be perceived as fair if both spouses are employed. Thus, if both spouses are employed in the modern stage, husbands' domestic participation should reduce the risk of divorce.

Studies have found that in contexts with gender equity promoted by state policies, husbands' contribution to housework can reduce divorce risk (Cooke, 2006a; Ruppanner et al., 2018). In line with this, a study of Italian married couples indicated that women's employment was associated with an increased divorce risk only if men did a small share of the domestic work (30% or less) (Mencarini & Vignoli, 2018).

In West Germany, however, where domestic tasks were found to be still unequally divided between spouses (Cooke, 2006b, 2007; Leopold et al., 2018), the link between women's employment and divorce was found to increase across marriage cohorts (Wagner et al., 2015) or across the periods between 1986 and 2009 (Bellani & Esping-Andersen, 2020). Furthermore, Bellani & Esping-Andersen (2020) concluded that among West German couples, in contrast to the assumptions of the multiple equilibrium model, the unequal division of unpaid work has been linked to greater marriage stability. It has also been shown that this association decreased across historical time, i.e., that the unequal division of unpaid work became irrelevant to marital stability in West Germany. Based on these findings, we can conclude that equality in the time spouses spend on domestic tasks was not (yet) a decisive factor in marital stability in West Germany. It could, however, play a role in East Germany, as East German women perceive within-couple arrangements in domestic tasks as relevant in assessments of fairness (Trappe & Köppen, 2014). Furthermore, the division of unpaid labor among married couples is less traditional in East than in West Germany, as spouses in the East seem to divide household tasks nearly equally (Cooke, 2006b, 2007).

To sum up, among the marriage cohorts who married during the traditional stage, women's employment was associated with an increased risk of divorce. However, we expect that changes in this association occurred across marriage cohorts. In the transitional stage, women's employment is theoretically expected to be unrelated to the risk of divorce if they fulfill their traditional role in domestic tasks. This is likely for marriage cohorts in West Germany, where domestic tasks were found to be unequally divided between spouses (Cooke, 2006b, 2007; Leopold et al., 2018). For the younger marriage cohorts, who married when new gender arrangements had become the norm (modern stage), women's employment is also expected to be unrelated to marital stability. However, in the modern stage, women's employment is unrelated to the risk of divorce only if men participate in domestic tasks in a way that is perceived as fair. As a study has shown that individuals hold gender-egalitarian attitudes towards the division of housework if both partners have equal resources (Schulz, 2021), we assume that equal division of domestic tasks is perceived as fair. In other words, we expect that the younger the marriage cohort, the weaker is the association between women's employment and the risk of divorce (H2a).

The dominant family model in East Germany, however, has become less gender-equal since it transitioned to the modified breadwinner model after reunification. As the women's full-time employment of women, and especially that of mothers, was encouraged by the state and normatively accepted in the GDR (e.g., Trappe et al., 2015), it is likely that the transition to a new stable family equilibrium took place earlier, i.e., already in older marriage cohorts in East than in West Germany. Therefore, we expect to find that the change in the association between women's employment and marital stability occurred earlier in East than in West Germany (H2b).

Regarding the division of domestic tasks, our second research question yields the dominant gender arrangements of the modern stage. If new gender-equal arrangements have been established in Germany, men's domestic work would be linked to a decreased risk of divorce. As attitudes have become more gender-equal in both East and West Germany (e.g., Ebner et al., 2020; Lois, 2020; Zoch, 2021), we expect that with husbands' contribution to the household labor the risk of divorce decreases (H3a).

Furthermore, we expect that the association between husbands' contribution to domestic tasks differs between marriage cohorts due to the change in gender norms. In line with this, previous studies have shown that men's contribution to the housework has increased over time (e.g., Fauser, 2019; Leopold et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the relative increase in housework is mainly driven by a reduction in women's time spent on housework. In younger marriage cohorts, we expect that the husbands' contribution to domestic tasks decreases the risk of divorce (H3b).

3. Data and methods

Our empirical analysis is based on German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data (1984-2017) that include retrospective information on the respondents' marital and employment life courses and on the hours the respondents have spent on housework since 1984 (Liebig et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2008). To investigate whether marital stability is still a function of the spouses' division of labor, we employ logistic discrete-time event-history models based on marriage-years from the SOEP data. In other words, we estimate the conditional probability of transitions into divorce in a marriage year for individuals whose first marriage was not yet divorced (Allison, 2014). As comparing odds ratios from logistic regression across models is not recommended (Auspurg & Hinz, 2011; Mood, 2010), we present our results as average marginal effects (AME). The average marginal effects represent the average change in the probability of separating when changing the given explanatory variables from the reference category to another category. Our decision to analyze first marriages only is in line with previous research that analyzed divorce trends over time in Germany (Wagner et al., 2015) and with evidence showing that higher-order unions have a greater divorce risk than first marriages (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Poortman & Lyngstad, 2007). Therefore, our results are rather conservative, as we have excluded the subgroup of higher-order unions with a higher risk of divorce, who also contribute to the increasing trend in divorce rates.

In a first step, we estimate models to check whether we can find evidence for the three stages of marital stability related to changes in the role of women. To test whether the effect of women's employment on divorce has changed across marriage cohorts, we present models that interact marriage cohorts and women's employment. We employ separate models for first-time married women in East and West Germany. In this first part of the analysis, we decided to analyze the data on the individual level rather than the couple level for the following reason: As the information on the respondent's partner was surveyed only prospectively, it was available since 1984 in West Germany and since 1990 in East Germany. This means that if a respondent's marriage ended before these dates, we do not have data on the spouse. If we analyzed dyads who were coupled at the first interview, we would have a biased sample of marriages that "selectively" survived until the entry into the SOEP. For our historical sample, we deleted higher-order unions from the sample ($n=7,505$) and first marriages from private households with a reported marriage year before 1940 ($n=898$ started between 1916 and 1939) as the numbers of these marriages are comparatively small.² In our final historical sample, we have 11,509 women in first marriages in 270,931 person-years in West Germany, and 3,321 women in first marriages in 83,665 person-years in East Germany (see Table 1).

In a second step, we investigate whether men's contributions to housework have been associated with marital stability since 1990. If we can find evidence for such an association, then we can expect that marriages in Germany have already transitioned to the modern stage with a new gender equilibrium. We estimate models indicating whether the share of husbands to the spouses' total hours of domestic tasks stabilizes marriages. We built a new sample containing information on both spouses. This means that we had to exclude marriages formed before 1990³ and attach the husband's information to the remaining women in a first marriage from the abovementioned historical sample. In this second part of the analysis, our sample is based on 2,438 marriages in 19,097 couple-years in West Germany and 541 marriages in 4,170 couple-years in East Germany (see Table 4).

The *outcome variable* is a dummy indicating whether a marriage is still ongoing or has been dissolved. Dissolved marriages are marriages with a reported divorce date. Cases in which the woman reported that she is separated from her husband but is not (yet) divorced are also considered dissolved marriages.⁴

The historical trend is captured by a comparison of *marriage cohorts*, which distinguishes between women married in 1940-1954, 1955-1964, 1965-1974, 1975-1984, 1985-1994, 1995-2004, and 2005-2017. To control for the marriage cohort in the second sample, we distinguished between couples married in 1990-2004 and 2005-2017. Thus, we marry the remaining subset of the marriage cohort 1985-1994, i.e., individuals married between 1990-1994 with the marriage cohort 1995-2004, as the second sample refers to marriages since 1990. The key independent variables are employment status (full-time, part-time, not employed) and domestic tasks. *Employment status* indicates the volume of the respondents' employment. In

2 Further, we exclude SOEP samples that overrepresent high income (sample G), special family structures (samples L1-L3), migrants (samples M1-M2), and refugees (samples M3-M5).

3 Domestic work is surveyed prospectively in the SOEP, and is available since 1984 in West and 1990 in East Germany. As we want to compare an identical time period in both country contexts, we exclude all unions of women married before 1990.

4 Separations are not available for marriages that ended before 1984 due to the survey mode of the SOEP.

accordance with Schnor (2014), the variable differentiates between full-time employed, part-time employed, and non-employed (e.g., unemployed, housewife, or retired).

The SOEP provides information on daily activities on weekdays, Saturdays, and Sundays.⁵ The survey asks respondents about the housework (washing, cooking, cleaning) they do and about the number of hours they regularly spend doing it. In line with other research, we use hours spent regularly on weekdays on *domestic tasks* (Bellani & Esping-Andersen, 2020) and decided against using hours spent on childcare or repairs. Childcare is only relevant for a subgroup of our sample (parents), while hours spent on repairs do not seem to fit the theoretical framework, which clearly asks whether men are becoming more engaged in domestic tasks that are traditionally considered female tasks. Domestic tasks are operationalized as a relative measure of the share of the husband's housework in the spouses' total hours of domestic work in percent ranging from 0 to 100. If both spouses indicated spending zero hours on domestic tasks per weekday, the husband's share of spouses' domestic tasks is 50%.

We control for the highest educational level, Christian denomination, and age at marriage. *Highest educational level* is a time-constant indicator based on the ISCED97 classification indicating the highest degree the respondent obtained. Following Härkönen & Dronkers (2006), we define a high educational level for women as ISCED97 level 4 or higher. We distinguish between high educational level (at least vocational training and *Abitur*) and other educational level (middle vocational and lower), as the theories imply that highly educated women are more likely to contribute to the diffusion of new gender arrangements. *Christian denomination* is a time-constant variable and indicates whether women are Catholic or Protestant (yes) or belong to another religious group, or have no religious denomination (no). Christian denomination has been shown to reduce the divorce risk (Böttcher, 2006; Wagner et al., 2015; Wagner & Weiß, 2003) and is measured with the most recent non-missing information in the data. In our multiple models, we account for the *z-standardized women's age at marriage*. We standardize separately for the East and West German samples to ensure that age at marriage is comparable across time ($\bar{x}_{\text{age at marriage}}=0$ and $SD=1$). For the second sample, the variables high educational level, employment status, and domestic hours are operationalized for women's husbands and are coded according to women's variables.

Furthermore, we control for *marriage duration* in years and the *logarithm of marriage duration* to account for the sickle distribution of marriage stability (Kulu, 2014). The investment level in their first marriage is indicated by the *number of children*, a time-varying variable that changes according to the number of a respondent's children in the child's year of birth, up to three or more children. Our time-varying independent variables are time-lagged, as they indicate the status of the year before a possible event in the outcome is observed.

4. Results

4.1 Women's employment and divorce risk

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for West and East Germany separately. In the West and East German samples, 11% of the observed person-years ever end in divorce. Of the married women in West Germany, 45% are non-employed, 31% are full-time employed, and 24% are part-time employed. In East Germany, 62% of the married women were full-time employed. The patterns across marriage cohorts in the prevalence of part-time employment are in line with those found in previous studies (see Table B1, [Online Appendix](#) and e.g., Trappe et al., 2015).

5 Question 183 from the SOEP Questionnaire: "What is a typical weekday like for you? How many hours per normal workday do you spend on the following activities?"

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the sample of women in first marriages in West and East Germany (couple years)

	West				East			
	% / Mean	SD	Min	Max	% / Mean	SD	Min	Max
Ever divorced	10.90		0	1.00	11.05		0	1
Marriage duration (years)	16.77	11.60	1	50	17.84	11.99	1	49
Marriage cohort	13.87		0	1	15.85		0	1
1940-1954	24.27		0	1	26.62		0	1
1955-1964	23.47		0	1	22.66		0	1
1965-1974	16.25		0	1	19.41		0	1
1975-1984	13.72		0	1	10.71		0	1
1985-1994	6.59		0	1	3.23		0	1
1995-2004	1.84		0	1	1.51		0	1
2005-2017	10.90		0	1.00	11.05		0	1
Employment status								
Full-time	31.01		0	1	62.32		0	1
Part-time	24.14		0	1	16.03		0	1
Non-employment	44.85		0	1	21.66		0	1
High educational level (yes)	20.87		0	1	31.89		0	1
Age at marriage (unstandardized)	23.56	4.73	16	65	22.72	4.54	16	63
Standardized values of age at marriage	0	1	-1.60	8.76	0	1	-1.48	8.86
Christian denomination (yes)	80.00		0	1	39.12		0.00	1.00
Children	15.20		0	1	9.20		0.00	1.00
Childless	25.78		0	1	31.41		0.00	1.00
One child	37.69		0	1	41.82		0.00	1.00
Two children	21.32		0	1	17.57		0.00	1.00
Three or more children	31.01		0	1	62.32		0	1
N	270,931				83,665			
N	11,509				3,321			

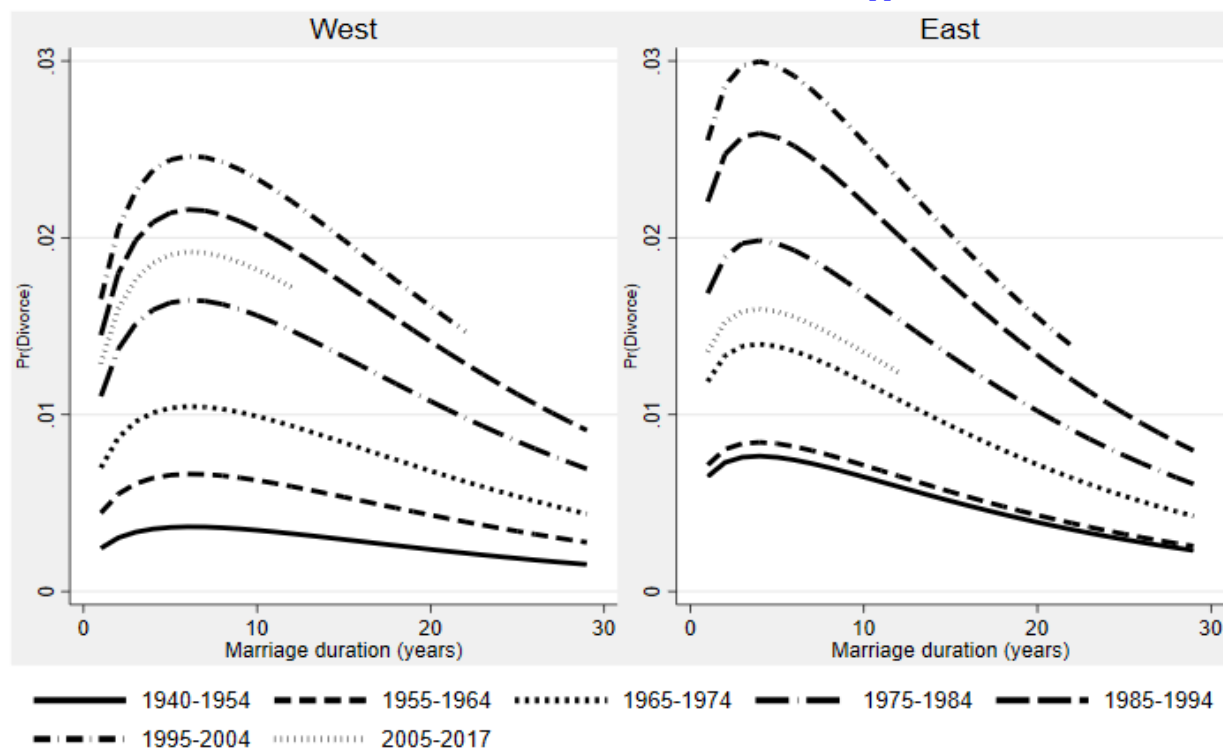
Source: SOEP v34, own calculations

The mean age at marriage for women is marginally lower in East Germany than in West Germany (age at marriage: $\bar{x}_{\text{East}}=22.7$; $\bar{x}_{\text{West}}=23.6$). As expected, the mean age at marriage is increasing across cohorts in West and East Germany (see Table B1, [Online Appendix](#)).

In line with H1, our discrete-time event history models show that divorce risk increases across marriage cohorts but that marriages are becoming more stable for the younger marriage cohorts in West and East Germany (see Figure 2 or Table B2, [Online Appendix](#)). The average marginal effects indicate that in West Germany, on average, the probability of divorce is 0.015 percentage points lower for women who married between 1940 and 1954 than for women who married between 1995 and 2004. The youngest marriage cohort (2005-2017) has a lower risk of divorce than the reference group (1995-2004). In West and East Germany, this trend reversal is statistically significant.

Model 2 (West and East, Table 2) additionally accounts for women's employment, educational level, children, Christian denomination, and standardized age at marriage. In West and East Germany, full-time employed women have a higher risk of divorce than part-time employed women. While there is a statistically significant difference in the divorce risk between non-employed and part-time employed women in West Germany, the divorce risk of non-employed and part-time employed women in East Germany differs only marginally. In West Germany, a high educational level, having two children, and a Christian denomination are strongly associated with marriage stability, whereas only belonging to a Christian denomination is associated with marriage stability in East Germany. Among both East and West German women in first marriages, we find a lower risk of divorce with increasing age at marriage, as the standardized age at marriage measure indicates.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of divorce by marriage cohorts in West and East Germany, graphical illustration of Model M1_West and M1_East, Table B2, [Online Appendix](#)



Source: SOEP v34, own calculations.

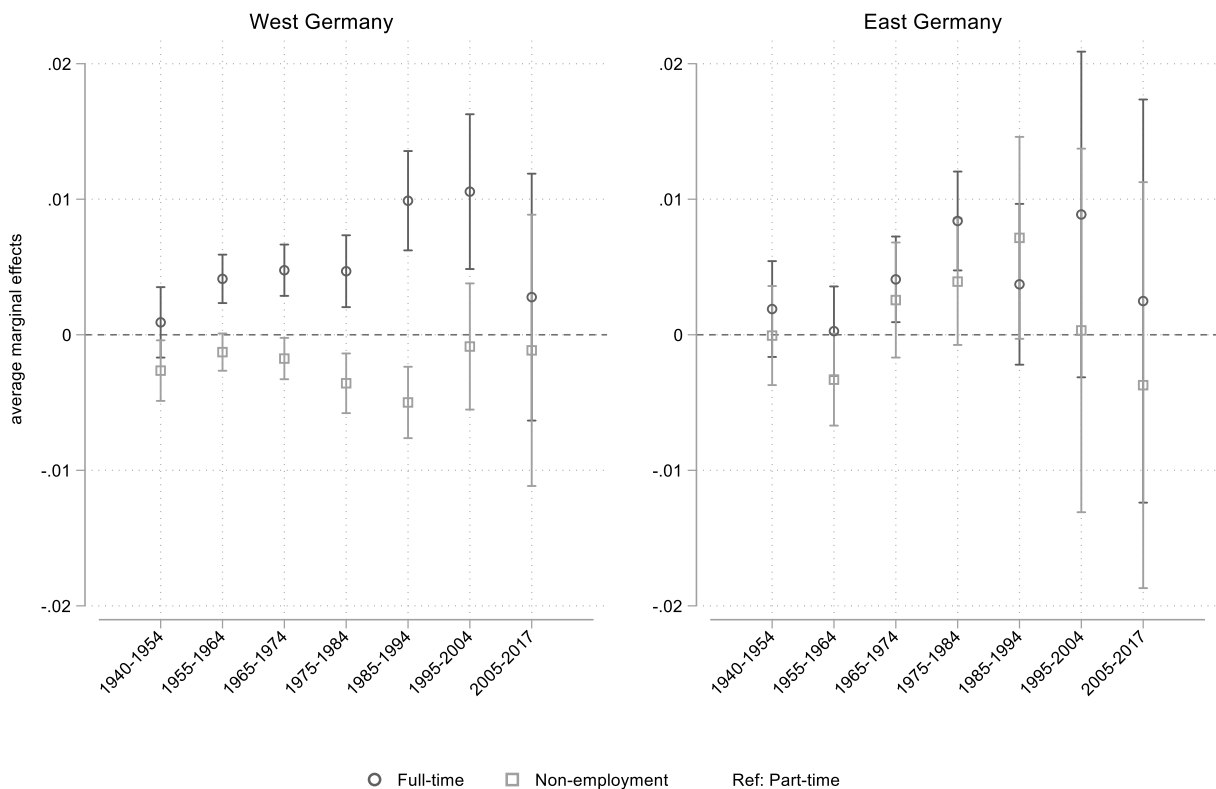
Table 2: Discrete-time event history models of divorce in West and East Germany (AME)

	Model 2 West		Model 2 East	
	AME	SE	AME	SE
Marriage duration (years)	-0.001***	<0.001	-0.001***	<0.001
Log (Marriage duration)	0.005***	0.001	0.003**	0.001
Marriage cohort				
1940-1954	-0.018***	0.001	-0.019***	0.003
1955-1964	-0.016***	0.001	-0.019***	0.003
1965-1974	-0.014***	0.001	-0.015***	0.003
1975-1984	-0.010***	0.001	-0.012**	0.003
1985-1994	-0.005***	0.001	-0.006	0.003
1995-2004	Ref.		Ref.	
2005-2017	-0.004	0.001	-0.009*	0.004
Employment status				
Full-time	0.005***	0.001	0.004***	0.001
Part-time	Ref.		Ref.	
Non-employment	-0.003***	<0.001	0.002	0.001
High educational level				
No	Ref.		Ref.	
Yes	-0.001*	<0.001	<-0.001	0.001
Number of children				
Childless	Ref.		Ref.	
One child	<0.001	0.001	-0.001	0.001
Two children	-0.001*	0.001	-0.003	0.001
Three or more children	-0.001	0.001	0.002	0.002
Christian denomination	-0.003***	<0.001	-0.004***	0.001
Standardized values of age at marriage	-0.002***	<0.001	-0.002***	<0.001
N	270,931		83,665	
BIC	26,711.33		8,590.27	

Source: SOEP v34, own calculations. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Figure 3 shows the results from the full models with an interaction between women's employment and marriage cohort, which test the hypothesis of H2a (for AMEs after discrete-time event history models, see Table B3, [Online Appendix](#)). Figure 3 displays the AMEs on the transition to divorce by employment status across marriage cohorts. Part-time employed women are the reference group.

Figure 3: Interaction effects. Average marginal effects of employment status for different marriage cohorts on divorce in West (first panel) and East (second panel) Germany. Models control for marriage duration, log (marriage duration), employment status, educational level, Christian denomination, standardized values of age at marriage, and number of children)



Source: SOEP v34, own calculations

In West Germany (first panel), the AMEs for transitions to divorce of full-time employed women were significantly higher compared to the reference group (part-time) in all marriage cohorts, except of the oldest (1940-1954) and youngest (2005-2017) cohorts. The AME for transition to divorce of full-time employed women is largest in the 1995-2004 marriage cohort. However, full-time employed women from the youngest marriage cohorts show no significant higher divorce risk compared to the reference group. Thus, we tend to observe a reversal of the association between women's full-time employment and divorce across marriage cohorts, even though the figure does not show whether differences in full-time employment are statistically significant between marriage cohorts. These results are not in line with hypothesis H2a. While we find evidence that tends towards a change in the association between women's employment and divorce risk across marriage cohorts in West Germany, women's full-time employment is strongest related to divorce in the 1995-2005 marriage cohort, where we expected a rather small association.

A significant increase in divorce risk among full-time employed women is observed in marriage cohorts 1965-1974 and 1975-1984 in East Germany, as the second panel in Figure 3 shows. In the remainder of the marriage cohorts, women's employment status is not related to the divorce risk. In line with H2a, we find evidence that the association between women's employment and the risk of divorce has changed across marriage cohorts the East German samples. Regarding our H2b, this finding tends to show that the association between employment status and marital stability changed earlier in East than in West Germany (H2b not rejected).

4.2 Domestic work and divorce risk

In this section, we aim to figure out whether men's engagement in domestic tasks can rebalance marriages. For this analysis, we use a reduced sample of married dyads from 1990 or later (see Table 3 for descriptive statistics). The domestic task measure shows that women do the bulk of domestic tasks in both East and West German marriages. In West Germany, husbands' share of spouses' total hours of domestic work is 21% on average. Across marriage cohorts in West Germany, husbands increase their share of domestic tasks by about 10 percentage points on average (see Table B4, [Online Appendix](#)).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the sample of women in first marriages and their husbands since 1990 or later in West and East Germany (couple years)

	West				East			
	% / Mean	SD	Min	Max	% / Mean	SD	Min	Max
Ever divorced	8.23		0	1	11.11		0	1
Marriage duration (years)	9.59	6.15	1	27	8.63	5.94	1	27
Marriage cohort								
1990-2004	85.25		0	1	81.55	0.39	0	1
2005-2017	14.75		0	1	18.45	0.39	0	1
Husbands share of spouses' total hours of domestic work	20.80	22.06	0	100	25.44	23.77	0	100
Employment status of wife			0	1			0	1
Full-time	28.47		0	1	47.58	0.50	0	1
Part-time	43.12		0	1	30.49	0.46	0	1
Non-employment	28.41		0	1	21.93	0.41	0	1
Employment status of husband			0	1			0	1
Full-time	93.31		0	1	88.52	0.32	0	1
Part-time	3.04		0	1	2.49	0.16	0	1
Non-employment	3.65		0	1	8.99	0.29	0	1
High educational level, wife	44.07		0	1	44.92	0.50	0	1
High educational level, husband	51.25		0	1	42.26	0.49	0	1
Childless	21.08		0	1	22.99	0.42	0	1
One child	27.53		0	1	34.21	0.47	0	1
Two children	39.82		0	1	34.21	0.47	0	1
Three or more children	11.57		0	1	8.59	0.28	0	1
Christian denomination	72.1		0	1	32.56	0.47	0	1
Standardized values of age at marriage	0	1	-2.02	6.22	0	1	-1.40	3.85
N	19,017				4,250			

Source: SOEP v34, own calculations

In East Germany, the husbands' share of domestic tasks is, on average, 25% and, thus, a little higher than in West Germany. In East Germany, husbands' participation in domestic tasks increases by 7 percentage points across cohorts (see Table B4, [Online Appendix](#)).

Our models show that in West Germany, the husbands' share of spouses' total hours of domestic work has no effect on the divorce risk (see Table 4, Model 4). This result contradicts our hypothesis that husbands' share of domestic tasks is negatively associated with marriage stability (H3a rejected). Also, in East Germany, the domestic task arrangement is not associated with marital stability. Interestingly, our results concerning the marital stability in married dyads from 1990 onwards (see Table 4) do not show significant differences in the association between women's employment and divorce risk, neither in East nor in West Germany. This finding underlines the results presented with the historical sample regarding a change in the association of women's employment and divorce risk.

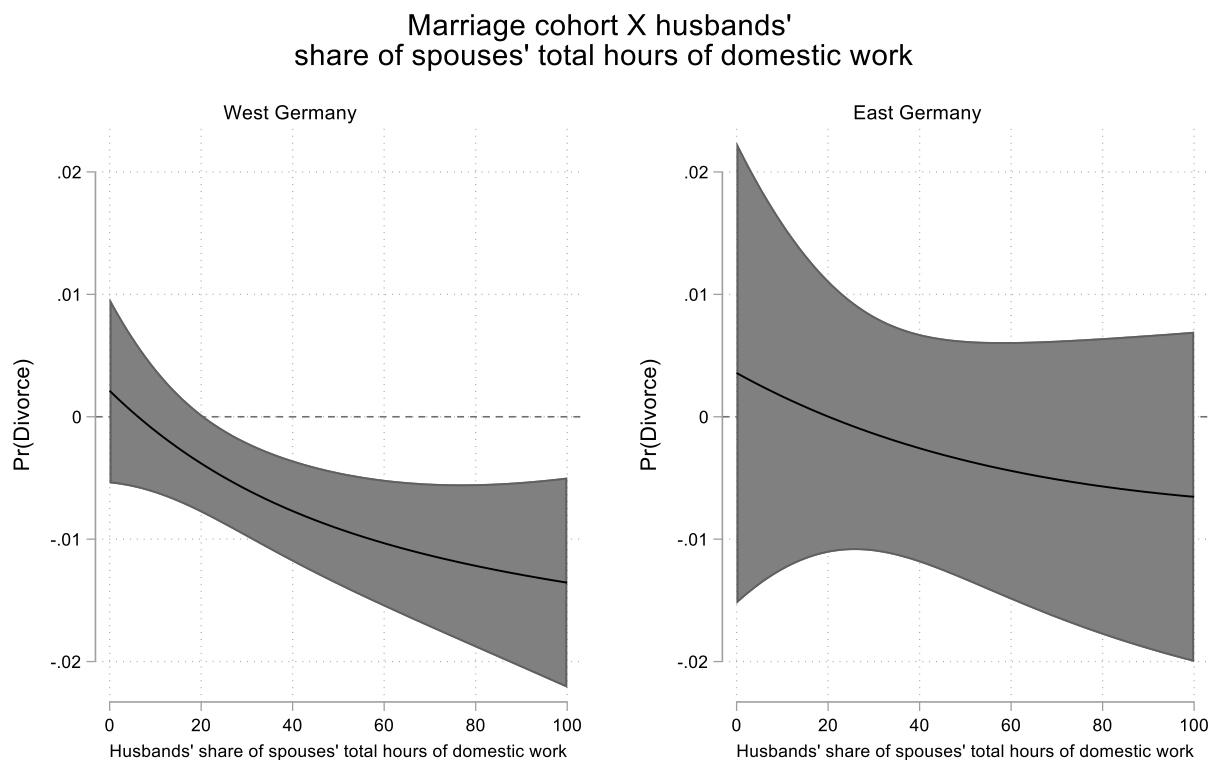
Table 4: Discrete-time event history models of divorce of women in first marriages and their husbands, married since 1990 or later in West and East Germany (AME)

	Model 4 West		Model 4 East	
	AME	SE	AME	SE
Marriage duration (years)	-0.002***	0.000	-0.001	0.001
Log (marriage duration)	0.010**	0.003	0.004	0.005
Marriage cohort				
1990-2004	Ref.		Ref.	
2005-2017	-0.004*	0.002	-0.001	0.005
Husbands' share on spouses' total hours of domestic work	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000
Employment status wife				
Full-time	0.002	0.003	0.006	0.005
Part-time	Ref.		Ref.	
Non-employment	-0.003	0.002	-0.002	0.004
Employment Status husband				
Full-time	Ref.		Ref.	
Part-time	0.004	0.006	0.019	0.022
Non-employment	0.002	0.004	0.013	0.011
High educational level wife (yes)	-0.002	0.002	-0.002	0.004
High educational level husband (yes)	-0.005**	0.002	-0.010**	0.004
Standardized values of age at marriage	-0.002	0.001	-0.012***	0.003
Childless	-0.001	0.003	0.008	0.007
One child	Ref.		Ref.	
Two children	-0.003	0.002	-0.003	0.004
Three or more children	-0.002	0.003	0.002	0.007
Christian denomination (yes)	0.001	0.002	-0.004	0.004
N	19,017		4,250	
BIC	2547.27		692.90	

Source: SOEP v34, own calculations

To test whether the divorce risk differs between marriage cohorts in levels of husbands' participation in domestic tasks, Figure 4 shows the interaction between marriage cohorts and husbands' share of spouses' total hours of domestic work in West (first panel) and East (second panel) Germany on the risk of divorce. It shows the difference in the divorce risk between the reference category (marriage cohort 1990-2004) and the marriage cohort 2005-2017 over the levels of husbands' share of domestic tasks. In West Germany, the cohort differences in the divorce risk increases as the husbands' share of domestic tasks increases. As the 95% confidence interval for the difference does not include zero for husbands that do 20% or more of the total hours of domestic work, the difference can be considered statistically significant. However, the divorce risk does not significantly differ between the marriage cohorts by levels of husbands' participation in domestic tasks in East Germany. According to these results, we reject the hypothesis of a change in the effect of husbands' contribution to domestic tasks across marriage cohorts for East Germany (H3b rejected) but not for West Germany (H3b not rejected).

Figure 4: Interaction effects. Average marginal effects of marriage cohort (Ref. marriage cohort 1990-2004) on divorce for husbands' share of spouses' total hours of domestic work in West (first panel) and East (second panel) Germany. Models control for marriage duration, log (marriage duration), employment status, educational level, Christian denomination, standardized values of age at marriage, and number of children)



Source: SOEP v34, own calculations.

5. Conclusion and limitations

Our aim in this study was to shed light on whether marital stability across cohorts is still a function of the spouses' division of labor. Comparing East and West Germany, we applied discrete-time event history models to SOEP data. In order to test our hypotheses derived from the multiple equilibrium approach, we drew samples of married women between 1940 and 2017. We used these samples to test whether the association between women's employment and marital disruption has changed across marriage cohorts. In a second step, we employed models on married women and their partners who were married between 1990 and 2017 to investigate the association between the spouses' division of domestic tasks and divorce risk. We were able to add to previous research by analyzing marriages over an exceptionally long historical period and comparing marriages in East and West Germany while testing a newer theoretical concept, i.e., the multiple equilibrium theory.

In line with our first hypothesis, we observed increasing divorce risks across marriage cohorts that reversed in the youngest marriage cohorts in East and West Germany. The increasing trend in divorce rates ended earlier in East than in West Germany. Our results further showed that the associations between women's employment and the risk of divorce have been decreasing in the youngest marriage cohort in West Germany. This pattern is not in line with our second hypothesis as we expected weaker associations between women's employment in younger marriage cohorts while our results tend to show an increasing importance of employment status that reverses in the youngest cohorts. However, our findings are in line with previous empirical findings on women's employment and its changing association with divorce risk in Germany (Wagner et al., 2015). Furthermore, the link between women's employment status and divorce

risk has vanished in marriages since 2005 in West Germany. This result may indicate that West Germany has already reached the modern stage, characterized by a new gender equilibrium, as expected by the multiple equilibrium approach. This association has also changed in East Germany. The results tend to provide evidence for H2b, which states that the gender equality supported in East Germany led to an earlier adoption of new family roles. However, as the family arrangement in East Germany has changed from the dual earner model to the modified breadwinner model, it seems that the new stabilizing marriage equilibrium (modern stage) in (East) Germany either is not gender-equal or is still in a transitional stage and a new gender equilibrium has not yet consolidated. Due to the fact, that there is no significant change between cohorts in the effect of men's housework in East Germany, we cannot completely rule out that men's housework already had a stabilizing effect in the earlier cohorts. This would actually suggest that East Germany entered the gender-egalitarian stage first. The division of housework hardly affects marital stability in East and West Germany. We observed descriptively that husbands in the younger marriage cohorts contribute relatively more hours on household tasks than husbands in marriages formed between 1990-2004. While these observations are in line with the results from Bellani & Esping-Andersen (2020), we were unable to reproduce the finding that the risk of divorce increases when husbands are engaged in household tasks without differentiating between marriage cohorts (Cooke 2006). We can add to previous research that the association between the division of domestic work and marriage cohort has also changed in West Germany (H3b). In West Germany, this finding is clearly in line with the multiple equilibrium model. Nevertheless, our findings regarding the role of men and its relevance for marital stability has to be interpreted with caution. The East German sample was rather small, leading to large confidence intervals in the interaction effect. However, the SOEP data cover a very long time period in Germany and allow for long-term inner-German comparisons. Additionally, our estimates were rather conservative, as we excluded higher-order marriages. Nonetheless, we could still provide evidence for the expected reversal in the time trend based on newer theories. We were able to show that even three decades after German reunification, East-West differences still persist. Future research should consider that the new stable gender equilibrium may not (yet) reflect gender equality and should include higher-order unions in the analysis.

Although we used longitudinal data, one must be cautious when making causal statements about the association between women's employment, the division of domestic tasks, and the risk of divorce. First, the low risk of divorce of the youngest marriage cohort could be – besides the increasing age at marriage – a consequence of selection effects. The increasing age at marriage and partners deciding to stay unmarried because they do not want to bear the costs of a possible divorce might be relevant. Second, this anticipation of divorce risks may also lead to women's decision to be fully employed. Empirical evidence for such a relationship is weak but cannot be ruled out (e.g., Poortman, 2005). Third, as women's labor force participation increased over time, marriage as an institution that serves women's economic security became less attractive. But for economic reasons, marriage is still attractive for part-time or unemployed women. For these women, compared to fully employed women, the divorce risk might become lower over time.

Data availability statement

The data for the analysis (Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), data from 1984-2017, doi: 10.5684/soep.v34) is available from the SOEP Research Data Center (RDC SOEP) (https://www.diw.de/en/diw_01.c.601584.en/data_access.html).

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Arbeitsteilung zwischen Ehepartnern und Ehestabilität: Eine Anwendung der Theorie des multiplen Gleichgewichts auf Scheidungstrends zwischen Ehekohorten in Ost- und Westdeutschland

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: In einem Vergleich zwischen Ost- und Westdeutschland untersuchen wir den Zusammenhang zwischen Arbeitsteilung von Ehepaaren und der Ehestabilität in zweierlei Hinsicht: (1) Hat sich der Zusammenhang zwischen der Erwerbstätigkeit von Frauen und dem Scheidungsrisiko über die Ehekohorten hinweg verändert? (2) Steht die Beteiligung von Männern an der Hausarbeit in Zusammenhang mit dem Scheidungsrisiko?

Hintergrund: Während ältere Theorien davon ausgingen, dass die Erwerbstätigkeit von Frauen Ehen destabilisiert, legen neuere Theorien nahe, dass Männer Ehen wieder stabilisieren können, indem sie ihr Verhalten ändern und sich an der Hausarbeit beteiligen.

Methode: In einer historischen und einer dyadischen Perspektive analysieren wir SOEP-Daten mittels diskreter Ereignisdatenanalyse.

Ergebnisse: Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sich der Zusammenhang zwischen Erwerbstätigkeit von Frauen und dem Scheidungsrisiko über die Ehekohorten hinweg verändert hat und dass dieser Trend in Ostdeutschland früher einsetzte. Zwar stabilisiert der relative Beitrag des Ehemannes zur Hausarbeit die Ehen in Ost- und Westdeutschland nicht, aber wir finden Unterschiede zwischen den Ehekohorten in Westdeutschland.

Schlussfolgerung: Unsere Ergebnisse bestätigen, dass das traditionelle männliche Ernährermodell in Deutschland nicht mehr mit einem stabilen Gleichgewicht in der Ehe verknüpft ist. Entweder scheint sich die deutsche Gesellschaft noch in der Übergangsphase zu befinden, da sich der Beitrag der Männer zur Hausarbeit als irrelevant für die Ehestabilität erweist, oder das neue stabile Gleichgewicht in Ehen ist nicht die Geschlechtergleichheit.

Schlagwörter: Beziehungen, Hausarbeit, Beschäftigung

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