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Gender Relations in Couples and the Risk of Separation in East and West Germany

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There is extensive and growing evidence which highlights that gender relations in couples are shaped by individual characteristics of both partners, by the family situation, as well as by institutional settings in which the behavior of actors and unions is embedded in (Fuwa 2004, Geist 2005, Hook 2006, Stier/Lewin-Epstein 2007). However, the ways in which societal contexts affect relational characteristics of couples are less well understood.

Therefore, the aim of our contribution is to focus on the mechanisms, relating relative gender equality of couples to marital stability in Germany, differentiating between East and West. Specifically, we focus on the role of gender relations for the risk of separation. A key hypothesis in this context is that the varying social and institutional context in the West and the East continues to affect social behavior. We assume that this differential socio-cultural background is reflected in gender relations to this very day and hence surfaces in differences in marital stability between East and West Germany. More precisely, we pay close attention to the duration of first marriages, formed after the unification over the course of the 1990s.

Our main interest is to shed light on the factors, affecting the risk of separation thereafter. "At the time of unification, West German young adults had formed their expectations regarding life and relationships under policies supporting separate spheres of a male breadwinner model, whereas East German young adults formed expectations under policies supporting women's full-time employment" (Cooke 2007: 936). In that sense, different gender relations in the private sphere coupled with varying opportunity structures for the reconciliation of family life and employment are supposed to persist in the future.

Overall, institutional settings in Germany still favor a specialization regarding the gender division of labor, especially after family formation and within marriage. In contrast, employment conditions have changed, demanding more flexibility from individual workers, particularly since the 1990s. Thus, the likelihood that couples

adjust their labor market behavior in order to provide mutual support during periods of economic hardship might be increasing. Yet, couples face an ambivalent incentive structure that they need to consider when negotiating the division of paid and unpaid work. This incentive structure includes cultural expectations of female contributions to care and housework, institutional support to shift traditional gender roles as well as pressures from the labor market. Importantly, this incentive structure varies in some respects between East and West Germany.

To address our research question, we use data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (Wagner et al. 2007). Our sample consists of all first marriages that were formed between 1990 and 2006. To investigate the likelihood of separation, all couples are considered for which we have information for at least one year following the transition to marriage. All analyses are conducted for East and West Germany separately in consideration of the mechanisms that are likely to affect gender affairs and the likelihood of separation differently across regions. Using event history models, we will include time-constant as well as time-varying covariates in the empirical analysis. Our explanatory variables depict relative gender equality in couples (e.g., regarding education, income, household division of labor/child care, employment arrangement) and include some control variables (e.g., age, number and age of children, total household income, home ownership, partnership duration). Our aim is to test whether economic independence or role specialization matters more for relationship stability of couples in present-day Germany.

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