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Housework, market work, and “doing gender” when marital satisfaction declines [☆]

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Abstract

When faced with a decline in marital satisfaction, are wives constrained from increasing their labor market work time in part because they “do gender?” One of the predictions of the human capital accumulation hypothesis, which assumes no constraints, is that housewives with little work experience will respond to a decline in marital satisfaction by increasing labor market work time (only). In contrast, the gender display hypothesis predicts that, in settings where the evaluations of marriage and wives’ work performance are closely intertwined, a decline in marital satisfaction among this group of housewives will increase both labor market work and housework—and the increase in housework serves as a constraint on the increase in labor market work. To evaluate these contrasting hypotheses, we analyze a panel survey of women in contemporary Japan. Results from multinomial logit regression models are more consistent with the gender display hypothesis than the human capital accumulation hypothesis. Housewives with relatively little work experience are 11 times more likely to increase the time spent on both labor market work and housework when the satisfaction of their marriage declines than when it does not. No evidence is found that, when marital satisfaction declines, these housewives are statistically significantly more likely to increase labor market work only.

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1. Introduction

Marriage is often viewed as an institution that improves women's economic well-being by giving them access to men's economic resources (e.g., Tyree and Treas, 1974; Waite, 1995). Some family scholars note, however, that marriage also compromises women's economic well-being by discouraging paid work while encouraging unpaid work among women (e.g., Gupta, 1999; Hochschild and Machung, 1989). These scholars argue that marriage contains normative expectations about work appropriate for a husband or a wife. These expectations contribute to a gender asymmetric allocation of work in which husbands spend most of their work hours on labor market work while wives spend most of their time on housework. They are thought to severely disadvantage women's economic position in the event of marital dissolution (e.g., Duncan and Hoffman, 1985; Peterson, 1996; Smock et al., 1999; Weitzman, 1985).

This presumed linkage between the normative expectations in marriage and the negative economic consequences of divorce for women has been the subject of very little scrutiny or explication. Researchers have not investigated the mechanisms underlying these consequences, even though they have measured the extent of the consequences (e.g., Peterson, 1996; Smock et al., 1999). On a theoretical level, there are reasons to question the assumed linkage. Neoclassical economic theorization, for example, implies that economically vulnerable wives who anticipated a divorce would devote more time to labor market work and would be able to do so in an unconstrained manner. Working within this neoclassical economic framework, Johnson and Skinner (1986) provide the only previous empirical study to examine the effect of the foreseen risk of divorce on married women's allocation of time to labor market work. They hypothesize that the foreseen risk increases labor market work hours among wives who are relatively economically vulnerable (i.e., housewives) but not among wives who are already accumulating human capital (i.e., working wives). We modify their hypothesis to develop the baseline perspective in the current study—the *human capital accumulation hypothesis* (See next section for Background).¹ The hypothesis posits that a decline in marital satisfaction will: (a) induce housewives with little work experience to increase the time allocated to labor market work—but not the time they devote to housework; and (b) have no major effect on the time allocation of working wives, who are already accumulating human capital.

At the empirical level, however, the substantial negative economic consequences of divorce for women in a variety of industrialized countries (Burkhauser et al., 1991; Cornell, 1990) raise questions about the neoclassical economic assumption that wives have few structural constraints on their capacity to increase labor market work

¹ Specifically, rather than measuring the propensity to divorce with estimates of future divorce probabilities derived from simultaneous equations and identifying assumptions, we measure it with wives' self-reported level of marital satisfaction. This modification relies on Booth et al.'s (1983) view that marital satisfaction is an index of "propensity to dissolve an existing marriage" (p. 388) and a "qualitative evaluation of an intact marriage" (p. 387). Modification also involves drawing on Becker's (1981) arguments, the theoretical foundation of Johnson and Skinner's analysis, to make predictions about changes in housework time.

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