



The role of social norms in a model of marriage and divorce

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Received 16 October 2000; received in revised form 4 April 2001; accepted 19 April 2001

Abstract

In the US, the rate of divorce has increased at an alarming rate since the 1960s. This paper presents a mechanism which gives rise to the emergence of multiple equilibria and a discrete jump in the rate of divorce in a simple search environment. We attempt to show that social norms influence the way each agent searches for a matching partner and hence the probability of divorce. In a low-divorce equilibrium, agents are willing to spend more cost in the search process. As a result, the act of divorce becomes a more accurate signal of unobservable characteristics of a divorced agent. This type of social norms is self-consistent in equilibrium as social stigma attached to divorce is relatively high and this forces agents to be more discreet in the search process. For exactly the opposite reason, a high-divorce equilibrium can also be supported where agents are willing to spend little cost in the search process. In the light of this logic, the rapid increase in the rate of divorce can be seen as a movement from a low-divorce to a high-divorce equilibrium, possibly triggered by a temporary shock. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social stigma; Social norms; Marriage; Divorce

JEL classification: D70; J12; Z13

1. Introduction

There is a world-wide trend that the rate of divorce has increased drastically over the last several decades. In the US, for instance, the rate of divorce had approximately doubled between 1963 and 1974.¹ This increase turned out not to be just a temporary shock: the rate of divorce has been consistently high since then. Moreover, the rapid increase in the rate

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¹ See, for instance, [Michael \(1988\)](#).

of divorce is not an isolated incident in the US. Many western countries have seen a sharp increase in the rate of divorce as well.

Since the stability of marriage has profound welfare implications, much attention has naturally been paid to the causes of this change. Indeed, it does not appear overly difficult to make a list of potential causes as virtually all western countries had gone through several structural changes during that span. For instance, it is often argued that the inception of no-fault divorce laws in many western countries contributed to this increase as, under no-fault divorce, the cost of obtaining a divorce decreases. Of course, the fact that no-fault divorce was introduced when the rate of divorce started to increase is by no means indicative of the direction of causation. It is certainly plausible that the easing of the divorce process could be the effect of social changes as well as the cause of them. Actually, [Michael \(1988\)](#) points out that the increase in the rate of divorce preceded the changes in the divorce law in many US states. [Allen \(1998\)](#) argues that the introduction of no-fault divorce was motivated by a rise in the number of inefficient marriages throughout the 1950s and 1960s.² The magnitude of the effect on the rate of divorce is still somewhat unclear.³

Another possibility is that changes in the economic situation triggered this increase as the stability of marriage is apparently closely associated with many economic factors.⁴ As [Becker et al. \(1977\)](#) argue, an increase in women's wages tend to decrease the value of marriage as it gives women more viable outside options. Then, it is certainly arguable that the recent increase in women's wages and labor force participation might contribute to this increase.

For illustrative purposes, we use those economic factors as potential originating causes although it should be emphasized that the paper is not primarily concerned with the causes of this change themselves. While there is little doubt that unexpected changes in the economic situation make otherwise acceptable options unacceptable, it is still not so clear how this sudden and rather substantial change was triggered by the gradual and continuous increase in women's wages and labor force participation over time. To account for this change, then, what is missing is a mechanism which links those potential causes to a catastrophic rise in the rate of divorce.

Given this fact, the main goal of the paper is to show the existence of multiple equilibria in a simple matching framework with search friction. By multiple equilibria, we mean a situation where two different rates of divorce arise simultaneously as an equilibrium outcome.⁵ To this end, the paper focuses on social norms in the search process as the main force behind

² An inefficient marriage refers to a marriage where total wealth is higher when the couple is separated than when together.

³ [Friedberg \(1998\)](#) found some evidence that the introduction of no-fault divorce raised the rate of divorce, but also pointed out that other factors had a great deal to do with the increase.

⁴ Following [Becker \(1973, 1974\)](#) the economic aspect of marriage has been studied rather extensively, mostly in a matching framework. More recent works on this issue include [Mortensen \(1985\)](#) and [Aiyagari et al. \(2000\)](#).

⁵ Therefore, the focus of the paper is strictly on the stability of matches. This point should be contrasted with many other matching models which focus on the resulting matching pattern. See, for instance, [Lu and McAfee \(1996\)](#) and [Shimer and Smith \(2000\)](#) for recent works on this issue. Normally, a resulting equilibrium would be a sorting type: a highly productive agent matches with another highly productive agent in equilibrium. That is, agents are divided into several classes and they are only able to marry with others in the same class. Even in this case, [Burdett and Coles \(1997\)](#) show the existence of multiple steady state equilibria. [Burdett and Coles \(1998\)](#) further show that separation cycle can be supported as Nash equilibria by incorporating endogenous separation behavior.

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