

The influence of children on marital stability

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Abstract

In divorce research, children are treated as a key influencing factor for the stability of a marriage. Depending on the existing child-parent relationship or the child's characteristics a decline or increase in marital stability is to be expected. Family economics e.g. presupposes a reduction of divorce risk if children are born legitimately and an increased risk if they are born out of wedlock. However, most studies on divorce research do not provide good insight into the different influences on parenthood for marital stability. Nevertheless, following the theories of family sociology, it can be assumed that the influence of children on marital stability can only be researched if there is a clear differentiation according to child-parent relationship for the construction of child variables. Yet, this approach can only be found in a few studies conducted in the field of divorce research. The aim of this study is to close the gap by conducting a differentiated examination of influences of various child-parent relationships and characteristics of children for marital stability based on the data of the 2000 DJI Survey of Families; the study will examine these factors in as broad a spectrum as possible. Furthermore, the impact of an imprecise differentiation of the child variables shall be demonstrated.

Keywords: marriage stability, divorce research, children an marriage stability, sociology of families, types of children.

1. Introduction

In the field of divorce research children are an important influential factor for marriage stability, An increase or decrease in the stability of the marriage can be expected depending on what family-child relationship or characteristics of children are present. For example, according to family economics, the presence of stepchildren children in a marriage reduces the stability of the marriage, while legitimate children reduce the risk of divorce. But, in most studies of divorce research the different influences of parenthood on the risk of divorce are examined to a lesser extent. Furthermore, based on the theories it can be assumed that the influence of children on the stability of a marriage can be studied only if the relationships to the children are clearly differentiated when operationalizing the child variables, but this method is used in only a few divorce research studies.

This paper attempts to close the gap by studying the influences that various characteristics of children and various family-child relationships have on the stability of a marriage using the data of the 2000 family survey for methodically correct research of the widest possible spectrum. In this study, the various family-child relationships and characteristics of children are operationalized in a manner that precludes the influence of other effects. Ultimately, only this method allows the influences of children on the stability of a marriage to be clearly determined.

The results of the paper show how the relevant theories establish the influence of children on the stability of a marriage and also confirm the findings of the multivariate analyses that different aspects of divorce risks are reported depending on family-child relationships or characteristics of children. This confirms the assumption that the exact differentiation by family-child relationships and characteristics of children and methodically correct operationalization of child variables reveal significant differences in divorce rates.

2. Theories

In order to build a highly profound model of the influence that children have on the risk of divorce, it is essential to determine the relation between children and their parents and, which characteristics children can have. Afterwards the theories, which discuss the influence of children on marital stability, have to be considered. These theories are the individualisation theory, the theory of demands (Nave-Herz), the social exchange theory as well as family economics. Additionally, the value-of-children approach and hypotheses of gender-preference play a substantial role. If interaction effects are not taken into consideration, the theoretical basis is reduced to the social exchange theory, family economics and the hypothesis of gender preference.

The social exchange theory allows an evaluation of the impact of premarital and legitimate children and their number and age. The profoundest differentiation is offered by family economics - in comparison with the social exchange theory the influence of adopted children, stepchildren children and gender on marital stability is analysed additionally. Besides, hypotheses, which are combined by the term "gender-preference hypotheses", help to investigate the impact of gender preference structures on the divorce risk.

Based on these theories and hypotheses different tendencies about the effects on the divorce risk arise depending on which types of children can be found in a marriage.

Family economics considers adopted children as investments into marriages that, however, do not increase marriage specific capital as much as legitimate children. According to Becker (1991: 44) children are predominantly adopted, if it is not possible for a married couple to conceive children. The birth of biological children provides a higher gain of utility than the adoption of children (Becker 1991:44f; 1996: 105ff; Becker and Lewis 1973: 818; Bethmann und Kvasnicka 2012: 2f). Adopted children affect marriages therefore only slightly

stabilising, i.e. they have a small positive impact on marital stability. In contrast, stepchildren children are negative capital, since they are not conceived with the spouse, and hence reduce the marital stability (Becker 1981; Becker et al. 1977). In accordance with family economics premarital children also reduce marital stability, because due to their conception the time span, in which the right partner can be found, is shortened (Becker et al. 1977: 1147ff). According to the social exchange theory, however, premarital children have a stabilising effect on marriages, although less than legitimate children, since they represent smaller emotional costs than legitimate children. Legitimate children are considered stabilising in all theories (Becker et al. 1977: 1151; Lewis et al. 1979: 276-278).

In accordance with family economics the utility of children is reduced with their advancing age, because children are subject to a depreciation rate – younger children thus reduce the divorce rate more than older children (Becker 1996: 105ff; Becker et al. 1977; Becker and Lewis 1973: 1156; Becker and Tomes 1976). Levinger (1979: 24) argues in a similar way. He considers especially small children as a barrier against divorce.

Regarding the influence of the number of children, the views presented in the social exchange theory and family economics differ from each other: Whereas family economics assumes a smaller increase of utility rate connected with a growing number of children, the social exchange theory considers the quality and hence also the marital stability reduced by the existence of many children (Becker 1991; 1996: 216; Becker et al. 1990; Lewis et al. 1979: 280).

The impact of the child's gender first came to attention in divorce research after a study of Morgan et al. (1988). They detected a smaller divorce risk in marriages with sons than in marriages with daughters. According to them this discovery is due to the husband's preference of sons. Consequently, not the gender of the children, but the preference of a certain gender affects the marital stability. If the divorce risk is analysed as depending on the gender of the children, gender specific divorce rates might reflect different structures of gender preferences (Diekmann et al. 2004: 2). To verify this assumption, several ad hoc hypotheses and family economics were tested for their conjectures: For example, family economics does not assume a preference to a specific gender, whereas the fathers'-involvement-hypothesis assumes a preference for sons (Harris and Morgan 1991: 532; Morgan et al. 1988: 111; Morgan and Pollard 2002: 1-3).

3. Data and Methods

Theory analysis shows, which child-parent relationships and characteristics of children can be identified as possible influential factors on divorce risk and the probable direction of this influence. Based on the respective, differentiated construction of child variables, proof shall be provided that divorce risk varies according to height and direction, depending on what kind of child-parent relationship or child characteristic exists. The attempt is made to configure child variables so as to exclude influence from other effects. The effects of various differentiation are particularly pronounced for child-parent relationships – therefore, this issue has been selected as the main focus of the study. According to family economics stepchildren children have a negative influence and legitimate children a positive influence on marital stability. If parents have both stepchildren as well as legitimate children, the effects influence each other, and the divorce risk is higher than for parents who only have legitimate children.

For the analysis with the data of the family survey 2000i the survival analysis and the $t\text{-ln}(t_2)$ -model (Klein: 1995:254) are chosen. Adopted and foster children, stepchildren, premarital and legitimate children are analysed together using the term "child-parent relation". Age, number and gender are characteristics of children that are investigated in separate analyses.

For a differentiated analysis of the child-parent relations different types of children are considered and partly combined. Altogether there are three studies on various questions about the differentiation of child-parent relations.

1. Which results provide a non-exact differentiation of child-parent relations?
2. What are the effects, if different types of children are combined?
3. What are the results, if the differentiation concerning the child variable is as high as possible?

Hereinafter the particular divorce risk is calculated for each type of children and for each study. However, first a schematic illustration of the influential tendency that can be expected according to family economicsii, shall be presented.

4. Results

The first study distinguishes:

- married couples with children, independent from the child-parent relation
- married couples with one (their first) legitimate child
- married couples, who have only legitimate children.

Table 1 shows the expected influential tendency on the divorce risk for the particular type of children according to family economics in the first columniii, the second column shows the schematic result and the last two columns illustrate the outcome of the multivariate analyses for West and East Germanyiv.

Table 2: Outcome of differentiation I

	Family Economics	Actual	Outcome	
			West	East
Children	±v	+	0,454***	0,648*
Legitimate Childrenvi	+vii	++	0,398 ***	0,440 ***
Only legitimate children	++viii	+++	0,345 ***	0,422 ***

*Significant at 0.05 level **Significant at 0.01 level ***Significant at 0.001 level

These results show for all types of children, as well in West as in East Germany, a highly significant stabilising effect on marriages. As expected the divorce rates vary with the level of differentiation: they decline level by level. The outcome, however, does not correspond exactly to the influential tendencies expected by family economics.

The following study combines possible child-parent relations for the first child in two steps. The first column shows at step 0 all possible child-parent relations, the second column presents the expected impact according to family economics and the third column presents the outcomeix for West and East Germany.

The combination of the variable leads to a change in the results. The more the child-parent relations are combined the higher is the stabilising effect on marriages in West Germany, in East Germany the divorce risk declines analogously.

Obviously, different perationalisations of variables affect the results to a large extent – similar to the first study. This illustrates, for example, what effects are induced by an imprecise differentiation between premarital and stepchildren children (see Table 2, step 1).

Hereinafter it shall be investigated as profound as possible, how different child-parent relations affect marital stability. For this purpose, combinations of child-parent relations for

married couples with one or two children shall be analysedx. The illustration of table 3 follows the same scheme as table 1 and 2.

As it is visible in Table 3, many results are not significant. For East Germany it is therefore not possible to use the results. The outcome for West Germany has similar characteristics as those in Table 2 (step 0). If married couples have only one child, adopted and foster children reduce the divorce risk the most, married couples with two legitimate children have the highest marital stabilityxi.

Table 3: Outcome of differentiation II

Stepxii	Relation to child	Impact according to economicsxiii	Outcomexiv	
			West	East
0	Stepchildren	--	0,766	2,363 *
	Premarital	-xv	0,705 **	0,651 +
	Legitimate	++	0,398 ***	0,440 ***
	Adopted/ Foster	+	0,320 ***	1,616
1	Stepchildren + Premarital	-	0,720*	1,210*
	Legitimate	++	0,392***	0,448 ***
	Adopted / Foster	+	0,322 ***	1,612
2	Stepchildren + Premarital /Foster	±	0,577*	1,527
	Legitimate	++	0,395***	0,446 ***

+ *Significant at 0.10 level *Significant at 0.05 level **Significant at 0.01 level ***Significant at 0.001 level

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Table 4: Outcome of differentiation III

Relation to child	Impact according to economics ^{xvi}	Outcomexvii	
		West	East
One child: stepchildren	--	ns	ns
One child: premarital	-	ns	ns
One child: legitimate	++	0,413**	0,468**
One child: adopted/foster	+	0,378*	ns
1st child: stepchildren, 2nd child: stepchildren	----	ns	ns
1st child: stepchildren, 2nd child: premarital	---	ns	ns
1st child: stepchildren, 2nd child: legitimate	±	ns	ns
1st child: stepchildren, 2nd child: adopted/foster	±	ns	ns
1st child: premarital, 2nd child: premarital	--	0,431**	ns
1st child: premarital, 2nd child: legitimate	±	0,637*	ns
1st child: stepchildren, 2nd child: stepchildren	±	ns	ns
1st child: legitimate, 2nd child: legitimate	++++	0,263***	0,282***
1st child: legitimate, 2nd child: adopted/foster	+++	ns	ns
1st child: adopted/foster, 2nd child: adopted/foster	++	ns	ns
1st child: adopted/foster, 2nd child: legitimate	+++	ns	ns

*Significant at 0.05 level **Significant at 0.01 level ***Significant at 0.001 level

Analogous to the first studies, the results for West Germany confirm the assumptions of family economics only in a few cases.

However, it is apparent, how the effects change due to a further differentiation of the child variables. Table 2 takes the child-parent relation only for the first child into consideration, in doing so it is not paid attention to the fact, that marital stability should change, if more children are born. In accordance with family economics, marital stability is reduced by stepchildren or premarital children whereas legitimate children decrease the divorce risk. Hence the “overall utility of children” should be computable via the utility of the individual children. If parents have, for example, only premarital children, the utility should be less than, if premarital and legitimate children exist. The comparison of Table 2 (step 0) and Table 3 confirms the assumption, that further differentiations change the outcome and that according to Gary S. Becker the utility function contributes substantially to an explanation of this assumption. One first premarital child reduces the divorce risk by approx. 30 % (Table 2 (step 0)). Here the effect of further children is not taken into consideration. Table 3 shows no significant effects for married couples with only one premarital child. For married couples with one premarital and one legitimate^{xviii} child, however, the divorce risk is higher than, if only one legitimate child exists, but lower than with couples with only one premarital child¹.

The third study also suggests, that the effects vary with different operationalisations and with the level of differentiations of the child variables. Further analyses with the Mannheim study on divorces show similar results, which are significant for many variables.

¹ There are no significant influences here.

Therefore child-parent relations should be investigated even more in depth with the help of more data, in order to obtain more detailed results.

Next the outcome of the study on characteristics of children shall be presented briefly (Table 4). It will be displayed in a simplified tablexix.

Table 5: Outcome for characteristics of children

		West	East
Number	First Child	0,402***	0,411***
	Second Child	0,275***	0,257***
	Third Child	0,217****	0,254**
	At least four children	0,333*	0,134***
Age	Age youngest child up to 3 years	0,330***	0,567**
	Age youngest child more than 3 and up to 7 years	0,541**	0,483**
	Age youngest child more than 7 and up to 11 years	0,503*	0,663**
	Age youngest child more than 11 and up to 15 years	1,097	0,449**
	Age youngest child more than 15 and up to 19 years	1,221+	1,786*
	Age youngest child more than 19 years	3,127***	3,025**
Gender	One child: Son	0,538**	0,600+
	One child: Daughter	0,619*	0,887
	Two children: Son-Son	0,220***	0,313**
	Two children: Son-Daughter	0,282***	0,324*
	Two children: Daughter-Son	0,307***	0,554*
	Two children: Daughter-Daughter	0,298***	0,477*
	Three children: Son-Son-Son	0,218**	1,008
	Three children: Son-Son-Daughter	0,252*	0,341*
	Three children: Son-Daughter-Son	0,387*	1,117
	Three children: Daughter-Son-Son	0,189*	0,997
	Three children: Son-Daughter-Daughter	1,174	0,396+
	Three children: Daughter-Son-Daughter	1,840*	0,281+
	Three children: Daughter-Daughter-Son	0,613+	0,388+
	Three children: Daughter-Daughter-Daughter	0,638*	0,497+

+ *Significant at 0.10 level *Significant at 0.05 level **Significant at 0.01 level ***Significant at 0.001 level

Regarding the number of children, analyses for one, two, three and four or more children were performed. The age of the children is illustrated by six cohorts. As for the gender, combinations are calculated for the first, second and third child. Table 4 shows the results for West and East Germany: In West Germany married couples with three children have the lowest risk of divorce, followed by those with two, at least four and one child. In East Germany the marital stability declines substantially, when a child is born, and is reduced by each further child. Concerning the age of their children, West German couples have the lowest divorce risk, when they have children that belong to the youngest age group, followed by those with children between 7 and 11 years, and between 3 and 7 years. For cohort 4 and 5 no significant impact of the age of the children can be observed, whereas with the oldest childrenxx the divorce risk even increases severely. With respect to the gender of children,

West German families with one or two children have a lower divorce risk for sons than for other combinations of their children's gender. In marriages with three children a combination of daughter-son-son is most stable. In East Germany the result is the same for one or two sons, whereas the results for three children are not significant enough to interpret them.

Regarding the structure of gender preference, more observations are essential, that cannot be presented for time reasons.

5. Discussion

The results demonstrate on the one hand how relevant theories substantiate the influence of children on marital stability. On the other hand the results confirm that opposing tendencies for divorce risk can be observed depending on the child-parent relationship and the characteristics of children. The divorce rates vary substantially based on the degree of differentiation: If only children are analyzed - without factoring in child-parent relationships - marital stability is much lower than for families who only have legitimate children. Families with stepchildren children show higher divorce rates than families with premarital or legitimate children.

The supposition - that an exact differentiation according to child/parent relationships and various characteristics of children account for considerable differences in divorce rates - can thus be confirmed.

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Endnotes

- i Only the replicative the survey with 3435 (West Germany) and 775 (East Germany) first marriages.
- ii Further theories are not included here.
- iii Plus and minus signs show the expected tendencies according to the theory.
- iv In order to retain the clarity, the indication of the results was spared in all tables for the covariates.
- v According to family economics children have different effects: illegitimate ones reduce marital stability, whereas legitimate children increase it: if children are controlled without taking their child-parent relation into consideration, there should be less effects than with the other two possibilities.
- vi Here only the effect of legitimate children is displayed; in order to retain clarity, the outcome for the other variables has been spared.
- vii According to family economics legitimate children have a stabilising effect on marriages.
- viii According to family economics legitimate children have a stabilising effect on marriages. If only legitimate children exist, this effect should be highest.
- ix In order to retain the clarity, the indication of the results was spared in all tables for the covariates.
- x Fifteen possibilities of combinations can be determined. They are displayed in the first column of table 3.
- xi The effect is also due to the fact that marital stability rises with the number of children – as was visible in other analyses.
- xii Step of combination.
- xiii Simplified.
- xiv Bold values: Compliance with family economics.
- xv According to the social exchange theory premarital children should stabilise marriages less than legitimate, but contrary to the conjecture of family economics they should at least have a stabilising effect.
- xvi Simplified.
- xvii Bold values: Compliance with family economics.
- xviii Value: 0.637*.
- xix All models were calculated with further covariates.
- xx Or not living in the household.