A Multilevel Analysis of the Connection between Female Labour Force Participation and Divorce in Canada, 1931-1991

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the causal order between women's employment and divorce in Canada 1931-1991. An econometric model—the Granger-Hsiao test—is applied to time series data to identify the form and direction of the relationship between these two events and predict their pattern of change over time. Autoregressive estimates show that increased entry of women into the work force was a causal factor in the rise in divorce rates from 1931-1969; after 1969 the direction of causality switched. Relative risk estimates obtained from individual-level survey data using Cox’s proportional hazard models confirm the time series results but, in addition, show that labour force participation was a significant predictor of the risk of marital dissolution only among women who married between 1950 and 1969 and who worked without interruption. Logistic regression results show that compared to women who did not experience marital disruption, divorced and separated women had higher odds of being employed while those who remarried were less likely to be employed. This study thus demonstrates that the causal connection between these two events have changed over time among Canadian women, and that analyses at different levels of data measurement can be used to support, refine or refute results obtained at either level.

Introduction

THE CONNECTION between divorce rates and women's labour force participation rates in industrialized societies is well established in the literature. What is not clear is the causal order of the connection. Does work outside the home make


We are grateful for the invaluable assistance of Professors T.R. Balakrishnan, Tom Burch and Roderick Beaujot and the comments of two anonymous referees of this paper. Help from the Population Studies Centre and Social Science Computing Laboratory is hereby acknowledged.

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IJCS XXXVIII, 3-4
it easier for women to leave marriage, or do women seek employment as insurance against possible future divorce?

Such a connection may be understood in terms of changes in the functions of the family to individuals and society (Goode, 1977; Wrigley, 1977). Particularly important are structural differentiation and social transformations that have created opportunity structures which allow women to find work outside the home and thus play divergent roles from their traditional ones of home-making and nurturing (Review of Demography, 1989). Such opportunities have expanded especially since World War I and, concomitantly, the family has become less a place where "people (need) each other for survival" to one where members seek emotional gratification from each other, a centre "of nurture and affection, providing individuals with emotional support as they retreat from the achievement-oriented struggles of the outside world" (Beaujot, 1991, p. 20).

Two major difficulties usually confront social scientists wishing to establish causal connections between social phenomena. At the aggregate level one faces the possibility of co-causality or even multicausality among variables of interest. Moreover, an observed correlation may be spurious because the phenomena of interest may be sub-processes of other underlying factor(s). For instance, in Easterlin’s relative income hypothesis linking women’s employment patterns and the likelihood of divorce in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, tight economic conditions is the underlying factor accounting for both women’s employment and divorce patterns (Cherlin, 1981).

At the individual level the difficulty arises at the point of generalization. In discussing the empirical connection between women’s employment and fertility, Bhrolchain (Bhrolchain, 1993) argues that it cannot be assumed that the temporal order of the two events establishes causality. We can make a similar argument with regard to women’s employment and divorce. A woman’s employment before divorce implies no necessary causality since employment may offer a range of gratifications to a woman which are not financial and which may not be directly relevant to her marital happiness; similarly divorce may be a response to a bad marriage rather than a quest for independence.

In this analysis we examine the causal connection between women’s employment and divorce in Canada at both the individual and aggregate levels of measurement. We apply an econometric method—the Granger-Hsiao model—to time series data to identify the form and direction of the causal order between these events and attempt to predict the pattern of change over time. We make no claim to non-spuriousness of the observed correlations at this point because of the difficulty of controlling for possible rival explanations at such an aggregate level of analysis. However, using retrospective survey data, the analysis is extended with statistical controls introduced for demographic, socio-economic, and attitudinal characteristics.