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Mental health dynamics around marital dissolution. Moderating effects of parenthood and children’s age

Abstract
Our study is the first that aims at estimating the intra-individual effect of marital dissolution on mental health, conditional on parenthood status and age of the youngest biological child. We rely on the set point model that predicts a nonlinear, homeostatic self-regulation process with an anticipatory effect and a subsequent recovery phase. Assuming heterogeneous effects, we expect both parenthood status and age of the youngest biological child grouped into five distinct categories to moderate the strength of the dissolution-health nexus. We use GSOEP data and restrict our sample to women and men who were at risk for first marital dissolution within the observational period 2002 to 2016. The dependent variable is the mental health component of the SF-12 survey instrument. We estimate distributed fixed-effects (dummy impact functions), covering the time span from three (or more) years before marital dissolution up to six (or more) years afterwards. Compared to the baseline, childless women exhibit a considerable impairment in mental health after dissolution, experiencing a slower recovery than childless men. Our most unambiguous result is the negative anticipation and a subsequent downward trajectory of mental health among mothers of infants and toddlers, whereas in the respective group of fathers we do not observe any change over time. In all other parent groups, mental health reacts mostly in a short-term manner to dissolution, except for fathers of pre- and primary school children whose mental health remains unchanged. Our study provides new evidence on mental health dynamics around marital dissolution and raises the awareness of mental distress, loneliness and potential social exclusion faced by childless and parents, in particular by lone mothers of young children.

Key words: mental health dynamics; marital dissolution; parenthood; distributed fixed-effects, GSOEP

Introduction
During the year 2016, almost one million couples divorced in Europe, and over 160 thousand of them in Germany (Eurostat 2018). From all German divorces, 83% occurred just after the obligatory “separation year”, 16% on average three years after separation, and the remaining 1% terminated exceptionally before the expiration of the separation year (Federal Statistical Office 2018). 51% of all divorce applications were filed by women, 41% by men and 8% by both spouses. About half of divorcing German couples had minor children (Federal Statistical Office 2018).
Separations and divorces have a multitude of effects for those involved. In this paper, we study temporal dynamics of mental health around marital dissolution. We are particularly interested to learn more about gender specific differences of these dynamics and the moderating role of (non)parenthood. Whether a couple has a child or not, may strongly influence the decision to separate and divorce. Couples having children are less likely to divorce, especially when they have several children (with 2-3 children minimizing the risk of divorce, Andersson 1997) and/or young children (Waite/Lillard 1991; Steele et al. 2005). Part of the effect may be causal, meaning that children increase partners’ commitment to the (marital) union, but it may also reflect selection, as partners less committed to a union are less likely to have children together (Coppola/Di Cesare 2008; Lyngstad/Jalovaara 2010).

Presence of a child may also affect partners’ experience of divorce. Although research from past decades accumulated vast evidence that divorce is detrimental to mental health (Amato/Keith 1991; Hank/Wagner 2013), the question of moderating effects of parenthood has been addressed by only a handful of papers (Blekesaune/Barrett 2005; Williams/Dunne-Bryant 2006; Leopold/Kalmijn 2016). Unfortunately, most previous studies use less than ideal research designs, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions. First of all, viewing marital dissolution as a dynamic process rather than an enduring state requires analyses of panel data and an adequate longitudinal modelling approach that considers anticipatory effects and subsequent adaptation (Amato 2000). Second, past research rarely accounts for the ages of children and typically pools together childless people in one category with parents of adult children. Our analysis overcomes these methodological limitations. First, we use fixed-effects regression for panel data to control for time-invariant intra-individual unobserved heterogeneity around marital dissolution. Second, we account for baseline age-related dynamics of mental health. And third, we distinguish five categories of (non)parenthood, from childless, through parents of infants and toddlers to those having pre- and primary school children, to those having adolescent or adult children.

Mental health—the outcome variable studied by us—is defined by the WHO as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO 2018). The question whether presence of children aggravates the consequences of marital dissolution for mental health is important from a substantive point of view: divorces affecting both parents and children are common and have long-reaching consequences. The experience of marital dissolution and conflict affects partners’ well-being for several years afterwards (Lucas 2005), influences their children’s well-being (Amato/Loomis/Booth 1995), and shapes family ties and behaviour among children and grandchildren of divorcees (Amato/Cheadle 2005). Moreover, we consider mental rather than physical health because mental health is more sensitive to life events in a short- and mid-term perspective.

Our study aims at the existing research gap on the role of diverse stages of parenthood in explaining mental health of parents around marital dissolution. Examining the complex role played by children at different developmental stages improves our understanding of negative consequences of marital dissolution as well as of benefits derived from marriage. Negative consequences of marital dissolution for mental health are typically interpreted in terms of being deprived of a protective effect of marriage itself. However, such reasoning