American Mother's Engagement in Paid Work During their First Child's Preschool Years, Relationship Stability, and Partners' Work Hours

The transition to parenthood marks a period in the life-course when gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work are amplified, on average between men and women, as well as within coupled households. Research shows that small children continue to impact women's employment participation, and employment outcomes in significant ways, while findings on the relationship between fatherhood and men's employment experiences is more mixed. This paper examines American women's employment pathways around and after the first transition to motherhood until the first child reaches school age. The analysis takes the viewpoint of women, but examines their employment trajectories after birth in conjunction with the presence and level of their partner's employment participation.

Decisions about paid and unpaid work are made within the context of households, whose members are making decisions given personal and household resources, as well as the larger socio-political, cultural and economic context. Jacobs and Gerson (2005) have argued in *The Time Divide* that professional couples, who have seen rising work hours over the years, experiencing a "time-squeeze," while lower skilled workers often cannot find enough employment to make ends meet. More recently, Cha (2010) examined the relationship between spousal overwork on men and women's employment hours. Cha's research shows that partners who work very long hours (50 or more, or 60 or more) increase the likelihood of mothers especially to leave paid employment. This paper builds on the existing body of research on the relationship among partner's work hours and extends it in several ways to map the variation in mother's long term employment participation and work hours and the ways they are linked to partnership and partner's working hours.

I use multichannel sequence analysis (optimal matching), a method that allows for the study of pathways over time as the unit of analysis, and for the simultaneous analysis of how women negotiate paid work after transition to motherhood, *in conjunction with* the their relationship patterns and their partner's employment participation. I employ data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) for the years 1979 to 2011 to construct employment pathways of women and their male cohabiting partners starting in the year prior to the woman's first transition to motherhood until the first child reaches school age. I construct parallel employment trajectories for women and their partners using information on both present and past

employment. For each year, I distinguish the following six "states," including "not employed," marginal part-time employment between 1 and 19, long part-time hours of 20 to 34 weekly hours, standard full-time hours (35 to 40 hours), long full-time hours (41 to 47), and very long full-time employment of 48 or more hours a week. Rather than excluding "single women," I include a state indicating the absences of a spouse or partner in the household in a given year. This takes analysis takes into account, that relationships are fluid, and that single or partnered motherhood is not a static characteristic, in fact, only about 6 percent of mothers in the sample remain permanently single, while 22 percent are intermittently partnered over the course of their first child's preschool years.

I use optimal matching and multi-channel sequence analysis included in the TraMineR package for R (Gabadinho, Ritschard, Studer, & Müller, 2009). The basic idea of optimal matching (OM) is to generate a measure of how different two trajectories are to each other by counting the number of substitutions (or insertions/deletions in the case of sequences of unequal length) necessary to turn one sequence into the other. The OM algorithm finds the "least costly" way to turn any given two sequences in the data set into the other, given the pre-defined substitution and insertion/deletion costs. In multi-channel sequence analysis, the substitution costs of each channel (here woman's employment channel and the partner channel) are combined to create to create one matrix of dissimilarity measures. Subsequently, a cluster analysis is performed on this "dissimilarity matrix," to reduce the complexity of information, resulting in a typology of employment and partnership trajectories. Unlike other statistical tools, such as regression analysis which assumes that patterns in the data are generated by a probabilistic process, this type of analysis does not make any assumptions about the processes that generate pattern (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010).

Initial analyses of parallel employment trajectories of women and their male partners yield seven different types of trajectories, illustrated by the sequence frequency plots in Figure 1. On the left hand side, graphs show women's employment participation and work hours' pathways in each of the seven clusters, while the right hand side graphs illustrate the corresponding partnership and partner's work hours patterns. For each year of the observation window (starting with the year prior to the birth, marked h1) the graphs display the frequency of each "state." Clusters 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 represent women who are partnered over most of the observation period, while clusters 4 and 7 are women with less stable relationship patterns.

The preliminary findings show the variation in couple's employment participation patterns beyond the two poles of ***standard work-week dual-earner*** (cluster 5), and ***female care provider-male breadwinner couples*** (cluster 2). Cluster 1 represents ***high intensity dual-earner couples***, with both partners working full-time. The male partners are most likely to work very long hours (over 48 weekly hours) over the entire observation period, with some men "reducing" working hours during the first few years to 35 to 40 hours a week, or 41 to 47 hours a week. Further analyses will show whether these couples represent the professional couples described by Jacobs and Gerson (2005). In contrast, women in cluster 6, the ***high intensity male breadwinner/precarious second earner couples***, whose partners also work predominantly long or very long hours, have weaker employment attachment. In the year after birth, about half of them are not employed, and an additional 33 percent are part-time employed (short or long part-time). These women tend to cycle in and out of employment rather than experience only a fluctuation in work hours. This cluster may represent the couples whose experiences were captured by Cha's (2010) research, which shows that especially mothers' likelihood of leaving employment is increased by spousal overwork. However, the present analysis indicates that employment exits may not necessarily be permanent for some mothers, but that spousal overwork may also be linked to a destabilization of some mother's employment trajectories over time. Women in c*luster 3* also experience fluctuations in their employment, but rather in their work hours (predominantly in the part-time range), rather than in employment participation. Women in this cluster experience the highest average number of transitions from one state to another among all the clusters, indicating less stable trajectories as well. The male partners in this cluster work regular, long, and very long full-time hours. This cluster may therefore be called ***male breadwinner/female part-time earner couples***.

Women in the two remaining clusters live on average for about half of the years in the observation window without a partner in the household. They also tend to be younger on average compared to the women in the other clusters, which corresponds to the increase of single motherhood over the past decades. Women in cluster 4 have moderate employment attachment, they spend an average of about 2.5 years outside employment within the observation window, and otherwise fluctuating employment hours. It is difficult to characterize this cluster, since it does not stand out in any way in comparison with the other clusters. These are women with ***less stable relationships, and moderate employment attachment***. In contrast, women in cluster 7,

while also in less stable relationships, have the strongest employment attachment of all the women in my sample. They spend over 6 years in employment, predominantly regular full-time employment. These are women ***with less stable relationships, and strong employment attachment***.

This initial analysis shows that motherhood and partnership status shape women's employment participation in dynamic ways that are not necessarily stable over time. Furthermore, partnership patterns are not as clear cut as often suggested by the distinction between single and partnered mothers. Further analyses will show, whether there were shifts in the frequency of these clusters over time, and how educational attainment, professional occupational status, and further children affect membership in these clusters.

References

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Figure 1. Sequence Frequency Plots by Cluster