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Dynamics of Women's Labor Force Participation in the United States and West Germany, 1983 to 1990

By Janet Z. Giele and Elke Holst*

Summary:

This paper uses the Syracuse University PSID-GSOEP Equivalent Data File to explore women's employment patterns over two four-year periods in the American and West German panel surveys. Four major theoretical traditions illuminate differences between employed and nonemployed women. Static labor supply models account for demographic differences. A dynamic life cycle framework finds greater stability in the lives of the nonemployed. Cultural and institutional factors underlie the 10 to 15 percent higher employment rates among American women. Finally, greater uncertainty reflected in divorce, poverty, and a weaker safety net are also associated with higher levels of women's employment in the United States.

1. Introduction

Women's labor force participation has been thoroughly studied by economists over the past 30 years but usually with cross-sectional data from only one year and only one country at a time. Our paper extends past work in two ways, by following women's employment patterns over two four-year periods during the mid- and late 1980s and by comparing equivalent data for the United States and West Germany. Such a comparison has recently become more easily possible through the Syracuse University PSID-GSOEP Equivalent Data File (Burkhauser, Butrica, and Daly 1995).

We first profile women according to their patterns of labor force participation in the United States (1983 to 1989) and in West Germany (1984 to 1990). Our inquiry moves from traditional economic explanations of why women enter or leave the labor force to the role of cultural and institutional factors. We reason that the more the culture favors women's combining work and family roles, and the more uncertain their lives, the more likely they will be to take a job. In addition, we discover what appear to be large-scale differences in expectations about women's roles in the two countries. Evidence comes both from the micro level (as reflected in differences among the employed, the nonemployed, and changers) and from national differences between the United States and West Germany.

The purpose of this paper is descriptive and exploratory. We use existing theoretical frameworks to make sense out of the data on women's labor supply. We do not attempt to test one framework in preference to another or to propose alternative models, but rather to outline a strategy for future analysis. We take up four major streams of inquiry — labor supply theories, dynamic life cycle approaches, cultural

factors, and the impact of uncertainty. We conclude that the four modes of analysis are complementary; together they suggest several promising lines of future inquiry for understanding women's labor supply.

2. A Comparative Research Design

In each country we followed cross-sectional samples for two four-year periods. We limited our sample to women ages 16 to 59 who had participated in the survey in every year of each period and who had answered the employment question in all four years. Thus, we had a total of four samples, two for each country. The PSID sample of 1983 to 1986 contained 5,250 cases and the 1986 to 1989 period 5,246 cases. The corresponding numbers of West German women in the GSOEP were 3,628 cases for 1984 to 1987 and 3,279 for 1984 to 1987. Table 1 shows the percentages from each group who were employed in the beginning and ending years of each period, the proportion who worked full- or part-time, and the percentage who had some full-time or part-time experience over each of the four-year periods. Although official statistics for each country show women's labor force participation rates to be quite similar (52 to 58 percent) through the 1980s, we found that roughly two-thirds of the United States women were employed in each period compared with about half of the German women. Nearly equal numbers of United States women worked full- or part-time in 1983, but full-time work had gained somewhat by 1989. Part-time work is much more common in the United States than in Germany; almost six out of ten women in the United States had some part-time work experience during both periods. Full-time work was the dominant working scheme in Germany in both periods, but part-time work gained slightly in the second period, especially among women with children (Holst and Schupp 1996).

We divided the samples into five comparison groups, as shown in Table 2, that are central to the analysis of this paper:

- in-stayers (who were in the labor force all four years of the period);
- out-to-in movers;
- changers (who had more than one transition during the four-year period);
- in-to-out movers;
- and out-stayers (who were not employed during all four years).

Almost one and a half times as many of the United States women were in-stayers compared with the West Germans (44 to 49 percent versus 31 to 33 percent); and nearly twice

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Table 1

Employment Experience of American and German Women, Aged 16 to 59, 1983 to 1990
weighted percentages¹⁾

	American Women (PSID)				German Women (GSOEP)			
	1983 to 1986 (N=5,250) ²⁾		1986 to 1989 (N=5,246) ²⁾		1984 to 1987 (N=3,628) ²⁾		1987 to 1990 (N=3,279) ²⁾	
	Year 1	Year 4	Year 1	Year 4	Year 1	Year 4	Year 1	Year 4
Employment³⁾								
Employed	59	65	64	68	47	49	46	53
Some employed	79		82		62		66	
Full-time work⁴⁾								
Full-time	30	36	37	39	31	33	30	35
Some full-time in years 1 to 4	49		53		43		46	
Part-time work⁴⁾								
Part-time	42	40	41	38	17	16	16	18
Some part-time in years 1 to 4	57		56		27		31	

¹⁾ Percentages are weighted by a longitudinal weighting factor applied to the last year of the period in the PSID. In the GSOEP, the weight is a combination of a cross-sectional and staying probability. — ²⁾ Period data were constructed by selecting only those respondents present in each of the four years of the period. The respondents were aged 16 to 59 in the first year of the period. — ³⁾ The employment variable E11101 gives better results on employment status in the United States; this variable is not available for Germany and E11102 was used instead. Results may therefore not be truly equivalent. A fuller discussion of the differences between the panel results and official statistics is contained in a Methodological Note available from the authors. — ⁴⁾ Full-time/part-time is based on variable E11103 for both the United States and Germany. But since the United States employment variable is E11101, and E11103 is based on E11102, results for the two countries are not entirely comparable.

Source: Authors' calculations.

as many German women were out-stayers compared with the Americans (34 to 38 percent versus 18 to 21 percent). The somewhat greater number of American changers indicates the higher mobility in United States employment.

One striking feature of the comparison is the significant difference in women's employment levels between the two nations, even though both are advanced industrial societies with relatively high levels of education and wealth. To understand the difference, we turn first to labor supply theories that have been used to explain the dramatic rise in women's employment during the past 50 years in the United States.

3. Human Capital and Women's Labor Supply

Following women's sustained movement into the labor force after World War II, economists sought to understand the phenomenon as a product of the rising demand in women's occupations as well as a result of women's increased education and higher wages. Mincer (1962) attributed the trend to a substitution effect whereby women's leisure became more costly and they chose paid employment instead. Further work by Cain (1966) and Bowen and Finegan (1969) fleshed out the key predictors of married women's labor supply.

Our data show that labor supply variables that distinguish employed and nonemployed women seem to work the same way in both countries (Table 3). That is, women were more likely to be employed if they had more educa-

tion, smaller households, fewer children, and less household income.

The continuously employed women were on average two to three years younger in the United States and four years younger in Germany than the nonemployed women. Women employed in all four years of each period had about a year and a half more education in the United States and one year more in Germany. In the United States the employed women came from smaller households (2.9 to 3.0 persons for the employed compared with 3.5 for the nonemployed). In both periods the United States employed women reported fewer than one child (.9) in the household, and the nonemployed only slightly more (1.2 to 1.3). Differences in household size by employment were almost identical for Germany. Employed women in West Germany averaged half as many children (.4 to .5) as the nonemployed women (.8 to .9).

The labor supply theory prediction that a woman is more likely to enter the labor force if she has a lower household income was also upheld. Household incomes for the two groups of women were compared by contrasting gross household income minus the woman's own labor income. The women who were out of the labor force in all four years in Germany had 25 to 35 percent more basic household income than their employed counterparts. In the United States the difference was slightly smaller. The American woman who was out of the labor force during the same period had a base household income that was on average

Table 2

**Samples for Period Analysis, American and German Women,
Aged 16 to 59, 1983 to 1990**
weighted percentage, unweighted frequencies

	In (4 years)	Out to In	Changers ¹⁾	In to Out	Out (4 years)
American Women (PSID)²⁾					
1983 to 1986, N=5,250					
Weighted percent	44	14	13	8	21
Frequency	(2,040)	(767)	(723)	(423)	(1,297)
1986 to 1989, N=5,246					
Weighted percent	49	12	13	9	18
Frequency	(2,364)	(682)	(670)	(458)	(1,072)
German Women (GSOEP)³⁾					
1984 to 1987, N=3,628					
Weighted percent	33	12	7	10	38
Frequency	(1,166)	(443)	(239)	(329)	(1,451)
1987 to 1990, N=3,279					
Weighted percent	31	15	11	9	34
Frequency	(1,007)	(513)	(348)	(282)	(1,129)

¹⁾ Changers are defined as persons who have made more than one change, from out to in or in to out of the labor force during the four-year period. — ²⁾ This classification into five dynamic categories is based on E11101 for the PSID. — ³⁾ German dynamic categories are based on E11102 and therefore may not be exactly parallel to the United States figures. Issues of missing data and choice of variables are discussed in the Methodological Note of a more detailed version of this paper.

Source: Authors' calculations.

Table 3

**Demographic Characteristics, Employed and Nonemployed
American and German Women, Aged 16 to 59, 1983 to 1990**
weighted means¹⁾

	Labor Force Status			
	American Women (PSID) ²⁾			
	1983 to 1986		1986 to 1989	
	In	Out	In	Out
Age of woman	36.7	38.8	36.9	40.2
Years of education	12.9	11.4	13.3	11.8
Household size	3.0	3.5	2.9	3.5
Number of children in household	0.9	1.3	0.9	1.2
Base household income in 1983, 1986 in dollars ³⁾	23,130	27,122	26,232	32,029
Number of observations	5,250		5,246	
	German Women (GSOEP)			
	1984 to 1987		1987-1990	
	In	Out	In	Out
	Age of woman	36.0	40.4	37.8
Years of education	11.7	10.8	11.8	11.0
Household size	2.9	3.4	2.7	3.4
Number of children in household	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.9
Base household income in 1984, 1987 in DM ³⁾	39,281	49,104	39,950	53,656
Number of observations	3,628		3,279	

1) Percentages are weighted by a longitudinal weighting factor applied to the last year of the period in the PSID. In the GSOEP, the weight is a combination of a cross-sectional and staying probability. — 2) Children are persons aged 16 and under. — 3) Base household income is the gross household income minus the woman's own labor income.

Source: Authors' calculations.

17-22 percent more than the woman who was employed. Thus, in a static analysis a woman's education, household size, and family income are powerful and consistent predictors of married women's labor supply.

4. Dynamic Impact of Aging and Life Events

Critics such as Killingsworth (1983) have noted, however, that many improvements are possible if a dynamic analysis and a longitudinal dimension are added. Recent contributions on women's labor force participation by Mroz (1987), Berndt (1991), Zabel (1993), and Van der Klaauw (1996) have elaborated a much needed dynamic dimension in the research on women's employment decisions. The labor supply of women who are already working appears to be surprisingly insensitive to changes in the wage rate, suggesting that self-selection and important intrinsic, endogenous, and nonpecuniary factors are present in the employment decision (Mroz 1987). Finally, change in marital status, effects of taxes and transfers, and

other factors have been added to show the complex interaction of internal and contextual factors in the employment decision.

For this paper our forays into dynamic analysis can be only rudimentary. We do not report on educational upgrading across the four-year periods because it was relatively rare, except in the youngest age groups. We do, however, compare five categories of respondents who ranged from the steadily employed to movers into or out of the market, changers back and forth, and those who were continuously out of the market during each period. The central question is whether there were any noticeable differences in the surrounding circumstances of the five different groups. Table 4 compares the groups on dissolution of marriage, children leaving home, change in household income, and reduction in amount of public transfers. Although the patterns are not perfectly consistent, the greatest amount of change appears to be among women in the positions associated with movement into the labor force. The women who entered the labor market during the

Table 4

**Dynamics in Life Events, by Labor Force Participation Pattern,
American and German Women, Aged 16 to 59, 1983 to 1990**
weighted percentages

	In (4 years)	Out to In	Changers ¹⁾	In to Out	Out (4 years)
Marital Status, percent no longer married²⁾					
PSID, 1983 to 1986	5	10	5	6	5
PSID, 1986 to 1989	6	12	6	2	4
GSOEP, 1984 to 1987	3	2	3	2	2
GSOEP, 1987 to 1990	2	2	2	3	4
Children, percent with fewer in Year 4³⁾					
PSID, 1983 to 1986	19	32	25	17	23
PSID, 1986 to 1989	18	31	25	14	20
GSOEP, 1984 to 1987	18	25	24	16	20
GSOEP, 1987 to 1990	12	22	15	8	16
Base household income, percent in same quintile⁴⁾					
PSID, 1983 to 1986	54	48	49	44	65
PSID, 1986 to 1989	56	49	55	46	60
GSOEP, 1984 to 1987	50	49	52	47	50
GSOEP, 1987 to 1990	55	54	48	43	59
Public transfers, percent who received less⁵⁾					
PSID, 1983 to 1986	18	28	23	22	17
PSID, 1986 to 1989	15	25	24	13	12
GSOEP, 1984 to 1987	39	52	37	36	36
GSOEP, 1987 to 1990	37	51	45	33	39
¹⁾ Changers made more than one change into and out of the labor force during the period. — ²⁾ Marital status changed from married, living with partner, in Year 1 to Year 4 of the period. — ³⁾ Number of children living in the household declined from Year 1 to Year 4 of the period. — ⁴⁾ Defined as gross household income not counting woman's labor earnings. — ⁵⁾ Persons who experienced either a drop in transfer income or exit from receiving transfers between Year 1 and Year 4 of the period. Source: Author's calculations.					

period were especially likely to experience an end of marriage, children leaving home, changes in household income, and lower public transfers from the beginning to the end of the four-year period. The greatest stability in marital status, household income, and public transfers was generally found among the women who were employed all four years ("In"), who left employment ("In to Out"), or who were entirely out of the labor force during the period ("Out").

5. Culture, Institutional Factors, and Tastes for Work

Although similar factors appear to be at work in the United States and Germany in the static and dynamic labor supply models, we return to a puzzle that these models cannot by themselves explain — the striking differences of 10

to 15 percent between the two countries in women's labor supply. What is it about the two societies that sets such very different constraints on behavior or that gives people different values about what kind of life they want to lead?

Answers to these cultural questions range from different tastes for work at the individual level to different institutions, laws, and value systems in each society at the macro level. Women's individual role expectations have gradually shifted from the homemaker ideal to acceptance of combining work and family roles. Based on a study of Wellesley College alumnae who graduated between 1910 and 1960, Perun and Giele (1982) and Giele (1993) have shown that United States college women at the turn of the century opted for marriage or career but during the 1960s began to seek marriage *and* career. Giele and Pischner (1994) found a similar shift in the life patterns from older to younger age cohorts in East and West Germany but with much lower levels of combining paid employment and marriage and motherhood in the West than in the East. Goldin (1995) traces the same trend through a cohort comparison within the United States National Longitudinal Surveys.

At the societal level there are also clear differences in women's employment patterns. Cross-national comparisons by Kahne and Giele (1992) and Blau and Ferber (1992) demonstrate that among advanced industrial societies the Scandinavian countries have generally the highest levels of women's employment. National cultural differences are played out in the institutional structures of the workplace, family, and social policies. They are passed on through socialization and the educational system and thence affect individual motivation, self-concept, and ambition. Vella's (1993) study of Australian women's labor market performance found that attitudes had "a dramatic impact upon the level of the individual's education, labor supply, and rate of return to education."

In Table 5 we present summary statistics intended to highlight some of the broad differences between the United States and Germany in the conditions that might affect female labor supply decisions. American women in the PSID have an average of 12 to 13 years of education, whereas the German women have approximately one year less. In Germany women are also less likely to combine paid employment with family responsibilities. The household size of employed women is similar, although the number of children is smaller to begin with, but the rate of combining work and family life is also much lower there (58 to 61 percent of the United States employed women are married versus 50 to 54 percent of the German employed women). Rates of combining work and motherhood contrast even more sharply, with 23 to 28 percent of the American employed women having more than one child compared with only 11 percent of their German counterparts. In addition, as shown in Table 1, nearly twice as many American women work part-time as German women (56 to 57 percent versus 27 to 31 percent), although more than half of nonemployed German women reported in 1993 that

Table 5
**Cultural and Institutional Factors in Women's Employment,
 United States and West German Women, Aged 16 to 59, 1980s**
 weighted means and percentages

	United States		West Germany	
	1983 to 1986	1986 to 1989	1984 to 1987	1987 to 1990
Years of Education in Year 1 (all women)	12.5	12.8	11.2	11.3
Household size in Year 1				
Number of children	1.1	1.1	0.7	0.7
Number of persons	3.3	3.2	3.2	3.1
Employed in Years 1 to 4				
Married in Years 1 to 4	61	58	52	54
More than 1 child in household in Year 1	23	28	11	11
Years of work experience in Years 1 to 6	4.4	4.6	2.9	3.0
Income in Year 1				
Gross household income ¹⁾	\$ 31,630	\$ 38,103	DM 56,723	DM 62,284
Woman's labor earnings	\$ 6,616	\$ 9,142	DM 11,984	DM 13,483
Woman's wages as percent of household income	0.21	0.24	0.21	0.22
Base household income in Year 1²⁾	\$ 25,015	\$ 28,961	DM 44,739	DM 48,801
80th percentile as per- cent of mean	1.54	1.57	1.47	1.52
20th percentile as per- cent of mean	0.14	0.12	0.20	0.21
Public transfers				
Percent who received in Year 1	31	27	55	67
Percent who received in Year 1 and Year 4	18	16	43	54
Amount received in Year 1	\$ 1,160	\$ 1,182	DM 3,976	DM 4,569
Taxes paid by household in Year 1	\$ 5,482	\$ 6,524	DM 14,685	DM 16,495

¹⁾ Gross household income is "pregovernment" income before taxes. — ²⁾ "Base household income" is computed by subtracting woman's earnings from gross household income.
 Source: Authors' calculations.

they would take part-time work if it were available (Holst and Schupp 1994). Thus, the PSID women are able to report more labor force experience (4.4 to 4.5 years over a six-year span compared with only 2.9 to 3.0 years in the GSOEP).

Table 5 also reports measures of income distribution and the receipt of public transfers. These variables reflect important national differences in income equality, the role of government, and the safety net. Table 5 reflects a slightly more even distribution of income in Germany from

top to bottom and a more comprehensive safety net. Base household income at the 20th percentile was 20 to 21 percent of the mean in Germany compared with only 12 to 14 percent of the mean in the United States. In addition, 43 to 54 percent of the German households received some form of public transfers in the first and last years of each period compared with only 16 to 18 percent of United States households. In Germany these transfers include housing allowances, child benefits, pensions for old age and disability, government student assistance, and unemployment benefits. In the United States data, public transfers refer to the sum of Aid to Families with Dependent Children payments, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), social security payments, unemployment and workman's compensation, and the dollar value of food stamps. Against these evident differences, however, it should also be noted that women's individual labor earnings as a percent of gross household income are almost identical, between 21 and 24 percent in both countries.

6. Individual and Cultural Adaptation to Uncertainty

Past theoretical work has related women's labor force participation to uncertainty at the micro level. Johnson and Skinner (1986) supported the hypothesis that divorce probabilities increase female labor supply. Based on their findings that women have increasingly adopted multiple role patterns combining work and family in East and West Germany as well as the United States, Giele and Pischner (1994) suggest that Becker's (1981) prediction of an increasing division of labor between household partners with respect to market work is no longer as plausible as in the past. Following Ott's (1992) reasoning, they argue that because of more uncertain conditions in the family and in the global economy, partners will avoid a high degree of specialization that is risky if they become separated or their contractual obligations to each other are weakened. Blau and Grossberg (1991) have also explored the relationship between employment uncertainty and women's labor supply decisions. Using time series data from the 1950s through the 1980s on changing wage structures, they attribute the rapid rise in women's labor force participation rates in the 1970s to a high degree of uncertainty about future wages and husband's income.

Several findings from our current PSID-GSOEP comparison bear out the theme that women's labor force participation is in part a response to changes in family structure, social context, and other changing circumstances. American rates of marital dissolution are consistently higher than those in Germany, and United States women who are out of the labor force have slightly lower rates of marital dissolution. Government and social transfers in Germany are much more widespread than in the United States, and social inequality at the lower end of the income distribution is slightly less extreme. If we add what is probably a greater degree of geographical mobility and spatial distance between family members in the United States, a

picture emerges of a less settled and more rapidly changing society than in Germany, where tradition, family ties, and public and social supports in time of crisis are less uncertain. Add to this the amount of change in women's lives themselves. The higher levels of women's employment in the United States developed very rapidly after 1950, at the rate of 2.4 percent increase per year between 1970 and 1990 compared with only 0.6 percent increase per year during the same period in West Germany (United Nations 1991, Table 8, p. 104). It may be that Germany has just embarked on a similar rise, as is suggested by the change in women's employment rates from 46 to 53 percent between 1987 and 1990.

Both psychological and sociological explanations are available to explain a link between increasing women's employment and conditions of rapid change and turbulence. Kohn (1980), Helson and Picano (1990), and Barnett and Rivers (1996) have shown that flexible adaptation to complex demands is psychologically adaptive by producing a greater sense of personal control and better physical and mental health. Individuals faced with frustrating circumstances are likely to learn new responses by redefining the situation and rearranging their goals and activities through a process of resocialization (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Esser 1996). Reworking of the cultural „tool kit” enables persons to find new solutions to new social conditions (Swidler 1986). Thus, a revision of a woman's role from that of traditional full-time homemaker to part-time or full-time employee can be a successful strategy of action in the face of new economic or social conditions for which there are no traditional solutions. While culture is often used to explain continuities in action, culture can also help people to reorganize their disrupted lives. Women's paid employment may be a new cultural solution to major changes in family and society.

7. Summary and Conclusions

Our descriptive and exploratory examination of women's labor force participation in the United States and Germany has made two methodological advances by being longitudinal and cross-national, enabling us to compare women's lives in a dynamic way across similar time periods in two countries. Using parallel samples of women aged 16 to 59, we found that similar variables explained labor supply in each country. The static labor supply model was upheld by observations that both groups of women were more likely to work if younger and more highly educated and if they had fewer children and lower incomes. The dynamic model uncovered more frequent marital changes, children's departure from home, and family income change among women who were employed or moved into the labor market.

Our speculation about cultural factors and uncertainty enabled us to understand what might be key factors behind the 10-15 percent higher levels of American women's employment. Cultural analysis of differences between countries in tastes and institutions revealed slightly higher levels of women's education in America and greater willingness to be employed while also filling the roles of wife and mother. A comparison between the two countries with respect to uncertainty about the future suggested that life is more uncertain in the United States than Germany, especially in marital permanency and women's roles themselves. Nor can Americans count so surely on their safety net for public transfers and on the income distribution to protect against gross inequalities at the lower end of the income scale. Thus, women's employment becomes an adaptation to unknown changes in the future.

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