

Western Economic Association International 84th Annual Conference
CSWEP Session Summary

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Sheraton Vancouver Wall Centre

Session Title: Marriage, Divorce, and Mortality

Chair: Martha Olney, University of California, Berkeley

Paper: Nellie Lew (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Trinidad Beleche (University of California, Riverside) presented *'Til Laws Do Us Part? The Impact of Changing Divorce Laws on Divorce Rates in Mexico*

The increased prevalence of marital dissolution in Latin America has raised concerns that recently liberalized divorce laws are to blame. Current evidence on the effects of divorce law reform has been conflicting and has yet to address these effects in the context of developing societies. As one of the earlier adopters of liberalized divorce statutes in Latin America, Mexico's modernization of family civil codes at the state level provides us with a unique opportunity to investigate, in a panel framework, the impact of expanding divorce provisions on divorce rates. Specifically, the law changes we consider include the adoption of domestic violence, separation, and incompatibility as legal causes for divorce and the use of 'administrative' divorce to expedite the divorce process. In this paper, we compile data on state level divorce rates and construct the coding for the dates of each state's divorce law changes between 1990 and 2005. Our difference-in-differences estimates suggest that liberalization of the divorce laws did not have a statistically significant effect on divorce rates and would explain at most 19% of the doubling of Mexico's divorce rate over this time period. We find that these results are robust to various specifications of the law changes and specifications which allow the effects of the laws to adjust dynamically.

Paper: Yu Zhou (University of Michigan) presented *Estimating the Gains From Marriage: Evidence From A Natural Experiment In China*

Age at first marriage has important implications for income prospects since classical marriage theory states that individuals can gain from the specialization of labor in the household, thus the earlier men marry, and the more they would gain from the marriage. However, there is little literature on this topic due to the endogeneity problem associated with marriage age and labor market outcomes. In order to test the previous classical theory, this paper uses 2000 Census Data in China and examines the change of age at the first marriage with the Difference-in-Differences method when late marriage enforcement was relaxed in 1981. The estimates in the paper are consistent with the specialization hypothesis associated with men. However, the estimates also indicate that women benefit from marriage which is different from the specialization hypothesis prediction. However, this can not be generalized in other contexts due to the special nature of limited family size in China in recent decades.

Paper: Amy Ickowitz (Clark University) presented *Geography and Mortality: Comparing Infant and Child Mortality Across Borders In West Africa*

The role of geography in contributing to differences in economic development across countries has been an important theme in the recent development literature. The main focus of the geography and development literature thus far has been on economic growth. This paper focuses on the relationship between geography and child mortality. Using data from the Demographic and Health Surveys for Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire, I compare infant and child mortality rates (ICMR) in communities that lie within 50 km of a border to see if there are significant differences between mortality rates across borders. Thus the question that I examine is whether after 'controlling' for geography, are there statistical differences in ICMR across national borders in neighboring communities. I find that there are indeed statistically significant and large differences in child mortality rates across some, but not all borders. Specifically, communities in Ghana have substantially (and statistically significant) lower child mortality rates than those in communities across the borders in both Togo and Burkina Faso even after controlling for other accepted correlates of child mortality. Thus while geography may play a role in causing high average rates of child mortality in West Africa, there is enough diversity in performance within relatively small geographical areas to suggest that even countries that have been 'cursed' by poor geography can potentially improve development outcomes and save children's lives.