

Premarital Conception and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution: the Case of Russia

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Introduction

Russia has long been characterized by high divorce rates compared to western European countries, but due to a lack of necessary data, the determinants of this phenomenon have not yet been thoroughly analyzed.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the determinants of divorce in first marriage in Russia. We use data from the 2004 Russian GGS, which provide detailed individual-level information on union formation and childbearing and enable an explanatory analysis. Although many predictors of divorce are discussed, this study takes as its central point of the analysis the effect of premarital conception on the stability of subsequent marriage. Generally, legitimating of premarital conception by marriage was a common practice in Russia in the past, when bearing a child out of wedlock was heavily condemned by the conservative society. Today in Russia, as in all other post-communist countries, the second demographic transition is taking place, in which cohabitation as well as non-marital childbearing is becoming increasingly widespread. However, even today, as available evidence shows (e.g., Tolts, Antonova and Andreev, 2005, 2006), many couples still marry as soon as they find out about the pregnancy. Thus, in this study we test whether marital unions, which are formed after and presumably because of conception, are at higher risk of breakup than other marital unions.

Data and methods

The analysis is based on the Russian Generations and Gender Survey data containing full histories of union formation and dissolution as well as of childbearing. The survey was conducted in June through August of 2004. Since we are not concerned with a comparison of men and women in this study, we restrict our sample to first-time married women.

The dependent variable in our study is the transition to legal divorce. The *process time* (the basic time factor) is the time elapsed from entry into first marriage until divorce, measured in months. Observations are censored in two situations: at the date of

interview, if there is no event, and at the death of a partner, when marriage ends due to this reason. We apply a piecewise constant event history model in our analysis, which assumes that hazard rates are constant in each segment of the basic time factor but can vary across them. Results are presented in a form of exponentiated coefficients, which are interpreted as relative risks.

We include a set of time-constant and time-varying covariates. The key independent variable is motherhood status at marriage, comprising three groups of women. The first group of women includes those who had premarital births and thus already had child(ren) at the entry into first marriage. We do not distinguish whether the husband is the biological father of the child(ren) or not. The second group consists of women who married following conception, i.e. they were pregnant at marriage. The third group encompasses women who were childless at marriage. Based on the findings from previous studies (Becker, Landes and Michael, 1977; Murphy, 1985; Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Hoem and Hoem, 1992; Kravdal, 1988; Teachman and Polonko, 1990; Andersson, 1997; Waite and Lillard, 1991, etc.), *we expect that both premarital conception and premarital birth increase the risk of marital disruption, compared to women who were not pregnant and had no child at marriage.*

The way we define the category of women “pregnant at marriage” is connected to our objective to capture marriages induced by conception, i.e. the so-called “shotgun” marriages, and their stability. We consider that during the first month or two of the pregnancy, a woman might not be aware of or completely sure about her status. When the pregnancy is confirmed, the couple usually needs some time to decide if they want to keep the baby. Despite decreasing rates, induced abortions are still relatively frequent in Russia, and women normally are allowed to have an abortion within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (Avdeev, Blum and Troitskaya, 1995). So this time might be regarded as a period of consideration. Once the couple decides to marry, the wedding arrangements also take some time. Therefore, we make an assumption that the highest probability of shotgun marriage is in the cases when marriage is registered in the fourth month of pregnancy or later. Consequently, a premaritally conceived child is expected to be born during the first five months of marriage. Earlier conceptions increase the probability of situations other than a pregnancy-induced marriage. For example, the couple may have stopped preventing conception before the anticipated wedding, or the woman may not even have been aware of her very early pregnancy at marriage. Correspondingly, in our study, conceptions which result in childbirth after six or more months of marriage, are assumed to be marital.

Other covariates included in our study are as follows: age at first marriage, parity and age of the youngest child, parental divorce, religious group, educational attainment and enrolment, duration of marriage and calendar period.

To validate obtained results, we have performed a similar analysis using Russian micro-census data from 1994. We use 10% of the original sample, which has been drawn randomly and contains more than 200,000 first-time married women.

Discussion of results and conclusions

Our results provide further evidence of a lower stability of marriages induced by pregnancy. Premarital conception increases the risk of divorce in subsequent marriage and premarital birth raises the risk even higher. We also would not reject the possibility that an increasing incidence of shotgun marriages was among the set of factors that caused the rise in divorce rates in the 1960s through the 1970s. Our estimates show a highly elevated risk of divorce both among women pregnant at marriage and women with child(ren) at marriage for this period. As for the most recent period, we believe that the converging trends in terms of divorce risk for pregnancy-induced marriages and marriages contracted without anticipated childbirth are linked to the spread and increasing acceptance of informal cohabitation. Cohabiting couples are more likely to marry and to plan children than singles (Musick, 2007); thus, marriages following conception might not be forced to such an extent as they were before. These findings, however, need further elaboration.

The effect of parenthood largely conforms to the results of previous studies. We find that having children reduces the risk of marital dissolution and that divorce is most likely to occur among childless unions. However, having more children does not necessarily lead to lower divorce risk. The arrival of the second child has the strongest positive impact on marital stability, and the contribution of subsequent children is not that significant. Parity similarly affects both women who married after premarital conception or premarital birth and those who married childless.

There is no consensus from previous research regarding the effect of the age of children. In the case of Russia, the age of the youngest child has a great impact on the propensity to divorce, but it mainly concerns first-borns. This association is not linear. According to our results, the risk of divorce considerably decreases upon the arrival of a child in the family. Then the risk increases as the child grows and declines again when the child starts school.

For the effect of other divorce determinants, we would like to draw attention to the following findings:

- Early marriage increases the probability of divorce and marrying at an older age contributes to marital stability.
- Parental divorce has a detrimental effect on children's marriages. Children from divorced families are more prone to divorce than children from stable families.
- For the association between the duration of marriage and divorce risk, the risk of marital breakup increases during the first four years and then gradually declines.
- Divorce is more frequent among the Orthodox than among the Muslim population.
- There is little difference found in the risk of divorce according to educational attainment and enrolment.

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