Dissertation Abstract: Essays in Labor Economics

Jin Young Lee
Michigan State University

My dissertation consists of three chapters in the area of empirical labor economics. The first chapter, written jointly with Gary Solon, examines the sensitivity of estimated effects of unilateral divorce laws on divorce rates in the United States. The second chapter investigates changes in female labor force participation rates and related socioeconomic outcomes of women using March Current Population Survey data. The third chapter focuses on the role of women's early work expectations in explaining the upward trend of their college-going. The analyses are conducted using data from three National Longitudinal Surveys.

Chapter 1: The Fragility of Estimated Effects of Unilateral Divorce Laws on Divorce Rates
(with Gary Solon)

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Following an influential article by Friedberg (1998) on the response of divorce rates to the adoption of unilateral divorce laws, Wolfers (2006) explored the sensitivity of Friedberg’s results to allowing for dynamic response. We in turn explore the sensitivity of Wolfers’s results to variations in estimation method and functional form, and we find that the results are extremely fragile. We conclude first that the impact of unilateral divorce laws remains unclear. Second, we make the methodological point that identification in differences-in-differences research becomes weaker in the presence of dynamics, especially in the presence of unit-specific time trends.

Chapter 2: The Plateau in U.S. Women's Labor Force Participation: A Cohort Analysis

Resubmission invited by Industrial Relations

After going up steadily for the last century, the female labor force participation (FLFP) rate in the United States suddenly leveled off in the early 1990s. Using March Current Population Survey data from 1968 to 2010, I investigate changes in FLFP rates and related socioeconomic outcomes of women. I find that, to a first approximation, the plateau in FLFP can be characterized as a leveling off in labor force participation for birth cohorts from the 1950s on. I also conduct a series of shift-share analyses that
decompose changes in labor force participation into within-group and composition effects, with groups defined by educational attainment, marital status, and child-rearing status. These analyses show that both the rising FLFP up through the cohorts of the early 1950s and the subsequent plateau appear within virtually all groups. The main qualification to this simple summary is that, among women under the age of 30, rising FLFP continued beyond the cohorts of the early 1950s up through those of the early 1970s. The prolonged upward trend in that age group was closely intertwined with the trends away from early marriage and childbearing. I recommend that this constellation of facts be used to guide further research on the causes of trend shifts in women’s labor force participation and related socioeconomic outcomes.

Chapter 3: The Upward Trend in Women’s College-going: The Role of Teenagers’ Anticipated Future Labor Force Attachment

Job market paper

Over the last several decades, U.S. women’s rates of college attendance and completion, which used to be lower than men’s, have grown to exceed men’s rates by a considerable margin. Following work by Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko (2006), this paper focuses on the role of teenagers’ anticipated labor force participation in explaining the upward trend in women's college-going. A simple formal model implies that individuals with more anticipated lifetime hours of work are more likely to invest in college education. My analysis using data from three National Longitudinal Surveys supports the theoretical implication. This finding, combined with the trend towards higher work expectations of young women across birth cohorts, may account in part for the upward trends in women's college attendance and completion.