

# The intergenerational transmission of family dissolution – and how it varies by social class origin and birth cohort

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# The intergenerational transmission of family dissolution – and how it varies by social class origin and birth cohort

*Alessandro Di Nallo<sup>1</sup>, Daniel Oesch<sup>2</sup>*

## Abstract

Children from separated parents are more likely to also experience the dissolution of their own union. For many children, parental separation thus is an adverse event that follows them into adulthood. We examine whether parents' social class mitigates this adversity and weakens the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution for children from advantaged class origins. The existence of such a compensatory class advantage is analysed for three birth cohorts in the United Kingdom. On the basis of 38,000 life histories, we show that the probability of family dissolution amounts to 16% among the offspring of intact families, but to 29% among those of non-intact families. The effect of parents' social class on children's family dissolution has reversed across birth cohorts. In the Silent Generation (1925-45), offspring from working-class parents were less likely to dissolve their childbearing union than offspring from middle-class parents, whereas among Baby Boomers (1946-64) and in the Generation X (1965-79) they were much more likely to do so. However, the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution is not mitigated for children from advantaged class origins. There is no compensatory class effect as parental separation weakens children's couples regardless of parents' social class.

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# 1. Introduction

Children of separated parents tend to experience worse educational, health and well-being outcomes (Amato and Anthony 2014, Härkönen et al. 2017, Leopold and Kalmijn 2016). Moreover, the effect of parental separation extends to adulthood as children of separated parents are also more likely to witness the dissolution of their own couple. This phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of union dissolution has been observed in multi-country studies (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2013, Dronkers and Härkönen 2008, Wagner and Weiss 2006) as well as single-country analyses for Britain (Kiernan and Cherlin 1999), Germany (Diekmann and Engelhardt 1999), Italy (Todesco 2013), the Netherlands (Liefbroer and Elzinga 2012), Norway (Lyngstad and Engelhardt 2009), Sweden (Gähler et al. 2009) or the United States (Amato and Patterson 2017).

For many children, parental separation thus appears as a critical life event with often adverse effects that spill over into adulthood. The question we raise here is whether parents' social class mitigates this effect and weakens the intergenerational transmission of separation for children from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This is the case if separated parents with more resources are able to offer better living conditions to their children and keep them longer in education, reducing children's incentives for early home-leaving, early cohabitation and early childbearing – three life-course choices that increase the risk of later family dissolution (Gähler et al. 2009, Kuperberg 2014).

In general, research in social stratification suggests that children from advantaged social backgrounds are less hampered in their educational and occupational trajectories by unfavourable life events (Bernardi 2014, Bernardi and Grätz 2015, Bernardi and Hernandez 2020). However, it is unclear whether such a compensatory advantage linked to social class also mitigates the consequences of parental separation. While some studies suggest that it does so in terms of schooling (Albertini and Dronkers 2009, Grätz 2015), other studies find a more detrimental effect of parental divorce on education for children from higher than lower class backgrounds (Bernardi and Boertien 2016, 2017a, Bernardi and Radl 2014, Martin 2012).

A growing body of research examines how parental separation affects children's education depending on their social origin (see the review by Bernardi and Boertien 2017b). Yet to the best of our knowledge, no study has examined whether the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution varies by parents' social class. Therefore, our article's primary contribution is to investigate how parental class influences the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution. We do so for the United Kingdom by analysing two panel datasets, the British Household Panel Survey 1991-2008 and Understanding Society 2009-2019.

Besides providing the first study on this question, our article wishes to make two additional contributions. First, we heed the advice that research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce should move beyond divorce and look at family instability more generally (Amato and Patterson 2017). Our analysis thus focuses on the disruption of childbearing unions, regardless whether these unions are marital or cohabiting. This definition has the advantage of providing us with the same measure of separation for parents' and children's generation: the dissolution of a childbearing union. Moreover, this focus allows us to analyse those union dissolutions that

have more far-reaching social consequences because they involve children (Cherlin 2009). This focus also acknowledges that the risk of separation may look very differently for couples with and without children (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021).

Second, our use of panel data from the United Kingdom provides us with the life histories of 38,000 adults in the child generation who were born over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This makes it possible to examine how the class pattern of the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution evolved over successive birth cohorts. Given the reversal in the educational gradient of divorce over the 20<sup>th</sup> century – higher education being no longer associated with higher, but lower risk of separation (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006, Kalmijn and Leopold 2021, Matysiak et al. 2014) –, parental separation and social class origin are likely to interact differently for children’s separation risks in younger than older cohorts.

Our article first presents the mechanisms behind the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution and then discusses why this transmission may vary by parental class and birth cohort. It then presents our data and measures of family dissolution and social class. The results show a strong link between parents’ family dissolution and offspring’s family dissolution, and a reversal in the effect of parents’ class on children’s risk of family dissolution over birth cohorts. However, there is no evidence that the intergenerational transmission of separation is mitigated by a compensatory class effect for offspring from more advantaged class origins.

## 2. Theoretical background

### **Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce**

Parental separation is one of the best documented risk factors for union dissolution (Amato and DeBoer 2001). A meta-analysis finds systematically higher risks of divorce for children of divorced parents in 19 Western countries studied (Wagner and Weiss 2006: 491), a result confirmed by two comparative studies that analyse over a dozen countries each (Diekmann and Schmidheiny 2013, Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). The association between parental divorce and children’s divorce is strong. In a British cohort born in 1958, 44 per cent of men from divorced families, but only 26 per cent of men from intact families had witnessed the break-up of their own *first* partnership (Kiernan and Cherlin 1999: 40). In France, 24 per cent of the children of divorced parents had also divorced as compared to only 13 per cent of children with non-divorced parents (Traag et al. 2000: 6).

Why does parents’ separation cast such a long shadow on their children’s future partnerships? Schematically, four mechanisms may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution: genes, socialisation, socio-economic resources and life course choices (Liefbroer and Elzinga 2012, Moen et al. 1997).

Genetic inheritance likely matters for union dissolution if parents and their children share genetic traits that increase the risk of partnership problems such as neuroticism or depression. Evidence from twin studies in the United States (McGue and Lykken 1992) and Australia (D’Onofrio et al. 2007) indeed show that the intergenerational transmission of marital instability is not solely driven by environmental factors, but also due to genetic inheritance. Similarly, a Swedish study based on an adoption design with register data confirms that genetic

factors account for a non-trivial part of variation in the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Salvatore et al. 2018). While these three studies show that genes play a significant role in the association, they leave no doubt that the social environment also crucially affects the inheritance of union dissolution.

Subsumed under socialization processes, a second theoretical mechanism stresses the importance of social learning, emotional stability and parents as role models (Amato 2000, Moen et al. 1997). Children develop interpersonal skills, values and attitudes from observing parental models. They notably learn from divorced parents that dissatisfying marriages can be voluntarily ended (Amato and DeBoer 2001). Besides creating stress, growing up in a divorced family may thus deprive children of role models for relationship skills and reduce their marital commitment (Amato and Patterson 2017).

A third mechanism puts the focus on socio-economic resources (Liefbroer and Elzinga 2012, Moen et al. 1997). Parents do not only transmit attitudes, but also access to social, cultural and economic resources. Family disruption reduces the amount of resources that parents can pass on to their offspring, and children typically experience a drop in their standard of living after parental divorce (Aassve et al. 2007). As divorced families have less time and money to invest in their children's education, these children are more likely to miss out on higher education (Bernardi and Radl 2014, Kreidl et al. 2017). They receive less economic support from their parents when forming their own households and, at adult age, possess less wealth than peers from intact families (Bernardi et al. 2019, Lersch and Baxter 2021). Less secure incomes increase economic stress and thereby put in peril union stability (Conger et al. 2010).

A fourth mechanism highlights life course transitions – transitions that may, in turn, be the consequence of socialization and economic insecurity. Growing up in a divorced household makes young adults more likely to leave the parental home early, to enter cohabitation early and to become parents early. They thus follow a pattern of early and often unstable demographic transitions that are associated with higher risks of family dissolution (Amato 2010, Gähler et al. 2009, Kuperberg 2014, Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010).

Empirical evidence is stronger for socialisation, notably the lack of partnership commitment (Amato and DeBoer 2001), and life course transitions (Gähler et al. 2009) as determinants of the intergenerational transmission of divorce than socio-economic resources (Wolfinger 2005). Yet the pathways from parents' to offspring's union dissolution are diverse and likely involve a combination of genetic, socio-demographic and behavioural factors.

Our article's aim is not to disentangle these pathways and to provide an unambiguous explanation of the transmission of union dissolution, but rather to determine the extent to which this transmission varies by parental social class. Still, our analysis makes one additional contribution by comparing how parental separation and parental death are associated with children's union dissolution. Parental death has been described as a natural experiment of how parental absence affects children (Amato and Anthony 2014, Corak 2001). It thus provides an opportunity to differentiate the effect of socialization from the effect of socio-economic resources: If the inheritance of union dissolution is primarily due to growing up in a single-headed household, it should make no difference whether a parent moved out or died. By contrast, if the intergenerational transmission is mainly driven by socialization (such as

observing that unhappy relationships can be ended), parental separation should be associated with higher rates of separation among offspring than parental death. This is indeed the result found for post-war Western Germany by the only study we are aware of that contrasts parental separation and death in the analysis of divorce inheritance (Diekmann and Engelhardt 1999).

### **Heterogeneous child outcomes after parental separation**

Two mechanisms potentially explain the association between parents' social class and offspring's union dissolution. To begin with, parents' class may affect their children's risk of family dissolution because of the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic position and education (Breen and Jonsson 2005). Previous research thus shows that the correlation between parents' education and offspring's union dissolution becomes weaker when offspring's own education is accounted for (Brons and Härkönen 2018). Moreover, parents' social class is associated with two crucial stages of children's family formation process – and these stages, in turn, affect the risk of dissolution: the age at family formation and the age at childbearing. Children from more advantaged class origins tend to form unions later and to have children later (Axinn and Thornton 1992, Dahlberg 2015, Wiik 2009), and these two life course choices decrease the likelihood of a union breakup (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). Our analysis explores to what extent these two mechanisms – offspring's education and family formation process – moderate the influence of parents' social class on children's union dissolution. Once we account for these measures of children's life course, the association between parental class and offspring's union dissolution should become weaker.

The effect of parental separation on children's separation may not be homogenous across the population, but vary depending on parents' social class. Earlier studies analysed how parents' union dissolution affects various child outcomes depending on their class origin. While none of these studies include offspring's own separation as an outcome, they provide a theoretical perspective on heterogeneous effects that may usefully apply to the intergenerational transmission of separation.

The key mechanism stems from research on educational inequality and is known as a compensatory class advantage (Bernardi 2014). It stipulates that a drawback in early life likely persists or grows over time for children from lower-class parents, whereas higher-class parents have the resources to attenuate its effect for their children. It is thus in the moments of adversity that social origin kicks in and class differences between families become salient.

Parental separation may constitute an adverse life course event that tends to decrease the financial means and parental time available for children's development. However, parents in subordinate class positions, having fewer resources to begin with, may struggle more to limit the adverse financial consequences of their separation. This is the case if they have to move to smaller flats and cheaper neighbourhoods with lower-quality schools – or if they can no longer afford their children's extra tuition. Yet not only material, but also non-material resources may decline, notably parental involvement in children's lives, and this decline may again be stronger for children from less advantaged backgrounds. Evidence from Germany (Grätz 2017) and the Netherlands (Kalmijn 2015) thus suggests that after parental separation, low-educated fathers decrease their involvement in children's lives to a larger extent than high-educated father.

In this view, a parental break-up may represent a larger misfortune in the lives of children from less advantaged origins. If their separated parents have fewer means to pay for education, provide less attractive housing and become less involved in their children's lives, these children are more likely to quit education early, leave home early, cohabit early and bear children early – four life course choices fostered by parental separation (Cherlin et al. 1995, Gähler et al. 2009) that may, in turn, increase offspring's risk of union dissolution (Kuperberg 2014).

With respect to educational outcomes, the empirical evidence is inconclusive as to whether upper-class children enjoy a compensatory class advantage after parental separation. Several studies suggest that the negative effect of parental separation is concentrated among children from less educated fathers in Germany (Grätz 2015) and less educated mothers in Italy (Albertini and Dronkers 2009), the Netherlands (Mandemakers and Kalmijn 2014) and United States (Augustine 2014). Yet other studies find the opposite result, namely that parental separation harms children's education more if parents – and notably fathers – are highly educated in Britain (Bernardi and Boertien 2016) and the United States (Martin 2012) as well as in a host of European countries with educational systems that do not track students early (Bernardi and Radl 2014).

These contradictory results raise the prospect that parental separation does not systematically increase the inequality between children from different classes. On the contrary, it may initiate a process of regression to the mean where children from privileged families fall from greater heights than children from disadvantaged families whose resources were limited to begin with. It has thus been argued that parental separation may be more disruptive for children from economically advantaged families because their financial losses are larger in absolute terms and they may suffer more from weaker parental monitoring and reduced contact with fathers (Bernardi and Boertien 2017b).

### **Cohort changes in the class gradient of divorce**

The link between social origin and post-separation outcomes are likely to vary across cohorts. This argument is suggested by the remarkable reversal in the educational gradient of divorce. While the higher-educated were more likely to divorce over much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the lower-educated have higher separation rates in a growing number of Western countries (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006, Kalmijn and Leopold 2021, Matysiak et al. 2014, Musick and Michelmore 2018). The leading explanation is that as long as divorce was a rare and stigmatized event that required legal and economic resources as well as resistance against dominant norms, members of the higher classes were more likely to separate (Goode 1962, Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). However, once the liberal attitudes towards divorce began to trickle down the social hierarchy and divorce became more common, life strains such as financial needs and social isolation may have begun to matter more for couples' stability (Hogendoorn et al. 2021).

In analogy to the reversal of the educational gradient, it is likely that the association between parents' education and offspring's risk of union dissolution has also changed over time. Given that parents' and children's educational attainment continues to be strongly correlated in Europe and North America (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016, Pfeffer 2008), we expect the same association to hold between parents' education and children's risk of union dissolution as



between children's own education and own risk of union dissolution. This means that over the last decades, the offspring from parents with more socio-economic resources – higher education and more advantaged class positions – should have seen their separation risks decrease relative to the offspring from parents with less resources.

Available evidence indeed suggests that this reversal is underway. While several country studies find that higher parental education increases the separation risks among offspring in Finland (Mäenpää & Jalovaara 2014), Italy (Todesco 2013), Norway (Lyngstad 2006) or Sweden (Gähler et al. 2009), a multi-country study shows that this relationship is reversing over time as having *higher* educated parents is progressively associated with a *lower* risk of offspring's family dissolution among younger cohorts in Europe, most notably so in the United Kingdom (Brons and Härkönen 2018).

This finding suggests that the social stratification underlying the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution has changed over time – and prompts us to formulate theoretical expectations that vary for cohorts. Our study wishes to analyse how two main effects act on offspring's family dissolution: parents' separation and parents' class position. We have no reason to expect a change over time in the negative effect of parental separation on offspring's union dissolution; earlier evidence points to stability across cohorts in this association (Li and Wu 2008, Teachman 2002). By contrast, we expect to see a shift in the effect of parental class on offspring's family stability over the successive birth cohorts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In analogy to the reversal of the educational gradient of divorce, we expect more advantaged parental class positions to have become gradually associated with lower rates of union dissolution among their offspring. We expect the compensatory class effect to reinforce this reversal by further reducing the risk of union dissolution for offspring from separated (upper-) middle class families over the successive birth cohorts.

Our primary interest lies on this interaction between these two main effects, parents' separation and parents' social class. Our hypothesis is that among younger cohorts, offspring from advantaged classes will be less affected by parents' separation than offspring from disadvantaged classes. For children from advantaged backgrounds born after World War II, we expect a compensatory class advantage to set in after parental separation and thus to reduce the intergenerational transmission of union dissolution.

### 3. Data, measures and method

#### Country

Our analysis focuses on the United Kingdom, a country that had among the highest divorce rates in Europe in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Crude divorce rates had continuously increased over the 1960s and 1970s and reached a highpoint in the 1980s and 1990s, before embarking on a downward trend in the 2000s and early 2010s. In the mid-2010s, the UK counted about 40 divorces per 100 marriages as compared to over 50 divorces in 2000. Its crude

divorce rate in the mid-2010s was comparable to those of France, Germany or Spain, while being lower than in Denmark or Sweden, but higher than in Ireland or Italy (Eurostat<sup>1</sup>).

The focus on divorce only provides a partial picture of union stability because cohabitation has become increasingly common in the United Kingdom as in most other Western countries. The marriage rate continuously dropped between 1970 and 2017, reaching a lower level than in Germany or the United States, but remaining higher than in France or Spain. As a result of the rise in cohabiting couples, almost half of all births in the UK took place outside marriage (48% in the year 2013) – a proportion that is higher than in Germany or Italy, but lower than in France or Sweden (Eurostat<sup>2</sup>). These shifts clearly show the need of incorporating cohabiting couples into the study of intergenerational transmission of family dissolution.

## Data

Our analysis is based on longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) 1991-2008 and Understanding Society (UKHLS) 2009-2019. Our focus is on the dissolution of childbearing unions and we therefore include in the parental and child generation only individuals with children. Our focus is on the child generation and we limit our sample to individuals in the child generation born between 1925 and 1979. The observation window starts when a respondent in the child generation becomes a parent, and it ends with his or her separation, death, panel non-response, right-censoring after 2019 or after 30 years of a childbearing union. After excluding respondents with missing information, we obtain an analytical sample of 38,515 individuals and 958,240 person-year observations from the child generation.

## Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is family dissolution and measured as the break-up of one's childbearing union, regardless of whether it was marital or cohabiting. By focusing on childbearing unions, we use the same definition of family dissolution for parents' and children's unions. This sets us apart from other studies that move beyond divorce, but use different measures for the two generations: divorce in parents' generation, but dissolution of first partnership in offspring's generation (Kiernan and Cherlin 1999); family dissolution for parents' generation, but separation of any co-resident cohabitation – with or without children – for offspring's generation (Amato and Patterson 2017).

Besides consistency, the focus on family unions has the additional advantage of social relevance as it puts the spotlight on those separations that have potentially negative implications for third parties, namely children (Cherlin 2009). In this context, Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) remind us that only about half of all separations in Western Europe involve children and that the separation surge in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was much stronger among couples without than couples with children. Of the 38,515 respondents in our analytical sample, 6,927 or 18 percent experienced the dissolution of their childbearing union during our observation window.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=demo\\_ndivind&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=demo_ndivind&lang=en) Accessed on 3.2.2021

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Marriage\\_and\\_birth\\_statistics\\_-\\_new\\_ways\\_of\\_living\\_together\\_in\\_the\\_EU&oldid=400392](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Marriage_and_birth_statistics_-_new_ways_of_living_together_in_the_EU&oldid=400392) Accessed on 3.2.2021

## Independent variables

Our first key independent variable is parents' union dissolution. The two surveys ask whether respondents lived in the same household with both parents until the age of 16, allowing us to distinguish three groups: (a) respondents from intact families who lived with both parents until the age of 16; (b) respondents from non-intact families where one of the two parents moved out before the child was 16; (c) respondents from families where at least one parent died during the respondent's childhood. In our analytical sample, 83% of individuals come from intact families, 9.4% from non-intact families and 7.6% from families where at least one parent died when the respondent was a child.

Our second key independent variable is parents' social class. The divorce literature mostly uses education as a measure of individuals' position in social stratification. However, social class based on individuals' position within labour markets – their occupation – may be a stronger determinant of the opportunities and constraints that people face in terms of life chances. Notably for the purpose of our study, it appears as a better proxy for the economic, social and cultural resources that parents can harness for their children. However, given the close link between educational and occupational attainment, the same mechanisms should hold for the two indicators, and we provide results with education as a robustness check.<sup>3</sup>

For parental social class, we use a merged version of the scheme developed by Oesch (2006) and distinguish four categories: (1) Upper-middle class, including professionals and managers; (2) Lower-middle class, including technicians, associate professionals and clerical officers; (3) Skilled working class, including skilled sales and service workers as well as craft workers; (4) Low-skilled working class, including assemblers, machine operatives and elementary occupations in agriculture, production, construction, cleaning, sales and services.<sup>4</sup> We use the dominance approach and attribute to each individual the higher class of either father or mother (Erikson 1984). In terms of social origin, 25% of our analytical sample come from families of the upper-middle class, 26% from the lower-middle class, 22% from the skilled working class and 20% from the low-skilled working class, with missing information for 8% of respondents.

For all our analyses, we use a second stratification variable that is based on socio-economic status and measured with ISEI (International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status). This indicator reflects the mean earnings and education in a given occupation (Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996) and has the double advantage of providing us with a linear measure and allowing us to attribute to each respondent the mean socio-economic status of *both parents*. We show results for the normalized z-score of socio-economic status which standardizes the variable's distribution by setting the mean at 0 and dividing values by the standard deviation.

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<sup>3</sup> We measure parental education by taking the higher attainment of either father and mother and distinguishing five levels: no school/no qualification (25.4%), dropout with some qualification (14.7%), some qualification (16.2%), degree (6.7%), missing information on education (37%). The large missingness of parental education seems to arise through a random process: this question was only asked in interviews held between January and June 2009 and not the rest of UKHLS wave 1 in order to reduce interview length.

<sup>4</sup> We code occupations into classes based on the Standard occupational classification 2010 (SOC-2010 at the 3 digit-level) or 1990 (SOC-90 at the 2 digit-level). All the Stata codes are readily available from the authors.

We measure cohorts by distinguishing three sociologically meaningful birth cohorts that capture similar historical contexts (Howe and Strauss 1992): the Silent Generation 1925-1945, the Baby Boomers 1946-1964, and Generation X 1965-1979. In our analytical sample, 7,999 respondents belong to the Silent Generation, 15,768 to the Baby Boomers, and 14,224 to Generation X. We would argue that in terms of socialization and life experiences, individual identify more with their birth cohort than their union cohort. However, we also provide robustness tests for union cohorts. Finally, all our models include three control variables: year of birth, gender and self-identified ethnicity (measured in 9 categories). Table A.1 in the appendix provides descriptive statistics for all the variables used.

## Model

Our model estimates the effects of parental class, parental family dissolution and the interaction between these two variables on offspring's family dissolution. The model is shown in the following equation:

$$Y_{jt} = \beta Class_j + \delta Parent\_Diss_j + \gamma Class_j * Parent\_Diss_j + \zeta Controls_{jt} + \phi(t) + v_{jt}$$

Where  $Y_{jt}$  is a binary measure of family dissolution for respondents  $j$  in the child generation at time  $t$ .  $Class_j$  indicates parents' social class, either operationalized as a categorical class measure or a continuous ISEI-score, and  $\beta$  represents the associated coefficients.  $Parent\_Diss_j$  indicates whether an individual experienced their parents' union dissolution before the age of 16, and this variable of parental dissolution is interacted with parental class. The coefficient associated with the interaction term,  $\gamma$ , therefore captures the differential effect of parental separation on individuals' childbearing unions by parental social class.  $Controls_j$  stand for four socio-demographic control variables such as year of birth, age, gender, and ethnicity. Finally,  $\phi(t)$  captures the duration of the union in years.

Our estimation technique consists in transforming our data into discrete-time event history format, with person-years as the unit of analysis, and estimating discrete-time event history regressions. This provides us with predicted probabilities of family dissolution that vary between 0.5 and 1.5 percent per year in the full sample. These event history analyses also enable us to account for attrition and, hence, include individuals who reported their family histories, but dropped out before the last survey wave. Therefore, we do not impose any minimal age threshold as a sample restriction on this event history model. Another advantage is to account for the influence of union duration. The time function is modelled with a linear, a quadratic and a cubic term of years since the union start.

We validate all our results with linear probability models (LPM) which have two attractive features. They allow us to directly compare the coefficients of different models (Mood 2010), and they provide us with an intuitive metric, namely the cumulative predicted probability of family dissolution. As linear probability models do not account for censoring (the fact that the outcome has not yet occurred for everyone by the time of the interview), we limit the analytical sample in these analyses to respondents who were at least 40 years old and had thus some time for family formation and separation. This leads to a slightly smaller sample (N=34,027). In this analytical sample, the proportion of union dissolution was 16 percent among the offspring of intact families and 29 percent among those of non-intact families.

## 4. Results

### **Intergenerational transmission of family dissolution by parental class**

We first compare in Figure 1 the predicted probability that offspring from intact and non-intact families experience the dissolution of their own childbearing union, depending on their social origin. The left-hand panel measures social origin with parents' social class and the right-hand panel with parents' socio-economic status (ISEI). Figure 1 shows the annual probability of family dissolution based on event history analysis and the cumulative probability based on LPM is shown in Figure A.1 in the appendix. All these models control for year of birth, gender, ethnicity and union duration.

These results show that individuals who experienced their parents' separation when growing up are much more likely to also see their own childbearing relationship break up than individuals who grew up in intact families. On an annual basis, the separation rate is about 1.2% for offspring from non-intact families as compared to 0.7% for offspring from intact families.

Regardless of whether social origin is measured with class or status, we observe a negative socio-economic gradient of family dissolution. This means that children from upper-middle class families face a lower risk of seeing their couple break up than children from working-class parents. This socio-economic gradient looks very similar for class and socio-economic status – and thus suggests that the observed relationship is not due to the idiosyncrasy of a given social stratification indicator. Indeed, the negative gradient is also visible if parents' social position is measured with education. The children of parents who hold a tertiary degree are less likely to separate from their partners than the children of parents who left school without any qualification (see Figure A.2 in the appendix).

Crucially, these results provide no evidence for a heterogeneous effect of class on the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution. The negative class gradient of family dissolution looks very similar for children from intact and non-intact families. Offspring from intact families enjoy greater union stability than offspring from non-intact families regardless of parents' social class or socio-economic status. At first sight, we therefore observe no compensatory class effect for upper-middle class children who grew up in non-intact families.

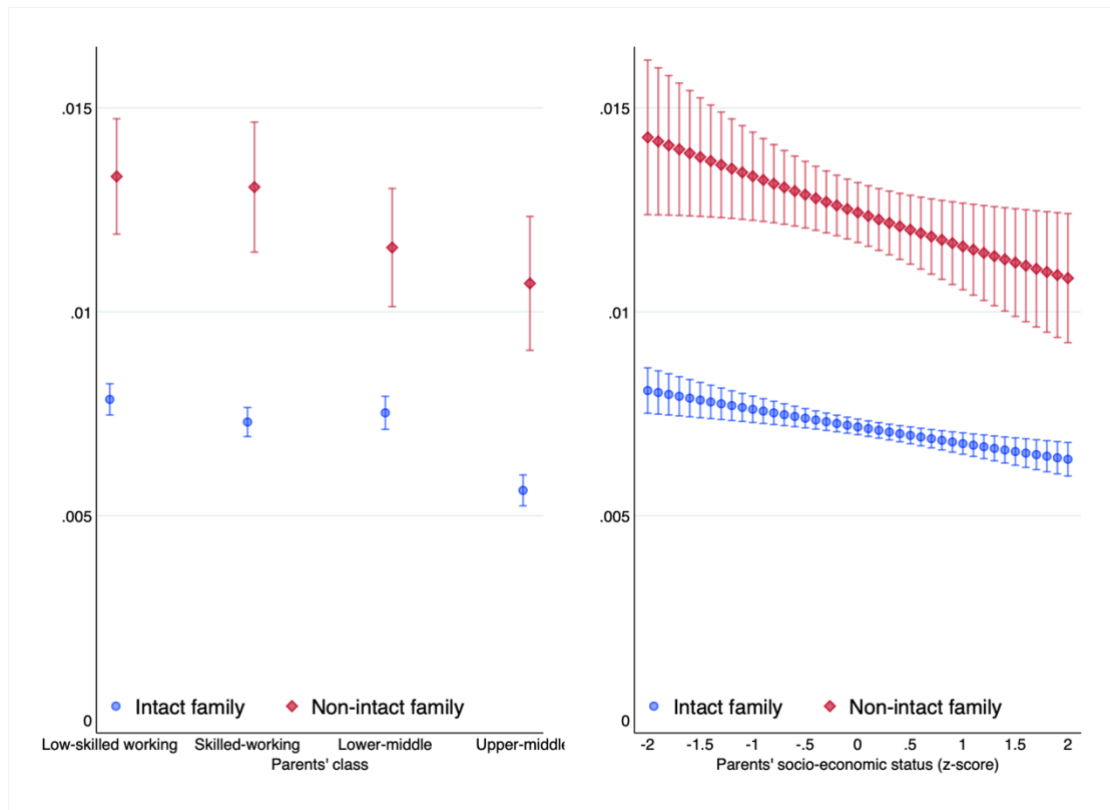


Figure 1: predicted annual probability of offspring's family dissolution by parents' social class (right) and socio-economic status (left). Discrete time event history model

Rather than to solely rely on graphical interpretation, we show in Table 1 the odds ratios of the event history analysis. These results confirm that parents' family dissolution is a major risk factor for the stability of offspring's own couples. Children experiencing their parents' separation have 71% higher odds to separate themselves. In terms of cumulative probabilities as shown with the LPM, this means that their likelihood of family dissolution is 13 percentage points higher than for children who grew up with both parents (see Table A.2 in the appendix).

With respect to social origin, the main contrast is between offspring from the upper-middle and low-skilled working class. Offspring from upper-middle class parents have odds to separate that are 28% lower than offspring from the low-skilled working class. While the main effects of parents' family status and parents' social class are sizeable and statistically significant, the interaction effects between these two variables are tiny and not statistically significant. Contrary to our expectation, the intergenerational transmission of divorce does not interact with class.

*Table 1: The effect of parents' family status and social class on offspring's family dissolution. Discrete time event history model*

	Odds ratio	SE
Parents' family status (ref: intact family)		
Non-intact family	1.71***	(0.103)
Parents' social class (ref: low-skilled working class)		
Skilled working class	0.93**	(0.033)
Lower-middle class	0.96	(0.036)
Upper-middle class	0.72***	(0.031)
Parents' family status # parents' social class		
Non-intact # skilled working class	1.06	(0.096)
Non-intact # lower-middle class	0.91	(0.083)
Non-intact # upper-middle class	1.12	(0.118)
Observations (individuals)	38,515	

Note: controls are included for year of birth, gender and ethnicity.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## **Mediating variables between parents' and offspring's separation**

To what extent is the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution mediated by life course transitions such as the age at union formation, the type of union and the number of children – or by resources such as one's own educational attainment? We try to answer this question by estimating five nested models (see Table A.3 in the appendix). A first model only includes the two main variables of parental family status and parental class as well as the interaction between these two variables. A second model adds three socio-demographic controls: year of birth, gender and ethnicity – this is our preferred model that we used for Figure 1 above. A third model adds five measures of life course transitions: type of union (married or cohabiting), order of union, age at union formation, being married in the past, and number of children. A fourth model adds a respondents' own education to the second model, and a fifth model includes all variables together.

What are the findings? Figure 2 shows that throwing the kitchen sink of life course transitions into our regression has only a marginal influence on the intergenerational transmission of separation. Having a younger age at family formation, cohabiting, having had other unions with children before and quitting education early are all associated with a higher risk of family dissolution. However, these transitions do not mediate the effect of parents' unstable union on offspring's unstable union: the gap in the dissolution rate between offspring from intact and non-intact unions remains unchanged. Likewise, the inclusion of life course transitions and own education into the model does not change our prior conclusion that there is no interaction between parents' family status and parents' class (see Table A.3 in the appendix).

Figure 2 shows how the socio-economic gradient of the intergenerational transmission of separation shifts across the five nested models. For simplicity, we use the linear measure of social stratification, socio-economic status. These graphs clearly show that the introduction of variables related to socio-demographics, union formation or education does not contribute to closing the large family-dissolution gap between offspring from intact and non-intact families. However, once we introduce measures on life course choices and own education, a more advantaged paternal background is no longer associated with a lower risk of family dissolution.

Hence, our measures for life course transitions and resources do not explain the transmission of family dissolution, but they attenuate the effect of parents' social class on children's union instability. If we account for offspring's timing of union formation, cohabitation and education, the effect of parental class on union dissolution disappears. This suggests that children from less advantaged families are more likely to experience the break-up of their couple because they tend to be younger when entering a child-bearing union, to cohabit rather than to marry and to leave the education system with lower qualifications. A more disadvantaged class origin therefore leads to life course transitions that heighten the risk of union instability.

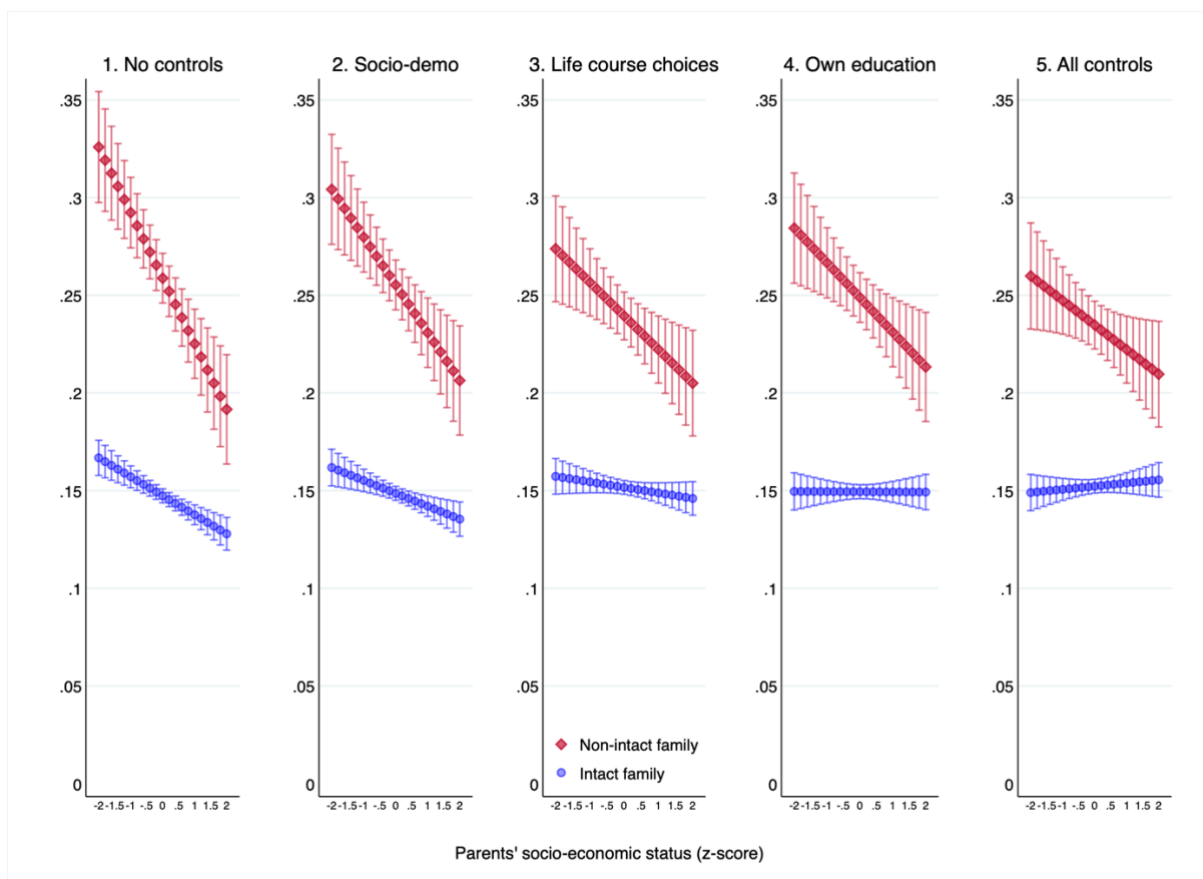


Figure 2: Cumulative predicted probability of offspring's family dissolution by parents' family status and socio-economic status, controlling for life course transitions (in %). Linear probability model



## Differences across birth cohorts

Given the spectacular reversal in the educational gradient of divorce over the last decades (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006), we expect to see differences by birth cohorts. We thus examine how the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution varies by class and status for the three cohorts of Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Generation X.

Figures 3 and 4 show that in all three cohorts, offspring from non-intact families were at greater risk of witnessing the break-up of their couples than offspring from intact families. The effect is smaller for the members of the Silent Generation, born between 1925 and 1945. Not only the separation rate of this generation was lower, but also the additional separation penalty of coming from a non-intact family was less sizeable. We have fewer observations for this oldest birth cohort and receive large standard errors.

The main benefit of an analysis by birth cohort is to see how the parental class effect on family dissolution shifts over time. Among members of the Silent Generation, having parents with a higher socio-economic status was associated with a marginally *higher risk* of family dissolution. Yet in the following cohort of Baby Boomers, coming from a more advantaged family became linked with a *lower* probability of seeing one's own family break up.

Family demographers often prefer to focus on union cohorts rather than on birth cohorts. Figure A.3 in the appendix shows that the conclusions of our analysis remain unchanged if we subdivide our analytical sample into four union cohorts (1940-59, 1960-79, 1980-99, 2000-19). While an advantaged class background was associated with a *higher* risk of family dissolution in the oldest union cohort 1940-59, it became linked to a lower probability of family dissolution in the two youngest union cohorts of 1980-99 and 2000-19.

Contrary to our expectations, neither Figures 3 and 4 on birth cohorts nor Figure A.3 on union cohorts point to a heterogeneous effect of parental class on the intergenerational transmission of separation. In the three birth cohorts and four union cohorts, socio-economic background seems to have a similar effect on offspring from intact and from non-intact families, suggesting that there is no interaction effect between parents' family dissolution and parents' class position on the stability of children's own couple.

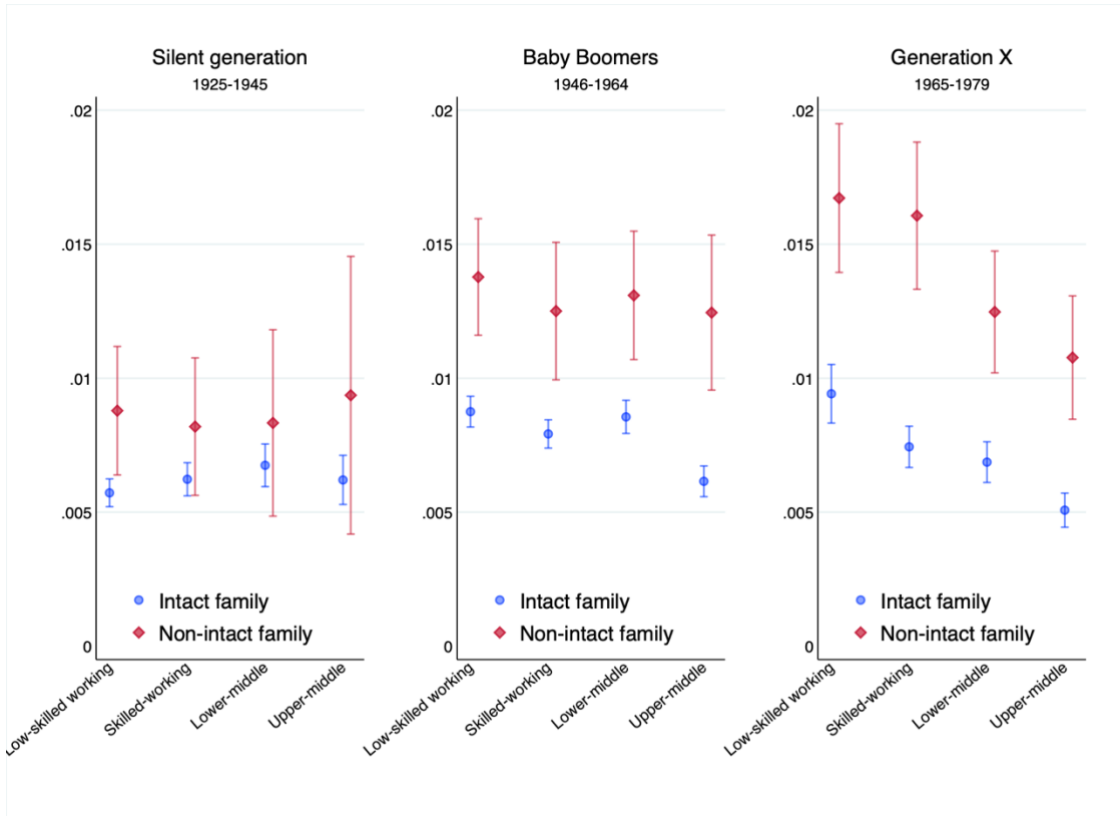


Figure 3: predicted annual probability of offspring's family dissolution by parents' class for three birth cohorts. Discrete time event history model

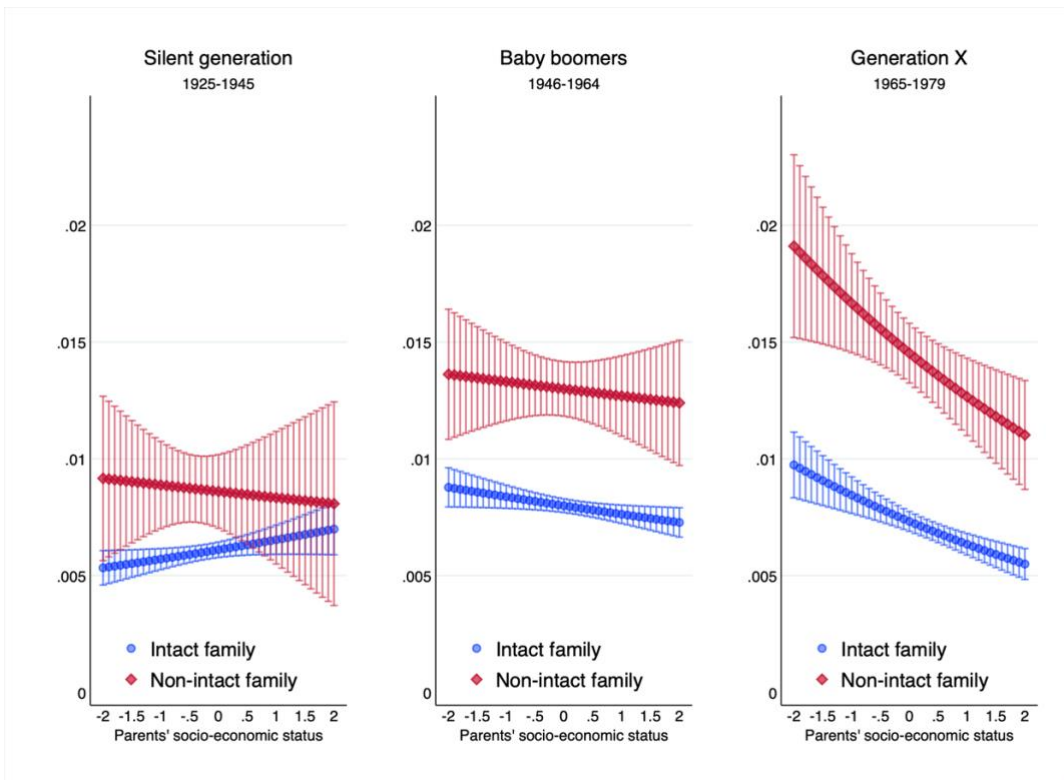


Figure 4: predicted annual probability of offspring's union dissolution by parents' socio-economic status for three birth cohort. Discrete time event history model

We turn again to a formal test and estimate the same model separately for each birth cohort. We avoid comparing odds ratios across different samples and show instead in Table 2 the coefficients of the linear probability model. In all three generations, growing up in a non-intact family is associated with greater instability in own one's childbearing union. Contrary to Wolfinger's (2011) result that the intergenerational transmission of divorce has weakened over time in the United States, we find no decreasing association of parents' and offspring's union dissolution for younger birth cohorts in the UK. The gap in the risk of union dissolution between children from intact and non-intact families increases from 9 percentage points in the Silent Generation to 14 points among Baby Boomers and 13 points in generation X.

In terms of class origin, offspring from the low-skilled working class were least likely to break-up their childbearing union in the Silent Generation, but most likely to do so in the two subsequent generations of Baby Boomers and, above all, Generation X. While these two main effects are large and statistically significant, there is no systematic interaction effect between parents' family dissolution and parents' social class for any of the three birth cohorts.

*Table 2: The effect of parents' family status and social class on offspring's family dissolution. Linear probability models*

	Silent Generation 1925-1945		Baby Boomers 1946-1964		Generation X 1965-1979	
Parents' family status (ref: intact family)						
Non-intact family	0.09**	(0.04)	0.14***	(0.03)	0.13***	(0.03)
Parents' class (ref: low-skilled working class)						
Skilled working class	0.01	(0.01)	-0.02**	(0.01)	-0.03**	(0.01)
Lower-middle class	0.03**	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.04***	(-0.01)
Upper-middle class	0.01	(0.01)	-0.06***	(0.01)	-0.06***	(-0.01)
Parents' family status # parents' class						
Non-intact # skilled working class	-0.03	(0.06)	-0.03	(0.04)	0.00	(0.04)
Non-intact # lower-middle class	-0.06	(0.06)	-0.01	(0.04)	-0.03	(0.04)
Non-intact # upper-middle class	0.02	(0.08)	0.04	(0.05)	-0.01	(0.04)
Observations (individuals)	7,999		15,477		10,027	

Note: controls for year of birth, gender and ethnicity. Analytical samples only include individuals aged 40+.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Contrasting parental separation with parental death

In a last step, we contrast the separation rates of offspring whose parents separated with offspring who lost a parent during childhood. If the intergenerational transmission of family dissolution is primarily mediated by resources, all that matters is growing up in a single-headed household and the two types of family dissolutions – separation and death – should have the same impact. By contrast, if socialization linked to role models and partnership commitment is paramount, the separation rates should be higher among offspring experiencing parental separation than among offspring experiencing parental death.

Figure 5 shows that the probability of family dissolution is largest among children who witnessed the separation of their parents and smallest among children who grew up with both parents, with children who lost one or both parents to an early death situated in-between. In terms of cumulative probabilities, parental separation raises the likelihood of offspring's family dissolution by 10 to 13 percentage points relative to growing up in an intact family, whereas parental death is associated with an increase of 4 to 6 points in offspring's separation risks relative to offspring from intact families. Clearly, it is not just the fact of growing up in a mono-parental home that increases the risk of offspring's family dissolution.

Together with the results shown above, these findings weaken the case for life course transitions or socio-economic resources as the main mechanism explaining the intergenerational transition of divorce. Instead, the results are consistent with the argument of socialization and couple commitment which maintains that children use their parents as role models to develop relational skills and learn how to deal with dissatisfying relationships – either sitting it out or ending it (Amato and DeBoer 2001). Moreover, these results are also consistent with studies highlighting genetic inheritance (D'Onofrio et al. 2007, Salvatore et al. 2018).

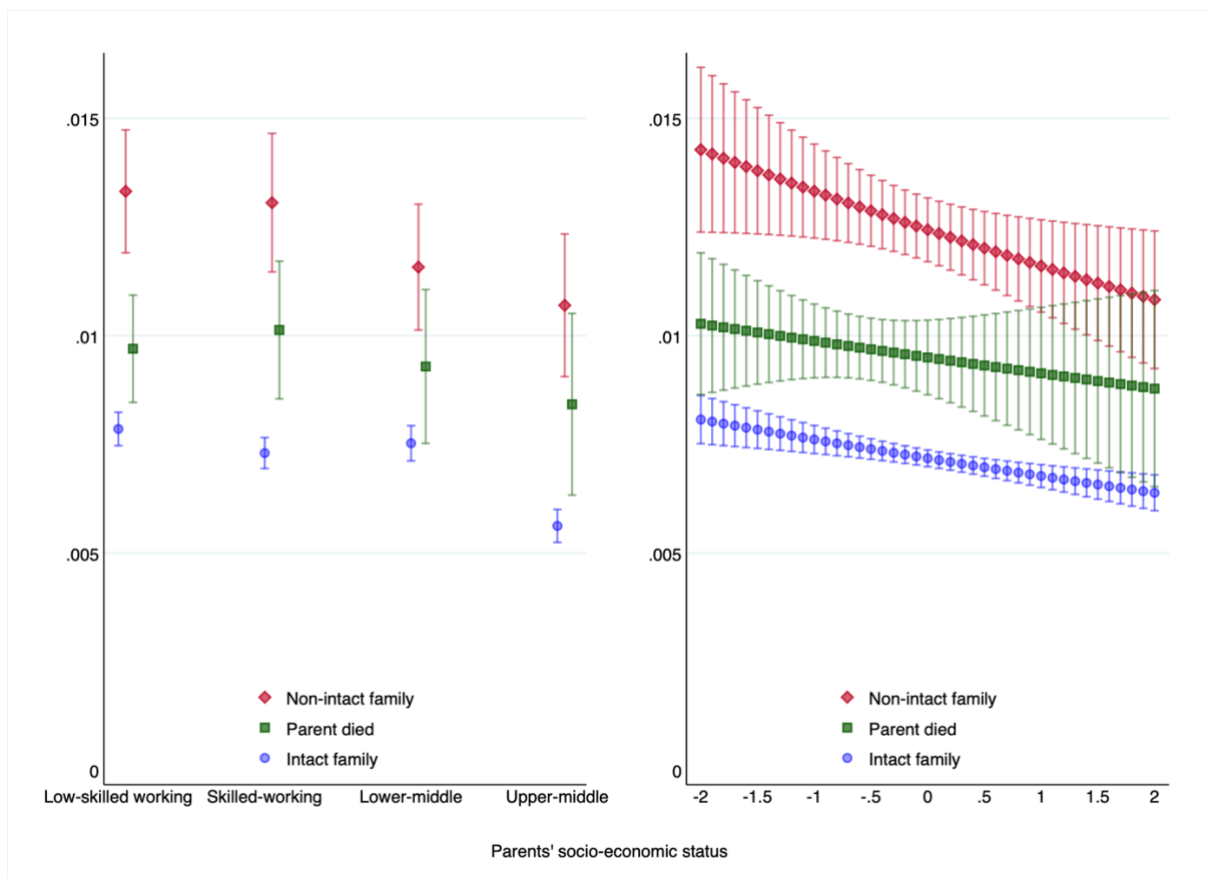


Figure 5: predicted annual probability of union dissolution by parents' family status. Discrete time event history model

## Conclusion

Our study shows a powerful influence of parents' family dissolution on children's family dissolution, but it provides no evidence for a compensatory class effect that moderates this influence. Contrary to our expectation, offspring from more advantaged class backgrounds are not any less affected by their parents' separation than offspring from less advantaged backgrounds. Therefore, coming from a privileged social origin does not weaken the link between parents' family dissolution and offspring's family dissolution in the United Kingdom.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that the influence of parental separation on offspring's separation does not vary for children from different social origins. Although parents' union dissolution tends to be an adverse life event for many children (but not for all, see Brand et al. 2019), the compensatory class effect does not set in for this type of adversity. On second glance, this result is quite consistent with the literature on how parental divorce affects the education of children from different class backgrounds. While half of all studies find larger negative effects of parental divorce for children from more advantaged families, the other half finds larger negative effects for children from less advantaged families (see Bernardi and Boertien 2017b: 243). When factoring-in the possibility of a publication bias towards significant results (Gerber and Malhotra 2008, Muñoz and Young 2018), a meta-analysis might well find that, overall, these positive and negative findings cluster around zero and cancel each other out

We had further explored the possibility that the compensatory class effect is limited to the inheritance of union dissolution in younger birth cohorts. This expectation was not borne out by the data either. However, the cohort analysis shows another noteworthy finding, namely the remarkable reversal in the parental class gradient of family dissolution. If anything, offspring from working-class families were less likely to dissolve their childbearing union than offspring from middle-class families in the Silent Generation (1925-1945). However, in the two following birth cohorts of Baby Boomers (1946-1964) and, above all, Generation X (1985-1979), they were more likely to experience the break-up of their own union. Hence, while coming from a working-class origin insulated earlier birth cohorts against family dissolution, it greatly increased the risk of family dissolution in later birth cohorts. Within Generation X, the separation rate is almost twice as large among the offspring from low-skilled working-class parents than among the offspring from upper-middle class parents.

Our analysis provides indirect evidence for the mechanisms that are behind the relationship between parental class and offspring's family dissolution. Children from less advantaged class origins tend to form unions earlier and to have children earlier, and an early age in these two life stages increases the risk of family dissolution.

The reversal in the parental class gradient of family dissolution echoes the pattern shown for the link between individuals' own education and union dissolution (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006, Matysiak et al. 2014). In sociological research, large shifts in the association between socio-demographic characteristics are unusual, and even more unusual are reversals in the direction of relationships as the one observed between social origin and family dissolution over the birth cohorts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our results thus confirm that marriage and the family are in a state of great flux in contemporary societies (Chan and Halpin 2005, Cherlin 2010).

What explains the long shadow cast by parents' separation on children's couples? Our analysis does not allow us to pinpoint the determinants, but nevertheless throws doubt on some explanations. If economic resources and parental time investment were decisive, we would not expect to see any difference in the separation risk between children from divorced or separated parents and children from families where a parent died – both grow up in a mono-parental household (Diekmann and Engelhardt 1999). Yet the former are over 30 percent more likely than the latter to dissolve their own child-bearing union. Similarly, while we observe that fewer resources (such as lower education) or life course choices (such as having a child at younger ages and not getting married) increase the risk of separation, they do not explain why the risk of union dissolution is much higher among offspring from non-intact families than among offspring from intact families. By contrast, our results are consistent with explanations that focus on socialization and that argue that children of separated parents hold less traditional views about long-term unions (Amato and Patterson 2017).

Finally, we need to raise several caveats. To begin with, all our findings only pertain to the couples of offspring who themselves have children – and not to childless couples. For this specific sample, our results of the intergenerational transmission of separation are likely an underestimation because we only account for respondents' family status and not the family status of his or her partner. While we share this shortcoming with most studies in the field (see Gähler et al. 2009: 709), evidence for the United States suggests that couples in which both spouses experienced their parents' divorce are more likely to divorce than couples in which only one spouse comes from a divorced family – and these couples are, in turn, more prone to divorce than couples where both partners come from intact families (Amato 1996, Wolfinger 2005). Hence, comparing only couples where both partners come from separated families with couples where both partners come from intact families likely produces even stronger evidence for the inheritance of union dissolution.

Moreover, our results are limited to the United Kingdom – and it is unclear how well the British experience of union formation and dissolution generalizes to other countries. The United Kingdom could either be an exception or a frontrunner. When comparing eight European countries, Kalmijn and Leopold (2021) find the UK to be an exception in two regards. Its separation surge over the last decades was less stratified between the higher- and lower-educated, and it was less strongly concentrated among childless couples than elsewhere in Europe. Yet the United Kingdom may also be a frontrunner that has simply embarked earlier on a common European trajectory of family demography. This hypothesis is suggested by Brons and Härkönen (2018) who show that the association between parents' education and children's risk of union dissolution has become more negative across Europe – with the earliest and strongest reversal observed for the United Kingdom. Future studies will hopefully tell us how representative the UK's shifting class pattern behind the inheritance of family dissolution is for other countries.

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## Appendix – Tables

*Table A.1: Descriptive statistics of the variables used*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Analytical sample size	38,515		
Separation / Divorce	6,927	0.18	0.38
Family status at age 16			
Intact	31,959	0.16	0.37
Non intact	3,624	0.29	0.45
One or both parents died/Other	2,932	0.23	0.42
Parents' class			
Low-skilled working class	9,747	0.25	0.43
Skilled working class	9,895	0.26	0.44
Lower-middle class	8,324	0.22	0.41
Upper-middle class	7,336	0.19	0.39
Missing	3,213	0.08	0.28
Average ISEI of parents (Non standardized)		29.30	18.61
Parents' education			
No schooling/No qualification	10,618	0.28	0.40
Left with some qualification	5,670	0.15	0.35
Some qualification	6,443	0.17	0.37
Degree	2,414	0.06	0.24
Gender			
Male	18,079	0.47	0.50
Female	20,436	0.53	0.50
Ethnicity			
British/Irish	31,586	0.82	0.38
European/Other White	1,171	0.03	0.17
Mixed: White & Other	400	0.01	0.10
Indian	1,425	0.04	0.19
Pakistani	916	0.02	0.15
Bangladeshi	651	0.02	0.13
Other Asian/Asian British	599	0.02	0.12
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	1,290	0.03	0.18
No information	115	0	0.05
Cohort			
Silent Generation: 1928-1945	7,999	21.05	
Baby Boomers: 1946-1964	15,768	41.50	
Generation X: 1965-1979	14,224	37.44	

*Table A.2: The effect of parents' family status and parents' social class on offspring's family dissolution – linear probability model*

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>
Parents' family status (ref: intact family)		
Non-intact family	0.13***	(0.017)
Parents' social class (ref: low-skilled working class)		
Skilled working class	-0.01**	(0.006)
Lower-middle class	-0.01	(0.007)
Upper-middle class	-0.05***	(0.007)
Parents' family status # parents' social class		
Non-intact # skilled working class	-0.01	(0.025)
Non-intact # lower-middle class	-0.04	(0.024)
Non-intact # upper-middle class	-0.00	(0.027)
Observations (individuals)	34,027	

Note: controls are included for year of birth, gender and ethnicity. The analytical sample of the linear probability model only includes individuals aged 40 and older.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table A.3: The effect of parents' family status and class on offspring's family dissolution – controlling for socio-demographic and behavioural mediators. Linear probability model

	M1: no controls	M2: socio-demo	M3: life course	M4: education	M5: all controls
Parents' family status (ref: Intact Family)					
Non-intact	0.13*** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
One or both parents died	0.06*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.04*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.04*** (0.02)
Dominant class (ref: low-skilled working class)					
Skilled working class	-0.01** (0.01)	-0.01** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Lower-middle class	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Upper-middle class	-0.06*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Parents' family status # parents' class					
Non-intact # skilled working class	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Non-intact # lower-middle class	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
Non-intact # upper-middle class	0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
Controls included:					
Socio-demographics: gender, birth year, ethnicity		x	x	x	x
Union formation behaviour: age at union formation, married, previous unions, N° children			x		x
Own education				x	x
Observations	34,027	34,027	34,027	34,027	34,027
R-squared	0.01	0.03	0.12	0.04	0.12

Note: Analytical samples only include individuals aged 40 and older.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Appendix – Figures

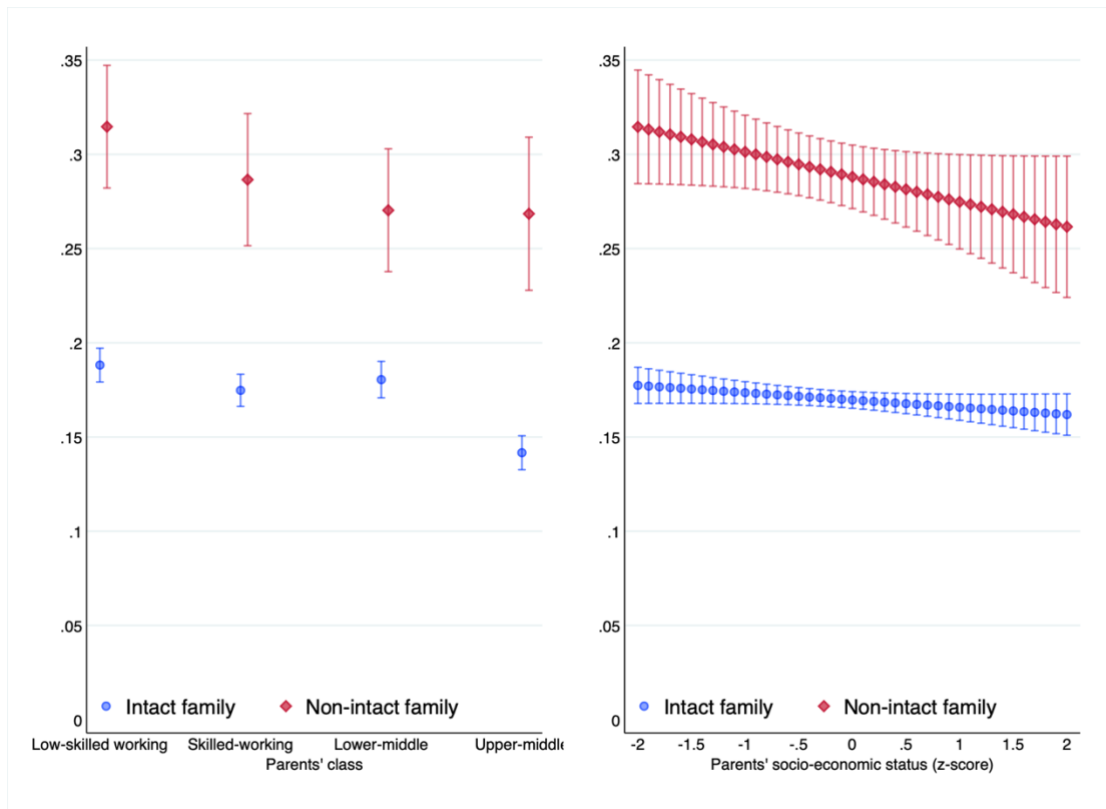
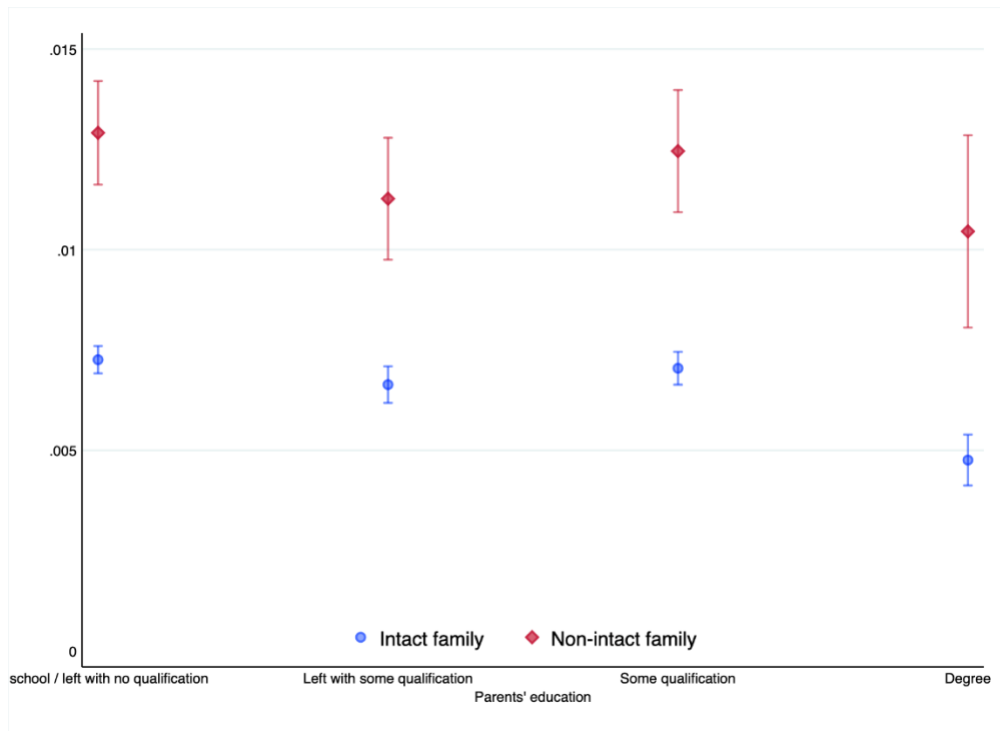


Figure A.1: Cumulative predicted probability of offspring's family dissolution by parents' class (right) and socio-economic status (ISEI, left), in %. Linear probability model



*Figure A.2: predicted probability of offspring's family dissolution by parents' education. Discrete time event history model*

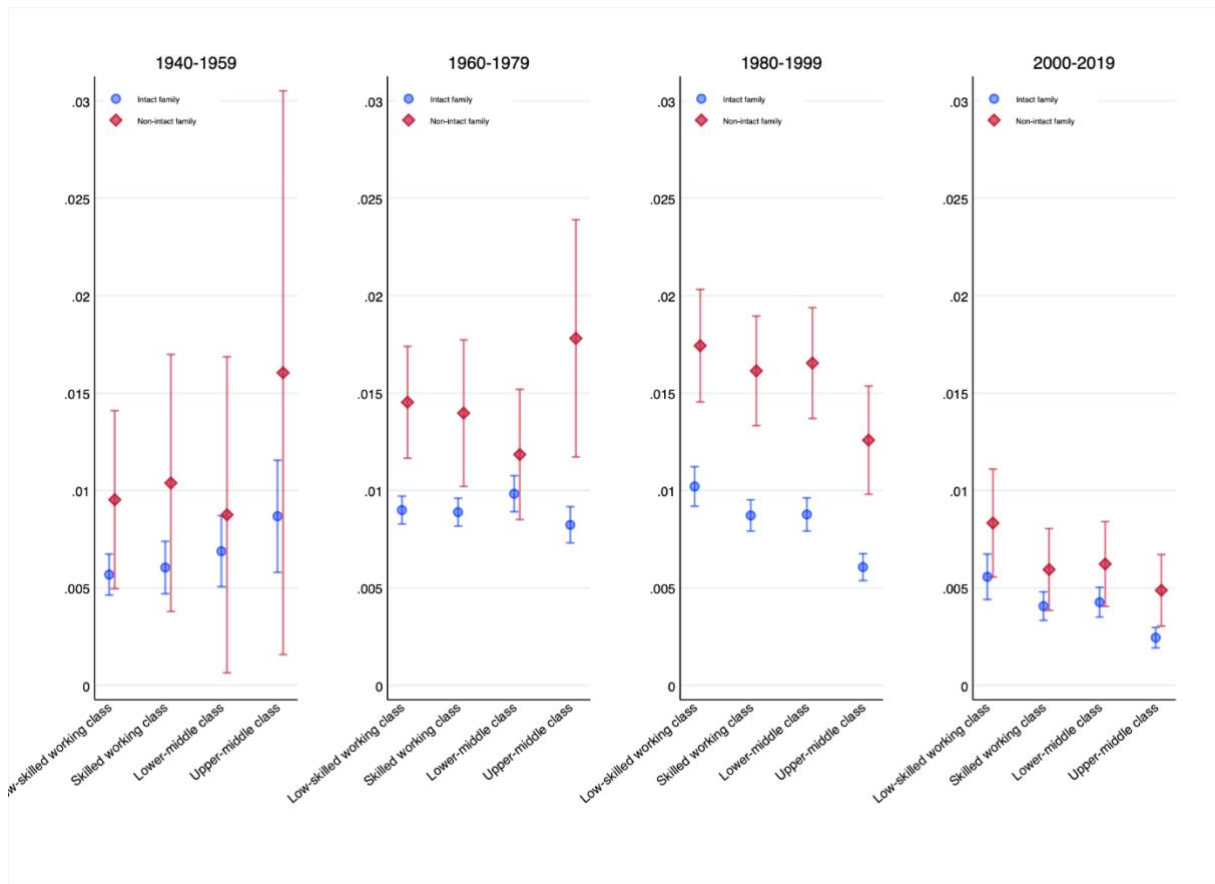


Figure A.3: predicted probability of offspring's family dissolution by parents' class for union cohorts. Discrete time event history model