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Research Article

The partnership context of first parenthood – and how it varies by parental class and birth cohort in the United Kingdom

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The partnership context of first parenthood – and how it varies by parental class and birth cohort in the United Kingdom

Alessandro Di Nallo[1]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
Family background strongly shapes when and how people have their first child, with potential consequences for inequality. In the United Kingdom, non-marital births have risen, yet little is known about how parental class drives these patterns.

OBJECTIVE
This study investigates how parental occupational class influences first-time parenthood within marriage or cohabitation, or outside any union. It further examines changes in these relationships across birth cohorts from 1940 to 1990.

METHODS
Using longitudinal data from about 55,000 individuals in the British Household Panel Study and Understanding Society, we apply discrete-time event history models. We compare transitions to parenthood by partnership context, controlling for individual and parental socioeconomic characteristics.

RESULTS
Higher class origins delay parenthood and reduce the likelihood of single parenthood. Over time, the probability of first birth within marriage has become increasingly similar across social classes, while cohabiting and single parenthood have become more strongly stratified.

CONCLUSIONS
Socioeconomic background remains central to shaping partnership contexts around first births, with growing divergence in cohabitation and single parenthood. These findings signal persistent class-based inequalities, underscoring the need for policy to pay attention to family formation pathways.

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CONTRIBUTION

This research demonstrates that parental occupational class influences not only the timing but also the context of first childbearing. By linking cohort trends to social background differences, it offers new evidence on how intergenerational inequality persists or evolves through shifting pathways to parenthood in contemporary Britain.

1. Introduction

Over the past half-century, family formation pathways in Europe have diversified, moving away from the sequence of marriage followed by childbearing (Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg 1976; Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007). The shift is reflected in the increase in births to cohabiting couples (e.g., Kiernan 2001, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Seltzer 2004) and outside residential unions (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017; Lappegård, Klüsener, and Vignoli 2018; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012).

In the United Kingdom, the proportion of non-marital births has risen from the 1970s onwards, mirroring broader European trends (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). The share of births outside marriage climbed from 11% in 1979 to 40% in 2001 (Kiernan 2004b), and further to 48% by 2021 (ONS 2021). This trend is primarily due to more births within cohabiting relationships (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). Additionally, the United Kingdom has a notable high rate of births to single women, similar to the United States (Kiernan 2004a; Kiernan and Smith 2003; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Sigle-Rushton 2008). Recent birth registration data show that in 2022, about 16% of all live births were to mothers not living with the child's father, based on sole registrations or joint registrations by parents living at different addresses (ONS 2025), a common proxy for single motherhood.

Previous studies have examined how parental socioeconomic status affects the timing of parenthood. However, evidence on the partnership context (form/type of partnership) of first childbearing is limited. This study addresses two main questions: it investigates how parental socioeconomic background influences various forms of parenthood – marital, cohabiting, or single ('out-of-union') – and assesses the consistency of these associations over 50 years in the United Kingdom. The goal is to explore the impact of parental socioeconomic status on the context of first-time parenthood and how it varies over time. The United Kingdom offers a unique context for studying transitions to parenthood due to its pronounced socioeconomic disparities and shifting norms around marriage and cohabitation over the past decades. These trends, coupled with increasing lone parenthood, offer a lens through which to examine how parental socioeconomic status shapes family formation pathways (Kuang et al. 2020).

Further, despite the United Kingdom's longstanding fertility near replacement level, pronounced social status differences persist in the timing and quantum of first births (Sigle-Rushton 2008).

First childbearing significantly impacts individual and offspring well-being and life trajectories. The partnership context during this transition often reflects socioeconomic disadvantage. McLanahan's (2004) Diverging Destinies – originally developed to explain trends in the United States and later applied to other country contexts – shows that disadvantaged individuals are more likely to have children outside of marriage, including in cohabiting and single-parent settings. These circumstances influence subsequent partnership trajectories (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012), as cohabiting parents face heightened risks of separation (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003; Kiernan 2001; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012).

The consequences of first childbearing are also intergenerational. Children of married couples are more likely to grow up in intact families than those born to cohabiting couples (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; Kiernan 2004a). Children from cohabiting unions often have fewer resources than those from marital unions (Manning and Brown 2006; Manning and Lichter 1996), and those from single-parent households typically face more disadvantaged conditions than those from two-parent families (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Kiernan and Cherlin 1999; Kiernan 2004a; Rowlingson and McKay 2005; Carlson and Berger 2013).

This study improves the understanding of intergenerational social inequality by examining how parental socioeconomic status (SES) influences the timing and context of transitioning to parenthood, whether in marriage, cohabitation, or outside a union (single parenthood). It expands existing research that primarily focuses on individual SES (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Zimmermann and Konietzka 2018) by examining the effects of parental SES (e.g., Barber 2001; Mooyaart and Liefbroer 2016), which affects educational opportunities (Blau and Duncan 1967) and thereby influences when and how parenthood occurs. Parental SES is a marker of intergenerational influence on family formation, reflecting structural and cultural resources transmitted from parents to children. Unlike own SES, which may fluctuate over the life course, parental SES provides a stable reference point for understanding long-term socioeconomic stratification in childbearing behavior. This analysis of whether the context of first birth varies with parental socioeconomic characteristics contributes to the literature on the role of family formation in the reproduction of inequality across generations (McLanahan 2009; McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

The first contribution of this study is that it shows how both the timing and context of first childbearing, including in non-marital settings, are influenced by the socioeconomic background of the parents, represented by occupational class. Previous research indicates that lower parental socioeconomic status often correlates with faster

parenthood transition (Aassve 2003; Carlson, VanOrman, and Pilkauskas 2013; Fomby and Bosick 2013; Högnäs and Carlson 2012; Manning and Cohen 2015) and having children outside marriage (Aassve 2003; Carlson, VanOrman, and Pilkauskas 2013; Barber 2000, 2001; Hobcraft 2008; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017), including in the United Kingdom (Berrington 2001; Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; Hobcraft 2008). While existing studies have examined this transition in relation to parental SES – namely education – in the United States (Hofferth and Goldscheider 2010) and in selected European countries (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017), this study adds new insights by focusing on various forms of union in the UK context.

The second contribution of this study is the exploration of how parental socioeconomic status and the timing and context of parenthood have evolved in the United Kingdom. It considers two competing theories: the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory, which views cohabitation as a marriage alternative initially adopted by higher socioeconomic groups (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002), and the Pattern of Disadvantage (PoD) theory, which attributes non-marital childbearing among less advantaged individuals to economic constraints (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). While SDT suggests that cohabitation spread broadly and replaced marriage as a normative pathway to parenthood (van de Kaa 2001; Lesthaeghe 2010), PoD emphasizes socioeconomic hardship as the primary driver of non-marital childbearing (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011), contesting the idea that it originated from liberal values among the advantaged (Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022).

Existing research indicates a decreasing influence of parental background on relationship timing across different cohorts (Sassler and Goldscheider 2004; South 2001; Wiik 2009; Mooyaart and Liefbroer 2016). However, its impact on cohabiting and single parenthood, particularly across socioeconomic strata, remains unclear. Furthermore, most studies have focused on older generations, leaving a gap in understanding how recent societal and economic shifts affect parenthood transitions (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2021; Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022). This research gaps suggests that the role of parental background in shaping single parenthood and non-coresidential unions, including living-apart-together (LAT) arrangements, is not well understood. If parental socioeconomic status continues to influence family formation and is linked to single parenthood, it indicates persistent intergenerational social inequality.

This study advances the understanding of how parental background affects parenthood transitions and whether these relationships have changed over time across a broad UK cohort from 1940 to 1990. Using data from two comprehensive British surveys, BHPS and UKHLS, which track about 55,000 individuals from adolescence to their first-time parenthood, this dataset allows for an analysis of how the influence of socioeconomic background influences parenthood transitions across different birth cohorts.

2. Background

2.1 Parents' background as occupational class

The use of parental occupational class aligns with the theoretical lens of intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage, offering insights into how parental background shapes childbearing decisions over time. The role of parental occupational class on the transition to adulthood and intergenerational fertility behaviors is not commonly analyzed in socioeconomic stratification (Dahlberg 2015). Besides other markers of parental background, such as education, income, and economic disadvantage (Dahlberg 2015; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017; Carlson, VanOrman, and Pilkauskas 2013; Aassve 2003; Hobcraft 2008), occupational class is a comprehensive measure of parental resources, encompassing employment conditions (manual and non-manual work), economic well-being, income prospects, and overall life chances (Buis 2013; Bukodi 2012; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Geyer et al. 2006; Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006). The influence of parental class on the timing and context of children's entry into parenthood is further explored in subsequent sections.

2.2 Parents' occupational class and the timing of parenthood

Parental socioeconomic background significantly influences the timing of parenthood. Individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may delay parenthood to focus on career and self-actualization, driven by an affluent upbringing and aspirations for high-paying jobs (Billari, Hiekel, and Liefbroer 2019; Brons, Liefbroer, and Ganzeboom 2017; Easterlin 1980). On the other hand, the economic security provided by wealthier parents might support earlier transitions to parenthood. However, inconsistent patterns observed in Sweden by Dahlberg (2015) suggest a complex interplay of factors. This leads to two hypotheses: higher parental class delays (Hypothesis 1a) or does not significantly affect (Hypothesis 1b) the timing of parenthood, depending on the dominance of career aspirations and economic security.

2.3 Parents' occupational class and the context of parenthood

Parents' occupational class influences their children's likelihood of becoming parents within or outside of marriage. In Europe, disadvantaged young people are more likely to become parents outside marriage, in cohabitation or as singles (e.g., Aassve 2003, Wu 1996; Högnäs and Carlson 2012; Hobcraft 2008; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017),

due to various factors, including socioeconomic constraints and behaviors (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021) such as unprotected sexual activity (Miller 2002). By contrast, children from higher-class families tend to delay parenthood as they seek stable partnerships and financial security, aided by greater parental investment and protection from non-marital unions (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021; Axinn and Thornton 1992). These higher-class individuals are also more selective in choosing a partner (Oppenheimer 1988), further delaying their transition to marital parenthood compared to their less privileged peers.

While extensive research has examined how parents' social class influences children's transition to parenthood within and outside marriage, less attention has been given to the nuances of non-marital parenthood, especially differences between cohabiting and single parenthood (Amato et al. 2008; Hofferth and Goldscheider 2010; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Studies have shown that lower socioeconomic backgrounds are linked to earlier, non-marital childbearing, particularly in North America (Duncan et al. 1998; Haveman and Wolfe 1993). In the United States, cohabitation is often viewed as a less desirable alternative to marriage for childbearing (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Kalmijn 2011). Factors like not cohabiting with a parent and experiencing multiple family transitions during childhood and adolescence – which are linked to lower parental SES (e.g., Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008) – are strong predictors of single parenthood, but not of cohabiting parenthood (Hofferth and Goldscheider 2010).

In Europe, many cohabiting couples either move to marriage post-childbearing (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012) or see cohabitation as an alternative to marriage for ideological or practical reasons (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Hiekel and Castro-Martín 2014). Research shows that parental education generally does not affect the likelihood of cohabitating births in most Western European countries. However, in both Western and Eastern Europe, women with less-educated parents are more likely to have children while single rather than within marriage (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017).

In the United Kingdom, there has been no specific research on how parents' social background influences marital, cohabiting, and single parenthood. The rate of cohabitation by age 25 has increased since 1980 (Beaujouan and Ní Bhrolcháin 2011), making it a stable (e.g., Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; Murphy 2000; Perelli-Harris 2014; Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016) and legitimate context for childbearing (Kiernan 2001; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Women with lower educational attainment are more likely to have children outside of coresidential partnernships, while those in cohabitation are less-educated than married women (Kiernan and Smith 2003) but more educated than non-partnered women. Additionally, for the 1958 and 1970 cohorts an economically deprived childhood has been linked to an increased risk of unpartnered parenthood by age 25 (Hobcraft 2008).

These findings indicate that the socioeconomic backgrounds of individuals who become parents while cohabiting or single vary, challenging the assumption that cohabitation is mainly chosen by those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many cohabiting parents deliberately choose this over marriage, suggesting that issues such as a lack of suitable partners, parental aspirations, or contraceptive use may be less influential for this group. This calls into question the traditional binary view of marital and non-marital childbearing, advocating for a more nuanced distinction between marriage, cohabitation, and singlehood to better represent how parental socioeconomic status influences parenthood transitions. While previous studies have explored socioeconomic disparities in the timing and context of parenthood in the United Kingdom (Berrington 2001; Berrington and Diamond 2000; Hobcraft 2008; Kuang et al. 2020), this study explicitly examines how parental socioeconomic status shapes transitions to parenthood through marital, cohabiting, or out-of-union births, capturing nuances in family formation often overlooked in prior work.

This study hypothesizes that high parental class significantly influences children to enter parenthood within marriage, with children from high-class families more likely to be married at the time of their first childbirth than those from lower-class backgrounds (Hypothesis 2). Additionally, parental SES might be less influential in births within cohabition compared to single parenthood. Therefore, children from advantaged backgrounds are less likely to become single parents compared to less-advantaged children (Hypothesis 3a), whereas parental class may be less relevant in parenthood transition within cohabitation (Hypothesis 3b).

2.4 Birth cohorts

The rise in unmarried cohabitation and non-marital parenthood, alongside falling marriage rates, indicates more diverse pathways to parenthood. This trend suggests that parental socioeconomic status affects children's parenthood transitions differently across cohorts (South 2001).

The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory posits that since the early 1980s, higher socioeconomic groups in Northern and Western Europe have led the shift towards non-marital parenthood and cohabitation, reflecting greater autonomy and self-realization (Lesthaeghe 2010; van De Kaa 2002). Initially, this caused socioeconomic divergence (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988), but these behaviors have gradually spread, reducing disparities in family formation (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021). In areas with prevalent cohabitation and flexible norms around starting families, parental influence on partnership decisions appears to be diminishing (Brons, Liefbroer, and

Ganzeboom 2017), especially among cohabitants (Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022; Wiik 2009).

SDT theory has been critiqued for overlooking economic factors (Zaidi and Morgan 2017). In response, the Pattern of Disadvantage (PoD) theory highlights how socioeconomic influences, particularly among the lower-educated, drive trends such as unmarried cohabitation and non-marital childbearing (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016). PoD theory suggests that lower socioeconomic status often leads to non-marital parenthood out of necessity, contrasting with SDT's emphasis on cultural shifts and higher socioeconomic groups initiating these trends (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2021; Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021; Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022).

The SDT and PoD theories offer different perspectives on how parental socioeconomic status affects children's transitions into partnership and parenthood. SDT posits that new behaviors are adopted universally across socioeconomic strata, leading to a convergence in family formation patterns over time (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021). By contrast, PoD associates family formation with economic needs and class disparity, suggesting that lower socioeconomic groups shift towards non-marital childbearing and cohabitation due to economic pressures, while higher socioeconomic groups adhere to more traditional marital and childbearing patterns, resulting in diverging parenthood patterns across socioeconomic backgrounds (Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022).

Research in Western and Northern European countries, not including the United Kingdom, has shown that the impact of parental socioeconomic status on childbearing contexts varies across cohorts (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017) as women with lower-status parents more frequently begin childbearing within cohabitation in certain European and North American settings. Young adults from high-SES families have increasingly postponed marriage and childbearing; when they do become parents, births are concentrated within marriage (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021), while those from lower SES backgrounds have become less inclined towards traditional family pathways and have continued to engage more frequently in cohabitation and single parenthood (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021). This trend towards postponing marriage and parenthood among the more-educated, with first births concentrated within marriage, while nonmarital pathways have become more common among the less-educated (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021) supports the 'Diverging Destinies' narrative (Amato et al. 2015; McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008), suggesting growing socioeconomic disparities in family formation patterns (Brons, Liefbroer, and Ganzeboom 2017; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017; Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021; Wiik 2009).

In the United Kingdom, research on how parental socioeconomic background influences children's pathways to parenthood, particularly across various cohorts, is very limited. Most existing studies have focused on union formation rather than on the nuances of marital or non-marital parenthood. Analyses based on cohorts from the 1950s to the 1970s indicate that socioeconomic background affects transitions to adulthood (Bynner 2001, 2005; Cavalli and Galland 1995; Coffield 1995), with cohabitation initially more common among the higher socioeconomic and educated groups (Ermisch and Francesconi 1996; Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2013), supporting the SDT theory. However, other analyses indicate reduced differences in first marriage and cohabitation rates across socioeconomic groups, suggesting widespread cohabitation norms (Berrington and Diamond 2000; Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022).

Research on the 1958 and 1970 British cohorts shows that childhood socioeconomic factors significantly influenced the timing and context of entering parenthood. Marital parenthood is typically associated with higher parental socioeconomic status, reflecting a stable upbringing, while cohabitation and single parenthood are often more common among those with lower socioeconomic status (Hobcraft 2008). This "youth divide" (Jones 2002) highlights the contrasting adulthood transitions between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged youth, often labeled as 'fast-track' and 'slow-track' pathways (Côté 2002; Côté and Brynner 2008; Bynner 2001, 2005).

In current research there are gaps in the understanding of how parental socioeconomic status influences children's transition to parenthood across various UK cohorts. Earlier studies focus primarily on older cohorts and union formation, paying less attention to how parenthood contexts have evolved. There are ongoing questions about socioeconomic impacts on cohabiting and single parenthood, and whether trends in union formation reflect those in parenthood contexts across generations. This underscores the need for more research to determine if first childbearing patterns across parental SES in the United Kingdom have converged or diverged.

2.5 Own education

Parents' socioeconomic status may indirectly influence children's childbearing behavior through the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment (Michael and Tuma 1985). Education significantly affects the timing and context of becoming a parent (e.g., Dahlberg 2015) and is closely linked to a family's social background (e.g., Breen and Jonsson 2005). While there is generally a negative correlation between own education level and early (e.g., Andersson et al. 2009; Michael and Tuma 1985; Mikolai, Berrington, and Perelli-Harris 2018) and non-marital fertility (Aassve 2003; Amato et al. 2008; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017; Mikolai, Berrington, and Perelli-Harris

2018), the relationship is not consistent over time (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991; Dahlberg 2015). It is relevant to explore how parental SES impacts childbearing decisions beyond the individual's educational level. This study considers the time-varying educational levels of individuals to determine the independent role of parental SES on the transition to parenthood.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Sample

This analysis uses data from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) from 1991 to 2008 (waves 1–18) and Understanding Society (UKHLS) from 2009 to 2019 (waves 1–10). The BHPS, which began in 1991, initially covered around 5,500 households and 10,000 individuals. UKHLS, launched in 2009, continues tracking BHPS participants and includes additional respondents from 40,000 households. Both surveys use probability sampling to ensure national representativeness and provide detailed data on union formation and dissolution, childbirth, education, and social background, combining retrospective and longitudinal data on partnership histories. The sample includes both original BHPS participants followed into UKHLS and new UKHLS entrants born between 1940 and 1990, totaling 55,158 individuals and 914,788 person-year observations.

3.2 Measures

Union formation and childbearing dates are derived from retrospective and longitudinal histories from age 16 to 40. Relationship histories (start and end dates of marriages and cohabitations) are used to create time-varying variables for analyzing parenthood transitions. These include: (1) a dichotomous variable indicating the occurrence of childbearing, and (2) partnership status at the time of the first birth, distinguishing between marriage, unmarried cohabitation, or no coresidential union. By treating partnership status as time-varying, these measures dynamically capture the timing and context of first childbirth. Monthly information is used to determine both the timing of first birth and the beginning of marriage or cohabitation. This allows for the identification of the partnership context at the time of the birth. However, in rare instances where both events occur in the same month or are based on retrospective reporting, small sequencing errors may still occur. As a robustness check, we further distinguish transitions to first

parenthood occurring within marriage, within cohabitation, or outside any union, and compare these with remaining childless.

The main independent variable in the study is parents' occupational class, categorized into four groups based on their labor market positions: (1) Upper-middle class (professionals and managers), (2) Lower-middle class (technicians, associate professionals, and clerical officers), (3) Skilled working class (skilled sales, service, and craft workers) and (4) Low-skilled working class (assemblers, machine operatives, and elementary occupations). This classification uses the Standard Occupational Classification 2000/2010 (SOC2000/2010) at a detailed 4-digit level (Oesch 2006; Oesch and Vigna 2022). Parental occupation is measured retrospectively based on the respondent's description of their parents' job when they were aged 14. As such, the SES variable reflects a snapshot of parental class at a fixed point in adolescence and does not capture changes over time. If the parental occupation is missing or individuals report 'unemployed' statuses, they are coded as 'Missing' (not displayed in the final output, though their results are available in the Appendix). The highest class of either parent is used for classification, following Erikson's (1984) dominance approach. Additionally, the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) is used as an alternative proxy for more robust analysis. Further details are available upon request.

The cohort is operationalized as a continuous variable reflecting the respondent's birth year, modeled in the main analysis with linear, quadratic, and cubic terms. For assessing variations in the parental class–cohort association, the cohort is centered around 1960 (see Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017), reflecting sociodemographic shifts in family behavior since the 1960s (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). This approach aligns with empirical evidence showing a surge in cohabitation in the United Kingdom from the late 1970s to early 1980s (e.g., Ermisch and Francesconi 1996; 2000). Additionally, a categorical variable spanning 10 years is used in the descriptive results to analyze partnership contexts during birth across cohorts.

Respondent's education is treated as a time-varying covariate, incorporating their highest educational attainment, age of leaving education, further education resumption, and any updates. If respondents were still enrolled at the time of interview, their highest level attained by then is recorded. Missing information is signaled by a flag indicator. Education categories are (1) Degree, (2) Other higher degree, (3) A-level and similar qualifications, (4) GCSE and similar qualifications, (5) Other qualifications, (6) No qualification and missing. These roughly correspond to ISCED levels 5–6 (categories 1–2), ISCED 3–4 (categories 3–5), and ISCED 0–2 (category 6).

Baseline controls in all models include age (modeled as linear, quadratic, and cubical; categorical specifications are available in the Appendix), gender, self-identified ethnicity (nine categories), and parents' partnership status before age 16 (three groups). Descriptive statistics are detailed in Table 1. While gender is included as a control

variable, a supplementary analysis (Appendix A.2) explores gender-specific patterns. Past studies have examined how parental socioeconomic background influences transitions to parenthood outside marriage or in cohabitation through the lens of gender (e.g., Dahlberg 2015; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017). This study builds on these insights by analyzing transitions to parenthood across distinct partnership contexts – marriage, cohabitation, and singlehood – for women and men separately.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	N	*Mean*
Number of individuals	55,158	
Number of observations	914,788	
Parenthood outside union	8,418	
Parenthood in cohabitation	10,765	
Parenthood in marriage	17,806	
Parents' class		
Low-skilled working class	13,897	0.25
Skilled working class	13,781	0.25
Lower-middle class	13,706	0.25
Upper-middle class	13,774	0.25
Parents' partnership status before age 16		
Intact	46,089	0.84
Non-intact	6,001	0.10
One or both parents died/Other	3,068	0.06
Gender		
Male	24,675	0.45
Female	30,483	0.55
Ethnicity		
British/Irish	43,913	0.80
European/Other White	1,992	0.04
Mixed: White & Other	721	0.01
Indian	2,035	0.04
Pakistani	1,623	0.03
Bangladeshi	893	0.02
Other Asian/Asian British	864	0.02
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	2,241	0.04
Other/No information	876	0.02
Cohort		
1940–1949	9,659	0.18
1950–1959	10,944	0.20
1960–1969	13,662	0.25
1970–1979	12,505	0.23
1980–1990	8,388	0.15
Own education		
Degree	4,897	0.09
Other higher	4,979	0.07
A level/similar	19,189	0.35
GCSE/similar	8,745	0.16
Other qualification	4,799	0.09
No qualification/Missing	13,458	0.24

3.3 Analytical approach

The dataset is organized as a person–period file, documenting each year an individual is at risk of transitioning to parenthood from age 16. Initially, all individuals are childless and remain so, and become parents within a cohabitation or marriage or as single. Individuals who have a child but do not form a union are classified under 'out-of-union' births, ensuring that all partnership contexts, including single parenthood, are captured. This approach ensures no exclusion from the analysis of individuals without cohabitation or marriage dates. An individual exits the risk set at the time of their first childbirth. Censoring occurs in two cases: (1) if the individual remains childless and reaches age 40, and (2) if the individual exits the panel before experiencing a first childbirth. This second scenario includes those who drop out of the survey prematurely and those born near the end of the cohort window (e.g., late 1980s), who are not yet old enough to be observed through age 40. These cases are treated as right-censored at their last observed age.

Discrete-time competing risk models with yearly intervals are used to estimate the effects of parental SES on the likelihood of having a birth in cohabitation, marriage, or as single (see Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017). The models differentiate between parenthood contexts: (a) within cohabitation vs. marriage, (b) outside a coresidential union vs. marriage, (c) outside a coresidential union vs. cohabitation (e.g., Steele, Goldstein, and Browne 2004). Respondents are considered at risk of pregnancy within marriage or cohabitation starting from the time they form a union. First births occurring outside any coresidential union – including those to single parents – are classified as out-of-union births. Because our outcome is the transition to first birth, we treat first birth as an absorbing state and right-censor follow-up at the month/year of that birth. Individuals who do not have a first birth by age 50 (or who exit the panel earlier) are right-censored at their last observation. Our competing-risks contrasts (marriage vs. cohabitation vs. outside union) therefore apply only to the context of the first birth.

In the alternative specification in the Appendix, the analysis examines separate transitions to first childbirth within different contexts: (1) cohabitation, (2) marriage, and (3) outside a union (vs. remaining childless) using logit event history models. This model maintains individuals in all three risk sets until their first birth. Once an individual has a first child in one context, they are removed from the other risk sets, reflecting that they are no longer at risk of a first birth in any other context.

The multinomial results are expressed as relative risk ratios, comparing different family contexts of parenthood – marriage (columns B and C of Tables 2 and 3) and cohabitation (column D of Tables 2 and 3) – across occupational tiers, with 'low-skilled working' families as the baseline. For instance, in Column B, a relative risk ratio greater than one indicates an elevated risk of cohabiting rather than marital parenthood for a child raised in a 'skilled-working' (or 'lower-middle or 'upper-middle') family, compared to

one raised in a 'low-skilled working' family. Conversely, ratios below one indicate a reduced risk of the same outcome.

The main analyses use two specifications. Model 1 employs parents' highest occupational status along with baseline characteristics, while Model 2 adds respondents' time-varying education as a confounder, adjusting for non-independence within unions using a robust cluster variance estimator.

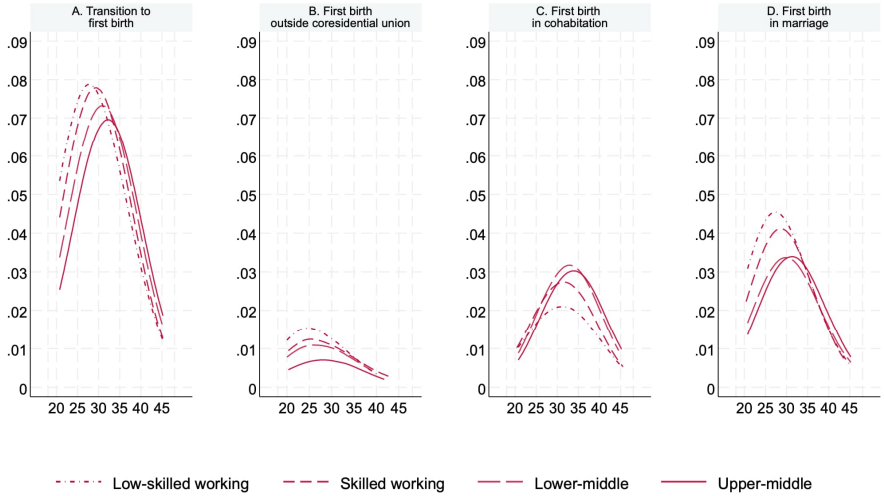
Robustness tests further assess parents' socioeconomic status by education (the higher attainment of the father or mother, depicted in Figure A-1). Gender-specific analyses are presented in Figure A-2. The parenthood context, conditional on the first birth, is explored using a multinomial logit model in Table A-1. Event history models addressing the transition to marital, cohabiting, out-of-union parenthood, and general childbearing without context distinction are displayed in Table A-2. These supplementary analyses yield findings consistent with the principal analyses.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive results

Figure 1 analyzes insights into the hazards associated with entering parenthood (panel A) and the hazards distinguished by partnership context – coresidential union (panel B), cohabitation (panel C), and marriage (panel D) – in relation to parents' highest occupational class. Children from higher occupational classes generally delay entering parenthood, with a clear contrast between about 33% of those from 'upper-middle' class backgrounds becoming parents by age 30, compared to over half from 'low-skilled working' backgrounds. Out-of-union parenthood is more common among less advantaged classes during teenage years and early 20s. Cohabitation as a first birth context shows less socioeconomic stratification, often peaking after age 30, especially among those from middle to upper-middle classes, in line with Kiernan (2004b). Conversely, marital births exhibit a pronounced socioeconomic gradient, with those from 'upper-middle' class families having a lower risk up to age 35, while those from 'low-skilled working' families face a higher risk of early marital parenthood.

Figure 1: Hazard of transition to parenthood in coresidential unions, cohabitations, and marriage, by age and parents' class



Note: Hazards are computed on a yearly basis. This figure displays age-specific hazards of transitioning to first parenthood between ages 15 and 50, based on discrete-time survival models. The four panels correspond to overall first birth (A), out-of-union first birth (B), cohabiting first birth (C), and marital first birth (D), each stratified by parental occupational class. Although the analysis includes the full 15–50 age range, the plotted curves are constrained to ages where events are sufficiently frequent to estimate hazards reliably.

4.2 Multivariate results: full sample

Table 2 presents relative risk ratios, comparing the likelihood of childbearing across different partnership contexts relative to the baseline category of marital births. The first column of this table examines how parents' occupational class impacts the rate of entering parenthood. In Model 1 there is a significant correlation between higher class and delayed first parenthood, even when controlling for sociodemographic confounders. Each step up in occupational class reduces the risk of transitioning to parenthood, forming a gradient-like progression. Model 2 shows that respondents' educational level partly attenuates the influence of parents' class on this transition, but the negative class gradient from Model 1 is largely confirmed.

Table 2: Influence of parents' occupation on transition to parenthood (Panel A) and context of parenthood (Panels B, C, and D). Relative risk ratios for first births within different partnership contexts by parental SES and cohort (reference group: low-skilled working families)

	A. Transition to first child		B. Transition to first child Cohabitation vs. marriage		C. Transition to first child Single vs. marriage		D. Transition to first child Single vs. cohabitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Parents' class (*Ref: Low-skilled working class*)								
Skilled working	0.896	0.916	1.098	1.095	0.866	0.883	0.788	0.807
	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.034)	(0.041)	(0.030)	(0.037)
Lower-middle	0.764	0.820	1.083	1.055	0.734	0.780	0.678	0.740
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.032)	(0.035)	(0.029)	(0.037)	(0.024)	(0.031)
Upper-middle	0.673	0.753	1.057	1.033	0.485	0.562	0.459	0.544
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.030)	(0.036)	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.019)	(0.027)
Own education	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Number of observations	914,788		914,788		914,788		914,788	
Number of individuals	55,158		55,158		55,158		55,158	

Note: Robust std. errors in parentheses. Sociodemographic controls: birth cohort (linear, quadratic, cubic), age (linear, quadratic, cubic), family status at 16, ethnicity (9 groups).

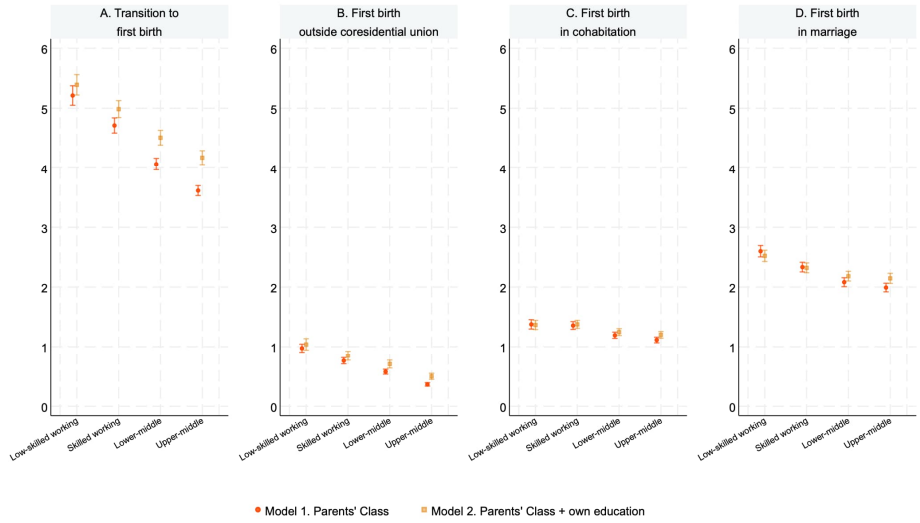
The additional columns of Table 2 explore the relative risks of transitioning to first parenthood in different contexts: within cohabitation vs. marriage (B), outside a union vs. marriage (C), and outside a union vs. cohabitation (D). Column B reveals that higher parental class does not increase the likelihood of choosing cohabitation over married first-time parenthood. Column C shows a negative association between higher parental class and the risk of becoming a single parent compared to being married. In Column D, the findings indicate that individuals from lower class backgrounds are more likely to experience single parenthood than cohabitation.

The findings shows that higher parental socioeconomic levels are negatively associated with transitioning to a first birth (in line with Hypothesis 1a), although the strength of this relationship varies across different outcomes. The influence of parental class diminishes when considering respondents' own educational attainment (Model 2) but remains statistically significant for transitions to 'single vs. marital parenthood' and 'single vs. cohabitation' parenthood.

Figure 2 exhibits the predicted annual probabilities of parenthood transitions from Table 2, highlighting differences across social contexts. Panel A shows that higher parental class delays the timing of a first birth. Panel B indicates a steep gradient in the risk of parenthood outside a coresidential union, with children from lower social classes

facing significantly higher probabilities compared to those from higher-occupation families – about 1% (Models 1 and 2) annually for children from low-skilled working families versus less than 0.5% (Model 2) for those from middle to upper classes. Panel C shows a mild socioeconomic association with the probability of first birth in cohabitation, ranging from 1.2% to 1.4% across all groups. Panel D reveals that children from lower-class families are more likely to experience their first childbearing within marriage, with probabilities of 2.6% for low-skilled working families versus 2% for higher classes (Model 1). The sociodemographic gradient narrows when accounting for own education, but significant gaps remain between lower and upper classes. These findings seem to contrast with Hypothesis 2 and to be in keeping with Hypotheses 3a and 3b.

Figure 2: Annual predicted probabilities of transition to parenthood, by union status and parents' class



Note: Figure 2 displays annual probabilities of transition to childbearing.

4.3 Multivariate results: cohort

This section examines how the association between parents' class and union status at birth changes across cohorts, by introducing an interaction term between parents' class (categorical) and cohort (continuous). The primary effect of cohort reflects the

association for children with 'low-skilled working' class parents (the baseline group from the previous specification) born in 1960. Results in Column A of Table 3 show a negative class gradient in the parenthood transition, with children from higher classes experiencing a slower transition than the 'low-skilled working' baseline. A relative risk below 1 for the 'cohort' variable indicates a decreasing rate of transition to first birth over time. The interaction analysis highlights an even slower transition for 'lower-middle' and 'upper-middle' classes relative to the baseline across different cohorts.

The interaction between parents' class and cohort shows that the negative association with the risk of first birth in cohabitation versus marriage (Column B) has strengthened in more recent cohorts. A similar trend is noted for the risk of outside coresidential parenthood versus marriage (Column C). Conversely, in the model for single parenthood versus parenthood in cohabitation (Column D), the interaction term exceeds 1, indicating a growing positive association in recent cohorts.

Adjusting for respondents' education, findings are consistent with Model 1, showing that higher parental class continues to delay cohabiting parenthood across cohorts (Column B). Conversely, the interaction between parental class and cohort in Panel C (outside union versus marriage) is negative, indicating that the delaying effect of higher socioeconomic backgrounds on outside-union first births compared to marital births has grown over time. In Panel D (single parenthood versus cohabitation), a positive and significant interaction suggests that the delaying effect of higher parental class on single parenthood, versus cohabitation, has lessened over time.

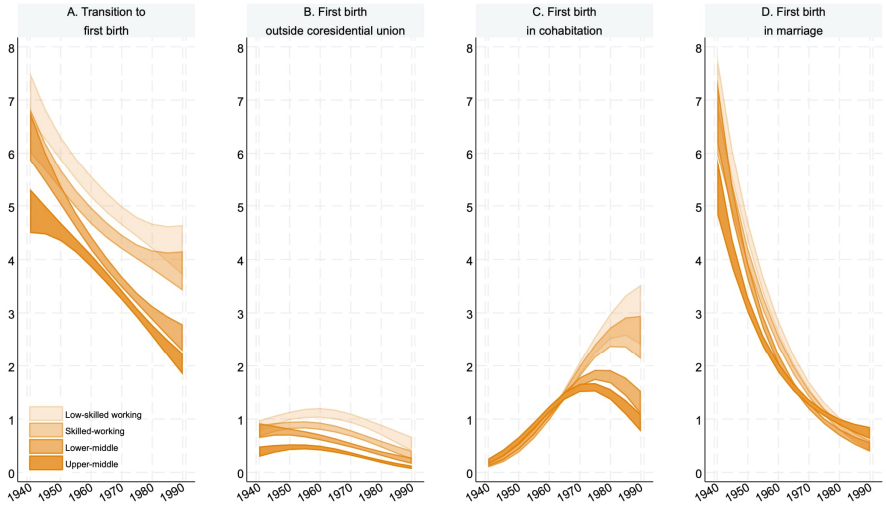
Table 3: Influence of parents' occupation on transition to parenthood (Panel A) and context of parenthood (Panel B, C, and D). Interaction with cohort of birth. Relative risk ratios for first births within different partnership contexts by parental SES and cohort (reference group: low-skilled working families)

	A. Transition to first child		B. Transition to first child Cohabitation vs. marriage		C. Transition to first child Single vs. marriage		D. Transition to first child Single vs. cohabitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Parents' class (*Ref: Low-skilled working class*)								
Skilled working	0.892	0.913	1.128	1.128	0.882	0.898	0.782	0.796
	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.035)
Lower-middle	0.778	0.840	1.319	1.296	0.786	0.809	0.596	0.625
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.030)	(0.032)	(0.027)	(0.029)
Upper-middle	0.687	0.773	1.452	1.441	0.553	0.602	0.381	0.418
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.060)	(0.061)	(0.024)	(0.027)	(0.019)	(0.021)
Cohort	0.988	0.992	1.099	1.097	1.040	1.038	0.946	0.946
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Cohort x Skilled working	1.000	0.999	0.995	0.996	0.994	0.995	0.999	0.999
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Lower-middle	0.993	0.990	0.983	0.985	0.990	0.992	1.006	1.007
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Upper-middle	0.994	0.992	0.960	0.961	0.977	0.979	1.018	1.019
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Own education	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Number of observations	914,788		914,788		914,788		914,788	
Number of individuals	55,158		55,158		55,158		55,158	

Note: Robust std. errors in parentheses. Sociodemographic controls: Cohort of birth (linear, quadratic, cubic), age (linear, quadratic, cubic), family status at age 16, ethnicity (9 groups).

Figure 3, based on Model 1 estimates, confirms a negative class gradient in the timing of first birth transition (Panel A), with a deceleration across all social groups. It also shows that the proportions of cohabiting and marrying at first childbearing have roughly reversed across cohorts, reflecting the findings of Ermisch and Francesconi (2000). Panel B illustrates that first childbearing outside a union remains stratified by social class but has become less pronounced among younger cohorts, especially in the lower-middle and upper-middle classes.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of transition to first birth and parenthood by union status, birth cohort, and parents' class



Note: Figure 3 displays annual probabilities of transition to childbearing. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals around the predicted probabilities.

Panel C shows that the stratification of parenthood within cohabitation has changed over time. It was not significantly stratified among cohorts from the 1940s to 1960s. However, it peaked among the upper-middle and lower-middle classes of the 1970s and 1980s cohorts, then declined and became more popular among less advantaged classes. Specifically, for the 'low-skilled' and 'skilled working' classes born in the 1980s, the likelihood of first birth within cohabitation more than doubled compared to their more advantaged peers. Conversely, the influence of parents' background on transitioning to marital parenthood (Panel D) has diminished over time. Previously, marital parenthood was more common among less advantaged classes, but this trend is reversing, with children from higher-class families born in the late 1980s now exhibiting slightly higher probabilities of a first marital birth compared to less advantaged peers.

5. Discussion

Previous research has highlighted the diversification of family formation across European cohorts influenced by family background (Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Van Winkle 2018). This study contributes to the literature by showing the significant and evolving role of social origin in shaping initial childbearing decisions. It highlights the sustained yet changing impact of family background on first childbearing across various generations.

The study advances understanding of how parental socioeconomic status influences the onset of parenthood, especially focusing on non-marital births and their role in perpetuating intergenerational inequality. Unlike previous research, which primarily examines the timing of parenthood and parental education, it examines the influence of parents' class on both the timing and context (single, cohabiting, or married) of entering parenthood. It specifically considers various cohorts within the UK context, a country known for high rates of non-marital and single parenthood (Kiernan 2004a; Kuang et al. 2020; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Sigle-Rushton 2008).

This study confirmed that in the United Kingdom, individuals from lower parental social classes typically enter parenthood earlier than those from middle or high classes, supporting Hypothesis 1b. This trend holds even when considering variation in individuals' education levels, consistent with previous research on the timing of first childbirth (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017). This recurrent finding across studies underscores the significant role of parental background in the transition to parenthood (e.g., Aassve 2003; Axinn and Thornton 1992; Carlson, VanOrman, and Pilkauskas 2013; Fomby and Bosick 2013; Goldscheider, Kaufman, and Sassler 2009; Manning and Cohen 2015).

The study reveals that the influence of parents' occupational class on their children's transition to parenthood differs by context – marriage, cohabitation, or outside any coresidential partnership. Children from upper-middle-class families generally delay entering parenthood across all contexts, with this delay most notable outside formal partnerships. This delayed is less pronounced in cohabitation, especially when considering the individual's education level. The findings show that children from lower parental occupational classes tend to enter parenthood earlier, especially within marriage, contrary to Hypothesis 2. Meanwhile, children from more advantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to experience single parenthood. This underscores that socioeconomic background influences both the timing and context of parenthood.

The impact of parental class on children's transition to parenthood in cohabitation and outside of union contexts varies. Children from lower socioeconomic classes are more likely to experience single parenthood than their more advantaged peers, confirming a steeper gradient, as per Hypothesis 3a. However, the influence of parental class on cohabiting parenthood is less pronounced, supporting Hypothesis 3b. This

observation, which is consistent with earlier findings in Sweden and France (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021), extends to the United Kingdom, highlighting the nuanced role of parental occupational class in these transitions.

Parental socioeconomic background distinctly influences various non-marital parenthood pathways in the United Kingdom. This calls for reevaluating the traditional distinction between non-marital and marital parenthood, emphasizing the unique dynamics of cohabiting and single parenthood, aligning with previous research by Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier (2017). These findings underline the nuanced impact of socioeconomic background on family formation trajectories, stressing the need for more detailed classifications within non-marital parenthood for a deeper understanding of family dynamics.

The second major contribution of this study is the exploration of how parental socioeconomic class impacted the timing of parenthood in the United Kingdom between 1940 and 1990. The analysis shows that the transition to first childbirth was increasingly delayed, particularly among higher-class individuals. Interestingly, the timing gap between the upper-middle and lower-middle classes narrowed, while the difference between the lower (low-skilled working and skilled working) and upper classes widened. This trend highlights evolving socioeconomic influences on family formation patterns across generations, contrasting with findings from Sweden, where those with medium-educated parents tend to start families earlier than those with lower-educated parents (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021).

Individuals from lower-class backgrounds increasingly entered cohabitation and single parenthood, compared to those from medium or higher classes. For earlier cohorts (born in the 1940s), births outside unions were less common among higher socioeconomic groups. This trend became more pronounced and socially stratified from the late 1950s, especially among those born in the 1970s, though it declined slightly for the 1980s cohorts. The pattern of entering cohabiting parenthood was not socially stratified for cohorts born from the 1940s to the 1960s. However, notable social stratification emerged among subsequent cohorts, particularly those born after the 1960s. Individuals from lower-class backgrounds began entering cohabiting parenthood at a faster rate than those from higher classes, in line with Mikolai, Berrington, and Perelli-Harris (2018). Marital parenthood declined across all classes, indicating a convergence in behaviors. However, individuals from upper-middle class backgrounds born in the late 1980s showed a slightly higher tendency to become parents within marriage than their working-class counterparts, indicating a new trend in the association between parental socioeconomic class and marital parenthood.

In younger cohorts, individuals with lower parental socioeconomic status increasingly choose cohabitation over marriage (Bumpass and Raley 1995; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2021; Rindfuss and Vandenheuvel 1990). This trend, which sees

cohabitation as a viable alternative to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Hiekel and Castro-Martín 2014; Holland 2017), is also observed in countries where marriage is valued, like the United States, Central and Eastern Europe, and parts of Southern Europe (e.g., Italy and Spain). This shift reflects broader social changes and aligns with findings from multiple studies indicating the growing acceptance and practice of cohabitation across different socioeconomic groups (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2021).

The study reveals that family formation pathways are increasingly diverging based on socioeconomic background. Individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds increasingly delay or avoid family formation, while those from lower backgrounds tend to form families earlier, often through single parenthood or cohabitation. This trend supports the 'diverging destinies' concept (Amato et al. 2015; McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008), highlighting the significant role of socioeconomic status in non-marital and particularly cohabiting parenthood (Brons, Liefbroer, and Ganzeboom 2017; Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2017; Wiik 2009). Meanwhile, patterns of marital parenthood have become more similar across socioeconomic groups, hinting at potential shifts in future family formation trends. The observed changes in the relationship between parental SES and childbearing likely reflect both structural shifts in socioeconomic advantage and behavioral changes in family formation norms. For instance, higher parental SES may delay childbearing by encouraging educational attainment and career-building, while lower SES may reinforce earlier transitions through economic necessity or cultural norms. Also, cohort differences in the sequencing of marriage and childbearing may affect interpretations of stratification processes. In recent cohorts, the increasing prevalence of post-birth marriages challenges traditional categorizations of marital and non-marital births, suggesting the need to interpret findings within the broader context of changing family norms. Also, although this study captures patterns of single parenthood across socioeconomic groups, it may not fully reflect emerging forms of later-life, elective single motherhood, particularly among highly educated women (Berghammer et al. 2024).

While some trends in family formation, such as the decline in marital parenthood and its convergence across social classes, align with Second Demographic Transition theory (SDT), other trends do not. Contrary to SDT's notion that cohabitation began primarily among affluent groups in the 1960s and 1970s, evidence in the United Kingdom indicates that cohabitation as a context for childbearing was not initially led by the socioeconomically advantaged born in the 1940s and 1950s. Instead, the Pattern of Disadvantage (PoD) theory, which focuses on socioeconomic factors driving non-traditional family patterns, seems more applicable. The study shows that disparities in family formation based on socioeconomic background have widened over time, with non-marital childbearing being more common among those in lower socioeconomic positions,

suggesting a pattern of disadvantage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010) rather than a shift towards liberal values seen in more advantaged groups (Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022).

The findings of this study complement those of Ermisch (2023), who emphasizes the role of parental education and intergenerational educational mobility in shaping fertility timing and patterns. While Ermisch identifies delayed parenthood among higher-educated groups and narrowing fertility differentials across family backgrounds in recent cohorts, this article reveals that parental SES continues to shape transitions to parenthood within cohabitation and singlehood, contexts not explicitly addressed in Ermisch's work. Furthermore, the evidence of a convergence in marital births across socioeconomic groups aligns with Ermisch's observation of broader societal shifts in fertility behaviors.

This study has some limitations, primarily using only occupational class as an indicator in its examination of parental socioeconomic status. Future research should incorporate broader indicators like social status (Dahlberg 2015) or income (Wiik 2009) for a more comprehensive analysis. The reliance on occupational class as a hierarchical measure necessitates cautious interpretation, and while parental education is included in the data (see Appendix A.1), its impact is limited by incomplete reporting and does not fully capture the complexity of the United Kingdom's education system. Additionally, the absence of a dynamic personal class status measure restricts deeper insight. Future studies should include a wider range of socioeconomic indicators and consider changing societal norms affecting parental influence across newer cohorts.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data for birth and union dates introduces potential recall bias, which skews findings, especially underestimating cohabiting parenthood in favor of single parenthood (Heuveline et al. 2003). Although monthly data improve classification of partnership status at first birth, some minor misclassification is possible in edge cases where birth and partnership formation are reported as occurring close together in time. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the data limits the availability of detailed annual work history, restricting the depth of possible analysis to understand participants' life-course trajectories.

Third, the study faces potential data skew due to less than half of the sample transitioning from BHPS to UKHLS, particularly affecting the youngest cohort, despite handling panel attrition. While major life events of older cohorts are well-documented, the attrition may impact the accuracy of estimates for younger participants. However, the use of event history models, which account for right censoring and truncation, helps mitigate these biases in longitudinal analysis. Further, while younger cohorts, particularly those born in the 1980s, have not yet completed their reproductive years, the models used account for right censoring. Nonetheless, predicted probabilities for these cohorts should be interpreted with caution, as they reflect only the childbearing behavior observed up to the late 20s.

The fourth limitation is the limited attention to gender differences in transitions to parenthood. A descriptive, gender-disaggregated figure in Appendix A-2 suggests that the association between parental socioeconomic background and the context of first birth (marriage, cohabitation, or outside a coresidential union) is somewhat more pronounced for women than for men. However, these patterns were not formally tested and should be interpreted cautiously. This tentative contrast aligns with prior evidence that social background can matter more for women's childbearing than men's (e.g., Dahlberg 2015). Possible mechanisms include the continued salience of gendered role expectations in family formation (e.g., Barber 2000) and differences in the reporting of fertility histories by men and women (Rendall et al. 1999).

Finally, the study recognizes other types of data limitations. For instance, the surveys lack information on non-coresidential unions, such as living-apart-together (LAT) relationships, about half of which transition to co-residential unions (Haskey 2005; Schnor 2015). Factors like fertility intentions and prior children play roles in these transitions (Coulter and Hu 2017). Consequently, some individuals classified as single parents might be in LAT partnerships, potentially moving to cohabitation post-childbirth. Future research including these dynamics could provide deeper insights into contemporary partnership experiences (van der Wiel, Mulder, and de Valk 2020). Further, it should be noted that the classification of partnership context at birth does not capture cases where union formation occurs during pregnancy, potentially underestimating conception-before-union transitions, especially among specific sociodemographic groups.

In summary, this study highlights the significant role of parents' socioeconomic background on their children's transition to parenthood, emphasizing how occupational class affects various partnership contexts over time. It notes a trend of delayed first childbearing among UK birth cohorts from 1940 to 1990 (e.g., Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022), with cohabitation increasingly becoming a common context for first childbirth, reflecting broader societal shifts such as economic uncertainty, liberal values, and the rise of LAT relationships (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier 2021; Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021; Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022). Economic challenges, particularly among millennials, have contributed to delayed cohabitation transitions (Palumbo et al. 2023; Pelikh, Mikolai, and Kulu 2022: 14), pointing to a potential shift in family formation patterns among younger, more economically advantaged groups. This trend may be unique to the British context, influenced by economic factors such as financial crises and reforms to the UK higher education system (including tuition fee increases), or it may represent a wider shift among more disadvantaged millennials. The study calls for further research to unpack these dynamics and highlights the strong intergenerational influence of socioeconomic status on family formation (Mooyaart, Liefbroer, and Billari 2021),

even when considering individuals' education levels (Brons, Liefbroer, and Ganzeboom 2017).

Future research should explore the interplay between children's psychological development and parental influence, particularly examining how children's values and beliefs might mediate the effects of parental background on life course transitions. More precise analysis is needed on how cultural norms influence demographic behaviors under the individualization thesis, with longitudinal data offering the potential for deeper insight. Cross-national studies should examine the impact of welfare systems on adulthood transitions. Higher welfare spending typically facilitates smoother transitions to stable family arrangements like marriage (Mooyaart and Liefbroer 2016). However, in Southern European countries, high welfare spending on older cohorts may increase young adults' reliance on family resources (Thevenon 2011), particularly in higher social strata. This reliance can limit life trajectory diversity and prolong dependency on parents (Sironi, Barban, and Impicciatore 2015), potentially hindering social mobility amidst economic crises and precarious job conditions. This research is essential for shaping policies that address the relationship between social class and social mobility among new generations.

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Appendix

A.1 Parents' education

Parents' educational attainment and occupational class are two complementary and not mutually exclusive dimensions of the socioeconomic stratification of the intergenerational transmission of parenthood and fertility behavior (Dahlberg 2015). In contrast to occupational class, which is a proxy of parental material resources, education is an indicator of the parental family's non-material resources. It captures cultural differences and abilities in using knowledge (Dahlberg 2015) and transmitting family formation preferences to children (Axinn and Thornton 1992; De Valk and Liefbroer 2007; Wiik 2009). Low parental education has been found to be associated with higher risk of non-marital childbearing in many countries (Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier. 2017). In the United States, the high-educated are less likely to experience single parenthood (McLanahan 2009; Musick and Mare 2004).

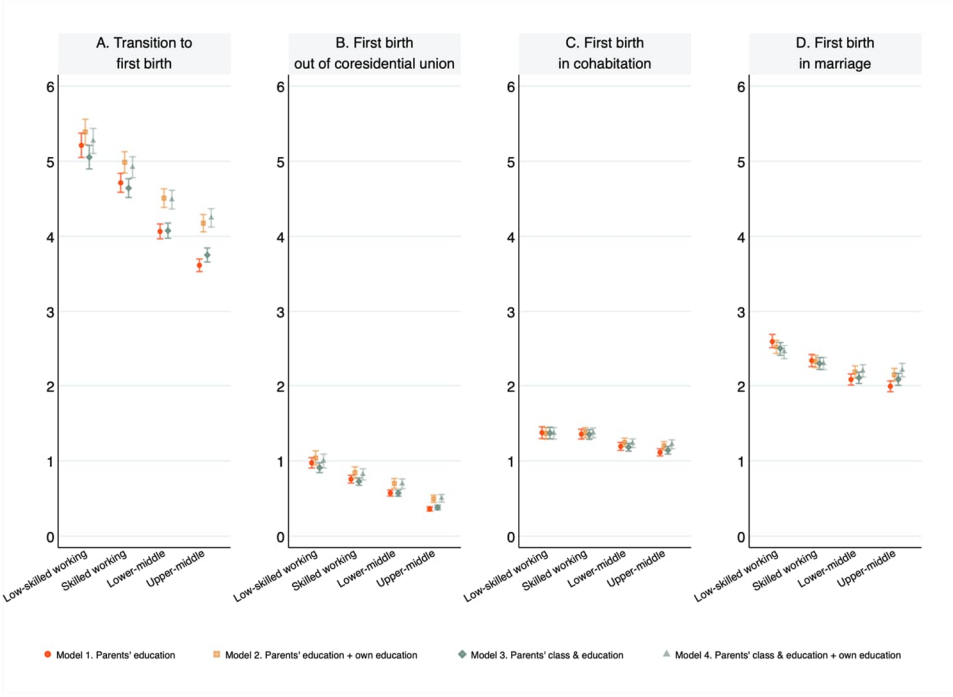
Socialization is the main mechanism that has been suggested to explain this association. Children receive their parents' preferences regarding parenthood behaviour through socialization, and parents' educational attainment is a proxy for parental attitudes and beliefs about family life. These life-course transitions tend to be transmitted to the parents' offspring (Barber 2000, 2001; Liefbroer and Elzinga 2012); for example, individuals who have raised children out of marriage express more positive beliefs about non-marital childbearing (Axinn and Thornton 1993; Wu 1996). Being aware of the potential negative consequences of unintended parenthood (Farkas 2003), highly educated parents should be more able to persuade their children to postpone early union formation (Axinn and Thornton 1992). Finally, parents with only low-education levels might not effectively socialize their children regarding knowledge about contraception and family planning (England, McClintock, and Shafer 2011), resulting in early, unintended, or out-of-union births.

Another indirect mechanism operates through the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991): more-educated parents, who have postponed their own experience of parenthood, socialize their children to aspire to higher education, to postpone parenthood (Steenhof and Liefbroer 2008), and possibly to avoid out-of-union parenthood. Conversely, disadvantaged young adults, less keen on accessing higher education (Osgood et al. 2005), often look to early parenthood in their own families as an attainable marker of adulthood (Cherlin et al. 2008).

Figure A-1 shows four models. Model 1 displays the influence of parental education, Model 2 adds individuals' time-varying education, Models 3 and 4 replicate Models 1 and 2 by adding parents' class, the same explanatory variable used in the main analysis. They show that individuals from higher-educated families are less likely to transition to

non-marital parenthood than their counterparts from lower-educated families. In particular, the negative gradient of education is more marked in the transition to single parenthood (Panel B) than in the transition to a cohabiting first birth (Panel C). The influence of parental education is coherent with that of occupational class.

Figure A-1: Annual predicted probabilities of transition to parenthood by union status and parents' education



A.2 Gender

Previous research has considered women's transition to parenthood and, to a lesser extent, men's. No substantial gender differences are found by Axinn and Thornton (1992) in the United States, Hobcraft (2008) in the United Kingdom, and Wiik (2009) in Norway, while Koops, Liefbroer, and Gauthier (2017) and Dahlberg (2015) report a stronger effect of social background for women's childbearing than men's in selected countries. Opportunity costs of family formation may differ by gender because of women's and men's traditionally different role models. The traditional role of men as the economic provider for the family has the consequence that women enter union and have children earlier than men (Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Winkler-Dworak and Toulemon 2007; Mooyaart and Liefbroer 2016; Hynes et al. 2008). In addition, highly educated parents may encourage their daughters to postpone family formation in order to complete education and secure better-paid, more stable jobs – that is, to consolidate human capital and labour-market attachment before childbearing (Barber 2000; Wiik 2009). Some research focusing on the intergenerational transmission of living arrangements shows that parents do not manage to transmit more traditional family norms to their daughters and more liberal norms to their sons (Barber 2000).

The supplementary analysis (Figure A-2) suggests that parents' socioeconomic background is more consequential for women's transition to parenthood than for men's. The gradient of parental class is more pronounced in the panel 'Women' for all the outcomes: transition to first birth (A), first birth in a (coresidential) union (B), first birth in cohabitation (C), first birth in marriage (D). It is also worth noting that first birth rates are higher for women, likely because of men's underreporting of fertility in surveys (Rendall et al. 1999).

Figure A-2: Annual predicted probabilities of transition to parenthood by union status, parental class, and gender

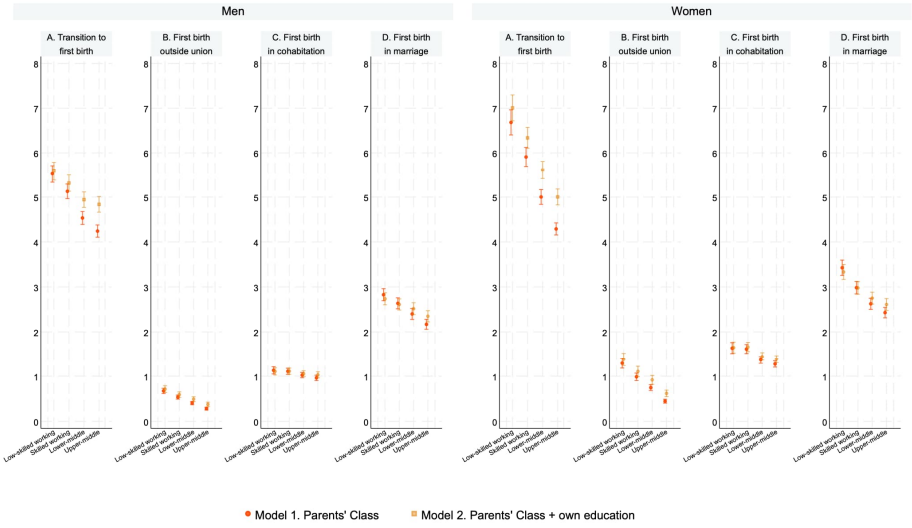


Table A-1: Influence of parents' occupation on parenthood context, conditional on experiencing first birth. Multinomial logit models

	Transition to first child Cohabitation vs. marriage		Transition to first child Single vs. marriage		Transition to first child Single vs. cohabitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Parents' class (*Ref: Low-skilled working class*)						
Skilled working	1.108	1.088	0.851	0.901	0.804	0.828
	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.027)
Lower-middle	1.071	1.068	0.801	0.848	0.656	0.702
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.024)	(0.023)
Upper-middle	1.069	1.045	0.556	0.636	0.466	0.546
	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Own education	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Number of individuals	39,930		39,930		39,930	

Note: Robust std. errors in parentheses. Sociodemographic controls: Cohort of birth (linear, quadratic, cubic), age (categorical), family status at 16, ethnicity (9 groups). The sample consists of individuals aged 40 or above in their last interview.

Table A-2: Influence of parents' occupation on parenthood context, conditional on experiencing first birth. Event history logit models

	A. Transition to first child		B. Transition to first child outside union		C. Transition to first child in marriage		D. Transition to first child in cohabitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Parents' class (*Ref: Low-skilled working class*)								
Skilled working	0.896	0.917	0.890	0.913	0.751	0.777	0.986	1.008
	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.031)	(0.033)
Lower-middle	0.764	0.820	0.787	0.854	0.552	0.623	0.862	0.908
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.030)
Upper-middle	0.674	0.753	0.751	0.839	0.335	0.417	0.803	0.873
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.017)	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.030)
Gender (*Ref: Male*)								
Female	1.646	1.728	1.767	1.779	1.967	2.101	1.416	1.459
	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.063)	(0.079)	(0.031)	(0.033)
Cohort (*Ref: 1960–1964)*								
1940–1944	1.370	1.260	2.944	2.704	0.852	0.734	0.136	0.122
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.107)	(0.100)	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.014)	(0.012)
1945–1949	1.343	1.276	2.628	2.486	1.001	0.907	0.255	0.235
	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.091)	(0.088)	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.017)	(0.017)
1950–1954	1.167	1.142	1.848	1.793	1.055	1.027	0.473	0.451
	(0.029)	(0.031)	(0.067)	(0.066)	(0.060)	(0.065)	(0.025)	(0.025)
1955–1959	1.070	1.059	1.452	1.435	0.968	0.941	0.684	0.672
	(0.025)	(0.027)	(0.051)	(0.052)	(0.054)	(0.058)	(0.031)	(0.031)
1965–1969	0.961	0.970	0.746	0.751	0.960	0.978	1.270	1.289
	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.052)	(0.058)	(0.047)	(0.049)
1970–1974	0.905	0.928	0.603	0.619	0.768	0.783	1.485	1.543
	(0.020)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.044)	(0.049)	(0.054)	(0.058)
1975–1979	0.867	0.905	0.559	0.582	0.547	0.561	1.690	1.777
	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.036)	(0.040)	(0.066)	(0.072)
1980–1984	0.769	0.806	0.459	0.487	0.483	0.487	1.633	1.728
	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.035)	(0.039)	(0.074)	(0.080)
1985–1989	0.666	0.692	0.302	0.322	0.507	0.493	1.599	1.680
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.045)	(0.048)	(0.093)	(0.100)
Age (*Ref: 20–24*)								
15–19	0.282	0.305	0.196	0.210	0.362	0.432	0.258	0.271
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.012)	(0.013)
25–29	1.743	1.875	1.998	2.043	1.475	1.654	1.956	1.996
	(0.027)	(0.030)	(0.042)	(0.044)	(0.049)	(0.065)	(0.056)	(0.057)
30–34	2.075	2.394	2.128	2.225	1.368	1.645	3.454	3.649
	(0.045)	(0.055)	(0.060)	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.097)	(0.120)	(0.128)
35–39	1.411	1.699	1.260	1.334	0.912	1.125	3.088	3.337
	(0.043)	(0.053)	(0.050)	(0.054)	(0.059)	(0.088)	(0.149)	(0.160)
40–44	0.512	0.627	0.446	0.474	0.274	0.340	1.398	1.520
	(0.023)	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.033)	(0.044)	(0.098)	(0.106)
45–49	0.153	0.188	0.133	0.140	0.059	0.074	0.492	0.531
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.061)	(0.066)
Family status at 16 (*Ref: Intact*)								
Non-intact	1.435	1.446	0.982	0.951	1.669	1.769	1.796	1.798
	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.080)	(0.095)	(0.058)	(0.058)
One or both parents died/Other	1.382	1.387	1.260	1.217	1.534	1.658	1.510	1.502
	(0.036)	(0.039)	(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.096)	(0.115)	(0.076)	(0.079)

Table A-2: (Continued)

	A. Transition to first child		B. Transition to first child outside union		C. Transition to first child in marriage		D. Transition to first child in cohabitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Ethnicity (*Ref: White British)*								
No information	0.394	0.400	0.498	0.590	0.394	0.320	0.286	0.299
	(0.040)	(0.043)	(0.081)	(0.094)	(0.093)	(0.085)	(0.052)	(0.055)
European/Other White	0.636	0.636	0.871	0.906	0.382	0.374	0.552	0.554
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.046)	(0.048)	(0.038)	(0.041)	(0.031)	(0.032)
Mixed: White & Other	0.799	0.825	0.769	0.788	0.859	0.958	0.759	0.780
	(0.045)	(0.050)	(0.074)	(0.078)	(0.117)	(0.144)	(0.065)	(0.068)
Indian	0.757	0.757	2.057	2.127	0.114	0.096	0.089	0.089
	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.082)	(0.084)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Pakistani	0.930	0.877	2.979	2.902	0.221	0.170	0.046	0.044
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.140)	(0.138)	(0.030)	(0.026)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Bangladeshi	1.214	1.107	4.339	3.983	0.168	0.127	0.065	0.059
	(0.058)	(0.056)	(0.258)	(0.242)	(0.037)	(0.030)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Other Asian/Asian British	0.735	0.730	1.723	1.738	0.212	0.209	0.266	0.261
	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.098)	(0.100)	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Black/African/Caribbean/ Black British	0.861	0.869	0.947	0.966	1.371	1.510	0.575	0.576
	(0.027)	(0.029)	(0.046)	(0.048)	(0.095)	(0.118)	(0.032)	(0.033)
Other	0.806	0.803	1.614	1.661	0.399	0.385	0.361	0.353
	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.131)	(0.134)	(0.072)	(0.077)	(0.048)	(0.048)
Time varying own education (*Ref: Degree)*								
Other higher		0.862		0.970		0.613		0.955
		(0.029)		(0.039)		(0.049)		(0.063)
A level/similar		0.555		0.482		0.799		0.601
		(0.015)		(0.016)		(0.048)		(0.033)
GCSE/similar		0.702		0.765		0.542		0.792
		(0.021)		(0.028)		(0.037)		(0.046)
Other qualification		0.685		0.799		0.385		0.804
		(0.022)		(0.033)		(0.033)		(0.050)
No qualification/Missing		0.434		0.496		0.256		0.555
		(0.013)		(0.018)		(0.020)		(0.032)
Observations	914,788	914,788	914,788	914,788	914,788	914,788	914,788	914,788
Number of individuals	55,158	55,158	55,158	55,158	55,158	55,158	55,158	55,158

Note: Robust std. errors in parentheses. p<0.01. p<0.05. p<0.1.
Age (categorical) is presented with a different operationalization as opposed to the main analyses.

Table A-3: Influence of parents' occupation on transition to parenthood (Panel A) and context of parenthood (Panels B, C, and D). Interaction with cohort of birth. Relative risk ratios for first births within different partnership contexts by parental SES and cohort (reference group: low-skilled working families). Only non-missing values of own education

	A. Transition to first child		B. Transition to first child Cohabitation vs. marriage		C. Transition to first child Single vs. marriage		D. Transition to first child Single vs. cohabitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Parents' class (*Ref: Low-skilled working class*)								
Skilled working	0.874	0.896	1.105	1.104	0.872	0.894	0.789	0.805
	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.043)	(0.045)	(0.039)	(0.046)	(0.040)	(0.045)
Lower-middle	0.761	0.813	1.088	1.059	0.742	0.7950	0.684	0.749
	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.037)	(0.039)	(0.034)	(0.041)	(0.029)	(0.037)
Upper-middle	0.667	0.744	1.068	1.047	0.500	0.591	0.462	0.548
	(0.019)	(0.021)	(0.035)	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.024)	(0.031)
Own education	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Number of observations	914,788		914,788		914,788		914,788	
Number of individuals	41,699		41,699		41,699		41,699	

Note: Robust std. errors in parentheses.
Sociodemographic controls: Cohort of birth (5-year categories), age (5-year categories), family status at 16, ethnicity (9 groups).