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Family Forerunners? Parental Separation and Partnership Formation in 16 Countries

Objective: To analyze the relationships between parental separation and partnership formation patterns across 16 countries and over time, and how the relationships are shaped by contextual factors.

Background: Several studies have found that parental separation predicts higher rates of cohabitation and lower rates of marriage. Few studies have analyzed these relationships over time or across countries, and none

have systematically analyzed whether they are moderated by contextual factors.

Method: Retrospective partnership histories on 138,739 women and men from the Generations and Gender Survey and Harmonized Histories datafiles were used. Monthly data on entry into cohabitation or marriage as the first coresidential union, and on entry into marriage were analyzed using life table and event history techniques. The overall incidences of parental separation and of premarital cohabitation were used as contextual-level measures in the event history analyses.

Results: The association between parental separation and partnership formation was moderated by the spread of premarital cohabitation. Higher incidence of cohabitation was associated with a weaker positive association between parental separation and cohabitation, and a more negative association between parental separation and marriage. The associations between parental separation and partnership formation were not weaker when parental separation was more common.

Conclusion: Children of divorce have been among the forerunners of the increase in cohabitation and the retreat from marriage.

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Many studies have found that having separated parents is associated with lower rates of marriage and higher rates of cohabitation (e.g., Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Erola, Härkönen,

& Dronkers, 2012; Frisch & Hviid, 2006; Kiernan, 2003; Ongaro & Mazzuco, 2009; Perelli-Harris, Berrington, Sánchez Gassen, Galezewska, & Holland, 2017; Raab, 2017; Sassler, Cunningham, & Lichter, 2009; Wolfinger, 2003). This finding has been used to argue that the increases in (parental) divorce and separation have catalyzed the decline of marriage as the setting for intimate and family life and the increase of cohabitation seen across Europe and North America (Perelli-Harris et al., 2017).

Research on parental separation and partnership formation has generally focused on single countries and time points, thus overlooking the potential variation in this association across countries and over time (for exceptions, see Kiernan, 2003; Li & Wojtkiewicz, 1994; Perelli-Harris et al., 2017; Raab, 2017; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004; Wolfinger, 2003). Some studies have questioned its stability. For example, Wolfinger (2003) found that children of divorce had lower rates of marriage only in more recent American cohorts, and Perelli-Harris et al. (2017) showed how parental divorce did not predict cohabitation in countries where cohabitation was next to universal, although a clear positive association was found in countries where cohabitation was less common. These findings question the stability of the association between parental separation and partnership formation. At the same time, they suggest that children of divorce may have been among the forerunners of the family change often referred to as the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 1995, 2010; Van de Kaa, 2001). However, despite providing descriptive evidence of variation in the association between parental separation and partnership formation, previous research has not systematically analyzed the contextual factors moderating this relationship. This has limited the ongoing—and often contradictory—research into the cross-national and temporal variation in the effects of parental separation (Härkönen, Bernardi, & Boertien, 2017), but also research on family change and its forerunners.

Our study presents the most comprehensive analysis of the relationship between parental separation and partnership formation across countries and over time. We used retrospective life course data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) and Harmonized Histories datafiles on 138,739 respondents born between 1930 and 1980 from 16 countries to answer two

main research questions. First, we asked the descriptive question of whether relationships between parental separation and partnership formation were similar across countries and over birth cohorts. Using life table analysis, we focused on two outcomes: the probability of cohabiting or marrying directly at the formation of one's first coresidential union by the early 30s, and the probabilities of getting married regardless of possible prior cohabitation(s) by the early 30s and the early 40s. The first outcome refers to the relationship between parental separation and the increase in cohabitation, whereas the second relates to questions of a possible withdrawal from marriage. Second, we asked the explanatory question of whether the association between parental separation and partnership formation varies by observed context-level factors. We theorized and tested the role of two such factors, the spread of cohabitation, and the overall incidence of parental separation. Our results contribute to the literatures on (the stability of) parental separation and family demographic outcomes, and on family change and its forerunners.

BACKGROUND

Parental Separation and Partnership Formation

Parental separation predicts when and what types of partnerships young adults form. Several studies have reported that children of divorce—here used to refer to everyone with separated parents—start forming coresidential unions at a younger age than their peers from intact families (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1995; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997). This has often been associated with a more general pattern of “growing up earlier” (Weiss, 1979), in which children of divorce begin dating, have their sexual initiation, and leave the parental home at an earlier age than those from intact families. The reasons for this include conflict with parents and their possible new partners (Cherlin et al., 1995; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998; Wolfinger, 2003), and lower social control by (Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992), or less support from separated parents (e.g., Aquilino, 1991; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998).

Research analyzing whether parental separation predicts entry into marriage has found contrasting results. Many studies have found that parental separation is associated with lower

rates of marriage (e.g., Erola et al., 2012; Frisch & Hviid, 2006; Ongaro & Mazzuco, 2009). Children of divorce are argued to hold more negative views about marriage and more positive views about cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Ongaro & Mazzuco, 2009; Perelli-Harris et al., 2017), to be more aware of the limitations of marriage (Amato, 1988), or to have lower levels of trust in their own relationships than those from intact families (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Parental separation is also associated with lower educational attainment, but how education predicts marriage varies cross-nationally (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Kravdal, 1999; Liefbroer, 1991; Liefbroer & Corijn, 1999; Manning & Cohen, 2015). Moreover, children of divorce may be less favored candidates for marriage (Erola et al., 2012; Wolfinger, 2003, 2005), due to consequences of their parents' separation on psychological well-being (Härkönen et al., 2017), or on interpersonal skills (Amato, 1996; Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Wolfinger, 2005).

Other studies, in contrast, have found no effect of parental separation on marriage, or that children of divorce marry at a younger age than those from intact families (Cherlin et al., 1995; Tasker & Richards, 1994; Wolfinger, 2003). Attempting to explain this apparent contradiction, Wolfinger (2003) found that the association between parental separation and marriage has changed: whereas children of divorce were more likely to marry in older cohorts, they were less likely to do so in younger ones (also, Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004; for contrasting results, Li and Wojtkiewicz (1994)). More specifically, Wolfinger showed that in older cohorts, children of divorce were more likely to marry young, and although those in younger cohorts continued to have higher marriage rates in their teens, they had lower rates of marriage from their 20s onward.

According to Wolfinger (2003), although early marriage may have remained a way out of unhappy home environments, children of divorce in younger cohorts were taking advantage of the growing accessibility of cohabitation. A number of studies have reported similar results of higher prevalence of cohabitation among children of divorce than among those from intact families (e.g., Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Cherlin et al., 1995; Kiernan, 2003; Ongaro & Mazzuco, 2009; Perelli-Harris et al., 2017;

Raab, 2017; Sassler et al., 2009). This does not, however, necessarily mean that children of divorce forego marriage altogether. Their attitudes toward or wariness of marriage, or their or their partners' skepticism of the quality of the partnership, can instead mean that cohabitation is used as a "trial marriage" (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman, 2014; Perelli-Harris et al., 2017), and that is used to delay rather than forego marriage.

Parental Separation and Partnership Formation in the Context of Family Change

The above discussion suggested that the relationship between parental separation and partnership formation can vary across social contexts. Although most research has focused on single countries, in particular the United States or the United Kingdom, some cross-national research yields support for this expectation. Perelli-Harris et al. (2017) showed that in Sweden and France, the likelihood of cohabitation did not vary by parental separation, and that the difference was generally small also in other countries where cohabitation was common, but larger in countries where cohabitation was less common. Despite results showing that the association between parental separation and partnership formation varies cross-nationally and over time, previous research has not systematically analyzed which contextual features may account for this variation.

Building on the literatures on family change and on the effects of parental separation, we discuss the importance of two contextual-level factors that can shape the association between parental separation and partnership formation, namely, the spread of cohabitation, and the incidence of (parental) separation. Their importance in family life courses has varied considerably both across countries and over time (e.g., Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, 2017), and we expect them to shape the association between the two.

The increased acceptability of having intimate partnerships and families outside marriage is a central feature of the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004) or more broadly, the Second Demographic Transition (e.g., Lesthaeghe, 1995, 2010; Van de Kaa, 2001). This change did not occur evenly across socio-demographic groups, but was led by "forerunners", who have been varyingly

identified as students and the avant-garde (Lesthaeghe, 1995, 2010; Van de Kaa, 2001) or alternatively as socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (e.g., Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011; Trost, 1975). Although children of divorce are less commonly considered, they may (un)willingly become forerunners of this change because of their skepticism of marriage and awareness of its limitations, or because of the characteristics that make them less “marriageable” (cf., Wolfinger, 2003).

This argument suggests that differences in partnership formation patterns by parental separation depend on the spread of cohabitation. These differences would be small when marriage is highly normative and cohabitation is sanctioned and marginal behavior. When cohabitation becomes more acceptable and commonly practiced, the gaps would grow if children of divorce are among the forerunners of this change. Finally, when cohabitation as the first union form becomes next to universal, differences by parental separation can yet again diminish (cf., Cherlin et al., 1995; Van de Kaa, 2001; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991), as suggested by Perelli-Harris et al. (2017).

The above argument relates primarily to the type of first union (cohabitation or marriage). The spread of cohabitation can also affect whether children of divorce simply delay or forego marriage. Although cohabitation has increasingly replaced (direct) marriage as the first coresidential union (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010), the meaning of cohabitation continues to vary within and across countries from being a prelude to or a trial marriage, to being a long-term alternative to it (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel et al., 2014; Sobotka, 2008). Cohabitation is more often a long-term alternative to marriage where cohabitation as a first partnership form has gained strong ground, and more often a stage in the family formation life course where cohabitation is less common (Andersson et al., 2017; Hiekel et al., 2014; Hoem, Kostova, Jasilioniene, & Muresan, 2009; Sobotka, 2008). Similar to above, gaps in marriage rates can be expected to be minor when cohabitation is uncommon and marriage—regardless of earlier cohabitation—is next to universal. In such contexts, children of divorce may even have higher marriage rates, or at least marry earlier as a legitimate way out of a troublesome home environment (Wolfinger, 2003). When the grip

of marriage on family life weakens, the gaps in marriage rates should grow. However, it is less clear whether this would translate into children of divorce being among the first to forego, rather than just delay, marriage; although countries vary in the prevalence and acceptability of long-term alternatives to marriage, life-time rates of marriage are high even in countries such as Sweden (Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011), which were at the forefront in the spread of cohabitation.

The incidence of parental separation can also modify differences in partnership formation by parental separation. The “waning effect” argument predicts that the effect of parental separation weakens as parental separation becomes more common (cf., Albertini & Garriga, 2011; Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Lansford, 2009; Raab, 2017; Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kieran, 2005). When separating is easier and common, the average child of divorce comes from a less troubled family, the separation process is likely to be associated with shorter periods of stressful acrimony, and parental separation is less stigmatizing. When parental separation is a more common experience, children of divorce may differ less from those from intact families in characteristics that predict partnership formation patterns.

Although the waning effect hypothesis has not, to our knowledge, been directly tested in the context of partnership formation, related research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce has led to somewhat conflicting conclusions. Dronkers and Härkönen (2008) found a negative correlation between the prevalence of parental divorce and the intergenerational transmission of divorce. On the other hand, a long debate has concerned whether the intergenerational transmission of divorce has weakened over time, or not (Li & Wu, 2008; Wolfinger, 1999, 2005). More generally, despite the popularity of the waning effect argument, many earlier studies have failed to support it (cf., Härkönen et al., 2017).

METHOD

Data

In this study, we used retrospective monthly event history data from 16 European countries. Data for 15 countries came from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). The data were collected in different years in different countries, between 2002 and 2013 (Fokkema,

Table 1. *Birth Cohorts, Interview Year, and Number of Women Per Country*

	Birth cohort	Interview year(s)	<i>N</i>
Austria	1963–1979	2008–2009	3,349
Belgium	1930–1979	2008–2010	5,716
Bulgaria	1930–1979	2004	9,855
Czech Republic	1930–1979	2004–2006	7,670
Estonia	1930–1979	2004–2005	6,149
France	1930–1979	2005	8,328
Georgia	1930–1979	2006	7,315
Hungary	1930–1979	2004–2005	11,279
Italy	1938–1979	2003	9,009
Lithuania	1930–1979	2006	7,399
Norway	1930–1979	2007–2008	12,476
Poland	1930–1979	2010–2011	16,209
Romania	1930–1979	2005	10,043
Russia	1930–1979	2004	8,716
Sweden	1933–1979	2012–2013	7,422
United Kingdom	1930–1979	2005–2006	7,804
Total	1930–1979	2003–2013	138,739

Sources. Gender and Generations Surveys (GGS) and Harmonized Histories (HH).

Kveder, Hiekel, Emery, & Liefbroer, 2016). We chose the countries with sufficiently detailed information on partnership history, parental separation and parental educational attainment: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Sweden. For the United Kingdom, we used the Harmonized Histories data set created by the Nonmarital Childbearing Network and made publicly available to the Generations and Gender Programme research community (Perelli-Harris, Kreyenfeld, & Kubisch, 2010). The Harmonized Histories data set consists of data from the British Household Panel Survey, collected in 2005 and 2006 and made comparable to GGS. In total, our data included 138,739 respondents. Table 1 gives an overview of the birth cohorts, interview year(s), and the number of respondents, respectively, in each country.

Analysis

The empirical analysis had two parts: A descriptive life table analysis, and an event history regression analysis. We used weights that are available for all countries in the GGS and Harmonized Histories datasets (for more information about the construction of the weights, see Fokkema et al., 2016;

Perelli-Harris et al., 2010). These weights are generally effective for correcting for non-response bias by age, gender, region, and household size, but less effective in correcting for bias according to marital status and education (Fokkema et al., 2016), which may affect our findings. We focused on two dependent variables, namely the type of the first coresidential union (cohabitation vs. marriage), and first marriage. Respondents entered the risk of union formation at age 16, if they had not yet been in a coresidential union. They exited the risk of union formation at the age of their first coresidential union or first marriage, respectively, or when right-censored at interview (at age 30/33 (women/men) or age 40/43, see below).

The main independent variable was parental separation, at age 16 or earlier. The timing of parental separation was not available for the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic. For these countries, we relied on the available information on whether the parents had separated.

Life Table Analysis. We used life table techniques (e.g., Preston, Heuveline, & Guillot, 2001) to estimate cumulative probability and cumulative incidence functions of partnership formation by parental separation in 16 countries and up to five cohorts. These estimates tell us of the experience of partnership formation irrespective of its timing.

The descriptive analysis produced three types of estimates. First, we estimated the cumulative probabilities of having entered any coresidential union by age 30 for women and age 33 for men. Almost everyone who ever entered a coresidential union had done so by these ages. Given gender differences in the timing of partnership formation, we used different right-censoring ages for women and for men.

Second, we estimated the cumulative incidences of having entered premarital cohabitation, or having married directly by ages 30 (women) and 33 (men). Because premarital cohabitation and direct marriage are competing events, regular life table methods produce biased estimates of cumulative probability functions. Therefore, we estimated cumulative incidence functions for these competing events using the Stata's *stcomlist* command (Clayton, 2017), and the *stpepemori* command to assess the statistical significance between the children of divorce and those from intact families (Coviello & Boggess, 2004).

Third, we estimated cumulative probabilities of marrying (regardless of prior cohabitation) by ages 30 (women) and 33 (men), as well as by ages 40 (women) and 43 (men). These analyses complemented the estimates of first union formation by allowing marriage after cohabiting as well as later in life.

To assess changes over time, the data were divided into five 10-year cohorts, from individuals born 1930–1939 to those born 1970–79. This division allowed the cohorts sufficient time in the data. Each country-cohort had to have at least 500 individuals and at least 20 parental separations to be included in the analysis on cohort patterns, in order to avoid unreliable coefficients due to few parental separations in a small cohort. As a result, for some countries all birth cohorts were not available. In the analysis of marriage by ages 40/43, we excluded the youngest cohort as it had not reached these ages by the interview date.

Event History Analysis. The objective of our event history analysis was to assess whether the associations between parental separation and partnership formation are moderated by the spread of cohabitation and the overall incidence of parental separation. We pooled the data from each country into one file. We analyzed the two outcomes, the rate of entering cohabitation or marriage as the first coresidential union and the rate of marriage regardless of prior cohabitation, separately. The data on first union formation were right-censored at ages 30 (women) and 33 (men), and the data on entry into marriage were right-censored at ages 40 (women) and 43 (men).

We measured the spread of cohabitation in each country-cohort using the life table estimates of the percentage of each cohort that had cohabited before marriage by their early 30s. Furthermore, we added a squared term of the percentage of cohabitators in each cohort to allow for nonlinear change in the relationship between parental separation and partnership formation during the spread of cohabitation, as theorized above. Our conclusions were robust when we used an alternative measure of the deinstitutionalization of marriage, namely a period-measure of the percentage of nonmarital births in each country and (five-year) period, collected from the Council of Europe (2006) and Eurostat (2018).

The second macro-level variable, the percentage of children of divorce in each birth cohort, was likewise aggregated from the GGS and Harmonized Histories data using the five birth cohorts for each country. Both macro indicators were centered around the mean in the regression analyses. The descriptives of these macro indicators can be found in Table 2.

We included five control variables in the event history analyses. Although gender differences in the effects of parental separation are modest at best (Amato & James, 2010), we controlled for gender as well as its interaction with parental separation. The highest level of educational attainment of both parents was available for all 16 countries, which we converted into a continuous and comparative measure of educational level, the International Standard Level of Education (ISLED), which ranges from 0 to 100 (Schröder & Ganzeboom, 2014). We used the average ISLED score of the father's and mother's education to control for parental education. Parental education was centered around the country-specific mean and divided by 10. We also controlled for birth cohort (centered) and its squared term, and a series of country dummy variables (the United Kingdom was the reference country). The continuous variables were mean-centered. The country-specific descriptives of these variables can be found in Table 2, and Tables S1 to S5 in Appendix S1 break them down by cohort.

We analyzed the rate of entering cohabitation or direct marriage as the first coresidential union using competing risks Cox regression models and the first marriage rate using ordinary Cox regressions (Cleves, Gutierrez, Gould, & Marchenko, 2010). First, we analyzed how the associations between parental separation and partnership formation vary by our macro-variables, by estimating interaction terms between them and parental separation. Because we controlled for country dummies, we also controlled for any stable but unobserved between-country differences. Our estimates are thus best interpreted as reflecting how change in the macro-variables predicted change in the association between parental separation and partnership formation over time. By controlling for birth year (and its squared term), we also adjusted for secular changes that affected all countries. We estimated cluster robust standard errors to allow for intra-country dependencies. These models summarize the

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Main Dependent and Independent Variables, Separately for Each Country

	% Ever partner (at age 30/33)	% Ever married (at age 30/33)	Mean parental education	Average birth year	% Experienced parental separation (before age 16)	% Cohabited
Austria	83.9	54.8	53.6	1971	12.8	67.0
Belgium	87.7	74.4	41.2	1957	8.0	44.0
Bulgaria	83.6	77.3	35.4	1956	4.7	22.0
Czech Republic	79.5	71.8	45.6	1958	13.8	19.0
Estonia	89.0	73.7	38.3	1956	14.3	38.0
France	88.1	67.6	33.1	1957	9.9	43.0
Georgia	82.0	71.7	43.0	1958	3.4	27.0
Hungary	82.7	75.1	36.8	1957	9.1	15.0
Italy	65.7	62.5	24.9	1960	1.6	6.0
Lithuania	84.0	78.7	38.8	1957	8.2	12.0
Norway	85.0	62.9	46.1	1958	9.0	49.0
Poland	86.2	82.1	39.1	1960	6.2	12.0
Romania	89.1	85.3	28.3	1958	5.9	12.0
Russia	89.9	82.5	40.6	1957	13.5	22.0
Sweden	87.1	54.9	45.2	1958	19.6	65.0
United Kingdom	86.1	72.4	43.8	1957	19.2	30.0
Average	84.3	72.9	38.9	1958	9.4	27.0

Sources. Gender and Generations Surveys (GGS) and Harmonized Histories (HH), weighted data. *N* = 138,739.

(varying) association between parental separation and partnership formation, and the results were robust when the models were estimated using discrete-time models with annual data (Yamaguchi, 1991).

Second, we analyzed how parental separation predicted (cumulative) patterns of partnership formation over the life course in different family contexts. We did this by estimating competing risks and ordinary Cox regression models for our outcomes, separately by parental separation. The separate models—which are akin to full interaction models stratified by parental separation—relax Cox models’ proportional hazards assumption and allow the groups (by parental separation) to differ in the timing of partnership formation (cf., Wolfinger, 2003). The models included the control and macro-level variables listed above. Based on the estimates, we predicted the cumulative incidence function (for competing risks cohabitation and direct marriage) and the cumulative probability of first marriage (Cleves et al., 2010), keeping the other variables at their reference values. These results provide more detail of how parental separation related to partnership formation in different contexts.

RESULTS

Life Table Analysis of Parental Separation and Partnership Formation

Table 3 shows the share of respondents from different countries and birth cohorts who had ever been in a coresidential union, begun their first coresidential union as a cohabiting union or as a marriage, and had ever been married, respectively, by ages 30 (women) and 33 (men). For interests of space, we present the results for the first, third, and fifth cohorts. Overall, one can detect major cross-national and cross-cohort variation in these partnership formation experiences. The shares of respondents who began their first coresidential union as a marriage or who had ever married decreased over time in all countries. With some exceptions (most clearly, Italy), the share of respondents who had had a coresidential partnership by their early 30s remained stable. The decreases in direct marriage were replaced by an increase in cohabitation as the first union. The decrease in the fraction of respondents who had ever married by their early 30s shows that many of these cohabitations were not transformed into marriages by this age.

Table 3. Parental Separation Union Formation by Age 30 (Women) and 33 (Men), Cumulative Probabilities, and Cumulative Incidences

		First partnership age 30/33		First partnership (competing risk) age 30/33				First marriage age 30/33	
		No	Yes	Cohabitation (1)		Marriage (2)		No	Yes
Parents separated?		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Austria	1930–1939	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	1950–1959	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	1970–1980	0.85	0.87	0.68	0.78	0.15	0.09	0.57	0.51
Belgium	1930–1939	0.84	0.82	0.24	0.36	0.60	0.46	0.82	0.79
	1950–1959	0.90	0.94	0.36	0.54	0.54	0.37	0.84	0.85
	1970–1980	0.93	0.90	0.69	0.83	0.23	0.06	0.64	0.50
Bulgaria	1930–1939	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	1950–1959	0.90	0.87	0.20	0.34	0.69	0.53	0.88	0.80
	1970–1980	0.79	0.77	0.36	0.45	0.41	0.31	0.64	0.58
Czech Republic	1930–1939	0.82	0.80	0.06	0.13	0.75	0.67	0.81	0.75
	1950–1959	0.85	0.81	0.12	0.19	0.71	0.62	0.82	0.78
	1970–1980	0.78	0.78	0.37	0.48	0.40	0.30	0.60	0.54
Estonia	1930–1939	0.91	0.97	0.15	0.24	0.75	0.73	0.88	0.93
	1950–1959	0.95	0.98	0.33	0.35	0.61	0.60	0.88	0.87
	1970–1980	0.86	0.82	0.69	0.68	0.17	0.14	0.49	0.42
France	1930–1939	0.89	0.92	0.06	0.11	0.81	0.47	0.86	0.91
	1950–1959	0.91	0.88	0.36	0.41	0.54	0.47	0.78	0.80
	1970–1980	0.93	0.88	0.78	0.82	0.13	0.05	0.58	0.46
Georgia	1930–1939	0.88	0.82	0.21	0.09	0.66	0.73	0.83	0.82
	1950–1959	0.88	0.87	0.23	0.36	0.63	0.50	0.84	0.75
	1970–1980	0.80	0.91	0.43	0.46	0.36	0.45	0.58	0.66
Hungary	1930–1939	0.91	0.96	0.02	0.00	0.89	0.96	0.90	0.96
	1950–1959	0.89	0.84	0.08	0.09	0.81	0.75	0.86	0.82
	1970–1980	0.79	0.75	0.40	0.47	0.38	0.29	0.60	0.49
Italy	1930–1939	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	1950–1959	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
	1970–1980	0.59	0.63	0.11	0.20	0.46	0.42	0.52	0.50
Lithuania	1930–1939	0.84	0.84	0.03	0.02	0.80	0.75	0.82	0.81
	1950–1959	0.87	0.88	0.06	0.17	0.80	0.71	0.84	0.83
	1970–1980	0.88	0.87	0.28	0.41	0.59	0.46	0.76	0.70
Norway	1930–1939	0.77	0.71	0.08	0.12	0.67	0.59	0.75	0.68
	1950–1959	0.88	0.88	0.47	0.61	0.40	0.26	0.77	0.65
	1970–1980	0.87	0.92	0.75	0.84	0.12	0.09	0.47	0.46
Poland	1930–1939	0.93	0.93	0.04	0.03	0.87	0.89	0.92	0.89
	1950–1959	0.88	0.89	0.05	0.08	0.83	0.81	0.87	0.88
	1970–1980	0.87	0.84	0.24	0.35	0.61	0.49	0.79	0.71
Romania	1930–1939	0.93	0.88	0.05	0.14	0.87	0.71	0.92	0.81
	1950–1959	0.94	0.99	0.09	0.21	0.84	0.76	0.92	0.94
	1970–1980	0.89	0.90	0.19	0.36	0.69	0.54	0.84	0.80
Russia	1930–1939	0.92	0.87	0.15	0.10	0.76	0.76	0.88	0.83
	1950–1959	0.94	0.96	0.15	0.23	0.78	0.72	0.90	0.90
	1970–1980	0.92	0.92	0.37	0.49	0.54	0.43	0.79	0.70
Sweden	1930–1939	0.84	0.76	0.23	0.26	0.61	0.50	0.79	0.74
	1950–1959	0.89	0.92	0.72	0.83	0.15	0.07	0.59	0.53
	1970–1980	0.90	0.94	0.77	0.87	0.12	0.05	0.47	0.37
United Kingdom	1930–1939	0.91	0.85	0.02	0.04	0.87	0.81	0.90	0.85
	1950–1959	0.89	0.95	0.20	0.34	0.68	0.58	0.83	0.80
	1970–1980	0.85	0.93	0.69	0.80	0.16	0.13	0.61	0.56

Notes. Statistically significant ($p < .05$, two-tailed test) differences in bold font. Sources. Gender and Generations Surveys (GGS) and Harmonized Histories (HH), weighted data. $N = 138,739$.

Did children of divorce differ from those from intact families in their union formation behaviors? Statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences are marked in bold font. The differences in having formed the first coresidential union were mostly nil or minor. There were larger differences in the type of the first union. As a general pattern, where statistically significant differences existed (in 23 out of 43 country-cohorts), children of divorce were more likely to cohabit in their first coresidential union than marry directly (cf., Kiernan, 2003). At its largest, the difference was about 15 percentage points. The only exception to this pattern was the oldest cohorts in Georgia and in Hungary, where children of divorce were more likely to marry directly. The differences in the share of ever-married respondents by their early 30s were statistically significant in 10 country-cohorts (out of 43). Although marriage tended to be less common among the children of divorce, we found two cases (the youngest Georgian and oldest Hungarian cohorts) where children of divorce were more likely than those from intact families to have married by their early 30s.

Were the apparent differences in partnership formation patterns related to the incidence of each partnership formation type, as we theorized? Regarding the type of first union, there was no apparently visible relationship between the incidence of a union type and the gaps therein by parental separation, when compared across all country-cohorts. Nevertheless, within countries, there was a tendency for unmarried cohabitation to replace direct marriage faster among the children of divorce. These gaps remained even in countries such as Sweden and Norway, where cohabitation as the first union type became next to universal. There seemed to be a more suggestive pattern in differences in ever having married. When marriage by age 30 was the norm (with 80% or so of each cohort having married), gaps by parental separation were not statistically significant, or children of divorce were more likely to have married. When marriage rates fell, they often fell first among the children of divorce.

Analyses shown in Figure 1 extended the follow-up in first marriage to ages 40 (women) and 43 (men) in the four oldest cohorts. In most country-cohorts, over 80% of all respondents had married by their early 40s and the differences by parental separation were not statistically significant. In three country-cohorts (Estonia 1940–1949; France 1930–1939;

Hungary 1930–1939), children of divorce were slightly more likely to have married. In each of these cases, overall marriage incidence was over 80%. Five country-cohorts—in each of which overall marriage incidence was below 80%—showed the opposite pattern. Altogether, these descriptive results suggested that when marriage started giving way to other partnership forms, it happened first among the children of divorce.

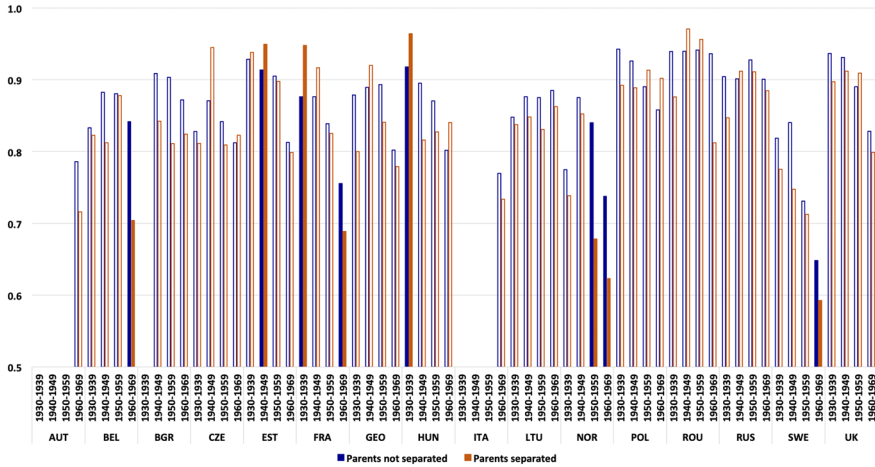
Event-History Analysis of Contextual Moderators

In the final stage of the analysis, we present the results from our Cox regression models, in which we analyzed whether contextual factors moderated the association between parental separation and partnership formation. Following the theoretical discussion, we analyzed whether the relationship depended on the spread of cohabitation, and on the overall incidence of parental separation.

Table 4 presents sub-hazard ratio (SHR) estimates from the competing risks Cox models for first union formation and hazard ratio (HR) estimates from Cox models for entry into marriage (regardless of prior cohabitation history). Estimates of the individual-level control variables show that women had higher rates of marriage (both direct and overall), which mostly reflects the fact that women married younger. Parental education predicted lower rates of direct marriage, but was not associated with the other outcomes. The rate of entering cohabitation increased, and the rates of marrying (directly or not) decreased. Compared to the United Kingdom, the rate of entry into cohabitation was higher in Sweden, and lower in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Italy, Poland, and Romania. The entry rate to direct marriage was higher in Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Russia. The rate of ever marrying was higher in Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Russia, than in the United Kingdom.

Our main interest was in the estimate of parental separation and especially its interactions with the two cohort-specific contextual variables: the percentages of premarital cohabitators (and its square), and of those who experienced parental separation. The macro-level variables were centered, and the

FIGURE 1. PARENTAL SEPARATION AND PROBABILITY OF HAVING EVER MARRIED BY AGE 40, BY COUNTRY AND COHORT. KAPLAN–MEIER CUMULATIVE PROBABILITY ESTIMATES, STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES ($p < .05$, TWO-TAILED TESTS) IN DARKER COLORS.



Notes. AUT = Austria; BEL = Belgium; BGR = Bulgaria; CZE = Czech Republic; EST = Estonia; FRA = France; GEO = Georgia; HUN = Hungary; ITA = Italy; LTU = Lithuania; NOR = Norway; POL = Poland; ROU = Romania; RUS = Russia; SWE = Sweden; UK = United Kingdom.

estimates for parental separation show that at the average levels of parental separation and cohabitation, children of divorce had a 34% higher rate (SHR = 1.341) of entering cohabitation, and an 18% lower rate (SHR = 0.822) of direct marriage. However, parental separation did not predict the marriage rate (regardless of prior cohabitation). Parental separation had a stronger effect on women’s entry rate into cohabitation, but otherwise the interactions between gender and parental separation were not statistically significant. Together, the results suggested that at average levels of parental separation and cohabitation incidence, children of divorce were more likely to cohabit in their first union, but eventually married at the same rate as those from intact families.

Although increasing levels of parental separation—maybe surprisingly—predicted higher rates of direct marriage and lower rates of cohabitation, none of the interactions between an individual’s experience of parental separation and its overall incidence were significant. The nonsignificant interactions provided evidence against the “waning effect” hypothesis of the consequences of parental separation stating that parental separation has a weaker effect when it is a more common experience.

We found more evidence for a moderating effect of the spread of cohabitation on the relationship between parental separation and partnership formation. All of the interaction terms between parental separation and the spread of cohabitation were negative. This, however, meant substantively different things for the different outcomes, depending on the main effects of parental separation and the spread of cohabitation (and its curvilinear term).

As mentioned above, at the average level of cohabitation, children of divorce had a higher rate of entering cohabitation and a lower rate of marrying directly, but did not differ in their first marriage rate. When cohabitation became more popular, the gap in the cohabitation rate decreased, as the rate increased faster among individuals from intact families (SHR = 1.046) than among children of divorce (SHR = 1.046 x 0.994). The negative curvilinear effect (SHR = 0.9996) of the spread of cohabitation—and the nonsignificant interaction term—suggested that this happened at a decreasing slope in both groups.

At the same time, the direct marriage rate decreased faster among children of divorce (SHR = 0.977 x 0.991) than among individuals hailing from intact families (SHR = 0.977). This meant that the gap in the direct marriage

Table 4. Parental Separation and Union Formation

	Model 1: First union				Model 2: First marriage	
	Cohabitation		Marriage		HR	SE
	SHR	SE	SHR	SE		
Individual level variables						
Parental separation	1.341**	0.046	0.822**	0.040	0.938	0.037
Female	1.059	0.035	1.544**	0.059	1.525**	0.052
Female × parental separation	1.185**	0.033	1.008	0.034	1.028	0.034
Parental education	0.995	0.020	0.939**	0.010	0.950	0.007
Birth cohort	1.022**	0.006	0.984**	0.005	0.987**	0.005
Birth cohort squared	1.000	0.000	0.999**	0.000	0.999**	0.001
Macro level variables						
% Parental separation in cohort						
Main effect	0.972*	0.012	1.031*	0.016	1.016	0.012
Interaction parental separation	0.999	0.003	1.000	0.004	1.003	0.005
% Premarital cohabitation in cohort						
Main effect	1.046**	0.002	0.977**	0.004	0.994	0.004
Interaction parental separation	0.994**	0.002	0.991**	0.002	0.995**	0.002
Main effect (squared)	0.9996**	0.000	0.9997**	0.000	0.9998**	0.000
Interaction parental separation (with squared term)	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.000
Country (ref. United Kingdom)						
Austria	1.141	0.087	1.171	0.213	1.107	0.173
Belgium	0.867	0.110	1.470	0.303	1.402*	0.218
Bulgaria	0.734	0.132	1.792**	0.392	1.694**	0.276
Czech Republic	0.851**	0.052	1.193	0.110	1.109	0.075
Estonia	1.013	0.049	1.377*	0.171	1.373**	0.115
France	0.914	0.110	1.420*	0.240	1.222	0.164
Georgia	0.746	0.165	1.347	0.322	1.242	0.225
Hungary	0.630**	0.091	1.840**	0.360	1.572**	0.201
Italy	0.389**	0.097	1.214	0.332	0.980	0.209
Lithuania	0.569**	0.091	1.544*	0.288	1.346 *	0.198
Norway	0.915	0.129	1.278	0.250	1.198	0.191
Poland	0.520**	0.104	1.786**	0.386	1.534*	0.261
Romania	0.561**	0.116	2.145**	0.447	1.923**	0.314
Russia	0.895	0.060	1.444**	0.145	1.441**	0.105
Sweden	1.450**	0.091	1.064	0.124	1.144	0.110
Log pseudolikelihood	−389,063.6		−828,149.8		−1,128,375.8	
Time at risk (person-months)	1,170,155		1,170,155		1,387,311.5	

Notes. Competing risks Cox regression analysis for entry into first union by early 30s (Model 1, subhazard ratios and SEs), and Cox regression analysis for entry into marriage by early 40s (Model 2, hazard ratios and standard errors). HR = hazard ratio; SHR = sub-hazard ratio.

Sources. Gender and Generations Surveys (GGS) and Harmonized Histories (HH). ***p* < .01. **p* < .05 (two-tailed tests).

rate increased—that is, children of divorce were increasingly unlikely to marry directly, relative to individuals from intact families—with the spread of cohabitation. The spread of cohabitation was also accompanied by an increasing gap in the first marriage rate (irrespective of prior cohabitation). The main effect of the spread of cohabitation was not statistically

significant, even though it was negative, but the negative interaction term suggested that children of divorce witnessed lower marriage rates as cohabitation gained in popularity and became a viable long-term alternative to marriage (Andersson et al., 2017; Hiekel et al., 2014; Sobotka, 2008).

The above results summarized how the spread of cohabitation moderated the association between parental separation and partnership formation. In order to characterize these patterns in more detail, we re-estimated the models separately by parental separation and plotted the predicted cumulative incidences (competing risks models) and cumulative probabilities to assess how parental separation related to partnership formation over the life course.

Figure 2 shows the results for first partnership formation, and Figure 3 presents them for first marriage. When cohabitation was rare (10% of the cohort had cohabited), cohabitation as the first partnership form was more common among the children of divorce, in line with the “forerunner” thesis. Moreover, this gap was found at all ages. In these cohorts, children of divorce were also less likely to marry directly, but this gap began to appear only from the early 20s onwards. Together, these results also suggested that children of divorce were more likely to have formed a coresidential union by their early 20s. The curves of first marriage almost overlap. There were indications of earlier marriage among the children of divorce (cf., Wolfinger, 2003), but this did not translate into differences in overall marriage incidence by the early 40s. All in all, in low-cohabitation cohorts, children of divorce were more likely to cohabit but later translated their unions into marriage.

The situation was rather different once cohabitation became more common and 60% of the cohort cohabited. Children of divorce remained more likely to cohabit rather than marry directly, and to have formed any union by their early 20s. As the overall incidence of cohabitation increased, the absolute percentage point gap in cohabitation by the early 30s increased as well, even though the (relative) gap in its rate decreased (Model 1 in Table 4). The incidence of direct marriage decreased, and it decreased faster among the children of divorce especially after their early 20s. What changed the most was the incidence of first marriage: it decreased for both groups, but more clearly (and at all ages) for the children of divorce.

Altogether, the life table and event history findings showed that children of divorce were among the forerunners of the increase in cohabitation and the withdrawal from marriage. They were among the first to take advantage of the growing acceptance of nonmarital family arrangements (cf., Wolfinger, 2003). They

were early adopters of premarital cohabitation, and later, among the first to delay or even forego marriage as premarital cohabitation spread and became a viable long-term living arrangement.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we analyzed the association between parental separation and partnership formation behavior in 16 countries and over five birth cohorts that spanned 50 years. Using retrospective partnership history data on over 138,739 respondents, we conducted life table and event history analyses on the association between parental separation and partnership formation, focusing on the type of the first coresidential union (cohabitation or marriage) and on whether one had ever married. Ours was the most comprehensive cross-national and cross-cohort analysis of parental separation and partnership formation, and the first to explicitly test the moderating effects of macro-level contextual features on the association.

The motivation for our paper stemmed from two literatures. A common finding in the divorce literature is that children of divorce have lower rates of marriage and higher rates of cohabitation. Suggested reasons for this pattern include attitudes toward cohabitation and marriage and awareness of their respective limitations, trust in own relationships, and life course and psychological implications of parental separation. These associations have been widely reported, but few studies have explicitly focused on whether they vary over time or cross-nationally. Another argument—though with varying levels of empirical support—in the divorce literature states that the effects of parental separation are weaker when parental separation is more common (cf., Härkönen et al., 2017). This “waning effect” argument leads to expect that the association between parental separation and partnership formation patterns weakened when parental separation became more common.

A second strand of literature that motivated our paper concerns family change—in particular, the retreat from marriage and increase in cohabitation—and its forerunners. Much of this research has focused on socioeconomic predictors, but results on whether low or high socioeconomic groups are most likely to cohabit vary cross-nationally and over time (Brons, Liefbroer, & Ganzeboom, 2017; Bumpass &

FIGURE 2. PARENTAL SEPARATION AND FIRST PARTNERSHIP FORMATION IN COHORTS WITH LOW (10%) AND HIGH (60%) INCIDENCE OF PREMARITAL COHABITATION. PREDICTED CUMULATIVE INCIDENCES (CIF).

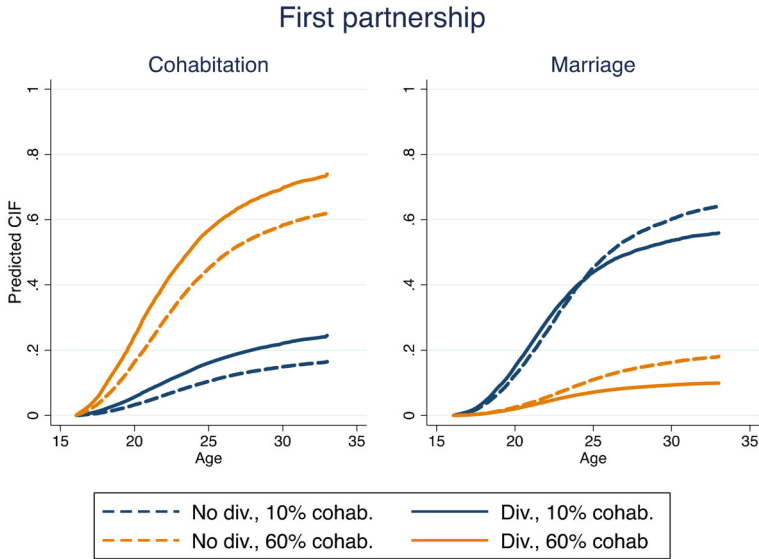
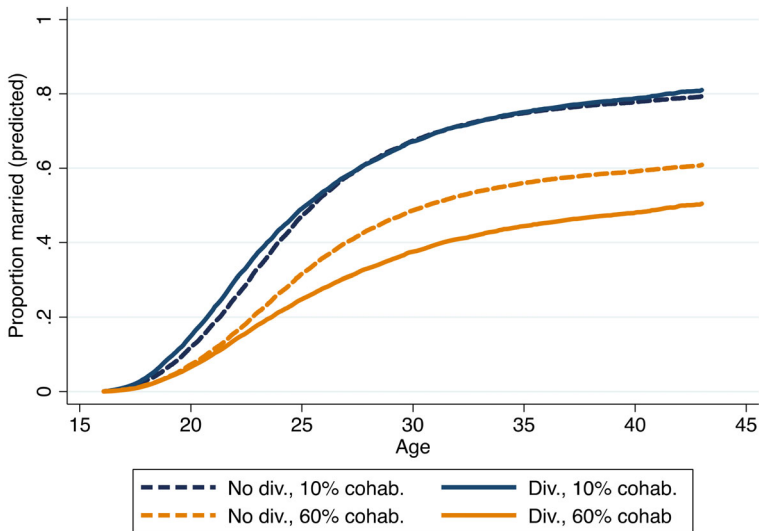


FIGURE 3. PARENTAL SEPARATION AND FIRST MARRIAGE FORMATION IN COHORTS WITH LOW (10%) AND HIGH (60%) INCIDENCE OF PREMARITAL COHABITATION. PREDICTED CUMULATIVE PROBABILITIES.



Lu, 2000; Cohen & Manning, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Kravdal, 1999; Lichter & Qian, 2008; Liefbroer, 1991; Manning & Cohen, 2015; Mooyaart & Liefbroer, 2016). Based on the proposed mechanisms for the

association between parental separation and partnership formation, we argued that children of divorce were among the forerunners of the increase in cohabitation and the retreat from marriage, being among the first to take

advantage of the emerging opportunities for intimate and family life outside marriage (cf., Wolfinger, 2003).

Our descriptive life table analyses over three cohorts showed that by the early 30s, there were small or no differences by parental separation in having formed any coresidential partnership. However, we found more differences in the type of partnership formed, which confirmed previous findings that children of divorce were more likely to have cohabited and less likely to have married, whether directly or overall (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1995; Erola et al., 2012; Ongaro & Mazzuco, 2009; Sassler et al., 2009; Wolfinger, 2003). Specifically, children of divorce had a lower probability of having married in country-cohorts where its overall probability had started to decline (roughly, to below 80%). These were first pieces of evidence suggesting that children of divorce were forerunners of family change.

We analyzed the “waning effect” and “fore-runner” hypotheses more closely in event history analyses, which pooled together data from the 16 countries and introduced contextual variables on the overall incidences of parental separation and premarital cohabitation in each country-cohort. The latter proxied the different stages of the spread of cohabitation (e.g., Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kieran, 2003) and a broader “deinstitutionalization of marriage” (Cherlin, 2004). These analyses produced two main findings. First, the “waning effect” hypothesis was not supported. None of the interactions between the overall incidence of parental separation and own experience of parental separation were statistically significant.

Second, the findings supported the “fore-runner” hypothesis. We found that children of divorce had higher rates of cohabitation already when it was rare. We also found that children of divorce were forerunners in the retreat from marriage. When cohabitation was rare, entry into first marriage was early and common regardless of parental separation; indeed, there were indications that children of divorce were marrying at a younger age, a finding resonating with that by Wolfinger (2003) for the United States. However, when cohabitation spread, children of divorce were among the first ones not only to postpone but to forego marriage.

Future research should analyze whether the retreat from marriage among children of divorce

has been a consequence of an increase in stable, long-term cohabitation, or due to instability in their cohabitations. Parental separation begets instability in own partnerships (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008), and cohabitations are less stable than marriages. Children of divorce may thus be less likely to marry because their (cohabiting) unions dissolved. Future research can also assess whether the trends found in our cross-national analysis hold for individual countries, or whether country-specific variation in the forms of the Second Demographic Transition (e.g., Hoem et al., 2009; Sobotka, 2008) or in institutional setups can produce idiosyncratic patterns that go unobserved in large-scale cross-national research like ours. National data can also include a richer selection of control variables on socio-demographic and partnership quality that may confound the association between parental separation and partnership formation, or can be used as moderators to analyze whether individual-level variation exists in the association. Finally, future research can consider alternative macro-level measures. Our results regarding the forerunner hypothesis were robust to two measures of the deinstitutionalization of marriage. A limitation of these is, however, their unidimensionality and future research on this and related topics may benefit from constructing a composite measure, which capture family change more broadly and reduce measurement error.

All in all, our findings show that children of divorce were among the forerunners in adopting new partnership forms. This conclusion has implications on the debates on family change. Several scholars have argued that the rise in cohabitation and retreat from marriage reflects either “avant-garde” behavior led by those with the most resources (Lesthaeghe, 1995, 2010; Van de Kaa, 2001), or a “pattern of disadvantage” led by the socio-economically less well-off (Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011). Though not directly addressing this debate, our findings add to the literature on the drivers of family change by showing how children of divorce have been early adopters in these developments. Our interpretation that due to their experiences, children of divorce were among those ready and willing to grasp the opportunities for new partnership forms has implications for thinking more broadly about who drove these family changes and why (cf., Sobotka, 2008).

Our study also speaks to the research on whether divorce has been a catalyst for the spread of cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al., 2017) and the retreat from marriage. The results suggest that experience of parental separation—which Perelli-Harris et al. (2017) dubbed “meso-level” effects—has had a non-linear effect on the adaptation of new family forms. Though children of divorce were among the first to cohabit before marriage, cohabitation spread faster among those from intact families, suggesting that the intergenerational transmission weakened as macro-level family changes increased the popularity of cohabitation across the population. At the same time, however, the same macro-level factors catalyzed a retreat from marriage, which was faster among the children of divorce, implying strengthening intergenerational processes. The importance of parental separation as a catalyst for family change has thus been contingent on the stage of family change itself as well as the indicator of family change. Finally, our findings question the claim that parental separation effects weaken when parental separation becomes more common. Though often claimed, this intuitive argument has struggled to find empirical support (Härkönen et al., 2017). If the increases in (parental) divorce and separation catalyzed the spread of cohabitation, it seems to have done so similarly among children of divorce and those from intact families.

NOTES

This study was initiated before our third author, Jaap Dronkers's, untimely death. He took part in formulating the research question, planning the design, and working on a very first version of the text. We (Härkönen and Brons) have treated Jaap's contribution respectfully and critically, and we carry ultimate responsibility for the final version and for any possible errors therein. The authors would like to thank the participants in various conferences and seminars for valuable comments. The research has been supported by Norface-DIAL project “CRITEVENTS: Critical Life Events and the Dynamics of Inequality: Risk, Vulnerability and Cumulative Advantage”. CRITEVENTS is financially supported by the NORFACE Joint Research Programme on Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-course, which is cofunded by the European Commission through Horizon 2020 under grant agreement No 724363. The research leading to these results has also received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013)/European Research Council Grant Agreement 324178 (Project: Contexts of Opportunity. Principle Investigator: Aart C. Liefbroer).

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1. Supporting information.

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