Heterogeneity in divorce penalties: Educational attainment of children from immigrant and mixed-origin families experiencing parental separation

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Abstract:

A large literature documents a negative effect of family dissolution on children's educational attainment, yet little is known about how this "divorce penalty" varies by migration background. Theory suggests that children of immigrants have "less to lose" from parental separation due to their lower initial socioeconomic resources, although evidence is limited to a few country cases. Moreover, research has largely overlooked the children of mixed couples (consisting of one native and one immigrant parent); however, as we argue, they may be most affected by parental separation due to disrupted ties with their immigrant parent and minority networks. The consequences for their educational attainment may be especially pronounced if the immigrant parent has greater socioeconomic resources. Using data from 12 European countries in the Generation and Gender Survey, we examine variation in the divorce penalty in tertiary attainment by parental migration background and its moderation by parental education. Contrary to previous research, we find no differences in divorce penalties between children with two native and two immigrant parents. The largest penalty occurs among children of mixed couples, particularly those with an immigrant father. This penalty is amplified when the immigrant parent has a tertiary education, suggesting that children lose access to valuable parental resources. Additional analyses of residential and meeting patterns after separation reveal that for immigrant fathers, this is due to a greater likelihood of losing contact with their children. Overall, the study sheds light on how family instability, migration background, and social origins jointly shape children's long-term educational outcomes.

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that families play a pivotal role for children's educational attainment. Educational inequalities in turn crucially determine later life chances, including labor market success, health, family formation or political participation. A substantial number of children experience parental separation before turning 18 (Zilincikova, Skopek, and Leopold 2023). This can affect the availability of family resources, thereby impacting the intergenerational transmission of educational attainment. Indeed, a large literature documents a negative effect of family dissolution on children's educational attainment, which we will refer to as the "divorce penalty" (Amato 2010; Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien 2017). However, this average effect conceals stark heterogeneity, as the "divorce penalty" varies remarkably across groups of individuals – with some experiencing substantial consequences and others remaining unaffected (Amato and Anthony 2014; J. E. Brand et al. 2019). A better understanding of this heterogeneity could inform policies aimed at addressing educational inequalities resulting from parental separation.

A growing body of demographic and sociological research aims to uncover and explain these differences. Several studies have investigated how the effects of parental separation vary by parental socioeconomic status (SES). The findings are somewhat mixed, with most studies suggesting that children from high-SES families experience greater disadvantages (Bernardi and Boertien 2016; Bernardi and Radl 2014), while others have found the opposite (Albertini and Dronkers 2009; Grätz 2015). These inconsistencies are partly driven by opposing mechanisms: on the one hand, high-SES families may be able to compensate for the disruptive effects of divorce; on the other hand, children from high-SES families may have "more to lose" from family separation (Bernardi and Boertien 2016; Härkönen et al. 2017). These mechanisms may play out differently depending on the educational outcome considered, how parental resources are measured, and on the context studied (Bernardi and Boertien 2017; Bernardi and Comolli 2019), resulting in mixed research findings.

Despite the increasing relevance of migration as a dimension of social stratification in European societies, only a few studies have examined how the divorce penalty varies by individuals' migrant background. A prevalently US-based literature investigating *ethnic/racial* heterogeneities finds a smaller dissolution penalty for Black and Hispanic Americans compared to White Americans (Cross 2020; Dunifon and Kowaleski–Jones 2002; Heard 2007, 2007; Kalmijn 2010b; Lee and McLanahan 2015; McLoyd et al. 2000). In contrast, the few existing European studies focusing on variation by *migration background* have produced inconclusive findings that vary by destination country and migrant group (Erman and Härkönen 2017; Guetto, Zanasi, and Carella 2022; Kalmijn 2017).

Against this background, this study contributes to the emerging literature on the migrant gradient in family dissolution penalties in three main ways. First, unlike prior studies that focus on grades or educational transitions, we study longer-term consequences of family dissolution on individuals' *tertiary attainment*.

Second, beyond the children of two immigrants, we investigate divorce penalties for the children of mixed (exogamous) couples. This is an increasingly large population (Kil, Taing, and Mageau 2021) with particularly high divorce rates (Smith, Maas, and Van Tubergen 2012), yet the consequences of family dissolution for their children has been largely overlooked (Erman and Härkönen 2017). There are also reasons to expect that divorce may be

especially consequential for this group. On average, the children of mixed couples have a similar socio-economic status and school performance to native-majority children in school (e.g., Kalmijn, 2010a; Panico & Nazroo, 2011), meaning that they may have "more to lose" from family disruption than the children of two immigrants. In addition, they benefit from social ties with both majority and minority family members, as well as peers. These ties can be disrupted by parental separation. Dissolution tends to result in stronger breaks in contact between ex-partners and their families in mixed couples, which may particularly limit children's contact with the migrant parent (Hofferth, Forry, and Peters 2010; Kalmijn 2015a; Maldonado 2017). Thus, comparing children with two immigrant parents or two non-immigrant (termed native) parents with children from mixed families (one native and one immigrant parent) sheds new light on how divorce contributes to inequalities in children's educational outcomes.

Third, we investigate the divorce penalty at the intersection of *both* migration background *and* SES. Drawing on the literature on SES gradients in divorce penalties, divorce may be most consequential when children lose contact with a high-SES parent, as this limits their access to the parent's resources (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). Distinct patterns of post-divorce parental contact among children of immigrants may therefore significantly shape the influence of SES on divorce penalties. Compared to children with two native parents, children of immigrants are more likely to have reduced contact with their *immigrant father*, partly due to gender norms regarding parenting responsibilities (Kalmijn 2015a). In mixed couples, children may have reduced contact with the *immigrant parent* for various reasons: immigrant parents may have a disadvantaged position in the post-divorce family due to their lower average SES, discrimination in disputes, or a return to their origin country (Bijwaard and Van Doeselaar 2013; Hofferth et al. 2010; Maldonado 2017). These considerations highlight the importance of examining how maternal and paternal resources shape divorce penalties for children from different migration backgrounds.

In summary, we seek to answer the following two research questions: (1) Does the divorce/separation penalty on children's educational attainment vary by native/migration composition of parents? (2) Does the penalty vary differently by parental education (used as a SES indicator) for children from native, immigrant, and mixed families? Our analysis is based on data from the Generation and Gender Survey (GGS) for birth cohorts between 1945 and 2000 in 12 European countries. Pooling these data (by accounting for country differences with using multilevel modelling) provides a statistically sufficient sample size of separated immigrant and mixed families. It also allows us to move beyond the specificities of individual countries and their institutional features, such as divorce laws or educational tracking systems. Future analyses based on harmonized large-scale register data from several countries may then delve deeper into country differences (see Conclusion Section).

2. Background

2.1 Parental separation and educational attainment

A large body of literature documents a negative effect of parental separation or divorce on children's educational outcomes (Amato 2010; Härkönen et al. 2017). This divorce penalty has been observed for various educational outcomes, including grades, educational transitions, and final attainment, and in several countries (Amato 2010; Bernardi and Radl 2014; Grätz 2015). Part of this association reflects negative selection into divorce, for example by social

origins or levels of parental conflict. Yet, studies employing causal designs that account for selection still find evidence of (often attenuated) divorce penalties (Amato and Anthony 2014; Bernardi and Boertien 2016; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013; Nielsen, Fallesen, and Gähler 2025).

Several mechanisms have been hypothesized to explain the divorce penalty. The first is the loss of parental socioeconomic and educational resources (Amato 2010; Bernardi and Boertien 2017; J. Brand et al. 2019). Intact families typically have greater means to support their children's education, which often decline after family dissolution (Cross 2020; Manning and Brown 2006). This decline is particularly pronounced in single-mother households, which are especially likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage. The second mechanism is that parental separation may cause emotional distress in affected children, which may lead to reduced well-being, behavioral problems, and worsened parental relationships (Amato 2005, 2010; Nielsen et al. 2025). These experiences may lead to worse educational outcomes among the children of divorced/separated parents (Härkönen et al. 2017). Third, divorce can lead to changes in parenting practices and time spent with parents, resulting in lasting consequences on children's educational outcomes. Family dissolution can lead to new living arrangements, such as step-parents, and residential mobility, both of which may disrupt children's social ties, affecting their education (Härkönen et al. 2017; Nielsen 2014; Nielsen et al. 2025).

2.2 Heterogeneity by socioeconomic status

The effects of parental divorce or separation on children's education vary remarkably across groups, and a large literature seeks to describe and explain this heterogeneity (J. E. Brand et al. 2019; Härkönen et al. 2017). Before turning to heterogeneity by migration background, we briefly review research on variation by social origins, as this literature is significantly more developed, and many of its theoretical and methodological insights will inform our analyses focusing on migratory family composition.

Studies examining how the divorce penalty varies by family SES have produced somewhat mixed findings (Albertini and Dronkers 2009; Bernardi and Boertien 2016, 2017; Bernardi and Radl 2014; Grätz 2015). These contrasting findings are partly expected from a theoretical perspective because two opposing mechanisms are at play. On the one hand, socioeconomically advantaged families are usually able to employ their resources to shield their children from the consequences of adverse events and "compensate" for them (Bernardi 2014). On the other hand, the children high-SES families have "more to lose" from parental separation in terms of resources and family environment, while the children of lower-SES families may have fewer resources regardless of family dissolution.

These two competing mechanisms may play out differently depending on other factors, which can explain some of the contrasting findings and are also relevant to our study. First, gradients in divorce penalties may vary depending on the educational outcome considered. Research suggests that the adverse effects of divorce on *educational attainment* are greater *for high-SES children*, while the divorce penalty for *intermediate educational outcomes* (e.g. grade repetition) is greater for *lower-SES children* (Bernardi and Boertien 2016; Bernardi and Comolli 2019; Bernardi and Radl 2014; Grätz 2015; Guetto and Panichella 2019). This may be related to threshold effects and the rarity of outcomes across groups, that is, when the baseline probability of an educational outcome is very high or very low, and children are far from a critical threshold, divorce has less potential to negatively influence it (Bernardi and

Comolli 2019). For example, if most children from low-SES families are already performing poorly in school, making tertiary attainment unlikely, the marginal impact of divorce on their chances of completing university will be small. Similarly, if most upper-class children are performing well above average, divorce is unlikely to reduce their performance or alter their enrollment decisions enough to prevent them from completing college.

Second, the SES gradient depends on whether we consider maternal or paternal SES (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). The reason is substantive rather than a simple measurement issue. Following family dissolution, children may maintain varying degrees of contact with each parent. Typically, they are closer to the co-resident parent (usually the mother) than to the non-resident parent (usually the father). Access to the non-resident parent's resources may become more difficult after separation, therefore, the greater the resources of the non-resident parent, the more is lost (i.e., the "more to lose mechanism) (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). Conversely, the resident parent's resources are generally more accessible and may help offset the consequences of the dissolution (i.e., the "compensation" mechanism). Investigating heterogeneity of the divorce penalty by both *maternal and paternal* resources is key to shedding light on SES gradients in the divorce penalty.

2.3 Heterogeneity by migration background

Several US-based studies have investigated *ethnic/racial* gradients in the divorce penalty, mostly finding that the negative consequences of family dissolution are smaller for Black and Hispanic children than for White Americans (Cross 2020; Dunifon and Kowaleski–Jones 2002; Heard 2007, 2007; Kalmijn 2010b; Lee and McLanahan 2015; McLoyd et al. 2000). In the European context, a smaller body of work has investigated differences in the divorce penalty across *migration backgrounds* – i.e., mostly differences between the children of native-born or foreign-born parents (Erman and Härkönen 2017; Guetto et al. 2022; Kalmijn 2017). Findings have been less conclusive than those of the US studies, with differences across destination countries and immigrant groups.

The literature points to several theoretical explanations for why one may expect differences in the divorce penalty across migrant backgrounds. First, following the "more to lose" mechanism, children of immigrants are expected to experience smaller divorce penalties because immigrant families are more often socioeconomically disadvantaged; thus, they have comparatively "less to lose" from divorce than majority families (Erman and Härkönen 2017; Guetto et al. 2022). The children of immigrants may have also "less to lose" due to additional non-economic disadvantages, such as linguistic barriers, limited knowledge of educational systems, and discrimination (Gil-Hernández et al. 2024; Heath and Brinbaum 2007).

The second explanation is based on the different prevalence of divorce across groups, which may affect the divorce penalty in two ways. On the one hand, if divorce is more common in a certain group, there should be less stigma associated with it and hence less psychological consequences faced by the children of dissolved unions (Amato and Keith 1991; Härkönen et al. 2017). On the other hand, if divorce is less common in a certain group, the event of separation may be a more "negatively selected" one, which would suggest larger negative effects. US studies finds that divorce is more common among minority groups, and notably Black families, which would may explain the smaller divorce penalty for this group (Amato 2010; McLanahan et al. 2013). Differences by migration background are less clear-cut,

because some immigrant groups have a higher prevalence of divorce that native majority couples, while others have a lower rate (Erman and Härkönen 2017; Kalmijn 2017).

The third explanation has to do with group differences in social support. Also rooted in a US-based literature, this explanation states that certain minority groups can rely on greater social support, notably through extended families, which can help mitigate the negative effects of parental separation (Cross 2020; McLoyd et al. 2000). Similar dynamics are found among certain immigrant groups in Europe (Kalmijn 2010b, 2017), though evidence for this explanation remains mixed (Erman and Härkönen 2017). Unlike minorities more broadly, however, immigrants and their children may have reduced access to extended family support when relatives remain in the country of origin (Boccagni 2015).

A fourth explanation builds on the role of transnational families. Some children of immigrant parents already live in single-parent households due to transnational separation. This is often part of a strategy employed by immigrants to reap economic benefits while actively maintaining family ties and mitigating the costs of separation for their children (Brunori 2025; Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012). Children in transnationally separated families may thus be less negatively affected by parental dissolution, since they are already accustomed to living apart from one parent and having limited contact. A related issue has to do with the measurement of family dissolution in survey data, which is often operationalized as the end of parental co-residence. Among immigrant families, however, the end of co-residence may reflect transnational separation rather than an actual parental breakup. Since transnational separations are typically less disruptive for children, this may contribute to a smaller observed negative effect of parental separation among the children of immigrants (Guetto et al. 2022). We discuss this issue further in our operationalization of parental separation in the Data and Methods section.

These four explanations (or mechanisms) point to weaker effects of divorce on the educational outcomes of the children of migrants, though with some variation across origin groups. Yet, only a few studies have examined this question for a limited number of European countries. Building on this work, we test the hypothesis of weaker divorce penalties among immigrant children using data from 12 European countries. Our focus is on *tertiary attainment*—a longer-term and more consequential outcome than those previously studied. Drawing on research on SES gradients in divorce penalties and outcome thresholds—that is, group differences in overall levels of educational attainment (Bernardi & Comolli, 2019)—we expect to find a smaller divorce penalty in tertiary attainment for children from two immigrant parents, since they tend to have worse educational outcomes in Europe (Heath & Brinbaum, 2007).

Hypothesis 1: Children of two immigrants experience smaller divorce penalty than the children of two native parents.

2.3 The children of mixed (native-migrant) couples

An understudied group in this literature is the children of mixed couples—where one parent is an immigrant and the other a native (Erman and Härkönen 2017). Research shows that such these couples have higher divorce rates, partly due to stress arising from differences in values, negative norms around intermarriage and pressure by families and peers (Kalmijn, De Graaf, and Janssen 2005; Smith et al. 2012). Given this high prevalence of divorce, examining its

consequences for their children is particularly important. Furthermore, there are reasons to expect that divorce penalties may be especially pronounced for this group.

Similar to the children of homogamous native couples, the children of mixed couples have "more to lose" from divorce. On average, they do not share the educational disadvantages of children with two migrant parents and their educational attainment is often similar the one of native majority children (Heath and Brinbaum 2007; Kalmijn 2010a, 2015b). This means that adverse events such as divorce may have greater potential to affect their educational outcomes (Bernardi and Comolli 2019). Their higher attainment is related to their parents' more advantaged socioeconomic status, which more closely resembles that of homogamous native couples than that of immigrant couples (Panico and Nazroo 2011; Platt 2012). This partly reflects selection into intermarriage by SES and other observed (e.g. immigrant group) or unobserved characteristics (e.g. motivation or desire to stay in the destination country) (Hannemann et al. 2018; Kalmijn 2012). It may also reflect positive effects of intermarriage on immigrants' labor market position – for example, through greater access to destination-country knowledge and social networks (Furtado and Theodoropoulos 2010; Vaalavuo and Rask 2025). In the event of family dissolution, the loss of these social and economic resources can have substantial consequences for children's educational attainment.

Children of mixed couples may have *the most to lose*, even more than children of homogamous native couples. In addition to having greater economic resources, children of mixed couples can rely on more extended social networks including individuals from both majority and minority groups (Kalmijn 2010a; Quillian and Redd 2009). These networks can provide access to greater cultural, linguistic, and social resources, which may foster their integration and academic performance. Developing a multiethnic identity may foster psychological resilience in children of mixed origin, enabling them to integrate into different cultural contexts and maintain higher levels of well-being (Binning et al. 2009; Kalmijn 2015b; Loi et al. 2021).

Family dissolution may cause the children of mixed couples to lose access to some of their extended networks – such as their native or minority family members and peers – with negative consequences on their integration, well-being, and academic outcomes. Dissolution causes stronger ruptures in mixed couples due to cultural differences, such as attitudes towards divorce, and may lead to an abrupt break in contact between ex-partners and their families (Kalmijn 2015a). Due to their on average more precarious economic position and other forms of structural disadvantage – such as discrimination in custody disputes – immigrant parents are less likely to obtain custody or co-parenting and maintain stable contacts with their children (Hofferth et al. 2010; Kalmijn 2015a; Maldonado 2017). Some immigrant parents may decide to migrate elsewhere or return to their origin countries, further limiting contact with their children (Bijwaard and Van Doeselaar 2013).

Based on the extra resources that the children of mixed couples may lose following family dissolution, we expect to find:

Hypothesis 2: The children of mixed couples experience a larger divorce penalty than the children of homogamous native and immigrant couples.

We propose two additional hypotheses regarding how the immigrant gradient in divorce penalties may vary by parental resources – that is, about the three-way interaction between divorce, migration background, and parental SES. As outlined above, the 'more to lose'

mechanism is most likely to operate with respect to the resources of the parent with whom the child has reduced contact following separation because these resources become harder to access (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). Evidence suggest that children of immigrants are more likely than children of natives to have reduced contact with their *fathers* after divorce, possibly because they come from countries where gender roles are more traditional and women are primarily expected to care for the children (Kalmijn 2015a). This tendency is especially pronounced for children of a native mother and an immigrant father since ties with the immigrant parent are more likely to be severed (Kalmijn 2015a). Although children of divorced families typically reside with their mothers, this pattern may be weaker when the mother is an immigrant and the father is a native.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that divorce penalties are largest when the immigrant parent in mixed couples or the immigrant father in homogamous immigrant couples has higher resources because children are most likely to lose these resources after separation.

Hypothesis 3: Children of two immigrants experience a larger divorce penalty if their father has a higher SES.

Hypothesis 4: Children of mixed couples experience a larger divorce penalty if the immigrant parent has a higher SES.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data and analytical sample

To test our hypotheses, we use data from rounds I and II of the Generations and Gender Study (GGSI, collected 2004–2011, and GGSII, 2020–2023) (Vikat et al. 2007). For round I, we only use data from the first wave (i.e., not the longitudinal component of the survey). We focus on countries that collected information on parental birth countries and on the timing of parental divorce. We exclude non-European countries, as well as those with small samples of individuals with at least one foreign-born parent (less than 5%). This leaves us with twelve countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Some of these countries participated in both rounds of the GGS, and so both are used, while others only participated in one (see Appendix Table A1). We selected individuals who were older than 25 at the time of the survey in order to observe their final educational attainment. This allows us to include birth cohorts between 1945 and 2000.

Since we are interested in the impact of living in separated or non-separated families *in the destination country*, and since the likelihood of (selection into) divorce may differ in origin countries, we only consider respondents who were born in the destination country or who moved there before the age of 18. In other words, we consider immigrant "children" of the second or the 1.5-generation.

In this restricted sample, 21% of respondents have a missing value for at least one of our variables of interest, mostly driven by our variables of parental divorce, parental education, and maternal age, which have similar shares of missingness around 10%. For our main analyses, we excluded these observations, resulting in a final analytical sample of 80,544. For our three-way interaction analyses, in which we use a more complex indicator of social

origins (see below), our sample size is reduced to 73,857. In our sensitivity analyses (see below), we also run models with multiple imputation to address missing cases.

3.2 Measures

Our dependent variable is an indicator for whether or not respondents attained a tertiary degree (ISCED 5 or above). We have two main independent variables. One is an indicator of family dissolution obtained from the survey item asking respondents, "Did your biological parents ever break up?" This may also include couples who break up without divorcing (possibly because they were never married) as well as couples who break up and then get back together. The former is of substantial interest given the prevalence of cohabitation; the latter is a potential limitation. However, our measure of family dissolution has advantages over commonly used indicators based on the end of parental co-residence (e.g., Erman & Härkönen, 2017), because the latter may conflate transnational family separation with parental breakup for immigrant families (Guetto et al. 2022). In line with prior research, we only consider parental breakups that occurred before the respondents turned 18.

Our second independent variable is respondents' migration background (or family migration composition). We consider four groups: (1) individuals with two native-born parents, (2) those with two immigrant (i.e., foreign-born) parents, (3) those with an immigrant (foreign-born) mother and a native-born father, and (2) those with an immigrant (foreign-born) father and a native-born mother. Due to the small sample size, we are unable to separate individuals with foreign-born parents coming from different countries (about 10% of our final sample). They are included in the second group.

As a measure of SES, we use information on parents' educational attainment, classified by four categories: primary or less, lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary. We adopt a measure of parental *highest educational attainment* based on the dominance criterion (if one parent has missing data, we consider the non-missing value). For hypotheses 3 and 4, where we estimate three-way interactions between social origin (parental education), migrant background, and divorce, we are specifically interested in the educational attainment of each parent. Therefore, we use a joint measure of maternal and paternal education, distinguishing between (a) neither parent, (b) only the mother, (c) only the father, or (d) both parents held a tertiary degree. Note that this indicator can only be computed for cases with non-missing information on both parents' education. Thus, our analytical sample is smaller for this set of analyses (see above).

Our measures of SES face a limitation in round I of the GGS. Respondents were only asked about the educational attainment of the parent(s) with whom they had lived "most of the time up to age 15." As a result, information is often missing for one of the two parents (typically the father), especially when they separated when the child was younger. Among respondents with divorced parents, about 50% lack paternal education data, compared to only 12% among those with non-divorced parents. This issue is mitigated in round II of the GGP, which asked about both biological parents' education regardless of living arrangements, yielding a more balanced rate of missing paternal education between dissolved and intact families (17% vs. 10%). To address this limitation, we replicated our analyses using only data from round II of the GGS.

We include a series of control variables in our models to account for potential confounders of both the likelihood of parental separation and children's educational attainment, including

maternal age at birth (linear and quadratic), parents' region of origin, and respondents' gender, age, number of siblings, an indicator for whether they were born abroad, and country of survey.

Table 1 describes our sample. Compared to the children of two native parents, those of two immigrants are 5 percentage points (pp) less likely to have attained a tertiary degree, while the children of mixed couples are 2 pp are more likely. The prevalence of divorce is similar in the first two groups, while it is higher among the children of mixed couples and especially those with an immigrant father. The children of two immigrants have a less advantaged SES , since their parents are significantly more likely to have at most a primary degree (21% of cases). By contrast, the children of mixed couples are more advantaged, with 37% having at least one parent with a tertiary degree. Immigrant couples in our sample mostly originate mostly originate from Eastern Europe (29%), Western/Continental Europe (18%), and the Middle East and North Africa (17%). Immigrant parents in mixed couples predominantly come from Western Europe (44% and 36%, respectively) and Eastern Europe (23% and 26%).

TABLE 1 HERE

3.3 Analytical strategy

In line with prior research using the GGS data to investigate divorce penalties (e.g. Bernardi & Radl, 2014), we use hierarchical models with random slopes to account for differences in the impact of divorce across countries of survey and historical time. To this end, we constructed country-cohort combinations by considering five birth cohorts: 1945-1954, 1955-1964, 1965-1974, 1975-1984, 1985-2000. We dropped combinations with less than 30 observations and are left with 50 country-cohort combinations (the smallest had 392 observations). We estimate multi-level linear models with country-cohort clusters as the upper level and include random slopes for our key lower-level variables: the parental divorce indicator and the migration background variable (Heisig and Schaeffer 2019).

We run three set of main analyses. First, we run some Linear Probability Models (LPMs) predicting divorce to describe selectivity in family dissolution across our four groups of interest. Second, to test H1 and H2, we investigate the impact of parental separation on respondents' educational attainment using LPMs including an interaction of divorce and migration background. We include our basic set of controls (Model 1) and then sequentially account parental highest educational attainment (Model 2). Third, to test H3 and H4, we also estimate LPMs with three-way interactions between parental divorce, respondents' migrant background and parental education using our joint indicator of maternal and paternal education. We run some additional sensitivity analyses that we outline in the results section.

We run some additional analyses to test the robustness of our results. First, we use logit models and odds ratios instead of LPMs, because research suggests that divorce penalties may vary significantly based on these modelling choices (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). Second, we use Coarsened Exact Matching (Iacus, King, and Porro 2012) to balance covariates between the children of separated and non-separated families non-parametrically before fitting our LPMs. Third, we run our models in an dataset where imputed missing data using multiple imputation with chained equations (White, Royston, and Wood 2011). Fourth, we replicated our analyses using only data from round II of the GGS to address the issue of missing paternal education in round I.

Finally, we conduct additional analyses to examine group differences in children's relationships with their parents after divorce. First, we describe residential arrangements based on a survey item asking respondents with whom they lived "most of the time up to age 15." We exclude those who reported living with both parents and distinguish between those living primarily with their biological mother, their biological father, or in another arrangement (e.g., with grandparents). Second, we assess the impact of parental divorce on the likelihood of reporting "never meeting" one's biological mother or father across our groups of interest.

All our analyses are computed using cross-sectional weights provided by the GSS. Sample sizes vary markedly across countries because of different sample targets and because some countries participated in both waves. We rescale the provided GSS weights so that each country weighs equally in our estimates, regardless of its sample size.

4. Results

4.1 Divorce penalty by migration background

Before examining the divorce penalty, we first look selection into parental separation. Table 2 shows estimates from LPMs predicting parental separation separately for our four groups of interest using our key analytical variables. Although the likelihood of separation is shaped by similar factors across groups, one notable difference emerges: among children of two migrants, the probability of parental divorce increases significantly with parental education, and it is highest when both parents hold a tertiary degree. This positive selection into separation may confound the association between parental separation and children's educational attainment in this group, so it must be accounted for in our analyses. The table also shows some differences in the likelihood of family dissolution by parents' region of origin. For example, dissolution is more common for couples of migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean and especially rare among Southern European migrants.

TABLE 2 HERE

Figure 1 presents the impact of parental separation on the likelihood of attaining a tertiary degree by respondents' migrant background, as obtained from LPMs, including an interaction term of parental separation and migration background (see Appendix Table A2 for the full set of coefficients). In line with prior research, we find that the children of separated native parents are about 5 percentage points (pp) less likely to attain a tertiary degree (Models 1 and 2).

Concerning hypothesis H1, Model 1 shows that, compared to other groups, the divorce penalty is smaller for the children of two immigrant parents (2.3 pp). However, Model 2 reveals that once we control for parental educational attainment, the divorce penalty becomes statistically significant and similar in size (5.7 pp) to that of the children with two native parents. As shown in Table 2, parental separation is particularly common among the highly educated immigrant couples, so children of separated parents tend to have more advantaged social origins. Ignoring this positive selection into separation leads to an underestimation of the divorce penalty. When it comes to mixed couples, the divorce penalty appears to be slightly larger, at 6.6 pp for the children of an immigrant mother and a native father, and 8.6 pp for the children of an immigrant father and a native mother (Model 2). This is line with hypothesis H2. We also tested other model specifications using coarsened exact matching and logistic regressions, as well as estimated LPMs using imputed data or GGS round II only (see

Appendix, Table A3). These results are very similar to those of our main specification, shown in Table 2.

Our results so far reject hypothesis H1 that parental separation has smaller consequences for children of two immigrants and provide some support for hypothesis H2 that the divorce penalty is larger for children of mixed couples – although the divorce penalties for the four groups do not differ significantly at conventional levels, partly because estimates for children of immigrant origin are less precise due to smaller sample sizes. The confidence intervals are also rather large because they hide significant within-group variation, which we turn to in the next section.

FIGURE 1 HERE

4.2 Divorce penalty by migration background and parental education

Figure 2 presents results of our LPMs with three-way interactions and the full set of controls. The figure shows the divorce penalty in attaining a tertiary degree by migrant group (panels) and parental education (the horizontal axis). Appendix Table A4 reports the full set of coefficients. We find that the divorce penalty is especially large among the children of two native parents when only one parent (the mother or the father) is tertiary educated. This finding is partially consistent with the theory that children have more to lose if, in the case of family dissolution, they lose access to the parent with the higher SES resources – although this usually applies to *paternal resources* (Bernardi and Boertien 2017).

In line with hypothesis H3, the top-right panel of Figure 2 shows that children of two immigrant parents experience a sizeable (11 pp) and statistically significant divorce penalty only when their father is tertiary educated and their mother is not. A similar pattern appears for children of mixed couples when the father is an immigrant and the mother is a native (bottom-right panel of Figure 2). Within this group, children with only a tertiary-educated father face a divorce penalty of 23 pp. Conversely, the picture is reversed for the children with an immigrant mother and a native father (bottom left panel). Here, children of a foreign-born tertiary-educated mother and a less-educated native father have the largest divorce penalty (22 pp). These results confirm hypothesis H4, which suggests that divorce penalties for children of mixed couples are larger when the immigrant couple has a higher SES. Again, we did some robustness checks, including coarsened exact matching, logistic regressions, imputed data, and GGS II only. The results are very similar to those of our main specification (see Appendix Table A4).

FIGURE 2 HERE

4.3 Additional analyses on residential patterns after separation

We conducted additional analyses to support our conjecture that the children of mixed couples – and especially those with a tertiary-educated immigrant parent – may suffer more from parental separation because they are more likely to lose contact with that parent. First, we used a survey item asking individuals "With whom did you live for most of your childhood, that is, until you were 15?". We excluded those who did not experience family dissolution and reported living most of the time with both parents. Figure 3 displays the residential patterns of children from dissolved families according to their parental migration background. We see

that in all groups, children are more likely to reside with the mother after separation. However, in mixed families where the mother is an immigrant, this likelihood is slightly lower (76%) and the likelihood of residing with the father is the highest (11%). In mixed families where the father is an immigrant, the likelihood of residing with the father is the lowest (4%).

FIGURE 3 HERE

Consistent with these residential patterns, Figure 4 shows that the likelihood of never meeting the mother after parental separation is very low, even in mixed couples where the mother is an immigrant. The situation is quite different for fathers. Children of all groups are more likely to never meet their father after separation, but the impact of separation is greater for children with an immigrant father, especially in mixed couples (i.e., when the mother is a native). Here, the immigrant father may be more likely to leave the country, which hinders their ability to see their children. A similar pattern emerges when examining whether children see their father less than once a month (results not shown). Taken together, these differences in contact may help explain why children of mixed couples with a (tertiary-educated) immigrant father are more likely to experience a higher divorce penalty. For children with an immigrant mother and a native father, the findings suggest that a higher divorce penalty is less likely due to a loss of contact than to the quality of the contact.

FIGURE 4 HERE

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on divorce penalties and how they vary depending on parental migration background. Compared to prior studies, we examined this question using a larger sample that covers 12 European countries and investigated longer-term consequences on individuals' educational attainment rather than intermediate educational outcomes. Two key aspects of our study is that we focus on the divorce penalty for the children of mixed couples, a subgroup that is often hidden in the group of second-generation children and overlooked in research (Erman and Härkönen 2017), and that we consider intersections with parental education (as one important dimension of SES; (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2013) Our study revealed several novel findings.

We found that the divorce penalty for the children of two immigrant and two native parents is *quantitatively similar*. This contrasts with earlier studies that reported a smaller penalty, *on average*, for children of immigrants (Erman and Härkönen 2017; Guetto et al. 2022). Our different results may reflect the broader set of countries we analyzed and our focus on longer-term outcomes, since both of these factors have been shown to shape heterogeneity in divorce penalties (Bernardi and Boertien 2017). A notable difference is that prior studies examined smaller or newer destination countries such as Finland and Italy. However, Italy is a notable outlier in Europe because the children of immigrants there tend to underperform academically and may therefore have less to lose from parental separation (Ferrara and Brunori 2024; Triventi, Vlach, and Pini 2022). By contrast, our sample includes countries with longer

migration histories, such as Belgium and France, as well as contexts where immigrant children often overperform relative to natives, such as the United Kingdom and Norway (Ferrara and Luthra 2024; Hermansen 2016).

Concerning the divorce penalty for the children of mixed (immigrant-native) couples, we hypothesized that they would be most negatively affected from parental separation because they benefit from unique socioeconomic and psychological resources in mixed households, and because dissolution may more often entail disrupted ties with one parent and their extended family. Consistent with these expectations, we found that the divorce penalty is larger for children from mixed-couple households and especially those with an immigrant father. This penalty is about 50% larger than that experience by children of homogamous native couples, although the difference is not statistically significant. Future research should investigate how divorce affects the often fragile well-being of these children (Loi et al. 2021), as well as the impact of other disruptive family events, such as transnational family separation.

Our study also delved deeper into possible heterogeneity in divorce penalties and also investigated how they vary at the intersection of migration background and social origins. These analyses can reveal hidden educational inequalities and shed light on the mechanisms behind the overall heterogeneity by migration background. Our findings suggest that the divorce penalty is particularly pronounced for children of *tertiary-educated fathers*, especially in mixed families. This finding aligns with the expectation that these children are more likely to lose contact with their immigrant fathers, particularly in mixed partnerships (Kalmijn 2015a), which is supported by our additional analyses. A similar, though weaker and statistically insignificant, pattern emerged for children of *tertiary-educated mothers in mixed families.* Together, these results suggest that children in mixed families may be especially prone to have a reduced contact with their immigrant parent. Possible drivers include immigrants' socioeconomic disadvantage, discrimination in custody decisions, or decisions to re-migrate (Bijwaard and Van Doeselaar 2013, 2013; Hofferth et al. 2010; Kalmijn 2015a; Maldonado 2017). Future research should investigate these mechanisms using richer data.

Our analyses come with some limitations. While the breadth of our data allows us to draw some general conclusions for the European context, our sample is too small to produce precise estimates for specific origin groups or destination countries. Investigating more specific country cases is an important issue for future research. Another limitation is that our design only permits us to examine associations between family dissolution and respondents' educational attainment, which cannot be interpreted in a causal sense. Research shows that divorce is a selective outcome and that this selectivity could confound our estimates of the divorce penalty (e.g. Nielsen et al., 2025). Due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, we could only control for the observable selection factors that are available in the Generation and Gender Survey. Future research investigating differences in the divorce penalty by children's family composition of migration backgrounds should use longitudinal data and designs to better account for this selection.

Nonetheless, our study is an important step in understanding the heterogeneity of divorce penalties because it reveals that policies aimed at reducing the negative effects of family dissolutions should also consider the specific needs of families with different migration backgrounds, such as mixed-family households, which may affect children-parent relationships after separation.

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