

Parental Separation and Children's Life Trajectories: A Cross-Country Analysis of Educational and Occupational Outcomes

Beatrice Cacciamani (PhD Student in Life Course Research at University of Florence)

Introduction

Family structure plays a crucial role in shaping children's life trajectories, particularly in education and employment. Among family transitions, parental separation has been consistently associated with disadvantages in these domains. However, its impact is not uniform: it varies across social groups, institutional settings, and historical contexts, reflecting how family instability interacts with broader mechanisms of intergenerational inequality.

This study focuses on differences between children who lived with both parents, those who lived with a single parent while maintaining contact with the non-residential parent, and those who lived with a single parent without such contact. These contrasts allow us to assess how the intensity of parental involvement after separation influences children's educational and occupational trajectories, and how these effects differ across countries and birth cohorts.

The heterogeneity of these outcomes is expected to depend on social origin, as families with greater economic and cultural resources are better equipped to mitigate the negative consequences of separation. Furthermore, cross-country and cohort variations are likely to reflect different welfare regimes, cultural norms, and levels of divorce diffusion and social acceptance, dimensions that correspond to distinct stages of the Second Demographic Transition.

Drawing on the 2019 and 2023 waves of the *Intergenerational Transmission of Disadvantages* Ad Hoc Module of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), this study adopts a comparative multilevel approach to analyze how parental separation contributes to the intergenerational reproduction of educational and occupational inequalities in contemporary Europe.

Theoretical background

Parental separation plays a critical role in shaping children's life trajectories, particularly in education and employment. Following a divorce or separation, children living with a single parent often experience increased economic and social strain. This may reduce the resources available to children and affect parenting quality, with long-term consequences for educational and occupational outcomes. The absence of the non-residential parent, typically the father, can further exacerbate these challenges by limiting both financial support and parental involvement (Booth & Amato, 1994).

A substantial body of research has shown that growing up in a non-intact family is associated with educational disadvantages, including lower academic achievement in childhood, weaker performance in secondary education, and a reduced likelihood of completing tertiary education (Amato & Anthony, 2014; Amato et al., 2015; Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Guetto & Panichella, 2019; Herbaut, 2021; Guetto et al., 2022). Yet the magnitude of these effects is heterogeneous across socio-economic backgrounds. Some studies suggest that parental separation has a stronger impact on children from lower socio-economic families in the short term, particularly during compulsory education (Guetto & Panichella, 2019), whereas for long-term outcomes such as university completion, the disadvantages appear more pronounced among children from more privileged families, who have more resources at stake (Bernardi, 2014; Guetto et al., 2022).

Post-separation parental involvement represents a key mechanism in moderating these outcomes. Both economic and social support from parents are crucial to sustaining children's academic performance (Cheng et al., 2012). Accordingly, children who maintain regular contact with both parents after separation, such as in joint custody arrangements, are likely to experience smaller educational penalties than those who lose contact with the non-custodial parent. However, the likelihood and quality of post-separation contact are themselves stratified by social origin. Parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds are often more able to maintain involvement (Spaan et al., 2022; Manzoni & Vidal, 2023), though other evidence highlights that

work demands and post-divorce conflict may reduce their engagement (Kalil et al., 2011; Van Houdt et al., 2018). Moreover, the nature of contact, whether in-person or remote, may condition the extent of support provided (Tosi & Guetto, 2024).

While much of the literature has focused on the educational consequences of parental separation, fewer studies have examined its long-term occupational effects. The intergenerational transmission of disadvantage extends beyond schooling, yet there is still limited evidence on how parental separation shapes children's employment opportunities and career trajectories. One of the few studies addressing this issue, Cantalini et al. (2022), investigates the role of parental separation in the reproduction of inequalities in both education and employment, though its scope is limited to the Italian context. Given that educational attainment strongly influences occupational outcomes, it is likely that the effect of parental separation is at least partially mediated by education.

Investigating these long-term consequences from a cross-national and cross-cohort perspective is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of how family instability contributes to the intergenerational transmission of inequalities. Previous research, mostly focused on educational outcomes, has shown that the magnitude of the divorce penalty varies substantially across both countries and birth cohorts. In particular, the negative consequences of parental separation tend to be stronger in contexts and cohorts where divorce is more widespread (Bernardi and Radl 2014; Guetto et al., 2022). As divorce becomes more common and less stigmatized, separations increasingly involve families with lower levels of conflict, for whom the negative effects of family disruption are not offset by potential benefits such as a reduction in parental conflict (Brand et al., 2019).

Methodology

This study examines how family structure moderates the intergenerational transmission of inequalities through the Origin-Education-Destination (OED) framework (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Within this framework, social origin, measured by parental social class using the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI), influences individuals' social class destination, also measured by ISEI, both indirectly through its impact on educational attainment and directly through its effect on occupational outcomes after accounting for education.

To empirically test these relationships, the analysis uses data from the 2019 and 2023 waves of the EU-SILC *Intergenerational Transmission of Disadvantages* Ad Hoc Module. This dataset is particularly suitable for this purpose as it provides retrospective information on family structure and socio-economic background when respondents were 14 years old, allowing for a long-term assessment of intergenerational mobility.

The main independent variable captures whether respondents lived with both parents at age 14 or experienced parental separation. Among those who did not live with both parents due to separation, the analysis distinguishes between respondents who maintained some form of contact with the non-residential parent and those who had no contact at all. This distinction allows the analysis to assess how the absence of one parent, and the degree of post-separation contact, affect educational and occupational trajectories.

A multilevel modeling strategy is employed to account for both individual- and contextual-level variation. The models explore how the effects of parental separation differ across countries and birth cohorts, incorporating contextual indicators that capture the diffusion of divorce as a proxy for its social acceptance and for different stages of the Second Demographic Transition. This comparative perspective enables the assessment of whether the divorce penalty varies according to broader demographic and cultural contexts.

This research introduces two key contributions. It utilizes recent data from the 2019 and 2023 EU-SILC waves, allowing for an updated and comprehensive analysis of parental separation's effects on educational and occupational outcomes. It also adopts a comparative, cross-country approach, shedding light on how macro-level factors and societal transformations shape intergenerational inequalities across Europe.

Expected results

Building on the outlined methodology, this study aims to examine how parental separation and continued contact with the non-residential parent shape the intergenerational transmission of inequalities in both educational and occupational outcomes. Previous research has consistently shown that parental separation has detrimental effects on children's life chances. In particular, when focusing on selective outcomes such as tertiary education, the divorce penalty tends to be stronger among children from higher socio-economic backgrounds. These children have more cultural and economic resources to lose following a family disruption, and their parents typically hold stronger educational aspirations and expectations. As a result, parental separation tends to attenuate, though not fully offset, the advantages typically enjoyed by children from higher socio-economic backgrounds, leading to a partial narrowing of social inequalities.

Preliminary analyses, which control for country and cohort differences, confirm this pattern. Parental separation is associated with a lower probability of attaining tertiary education, and this negative effect is more pronounced among individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds. A similar pattern emerges when looking at occupational outcomes: children of separated parents tend to occupy lower-status positions in adulthood. However, once educational attainment is accounted for, the effect of parental separation on occupational status becomes weaker, and the interaction between family background and separation loses significance. This suggests that education acts as a key mediating channel through which family disruption influences long-term life chances. Over time, the impact of parental separation appears to diminish, and its role as a potential "social equalizer" fades.

Another important dimension concerns the role of contact with the non-residential parent. Maintaining contact with the non-residential parent is expected to mitigate, at least partially, the negative effects of parental separation, as it may provide continued emotional, financial, and social support. Nevertheless, this mitigating effect is limited: even when contact persists, children from separated families still face a disadvantage compared to those from intact families.

Finally, the study explores how these relationships vary across countries and birth cohorts. Although one might expect the divorce penalty to weaken in societies or cohorts where divorce is more widespread and socially accepted, the literature suggests the opposite trend (Bernardi and Radl 2014; Guetto et al., 2022). When divorce becomes more common and less stigmatized, couples with lower levels of conflict, who might otherwise have remained together, also separate. Therefore, as divorce becomes more common and socially accepted, its average impact on children may grow, reflecting shifts in who divorces and how separation is socially perceived.

Conclusions

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of how parental separation contributes to the intergenerational transmission of inequalities in educational and occupational outcomes across European countries and birth cohorts. The analysis focuses on how these effects vary by social origin, emphasizing the mechanisms through which parental separation, and the maintenance or loss of contact with the non-residential parent, shape children's long-term life trajectories.

We expect parental separation to have overall negative consequences for children's educational and occupational outcomes. These effects are likely to be more pronounced among children from higher socio-economic backgrounds, for whom the loss of economic, social, and cultural resources following separation is greater. Preliminary evidence suggests that the divorce penalty on tertiary education attainment is stronger among those from privileged families, and that this pattern also extends to occupational outcomes, although much of the effect appears to be mediated by educational attainment. Maintaining contact with the non-residential parent may partially mitigate these disadvantages, even though the overall separation penalty remains substantial.

Finally, cross-national and cohort comparisons will shed light on how macro-level factors, such as the diffusion and social acceptance of divorce, shape these dynamics. Building on insights from the Second Demographic

Transition framework, we expect the divorce penalty to be stronger in contexts where divorce is more common and less stigmatized, as separations increasingly occur among low-conflict couples. By integrating individual- and contextual-level perspectives, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how family structures, social origin, and societal change interact in shaping children's educational and occupational trajectories, offering implications for policies that aim to support children affected by parental separation.

References

- Amato, P. R. & Anthony, C. J. (2014). *Estimating the effects of parental divorce and death with fixed effects models*. Journal of Marriage and Family 76(2): 370-386.
- Amato, P. R. (2000). *The consequences of divorce for adults and children*. Journal of marriage and family, 62(4), 1269-1287.
- Amato, P. R. (2010). *Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments*. Journal of marriage and family, 72(3), 650-666.
- Amato, P. R., Patterson, S., & Beattie, B. (2015). *Single-parent households and children's educational achievement: A state-level analysis*. Social science research, 53, 191-202.
- Bernardi, F. & Radl, J. (2014). *The long-term consequences of parental divorce for children's educational attainment*. Demographic Research 30(1): 1653-1680.
- Bernardi, F. (2014). *Compensatory advantage as a mechanism of educational inequality: A regression discontinuity based on month of birth*. Sociology of Education 87(2), 74-88.
- Blau, P. M., & Duncan, O. D. (1967). *The American occupational structure*. New York, Wiley.
- Booth, A., & Amato, P. R. (1994). *Parental marital quality, parental divorce, and relations with parents*. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 21-34.
- Brand, J. E., Moore, R., Song, X., & Xie, Y. (2019). *Parental divorce is not uniformly disruptive to children's educational attainment*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116(15), 7266-7271.
- Cantalini, S., Panichella, N., Guetto, R., & Ballarino, G. (2022). *Divorzio e stratificazione sociale in Italia. Il ruolo della separazione dei genitori sugli esiti educativi e occupazionali dei figli*. Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia, 63(1), 119-148.
- Cheng, W., Ickes, W., & Verhofstadt, L. (2012). *How is family support related to students' GPA scores? A longitudinal study*. Higher education, 64, 399-420.
- Guetto, R., & Panichella, N. (2019). *Family arrangements and children's educational outcomes*. Demographic Research, 40, 1015-1046.
- Guetto, R., Bernardi, F. & Zanasi, F. (2022). *Parental education, divorce, and children's educational attainment*. Demographic Research 46, 65-96.
- Herbaut, E. (2021). *Overcoming failure in higher education: Social inequalities and compensatory advantage in dropout patterns*. Acta Sociologica, 64(4), 383-402.
- Kalil, A., Mogstad, M., Rege, M., & Votruba, M. (2011). *Divorced fathers' proximity and children's long-run outcomes: Evidence from Norwegian registry data*. Demography, 48, 1005-1027.
- Manzoni, A., & Vidal, S. (2023). *Parental separation and intergenerational support*. JFR-Journal of Family Research, 35, 124-144.
- Spain, J., van Gaalen, R., & Kalmijn, M. (2022). *Disentangling the long-term effects of divorce circumstances on father-child closeness in adulthood: A mediation analysis*. European Journal of Population, 38(5), 1183-1211.
- Tosi, M., & Guetto, R. (2024). *The social stratification in parent-child relationships after separation: Evidence from Italy*. Journal of Family Research, 36, 0-0.
- Van Houdt, K., Kalmijn, M., & Ivanova, K. (2018). *Family complexity and adult children's obligations: The role of divorce and co-residential history in norms to support parents and step-parents*. European Sociological Review, 34(2), 169-183.