

Inter-generational Social Mobility and Divorce Risks

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We now have a rather extensive literature on the social correlates of divorce. Here the main conclusion is that we are witnessing a reversal of the educational gradient: the marriages of the highly educated are increasingly more stable compared to those with little education (Harkonen and Dronkers, 2006; Boertien and Harkonen, 2018; McLanahan, 2004; Torr, 2011).

But, surprisingly, there exist virtually no studies of how inter-generational social mobility influences partnerships and divorce. Are the stabilizing effects of education and income due to effects of social origin, or do these apply regardless of whether one comes from a working class or service class background? The lack of attention to social mobility effects is all the more surprising considering the expansion of access to higher education in many countries as well as the pervasive degree of occupational transformation of the advanced societies – promoting technical and professional jobs at the expense of routine manual employment.

We should expect that couple stability will vary significantly depending on whether an upwardly or downwardly mobile person partners with someone from his/her social origin, social destination, or with someone who is similarly upwardly or downwardly mobile. We should also expect that the non-mobile partnered with someone from their origin status will exhibit comparatively high degrees of stability.

Note, however, that the influence of inter-generational social mobility on family behaviour – primarily fertility -- did receive scholarly attention in the post-war decades. Three distinct hypotheses evolved. One emphasized the role of economic resources in family decision making (Easterlin, 1976). In this framework, the probability of divorce depends on the relative cost and benefit of remaining in, as opposed to leaving, the union. A second adopted a status exchange logic, originally developed by Westoff (1953). It predicted lower fertility among the upwardly mobile and, reciprocally, higher fertility among the downwardly mobile (for a review, see Kasarda and Billy, 1985; Stevens, 1981; and most recently, Billingsley, 2011; and Billingsley and Matysiak, 2018).

A third variant is found in Blau and Duncan (1967), who adopted a social networks framework which was applied to both partnering choice and to fertility (but never to divorce). It predicted that both the upwardly and downwardly mobile will exhibit higher fertility than the non-mobile. This is because mobile individuals are likely to become distanced from their old social relationships and therefore risk social isolation. Having children may help increase interaction with the community of destiny (Kasarda and Billy, 1985).

For marriages based on different social origins, the social network thesis would expect adverse stability effects just like among ethnically mixed marriages. The partners may identify and socialize with contrasting social networks; they may have different socialization backgrounds, values, expectations, and fewer common interests; and this can provoke marital conflict (see especially Kalmijn et.al, 2005, and Lyngstad, 2006). If anxiety and stress accompanies high-mobility trajectories, these are likely to additionally de-stabilize partnerships.

In contrast, the social exchange framework would predict more stable unions among the upwardly mobile who partner with someone from one's social destination. This is due to the relative cost of leaving a relationship compared to the benefits of staying together. A higher educated, career partner is likely to command greater resources and better interpersonal skills, and leaving a resourceful partner will incur more costs than leaving a partner from an upwardly

mobile person's social origin. In this sense, the social exchange framework arrives at predictions quite similar to those from the Easterlin (1976) hypotheses.

The debate between these theoretical perspectives inspired a number of empirical studies which, however, produced no consistent findings (see in particular Boyd, 1973; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Sobel, 1985; and Stevens, 1981). The absence of any clear findings may have its roots in the lack of high-quality data in that period that permits identification of life histories. Also, mobility was typically based on a rough blue collar-white collar comparison (Stevens, 1981; Zimmer, 1981).

The recent literature is basically limited to two studies. Blanden (2005) suggests that those who are matched in terms of social origin status are more stable while marriages based on different social origins face greater divorce risks. A recent Finnish study finds that union stability is more strongly related to educational similarities than to social origin (Maenpaa and Jalovaara, 2014). This finding can be generalized to hypothesize that couple stability will increasingly depend on similarities in terms of social destination rather than of origin, the greater is the overall rate of social mobility in any society.

In this paper, we use data from Britain to investigate how important partner matching based on origin and destination class matters for the stability of marriages, as well as the interaction between both. In other words, how does social mobility matter for partnership stability?

Data and methods

The data used for this paper come from the Understanding Society study, a representative longitudinal household panel survey of the British Population. For our analysis, we select all cohabiting and married couples present in the first wave of the study (2010) and follow them across the yearly waves of the study until 2017. In this first wave, all respondents of the households interviewed were asked about the educational and occupational attainment of their parents. The panel structure of the data allows us to document the stability of unions depending on own social mobility as well the social origin of their partners. Requirements for inclusion in the study sample are the presence of information on both partners' occupation as well as information on both partners' parents' occupation. This leads to a selection of 6,416 couples. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the sample used.

The main dependent variable of our study is separation from a cohabiting union or marriage. Separations are identified when one of the partners of the couple is not living in the household anymore in a subsequent wave. For the 6,416 couples included in this study, this leads to the inclusion of 357 separation events in our analysis.

Our main independent variables are based on information on both partners' occupation as well as the occupation of their parents. Information on occupations is collected from both partners in the first wave through individual questionnaires. For our analysis we adopt the ESeC class scheme (Rose & Harrison, 2007) and divide occupations into three large groups. The "Service Class": ESeC classes 1 and 2, which include large employers, professionals, managers and higher grade technician and supervisory occupations; "Intermediate occupations": ESeC classes 3 to 5, which include higher grade white collar workers as well as self-employed individuals; and the "Working Class": ESeC classes 6 to 9 which include lower supervisory and technical occupations as well as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. For parental social class we took the "highest" recorded occupation between mothers and fathers as an indicator of an individual's social origin.

In our analysis we employ discrete-time event history models using logistic regression and cluster observations by union. We include left-censored cases, unions that were already intact before the first wave, and include the duration of the relationship as a covariate in the model.

Information on the duration of the current relationship is retrieved from individual questions about people's relationship history. For part of the sample, this information was retrieved from information provided in earlier years when they were members of the British Household Panel Survey. We control for the age of the female partner at union formation in the analysis.

Note, however, that we face complex selection bias problems. There is selection on unobservables into partnering to begin with. To exemplify, the highly mobile may be less inclined to partner, either because they are intensely career focused, or possibly because they are torn between their allegiance to their social origins and their desire to be accepted into the loftier socio-economic milieu of their destiny status. And selection into partnering choice may very well influence the degree to of marital stability.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample Used

	<i>Share / Average</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
His age	52.0	13.7
Her age	49.5	13.5
Duration of relationship (months)	327.8	179.3
Her age at union formation	26.8	7.3
Married	.87	
He college educated	.30	
She college educated	.28	
He working class (ESeC 6-9)	.22	
He intermediate occupation (ESeC 3-5)	.29	
He service class (ESeC 1-2)	.49	
His parents working class (ESeC 6-9)	.26	
His parents intermediate occ. (ESeC 6-9)	.38	
His parents service class (ESeC 6-9)	.36	
She working class (ESeC 6-9)	.18	
She intermediate occupation (ESeC 3-5)	.31	
She service class (ESeC 1-2)	.41	
Her parents working class (ESeC 6-9)	.27	
Her parents intermediate occ. (ESeC 6-9)	.37	
Her parents service class (ESeC 6-9)	.36	
N (couples)	6 461	
Couple-years	29 266	

Estimating Effects of Social Mobility

To identify distinct intergenerational mobility effects on divorce risks, a good starting point would be the following general model. Let Y_t represent the binary variable measuring divorce/separation versus remaining together in a given year t , let ORIG be the social class of origin and DEST the social class of destination. The effects of ORIG and DEST on Y can be estimated by the following expression:

$$Y_t = \alpha + \beta \text{DUR} + \beta X + \beta_1 \text{ORIG} + \beta_2 \text{DEST} + \beta_3 \text{ORIG} * \text{DEST}$$

Here βX represents a set of additional covariates (e.g. age at union formation) and DUR indicates the duration of the union. Given this parameterization, four kinds of dynamics may emerge.

1. $\beta_1 \neq 0$, $\beta_2 = 0$ and $\beta_3 = 0$. In this case, divorce (Y) depends exclusively on the social class of origin. If so, social mobility effects are completely absent. This probably represents a traditional society in which people's family choices completely depend on their social background.

2. $\beta_1 = 0$, $\beta_2 \neq 0$ and $\beta_3 = 0$. In this case, Y depends only on the destination class. This represents a society in which your family outcomes depend wholly on your social class attainment.

3. $\beta_1 \neq 0$, $\beta_2 \neq 0$ and $\beta_3 = 0$. In this case, Y depends both on the social class of origin and of destination. The total social class effect is a weighted average of the effect of your class of origin and your class of destination. Depending on the size of β_a and β_b , either social class of origin or social class of destination is more important. The consequences of downward and upward mobility are inversely related.

4. $\beta_3 \neq 0$. In this case, divorce does not only depend on class of origin and/or destination, but also on the combination of the two. This represents the most interesting cases: the effects of upward and downward mobility are not inversely related, but could e.g. work in the same direction (as in the social stress hypothesis).

The theoretical challenge is to develop hypotheses about the conditions under which either $\beta_3 \neq 0$, $\beta_3 \leq 0$, or $\beta_3 \geq 0$ prevail. If Y is divorce, and the effect of social class of origin and social class of destination on divorce is negative (so the higher the social class, the lower the divorce risk). In this case, both $\beta_1 \leq 0$ and $\beta_2 \leq 0$. Now, three situations can occur:

* If $\beta_c = 0$, those from a low social origin who are upwardly mobile have a lower divorce risk than those from a low social origin who are not upwardly mobile (but have a higher divorce risk than those from a high social origin who remain in their same class). Whether those from a high social origin who are downwardly mobile will have a higher divorce rate than those from a low social origin who are upwardly mobile depends on whether $\beta_a \neq \beta_b$.

* If $\beta_c \geq 0$, being upwardly mobile produces a stronger reduction in divorce risks than that being downwardly mobile leads to an increase in divorce risks. In this situation upward mobility is more 'stressful' than downward mobility (e.g. because the upwardly mobile have difficulty adapting to the cultural codes of those with a high social class background).

* If $\beta_c \leq 0$, the situation is reversed, and upward mobility leads to a smaller reduction in divorce risks than being downwardly mobile. In this situation downward mobility is more 'stressful' than upward mobility (e.g. as a result of relative deprivation among the downwardly mobile who are likely to compare themselves with those from their class of origin).

Our second main interest is the extent to which the social origin of partners matters for union stability, net of own social origin and destination. To investigate whether the social origin of partners matters, we run event history models for different subsamples based on respondents' social origin. More specifically, we first select all respondents whose parents are from the service class and look at the general effects of having dropped out of the service class as well as general effects of partners' social origin. Interacting both variables gives us an indication of whether social mobility has different effects depending on the social origin of mobile individuals' partners.

If congruence between partners' social origin stabilizes relationships (social network hypothesis), we would expect more stable unions if socially mobile individuals partner with someone from their origin class. On the other hand, if the stabilizing effect of a partner's

resources dominates (social exchange hypothesis), we would expect different results depending on whether the individual is upwardly or downwardly mobile. In both cases having a partner with a service class origin should stabilize relationships. In the case of upwardly mobile individuals, this implies that partnering with someone from your origin class leads to less stable relationships, whereas for downwardly mobile individuals partnering with someone from the origin class should increase stability.

Results

We start our results section by looking at the general effects of mobility for men and women in the sample. Subsequently we investigate whether the effects of social mobility are different depending on whom one partners.

Tables 2 displays the odds of separation for women based on own origin and destination class. Model 1 shows that women who have a working class occupation are more likely to experience a separation than women who have an intermediate occupation. Differences between women with intermediate occupations and women in the service class are not statistically significant. Model 2 shows that the social class of parents is not related to separation risk in a statistically significant manner. The presence of destination effects, but absence of origin effects, persists once introducing them jointly, as done for Model 3. In other words, effects of women's destination class on separation risk are not driven by effects of social origin. Finally, social mobility does not seem to have any effects beyond the main effects of social origin and destination (Model 4). These results provide support for a general stabilizing effect of own occupation for women, which directs attention to the resources women's destination class provides to relationships.

Table 2. Discrete-time event history models explaining separation based on women's social mobility

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
<i>Women's destination class</i>								
She working class (ESeC 6-9)	1.39*	0.20			1.38*	0.24	1.46	0.43
She intermediate (ESeC 3-5)	Ref.				Ref.		Ref.	
She service class (ESeC 1-2)	0.99	0.14			0.99	0.14	1.22	0.34
<i>Women's origin class</i>								
Her parents working class (ESeC 6-9)			1.25	0.21	1.20	0.17	1.15	0.35
Her parents intermediate (ESeC 3-5)			Ref.		Ref.		Ref.	
Her parents service class (ESeC 1-2)			1.11	0.15	1.15	0.16	1.52	0.42
<i>Interaction destination and origin class</i>								
Working class destination & origin							1.23	0.46
Working class destination, service origin							0.66	0.25
Service class destination, working origin							0.87	0.34
Service class destination, service origin							0.67	0.23
Her age at union formation	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01
Duration	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00

N (couples)	6,461	6,461	6,461	6,461
Number of events	352	352	352	352

Table 3 shows the same set of results for men, and reveals similar results, even though it are men with a service class occupation who separate less than those with an intermediate occupation (note that this association is only marginally statistically significant). Note that also here the effects of destination class are not driven by social origin (Model 3). In the case of men, we do see that mobility has an effect beyond the main effects of origin and destination. Both men with a working class background and men with a service class background benefit more from having attained a service class occupation than individuals whose parents had an intermediate occupation (the reference category in the models). Given that our hypotheses would predict only one group to benefit more from mobility (whether these are those from a service class origin or those of a working class origin depends on the hypothesis), this result provides no clear support for any of the hypotheses formulated.

Table 3. Discrete-time event history models explaining separation based on men's social mobility

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
<i>Men's destination class</i>								
He working class (ESeC 6-9)	0.99	0.14			0.99	0.14	1.43	0.40
He intermediate (ESeC 3-5)	Ref.				Ref.		Ref.	
He service class (ESeC 1-2)	0.70**	0.10			0.70**	0.10	0.97	0.26
<i>Men's origin class</i>								
His parents working class (ESeC 6-9)			1.10	0.15	1.07	0.15	1.23	0.36
His parents intermediate (ESeC 3-5)			Ref.		Ref.		Ref.	
His parents service class (ESeC 1-2)			0.98	0.14	1.04	0.15	1.74*	0.47
<i>Interaction destination and origin class</i>								
Working class destination & origin							0.80	0.29
Working class destination, service origin							0.43*	0.17
Service class destination, working origin							0.84	0.40
Service class destination, service origin							0.52†	0.18
Her age at union formation	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01
Duration	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00
N (couples)	6,461		6,461		6,461		6,461	
Number of events	352		352		352		352	

Note. ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; † p <0.10.

Effects of partner's social origin on the stability of socially mobile individuals' relationships

The previous section showed that social mobility by itself does not have a major impact on the stability of relationships beyond the general effects of social origin and destination. However, our hypotheses suggested that the stability of socially mobile individuals' relationships might depend on the social origin of their partners. To investigate this, we focus on upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals in the remainder of the analysis.

Table 4 restricts the sample to men who have a service class origin, and hence are at risk of downward mobility. Model 1 shows how downwardly mobile individuals are more likely to separate than individuals who are immobile. In other words, these results confirm the stabilizing effect of having a service class destination (*or indicate that downward mobility induces couple instability*). Model 2 shows the general effect of partners' social origin, and in line with previous results on social origin we do not find statistically significant differences. Model 3 quantifies the main interest of our analysis: does the effect of social mobility depend on partners' social origin? The results confirm that this is indeed the case for downwardly mobile men. Downward mobility is only associated with increased separation risk for men if their partner has a service class origin. This result goes against two hypotheses. Firstly, that a clash of social origins destabilizes is not supported (????????). Secondly, having an advantaged background is not always stabilizing. Instead, downward mobility might put pressure on relationships if this means exiting from not only one's own social class but also that of the partner (????). Model 4 presents results in a more interpretable way and confirms how downwardly mobile individuals with a partner with a service class origin stand out in terms of separation risk.

Table 5 restricts the sample to men who have a working class origin (i.e. the 'bottom third'), and are therefore at risk of upward mobility. We do not notice statistically significant effects of upward mobility for men from the working class. At the same time, we do observe that the social origin of their partners matters (Model 2). Having a partner with a working class origin destabilizes relationships. Again, this goes against expectations that having the same social origin lowers the risk of separation. But it does support the stabilizing effect that women's resources might have on relationships. The destabilizing effect of having a partner with a working class origin does not differ between upwardly mobile and immobile men (Model 3). Upwardly mobile men who have a partner from a working class origin are more likely to separate than mobile men with a service class origin partner (Model 4), but given the absence of a statistically significant effect in Model 3, this is likely to be driven by the main effect of partners' social origin.

Table 6 looks at the effects of women's downward mobility. Downward mobility of women destabilizes relationships but not to a statistically significant extent (Model 1). At the same time, having a husband of a service class origin stabilizes relationships of women with a service class origin (Model 2). Much like the results observed for men, the destabilizing effect of downward mobility is greater if women partner men from a service class origin, but these differences in effects are not statistically significant.

For upward mobility we do observe statistically significant results, and notice a stabilizing effect of upward mobility for women (Model 1) and a marginally significant destabilizing effect of having a partner with a working class origin. The effect of mobility differs depending on the social origin of women's partners. If women's partners have a working class origin, upward mobility brings more benefits in terms of relationship stability (Model 3). As can be seen in Model 4, the least stable relationships among women from a working class origin are those composed of a man with a working class origin and a woman with a working class destination. Again, homogamy in terms of social origin does not stabilize relationships for mobile individuals. These results do provide support for the explanation that the more resources that people bring to relationships, the more stable the union.

In sum, once looking at all four groups of mobile people together, we find a quite uniform pattern that partnering with someone from your social origin does not stabilize relationships. This goes against the hypothesis that a clash of social origin networks and habits pose important obstacles to maintaining a relationship. Instead, leaving the origin class of your partner seems to destabilize relationships, whereas entering the origin class of your partner seems to stabilize. ***The results therefore provide some support for the social exchange hypothesis. They evidence here would be that an upwardly mobile (male) partners with a downwardly mobile female whose origin is equal to the (male's) destination.***

suggest that one's destination class might pose challenges to relationships if it differs from the origin class of partners. We discuss further interpretations of these results further in the next section.

Table 4. Discrete-time event history models explaining separation for men with a service class origin

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
He service origin & destination	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.			
He service origin, non-service destination (downwardly mobile)	1.61**	0.25			0.69	0.24		
She service origin (<i>ref. non-service origin</i>)			1.44	0.27	0.93	0.24		
<i>Interaction Effect</i>								
Downwardly mobile*she service origin					3.07**	1.25		
<i>Mobility Combinations</i>								
He downwardly mobile, she non-service origin							Ref.	
He downwardly mobile, she service origin							2.70**	0.86
He immobile (service), she non-service origin							1.28	0.46
He immobile, she service origin							1.26	0.40
Her age at union formation	0.97*	0.01	0.97	0.01	0.97	0.01	0.97	0.02
Duration	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00
N (couples)	2243							
Number of events	133							

Table 5. Discrete-time event history models explaining separation for men with a working class origin

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
He working class origin & destination	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.			
He Esec 6-9 origin, Esec 1-5 destination (upwardly mobile)	0.82	0.12			0.95	0.25		
She working class origin (<i>ref. Esec 1-5 origin</i>)			1.45*	0.25	1.78*	0.48		
<i>Interaction Effect</i>								
Upwardly mobile*she Esec 6-9 origin					0.71	0.25		
<i>Mobility Combinations</i>								
He upwardly mobile, she Esec 1-5 origin							Ref.	
He upwardly mobile, she Esec 6-9 origin							1.89*	0.53
He immobile (working), she Esec 1-5 origin							1.02	0.28
He immobile, she Esec 6-9 class origin							1.27	0.37
Her age at union formation	0.97*	0.01	0.97	0.01	0.97	0.01	0.97	0.02
Duration	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00
N (couples)	2,514							
Number of events	127							

Table 6. Discrete-time event history models explaining separation for women with a service class origin

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
She service origin & destination	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.			
She service origin, non-service destination (downwardly mobile)	1.13	0.13			0.90	0.21		
He service origin (<i>ref. non-service origin</i>)			0.73**	0.11	0.61**	0.14		
<i>Interaction Effect</i>								
Downwardly mobile*he service origin					1.56	0.49		
<i>Mobility Combinations</i>								
She downwardly mobile, he non-service origin							Ref.	
She downwardly mobile, he service origin							0.84	0.21
She immobile (service), he non-service origin							1.12	0.28
She immobile, he service origin							0.65†	0.15
Her age at union formation	0.97*	0.01	0.97	0.01	0.98	0.01	0.97	0.02
Duration	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00
N (couples)	2309							
Number of events	141							

Table 7. Discrete-time event history models explaining separation for women with a working class origin

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
She working class origin & destination	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.			
She Esec 6-9 origin, Esec 1-5 destination (upwardly mobile)	0.58*	0.10			0.89	0.24		
He Esec 6-9 class origin (<i>ref. Esec 1-5 origin</i>)			1.43†	0.27	1.97*	0.53		
<i>Interaction Effect</i>								
Upwardly mobile*he Esec 6-9 origin					0.46*	0.18		
<i>Mobility Combinations</i>								
She upwardly mobile, he Esec 1-5 origin							Ref.	
She upwardly mobile, he Esec 6-9 origin							0.91	0.19
She immobile (working), he Esec 1-5 origin							1.12	0.29
She immobile, he Esec 6-9 class origin							2.21**	0.50
Her age at union formation	0.99*	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.01	0.99	0.02
Duration	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00	0.99**	0.00
N (couples)	2,427							
Number of events	127							

Discussion

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