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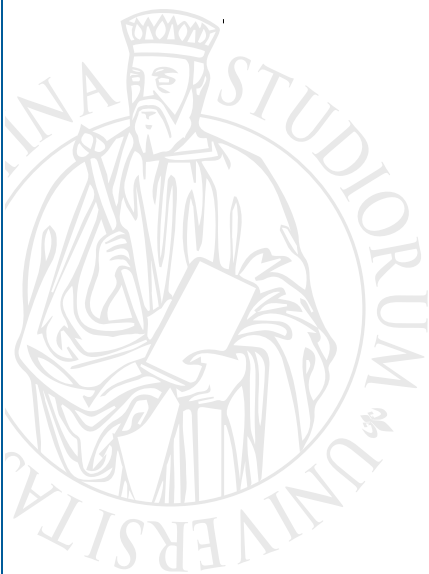
The changing socioeconomic gradient in the dissolution of marriage and cohabitation: Evidence from a latecomer of the Second Demographic Transition

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Abstract

The existing literature on the (changing) socioeconomic gradient of divorce is not without shortcomings. First, virtually all studies have operationalized individuals' socioeconomic status through education, downplaying that class differences may be equally (or even more) important. While education may proxy cultural and cognitive skills, social class could more accurately capture individuals' economic means. Second, most studies have only focused on married couples, despite non-marital cohabitation having become commonplace. Third, the majority of studies have exclusively focused on women. This study addresses such oversights by analyzing the educational and social class gradients of marriage and cohabitation in Italy— a country widely-known as a latecomer of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) and long characterized by a limited diffusion of union dissolution. We adopted non-proportional hazard models to estimate survival curves and probabilities of union dissolution for married and cohabiting women and men, stratifying by education, social class, and cohort. We found that education and social class play an important and independent role as antecedents of union dissolution in Italy. Our results suggest a vanishing, among women, and a reversal from positive to negative, among men, of the educational and social class gradients of marital dissolution across cohorts. We found no clear socioeconomic gradient in the dissolution of cohabiting unions, neither in terms of education nor social class. However, cohabiting men who are not employed were found to face a much higher risk of union dissolution.

Keywords: Socioeconomic gradient; education; social class; union dissolution; divorce; marriage; cohabitation; Italy.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Over the last century, union dissolution has become an increasingly common phenomenon in Western societies, with relevant social and economic consequences for individuals. Union dissolution can be a disruptive event, and separated men and women face higher risks of economic deprivation compared to their partnered counterparts, especially if they have children (Amato 2000; Andreß et al. 2006). Accordingly, the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution, or the differential dissolution risk between different socioeconomic groups, is increasingly attracting scholarly attention.

The most prominent theoretical perspective on the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution was proposed in the seminal work of William Goode (1962; 1993). According to this view, early adopters of divorce correspond to the "social vanguard." When the legal, social, and economic barriers to divorce are high, only high socioeconomic status (SES) partners have the necessary cultural and economic resources with which to break such barriers. As these barriers diminish, divorce becomes more accessible to less privileged couples, thereby spreading through the population. When divorce becomes commonplace, the unions of high-SES partners may result in being more stable than those of lower SES partners. Individuals from higher social strata tend to form more successful matchings and are less exposed to stressful life events (e.g., unemployment, health issues) that affect relationship quality (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010). Moreover, upper-class partners share more financial assets and long-term investments (e.g., home ownership), which rises the financial costs of divorce (Boertien and Härkönen 2018). Goode's narrative has been widely supported by within- and between-country empirical evidence, revealing a generalized reversal—from positive to negative—of the educational gradient of divorce over time, with differences based on institutional and cultural contexts (Harkonen and Dronkers 2006; Matysiak, Styrc, and Vignoli 2014). Nonetheless, the literature on the (changing) socioeconomic gradient of divorce contains several shortcomings.

First, while Goode's original thesis referred to "class differentials" in divorce, virtually all studies have operationalized individuals' SES through education. The importance of social class, as a well-defined concept distinct from education or income, for demographic behaviors has been increasingly recognized in the literature (Baizan 2020; Kreyenfeld et al. 2023). Partners' education and social class may both influence union dissolutions through different underlying mechanisms. Education should more accurately proxy partners' cultural resources to overcome the legal and social barriers to divorce, or the cognitive skills required to form

more stable unions. Instead, social class may more precisely capture individuals' economic means to cope with the direct and indirect costs of union dissolution. Moreover, (low) social class is a more direct indicator of economic hardship, which may increase the risk of union dissolution, or of the partners' financial assets and long-term investments, which may deter them from dissolving the union. We thus ask: *Does social class influence union dissolution over and above education? Does the effect of social class, net of education, change across cohorts?*

Second, most studies have only included married couples in the analysis, despite the rising popularity of unmarried cohabitation as a living arrangement, conceived both as a pathway or alternative to marriage (Manning 2020; Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012). Marriage and cohabitation differ in terms of partners' socioeconomic characteristics and union stability, with the latter often considered a more flexible and easier to terminate living arrangement (Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012). Married and cohabiting couples may thus encounter different types of barriers to union dissolution (Cherlin 2017). We ask: *Is there a socioeconomic (educational and social class) gradient in the dissolution of cohabitation? Does it change across cohorts?*

Third, the majority of existing research has focused on women only. Goode (1962, 1993), however, generally referred to the couple's social class, often operationalizing it through that of the husband (which was, at the time, most available). If we consider the change in the socioeconomic gradient of divorce as a result of a cultural diffusion process, it should operate in the same fashion for men and women. Nevertheless, it is well-known that SES may have different implications for women and men's partnership choices (Sayer et al. 2011). It is therefore important to account for possible dissimilarities between men and women. This prompted us to ask: *Does the socioeconomic gradient in the dissolution of marriage and cohabitation differ between women and men? Does the pattern change across cohorts?*

We answer these research questions by analyzing the educational and social class gradients in the dissolution of marriage and cohabitation for both men and women. Studies in this field have generally focused on countries with relatively high separation rates. We complement previous work with analyses for Italy, a latecomer country of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) that—despite being all-to-often caricatured by the international literature as a "traditional" country in terms of family demographics—over the last three decades has witnessed a strong

increase in total divorce and separation rates, and a rapid diffusion of cohabitations (Caltabiano et al. 2019; Pirani and Vignoli 2016; Vignoli et al. 2018).

The present paper moves beyond existing research in three ways: (1) We conceptualize and test the potential independent role of the educational and social class gradients in union dissolution; (2) we explore whether the (changing) socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution differs between marriage and cohabitation; and (3) between genders. While previous research has hitherto neglected latecomers of the SDT, we offer these three contributions with a focus on the Italian case, hence also elucidating on how the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution develops over time in a country with a postponed, yet somewhat-accelerated SDT. We combined the two latest and largest statistically representative family surveys conducted by the Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat) in 2009 and 2016. From a methodological perspective, we adopted an event-history analysis approach relying on stratified Cox models. With this analytic strategy, we sought to relax the proportionality assumption, and were able to estimate survival curves and survival probabilities at different points in time, stratifying by education and cohort, and social class and cohort (separately for married and cohabiting women and men) while also adjusting our estimates for other covariates.

Theoretical background

The changing socioeconomic gradient of divorce

Whether relationship dissatisfaction converts into an actual separation depends partly on the monetary and social costs of separation. Generally speaking, new social behaviors and trends first emerge in specific social groups—who are defined as "trendsetters," "prior adopters," or "pioneers" (Livi Bacci 2017; Rogers 1962)—and only later gradually spread to others. According to the influential work of Goode (1962; 1993), prior adopters of divorce correspond to the most "modern," high-SES couples with the cultural and economic means to afford such a separation. In contexts where divorce is uncommon, its economic and social costs are high: Divorce is considered a severe breach of social norms and is thus strongly stigmatized; it is expensive and time-consuming in terms of legal proceedings; and it has important economic consequences. High-SES individuals, due to their greater levels of autonomy, a higher degree of rejection of traditional institutions and religion, and, more broadly, embracement of post-modern values, are generally more ideologically tolerant to divorce than the lower social strata

(Lesthaeghe 1991; 2014; 2020). Moreover, high-SES couples tend to be better prepared to weather the economic costs of divorce, e.g., legal expenses, the costs of moving into a new home, and bearing living expenses alone. Thus, in low-divorce contexts, the social gradient of union dissolution is usually positive.

Only later, as divorce spreads, does it gradually become affordable to less privileged social groups. As separation becomes more common, it begins to be seen as an eventuality of the life course, free from stigma, and its economic cost decreases. Goode (1963) predicted that, in this second phase, the class gradient of divorce will be negative due to several factors that imply a lower propensity to dissolve the union for the upper than for the lower social strata. First, a higher SES may be an indicator of marital attraction (Boertien and Härkönen 2018) and provide non-economic benefits that enhance the quality of the marriage. It may also correspond to more advanced cognitive and communication skills, and problem-solving ability (Becker, Landes, and Michael 1977; Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010; Oppenheimer 1988). In addition, high-SES couples generally show a higher level of gender egalitarianism in the domestic sphere, which should lead to greater relationship satisfaction and stability (Cooke 2006; Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015; Hochschild 1989; Oláh and Gahler 2014). Finally, high-SES couples have more financial assets and goods than their low-SES counterparts. Since separation leads to a decrease in net worth, high-SES couples encounter more significant economic barriers to divorce due to having more to lose (Boertien and Härkönen 2018). By contrast, individuals with lower SES are more likely to be exposed to stressful life events and behavioral issues, such as unemployment, health problems, alcohol or drug abuse, and economic hardship (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Whelan 1994), which may decrease relationship satisfaction and increase their risk of union dissolution (Conger et al. 1990; Howe, Levy, and Caplan 2004; Liker and Elder 1983; Randall and Bodenmann 2009).

The socioeconomic gradient of divorce: Education or social class?

Despite Goode's work originally referring to "class position" and "class differentials" (Goode 1962), virtually all empirical research has operationalized individuals' SES through education alone (e.g. Chen 2012; Cheng 2016; Harkonen and Dronkers 2006; Kalmijn and Leopold 2021; Martin 2006; Musick and Michelmore 2018). Education is a more accurate indicator of the cultural resources (e.g., rejection of traditional institutions and religion, post-modern values, gender equality) necessary to overcome the social barriers to divorce (Lesthaeghe 2014), and

of the cognitive skills that lead to more stable unions (e.g., communication and problem-solving skills) (Conger, Conger, and Martin 2010). While some of the mechanisms underlying his hypothesis of a reversal, from positive to negative, of the socioeconomic gradient of divorce are thus directly linked to education, others are more strictly economic, and may be more precisely captured by social class.

In contemporary capitalist societies, social class (i.e., the position in the occupational division of labor; (Weber 1978), shapes individual life chances, behavioral patterns, and inequalities (Breen and Rottman 1995; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). Our definition of social class is derived from the well-known and recognized European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC), an evolution of the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) class schema (Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), which refers to categories of individuals sharing similar positions in term of employment relations and occupations (Rose and Harrison 2007). Within this classification, the *salariat class* includes large employers, professionals, high administrative and managerial occupations, higher grade technicians, and supervisory occupations. The *middle class* is constituted of such intermediate occupations as higher grade white collar ("non-manual") workers, small employers and self-employed in nonprofessional occupations, and lower supervisory or technician occupations. Finally, the *routine class* refers to lower grade white collar workers, lower technical occupations, and semi- and unskilled workers (Harrison and Rose 2006; Rose and Harrison 2007). Thus defined, social class is not interchangeable with education or other individual attributes, such as employment status or income. Rather, it emphasizes individuals' positions in society and is strictly linked to different risks of job loss and being trapped in temporary employment, as well as to different levels and continuity of earnings (Breen and Rottman 1995; Baizan 2020; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). These factors, which can generate stress within couples, are well-known for their association with higher risks of union dissolution (Bastianelli and Vignoli 2022; Jalovaara 2003; Kalmijn 2011; Kalmijn, Loeve, and Manting 2007; Ono 1998).

As predicted by Goode, many countries have documented a clear weakening in the positive educational gradient of divorce over time, which has gradually become more common in the least educated fraction of the population (Chen 2012; Cheng 2016; Harkonen and Dronkers 2006; Kalmijn and Leopold 2021; Martin 2006; Matysiak, Styrc, and Vignoli 2014; Musick and Michelmore 2018; Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016). In a comparative study of 17 countries, Harkonen and Dronkers (2006) found that women with higher education had a higher risk of divorce in France, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Spain. Moreover, they found no

relationship between education and divorce in Estonia, Finland, West Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Sweden, Switzerland, Flanders, and Norway, but found a negative educational gradient in Austria, Lithuania, and the United States. Their results highlight that, in line with Goode's hypothesis, the de-institutionalization of marriage and the diffusion of unconventional family practices are associated with an increasingly negative educational gradient of divorce. Likewise, in a meta-analysis of research findings, Matysiak, Styrc, and Vignoli (2014) found that increases in women's participation to the labor force and in divorce rates were the main factors driving the reversal of the educational gradient. This confirms the notion that the change in the educational gradient can be linked to a decrease in both the economic and social costs of divorce.

To the best of our knowledge, only a handful of studies have considered social class differentials in union dissolution (Gibson 1974; Haskey 1984; Kalmijn, Vanassche, and Matthijs 2011). Existing research has predominantly employed historical administrative data including information on divorce and occupation (Gibson 1974; Haskey 1984; Kalmijn, Vanassche, and Matthijs 2011). Gibson (1974) and Haskey (1984) analyzed the case of England and Wales—the former using data from divorce petitions filed in 1961 and the latter using 1979 census data—and found mixed evidence. Kalmijn et al. (2011), using historical data stemming from marriage records, found that occupational class was positively associated to divorce in 19th-century Netherlands, in line with theories identifying upper-class individuals as trendsetters of new social behaviors. Less is known, however, on how these trends have evolved in more recent times.

The socioeconomic gradient in the dissolution of cohabitation

Most theoretical reflections and empirical studies described in the previous sections have only considered the dissolution of marriages. Nonetheless, in Western societies, from the 1970s onwards, non-marital cohabitation has become an increasingly popular living arrangement. Married and cohabiting couples share fundamentally similar features. Members of both types of union share a household, usually resulting in economies of scale, and present themselves socially as a couple (Smock 2000). It follows that many of the implications of a couple's breakup are virtually identical regardless of union type, and the union dissolution has been found to affect cohabiting partners' economic well-being, emotional health, and parental responsibilities (Avellar and Smock 2005; Manning 2020; Tavares and Aassve 2013). It is thus

important to uncover the socioeconomic gradient of the dissolution of cohabiting unions, which has been neglected in the literature, often due to data availability. For instance, register data for Nordic countries, where the divorce literature has flourished in recent decades, did not include information for cohabitations, with exceptions for Finnish studies (Jalovaara 2013; Mäenpää and Jalovaara 2014).

The theoretical discourse around similarities and differences in the dissolution of marriage and cohabitation is rooted in the fact that, across many wealthy countries, marriage and cohabitation continue to have distinct meanings. Marriage predominantly signifies a stronger level of commitment than cohabitation due to the latter being easier to terminate (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014; Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012). As such, cohabitors have been shown to experience far higher rates of dissolution, even if the partners have children in common (Kelly Raley and Wildsmith 2004; Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010; Musick and Michelmore 2018). Dissolving a cohabiting union is easier and less costly than divorcing, as it does not require legal procedures and usually involves fewer long-term economic investments and, generally, a lower level of commitment (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). While it may be more accessible for the lower social strata, it also implies fewer deterrents (such economic barriers as home ownership) for the higher social strata. Thus, education and social class may be less significant factors for the dissolution of cohabiting couples.

As a matter of fact, despite a trend toward a negative educational gradient of divorce having been found in many countries, the educational gradient in the dissolution of cohabiting unions is more varied (Cherlin 2017). A negative educational gradient in the dissolution of cohabiting unions was found in two studies on Finland (Jalovaara 2013; Mäenpää and Jalovaara 2014), and a recent study by Kalmijn and Leopold (2021), including eight European countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). However, they found that the negative gradient was stronger in married than in cohabiting unions (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021).

Ultimately, evidence on the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution for cohabitors is limited. Given the rising importance of cohabitation in contemporary family life courses, this paper seeks to address this oversight.

A gender perspective

Most empirical studies on the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution—most often concerning the educational gradient in divorce—have exclusively focused on women. Goode's (1962) theory, however, does not explicitly refer to women. On the contrary, he mainly considered the husband's social class as, at the time, women's employment was still widely limited. His theoretical reflections generally referred to the couple as a unit of analysis and, as such, should apply to both men and women.

However, it has been well established that individuals' SES may have a different relevance for men and women's partnership patterns (Bastianelli and Vignoli 2022; Killewald 2016; Sayer et al. 2011). Goode's theory predicts that, when divorce is commonplace, low SES should be linked to more unstable unions. Nevertheless, while this may clearly be the case for men, whether a negative association between SES and union dissolution emerges also for women may partly depend on society's division of gender roles (Gonalons-Pons and Gangl 2021; Killewald 2016). In contexts with a prevalent male-breadwinner family model, where women only have (and are only expected to have) marginal or complementary roles in the labor market, low-SES women are generally more likely to be financially dependent on the partner, and thus less likely to separate (Killewald 2016; Sayer et al. 2011; Vignoli et al. 2018). As the prevalence of the dual-earners family model increases, expectations toward women's employment change, and women's contribution to family income becomes more substantial and valued. Under these different circumstances, low-SES women may become comparably less desirable partners than high-SES women and form less stable unions as predicted by Goode. Thus, the reversal from positive to negative of the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution for women is only likely to occur in contexts where women employment is both established and widespread. Indeed, the diffusion of women's labor force participation has been found to be negatively associated to changes in women's educational gradient in divorce (Matysiak, Styrc, and Vignoli 2014).

In conclusion, a proper empirical investigation of the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution should ideally test the role of both education and social class, and adopt a gender perspective, so as to disentangle potentially different cultural and economic mechanisms.

Italy, a latecomer of the SDT

Until the last couple of decades, Italian marital stability seemed to be an exception in the European landscape. Divorce was only introduced in 1970, and divorce rates have always been low compared to those in most Western societies (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Moreover, unlike in Northern and Western European countries, marriage in Italy has consistently maintained its centrality in family formation (Rosina and Fraboni 2004). Divergences with other Western countries have been occasionally attributed to the lower level of secularization and the strong role of the Catholic Church, as well as to strong parent–child ties and the importance of parental approval rooted in Italian society (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2009; Guetto et al. 2016; Reher 1998; Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Vignoli and Salvini 2014).

Nevertheless, separation and divorce rates in Italy have considerably grown in the last couple of decades, while marriage rates have decreased to such an extent that, in 2019, the number of divorces reached almost 50% of the number of marriages celebrated in the same year (Guarneri et al. 2021; Istat 2021b). Cohabitations (both non-marital and pre-marital)—which have long been considered a marginal phenomenon in Italy—almost quadrupled between 2000 and 2020, when roughly 16% of all partnered individuals aged 25–54 were in a cohabiting union (Tomassini and Vignoli 2023), particularly in the country's northern and central regions, and in urban areas (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2009; Gabrielli and Hoem 2010). Non-marital cohabitations are increasingly accepted across generations as an alternative to marriage, even for childbearing, to the extent that, in 2020, 35.8% of children were born from unmarried parents (Istat 2022).

Proponents of the SDT (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986; see Lesthaeghe 2020 for a global update) have tended to interpret recent family-related changes as processes driven by emancipation from traditional social norms. In Italy, these new family patterns began to spread across more secularized individuals, those with the highest socioeconomic profiles, and predominantly among those living in the north of the country (Pirani and Vignoli 2016; Caltabiano et al. 2019). Research on the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution in Italy is, however, limited and dates back to a couple of decades. The latest evidence still suggests a positive educational gradient of divorce (Salvini and Vignoli 2011; Vignoli and Ferro 2009), which has been explained by Italy's slow rate of societal change and the persistent strong stigmatization of union dissolution (Salvini and Vignoli 2011). Regarding social class, the empirical evidence is virtually non-existent, with the exception of Todesco (2013), who noted

a positive relationship between parental (not respondents') socioeconomic background and divorce risk. In light of Italy's low female employment rate (especially among the low educated) more research has focused on the link between employment status and union dissolution, highlighting a strongly gendered relationship: Joblessness is associated with an increased risk of union dissolution for men and a reduced risk of union dissolution for women (Bastianelli and Vignoli 2022; de Rose 1992; de Rose and Di Cesare 2007; Vignoli et al. 2018; Vignoli and Ferro 2009).

To the best of our knowledge, the only trace of a reversal, from positive to negative, in the educational gradient of divorce in Italy was found by Salvini and Vignoli (2011). Although they found an overall positive educational gradient in marital dissolution for both women and men, highly-educated women were characterized by a strong increase of separation risk during the early 1990s, followed by a stabilization and decline in the early 2000s, thus revealing a potential emergence of a negative gradient in union dissolution. However, empirical evidence for younger Italian cohorts is lacking.

Research hypotheses

The present paper offers fresh empirical evidence on the (changing) educational and social class gradients in the dissolution of marriages and cohabitations for men and women. In so doing, it addresses several research gaps in the literature by focusing on a (rather unexplored) case study, Italy, where the diffusion of union dissolution was postponed relative to many European countries, but dramatically accelerated in the last three decades. In the following, in line with the presented theoretical arguments, we test four analytical research hypotheses:

Given that education and social class may capture different mechanisms related to union dissolution, and in light of the recent remarkable changes in the Italian family demographics,

HP1: *We expect a reversal, from positive to negative, in the educational gradient of union dissolution across cohorts.*

HP2: *We hypothesize that, net of education, social class is also significant for union dissolution. We thus anticipate a reversal, from positive to negative, even in the social class gradient of union dissolution across cohorts.*

Due to the lower barriers to union dissolution for non-marital cohabitations and in light of the existing empirical evidence for other countries,

HP3: *We hypothesize that education and social class are less determinant for the dissolution of non-marital cohabitations than for marriages.*

Finally, given the still limited diffusion of women's employment and the persistence of the male-breadwinner model in the Italian society,

HP4*: We hypothesize that the change in the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution across cohorts may be more evident for men than for women.*

Data and methods

We used data from the two Italian surveys on Families and Social Subjects (FSS) conducted by Istat in 2009 and 2016. These are the most complete and reliable retrospective, nationally-representative surveys on Italian individuals and their families. The former collected information on approximately 24,000 households for roughly 50,000 individuals, while the latter gathered data on 30,000 individuals aged 18 years and older. Both had an overall response rate of approximately 80%. These data include detailed retrospective information (recorded on a monthly basis) on men and women's partnership histories, which allowed us to follow an event-history approach.

The event studied corresponded to the date of de-facto separation provided by the survey, which is consistent for marriages and cohabitations. We considered the respondents' first marriage or cohabitation. Higher-order unions may in fact suffer from selection effects, and approximately 90% of the individuals in our survey only had one union (married or unmarried). The sample of marriages included direct marriages, as well as those preceded by pre-marital cohabitations. Thus, if a respondent first cohabited and then married the same partner, said respondent would appear in both samples (cohabitators and married). The time was measured in months since the date of marriage or beginning of cohabitation, to its end. Episodes were right censored if unmarried cohabitations became marriages, if the partner died, and if the union had not ended.

For marriages, we are able to observe three birth cohorts: Those born before 1960, who mostly grew up when divorce was not yet allowed in Italy; those born between 1960 and 1969, who

were raised in the years when divorce was publicly debated and eventually introduced; and finally, those born after 1970, who were born when divorce was already established.[1] As cohabitations spread later in Italy, and the sample size was much smaller (especially for the oldest cohorts) we combined the two oldest cohorts for the analysis of cohabitations, and observed differences between those born before and after 1970.[2]

Respondents' education was measured through the ISCED scale, recoded as "low" for ISCED 0–2, "mid" for ISCED 3–4, and "high" for ISCED 5–6, and was measured at the beginning of the union. Those who were still in education at the beginning of the union (less than 2% of the sample) were excluded from the analysis. Social class was measured according to ESeC in the four classes version, i.e., routine jobs (lower class), middle class, and salariat (upper class), and an additional category for those not employed for whom the social class could not be detected. Social class was also measured at the union's beginning. Although social class may have improved over the course of the relationship, this only occurred to a limited number of respondents (roughly 6%). For a robustness check, we ran our models excluding those cases, and the results (available upon request) were unaffected. Moreover, for those who did not work at the beginning of the union, but were employed just before or after, we ran additional robustness checks using the social class related to the previous or following employment spell. The results for this test also proved stable.

All of the models controlled for region, parents' separation, and parents' education. Region was coded into three categories, measuring whether the respondent resided in the north, center, or south of the country. Parents' separation was coded as a dummy variable indicating whether the respondents' parents were separated or not when they were ages 18. Finally, parents' education was also coded as a dummy variable measuring whether at least one between mother and father is higher educated (ISCED 5-6).

We also controlled for other well-known predictors of union dissolution, such as age at union formation, pre-marital cohabitation for marriages, and number and age of children. Despite the results remaining essentially unchanged, we opted for the simpler models (only controlling for region, parents' separation, and parents' education) to observe the total effects of education

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[1] Most research analysing changes in the educational gradient of divorce have considered marriage, rather than birth, cohorts. We estimated our models with both union and birth cohorts, and found that, despite the similarity of the results (available upon request), birth cohorts better captured the changes in the socioeconomic gradient, highlighting the importance of the generational dimension in diffusion processes.

[2] Although having only two cohorts limited our ability to identify cohort trends, the sample size for the oldest cohorts was too small to stratify by gender and education or social class the sample size.

and social class. Age at union formation, pre-marital cohabitation, and number and age of children may also be dependent on education and social class, and thus partly mediate their effects. The results of these additional analyses are displayed in Appendix A1.

We applied stratified Cox models (Kleinbaum and Klein 2012), stratified by education and cohort, and by social class and cohort. With this approach, the proportionality assumption was relaxed, and the baseline hazard was allowed to vary across education, social classes, and cohorts. Due to there being different baseline hazard functions, the fitted stratified Cox model yielded different estimated survival curves (and survival probabilities) for each combination of education and cohort, and social class and cohort. With this analytical strategy, we were thus able to estimate the survival functions predicted by our models for different population subgroups using a minimum of assumptions while adjusting for covariates. Furthermore, displaying our results as survival probabilities, instead of hazard ratios, allowed for a clearer and more accurate perception of the actual magnitude of the phenomenon.

Within the retrospective section of the survey, couple-level information was unavailable as information of ex-partners was not collected. Hence, we computed our analyses separately for women and men. Moreover, we segmented the analysis by type of union to assess differences and similarities in the relationship between respondents' SES and union dissolution in marriages and cohabiting unions. Our sample consisted of 23,641 married women, of whom 2,175 experienced a union dissolution, 19,621 married men with 1,790 dissolutions, 3,256 cohabiting women with 782 union dissolutions, and 3,446 cohabiting men with 1,027 separations. For each subgroup, we separately analyzed to what extent the association between respondents' SES and union dissolution evolved across cohorts, and whether social class was more salient than education.

Unions of individuals born in the youngest cohorts could only be observed for a relatively short time-span, especially compared with the oldest cohorts. In order to maintain a consistent observational window across birth cohorts, we displayed predicted survival curves and probabilities of union dissolution for the first 10 years of marriage and the first 5 years of cohabitation, as cohabitations have (on average) a considerably shorter duration.

Results

The educational and social class gradients of marital dissolution

Education

Figure 1 displays the survival curves predicted by the stratified Cox model for married men and women, stratified by education and cohort, and adjusted for region, parents' separation, and parents' education. Table 1 reports the corresponding predicted cumulative probabilities of marital dissolution for men and women after 10 years of marriage.

For men born before 1960, despite the probabilities being low for all educational groups, the cumulative probability of separation for the highly educated (6%) was double that for those with low education (3%), thus denoting a positive educational gradient. In the 1960–1969 birth cohort, there was a drastic increase in the probability of marital dissolution for all educational groups, reaching 9% for low- and mid-educated, and 12% for the highly-educated. Finally, in the 1970–1990 cohort, we observed a clear reversal in the educational gradient of marital dissolution. Overall, while the probability of marital disruption for the highly-educated increased from 6% to 8% from the oldest to the youngest cohort, those with lower education passed from 3% in the oldest cohort to 13% in the youngest. Thus, in line with Goode's hypothesis, we found a reversal from positive to negative in the educational gradient of marital dissolution for men, confirming HP1.

We observed a similar pattern for married women. For those born before 1960, despite the rarity of marital dissolutions, the marriages of highly-educated women had lower survival rates than those of the low- and mid-educated. After 10 years of marriage, only 2% of low-educated women belonging to this cohort experienced marital dissolution, while the corresponding figures were 5% and 7% for mid- and highly-educated women, respectively. The differences were relatively small, but statistically precise. Among those born between 1960–1969, mid- and highly-educated women continued to show higher probabilities of marital dissolution than their low-educated counterparts. Finally, in the 1970–1990 cohort, the cumulative probability of experiencing marital dissolution after the first 10 years of marriage was neither substantially nor statistically different across educational groups.

Thus, for married women, HP1 was only partially confirmed as we observed a vanishing (and not a reversal) of the positive *educational gradient* of marital dissolution across cohorts. This

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result, however, aligned with HP4: The change in the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution is less marked when considering women instead of men.

Figure 1: Survival curves for marriages of men and women by education and cohort
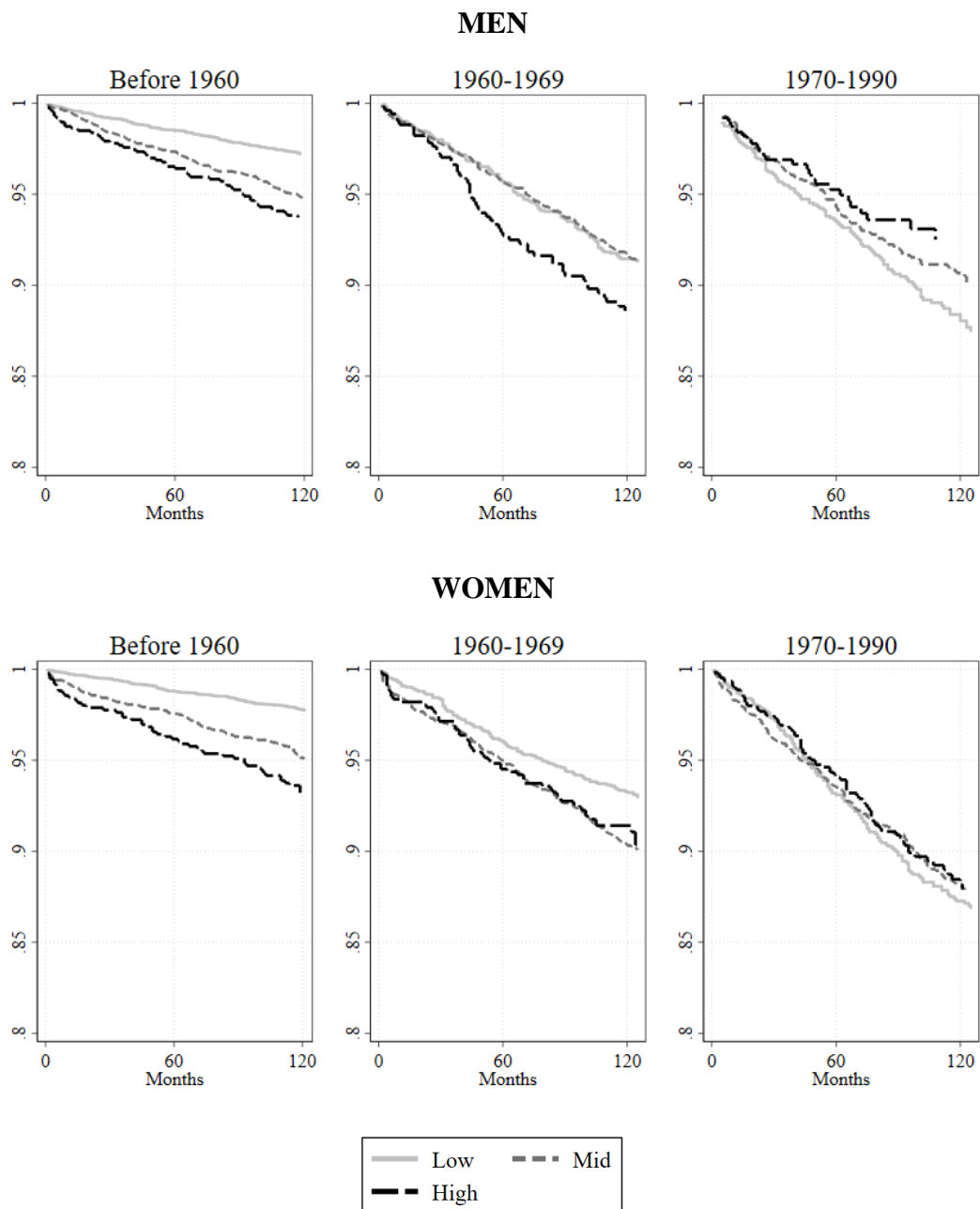
Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, and parents' education.

Table 1: Cumulative probability of marital dissolution after 10 years of marriage for men and women, by education and birth cohort

		Before 1960			1960-1969			1970-1990		
	Education	Pr	se	c.i.	Pr	se	c.i.	Pr	se	c.i.
MEN	Low	**0.03**	0.00	(0.02-0.03)	**0.09**	0.01	(0.08-0.10)	**0.13**	0.01	(0.11-0.15)
	Mid	**0.05**	0.00	(0.05-0.06)	**0.09**	0.01	(0.08-0.10)	**0.10**	0.01	(0.08-0.11)
	High	**0.06**	0.01	(0.05-0.08)	**0.12**	0.02	(0.10-0.15)	**0.08**	0.02	(0.06-0.10)
	N	N=11797 Dissolutions=927			N=4352 Dissolutions=562			N=3472 Dissolutions=301		
WOMEN	Low	**0.02**	0.00	(0.02-0.03)	**0.07**	0.01	(0.06-0.08)	**0.13**	0.01	(0.11-0.14)
	Mid	**0.05**	0.00	(0.04-0.06)	**0.10**	0.01	(0.09-0.11)	**0.12**	0.01	(0.11-0.13)
	High	**0.07**	0.01	(0.06-0.08)	**0.09**	0.01	(0.08-0.11)	**0.12**	0.01	(0.10-0.14)
	N	N=13848 Dissolutions=910			N=4871 Dissolutions=692			N=4922 Dissolutions=573		

Note: adjusted for region, parent's separation, and parent's education. C.I. 83.4 %.
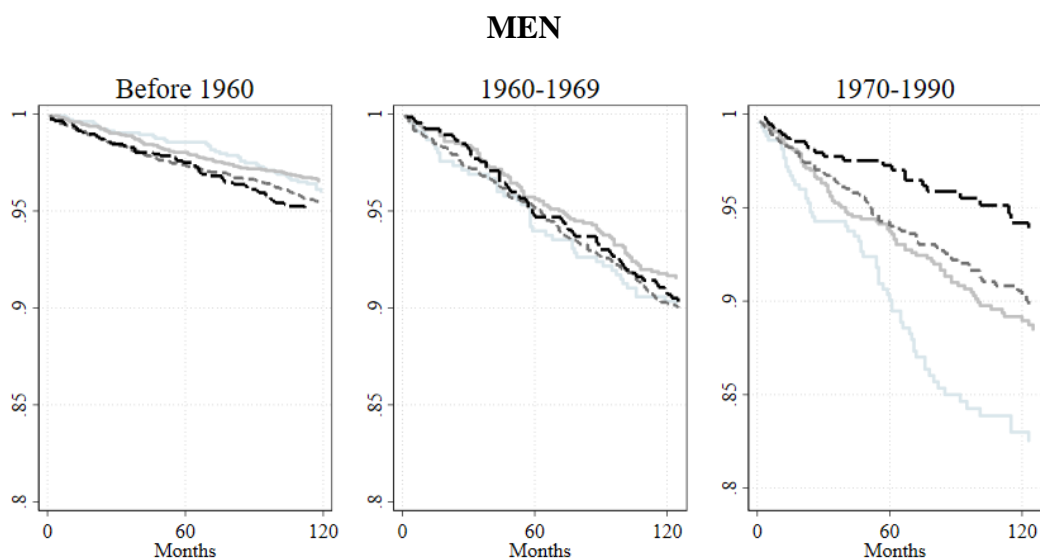
Social class

Figure 2 and Table 2 display the survival curves and probabilities of marital dissolution for men and women, this time by social class and cohort, net of education.

Among men born before 1960, the probabilities of marital dissolution after 10 years for those in the middle and salariat social classes were higher than for the non-employed and those employed in routine jobs. In the 1960–1970 birth cohort, the probabilities of marital dissolution increased for all social classes, with still slightly higher probabilities for the middle and salariat classes (10%) relative to the routine class (8%). Finally, in the 1970–1990 cohort, we noted a drastic reversal in the social class gradient of marital dissolution. Particularly notable was that, while differences by social class (net of education) were rather small in the two older cohorts, class differentials in the dissolution of marital unions became marked for the youngest. In particular, relative to the previous cohorts, we saw an important increase in the probability of marital dissolution for the non-employed (from 3% in the oldest cohort to 18% in the youngest), but also for those in the lowest social class (from 3% to 11%). Therefore, also when considering married men's *social class gradient* in marital dissolution, Goode's hypothesis was confirmed. In line with HP2, net of education, social class appears to play an independent and crucial role in the prediction of marital dissolution, and the social class gradient in marital dissolution turned from positive to negative across cohorts.

For women, the analysis of the social class gradient in marriage dissolutions (net of education) led to similar conclusions. In the two older cohorts, the social class gradient appeared positive. Among women born before the 1960s, although the probabilities of marital dissolution were relatively low for all social classes, marriages in the salariat and middle classes had lower survival probabilities. In the 1960–1969 cohort, we noted a drastic increase in marital dissolution probabilities for all social classes, and group-specific differences narrowed. However, women in the salariat social class had significantly higher probabilities of marital dissolution than non-employed women. Moving to the youngest cohort, we found that the probability of marital dissolution in the salariat social class stabilized compared to the 1960–1969 cohort (with 11% of women experiencing marital dissolution), while there was a substantial increase in the probabilities for non-employed women and for those in the lower social classes (up to 14% for women in the routine class), which overtook the probability for salariat women.

We thus identified a distinct role of education and social class even among married women. Considering social class instead of education, we found a mild trace of a reversal of the socioeconomic gradient, in line with HP2, although it must be noted that the differences between social classes were not statistically precise. These findings again support HP4, in that the change in the socioeconomic gradient of union dissolution across cohorts is more evident for men than for women.

Figure 2: Survival curves for marriages of men and women, by social class and cohort

MEN

WOMEN

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, and respondent's education.

Table 2: Cumulative probability of marital dissolution after 10 years of marriage for men and women, by social class and birth cohort

		Before 1960			1960-1969			1970-1990		
	Social class	Pr	se	c.i.	Pr	se	c.i.	Pr	se	c.i.
MEN	Not employed	**0.03**	0.00	(0.03-0.04)	**0.10**	0.02	(0.08-0.12)	**0.18**	0.02	(0.15-0.21)
	Routine	**0.03**	0.00	(0.03-0.04)	**0.08**	0.01	(0.07-0.09)	**0.11**	0.01	(0.09-0.13)
	Middle class	**0.04**	0.00	(0.04-0.05)	**0.10**	0.01	(0.09-0.11)	**0.10**	0.01	(0.08-0.12)
	Salariat	**0.05**	0.01	(0.04-0.06)	**0.10**	0.01	(0.09-0.12)	**0.06**	0.01	(0.05-0.09)
	N	N=11797 Dissolutions=927			N=4352 Dissolutions=562			N=3472 Dissolutions=301		
WOMEN	Not employed	**0.03**	0.00	(0.02-0.03)	**0.08**	0.01	(0.07-0.09)	**0.13**	0.01	(0.11-0.14)
	Routine	**0.02**	0.00	(0.01-0.03)	**0.08**	0.01	(0.06-0.10)	**0.14**	0.02	(0.12-0.16)
	Middle class	**0.04**	0.00	(0.04-0.05)	**0.09**	0.01	(0.08-0.11)	**0.13**	0.01	(0.11-0.15)
	Salariat	**0.05**	0.01	(0.04-0.07)	**0.11**	0.02	(0.09-0.13)	**0.11**	0.02	(0.09-0.14)
	N	N=13848 Dissolutions=910			N=4871 Dissolutions=692			N=4922 Dissolutions=573		

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, and respondent's education. C.I. 83.4 %.

*The educational and social class gradients of cohabitation dissolution*

Education

Figure 3 displays the predicted survival curves for cohabiting men and women, and Table 3 the corresponding cumulative probabilities of union dissolution after the first 5 years of cohabitation.

For men, dissolution rates from non-marital cohabitations were far higher than from marital dissolutions: After 5 years, roughly 30% of men experienced dissolution. However, our results did not reveal a clear educational gradient. In the older cohort, mid-educated men had a higher probability of separating than their low- and high-educated counterparts. In the youngest cohort, however, the educational gradient was positive, as mid- and high-educated were more likely to dissolve their unions than those with low education, while there were no differences between mid- and high-educated men. Thus, found no pattern of changes across cohorts consistent with Goode's hypothesis. This result aligned with our expectation that socioeconomic differences are less relevant for the dissolution of cohabiting unions (HP3).

Also considering cohabiting women, we found them to have a far higher probability of union dissolution than married women. Similarly to men, in the cohort of women born before 1970, those with an intermediate level of education had the highest probability of separating, whereas we found no differences between high- and low-educated women. In the 1970–1990 cohort, probabilities of union dissolution after 5 years of union increased for all women, but especially for the low educated, meaning that we observed no substantially or statistically significant differences in the cumulative probability of cohabitation dissolution across educational groups. Our HP1 on a reversal, from positive to negative, of the educational gradient in union dissolution was thus unconfirmed for cohabiting women.

Figure 3: Survival curve for cohabitations of men and women, by education and cohort

MEN
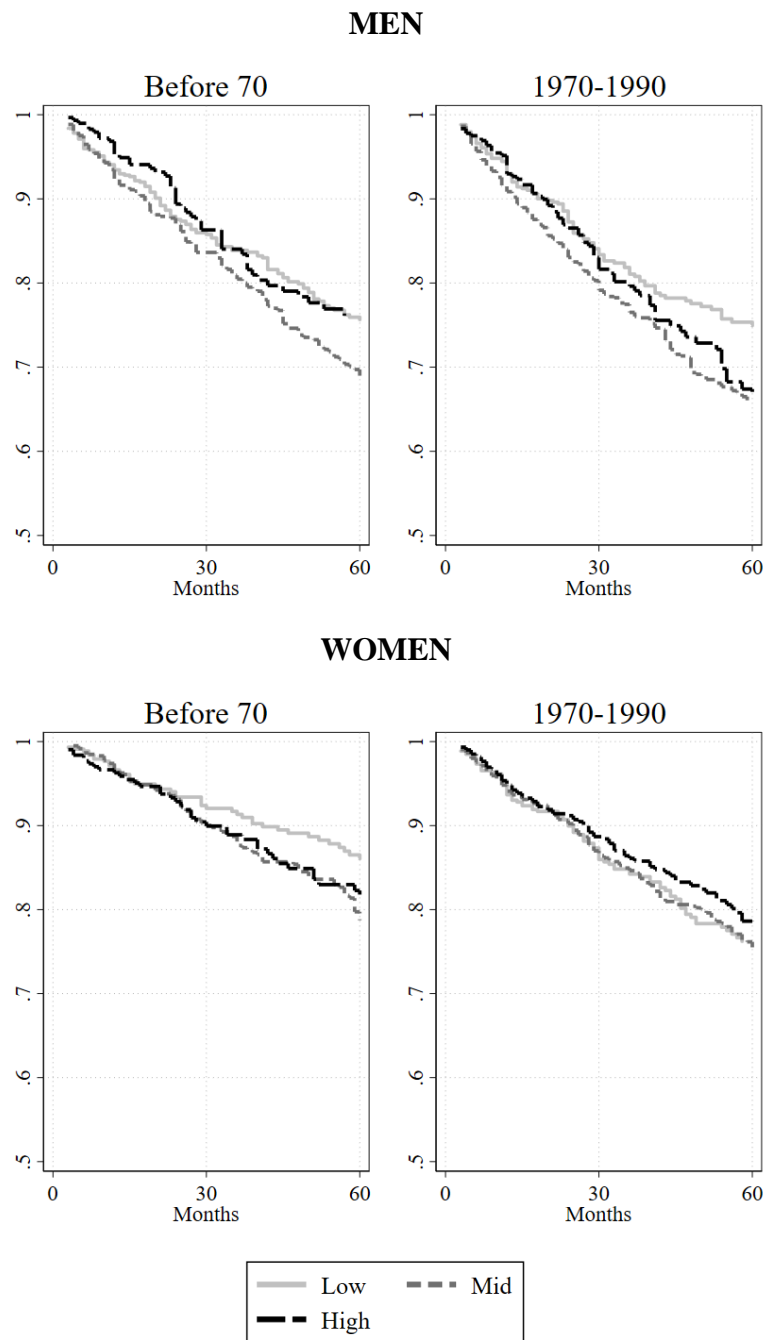
WOMEN

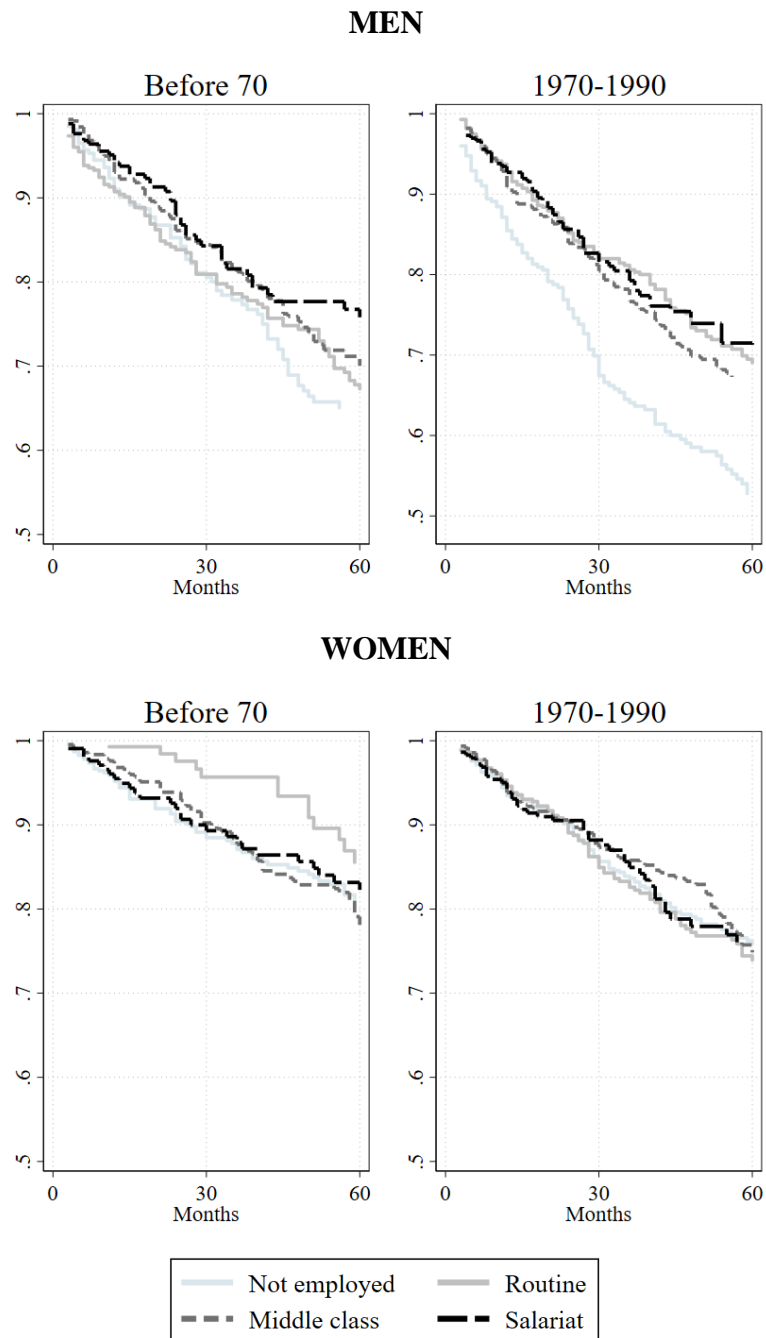Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, and parents' education.

Table 3: Cumulative probability of cohabitation dissolution after 5 years of cohabitation for men and women, by education and cohort

		Before 1970			1970-1990		
	Education	Pr	se	c.i.	Pr	se	c.i.
MEN	Low	**0.24**	0.02	(0.22-0.27)	**0.25**	0.02	(0.22-0.28)
	Mid	**0.32**	0.02	(0.29-0.35)	**0.34**	0.02	(0.32-0.37)
	High	**0.24**	0.03	(0.20-0.29)	**0.33**	0.04	(0.29-0.39)
	N	N=1664 Dissolutions=483			N=1782 Dissolutions=544		
WOMEN	Low	**0.14**	0.02	(0.11-0.17)	**0.24**	0.02	(0.21-0.27)
	Mid	**0.21**	0.02	(0.18-0.24)	**0.25**	0.02	(0.22-0.27)
	High	**0.18**	0.03	(0.15-0.23)	**0.22**	0.03	(0.19-0.26)
	N	N=1332 Dissolutions=324			N=1924 Dissolutions=458		

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, and parents' education. C.I. 83.4 %.

Social class

The social class gradient in the dissolution of cohabiting unions for men and women is displayed in Figure 4 and Table 4. In line with the results concerning education, no clear pattern of social class gradient (net of education) was evident among men born in both cohorts. In fact, notwithstanding the high estimation uncertainty, a negative class gradient seemed to emerge after 5 years of union in the oldest cohort, contrary to theoretical expectations (HP2). However, the results suggest that being out of employment is particularly detrimental for men's union stability. The differential in the probability of union dissolution between the non-employed and other social classes considerably increased across cohorts. Among men born before the 1970s', the probability of union dissolution for those outside of the labor market was 33%, but rose to 44% for the 1970–1990 cohort. Therefore, what appears most significant for cohabiting men is being out of employment, rather than education or social class.

Regarding social class differentials for women, we again detected no clear pattern. Among those born before the 1970s', women with routine jobs had the lowest risk of dissolution. However, throughout our observational window, we detected hardly any differences between women in the other social classes or the non-employed. In the 1970–1990 cohort, the probability of dissolution after 5 years of cohabitation increased for all women, and differences among social classes were virtually null.

Thus, the results aligned with HP3 in that education and social class appeared less relevant for the dissolution of cohabitations, to the point that we observed no clear pattern of change across cohorts in the socioeconomic gradient, neither for men nor for women. This conclusion remained substantially unchanged with the inclusion of additional variables (age at union formation and number or children) in the model (see Figures A1.3 and A1.4 in the Appendix).

Figure 4: Survival curves for cohabitations of men and women, by social class and cohort

Table 4: Cumulative probability of cohabitation dissolution after 5 years of cohabitation for men and women, by social class and birth cohort

	Social class	Before 1970			1970-1990		
		Pr	Se	c.i.	Pr	se	c.i.
MEN	Not employed	**0.33**	0.03	(0.28-0.38)	**0.44**	0.03	(0.39-0.48)
	Routine	**0.29**	0.03	(0.25-0.33)	**0.28**	0.02	(0.25-0.32)
	Middle class	**0.27**	0.02	(0.24-0.30)	**0.31**	0.02	(0.27-0.34)
	Salariat	**0.22**	0.03	(0.18-0.27)	**0.27**	0.03	(0.23-0.32)
	N	N=1664 Dissolutions=483			N=1782 Dissolutions=544		
WOMEN	Not employed	**0.17**	0.02	(0.15-0.21)	**0.23**	0.02	(0.20-0.26)
	Routine	**0.13**	0.04	(0.09-0.19)	**0.25**	0.03	(0.22-0.29)
	Middle class	**0.21**	0.02	(0.18-0.25)	**0.24**	0.02	(0.21-0.28)
	Salariat	**0.17**	0.03	(0.13-0.22)	**0.23**	0.03	(0.19-0.28)
	N	N=1332 Dissolutions=324			N=1924 Dissolutions=458		

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, and respondent's education. C.I. 83.4 %.

Conclusion and discussion

The present study adds to the existing literature on the changing socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution by addressing three main shortcomings. First, unlike most studies, we considered the social class gradient, in addition to the educational, for union dissolution. Second, we included dissolution from both marriages and cohabiting unions. Third, the study followed a gender perspective. The empirical investigation focused on Italy, a country long considered to be an exception in the diffusion of SDT-related family behaviors, and for which evidence on the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution is scant and outdated.

It is well-known in the literature that the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution—usually operationalized in terms of educational differences—tends to turn from positive to negative over time (Harkonen and Dronkers 2006; Matysiak, Styrc, and Vignoli 2014). Following the pioneering work of Goode (1962; 1993), the positive educational gradient in divorce among older cohorts can be traced back to the ability of high-educated individuals to overcome the legal, social, and economic barriers to divorce at a time where it was still viewed as a rare and culturally "disruptive" behavior. When such barriers decline, divorce spreads among low-educated couples, eventually producing a reversal of the socioeconomic gradient. We found evidence of a change in the educational gradient in divorce over time, even in Italy. Across

birth cohorts, we noted a reversal in the educational gradient from positive to negative for married men, and a vanishing of the positive gradient for married women. It is worth drawing attention to our finding that contemporary Italian marriages formed by highly-educated women are not necessarily less stable than those formed by less-educated women. Not only does this finding confirm prior evidence for Italy based on older cohorts (Salvini and Vignoli 2011), it also generally strengthens the findings for Southern Europe (Bernardi and Martínez-Pastor 2011; Bonke and Esping-Andersen 2011).

While some of the mechanisms underlying the changing socioeconomic gradient in divorce relate to the cultural resources available to individuals, and are thus more directly linked to individuals' level of education, others are more strictly economic, and may be more accurately explained by social class. For instance, high-SES couples are less exposed to economic strain, and are more likely to share financial assets and long-term investments (e.g., home ownership), which consequently raise the financial costs of divorce. These within-couple economic mechanisms have been found to play a crucial role in the emergence of a negative educational gradient in union dissolution (Boertien and Härkönen 2018). Accordingly, our results show that, *net of education*, social class has an important and distinct role in the prediction of marital dissolution. These results are in line with those found for the educational gradient. Across birth cohorts, we detected a reversal (especially notable in men) from a positive to a negative social class gradient of divorce. Social class differentials in divorce seem even more marked than educational differentials, which confirms that the use of both education and social class as measures of SES helps account for different mechanisms. In fact, social class seems to be a more precise measure for capturing the economic means of affording a separation, which may explain why, among women, the reversal in the socioeconomic gradient of divorce is more evident when considering social class than education. Moreover, social class is more strongly related to both partners' access to economic resources and investments that may act as within-couple barriers to divorce. Hence, our results point to the importance of considering both educational and social class differentials in marital dissolution.

Regarding the educational and social class gradients in the dissolution of cohabitations, the results did not accord with our theoretical expectations. Educational differentials in union dissolution did not seem to follow any recognizable pattern, neither for men nor for women. Similarly, social class, net of education, showed no clear-cut gradient. Instead, what we found to be detrimental for men's cohabitation stability was being out of employment—a negative effect that increased considerably increased across cohorts. The economic disadvantage

derived from non-employment had similar implications for married and cohabiting men. The focus on men's employment situation allows to for the mechanism related to the incapability of non-employed men to play their male-breadwinner role to be explicitly investigated, which seems to be a de-stabilizing factor for couples in countries such as Italy, which have been characterized by low female labor market participation (Bastianelli and Vignoli 2022). In line with the few existing studies in the literature (see, for example, Kalmijn and Leopold 2021), our results suggest that socioeconomic status is less important in the prediction of union dissolution for cohabitation than for marriage. This finding could be explained by the fact that cohabiting partners, regardless of their level or education and social class, are already a selected group of individuals violating an established social norm—at least in Italy and for the selected birth cohorts—and are also more prone to separate due to their lower level of commitment. In sum, our results provide evidence with which to support the notion that the reversal of the socioeconomic gradient of divorce may be driven by more committed partners, namely married couples with children (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021).

Generally speaking, gender differences emerged in the socioeconomic gradient of marital dissolution in Italy. Such differences in the role of education and social class in the prediction of divorce could be explained by the still limited labor market participation and low earnings of Italian women—especially among the low-educated and those in low social classes (Istat 2021a; OECD 2017). Indeed, increased women's labor force participation has been identified as one of the crucial factors associated with the change in the educational gradient of divorce (Matysiak, Styrc, and Vignoli 2014). Despite women of all educational levels having seen a considerable increase in union dissolution across cohorts, many of them are often housewives and, if employed, cover complementary economic roles within the couple. This may explain why we observed no negative educational gradient in marital dissolution: Low-educated Italian women may lack the material means to separate, and consequently, their risk of union dissolution is likely to remain relatively low irrespective of divorce's level of diffusion. For the same reasons, our results show the first traces of a reversal of the social class gradient in marital dissolution also for women, since social class more accurately captures women's economic independence.

As with all research, our study has certain limitations. First, with our retrospective data, we could only examine women and men separately as information was not collected on ex-partners. Thus, we could not account for educational and social class homogamy/heterogamy within couples, which may influence union dissolution risks (Kalmijn 2003; Mäenpää and

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Jalovaara 2014). Second, our sample for cohabitations was relatively small, meaning that the detection of cohort trends was limited by our ability to only consider two birth cohorts. Third, we used a static measure of social class at the beginning of the union, but social class may evolve over the course of the relationship. However, it is worth noting that, in our sample, only 6% of individuals reported changes to their social class during the first 10 years of marriage or 5 years of cohabitations, and our results were unaffected by this issue.

Employing the best available data for Italy, our study leads to important findings on the changing socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution in marriages and cohabitations. Overall, we showed that both education and social class are important predictors of union dissolution. Indeed, union dissolution has both cultural and economic antecedents which can be more precisely discerned by considering both measures of individuals' SES. Moreover, we uncovered distinct trends for married and cohabiting couples, highlighting the importance of including cohabitating unions into the analysis of the socioeconomic gradient in union dissolution. Finally, despite the pattern of a reversal in the socioeconomic gradient being evident for both married men and women, we found that gender differences persist. Overall, our results show that, even in Italy, a general democratization of union dissolutions has occurred, which has spread across all educational levels and social classes, and a reversal from a positive to a negative gradient in marital dissolutions is now visible. This finding is of crucial importance to understanding the future consequences of union dissolutions on the reproduction of social inequalities in Italy (Guetto and Panichella 2019). If marital dissolutions are more widespread among lower-SES groups and are associated with higher risks of (further) socioeconomic deprivation for their children, we can expect "diverging paths" to emerge (Kalmijn and Leopold 2021; Mclanahan 2004): The educational and socioeconomic outcomes of children who were already disadvantaged will be more negatively affected by growing marital instability compared to those of children from more advantaged families. Accordingly, addressing to what extent this evolution might be mitigated by the diffusion of cohabitation would be an interesting avenue for further research.

Data Availability Statement

Data for this paper were obtained from the Italian National Statistical Office survey "Family, Social Subjects, and the Life Cycle", available at https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/236637 upon request.The STATA code used in the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Appendix

A1. Models with all control variables

Figure A1.1 Educational gradient in marriage
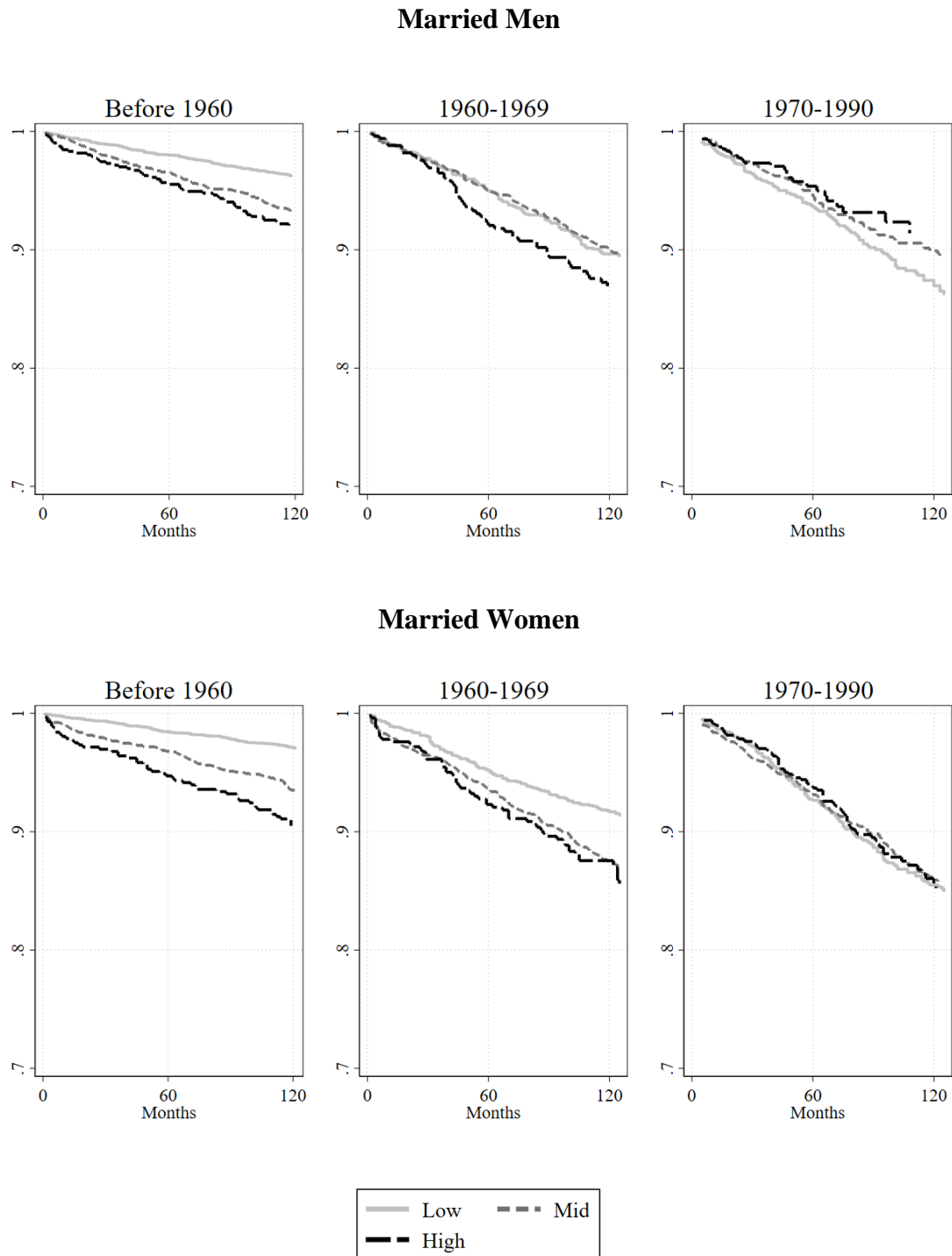
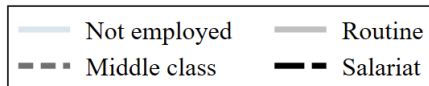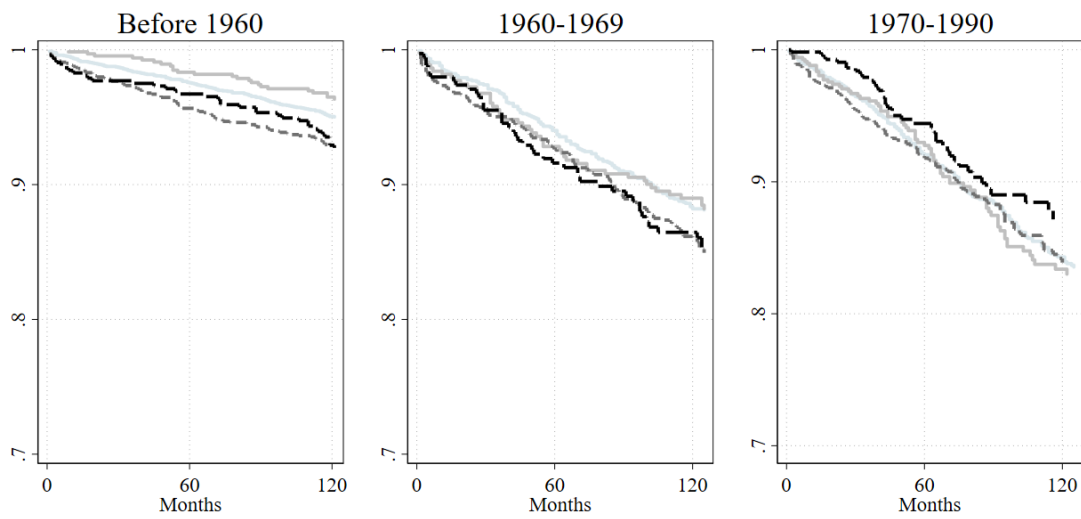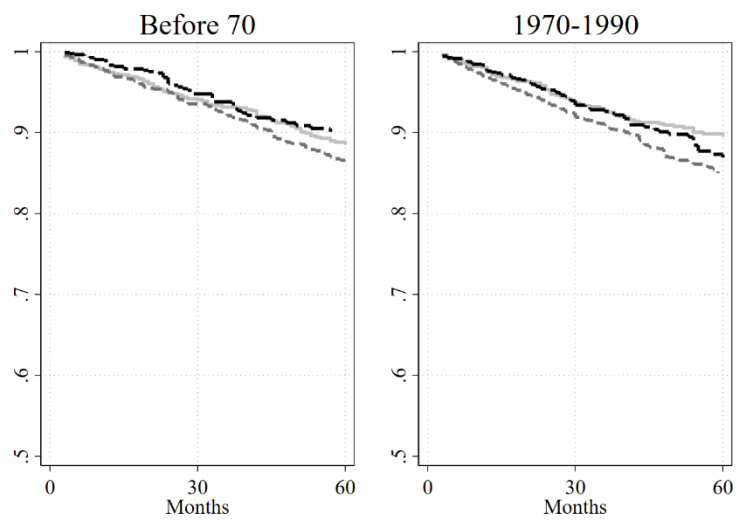**Married Men**

Married Women
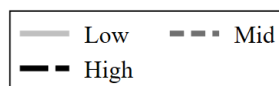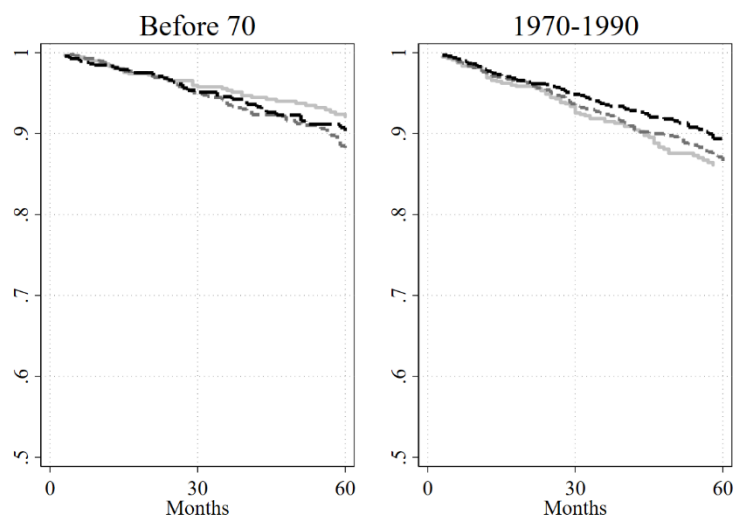
Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, age at union formation, pre-marital cohabitation, number of children

Figure A1.2 Social class gradient in marriage

Married Men

Married Women

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, age at union formation, pre-marital cohabitation, number of children, respondent's education

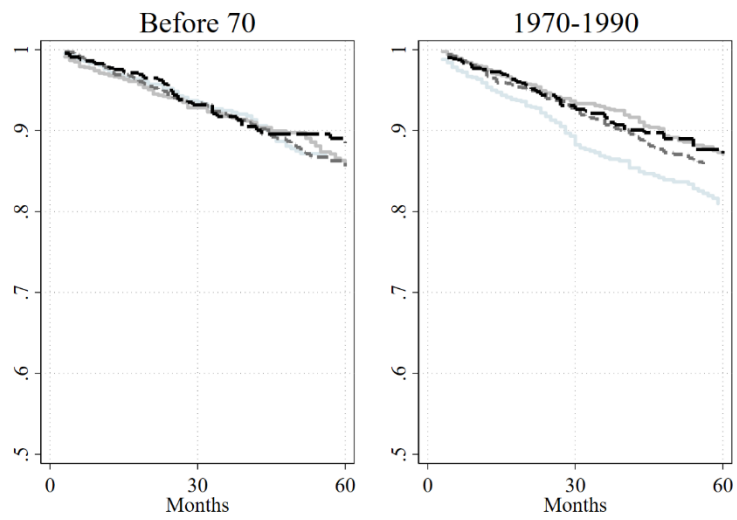**Figure A1.3 Educational gradient in cohabitation**
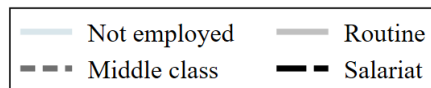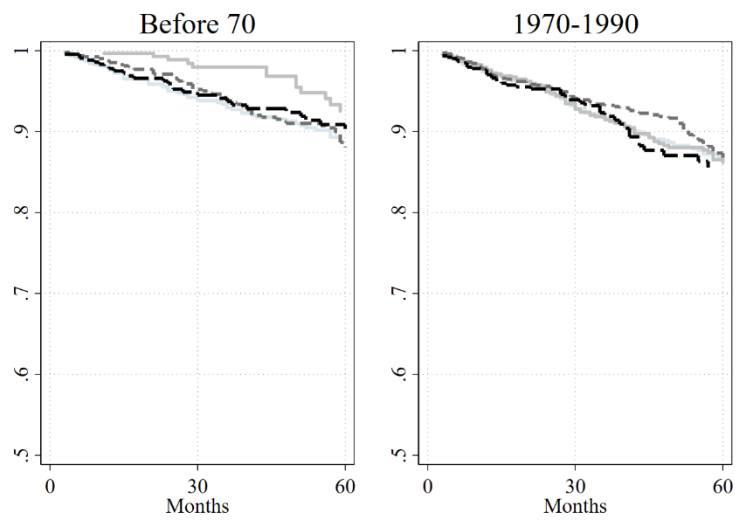
Cohabiting Men

Cohabiting Women

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, age at union formation, number of children.

Figure A1.4 Social class gradient in cohabitation

Cohabiting Men

Cohabiting Women

Note: adjusted for region, parents' separation, parents' education, age at union formation, number of children, respondent's education.