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Make up or break up? Partnership transitions among young adults in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates partnership transitions of young adults born between 1974 and 1990 in England and Wales. These cohorts were affected by the expansion of higher education, increasing gender equality, and ideational changes, but faced increased economic precarity caused by the economic and housing crisis. Given these changes, it is likely that the partnership experiences of young adults including marriage, cohabitation, separation, and repartnering have also undergone considerable changes. We apply competing risks event history analysis to combined data from the British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study to determine how birth cohort, gender, socio-economic background, and educational attainment influence partnership changes. We study the transition into and out of first cohabitation and marriage and repartnering between age 16 and 27. Cohabitation has become a universal form of first union among young adults born in the late 1970s and 1980s regardless of their socio-economic background or educational level, but their first unions do not last long. While cohabiters are equally likely to marry or separate in the oldest cohort (1974–1979), cohabiting unions are very likely to end in separation among the two youngest cohorts (1980–1984 and 1985–1990). Consequently, repartnering has become common; those in the youngest cohort repartner rather quickly suggesting that an increasing number of individuals experience multiple partnerships. Highly educated young adults have higher rates of entry into first cohabitation than their lower educated counterparts across all cohorts. However, we do not find differences in cohabitation outcomes by socio-economic background and educational level indicating that the main changes have taken place across birth cohorts. The results also suggest that there is a convergence in partnership experiences among young men and women. The increased prevalence of sliding into and out of cohabitation could indicate significant changes in the meaning young people attach to first partnerships.

1. Introduction

Partnership experiences have changed considerably during the past decades across industrialised countries (Cherlin, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010; Seltzer, 2004). The prevalence of the traditional pattern of marriage followed by co-residence and childbearing has gradually disappeared (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Seltzer, 2004; Wright, 2016) and new living arrangements have emerged including non-marital cohabitation, living-apart-together relationships and prolonged living in shared housing (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Liefbroer, 1999; Mills & Blossfeld, 2003). With the increasing prevalence of cohabitation and union dissolution, repartnering has also become common (Beaujouan & Bhrolcháin, 2011; Perelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos, 2015).

There are two competing explanations for changing partnership and family behaviours. Advocates of the Second Demographic Transition theory (SDT) argue that new family behaviours result from an ideational and value change towards a larger freedom of personal life decisions and greater extent of fulfilling individual pursuits in various life domains. This implies that liberal, more secularised, highly educated individuals are more likely to be the forerunners of new partnership and family behaviours (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986; Liefbroer, 1999; Mikolai, 2012). However, this theory is often criticised for underestimating the role of social inequalities and structural constraints in shaping life course trajectories (McLanahan, 2004; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017). Therefore, a competing explanation for changes in partnership and family

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behaviours is related to social and economic disadvantage (Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011). The Pattern of Disadvantage (PoD) theory argues that those with lower levels of education and/or fewer resources are more likely to experience new partnership forms as a result of economic constraints rather than choice compared to those who come from more advantaged backgrounds (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011).

There is a large body of literature on partnership experiences, such as first union formation, union dissolution, and repartnering in industrialised countries (e.g., Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Guzzo, 2014; Mikolai, Berrington, & Perelli-Harris, 2018). Most studies have shown that cohabitation and union dissolution are associated with lower levels of education and disadvantaged socio-economic position whereas marriage and repartnering are more common among those with higher education and/or more resources (Berrington, 2001; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 2001; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010; Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011; Seltzer, 2004). However, these studies have typically focused on older generations and have not examined partnership transitions among Millennials.

The Millennial generation, i.e., those born between the 1980s and 2000s, have been affected by vast societal changes such as the expansion of higher education, especially among women (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), and neoliberal structural changes to the welfare state, housing market, and labour market (Hoolachan & McKee, 2018). On the one hand, these cohorts could represent a relatively homogeneous group with more liberal and egalitarian views compared to older cohorts as suggested by the SDT. The transition to adulthood among the Millennial generation has become de-standardised and individualised resulting in weaker social 'age deadlines' for the occurrence of different life events (e.g., first union formation) and a larger freedom of lifestyles choices (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Macmillan, 2005; Shanahan, 2000; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004). On the other hand, although some young people have benefitted from the increased flexibility in work and relationships, young people have not been able to benefit equally from these opportunities. Trajectories in early adulthood may differ by socio-economic background as people from less advantaged backgrounds have more limited life choices (Côté, 2002; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Furstenberg, 2008). Less advantaged groups face more economic constraints and could experience more diverse and turbulent life course transitions, including new partnership and family forms (PoD). Moreover, Millennials were vastly affected by economic and housing crises leading to increasing inequalities and difficulties in gaining social, economic, and residential independence. As existing research has focused on older cohorts' partnership trajectories, it remains unclear how these societal and economic changes have affected Millennial young adults' partnership trajectories and whether and how theories of social stratification and PoD (still) apply to partnership transitions in the context of changing values and behaviours.

This paper contributes to the literature by focusing on partnership experiences of young adults born in 1974–1979, 1980–1984, and 1985–1990 in England and Wales. We address the following research questions: *How have partnership experiences of young adults changed across cohorts? How do partnership experiences differ by gender, parental socio-economic background, and educational attainment?* To answer these questions, we apply competing risks event history models to combined life histories from the British Household Panel Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Study and investigate the role of socio-economic and demographic factors in influencing three sets of transitions: first union formation (cohabitation or marriage), outcome of first cohabiting unions (marriage or separation), and second union formation.

2. Theoretical background

First union formation is considered to be an important marker of the transition to adulthood next to leaving the parental home, completing education, and entry into the labour market (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Billari, 2001; Huinink, 2013). However, an increased variation in the timing and sequencing of how they occur together with the increased reversibility of these events in the last few decades, such as returning to the parental home and de-standardised school-to-work transitions (Anders & Dorsett, 2017; Stone, Berrington, & Falkingham, 2014), encourages looking beyond one event at a time and instead considering life course trajectories, i.e., partnership, education and employment, and residential careers. These trajectories are interrelated and altogether shaped by both societal structures (e.g., social norms and institutional background) and individual factors (i.e., gender, parental SES, personality traits) (Bernardi, Huinink, & Settersten, 2019; Elder, 1985; Giele & Elder, 1998; Spéder, Murinkó, & Settersten, 2014) which may change over time. In this paper, we aim to investigate how the SDT and PoD theories contribute to our understanding of the recent developments and cohort changes in partnership behaviour. In this section, we first discuss cohort and gender differences in partnership experiences (i.e., first union formation (cohabitation or marriage)), outcome of first cohabiting unions (marriage or separation), and second union formation. Next, we discuss the association between parental SES and own educational attainment – as proxies for ascribed and achieved socio-economic position – and young adults' partnership experiences. We conclude each section with deriving hypotheses in the UK context.

2.1. Cohort changes in partnership experiences

In countries characterised by ideational shifts associated with the SDT, marriage has lost its universal significance as an integral life stage in early adulthood (Cherlin, 2004; Seltzer, 2004) and most people choose cohabitation as a first partnership (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Hannemann & Kulu, 2015; Wiik, 2009). Even though cohabitation has not completely replaced marriage, its emergence has affected the meaning people attach to non-marital unions (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015; Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman, 2015; Manning & Smock, 2002; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). Cohabitation can be seen both as an alternative or prelude to marriage as well as an alternative to being single — a phase when young people prefer cohabiting rather than living separately during courtship with no immediate marriage or childbearing intentions (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). In the U.S., Manning and Smock (2005) coined the terms 'sliding' or 'drifting' in and out of cohabitation among young adults highlighting that young people do not see cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Rather, it is seen as a progression in relationships (not necessarily leading to marriage), and, thus, an alternative to being single. However, while direct marriage rates have gradually declined over time (Manning, 2020), for some groups it might still be the most prevalent way of forming a first union, for example, among certain religious, ethnic, or migrant groups (Hannemann & Kulu, 2015; Kamp Dush, Jang, & Snyder, 2018; Mikolai & Kulu, 2021).

Another possible explanation for changes in first partnership experiences is related to economic constraints (PoD) (Clarkberg, 1999; Kravdal, 1999; Manning & Smock, 2002, 2005; Sassler & Miller, 2011; Smock & Manning, 1997). Living together as a couple might be more convenient and economical than living alone (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007; Sassler & Miller, 2011; Sassler, 2004). For example, in the UK, the housing crisis together with changes in housing benefits regulation have led to an increased number of people living in shared housing in their 20s and early 30s (Berrington & Stone, 2014; Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Heath & Kenyon, 2001), where many first cohabiting unions start. Furthermore, cohabiters might be prone to remain in cohabitation due to the financial costs associated with getting married (Kravdal, 1999; Manning & Smock, 2002, 2005).

Following the increased heterogeneity in cohabitation experiences, the question arises as to how stable these relationships are. Ever since non-marital cohabitation became prevalent, it was often conceptualised

as a 'trial marriage', time that couples spend getting to know each other to decide whether to get married or not. This implies that lower quality cohabitations are weeded out during relatively early stages of the relationship. However, with the increasing diversity in the meaning attached to cohabitation, recent studies have shown that the outcome of cohabitation (separation or marriage) is related to how cohabiters see these unions (Hiekel et al., 2015; Manning & Smock, 2002). Moreover, more cohabiting unions might stay intact for longer in line with the increasing trend that cohabitation is seen as an alternative to marriage or as a form of a stable union but with no other commitments such as marriage or children (Di Giulio, Impicciatore, & Sironi, 2019). Besides the meaning of cohabitation, economic constraints, i.e., changes in partners' employment and income also have an impact on partnership stability, especially among couples living together for financial reasons (Boheim & Ermisch, 2001; Jalovaara, 2013; Kamp Dush et al., 2018; Poortman, 2005). While there is evidence that first cohabiting unions have become less stable and an increase in repartnering (Eickmeyer, 2018; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Skew et al., 2009) and higher-order cohabitations ('serial cohabiters') has been observed among younger cohorts in many countries, including Britain (Beaujouan & Bhrolcháin, 2011; Bukodi, 2012; Holdsworth & Elliott, 2001), expectations to marry remain high among the Millennials (Manning, 2020). It is therefore unclear to what extent high separation rates from first unions might be related to low stability of unions formed at the life course stage when young people do not yet consider marriage-type commitments or cohabit for convenience, or to increased union dissolution caused by economic uncertainty. We might observe a higher stability or convergence to marriage among unions formed later in life when partners might have accumulated more resources and could be considering starting a family. Taken together, both the SDT and PoD arguments provide reasons to believe that first cohabiting unions might have become less stable across cohorts, however, it is unclear to what extent separation occurs in relation to marriage and how many unions remain intact in the long-term. While it could be that some couples form first unions later when they have accumulated more resources and cohabit for longer in marriage-type partnerships, we believe that with the expected increase in short-lived first unions among the youngest cohorts, repartnering rates are also likely to be higher.

We expect to find the following cohort-specific patterns in young adults' partnership experiences:

H1. Cohort

a. We expect a continuing decrease in direct marriage rates across cohorts and an overall postponement of partnership formation among the youngest cohorts.
b. Cohabiters in the youngest cohort are expected to have higher separation rates and lower marriage rates than in the older cohorts.
c. We expect higher rates of repartnering among the youngest cohorts than among older cohorts.

2.2. Gender differences in partnership experiences

The technological innovations following the contraceptive revolution and changes in the economic and social structure were accompanied by the so called 'gender revolution', i.e., changes in gender norms and attitudes. Once women gained access to education, the traditional pathway of leaving the parental home and gaining residential independence through marriage began to change (Andersson & Philipov, 2002; Andersson et al., 2017; Berrington & Murphy, 1994; Berrington, 2001; Winkler-Dworak & Toulemon, 2007). Alongside the feminisation of higher education and the labour market, the re-emergence of feminism has also played an important role in the shift towards greater gender equality and professional self-realisation, particularly among highly educated women which subsequently delayed family formation (Oppenheimer, 1994, 1997; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004; Lesthaeghe, 2010; Raybould & Sear, 2021). However, despite the increased participation of women in higher education and even higher enrolment rates among women than men in recent years, the proportion of men and women pursuing further and higher education in Britain among the cohorts born 1974–1990 was less than 50% (Broecke & Hamed, 2008). It can therefore be expected that some of the traditional patterns with women entering the first union earlier than men may be observed among the youngest cohort as well.

Changes in gender norms and expectations have been reflected in gradually converging trends in partnership experiences of women and men. In the late 1980s and early 1990s women were more likely than men to marry their first cohabiting partner, and men had a greater probability to dissolve their first cohabiting unions (Thornton, 1988; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Women's higher marriage rates in the past might have been associated with financial dependence on their partners and negative societal attitudes towards non-marital unions and childbearing (Thornton, 1988; Wu & Balakrishnan, 1995). Similarly, many studies have shown that men used to exhibit higher repartnering rates than women because of their greater financial security and fewer caring responsibilities for children (Ivanova et al., 2013; Poortman, 2007; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). However, these associations became more complex with the increased prevalence of separation and divorce. It's been widely discussed how recent trends in repartnering are affected by economic resources, presence of children, level of gender equality in education and employment as well as the social welfare regime of the country (Beaujouan, 2012; Gałęzewska et al., 2017; Ivanova et al., 2013; Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2017; Shafer & James, 2013). Some recent studies have found no gender differences in the outcome of cohabitation (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2015) or levels of repartnering (Skew et al., 2009), reflecting women's increased independence and the increased acceptance of non-marital unions in Western societies.

Altogether, women's increased participation rates in higher education, improved contraception methods, together with the ongoing feminisation of the labour market have contributed to the changing role of women in society. These changes have led to a growing similarity in various life course transitions such as leaving the parental home, independent living, and internal migration among young men and women in Britain (Falkingham, Sage, Stone, & Vlachantoni, 2016; Pelikh & Kulu, 2018; Stone et al., 2014). However, it remains unclear whether and how changes in gender norms are reflected in partnership trajectories among the youngest cohorts. To summarise, we expect to find the following gender-specific patterns in young adults' partnership experiences:

H2. Gender

a. We expect women to enter a first union earlier than men.
b. We expect cohabiting men and women to have similar separation and marriage rates.
c. We expect separated men and women to have similar rates of repartnering.

2.3. Parental socio-economic background and own educational attainment

Parental socio-economic resources play a significant role in shaping young people's life courses through the transmission of educational choices, expectations on 'leaving the nest', and attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage (Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Furstenberg, 2008; Liefbroer & Elzinga, 2012; Sironi et al., 2015; Wiik, 2009). The theoretical explanations on the link between parental background and partnership behaviour fall into two lines of arguments discussing whether theories of social stratification still apply to partnership transitions in countries affected by the SDT. On the one hand, it is argued that young people's life choices are influenced by their parental

background through the mechanisms of social stratification and structural constraints. This includes parental influence through values, attitudes, and expectations as well as through their own partnership behaviour, e.g., parents' age at first union formation, marriage, divorce or repartnering (Billari et al., 2019; Keijer et al., 2018; Mooyaart & Liefbroer, 2016). High-SES parents are more likely to transmit higher educational aspirations as a means of retaining family wealth than low-SES families (Goldthorpe, 1996; Wiik, 2009). Children of high- and low-SES families are likely to develop different intentions about their life course decisions. For example, children of high-SES parents are likely to prioritise education and investment in human capital before family formation (Brons et al., 2017; Keijer et al., 2018; Mooyaart & Liefbroer, 2016). Family resources and networks might help achieving educational and career goals and lead to a longer search for a suitable partner. The lack of similar level of support for young people from less advantaged backgrounds may lead to lower educational and career aspirations leading to earlier family formation.

However, on the other hand, building on the SDT, it is argued (and has been shown empirically) that in countries where cohabitation is widespread and age norms around leaving the parental home and starting a family are weak, parental background should not have a major influence on young people's partnership decisions (Brons et al., 2017). Given that the increase in cohabitation already reflects less traditional values, parental background might influence cohabiters less than those who marry directly without a period of pre-marital cohabitation (Wiik, 2009).

There are various mechanisms through which own educational attainment might influence partnership experiences of the youngest cohorts. As obtaining a degree and finding a suitable partner take time, the postponement of union and family formation is often linked to the expansion of higher education (Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2012; Winkler-Dworak & Toulemon, 2007). The SDT suggests that highly educated people are more likely to develop liberal values towards new partnership forms and therefore opt for cohabitation (Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan, 2013; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004). However, the SDT also suggests that in the long-run these forms of behaviours will become universal across all societal groups. From a PoD perspective, for those not enroled in higher education and who may struggle to gain residential independence otherwise, moving in with a partner might be more convenient financially (Sassler & Miller, 2011).

Both SDT and PoD theories provide arguments on how parental SES and own educational attainment might influence the outcomes of first cohabitations. Cohabiting couples from advantaged backgrounds as well as highly educated individuals are more likely to acquire socio-economic resources and face fewer financial constraints which, in turn, might lead to higher relationship stability and a lower likelihood of separation (Duvander, 1999; Hogendoorn et al., 2022; Kamp Dush et al., 2018; Smock & Manning, 1997; Wu & Pollard, 2000). As marrying is financially costly, according to the PoD, marriage might be reserved for those who can afford it (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010, 2012). Additionally, those who move together for financial reasons might have a shorter-term vision of their cohabitation and not think about marriage. Conversely, and in line with SDT, higher education is associated with an exposure to more liberal values where cohabitation might be seen as an alternative to or not different from marriage, which might translate to lower marriage rates. However, it is also possible that education per se might not play an important role in cohabitation outcomes in societies where cohabitation has become an almost universal form of first union. This has been highlighted by qualitative research showing that the meaning ascribed to cohabitation, marital and childbearing intentions, and relationship quality vastly affect cohabitation outcomes which might not be correlated with educational level per se (Hiekel et al., 2014; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014).

With regards to repartnering, previous literature discussed how socio-economic resources and education might affect the chances of finding a new partner after separation (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2017; Skew et al., 2009) but neglected the role of the parental background. As higher education is associated with better economic prospects, if a separation occurs, the highly educated might find the financial loss of a household disruption less burdening. This might be reflected in quicker adjustments to residential change and better housing prospects after separation (Mikolai & Kulu, 2019) as opposed to 'boomeranging' back to the parental home (Stone et al., 2014). Additionally, highly educated individuals may have better coping strategies (e.g., counselling) or more extended support networks to deal with the psychological distress arising from separation (Metsä-Simola & Martikainen, 2013; Richards, Hardy, & Wadsworth, 1997) than their lower educated counterparts. Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that more educated separated individuals have higher repartnering rates. Although previous studies have not looked at the role of parental SES for repartnering, the SDT/PoD suggests that unlike for first union formation, they should not have a big influence on repartnering. Hence, it is likely that own experiences and accumulated resources should play a bigger role than parental background.

To sum up, the SDT and PoD provide competing explanations with regards to the link between partnership transitions and parental SES as well as own educational level. The SDT implies that among the youngest cohorts, there should be a universal acceptance and practice of new partnership behaviours regardless of socio-economic position. Conversely, the PoD predicts diverse trends in partnership behaviour among more and less economically advantaged groups. The UK presents an interesting example; it is a country affected by the SDT but it is also characterised by persistent social inequalities. Cohabitation in the UK first became more prevalent among individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Ermisch & Francesconi, 1996) as well as among the highly educated in the 1960s (Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2013), in line with the Nordic forerunners of SDT. Socio-economic background has traditionally played an important role in the transition to adulthood in Britain (Bynner, 2001, 2005; Cavalli & Galland, 1995; Coffield, 1995). These differences are often referred to as the 'youth divide' – the polarisation between advantaged and disadvantaged youth – and the existence of the so called 'fast-' and 'slow-track' in the transition to adulthood (Bynner, 2001, 2005; Jones, 2002). Rapid school-to-work transitions with early family formation patterns have been mostly prevalent among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds ('fast-track'), while young people from more advantaged backgrounds have traditionally followed their parents' routes into higher education which allowed them to explore various options before starting a family ('slow-track').

Among the youngest cohorts in the UK, the spread of new cohabitation norms, as SDT suggests, is expected to be universal among all societal groups. This does not, however, exclude that increased precarity among young people might also contribute to an increase in cohabitation for financial and convenience reasons. However, we do expect a postponement of partnership formation among more advantaged and highly educated groups driven by longer time spent in education. Outcomes of first cohabitation are also likely to be driven both by socio-economic resources and the SDT; hence the trends between different societal groups are likely to converge. However, as young people born in the late 1970 s and 1980 s would have undergone separation in the times of increased economic hardship, high youth unemployment rates, and a tightening housing market, we expect that highly educated young people might have more financial security and might be able to adapt more quickly to the post-separation circumstances and find a new partner than lower educated young adults (PoD). Our hypotheses could be summarised as follows:

H3. SES Background

a. We expect young adults from more advantaged families to postpone entry into first union; however, we expect individuals with different

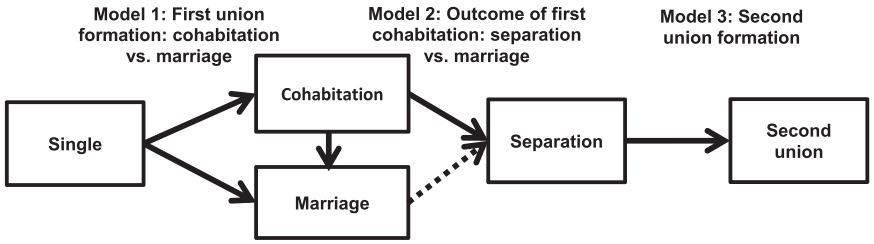

Fig. 1. Partnership transitions of young adults.
Source: own design.

parental socio-economic backgrounds to have similar levels of entry into first marriage or cohabitation.
b. We expect parental socio-economic background to have little influence (if any) on the outcomes of cohabiting unions.
c. We expect parental socio-economic background to have little influence (if any) on rates of repartnering.

H4. Education

a. We expect highly educated young people to postpone entry into first union.
b. We expect the outcomes of first cohabitation to be similar among the high- and low-educated.
c. We expect highly educated young people to have higher rates of repartnering.

3. Data, methods, and variables

3.1. Data

We combined data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the Understanding Society study (UKHLS) (University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2010, 2014; University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research, NatCen Social Research, Kantar Public, 2021). The BHPS is an annual panel survey of a nationally representative sample of about 5500 households (approximately 10000 individuals) recruited in 1991. It contains detailed information on union formation and dissolution, birth of children, and changes in residence, housing, education, and employment. Additionally, retrospective partnership histories were collected in waves 2, 11, and 12 (Pronzato, 2011). The dataset contains information on the type (cohabitation or marriage), start date, and end date of up to nine co-residential unions as well as how these unions ended (separation, divorce, or widowhood). UKHLS was launched in 2009 and it follows BHPS respondents from wave two (2010) onwards. Combining data from the BHPS and UKHLS, we were able to extend the observation window for the BHPS sample by following them up to wave 6 of UKHLS (collected in 2014–2016). The two studies have very similar design.

Our sample consists of individuals residing in England and Wales who turned 16 between 1991 and 2008, and for whom data was collected both prospectively and retrospectively. Only respondents who were present at two or more consecutive waves were included. The final sample contains 3233 individuals from three birth cohorts: 1974–1979, 1980–1984 and 1985–1990, observed between 1991 and 2016. Overall, 48% of BHPS respondents in the sample were followed up in UKHLS. Events, which happened between the last BHPS wave and wave 2 of UKHLS have been recorded using retrospective information from wave 2 of UKHLS.

3.2. Methods

At the start of the observation period, individuals are 16 years old and never partnered. They can then either remain single (i.e., never partnered) or form a first cohabiting or marital union (Fig. 1). Those who cohabit can either marry their cohabiting partner or separate. We define separation at the time when a co-residential relationship ended (as reported by respondents). Married individuals may experience separation or divorce. We use data on the timing of separation to define the end of marriage and not the actual timing of divorce as it can be delayed due to various institutional arrangements. Following separation, individuals can either form a second union (cohabitation or marriage) or remain separated.

We analyse each set of transitions separately, conducting analyses of first union formation (Model 1) and the outcomes of first cohabiting unions (Model 2) using competing risks event history models; a powerful tool for investigating complex partnership transitions (Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Hannemann & Kulu, 2015). Due to small sample size, it is not possible to analyse the dissolution of marriages[1] with the first partner (dashed line in Fig. 1). For the same reasons, to study second union formation (Model 3), we are not able to study competing risks of cohabitation vs. marriage and instead estimate the risk of second union formation using conventional event history models. Individuals are at risk of forming a second union if they have separated from their first partner regardless of the type of first union.

We specify piecewise constant exponential models to study the hazard of each set of transitions separately:

$$\begin{aligned} \ln \mu_i^A(t) &= \ln y^A(t) + \sum_k \alpha_k^A x_{ik} + \sum_j \beta_j^A w_{ij}(t), \\ \ln \mu_i^B(t) &= \ln y^B(t) + \sum_k \alpha_k^B x_{ik} + \sum_j \beta_j^B w_{ij}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where for first union formation $\mu_t^A(t)$ and $\mu_i^B(t)$ denote the hazard of forming a cohabiting union or marriage, respectively, for individual i, and $y^A(t)$ and $y^B(t)$ denote the baseline hazard (age). For cohabitation outcomes, $\mu_i^A(t)$ denotes the hazard of union dissolution and $\mu_t^B(t)$ is the hazard of marriage, $y^A(t)$ and $y^B(t)$ denote the baseline hazard (duration of first cohabitation). Furthermore, x_k represents time-constant variables and w_jt represents time-varying variables. As repeated partnership episodes are nested within individuals, we used clustered standard errors (Cleves, Gutierrez, William, & Marchenko, 2010; Putter, Fiocco, & Geskus, 2007). For the event of interest (A or B) individuals are censored at the time when they experience the competing event (B or A, accordingly).

The model defined in Eq. (1) allows us to study the effect of covariates on each type of transition. However, using separate models does not allow us to assess how likely each type of transition (cohabitation vs marriage or marriage vs separation) occurs compared to each other. We thus extend the conventional continuous-time event history model on

[1] Nonetheless, we provide some descriptive information. The proportion of young adults who ever married by age 27 is 21% among the 1974–79 cohort, 15% among the 1980–84 cohort and 5% among 1985–90 cohort. Among these married individuals, approximately 25% have separated by age 27 in each cohort.

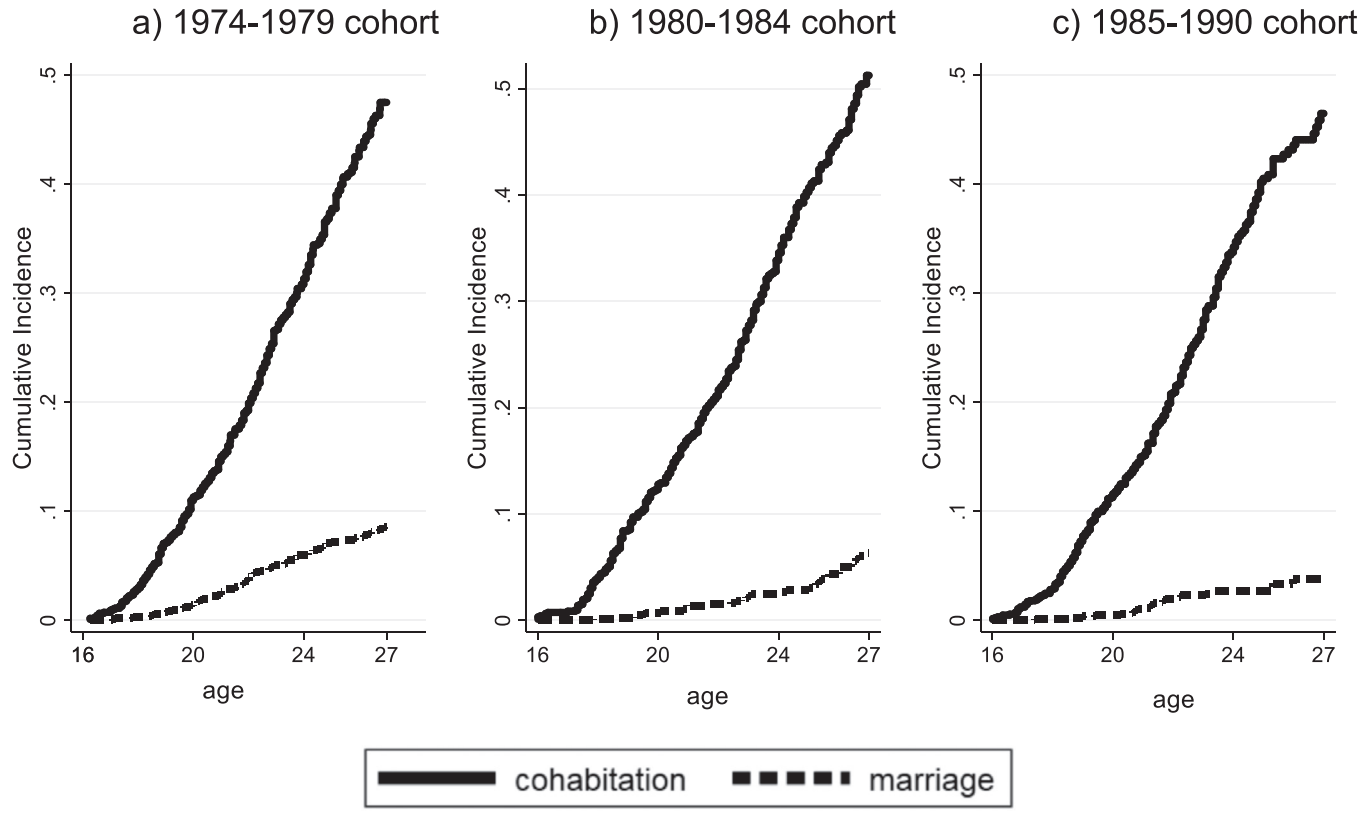

Fig. 2. Cumulative incidence functions of entering a first union by type of union and cohort. Note: Confidence intervals (95%) for cohabitation and marriage do not overlap for all cohorts.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

single-event outcome to competing risks models:

$$\ln \mu_{iT}(t) = \ln y(t) + \sum_k \alpha_k x_{ik} + \sum \beta_j w_{ij}(t) + \gamma T, \quad (2)$$

where μ_{iT} is the hazard of an event of type T (cohabitation or direct marriage in Model 1, and separation or marriage in Model 2) for individual i and γ is the parameter for transition type T. The model assumes a common baseline for all transition types in each set of competing risk models and the effect of the control variables is the same for all transitions. Transition-specific effects can be included by specifying an interaction term between a covariate and the transition type. The model is fitted by using extended data where each person has T records ($T = 2$ in this study).

To study second union formation (Model 3), the piecewise constant hazard model is formalised as:

$$\ln \mu_i(t) = \ln y(t) + \sum_k \alpha_k x_{ik} + \sum_j \beta_j w_{ij}(t), \quad (3)$$

where $\mu_i(t)$ denotes the hazard of forming a second union, $y(t)$ denotes time since first union dissolution, x_k represents time-constant variables, and $w_j(t)$ represents time-varying variables.

As the length of the observation window differs by cohort, we present the results using data from all cohorts truncated at age 27, which is reached by most individuals in the youngest cohort. This leads to comparable results across cohorts.[2]

[2] We have performed additional analyses to understand whether truncating the analysis at age 27 influences the main findings of this paper (available upon request). Overall, the findings and the main message of the paper remain unchanged.

3.3. Variables

Cohort (1974–1979; 1980–1984; 1985–1990), gender, and parental socio-economic background are the main time-constant explanatory variables. Parental socio-economic background can be captured through a variety of measures including occupational status, education, and income. The three measures are highly correlated with income being shown to be a less stable and reliable indicator in longitudinal settings (e.g., Connelly et al., 2016; Erola et al., 2016). We chose parental occupational status over education as employment relations capture well a combination of levels of skills, income, economic security and implicitly education. Occupational status measured through the Goldthorpe social class schema is commonly used in the UK research tradition (Goldthorpe et al., 1980; Goldthorpe, 1983). The panel contains information on respondent's mother's and father's occupational status. We used information from the wave where respondents turned 14. If the occupational class of the mother and the father was different, we used information on the father's occupational status. According to the Goldthorpe social class schema, we distinguished between service (mostly professional and managerial occupations), intermediate (routine non-manual occupations, small proprietors, technicians), and working class (skilled manual, semi- and unskilled occupation).

Educational level is a time-varying variable measured as low (compulsory school education, GCSE or equivalent), medium (A-levels or equivalent), and high (degree). We additionally controlled for a time-varying economic activity status (employed, full-time student, unemployed, and out of the labour force), presence of children in the household, whether the woman was pregnant, and the area type of residence (London vs. the rest of the country).

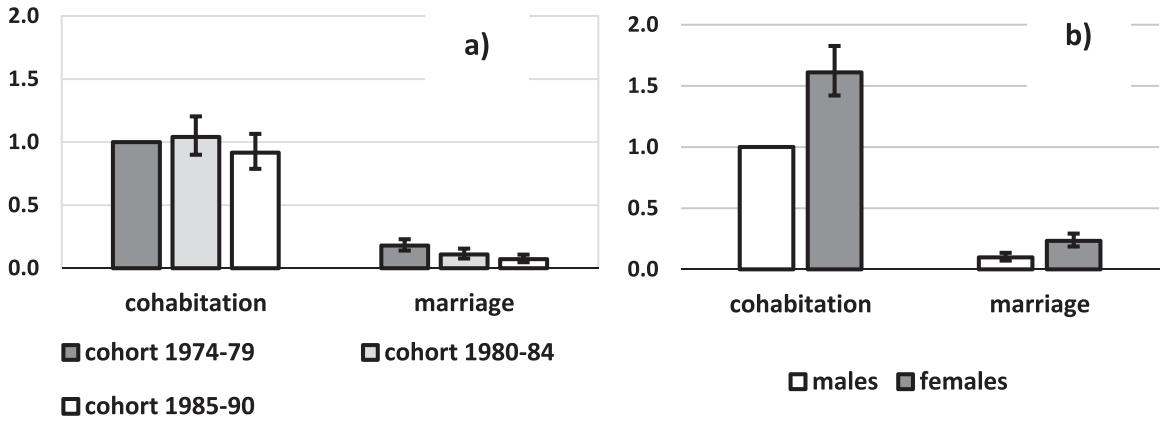

Fig. 3. Hazard ratios of first union formation by union type and a) cohort; b) gender. Note: Models are controlled for socio-economic and demographic characteristics; see Table A2. The first bar on each panel represents the reference category, e.g., "cohort 1974–1979" on panel a).
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

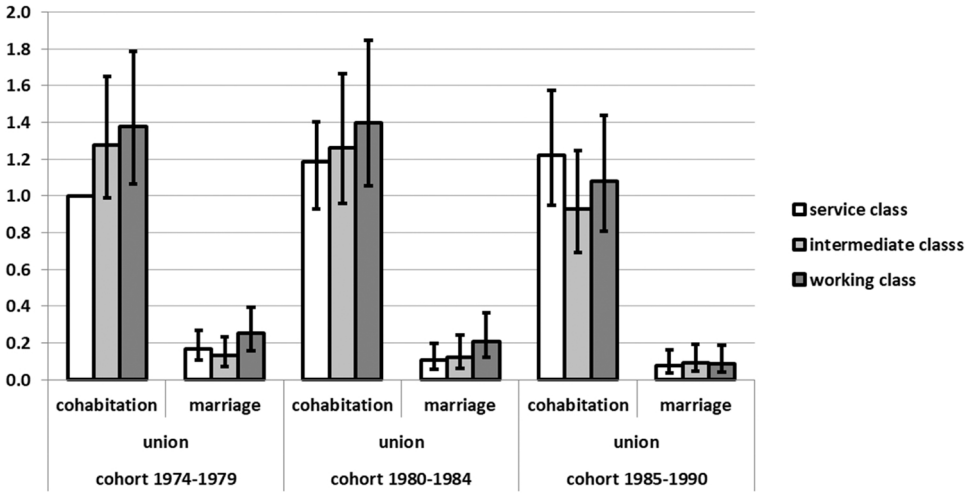

Fig. 4. Hazard ratios of first union formation by cohort and parental SES. Note: Models are controlled for socio-economic and demographic characteristics; see Table A2. The reference category is service class in the cohort 1974–1979.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

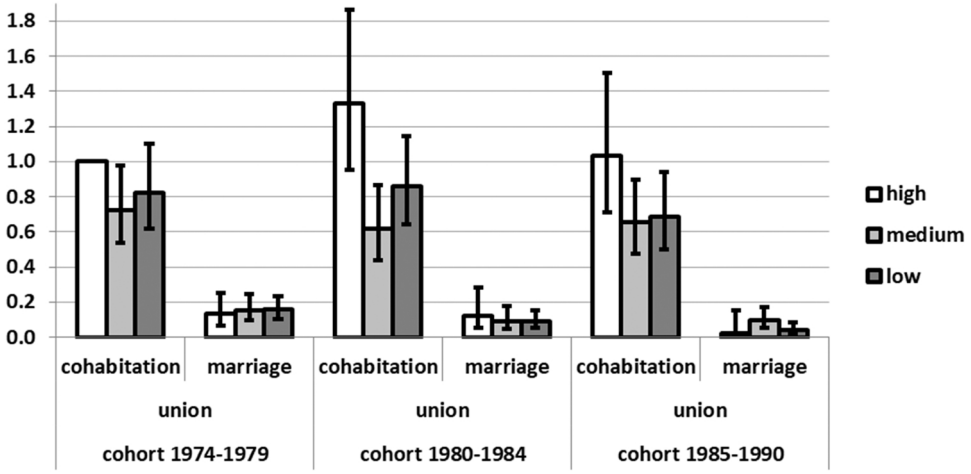

Fig. 5. Hazard ratios of first union formation by cohort and educational level. Note: Models are controlled for socio-economic and demographic characteristics; see Table A2. The reference category is highly educated in the 1974–1979 cohort.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

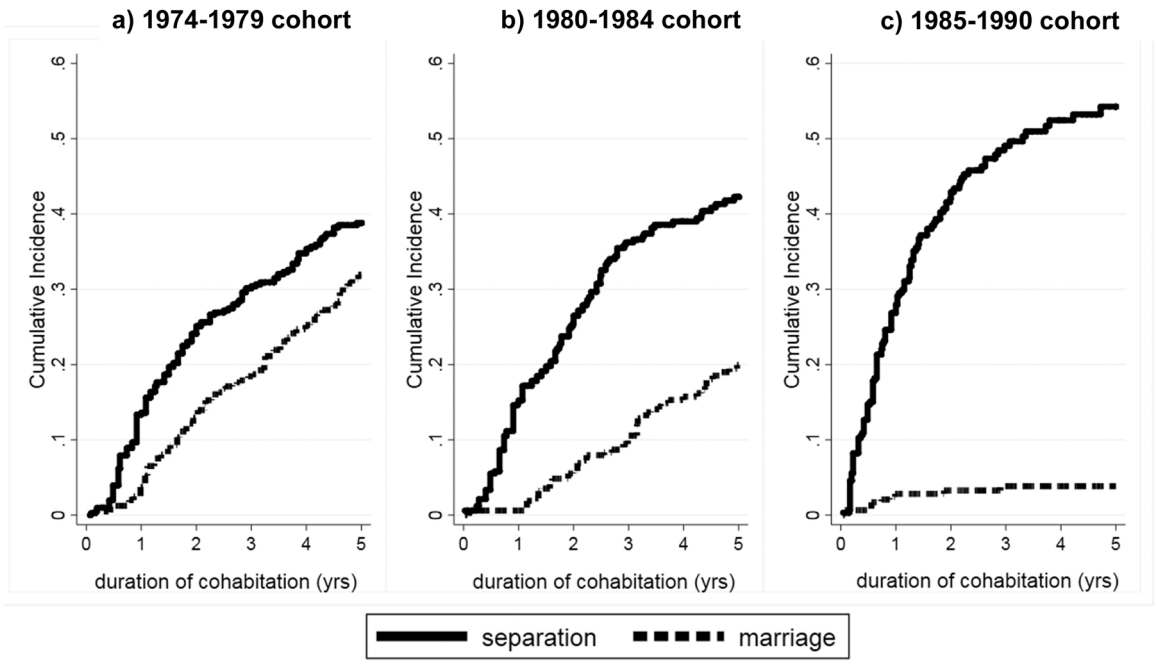

Fig. 6. Cumulative incidence function of cohabitations ending in separation or marriage, by cohort. *Note*: The observations in this graph are censored after 5 years from the start of cohabitation as only 10% of cohabiting partners in the 1985–90 cohort, 11% in the 1980–84 cohort, and 16% in the 1974–79 cohort were still cohabiting at the end of the observation period. Confidence intervals (95%) for separation and marriage overlap for the cohort 1974–1979, but not for the other cohorts.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

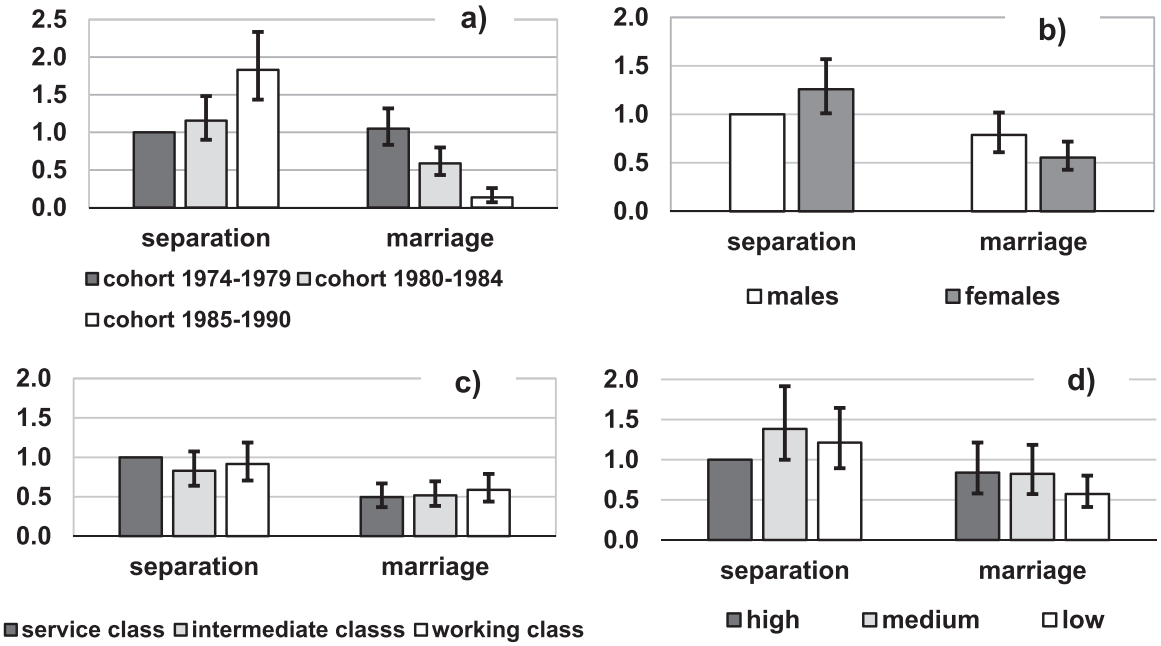

Fig. 7. Hazard ratios of separation or marriage among cohabiters by a) cohort; b) gender; c) parental occupational class; and d) educational level. *Note*: Models are controlled for socio-economic and demographic characteristics; see Table A3. The first bar on each graph represents the reference category, e.g., "cohort 1974–1979" on graph a).
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

4. Results

We present the results for each set of transitions (i.e., first union formation, outcome of first cohabiting unions, and second union formation) separately. We first report cumulative incidence functions and cumulative distribution functions, depending on the type of analysis. Second, we present multivariate results for cohort, gender, parental socio-economic background, and educational differences in partnership transitions. The key findings most pertinent to our hypotheses are presented in Figs. 2–7 and results of the full models including the interaction effects presented in the Figures are shown in Table A2 and Table A3 in the Appendix. Table A1 in the Appendix shows the number of events

Table 1
Median age at first union formation by cohort, gender, parental socio-economic background, and educational attainment.

Cohort	Occurrence/exposure rate (95% CI)	Mean age at first union formation								
		Gender			Parental socio-economic background			Educational attainment		
		Women	Men	Total	Service class	Intermediate class	Working class	High	Medium	Low
1974–1979	0.0051 (0.0047–0.0056)	24.3	27.1	25.9	27.0	26.4	24.8	26.2	26.2	25.2
1980–1984	0.0049 (0.0450–0.0055)	24.2	27.5	26.0	26.3	26.4	25.2	24.0	27.0	25.7
1985–1990	0.0040 (0.0036–0.0044)	24.7	–*	26.9	25.3	26.9	26.9	25.2	27.4	27.4
Overall	0.0047 (0.0044–0.0050)	24.3	27.2	26.0	26.4	26.5	25.2	25.2	26.7	25.8

Note: *Less than 50% (47%) of men in the cohort 1985–1990 have experienced first union formation by the end of the observation window. All median ages were calculated from untruncated data.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

and exposure times by categories of the main covariates for each set of transitions.

4.1. First union formation

Comparing levels of union formation at age 27, we find that the rates of first union formation among the youngest cohort were significantly lower compared to the other two cohorts with unions being formed later (see Table 1).

We also observe changes in the type of first union. Although the proportion of people entering a cohabiting union is similar across cohorts, direct marriage rates declined from nearly 10% in the 1974–1979 cohort[3] to less than 5% among the youngest cohort (Fig. 2).

Next, we estimated competing risks event history models to analyse the associations between cohort, gender, parental socio-economic status, and education and the risk of never partnered young adults to enter cohabitation or marriage as a first union. Coefficients for interaction effects are presented in Table A2 in the Appendix. First, we analysed how patterns of first union formation have changed across cohorts. Fig. 3***a*** shows the results of interaction models between union type and cohort. Young adults from all cohorts are more likely to cohabit than to enter direct marriage, as expected; direct marriage rates decline across cohorts when we control for socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Next, we studied whether there are differences in first union formation between men and women and whether the associations are the same across cohorts. Women form first unions (both cohabitations and marriages) at a higher rate and earlier than men (Fig. 3***b*** and Table 1). The gender gap in the timing of union formation is approximately three years and has not changed across cohorts. Similarly, gender differences in the risk of first union formation are similar across cohorts.[4]

Next, we study the link between parental socio-economic background and first union formation. Fig. 4 shows the results of three-way interaction models investigating whether associations between parental socio-economic background and first union formation have changed across cohorts. The differences between social classes are pronounced in the oldest cohort, with people from working class backgrounds showing higher levels and lower median ages of entering first cohabitation compared to those whose parents are from the service class (Fig. 3 and Table 1). This difference disappears among cohorts born in the 1980 s, and trends in the timing of first union formation even reverse; young people from a working class background in the youngest cohort tend to postpone first union formation.

Regarding educational differences in relation to the risk of cohabitation versus marriage we find that cohabitation is the most common type of first union across all cohorts (Fig. 5). Highly educated young adults are more likely to cohabit than their lower educated counterparts. Among the oldest cohort, the highly educated enter first unions later than those with the lowest educational levels. In contrast, among the youngest cohort, highly educated individuals form unions earlier than the lower educated (see Table 1). We do not find any cohort differences in the risk of direct marriage by parental SES or education, but we are cautious in our interpretations due to small group sizes.

Table A2 **in the** Appendix shows the effect of the control variables on the risk of entering a first union. The rates of entering a first union are much higher among those who have experienced a pre-partnership pregnancy[5] regardless of their parental SES or level of education. Those who already have child(ren) are more likely to form a first co-residential union than those who are childless controlling for the other variables in the model. Furthermore, young people living in London postpone entering a first union and show the lowest rates of union formation. This can be explained by high housing prices and tight housing markets (Clark & Huang, 2004).

4.2. Outcomes of first cohabitation

In the oldest cohort (1974–1979), cohabiters are almost equally likely to marry and to separate (Fig. 6). By contrast, among the two younger cohorts, cohabiting unions are more likely to end in separation than in marriage. Thus, the risk of separation from cohabitation has increased across cohorts and rose rapidly, especially at early durations. In the two oldest cohorts, 25–27% of couples have separated within two years from the start of cohabitation, whereas this figure is 43% in the youngest cohort. This indicates that cohabiting unions have become less stable across cohorts.

Next, we estimate competing risks event history models to study the risk of marriage vs. separation among cohabiting young adults (Fig. 7). Similarly to the previous section, we include interaction effects between the type of transition (marriage vs. separation) and the four main covariates of interest (cohort, gender, parental socio-economic status, and education) and investigate whether these associations differ between cohorts. We find that the likelihood of the transition from cohabitation to marriage declines across cohorts even when adjusting for socio-economic and demographic variables (Fig. 7a). Separation rates are significantly higher for the youngest cohort than for older cohorts. Cohabiting women exhibit slightly higher rates of separation than men, but the differences are not significant (Fig. 7b).

We do not find many differences in the risk of marriage vs. separation among cohabiting young adults by parental social class (Fig. 7c). Additional analysis by cohort (not shown) has shown that, for the oldest cohort, cohabiting adults were equally likely to marry or separate among all social classes, whereas in the youngest two cohorts, regardless

[3] Additional untruncated analysis of first union formation in the 1974–1979 cohort has revealed that by age 40 almost 90% of the cohort have formed a first union with the rate of direct marriage entry plateauing at 18% after age 34.

[4] Results from three-way interactions are only shown in the paper when they are significant but they are available upon request.

[5] 20% of first unions in the sample were formed after experiencing a pre-partnership pregnancy defined as a female partner in a couple becoming pregnant before the partners started living together

Table 2
Hazard ratios of second union formation.

Covariates	Hazard Ratio	Sig
Time since separation (baseline hazard)		
< 1 year		***
	0.008	
1–2 years		***
	0.011	
3–4 years		***
	0.016	
Cohort		
1974–1979 (ref.)		
	1	
1980–1984		
	0.85	
1985–1990		
	1.18	
Sex		
Male (ref.)		
	1	
Female		
	1.05	
Parental occupational class		
Service class (ref.)		
	1	
Intermediate class		
	1.03	
Working class		
	0.86	
Out of the labour force/workless		
	1.10	
Educational level		
Low (ref.)		
	1	
Medium		
	0.90	
High		
	0.96	
Economic activity		
Employed (ref.)		
	1	
Full–time student		
	0.72	
Unemployed		
	1.02	
Out of the labour force		
	2.10	
Residential context		
London (ref.)		
	1	
Rest of the country		
	1.32	
Pregnancy status of woman		
Not pregnant (ref.)		
	1	
Pregnant		**
	2.34	
Number of children		
None (ref.)		
	1	
One or more		
	0.82	
Age at separation		
16–21 (ref.)		
	1	
22–27		
	1.28	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

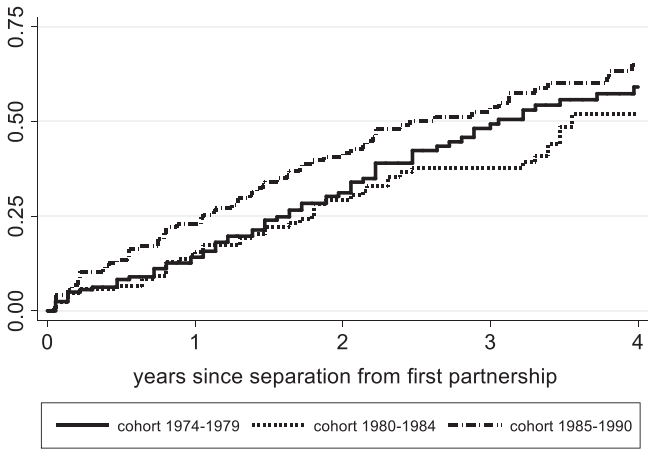

Fig. 8. Cumulative distribution function of entering a second union by cohort. *Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.*

of parental socio-economic background, separation rates were higher than marriage rates. Thus, we conclude that parental socio-economic background plays only a modest role in influencing the outcomes of first cohabitation.

Similarly, we do not observe many differences in separation vs. marriage rates with regards to educational level (Fig. 7d). However, when looking at whether and how the educational gradient of separation or marriage among cohabiting young adults has changed across cohorts (not shown) we find a shift from higher partnerhsip stability and marriage rates among highly educated in the oldest cohort to an almost universal breakdown of first cohabiting unions in the youngest cohort.

Regarding the control variables, the occurrence of both separation and marriage is low if a woman in a cohabiting couple is pregnant. After controlling for socio-economic characteristics, the level of separation rates among cohabitees with children is lower than among childless people, but parenthood status has no effect on the likelihood of marrying a cohabiting partner (additional analysis not shown). No significant differences were observed between London, other urban, and rural areas (Table A3 **in the** Appendix).

4.3. Second union formation

Over 60% of separated respondents from all cohorts formed a second union during the first four years following separation. The youngest cohort has the highest rates of repartnering (Fig. 8).

However, the differences in repartnering rates between cohorts are not significant when we control for other variables (Table 2), the youngest cohort seem to repartner quicker on average (Fig. 8). We did not find differences in the risk of repartnering by gender, parental socio-economic background or level of education. Regarding the influence of the control variables, we find some interesting results. Pregnancy increases the likelihood of repartnering whilst residential context and employment status did not have a significant effect on the risk of repartnering. Unlike for first union formation, the presence of children in the household was not a significant predictor of repartnering rates. These results should be interpreted with caution because of the small number of events and research design (truncation at age 27).

Table 3 presents a summary if all hypotheses tested in the paper with the corresponding results.

5. Conclusion and discussion

We studied various partnership transitions among young adults in England and Wales by cohort, gender, parental socio-economic background, and education by applying competing risks event history models to combined data from the British Household Panel Survey and the

Table 3
Full list of tested hypotheses with results.

Dimension/ outcome	First union formation	Outcomes of first cohabitation	Second union formation
Cohort	1a. We expect a continuing decrease in direct marriage rates across cohorts and an overall postponement of partnership formation among the youngest cohorts	1b. Cohabiters in the youngest cohort are expected to have higher separation rates and lower marriage rates than in the older cohorts	1c. We expect higher rates of repartnering among the youngest cohorts than among older cohorts
Hypothesis confirmed	YES	YES	The differences are insignificant when controlled for other socio-demographic characteristics. Yet, the youngest cohort repartners quicker on average.
Gender	2a. We expect women to enter a first union earlier than men	2b. We expect cohabiting men and women to have similar separation and marriage rates	2c. We expect separated men and women to have similar rates of repartnering
Hypothesis confirmed	YES	YES	YES
Parental SES	3a. We expect young adults from more advantaged families to postpone entry into first union; however, we expect individuals with different parental socio-economic backgrounds to have similar levels of entry into first marriage or cohabitation	3b. We expect parental socio-economic background to have little influence (if any) on the outcomes of cohabiting unions	3c. We expect parental socio-economic background to have little influence (if any) on rates of repartnering
Hypothesis confirmed	YES for similar levels; but partially for timing (postponement among high SES confirmed only for 1974–1979 and 1980–1984 cohorts; reverse association for 1985–90 cohort)	YES	YES
Education	4a. We expect highly educated young people to postpone entry into first union	4b. We expect the outcomes of first cohabitation to be similar among the high- and low-educated	4c. We expect highly educated young people to have higher rates of repartnering
Hypothesis confirmed	Partially (confirmed only for 1974–1979 cohort; reverse association for 1980–1984 and 1985–90 cohort)	Partially (confirmed for 1980–1984 and 1985–90 cohorts – universal separation of first cohabiting unions; highly educated from 1974 to 1979 cohort were more likely to marry their first cohabiting partners)	NO

Understanding Society study. We investigated how the SDT and PoD theories contribute to explaining partnership transitions among the youngest cohorts vastly affected by both ideational change and the economic uncertainties.

We first studied cohort changes in partnership experiences and observed the postponement of first union formation and that cohabitation has become the main form of first union across all cohorts for both men and women, supporting our hypothesis (H1a). Considering that the vast majority of first unions begin as cohabitations, we expected to find higher separation than marriage rates in these unions (H1b) following the trends in various industrialised countries where cohabitation is widespread (Jalovaara, 2013; Lamidi et al., 2019; Manning & Smock, 2002). Although we expected that cohabiting unions would have become less stable among the youngest cohorts, we did not expect an almost universal breakdown of these unions. Compared to individuals from the 1974–1979 cohort, who were almost equally likely to marry or separate from their first cohabiting partners, the youngest cohort is significantly more likely to separate from their first cohabiting partner than to marry them. In line with this, individuals from the youngest cohort were the quickest to repartner which could signal an increase in the number of people experiencing at least two partnerships (H1c).

Next, we investigated gender differences in partnership experiences. We found that women enter first unions earlier than men by approximately 3 years, as expected (H2a). Both men and women born in the 1980s are more likely to separate from their first cohabiting partner than to marry them (H2b). No gender differences were observed in repartnering rates (H2c). The results suggest that there is a convergence in partnership experiences among young men and women. Following the discourse on women's changing role in society, our findings provide support for the notion of similarity in life course transitions among young men and women (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2015; Stone et al., 2014; Winkler-Dworak & Toulemon, 2007).

Third, we studied whether and how partnership experiences differ by parental socio-economic background. The results show that individuals from working class backgrounds form first unions earlier among the 1974–1979 and 1980–1984 cohorts than those from more advantaged backgrounds, partially confirming our hypothesis (H3a). However, the reverse is observed among the 1985–90 cohort. This could relate to the increased economic hardship and lower affordability of housing among the youngest cohort as those from disadvantaged backgrounds might be staying longer in the parental home while not being able to afford to move in with a partner. Additionally, we expected (H3a) that young adults with different parental socio-economic backgrounds would have similar rates of entry into first marriage or cohabitation. This hypothesis is confirmed as we found no differences in the rates of entering a first marriage or cohabitation across all cohorts, confirming earlier findings for the older cohorts in the UK (Berrington & Diamond, 2000) and suggesting a universal spread of cohabitation norms across all social groups as predicted by the SDT. We did not find any differences in outcomes of first cohabitation or repartnering rates with regards to parental SES. Taken together, our findings show that parental socio-economic background plays a minor role in young people's partnership experiences, supporting our hypothesis (H3b and H3c) and that the influence of individual experiences is more important than ascribed socio-economic status in countries most affected by the SDT (e.g., Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Mäenpää & Jalovaara, 2014).

Fourth, we investigated educational differences in partnership experiences. We expected highly educated individuals to postpone entry into first union (H4a), but this hypothesis was only partially confirmed. Highly educated young adults exhibited higher rates of entering a first cohabitation than their lower educated counterparts among all cohorts. The delay in entering a first cohabitation among the highly educated was observed among the 1974–1979 cohort and this group was more likely to marry their first partners than to separate. On the contrary, highly educated young people born in the 1980s were the earliest to form first and second unions, although they were more likely to separate

Table A1
Number of events and number of person-months by covariates for a) first union formation (cohabitation or marriage); b) outcome of first cohabitation (marriage or separation); and c) second union formation.

	a) First union						b) Outcome of first cohabitation						c) Second union			
	Person-months	%	Cohabitation		Marriage		Person-months	%	Separation		Marriage		Person-months	%		
Covariates			Events	%	Events	%			Events	%	Events	%			Events	%
Age																
16–17	76002	30	99	9	5	4										
18–21	113454	45	460	44	59	45										
22–27	6046	25	488	47	68	52										
Duration of first cohabitation																
< 1 year							10939	34	172	44	25	11				
1–2 years							7441	23	105	27	53	24				
3–5 years							13568	42	114	29	140	64				
Time since separation																
< 1 year													4321	42	70	35
1–2 years													2946	29	55	27
3–4 years													2974	29	77	38
Cohort																
1974–1979	93780	37	407	46	73	55	14089	44	143	46	150	69	3782	37	74	37
1980–1984	74646	30	333	30	35	27	10195	32	114	30	58	27	3283	32	55	27
1985–1990	83077	33	307	24	24	18	7664	24	134	24	10	5	3177	31	73	36
Sex																
Male	136777	54	427	41	42	32	12113	38	132	34	104	48	3298	32	58	29
Female	114726	46	620	59	90	68	19835	62	259	66	114	52	6943	68	144	71
Parental occupational class																
Service class	92691	37	356	34	39	30	9420	29	129	33	64	29	3110	30	63	31
Intermediate class	71042	28	287	28	29	22	9839	31	109	10	68	31	2752	27	59	29
Working class	65191	26	306	29	44	33	9286	29	112	11	72	33	3188	31	56	28
Out of the labour force/ workless	22579	9	98	9	20	15	3403	11	41	4	14	6	1192	12	24	12
Educational level																
Low	127834	51	522	50	66	50	18344	57	222	57	105	48	5665	55	112	55
Medium	69,396	28	271	26	47	36	6785	21	99	25	59	27	2562	25	51	25
High	22297	9	189	18	17	13	5677	18	62	16	52	24	1765	17	38	19
Missing	31976	13	65	6	2	2	1141	4	8	2	2	1	249	2	1	0
Economic activity																
Employed	198748	79	798	76	98	74	23076	72	282	72	172	79	7064	69	142	70
Student	19982	8	112	11	17	13	2762	9	47	12	12	6	1193	12	17	8
Unemployed	11371	5	95	9	15	11	5499	17	61	16	33	15	1900	19	39	19
Out of the labour force	21401	8	42	4	2	2	610	2	1	0	1	0	85	1	4	2
Residential context																
London	34367	14	942	90	17	12	2706	8	33	8	25	11	824	8	13	6
Rest of the country	217135	86	105	10	115	87	29242	92	358	92	193	89	9417	92	189	94
Pregnancy status of woman																
Not pregnant	248755	99	912	87	122	92	29152	91	380	97	201	92	9758	95	182	90
Pregnant	2748	1	135	13	10	8	2795	9	11	3	17	8	484	5	20	10
Number of children																
None	246059	98	963	92	114	86	21411	67	278	71	145	67	6474	63	131	65
One or more	5443	2	84	8	18	14	10537	33	113	29	73	33	3768	37	71	35
Age at first union																
16–17							3760	12	46	12	13	6				
18–21							16185	51	220	56	84	39				
22–27							12002	38	125	32	121	56				
Age at separation																
16–17													5434	53	98	49
18–21													4808	47	104	51
Total	***251503***		***1047***		***132***		***31948***		***391***		***218***		***10242***		***202***	

Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

from their first partners, contrary to older cohorts. This partially confirms H4b, according to which we expected similar cohabitation outcomes among different educational groups. We did not, however, find any evidence that highly educated people exhibit higher rates of repartnering (H4c). We conclude that partnership experiences continue to diverge by education, although, we see a clear divide in trends across cohorts.

Our study has some limitations. Although we have controlled for pre-partnership pregnancy and the presence of children in the household on various partnership transitions, these relationships are complex. Research has found a significant negative educational gradient of childbearing among cohabiters affecting the subsequent stability of such unions (Berrington, 2001; Steele et al., 2006; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012; Mikolai et al., 2018). Parental socio-economic status was also found to be an important predictor of partnership context at childbirth (Koops et al., 2017; Mooyaart, Liefbroer, & Billari, 2021). In our sample, 27% of first-time cohabiters had a child within the first cohabitation with almost 65% of the former being low educated, suggesting that further research is needed to investigate how these patterns might have changed across cohorts. Additionally, we do not have information on non-coresidential unions in the dataset. Previous research has shown that around half of the living-apart-together (LAT) relationships become co-residential unions (Ermisch & Siedler, 2009; Haskey, 2005; Schnor, 2015), with intentions to cohabit being highly dependent on a variety of life course circumstances (Coulter & Hu, 2017). Thus, including these transitions and factors influencing the decision to move in together, i.e.,

Table A2
Hazard ratios of first union formation (cohabitation vs. marriage) with interaction effects.

Covariates	Model with cohort * union type interaction		Model with gender * union type interaction		Model with SES * cohort * union type interaction		Model with education * cohort * union type interaction	
	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig
Interaction effect between the cohort and type of first union (Fig. 3a)								
Ref: cohort 1974–79 * cohabitation	1							
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation	1.02							
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation	1.67	***						
cohort 1974–79 * marriage	0.85							
cohort 1980–84 * marriage	0.45	***						
cohort 1985–90 * marriage	0.12	***						
Interaction effect between gender and type of first union (Fig. 3b)								
Ref: males * cohabitation			1					
females * cohabitation			1.61	***				
male * marriage			0.10	***				
females * marriage			0.23	***				
Interaction effect between parental SES, type of first union and cohort (Fig. 4)								
Ref: cohort 1974–79 * cohabitation * service class					1			
cohort 1974–79 * cohabitation * intermediate class					1.28			
cohort 1974–79 * cohabitation * working class					1.38	*		
cohort 1974–79 * marriage * service class					0.17	***		
cohort 1974–79 * marriage * intermediate class					0.13	***		
cohort 1974–79 * marriage * working class					0.25	***		
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation * service class					1.19			
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation * intermediate class					1.26			
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation * working class					1.40	*		
cohort 1980–84 * marriage * service class					0.11	***		
cohort 1980–84 * marriage * intermediate class					0.12	***		
cohort 1980–84 * marriage * working class					0.21	***		
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation * service class					1.22			
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation * intermediate class					0.93			
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation * working class					1.08			
cohort 1985–90 * marriage * service class					0.08	***		
cohort 1985–90 * marriage * intermediate class					0.09	***		
cohort 1985–90 * marriage * working class					0.09	***		
Interaction effect between education, type of first union and cohort (Fig. 5)								
Ref: cohort 1974–79 - type: cohabitation - education: high							1	
cohort 1974–79 * cohabitation * medium							0.72	*
cohort 1974–79 * cohabitation * low							0.82	
cohort 1974–79 * marriage * high							0.13	***
cohort 1974–79 * marriage * medium							0.15	***
cohort 1974–79 * marriage * low							0.16	***
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation * high							1.33	
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation * medium							0.62	**
cohort 1980–84 * cohabitation * low							0.86	
cohort 1980–84 * marriage * high							0.12	***
cohort 1980–84 * marriage * medium							0.09	***
cohort 1980–84 * marriage * low							0.09	***
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation * high							1.03	
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation * medium							0.65	**
cohort 1985–90 * cohabitation * low							0.69	*
cohort 1985–90 * marriage * high							0.02	***
cohort 1985–90 * marriage * medium							0.10	***
cohort 1985–90 * marriage * low							0.04	***
Age (baseline hazard)								
16–17	0.001	***	0.001	***	0.001	***	0.001	***
18–21	0.002	***	0.002	***	0.002	***	0.002	***
22–27	0.003	***	0.003	***	0.003	***	0.004	***
Cohort								
1974–1979 (ref.)			1					
1980–1984			0.97					
1985–1990			0.84	*				
Sex								
Male (ref.)	1				1		1	
Female	1.68	***			1.68	***	1.69	***
Parental occupational class								
Service class (ref.)	1		1				1	
Intermediate class	1.03		1.03				1.03	
Working class	1.19	*	1.19	*			1.19	*
Out of the labour force/workless	1.06		1.06				1.06	
Educational level								
Low (ref.)	1		1		1			

(continued on next page)

Table A2 (*continued*)

Covariates	Model with cohort * union type interaction		Model with gender * union type interaction		Model with SES * cohort * union type interaction		Model with education * cohort * union type interaction	
	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig
Medium	0.89		0.89		0.89			
High	1.33	**	1.33	**	1.35	**		
Economic activity								
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Full–time student	1.04		1.04		1.05		1.04	
Unemployed	1.19		1.19		1.21		1.18	
Out of the labour force	0.90		0.90		0.90		0.93	
Residential context								
London (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Rest of the country	1.62	***	1.62	***	1.61	***	1.61	***
Pregnancy status of woman								
Not pregnant (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Pregnant	8.72	***	8.80	***	8.80	***	8.76	***
Number of children								
None (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
One or more	1.49	**	1.49	**	1.51	**	1.49	**

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

fertility intentions and having children from previous partnerships (van der Wiel, Mulder, & de Valk, 2020; Wagner, Mulder, Weiß, & Krapf, 2019) might bring further insight to partnership experiences among young people today.

Our study design and data also have some limitations. First, less than half of the selected sample members made the transition from the BHPS to the UKHLS study. While this is not a problem for the older cohorts as most of their first transitions fall under the life span of BHPS, estimates for the youngest cohort might suffer from panel attrition. Second, the youngest cohort already shows further postponement of first union formation and since we truncated the data at age 27, a non-negligible proportion of this cohort might have not yet experienced any partnership transitions. While we do not expect this to affect the overall rates of first union formation (or type), it might reveal some new findings, if say the unions of those who postpone entering first partnership turn out to be more stable. Both truncation and panel attrition lead to small numbers for some transitions observed in the data, e.g., direct marriage or marriage as an outcome of first union formation among the youngest cohort. We acknowledge that these results (and especially the interaction effects) need to be considered with caution. Replicating these analyses in the future with a longer observation window will further enhance our understanding of partnership behaviours of the Millennials.

To summarise, in contrast to some other countries (e.g. Germany, the U.S., and Canada), where the rise in cohabitation has offset changes in the levels and timing of marriage, and, thus, the mean age at first union formation has not changed over the last few decades (Konietzka & Tatjes, 2014; Manning et al., 2014; Wright, 2016), we observed further postponement in first union formation among the 1974–1990 birth cohorts in the UK similarly to the slight postponement in the same cohorts observed in the U.S. (Bloome & Ang, 2020). Whether this is due to more liberal value orientation, a search for self-realisation, spread of LAT relationships or economic precarity, cohabitation has become an almost universal form of first union in the UK echoing trends in other countries (Manning, 2020; Wright, 2019). However, the increased precarity among the Millennials caused by the financial and housing crises resulted in the postponement of first union formation among low-SES and low educated individuals in the UK, unlike in the U.S. (Bloome & Ang, 2020). More evidence is needed to investigate whether this an emerging trend specific for the British context (and whether this is driven by the financial crisis and austerity) or an argument towards new partnership behaviour among more disadvantaged groups among the Millennials.

Our findings suggest that compared to older cohorts, first cohabiting unions among Millennials do not tend to last long, a trend similar to what was shown in the U.S. (Eickmeyer, 2018; Guzzo, 2014; Lamidi et al., 2019). We do not find evidence that first cohabitations are becoming more of a marriage-like long-term type of unions among Millennials unlike it was shown to be the case for older cohorts (Di Giulio et al., 2019). This poses further questions on the meaning young people attach to cohabitation and the quality of these unions which tend to be short-lived. While among older cohorts first co-residential unions were likely to be treated as trial marriages, young adults born in the 1980s could be more likely to move together for different reasons. We argue that both the SDT and PoD provide valuable arguments in explaining these associations as the lack of normative constraints, convenience, and economic reasons are all likely and potentially intertwined underlying factors of this phenomenon (Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004). Therefore, our findings provide support for the previous notion of increased 'sliding' in and out of cohabitation (Jalovaara & Kulu, 2018; Manning & Smock, 2005), at least for first cohabitations that occur before age 27. Alternatively, it could be that young adults in the youngest cohorts (and especially at young ages) see cohabitation an alternative to being single and it is not until later ages or several unions when they consider marriage as a potential outcome of a cohabiting relationship or would engage in a marriage-like long-term cohabitation. Some evidence from qualitative research in the UK suggests that cohabiters do not ascribe lower levels of commitment to cohabitation than to marriage, but marriage is perceived to symbolise greater moral and structural commitment (Berrington et al., 2015). This poses further questions on whether the lack of constraints leads to an increase in poor matches between partners, which would be weeded out during cohabitation, and could lead to an almost universal breakdown of first cohabiting unions among the youngest cohorts. Further qualitative research into the meaning that young people attach to cohabitation and the perceptions of the courtship process is needed to deepen our understanding of current and future trends in partnership experiences.

Our analysis highlights that parental SES and own level of education still play a role in shaping young people's partnership transitions in Britain, however, the associations are changing among the youngest cohorts. We found a positive educational gradient in the transition from cohabitation to marriage for cohorts born 1974–1979, which was also confirmed in other countries where cohabitation is widespread both among pre-Millennials (Mikolai et al., 2018; Wright, 2019) and Millennials (Lamidi et al., 2019). For those born in the late 1970s education played a somewhat protective role for union stability, in line with arguments from the PoD. In contrast, among those born in the 1980s

Table A3
Hazard ratios of first cohabitation outcome (separation vs. marriage) with interaction effects.

	Model with cohort * cohabitation outcome interaction		Model with gender * cohabitation outcome interaction		Model with SES * cohabitation outcome interaction		Model with education * cohabitation outcome interaction	
Covariates	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig	Hazard Ratio	Sig
Interaction effect between the cohort and cohabitation outcome (Fig. 7a)								
Ref: cohort 1974–79 * separation	1							
cohort 1980–84 * separation	1.16							
cohort 1985–90 * separation	1.83	***						
cohort 1974–79 * marriage	1.05							
cohort 1980–84 * marriage	0.59	**						
cohort 1985–90 * marriage	0.14	***						
Interaction effect between gender and cohabitation outcome (Fig. 7b)								
Ref: males * separation			1					
females * separation			1.26	*				
male * marriage			0.79					
females * marriage			0.55	***				
Interaction effect between parental SES and cohabitation outcome (Fig. 7c)								
Ref: separation * service class					1			
separation * intermediate class					0.83			
separation * working class					0.91			
marriage * service class					0.50	***		
marriage * intermediate class					0.52	***		
marriage * working class					0.59	***		
Interaction effect between education and cohabitation outcome (Fig. 7d)								
Ref: separation - education: high							1	
separation * medium							1.38	*
separation * low							1.21	
marriage * high							0.84	
marriage * medium							0.82	
marriage * low							0.57	***
Duration of first cohabitation (baseline hazard)								
< 1 year	0.010	***	0.012	***	0.012	***	0.012	***
1–2 years	0.012	***	0.014	***	0.014	***	0.014	***
3–5 years	0.011	***	0.013	***	0.013	***	0.013	***
Age at first union								
16–17	0.89		0.89		0.89		0.89	
18–21	0.97		0.97		0.97		0.97	
22–27 (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Cohort								
1974–1979 (ref.)			1		1		1	
1980–1984			0.85		0.85		0.85	
1985–1990			0.96		0.96		0.96	
Sex								
Male (ref.)	1				1		1	
Female	1.01				1.01		1.01	
Parental occupational class								
Service class (ref.)	1		1				1	
Intermediate class	0.90		0.90				0.90	
Working class	1.00		1.00				1.00	
Out of the labour force/workless	0.89		0.89				0.89	
Educational level								
Low (ref.)	1		1					
Medium	1.24	*	1.24	*				
High	1.03		1.03					
Economic activity								
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Full–time student	1.25		1.25		1.25		1.25	
Unemployed	1.04		1.04		1.04		1.04	
Out of the labour force	0.20	*	0.20	*	0.20	*	0.20	*
Residential context								
London (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Rest of the country	0.93		0.93		0.93		0.93	
Pregnancy status of woman								
Not pregnant (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Pregnant	0.53	**	0.53	**	0.53	**	0.53	**
Number of children								
None (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
One or more	0.96		0.96		0.96		0.96	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
Source: BHPS waves 1–18 and UKHLS waves 2–6; own calculations.

highly educated exhibit higher levels of union formation, but the level of education does not affect the stability of these unions as they almost universally end in separation. This could be a sign of the emergence of a new behaviour, i.e., short-lived unions starting while in education or shortly after finishing a degree. Postponement of first union formation among those not pursuing further education could be a marker of the increased economic hardship and uncertainties. Additionally, we found that most separated individuals exhibit high rates of repartnering. Similar trends were observed among the Millennials in the U.S. (Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018) and this could be an indicator of an increase in serial cohabitations in the future (Bukodi, 2012; Cohen & Manning, 2010; Holdsworth & Elliott, 2001; Lichter et al., 2010).

Applying competing risks models to longitudinal data from England and Wales, this study has shown that partnership experiences among young adults have changed over time. To the best of our knowledge this is the first paper to investigate changes in partnership behaviours among the Millennials in the UK. We found evidence suggesting that both change in values and lifestyles (SDT) as well as economic constraints (PoD) might have an influence on young people's partnership transitions. Findings from this paper provide further evidence towards the de-standardisation and individualisation of 'protracted' youth transitions, including further postponement of first union formation and increasing complexity of partnership transitions. The 'demographically dense' period of the transition to adulthood among the Millennials is associated with the decoupling of cohabitation and marriage and increased union dissolution and repartnering regardless of socio-economic background or education. This new trend in the youngest cohorts might indicate the increasing prevalence of two types of partnership behaviours: postponement of first co-residential union formation and a potential increase in the number of individuals who experience multiple partnerships.

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Appendix

See appendix Tables A1–A3 here.

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