

# **Parental Divorce During Childhood in Sweden: Changed Experience, Unchanged Effect**

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# Parental Divorce During Childhood in Sweden: Changed Experience, Unchanged Effect

*By Michael Gähler and Eva-Lisa Palmtag*

## *Abstract*

During the last century, the proportion of children and adolescents who have experienced a parental divorce or separation has increased dramatically, in Sweden and elsewhere. Vast research has shown that children in these families fare less well than children in intact families, both in the short and in the long run and on a number of outcomes. Much less is known about whether parental divorce means the same for children and adolescents today as it did a century ago. Have living conditions changed and, if so, how? Moreover, has the association between parental divorce and child well-being changed in magnitude over time? To answer these questions six waves of the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU) were used. The data set contains indicators on childhood living conditions for an entire century of Swedes, born 1892-1991. We show that living conditions for children of divorce have indeed changed on a number of dimensions but there is no evidence of magnitude change in the association between parental divorce/separation and two child outcomes, psychological well-being and educational attainment.

*Keywords:* Parental divorce, Living conditions, Cohort change, Psychological well-being, Educational attainment, Sweden.

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## Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Parental divorce and child well-being.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Has the association between parental divorce and child well-being changed over time? Previous empirical evidence.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Data, variables, and method .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Results .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Concluding discussion .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>19</b>

## **Introduction**

Decades of vast research, from a number of countries, has shown that children with divorced and separated parents fare less well than children in intact families, both in the short and in the long run and on a number of dimensions, e.g., social, behavioral, emotional, and psychological well-being, physical health, and educational attainment. Adolescents and adults from dissolved childhood families are also more prone to leave the parental home and form a family early in life, and they run a higher risk to divorce or separate themselves (see Amato 2000, 2010; Amato & James 2010; Bernardi et al. 2013; Chapple 2009 for literature reviews and Amato 2001; Amato & Keith 1991a and 1991b for meta-analyses of a large number of studies and outcomes). The reason for this association is still contested, however. Whereas some scholars claim a causal link, i.e., that children are harmed by their parents' divorce per se, or other conditions following in the wake of family dissolution, others claim social selection, i.e., that children in dissolved families had a lower well-being already before their parents' divorce (see Amato 2010; Bernardi et al. 2013 for reviews). In this paper, we will not add to the ongoing discussion on causality and selection, we instead focus on two overarching questions that have received much less attention in previous research. First, does parental divorce mean the same for children and adolescents today as it did a century ago? During this period most societies have undergone large social, economic, and political changes. In the developed world, the Second Demographic Transition has meant major changes in family structure and patterns; marriage and fertility rates have declined and cohabitation and divorce rates have increased (Lesthaeghe 2010; van de Kaa 1987). When divorce spreads to larger parts of the population, and motives for divorce alter (de Graaf & Kalmijn 2006b), it seems unlikely that children with divorced parents, born one hundred years apart, share experiences entirely. Here we will describe how childhood living conditions by family type have changed. For example, has socio-economic selection into divorce changed, is divorce still associated with interparental dissension to the same extent as earlier, has child age at parental divorce altered, has it become more or less common to live in a reconstituted family, and how has the frequency of interaction with the non-custodial parent developed? Second, given that the experience of growing up with divorced parents has altered over time, just as other conditions surrounding the event, has the association between parental divorce and child well-being and life chances changed in magnitude or are children just as affected by their parents' divorce today as they were previously? Here we focus on

two vital outcomes, psychological well-being and educational attainment, both measured in adulthood.

To describe long-time change in childhood living conditions, and compare effects of parental divorce for birth cohorts wide apart, data must cover a long time period, include identical measures over time, and samples must be drawn in an identical way (Amato 2001). With such high demands on data, only few previous studies were able to deal with the two questions raised here, and in particular to cover such a long period as we do here. Data from six waves of the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU) are ideal for our purpose as they include a broad range of childhood and adult living conditions for one entire century of Swedes, born between 1892 and 1991.

### **Parental divorce and child well-being**

As noted, a large number of studies show that children with divorced and separated parents generally exhibit poorer well-being and life chances than children growing up with both their parents. This also regards the outcomes in focus in this paper, i.e. education (see, e.g., Frisco, Muller & Frank 2007; Heuveline, Yang & Timberlake 2010; Song, Benin & Glick 2012) and psychological well-being (see, e.g., Amato & Sobolewski 2001; Barrett & Turner 2005; Sun & Li 2002). This difference in well-being has been explained in different ways, as resulting from a direct effect of the parental divorce itself, via interparental conflict and/or loss of resources for children following their parents' divorce, and, as noted, social selection.

Parental divorce may have a direct effect on child well-being. When Öberg and Öberg (1991) interviewed 85 Swedish children of divorce about their experience, many of them mentioned feelings of *shock* when they were unexpectedly told that their parents were about to divorce, and, following the divorce, *anger* because the parents no longer lived together, *grief* over the family that no longer existed, and *regret* at the loss of a parent. Other studies have shown that children sometimes feel abandoned by their parents, worry about the future and blame themselves for being the cause of the divorce (Hetherington 1979; Pryor & Rodgers 2001; Rutter 1979). Some of these emotions are in themselves expressions of low psychological well-being but they can also cause, e.g., depression later in life (Wadsby 1993) and affect child school attainment negatively (McLeod & Kaiser 2004; Potter 2010). Parents' psychological well-being may also be negatively affected by divorce (Gähler 2006; Johnson

& Wu 2002), which, in turn, can harm child well-being (Goodman 2007; Kiernan & Huerta 2008).

Another explanation for lower well-being among children from dissolved families suggests that it is not parental divorce per se that affects children negatively but rather the interparental conflict that often appears in conjunction with parental divorce. When parents fight, children may react with fear, helplessness, anxiety and blame themselves for the conflict (Amato 1993) and this affects their psychological well-being negatively (Kim et al. 2008). Children may also be drawn into the conflict and be forced to take sides (Amato 1993). Studies show that interparental conflict is negatively associated with child psychological well-being and school achievement irrespective of whether the conflict precede (Hanson 1999; Jekielek 1998) or follow divorce (Kelly & Emery 2003). The difference in well-being between children in intact and dissolved families decreases or even ceases when conflict in the childhood family is controlled for (Amato 1993). Children sometimes feel relieved when their fighting parents move apart (Öberg & Öberg 1991) and, thus, a parental divorce or separation may even improve child well-being (Amato, Loomis & Booth 1995; Booth & Amato 2001; Jekielek 1998).

Children of divorce also suffer from loss of different resources when one parent moves out and takes his (most often the father) resources with him. Economic and material conditions often deteriorate (Andreß et al. 2006) which impacts on child school success (Gähler, Jonsson & Låftman 2009) and psychological well-being (Gähler & Garriga 2013). Economic impairment may also force children to move, change school and leave their friends and social network (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). Custodial parents may also need to increase their labor supply which limits the time and energy devoted to the child. A decrease in social support, attention and time for help with schoolwork, both on behalf of the custodial and the non-custodial parent, can affect child psychological well-being and school achievement negatively (Astone & McLanahan 1991; Barrett & Turner 2005). Parents' educational level and class position are also important for children's school success and their aspirations. Children with a privileged socioeconomic background not only achieve better in school, they also attend higher education to a higher extent than children from less privileged backgrounds, given school achievement (Rudolphi 2011). Thus, child school success is negatively affected if the parent with the higher education and class position leaves the child's household (Jonsson & Gähler 1997).

Other conditions may affect child well-being after parental divorce as well, e.g. age at parental divorce, interaction with the non-custodial parent, and family reconstitution. Several

studies have analyzed the impact of child age at parental divorce for child well-being. Some scholars argue that younger children should be more harmed by parental divorce than older children, partly because they live together with both parents for a shorter period, partly because they are less well equipped to understand the causes and consequences of their parents' divorce. Other scholars instead argue that teenagers are most harmed by parental divorce because relations to parents, and parental supervision and monitoring, are particularly important at this age. Results from individual studies sometimes show that children's response to divorce differs by age but literature reviews generally indicate no clear pattern (Amato 2010; Chapple 2009).

Interaction with the absent, non-custodial, parent may also be important for child well-being in the wake of parental divorce. Recent Swedish studies indicate that children living equally much with each parent (i.e. alternate living), fare better on a number of outcomes than children who mainly live with one of the parents (Bergström 2012; Carlsund et al. 2012). Still, however, the question remains if the residential situation per se affects child well-being or if this result is due to selection, i.e. that parents with large socioeconomic resources, large parental commitment, and parents who are able to cooperate, are more likely to chose this way of child custody (Amato 2000). The question also remains whether it is *frequency* or *quality* of interaction that matters for child well-being. American studies indicate that the frequency is less important for child school success and psychological well-being than the interaction content, i.e. qualitative dimensions like social relations and emotional closeness between parent and child (see Amato & Gilbreth 1999 for a meta-analysis of a large number of studies).

Finally, family reconstitution may affect child well-being following parental divorce. A step-parent can add to economic, social, and emotional resources in the child's household. The step-parent may, e.g., add an income, help the child with school work, execute household tasks, and set time and energy free for the custodial parent to interact with the child. At the same time, studies indicate that the relation between child and step-parent is sometimes problematic and conflict-ridden. For example, there could be rivalry about the child's biological parent and the child could see the step-parent as a threat to the child's relation to the non-custodial parent. It may also be difficult for step-parents to handle their step-parenthood (Cherlin 1978; Öberg & Öberg 1991; see Coleman, Ganong & Fine 2000; Sweeney 2010 for literature reviews). Studies generally show that children in reconstituted families have lower well-being than children in intact families whereas the difference in

relation to children in single-parent families is often small (Bernardi et al. 2013; Coleman et al. 2000; Sweeney 2010; Turunen 2013).

All these circumstances associated with parental divorce, i.e., interparental conflict, loss of different resources, age at parental divorce, interaction with non-custodial parent, and family reconstitution, may indeed influence child well-being and life chances but we know little about how these circumstances have changed over time. Thus, this is the first question to be answered here.

### **Has the association between parental divorce and child well-being changed over time? Previous empirical evidence**

We also have relatively little knowledge about whether the association between parental divorce and child well-being and life chances has changed over time and, if so, why. This is the second question to be answered here and it is, of course, linked to the first question as changes in circumstances surrounding parental divorce could also imply change in the association between parental divorce and child outcomes. There are only a handful previous studies on change over time in the association between parental divorce and child school success and psychological well-being respectively; the main reason being that data sets which meet necessary criteria are rare, not only in Sweden but also internationally (Amato 2001). In one of the few previous studies, Biblarz and Raftery (1999) show that the association between childhood family structure and socioeconomic success had not changed during a period of 30 years, from the 1960s to the 1990s. The same conclusion is drawn in two other studies, based on British cohort data including respondents born in 1946, 1958 and 1970, followed from childhood to adult age. Ely et al. (1999) show that the negative association between parents' divorce and child educational attainment has not changed between the three birth cohorts. Sigle-Rushton et al. (2005) use the two latter birth cohorts, 1958 and 1970, to study psychological well-being and long- and short-term indicators of educational success and find no change over time in the association between these outcomes and family structure in childhood and adolescence.

One should keep in mind that these studies are few, that they cover relatively short time periods, and that they were only carried out in Great Britain and the U.S. Sweden differs from these societies in some important aspects, e.g. regarding gainful employment and income among single parents (Brady & Burroway 2012; Destro & Brady 2011). One Swedish study,



based on previous waves of LNU data, also, however, just like the British study by Sigle-Rushton et al., shows that the association between childhood family structure and psychological well-being in adult age (19-34 years) has not changed between those born in the period 1934–1949 and those born 1966–1981 (Gähler & Garriga 2013). In the present analysis we are not only able to add another twenty years to the observation window (ten birth cohorts up and down respectively), but also to study whether this result applies to educational attainment. We are also able to relate (lack of) any cohort change in the association between parental divorce and child outcome to changes in circumstances surrounding parental divorce, i.e., family conflict, loss of resources, child age at parental divorce, frequency of contact between child and absent parent, and family reconstitution.

## **Data, variables, and method**

For the descriptive analyses on childhood family conditions we use data from all six waves of the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU), conducted in 1968, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000, and 2010. LNU is a face-to-face survey containing a wide range of questions on several dimensions of people's living conditions, e.g., childhood conditions, housing, education, occupation, household composition, family history, economic conditions, social network and health. Many questions were posed in an identical way over time. LNU has a panel character, i.e., respondents in the valid age range (18-75 years) are asked to take part in any new wave. Respondents older than 75 years leave the panel but, as immigrants and young people are added to the sample, each wave also mirrors the Swedish population at the time and can, thus, be used as cross-sections. The random sample corresponds to approximately 1 per mille of the Swedish population and response rates vary between 72.0 percent in 2010 and 90.8 percent in 1968. In the 1968 wave, the oldest respondents were born in 1892 and in the 2010 wave, the youngest respondents were born in 1991. Thus, the data set includes information on childhood living conditions for an entire century of Swedes.

The survey includes a question on whether the respondent lived with both her/his natural (or adoptive) parents during their entire childhood, i.e. up to age 16. If not, respondents were asked about the reason, one alternative being divorce or separation between the parents. For

the purpose of the analyses conducted here we contrast respondents from an intact family background with those who experienced a parental divorce or separation.<sup>1</sup>

Respondents are also asked whether they experienced any “serious dissension” in their childhood family. In LNU 2000 and 2010 (birth cohorts 1925 and later) a follow-up question was asked about which family members were involved in the conflict. A number of alternatives were given but almost eight out of ten respondents with divorced and separated parents referred to conflict between biological parents. We assume that the high proportion is valid also for earlier cohorts.

We use three indicators to reflect respondents’ socio-economic resources during childhood. First, the variable economic difficulties refers to the question “Did your family experience economic hardship while you were growing up?” (yes/no). Second, the variable parental social class is based on information on both parents’ main occupation during the respondent’s childhood and we use the principle of dominance to determine which class position to use, the mother’s or the father’s, to define household class.<sup>2</sup> According to Erikson (1984) the dominant class position influences, e.g., household consumption patterns, political preferences, and social status. We use the following dominance order: upper service class (highest), farmers, self-employed, lower service class, skilled manual workers, routine non-manual employees and unskilled manual workers (lowest). Third, parents’ education is based on the question “Which of the following best describes your [father’s/mother’s] highest level of education?” Four categories are identified, primary school, vocational school, lower secondary school, and upper secondary school or higher, and, just as for parents’ social class, we use the highest of mother’s and father’s education.

Any residential move during childhood is indicated by the question “In how many places did you live during your childhood, i.e., up to age 16?” This information was dichotomized into those who ever and never moved respectively. If respondents were uncertain about the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that in LNU 1968, questions on childhood conditions were asked to all respondents (in later waves they were only asked to new respondents, i.e. younger cohorts and immigrants). As noted, the oldest respondents were born in 1892 and in 1968 their childhood was quite far back in time. Thus, there is a risk for lapse of memory for the older cohorts. We do not believe, however, that this risk is large regarding the question on parental divorce. Another potential problem is the selection on survival, i.e. the risk that respondents born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, still alive at age 70+, differ in childhood conditions from those who deceased.

<sup>2</sup> We would have preferred to use parents’ occupation at the time for their divorce but this information is not available. The correlation with main occupation during childhood is probably high, though, but some studies indicate that men’s and women’s positions in the labor market change in conjunction with divorce and separation (see, e.g., Evertsson 2001). Moreover, we take both parents’ social class position into account although the child no longer lives with both parents. Thus, there is a risk that we overestimate the child’s socio-economic resources. A study by Gähler et al. (2009) shows, however, that absent parents’ resources are very important for children and that their resources are underestimated if absent parents’ resources are disregarded.

definition of “place”, they were informed by the interviewer that a move should imply change of school and friends.

Since LNU 2000, a number of follow-up questions are asked to respondents who experienced a divorce or separation between their parents during childhood. One question refers to the age at parental divorce or separation. The answer was categorized into 0–5 years, 6–10 years and 11–16 years.<sup>3</sup> Another question concerns the frequency of interaction with the non-custodial parent. This variable was dichotomized into at least once a month (1) and less often (0).<sup>4</sup> Two questions also concern whether the respondent ever lived with a step-parent and step-siblings respectively during childhood (yes/no).

For the multivariate analyses we use data from wave 1 (1968) and 6 (2010). We have selected respondents born 1924-1949 (from LNU 1968) and 1966–1991 (from LNU 2010) respectively, who either grew up in an intact family or experienced a parental divorce or separation during childhood, either during the period 1924–1965 (1968) or 1966–2007 (2010). Thus, we base the analyses on two groups, both aged 19-44 at the time of the interview, but growing up during different time periods, varying largely, e.g., in the occurrence of divorce.

The survey also contains a question on how many years the respondent has been to school or studied full-time. Due to the educational expansion, a certain number of years of education do not mean the same for respondents born in the 1920s as for respondents born in the 1990s. Therefore, to be able to compare educational achievement directly between respondents born decades apart, we use a relative measure, i.e. whether the respondent’s years of education scores lower than the median for her/his birth cohort (*years of education below median*). Thus, we adopt the strategy proposed by Ely et al. (1999).<sup>5</sup> Respondents were also asked whether they have suffered from any illness or ailment during the last twelve months. The listed illnesses include “general tiredness”, “insomnia”, “nervous trouble”, “depression”, “mental illness” and “overexertion”. For all illnesses three answer categories were given: “no problems” (0), “mild problems” (1), and “severe problems” (3). We constructed a dummy variable (*low psychological well-being*) based on all six illnesses. The variable was dichotomized where 0-2 points indicate no problem (0) and 3+ points indicate low psychological well-being (1). We define mental illness as low psychological well-being

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<sup>3</sup> We have tried different categorizations and also used age as a linear variable but there is no change in results.

<sup>4</sup> We have tested different cut-off points but results are unaltered.

<sup>5</sup> See Ely et al. (1999) for an exhaustive discussion on the advantage using a relative measure on education. It should be noted, however, that we have performed analyses using the crude measure of years of education with no substantial change in results.

regardless of whether the respondent has indicated mild or severe problems (this procedure is in accordance with Lundberg 1990). We apply Linear Probability Models (with robust standard errors) for the analyses on both outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we test whether results differ by respondent gender. Previous research does not, however, indicate any strong gender patterns, regardless of outcome (see, e.g., Amato 2010; Amato & James 2010; Chapple 2009 for recent literature reviews).

## Results

Our first question, then, is how childhood living conditions have changed during the last century and how these changes relate to childhood family type. During the last hundred years, the divorce and separation rate has increased dramatically. According to respondent's reports in the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU), the proportion of children and adolescents that experienced family dissolution before age 16 has increased from around 1 percent of those born in the late 19th century to around one fourth of those born one century later (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

Parallel to the development for divorce, the proportion of respondents reporting serious dissension in their childhood family has increased from almost 10 percent to approximately one fourth. It is interesting to note that for a long time, for respondents born from the 1890s to the 1950s, there was a gap between parental divorce and dissension, i.e. it was clearly more common for children to experience serious dissension in their childhood family than to experience parental divorce. This implies that many parents continued to live together although the family was characterized by severe dissension. Over time, however, the curves for divorce and dissension merge.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 2 shows, unsurprisingly, that respondents are clearly more likely to report dissension in the childhood family if their parents divorced than if their parents remained living together. But the association is not absolute. Some parents divorce without their children noticing any conflict and, as noted, there is serious dissension also in families where parents stay together. Over time, however, some interesting changes can be noted. Early in

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<sup>6</sup> We have tested different methods and cut-off points for the analysis on low psychological well-being but the results only differ marginally.

<sup>7</sup> According to Swedish register data the actual proportion for the younger cohorts in the population may even be slightly higher (Thomson & Eriksson 2013).

the period, almost eight of ten respondents from dissolved families report serious dissension in their childhood family. This proportion is considerably lower for later born cohorts, less than half among those born 1970-1991.<sup>8</sup> This development accords with changes in divorce motives over time. Previously, when divorce was socially stigmatized and the economic and legal obstacles were higher, spouses were often forced to stay together and only divorced if the situation was unbearable (Wolfinger 2005; also see de Graaf & Kalmijn 2006b for a study on changing divorce motives over time).

[Figure 2 here]

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Sweden, an almost constant economic growth and the introduction of welfare state arrangements improved living conditions in general (Schön 2000). A number of family and social policy programs have served to limit income inequality between different family types (Gähler 2001; Hobson & Takahashi 1997) and female labor supply has increased considerably. Thus, single mothers are better able to provide for their families today than previously. The general improvement in economic conditions is apparent in Figure 3. The proportion claiming to have experienced economic difficulties during their childhood has clearly diminished during the last century. For the youngest cohorts, however, the proportion has increased again. This hardly comes as a surprise as their childhood and adolescence coincided with a severe economic recession in Sweden in the early 1990s, which entailed, e.g., mass unemployment (Lundborg 2000). Over time, conditions have improved for children in both family types but more so for intact families. Thus, the difference between family types has increased.

[Figure 3 here]

The socio-economic selection into divorce and separation has also changed over time. Figure 4 shows the proportion of respondents who experienced parental divorce during childhood by the dominant parental class position. We contrast unskilled manual workers with the upper service class. Among respondents born 1892-1919, with at least one parent belonging to the upper service class, around 6 percent experienced a divorce between their parents during childhood. According to today's situation, this is of course a small proportion but the overall risk at the time was only around 1 percent. Among children with parents who were unskilled manual workers less than 2 percent experienced a parental divorce during childhood. The pattern of higher divorce rates for higher social classes remains for cohorts that were born the coming four decades but then it reverses. Now it is clearly less common

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<sup>8</sup> Here we categorize birth cohorts due to the small number of parental divorces in earlier birth cohorts.

that children from a higher class background experience their parents' divorce. We find the same, although not as pronounced, pattern for parental education (not displayed). This reversal in the association between socioeconomic conditions and divorce has been noted in previous studies, in Sweden (Hoem 1997; Sandström 2012) and elsewhere (de Graaf & Kalmijn 2006a [the Netherlands]; McLanahan 2004 [USA]; Härkönen & Dronkers 2006 [a comparison of a number of countries]) but few studies, if any, cover such a long time period as here. Goode (1962) was one of the first to notice this development. Previously only the privileged classes had the resources to clear the economic, social, and legal obstacles for divorce but when obstacles were reduced or eliminated the behavior spread to lower classes. A possible reason why divorce and separation is now more common in these classes is that low income decreases the benefit for the couple to live together and that economic difficulties may put pressure on the relationship (see Lyngstad & Jalovaara 2010 for a literature review).

[Figure 4 here]

Over time, families have also become more residentially mobile. This applies to intact and dissolved families alike (see Figure 5). Throughout the period, however, respondents from dissolved families are more likely than respondents from intact families to have moved to a new place during their childhood (involving a change of school and friends), and the difference between the two family types has remained.

[Figure 5 here]

What about conditions that are specific for respondents from dissolved childhood families, i.e., age at parental divorce, family reconstitution, and interaction with non-custodial parent? Questions on these conditions were asked in LNU 2000 and 2010 only and, thus, we only have this information for respondents born 1925–1991. In Figure 6 we find that the mean age at parental divorce oscillates between 7 and 8 years of age throughout the period under study (the standard deviation varies between 3.6 and 4.3). Considering that it has become easier to divorce over time, we would have expected the mean age at parental divorce to decrease but no such distinct trend can be spotted here. We also find that it has become clearly more common among children with divorced parents to ever have lived with a step-parent and step-siblings. In other words, divorced parents are more likely to move in with a new partner today than previously. Finally, we know from previous research that the frequency of interaction between child and non-custodial parent (Statistics Sweden 1995, 2003), and alternate living (Statistics Sweden 2009), has increased during the last decades but here we can show that this trend can be extended quite far back in time, and that there has been a constant increase in the frequency of contact throughout the period under study here.

The proportion of respondents from a dissolved family background claiming that they saw the non-custodial parent at least once a month has increased from less than 20 percent for the oldest birth cohorts in our data to 80 percent for the youngest cohorts. During the same period the proportion of children claiming that they never saw the non-custodial parent has decreased from more than 30 percent to 5 percent and respondents seeing the non-custodial parent at least once every week has increased from 2 to 40 percent (not displayed).

[Figure 6 here]

Our second question is whether the magnitude of the association between parental divorce in childhood and outcomes in adulthood has changed over time. Judging from the development for the determinants of child well-being following parental divorce, that were shown here and in previous research, it is not clear whether we should expect a change in the divorce "effect" and, if so, in what direction. On the one hand, parallel to increasing divorce and separation rates, the acceptance towards divorce and divorcees has increased (Halman et al. 2008: Table F121 [data for 85 countries, including Sweden]; Thornton & Young-DeMarco 2001 [the U.S.]) and the social stigma has decreased (Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft & Kiernan 2005). Thus, children of divorce are no longer judged based on their family situation to the same extent as they used to be (Wolfinger 2005). Economic conditions have also improved for single parents, children of divorce have become less likely to experience severe dissension between their parents, and children to a higher extent keep frequent contact with both parents after their divorce. Some studies also show that not only frequency of contact but also the relationship quality between child and non-custodial parent has improved over time (Amato & Gilbreth 1999). Moreover, parents are probably more aware of how a divorce affects children and are, thus, potentially better able to help to alleviate any negative consequences (Sigle-Rushton et al. 2005). All these factors suggest that the association between parental divorce and child well-being has decreased over time. On the other hand, children from dissolved families still grow up under less privileged economic conditions. In fact, the difference in economic difficulties between children in the two family types has increased during the last century. One reason, apart from the common drop in income following divorce, is the reversal in socio-economic selection into divorce over time, from positive to negative. These changes mean that children of divorce now experience a double disadvantage. Not only do parents move apart but the economic and social resources are relatively lower already to begin with. Thus, children from dissolved and intact families to an increasing extent experience "diverging destinies" (McLanahan 2004). Children of divorce have also become more likely to change neighborhood, school and friends during childhood

and, moreover, some scholars argue that an unexpected and unwanted divorce between parents who, from the child's perspective, seem to get along well, is more stressful to children than a divorce preceded by severe conflict (Amato et al. 1995; Booth & Amato 2001). According to these factors, then, we would rather expect an increase in the divorce "effect" over time. It is less clear what we can expect from the increased experience of living in a step-family; previous research is inconclusive regarding the influence of family reconstitution on child well-being. Given the consistency over time in age at parental divorce, and the fact that it seems to be of little importance for child well-being in the first place, we see no reason for a magnitude change in the association between parental divorce and child well-being based on this.

In Table 1 we display the results for our analyses on low psychological well-being. We first report the results by survey year (or year for parental divorce). When we only control for age and gender, there is a clear association between parental divorce or separation in childhood and low psychological well-being in adulthood. In 1968 (model 1), the estimated proportion is 10 percentage points higher among respondents from dissolved childhood families than for respondents from intact families and in 2010 (model 3) the difference is 6 percentage points. When we control for indicators on childhood socio-economic conditions, i.e. dominant parental social class, parents' highest education, and economic difficulties, any residential move during childhood and severe dissension in the childhood family (model 2 and 4), the difference between family types no longer remains. Thus, the increased risk for low psychological well-being among respondents from dissolved childhood families that we noted in model 1 and 3 can be explained by conditions now controlled for. Additional analyses (not displayed) indicate that economic difficulties and severe dissension in the childhood family in particular contribute to explain the difference in psychological well-being between respondents from different family types. This result suggests that it is not parental divorce per se (i.e., the physical separation of a parent from the childhood home) that affects children's psychological well-being later in life, but rather other conditions. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether these conditions precede or follow from the parental divorce or separation, possibly both.

Additional analyses (not displayed) also show that there are no differences between men and women in the association between family type in childhood and psychological well-being in adult age. The results also remain if we study individual indicators on low psychological well-being rather than the summarized measure used here. All results are valid for both survey years.



What about change over time? When we compare model 1 and model 3, it seems as if the association between childhood family type and adult psychological well-being has weakened over time, from 10 percentage points in 1968 (parental divorce years 1924-1965) to 6 percentage points in 2010 (parental divorce years 1966-2007). This change is not statistically significant, however, which is indicated by the interaction term for divorced/separated parents\*survey year in an analysis where data from both survey years are pooled (models 5 and 6). Thus, we conclude that there has been no change in the association between parental divorce in childhood and adult psychological well-being between those who experienced family dissolution in the period 1924-1965 and those who experienced it on average more than forty years later.<sup>9</sup>

[Table 1 here]

The corresponding analyses were conducted for educational attainment, i.e. years of education below median in own birth cohort (see table 2). When we control for gender and age (model 1 and 3) we find that adult respondents from dissolved childhood families are more likely than respondents from an intact family background to achieve below the median on years of education for their birth cohort. The difference amounts to 4 percentage points for parental divorce years 1924-1965 (survey year 1968) and 13 percentage points for parental divorce years 1966-2007 (survey year 2010). When we control for different socio-economic conditions in childhood (model 2 and 4) it is clear, as expected, that these conditions are strongly associated with respondent educational attainment. The higher the parents' education and class position, the less likely their children are to attain education below the median, whereas those who experienced economic difficulties in their childhood family are more likely to attain below the median. The difference between family types in psychological well-being could to a large extent be explained by the fact that respondents from dissolved families more often had experienced severe family dissension. This explanation is not valid here as severe dissension in the childhood family is not associated with educational attainment.

Just as for low psychological well-being, additional analyses (not displayed) show that the association between childhood family type and low education does not differ between men and women. Neither do we find that the impact of parental divorce or separation has changed over time for this outcome (see the variable "divorced/separated parents\*survey year

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<sup>9</sup> It can also be noted that the coefficient for survey year 2010 is positive, which suggests that the incidence of low psychological well-being has generally increased for young adults since 1968 (see Ministry of Education and Culture 2006; National Board of Health and Welfare 2009 for similar results).

2010” in models 5 and 6 which is not statistically significant). We do find another interesting result, however. In 1968, when we only control for age and gender in model 1, we find no statistically significant difference in low educational attainment between respondents who grew up with both their parents and respondents from a dissolved family background. A significant difference occurs, however, when we control for socio-economic childhood conditions in model 2. The reason for this is, as noted, that children with divorced parents previously were more likely to have well-educated parents from higher social strata and, due to this, achieved relatively well in school.

[Table 2 here]

Finally, in additional analyses that we have conducted based on LNU 2010 (not displayed), we find no statistically significant associations between child age at parental divorce or separation, frequency of interaction with the non-custodial parent, or if the child ever lived with a step-parent or step-sibling, and adult low psychological well-being and education below the median respectively. These results accord with previous research which has also often shown little importance of these childhood circumstances for adult living conditions. Unfortunately, since this information is lacking in LNU 1968, we are not able to conduct parallel analyses to the previous ones, i.e. to study whether the influence of these conditions on child well-being has changed over time.

## **Concluding discussion**

During the last century, the proportion of children and adolescents who have experienced a divorce or separation between their parents has steadily increased. We have shown that this experience is associated with other circumstances and living conditions today than it was a century ago. Respondents with divorced parents to a lesser extent than previously, claim to have experienced severe family conflict and economic difficulties in their childhood family. Moreover, the social class gradient in parental divorce has switched from positive to negative whereas residential mobility, interaction with the non-custodial parent, and experience of living in a reconstituted family has increased, and age at parental divorce has remained unaltered.

Respondents from dissolved childhood families exhibit a lower psychological well-being and shorter education as adults than their peers from intact families. The association between childhood family type and the two outcomes is not necessarily causal, however. Parental

divorce and separation is often caused by, or causes, other conditions which may, in turn, affect child well-being negatively. We have shown that the lower psychological well-being among respondents from dissolved families seems to be associated with the fact that they were more likely to experience economic difficulties and severe dissension in their childhood family. The difference in psychological well-being between respondents from intact and dissolved families no longer remains when we control for these conditions. We do not know whether these conditions precede or follow from the parental divorce, or both. To the extent that they follow from it, we could argue that parental divorce has an indirect effect on respondent's psychological well-being. Nevertheless, the result suggests that there is no direct link between parental divorce in childhood and psychological well-being in adult age.

There is, of course, a risk that adult respondents with low psychological well-being overestimate the actual extent of dissension and economic difficulties in their childhood family, i.e., that problems in the childhood family do not affect adult well-being but rather that the causal direction is reversed, that low adult well-being affects how respondents perceive their childhood and adolescence. As long as this does not vary systematically between childhood family types, however, the main conclusion remains, i.e., that there is no direct association between childhood family type and adult psychological well-being.

For education, matters stand partly different. Severe dissension in the childhood family is not associated with low education as an adult and can, thus, not explain why respondents from dissolved families are less likely to attain a long education than respondents from intact childhood families. On the other hand, socio-economic conditions like parents' social class, education, and economic difficulties are vital for children's educational attainment. Today, respondents from dissolved families are more likely than previously to have low educated parents belonging to the working class and the relative difference in economic difficulties during childhood has increased during later decades, to the disadvantage of respondents from dissolved childhood families. Thus, when we control for these conditions the difference in educational attainment by childhood family type decreases somewhat but a significant difference still remains (in 2010). This could either be due to a direct effect of parental divorce, conditions not controlled for in our models or selection. Based on our analyses we are not able to tell which explanation is most valid.

We have also shown that child's age at parental divorce or separation, frequency of interaction with the non-custodial parent and family reconstitution, i.e. living with a step-parent and step-siblings, do not seem to be associated with adult psychological well-being or education. These results accord with most previous international studies. Even if frequency of

seeing the absent parent seems to be of little importance, the quality of the relationship may still be important. Unfortunately, we do not have access to any measures of this dimension here.

The main issue in this paper, however, has been to study whether the association between childhood family type and the two outcomes has changed over time. There are several reasons to assume such a change. Still, we do not find any. The explanation for this differs between the two outcomes. The remaining difference between childhood family types in educational attainment in 2010 could to some extent be explained by the reversal over time in socio-economic selection, from positive to negative. Still, after controlling for these conditions, a substantial family type difference in educational attainment remains and, as noted, we are not able to tell why this is so. Childhood family type differences in psychological well-being, on the other hand, could largely be explained by differences in severe dissension and/or socio-economic conditions. If the association between childhood family type and dissension and socio-economic conditions does not change, then the association between childhood family type and this outcome also does not change. For the birth cohorts in focus here, i.e. 1924-1949 and 1966-1991 respectively, it has indeed become less common for children from dissolved families to experience severe dissension in their childhood family. Still, however, the association between childhood family type and severe dissension remains strong. The same applies to economic difficulties in the childhood family. This problem has generally decreased but it is still much more common among respondents from dissolved families. The remaining and strong associations between childhood family type and severe dissension and economic difficulties respectively are strongly contributing reasons for the unchanged association between childhood family type and low psychological well-being as an adult. Remaining, if not increasing, family type differences in economic conditions were also suggested as explanations to unaltered associations between parental divorce and child outcomes over time in previous American and British studies (Biblarz & Raftery 1999; Ely et al. 1999). As long as these differences remain, we should expect little change in the association between individuals' experience of parental divorce in childhood and their psychological well-being.

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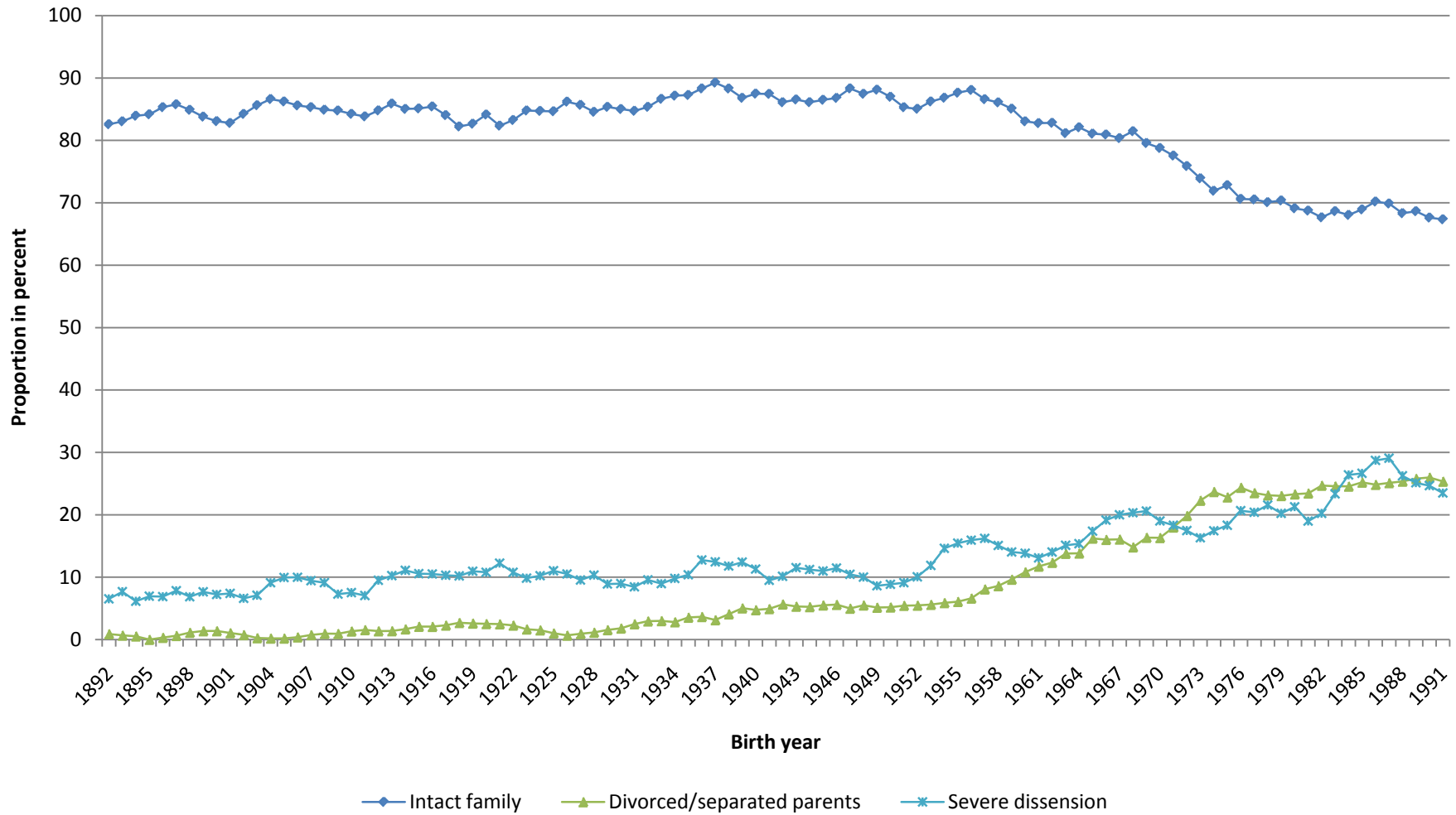
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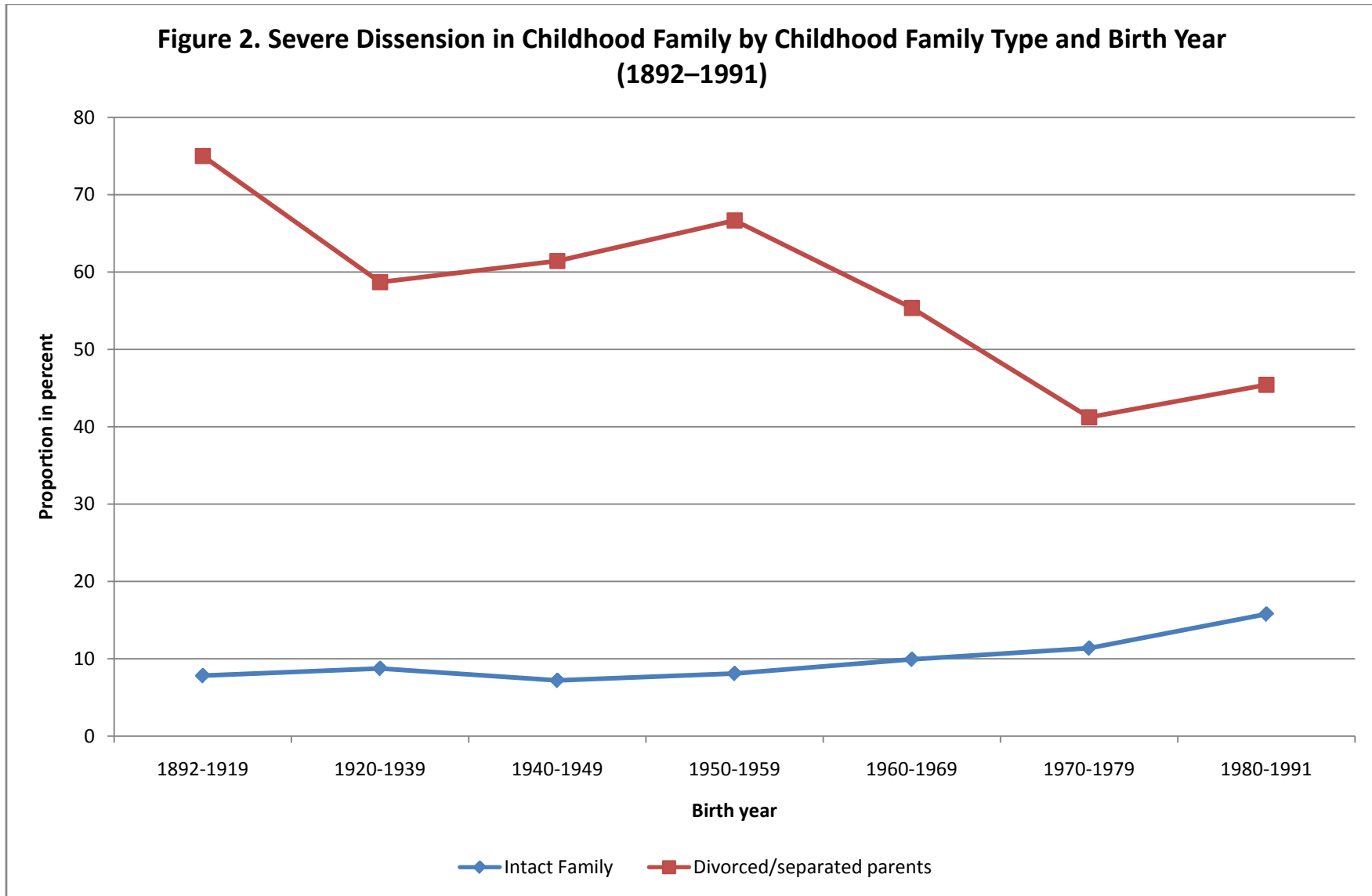


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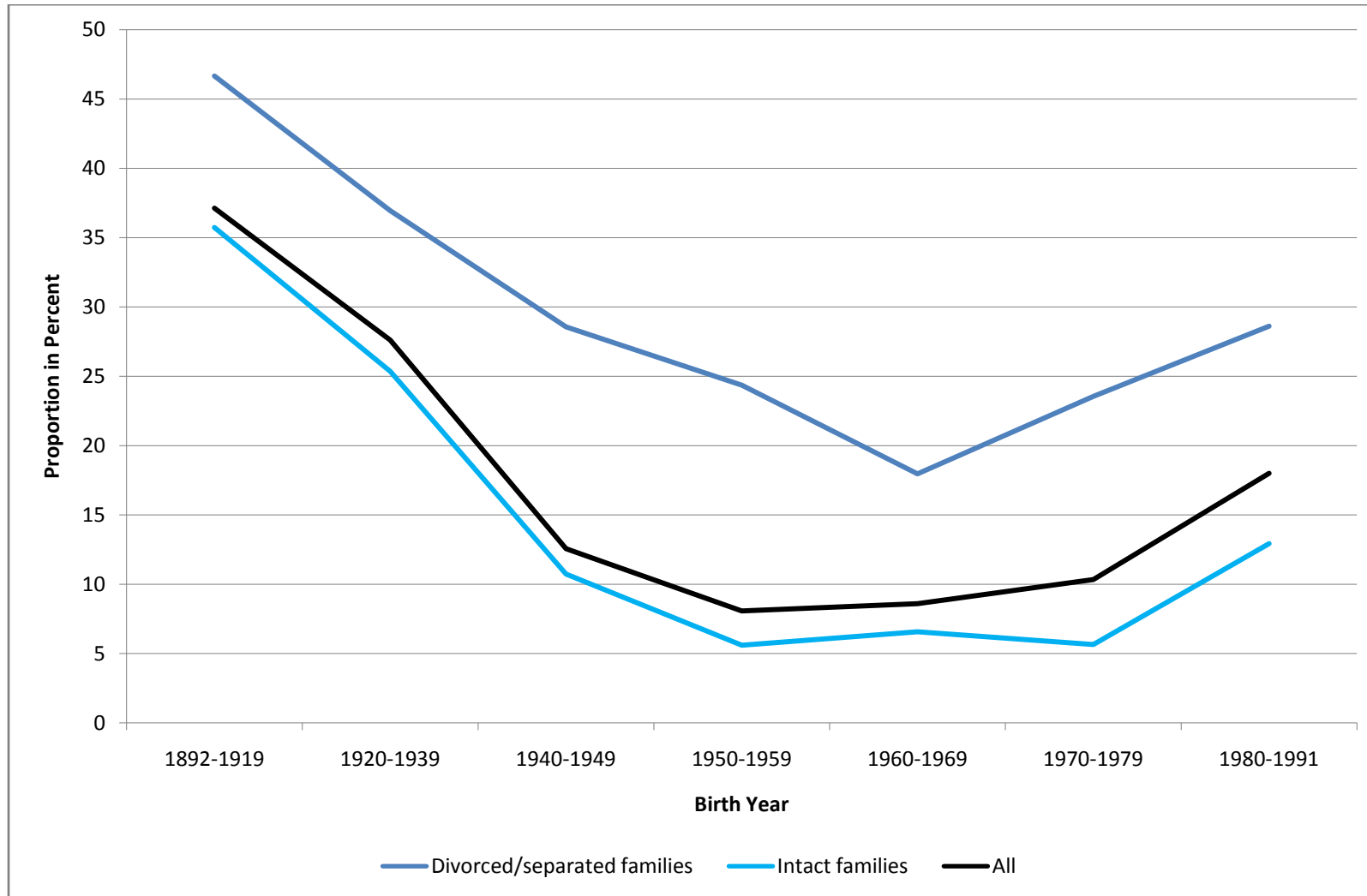
**Figure 1. Childhood Family Type and Severe Dissension in the Childhood Family by Birth Year (1892–1991). Five Years Moving Averages**



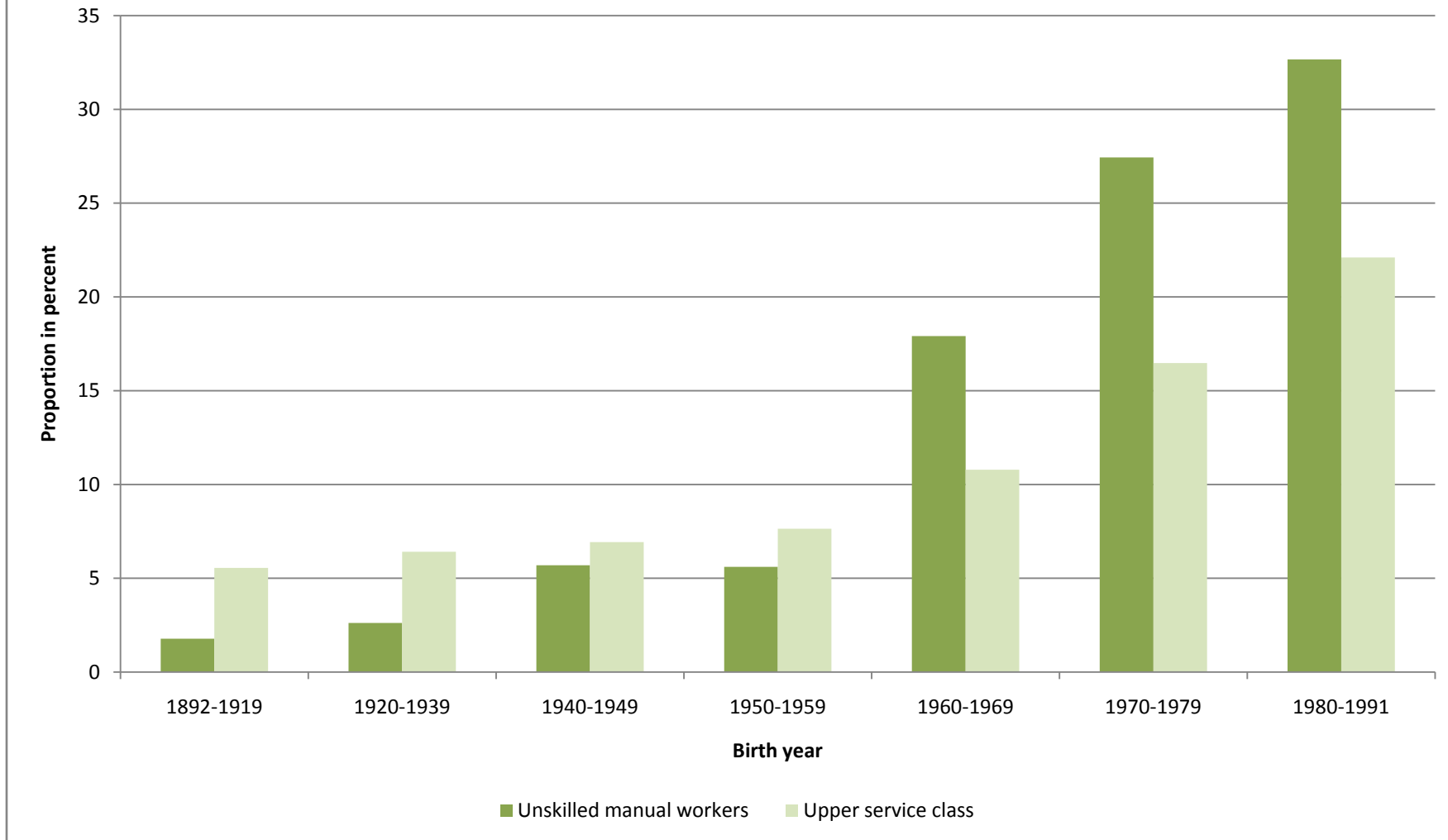
**Figure 2. Severe Dissension in Childhood Family by Childhood Family Type and Birth Year (1892–1991)**



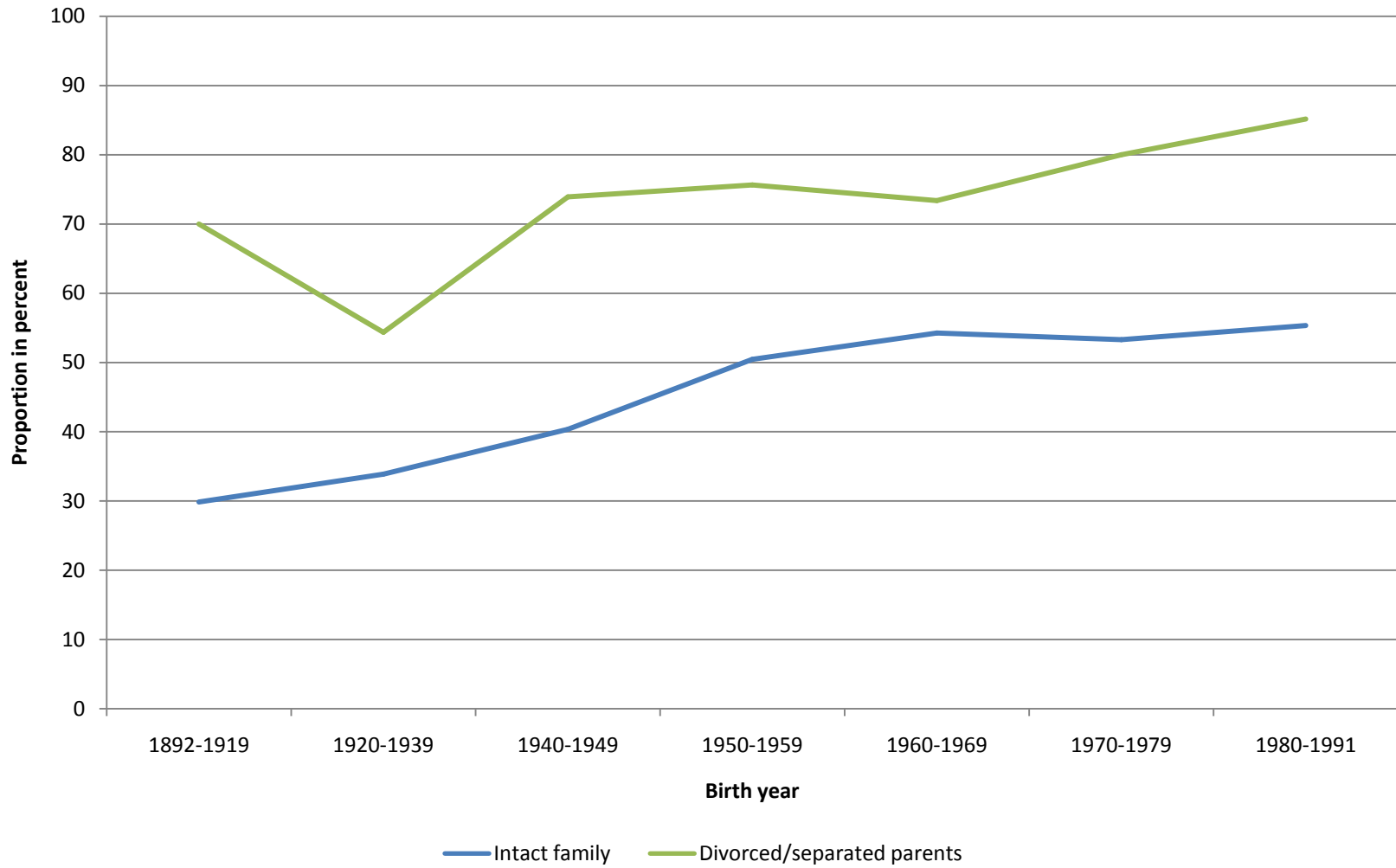
**Figure 3. Economic Difficulties in Childhood Family by Family Type and Birth Year (1892-1991)**



**Figure 4. Experience of Parental Divorce During Childhood by Parental Social Class and Birth Year (1892–1991)**



**Figure 5. Any Residential Move in Childhood by Family Type and Birth Year (1892-1991)**



**Figure 6. Other Conditions among Children with Divorced/Separated Parents by Birth Year (1925–1991)**

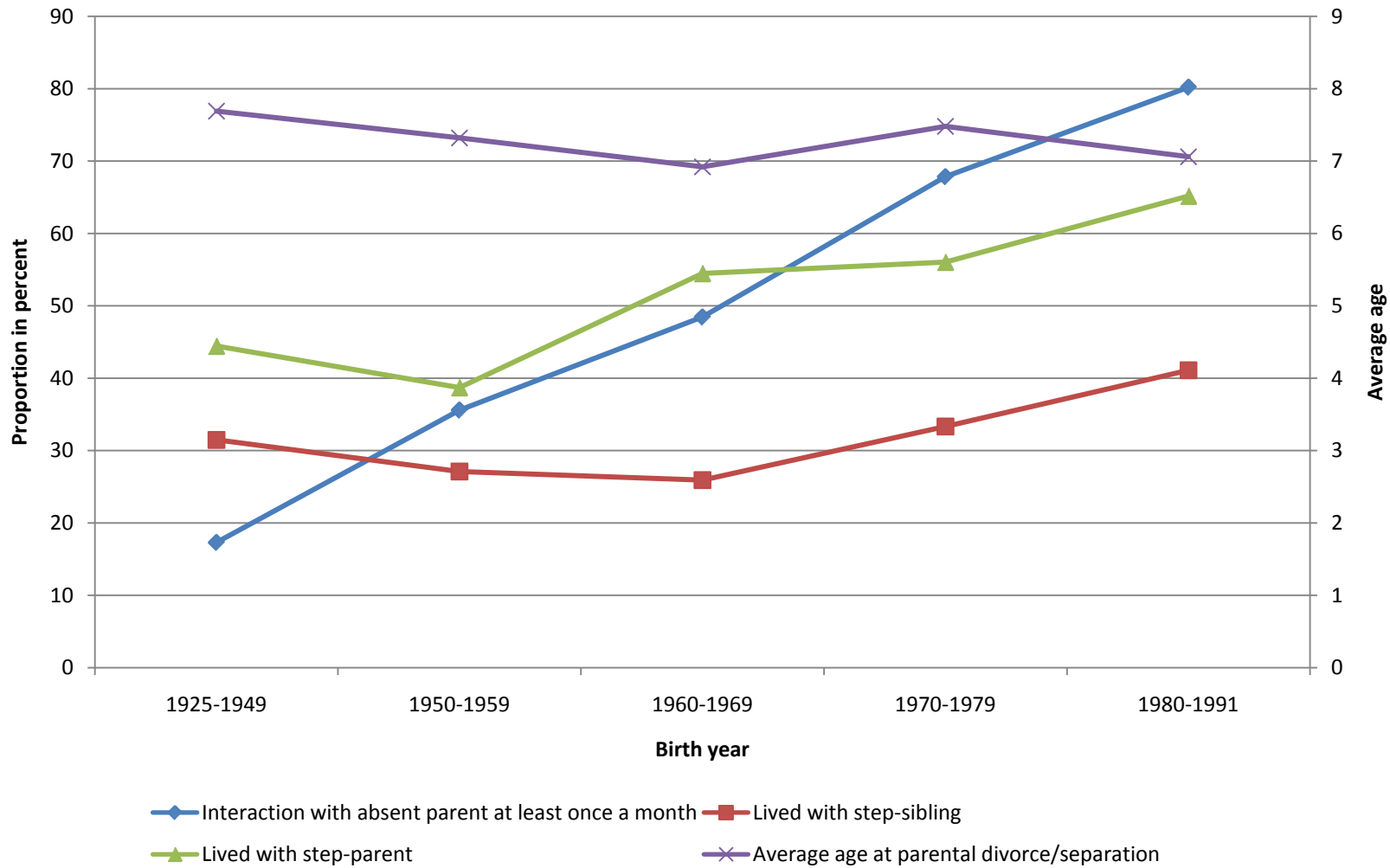


Table 1: Low psychological well-being by family type in childhood (cross-sectional analyses based on LNU 1968 and 2010 respectively) and year for parental divorce (analysis based on pooled data for LNU 1968 and 2010). Linear Probability Model with robust standard errors

Model	Survey year (year for parental divorce)					
	1968 (1924-1965)		2010 (1966-2007)		1968 and 2010 (pooled data)	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Male	-0.067***	-0.065***	-0.088***	-0.077***	-0.076***	-0.069***
Age	0.002**	0.002*	-0.004***	-0.003**	-0.000	-0.000
Divorced/separated parents	0.102*	0.001	0.058*	0.008	0.095*	0.012
<i>Parents' education (dominant)</i>						
Primary school		0		0		0
Vocational school		0.014		0.036		0.021
Lower secondary school		0.003		0.012		0.007
Upper secondary school or higher		-0.053†		-0.000		-0.011
<i>Parents' social class (dominant)</i>						
Unskilled manual worker		0		0		0
Skilled manual worker		-0.016		-0.031		-0.018
Routine non-manual employee		-0.006		-0.028		-0.017
Lower service class		0.010		0.006		0.012
Self-employed		0.020		-0.072*		-0.012
Farmer		0.009		0.007		0.010
Upper service class		0.075†		0.016		0.035
Economic difficulties in childhood		0.057**		0.090**		0.076***
Residential move in childhood		0.019		0.033†		0.018†
Severe dissension in childhood family		0.157***		0.091***		0.121***
Survey year 2010					0.041***	0.035*
Divorced/separated parents*survey year 2010					-0.031	-0.001
Constant	0.060*	0.156**	0.299***	0.420***	0.137***	0.264***
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.020</b>	<b>0.055</b>	<b>0.029</b>	<b>0.057</b>	<b>0.025</b>	<b>0.054</b>
<b>Number of observations</b>		<b>2,310</b>		<b>1,564</b>		<b>3,876</b>

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; †  $p \leq 0.10$ .



Table 2: Years of education below median (for birth cohort) by family type in childhood (cross-sectional analyses based on LNU 1968 and 2010 respectively) and year for parental divorce (analysis based on pooled data for LNU 1968 and 2010). Linear Probability Model with robust standard errors

Model	Survey year (year for parental divorce)					
	1968 (1924-1965)		2010 (1966-2007)		1968 and 2010 (pooled data)	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Male	-0.006	-0.013	0.089***	0.083***	0.032*	0.027†
Age	-0.006***	-0.010***	0.014***	0.012***	0.002*	-0.001
Divorced/separated parents	0.038	0.096†	0.129***	0.120***	0.060	0.128**
<i>Parents' education (dominant)</i>						
Primary school		0		0		0
Vocational school		-0.161***		-0.081†		-0.136***
Lower secondary school		-0.213***		-0.132**		-0.199***
Upper secondary school or higher		-0.256***		-0.151***		-0.237***
<i>Parents' social class (dominant)</i>						
Unskilled manual worker		0		0		0
Skilled manual worker		-0.101***		-0.080†		-0.092***
Routine non-manual employee		-0.168***		-0.114*		-0.128***
Lower service class		-0.194***		-0.192***		-0.181***
Self-employed		-0.148***		-0.107*		-0.129***
Farmer		0.115***		-0.109		0.080**
Upper service class		-0.238***		-0.325***		-0.284***
Economic difficulties in childhood		0.045†		0.067†		0.021
Residential move in childhood		0.013		-0.032		-0.001
Severe dissension in childhood family		0.001		-0.021		-0.013
Survey year 2010					-0.035*	0.200***
Divorced/separated parents*survey year 2010					0.047	-0.031
Constant	0.564***	0.894***	-0.128**	0.355***	0.308***	0.562***
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.009</b>	<b>0.143</b>	<b>0.062</b>	<b>0.153</b>	<b>0.006</b>	<b>0.113</b>
<b>Number of observations</b>		<b>2,310</b>		<b>1,564</b>		<b>3,874</b>

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; †  $p \leq 0.10$