

# Assessing the parental SES gradient in young Britons' partnership expectations, attitudes and its potential mediators

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## ABSTRACT

A well-documented trend in family demography is that young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to enter their first partnership earlier and forego marriage more often than their advantaged counterparts. Yet, limited research has explored whether there is also an association between parental background and expectations for partnership formation, which are considered important precursors of behaviours. Further, few studies have explored the potential mechanisms mediating these differences. This paper uses data from the British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society to analyse the relationships between parental socioeconomic status and young Britons' expectations for marriage, cohabitation, and attitudes towards ideal age at marriage. Using the KHB decomposition as a mediation method, we verify whether these relationships are explained by two mechanisms measured during the young adults' adolescence: family structure socialisation and academic socialisation. We find that marriage expectations are socially stratified in the UK. Those from the least advantaged backgrounds have significantly lower expectations for marriage than the most advantaged, but this difference does not hold for cohabitation. Those from the least advantaged backgrounds are also more uncertain about their ideal age at marriage. Academic socialisation mediates these relationships to a limited extent. Family structure socialisation mediates a greater percentage, especially living with a single parent, rather than married parents, during adolescence.

## 1. Introduction

The rise in persistent singlehood, living apart together, and cohabitation have all contributed to the delay or foregoing of marriage in high-income countries (Sassler and Lichter, 2020; Sobotka and Berghammer, 2021). However, the adoption of less traditional family behaviours, e.g., single-motherhood, nonmarital childbearing (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan et al. 2015; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010, 2012; Mooyaart, 2021) and long-term cohabitation without marriage (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Berrington et al., 2015), has happened to varying extents within different socioeconomic sub-groups. Studying the subjective reasoning underlying demographic behaviours (in this case, partnerships) could enrich the understanding of the trends that exist in the exact behaviours (Bernardi et al., 2019; Billari et al., 2019; Vignoli et al., 2020). First, gauging variations in young adults' subjective outlooks on

partnerships is important, since they provide insight into whether these partnership dynamics reflect changes in the ideational context around union formation (Manning et al., 2019). Second, the social stratification of the subjective perspectives (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011; Hiekel, 2021) may enhance understanding of the mechanisms underlying socioeconomic differences in family behaviours. These differences could lead to a cumulative socioeconomic disadvantage, e.g., in terms of earnings and either physical or mental health (Mooyaart et al., 2019; Hiekel, 2021; Zoutewelle-Terovan and Muller, 2021).

In this paper, we focus on expectations for marriage and cohabitation, expressed as subjective probabilities, and attitudes towards the ideal age at marriage.<sup>1</sup> Expectations represent what individuals believe will happen in the future based on their previous life experiences (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bohon et al., 2006; Vaisey, 2010; Bazani, 2023). Attitudes towards marriage timing are subjective

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, they are also referred to as simply attitudes towards age at marriage.

evaluations of the ages or times considered good or preferred to marry (Allendorf et al., 2021). This likely reflects optimal age norms defined by the social and cultural context where the young individual grew up and lived (Settersten and Mayer, 1997; Settersten, 2003). Therefore, both these concepts draw from individual and social experience and contribute to influencing young adults' current behaviours and selecting them into different life choices and trajectories (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby and Carroll 2015). Although expectations represent important indications of behaviour also in young ages (Manning et al., 2019), it may be that there is some variation as time passes, individuals get older and more information becomes available (Willoughby, 2010).

Using prospective data from two household panel surveys, we examine whether expectations and attitudes among 16–21-year-olds in the UK differ by parental socioeconomic status (SES), measured through parental occupational class when the respondent was an adolescent. Having found significant relationships linking parental SES and expectations/attitudes, we quantify the extent to which two potential mechanisms mediate these relationships. "Family structure socialisation" highlights the role of family structure during adolescence in influencing young adults' own partnership expectations (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; Bloome and Ang, 2020; Boertien and Bernardi, 2022). "Academic socialisation" posits that socioeconomic differences in adolescent educational aspirations also affect expectations regarding partnership dynamics (Wiik 2009; Brons et al., 2017, 2021; Billari et al., 2019).

We contribute to the literature by identifying parental class differences in young adults' subjective partnership outcomes and testing potential mechanisms. Existing literature focuses on the role of parental SES in influencing demographic behaviours (Mooyaart and Liefbroer, 2016; Brons et al., 2017; Koops et al., 2017; Liefbroer and Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2021), missing that propensity towards certain behaviours can already be recognised early on in the life course. Some studies examine partnership intentions, often within a certain timeframe (Liefbroer and De Jong Gierveld, 1993; Carroll et al., 2007, 2009; Thornton et al., 2007; Willoughby and Carroll 2015; Vergauwen et al., 2017; Billari et al., 2019), norms, preferences or attitudes (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Carroll et al., 2007; Liefbroer and Billari, 2010; Settersten and Ray, 2010; Keijer et al., 2016; Allendorf et al., 2021). Existing literature focusing on the expectations has considered marriage only (Gassanov et al., 2008) or has also dealt with both expectations for marriage and cohabitation. When analysing both outcomes, studies focused on differences by ethnicity in the UK (Berrington, 2020), individual SES and parental education (Manning, Smock et al., 2014; Manning et al., 2019) or different adolescents' characteristics in the US (Manning et al., 2007). Manning et al. (2014) also analysed the determinants underlying the realisation of cohabitation expectations in the US.

## 2. Parental SES, young adults' expectations for partnership formation and attitudes towards age at marriage

The theory of conjunctural action argues that individuals within the same social group share a common social structure since childhood (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011). Shared schemas and resources encourage similar views about their life course and comparable behavioural patterns. Schemas and resources are distinct concepts, but they are strongly interdependent in motivating social action (Johnson-Hanks et al., 2011). Schemas are the cultural elements behind a certain behaviour, e.g. values and beliefs (Manning et al., 2022). Resources, either material, e.g., finances, or nonmaterial, e.g., time, serve as constraints or incentives for specific behaviours and may reinforce the establishment of schemas (Bachrach and Morgan, 2013).

Young adults sharing the same parental SES likely have similar expectations and attitudes towards life events, including family formation. Parental SES can influence children's schemas directly, e.g., through finances or discussions on specific topics, or indirectly. For instance, parents from different backgrounds can consciously socialise their

children with values regarding desirable life goals, support them in their realisation, and serve as standards in guiding young adults' demographic behaviour (Billari et al., 2019; Hiekel, 2021). The influence of one social structure can be moderated or even nullified by the effect of other structures, which entail different schemas and resources, e.g., gender or historical period.

Parental class is a strong indicator of social origins in the UK (Blanden et al., 2018). It represents long-term access to economic resources and is strongly intertwined with parental education and status. The former exemplifies the educational resources through which parents support their children's learning and successful progression through the educational system, whereas the latter shows "sociocultural resources" influencing social networks, cultural tastes and sociocultural participation (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2013). This conception significantly resembles Bourdieu's concept of social class (Bourdieu 1986), which embodies three forms of capital—economic, cultural, and social—and has greatly influenced class research in the UK. For instance, when surveying individuals' subjective perceptions of their social class in Britain, Savage et al. (2015) have investigated class as economic capital, i.e. income and wealth, but also as cultural capital, i.e., tastes, interests and activities, and social capital, i.e., networks, friendships and associations.

### 2.1. The role of parents' financial resources in influencing the expectations for partnership formation and the attitudes towards age at marriage

Parents' financial resources contribute to the different forms and timings of young adults' transitions to adulthood, shaping their partnership expectations (Bynner, 2005; Du Bois-Reymond 2015). Compared to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, e.g., working class, those from an advantaged parental background, e.g., those from a middle social class or above, who are here defined as high-SES or intermediate-SES, are more likely to undergo "emerging adulthood" (Bynner, 2005; Kloep and Hendry, 2011), i.e., a transitory phase between adolescence and young adulthood for life exploration without serious commitments (Arnett, 2000; Tanner and Arnett, 2011). While experiencing emerging adulthood, wealthier parents can afford to pay for the housing, living expenses and tuition fees of their grown-up children and, thus, help emerging adults devote time to higher education, secure stable employment with good prospects and search for the optimal partner (Kennedy et al., 2003; Schoeni and Ross 2005; Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2013; Cepa and Furstenberg, 2021). For this reason, young adults with high- and intermediate-SES parents tend to follow a more standardised transition into adulthood than those from less advantaged backgrounds, starting with higher education, continuing with the establishment in the labour market and ending with the first marriage and childbearing (Osgood et al., 2005; Sassler et al., 2010; Berrington et al., 2015).

Those from less advantaged backgrounds often cannot experience emerging adulthood to the same extent, given the reduced financial support from their family of origin and the consequent need to urgently provide for themselves (Bynner, 2005; Willoughby and Carroll 2015; Berg et al., 2018). Traditionally, those from poorer backgrounds followed an accelerated transition into adulthood, with early entry into the labour market and family formation (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011). However, in recent decades, employment precarity and housing unaffordability have progressively decreased the future economic prospects of less-skilled young adults, leading to extended stays or returns to the parental home, disrupting patterns of early independence seen in the UK (Berrington & Stone, 2014; Gagné, Sacker, & Schoon, 2021; ONS, 2023).

The social stratification of the transition into adulthood, which strongly relies on parental resources, is strictly intertwined with the differences in marriage expectations and timing. UK and US studies find marriage is more likely among individuals from more advantaged classes (Bloome and Ang, 2020; Palumbo et al., 2023). One explanation is

that wealthier parents can assist grown-up children in setting up their family life (Thornton et al., 2007), e.g. by helping with the expenses for a "proper wedding celebration" and clearing their "economic bar to marriage", i.e., a series of economic standards that, if not met, can discourage entry a marriage (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Ishizuka, 2018). Additionally, they can help long-term, e.g., by paying mortgage instalments (Pannell and Jenkins, 2018). Further, the financial influence of high-SES and intermediate-SES parents can shape their children's marriage expectations by sanctioning children who do not comply with their preferences towards partnership behaviours, e.g., cutting off their finances or avoiding contact (Axinn and Thornton, 1993; Manning et al., 2011).

High-SES parents may also discuss with their children and encourage them to postpone family formation due to the potential negative consequences of early childbearing for establishing careers (Brons et al., 2021; Mooyaart, 2021). Thus, their children may have also developed preferences for a relatively late age at marriage (Berrington et al., 2015; Billari et al., 2019). Given that the earlier timing of the transition into adulthood characterises less advantaged young adults the most, we might expect that disadvantaged youth would prefer a relatively early age at marriage. However, this is not likely to be the case nowadays. The more liberal attitudes towards cohabitation and the increasingly difficult economic circumstances of youth may have enhanced the uncertainty of disadvantaged young adults regarding their preferred age at marriage, as they might anticipate a longer time spent cohabiting and delaying marriage (Wiik 2009; Brons et al., 2021).

Expectations towards cohabitation represent an exception to these socially differentiated patterns. Nowadays, many couples start their coresidential partnership as cohabitation and marry afterwards, albeit to different extents. Thus, we might expect parental SES to have less influence on expectations for cohabitation since it has become the normative pathway to enter the first coresidential union across almost all social groups (Sánchez Gassen, 2023). Whilst those from more advantaged parental backgrounds may cohabit during emerging adulthood to "test out" their relationship, couples from poorer backgrounds, who face more uncertain economic conditions, may find cohabitation more accessible than marriage and, thus, either stay within it for longer or, even, not to marry (Smock et al., 2005; Sassler and Miller, 2011; Hiekel et al., 2014).

In sum, we posit that:

**H1a.** : Young Britons with low-SES parents are less likely to expect marriage in their lives than their counterparts with high-SES and intermediate-SES parents.

**H1b.** : No socioeconomic differences exist in young adults' cohabitation expectations.

**H2a.** : Among young adults intending to marry at a specific age, those with low-SES parents have a similar preferred age at marriage as those with high- or intermediate-SES parents.

**H2b.** : Compared to those with an advantaged background, those with disadvantaged parents are more likely to report that they do not wish to marry or are more uncertain regarding their ideal age at marriage.

## 2.2. Mechanisms underlying SES differences in expectations and attitudes

### 2.2.1. Family structure socialisation

Numerous studies, mostly from Anglo-Saxon countries, find that children from poorer family backgrounds are less likely to experience a family situation where both parents are coresident and married during childhood (McLanahan, 2004; Kiernan et al., 2011; McLanahan and Jacobsen, 2015). Children from poorer SES backgrounds are more likely to be raised within cohabitation (Probert, 2009; Crawford et al., 2013) because low-SES parents are less likely to marry due to a lack of economic resources and because re-partnering after dissolution is frequently characterised by post-separation cohabitation (Perelli-Harris

et al., 2017). Therefore, they are more likely to experience parental separation and grow up in non-intact families, e.g., single- or stepparent families. Economic stress has been blamed for the greater instability of partnerships among low-SES couples, as it may diminish the relationship quality between parents and facilitate dissolution (Conger et al., 1994, 2010; Ermisch et al., 2004, 2012).

Experiencing family instability and non-traditional family structures in childhood is associated with a greater likelihood of non-marital cohabitation, extra-marital fertility, and partnership instability in adulthood. The exposures analysed in these studies cover several living arrangements, e.g. single parents (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Graefe and Lichter, 1999; Lichter et al., 2003), cohabiting parents (Reed, 2006; Smock et al., 2013), and divorced and repartnered parents (Amato, 1996; Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997; Amato and DeBoer, 2001; Amato and Patterson, 2017; Kamp Dush et al., 2018). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1979) can explain these relationships. First, children are enculturated by parents, i.e., while observing their parents during childhood, they learn their parents' ways of thinking, believing and behaving, including regarding partnerships. Second, parents may consciously socialise them with values and norms actively supporting a certain family structure (Smock et al., 2013; Hiekel, 2021). Consequently, compared to children raised by married parents, those who experienced other living arrangements tend to be more inclined to consider them common and normal (Axinn and Thornton, 1993; Willoughby et al., 2012; Smock et al., 2013; Allendorf et al., 2021). It is also plausible that they are more likely to expect such arrangements during adulthood (Amato, 1996; Amato and DeBoer, 2001). Based on these arguments, we expect the following scenario (cohabitation expectations and attitudes for age at marriage are not included, given we do not hypothesise parental SES differences):

**H3a.** : Not living with two married parents during adolescence partially mediates the relationship between parental SES and young adults' expectations for marriage (hypothesised in H1a).

**H3b.** : Not living with two married parents during adolescence partially mediates the socioeconomic differences expected for the relative risks of uncertainty about the age at marriage and not wanting to marry (hypothesised in H2b).

### 2.2.2. Academic socialisation

Children with wealthier parents have higher educational aspirations, e.g., plans to attend college or university, than those with low-SES parents (Hill and Tyson, 2009; Benner 2011). Indeed, advantaged parents are more likely to instil educational aspirations in their children (Brons et al., 2021; Mooyaart, 2021). Compared to low-SES parents, wealthier parents are more disposed to invest their wealth and time in children's high-quality education (Becker and Tomes, 1986); they are also more likely to engage in academic socialisation, i.e. transferring the positive beliefs and behaviours necessary to improve school performance and feel motivated to continue their studies beyond the compulsory age (Taylor et al., 2004).

Higher-SES and intermediate-SES parents are more likely to perform a "concerted cultivation" than "natural growth", which more often characterises low-SES parents (Lareau, 2011). It means they actively engage in school activities, such as volunteering, meeting with teachers, and participating in school governance. At home, they also tend to offer educational and cognitively stimulating activities (e.g. visits to museums), assist with homework, provide a structure for free and work time or discuss their plans for their academic future (Vincent and Ball, 2006; Hill and Tyson, 2009; Benner 2011).

Educational aspirations often combine with high levels of economic socialisation: individuals tend to reproduce in adulthood the living standards experienced in childhood (Easterlin, 1976, 1987). This relationship exists as higher educational aspirations are generally connected to a successful career and enough earnings to maintain the same socioeconomic well-being experienced in childhood (Thornton et al.,

2007). Thus, compared to their counterparts who tend to have low aspirations to attend college or university, young adults with higher educational aspirations should expect brighter economic horizons and achieve financial independence and enough appeal to enter a financially demanding relationship such as marriage (Carroll et al., 2009; Willoughby and Carroll 2015; Arocho and Kamp Dush, 2018). In contrast, those with more modest educational aspirations will have less optimistic expectations regarding their economic prospects and their ability to enter a marriage or be attractive marital partners (Arocho, 2021).

Young adults from wealthier parental backgrounds are likely also to have favourable attitudes towards a later age at first marriage because they envision a longer period in education and looking for a suitable partner, which are conditions that are easier to conciliate with a cohabitation rather than a long-term relationship as a marriage (Oppenheimer, 1988, 2003; Plotnick, 2007; Brons et al., 2017, 2021; Billari et al., 2019). Simultaneously, those with low educational aspirations may foresee stronger economic constraints for entering a marriage and are more uncertain about whether and when they prefer to marry. We expect that:

**H4a.** : Individuals' educational aspirations during adolescence partly mediate the relationship between parental SES and young adults' expectations for marriage (hypothesised in H1a).

**H4b.** : Individuals' educational aspirations also mediate the socio-economic differences expected for the relative risks of uncertainty about the age at marriage and not wanting to marry (hypothesised in H2b).

### 3. Data and methods

The data comes from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and Understanding Society (UKHLS) (ISER, 2020). The sample includes youths who provided at least one valid observation on the outcome variables, i.e., expectations for forming partnerships and attitudes towards the age at marriage. These questions were asked more than once in specific waves as part of the "young adults' module" between ages 16 and 21. All of the repeated observations of expectations/attitudes within an individual were included in the regression model. Expectations were collected in waves 12 (2002), 13 (2003) (Northern Irish sample), and 17 (2007) of the BHPS, and waves 2 (2010/2011), 3 (2011/2012), 5 (2013/2014), 7 (2015/2016), and 9 (2017/2018) of the UKHLS, whilst attitudes towards the age at marriage were asked in waves 4 (2012/2013), 6 (2014/2015), 8 (2016/2017), and 10 (2018/2019) of the UKHLS. Another criterion of inclusion in the sample was that the young adult had participated in the youth questionnaire between the ages of 10 and 15, i.e., their adolescence, and given at least one valid answer to the yearly question on educational aspirations. If the respondent had repeated observations for educational aspirations, we selected the earliest observation to maximise the gap between the time when educational aspirations were reported and expectations for partnerships, collected at ages 16 – 21.

When analysing expectations, the final sample consists of 11,370 person-wave observations (i.e., valid measures of expectations for marriage and cohabitation), corresponding to 6554 individuals. Of these individuals, 1875 present two observations, 1299 three, and 268 four. Some individuals (around 14 % of the sample) shared the same household, most likely as siblings. The sample providing information on the ideal age at marriage is smaller because it was surveyed in fewer waves and corresponds to 4950 individuals (8316 observations). Fig. 1 presents potential trajectories of the youth included in the sample to facilitate understanding of the sample selection.

#### 3.1. Dependent variables

Young adults' expectations about marriage and cohabitation were elicited through subjective probabilities using the following

introductory text: "On a scale from 0 % to 100 %, where 0 % means 'No chance of happening' and 100 % means 'Totally likely to happen', please tell me how likely it is that the following events will happen in your life in the future. If any of the following events have already happened, just let me know". Young adults were questioned about their likelihood to "marry at some time"<sup>2</sup> or to "live unmarried with a partner". The young adults who already experienced a cohabitation (210) or marriage (68) either before or during the participation to the panel are given the value of 100,<sup>3</sup> whereas those who answered "Don't know" are coded as 50 (12.4 % for marriage expectations and 17.4 % in the case of cohabitation) (Figure A 1 in the Appendix). The 50-value is often referred to as epistemic uncertainty, meaning that people struggle to picture a clear probability distribution of the event (Fischoff and De Bruin, 1999; Hurd, 2009).

We also examine young adults' attitudes towards their ideal age at marriage. Ideally, we would also explore the ideal age of cohabitation and whether marriage would be preceded by premarital cohabitation, but this was not asked. The text of the question is the following: "At what age do you want to get married?". The outcome, i.e., age at marriage, is continuous. However, we treat it as categorical due to the presence of respondents who answered that they did not want to get married or did not know the exact age at which they expected to marry. We cannot, however, exclude the possibility that they referred to marriage in general. The young adults who expressed a valid value for age at marriage are divided into two groups depending on whether they anticipated marrying before age 25, the modal age, or afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

#### 3.2. Parental SES

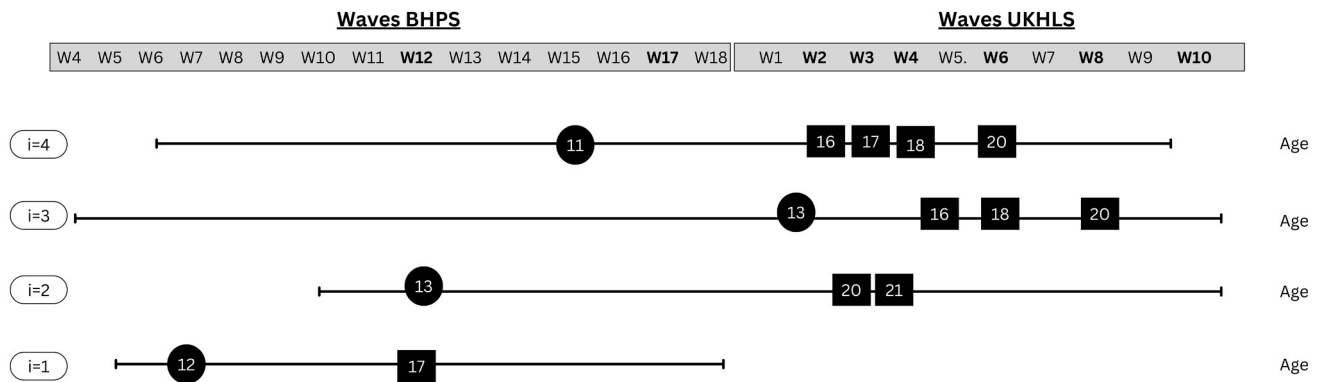
Parental occupational class is measured through the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), which aggregates individuals into classes according to the type of occupation, employment relations and working conditions (Pevalin and Rose, 2002). The variable is obtained from the parents' answers to the question about their occupation in the survey wave when their children answered the question on educational aspirations for the first time at ages 10–15. To operationalise class, we follow a "dominance approach" by considering the class of the coresident parent in the highest category, irrespective of the parent's gender (Erikson, 1984). If the child was residing with one parent only, parental class coincides with the one of the coresident parent. Further, if a stepparent was present alongside a biological parent, the occupational class of the coresident biological parent is considered. If both parents did not have information on class, the young adult is not included in the analysis because it is not possible to determine the respondent's parental class (201 observations).

The parental class consists of three ranked categories. The most advantaged class comprises parents in managerial or professional occupations, while the least advantaged those in routine, semi-routine or lower supervisory jobs. An in-between category is also included to represent parents working in intermediate occupations (ONS n.d.). For unemployed parents we use their most recent occupation. Respondents without information are considered never-employed or missing according to whether we could establish that they did not participate in paid employment for the entire observational period. Never-employed parents are included with the least advantaged parents.

<sup>2</sup> Since wave 5 of the UKHLS, the text is "marry (or form a civil partnership) at some time".

<sup>3</sup> To identify those who had a partnership or were living in a partnership, we rely on the file reporting respondents' partnership histories in BHPS and UKHLS (ISER, 2021) and on the current marital status. We made a robustness check without imputing the 100 value, stratifying the sample by gender to consider the differing in partnership formation of men and women. The results, available upon request, are invariant.

<sup>4</sup> 13 observations who answered an age below 18 and above 40 are excluded.



- Each line represents the life course of an individual observed in the sample. Each individual enters and exits the survey at different time points. In this graph, we assume interviews happening at a one-year distance (as in the survey documentation).
- The waves in bold (at the top of the graph) represent the ones in which the question on expectations were asked (we do not bold W13 as the Northern Irish sample, which was asked this question, did not fill the questionnaire and did not have information regarding educational aspirations during adolescence).
- The black circles indicate the age at which individuals completed the youth questionnaire for the first time during adolescence (ages 10-15), marking the period when parental SES and the mediators family structure and educational aspirations were measured in the study. On the other hand, the black squares represent the ages at which individuals responded to questions about expectations in the young adults' module (at ages 16-21).

Fig. 1. Potential life trajectories of individuals in the sample. Source: author's own representation.

### 3.3. Mediators

Educational aspirations, i.e., aspirations to go to college or university, are reported at ages 10 –15, when the respondent first completed the youth questionnaire. These are coded as either positive or negative/uncertain. We merged the latter two categories, as we think it is key to discern between those who have a definite positive aspiration and those who do not and avoid creating a too small category for those with completely negative expectations (11 % of the total). The second mediator identifies the respondent's family structure during adolescence from the parents' answers about their marital status, when the individual first answered the question on educational aspirations. The indicator has four categories: married, cohabiting, single-parent, and others who were living with no biological parents. Almost 90 % of the married parents were both biological parents, whereas around 62 % of the cohabiters were step-families. Due to small sample sizes, we did not distinguish between marriages and cohabitations with biological or non-biological parents. Instead, we defined family structure as parental marital status. Indeed, according to our theoretical background, parental marital status is more indicative of economic resources and, thus, is more in line with the idea of it partly explaining the relationship between parental SES and expectations.

### 3.4. Control variables

We include controls for important socio-demographic characteristics at ages 16 –21, when expectations or attitudes were collected. The respondent's current employment status considers employed, unemployed, inactive, self-defined students, or missing (when information is lacking). Both inactive and unemployed lacked a job at the time of the interview but the inactive differ from the unemployed in that they were not actively looking for one. Religious affiliation is classified as not religious, Christian, Muslim and a residual category including other faiths or with low sample size (e.g., Jews, Buddhist, Sikh, or Hindu). Since religion was not asked across all the BHPS and UKHLS waves, the missing information is imputed using the most recent available observation. The historical period in which the interview occurred is grouped as: before 2010; between 2010 and 2013; and after 2013. Other controls are age (dichotomised as equal or below 18 years old or above); sex; foreign status (signalling whether the person was or was not born in the UK); self-rated health (ranging from very good to bad); indicators for

coresidence with parents and biological children, and the number of coresident siblings.

### 3.5. Analytical strategy

We use pooled OLS regressions to analyse the relationship between parental class, during adolescence, and marriage or cohabitation expectations, during young adulthood. The standard errors are clustered at the individual level to account for correlation among repeated observations on the same individual (Wooldridge, 2018). The OLS regression models are weighted through cross-sectional weights rescaled to give an even representation of wave sizes. A multinomial logistic regression is used to identify relationships between the independent variables and attitudes towards age at marriage (Agresti, 2007). The reference category of the dependent variable consists of individuals expecting to marry at or after age 25, which is contrasted with individuals expecting to marry before age 25, those who were uncertain about their marital age (or, possibly, the event of marriage) and those not expecting to marry at all. As for OLS, standard errors are clustered at the individual level.

Using mediation analysis, we explore whether the total relationship (effect) between parental class during adolescence and partnership expectations in young adulthood (arrow *t* in Fig. 2A) could be explained by the two (mediating) mechanisms presented in Section 2. According to a mediation model, the total effect of parental SES on family expectations—in this case, the coefficient of the OLS or the relative risk ratio (RRR) of the multinomial logit regression model— can be decomposed into a direct and an indirect effect (Judd and Kenny 2010). The indirect effect reveals how much the total effect declines when the mediators are introduced in the model. It is the joint result of regressing the mediators (educational aspirations and family structure) on parental SES (and the controls) (arrows *i',j'* in Fig. 2B) and, then, expectations on the mediators and parental SES (and the controls) (arrows *i'',j''* in Fig. 2B). If both these relationships are sizable and significant, it is possible to identify a mediating path. The direct effect represents the size of the total relationship once the mediators are introduced in the model (arrow *d* in Fig. 2B). Depending on whether the direct effect points to zero or not, the mediation can be total or partial. The method used to perform the mediation analysis is the KHB decomposition, an acronym for "Karlson-Holm-Breen" (Kohler et al., 2011; Breen et al., 2012), which is suitable for identifying the contribution of each mediator to the indirect effect in both linear and nonlinear models.

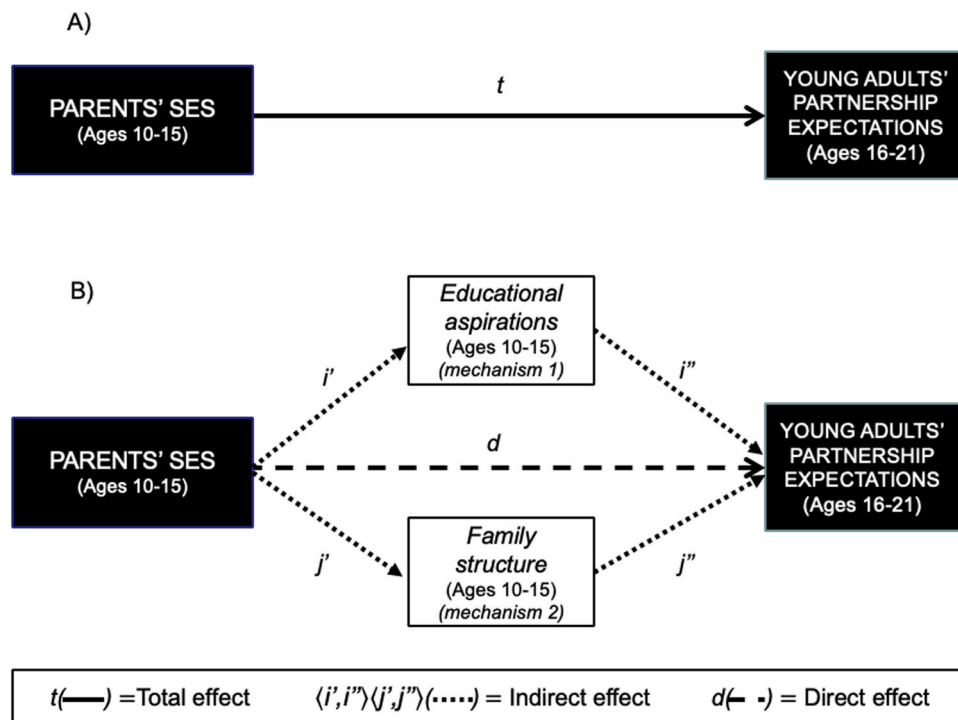


Fig. 2. Direct and indirect mechanisms influencing young people's partnership expectations. Source: authors' graphical representation.

Although it is reasonable to expect that the influence of parental class differs by gender and historical period, we do not stratify the main analyses (including mediation) by these dimensions for two reasons. First,

we do not find that the relationship between parental SES and expectations differs for men and women when interacting sex with parental SES. Second, when we interact historical period with parental SES, we

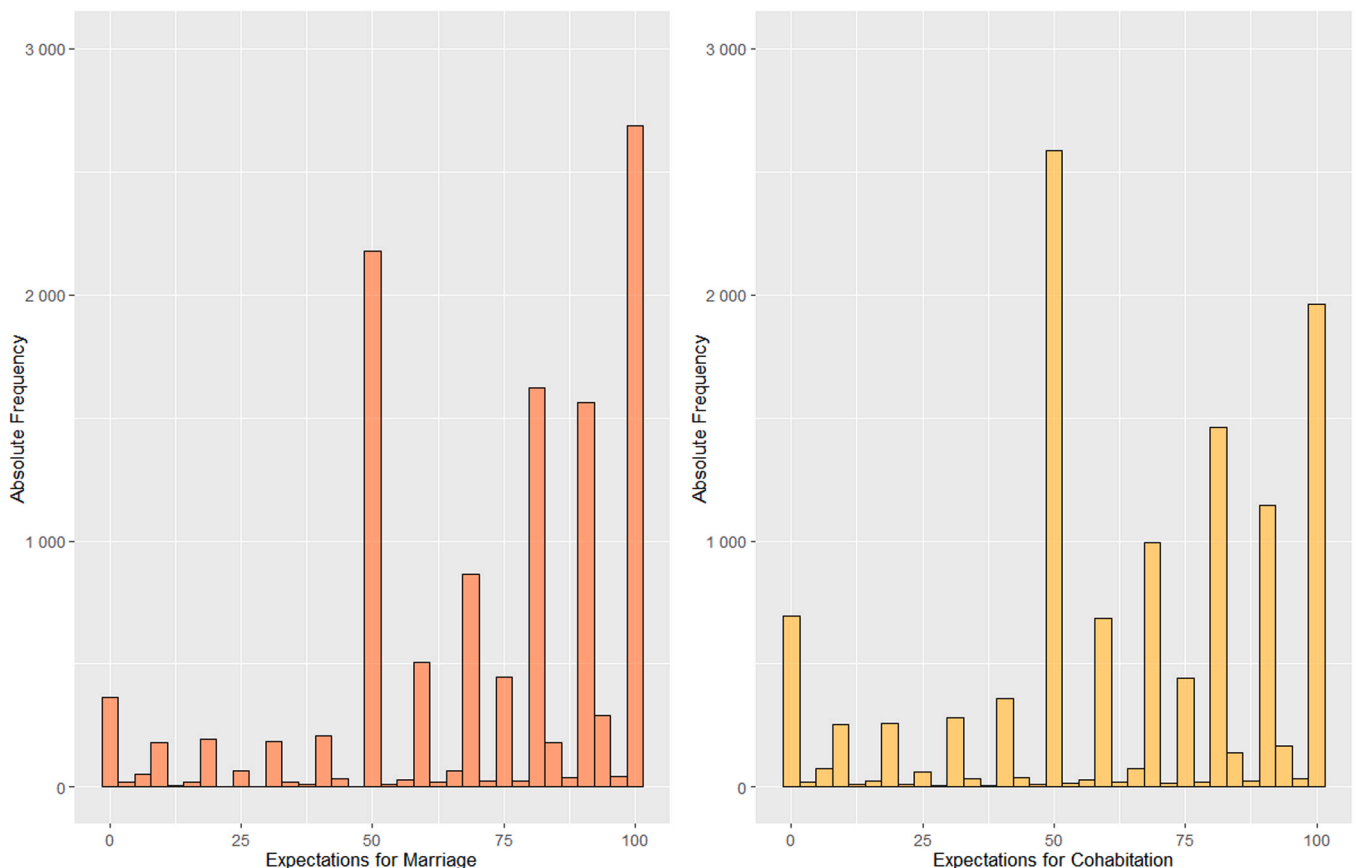


Fig. 3. Distribution of young adults' expectations for partnership formation (N = 11,370). Source: own weighted computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2002–2018).

find that the marriage expectations of the least advantaged fall more dramatically in the most recent period than in the least recent ones. However, given the scarce availability of observations in the earliest period, we do not conduct further analyses. The moderating effects of gender and historical period are presented in the Supplementary Material (analysis S1).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive results

Fig. 3 shows that the distribution of marriage and cohabitation expectations is highly skewed towards values beyond 49, especially 50 and 100. This irregular distribution is generally associated with individuals simplifying their reasoning by focusing on numbers ending in zero or five. Cohabitation expectations have a higher density at 0 and 50 than marriage. Given that 50 generally denotes uncertainty, it suggests young adults are more confident about the likelihood of marrying than cohabiting. Similar to expectations, the distribution of the numerical values of the ideal age at marriage peaks at 25 and 30 (Figure A 2). Observations expecting an “Early marriage” at ages 18–24 represent 8.6 % of the weighted sample, whereas those selecting “Later marriage” at ages 25–40 61 %. Around one-quarter of observations are uncertain about the expected age at marriage, whilst 7 % report that they do not expect to marry.<sup>5</sup>

Table 1 shows the distribution of parental class and the mediators during adolescence<sup>6</sup>. In the sample, children’s observations with dominant parents in managerial and professional occupations are the majority (45.3 %), followed by those with parents in the “least advantaged” (31.7 %) and intermediate occupations (23 %).<sup>7</sup> Further, Table 1 also shows that the most frequent family structure during adolescence is married parents (68.9 %), while cohabiting parents are less frequent (10.1 %). Consequently, marriage still appears to be the preferred arrangement by parents while raising children. Single parents represent a large share of observations in the sample (20.4 %). Finally, most youths aspire to go to college or university (70.9 %).

### 4.2. The total effect of parental SES on partnership expectations and attitudes

Fig. 4 compares the estimated marginal effects of parental class, during adolescence, on marriage and cohabitation expectations, during young adulthood. These estimates are derived from OLS models including no mediators, only educational aspirations, only family structure and both mediators (alongside control variables). The x-axis of the graph shows the estimated marginal effects of parental SES on marriage and cohabitation expectations. The red line centred at 0 indicates whether the estimates significantly differ from zero at the 5 % significance level. On the y-axis, the graph shows parental class during adolescence (first row) and the two mediators, educational aspirations and family structure during adolescence (second and third row, respectively).

<sup>5</sup> The internal consistency of the answers was verified by cross-tabulating the answers to marriage expectations and attitudes towards marital age, among those who answered both questions. Around 80 % of those who answered a numerical age at marriage report marriage expectations above 50, whereas 70 % of those who did not plan to marry report a marriage expectation equal to 50 or below. Among those uncertain, 26.6 % expect 50 and 45.8 % between 75 and 100. Thus, it is likely that most individuals are uncertain about age at marriage rather than the event, and a lower share of them refer to the event.

<sup>6</sup> All the statistics refer to the main sample that considers expectations for marriage and cohabitation (not age at marriage).

<sup>7</sup> Parents who have never been employed during their children’s adolescence represent 2.5 % of the entire weighted sample (375 person-waves), of which single mothers account for nearly 60 %.

**Table 1**

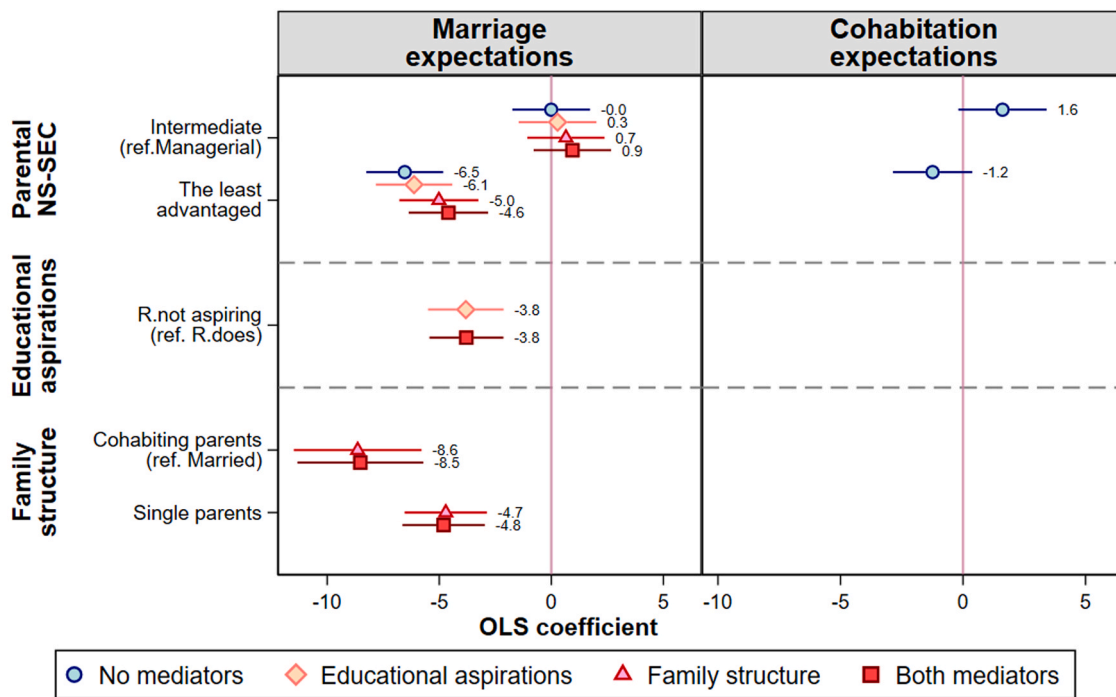
Distribution of the person-years of parental social class, mediators, and controls (N = 11,370).

	Unweighted absolute frequency	Weighted relative frequency (percentage)
<b>PARENTAL SES AND MEDIATORS DURING ADOLESCENCE (Ages 10–15)</b>		
<b>Parental class</b>		
Managerial & professionals (high-SES)	5 223	45.3
Intermediate	2 519	23.0
The least advantaged (low-SES)	3 628	31.7
<b>Family structure</b>		
Married parents	7 813	68.9
Cohabiting parents	1 047	10.1
Single parents	2 438	20.4
Others	72	0.6
<b>Educational aspirations</b>		
No/Not sure	3 221	29.1
Yes	8 149	70.9
<b>CONTROL VARIABLES DURING YOUNG ADULTHOOD (Ages 16–21)</b>		
<b>Activity status</b>		
Employed	2 763	27.4
Unemployed	511	5.1
Inactive	503	4.5
Student	7 493	62.3
Missing	100	0.8
<b>Age</b>		
16–18	7 646	67.1
19–21	3 724	32.9
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	5 428	52.7
Female	5 942	47.3
<b>Wave of the interview</b>		
Before 2010 (12,17 BHPS)	1 537	24.1
2010/2013 (1,2 3,5 UKHLS)	5 432	45.5
2015/2018 (7,9 UKHLS)	4 401	30.4
<b>Religion faith</b>		
No religion	6 180	59.6
Christian	1 998	19.9
Muslim	819	3.2
Other faiths	345	2.6
Missing	2 028	14.7
<b>Foreign status</b>		
Born in the UK	9 256	82.2
Not born in the UK	454	3.3
Missing	1 660	14.6
<b>Number of coresident siblings</b>		
0	2 823	24.3
1–2	6 971	64.1
3 or more	1 576	11.6
<b>Number of coresident biological children</b>		
No children	11 197	98.5
Presence of coresident children	173	1.5
<b>Health status</b>		
Very good	6 849	56.1
Good	3 331	32.7
Fair	870	8.5
Bad	190	2.1
Missing	130	0.7
<b>Coresidence with parents</b>		
No	682	5.1
Yes	10 688	94.9

Source: own weighted computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2002–2018).

Note: Some relative frequencies may go beyond 100 % due to rounding.

We now consider the total effect of parental SES on expectations for marriage and cohabitation, i.e., the relationship depicted in Fig. 2 A, whose characteristics are hypothesised in H1a and H1b. This effect is illustrated by the blue circles in the first row of each panel, representing the estimated marginal effects of the model regressing expectations on



- Intervals are graphed at the 95% confidence level  
 - Marriage and cohabitation expectations are measured at ages 16-21  
 - Parental SES, Educational aspirations, and Family Structure are measured at ages 10-15  
 - All models are controlled for activity status, sex, religion, foreign status, number of coresident siblings, age, historical period, health status, coresidence with parents, coresidence with own children (measured at ages 16-21)

**Fig. 4.** Coefficients from four OLS models regressing partnership expectations on parental class and control variables. Models contain, respectively, no mediators, only educational aspirations, only family structure and both mediators (N = 11,370).  
 Notes: The category “Other types of families” has been removed from the graph because its wide confidence intervals did not allow proper visualisation of the results.  
 Source: own computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2002–2018).

parental class only (Table A 1 presents the complete estimates from the analytical model).

First, we focus on the left panel of Fig. 4, which shows marriage expectations. This panel shows, that, holding other variables constant, young adults whose parents were in the least advantaged parental class present marriage expectations that are, on average, 6.5 points (out of 100) lower than those whose parents were in a managerial and professional one. Conversely, the marginal effect of the intermediate parental class is very close to zero and not statistically significant. Overall, H1a is confirmed: less advantaged young adults are, on average, significantly less likely to expect to ever marry in their life than their more advantaged counterparts.

The right panel of Fig. 4 shows cohabitation expectations. The results show a modest marginal effect of parental class on cohabitation expectations. On average, young adults from the least advantaged parental class show expectations that are 1.2 points lower than those from an advantaged parental class, although this estimate is not statistically significant. Those from an intermediate parental class show, instead, a positive coefficient, amounting to 1.6, which is significant at the 10% confidence level ( $p = 0.08$ ). In sum, contrary to marriage expectations, the differences in cohabitation expectations across socioeconomic groups are limited, thus confirming H1b.

Fig. 5 investigates the total effect in Fig. 2A for the variable indicating the attitudes towards age at marriage, whose relationships with parental SES are reported in H2a and H2b. The reference group, i.e., “Later marriage” (at ages 25–40), is the category with the highest frequency (analytical model estimates in Table A 2). Compared to young adults from a parental managerial and professional class, young adults from the least advantaged parental background are 1.2 times more likely to expect to fall into the “Early marriage” category (ages 18–24) than the “Later marriage” (25 and over). The results are, however, not

statistically significant at any conventional level ( $p > 0.1$ ). Hence, there is not enough evidence from the data to reject H2a. Although those with low social origins had an earlier expected age at marriage than their counterparts –in line with studies supporting an accelerated transition into adulthood for low-SES–, the likelihood of expecting an early or a later marriage across parental classes is not significantly different from zero.

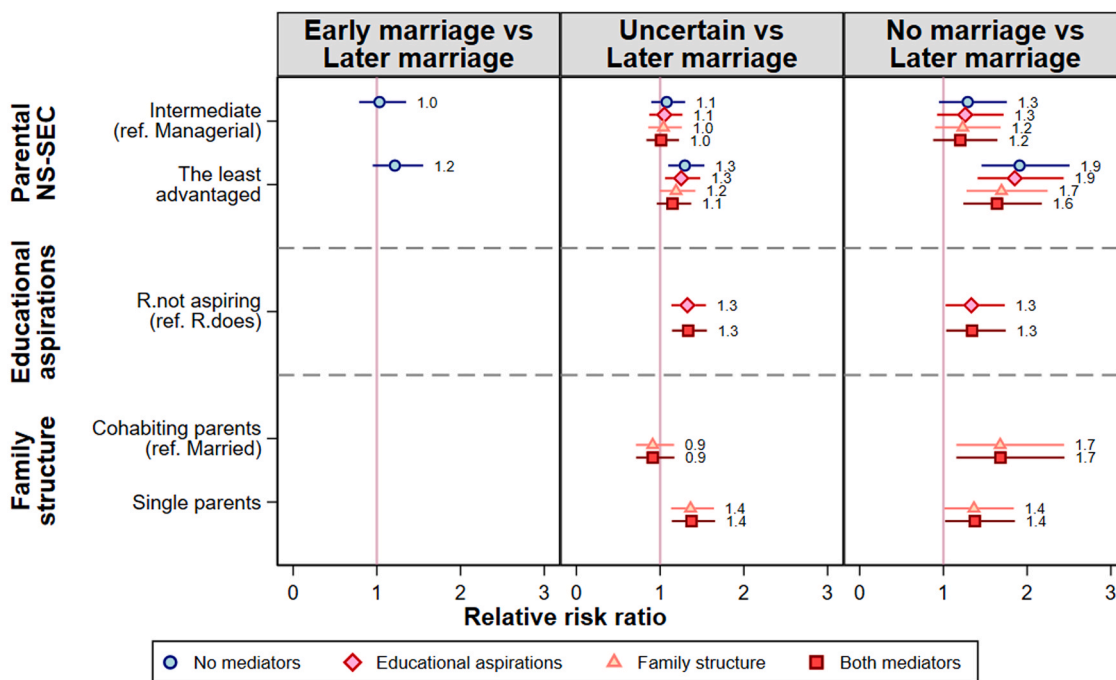
Respondents from the least advantaged parental class also had a significantly higher likelihood of expecting not to marry or to be uncertain about their age at marriage, relative to wishing to marry at or after age 25 (RRR = 1.9 and 1.3 respectively,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that H2b is confirmed, as those from the least advantaged class are more likely to be uncertain about their age at marriage or to expect not to marry than those from the advantaged one.

### 4.3. Mediating mechanisms

We now turn to mediation analysis to test the mechanisms of family structure and academic socialisation for marriage expectations (H3a and H3b) and the relative risks of uncertainty about the age at marriage and not wanting to marry (H4a and H4b). Before quantifying the percentage mediated through the KHB method, we investigate the existence of potential mediating paths in two steps. First, we verify whether linear probability models regressing the family structure or educational aspirations on parental class and controls present sizable and significant estimates (Breen et al., 2012). Second, after controlling for parental class, we examine whether the mediators are significant determinants of partnership expectations in young adulthood. The former step corresponds to the paths  $i'$  and  $j'$  shown in Fig. 2B, whereas the latter corresponds to the paths  $i''$  and  $j''$  shown in Fig. 2B.

Figure A 3 and Figure A 4 in the Appendix show the results of





- Intervals are graphed at the 95% confidence level  
 - Attitudes towards age at marriage are measured at ages 16-21  
 - Parental SES, Educational aspirations, and Family Structure are measured at ages 10-15  
 - Parental SES, Educational aspirations, and Family Structure are measured at ages 10-15  
 - All models are controlled for activity status, sex, religion, foreign status, number of coresident siblings, age, historical period, health status, coresidence with parents, coresidence with own children (measured at ages 16-21)

**Fig. 5.** Relative risk ratios from four multinomial logits regressing attitudes towards age at marriage expectations on parental class and control variables. Models contain, respectively, no mediators, only educational aspirations, only family structure and both mediators (N = 8316). Notes: The category “Other types of families” has been removed from the graph because its wide confidence intervals did not allow proper visualisation of the results. Source: own computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2012–2019).

undertaking the first step. Four linear probability models estimate the marginal effects of class on family structures and educational aspirations. On average, the higher the parental class, the higher the relative risk of living with two married parents and aspiring to college or university. The coefficient of living in a single-parent family has the largest magnitude (0.1–0.25).

Having established the validity of the initial step, we explore the second step by progressively adjusting nested models for mediators in Fig. 4 and Fig. 5. Initially, in the second and third rows of these graphs, we examine the marginal effect of aspirations and family structure on expectations or attitudes. Subsequently, we inspect the first row of the graphs to assess whether the overall effect of expectations or attitudes alters when one or both mediators are incorporated into the model. We start by analysing Fig. 4, which shows that young adults living in single-parent and cohabiting families during adolescence have, respectively, around 9 and 5 points lower marriage expectations (on a scale from 0 to 100) than living with married parents ( $p < 0.05$ ). Consistent with the literature, young adults who did not aspire to attend college or university during adolescence have, on average, 3.8 points lower marriage expectations than those who did. When both the mediators are in the model, the coefficient for the least advantaged parental class is 1.9 points lower, equivalent to the sum of the mediated effect of family structure and educational aspirations in separate models. Given the result of the separate models, however, family structure mediates the total effect of marriage expectations more than educational aspirations.

Fig. 5, which represents the socioeconomic differences in the attitudes towards the age of marriage, shows that respondents living with cohabiting parents during adolescence, rather than with married parents, have a significantly higher likelihood of expecting no marriage than marriage at 25 or more. Further, respondents living in single-parent families show a higher likelihood of expecting no marriage or being

uncertain about the age at marriage rather than marrying at 25 or later. Respondents with no or uncertain college aspirations show a higher RRR of expecting no marriage or being uncertain about the age at marriage. When the mediators are in the model, the RRR of the least advantaged parental class are modestly resized, especially when considering the categories “Uncertain” and “No Marriage” vs “Later Marriage”.

As a final step, the KHB decomposition calculates how much the indicators for family structure and educational aspirations during adolescence explain the total effect of parental class on the outcomes of interest. We analyse only the coefficients contrasting the “least

**Table 2a**  
 Percentage of the total effect contrasting the “least advantaged” vs “the most advantaged” mediated by family structure and educational aspirations for the expectations for marriage (N = 11,370).

	Marital expectations
Share of total effect due to mediators (%):	29.8
Share of total effect mediated via (%):	
<u>Educational aspirations</u>	
R. does not aspire to go to college or is uncertain <sup>1</sup>	6.3
<u>Family structure</u>	
Cohabiting parents <sup>2</sup>	6.7
Single parents	16.8
Other types of families	−0.0
Unexplained share of the total effect (%):	80.2

<sup>1</sup>R. aspires to go to college <sup>2</sup> Ref. married parents  
 Note: (a) Only the decomposition for the statistically significant coefficients at the 5 % level was considered. (b) All the models were adjusted for age, religion, immigrant status, gender, historical period, number of coresident siblings, coresident with biological children, employment status, self-rated health status, and coresident parents (measured at ages 16–21).

advantaged” and the “most advantaged”, as these are the only categories presenting sizable differences. Table 2a and Table 2b confirm that the share of the coefficients not explained by the mediating paths is still over 50 % for all the outcomes.

The outcome with the highest indirect effect, i.e., percentage mediated of the total effect, is the one contrasting “Uncertainty about age at marriage” and “Later marriage” (45.7 %). The models with “No marriage” vs “Later marriage” and marriage expectations as the outcome show lower mediated percentages (23.1 % and 29.8 %, respectively). In all cases, the category “Single parents” vs “Married parents” has the highest explanatory power (34.1 %, 13.4 % and 16.8 % of the total effect, respectively).

Based on these results, H3a, H3b, H4a and H4b are confirmed, as the mediation is partial. Living with a single parent during adolescence rather than married parents explains a sizable share of the parental socioeconomic differences in partnership expectations. Other family structures, including cohabiters, have a much smaller mediating role, between 0 % and almost 7 %. The percentage mediated by educational aspirations during adolescence is half, or less, the one of the category contrasting married and single parents. The estimates in the model unadjusted for mediators are never completely driven to zero in the adjusted model. The absence of full mediation suggests that either parental social class has a direct effect on expectations or that there are other mechanisms explaining part of the relationship of interest, or both.

#### 4.4. Findings from the control variables

Table A 1 and Table A 2 report the estimated coefficients or RRR for individual controls. Currently, unemployed or inactive young adults have, on average, significantly lower cohabitation and marriage expectations than the employed. In addition, they are more likely to be uncertain about marriage or to expect no marriage, relative to a later marriage. This result suggests that the experience of joblessness may undermine the expectations towards partnership formation in general, in contrast to literature suggesting the increasing appeal of cohabitation for individuals under economically uncertain conditions. Further, compared to the employed, students have a negative relationship with cohabitation expectations and expectations for early marriage, relative to later marriage. By contrast, this relationship is positive if the outcome is “Uncertainty about age at marriage” vs “Later marriage”. Being religious is also positively linked to higher marriage and lower cohabiting expectations. Moreover, religious individuals tend to have higher

**Table 2b**

Percentage of the total effect contrasting the “least advantaged” vs “the most advantaged” mediated by family structure and educational aspirations for the model that has attitudes towards age at marriage as the outcome.

	"Uncertain" vs "Later marriage"	"No marriage" vs "Later marriage"
Share of total effect due to mediators (%)	45.7	23.1
Share of total effect mediated via (%):		
<u>Educational aspirations</u>		
R. does not aspire to go to college (or is uncertain) <sup>1</sup>	13.3	5.3
<u>Family structure</u>		
Cohabiting parents <sup>2</sup>	-2.1	4.6
Single parents	34.1	13.4
Other types of families	0.3	-0.2
Unexplained share of the total effect (%):	54.3	76.9

<sup>1</sup>R. aspires to go to college <sup>2</sup> Ref. married parents

Note: (a) Only the decomposition for the statistically significant coefficients at the 5 % level was considered. (b) All the models were adjusted for age, religion, immigrant status, gender, historical period, number of coresident siblings, coresident with biological children, employment status, self-rated health status, and coresident parents (measured at ages 16–21).

relative risks for the category of early marriage and lower for the categories of uncertainty or no marriage, than not religious. On average, the worse the individuals’ health status, the lower the expectations for marriage. Instead, cohabitation expectations are negatively linked to health status only when bad.

#### 4.5. Further analyses

We conducted a series of additional analyses to deepen some aspects of our findings and robustness checks to verify whether our results could hold under different circumstances. First, we use a multinomial logit to analyse the combined outcome of marriage and cohabitation expectations (analysis S2 of the Supplementary Material). Compared to those from an advantaged background, more disadvantaged ones have a higher relative risk of expecting marriage equal to or lower than 50, regardless of the value for cohabitation expectations (the reference category is marriage and cohabitation expectations above 50). This result confirms what was found in our analysis of the marriage and cohabitation expectations analysed separately.

We also re-defined family structure, reclassifying married and cohabiting parents as “families with both biological parents” opposite to “step-families”. We find similar results to the previous ones: as in the main analysis, we observe that single parenthood is the strongest mediator. The only difference is due to the outcome of “No marriage” vs. “Later marriage,” for which the percentage mediated by single parenthood is lower (around 5 %, meaning a decline of 8 percentage points).

Further, it is well known that men and women have different timings of entry into the first marriage (Manning et al., 2014). For this reason, we performed a robustness check modifying the current age determining early and late marriages by gender, i.e., 25. The threshold for men and women was fixed at 27 and 25, respectively. We did not find any difference with previous results, suggesting that socioeconomic differentials may occur at younger, less traditional ages or that behaviours may derive from contingent factors. Another sensitivity analysis concerned the changes in the results if we did not consider “Don’t know” as 50 values for the expectations. The percentages imputed this way are quite limited (Figure A 1); thus, the main results do not change if imputation is not performed. We also examined whether the parental class was related to an uncertain response. We verified that having the least advantaged background, rather than the most advantaged, was related to higher uncertainty regarding marriage and cohabitation expectations.

From a more technical point of view, we verified whether removing those respondents whose parents were never employed could decrease the percentage mediated by the category of family structure contrasting “Single parents” vs. “Married parents”. Single parenthood may lead to never employment and not the reverse, thereby causing potential endogeneity, and undermining the assumption of correct temporality for mediation analysis. However, given the low number of observations forming the “never-employed” class, this exclusion does not affect the results. We performed a check using parental education as a covariate of our model, either in place of parental class or together in the same model. Only modest changes to the findings are seen, which are presented in the Supplementary Material (analysis S3 of the Supplementary Material). We choose not to include education in the model together with class, as some of its categories overlap with class (Table S 4) and potentially generate some collinearity.

## 5. Discussion

Exploiting rich prospective data from the UK, this paper examines how adolescent family structure and educational aspirations mediate the association between parental SES and young adults’ expectations about marriage and cohabitation. Our descriptive results show that, among young adults in the UK, the expectations for marrying at some point in life are relatively high, whereas they are less certain about cohabitation. These findings are consistent with the analysis by Manning

and colleagues (2019) for the US, where the diffusion of secularised and individualised ideals did not lead to a decline in the expectations for marriage in favour of the ones for cohabitation, contrary to what was anticipated by the Second Demographic Transition (Van De Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe, 2010). Rather, the high share of uncertainty about cohabitation may reflect the fact that cohabitation is not yet fully institutionalised (Nock, 1995). Young adults may, therefore, “slide” into cohabitation in a more uncertain and unanticipated way (Smock et al., 2005; Stanley et al., 2006). In the UK, the significant minority of individuals who did not expect to cohabit or were uncertain may relate to the presence of specific ethnic groups who are more likely to follow traditional family patterns (Berrington, 2020).

Marriage expectations vary according to young Britons’ parental SES. In line with our first hypothesis, marriage expectations are higher for young adults from wealthier backgrounds, suggesting that the SES differences characterising observed marriage behaviours could derive from pre-existing differences in expectations held as teenagers. Thus, expectations may be the basis of the socioeconomic divergencies in family behaviours witnessed in the US, Europe, and the UK (McLanahan, 2004; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010, 2012; Benson and McKay, 2015; McLanahan and Jacobsen, 2015).

Our second hypothesis is also supported, as the expectations for cohabitation present very modest differences by parental SES. This finding is perhaps unsurprising, as cohabitation has become diffused across all social strata over time (Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan, 2013). However, parental SES differences could occur according to whether cohabitation is considered a pre-marital phase, a way to test the relationship, or a long-term arrangement to start a family under more favourable economic conditions than marriage (Hiekel et al., 2014; Di Giulio et al., 2019). In the UK and the US, findings from qualitative research suggest that, for those from advantaged parental backgrounds, cohabitation is likely to be a transitory phase in between the search for economic stability and entry into marriage, whilst for those from poorer backgrounds cohabitation is more likely to represent a suitable arrangement to start a family (Sassler and Miller, 2011; Berrington et al., 2015). High-SES individuals in the UK are also more likely to have additional economic advantages through marriage, as they may benefit from tax liabilities and inheritance rules, leading them to potentially avoid long-term cohabitation (Probert, 2009; Perelli-Harris and Gassen, 2012).

Additional analyses from a multinomial logit where we combined expectations for marriage and cohabitation into a newly derived outcome show that expectations for cohabitation have a marginal role in determining socioeconomic differences in the combined partnership expectations. Specifically, young adults from the least advantaged backgrounds have a higher relative risk of falling into categories where marriage expectations are low, regardless of whether cohabitation expectations are high, uncertain or low. Future surveys should consider asking further and more detailed questions about the attitudes towards the ideal age of cohabitation or the expected sequencing of marriage, cohabitation and childbearing. This may clarify whether the socioeconomic differences in cohabitation are visible in the expected timing, or in the meaning attributed to cohabitation (pre-marital phase, long-term arrangement apt to have children, etc.). However, it is worth mentioning that young adults’ current inactivity or unemployment significantly reduces marriage and cohabitation expectations. Therefore, whilst employment instability and parents’ low SES can add up and jointly inhibit the expectations for marriage, only current employment instability reduces the expectations for any sort of co-residential partnership. Consequently, while the results suggest that *parental* class may influence marriage expectations but not cohabitation expectations, *individual* employment instability could influence the expectations for marriage and cohabitation and, thus, ever experiencing a coresidential union.

Young adults’ reports of their ideal age at marriage tended to heap on ages 25 and 30, aligning with critical age thresholds for transitioning from young to actual adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Only a small proportion

of 16–21-year-olds anticipate marrying before 25 or after 30. However, it is noteworthy that the actual median age at first marriage has progressively surpassed these ranges, reaching 32.1 and 30.6 for never married men and women, respectively, in 2020 (Sharfman and Cobb, 2023). This might be explained by the significant proportion of the sample who expressed uncertainty about the age at which they expected to marry or whether they were likely to marry at all. In line with our expectations, young adults from the least well-off environments are more likely to be uncertain about their age at marriage or not to expect to marry, relative to expecting later marriage, than those who are better off. This finding may reflect the increasing economic precarity these young adults experience, making the milestones characterising their transition into adulthood increasingly uncertain (Blossfeld et al., 2005; Furlong et al., 2017). Consistent with our hypotheses, there was little evidence of significant socioeconomic differences in young adults’ expectations of early marriage (before 25) rather than later marriage (at 25 or afterwards). The wide diffusion of cohabitation has reduced SES differences in young people’s expectations about age at marriage. Thus, the UK seems to have moved away from the “fast vs slow track” dichotomy, whereby young adults from poorer backgrounds had a younger age at marriage than those from more advantaged ones (Bynner et al., 2002; Jones, 2002).

Using mediation analysis, the paper extends existing research by empirically testing two mechanisms for the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities in family expectations and, potentially, behaviours. One focuses on academic socialisation during adolescence and the other on family structure socialisation during adolescence. The “academic socialisation” mechanism received little empirical support, as its mediated percentage is low. One potential explanation for this finding is that most respondents, when aged 10 to 15, held positive aspirations for going on to study post-age 16 further. Thus, although we find differences in educational aspirations by social origins, the relationships are limited. A better way to tackle such differences may be to ask the higher education institution young adults aim to attend, as more prestige is related to higher socioeconomic advantage, e.g. in terms of wages (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). An alternative explanation for this finding is that aspirations and expectations are differently generated. Aspirations depend more on desires than reality, whereas expectations are more strongly grounded on actual experiences (Bohonen et al., 2006; Vaisey, 2010). Hence, low educational aspirations and poor economic prospects, during adolescence, are not necessarily related to expectations of overcoming the “economic bar to marriage”.

We found greater support for the “family structure socialisation” mechanism. Living in a single-parent family, rather than with married parents, during adolescence mediates the expectations for marriage and its timing by a range of 13.4 % and 34.1 % of the total effect, depending on the considered outcome. The findings align with the suggestion that those from poorer backgrounds have a higher likelihood of experiencing a single-parent family, and, thus, develop lower expectations for marriage and greater expectations for other arrangements (Amato, 1996; Amato and DeBoer, 2001). Our findings show that only a small percentage of this relationship is mediated by living with cohabiting parents during adolescence, rather than with married parents. One likely explanation is that there were too few cases of cohabiting parents in the sample to provide reliable results, which may result from some cohabiting couples marrying once children are planned or have been born. The low explanatory power of living within cohabitation, rather than marriage, may also be motivated by cohabitation being less socioeconomically selective than other countries such as the US (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Di Giulio et al., 2019). However, it is important to point out that the unexplained relationship between parental class and partnership expectations is still dominant. There could be other potential mediators, such as values or personality traits, or a direct effect of class on expectations, e.g., parents’ *current* economic circumstances.

Overall, our findings are consistent with previous research in the US that explores how socioeconomic factors influence marriage and

cohabitation expectations (Manning et al., 2019). Individuals from less privileged backgrounds tend to have lower expectations regarding marriage, compared to their more advantaged counterparts. Similarly, their attitudes also indicate less uncertainty and greater willingness to marry. While many studies focus on the relationship between parental socioeconomic status and family formation, our research goes further by examining why these socioeconomic differences exist and exploring potential explanatory factors. Although our findings are descriptive and do not prove causation, we analyse why these differences occur and empirically assess possible explanations. Additionally, our unique approach involves using longitudinal household survey data, which allows us to track parents and their children as they transition to adulthood. This method provides a more effective way to investigate causal mechanisms than relying on retrospective questions, which may be affected by recall bias and post-hoc rationalisation.

Although it is still unknown whether these expectations may be reliable predictors of behaviours for most interviewees, this paper has demonstrated that studying expectations or attitudes can complement the study of behaviours. First, expectations and attitudes are subjective outcomes with concrete foundations in the individual and social experience. Further, while behaviours allow studying realised outcomes and assessing current or past trends in family formation, expectations, and also attitudes, allow undertaking a prospective outlook and grasping young adults' relationship horizon. As Manning et al. (2019), we consider both as indicators "of ideation and an early signal of broader-based behavioural changes in marriage and cohabitation" (p. 343). Our results suggest we may expect a consolidation or further strengthening of the trends where young adults from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to marry or are more uncertain about this event or its timing than those from more advantaged ones. This trend would especially be explained by low-SES being more likely to grow up in less traditional family structures, e.g., lone parenthood, a tendency that has increased over the years (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). This means they would be increasingly more likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage cyclically across generations (Mooyaart et al., 2019; Hiekel, 2021; Zoutewelle-Terovan and Muller, 2021).

Our study has limitations. First, the data did not allow us to measure the mediators in early childhood. Ideally, we would exploit the advantages of panel data to obtain information on parental class, educational aspirations, and family structure for the entire childhood period, or at significant points in time. Unfortunately, this dynamic can be investigated only for family structure using changes in parents' partnership histories, whereas information on the class is limited to the panel period and educational aspirations to the even shorter period of the youth questionnaire. Therefore, we can provide only a partial view of the dynamics underlying the relationship between parental class and expectations. Second, the preferred sequencing of marriage and cohabitation was impossible to ascertain through expectations, alongside whether the young adults had completely ruled out the possibility of forming a coresidential union when they expressed low expectations. The results of the age at marriage could suggest that both uncertainty and reluctance towards marrying could hold. Third, the relationships found so far have been descriptive and not tested through causal

methods. Although we built our hypotheses based on the literature, some omitted variables could confound the relationship of interest. Moreover, feedback loops between parental class and family structure could exist, e.g., women starting to work in a routine class job after a divorce. However, this appears unlikely, as the selection into separation has started to follow a negative gradient over the last decades (Chan and Halpin, 2002; Boertien and Bernardi, 2022). Finally, problems of attrition characterising panel data, the relatively recent introduction of the questions on expectations, and the still young ages of the respondents did not allow us to track individuals until they reached an age at which most of them had completed their process of first partnership formation, e.g., age 30. Indeed, the median age for the last observation was 21.

Future research could try to verify more accurately the interrelationship between expectations, attitudes and outcomes in the UK context, as survey data collection goes on. Another potential avenue for exploration is to investigate additional mediating factors that could help explain aspects of the relationship that were not captured in the current study. Further, we believe extending these questions on partnership expectations or attitudes to being more detailed regarding cohabitation and the interrelation between marriage and cohabitation can be key in advancing the research on family dynamics. Additionally, the possibility of having similar modules not only in the UK or the US but in other countries as well could provide insights into the potential general trends in family dynamics moving forward.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Lydia Palumbo:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Ann Berrington:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Peter Eibich:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix A

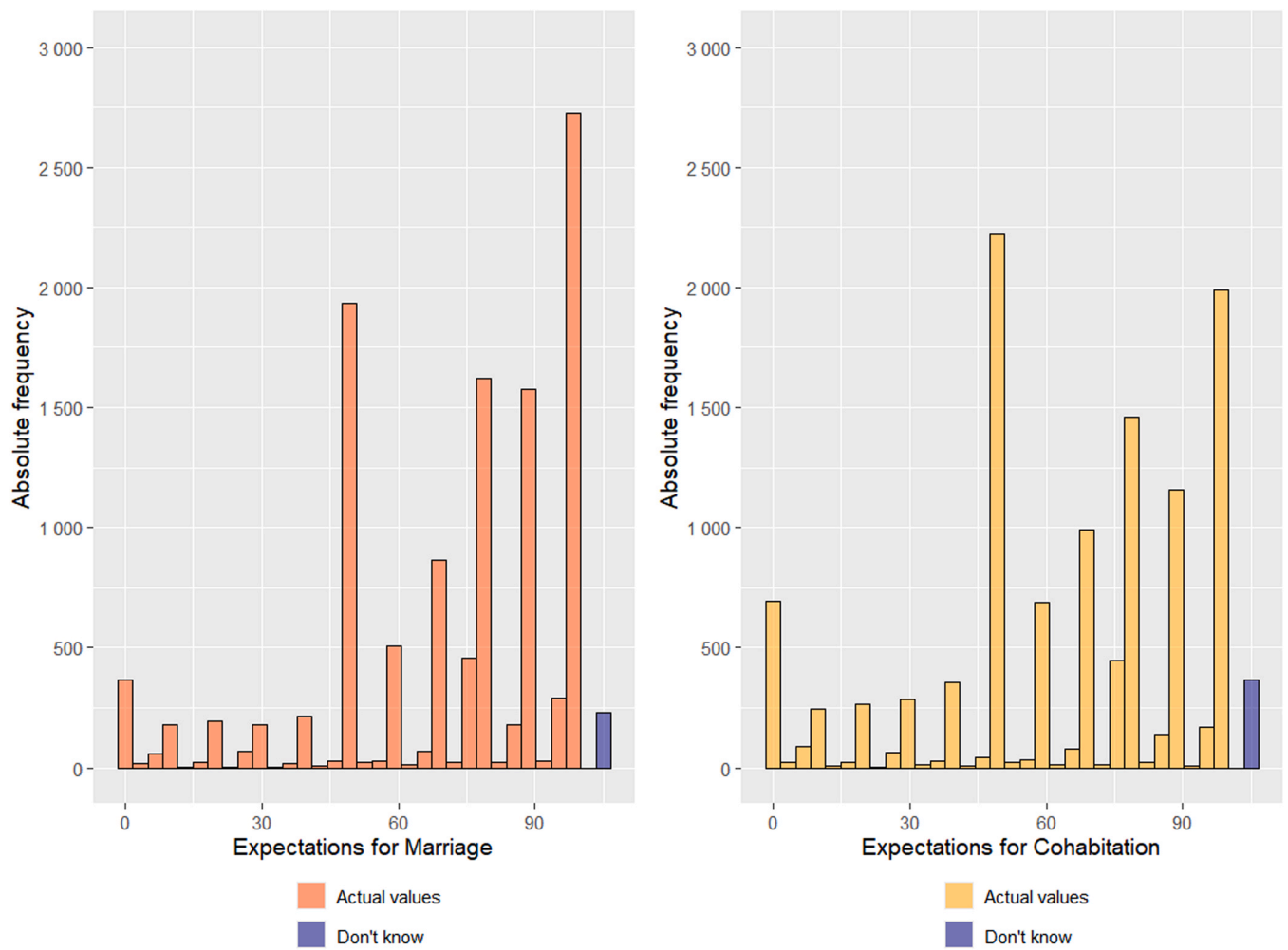


Fig. A1. Distribution of marriage and cohabitation expectations without imputing the 50-values (N = 11,370). Note: The “don't know” category was available in UKHLS but not BHPS. Source: own weighted computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2002–2018).

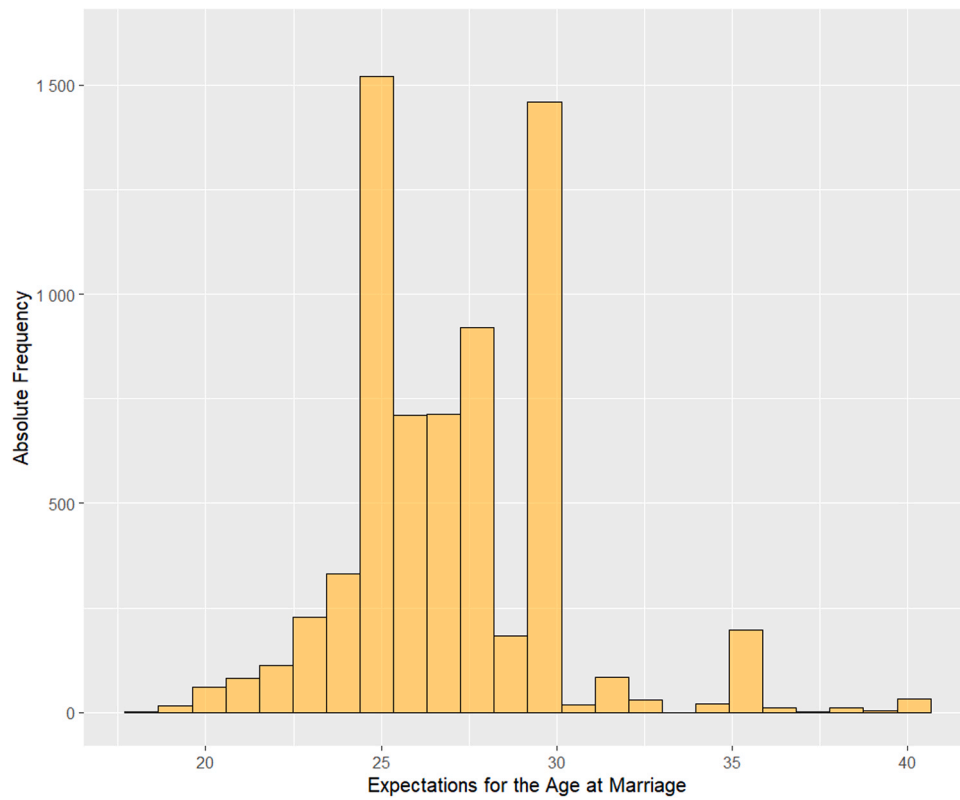


Fig. A2. Distribution of the expected attitudes towards age at marriage (N = 5982). Note: Only numerical expectations are considered in the graph. Non-considered categories include “No Marriage” and “Uncertain”. Source: own unweighted computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2012–2019).

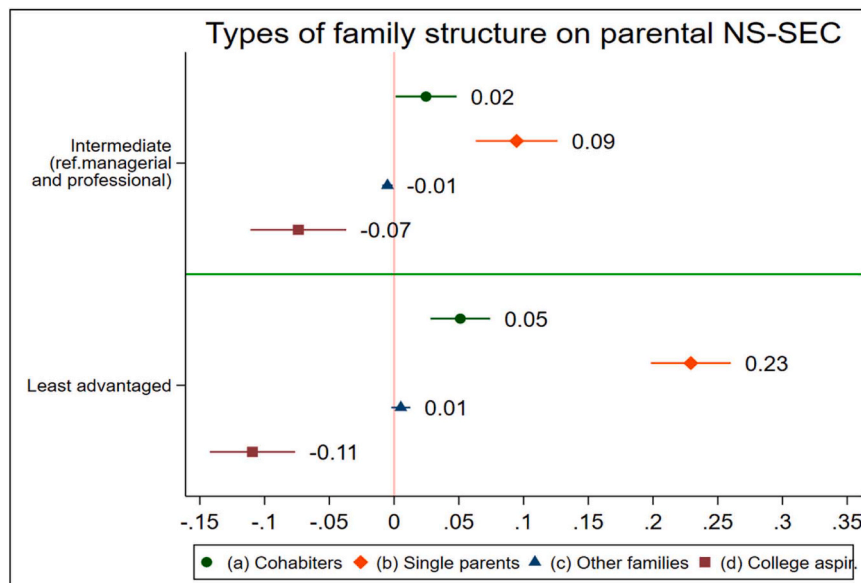


Fig. A3. Linear probability models regressing types of family structure and educational aspirations on parental NS-SEC and control variables among those expressing cohabitation and marriage expectations. Note: Four linear probability models (a-d) estimated the marginal effect of class on family structures (the outcomes of each model were a specific family structure vs all others) and educational aspirations. Source: own computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2002–2018).

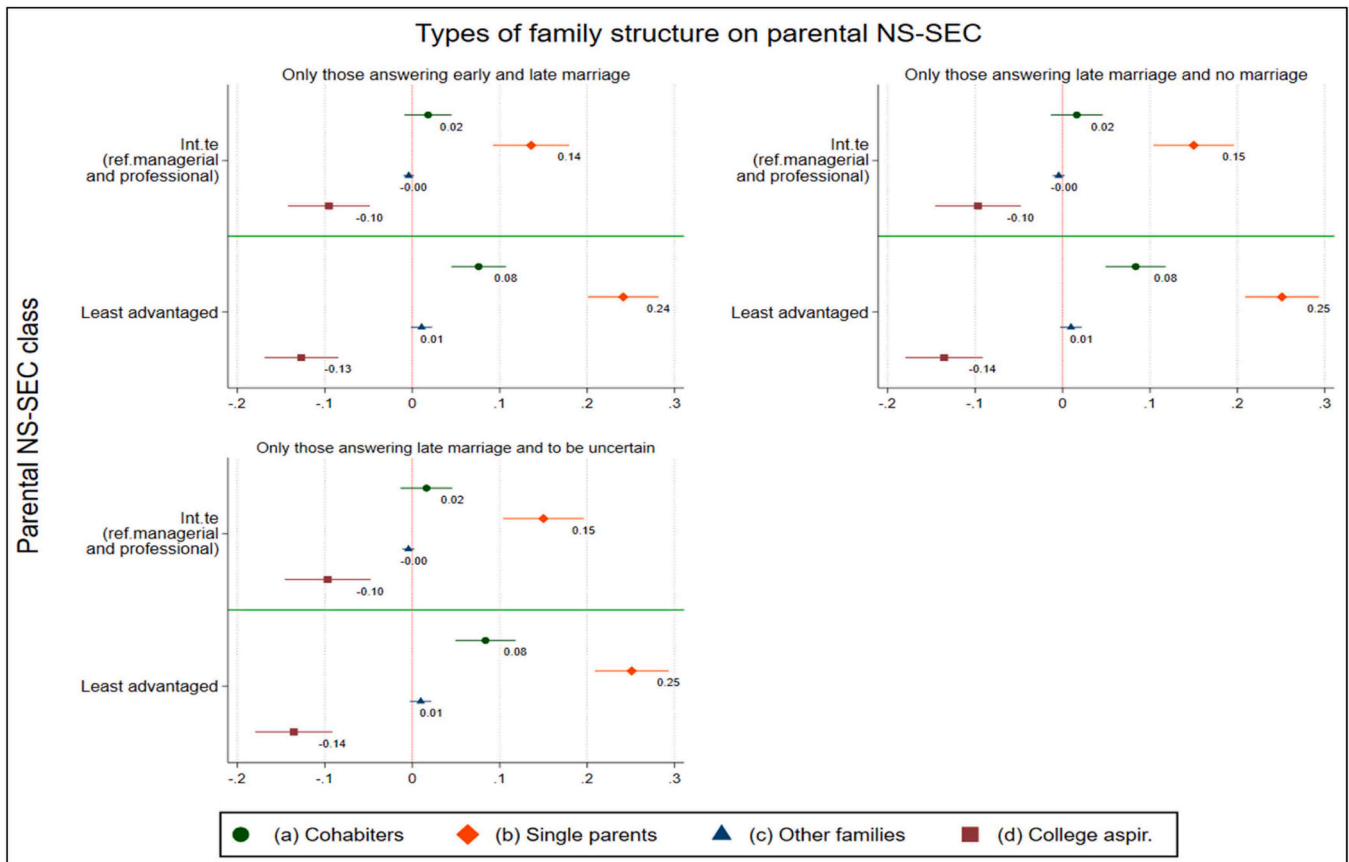


Fig. A4. Linear probability models regressing types of family structure and educational aspirations on parental NS-SEC and control variables, within different samples answering the question on the attitudes towards age at marriage. Source: own computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2012–2019).

Table A1

Coefficients of OLS models regressing marriage and cohabitation expectations on parental NS-SEC and control variables (N = 11,370).

	Marriage expectations		Cohabitation expectations	
	Coefficient (S.E.) <sup>a</sup>		Coefficient (S.E.) <sup>a</sup>	
<b>Parental NS-SEC (ref. Managerial and Professionals)</b>				
Intermediate	-0.01	(0.88)	1.61 <sup>†</sup>	(0.92)
The least advantaged	-6.54 **	(0.87)	-1.24	(0.82)
<b>Activity status (ref. Employed)</b>				
Unemployed	-5.25 **	(1.85)	-3.82 *	(1.60)
Inactive	-9.99 **	(1.95)	-5.68 **	(1.74)
Student	1.21	(0.80)	-2.02 *	(0.81)
Missing	-2.66	(2.75)	-1.22	(2.57)
<b>Sex (ref. Male)</b>				
Female	1.76 *	(0.71)	5.37 **	(0.70)
<b>Religion (ref. No religion)</b>				
Christian	5.32 **	(0.90)	-2.23 *	(1.00)
Muslim	11.35 **	(2.04)	-46.33 **	(2.08)
Other	6.60 **	(2.23)	-26.05 **	(3.05)
Missing	1.79 <sup>†</sup>	(0.98)	-3.98 **	(0.91)
<b>Foreign status (ref. Born in the UK)</b>				
Not born in the UK	5.55 **	(1.72)	1.05	(1.97)
Missing	-1.01	(1.20)	-0.48	(1.12)
<b>Number of coresident siblings (ref. none)</b>				
1–2	-0.40	(0.87)	-1.99 *	(0.86)
3 or more	-0.86	(1.35)	-4.68 **	(1.39)
<b>Age (ref. 16–18)</b>				
19–21	-1.45 *	(0.74)	2.19 **	(0.76)
<b>Historical period (ref. Before 2010)</b>				
2010/2013	-5.91 **	(1.01)	-4.18 **	(1.02)
2015/2018	-5.18 **	(1.00)	-5.30 **	(1.01)
<b>Health status (ref. Very good)</b>				

(continued on next page)

**Table A1** (continued)

	Marriage expectations		Cohabitation expectations	
	Coefficient (S.E.) <sup>a</sup>		Coefficient (S.E.) <sup>a</sup>	
Good	-5.05 **	(0.76)	-0.99	(0.75)
Fair	-8.41 * *	(1.36)	-1.66	(1.25)
Bad	-12.55 * *	(2.80)	-6.65 *	(2.99)
Missing	-4.56	(2.85)	-0.79	(2.71)
<b>Coresidence with parents (ref. no)</b>				
Yes	-0.39	(1.64)	-5.85 * *	(1.56)
<b>Coresidence with own children (ref. no)</b>				
Yes	-3.73	(3.96)	10.80 * *	(2.87)
<b>Constant</b>	79.33 * *	(2.05)	77.43 * *	(1.92)

Notes: (a) Standard errors were clustered at the individual level; (b) P- value: \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, † p < 0.1  
 Source: own weighted computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2002-2018)

**Table A2**

Relative risk ratios (RRR) of a multinomial logistic model regressing the attitudes towards the age at marriage on parental NS-SEC and control variables (N = 8316).

	“Early age at marriage” vs “Later age at marriage” <sup>a</sup> RRR (S.E.) <sup>b</sup>		“No marriage” vs “Later age at marriage” <sup>a</sup> RRR (S.E.) <sup>b</sup>		“Uncertain” vs “Later age at marriage” <sup>a</sup> RRR (S.E.) <sup>b</sup>	
<b>Parental NS-SEC (ref. Managerial and Professionals)</b>						
Intermediate	1.03	(0.14)	1.29	(0.20)	1.08	(0.10)
The least advantaged	1.21	(0.15)	1.91 * *	(0.26)	1.29 * *	(0.11)
<b>Activity status (ref. Employed)</b>						
Unemployed	1.16	(0.29)	1.40	(0.34)	1.82 * *	(0.31)
Inactive	0.97	(0.22)	2.29 * *	(0.48)	1.61 * *	(0.29)
Student	0.56 * *	(0.07)	1.01	(0.13)	1.27 * *	(0.11)
Missing	0.92	(0.36)	1.38	(0.67)	2.49 * *	(0.66)
<b>Sex (ref. Male)</b>						
Female	1.80 * *	(0.20)	0.89	(0.11)	0.63 * *	(0.04)
<b>Religion (ref. No religion)</b>						
Christian	1.29 <sup>†</sup>	(0.18)	0.49 * *	(0.09)	0.73 * *	(0.07)
Muslim	5.14 * *	(0.88)	0.18 * *	(0.06)	0.82	(0.13)
Other	2.47 * *	(0.84)	0.50	(0.22)	0.57 * *	(0.11)
Missing	1.08	(0.17)	0.92	(0.16)	0.86	(0.09)
<b>Foreign status (ref. Born in the UK)</b>						
Not born in the UK	0.74	(0.20)	0.88	(0.30)	1.23	(0.18)
Missing	1.10	(0.27)	1.02	(0.27)	0.96	(0.14)
<b>Number of coresident siblings (ref. none)</b>						
1–2	1.25 <sup>†</sup>	(0.17)	1.20	(0.18)	0.93	(0.08)
3 or more	1.47 * *	(0.27)	1.03	(0.26)	1.10	(0.14)
<b>Age (ref. 16–18)</b>						
19–21	0.53 * *	(0.06)	1.05	(0.13)	0.81 * *	(0.06)
<b>Wave UKHLS (ref. wave 4)</b>						
wave 6	0.97	(0.12)	0.50 * *	(0.08)	1.49 * *	(0.13)
wave 8	1.23	(0.16)	0.81	(0.13)	1.11	(0.11)
wave 10	1.15	(0.18)	1.43 * *	(0.24)	0.73 * *	(0.09)
<b>Health status</b>						
Good	1.37 * *	(0.15)	1.60 * *	(0.20)	1.12	(0.09)
Fair	1.39 <sup>†</sup>	(0.26)	2.08 * *	(0.40)	1.08	(0.16)
Bad	4.08 * *	(1.38)	8.84 * *	(3.02)	1.24	(0.39)
Missing	0.91	(0.40)	1.15	(0.90)	1.58 <sup>†</sup>	(0.43)
<b>Coresidence with parents (ref. no)</b>						
Yes	0.58 * *	(0.13)	1.01	(0.27)	1.36 <sup>†</sup>	(0.24)
<b>Coresidence with own children (ref. no)</b>						
Yes	1.82 <sup>†</sup>	(0.63)	3.34 * *	(1.09)	2.22 * *	(0.75)
<b>Constant</b>	0.15 * *	(0.04)	0.07 * *	(0.02)	0.26 * *	(0.05)

Notes: (a) “Early age at marriage” refers to age 18-25, whereas “Later age at marriage” refers to age 25-40; (b) Standard errors were clustered at the individual level; (c) P- value: \*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, † p < 0.1  
 Source: own weighted computations from BHPS and UKHLS (2012-2019)

**Appendix B. Supporting information**

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.alcr.2024.100630](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2024.100630).

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