The long term effect of marriage on social mobility

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- Over the course of a lifetime, British adults were 23 percent more likely to have been to university, 10 percent more likely to have got married and 16 percent less likely ever to have received benefits, if their parents were married at the time of their birth.

- Our new analysis is based on combined data from 20,000 adults now aged in their late 40s or 50s who have taken part in either the 1958 National Child Development Study or the 1970 British Cohort Study.

- This finding takes into account the social class of their parents when they were aged 16.

- There is also a significant advantage in having parents in a higher social class, in terms of higher probability of going to university and of getting married, and lower probability of ever needing benefits.

- However the protection against needing benefits only applies specifically to adult children whose parents were originally married. Where the parents were not married, their higher social class appears to have no long term protective influence on their children's future as adults.

A great many studies have established the beneficial effect of getting married on subsequent adult and child outcomes.

For example, being married is associated with greater stability, health, well being, and longevity for adults (*Benson 2015, Gulack et al 2017, Holt-Lunstad et al 2008, Kaplan & Kronick 2006, Kilpi et al 2013, Manzoli et al 2007, Wilson & Oswald 2005*) and greater health and well-being for their children (*Brown 2004, Amato 2005, Benson & James 2016*)

Our study extends these findings by looking at the influence of having married parents on adult children over much of their working life.

Having married parents increases the chances that children will go to university, get married and avoid benefits when they grow up. This is true across the social spectrum, with the sole exception being that having parents in a higher social group does not reduce the chances of ever using benefits.

In other words, if their parents were not married, when they were born, "rich kids" are nearly as likely to end up on benefits as "poor kids".

Part of the reason may be that higher family instability among unmarried parents leads to a more relaxed attitude to benefits among the children, even when one parent is a professional.

Probability of ever receiving benefits by parental social class & marital status
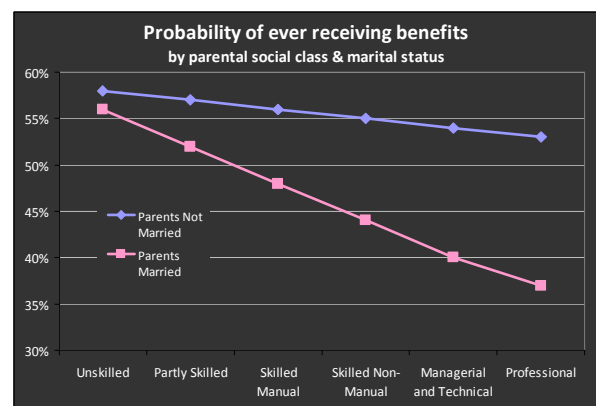
INTRODUCTION

The UK has the highest level of family instability in the developed world, across education groups.

By the time a child reaches their 12th birthday, 62% of children born to unmarried cohabiting parents and 32% of children born to married parents will have experienced more than one transition by their parents, whether into or out of a relationship (*DeRose et al 2017*).

Altogether nearly half of all today's teenagers aged 13 to 15 are not living with both natural parents (*Benson 2013a*).

This has serious and well-known consequences for children's outcomes, whether due to lack of parental resources, father absence, or instability (*Amato 2005; Brown 2004; Lee & McLanahan 2015; McLanahan et al 2013; Panico et al 2010*), especially following low conflict splits (*Booth & Amato 2001*).

The end result is that family breakdown costs the taxpayer £48 billion per year, much of which on benefits to support lone parent families (*Ashcroft 2016*). For example 60% of lone parents receive housing benefit compared to 10% of couple parents (*DWP 2015; ONS 2015*).

The consequences of childhood stability and instability can also extend far into adulthood.

Much of the evidence for this is by inference. For example, our research shows that having married parents boosts teen well-being (*Benson & James 2016*). Other research in turn shows that teen well-being is a powerful predictor of adult outcomes (*Trzesniewski et al, 2006*). Hence the inference that having married parents is a protective factor against subsequent negative outcomes in adulthood.

The government-appointed Social Mobility Foundation rightly highlights a lack of progress in issues such as education and poverty, despite a 50 per cent real terms increase in education spending and early years programmes such as Sure Start (*SMC, 2017*).

However strangely absent is any mention whatsoever of family stability, a key driver of future outcomes, let alone marriage.

Our analysis looks at two generations of adults, now in their late 40s and 50s, to see how family background has influenced actual outcomes.

For this we have used data on 20,000 adults from the 1958 National Child Development Survey cohort and 1970 British Cohort Study.

Our hypothesis was that unmarried parents would be more likely to experience family breakdown and therefore have fewer resources – time, money, encouragement, oversight – with which to support their children.

Therefore we predicted that those children born to married parents, across the social spectrum, would be more likely to attend university, more likely to get married, and less likely to need benefits.

METHOD

We combined two studies for this study for comparative purposes.

The first, the 1958 National Child Development Study, began with over 17,000 people born during a single week in England, Scotland, and Wales and collects information on physical health, educational and economic circumstances, family life and overall wellbeing. Individuals were followed at ages 7, 11, 23, 33, 42, 46, 50, and 55.

Similarly, the British Cohort Study began with an additional approximately 17,000 individuals on similar topics and were followed at ages 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34 38, and 42.

For this study, our primary variable of interest was parental marital status at birth.

We then compared individuals whose parents were married at birth with children whose parents were not married on three outcomes: whether they went on to earn a university degree (1 = yes), were ever on benefits (1 = yes), or eventually married (1 = yes).

If they reported any of these statuses at any sweep, they were counted as a '1' for analysis purposes.

To ensure that the estimates represent the most likely relationship between parental marital status and subsequent indicators of social mobility, we also controlled for biological sex (1 = Female), parental social class at age 16 (0 = unskilled 1 = partly skilled 2 = skilled manual 3 = skilled non-manual 4 = managerial and technical 5 = professional) mother's age at birth, mother's interest in child's education at age 16 (1 = little interest 2 = some interest 3 = very interested 4 = overly concerned), and a dummy variable looking

at overall differences between the two surveys in university degrees, benefits receipt, and marriage.

We estimated the models using binary logistic regression models for each outcome, yielding results in odds ratios.

Odds ratios, when greater than 1, mean the relationship between the outcome and independent variable is positive; when the odds ratio is less than 1, the relationships is negative (an odds ratio of 1 indicates no relationship). These odds ratios are can then be converted into probabilities that vary from 0-1.

RESULTS

Combining the two cohorts produced a maximum sample size of 20,206 adults in their late 40s and 50s.

Model 1 (at the end of this paper) shows the **odds ratios** of earning a university degree, ever taking benefits, and ever being married, whilst controlling for parent's social class at age 16, mother's interest in child's education at 16, mother's age at child's birth, sex, and sample.

Those with married parents had 30 per cent greater **odds** of gaining a degree, 50 per cent greater odds of ever getting married, and 30 per cent lower odds ever to have received benefits.

Social class had similar effects to having married parents, though more pronounced for earning a degree and less pronounced for getting married or avoiding benefits.

Mother's age also had significant but much smaller effects, while mother's interest in child's education – somewhat surprisingly – had no impact on the chances of a university degree and a small reduction in the odds of receiving benefits and getting married.

Women were more likely than men to receive benefits and to get married, but no more likely than men to earn a degree.

And those in the earlier cohort were less likely to gain a degree, and more likely to receive benefits and to marry.

Model 2 controls for all of these factors, while also showing that the negative effect of social class on benefits only works for those born to married parents, while working equally well for children of both married and unmarried parents in terms of university degree and getting married.

Figure 1 and **Table 2** (below) show this more clearly.

Probability of ever receiving benefits
by parental social class & marital status
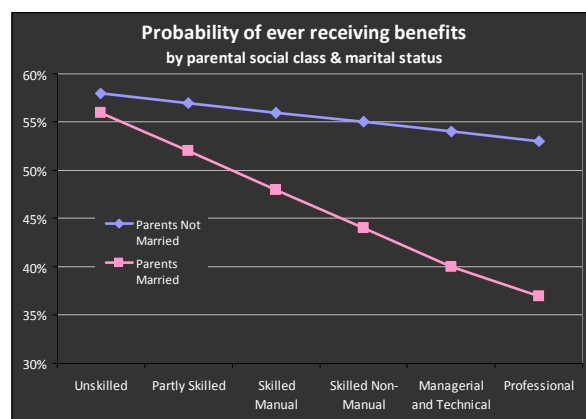
TABLE 2

Probability of Receiving Benefits for Parental Social Class, by Parental Marital Status, NCDS 1958 & BCS 1970	Parents Not Married	Parents Married
Unskilled	58%	56%
Partly Skilled	57%	52%
Skilled Manual	56%	48%
Skilled Non-Manual	55%	44%
Managerial and Technical	54%	40%
Professional	53%	37%

Whereas the **probability** of receiving benefits for those born to married parents increases from 37 per cent to 56 per cent as social class reduces – a gap of 19 per cent – the probability among those born to unmarried parents reduces from 58 per cent to 53 per cent – a gap of just 5 per cent.

Model 3 shows that the differences in having married or non-married parents in getting a university degree, receiving benefits, and getting married do not differ between the two data sources.

Finally, **Table 3** shows the overall difference in probabilities by parental marital status of attending university, receiving benefits and getting married.

TABLE 3

Predicted Probabilities by Parental Marital Status of Attending University, Receiving Benefits, and Getting Married		University Degree	On Benefits	Getting Married
Not Married Parents	**(b)**	13%	55%	71%
Married Parents	**(a)**	16%	46%	78%
Dfference in probability	*(a-b)*	*3%*	*-9%*	*7%*
Difference in likelihood	*(a-b)/b*	*23%*	*-16%*	*10%*

Although the absolute difference in probabilities in each case seem relatively small – between 3 and 9 per cent - these translate into 23 per cent greater likelihood of earn a degree, 16 per cent less likelihood of ever being on benefits, and 10 per cent greater likelihood to get married, if the parents were married when the child was born.

DISCUSSION

Through analysis of two large British cohorts of men and women now aged in their late 40s and 50s, we have been able to make a robust link between the marital status of their parents when they were born, the social class of their parents when they were aged 16, and three important outcomes throughout their adult lives.

In each of these we found a positive link between parental marital status, parental social class, and whether the children subsequently went to university, got married and stayed off benefits.

For most of these outcomes, the effect of having married parents was similar to that of having parents in a higher social class, although parent social class had slightly more of an effect on whether the children subsequently went to university and slightly less on whether the children married or stayed off benefits.

These findings demonstrate that having married parents has had a significant impact on how their children live their lives as adults over a period of nearly 60 years.

The one unexpected finding was that having unmarried parents of higher social class did not appear to protect adult children from receiving benefits.

Recent research using the same cohorts has shown how earnings are strongly related to family background. Those in higher income families are more likely to end up in paid work (*Belfield et al 2017*).

All of which makes it somewhat puzzling why this advantage, or protective effect, appears not to apply to children born to unmarried couples.

At least part of the answer lies in the higher break-up rates of unmarried versus married families (*Benson 2015*).

Children born to unmarried parents are more likely to be living with only one natural parent at age 16. Those brought up by lone parents in a higher social class are also more likely to have remarried and be living in a two parent household.

In this way, family instability reduces social capital whereas family stability builds it.

This would explain why children from richer unmarried households, even those that have split up, are more likely to go on to university and to marry. For the vast majority, both of these events will have happened during twenties or early adulthood.

However after seeing their parents go through family breakdown, and in many cases need state financial support, the children grow up with a more relaxed attitude to relying on such a safety net themselves.

Part of the answer is therefore also likely to lie in father involvement, parenting styles and the social attitudes that these factors produce.

It has long been known that the best outcomes for children come from a balance of love and boundaries from their parents, a style known as "authoritative" parenting. Those who parent with less love are described as "authoritarian". Those who parent with fewer boundaries are described as "permissive". Both of these styles have been shown to have consistently poorer outcomes for children (*Chan & Koo 2010*).

This same UK study by Chan and Koo showed that parenting styles are primarily structured by family structure and not social class. Whereas 52 per cent of two parent families use the "authoritative" style, only 32 per cent of lone parent families do so.

Lone parent families tend to overcompensate for lack of resources and input from fathers, they are twice as likely to do so by being "permissive".

It is the greater acceptance of – or reduced resistance to – the necessity of using of benefits, due to the combined experience of seeing their parents receive benefits and having a more permissive upbringing, that we speculate explains why coming from a higher social class does not prevent children subsequently claiming benefits as adults.

This explanation will clearly benefit from more specific research.

Our main finding however remains robust, that having married parents increases the chances of going to university, getting married and staying off benefits.

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TABLE 1

Social Mobility. People with Married Parents at Birth Are More Likely to Earn a University Degree and Marry and Less Likely to Be on Benefits.

	Model 1 Earned University Degree	On Benefits	Ever Married	Model 2 Earned University Degree	On Benefits	Ever Married	Model 3 Earned University Degree	On Benefits	Ever Married
Not Married Parents	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Married Parents	1.30*	0.70***	1.50***	1.82*	0.92	1.64***	1.26	0.69***	1.49***
	-0.14	-0.05	-0.11	-0.44	-0.11	-0.20	-0.17	-0.07	-0.15
Social Class at Age 16	1.57***	0.85***	1.10***	1.79***	0.96	1.15*	1.57***	0.85***	1.10***
	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.15	-0.05	-0.06	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01
Mother's Interest in Child's Education @ 16	1.01	0.93***	0.92***	1.01	0.94***	0.92***	1.01	0.93***	0.92***
	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01
Mother's Age at Birth	1.03***	0.99***	0.99*	1.03***	0.99***	0.99*	1.03***	0.99***	0.99*
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Male	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Female	1.04	1.66***	1.60***	1.04	1.61***	1.60***	1.04	1.66***	1.60***
	-0.04	-0.05	-0.06	-0.04	-0.05	-0.06	-0.04	-0.05	-0.06
BCS	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
NCDS	0.65***	1.03	1.20***	0.65***	1.18***	1.20***	0.59*	1.00	1.17
	-0.03	-0.04	-0.05	-0.03	-0.04	-0.05	-0.14	-0.15	-0.18
Not Married Parents # Social Class at Age 16				1	1	1			
				(.)	(.)	(.)			
Married Parents # Social Class at Age 16				0.88	0.89*	0.95			
				-0.07	-0.05	-0.05			
Not Married Parents # BCS							1	1	1
							(.)	(.)	(.)
Not Married Parents # NCDS							1	1	1
							(.)	(.)	(.)
Married Parents # BCS							1	1	1
							(.)	(.)	(.)
Married Parents # NCDS							1.11	1.04	1.03
							-0.27	-0.17	-0.16
Difference in Probability (Married Parents vs. Non-Married Parents)	0.03	-0.09	0.08						
P-value	0.01	0.00	0.00						
Number of Cases	18,883	18,517	20,206	18,883	18,517	20,206	18,883	18,517	20,206

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

(.) denotes reference category

Sources: National Child Development Study (1958) and British Cohort Study (1970)

Difference in probability: 0.04 * 100 = 4% higher probability of earning a university degree for children born to married parents.

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001