ARTICLE

Journal of Marriage and Family

Women's family trajectories after union dissolution: A comparative life course analysis

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Abstract

Objective: Changes in family dynamics due to increased union instability are gathering scholarly attention. Against this backdrop, we asked: *How do family life courses evolve after the dissolution of a first union?* And, *how do these processes vary across socio-historical contexts?*

Method: We deployed sequence and cluster analysis on women's combined relationship and fertility trajectories over 120 months after the dissolution of the first union using survey data from the Harmonized Histories datasets. Context-level variation was assessed by comparing a series of measures of heterogeneity in family life courses across separation cohorts (1970–2009) and countries (France, the Netherlands, Poland, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

Results: We found substantial heterogeneity in family life courses that we inferred from a typology of trajectory pathways. We also found relevant dynamics across socio-historical contexts. Post-separation trajectories became more diverse (between-individual heterogeneity) and complex (within-individual heterogeneity) in recent periods among countries that we deem *laggards* in the diffusion of union dissolution, whereas path dependencies in post-separation family paths could be identified amongst the *forerunners*.

Conclusion: We conclude that increased union instability across different population groups generally contributes to the heterogenization of family life courses, but national contexts are also important in shaping family trajectories upon union dissolution.

INTRODUCTION

Post-industrial societies have witnessed increased union dissolution since the second half of the 20th century. Despite heated debates about the erosion of the family unit, research suggests that the formation of romantic unions and childbearing are now frequently occurring after the dissolution of the first union (Beaujouan, 2012; Ivanova et al., 2013; Thomson et al., 2014) and a more diverse landscape of family forms has emerged in contemporary societies. The family dynamics of repartnering and childbearing in higher order unions (including step- and blended families) attracted more and more scholarly attention. Whereas demographers have examined whether levels of union stability and fertility vary between first and subsequent unions (Sweeney, 2010; Thomson, 2014), research on social stratification has investigated the roles of union dissolution and subsequent family arrangements in increased social inequality (Bernardi & Boertien, 2017; McLanahan, 2004).

The undeniable value of prior research is diminished by the limited cross-fertilization among studies. The bulk of research has focused on post-separation family events and structures individually, overlooking the crucial fact that their combinations underpin the complexity and diversity of family lives. This oversight hinders a more profound understanding of post-separation family life courses. Additionally, the analytical focus of extant research is on point-in-time outcomes—family transitions and statuses at a given age or time—often isolated from a wider family biography. This obscures patterns in successive family transitions. There is also limited evidence from cross-national and cross-cohort comparative studies that impedes our understanding of how national contexts and socio-demographic change shape post-separation family lives (for an exception on repartnering see, e.g., Gałęzewska et al., 2017; and on childbearing see, e.g., Thomson et al., 2014).

In this study, we shed new light on post-separation family processes using comparative and life course approaches. First, we adopted a holistic approach to examining the life course, with a focus on *process outcomes*, where long-term trajectories that combine the occurrence, timing, and sequencing of partnership and fertility transitions after first union dissolution become the units of analysis (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010). We posed the question (RQ1) *How do family life courses evolve after the dissolution of the first union?* Second, we adopted a double (cross-national and cross-temporal) comparative approach to understand the role of (changing) contextual conditions in the development of family trajectories. Exploiting samples of individuals exposed to union dissolution in a diverse set of European countries across different periods, we assessed stability and change in family trajectories in order to address the question (RQ2) *How do post-separation family life courses vary across socio-historical contexts?*

For the empirical application, we deployed sequence analysis on combined relationship and fertility trajectories over 120 months after the dissolution of first unions. The focus on family transitions after first unions responds to the notion of union dissolution as the starting point of a new phase in family lives. This approach offers a deeper understanding of continuity and change in post-separation lives compared to analyses covering entire family trajectories. The latter often emphasize heterogeneity in the pre-separation stages and conflate diverse post-separation paths. We acknowledge that opportunities for partnering and having children after the first union vary across socio-cultural contexts. These differences are rooted in variations in the formation and stability of first unions, which are also influenced by the evolving significance and prevalence of cohabitation. Consequently, we analyze family trajectories after the end of either marital or cohabiting unions—acknowledging that cohabitation is increasingly seen as an

alternative rather than a trial stage prior to marriage in many contexts nowadays (Hiekel et al., 2014)—and assess how these relate to pertinent characteristics of initial unions (i.e., age at union dissolution, union duration, type of union, pre-marital cohabitation, and childbearing). In particular, we examine post-separation sequences of episodes in and out of (cohabiting and marital) unions that enable us to assess the processes of repartnering, higher-order union dissolution, and multiple partnerships, as well as childbearing episodes. Context-level variation was assessed by comparing measures of sequence complexity and diversity, as well as typical pathways across four decades or decennial separation cohorts (1970–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, 2000–2009) and seven countries (France, the Netherlands, Poland, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) using data from the Harmonized Histories comparative datasets (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010).

This is the first study to compare family life courses across periods and countries through the post-separation stage. The availability of comparable datasets across countries and periods came at the cost of having data restricted to women only, since many of the surveys used in this research did not collect information for men. However, a focus on women allows for a more nuanced interpretation of context-level heterogeneity in family life courses. Union dissolutions have traditionally affected men and women differently due to societal gender roles, including "double standards" that imply varying evaluations of the same behavior for men and women (Rijken and Liefbroer 2016). Additionally, women's life chances and family behaviors are particularly affected by the national institutions that regulate women's degree of independence from their families, a factor that varies importantly across socio-historical contexts.

Understanding family patterns following union dissolution is crucial because existing evidence suggests that post-separation family transitions are relevant to life outcomes. While union dissolution is traditionally associated with the accumulation of socioeconomic disadvantage, subsequent family transitions may mitigate this association. For example, it was found that repartnering can buffer some of the negative consequences of union dissolution, particularly among women (Dewilde & Uunk, 2008; Jansen et al., 2009). Our study contributes to a more detailed analysis of women's post-separation family behavior, which will inform studies addressing the individual and societal impacts of union instability. By deploying a trajectory approach in a wide range of countries, we identified substantive variation in family life courses after union dissolution. By comparing countries and separation cohorts, we found that family behaviors vary across socio-historical contexts that feature different degrees of union instability and support for women's (economic) independence.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Family life courses after union dissolution

Fragmented research has examined a diverse set of family relationships and living arrangements that emerged through increased union instability (for a more comprehensive review, see Raley & Sweeney, 2020, and Kreyenfeld & Trappe, 2020). The greater availability of longitudinal data and the adoption of a life course approach has stimulated the examination of the formation, stability, and institutionalization of higher-order unions. It has also sparked research into childbearing with multiple partners and childbearing in the context of re-constituted families.

From a life course perspective, the successive family events and states—such as fulfilling partnership and parenthood—are seen as purposive transitions aimed at achieving subjective well-being over the course of life (Huinink & Kohli, 2014). However, when these are not achieved in a given union, its dissolution becomes a salient option that opens up the path for new unions and families (Buhr & Huinink, 2014). In accordance with these postulates, studies

have deployed transition-based methods to analyze individuals' retrospective accounts to establish the frequency and conditions underlying the specific family events and states that follow union dissolution. Supporting the theoretical postulates of partner attractiveness and the opportunity for repartnering, research has indicated that women are less likely to enter into new partnerships than men. This is particularly evident among older women and mothers compared with their male counterparts (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Gałęzewska et al., 2017; Schimmele & Wu, 2016). Higher-order unions were found to be less stable, especially among those who repartner at younger ages and have children from previous unions (Beaujouan, 2016; Kulu, 2014; Vanassche et al., 2015; Wolfinger, 2007). This is partly attributed to a lower expectation for a union to last among previously separated people and partly due to selection into separation (Poortman and Lyngstad, 2007). Childbearing in higher-order unions often compensates for a lack of children from the first union. It also reflects the value of children in new unions, which is evidenced in the increasing numbers of individuals having children with multiple partners, and in the context of step-families (Heintz-Martin et al., 2014; Kreyenfeld et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2014). These studies have been instrumental in explaining the conditions under which family behavior after union dissolution occurs. Despite an increasing diversity of family forms being highlighted in these studies, by focusing on age-specific behavior or point-in-time outcomes they offer less insight into the complex ways that post-separation family lives evolve.

In order to establish the links across (multiple) family behaviors and roles over individual lives, a holistic perspective to the life course approach has recently emerged. The focus has shifted from explanation to thick description, offering detailed assessments of family lives *as lived* and shedding light on diverse family pathways and complex family dynamics over the life course (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2010; Widmer & Ritschard, 2009). Sequence analysis (among other trajectory-based methods) has become a key methodology in examining chronologically ordered family events and states.

To date, studies adopting such a holistic approach have examined typical family trajectories over the prime age of family formation and explored how they relate to various life outcomes (e.g., Kapelle & Vidal, 2022; Muller et al., 2020). By focusing on the overall population, however, these studies often conflate trajectories featuring union dissolutions into a few largely heterogeneous pathways and, as a result, offer little insight into the heterogeneity in post-separation family tracks. Only two previous studies in Flanders-Belgium (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015; Vanassche et al., 2015) and one study in Germany (Schmid & Vidal, 2021) have examined family trajectories for samples of separated individuals. These studies identify a range of latent pathways that underscore key differences in post-separation family trajectories. Among others, these studies single out dominant trajectory paths that feature no new family transitions. Other typical pathways feature repartnering after union dissolution, but no childbearing in the new unions. Parenthood and child custody granted upon separation, along with economic resources, play important roles in how closely women follow these dominant pathways. Of additional but less substantive relevance, are pathways where women experience instability and childbearing in higher order unions, as well as multiple partnerships. Despite these similarities, results from these studies differ in the number of latent pathways (between five and eight), as well as on the family dynamics and population distributions of the pathways. Given differences in the research designs of these studies, it is difficult to say whether results reflect context-level variation.

Post-separation family life courses across socio-historical contexts

The socio-historical context is considered as the unit where socio-demographic change can be observed and this can be defined along two axes, the national context and the temporal context. By comparing family life courses across diverse socio-historical contexts, researchers can assess

whether their shifts are linked to changes in opportunities (and constraints) for family transitions. To date, studies comparing family life courses across countries and periods are limited (see, e.g., Perelli-Harris et al., 2012) and none have focused on the post-separation stage.

A series of measures was proposed to examine the life course change of the overall population across cohorts that faced different socio-historical conditions (Brueckner and Mayer, 2005). On one hand, studies have examined the *de-standardization* of the life course, meaning that a dominant family trajectory once considered a *normative standard* characterizes shrinking shares of the population. Notable here, the typical post-war life course, which features early transitions to a stable marriage and childbearing, became increasingly less popular overtime. Concurrently, a plurality of trajectory pathways increasingly dominates the family life courses of recent cohorts, that is, between-individual heterogeneity or trajectory diversity grows over time. On the other hand, life course *differentiation* indicates that individual life courses consist of more stages and different states, that is, within-individual heterogeneity or trajectory complexity grows over time. Clearly, the rise of union instability contributes to the *differentiation* of the family life course, as individuals enter different partnership phases and family structures in their lifetimes. While these ideas have been applied to the study of change in entire family life courses, they can also provide additional insight into post-separation life stages. De-standardization in the context of post-separation life courses suggests an increasing dissimilarity between individuals' family paths, attributed to increased options for family transitions after union dissolution. Correspondingly, differentiation in post-separation life refers to more complex sets of family transitions within individual trajectories upon first union dissolution.

De-standardization and differentiation of family life courses are expected outcomes in post-industrialized societies. Taking ideational change as the main driver of family transformation, the second demographic transition (SDT) theory (Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa, 1986; Lesthaghe, 2010, 2014) postulates that pervasive processes of individualization, secularization, and modernization that European societies underwent since the second half of the 20th century undermine *traditional* family behavior. Sub-replacement fertility, declines in the formation and stability of marital unions, and the growth of non-marital family arrangements are evolving dynamics in increasingly individualized societies. The SDT's emphasis on individualization, which encourages different decisions about family, could also make us expect post-separation family trajectories to become more heterogeneous over time. In traditional contexts, the dissolution of the marital union would be associated to limited family transitions, as divorce would be uncommon and stigmatized. Thus, divorcées would find it more difficult to find a partner or to start a family after separation. As union dissolution becomes commonplace, individuals' behavior would be more heterogeneous. Some individuals want to form families no matter the economic and social costs, while others focus on other priorities, such as work and career. In accordance with the SDT, a convergence toward increasingly heterogeneous and complex post-separation family trajectories across countries over time can be expected.

Contrary to postulates of unidirectional trends in family change, evidence from comparative studies indicates that cross-national differences in family behavior persist across highly individualized societies (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007; Gałęzewska et al., 2017; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012; Van Winkle, 2018). Research that adopts comparative family policy or welfare state approaches emphasizes the role of institutional differences and path dependency in moderating the influence of economic uncertainty, changing gender roles, and other social forces underlying family change (Zaidi and Morgan, 2017; Schneider & Kreyenfeld, 2021). Accordingly, cross-national variation in the institutions which support families and enable the *de-familialization* of women (i.e., lower their economic dependence from the family) could explain national differences in the spread of family behavior after separation. More comprehensively, the Theory of Conjunctural Action (TCA) proposes that family change is the result of recursive influences between supra-individual *structures* (combining ideas—"schemas"—and material conditions) and individual *agency* (Johnson-Hanks, et al., 2011). Under the TCA, the *structures* that support particular

family roles not only vary across countries but also across population groups within countries. Accordingly, cross-country divergences in post-separation family life courses may reflect heterogeneity in lines of action and resources for family behavior available to different population groups. It may also reflect differences in the social selectivity of the population groups that are exposed to union instability in the first place. In accordance with the TCA, dynamics in post-separation family trajectories are context-dependent, and should be reflected in persisting differences across countries.

The present study

In our study, we extended country-specific studies of post-separation family pathways by adopting a cross-national and cross-temporal comparative design. This design enables us to establish how family life courses evolve after the dissolution of the first union, differentiating patterns that are universal from those that are context-specific. It also enables us to empirically assess continuity and change in post-separation trajectories, addressing expectations of convergence and persisting differences across countries over time in accordance with our interpretation of the SDT and the TCA.

We assessed socio-historical contexts that vary in key macro-level structures that underlie union dissolution and the subsequent family roles. We considered combinations of countries (the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and the decennial separation cohorts (1970–79, 1980–89, 1990–99, 2000–09) as our contextual units of analysis. The selection of countries and periods is based on data availability and substantive heterogeneity in institutional contexts. To ease the interpretation of variation across socio-historical contexts, we built on two fundamental aspects underlying opportunities and constraints for post-separation family transitions that align with our interpretation of the SDT and the TCA: (i) the *diffusion* of union instability, and (ii) the context support to families and work-family balance by means of formal and informal institutions (*de-familialization*).

It is expected that scenarios of more *diffused* union instability support the spread of post-separation family transitions, leading to more heterogeneous and complex trajectories. Figure 1 shows a universal growth in divorce rates over recent decades, although countries vary on the onset and pace of this growth (we note that divorce rates from official statistics display substantive correlations with our sample-based dissolution rates combining marital and cohabiting unions). Divorce rates experienced a rapid surge between the late 1960s and the 1980s in Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, recognized as forerunners in the diffusion of divorce. Although divorce rates stabilized or slightly declined in subsequent years in Sweden and the United Kingdom, Russia witnessed continuous increases, resulting in heightened divorce rates since the early 1990s. In France and the Netherlands, considered *intermediate adopters*, the increases in divorce rates were less rapid and intense, peaking in the mid-80s. Lastly, Poland and Spain are considered *laggards* in the diffusion of divorce and have seen an increase in divorce rates only recently. The diffusion of union instability across different population groups occurred earlier among the *forerunners*. In particular, Sweden and the United Kingdom displayed higher proportions of union dissolutions among less-educated women in earlier periods. In accordance with the SDT, post-separation trajectories should be more heterogeneous and complex among the *forerunners*, but the other groups of countries should be converging with them across more recent periods.

Our study contexts also varied in several interrelated factors that underlie family roles among women, such as female employment participation, policies that support work ——family balance, and dominant family and gender ideology (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Thévenon, 2011). Comparative family policy and welfare state research uses the notion of *de-familialization* to classify national contexts in *regimes*, according to whether women largely
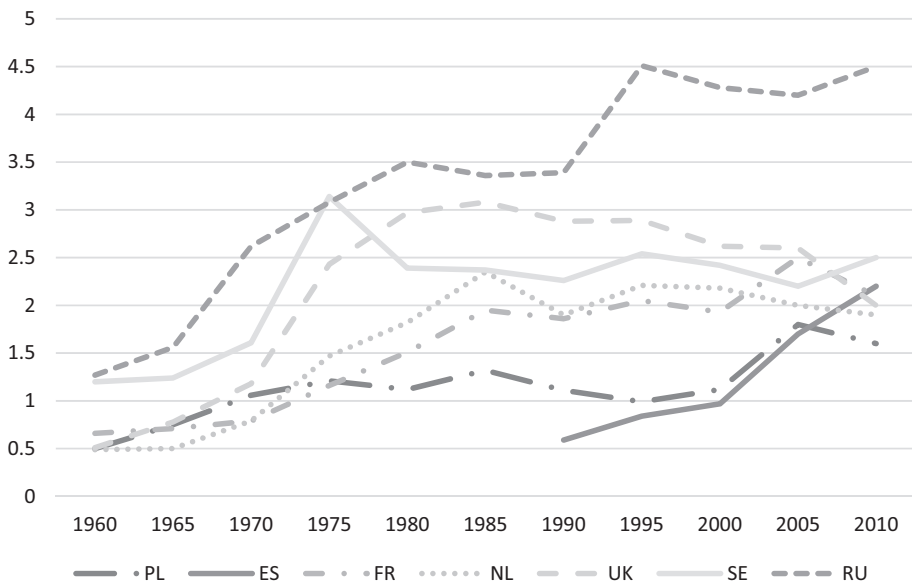
FIGURE 1 Crude divorce rates in study countries (1960–2010). *Source*: UN Demographic Yearbook. The crude divorce rate is defined as the number of divorces during a given year per 1000 people. ES, Spain; FR, France; NL, Netherlands; PL, Poland; RU, Russian Federation; SE, Sweden; UK, United Kingdom.

depend on family support (familialist regimes) or whether they fall back on the state (de-familialized regimes) or the market (market-oriented regimes). We show in Table S1 (in the Supplementary materials) a range of indicators of state support, market support, and values supporting de-familialization across study countries and periods. Arguably, women's options for a variety of family behaviors should be maximal in de-familialized contexts because these promote policies and ideologies that enable women to transcend traditional family roles. Sweden is a paradigmatic case of a *weak breadwinner, dual-earner/dual-carer* regime (e.g., Daly, 2000; Korpi, 2000) that promotes gender egalitarianism and female employment (as seen in earlier periods in Table S1), encouraged via state-based support (such as parental leave and childcare public provision). The United Kingdom also displays high rates of female employment (already observed in earlier periods), but state support has traditionally been (and remains) scarce, and is often geared to low-income families, such as single mothers—as other cases of the *market-oriented* regime. France and the Netherlands belong to a *modified breadwinner*, *general family support* regime (e.g., Daly, 2000; Korpi, 2000) that traditionally supports a male bread-winner family. In recent decades, however, state support for a work-family balance has intensified dramatically in these countries. This can be seen for instance in the steady increase in female labor force participation in the Netherlands, and more generous child support by the state in France. Spain, having adopted for a long time a *male breadwinner/female caregiver* model as "Southern" European regime (Ferrera, 1996), aligns with a more family-centered value system, less state support for a work-family balance and fewer women in the labor force than in France and the Netherlands. As per their state-socialist tradition, the *soviet gender regimes* of Poland and Russia have featured comprehensive state support for families and high female employment, but these were undermined by the economic turmoil and policy reform that accompanied their transition to market economies in the 1990s (Pascall & Kwak, 2005). A clear distinction should be made between the highly Catholic, conservative tradition of Poland and the more (officially) secularized Russian federation, even though many Russians are Russian Orthodox. Relatedly, a notable difference between the two countries is the rate of stability

between couples, as mentioned above. Although this overview of institutions promoting the de-familialization of women in various countries is concise and not exhaustive, it does indicate relevant country variations. Consequently, it reinforces the expectation, in line with the TCA, that distinctions in women's post-separation trajectories will persist across nations.

METHOD

Datasets

For the empirical analysis, we used survey data from the Harmonized Histories datasets (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010; https://www.ggp-i.org/data/harmonized-histories/). The data contain nationally representative samples of adult women in the seven study countries between 2006 and 2018. These surveys collected relevant, comparable, and retrospective information that enabled us to reconstruct respondents' relationship and childbirth histories up to the date of the survey. The data enabled us to construct a comparative analysis of post-separation trajectories and account for relevant characteristics underlying union instability and subsequent family behavior that may vary across socio-historical contexts. Table 1 shows details of the data sources and samples from each country.

Sample

We selected female respondents born between 1930 (1940 in Spain due to sample design) and 1984 from the seven study countries, who dissolved a marital or a cohabiting union between ages 16 and 40. Examining a broad age range enables identifying variability in post-separation trajectories across countries and periods. An older cut-off age is not considered given the low number of family transitions, particularly in the fertility domain, in our study cohorts. The initial sample consisted of 50,670 women within the birth year ranges, mostly aged 40–60 at the time of interview. We excluded 4751 respondents (ranging from 4% of the sample in Sweden to 13% in France) who did not enter a cohabiting or marital union before age 40 or by the survey date, whichever occurred first. We also excluded a negligible number of respondents ($n = 234$) whose unions were formed before age 16 because of the unique circumstances underlying child union formation. As we aim to examine post-separation trajectories, we excluded approximately 75% of respondents who did not dissolve their first union ($n = 33,476$). The highest rate of first union dissolution is in the Swedish sample (48% of women dissolved their first union)

T A B L E 1 Data sources for the comparative analysis of post-separation family trajectories.

Country	Dataset	Period of data collection	Period of union dissolution	Sample size
FR—France	GGS	2005	1960–1999	860
NL—Netherlands	OG	2013	1960–2007	1004
PL—Poland	GGS	2010–11	1960–2005	934
RU—Russian Federation	GGS	2004	1960–1998	1321
ES—Spain	SFS	2006 and 2018	1971–2009	1028
SE—Sweden	GGS	2012–13	1960–2007	1500
UK—United Kingdom	BHPS	2005–06	1960–1999	1081

Note: Data are from the Harmonized Histories. Respondents were born between 1930 (1940 in Spain) and 1984.
Abbreviations: GGS (W1), Generations and Gender Survey (wave 1); BHPS, British Household Panel Study (wave 15); OG, Onderzoek Gezinsvorming; SFS, Spanish Fertility Survey (2006 and 2018 editions).

and the lowest is in the Polish sample (16%), with an overall tendency for earlier birth cohorts to remain in their first union rather than later birth cohorts. Since family behavior often occurs during prime family ages, we excluded respondents who dissolved their first union after age 40 ($n = 2499$). We also excluded respondents whose separations occurred in the 5 years previous to our survey so that we could observe up to 5 years after separation ($n = 1674$). In our analyses, we only considered individuals who dissolved their first union between 1960 and 2009, and for that reason, we excluded 84 respondents who separated prior to 1960 and 224 respondents who separated after 2009. Our analytical sample for RQ1 (i.e., identify typical post-separation trajectories) consists of 7728 women. We note that for RQ2 (i.e., assess socio-historical variation in post-separation trajectories) the analytical sample is reduced to 7120 women because we disregarded cohorts of women separating in the 1960s due to low numbers for cross-cohort/country comparisons ($n = 441$), and some of the co-variates included in the multi-variate models have a few missing cases ($n = 167$).

We acknowledge that our definition of first union combines a range of heterogeneous situations such as marital or cohabiting unions, unions of different lengths, or unions with and without children. To assess the extent to which our results conflate heterogeneous situations, we replicated the analysis for samples of long-term unions of any type (i.e., 1 year of duration or more, either cohabiting or married), sample of marital unions and cohabitation only as a premarital stage; and marital unions and cohabitation only if linked with childbearing. Results from these additional analyses (available online in https://osf.io/f3w6p) are largely in line with our main results.

Measures

We used information collected at the time of the survey on the year and month of each respondent's union formations and dissolutions, as well as childbirths, to examine post-separation family trajectories. The surveys recorded up to nine union episodes and 16 childbirth episodes. For each respondent, we constructed the sequence of new family roles since the dissolution of the first union, and over 10 years (i.e., 120 months). The 120-month observation window captured a large share of family behaviors after union dissolution (i.e., new partner, childbirth, union dissolution), and enabled us to compare women separating between ages 16 and 40. Each respondent's sequence consists of a succession of 120 categorical states that combine two partnership roles (partnered and unpartnered) with three childbearing roles (no childbirth, first birth, and 2+ births). We thus considered five post-separation family roles: Unpartnered; Partnered; Unpartnered with child(ren); Partnered, 1 child; and Partnered, 2+ children. The partnered status considers both marital and cohabiting unions because a disaggregated analysis was not feasible, and our focus is on the repartnering process. We note that country comparisons of only marriages would be misleading for socio-historical contexts where cohabitation has already become a substitute to marriage. Information on unmarried, non-coresident partners is not available in all surveys, and thus respondents in such situations are categorized as *unpartnered*. Since we focused on post-separation family roles, our categorical states disregarded the parenthood status upon the dissolution of the first union—but we considered having children from the first union in our description of typical trajectories and the context comparisons. Childbirths occurring less than 7 months after the dissolution of the first union were also disregarded since these childbirths are considered to be related to the first union. We also do not include adoptions, since information on their timing was not available in all samples. Few respondents had more than two children within 10 years after the dissolution of the first union, and thus we included the fewer high fertility roles as part of the "Partnered, 2+ children" state. Similarly, we did not disaggregate the unpartnered states by the number of births because zero or only one childbirth was observed in the large majority of them.

We considered a set of additional measures for the description of post-separation family trajectories (in RQ1) and as co-variates in the regression analysis (in RQ2). Most of these measures relate to the first union, arguably being important dimensions underlying separation and subsequent family roles. We considered *age at union formation*, *age at union dissolution* and *union duration*, whether the respondent was married (*marital union*) and cohabited prior to marriage (*pre-marital cohabitation*), and *childbearing* status (previous childbearing includes children born up to 7 months after the dissolution of the first union). We also consider the *age at interview* and the *level of education* at the time of the survey (Low: ISCED levels 0–2; Medium: ISCED levels 3–4; High: ISCED levels 5–6). For the regression analyses (answering RQ2) we recoded level of education into a binary variable that indicates whether the respondents had more than a low level of education (or not) to minimize potential anticipatory analysis.

Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy proceeded in several steps. First, we generated a typology of post-separation pathways using sequence analysis and cluster analysis. We summarized the number, trajectory features, and population distributions of the underlying pathways in order to respond to RQ1. Second, we deployed multi-variate regression analyses to assess socio-historical variation in post-separation life courses across countries and periods (RQ2).

Typology of family pathways. We deployed an Optimal Matching (OM-Spell) algorithm to compute pairwise dissimilarities across respondents' sequences from all countries and separation cohorts. Based on the pairwise dissimilarities, we grouped sequences using cluster analysis to establish a typology of post-separation pathways. We chose a nine-cluster solution because it renders a set of interpretable pathways, with a relatively high internal homogeneity of the cluster groups (see Technical Appendix).

Comparisons across contexts. We predicted within-sequence heterogeneity (number of transitions, a measure of life course complexity or "differentiation"), between-sequence heterogeneity (dissimilarity to a representative sequence, a measure of diversity or life course "de-standardization"), and the typical trajectory pathways across countries and separation periods using multi-variate regression analysis.

Within-trajectory heterogeneity or complexity is defined by the number of exposures to different states and transitions overtime (Elzinga, 2010). While a range of sophisticated indicators were available, we used a rather elementary measure: the *number of transitions* between states over the 120 months of post-separation observation. This was considered an easily interpreted and straightforward measure for trajectory complexity, particularly when a single overall indicator was needed (Pelletier et al., 2020). On average, our respondents underwent 1.5 family transitions over 10 years since union dissolution, with 34% of the respondents not experiencing a single transition. We predicted the number of transitions using Poisson regression.

Between-trajectory heterogeneity or diversity is defined as individuals' trajectories being less similar to one another or to a dominant trajectory (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007). We considered the average *dissimilarity to context-specific representative sequences* as a measure of diversity. We identified a representative sequence for each country-cohort permutation using the neighborhood density criterion. Using the above-mentioned OM-Spell algorithm, we computed the dissimilarity of each sequence to its context-specific representative sequence. Higher average values of the dissimilarity measure indicated higher diversity across life courses in a given context. We normalized the variable so that the average dissimilarity is 0.34, ranging from 0 (minimum dissimilarity) to 1 (maximum dissimilarity). We predicted the average dissimilarity to the representative sequence using OLS regression.

The typology of family pathways combined within- and between-sequence heterogeneity. Contexts featuring higher levels of life course complexity should be reflected in respondents

following pathways with a higher number of transitions. Contexts featuring higher levels of life course diversity should be reflected in a higher dispersion of respondents in multiple pathways, particularly pathways featuring low internal homogeneity. Thus, to further facilitate the interpretation of change in post-separation trajectories across socio-historical contexts, we predicted the distributions of typical trajectory pathways using a multinomial logit regression.

Our main predictors were the interactions between separation cohort and country. We compared predictions across permutations of countries and separation cohorts to assess the heterogeneity of life course trajectories and distributions of pathways across socio-historical contexts. In the regression models, we additionally controlled for features of the first union as well as for age and more-than-low education at survey time to control for compositional aspects, as these varied across the socio-historical context of our samples of separated people. Whereas the range of ages at separation in our sample is broad, an age decomposition suggested no substantive heterogeneity in our results due to age at separation. In all models, standard errors were cluster-robust to the non-independence of observations within surveys (Abadie et al., 2017).

RESULTS

Post-separation family pathways across European countries

Figure 2 visually characterizes the nine post-separation family trajectories pathways resulting from the sequence and cluster analysis. Table 2 displays distributions of pathways across countries (see Table S2 in the Supplementary material for average compositional characteristics of each pathway). To ease interpretation, we presented the nine pathways in three groups with shared patterns in post-separation trajectory properties.

The first group (*Delayed post-separation family pathways*) consisted of two pathways that featured little complexity, with few family transitions after the end of the first union, if any, occurring at later stages of our 10-year post-separation window. These were dominant pathways in Poland, Spain, Russia, and France.

- The largest pathway within this group was labeled *No post-separation transitions* as it consisted of women who neither repartnered nor had (additional) children within the first 10 years after first union dissolution. This was more often observed among married women with children in their first union. On average, the first union was long (about 9 years), and separation occurred at later ages (over age 30). This pathway garnered about half of separated women in Poland and Spain. It was also the largest pathway in Russia (41%), France (35%), the United Kingdom (26%), and the Netherlands (25 per cent).
- Next, the *Late post-separation transitions* pathway featured late repartnering, with half of the respondents being re-partnered between seven and 8 years after separation. About 40% of the respondents had a child shortly after repartnering. This pathway was evenly distributed across countries, ranging from 7% (in France) to 10% (in the Netherlands).

The second group (*Stable post-separation family pathways*) featured three pathways with universal, largely stable, and relatively early repartnering within the 10-year post-separation window. In addition, two of the pathways featured childbearing shortly after repartnering. While this group of pathways was dominant in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, only one in four women in Poland and Spain followed such pathways.

- First, a pathway of *Stable repartnering* featured a single repartnering transition that occurred between the first and the sixth year after first union dissolution. Dissolution of this union was rather marginal and childbearing was inexistent within the 10-year window. This is the largest
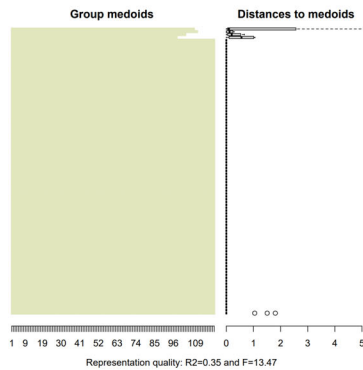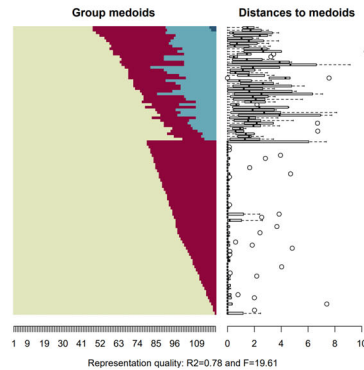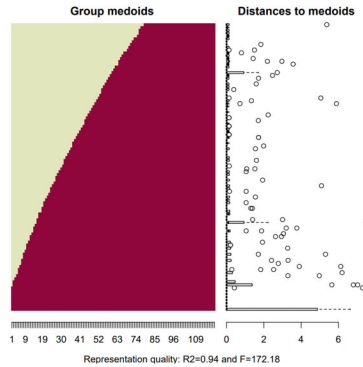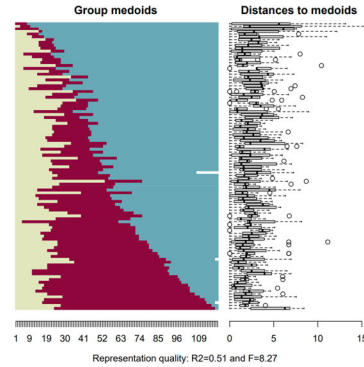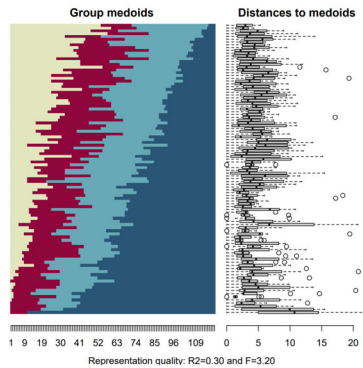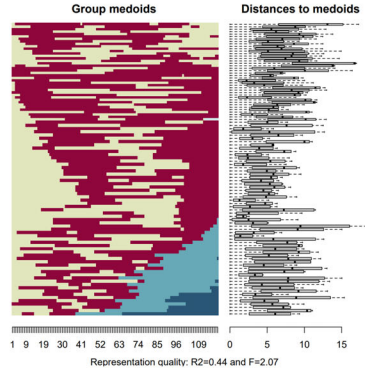
FIGURE 2 Post-separation family pathways. Data are from the Harmonized Histories datasets. Horizontal stacked bars depict a selection of representative (i.e., medoid) sequences of combined partnership and childbearing state states over 120 successive months since the dissolution of the first union. Dissimilarities to medoids indicate heterogeneity between the represented and the representative (medoid) sequences. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

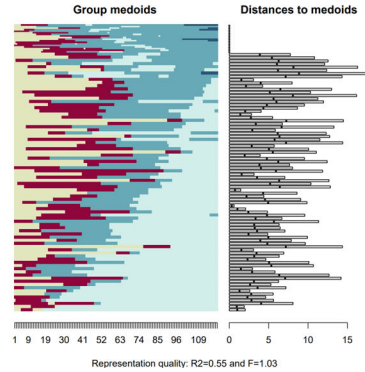**(c)** *Marginal post-separation family pathways*
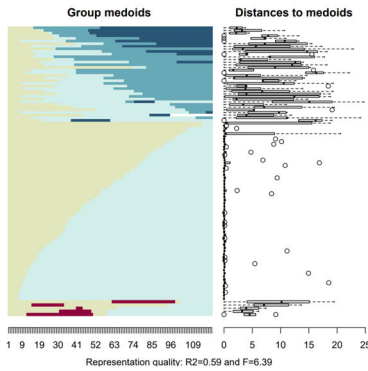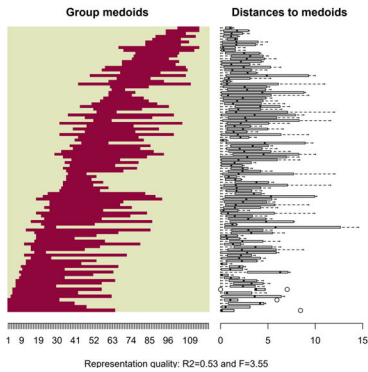
F I G U R E 2 (Continued)

pathway within the group of Stable Family Pathways, and the second largest group overall, ranging from 10% in Poland to 23% in the Netherlands.

- Next, the *Stable repartnering with 1 child* pathway featured stable repartnering, about 2 years after union dissolution, and one childbirth, with some variability on its timing. It was more common among women who dissolved their first union at younger ages (about age 26). About one in 10 women followed this pathway, ranging from 9 per cent in Poland and Spain to 15% in Russia.

- Last, the *Stable repartnering with 2+ children* pathway featured stable repartnering, within the initial 4 years since union dissolution, and two or more childbirths shortly after repartnering. This pathway was more common among women with intermediate levels of education. The first union was relatively early (about age 21), often a cohabitation without children, and lasted less than 4 years. While this was the largest pathway in Sweden (22%), it is rather marginal in countries such as Poland, Spain, and Russia (5%).

The last group (*Marginal post-separation family pathways*) featured four marginal pathways with complex trajectories and family behaviors that were often linked with social disadvantage. The combination of these pathways was particularly important in the United Kingdom (28%), while these were less relevant in the other countries, ranging from 14% in Poland to 21% in Sweden.

- The *Unpartnered post-separation childbearing* pathway featured women who had a child without a co-resident partner after separation from the first partner. The timing of childbearing was heterogeneous. About one in three re-partnered sometime after childbearing, and a few dissolved a co-resident union that occurred before childbirth. Such women were often low-educated and they dissolved their first union at young ages. This pathway was not uncommon in the United Kingdom (15%) but was much less common in the other countries.
- The *Multiple repartnering* pathway featured high trajectory complexity, with two or more partnerships after separation from the first partner. About one in three women had one or more children. This was more common for recent birth cohorts (with related higher educational achievement), and among recently separated women whose first union started early, was non-marital, childless, and short-lived. It ranges from 1 per cent in Poland to 9% in Sweden.
- The *Unstable repartnering* pathway featured one short-lived co-residential relationship with no childbearing, and the respondents remaining unpartnered by the end of the 10-year window. It is more typical among recent separation and birth cohorts (with related higher educational achievement). It ranges from 3% in Poland to 7% in the United Kingdom.
- Last, the *Unstable repartnering with post-separation childbearing* pathway featured a highly complex trajectory, with relatively early repartnering, childbearing, and eventually union dissolution. A few women re-partnered more than once and had additional children. It was more common among respondents whose first union ended when they were relatively young. This was the smallest pathway, ranging from 1% in the Netherlands to 4% in France.

The results presented so far refer to analyses pooling all countries, and thus, it was assumed that post-separation pathways should be universal. We replicated these analyses in country-specific samples to assess whether the same typology would appear. Results from the pooled- and country-specific samples (not shown here) were similar regarding the cluster types. As expected, there are differences in country-specific sample distributions across pathways and some of the properties associated to each type. The most common pathways remained the same in the pooled- and country-specific analyses. There were some variations in smaller pathways in the country-specific analysis. For example, the cluster featuring *multiple partnerships* did not appear in France, Poland, Russia, and Spain, and the few individuals following such trajectories were integrated into the cluster featuring one short partnership spell (i.e., *unstable repartnering*). Also, the *late post-separation transitions* cluster did not appear in the United Kingdom, since most women repartnered or had children early after the first union dissolution. Despite these exceptions, our results suggested that the typology is rather consistent across a diverse set of European contexts.

Heterogeneity in post-separation family trajectories across socio-historical contexts

To assess variations in life courses after first union dissolution across socio-historical contexts, we show predictions of within- and between-sequence heterogeneity as well as distributions of trajectory pathways for interactions between separation cohorts and countries from multivariate regression models. Figure 3 shows the predicted number of transitions within the 10-year window after first union dissolution, with higher number of family transitions reflecting higher life course complexity. Full model results as well as predicted probabilities in tabular format can be consulted in Tables S3 and S4, respectively, in the Supplementary Material.

We found that countries that we considered laggards and intermediate adopters in the diffusion of union instability (Poland, Spain, France, and the Netherlands) displayed the lowest number of post-separation family transitions in earlier separation cohorts. Particularly low were

TABLE 2 Population distributions of post-separation family pathways by country (percentages).

	Poland	Spain	Russian Federation	Netherlands	France	Sweden	United Kingdom
	(PL)	(ES)	(RU)	(NL)	(FR)	(SE)	(UK)
Delayed post-separation family pathways							
(1) No post-separation transitions	55.1	47.8	41.2	25.4	34.9	16.3	26.1
(2) Late post-separation transitions	7.9	7.9	8.6	9.5	7.3	9.0	8.3
Overall	*63.1*	*55.6*	*49.8*	*34.9*	*42.2*	*25.3*	*34.4*
Stable post-separation family pathways							
(3) Stable repartnering	9.5	13.7	13.7	22.7	15.5	17.7	17.0
(4) Stable repartnering with 1 child	8.5	8.5	15.3	11.1	10.8	14.5	9.8
(5) Stable repartnering with 2+ children	5.2	4.6	5.2	13.4	11.2	21.9	10.0
Overall	*23.2*	*26.8*	*34.2*	*47.2*	*37.4*	*54.1*	*36.8*
Marginal post-separation family pathways							
(6) Unpartnered post-separation childbearing	7.5	7.0	6.2	4.6	7.7	3.6	14.5
(7) Multiple repartnering	1.1	2.5	2.2	5.6	4.7	8.8	6.2
(8) Unstable repartnering	3.3	6.2	4.2	6.4	4.4	5.6	6.6
(9) Unstable repartnering and post-separation childbearing	1.8	1.8	3.4	1.4	3.6	2.7	1.5
Overall	*13.7*	*17.6*	*16.0*	*17.9*	*20.3*	*20.7*	*28.8*
Total (*N*)	100 (934)	100 (1028)	100 (1321)	100 (1004)	100 (860)	100 (1500)	100 (1081)

Note: Data are from the harmonized histories datasets.

the predictions for Poland and Spain, with less than one transition for those who separated before the 1990s. In contrast, countries that we considered forerunners in the diffusion of union instability (Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) displayed higher numbers of transitions, with about 1.5 transitions, in earlier separation cohorts.

Overtime, the laggards and intermediate adopters experienced sharp increases in the number of transitions in post-separation life courses and gradually converged with the levels of the forerunners. In particular, Poland and Spain reached over one transition, and the Netherlands and France reached about 1.5 transitions for those separating in the 1990s and thereafter. Overall differences in number of transitions across laggards and intermediate adopters were lowest in the most recent separation periods in our study.

The developments in number of transitions among the forerunners were mostly heterogeneous. In Sweden and the United Kingdom, the number of transitions increased slightly in the 1980s separation period. More recently, the number of transitions stagnated but remained higher in Sweden, and decreased slightly in the United Kingdom. In Russia (in contrast to its high levels of union dissolution) the number of transitions declined for the 1990s separation

cohort to slightly over one transition (similar to Poland and Spain), which possibly reflects difficulties in times of political and economic transition.

Figure 4 shows predicted dissimilarity to the context-specific representative sequence, which measured the diversity in family trajectories after the end of the first union across women of a given socio-historical context.

As for complexity, the laggards showed a pattern of overtime increase in levels of life course diversity. We found that Poland and Spain displayed the lowest trajectory diversity levels in the earliest cohorts. Sharp increases in diversity occur in the 1990s separation cohort in Poland and the 2000s cohort in Spain. Levels of diversity were average in France and the Netherlands for the early separation cohorts. Then, we observed increases for those separating during the 1990s in the Netherlands and during the 1980s in France; after that diversity levels stagnated. Overall differences in levels of diversity across laggards and intermediate adopters were lowest in the latest separation periods, and highest in the earliest separation periods.

Again, dynamics of trajectory diversity among the forerunners were somewhat heterogeneous. Trajectory diversity in Russia and the United Kingdom was average in the earliest separation cohorts. Despite a slight increase in the 1980s, diversity declined again in the early 2000s. Sweden displayed higher-than-average trajectory diversity in the 1970s separation cohort, slight increases in the 1980s, and stagnation since the 1990s.

Figure 5 shows predicted distributions of grouped post-separation trajectory pathways. Shifts in trajectory complexity and diversity should be reflected in changes in sample distributions of major pathways across socio-historical context.

In line with lower initial levels of trajectory complexity and diversity, we found higher proportions of respondents in *Delayed post-separation family pathways* in earlier periods, particularly in Poland, Spain, and France. This proportion decreased for respondents who separated in subsequent cohorts, particularly due to declines in the *No post-separation transitions* pathway among the countries considered laggards. Somewhat different were the dynamics for Russia and the United Kingdom, with slight declines of these pathways in the 1980s, but increases in the 1990s. In Sweden, levels of delayed family pathways remained low overtime, indicating that the context has been supportive of women's opportunities to combine work and family roles or that repartnering was highly accepted since early periods in the diffusion of union instability.

With regards to *Stable post-separation family pathways*, we found overtime increases in countries such as Poland, Spain, and France, which had the lowest baseline levels. In particular, these countries had seen substantive increases in pathways that featured childbearing in a stable union. In contrast, Russia and the United Kingdom started with higher proportions in the 1970s but saw important declines overtime. The Netherlands and Sweden boasted higher levels at baseline and fluctuated around these overtime.

Lastly, most countries observed increases in *Marginal post-separation family pathways* overtime, but with some exceptions, these pathways remained marginal. Poland, France, Russia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have seen increased proportions in such pathways between the 1970s and the 1990s. Stark increases occurred in the United Kingdom during the 1980s, mostly due to important increases in the *Non-partnered childbearing* pathway. We did not find substantive variations across separation cohorts in Spain and Sweden.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary societies have witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of family forms and structures resulting from increased union instability. Whereas the dynamics of partnership and childbearing following union dissolution have been the focus of research, how these factors collectively shape post-separation life courses remains largely unknown. To address this gap,
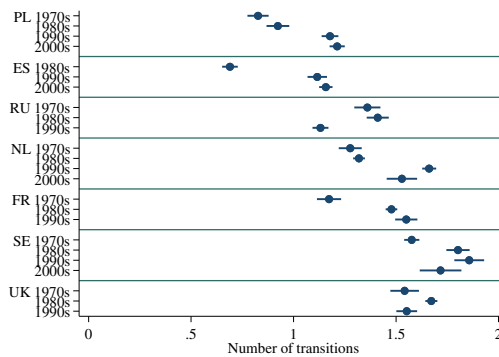
FIGURE 3 Within-sequence heterogeneity across countries and separation cohorts (predicted number of family transitions after the dissolution of the first union). Data are from the harmonized histories. Predicted number of transitions across family states over 120 successive months since the dissolution of the first union based on multivariable Poisson regression models. ES, Spain; FR, France; NL, Netherlands; PL, Poland; RU, Russian Federation; SE, Sweden; UK, United Kingdom. 1970s—eparation between 1970 and 1979; 1980s—separation between 1980 and 1989; 1990s—separation between 1990 and 1999; 2000s—separation between 2000 and 2009. Whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

our study examined family trajectories over the first 10 years since the dissolution of the initial union. In doing so, our study contributes to a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of family lives, increasingly shaped by the experience of union dissolution. We utilized samples of separated women from various European countries (France, the Netherlands, Poland, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and decennial separation cohorts (1970–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1999, 2000–2009). This approach allowed us to gather novel cross-national comparative evidence and examine the role of the socio-demographic change in post-separation family life.

We first unpacked the structure of post-separation family life courses. Employing sequence and cluster analysis, we identified nine family pathways that reflect the diversity and complexity of post-separation family life courses across countries and decennial separation cohorts. Broadly speaking, the pathways diverged in the occurrence and timing of repartnering and childbearing, as well as the level of stability of new families. Dominant pathways in most countries (except Sweden) featured delayed family transitions—with no repartnering and childbearing within the first 7 years after union dissolution—but these declined among recent separation cohorts (except in Russia and the United Kingdom). These pathways were associated with parenthood in the earlier union and child custody upon separation, which limited the attractiveness and availability of separated women in partner markets. Another group of typical pathways featured the formation of a stable partnership (with or without children). These pathways were particularly relevant in Sweden—where stable repartnering and childbearing in a higher order union was observed in almost 20 percent of the overall women's life courses, with and without union dissolution experience—and with varying levels across other countries. Lastly, a series of pathways featuring instability of higher-order unions and unpartnered childbearing after separation emerged recently but overall remained marginal.

Our results contribute to an emerging literature that has already adopted a trajectory approach to study the heterogeneity in family life courses by further unpacking relevant differences in the post-separation stage. In common with three previous context-specific studies focusing on post-separation stages (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015; Schmid & Vidal, 2021; Vanassche et al., 2015), we found dominant trajectory paths featuring delays in (or absence of) family transitions, and a range of less substantive pathways featuring instability and childbearing in higher order unions, as well as multiple partnerships. Perhaps the key differences with
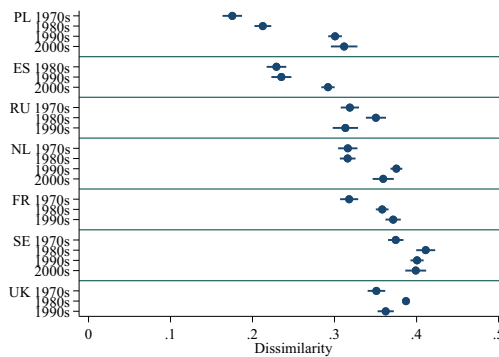
FIGURE 4 Between-sequence heterogeneity across countries and separation cohorts (predicted dissimilarity to representative sequence of family transitions after the dissolution of the first union). Data are from the Harmonized Histories. Predicted OM-based dissimilarity to separation cohort- and country-specific medoid sequence based on multivariable OLS regression models. ES, Spain; FR, France; NL, Netherlands; PL, Poland; RU, Russian Federation; SE, Sweden; UK, United Kingdom. 1970s—separation between 1970 and 1979; 1980s—separation between 1980 and 1989; 1990s—separation between 1990 and 1999; 2000s—separation between 2000 and 2009. Whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

previous studies lie in the number of latent pathways identified, in the family dynamics featured in some pathways, and in their population distributions. For example, our study identified pathways of stable repartnering with childbearing not relevant or present in the previous studies. Although this could be partly attributed to differences in research designs, results from previous studies also reflected opportunity structures for family transitions in the specific socio-historical contexts studied.

Our second goal was to examine the role of socio-demographic change by assessing variations in post-separation family trajectories along national and temporal axes. To guide the analysis, we theorized on the extent to which post-separation life courses were specific or universal across national and temporal contexts. We argued that in accord with the SDT and the underlying notions of individualization, it was expected that as union dissolution becomes commonplace countries would converge toward increasingly heterogeneous and complex post-separation family trajectories. In contrast, following the postulates of the TCA, country-specific dynamics in post-separation trajectories would be expected as they reflect differences in national institutions and ideologies supporting women's roles in society.

Two main findings arise from the comparisons of post-separation family dynamics between countries and separation cohorts. First, we found that many national contexts have advanced toward greater diversity and complexity of post-separation family dynamics over time, as separation rates increased. This observation was most true in contexts that experienced a late diffusion of divorce—what we termed the *laggards* (i.e., Poland and Spain), and to a lesser extent for the *intermediate adopters* (i.e., France and the Netherlands). In these contexts, growing family instability across population groups would have contributed to heterogenization of the courses of family life in more recent periods, which led to a path of convergence toward the other countries. Typical post-separation pathways of delayed (or absence of) family formation were recently replaced by pathways of stable family formation.

Second, we also found trends of divergence across countries pioneering the diffusion of divorce, what we called the *forerunners* (i.e., Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Sweden featured high heterogeneity in post-separation family lives across study periods, but also an emphasis on stable family formation. In contrast, Russia has seen recent declines in heterogeneity despite very high rates of union instability. And the United Kingdom has seen a
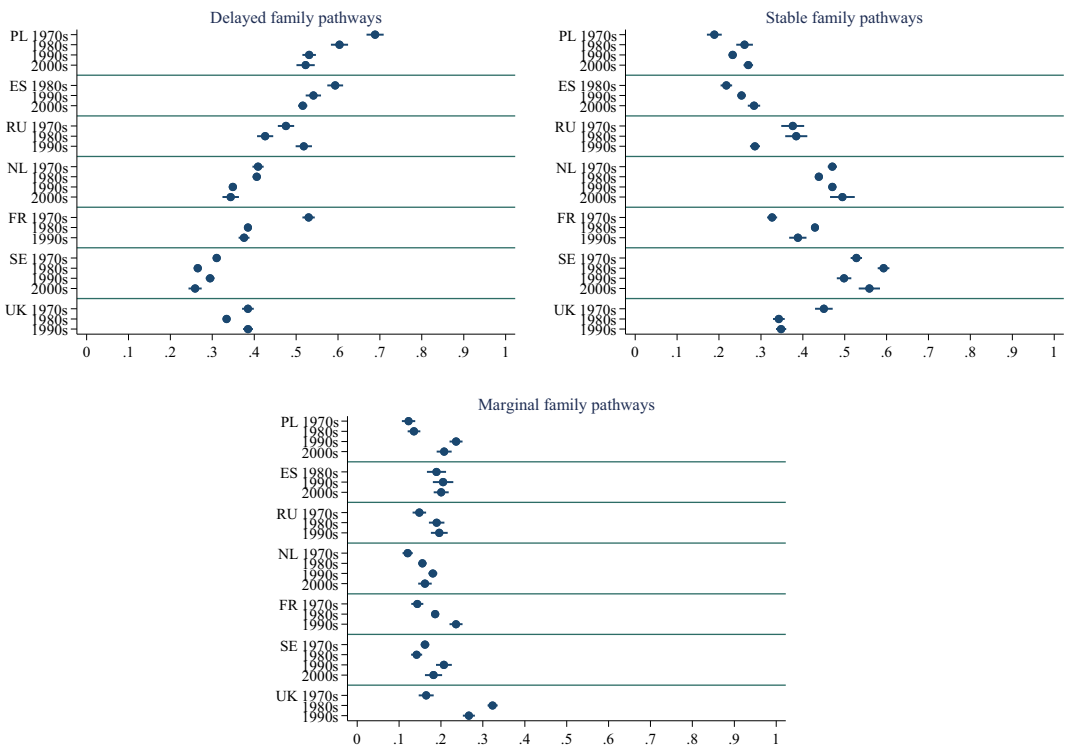
FIGURE 5 Post-separation family pathways across countries and separation cohorts (predicted probabilities). Data are from the Harmonized Histories. Predicted post-separation family pathways (groups of clustered sequences of monthly family states over 120 successive months since the dissolution of the first union) based on multinomial regression models. ES, Spain; FR, France; NL, Netherlands; PL, Poland; RU, Russian Federation; SE, Sweden; UK, United Kingdom. 1970s—separation between 1970 and 1979; 1980s—separation between 1980 and 1989; 1990s—separation between 1990 and 1999; 2000s—separation between 2000 and 2009. Whiskers indicate 95% confidence intervals. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

decrease in stable family formation and increases in marginal, less stable pathways such as unpartnered childbearing.

Thus, our results challenged ideas of unilineal family change in post-separation family lives, as there was no institutional equilibrium in contexts of *increased* union instability where the different countries converge towards. Instead, varieties of trends in women's post-separation trajectories were possibly linked to the support that the context offers for family transitions, more concretely to the type of family policies and the gender ideologies. Within this context, critical frameworks like the TCA can prove highly valuable in elucidating family change. This framework recognizes that when individuals encounter distinct institutional, cultural, and economic *structures*, they may pursue distinct courses of action (*schemas*) after separation, influenced by what is considered "normal" within that specific context. Given that these *structures* vary across different socio-historical settings and even within them, particularly across socio-demographic groups, it is reasonable to anticipate heterogeneity in post-separation life paths.

Our study was limited in several dimensions. We acknowledge that inference of our results may be limited to the contexts studied and that the consideration of other contexts is necessary to contribute further knowledge on cross-country variation in post-separation life courses. This is evidenced in the above-mentioned differences in types and population distributions of pathways between our study and previous case studies of Belgium and Germany. Even though we have covered quite a large variety of different "gender and divorce" regimes, it might be

particularly interesting to consider yet other countries with different family and fertility systems. The United States is particularly interesting in that it features high rates of fertility outside unions or with multiple partners, and therefore, one can expect that what we considered marginal pathways in our study might be more relevant and heterogeneous in this context.

We also acknowledge that, due to data restrictions, our study focuses only on women. Due to the ubiquity of women's roles in families and "double standards" in post-separation behaviors across socio-historical contexts, it can be expected that variations in gender ideologies and welfare institutions might have different consequences for men and women, affecting men's post-separation trajectories to a lesser extent. Another major limitation was the lack of information on child custody and coresidence, as well as living-apart-together partner arrangement that may obscure relevant heterogeneity in our delayed post-separation family arrangements, particularly among separated mothers. Future research should also consider analyzing separately marital and cohabiting unions to further insights on changing union forms.

Despite these and other limitations, results from our study make a substantial contribution to the discovery of key relationships in family life courses and can inform research on the dynamics of union dissolution and subsequent family behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.