

**KU LEUVEN**

FACULTEIT SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN

# **Stepfamily configurations and trajectories following parental divorce**

A quantitative study on stepfamily situations,  
stepfamily relationships and the wellbeing of children

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Onderzoekseenheid:  
Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek [CeSO]

Proefschrift tot het verkrijgen  
van de graad van  
Doctor in de Sociale Wetenschappen  
aangeboden door  
**Sofie VANASSCHE**

2013

(blanco sheet in between)

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# PROLOGUE

Newspaper headings such as “*Two mail boxes and four new years’ s lettres*” (De Standaard, 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2010) and “*Advertisement world discovers stepfamilies*” (Het Nieuwsblad, 1<sup>th</sup> of October 2011) announce the presence of stepfamilies in current Western society. Stepfamilies are surely not a new phenomena, but the origins and nature of stepfamilies and stepfamily relationships have changed enormously over time. Stepfamilies can be formed in a variety of ways, depending on the relationship and fertility history of both partners. The key characteristic of stepfamilies is that they involve a partner relationship in which at least one of the partners has a child from who the other partner is neither the biological nor adoptive parent.

In earlier times, many stepfamilies were formed after the death of one of the parents. Children who lived with only one of their biological parents were in most cases totally deprived of the other biological parent, who was often either dead or unknown. Today, divorce and separation are more frequently the events that precede the stepfamily formation. Consequently, children in stepfamilies are now much more likely to still have contact with both biological parents. In this doctoral thesis, we focus on this ‘new’ kind of stepfamily, that originates from the remarriage, post-marital cohabitation or repartnering of a divorced or separated parent.

The main goal of the project is to analyze the importance of custody arrangements of children following divorce for different dimensions of stepfamily life, both structural as in terms of family processes. The topics considered are largely absent from the research literature, but they are increasingly important factors in overall family life. Given the current normative climate of joint legal and joint physical custody following parental divorce in many westerns countries, including Belgium, stepparents are increasingly supplementary parents, rather than replacement parents. Both biological parents are more likely to remain physically and emotionally present in the lives of their children. But, these children often have two families who are not living under the same roof, increasing the complexity of the family configuration during childhood. This dynamic creates a complex network of interpersonal family relationships, with its own individual and social dynamics. Many of these arrangements are ‘new’ and therefore, transpire outside any clear normative framework. This ambiguity motivates the central research topic of this thesis: what do stepfamily configurations and trajectories following parental divorce/separation look like and how are they associated with different (step)family relationships and the wellbeing of the involved children?

Until now, very little scientific information has been available on post-divorce family configurations in Flanders, despite the growing occurrence of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, this information is much needed for policy makers who have to address questions about the juridical, social and economic problems that people in alternative family situations face. Rather than concentrating on one specific issue, we explore new terrain in various domains. Our core research questions fall into two categories. The first consists of demographic questions: how many children live in a stepfamily formation following divorce, what is the composition of those stepfamilies and how does the

composition differ according to the custody arrangement of the child? The second set is more grounded within family sociology. These questions relate to the interrelatedness of custody arrangements, the relationships with and between parents and stepparents and their association with adolescent and child wellbeing.

There are three important language issues that we want to stress. First, some people have troubles with the prefix *step*. Consequently, a dozen or more alternative names are in use to indicate stepfamilies and steprelationships, both in English (for example *new extended families*, *surplus families*, *jigsaw families*) and in Dutch (for example *nieuwsamengestelde gezinnen*, *mozaïekgezinnen*, *plusgezinnen*). Although it is undoubtedly possible to write a doctoral thesis on the origin, connotation and evolution of the use of these different labels, we have chosen to maintain throughout this work the concept of stepfamilies and steprelationships to indicate family situations in which children from a previous relationship of one or both partners are involved. Another language issue may be the alternating use of either children or adolescents. While the empirical parts of the study are mainly, but not exclusively, focused on adolescents, we do often speak of children. We apply the term *children* to indicate the relatedness to the parents, and of course, adolescents are children of their parents. Finally, in the remainder of the text we refer to biological and adoptive parents as biological parents. Stepparents who adopted their stepchildren after the formation of the stepfamily on the other hand remain categorized as stepparents.

The first chapter provides an overview of the research context. After a brief description of the demographic and macro-social context of contemporary stepfamily families, we review the more specific research topics that are the focus of subsequent chapters. The second chapter describes the two data sources that are used for the empirical analyses, including their strengths and weaknesses for studying post-divorce stepfamily formation. Chapters three through ten can be considered as research chapters and are based upon different publications and research papers. We end with a general discussion. One aim of this concluding chapter is to summarize the findings on specific research topics, which are based upon analyses that are sometimes presented across different research chapters. We also comment on the most important methodological issues that were encountered throughout the project and on the policy relevance of our findings. The concluding remarks concern directions for future research.

It should be noted that the different chapters of this dissertation are based upon several manuscripts that were either published, accepted for publication, or currently are under review. As a consequence, there is some overlap between chapters, as all of them are based upon publications that stand on their own. It is also the case that some related research questions are scattered across different chapters as they were dealt with in different publications.





# **CHAPTER 1**

## **Research context and research questions**

In this first chapter, we describe the demographic context of contemporary stepfamily formation. In doing so, we also define post-divorce stepfamily formation and the different relationships that may exist between stepfamily members. Next, we discuss the normative and juridical framework of stepfamilies and steprelationships, including the consequences of the current focus on biological parenthood following parental divorce. We end with an overview of the specific research topics that are dealt with in the different chapters of this study and position them in the research literature.

## **1.1 Demographic context**

While the married couple with children was once the dominant family model in Western societies, this ‘classical’ family form now exists alongside of single parents, remarried couples, unmarried partners living together, and voluntary singles. The nuclear family has lost its numerical and normative dominance (Corijn & Matthijs, 2004). These remarkable changes in behaviours and norms have been linked to the long term trend of individualization, whereby people are increasingly free to choose lifestyle options according to their own needs and desires (Kuijsten, 2002) without feeling obligated to get married, to have children, or to spend their whole life with one partner. This transformation has been accompanied by widespread declines in average family size. Childbearing is frequently delayed and often forgone, and the meaning of parenthood has shifted accordingly. Collectively these trends constitute *the second demographic transition* (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa 1986; Liefbroer 2005; Wehner & Abrahamson 2004), now quite advanced in parts of Europe but clearly evidenced in many regions of the world.

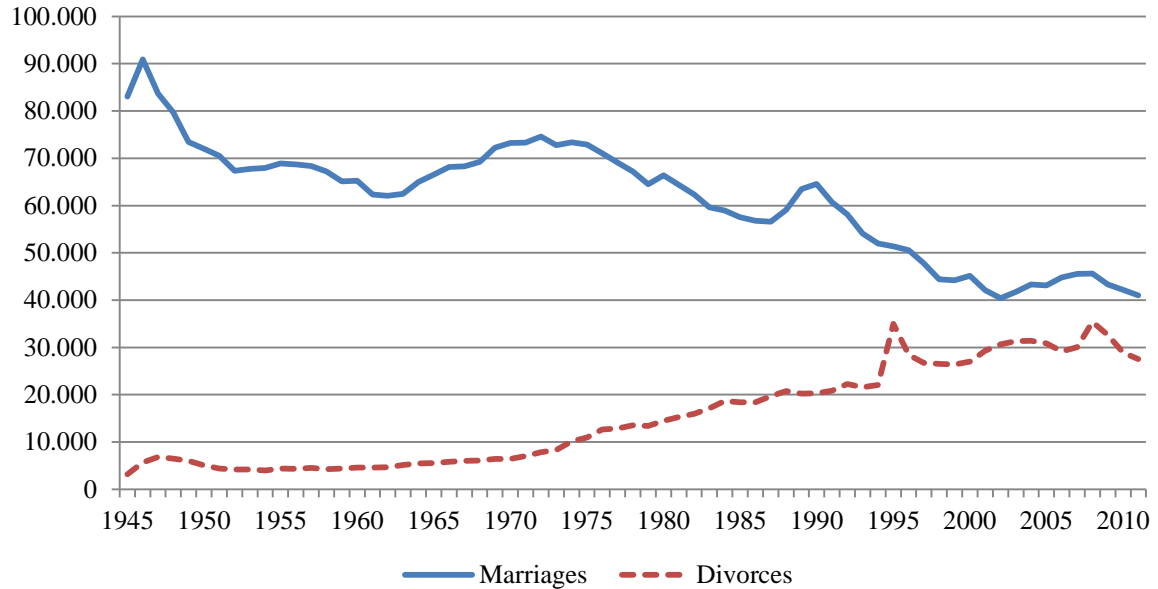
There is a huge research literature on this second demographic transition, with both fervent supporters and opponents. A review of this literature is outside the scope of this doctoral thesis. In the next paragraphs, we present a brief description of the demographical context in which stepfamily formation following divorce occurs. We focus on respectively relationship dissolution and higher order union formation, which we consider from the perspective of both the parents and the children.

### ***1.1.1 Relationship dissolution: (parental) divorce and separation***

In international perspective, Belgium is a real frontrunner with regard to divorce rates. Consequently, many people are confronted with the end of their marriage. Figure 1.1 presents the evolution in the absolute number of marriages and divorces in Belgium between 1945 and 2011. Since the 1970’s, the number of marriages is declining, while the opposite is true for the number of divorces. These trends are strongly related, as the number of people at risk of divorce depends on the number of ever-married people. Therefore, longitudinal divorce figures of ever-married people are a better way to present the evolution of divorce over time. Figure 1.2 presents the cumulative percentage of marriages that ended in a divorce by marriage duration and marriage cohort. This graph illustrates very clearly the growing proportion of marriages that dissolve over time. For example, from the couples that married in 1970, less than 20% were divorced twenty years

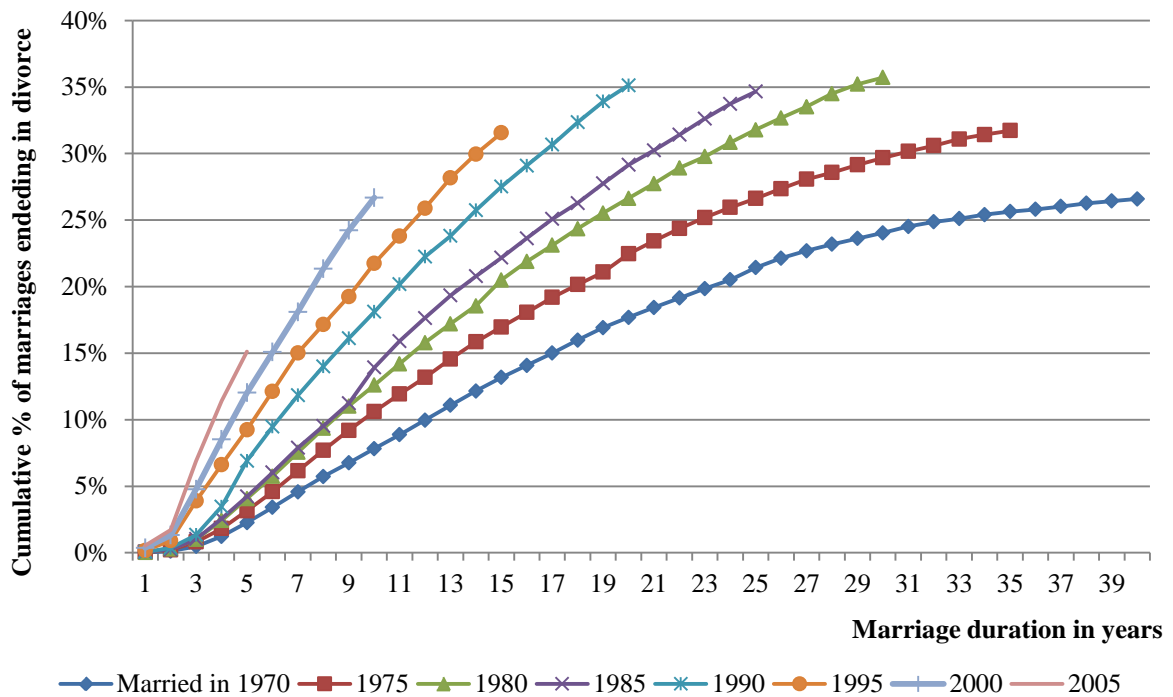
later. From the couples that married in 1990, 35% had ended their marriage twenty years later.

**Figure 1.1: Evolution in the number of marriages and divorces in Belgium between 1945 and 2011**



Source: FOD Economie, 2013a

**Figure 1.2: Cumulative percentage of marriages which ended in a divorce by marriage duration and marriage cohort**



Source: Corijn, 2011 [Translation]

At the same time, there is a large increase in the proportion of couples living together without being married, a trend which is especially pronounced since the 1990's (Corijn, 2012). As unmarried cohabitation is even more unstable than marriage (Corijn, forthcoming; Poortman & Lyngstad, 2007; Wobma & De Graaf, 2009), this trend creates an additional group of people experiencing an informal relationship dissolution or separation. Based on Register data, Defever & Mortelmans (2011) calculated that of all cohabiting couples that ended their relationship in 2004, 58% were married and 42% were unmarried the year before. But since there are currently few data sources that can be used to examine the dissolution of unmarried relationships and the subsequent transitions, we focus in this study mainly on post-divorce family structures.

As the main topic of this thesis concerns stepfamily formation following divorce, we are primarily interested in divorces in which children are involved. In Belgium, two-thirds of divorces involve partners who have children in common (FOD Justitie, 2011). Based on population figures of 2004, Lodewijckx (2005) estimated that the proportion of children that experienced a parental separation ranges from 10% of all children between zero and two years old to 26% of all children between twelve and seventeen years old. In other words, a substantial proportion of the children of minor age are not living together in one household with both biological parents. The main reason is parental divorce, followed by the relationship dissolution of unmarried parents.

### *1.1.2 Post-divorce family transitions*

The increasing number of people experiencing a union dissolution creates a growing group of divorced or separated men and women that experience additional family transitions after their first union and having children within that union. In Flanders, more than two out of three men and women start a new partner relationship relatively soon after divorce, with or without cohabitation or remarriage. Only a minority of divorcees stay single following union dissolution (Defever & Mortelmans, 2011; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012). In other words, divorce is often not the last family or partner transition that people experience.

The majority of divorced men and women remarry, although the remarriage rate is declining over time (Table 1.1). From the most recent divorce cohort (2000-2009), 26% of all men and 22% of all women married again within five years (Corijn, 2012). For men and women who divorced between 1970 and 1979, the same figures equal 48% and 46%. Men and women from more recent divorce cohorts clearly remarry less frequently than those from earlier divorce cohorts. This does not mean that men and women who divorced more recently repartner less, they do so in another way. Divorced men and women nowadays more often choose to cohabit or to have a living-apart-together relationship. (Corijn, 2005a, 2005b, 2012; de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2008; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012). In 2007, 31% of divorced men and 14% of divorced women lived together with a partner without being married to that partner (Corijn, 2011).

**Table 1.1: Likelihood and timing of remarriage following the dissolution of a first marriage, by divorce cohort and sex (Flemish Region, 2011).**

Divorce-cohort	N	% married within ... years following dissolution first marriage					
		2	5	10	15	20	Ever
<b>Men</b>							
1970-1979	24 336	32.8	48.2	58.2	64.5	68.4	73.7
1980-1989	65 539	22.7	37.6	50.9	57.3	61.0	66.3
1990-1999	111 138	18.5	31.4	43.2	49.1	-	54.5
2000-2009	137 228	13.7	25.9	-	-	-	37.7
<b>Women</b>							
1970-1979	32 915	30.9	45.5	54.5	60.4	64.4	69.3
1980-1989	77 044	22.3	36.2	48.1	53.9	57.6	62.3
1990-1999	121 033	18.6	30.0	39.5	45.5	-	50.4
2000-2009	143 244	11.8	22.2	-	-	-	34.6

*Source: Corijn, 2012 [Translation]*

Also partner relationships following divorce, cohabiting or not, married or not, may be dissolved. Higher order marriages are even less stable than first marriages (Corijn, forthcoming; Poortman & Lyngstad, 2007; Wobma & De Graaf, 2009). An important number of ever-divorced men and women (and their children, if any) hence experience additional relationship dissolutions (Brody, Neubaum & Forehand, 1988; Teachman, 2008). In Flanders, approximately one out of three of the second marriages ends in a second divorce (Corijn, 2012). Although the data we use in this study are limited with respect to studying instable stepfamilies, this possibility of additional relationship and family dissolutions should not be ignored.

### ***1.1.3 A definition of post-divorce stepfamilies and stepfamily relationships***

Children are de facto involved in the family transitions of their father and mother. When men or women that form a new union bring in children from previous relationships, we speak of stepfamily formation. A *stepfamily* is by definition a family situation in which at least one child is involved who is the offspring from a previous relationship of one of the adult partners. Stepfamilies may include different types of stepdyads. First, by introducing children to the union who are not biologically related to one of the partners, a stepparent-stepchild relationship is created. A *stepparent* refers to an adult whose present partner has at least one child from a previous relationship. A *stepchild* refers to a person for whom at least one parent is in a partner relationship with someone who is not the biological parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). A stepparent may become part of the household or remarry with the parent over time. Many definitions restrict stepparents to new partners of mother or father living in the household, excluding partners not living together with the parent (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). In the present study, we also describe the prevalence of the latter group of stepparents, but in analyzing the family processes within stepfamilies, we restrict the definition of stepparents to partners living together with the parent.

Another category of stepdyads concerns the relationships between the children of both partners. Both partners within a stepfamily have a unique fertility history (Stewart, 2002). Different combinations of fertility histories lead to different stepfamily formations with different (step)family relationships. If a child is born within the new partner relationship, children from previous relationships obtain a *halfsibling*. Halfsiblings have only one biological parent in common. In contrast with the other children in the stepfamily, children born within the new union are living together with both biological parents. Finally, if both partners bring children from previous relationships, stepsibling configurations are created. *Stepsiblings* do not have any biological parent in common. Stepsiblings are assumed to be mutually more equal than halfsiblings, as children from the new couple represent the present, while children from previous relationships represent the past (Ambert, 1986).

The characteristics of the sibling system according to biological and affinal kinship and residence are frequently used criteria in the construction of typologies of stepfamilies. The presence of stepsiblings and halfsiblings is used to distinguish between *simple* and *complex stepfamilies* (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). In simple stepfamilies, all children are related in the same way to both partners of the new union. In practice, this means only one of both partners bring children from a previous relationship and no child is born within the new union. In complex stepfamilies, siblings vary in their biological relatedness to mother and father (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

#### ***1.1.4 The prevalence of post-divorce stepfamilies***

Population figures on the number of children living in stepfamily formations are scarce. Post-divorce family configurations are difficult to register, as the factual living situation is often different from the official one. This may be for financial, practical or other reasons. Moreover, stepfamilies are difficult to detect as information is needed on the biological (un)relatedness of all household members. Some attempts were made to estimate the number of Flemish children living in stepfamily formations (for example by Lodewijck, 2005, 2010), but the reliability margins for these types of estimates are relatively high. For example, the biological relatedness of the child to one of the two partners is unknown for 14% of the Flemish children (aged 0 to 17) living together with a couple in 2008 (Lodewijck, 2010). The estimated proportion of children living with a stepparent in 2008 varies between 5% and 19% (Lodewijck, 2010). Besides these transversal figures, Lodewijckx (2005) provides estimates of the proportion of children living with a stepparent four years after parental divorce. For example, 44% of the children who were younger than 14 years old at the time of the official divorce of the parents are living with one parent and a stepparent four years later. Overall, these figures indicate that stepfamily formation following divorce is not a marginal event and that a significant portion of children experience the transition to a stepfamily quite fast following divorce.

For neither Flanders nor Belgium there are figures available on the post-divorce family structures of children that take into account the custody arrangement of the child.

Nevertheless, post-divorce family configurations of children consist of two structural components: the family configuration of both parents and the custody arrangement or residential arrangement of the child. Information about how many children are living with a stepparent is unreliable if it does not take into account the child's residence. An additional limitation of official data in this regard is that children currently can only be domiciled at one address, while a non-negligible proportion of children are living alternately in the maternal and paternal household following divorce. This makes a reliable estimation of the proportion of children in specific post-divorce family structure based upon Register data even more complex.

## **1.2 The macro-social context of post-divorce stepfamily formation**

The impact of a divorce and subsequent family transitions for the involved actors is partially determined by the social, normative and juridical climate in which those processes take place. The importance of the macro-social context for understanding the causes and consequences of a divorce/separation is empirically supported by a variety of studies (Dronkers, Kalmijn & Wagner, 2006; Kalmijn, 2007; Kalmijn & Uunk, 2007). The question how institutions shape the life courses of people is also a central concern of the life course perspective. Green (2010, p. 27) for example notes, "*Family law defines who is regarded as married, divorced, single or in an otherwise acceptable union and who is the legal guardian or carer of a child.*" Moreover, there is a reciprocal influence between the legislation, the current social climate and family norms (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). For example, an important change in divorce law is both a reflection of changes in family norms and values and a factor that subsequently influences the experiences and consequences of divorce. Subsequently, this might trigger new discussions on what is good and what is bad, challenging existing norms and laws.

There are two contrasting approaches to stepfamilies and steprelationships in contemporary society. On the one hand, the role of both biological parents in raising the children after divorce has been put forward very explicitly during the last decades (Spruit & Kormos, 2010). On the other hand, stepfamilies are increasingly present and recognized as specific family structures with their own needs and challenges. In the next paragraphs, we discuss these two parallel evolutions and how they are impacting contemporary stepfamilies.

### ***1.2.1 A focus on biological ties regarding childrearing following divorce***

The contemporary normative climate continues to identify biological parents as ultimately responsible in bringing up their children following union dissolution, the so-called *permanent parental responsibility principle* (van Krieken, 2005). Parenting became absolute and unconditional: the parental system has to survive the conjugal system (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). Stable emotional bonds with both parents are seen as beneficial for the wellbeing of children. This evolution resulted quite recently in two important changes in Belgian divorce law, in which joint custody following parental divorce became the standard. Although the majority of Western countries are experiencing increasing gender neutrality in custody decisions, Belgium already has a very liberal

custody legislation by international standards. In discussing this legislation, it is important to make a distinction between joint legal custody and joint physical custody.

*Joint legal custody* was incorporated into Belgian custody law on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1995 and outlines the joint exercise of parental authority, including the situation where both parents no longer live together. From then on, divorce has no longer implications for the parental rights and duties of the biological parents. Both parents are supposed to be responsible, in proportion to their own means, for housing, living costs, parenting and the education of their children. Moreover, joint legal custody refers to equal parental responsibilities towards the child, active involvement and shared decision-making (Bauserman, 2002). Exceptions on this rule can only be made in favor of the interests of the child (FOD justitie, 1995). This principle replaces the former situation in which one parent had full custody (usually the mother) and the other parent only had visitation rights (usually the father).

The law of 1995 did not stipulate a preferred residential model after divorce; the only guideline was the child's best interest. As a consequence, a wide range of residential arrangements emerged. In 2006, *joint physical custody* was introduced as the preferred model for the regulation of the residence of the children when parents separate in the absence of a parental agreement (FOD justitie, 2006). Joint physical custody assumes that the child lives an equal or substantial amount of time with each parent (Bauserman, 2002). In practice, this often translates in 50-50 arrangements, but variations are possible. When a parental agreement exists, the judge will ratify this, unless it is incompatible with the child's best interests. In case of disagreement, joint physical custody must be investigated by the court and may be imposed by the judge, even against the will of one parent. The reason why Belgian policy makers decided to favor this post-divorce living arrangement was that frequent contact and a good relationship between children and both their parents after divorce may buffer detrimental effects caused by the divorce itself (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Bauserman, 2002; Johnston, 1995; Lee, 2002). Because the criteria for the child's best interest are not stipulated in the law, there is still considerable ambiguity regarding custody decisions (Martens, 2007; Vanbockrijck, 2009). The incidence of joint physical custody arrangements exceeds 30% for recent divorces (Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2013).

Interestingly, while the current discourse of permanent parental responsibilities of biological parents following divorce almost completely ignores social parenthood, social parenthood has priority above biological parenthood within the legal framework of sperm and egg cell donation. This heterogeneity in the approach of biological parenthood depending on the family configuration involved is extensively discussed by Marquet (2005). Sperm or egg cell donors, by definition the biological parents of children that are born after a fertility treatment based upon donation, have no legal rights or duties towards the child. Hence, the normative framework of unconditional parental responsibilities of biological parents is only applicable if a biological parent recognizes the child. The latter holds by definition within marriage, but often also holds within unmarried couples. While



more liberal divorce legislation reduced the indissoluble status of marriage, the parental union established within the institution of marriage is considered to be permanent, even if marriage dissolves. Conversely, biological parenthood outside the institution of marriage is considered much less important. This is also evidenced by the fact that biological fathers officially need to recognize the child in case of unmarried cohabitation, while recognition of fatherhood is implicitly following from the marriage with the biological mother.

Finally, in case the biological component is not introduced to define the parental status, often the criterion of co-residence with the child is applied, for example in case of adoption (Marquet, 2005). This contrasts with the fact that in the case of stepparents, the importance of co-residence with the child is completely ignored. Once again, this implies that the relative importance of biological and social parenthood within Belgian legislation depends upon the context in which it is considered.

### ***1.2.2 The current normative and juridical framework of steprelationships***

Cherlin introduced in 1978 the *incomplete institution hypothesis* to designate the lack of a normative framework for stepfamily relationships. More than thirty years later, post-divorce stepfamilies are increasingly common and present within society. The increasing number of post-divorce stepfamilies has created a more visible group that has opened the debate on the caveats and pitfalls in the regulation of steprelationships.

There are some important domains in which the unique characteristics of stepfamilies are recognized and in which specific regulations for stepfamily members were made. A nice illustration is the marketing campaign of a large Belgian financial company in 2011. This campaign was explicitly directed towards stepfamilies and the complex arrangements that might be involved in these family configurations. There are currently also many proposals for a more equal regulation of the inheritance between stepparents and stepchildren and between biological parents and children. Different companies and firms allow stepparents to take sick leave for family members who live under the same roof, which also include stepchildren. Some companies have even included explicit rules regarding leave or absence relating to a stepparent or stepchild in the labor regulations. All of these examples focus however on the financial or economic aspects of steprelationships. Although they are indirectly also a kind of recognition of the stepparental position, they contrast with the lack of a juridical framework regarding the actual parental rights and duties of stepparents within civil law.

The current legislation does not allow the dispersion of parental responsibilities across more than two parental figures (Steunpunt Jeugdhulp, 2010). Stepparents can only obtain a juridical parental position towards the child in case of adoption, in which one of the other (biological) parents gives up his or her parental rights. Therefore, most stepparents have no parental rights or duties towards the child, except for the indirect duties to fulfill the needs of the household and household members resulting from cohabitation or marriage with the biological parent of the child (Steunpunt Jeugdhulp, 2010). This also has important consequences if the relationship between the biological parent and stepparents dissolves.

Then, stepparents must rely on the juridical principle of a *close affectional bond* to obtain visitation rights with the stepchild. This also holds if the stepparent was the primary caregiver during childhood or youth or helped raising the child for a significant number of years. The conditions are that the existence of such a close affectional bond can be proven and that the maintenance of contact is beneficial for the child. In practice, the existence of such bonds between stepparents and stepchildren is very rarely recognized by judges in court (Trefpunt Zelfhulp, 2013).

Overall, stepfamilies following divorce can still be seen as incomplete institutions. Generally accepted guidelines for sharing parenthood between parents and stepparents (within and across households) still have not emerged. In many aspects, there are rather few differences between the situation described by Cherlin in 1978 and the situation more than thirty years later. Moreover, at time post-divorce stepfamily formation began to rise in the 1970's, often one biological parent was having full custody. Stepparents were often either living full-time together with the child or were not living together with the child at all. With the recent evolution towards joint custody following parental divorce, the lack of agreement on shared parenting between parents and stepparents becomes even more obvious and relevant, as stepparents have become increasingly additional parents next to both biological parents.

Although the maintenance of strong biological parent-child relationships following divorce is one of the main motivations behind the promotion of joint custody, we might expect that exactly the increasing number of children in joint custody will increase the number of children that are confronted with new partners of their mother or father or stepparents. The association between joint custody arrangements and stepfamilies are hence very dual: the post-divorce relationships with and between biological parents are increasingly seen as important, but at the same time it might increase the number of children living (part-time) together with a stepparent. Research on the experience of this unique combination of part-time biological parenthood and part-time stepparenthood from the child's, parents' and stepparents' perspectives is currently very scarce. Our contemporary society is still busy with exploring and discovering the benefits and pitfalls of these new types of relationships. Undoubtedly, there will follow many debates in the coming years on different aspects of the regulation of the relationships and positions of stepfamily members (including both biological parents) towards each other.

### **1.3 Situating of the research questions within the literature on stepfamilies**

This brings us to an overview of the research questions that are tackled within this study and their position within the stepfamily literature. Overall, there is a large, mainly American research literature on stepfamily formation (the demographic aspects), stepfamily processes and relationships and their outcomes on stepfamily members. As the research questions of this study span multiple research domains, it is not the goal to provide an extensive general literature review here, but rather to situate the different

research questions within the research literature. Each research chapter contains a domain-specific literature review.

A major criticism of the existing research literature concerns the fact that often the complexity and heterogeneity of stepfamilies are ignored (Kurdek, 1994). Starting from a *deficit-comparison perspective*, research often focuses only on the negative impact of stepfamily configurations and is limited to the comparison of outcomes of individuals living in stepfamilies with people living in so-called intact families and single-parent households (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). This perspective is partially rooted in the nuclear family ideology, that views the stepfamily either as a deviant or deficient family form (Coleman & Ganong, 1997), or a re-formed or reconstituted nuclear family (Levin, 1997). These perspectives are in their own way responsible for several research limitations, such as ignoring the structural complexity and heterogeneity of stepfamily forms, focusing on problems and weaknesses and ignoring the possibility of functional stepfamily relationships being fundamentally different from relationships within nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

The shift in the research literature from a pathogenic model to a perspective that emphasizes the diversity of outcomes, family systems and transitions has been an important advance in the study of stepfamilies (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Ganong and Coleman (1994) were some of the first authors to use a more multidimensional approach when studying stepfamilies, using what they call a *normative-adaptive perspective*. An alternative name for this perspective is the *risk and resiliency model*. This perspective emphasizes both positive and negative dimensions of stepfamily life, as well as the diversity in stepfamily forms (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

This study will address some of the gaps in the existing research literature by recognizing the heterogeneity in stepfamilies according the custody arrangement of the children involved. The lack of studies on the effect of custody arrangements on stepfamilies was already described in 1991 by Crosbie-Burnett, but until now not much effort has been made to rectify the situation. We explore differences in family configurations and trajectories according to the custody arrangements of children and the importance of this structural variation in explaining the heterogeneity in stepfamilies, the relationships between different stepfamily members and the outcomes for children.

The research questions of this doctoral thesis may be divided into two groups. A first group are essentially demographic questions, while the second group of questions are grounded within family sociology. In the next paragraphs, we present an overview of all research questions that are tackled within this study and the chapters in which they are discussed.

### ***1.3.1 Demographic questions***

The custody arrangement of children following parental divorce is important from both parent and child perspective in a demographic point of view. From the perspective of a child, the custody arrangement determines whether the family configurations and

transitions of mother and father are situated within the household where the child is living always, sometimes or never. Most studies are limited to family configurations and transitions within the household of the child and ignore transitions in the household of the parent with whom the children does not live. Nevertheless, with the growing importance of joint custody arrangements following divorce, both parental households are increasingly important.

From parental perspective, custody arrangements determine the parental status of mothers and fathers. The evolution towards joint physical custody had created a new category of parents with part-time residential children, next to residential and non-residential parents. To this point, there has been little attention to the impact of this evolution on the family trajectories of men and women.

### *1.3.1.1 The post-divorce family structures of children*

From the perspective of the children, a post-divorce family implies the co-existence of two parental households: one of the mother and one of the father. Both households can vary from a single-person household to a complex stepfamily configuration containing children from the previous union(s) of both partners, as well as children born within the new partner relationship. This parallel existence of a household of respectively the mother and father is also referred to as *binuclear families* (Ahrons, 1979; Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1982).

Joint custody arrangements imply that the post-divorce family transitions of both parents are within-household family transitions for the child. All other things equal, this implies that children in joint custody have a higher likelihood of living in at least one stepfamily formation following parental divorce, and they may even live in two. Currently, there is almost no information available for Flanders describing these binuclear post-divorce family configurations of children. Therefore the first research goal of this doctoral thesis is to describe the binuclear family formations of children, taking into account the fact that many children reside in two households following parental divorce. We explicitly pay attention to the heterogeneity in stepfamily types, both in the relationship types between parent and stepparent (not living together, unmarried cohabitation, (re)married) and in terms of the residential situation. The latter results from one critique of the existing literature, in which custody arrangements of children are very frequently simplified or ignored in stepfamily research. Children are often assumed to live together with a parent and stepparent or not to live together with a parent and stepparent. In reality, there is however a lot of variation in the time children spend within the maternal and paternal household. In the third chapter of this thesis, we describe the following characteristics for the group of Flemish children and adolescents with divorced/separated parents:

- RQ1a. How many children are living together with a new partner of mother and/or father and how does this vary according to the criterion of co-residence? (Chapter 3)
- RQ1b. How many children are living together with a least one stepsibling and how does this vary according to the criterion of co-residence? (Chapter 3)

- RQ1c. How many children are living together with at least one halfsibling and how does this vary according to the criterion of co-residence? (Chapter 3)
- RQ1d. What does the distribution of binuclear family situations of Flemish children and adolescents look like in terms of the combined distribution of custody arrangement and residential stepparent(s)? (Chapter 3)

#### *1.3.1.2 The post-divorce family trajectories of parents and children*

A second limitation within stepfamily literature is the lack of a life course perspective in describing family trajectories. Studies are often limited to describing the number of children experiencing single events, such as parental divorce or remarriage. Nevertheless, the family situation in which children reside at a certain moment in time is only a snap-shot of the complete family trajectory. The *multiple transitions perspective* stresses the importance of looking at all transitions in family structure that children experience before adulthood. Several studies have found support for an association between the number of transitions and different aspects of children's wellbeing (for a recent overview, see Amato, 2010). Multiple transitions are thereby related to *cumulated stress*, negatively affecting children's wellbeing. In contrast, *family stability* is considered to be important for child wellbeing (Brown, 2010). Amato (2010) sees a great deal of potential for future research that is grounded in this perspective. Not only the number of transitions, but also the type of transitions are considered to be important. With regard to post-divorce family trajectories, there are important differences in the timing of parental divorce and the experience, timing and stability of post-divorce single-parent and stepfamily configurations. Currently, there are few sources available to describe these complete family trajectories of children. The second goal of this project is therefore to explore the pathways to stepfamily formation. We thereby explore the possibilities of the technique of sequence analysis in describing and summarizing these trajectories:

- RQ2a. What do the family trajectories of children with divorced/separated parents look like during childhood and youth? (Chapter 4)
- RQ2b. What do the family trajectories (in terms of partnership and fertility) of divorced mothers and fathers look like in the first seven years following parental divorce? (Chapter 4)

#### *1.3.1.3 The association between custody arrangements and post-divorce family trajectories*

The last demographic question is how custody arrangements of children influence the family configurations and trajectories of mothers and fathers. Regarding post-divorce family structures, we know that a large majority of divorced men and women repartner rapidly following divorce. Parenthood, however, can be associated with a lower likelihood of repartnering, especially for women (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Although there is a large research literature on the impact of parenthood on repartnering and fertility in higher order unions, studies exploring the impact of custody arrangements on post-divorce

demographic behavior of parents are rare. The third research goal of this doctoral thesis is therefore to explore the association between the custody arrangements of children following divorce and the post-divorce family trajectories of their parents:

- RQ3a. How are custody arrangements of children from the previous union related to the likelihood of repartnering and to the union type of divorced mothers and fathers? (Chapter 5)

- RQ3b. How are custody arrangements of children from the previous union of divorced mothers and fathers related to the likelihood of repartnering with another parent? (Chapter 5)

- RQ3c. How are custody arrangements of children from the previous union of divorced mothers and fathers related to the likelihood of a birth within a new partner relationship following divorce? (Chapter 5)

### ***1.3.2 Research questions within the field of family sociology***

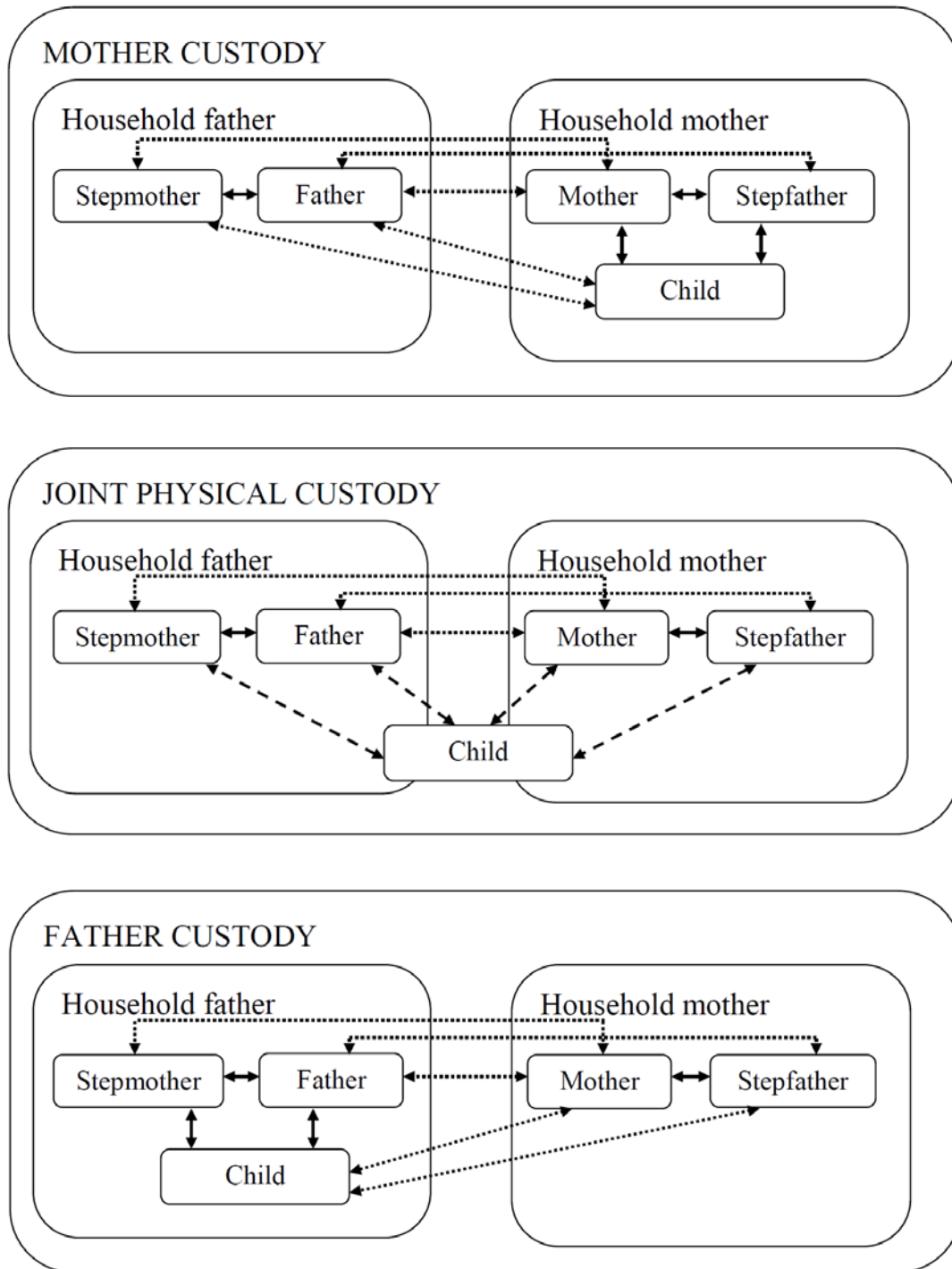
A second group of research questions relates to the family relationships within stepfamilies following divorce, the wellbeing of children living in such stepfamily formations and the importance of the different family relationships in explaining child wellbeing. We focus on custody arrangements as a structural component that might be either directly related to the different family relationships and child wellbeing, and on custody arrangements as conditional factor in the association between family processes, family structure and child outcomes.

#### ***1.3.2.1 Family relationships within post-divorce stepfamily formations: a family systems perspective***

The research chapters that are dealing with the family relationships within post-divorce stepfamilies depart from a *family systems perspective*. System theory sees the family as a hierarchically organized system composed of different subsystems, such as the parental system, the partner system and the siblings system (Cox & Paley, 1997). The continuous and reciprocal influence of individual family members (Cox & Paley, 1997), the mutual interdependency of family relationships and positions within and between different subsystems (Minuchin, 1985) and the bi-directionality of family relationships (O'Connor, Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1997) are considered to be very important within this perspective.

From a child-centered approach, a post-divorce family implies the co-existence of two parental households. Depending on their composition, both parental households can have their own partner system, parent-child system, stepparent-stepchild system and sibling system. Furthermore, additional subsystems are created, for example between the ex-partners, between parent and child and between old and new partners. All these subsystems are imbedded in a larger family system and mutually influence each other (Minuchin, 1985; O'Connor, Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1997).

**Figure 1.3: Within- and between-household relationships between (step)parents and (step)children in mother custody, joint physical custody and father custody**



- ↔ Full-time within-household relationship
- ⋯↔ Full-time between-household relationship
- ⋯↔ Part-time within-household relationship, part-time between-household relationship

The whole family system, the family relationships and functioning of the different subsystems and family members are altered in case of stepfamily formation (Hetherington, 1999). These changes may induce boundary ambiguity or questions about membership of the family and the position and role of old and new family members (Van Bavel, 1995). As stated by Brand & Clingempeel (1987, p. 140): “*Remarriage of a residential parent requires a reallocation of the personal resources of family members, a reassignment of roles, and a redistribution of parent-child boundaries.*” For example, coparenting arrangements that were established following divorce are disrupted when a new member enters the family system (Christensen & Rettig, 1995).

Relationships within stepfamilies may also have different meanings as compared with families with only biological parents. Cox & Paley (1997) report an example of the conditionality of the association between marital relationships and parent-child relationships. In never-divorced families, these two relationships are clearly positively linked, but there are indications that this works differently in stepfamilies (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987). Some argue that the subsystems are more encapsulated and independent in stepfamilies (Bray & Berger, 1993), conversely others suggest a higher permeability between certain subsystems within stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1995).

The family relationships between parents, stepparents and (step)children in a post-divorce stepfamily system are visualized in Figure 1.3. For simplicity, we ignore the possibility of step- and halfsiblings and focus on a single stepchild perspective. According to the custody arrangement of the child, specific family relationships are full-time or part-time within- or between-household relationships. The new partner relationships are full-time within-household relationships, the relationship between the ex-partners and between the new partner and ex-partner full-time between-household relationships. This holds by definition for all custody types. On the other hand, the parent-child and stepparent-child relationship can be either a within-household relationship or a between-household relationship, part-time or full-time, depending on where the child lives. In strict mother or father custody, the relationship of the child with the residential parent and his/her partner is a within-household relationship, the relationship with the non-residential parent and his/her parent a between-household relationship. In joint physical custody, things are more complex: both relationships are situated part-time within and part-time between households, depending on where the child resides.

Although the number of children in joint custody arrangements following divorce has been rising for some years in several western countries, there is little research that explores the association between these custody arrangements and family relationships within stepfamily configurations. As already stressed by Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett in 1989, it is important to analyze how structural variation across stepfamilies affects the interpersonal relationships. The custody arrangement is one of these important structural variables. Much of the research on stepfamilies ignores the interactions with members of the other parental family system (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). People living in different households might however be strongly involved with each other’s lives, composing a so-



called *linked family system* (Jacobson, 1987). Also recent review studies on stepfamily life stress the importance of studying family relationships that span multiple households and involve part-time household membership (Sweeney, 2010).

In the present study we want to explore variations in the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and in the relationships between parents and stepparents across different custody arrangements. From a family systems perspective, we are explicitly interested in how different family relationships are mutually related. As different parts of these research questions were tackled in different papers and articles, they are dispersed across chapters six, seven and eight of this thesis:

- RQ4a. How are custody arrangements of children related to the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, from both stepparent and stepchild perspective? (chapter 6)
- RQ4b. How many children have a good relationship with father and stepfather or with mother and stepmother and how does this differ between custody arrangements? (chapter 8)
- RQ4b. How is the stepparent-stepchild relationship related to the mother-child and father-child relationship and how does this differ between custody arrangements? (chapter 6)
- RQ4c. How is the stepparent-stepchild relationship related to the relationships between parents and stepparents and how does this differ between custody arrangements? (chapter 6)
- RQ5a. How are custody arrangements of children related to the partner and parental relationships between parents and stepparents, from the parent and stepparent perspectives? (chapter 7)
- RQ5b. How are the partner and parental relationships between parents and stepparents mutually related? (chapter 7)

#### *1.3.2.2 Adolescent wellbeing within post-divorce stepfamily formations*

A final group of research questions consider the association between family structures, family relationships and child wellbeing. There is a wide range of literature linking the family characteristics of children to outcomes in different domains: educational achievement, psychological wellbeing, problematic behavior and social relationships (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000; Spruijt, 2007). Overall, the research evidence indicates that children in two-biological-parent (married) families do somewhat better than children in other family structures (Amato, 2010; Brown, 2010; Coleman, Ganong & Fine; 2000; Spruijt 2007). The variation within the latter group (including single-parent families and stepfamilies) appears to be rather small (Brown, 2010; Coleman, Ganong & Fine; 2000).

The classification of theoretical explanations for the effects of family structures on child wellbeing varies somewhat across different review articles, but they all tend to reflect the same general perspectives. In their review article, Crosnoe & Cavanagh (2010) classify the

literature on the association between family structures and trajectories and child wellbeing in two categories: family statuses (such as family structure and socioeconomic status) and family processes (including intergenerational and intergenerational relationships). Brown (2010) distinguishes between economic resources, parental socialization, family turbulence and selection. Coleman, Ganong & Fine (2000) argue that most explanations can be seen as variants of stress models (including parental conflicts), (step)parent involvement, (step)parent style models and selection. One or more family transitions or changes, compromised parental competencies, conflict between parents and stepparents, and lacking culturally institutionalized support are all seen as stress-inducing factors associated with stepfamily formation. These might explain the lack of a beneficial effect of living in a stepfamily formation compared to living in a single-parent household following parental divorce.

The overall question in this study is how specific family structures following parental divorce are related to adolescent wellbeing. The innovative approach lies again in the integration of joint custody arrangements within different aspects of this research tradition. As stated by Schrodtt (2011, p. 999): *“Although researchers have continued their efforts to document both the challenges and the opportunities that stepfamily members face in the wake of divorce and remarriage, they have generally neglected coparenting relationships and the influence that these relationships have on both adults’ and children’s adjustment to stepfamily life.”* Chapter eight focuses on the association between the quality of the relationship with parents and stepparents and adolescent wellbeing within different custody arrangements. Chapter nine deals with the question how the association between custody arrangements and adolescent wellbeing is moderated by the quality of the relationship with parents, parental conflict and the presence of stepfamily members. Chapter ten explores an alternative way of defining post-divorce family structures (including custody arrangements) and the mediating effect of family relationships and parental role models on adolescent wellbeing.

- RQ6a. Does the association between the quality of the (step)parent-(step)child relationship and adolescent wellbeing differ between custody arrangements? (chapter 8)
- RQ6b. Does the association between custody arrangements and adolescent emotional wellbeing differ according to the presence of stepparents and stepsiblings or halfsiblings, the quality of the parent-child relationships and the degree of parental conflict? (chapter 9)
- RQ6c. How are post-divorce family structures related to delinquent behavior and alcohol consumption among adolescents? (chapter 10)

# CHAPTER 2

## Data

This chapter draws in part upon the following publications:

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A., Dekeyser, G. & Matthijs, K. (2012). *Methodologische document Leuvens Adolescenten- en Gezinnenonderzoek Versie 2.0*. Leuven: KU Leuven, Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek.

Dekeyser, G., Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (2012). *Het Leuvens Adolescenten en Gezinnen Onderzoek 2010 – 2011: Onderzoeksrapport*. Leuven: KU Leuven, Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek.

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (2011). *Het Leuvens Adolescenten- en Gezinnenonderzoek 2009-2010: onderzoeksrapport*. Leuven: KU Leuven, Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek.

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (2010). *Adolescenten en gezinnen 2008-2009: onderzoeksrapport*. Leuven: KU Leuven, Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek.

## 2.1 Introduction

To answer the research questions that were outlined in chapter 1, we use the information from two databases. The first is constructed within the context of a large-scale, interuniversity research project on divorce in Flanders, called *Scheiding in Vlaanderen* or *Divorce in Flanders* (henceforth SiV). The second database comes from the *Leuvens Adolescenten en Gezinnenonderzoek* or *Leuvens Adolescents and Families Study* (henceforth LAGO).

In the next paragraphs, we briefly describe the context, research goals and sampling designs of both projects. We summarize the strengths and weaknesses of both projects in answering our research questions. For more detailed information on the SiV-data, we refer to the first SiV-book (Mortelmans et al., 2011a), the fieldwork documentation (Mortelmans et al., 2011b), and the SiV-website ([www.scheidinginvlaanderen.be](http://www.scheidinginvlaanderen.be)). For more detailed information on the history, research design and questionnaire content of LAGO, we refer to the LAGO-website ([www.soc.kuleuven.be/lago](http://www.soc.kuleuven.be/lago)), the methodological documentation (Vanassche et al., 2012) and the different research reports, including questionnaires and codebooks (Dekeyser et al., 2011; Vanassche, Sodermans & Matthijs, 2009, 2010). The description of both datasets in this chapter are primarily based upon these documents, extended with own data calculations and critical reflections on the use of these data for the present study.

## 2.2 Divorce in Flanders (SiV)

### 2.2.1 Context of the SiV-project

SiV was initiated in 2006 as a collaborative research effort of twelve social scientists (sociologists, demographers, psychologists, juridical scholars) from four Flemish universities (KU Leuven, University of Antwerp, Ghent University, Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and the research department of the Flemish government. SiV is a large-scale study that focuses on the causes, consequences and policy implications of divorce and separation in Flanders. The research is funded by the Flemish Agency for Innovation by Science and Technology (IWT).

The study design incorporates both married and divorced couples who are questioned about the start and development of their current and past partner relationships, their relationships with their children, their wellbeing, their social networks and their employment and income situations. Next to both (ex-)partners, also new partners, a child and parent of both (ex-) partners are questioned.

### 2.2.2 Sample and research design

The sample was drawn from the Belgian National Register and consists of so-called reference marriages conducted between 1971 and 2008, from which one third (N = 2502) was still intact in 2009 and two third (N = 6004) was dissolved. The sample is disproportional according to marital status, but proportional according to marriage cohort.

All marriages had to meet the following selection criteria: 1) the partners are of different sex, 2) the reference marriage is the first marriage of both partners, 3) both partners were between 18 and 40 years old at time of the marriage, 4) both partners have the Belgian nationality from birth, 5) both partners are domiciled in the Flemish Region at the time of the marriage and the sample, 6) both partners are alive, and 7) both partners divorced not more than once.

From these reference marriages, different actors were questioned, using a multi-actor design. The detailed response rates for the different actors can be found in Pasteels et al. (2012). Here, we briefly discuss the selection method, fieldwork procedure and measurement instrument for the different actors.

The *partners* from the reference marriages were questioned by means of *Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing* or CAPI. In total, 1811 partners from intact reference marriages were questioned (response rate = 40%), including 786 marriages in which both partners were questioned. 4659 ex-partners from non-intact reference marriages were questioned (response rate = 43%), including 1134 marriages from which both ex-partners were questioned. While the response rates on individual level are almost equal for both groups, the proportion of reference marriages from which both (ex-)partners participated is much higher within the group of intact marriages (34%) compared to the group of non-intact marriages (21%).

If the partners from the reference marriage had a common child, a random targetchild was selected during the interview with the first partner of the reference marriage. There was a preference for children living in the parental home of at least 10 years old. The partners received some questions on that child during the interview. Targetchildren above age 10 that were still living in the parental home (residential children) were questioned with a CAPI-interview. Targetchildren above age 18 that were no longer living with one or both parents (non-residential children) were questioned by mail- or websurvey. In almost 90% of the intact reference marriages and 75% of the non-intact reference marriages there was at least one common child. In total, 3540 targetchildren were selected, from which 3153 met the criteria to participate in the study: 2225 residential children and 928 non-residential children. If the selected child was under age 18, one of the parents needed to give permission to contact the child. In 43% of the dissolved marriages, the parents did not want the child to be contacted. Within the group of intact marriages, only 13% of the parents did not want their minor child to participate in the study. In total, 379 residential children from intact reference marriages were interviewed (response rate = 72%) and 878 residential children from non-intact reference marriages (response rate = 52%). 102 non-residential children from intact reference marriages completed the mail- or websurvey (response rate = 55%), compared to 218 non-residential children from non-intact reference marriages (response rate = 29%). Overall, the response rates on child-level are much smaller within the group of non-intact marriages compared to the group of intact marriages.

If the (ex-)partners from the reference marriage indicated during their interview to have at least one biological parent alive, a random *parent* was selected and questioned by mail or websurvey. In case a targetchild was selected during the partner interview, the parent questionnaire contained some questions with regard to this child. In total, 729 parents from a partner from an intact reference marriage completed the mail- or websurvey (response rate = 50%), and 1428 parents from a partner from a non-intact reference marriage (response rate = 38%). Again, response rates are lowest within the group of non-intact reference marriages.

If the ex-partners from non-intact reference marriages indicated during their interview to live together with a partner, this partner was asked to participate in the study. These actors are called *new partners* and were contacted by a drop-off questionnaire, that was either given to them in person or left with the partner after the interview. They also had the possibility to complete the questionnaire by means of a websurvey. In case a targetchild from the non-intact reference marriage was selected, the questionnaire also contained some questions with regard to this child. In total, 1837 new partners returned the questionnaire by mail or completed the websurvey (response rate = 68%). 69% of these new partners were questioned about the selected targetchild of their partner, with who they have no biological relatedness themselves. Within this group of stepparents, 2% of the selected targetchildren were between 0 and 5 years old, 13% between 6 and 11 years old, 26% between 12 and 17 years old, 19% between 18 and 21 years old and 40% were older than 21 years at the time of the (first) parental interview.

The subsamples of the SiV-data that are used in this doctoral thesis differ between the research chapters. Therefore, every chapter provides a detailed overview of the sample selection and sample characteristics.

### ***2.2.3 Strengths of the SiV-data for the present study***

Although the SiV-project focuses on the direct causes and consequences of divorce and on the divorce process itself, it is also the case that the data collected under the auspices of the SiV project contain rich information on post-marital living arrangements including the structure and functioning of the households and families that emerge in the aftermath of divorce. Stepfamilies are an important part of this post-marital domain. Therefore, the SiV-dataset is an excellent datasource to tackle the research questions put forward in this study. The data contain most information that is necessary for undertaking the analysis and sociological interpretation of the origin, structure and the evolution of stepfamily relationships in Flanders.

A first group of strengths of the SiV-study relates to the questionnaire content. One of the reasons why little is known on post-divorce family structures and trajectories is that only few transitions are visible in official statistics, such as remarriage. Exactly these transitions are decreasing during the last decades (Corijn, 2012). The increasing number of couples living together without being married or couples living apart make official statistics increasingly insufficient. Figures on the incidence of stepfamily formation and the

prevalence of specific stepfamily structures often have to make certain assumptions on the relatedness of family members in order to obtain rough estimations (Lodewijck, 2005). In addition, the official situation often deviates from the factual situation because of financial, practical or other reasons. For example, partners living together may keep separate domiciles. In surveys on the other hand, the questions are often limited to the current family composition. Also the biological relatedness of different family or household members is often not available in surveys. In other words, there are currently few sources to study post-divorce family structures and trajectories in Flanders. One of the aims of the SiV-project was to fill this gap. The SiV-questionnaire therefore contains detailed information on the current family composition and all previous partner and fertility transitions of divorced men and women. The complete life course of the respondents may be constructed on this domain, which is quite exceptional information for Flanders. From child perspective, it allows to reconstruct the family history of all targetchildren from birth until present. In addition, partner relationships are not limited to cohabitation relationships, as often the case in other surveys. In sum, SiV is an excellent datasource for the reconstruction of post-divorce family trajectories, which is impossible to do with data from the National Register or data from most other large-scale surveys.

Second, the relationships with and between different family members are very detailed questioned to all actors. The multi-actor design provides information on the family system and the including subsystems and relationships from different perspectives. This allows to compare and explore the association between answers of different family members, which has several advantages. The perspective of different actors on the same relationships and events, their causes and consequences can be used to enhance the reliability and validity of the measurement, or to construct more objective or intersubjective information on family processes (Dekovic & Buist, 2005). In addition, it can eliminate the problem of shared method variance, overestimating the association between indicators measured with the same person (Sweeting, 2001).

A final strength regarding the questionnaire content is that all actors are questioned in detail about their psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing. Within this doctoral thesis, we use information on different wellbeing dimensions of the selected targetchildren.

A second group of strengths relates to the research design. As the main sample consists of reference marriages established between 1970 and 2008, the data allow to explore evolutions through time. The sample is proportionally drawn by marriage cohort, but also contains variation in terms of birth and divorce cohort. With a time frame of almost 40 years, there is substantial variation in the combination of age, period and cohort. This allows to study changes in the organization of the life course.

Finally, working with CAPI-questionnaires entails a strict standardization of the measurement instrument. It also improves the homogeneity in the way the questionnaire was completed. Although it is impossible to standardize the research setting completely,

this method limits the variation in the answers of respondents that are merely the result of the research setting and the way in which the questions were formulated.

#### ***2.2.4 Weaknesses of the SiV-data for the present study***

A first weakness relates to the sample sizes for specific research goals. Although SiV initially entails large sample sizes for the different actors, specific research questions often results in small subsamples of families, men and women, or children in a similar life stage. For example, although we start with 1257 targetchildren, sample sizes drop quickly if we make restrictions according to the age of the child at time of the interview or the number of years elapsed since divorce of the parents.

Another type of weaknesses relates to the selectivity resulting from the sampling criteria. First, the main sample contains no men and women who divorced twice or more or whose partner from their first marriage divorced twice or more. Subsequently, we also have no parents, children or partners of men and women who divorced twice or more. Calculations on the National Register learn that of all men and women who ever married between 1971 and 2008, 10% divorced more than twice (National register, Calculations SVR). As this condition holds for both (ex-)partners from the reference marriage, this means at least 10% of the population (in case of perfect positive relatedness of the likelihood of divorce of ex-partners) and maximum 20% of the ever-married population (in case of perfect negative relatedness of the likelihood of divorce of ex-partners) is not represented in the sample. Reality will be somewhere in between.

Second, the sample is limited to ever-married people and the parents, children and new parents from ever-married people. This implies that we ignore the group of individuals who were not married at the time of sample selection. In 2012, from all people of 18 years or older in the Flemish Region, 72% were (ever) married and 28% were not (yet) married (FOD Economie, 2013). Since the 1990's, there is a growing number of couples living together without being married, and hence also separating without being married (Corijn, 2004). Of all couples in Belgium living together that separated in 2004, 58% were married and 42% were not married (Defever & Mortelmans, 2011). This latter group is also interesting regarding stepfamily formation, but largely underrepresented in the SiV-study, with the exception of (unmarried) relationship dissolutions after divorce.

A second type of selectivity results from the multi-actor design. Participation of the (ex-) partner of the reference marriage was a condition for participation of a parent, child and new partner. In addition, (ex-)partners from the reference marriage had to give permission to contact a child under age 18. Partners from non-intact reference marriages could also refuse the interviewer to leave a questionnaire for their current partner. Finally, partners from the reference marriage could refuse to give the address of a parent or non-residential child. In other words, there are different mechanisms by which the partners from the reference marriages are important gatekeepers in the composition of the sample. This selectivity in response rates is largely documented in different research papers (e.g. Bastaits et al., 2012; Pasteels, Mortelmans & Van Bavel, 2012; Vanassche, 2012).



### ***2.2.5 Research questions tackled with the SiV-data***

The SiV-data is used in seven of the research chapters. In chapter 3, 8 and 10, the analyses performed on the SiV-data are combined with analyses on the LAGO-data. This replication of analyses entails a certain robustness test and cross-validation of the results.

To describe the post-divorce family configurations of children following divorce in chapter 3, we use data from the partner questionnaires of the parents of 1540 targetchildren between 0 and 21 years old who were still living in the parental home at the time of the (parental) interview. Seen the sampling design of the SiV-study, we always have at least information for one parent of a targetchild. In case the other parent did not participate in the study, we use the information provided by the other parent on the presence of a partner in the household of the ex-partner.

In chapter 4, the SiV-data is used to reconstruct the post-divorce family trajectories of parents and children. These trajectories were questioned in detail in the partner questionnaire. As detailed information is needed on all partner and fertility transitions, these trajectories can only be constructed for the parents that participated in the study. Regarding the family trajectory of children, there is a selection regarding the age of the targetchild. The complete family trajectory of targetchildren between birth and age 18 can be constructed for 987 children (18 years or older) with divorced parents regarding the maternal family trajectory and 822 children (18 years or older) with divorced parents regarding the paternal family trajectory. Second, for the trajectories in the first seven years following divorce, we have information on the trajectories of 1760 women and 1521 men that were at least seven years divorced. Approximately 70% of these men and women were parents at the time of divorce.

A next couple of questions relates to the impact of the custody arrangement of children following divorce on the post-divorce partner and fertility trajectory of their parents (chapter 5). Therefore, different person-period files were constructed, modeling the likelihood of different relationship types, the likelihood of repartnering with somebody with children and the likelihood of a birth of a child following divorce. We therefore use all observations of divorced men ( $N = 2181$ ) and women ( $N = 2478$ ). We use again the information on the post-divorce partner and fertility trajectory from the partner questionnaire.

Chapter 6 describes the association between the custody arrangement of the child and the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In this chapter, information from the partner questionnaire, the new partner questionnaire and child questionnaire are combined. We distinguish four different subsamples, depending on whether the relationship quality reported by the stepparent or stepchild is modeled, and whether it involves stepfathers or stepmothers. The samples are limited to (stepparents of) targetchildren who were not older than 21 years at the time of the interview. In addition, the parent had to live together with the stepparent and there had to be at least some contact between the child and the parent living together with a new partner. In total, we have information on the relationship with a

new partner of mother for 353 targetchildren and on the relationship with a new partner of father for 366 targetchildren. For the stepparent's perspective, we have information on the relationship with the targetchild for 234 new partners of mother and for 263 new partners of father.

In chapter 7 we investigate the association between custody arrangements following divorce and the partner and parental relationships between parents and stepparents. We use information from the partner questionnaire and the new partner questionnaire. We distinguish two main research samples and two additional subsamples of respectively mothers and fathers, and stepfathers and stepmothers. All samples are limited to parents and stepparents of targetchildren between age 4 and 18. We use information on 382 divorced mothers living together with a new partner, from which 203 of those partners also participated in the study. For the father's and stepmother's perspective, we have information from respectively 366 and 236 respondents.

Chapter 8 describes the relationship quality of stepchildren with the parent and stepparent of the same sex, and their relative importance in explaining child wellbeing. We use information from the child questionnaire of adolescents between age 10 and 21, whose parents are divorced, who have at least one stepparent and who are residing in one or two parental households. We distinguish two subsamples of children reporting respectively on their relationship with father and stepfather (N = 278) and with mother and stepmother (N = 322).

In chapter 9 we investigate the combined effect of the presence of stepparents, the custody arrangement of the child, close parent-child relationships and few parental conflict for child wellbeing. We combine information from the partner and child questionnaire. In total, we use information on 707 targetchildren between age 10 and 21. We distinguish an additional subsample of 303 complete mother-father-child triads. The latter refers to a subsample in which both ex-partners and a targetchild between age 10 and 21 participated in the study.

## **2.3 Leuven Adolescents and Family Study (LAGO)**

### ***2.3.1 Context of the LAGO-project***

The Leuven Adolescents and Family Study or LAGO was initiated in 2008 by the research group Family and Population Studies of the KU Leuven. It is both a research and educational project, in which the knowledge, skills and energy of different researchers and master students are combined. This collaboration implies different scale-advantages and allows to conduct a research project of a quantity and quality that could not have been reached by the single partners. Since 2008, every year a group of approximately 1500 pupils across 10 secondary school are questioned about their family life, family relationships and different wellbeing dimensions.

### ***2.3.2 Sample and research design***

LAGO is based upon a two-stage sampling design: in a first stage schools are selected, in a second stage classes or clusters of pupils within those schools are selected. In the next paragraphs, these two phases are discussed in detail.

#### ***2.3.2.1 School selection***

For the selection of schools we apply a disproportional quota-sample. It concerns a quota-sample as we first divide the Flemish school population in a number of subgroups or strata and we aim for questioning a specific number (quotum) of schools within each stratum. The strata consist of specific combinations of school type (schools owned by the communities, subsidized free schools and subsidized public schools) and region (with at least 50 000 inhabitants). For a detailed overview of these strata, we refer to Vanassche et al. (2012). It concerns a disproportional sample because we do not aim for a distribution of the different strata identical to the Flemish population, but for a researchable number of schools from respectively different school types and regions. We therefore put the quotum equal across all strata, striving for two schools within each stratum.

In a first phase the ‘own’ schools of participating students are contacted, as well as other schools with who students or researchers have a personal tie. The motivation is that personal contacts with the schools increase the response rate. This is crucial for a research project with a limited amount of resources. All schools that were contacted during this phase gave their agreement to participate. Across the first four rounds, 19 schools were contacted in this phase: ten schools in Antwerp, three schools in Flemish Brabant, five in Limburg and one in West-Flanders. A disadvantage of this sample phase is that we have a large overselection of schools with (only) the generational educational track, subsidized free schools and schools in the provinces surrounding Leuven. In a second phase, this overselection is compensated by an a-select, disproportional stratified sample of schools. If the quotum for a specific stratum was reached, no additional schools were selected for that stratum in phase two. In addition, schools with different educational tracks were given a higher weight in the random selection within each strata in the second phase. In both phases, schools were first contacted with a personal letter to the school principal, explaining the research goals and designs. The week after they received this letter by mail, students contacted the school principal, either by telephone or face-to-face.

The characteristics of the strata that are used have different consequences for the composition of the sample. First, schools are geographically clustered within specific research rounds. This has a lot of practical advantages for the organization of the fieldwork, but ensures nevertheless a substantial geographical spread for the total sample. Second, we obtain a sufficient proportion of schools from the different school types. The latter is important as there are important differences in the socio-economic and cultural background of pupils across school types (Vanassche et al., 2012). Third, within the strata of Antwerp, Gent, Genk, Mechelen, The Flemish border of Brussels and Brussels-Capital

Region we expect to find a researchable proportion of the Flemish migrant population or adolescents with either parents or grandparents born abroad or with a foreign nationality.

Within the first four research rounds, 44 schools participated in our study: 10 schools in the first round, 10 schools in the second round, 15 schools in the third round and 9 schools in the fourth round. As Flanders counts 706 secondary schools, the LAGO-sample of the first four research rounds contains approximately 6% of the total school population.

### *2.3.2.2 Pupil selection*

The second stage consist of the selection of pupils to participate in the study. Within the selected schools we take a cluster sample of classes of pupils in which all pupils are questioned. In Flanders, the secondary educational system is organized in three grades of each two years in all educational tracks. The target for the pupil sample is set on questioning two classes of pupils within each educational track, within each grade, within each school. For example, if a school offers two grades of three educational tracks, 12 classes of pupils are questioned within that school. An additional criterion is that in case of typical boys' or girls' tracks within a school (for example car mechanics or child care), we preferred to select both a typical boys' and a typical girls' track.

In the first grade, we distinguish only two educational tracks, track A and track B. The B-track is the track to which pupils are directed who did not obtain their certificate of primary school. In the second and third grade there are four educational tracks. The general educational track (GET) is often seen as the highest secondary educational level and mainly prepares for higher education. The technical educational track (TET) is oriented on technical-theoretic education, complemented with practical courses, in which pupils learn a profession and which enables them to follow higher (technical) education. The art educational track (AET) is a very small track in number of pupils and focuses on artistic knowledge and skills. Finally, the vocational educational track (VET) is preparing students directly for the labour market, with specialization options such as woodwork, electricity, child and elder care. The VET is the only track with an additional seventh year or fourth grade. The completion of this seventh years is a necessary condition to obtain the certificate of higher secondary education.

Response analyses of the questioned pupils within each of the participating schools learns that the guideline of two classes for each grade and educational track is applied within all schools: in every school all available grades and tracks are present in the sample. The number of pupils that were questioned varies a lot between grades and educational tracks, but this is in line with the actual variation in class size.

The selection of classes happened in consultation with the school, in which the ad randomness of selectivity was strongly recommended. Some school principals preferred to select classes from which a teacher was absent during the period of the fieldwork, others selected ad random classes in which completing the questionnaire was done within class hours, others selected collective, obligatory study moments of different classes in which all

pupils were questioned. Although a standardized selection method (and research setting) across all schools is the most preferable scenario, meeting the desiderata of school principals was inevitable, important and a sign of respect as they are the most important stakeholders in the research design of the LAGO-project.

The first four research rounds resulted in 7035 respondents, corresponding with 1.6% of all Flemish adolescents in normal secondary education. In the first round 1970 pupils were questioned, in the second round 1688 pupils, in the third round 2120 pupils and in the fourth round 1257 pupils.

### 2.3.2.3 Comparison with the Flemish school and pupil population

If we compare the composition of the LAGO-sample in terms of school type and region (the stratification criteria on school level), LAGO entails a small overrepresentation of schools owned by the communities and a small underrepresentation of the subsidized free schools on both pupil and school level (Table 2.1). Also regions within the provinces of Antwerp and Limburg are overrepresented, while regions within East and West Flanders are underrepresented.

**Table 2.1: Distribution of schools and pupils across the different educational tracks, school type and Flemish provinces (in %)**

	Flanders (2009-2010)		LAGO (2008-2011)	
	Schools (N = 960)	Pupils (N = 425 316)	Schools (N = 44)	Pupils (N = 7 141)
<i>Educational track</i>				
A track (first grade)		27.1		22.4
B track (first grade)		5.1		3.7
General Secondary Education		27.2		34.3
Technical Secondary Education		21.7		21.3
Arts Secondary Education		1.5		2.3
Vocational Secondary Education		17.4		16.0
<i>School type</i>				
Schools owned by the communities	22.5	17.0	27.3	25.5
Subsidized free schools	69.3	75.3	65.9	66.8
Subsidized public schools	8.2	7.7	6.8	7.7
<i>Provinces</i>				
Antwerp	26.6	27.7	38.6	41.8
Flemish Brabant	13.4	13.8	15.9	15.9
Brussels-Capital Region	4.2	3.1	4.6	1.1
West Flanders	21.8	18.8	13.6	10.4
East Flanders	20.2	22.4	11.4	9.0
Limburg	13.8	14.2	15.9	21.8

Sources: Vlaamse onderwijsstatistieken (2013) & LAGO, own calculations

The combined distribution of sex, educational track and grade in the LAGO sample resembles in a very good way the distribution in the Flemish population (Table 2.2). In LAGO there is a small overrepresentation of girls versus boys, of GET-pupils versus VET-pupils and of pupils from the second and third grade versus the first grade.

7% of the pupils in the LAGO sample do not have the Belgian nationality versus 5% of the Flemish secondary school population (Vlaamse onderwijsstatistieken, 2013). Finally, with a percentage of 26% pupils with divorced or separated parents, the LAGO-sample almost perfectly reflects the distribution of parental divorce experience within the population of Flemish adolescents between 12 and 17 years old (Lodewijckx, 2005).

**Table 2.2: Combined distribution of Flemish and LAGO population across educational grade, educational track and sex (in %)**

Educational grade	Educational track	Flanders (N = 425 316)			LAGO (N = 6 919)		
		Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
First	A-track	13.1	13.4	26.5	11.0	11.6	22.6
	B-track	3.2	2.5	5.7	1.5	2.1	3.6
	Total	16.3	15.9	32.2	12.5	13.7	26.2
Second	GET	6.7	7.9	14.6	9.3	9.9	19.2
	TET	5.8	4.3	10.1	6.1	5.2	11.3
	AET	0.2	0.4	0.7	0.4	0.9	1.3
	VET	4.0	3.3	7.3	2.6	4.2	6.7
	Total	16.7	15.9	32.6	18.3	20.2	38.6
Third & fourth	GET	5.6	7.1	12.7	6.2	9.0	15.2
	TET	6.5	5.1	11.7	4.9	5.2	10.0
	AET	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.3	0.8	1.0
	VET	5.4	4.7	10.1	3.6	5.4	9.0
	Total	17.8	17.4	35.2	14.9	20.3	35.3
Total		50.8	49.1	100	45.7	54.3	100

*Sources: Vlaamse onderwijsstatistieken (2013) & LAGO, own calculations*

### **2.2.3 Strengths of the LAGO-data for the present study**

A first strength of the LAGO-data relates to the questionnaire content. Adolescents are questioned in detail about their family configurations, their family relationships, and different dimensions of their wellbeing. Questions for children with divorced parents were adapted to the binuclear family perspective that many children experience following parental divorce. When necessary, questions were split up for the maternal and paternal household.

Another strength of the LAGO-data is that it relies on self-reports of adolescents instead of parental reports on their children. Parents would significantly underestimate child worry and anxiety and overestimate optimism compared to child self-report (Lagattuta, Sayfan & Bamford, 2012). This is especially important with regard to research questions that entail

child wellbeing. Moreover, the quality of data gathered with both adolescents and primary school children on their families would be high in absolute terms, with the quality being even a little bit higher for adolescents than for younger groups (Amato & Ochiltree, 1987).

A very important advantage of the sample design is that there is a very negligible drop-out rate compared to other large-scale surveys. Less than 1% of the questionnaires return empty or are considered not to be reliable. The latter is also considered as a type of non-response, as pupils who do not want to complete the questionnaire might write complete nonsense or give very systematic answers on all questions. These observations are removed during the data-cleaning process, on which more detailed information can be found in the methodological documentation (Vanassche et al., 2012).

Finally, the disentanglement of questionnaire content and research setting are used to obtain the true stories of children. By not questioning youngsters about their family at home, we aim for a more comfortable situation to report less positive or negative feelings about specific family members or family relationships. This should be reinforced by the greater feelings of anonymity of a written questionnaire compared to a personal interview.

#### ***2.2.4 Weaknesses of the LAGO-data for the present study***

A first weakness of LAGO relates to the information on the family that may be asked to adolescents. Although we may assume reliable answers on the current family composition by secondary school pupils in terms of household composition of mother and father, things get more difficult regarding complete family histories. For example, adolescents may have been very young at time of parental divorce, and remember little of the pre-divorce and post-divorce family situations and relationships before a certain age. Children's reports on (timing of) parental divorce experience may therefore be less reliable than parents' reports, due to memory bias. In addition, if adolescents do not live together with one or both parents, or do no longer have contact with one or both parents, they may not be the best source regarding the family composition of mother and father.

Only working with adolescent reports also entails the problem of shared variance, whereby we may overestimate the correlation between different measures. For example, a stressful event preceding the interview might negatively affect the answers regarding both wellbeing dimensions and the quality of specific family relationships. This might lead to an overestimation of the association between both measures, which is caused by their interrelatedness with another factor.

There are also some weaknesses related to the research design. First, questioning pupils within schools entails that truants/schools skippers are underrepresented. Second, there is some variation in the field work to meet the wishes of schools principals. Finally, the collective completion of the questionnaire may reduce the feelings of privacy.

### ***2.2.5 Research questions tackled with the LAGO-data***

In chapter 3, we use data from the four research rounds to describe the post-divorce family configurations of adolescents. The research sample consist of 1525 adolescents with divorced or separated parents for whom detailed information is available about their custody arrangement. In chapter 10, we use the same research sample to explore the association between the presence of stepparents, the custody arrangement of the child, the parent-child relationship, and the frequency of parental conflict and the wellbeing of adolescents.

In chapter 8 we use information from the third and fourth research round to describe differences between custody arrangements in the relationship quality of adolescents with respectively father and stepfather, and with mother and stepmother. Subsequently, we explore the importance of these relationships for different wellbeing dimensions of the adolescents. The research sample consists of adolescents whose parents are divorced, have at least one stepparent and are residing in one or two parental households. We distinguish two subsamples according to the sex of the stepparent. 343 adolescents reported on their relationship with father and stepfather and 339 adolescents reported on their relationship with mother and stepmother.

In chapter 10, we use data from the second research round to analyze the association between different family structures, parent-child relationships, parental role models and problem behavior. The research sample consist of 1619 pupils, of whom 757 boys and 862 girls.



## CHAPTER 3

### Post-divorce custody arrangements and binuclear family structures of children

This chapter draws in part upon the following publications:

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K. (joint first authorship) & Matthijs, K. (2013). Post-divorce custody arrangements and binuclear family structures of Flemish adolescents. *Demographic Research*, 28, 421-432, DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2013.28.15. (IF most recent: 1.53)

Sodermans, A.K., Vanassche, S., Matthijs, K. & Swicegood, G. (2012). Measuring Post-Divorce Living Arrangements: Theoretical and Empirical Validation of the Residential Calendar. *Journal of Family Issues* (epub ahead of print), art.nr DOI: 10.1177/0192513X12464947. (IF most recent: 1.04)

Sodermans, A.K., Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2011). Gedeelde kinderen en plusouders: de verblijfsregeling en de gezinssituatie na scheiding, pp. 135-151 in D. Mortelmans, I. Pasteels, P. Bracke, K. Matthijs, J. Van Bavel & C. Van Peer (Eds.), *Scheiding in Vlaanderen*. Leuven: Acco.

### 3.1 Introduction

One of the challenging issues for future demography and family sociology is the question of how to define and measure the family situation of children following parental divorce. In many research articles, single-parent families are dichotomously distinguished from stepfamilies as if there exist clear, undisputable boundaries between both family configurations. With the growing number of children living (partially) in two households after divorce, this dichotomy becomes challenged. Shared parental responsibilities have become the norm in many countries and the number of children in joint custody is rising. Consequently, an increasing number of children are living a substantial amount of time in both parental households, in which different family configurations may exist. In addition, children in joint custody situations stochastically have a higher likelihood of living together with a new partner of mother and father, or with both. This has important consequences for the way we look at families and how we describe them.

Flanders (the Northern region of Belgium) provides us with an interesting context to study post-divorce custody arrangements and family structures of children for several reasons. First, in an international context, Belgium has one of the highest divorce rates (Eurostat, 2010). More than one fifth of the children below the age of eighteen experienced a parental divorce (Lodewijckx, 2005). Second, it has liberal custody legislation. *Joint parental authority* has been legally established since 1995 and *joint physical custody*, also known as *shared residence*, was introduced in 2006 as the preferred residential model following parental divorce.

No official figures exist for residential arrangements nor for post-divorce family structures. Decisions on residential arrangements are consolidated in court but not available on an aggregate national level. As a consequence, Belgian policy makers have no precise information on the residential arrangements of divorced families. As stressed in chapter 1, post-divorce family configurations are also difficult to register, as the factual living situation is often different from the official one because of financial, practical or other reasons. Moreover, often the information on the biological ties between the different household members is lacking. Some attempts have been made to estimate the number of Flemish children living in stepfamily formations (for example by Lodewijck, 2005), but the reliability margins are relatively high. Finally, the growing number of children born outside marriage reinforces the estimation difficulties involved with the biological relatedness of household members.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, we describe the proportion of children in different residential arrangements for different divorce cohorts. We thereby expect an increase of children in shared residence for the more recent cohorts. Second, we illustrate the post-divorce family configurations of children, taking into account their residential arrangement. We thereby focus on the question of how different definition criteria alter the distribution of specific family configurations. We make use of data from the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche et al., 2012) and Divorce in Flanders

(Mortelmans et al., 2011). Both data sources are very suitable for the aim of this chapter due to their research designs and the measurement instruments regarding the custody arrangement and family configurations of children.

### **3.2 Data**

Both data sources have their strengths and weaknesses for describing the post-divorce family structures of children. The data from Divorce in Flanders (SiV) cover a wider age range, that is children between 0 and 21 years old. The Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (LAGO) is limited to adolescents in secondary schools, roughly between 12 and 18 years old. On the other hand, SiV is limited to children of ever-married parents, while LAGO also includes children whose parents were never married. Despite these differences in research populations, the comparison of the results provides a certain cross-validation of the results. This is especially important since there are no population figures to compare with our figures.

The SiV-data provide information on 3525 marriages that were dissolved at the time of the interview (2009-2010). In cases where at least one child was born within the marriage, a targetchild was selected. The selection criteria implied a preference for a targetchild aged 10 years or older and residing with at least one of the parents. In this chapter, we use the information from the mothers and fathers of targetchildren to reconstruct their family structures. We selected only mothers and fathers from targetchildren who were not older than 21 at the time of the interview with the first parent, and who still resided with at least one of the parents at that time ( $N = 1540$ ). Information on the custody arrangement of the child was obtained from the mother and father data. Due to the sampling strategies that were applied, at least one parent participated for each targetchild, giving information on the custody arrangements of all targetchildren. On the other hand, the current partner situation of the mothers and fathers of the targetchildren is only known in detail if both the mother and father participated in the study. In other words, for some children we only have detailed information on the partner situation of mother, for others only on the partner situation of fathers, and for others we have information on both parents. The only information on the partner situation of both parents that is available if only one of the parents completed the interview is the presence of a new partner in the household. All respondents were specifically asked whether their ex-partner was living together with a partner at the time of the interview.

Second, from the 7035 adolescents that were questioned within the first four rounds of the LAGO-study, we selected a research sample of 1525 adolescents with divorced or separated parents for whom detailed information is available about their custody arrangement. For the description of the sibling composition, we only have information for respondents of the last two research rounds.

In Table 3.1 we present some descriptives regarding the composition of both research samples. The LAGO-sample contains a larger proportion of girls, while SiV contains a larger proportion of boys. The mean age at time of the interview is approximately 15 years

in both samples. In line with the sample designs, the age variation is larger in the SiV-sample. Children in the SiV-sample were on average a year younger at time of parental divorce compared to children in the LAGO-sample. The mean duration since parental divorce in both datasets is approximately eight years.

**Table 3.1: Descriptives for both research samples (percentages or mean and standard deviation)**















	SiV	LAGO
Girls (%)	49	58
Age of child at time of interview <sup>1</sup>	14.6 (4.3)	15.2 (1.9)
Age of child at time of parental divorce	6.2 (5.0)	7.5 (4.3)
Duration since parental divorce in years	8.3 (4.5)	7.8 (4.3)
N	1 540	1 525

<sup>1</sup>In SiV this refers to the data of the parental interview, in LAGO to the date of participation of the child

### 3.3 A residential calendar to measure residential arrangements

Residential arrangements, if included at all in surveys, are generally measured with rather simple predefined categories (for example: living with mother, living with both parents, living with father). Therefore, a new measurement instrument, the residential calendar, was developed to measure post-divorce residential arrangements (Sodermans et al., 2012). The residential calendar is a visual depiction of a normal month, each box representing a part of a day. Figure 3.1 presents the calendar that was used in the LAGO-sample to question children about their residential arrangement. Respondents needed to indicate for a one month time span, which days and nights they spend with their mother, their father, or somewhere else. Clear instructions were provided, followed by an example of a residential situation and a correctly completed calendar. In the SiV-study, parents had to complete a similar calendar regarding the child's residential arrangement.

**Figure 3.1: The residential calendar**

	Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday		Saturday		Sunday	
														
Week 1														
Week 2														
Week 3														
Week 4														

From the residential calendar, the share of time that children live with their mother and father was calculated. Following Melli (1999), the threshold for shared residence was set at 33%. Five different residential arrangements were distinguished: always with mother – mostly with mother – shared residence – mostly with father – always with father. *Living always with a parent* is defined as living exclusively (100%) with that parent. *Living*

*mostly with a parent* is defined as living more than 66% but less than 100% with that parent. Shared residence means that the child lives at least 33% of time with each parent. For those respondents who did not fill out the residential calendar, we used their answer on the conventional scale of residential arrangements. This scale contained the same five categories as listed above.

### 3.4 Results

#### 3.4.1 Post-divorce custody arrangements

The distribution of the custody arrangements within the different divorce cohorts are very similar in both datasets. Almost one third of the children live permanently with the mother and another third indicate that they live mostly with the mother. One out of four children live with their mother and father alternately (joint custody). Around 6% live always with the father and 3% live mostly with the father. These figures show that, despite the changing normative climate towards equal parental rights, the mother is still the dominant caregiver after a parental break-up for the majority of the children.

Yet, there are reasons to assume that joint custody has increased over time. As shown in table 3.2, the proportion of children in joint custody more than triples between the first and last divorce cohort. Among the children whose parents divorced from 2006 onwards, about one third are in a joint custody arrangement. Conversely, the proportion of children living exclusively with the mother is lower for recent divorced parents. This indicates that the role of the custodial parent, traditionally held by mothers, has gradually become less stable.

**Table 3.2: Proportion of children in different custody arrangements, according to divorce cohort (in column %)**

	1990-1995		1996-1999		2000-2005		2006-2011		Total	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
Always with mother	52.4	52.2	42.7	45.7	33.3	26.0	24.3	27.8	34.1	33.4
Mostly with mother	28.0	27.2	29.8	35.1	32.6	34.8	29.0	28.1	30.7	32.7
Joint custody	8.5	9.8	16.4	14.1	26.4	29.3	36.7	32.8	26.0	25.6
Mostly with father	1.7	6.5	3.0	2.9	2.2	4.3	2.6	4.7	2.4	4.3
Always with father	9.3	6.1	8.2	2.2	5.5	5.6	7.4	6.6	6.8	5.0
N	118	92	232	276	651	624	379	320	1 380	1 312

The differences between different divorce cohorts can partially be due to age differences. Additional analyses show that children whose parents divorced more recently, are on average younger than those in older divorce cohorts (Vanassche, Sodermans & Matthijs, 2013). The finding that older children are more likely to live exclusively with one of their parents has been demonstrated by other research as well (Cancian & Meyer, 1998).

### 3.4.2 Post-divorce family structures following parental divorce

Table 3.3 and Table 3.4 present the crosstabulation of the partner situation of respectively mother and father and the custody arrangement of the children. Overall, the distributions are again very similar in both datasets. Almost one in three report their mother to be single, and the same proportion reports their father to be single. Consequently, if a stepparent is very broadly defined as a partner of a biological parent of the child, these figures indicate that two out of three children with divorced parents have a stepmother, and two out of three have a stepfather. If we further restrict the definition of a stepparent to a partner living together with a biological parent, approximately half of the children have a stepfather, and half have a stepmother. A further restriction may be co-residence of stepparent and stepchild. If co-residence is considered as living at least some time together (>0%), almost half of the children live with a stepfather, versus one third with a stepmother. A further restriction of living at least 33% of time with a stepparent reduces the number of children living with a stepmother to one out of five children, while the proportion living with a stepfather remains almost unchanged. Finally, while one out of three children lives at least 66% of time with a stepfather, only 5% of children report to live at least 66% of time with a stepmother.

**Table 3.3: Crosstabulation of partner situation mother and custody arrangement of child (% of total & column %)**

% of total Column %	Always with mother		Mostly with mother		Joint custody		Mostly with father		Always with father		Total	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
No partner	17.0	12.6	10.9	10.3	8.7	8.8	1.3	1.3	4.7	1.4		
	42.3	38.6	36.1	31.4	36.6	34.9	29.4	30.7	42.2	26.6	38.9	34.4
LAT-relation	5.4	4.8	4.3	4.8	3.5	4.1	0.2	0.7	0.5	0.4		
	13.5	14.6	14.2	14.6	14.6	16.1	11.8	16.1	11.1	7.6	13.9	14.7
Unmarried cohabitation	9.0	8.8	8.5	10.1	7.1	8.2	0.7	1.3	1.4	2.3		
	22.5	26.8	28.4	30.8	29.7	32.5	41.2	30.7	31.1	44.3	26.6	30.6
Remarried	8.7	6.5	6.4	7.6	4.6	4.1	0.3	0.9	0.7	1.1		
	21.7	19.9	21.3	23.3	19.1	16.4	17.7	22.6	15.6	21.5	20.6	20.3

$N_{SiV} = 1\,032 / N_{LAGO} = 1\,505$

Table 3.5 presents the post-divorce family configuration of children from a binuclear perspective. In the first column, a broad definition of co-residence is used, while in the second column co-residence is defined as living at least one third of time together in a household. The distributions within both datasets are again very similar.

**Table 3.4: Crosstabulation of partner situation father and custody arrangement of child (% of total & column %)**

% of total Column %	Always with mother		Mostly with mother		Joint custody		Mostly with father		Always with father		Total	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
No partner	7.7	9.3	10.4	8.7	10.4	8.0	1.3	1.6	3.7	2.2		
	32.3	30.5	32.1	25.9	34.4	30.8	37.9	37.1	36.5	40.0	33.5	29.8
LAT-relation	2.5	2.8	3.4	4.4	4.7	4.8	0.1	0.8	1.2	0.8		
	10.6	9.3	10.5	12.9	15.6	18.6	3.5	17.7	11.8	13.8	11.9	13.6
Unmarried cohabitation	8.3	10.7	11.6	14.2	9.2	9.1	1.6	1.0	2.4	1.5		
	34.9	35.0	35.8	42.1	30.4	35.1	44.8	24.2	23.5	26.3	33.0	36.5
Remarried	5.3	7.7	7.0	6.4	5.9	4.1	0.5	0.9	2.9	1.1		
	22.2	25.2	21.6	19.1	19.6	15.7	13.8	21.0	28.2	20.0	21.6	20.2

*N SiV = 830 / N LAGO = 1 446*

Under the broad definition of co-residence, one out of six children lives full-time with mother and one out of six full-time with mother and stepfather. A very small group of children live full-time with a single father or with father and stepmother. Almost one out of six children commute between two single-parent households. More than one out of four children alternate between a single-parent household and a stepfamily. Finally, one in five children live part-time in two stepfamily configurations. Overall, two out of three children currently live at least some time together with a stepparent.

**Table 3.5: The binuclear family situation of children following parental divorce according to two co-residence criteria (in %)**

	Child is living at least 1% of time in household		Child is living at least 33% of time in household	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
Full-time with single mother	18.5	17.5	32.9	32.5
Full-time with single father	3.3	2.9	4.2	5.1
Full-time with mother and stepfather	15.9	15.4	32.1	33.1
Full-time with father and stepmother	3.7	2.5	5.1	4.3
Alternating with single mother and with single father	12.6	14.3	6.2	6.7
Alternating with mother and stepfather and with single father	12.9	13.0	6.4	5.7
Alternating with single mother and with father and stepmother	14.8	15.3	5.7	6.1
Alternating with mother and stepfather and with father and stepmother	18.5	19.2	7.5	6.7
N	1 355	1 495	1 363	1 504

Under the more strict definition of co-residence, one out of three children live full-time with a single mother, and one out of three live full-time with mother and stepfather. The remaining third of children are almost equally distributed over the six remaining binuclear family configurations. Overall, 55% of the children with divorced parents currently live at least one third of time together with a stepparent.

Next, we have a look at how frequently children have stepsiblings, residential stepsiblings and halfsiblings in the maternal and paternal household (Table 3.6 and Table 3.7). Halfsiblings are siblings with whom the child only has one biological parent in common. For the children in our research samples, these halfsiblings are children that are born within the new partner relationship of mother or father following divorce. Stepsiblings have no biological parents in common. For the children in our research samples, stepsiblings are children from a previous relationship of the new partner of mother or father. Those children can either live in the parental household (residential stepsiblings) or not.

We present the distribution for both the complete research samples and for the subsamples in which respectively mother and father are living together with a new partner. The distribution of children with stepsiblings and halfsiblings respectively is very similar in both datasets. There are however large differences between both datasets in the proportion of children reporting residential children in the maternal and paternal household. This may be the result of limitations in the way this information was assessed in both studies. In SiV, parents were asked whether they had ever lived together with the children of their (new) partner, without a clear criterion to distinguish *ever* from *never*. In LAGO, the information was gathered from the children by means of a household grid. The combination of answers on a general question about the sibling composition and the information from this household grid suggests that a significant number of children may have trouble completing such complex table. In other words, for both datasets, the information on residential stepsiblings has to be interpreted with caution.

Overall, more than one out of three children with divorced parents have at least one stepsibling with respectively mother or father. Within the group of children whose mother or father has a new partner, more than one out of two children has a stepsibling. The proportion of children with stepsiblings in the maternal household decreases with the proportion of time they spend in the maternal household. The proportion of children with stepsiblings in the paternal household is more similar across the different custody arrangements.



**Table 3.6: Proportion of children with stepsiblings, residential stepsiblings and halfsiblings on mother's side (in %)**

	Always with mother		Mostly with mother		Joint custody		Mostly with father		Always with father		TOTAL	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
<i>All children</i>												
% with stepsiblings via partner of mother	34.3	34.5	40.1	36.4	38.2	41.3	35.3	52.4	42.2	32.4	37.3	37.4
% with stepsiblings living with mother and her partner	9.9	1.9	15.5	4.3	17.5	9.2	23.5	19.1	8.9	2.7	13.6	5.3
% with halfsiblings via partner of mother	14.5	14.9	15.9	14.9	12.6	9.8	29.4	14.3	6.7	14.6	14.4	13.5
<i>N SiV = 1 031 / N LAGO = 657</i>												
<i>Children with partner living with mother</i>												
% with stepsiblings via partner of mother	54.6	51.5	60.1	54.5	55.0	57.7	50.0	75.0	71.4	42.3	57.1	54.3
% with stepsiblings living with mother and her partner	21.9	3.9	30.1	8.0	35.0	16.5	40.0	25.0	19.1	3.9	27.9	9.4
% with halfsiblings via partner of mother	31.2	20.4	30.3	23.7	24.2	17.5	50.0	25.0	9.5	17.9	28.6	20.6
<i>N SiV = 487 / N LAGO = 354</i>												

**Table 3.7: Proportion of children with stepsiblings, residential stepsiblings and halfsiblings on father's side (in %)**

	Always with mother		Mostly with mother		Joint custody		Mostly with father		Always with father		TOTAL	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
<i>All children</i>												
% with stepsiblings via partner of father	42.4	35.4	35.1	40.5	40.0	33.2	37.9	33.3	43.5	31.6	39.3	36.1
% with stepsiblings living with father and his partner	27.3	11.3	23.6	13.8	23.6	12.2	31.0	9.5	23.5	7.9	24.7	12.1
% with halfsiblings via partner of father	14.7	15.3	17.2	17.6	14.4	11.4	13.8	4.8	17.7	17.1	15.7	14.7
<i>N SiV = 830 / N LAGO = 645</i>												
<i>Children with partner living with father</i>												
% with stepsiblings via partner of father	58.1	52.9	50.0	55.6	53.6	43.5	58.8	62.5	63.6	55.6	54.8	51.8
% with stepsiblings living with father and his partner	46.0	18.5	40.9	23.0	47.2	22.8	52.9	12.5	45.5	11.1	44.8	20.7
% with halfsiblings via partner of father	25.7	23.0	29.9	26.8	28.0	18.3	23.5	12.5	34.1	33.3	28.5	23.4
<i>N SiV = 453 / N LAGO = 368</i>												

Despite the reported limitations regarding the proportion of children with residential stepsiblings, we see in both research samples that stepsiblings are more frequently a part of the paternal household, and less frequently present in the maternal household. In both datasets, the proportion of children with residential stepsiblings in the maternal household is nearly half of the proportion of children with residential stepsiblings in the paternal household. This follows from the fact that stepmothers more often have custody over their children from previous relationships than stepfathers. The differences according to the custody arrangements are overall very small.

Approximately one out of six children with divorced parents report a halfsibling in respectively the paternal and maternal household. Within the group of children whose parents are living together with a new partner, this proportion equals approximately one out of four. There are no pronounced differences according to the custody arrangement of the child.

According to the presence of stepsiblings and/or halfsiblings, a distinction can be made between *simple stepfamilies* and *complex stepfamilies*. In simple stepfamilies, only one of the partners has residential children from a previous relationship and there are no common children. In complex stepfamilies, children vary in their biological relatedness, either sharing none or one only biological parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Table 3.8 presents the distribution of single-parent family formations, simple stepfamily formations and complex stepfamily formations for both parental households. The differences in the distribution within the LAGO and SiV-sample are the result of differences in the proportion of residential stepsiblings discussed above. There are few differences according to the custody arrangement of the child.

In both datasets, children are more often living within a complex stepfamily formation in the paternal household compared to the maternal household. Although the differences between the two datasets are large to make general conclusions, the results suggest that between one third and one half of children who live in a stepfamily, are living in a complex stepfamily formation.

A final way to look at the post-divorce family configurations of children is to count the type of siblings they have in both parental households (Table 3.9). If we also include stepsiblings that are not living in the parental household, one out of four of the children in the SiV-sample and one out of three children in the LAGO-sample have no step- or halfsibling. Approximately one quarter have at least one step- or halfsibling, and one out of five have at least two types of step- or halfsiblings. Only a very small group of children combine more than two types of step- or halfsiblings. The proportion of children with step- or halfsiblings living in the parental households is smaller, especially within the groups with more than one type of step- or halfsibling.

**Table 3.8: Proportion of children living in single-parent household, simple and complex stepfamily configurations (in column %)**

	Always with mother		Mostly with mother		Joint custody		Mostly with father		Always with father		Total	
	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO	SiV	LAGO
<b>MOTHER</b>												
Single-mother household	55.8	51.9	50.5	48.9	51.2	49.2	41.2	42.9	53.3	29.7	52.7	48.7
Simple stepfather formation <sup>1</sup>	22.7	37.9	24.6	35.6	22.0	35.1	17.7	33.3	33.3	54.1	23.5	37.1
Complex stepfather formation <sup>2</sup>	21.5	10.3	24.9	15.5	26.8	15.7	41.2	23.8	13.3	16.2	23.8	14.2
<i>N SiV = 1 031 / N LAGO = 682</i>												
<b>FATHER</b>												
Single-father household	42.9	39.0	42.5	42.0	50.0	51.6	41.4	61.9	48.2	53.9	45.4	45.2
Simple stepmother formation <sup>1</sup>	20.2	38.5	20.2	30.4	15.2	29.5	13.8	28.6	15.3	28.2	18.0	32.3
Complex stepmother formation <sup>2</sup>	36.9	22.6	37.3	27.7	34.8	19.0	44.8	9.5	36.5	18.0	36.6	22.5
<i>N SiV = 830 / N LAGO = 622</i>												

<sup>1</sup> No residential step/halfsiblings, <sup>2</sup> At least one residential step/halfsibling

**Table 3.9: Proportion of children with different types of siblings (in %)**

Information from mother and father	SiV		LAGO	
	All	Residential	All	Residential
No step/halfsiblings	26.2	45.9	33.7	67.6
One type of step/halfsiblings	44.0	39.9	40.9	23.8
Two types of step/halfsiblings	23.9	11.8	21.7	7.8
Three types of step/halfsiblings	5.1	2.3	3.5	0.9
Four types of step/halfsiblings	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.0
<i>N SiV = 527 / N LAGO = 658</i>				

### 3.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to describe the post-divorce family configurations of children, with a focus on the increasing number of children in joint custody and the implications for stepfamily formations.

First of all, we observe an increase over time in children spending at least 33% of their time in both parental households. Especially after 2006, when the legal presumption for joint custody was installed, the proportion of children in joint custody is rather high (approximately 33%), reflecting the diminution of the maternal dominance in custody decisions. The relatively high prevalence of joint custody challenges the current practice of dichotomizing post-divorce families into single-parent families or stepfamilies and raises questions about how to classify part-time single-parent, part-time stepfamily formations. Family typologies applying a binuclear perspective are therefore increasingly meaningful and necessary.

Second, a transversal look at the child population indicates that a large majority live with a new partner of mother or father following parental divorce. From a life course perspective, the proportion of children with divorced parents that has ever lived with a stepparent will even be higher. According to the criteria that are used to define stepparents, there are however important differences in the proportion of children with a stepmother and with a stepfather. Due to dominant mother custody, children most often live together with a stepfather, especially if strict co-residence criteria are applied. With the increasing proportion of children in joint custody, we may however expect an increasing number of children to live with a stepmother. Correspondingly, we may expect the proportion of full-time residential stepfathers to decline. More equal custody arrangements may thus diminish existing differences in the frequency with which the parental role of stepfathers and stepmothers is occupied. Although this data doesn't really speak to changes in the nature of the role of stepparents, increasing frequency may be a catalyst for the evolution of these social roles.

Finally, our results show that a significant proportion of children who live with a stepparent also have step- and/or halfsiblings. Here there are important differences between the maternal and paternal households. Stepfathers less frequently co-reside with their children from previous relationships. Consequently, the paternal post-divorce family configuration is more often a complex stepfamily configuration than the maternal post-divorce family configuration. These differences in sibling composition might be important in explaining differences in family processes between stepfather and stepmother families. Nevertheless, with the increase in joint custody arrangements, we might also expect these differences to decline over time. Stepmothers and stepfathers do not only increasingly become part-time residential stepparents, but also part-time residential parents from the children from their previous relationships.

Overall, our empirical inventory shows that there is an increasing heterogeneity in family and household configurations of parents and children. We see important variation in the

distribution of post-divorce family configurations according to the definitional criteria that are used. The ideal criteria depend on the research question under investigation. The main goal of this descriptive chapter was to stress the value of careful reflection on the definition of family structures. Multiple household membership has important consequences for the analysis of demographic evolutions and for the sociological understanding of household structures and kinship systems. Moreover, it will increasingly have consequences for official population registrations that are currently not adapted to this new demographic reality.



## CHAPTER 4

# Post-divorce family trajectories of parents and children

This chapter draws in part upon the following publications and conference papers:

Vanassche, S., Corijn, M., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (forthcoming). Gezinstrajecten van ouders en kinderen na (echt)scheiding, pp. xx-xx in C. Van Peer & M. Corijn, *Gezinstransities in Vlaanderen*. Brussel: Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering, SVR-studie 2.

Havermans, N., Vanassche, S., Botterman, S. & Matthijs, K. (forthcoming). Gezinstrajecten en schoolloopbanen van kinderen, pp. xx-xx in C. Van Peer & M. Corijn, *Gezinstransities in Vlaanderen*. Brussel: Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering, SVR-studie 2.

Vanassche, S., Havermans, N. & Matthijs, K. (2013). Divorce divide, educational divide? Parental education level and family histories as interwoven forces in the reproduction of social inequality. *Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America*, New Orleans, LA, 11-13<sup>th</sup> of April.

Vanassche, S., Havermans, N. & Matthijs, K. (2012). Divorce divide, educational divide? The complex interaction between the educational level of parents and the family trajectories and educational attainment of children: testing the selection, stress and differential coping and resource hypotheses. *European Population Conference*, Stockholm, 13-17<sup>th</sup> of July 2012.

Vanassche, S., Havermans, N. & Matthijs, K. (2012). Divorce divide, educational divide? Parental education level and family histories as interwoven forces in the reproduction of social inequality. *Seminar of the Committee on Family Research 2012*, Leuven, 12-14<sup>th</sup> of September.

## 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we aim to describe the family trajectories of children following the dissolution of the marriage of their parents. These trajectories might be very diverse. They are based upon two important components of the parental trajectories: the partner trajectory and the parenthood trajectory of mother and father following divorce. Partner trajectories are determined by the formation of new partner relationships, either cohabiting or not, and married or not. Parenthood trajectories include both transitions in biological parenthood and in stepparenthood. The partner and parenthood trajectories of divorced men and women are closely related. First, most children are born within partner relationships, mostly (married or unmarried) cohabitation relationships. In addition, the transition to stepparenthood is a consequence of repartnering. From the perspective of the child, the partner and parenthood trajectories of parents can be interpreted in terms of stepparent and sibling trajectories.

Transitions and trajectories are two important concepts from the sociology of the life course (Green, 2010). Key questions arising from this perspective include the age at which transitions are made, the duration between specific transitions and the sequencing of the transitions. Most studies that explore post-marital transitions are however limited to single events: post-marital cohabitation (Beaujouan, 2012; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2008; Wu & Schimmele, 2005), remarriage (Koo, Suchindran & Griffith, 1984; Teachman & Heckert, 1985; Wilson & Clarke, 1992; Wu & Schimmele, 2005), unmarried cohabitation versus remarriage (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Matthijs, 1987) or having a child within a new relationship (Beaujouan & Solaz, 2008; Brown, 2000; Buber & Prskawetz, 2000; Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Jefferies, Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Holland & Thomson, 2010; Wineberg, 1990). These studies present important insights in the determinants of these events, but they do not provide an overview of the complete trajectory or the sequence and timing of various events. All of these transitions can be repeated several times, which gives family structures of parents and children following divorce a temporal dimension. For example, a child can experience a parental divorce, live some years in a single-parent family, followed by a new partner relationship of the residential parent, resulting in the birth of a common child within that relationship, but which ended in a second separation of that parent some years later. In addition, repartnering is often limited to cohabitation relationships or remarriage, even in more recent studies (Beaujouan, 2012; De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). Non-residential partner relationships are rarely considered in this research literature (Hughes, 2000; Parker, 1999; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012; Qu & Weston, 2005). Other studies are limited to the family situation following divorce or separation at a snapshot in time (Corijn, 2005a; Corijn & Lodewijckx, 2009; Defever & Mortelmans, 2011).

Individuals may vary significantly in their period at risk of specific transitions. It is therefore important to clearly define the population at risk of specific (sequences of) events. In studying family transitions following divorce, the crucial time frame is the duration between divorce and date of data collection. As the main focus of this thesis



concerns the post-divorce family trajectories of children, an additional time component concerns the age at which children experience specific transitions. Because it is difficult to compare trajectories with large differences in duration, we have chosen to limit the description of the family trajectories in this chapter to two clearly defined periods: the complete childhood between birth and age 18 and the first seven years following (parental) divorce.

We use the technique of sequence analysis to construct different typologies of family trajectories and describe their frequency distribution. All typologies are based on data from Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans et al., 2011), but the sample selection criteria depend upon the trajectory that was constructed. First, we reconstruct the family trajectories of children with divorced parents from birth until age 18. In fact, these trajectories are not strictly post-divorce family trajectories, as they also include the family trajectory before divorce. Second, we reconstruct the post-divorce family trajectories of divorced men and women in the first seven years after divorce. This sample includes both childless persons and parents at time of divorce. We apply the technique of sequence analysis to construct two typologies of these trajectories. A first typology focuses on the partner trajectory following divorce, a second typology on the parenthood trajectory following divorce.

All typologies are based on the transitions that occur following the date of residential separation from the spouse, and not the official divorce date. Several months or even years might pass between the factual separation and the juridical divorce date (Bastais et al., 2011). Within that period, men and women may already have established new partner relationships or even had (more) children.

In describing the different trajectories from children's perspective, we take the post-divorce transitions of both the mother and the father of the child into account. The frequency distribution of the different typologies from the perspective of children is always presented in two ways. First, we present the trajectories of mother and fathers respectively according to the custody arrangement of the child. The custody arrangement is important because it determines whether the post-divorce family transitions of mother and father are situated inside or outside the household of the child. Second, for children whose both parents participated in the SiV-study, we present an additional distribution in which information on the trajectory of mother and father is combined. In the construction of this so-called *binuclear family trajectory*, we give priority to the trajectory with the most and earliest transition(s). As the number of cases drops quickly if we combine the maternal and paternal trajectories, it is not possible to combine this binuclear family trajectory with the custody arrangement of the child.

## **4.2 Family trajectories between birth and age 18**

We begin looking at family trajectories of children with divorced parents by reconstructing their complete family history between birth and age 18. By doing so, we take into account both the timing of parental divorce as well as the timing of additional family transitions before age 18.

### **4.2.1 Research sample**

We use the data from Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans et al., 2011). The research sample consists of divorced men and women with a targetchild of age 18 or older. Only for targetchildren that meet this age criteria, we may reconstruct the complete family history between birth and age 18. In total, we have information on 986 divorced mothers and 821 divorced fathers of targetchildren aged 18 or older at time of the interview. In combining information on the maternal and paternal household, an additional sample selection occurs, limiting the sample to the trajectories of children whose both parents participated in the study (N = 418).

### **4.2.2 Method**

We use sequence analysis to construct a typology of the family trajectories of children from birth until age 18 (for examples, see Abbott & Tsay, 2000; Billari et al., 2006; Wu, 2000). The trajectories are divided into time units and we assign a specific status to each time unit. The goal is to identify clusters of similar trajectories in terms of the type, duration and sequence of the different statuses. Ward method was used as clustering technique to aggregate the individual sequences into a reduced number of meaningful groups based upon the *optimal matching distance matrix*. This matrix contains the distances between all pairs of sequences in the data set (Gabadinho et al., 2011). These distances are the minimal numbers of insertions, deletions and substitutions that are necessary for transforming one sequence into another. We used the default insertion/deletion cost of one and a substitution cost matrix with constant value two, corresponding to the *Longest Common Subsequence* or LCS (Gabadinho et al., 2011). This measure is discussed in detail by Elzinga (2008).

The principle of the LCS can most easily be explained in comparison with the notion of the longest substring. While the latter assumes by definition adjacent family states, the LCS only assumes the same order. Common subsequences are hence a shared order of identical statuses between two sequences, without the condition of contiguous statuses. The LCS is the common subsequence with the largest length. The longer the LCS of two sequences, the more similar these sequences are, the smaller the distance between both sequences and the larger the likelihood that they will cluster together. We use the *Average Silhouette Width* or ASW-value to measure the quality of the cluster solution (Studer, 2012). This measure (range 0-1) gives a good indication of the coherence of the assignment of the sequences to the different clusters, or the degree in which the clusters are distinctive from one another. An ASW-value of more than 0.50 points suggests a useful cluster solution.

In a first step, the family history of children from birth until age 18 was divided into 216 months. Each time unit was assigned one of the following statuses: *biological parents living together* (BOTH), *parent living single* (SIPA), and *parent living together with another partner* (STEP). The first status hence refers to the period before parental divorce, while the second and third status refers to the partner status of the parent following divorce in terms of (married or unmarried) cohabitation. Since post-divorce relationships may also

be dissolved, we assign an order to the new cohabitation relationships of the parents (STEP1, STEP2, STEP3 and STEP4).

In total, 10 cluster solutions were tested, which are presented tree-wise in Figure 4.1. Based upon this regression tree, we maintained the 10-cluster solution. This solution results in an ASW-value of .49, which is not a perfect, but reasonable solution. Allowing additional cluster divisions demonstrated no substantial increase in the ASW-value and the additional clusters were only further refinements of the timing of parental divorce experience.

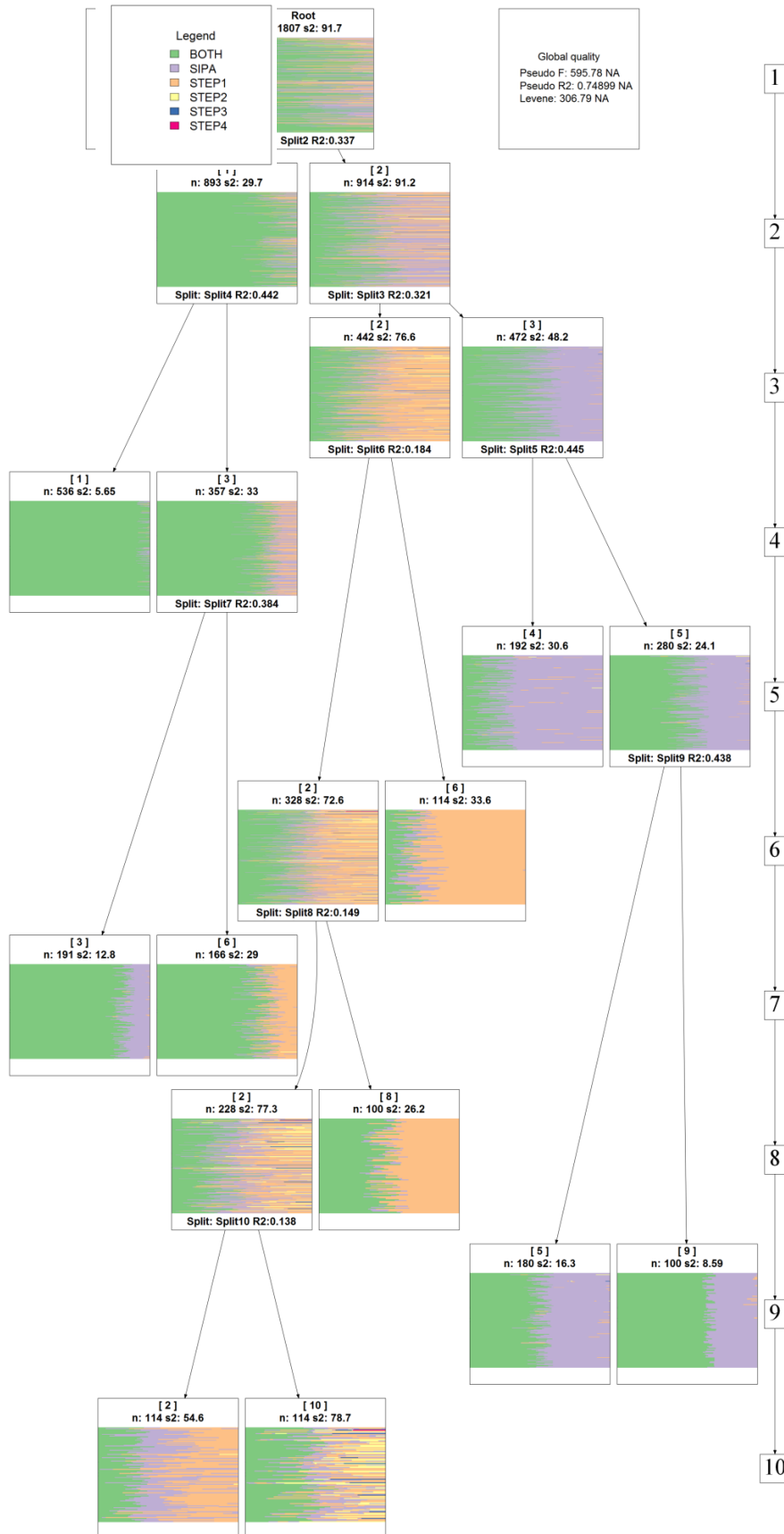
### **4.2.3 Results: Family trajectories between birth and age 18**

#### *4.2.3.1 A typology of family trajectories of mothers and fathers*

Figure 4.2 presents the sequence frequency plots for the ten clusters, representing all sequences within each cluster. Table 4.1 presents the average number of months spent in the different statuses within each cluster and the frequency distribution for mothers and fathers separately.

The cluster *both parents* contains children whose parents stayed together until they were (almost) 18 years old and divorced later. As children whose parents never divorced, they experienced a stable two-parent family configuration throughout childhood. The next four clusters are ones in which the parents mainly remained single following divorce. The names of the clusters reflect the differences in timing of the divorce within childhood: *early single-parent family formation*, *mid-early single-parent family formation*, *mid-late single-parent family formation*, and *late single-parent family formation*. The average ages of the targetchild at time of the single-parent family formation within the different clusters are 4 years, 9 years, 12 years and 15 years. Next, there are three trajectories in which the parent starts a new cohabitation relationship relatively soon after their divorce. The average time spent within a single-parent family within those three clusters varies between one and two years. Again, there are mainly differences in the timing of divorce within childhood: *early stepfamily formation*, *mid-term stepfamily formation* and *late stepfamily formation*. If we assume that the large majority of time in the single-parent family preceded the stepfamily formation, the average age of the targetchild at time of the stepfamily formation within the different clusters equals respectively 5 years, 9 years and 14 years. An additional cluster *single-parent and stepfamily formation* is obtained for children that have spent a considerable amount of time in both a single-parent family formation (on average 6 years) and a stepfamily formation (on average 7 years) following parental divorce. Children in this cluster experienced the parental divorce on average at age 5. Finally, children in the cluster *turbulent trajectory* spend a significant proportion of time in both a single-parent family and one or more stepfamily configurations. They have on average the most instable family trajectory and experienced the parental divorce at a very young age.

**Figure 4.1: Sequence regression tree (1-10 clusters) of family trajectories from birth - age 18**



*Note. BOTH = Both parents, SIPA = Single parent, STEP1-STEP4 = First to fourth stepfamily configuration*

**Table 4.1: Mean duration in different statuses and frequency distribution of mother and father trajectories between birth and age 18**

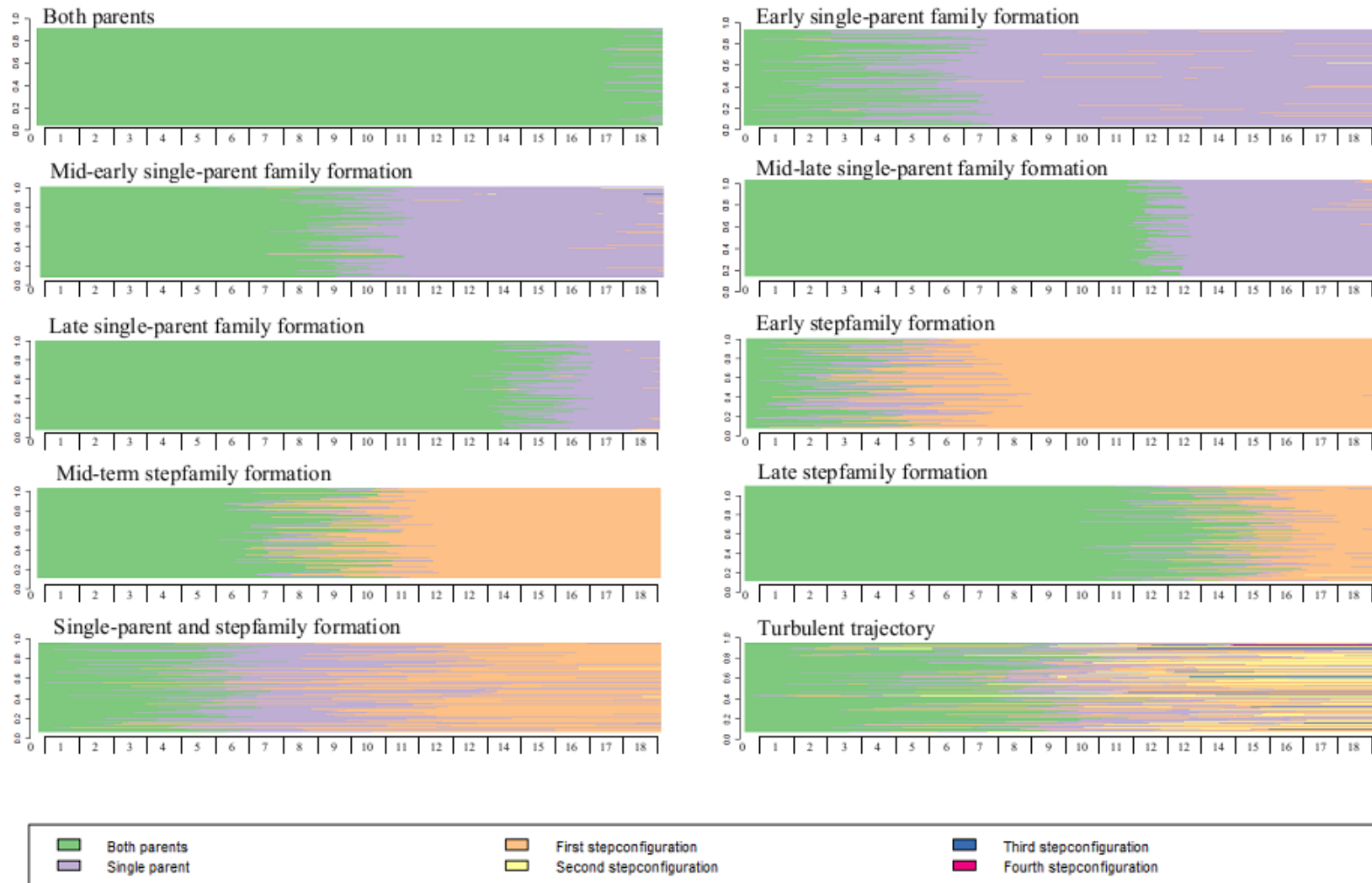
	Mean duration in status (in months)				Father trajectory		Mother trajectory	
	BOTH	SIPA	STEP1	OTH	n	%	n	%
Both parents	213	3	0	0	262	31.9	274	27.8
Early single-parent family formation	49	163	4	0	78	9.5	114	11.6
Mid-early single-parent family formation	107	107	2	0	68	8.3	112	11.4
Mid-late single-parent family formation	141	74	1	0	36	4.4	64	6.5
Late single-parent family formation	175	41	0	0	90	11.0	101	10.2
Early stepfamily formation	32	23	160	0	39	4.8	75	7.6
Mid-term stepfamily formation	97	10	109	0	55	6.7	45	4.6
Late stepfamily formation	157	15	44	0	78	9.5	88	8.9
Single-parent and stepfamily formation	53	75	88	0	49	6.0	65	6.6
Turbulent trajectory	84	49	50	33	66	8.0	48	4.9
Total	136	48	30	2	821	100	986	100

*Note. BOTH = Both parents, SIPA = Single parent, STEP1 = First stepfamily configuration, OTH = second, third or fourth stepfamily configuration*

*Note. Significance test gender differences: Chi-Square = 29.5, df = 9, p < .001*

The distribution is very similar for the maternal and paternal trajectories. Almost 30% of the targetchildren with divorced parents in SiV lived mainly with both parents from birth until the age of 18, which clearly constitutes the largest cluster. The proportional differences are much smaller between the other trajectories. There is clearly a lot of variation in both the timing of parental divorce, the incidence of stepfamily formation and the timing of stepfamily formation. The number of children experiencing a turbulent trajectory with mother or father is rather small. Overall, more than one out of three of the children experienced the large majority of childhood following divorce a single-parent family with mother and father respectively. Another third experienced the transition to a stepfamily.

Figure 4.2: Sequence frequency plots for ten-cluster solution of family trajectories between birth and age 18



#### 4.2.3.2 *Family trajectories of children between birth and age 18 from a binuclear perspective*

Next, we discuss the family trajectories from children's perspective (Table 4.2). In the first columns, the trajectories of mothers and fathers are related to the first custody arrangement of the child following divorce. The distribution of trajectories for children in mother custody resembles quite well the overall distribution described above. This relates of course to the large proportion of targetchildren aged 18 or older that lived in mother custody following divorce. Children in the category *other custody arrangement* were often living independently at time of parental divorce, which explains the large proportion of children within that group that lived the entire childhood with both parents. Compared to children who lived full-time with mother, children in joint custody lived less frequent with both parents during their entire childhood, while the reverse holds for children that were living full-time with father. Children in joint and father custody experienced more frequently a transition to either a single-parent family or stepfamily during late childhood, which suggests mainly an association with the timing of parental divorce. The generalizability of these findings is also limited because they are based upon a small number of children. Moreover, the differences according to the custody arrangement of the child might strongly be related to other characteristics, such as divorce cohort and age of the parent at the time of divorce. The interrelatedness of these variables is quite complex as the mean age at divorce of the parents varies between marriage and divorce cohorts. The latter does not only result from evolutions in the mean age at marriage and divorce, but also from the fact that for the most recent marriage cohorts, the sample mainly contains recent divorces. Moreover, also the age of the targetchild at time of the interview and time of parental divorce is not completely random across the different divorce cohorts. The latter results from the combination of the selection criteria for the reference marriages in terms of marriage cohorts and the selection of the targetchild with a preference for children above age 10 living in (one of the) parental home(s).

In the distribution of the family trajectory from a binuclear perspective (last columns of Table 4.2), children are only classified in a single-parent trajectory if neither parent had a turbulent or stepfamily trajectory. As a binuclear perspective stochastically increases the likelihood of experiencing transitions within (one of) the parental households, the proportion of children experiencing a transition to one or more stepfamily formations is higher compared to a perspective in which the trajectory of only one parent is considered. Approximately one out of ten children experienced a turbulent trajectory with at least one of the parents. Also the proportion of children that experienced a stepfamily formation before age 18 is much greater from binuclear perspective (50%) than in case the trajectory of only one parent is considered (30%).

**Table 4.2: Distribution of family trajectories of targetchildren between birth and age 18 according to the first custody arrangement of the child after parental divorce**

	Father trajectories (N = 821)								Mother trajectories (N = 986)								Binuclear trajectories (N = 418)	
	Mother custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Other		Mother custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Other		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Both parents	86	21.1	14	12	65	45.1	97	63.4	135	20.5	11	11.0	35	42.7	93	66.0	140	33.5
Early childhood single-parent family formation	53	13.0	11	9.4	11	7.6	3	2.0	91	13.8	9	8.7	7	8.5	7	5.0	20	4.8
Mid-early single-parent family formation	44	10.8	14	12	5	3.5	5	3.3	94	14.2	9	8.6	4	4.9	5	3.6	27	6.5
Mid-late single-parent family formation	18	4.4	5	4.3	5	3.5	8	5.2	49	7.4	11	11.0	3	3.7	1	0.7	13	3.1
Late single-parent family formation	39	9.6	20	17.1	21	14.6	10	6.5	68	10.3	15	14.0	6	7.3	12	8.6	21	5.0
Early stepfamily formation	25	6.1	7	6.0	3	2.1	4	2.6	67	10.2	2	1.9	2	2.4	4	2.9	26	6.2
Mid-term stepfamily formation	37	9.1	8	6.8	7	4.9	3	2.0	29	4.4	9	8.6	5	6.1	2	1.4	26	6.2
Late stepfamily formation	31	7.6	16	13.7	16	11.1	15	9.8	43	6.5	20	19.0	14	17.1	11	7.9	59	14.1
Single-parent and stepfamily formation	35	8.6	7	6.0	5	3.5	2	1.3	51	7.7	9	8.7	2	2.4	3	2.1	38	9.1
Turbulent trajectory	39	9.6	15	12.8	6	4.2	6	3.9	33	5.0	9	8.7	4	4.9	2	1.4	48	11.5

*Note. Mother custody = >75% living with mother, Joint custody = alternately living 25-75% with mother and father, Father custody = >75% living with father, Other = other custody arrangement, custody arrangement unknown or living independently at time of parental divorce*



### **4.3 Family trajectories in the first seven years following divorce**

Next we apply sequence analysis to reconstruct two typologies of family trajectories of men and women following divorce. The main goal is to interpret these trajectories from children's perspective in a next step. In a first typology, we focus on the partner trajectory, in which we include the timing, the stability and the type of partner relationship. The second typology focuses on the parenthood trajectories within cohabitation relationships following divorce. Within this typology, the timing of (unmarried or married) cohabitation, the presence of children from the new partner within the household and (the timing of) a birth of a child within these relationships are taken into account. The trajectories are limited to the first seven years following divorce. Prior research suggests that men and women who repartner or have a child following divorce, do so rather quickly (Defever & Mortelmans, 2011; Pasteels et al., 2012; Wijckmans et al., 2011). By limiting the time frame to the first seven years following divorce, we also have information on the complete trajectory for men and women from more recent divorce cohorts.

#### **4.3.1 Research sample**

Restriction of the SiV-sample to divorced men and women that were divorced for at least seven years at the time of interview results in a research sample of 1530 men and 1762 women. 31% of these men and 27% of these women were childless at the time of divorce, the other were parents at the time of divorce. For this latter group of mother and fathers, the post-divorce trajectories are also described for targetchildren who were younger than 18 years at the time of divorce. This gives information on the mother trajectories for 1120 targetchildren and the father trajectories for 867 targetchildren. These two subsamples share 511 targetchildren for whom both parents participated in the study. For the latter group of targetchildren, the family trajectories can be constructed from a binuclear perspective.

#### **4.3.2 Method**

We use again Ward method and the optimal matching distance matrix with the longest common subsequence to cluster the individual sequences into meaningful groups. The number of clusters was determined by choosing a substantively meaningful cluster solution (based upon the regression tree) with a relatively high average silhouette width.

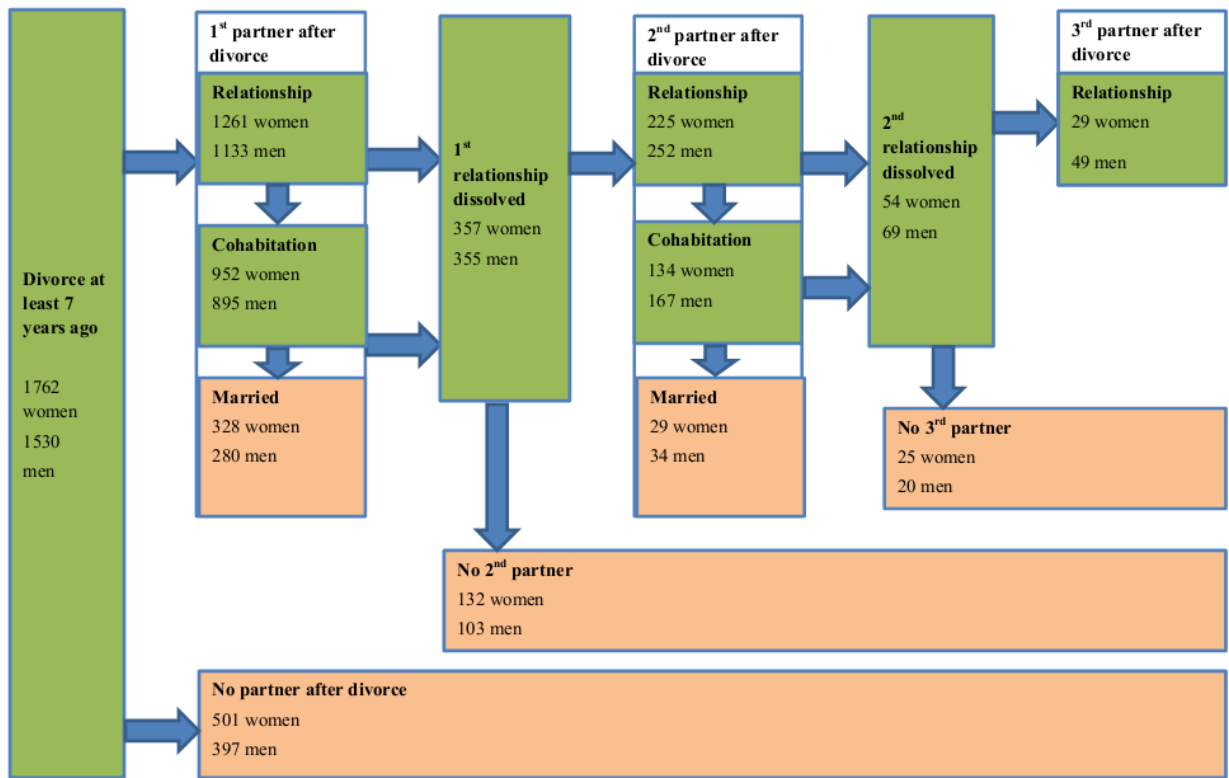
The trajectories were divided in time units of one month, resulting in 84 subsequent statuses, corresponding within the first seven years following divorce. For the partner trajectory we distinguish four statuses: *without partner* (SINGLE), *with a non-residential partner* (LAT), *unmarried cohabitation* (LIV) and *remarried* (MAR). Only partner relationships that lasted for at least three months were taken into account. As relationships may also be dissolved, we make a distinction according to the order of the partner relationship (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> partner). This allows to distinguish subsequent relationships with different partners, also in case there is no period of singlehood in

between. For the status remarried, we do not make this distinction, as people who divorced more than once were not included in the SiV-sample.

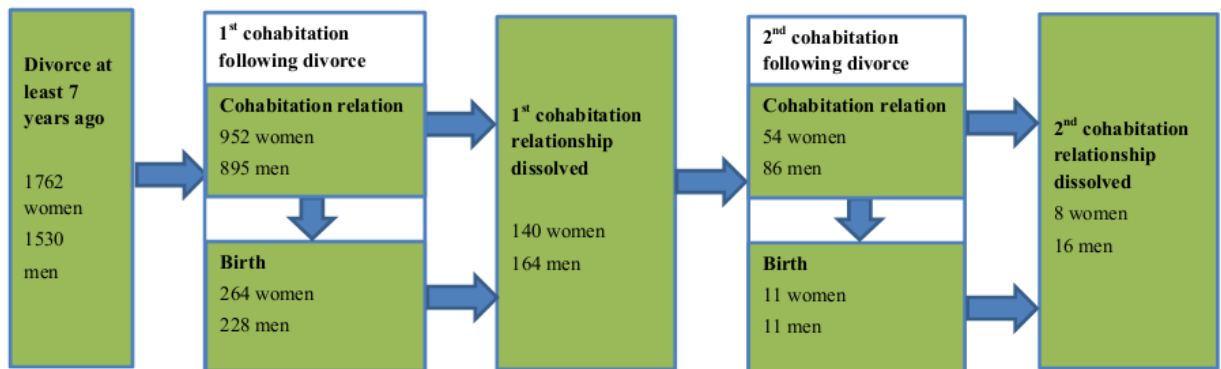
For the parenthood trajectory we distinguish five statuses: *no cohabitation relationship* (SINGLE), *cohabitation relationship with partner without residential children of that partner and without common children with that partner* (PARTNER), *cohabitation relationship with partner with residential children of that partner but without common children with that partner* (PARTNER & STEPCHILD), *cohabitation relationship with partner without residential children of that partner but with common child(ren) with that partner* (PARTNER & CHILD), and *cohabitation relationship with partner with residential children of that partner and with common child(ren) with that partner* (PARTNER & STEPCHILD & CHILD).

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 present a schematic overview of both trajectories within our research sample in term of events. We see that the large majority of men and women start at least one partner relationship within the first seven years following divorce. There is nevertheless a large variation in the type and stability of these relationships. Approximately one out of seven men and women has two partner relationships within that period and a small minority has more than two partner relationships. For the parenthood trajectories, we see that approximately one out of four men and women who start a new cohabitation relationship, also experience the birth of a child within that relationship within the first seven years following divorce. This corresponds with approximately 16 % of men and women in the complete research sample.

**Figure 4.3: The partner trajectory of men and women in the first seven years following divorce in terms of events, by sex**



**Figure 4.4: The parenthood trajectory within cohabitation relationships of men and women in the first seven years following divorce in terms of events, by sex**



### 4.3.3 Results: Partner and stepparent trajectories following divorce

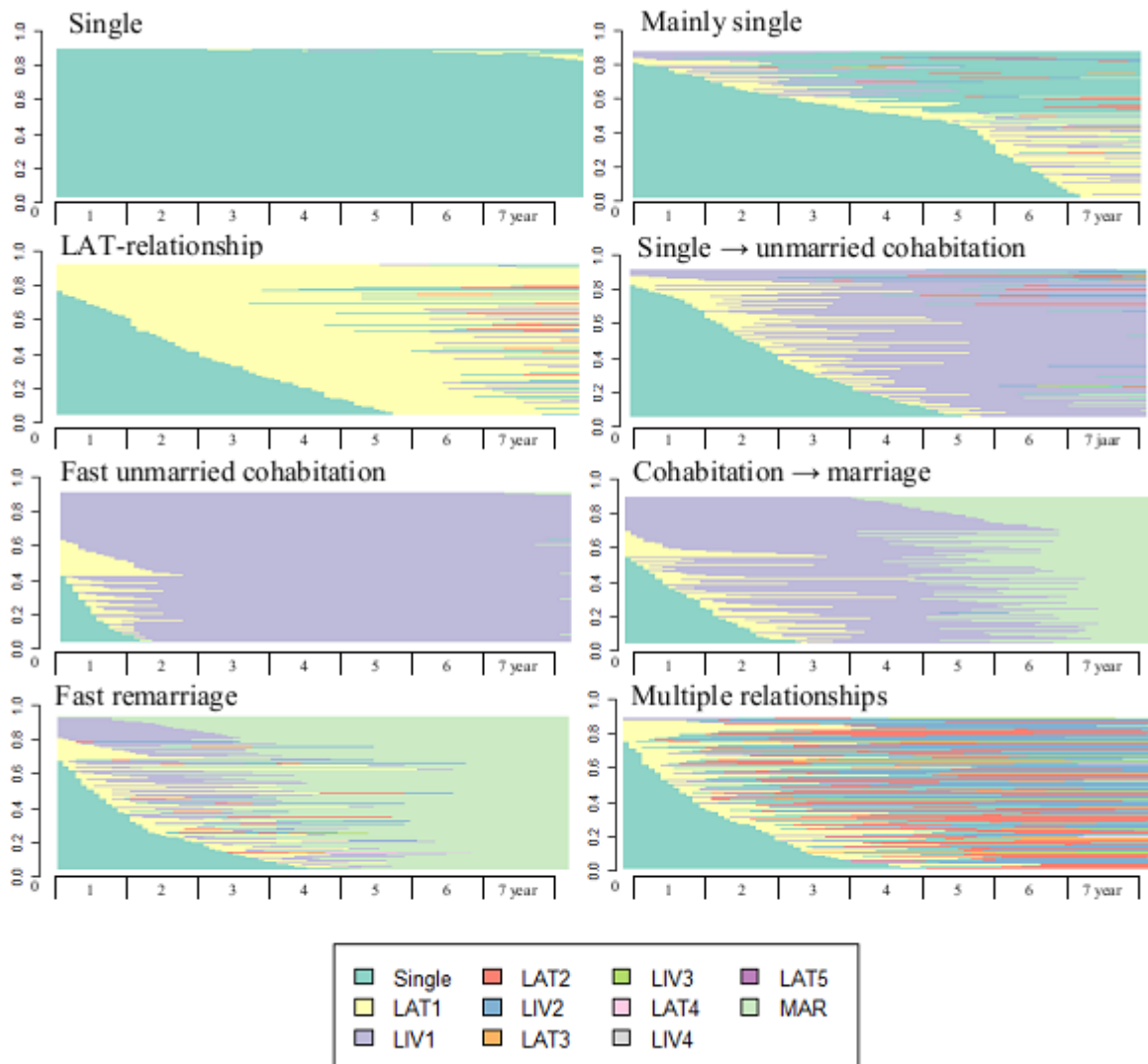
#### 4.3.3.1 A typology of partner trajectories of men and women following divorce

The cluster solution with eight partner trajectories has a ASW-value of 0.51, which indicates a good cluster solution (Studer, 2012). Additional trajectories do not increase the ASW-value and are substantively less meaningful. Table 4.3 presents the mean duration within the different statuses for each cluster, as well as the frequency distribution of the cluster solution for men and women separately. The trajectories of men and women are

overall very similar. Figure 4.5 presents the sequence frequency plots for the different clusters of partner trajectories, plotting all individual sequences within each cluster.

The first trajectory is that of men and women who stay *single* during the first seven years following divorce. This is the largest cluster in size. In addition, there is also a smaller cluster *mainly single*, in which men and women spend approximately five of the seven years single. There is some heterogeneity within this cluster in the sequencing of singlehood. Certain persons accumulate different short relationships, while others repartner after a long term of singlehood. The cluster *LAT-relationship* contains divorced men and women who started a new partner relationship without starting to cohabit or the remarry. This cluster contains somewhat more women than men. On average, this group had 4.5 years a non-residential partner. All other clusters contain persons who started a cohabitation relationship following divorce. A first group, *single* → *unmarried cohabitation*, remains single for approximately two years before starting to live together with a partner. Proportionally, this cluster contains a bit more men than women. In contrast, in the group *fast unmarried cohabitation*, people (almost) immediately start to cohabit with a new partner, and lives on average 6.5 years together with the first seven years following divorce. Next, there are two clusters in which men and women remarry, and that distinguish themselves in the timing of marriage. In the cluster *cohabitation* → *remarriage*, people first live on average 3.5 years unmarried together before getting married. The second group, *fast remarriage*, remarries after about one year of unmarried cohabitation and is larger in size than the previous one. Finally, there is a small group of men and women who cumulate multiple partner relationships and relationship dissolutions in the seven years following divorce. This cluster is labeled *multiple relationships*.

**Figure 4.5: Sequence frequency plots for partner trajectories of men and women in the first seven years following divorce**



*Note. SINGLE = Single, LAT1/LAT2/LAT3/LAT4 = LAT-relationship with respectively first, second, third and fourth partner, LIV1/LIV2/LIV3/LIV4 = Cohabitation relationship with respectively first, second, third and fourth partner, MAR = Remarried*

**Table 4.3: Mean duration in different statuses and frequency distribution of partner trajectories of men and women in the first seven years following divorce**

	Mean duration in different statuses							Men		Women	
	SINGLE	LAT1	LIV1	LAT2	LIV2	MAR	OTHER	n	%	n	%
Permanent single	83.3	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	453	29.8	562	31.9
Mainly single	60.6	10.6	7.7	1.7	1.3	0.0	1.9	128	8.4	136	7.7
LAT-relationship	24.0	56.0	2.7	0.9	0.1	0.0	0.1	134	8.8	207	11.8
Fast cohabitation	2.5	4.0	77.2	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	185	12.2	196	11.1
Single → Cohabitation	23.6	10.2	46.8	0.9	1.8	0.4	0.2	282	18.5	279	15.9
Cohabitation → remarriage	7.0	6.2	42.1	0.0	0.0	28.7	0.0	92	6.1	102	5.8
Fast remarriage	10.7	8.1	11.8	0.6	1.6	50.9	0.3	158	10.4	186	10.6
Multiple relationships	25.2	11.4	3.4	16.0	22.9	0.4	4.9	89	5.9	92	5.2
Total	40.4	10.8	21.8	1.4	1.9	7.3	0.3	1 521	100	1 760	100

*SINGLE = Single, LAT1/LAT2 = LAT-relationship with respectively first and second partner, LIV1/LIV2 = Cohabitation relationship with respectively first and second partner, MAR = Remarried, OTHER: LAT- or cohabitation relationship with third, fourth or fifth partner*

*Significance test men-women differences: Chi-square = 13.4, df = 7, p = 0.06*

#### 4.3.3.2 *Stepparent trajectories of children following parental divorce from a binuclear perspective*

The next step is to describe the trajectories described above from the perspective of the selected targetchildren younger than 18 at time of the parental divorce (Table 4.4). We use again information on the first custody arrangement that was applicable at the time of divorce. The names of the clusters are adapted to the child's perspective. The start of a new partner relationship by mother and father is thereby considered as a stepfamily formation. We make a distinction between *non-residential stepparents*, *unmarried stepfamilies* and *married stepfamilies*. Combined, the last two groups refer to residential stepparents. The concept *non-residential stepparent* refers to a new partner that is not living together with the parent. *Unmarried stepfamilies* refers to parents living together with a partner without being married to that partner. If a parent stays single, we speak of a *single-parent family*.

Approximately 70% of the children experience a new partner relationship of respectively mother and father within the first seven years following divorce. 10% of these children have only a very limited proportion of time within that period a mother or father in a new partner relationship. 40% of the children experience the majority of time a single-parent family with respectively mother and father. 9% of the children their fathers have a LAT-relationship within that period and 13% of their mothers. These non-residential stepparents are mostly neglected within stepfamily studies. Approximately 45% of the children experienced a residential stepparent with mother and 50% of the children with father. Finally, there is a small group of children that experienced additional partner relationships and relationships dissolutions with one or both of the parents.

The results also indicate some differences according to the custody arrangement of the child. Children who are living full-time with mother seem to experience a maternal stepfamily formation less frequently than children in joint physical custody or children living full-time with father. Similarly, children who are living full-time with father are less frequently experiencing the formation of a stepfamily by repartnering of the father than children in joint physical custody or children living full-time with mother.

**Table 4.4: Stepparent trajectories in the first seven years following divorce for targetchildren <18 years at parental divorce**

	Father trajectories (N = 867)								Mother trajectories (N = 1 120)								Binuclear trajectories (N = 508)	
	Mother custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Total		Mother custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Total		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Permanent single-parent family	163	31.6	59	24.9	45	38.8	267	30.7	315	36.3	43	23.5	22	32.4	380	33.9	58	11.4
Long-term single-parent family	39	7.6	28	11.8	9	7.8	76	8.8	82	9.4	14	7.7	1	1.5	97	8.7	36	7.1
Non-residential stepparent	44	8.5	23	9.7	11	9.5	78	9.0	110	12.7	27	14.8	9	13.2	146	13.0	49	9.7
Single-parent family → unmarried stepfamily	106	20.5	41	17.3	18	15.5	165	19.0	129	14.8	36	19.7	7	10.3	172	15.4	82	16.1
Unmarried stepfamily	59	11.4	26	11.0	8	6.9	93	10.7	64	7.4	27	14.8	16	23.5	107	9.6	84	16.5
Unmarried stepfamily → married stepfamily	27	5.2	20	8.4	5	4.3	52	5.6	41	4.7	13	7.1	5	7.4	59	5.3	44	8.7
Married stepfamily	44	8.5	16	6.8	19	16.4	79	9.1	74	8.5	14	7.7	6	8.8	94	8.4	87	17.1
Multiple stepparents	34	6.6	24	10.1	1	0.9	59	6.8	54	6.2	9	4.9	2	2.9	65	5.8	68	13.4

*Note. Mother custody = >75% living with mother, Joint custody = alternately living 25-75% with mother and father, Father custody = >75% living with father*



The last column contains the distribution of the stepparent trajectories from binuclear perspective. In the assignment to the different categories, priority was given respectively to multiple stepparents, the fastest remarried stepfamily, the fastest unmarried stepfamily, a non-residential stepparent and long-term single-parent family. Sample size does not allow for the additional distinctions according to the custody arrangement of the child. In total, we have the information on the stepparent trajectory with both parents for 508 targetchildren who were younger than 18 years at the time of parental divorce. 11% of these children experienced a permanent single-parent family with both parents. Less than one out of five children was having two single parents for the largest proportion of time within the first seven years following divorce. This is a much smaller proportion than in case only one parental trajectory is considered. In other words, the proportion of children experiencing at least one new partner relationship of a parent is higher from a binuclear perspective. Similarly, 13% of children experienced multiple relationships of at least one parent within the first seven years following divorce.

#### **4.3.4 Results: Parenthood and sibling trajectories following divorce**

##### *4.3.4.1 A typology of parenthood trajectories of men and women following divorce*

Next, we discuss the results for the parenthood trajectories of men and women following divorce. The cluster solution with eight parenthood trajectories has an ASW-value of 0.65, which indicates a clear distinction between the different clusters. Table 4.5 presents the mean duration within the different statuses for each cluster and the frequency distribution for men and women separately. Figure 4.6 presents the state distribution plots for the different clusters, plotting the state distribution at each point in time.

The cluster *single* contains men and women who do not start a cohabitation relationship within the first seven years following divorce. This cluster contains proportionally more women than men. The next three clusters contain men and women who start a cohabitation relationship within the first seven years following divorce with a partner without residential children from a previous relationship, and with who they do not have children themselves within that period. These three clusters are distinct from one another by the duration of singlehood preceding cohabitation: *longterm single* → *partner* (on average 5 years single), *single* → *partner* (on average 2 years single), and *partner* (on average 0.5 years single). The next two clusters contain persons who start a cohabitation relationship with a partner with residential children. Within the cluster *partner & stepchild*, this happens on average within the first half year following divorce. Within the cluster *single* → *partner & stepchild*, men and women are on average three years single after divorce. These two clusters contain proportionally twice as many men as women. Within the final two clusters, men and women experience the birth of a child within a cohabitation relationship following divorce. In the cluster *partner & birth*, the partner has no residential children from a previous relationship, in contrast with those in the cluster *partner, stepchild & birth*. In both clusters, men and women are on average one year and a half single before starting a cohabitation relationship. The (first) birth within the new partner

relationship follows on average two years after the start of the cohabitation relationship. The proportion of men and women that have a child with a partner that has residential children from a previous relationship is very small.

**Table 4.5: Mean duration in different statuses and frequency distribution of parenthood trajectories in cohabitation relationships of men and women in the first seven years following divorce**

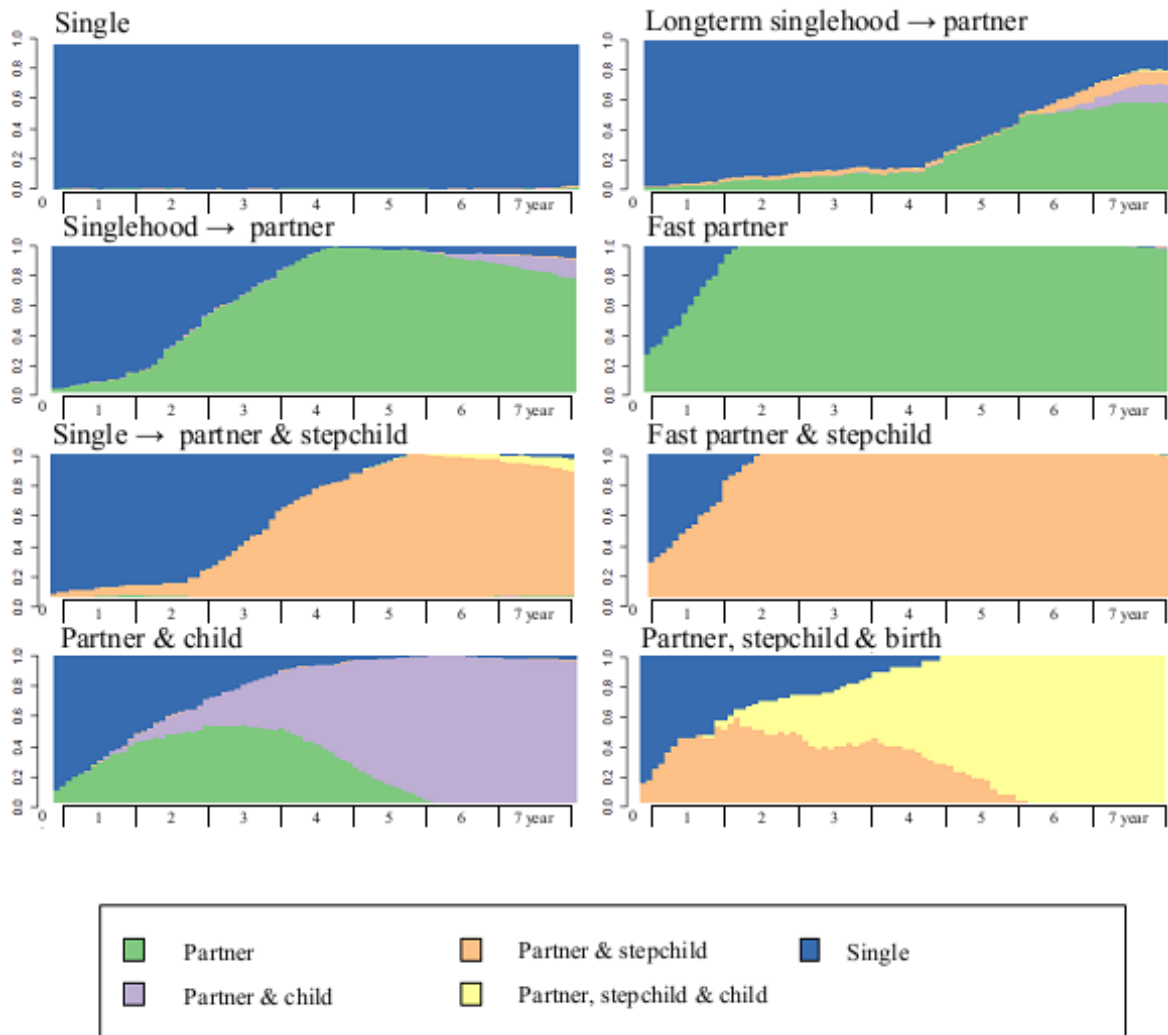
	Mean duration in different statuses					Men		Women	
	Single	Partner	Partner & stepchild	Partner & child	Partner, stepchild & child	n	%	n	%
Single	83.7	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	672	44.3	846	48.0
Single → Partner	58.3	21.0	3.2	1.4	0.1	196	12.9	225	12.8
Longterm single → Partner	26.5	55.6	0.2	1.8	0.0	167	11.0	194	11.0
Partner	6.5	77.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	80	5.3	148	8.4
Single → Partner & stepchild	34.7	1.3	46.7	0.2	1.2	139	9.8	71	4.0
Partner & stepchild	7.3	0.0	76.6	0.0	0.0	96	6.3	68	3.9
Partner & birth	17.7	22.0	0.1	44.2	0.0	134	8.8	190	10.8
Partner, stepchild & birth	16.0	0.0	0.0	22.0	46.0	34	2.2	19	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>54.2</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>1518</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1761</b>	<b>100</b>

*Note. Significance test gender differences: Chi-Square = 67.3, df = 7, p < 0.001*

Summarizing in terms of parenthood trajectories, the first four trajectories imply no transition in parenthood status. The fifth and sixth trajectory imply a transition to stepparenthood. Men and women in the seventh trajectory experience the birth of at least one child within the new partner relationship. In the last cluster, the experience of a birth within the new partner relationship is combined with the transition to stepparenthood.

In contrast with the partner trajectories, we see clear differences between men and women in the distribution of the trajectories. Men are belonging twice as many to the clusters *single → partner and stepchild*, the cluster *fast partner and stepchild* and the cluster *partner, stepchild & birth* than women. Women more often have no cohabitation relationship within the first seven years following divorce and when they do, their partner less often has residential children.

**Figure 4.6: State distribution plots for parenthood trajectories in cohabitation relationships of men and women following divorce**



**Table 4.6: Sibling trajectories in the first seven years following divorce for targetchildren <18 years at parental divorce**

	Father trajectories (N = 867)								Mother trajectories (N = 1 119)								Binuclear trajectories (N = 511)	
	Mother custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Total		Mother custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Total		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Permanent single-parent family	235	45.7	105	44.3	59	50.9	399	46.0	478	55.0	78	42.9	32	47.1	588	52.6	156	30.5
Longterm single-parent family → Simple stepfamily	58	11.3	31	13.1	16	13.8	105	12.1	116	13.4	21	11.5	5	7.4	142	12.7	70	13.7
Single-parent family → simple stepfamily	59	11.5	23	9.7	7	6.0	89	10.3	92	10.6	21	11.5	4	5.9	117	10.5	72	14.1
Fast simple stepfamily	29	5.6	13	5.5	5	4.3	47	5.4	52	6.0	13	7.1	16	23.5	81	7.2	51	10.0
Fast complex stepfamily formation with stepsibling(s)	34	6.6	11	4.6	10	8.6	55	6.3	30	3.5	16	8.8	4	5.9	50	4.5	33	6.5
Single-parent family → complex stepfamily with stepsibling(s)	50	9.7	28	11.8	14	12.1	92	10.6	33	3.8	17	9.3	2	2.9	52	4.7	45	8.8
Complex stepfamily with halfsibling(s)	40	7.8	23	9.7	4	3.5	67	7.7	60	6.9	14	7.7	3	4.4	77	6.9	78	15.3
Complex stepfamily with stepsibling(s) and halfsibling(s)	9	1.8	3	1.3	1	0.9	13	1.5	8	0.9	2	1.1	2	2.9	12	1.1	6	1.2

*Note. Mother custody = >75% living with mother, Joint custody = alternately living 25-75% with mother and father, Father custody = >75% living with father*

#### *4.3.4.2 Sibling trajectories of children following parental divorce from a binuclear perspective*

Table 4.6 presents the parenthood trajectories of mothers and fathers for target children aged 18 or less at time of parental divorce in terms of the presence of a residential stepparent, stepsiblings and halfsiblings. The labels of the different clusters are adapted to children's perspective. In case of the presence of stepsiblings or halfsiblings we speak of complex stepfamily formation. In the other trajectories with a residential stepparent, we speak of simple stepfamily formation.

Approximately half of the children experienced permanently a single-parent family with respectively mother and father during the first seven years following divorce. The other half of the children experienced within that period the transition to a stepfamily with mother and father respectively. There are however important differences in the composition of these stepfamilies. Almost one out of four children experienced the transition to a complex stepfamily formation by repartnering of the father. This corresponds with almost half of the children whose father starts a new cohabitation relationship within that period. In contrast, one out of six children experienced the transition to a complex stepfamily with mother. This corresponds with one out of three of the children whose mother started a new cohabitation relationship with that period. The more frequent transition to a complex stepfamily formation with father compared to mother is explained by the more frequent presence of residential children of the new partner (stepmother of the child) in cases where the father starts a new cohabitation relationship.

The differences according to the custody arrangement of the child mainly relate to the presence of a new partner, and less to the presence of step- or halfsiblings. Children in father custody less often experience a stepfamily formation by repartnering of father compared to children in mother and joint custody. Conversely, children in mother custody experience less often a stepfamily formation by repartnering of mother than children in joint or father custody. The most pronounced difference regarding sibling composition according to the custody arrangement of the child is the more frequent presence of stepsiblings with mother for children in joint custody compared to children in both mother and father custody.

As for the previous typologies, the last columns present the distribution of the trajectories from binuclear perspective, without the distinction according to custody arrangement. In the assignment to the different categories, priority was given to respectively the fastest birth of a child, the fastest transition to a stepfamily with stepsiblings and the fastest transition to a simple stepfamily. We see that from a binuclear perspective, the proportion of children that experiences no transition to a stepfamily formation (31%) is lower than in case only one parental perspective is considered. The proportion of children experiencing a transition to a complex stepfamily formation with residential stepsiblings (17%) is only higher from binuclear perspective compared to the situation in which only the mother

trajectory is considered. The proportion of children experiencing a transition to a complex stepfamily formation with halfsiblings (17%) is higher from binuclear perspective than in case only one of the parental trajectories is taken into account.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

In this chapter, we described the family trajectories of children in two different ways. Compared to the transversal approach in chapter 3, these trajectories are more in line with the basic principles of the life course perspective. Not only the transitions themselves, but also the age or timing at which specific transitions are made, the time span between transitions and the specific order of transitions are taken into account (Green, 2010).

A first general conclusion concerns the incidence of specific family transitions. As could already be deducted from the cross-sectional results in chapter 3, a large proportion of children and parents experience additional family transitions following divorce. These transitions relate to the post-divorce partner and parenthood trajectories of mothers and fathers. The majority of mothers and fathers repartner quite fast following divorce. Children who were relatively young at the time of parental divorce, therefore have a considerable likelihood of experiencing the transition to a stepfamily formation in one or both of the parental households during childhood or youth. As the SiV-data do not include second divorces, our figures even underestimate the proportion of children that ever lived in a stepfamily formation following parental divorce in the Flemish population. The arrival of a stepparent often involves the transition to a complex stepfamily formation, with residential stepsiblings, the birth of a halfsibling, or both. This is even more the case in the paternal household than in the maternal household. From a binuclear perspective, the transition to a stepfamily formation implies that half of the children experience a complex stepfamily. Overall, the results demonstrate the importance of a binuclear perspective when describing the post-divorce family trajectories of children. By only considering the family trajectory of one of the parents, the number and heterogeneity in family transitions of children following divorce is clearly underestimated.

A second conclusion is that there are important variations in the family trajectories of children with divorced parents. The typologies that were obtained nicely illustrate the heterogeneity in trajectories of children and their parents. These differences relate both to the timing of divorce (in the first typology) as to the timing and nature of post-divorce family transitions (in all of the typologies). This heterogeneity is often ignored when studying the consequences of a parental divorce experience for children. For example, studies on the effect of parental divorce often model parental divorce as a single event. Similarly, merely distinguishing between single-parent and stepfamilies following divorce ignores the timing of these family formations and the duration that children spend within these specific family structures. A challenge in combining these post-divorce trajectories to specific outcomes (e.g. wellbeing dimensions, family relationships) is that these outcomes ideally also need to be assessed clearly defined points in time. For the first typology, this implies outcomes that are situated on specific time moments during the age-determined

time frame between birth and age 18. For the second and third typology, the time frame is conditional on the time of divorce, and therefore not age-determined but event-determined. The latter makes it even more difficult to have clear time-stamped outcome measures.

Finally, we also want to stress some important limitations to the typologies that are presented in this chapter. First, as second divorces are excluded from the SiV-sample, we underestimate the proportion of unstable (post-divorce) family trajectories. This underestimation would however be limited as the large majority of second divorces takes place after age 50 (Corijn, forthcoming). In case children are involved in these divorces, they will often be older than 18 years. Second, there are also important selection criteria regarding the targetchild, which are not independent of the divorce cohort of the parents. The distributions for the different cluster solutions from the perspective of the targetchild may therefore not be generalized to the population of Flemish children with divorced parents. They rather have to be considered as an illustration of a way to explore (post-divorce) family trajectories. Finally, limited sample sizes does not allow to make distinctions according to the custody arrangement of the child from a binuclear perspective.





## CHAPTER 5

### **Custody arrangements and post-divorce family trajectories**

This chapter draws in part upon the following publication and conference paper:

Vanassche, S., Corijn, M., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (forthcoming). Gezinstrajecten van ouders en kinderen na (echt)scheiding; pp. xx-xx in C. Van Peer & M. Corijn, *Gezinstransities in Vlaanderen*. Brussel: Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering, SVR-studie 2.

Vanassche, S., Corijn, M., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (forthcoming). Post-divorce family trajectories of parents and children. Paper prepared for the workshop *Life-Course Transitions after Separation: Stepfamilies, Lone and Non-residential Parenthood*, Berlin, 4-5<sup>th</sup> of July.

## 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, we saw that many children experience additional family transitions following divorce. But children are not only involved in these post-divorce transitions, having children or being a parent is also an important determinant of the post-divorce family trajectories of men and women. Moreover, there are not only differences in the family trajectories between parents and non-parents, but also between parents. An important difference between parents relates to the custody arrangement of children from previous relationships. The custody arrangement of children determines whether parents are full-time, part-time or non-residential parents. Sassler (2010) has recently emphasized the need for more research on the impact of custody arrangements of children on the family trajectories of their divorced parents.

The presence of children is clearly related to the probabilities of repartnering for both men and women (Beaujouan, 2010; Bumpass, Sweet & Martin, 1990; de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Ivanova, Kalmijn & Uunk, 2012; Koo, Suchindran & Griffith, 1984; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012; Teachman & Heckert, 1985; Wijckmans et al., 2011). Moreover, research has shown important differences in the partner trajectories following divorce between parents with residential children and parents with non-residential children (Beaujouan, 2012). The evolution towards joint physical custody expanded the number of part-time residential parents, but in opposite directions for men and women. Ever-divorced mothers have fewer and fewer full-time residential children, while ever-divorced fathers have fewer and fewer non-residential children. Ever-divorced mothers are thereby having increasing amounts of ‘child-free’ time, and divorced fathers increasingly less. We currently know little about the impact of this evolution on the family trajectories of parents and their children.

Second, the parenthood status following divorce might also affect the subsequent parenthood trajectory. There are indications that parents are more likely to repartner with another parent rather than with a childless person (Goldschneider & Sassler, 2006). This pattern has consequences for the composition of stepfamily formations in terms of stepsiblings. Moreover, divorced persons without children often wish to become a parent, which influences both their partnership and fertility trajectories following divorce (Beaujouan & Solaz, 2008; Brown, 2000; Buber & Prskawetz, 2000; Wijckmans et al., 2011). Little is known about the impact of the custody arrangements of children on both parenthood transitions.

In this chapter, we use the data from Divorce in Flanders to investigate the relationship between custody arrangements following divorce and the likelihood of specific post-divorce family transitions. We model the likelihoods of 1) repartnering, 2) cohabitation, and 3) remarriage following divorce. With regard to the parenthood trajectory, we consider both the transition to stepparenthood and the birth of a child following divorce. The first parenthood transition is modeled as the likelihood of repartnering with a parent who has

(residential) children. For the second parenthood transition, we model the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce.

## 5.2 Parenthood and partner trajectories following divorce

Previous studies have shown that for women, the presence of children at time of divorce is associated with a lower likelihood of starting a new partner relationship, cohabitation relationship or remarriage (Beaujouan, 2010; Bumpass, Sweet & Martin, 1990; de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Ivanova, Kalmijn & Uunk, 2012; Koo, Suchindran & Griffith, 1984; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012; Teachman & Heckert, 1985). The results for men are less consistent. Some studies have shown less negative effects of children on the likelihood of repartnering of divorced men (Ivanova, Kalmijn & Uunk, 2012; Poortman, 2007), while other studies have suggested positive effects (Bemhardt & Goldscheider, 2002; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006; Stewart, Manning & Smock, 2003). And at least one study, reports a larger negative effect of residential children for men than for women (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). There are also indications that the association between children and repartnering varies according to the number of children and their age at time of divorce. More and younger children seem to increase the negative effect on repartnering (Ivanova, Kalmijn & Uunk, 2012; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2008; Poortman, 2007).

The research literature provides three categories of explanation for the differences in repartnering according to the parenthood status: the need for a partner, the attractiveness as potential partner and the opportunities to meet a new partner (Becker, 1991; de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Goldscheider & Waite, 1986; Oppenheimer, 1988).

First, (residential) children increase the *need* for a new partner, both financially and for care giving support. The financial aspect would mainly play for women (Fokkema & Dykstra, 2002; Jansen, Mortelmans & Snoeckx, 2009; Poortman, 2000), while the need for support in caregiving and homemaking would mainly count for men (Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012). There is little empirical evidence for the financial motivation of women, as mothers with residential children often have a lower likelihood to repartner than other women. Studies that found positive effects of children on the likelihood of repartnering of men may however point towards the need for support in childrearing. A second need-related explanation is that childless men and women have a higher need for a new partner following divorce to realize their child wish (Beaujouan, 2010; Lampard & Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2008; Peggs, 1999). In addition, parents with residential parents would feel less lonely and are therefore less in need of a cohabitation partner (Lampard & Peggs, 1999).

Second, parents may be less *attractive* on the relationship market. Starting a relationship with a person with (residential) children from a previous relationship implies a transition to stepparenthood. Potential partners may be frightened by the stepparental role associated with starting a union with a parent (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Ivanova, Kalmijn & Uunk, 2012; Stewart, Manning & Smock, 2003). Moreover, children from a previous relationship may be seen as a resource drain, both financially and emotionally (Stewart, Manning &

Smock, 2003). Childcare requires time, money and energy that can't be invested in the partner relationship or other things. Studies on partner choice show that women are more willing to repartner with somebody with children than are men (South, 1991). In addition, (residential) parents can perhaps more easily choose another parent for a partner than childless men and women (Goldschneider & Sassler, 2006). This pattern can be understood in terms of exchange processes: men and women who have (residential) children themselves are not in the position to make claims about the parenthood status of the other party. Parenthood is thereby assumed to deter potential partners from starting a relationship (Beaujouan, 2012). This restriction on the relational market may explain why parents more frequent repartner with other parents than with childless men and women.

Finally, residential children also limit the *opportunities* to meet potential partners (Beaujouan, 2010; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). This mainly holds for parents of young children. De Graaf & Kalmijn (2003) found stronger empirical support for this opportunity hypothesis than for the effect of children on attractiveness or parent-specific needs or preferences. Finally, new partner relationships may encounter resistance from children from previous unions and therefore also imply a certain restraint from parent's perspective on starting a new partner relationship (Lampard & Peggs, 1999).

There are not only differences between parents and childless men and women in repartnering, but also in the type of the relationship that is chosen. If parents do repartner, they more frequently choose not to live together with this partner (Lampard & Peggs, 1999; Martin, 1994). A frequent motive is the fear of conflicts between the child and new partner (Beaujouan, 2010). Studies also suggest that unmarried cohabitation is more frequent preferred to remarriage in cases where children from previous relationships are involved (Bennett, Bloom & Miller, 1995; Carlson, McLanahan & England, 2004; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg & Waite, 1995; Graefe & Lichter, 1999).

It is clear that the custody arrangements of children are a crucial factor in different explanations for the negative association between parenthood and repartnering. For example, residential children imply a greater restraint on potential partnerships than non-residential children (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). The results of Beaujouan (2010, 2012) suggest that the custody arrangement of the child is more consequential for the speed of repartnering than parenthood itself: mothers whose children were not living full-time in the household repartnered as fast as childless women within five years following divorce. This study also explains the fact that women less often start new cohabitation relationships because mothers still more often have full-time residential children than fathers following divorce. Until now, most studies only distinguished between parents and non-parents, or between parents with and without residential children. Here, we also distinguish parents with children in joint custody arrangements. Gunnoe & Braver (2001) found evidence for more rapid maternal repartnering in joint legal custody compared to mother custody, controlling for factors that predispose families to choose or be awarded joint custody. These results were however based upon a small sample of 26 joint legal custody families.

In the present study, we do not focus on the legal custody arrangement, but on the residential custody arrangement.

Based upon this body of prior research, we formulate two questions with regard to repartnering of men and women following divorce. The first research question is: *how does the likelihood of entering a new partner relationship (repartnering, cohabitation and remarriage) following divorce differ according to parental status?* The second research question is: *following divorce, how does the likelihood of men and women to repartner with somebody with (residential) children differ according to their parental status?* In addressing these questions, we compare men and women without children, with full-time residential children, with part-time residential children, with full-time non-residential children and with major children. Within the group of parents, we also control for the number of (own) children and the age of the youngest child.

### **5.3 Parenthood and fertility trajectories following divorce**

Parenthood and the custody arrangement of children from previous relationships might not only influence relationship trajectories, but also the probability of having children within their new partner relationships (Beaujouan, 2011; Buber & Prskawetz, 2000; Jefferies, Berrington & Diamond, 2000; Holland & Thomson, 2010; Kalmijn & Gelissen, 2002; Meggigliaro & Ongaro, 2010; Vikat, Thomson & Prskawetz, 2004; Wijckmans et al. 2011; Wijckmans, Corijn & Van Bavel, 2012). There are two dominant hypotheses regarding childbearing within a new relationship (Kalmijn & Gelissen, 2007). The *parenthood* hypothesis claims that men and women at the first place want to become parents. The *commitment* hypothesis on the other hand stresses the importance of a shared biological child as relational capital or the confirmation of the relationship. There is empirical evidence for both hypotheses (Buber & Prskawetz, 2000; Griffith, Koo & Suchindran, 1985; Vikat, Thomson & Hoem, 1999; Wineberg, 1990). A third, additional hypothesis suggests that men and women with only one child from a previous relationship want a (half)sibling for that child, the so-called *sibling* hypothesis (Vikat, Thomson & Hoem, 1999).

The custody arrangement of children from previous relationship is again very relevant. If children from a previous relationship co-reside with the new couple, a stepfamily formation exists before the birth of a child. Kalmijn & Gelissen (2007) consider the birth of a child within the new partner relationship as a smaller transition in case the couple already has residential children from previous relationships than in case the partners only have non-residential children. Conversely, Vikat, Thomson & Prskawetz (2004) introduce the *childrearing responsibility* hypothesis. They argue that the likelihood of having a child within a stepfamily depends on the responsibility for childrearing of children from previous unions. Co-residence with the child is thereby seen as an important predictor, with residential children from previous relationships more strongly reducing the likelihood of a new child than would non-residential children. Both studies find empirical support for their hypothesis. We aim to contribute to this literature by providing additional empirical

evidence on the relationship between custody arrangements of children from previous relationships and the birth of a child within a new relationship. An important feature of our contribution follows from the clear distinction we are able to make between part-time residential children and full-time (non-) residential children.

In higher order unions, parenthood status of both partners needs to be considered: couples consisting of respectively two childless partners, one parent and one childless partner and two parents will have varying needs and desires regarding parenthood. As a consequence of the increasing number of divorces, divorced men and women (from which two out of three have children) increasingly meet each other on the relational and remarriage market (Corijn, 2005b). Recently 41% of all remarriages in Belgium involved two divorced partners, versus almost 50% that occurred between a divorced and never-married partner (ADSEI, 2013 SVR-calculation). This also implies a higher likelihood of at least one partner bringing children from a previous relationship, with variations in custody arrangements. The parenthood status of a divorced person is hence not only dependent on their own fertility history, but also on the fertility history of the new partner, and the custody arrangements of present children.

This brings us to the last research question of this chapter, concerning the association between the parenthood status and the likelihood of childbearing following divorce. As children are commonly born within a cohabitation relationship, we model the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce. The third research question is therefore: *how does the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce differ according to the parental status of men and women?* We compare ever-divorced men and women without children, with full-time residential children, with part-time residential children, with full-time non-residential children and with only major children at time of divorce. Within the group of parents, we control for the number of children and the age of the youngest child. In addition, we control for the parenthood status of the first cohabitation partner.

#### **5.4 Control variables**

In analyzing the association between parenthood status and family transitions following divorce, it is important to control for factors that are related to both of them and therefore might account for (a part of) their association.

We know that ex-partners with children in joint custody arrangements are on average more recently divorced than ex-partners with children in full-time mother custody because the prevalence of joint physical custody arrangements has been increasing over time (Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2012). In addition, there were important changes through time in the composition of the population of divorced men and women in terms of average age at marriage and divorce, duration of marriages and the presence of children (Corijn, 2005b, 2011). The growing tolerance towards divorce, has been accompanied by increased tolerance and access to a post-marital partner and family (Corijn, forthcoming). Finally, the popularity of specific relationship types has changed over time. While the rates

of unmarried cohabitation following divorce are increasing, remarriage rates have declined over time (Corijn, 2012; Pasteels et al., 2011). A first important control factor is therefore the timing of divorce or divorce cohort.

Second, age is strongly related to parenthood status, the likelihood of repartnering and the fertility trajectory following divorce (Beaujouan, 2012; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012; Wijckmans et al., 2011, 2012). Men and women who divorce at a very young age have a higher need to repartner, a greater attractiveness as potential partners and more opportunities to meet new partners. Regarding fertility transitions, women after age 40 have a very small likelihood of giving birth to a child. In addition, children in joint custody are on average younger than children in mother or father custody (Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2012). The latter also relates to the age of mother and father. A second important control factor is therefore the age of the respondents.

Finally, the educational level of men and women is important for their post-divorce trajectories (Dykstra & Poortman, 2009; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012; Sweeney, 1997). In Flanders, lower educated men have a lower likelihood of repartnering, while this pattern does not hold for women (Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012). In addition, ex-partners with children in joint custody are on average higher educated (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2011; Strohschein, 2005).

## **5.5 Data and methods**

### ***5.5.1 Methods and research samples***

We use the data from *Scheiding in Vlaanderen* (Mortelmans et al., 2011), in which the complete post-divorce partner trajectory was assessed retrospectively in terms of timing, type, duration and stability. We also have detailed information on all biological children of the respondents, which can be combined with information on the birth of a common child within a new partner relationship following divorce. In addition, we know for every new partner relationship following divorce whether this partner had one or more children from a previous relationship and whether these children ever lived within the same household as the respondent and his/her partner. It should be noted that the response categories on the last question were either yes or no, and thus there may be considerable variation in the proportion of time that these children ever spend in the same household as the respondent.

An extensive data-cleaning process preceded the construction of the research samples, as information on the partner and fertility trajectories was sometimes missing or inconsistent. The final research samples therefore only contain those respondents with valid information on the timing of the partner and fertility trajectories that are modeled.

To model the likelihood of specific types of repartnering and the birth of a child within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce, we apply *discrete-time event history analyses*. Censoring and different periods at risk of an event are implicitly handled with this technique (Mills, 2011). This also allows recent divorces to be included in the sample.

Moreover, this technique allows for time-varying covariates, in contrast with traditional regression methods. This allows us to incorporate changes in the custody arrangement of children and the increasing age of children from the dissolved reference marriage in modeling the likelihood of different transitions according to parenthood status.

For the repartnering models, we limit the analyses to the first ten years following divorce for several reasons. First, previous studies suggest that men and women that repartner following divorce, repartner quickly (Defever & Mortelmans, 2011; Pasteels, Corijn & Mortelmans, 2012). Second, larger periods at risk are only applicable for older divorce cohorts. Limiting the period at risk to the first ten years following divorce means that the sample contains a much larger proportion of respondents that might contribute to the complete at-risk-period. Third, the proportion of men and women that have minor children at home from the dissolved reference marriage decreases as time since divorce elapses. With regard to our research questions, modeling the likelihood of repartnering during the first twenty or thirty years following divorce has no surplus value.

Analogous to the repartnering trajectories, the birth of a child within a new partner relationship occurs quite fast following the start of that relationship (Wijckmans et al., 2011; Wijckmans, Corijn & Van Bavel, 2012). In addition, a first exploration of the SiV-data shows that more than 90% of the children that were born following divorce, were born within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce. We therefore have chosen to model the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce, within the first ten years following the start of that relationship. This criteria implies that respondents disappear from the population at risk by either giving birth to a child within the first cohabitation relationship or by ending that relationship within the first ten years before giving birth to a child.

For the four different events that are modeled (repartnering, cohabitation, remarriage and birth following divorce), we make four different person-period files for respectively men and women. These files can contain multiple lines for an individual respondent, depending on the number of years that a respondent is at risk at the event that is modeled (Singer & Willett, 2003). In total, this results in eight different person-period files. As the time-varying parenthood status (see below) can only be reconstructed in years, we have chosen to model the likelihood of the different transitions on yearly basis. We model the association between the parenthood status at respectively the time of divorce, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, ..., to the 10<sup>nd</sup> year following divorce and the likelihood on the different transitions in the following year.

First, we have three person-period files that contain data lines on 2151 men. 1709 of those men repartner within the first ten years following divorce, 1332 start a cohabitation relationship and 506 remarry within that period. The person-years files to model the likelihood of the different events, contain respectively 6897, 9961 and 15323 data lines. Similarly, we constructed three data files based upon the information from 2458 women. 1857 of those women repartnered within the first ten years following divorce, 1349 started



a cohabitation relationship and 553 remarried within that period. The corresponding person-years files for women contain respectively 8257, 12200 and 17699 data lines. Finally, there are two person-year files to model the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce. Of the 1414 men that ever started a cohabitation relationship following divorce, 368 experienced the birth of a child within that relationship within the first ten years after the start of that relationship. This results in a person-period file with 6 245 data lines. A similar proportion, 369 of the 1 437 women that ever started a cohabitation relationship following divorce, gave birth to a child within that relationship, within the first ten years after the start of that relationship. This results in a final person-period file for women with 6725 datalines.

The parenthood status of a new partner is however not an event, but a characteristic of a partner (relationship) and therefore modeled with binary logistic regression models. With regard to the first partner, we model the likelihood of this partner having one or more children from a previous relationship. Of the 1766 men that ever repartnered following divorce, 977 repartnered with a parent. Similarly, 1081 of the 1914 women that ever started a first partner relationship following divorce, repartnered with someone with one or more children from a previous relationship. With regard to the first cohabitation partner, we model both the likelihood that this partner already had one or more children from a previous relationship and the likelihood that this partner had children living in the same household. Of the 1414 men that ever started a cohabitation relationship following divorce, 725 men repartnered with someone with (a) child(ren) from a previous relationship. 549 of these men had ever lived together with one or more of these children. Of the 1437 women that ever started a cohabitation relationship following divorce, 771 of their partners had children. 304 women had ever lived together with at least one of these children of their partner.

### ***5.5.2 Independent variables***

The main independent variable is the parenthood status of the respondents. In the event history analyses, this variable is time-varying, while in the models regarding the parenthood status of the partner, this variable relates to the status at the start of the relationship. The parenthood status expresses whether the respondents are parents or not and whether parents still have minor children. Within the group with children younger than 18, a distinction is made between children living full-time (>75%) with mother, children living in joint physical custody (alternately between 25 and 75% with mother and father) and children living full-time (>75%) with father. This results in five categories: 1) no children, 2) minor child(ren) living full-time with mother, 3) minor child(ren) living in joint physical custody, 4) minor child(ren) living full-time with father and 5) only children age 18 or older. It is important to note that the complete history of the custody following divorce is only known for the targetchild. The distinction between mother, joint and father custody is hence based upon the information of the targetchild and does not allow for differences in custody arrangements amongst brothers and sisters. To have an idea about the impact of this limited operationalization, we compared the rough information on the

custody arrangement of brothers and sisters born within the same reference marriage at time of the interview (for children still residing in the parental home at time of the interview) or before leaving the parental home (for children that already left the parental home at time of the interview). This comparison indicates that 14% of the common children of ex-partners have a different custody arrangement.

With regard to the control variables, the time of divorce is categorized into four divorce cohorts: 1971-1985, 1986-1994, 1995-1999, and 2000-2008. Age is a time-varying variable in the event history analyses and refers to the age at the start of the relationship in the models regarding the parenthood status of the partners. We distinguish five categories: younger than 26 years, 26-30 years, 31-35 years, 36-40 year and older than 40 years. For the (highest) educational level, we make a distinction between lower (lower secondary school or less), average (higher secondary school) and higher educated (Post-secondary or higher education).

For the subsample of parents, we construct two additional variables. The age of the youngest child at the time of parental divorce is included as a metric variable. This variable is time-varying in the event history analyses and referring to the age at the start of the relationship in the models for the parenthood status of the partner. The number of children born within the dissolved reference marriages contains three categories: one child, two children, and three or more children.

Table 5.1 presents the descriptive statistics for the independent variables for all divorced men and women. Statistics for the time-varying variables are limited to those reported at the time of divorce.

**Table 5.1: Descriptives for independent variables for all divorced men and women in SiV-sample**

	Men (N = 2 151)		Women (N = 2 458)	
	n	%	N	%
Parenthood status at time of divorce				
No children	565	28.7	553	24.2
Minor children in mother custody	665	33.8	1097	48.1
Minor children in joint custody	390	19.8	366	16.1
Minor children in father custody	169	8.6	86	3.8
All children 18 years or older	178	9.1	179	7.9
Missing	184		177	
Divorce cohort				
1971-1985	166	7.7	180	7.3
1986-1994	450	20.9	556	22.7
1995-1999	465	21.6	554	22.6
2000-2009	1070	49.7	1165	47.5
Missing	0		3	
Age at time of divorce				
Younger than 25 years	133	6.2	306	12.5
25-30 years	373	17.4	562	23.0
31-35 years (= ref)	554	25.9	594	24.3
36-40 years	489	22.8	516	21.1
Older than 40 years	593	27.7	468	19.1
Missing	9		12	
Educational level				
Lower educational level	559	26.1	537	21.9
Average educational level (= ref)	899	41.9	1025	41.8
Higher educational level	687	32.0	890	36.3
Missing	6		6	
Age youngest child at time of divorce (mean & S.D.)	9.6 (6.2)		9.1 (6.1)	
Number of children in reference marriage				
No children	565	26.3	553	22.5
One child	525	24.4	653	26.6
Two children	734	34.1	878	35.7
Three or more children	327	15.2	374	15.2
Parenthood first cohabitation partner <sup>1</sup>				
No children	653	48.4	631	45.8
Only non-residential children	170	12.6	454	32.9
Residential children	526	39.0	294	21.3

<sup>1</sup>For men and women that ever started cohabitation relationship following divorce

## 5.6 Results

### 5.6.1 Custody arrangements and the likelihood of repartnering following divorce

Table 5.2 presents the results for the event history analyses in which the likelihoods of starting a partner relationship, starting a cohabitation relationship and remarrying following divorce are modeled. These outcomes are modeled separately for men and women. The first model contains persons without children as well as those who were parents at time of divorce. These models give insights in the differences between parents and childless persons. The second models are limited to men and women who were parents at time of divorce. These models provide estimates of the differences between custody arrangements, controlling for the number of children and the age of the youngest child.

We see that only men and women with full-time residential, minor children have a lower likelihood of repartnering and of starting a cohabitation relationship following divorce relative to childless men and women. The differences according to parenthood status are not distinctly different for these two relationship types. The likelihood of remarrying on the other hand is lower for fathers with non-residential or part-time residential, minor children as compared to childless men. Conversely, the results for the likelihood of remarrying of full-time residential fathers does not differ from those of childless men. For women, the results for the likelihood of remarrying are more in line with those of the other relationship types. The only exception is that mothers with children in joint custody are less likely to remarry within the first ten years following divorce than are childless women.

The results for the parental models are in line with the expectation that it are mainly those divorced parents with full-time residential, minor children who experience reduced likelihoods of repartnering or starting a cohabitation relationship following divorce. For men, there are few differences between full-time non-residential fathers and fathers with children in joint custody in terms of entering a new relationship of either type. For women, there are few differences between these two parenthood statuses regarding the likelihood of repartnering, but full-time non-residential mothers have a higher likelihood of starting a cohabitation relationship than mothers with children in joint custody. The likelihood of remarrying does not vary according to the custody arrangement of children. The age of the youngest child and the number of children born within the dissolved reference marriage are not related to the transition into either relationship type.

With regard to the control variables, we see that the likelihood of repartnering and cohabiting following divorce increases over time. The differences according to divorce cohort are less pronounced in the models for remarriage. Age is strongly related to the likelihood of repartnering of men and even more so for women in all models. Men and women older than 40 years clearly have the lowest likelihoods of repartnering, cohabitation and remarrying following divorce. The differences at younger ages are more pronounced for women. Finally, education is only related to the likelihood of repartnering of men, with lower educated men having a lower likelihood of repartnering and starting a cohabitation relationship following divorce than higher educated men.

**Table 5.2: Odds-ratio's from discrete-time event history analyses predicting the likelihood of repartnering, cohabitation and remarriage within the first 10 years following divorce, for men, fathers, women and mothers**

	Partner relationship				Cohabitation relationship				Remarriage			
	Men	Fathers	Women	Mothers	Men	Fathers	Women	Mothers	Men	Fathers	Women	Mothers
Parenthood status (TV)												
No children	(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)	
Minor children in mother custody	1.06	(= ref)	0.69***	(=ref)	0.98	(= ref)	0.64***	(= ref)	0.80°	(= ref)	0.69***	(= ref)
Minor children in joint custody	0.98	0.93	0.92	1.36**	0.85	0.89	0.84	1.34**	0.79°	0.97	0.72*	1.07
Minor children in father custody	0.80°	0.76*	1.13	1.61**	0.75*	0.76°	1.45	2.29***	0.88	1.06	0.84	1.21
All children 18 years or older	0.91	0.79	0.85	0.98	0.91	0.77	0.94	1.26	0.95	0.85	0.94	1.01
Divorce cohort												
1971-1985	0.88	0.82	0.72*	0.66*	1.05	0.98	0.77*	0.71°	1.14	1.08	0.89	0.96
1986-1994 (= ref)												
1995-1999	1.34**	1.40**	1.22***	1.17	1.25*	1.35*	1.33**	1.34**	1.22	1.59**	1.08	1.12
2000-2009	1.60**	1.56***	1.38***	1.30**	1.48***	1.49***	1.44***	1.41**	1.08	1.31	1.38**	1.45*
Age (TV)												
Younger than 25 years	1.00	1.78°	1.51**	1.52*	0.72	1.25	1.43**	1.91**	0.42°	0.67	1.22	1.91*
25-30 years	1.33*	1.23	1.29**	1.22°	1.25*	1.40*	1.35**	1.61***	1.10	1.12	1.21	0.98
31-35 years (= ref)												
36-40 years	1.00	1.05	0.68***	0.67***	0.91	0.97	0.63***	0.66***	0.85	0.96	0.60***	0.55***
Older than 40 years	0.66***	0.72*	0.47***	0.48***	0.57***	0.54***	0.38***	0.39***	0.68**	0.61*	0.35***	0.32***
Educational level												
Lower educational level	0.76***	0.76**	0.92	0.88	0.84*	0.89	0.92	0.88	0.94	1.06	1.18	1.10
Average educational level (= ref)												
Higher educational level	1.22*	1.24*	1.05	0.99	1.06	1.06	0.96	0.95	1.21°	1.10	0.90	0.85
Age youngest child (TV)												
		1.00		1.02		1.02		1.02		1.03		1.03
Number of children 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage												
One child (= ref)												
Two children		0.99		0.93		0.96		0.93		0.87		0.89
Three or more children		0.98		0.85		1.03		0.85		1.24		0.93
N person years	6 263	4 444	7 573	6 046	9 116	6 519	1 1259	8 859	13 993	9 832	16 372	12 343
N persons	1 954	1 394	2 268	1 716	1 954	1 394	2 268	1 716	1 954	1 394	2 268	1 716

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; coefficients for duration not included for parsimony; ref = reference category; TV = time-varying

### ***5.6.2 Custody arrangements and the parental status of the first new partner following divorce***

Next, we model the likelihood to repartner with a parent (Table 5.3). Regarding the first partner relationship (either cohabiting or not), we model the likelihood of repartnering with someone who has children. Regarding the first cohabitation partner, we model both the likelihood of repartnering with somebody who has children and the likelihood of cohabiting with the children of that partner. As for the likelihood of repartnering, we always run a model including both parents and childless men and women, and a model with only parents, including the age of the youngest child and the number of children.

Across all models, men and women with children have higher probabilities of repartnering with somebody who also has children than do childless men and women. We find no differences according to the custody arrangement of the child. For men, the results for the likelihood of living together with children of the first cohabitation partner are not different from the other models. For women on the other hand, we only found a higher likelihood of living together with children from the first cohabitation partner for mothers with minor children in joint custody, when compared with either childless women or with mothers with children in full-time mother or father custody. The age and number of children are only related to the likelihood of repartnering with a parent for women. Mothers with older and more children have a higher likelihood of repartnering with a parent than mothers with younger children and mothers with only one child. Conversely, the likelihood of living together with children of a partner is negatively related for women to the age of the youngest child from the dissolved reference marriage.

Regarding the control variables, we see especially for women a higher likelihood of repartnering with a parent in more recent divorce cohorts. The likelihood of repartnering with a parent also increases with age, especially for men. Lower educated men also have a greater likelihood than higher educated men of repartnering with someone with children. Lower educated women on the other hand have a lower likelihood of cohabiting with children from a partner.

In an additional model (results not included), the likelihood of cohabiting with children of the first cohabitation partner was modeled within the group whose first cohabitation partner had children. In other words, we also modeled the likelihood of cohabiting with the children of the partner in case he or she has children from a previous union. For men and fathers, there is no difference in the likelihood of cohabiting with children of the partner according to the parenthood status. For women and mothers, the results indicate (in line with the previous models) that mothers with minor children in joint custody have a higher likelihood of cohabiting with the children of the partner, both compared to childless women and to mothers with children in other custody arrangements.

**Table 5.3: Odds-ratio's from binary logistic regressions analyses predicting the parenthood status of the first partner and first cohabitation partner following divorce, for men, fathers, women and mothers**

	Partner has child(ren) (ref='no')				Partner has child(ren) (ref='no')				Partner has residential child(ren) (ref='no')			
	First partner relationship				First cohabitation partner				First cohabitation partner			
	Men	Fathers	Women	Mothers	Men	Fathers	Women	Mothers	Men	Fathers	Women	Mothers
Parenthood status <sup>1</sup>												
No children	(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)		(= ref)	
Minor children in mother custody	1.45**	(= ref)	1.66***	(= ref)	1.76***	(= ref)	1.62***	(= ref)	1.65**	(= ref)	1.25	(= ref)
Minor children in joint custody	1.67**	1.15	1.84***	1.04	1.83**	1.05	1.88***	1.07	1.78**	1.06	2.10***	1.63*
Minor children in father custody	1.75*	1.17	2.26**	1.30	2.40**	1.32	2.14*	1.28	1.95**	1.18	1.60	1.41
All children 18 years or older	1.49°	0.89	2.25**	1.17	1.40	0.69	1.72*	0.83	0.96	0.61	1.03	1.58
Divorce cohort												
1971-1985	0.96	1.53	1.36	1.46	1.09	1.61	1.72*	1.71°	0.95	1.49	1.49	1.67
1986-1994	(= ref)											
1995-1999	1.06	1.00	1.15	1.43*	1.33°	1.21	1.43*	1.76**	1.36	1.21	1.22	1.27
2000-2009	1.20	1.36°	1.08	1.29°	1.42*	1.57*	1.37*	1.71**	1.25	1.35	1.65**	1.60*
Age <sup>1</sup>												
Younger than 25 years	0.39**	0.41°	0.41***	0.54*	0.60	0.49	0.58*	1.01	0.64	0.69	0.50*	0.35*
25-30 years	0.72°	0.62°	0.59***	0.77	0.70°	0.49*	0.70*	1.00	0.86	0.60°	0.73°	0.67°
31-35 years	(= ref)											
36-40 years	1.87***	1.83**	1.39*	1.23	1.40*	1.27	1.36°	1.17	1.30	1.25	0.99	1.11
Older than 40 years	3.61***	3.05***	1.97***	1.18	3.87***	3.49***	2.50***	1.21	1.96***	1.87*	0.75	0.98
Educational level												
Lower educational level	1.39*	1.46*	0.87	0.76	1.42*	1.56*	0.92	0.80	1.19	1.28	0.62*	0.54**
Average educational level	(= ref)											
Higher educational level	0.74*	0.78°	0.82°	0.83	0.72*	0.69*	0.85	1.01	0.94	0.96	0.85	0.93
Age youngest child <sup>1</sup>		1.02		1.04°		1.01		1.07*		1.00		0.94*
Number of children 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage												
One child	(= ref)											
Two children		1.08		1.39*		0.96		1.14		0.99		0.89
Three or more children		1.24		1.58*		1.12		1.73*		0.87		1.05
-2LL	1976.0	1368.0	2231.0	1603.5	1579.0	1076.3	1708.7	1166.8	1646.5	1168.1	1315.6	950.4
N	1 602	1 125	1768	1 284	1 276	868	1 328	913	1 276	868	1 328	913

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; coefficients for duration not included for parsimony; ref = reference category; TV = time-varying

<sup>1</sup>At start of the (cohabitation) relationship

### ***5.6.3 Custody arrangements and the likelihood of having a child within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce***

Table 5.4 presents the results for the event history analyses modeling the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce. Again, models were run for men and fathers, and women and mothers respectively. Within each of these four groups, two models are tested. In the second model, the parenthood status of the partner is included. The inclusion of this variable is done stepwise as the previous analyses demonstrated a strong association between the parenthood status of both partners.

Overall, the results for men and women confirm the parenthood hypotheses. Following divorce, childless men and women have the highest likelihood of a birth within a new partner relationship. Within the group of mothers and fathers, we find no differences according to the custody arrangement of the children. Also the number of children born within the dissolved reference marriage is not related to the likelihood of a birth. For men, the likelihood of a birth is negatively associated with the age of the youngest child. The older the youngest child from the reference marriage, the lower the likelihood of a birth within the new partner relationship.

Inclusion of the parenthood status of the partner does not change the initial effect of parenthood status. The parenthood status of the partner is nevertheless strongly related to the likelihood of a birth of a common child. If the partner has one or more children from a previous relationship, the likelihood of a birth is much lower. Men with a partner with non-residential children have the lowest likelihood of a birth within the new relationship. For women, the likelihood of a birth is the lowest if the partner has residential children.

With regard to the control variables, we see an increase in the likelihood of experiencing a birth within the new partner relationship over time, which is most pronounced for men. Age on the other hand is negatively related to the likelihood of a birth within the new partner relationship. The differences according to age are even more pronounced for women than for men. Finally, regarding the educational level, we only found a significant higher likelihood of a birth for higher educated women as compared to lower educated women.



**Table 5.4: Odds-ratio's from discrete-time event history analyses predicting the likelihood of a birth within the first cohabitation relationship following divorce, for men, fathers, women and mothers**

	Men		Fathers		Women		Mothers	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Parenthood status (TV)								
No children	(= ref)	(= ref)			(= ref)	(= ref)		
Minor children in mother custody	0.62**	0.70*	(= ref)	(= ref)	0.70**	0.81°	(= ref)	(= ref)
Minor children in joint custody	0.64*	0.72°	1.09	1.10	0.57**	0.70°	0.80	0.83
Minor children in father custody	0.67	0.75	1.14	1.12	0.71	0.88	0.99	1.10
All children 18 years or older	0.41***	0.53*	1.13	1.23	0.36	0.41	0.60	0.65
Parenthood partner								
No children (=ref)								
Only non-residential children		0.04***		0.03***		0.50***		0.40***
Residential children		0.36***		0.23***		0.36***		0.32***
Divorce cohort								
1971-1985	0.86	0.93	0.82	1.14	0.64*	0.74	0.64	0.81
1986-1994 (=ref)								
1995-1999	1.40*	1.53*	1.40	1.60*	0.96	1.09	0.88	1.14
2000-2009	1.38*	1.54**	1.11	1.35	1.09	1.20	1.13	1.36
Age (TV)								
Younger than 25 years	0.42	0.43	1.85	1.40	1.64*	1.60*	1.66	1.64
25-30 years	1.43*	1.36°	2.11*	1.85*	1.49**	1.45**	1.32	1.27
31-35 years (= ref)								
36-40 years	0.65**	0.71*	0.93	1.17	0.30***	0.32***	0.25***	0.26***
Older than 40 years	0.27***	0.38***	0.37**	0.64	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***
Educational level								
Lower educational level	0.92	0.97	0.89	1.05	0.84	0.84	0.89	0.88
Average educational level (= ref)								
Higher educational level	1.18	1.06	1.26	1.10	1.27°	1.30°	1.15	1.28
Age youngest child (TV)			0.96°	0.95°			1.00	0.99
Number of children in 1 <sup>st</sup> marriage								
One child (=ref)								
Two children			0.78	0.76			1.00	1.06
Three or more children			0.83	0.83			0.78	0.83
N person years	5 842	5 842	4 019	4 019	6 357	6 357	4 551	4 551
N persons	1 246	1 246	852	852	1 291	1 291	886	886

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; coefficients for duration not included for parsimony; ref = reference category; TV = time-varying

## 5.7. Discussion

In this chapter, we explored the association between the parenthood status of divorced men and women and three important dimensions of their post-divorce family trajectories: different types of partner relationships, the transition to stepparenthood and the birth of a child within post-divorce partner relationships. We explicitly focused on differences according to the custody arrangements of children from the dissolved marriage. With the recent evolution from dominant mother custody of children towards increasing joint custody of children, there is an important gender dimension related to this issue.

In line with the results of Beaujouan (2012), we report evidence that the custody arrangement of children following divorce is more important for the post-divorce family trajectory than parenthood itself. Mainly full-time residential, minor children decrease the likelihood of starting a new partner relationship for men and women as compared to childless men and women. One explanation might be that only full-time parenthood substantially decreases opportunities to meet new partners (Beaujouan, 2010; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Joint custody has in that sense created more child-free time for women, which may facilitate meeting new partners. Another explanation may be reduced restraints on forming a new partner relationship from the perspective of both child and partners. From partner perspective, joint custody implies more time and privacy for the new partner relationship (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). From child perspective, there might be less resistance towards a stepparent with who they co-reside part-time in contrast to a full-time residential stepparent (Lampard & Peggs, 1999).

Our findings with regard to repartnering are also important from a policy perspective. The inclusion of joint legal custody in divorce law in 1995 and the implicit preference for joint physical custody in the divorce law of 2006 were primarily directed towards improving the wellbeing of parents and children following divorce by facilitating the maintenance of good relationships between children and both of their parents. Preceding this evolution, full-time mother custody (with mother custody and visitation rights for the father) was the standard living arrangement for children following parental divorce. The evolution towards joint custody therefore has important implications from gender perspective. During the last decades, the differences between men and women with regard to education and employment have decreased. More recently, this is also the case with regard to child care. Before joint custody became the normative standard, child care following divorce was almost completely carried out by mothers, which impeded new partner relationships. If the current trend of increasing joint custody arrangements persists, we might expect a further increase in the proportion of women who repartner following divorce. In addition, we see no differences in the likelihood of repartnering of parents with either part-time residential children or non-residential children compared to childless men and women. Consequently, the evolution from full-time mother custody towards joint custody has no negative consequences for the post-divorce family trajectory of fathers. We know from previous studies that divorced men and women that repartner have a better economic and emotional wellbeing than divorced men and women without a new partner (Fokkema, 2001; Symoens

et al., 2011; Willekens et al., 2011). Therefore, the increasing incidence of joint custody arrangements might increase the wellbeing of divorced mothers, without reducing the wellbeing of divorced fathers. In that regard, more gender-neutral child care patterns might reduce both gender differences in partner trajectories following divorce as well as gender differences in wellbeing.

The findings discussed above also have important consequences from child perspective. With the increasing incidence of joint custody arrangements and the general increase in repartnering rates, our results imply that children will increasingly have a stepparent in the maternal household, and increasingly co-reside with a stepparent in the paternal household. In other words, they will increasingly have a part-time residential stepmother, a part-time residential stepfather, or both. Although the financial situation of the household and the emotional wellbeing of the parent are frequently better after the arrival of a stepparent, it also involves additional family transitions. Children often need time to adapt to these transitions (Jeynes, 2006).

We have also investigated parenthood transitions following divorce, both in terms of the transition to stepparenthood and the birth of a child within a new partner relationship. With regard to both outcomes, parenthood itself seems to be more important than the custody arrangement of present children. These findings are in line with the parenthood hypothesis. We find no evidence for the childrearing hypothesis. Childless men and women more frequently give birth to a child within a new partner relationship than parents, independent of the custody arrangement of children. Parents on the other hand more frequently repartner with parents than with childless men and women. The latter might be interpreted as parenthood being a handicap on the relational market, since lower educated men, who experience more difficulties on the relational market, also repartner more frequently with a parent than do higher educated men. Having children is therefore to a certain degree a burden on the relational market. This interpretation is also supported by the finding that more children and older children are also associated with a higher likelihood of repartnering with a parent for mothers.

In line with the results for repartnering, there are also indications that the proportion of divorced men and women who give birth to a child in a post-divorce relationship is increasing over time. More people are having children after their first marriage, which implies additional family transitions following divorce. Moreover, we also find indications of an increasing trend in repartnering with a parent over time. This contrasts to a certain degree with the increasing repartnering rate over time, and might be the result of the larger proportion of parents on the relational market. From child perspective, these two findings entail an increasing trend in complex stepfamily formation, in which either step- or halfsiblings are involved.

The only difference according to the custody arrangement of children in the parenthood transitions concerns the higher likelihood of cohabiting with children of the partner for mothers with minor children in joint custody compared to both childless women and to

mothers with children in other custody arrangements. This finding might be interpreted in different ways. In one sense, the difference according to custody arrangement within the group of mothers might be interpreted as joint custody facilitating repartnering with somebody with residential children. Given the low incidence of full-time father custody, these new partners are very likely to be fathers with children in joint custody. Joint custody for all children in the household might in that sense facilitate the organization of the household. On the other hand, men with residential children from a previous relationship will be less inclined to start a cohabitation relationship with a mother whose children live full-time with their father. Another possible interpretation relates to the rough measurement of the residential status of the children of new partners, based upon the single question *did you ever live together with one of these/this child(ren) of that partner?*. Women who have children in joint custody themselves might be more sensitive to the subjective definition of co-residence, and more frequently consider part-time residential children as living in the household than mothers with children in full-time mother or father custody.

We also note several limitations of this study. First, we only have detailed information on (the changes in) the custody arrangement of the selected targetchild. The parenthood status is therefore determined by the custody arrangement of the targetchild, while there might be different custody arrangements for their (biological) brothers and sisters. An explorative analysis of differences in custody arrangements between siblings shows nevertheless that these situations are relatively rare. Second, we have only rough information on the custody arrangement of stepchildren, or children of new partners. The results regarding the presence of residential stepchildren therefore need to be interpreted with caution. Finally, the proportion of fathers with full-time custody is small. Consequently, the results for this group may lack statistical power. Finally, we emphasize that although this chapter focused on the effects of parenthood status on post-divorce family transitions, the reverse relationship might also hold. For example, the repartnering of a parent might result in adapting the custody arrangement to this new family configuration. The exploration of this bi-directionality is beyond the scope of this doctoral thesis, but deserves attention in future studies.

Summarized, we can conclude that repartner rates, post-divorce childbearing and stepparenthood have increased over time. Consequently, an increasingly proportion of children experience the transition to a (complex) stepfamily formation following divorce. This is partially the result of a growing tolerance towards post-divorce family formations, a trend that is likely to continue in future years. In addition, if the number of children in joint custody arrangements keeps increasing in the next years, this trend might even be reinforced by faster maternal repartnering.

## CHAPTER 6

# Custody arrangements and the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren following parental divorce

This chapter draws in part upon the following publication and conference papers:

Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2012). Deeltijds versus voltijds stiefouderschap. De relatie tussen stiefouders en stiefkinderen in moedergezinnen, vadergezinnen en verblijfsco-ouderschap na scheiding. *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 33(3-4), 267-295.

Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2012). Entangled in a complex network of family relations: the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relation within different custody arrangements. *European Population Conference*, Stockholm, 13-17<sup>th</sup> of July 2012.

Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2012). The stepparent-stepchild dyad from a multi-actor perspective. The characteristics and family relations of participating stepparents and stepchildren. *Seminar of the Committee on Family Research 2012*, Leuven, 12-14<sup>th</sup> of September.

## 6.1 Introduction

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the preference for joint physical custody within the Belgian divorce law has led to an increasing amount of children living part-time with mother and part-time with father following parental divorce. This bilocation of children created a new context in which stepparent-stepchild relationships develop: steprelationships are now increasingly established and maintained within a context of binuclear households (Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1982). These binuclear families are the foundation of an extended network of (step)family relationships with mutual strong differences regarding kinship and affection.

Joint physical custody and stepparent-stepchild relationships are interrelated in complex ways. On the one hand, both biological parents remain more frequently physically and emotionally present within the life of children following divorce. On the other hand, as we have seen in chapter 3, children in joint custody have a higher likelihood of living together with at least one new partner of mother or father than children in sole custody. This stochastic relationship is even reinforced by the fact that joint custody increases the likelihood of repartnering for mothers compared to mother custody, as demonstrated in chapter 5. Summarized, children in bilocation more often have a (part-time) residential mother and stepmother, a (part-time) residential father and stepfather, or both. Therefore, while co-residence with both parents must allow the maintenance of a good relationship with mother and father, children in joint custody also more often have to establish a relationship with new partners of one or both parents. Exactly the presence of new partners or stepparents might challenge the relationship with biological parents (Vischer & Vischer, 1996).

Children in joint physical custody are not only living more frequently in a stepfamily configuration, they do so in a very specific way. Joint custody arrangements create part-time residential and part-time non-residential relationships. In the research literature, there are almost no studies that give attention to the specific nature of these relationships. Although there is an extended research literature on the association between custody arrangements following divorce and the quality of the parent-child relationship (e.g. Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Schapiro & Lampert, 2009), and on predictors of a good stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g. Fine & Kurdek, 1995; King, 2006, 2007, 2009; Marsiglio, 1992), few studies distinguish between full-time or part-time stepparenthood, a bridging topic between these two research issues.

The few studies that we found on the relationship between joint custody and steprelationships are suggesting a positive influence of secured family ties and less loyalty conflicts (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Greif & Simring, 1982). We found however no recent studies dealing with this topic. A recent review article of Sweeney (2010) stresses nevertheless the importance of attention for diverse stepfamily structures, and for stepfamily relationships than span multiple households or involve part-time household membership.

The major aim of this chapter is to explore how variations in the residential arrangements of children following parental divorce are related to the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. We use the data from the research project *Divorce in Flanders*, in which both stepparents and stepchildren were questioned in detail about their different family relationships (Mortelmans et al., 2011). Applying a family systems perspective, we are explicitly interested in how the quality of the relationship between stepparent and stepchild is interrelated with other family relationships within the family system. We focus on the relationships of children with their biological parents, the relationship between mother and father, the new partner relationships and the relationships between old and new partners. First, we consider whether these relationships are experienced differently within different custody types. Second, we study how different custody arrangements and family relationships are associated with the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship reported by stepchildren and stepparents. Finally, we analyse whether the association between different family relationships and the stepparent-stepchild relationship varies across custody arrangements.

## **6.2 Joint physical custody and stepfamily relationships from a family systems perspective**

System theory sees the family as a hierarchically organized system, composed of different subsystems, e.g. the parental system, the partner system and the siblings system (Cox & Paley, 1997). These subsystems mutually influence each other (Minuchin, 1985). As stated by Cox & Paley (1997, p. 246 ): “*Individual family members are necessarily interdependent, exerting a continuous and reciprocal influence on one another.*” The mutual interdependency of different family relationships within and between different subsystems are very important in this regard, together with the bi-directionality of relationships (O’Connor, Heterington & Clingempeel, 1997). The implications of this approach for the present study is that we expect the relationship between stepparent and stepchild to be strongly interrelated with the relationships with and between the other members of the family system (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006).

As was described in chapter 1 (figure 1.2), the parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationship can be either a *within-household relationship* or a *between-household relationship*, part-time or full-time, depending on where the child lives. Also relationship dyads may be divided into within-household relationship dyads and between-household relationship dyads, depending on the co-residence of the respective family members. Overall, we expect a stronger association between the relationships of an actor with members within the same household (*within-household relationship dyads*) than with members from different households (*between-household relationship dyads*) (White & Gilbreth, 2001). For example, from child perspective, we expect a stronger association between the relationship with stepmother and the relationship with father than between the relationship with stepmother and the relationship with mother. Within joint custody, the continuous transition of the child between the two parental households might however create a stronger interrelation of both parental family systems compared to sole custody.

We therefore expect a stronger association between the relationships in between-household relationship dyads for children in joint physical custody compared to children living full-time with one parent.

### ***6.2.1 The relationships between (step)parents and (step)children***

In general, children have a less close relationship with stepparents than with biological parents, also in established stepfamilies (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hobart, 1987). Frequent explanations are the biological predisposition to defend the needs of genetic relatives (Popenoe, 1994) and the specific attachment bonds towards primary caregivers in early life (Bowlby, 1979). Nevertheless, many stepparents and stepchildren develop a close bond over time. An important condition for a good relationship is living together with the child, the so-called *residence hypothesis* (King, 2007). The daily interaction involved in living together under one roof would help to create and maintain a good relationship between (step)parent and (step)child (Hetherington, 2003; King, 2006, 2007). The custody arrangement following divorce is in other words closely connected with the quality of both the parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationship (King, 2007). We therefore expect that the quality of the relationship with a residential stepparent/stepchild is better than the quality of the relationship with a non-residential stepparent/stepchild. It is however unclear whether the part-time within-household relationship, part-time between-household relationship with a stepparent in case of joint custody takes an intermediate position, rather leans towards one of both extremes or implies better or worse relationships compared to mother and father custody.

Parents function as gatekeepers and can both facilitate or impede the development of the stepparental role (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Giles-Sims, 1984). On the one hand, a good relationship with mother and father can positively affect the stepparent-stepchild relationship (King, 2007), the so-called *spillover hypothesis*. Different studies report a strong, positive association between the relationships of the child with the parent and stepparent within the same household (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1996; King, 2007; Marsiglio, 1992).

Parents can also prefer to maintain the primary caregivers themselves (Bray & Kelley, 1998), refusing to stimulate a close stepparent-stepchild relationship or to coparent with the stepparent. Especially non-residential parents may be less inclined to stimulate a good stepparent-stepchild relationship. King (2006) discusses three mechanisms via which the association between the relationship between father and stepfather may be negative. First, non-resident fathers may interfere with the stepfamily. Second, children may feel caught between father and stepfather, experiencing loyalty conflicts or not willing to accept the stepparental authority. Finally, stepfathers may be less inclined or willing to become actively involved in the life of the child. Some studies find indeed a negative association between the relationship with the non-residential parent and stepparent (MacDonald & DeMarris, 2002). Most studies however found no association between the relationship with father and stepfather or between the relationship with mother and stepmother (Buchanan,



Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1996; King, 2007; Vogt Yuan & Hamilton, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001). The largest bulk of research evidence suggests that the relationship with the stepparent develops relatively independently from the relationship with the non-resident parent (Sweeney, 2010). The latter may be different within joint physical custody, as there is no full-time non-residential parent. Crosbie-Burnett (1991) argues that if children and non-residential parents have the security of the legal tie of joint custody, children may feel freer to accept new stepparents into their families. It is argued that children experience less loyalty conflicts between parents and stepparents in joint custody arrangements, leading to better relationships with stepparents (Greif & Simring, 1982). A good relationship with the part-time non-residential parent may therefore be positively related to the relationship with a stepparent within joint custody. Fathers that maintain a good relationship with the child themselves may in this context be more inclined to stimulate a good relationship between the child and the stepfather. The same holds for mothers and stepmothers. Marsiglio & Hinojosa (2007) use the concept of *father allies* to describe the process in which stepfathers help a stepchild to develop or maintain a good relationship with the father. A similar process may be at work the other way around, with part-time non-residential parents having a good relationship with the child themselves acting as *stepparent allies*, supporting a good stepparent-stepchild relationship. Joint custody may therefore be a beneficial arrangement for the stepparent-stepchild relationship by positive spillover from both parental relationships.

In addition, we might expect joint custody to be a beneficial context for the stepparent-stepchild relationship by limiting the stepparental role. A recurrent finding in studies on the development of positive stepparent-stepchild relationships is that in early stages of stepfamily formation, affinity-seeking seems to be the pathway to positive responses by stepchildren. Investing (too) early in the child-rearing role can have the opposite effect, the so-called *limited stepchildrearing hypothesis*. Steprelationships are more likely to be valued positively when stepparents first try to develop a friendship relationship with their stepchild(ren), instead of immediately taking the position of a new disciplinarian (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1996). We might expect that the continuity in (co)parenting by both biological parents reduces the importance of a child-rearing role by the stepparent: stepparents will be more frequently additional parents instead of replacement parents in joint custody compared to sole custody (Clingempeel, Ievoli & Brand, 1984; Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Joint custody might therefore create a context for more pleasant interactions with stepchildren (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

### ***6.2.2 The relationships between parents and stepparents***

Several studies show that a strong couple bond in stepfamilies is very important for the wellbeing of both the members of the stepfamily as the stepfamily as a whole (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Papernow, 1993). Marital or relationship problems are expected to extend to other parts of the family system (Vandervalk et al., 2007). The meta-analytic review of Erel & Bruman (1995) reports clear evidence for conflicts within the marital or

partner dyad to negatively affect the parent-child relationship, indicating spillover effects between the two systems. Fine & Kurdek (1995) report empirical evidence for their hypothesis that the boundary between the marital subsystem and the stepchild-stepparent subsystem is even more permeable than the boundary between the marital and parent-child subsystem. They argue that the relationship of stepparents with both their partner and the stepchild are affectively linked because they develop simultaneously. There are however also studies suggesting a reverse association within stepfamilies (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987), others find no association (King, 2007; Marsiglio, 1992). The most empirical evidence points however to a positive association between the quality of the new partner relationship and the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Divorce not necessarily means the end of conflict between the ex-partners. Some post-divorce relationships may even be more discordant than pre divorce. A very robust finding in the research literature is the negative association between parental conflict and disruptive coparenting and child outcomes (Amato, 2010). Stepfamilies that are faced with high conflict between the ex-partners are more likely to have children with interpersonal or intrapersonal problems, creating additional challenges for the stepfamily to face (Ganong, Coleman & Hans, 2006). On the other hand, some couples continue to respect each other, remain friends after divorce and succeed in establishing a cooperative coparenting relationship. Especially within joint custody arrangements there would be a selection of low-conflict and high coparenting ex-couples (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Although these kinds of post-divorce coparenting relationships result in the most positive outcomes for children, they also can hinder the integration of a stepparent in the family system (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Weston & Macklin, 1990). Actively coparenting by the ex-partners may make it more difficult to set boundaries around the new partner relationship (Ganong, Coleman & Hans, 2006). Summarized, the research literature is inconclusive regarding (the direction of) the association between the relationship between the ex-partners and the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild.

One of the most challenging relationships within stepfamilies is probably those between stepparents and their partner's ex-spouse. We did not find any research regarding the influence of this relationship on the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Nevertheless, King (2006) stresses the need for future research on how the relationships between the biological parents and between the parent and stepparent of the same sex foster close ties between stepparents and stepchildren. Building upon the idea of parents and stepparents as *allies* (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007), both relationships might be positively related.

### **6.2.3 Gender differences**

An important difference between stepfathers and stepmothers is that society has higher expectations with regard to motherhood than with regard to fatherhood (Haverkort & Spruijt, 2012; Nielsen, 1999). Moreover, stepmothers are more involved in day-to-day care of children and domestic work than stepfathers (Allan, Crow & Hawker, 2011; Haverkort & Spruijt, 2012). Therefore, stepmothers have often more difficulties than stepfathers,

especially with regard to role ambiguity, as well as in relationship to the stepchild, her own child(ren) and the mother of the stepchild (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In addition, the residence of children is an important mediating factor in explaining the often more difficult relationship with stepmothers than with stepfathers (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997).

Steprelationships also differ according to the sex of the stepchild. The most common finding is that boys have better relationships with stepparents than girls, and that the negative influences of living in a stepfamily are bigger for girls than for boys (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The *same-sex hypothesis* suggests that daughters have a better relationship with the mother, and sons with the father. For stepparents, the opposite would be true (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004). Clingempeel, Ievoli & Brand (1984) found the stepparent-stepdaughter relationship in both stepmother and stepfather families to be more problematic than stepparent-stepson relationships. They found however no difference in the relationship quality of stepparents according to the sex of the stepchild.

Although we do not aim to focus on the gender differences in the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships, the findings in the research literature demonstrate the importance of distinguishing the different gender-dyads when studying steprelationships. In addition, there may be important differences between stepmother and stepfather families regarding socio-economic, demographic and marital history dimensions, which make it somewhat tricky to model them simultaneously (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). The results regarding the relationships between stepchildren and respectively stepmothers and stepfathers are therefore presented separately. The sex of the stepchild is included as a control variable.

## **6.3 Data and methods**

### **6.3.1 Data**

We use data from the project Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans et. al., 2011). A major strength of these data for the present study is that they include information on the stepparent-stepchild relationship by stepparents and stepchildren. This allows to study the stepparent-stepchild relationship from both perspectives and additionally gives an idea on the robustness of the results. Moreover, by analysing the estimation between variables measured with different persons, we partially overcome the problem of shared-method-variance (Sweeting, 2001).

In this chapter, we use data collected with the ex-partners of the dissolved marriages, with the new partners of these divorced men and women and of children living in the parental home. As described in chapter 2, participation and consent of at least one parent was a necessary condition for the participation of a resident child. Participation and consent of the partner was a necessary condition for the participation of a new partner.

We use four different research samples, according to the sex of the stepparent and whether the reported relationship quality by stepparent or stepchild is used: 1) children reporting on the relationship with stepfather (N = 353), 2) children reporting on the relationship with

stepmother (N = 366), 3) stepfathers reporting on the relationship with the stepchild (N = 234) and 4) stepmothers reporting on the relationship with the stepchild (N = 263). For the four research samples, the same conditions hold: 1) the stepparent lives together with the parent of the stepchild, 2) the stepchild lives together with at least one of his/her biological parents, 3) the stepchild is between 10 and 21 years old at the time of the interview and 4) there is at least some contact between the child and the parent that lives together with the stepparent. Combined, these four research samples gives us information on 426 stepfather and 486 stepmother configurations. For 149 stepfather configurations both stepfather and stepchild were questioned, for 136 stepmother configurations the stepmother and stepchild.

Next we discuss the operationalization of the study variables. The descriptives of all variables for the four samples are presented in Table 6.1. This table also marks the datasource of the variable, indicating from which actor in the study the information was taken.

### **6.3.2 Dependent variables**

The quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship was measured with a single question with five answering categories: very bad, bad, neither bad nor good, good, very good (range 1-5). This question was asked to both stepparents and stepchildren. Corresponding with the four research samples, we distinguish between the relationship quality reported by children on the relationship with stepfather, by children on the relationship with stepmother, by stepmothers on the relationship with the child and by stepfathers on the relationship with the child. The general tendency is that the stepparent-stepchild relationship is perceived as good to very good by both stepparents and stepchildren.

### **6.3.3 Key independent variables**

*Custody arrangement child.* To determine whether the child lives together with the stepparent (full-time or part-time) or not, we used the information on the custody arrangement reported by the parents. Mothers and fathers had to indicate on a calendar how many days and nights the child spend within their household and within the household of the other biological parent. This information was used to determine whether the child lives full-time in the same household with the parent (and stepparent), lives part-time in the same household with the stepparent or does not live together with the stepparent. We distinguish between living full-time (>75%) with mother, living alternately between 25% and 75% with mother & father and living full-time in father custody (>75%). This means that children on average have to spend at least two full days or four halve days a week with each parent to speak of joint custody.

*The quality of the parent-child relationship, reported by the child.* The quality of the parent-child relationship was questioned similar to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, with a single question for mother and father separately with five answering categories: *very bad, bad, neither bad nor good, good, very good* (range 1-5).

*Conflict between parent and stepparent, reported by the child.* The children were asked to indicate on a seven point-scale how often their father/mother and his/her new partner had arguments during the last twelve months. Answer categories varied from *never* to *daily* (range 1-7).

*Conflict between parent and stepparent, reported by stepparent.* The new partners were asked to indicate on a seven point-scale how often five specific conflict situations occurred between them and their partner. Answering categories varied from *never* to *daily*. The variable was constructed as the mean score on these five items (range 1-7).

*Conflict between mother and father, reported by the child.* Children had to indicate the frequency of five specific conflict situations between their mother and father. Answering categories varied again from *never* to *daily*. The variable was constructed as the mean score on these five items (range 1-7).

*Quality of the relationship between the biological parents of the stepchild, reported by the stepparent.* The stepparent was asked how good the relationship is between their partner and his/her ex-partner with a single question with five answering categories: *very bad, bad, neither bad nor good, good, very good* (range 1-5).

*Coparenting stepparent and parent, reported by the stepparent.* The new partners were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale how often during the last twelve months 1) *they talked with their partner about the child* and 2) *they took important decisions regarding the child*. Answering categories varied from *never* to *daily*. The variable was constructed as the mean score on these two items (range 1-7).

*Quality of the relationship between the stepparent and the other parent, reported by the stepparent.* The stepparent was asked how good the relationship is with the ex-partner of his/her current partner with a single question with 5 answering categories: *very bad, bad, neither bad nor good, good, very good* (range 1-5).

#### **6.3.4 Control variables**

We control for the *sex* and *age* of the stepchild. Girls and adolescents would experience more troubles in adapting to stepfamily configurations (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Age is modelled with two dummy variables, distinguishing 10 to 13 years old (the reference category), 14 to 17 years old and 18 to 21 years old, corresponding to early, middle and late adolescence. Sex is operationalized as a dichotomous variable with boys as reference category.

**Table 6.1: Descriptives for all study variables in the four reach samples (means and standard deviations and percentages)**

	Data source <sup>1</sup>	Children with stepfather (N = 353)	Children with stepmother (N = 366)	Stepfathers (N = 234)	Stepmothers (N = 263)
Relationship with stepparent	C	3.9 (1.0)	3.5 (1.1)	4.0 (0.9)	3.8 (1.1)
Relationship with father	C	4.0 (0.9)	3.8 (1.0)	3.9 (1.0)	4.1 (0.9)
Relationship with mother	C	4.3 (0.8)	4.3 (0.8)	4.4 (0.8)	4.2 (0.9)
Conflict between parent and stepparent	C	2.6 (1.3)	2.6 (1.4)	2.5 (1.3)	2.6 (1.4)
Conflict between parents	C	1.6 (1.0)	1.6 (1.0)	1.6 (1.0)	1.7 (1.0)
Relationship with stepchild	SP	4.1 (0.8)	4.0 (0.8)	4.1 (0.8)	3.9 (0.8)
Conflict with partner	SP	1.6 (0.5)	1.6 (0.6)	1.6 (0.5)	1.6 (0.7)
Relationship between partner and his/her ex	SP	2.9 (1.1)	2.7 (1.2)	2.9 (1.2)	2.7 (1.1)
Coparenting with partner regarding stepchild	SP	4.5 (1.2)	3.9 (1.2)	4.5 (1.3)	3.8 (1.2)
Relationship with same-sex parent	SP	2.7 (1.1)	2.6 (1.2)	2.6 (1.1)	2.5 (1.1)
Age stepchild	H	15.8 (3.4)	16.0 (3.3)	15.7 (3.4)	15.6 (3.3)
Years since divorce	M/F	10.0 (4.7)	9.2 (4.6)	10.2 (4.7)	8.7 (4.1)
Duration relation parent & stepparent (years)	M/F	8.2 (4.2)	6.3 (3.7)	8.5 (4.6)	7.0 (4.4)
Girls	M/F	51	46	47	42
Custody	M/F				
Sole mother custody		57	59	65	49
Joint physical custody		31	31	30	38
Sole father custody		10	10	5	13
Other parent living together with partner	M/F	64	51	64	57
Stepparent has own children	M/F				
Stepparent only has children living elsewhere		30	11	28	10
Stepparent has residential children		28	47	31	43
Parent and stepparent have common child	M/F	23	24	21	24
Child participated	C	100	100	66	56
Stepparent participated	SP	48	43	100	100
Father participated	F	56	57	47	100
Mother participated	M	86	88	100	68

<sup>1</sup> C = Child data, SP = Stepparent data, H = Household data, M/F = Mother/Father data

A second group of control variables are measures of family configuration, which showed to be related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship in previous studies (Ambert, 1986; Marsiglio, 1992; Stewart 2005a, 2005b). The information for these variables comes from the partner questionnaire.

*Presence of new partner with other parent.* We control for the presence of a stepparent in the other parental household, that is a stepmother regarding the stepfather-stepchild relationship, and a stepfather regarding the stepmother-stepchild relationship. The reference category of this dichotomous variable consists of the stepparent-stepchild dyads in which the other parent does not live together with a new partner.

*Presence (residential) stepsiblings.* We control for the presence of biological children of the stepparent from previous relationships or stepsiblings within or outside the household. The reference category of this dichotomous variable consists of the stepparent-stepchild dyads in which the stepparent does not have children from a previous relationship. Two dummy variables express 1) the presence of non-residential stepsiblings and 2) the presence of at least one residential stepsibling.

*Presence halfsiblings.* We control for the presence of shared children from the stepparent and biological parent in the household or halfsiblings. The reference category of this dichotomous variable consists of the stepparent-stepchild dyads in which the stepparent and biological parent have no biological shared children.

A third group of control variables is related to the timing of the family transitions. The information for these variables comes from the partner questionnaire.

*Duration since divorce.* We control for the years passed by since the parental divorce.

*Duration relationship partner and stepparent.* We control for the duration of the relationship between parent and stepparent.

### **6.3.5 Analytical strategy**

We begin by looking how the custody arrangement of the child is associated with the parent-child relationships, the relationships between the ex-partners, the new partner relationships and the relationships between old and new partners. These associations are important as explanations for existing associations between custody type and quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. All relationships are modelled with ordinary least square regression models. To estimate more cleanly the association, we controlled for the age and sex of the stepchild, the duration since divorce and the duration of the new partner relationship. Previous research has shown that children in joint physical custody are on average younger, more recently experienced the parental divorce and, consequently, are living more recently within a stepfamily formation (Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2011, 2013). Boys would also more often live in joint custody arrangements than girls (Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2011, 2013).

Next, we look at the predictors of a good stepparent-stepchild relationship in a multivariate way. First, we estimate 2x3 models for the relationship with stepmother and with stepfather reported by the child. Second, we estimate 2x3 models for the relationship with the stepchild, reported by stepmother and stepfather. All models are presented stepwise. The first model only contains the custody arrangement and control variables. In the second model, the other family relationships are added. This allows to see the additional explanatory power and the change in the effect of custody arrangement caused by including these variables. In the third model, significant interaction effects between the custody arrangement and the relationship variables are presented. These allow to see whether the association between the stepparent-stepchild relationship and other family relationships differs according to the custody arrangement of the stepchild. All independent relationship variables are mean-centred to reduce multicollinearity. This has no effect on the significance of the interaction or on the values of the specific slopes (Holmbeck, 2002).

In the multivariate analyses we combine information questioned with different actors. As frequently the case in multi-actor designs, not all actors always participated to the study and there is a certain selectivity in the multi-actor responses. We followed two strategies to deal with the multi-actor non-response. The first strategy involves imputation of the mean for the variables of the actor who did not participate. These are variables based on the data of the new partners regarding the reported relationship quality by the stepchild and variables based on the child data regarding the reported relationship quality by the stepparents. We control for these imputations with a dummy-variable expressing the non-response of this actor. A consequence of this method is that the standard deviation is underestimated and relationships between variables are distorted by pulling estimates of the correlation toward zero (Gelman & Hill 2007). Within each model, there are however only two variables with a considerable amount of mean-imputed cases. The overall impact of the imputation is therefore expected to be limited. The second strategy is applying complete-case analysis. Applying this strategy, only stepdyads from which both stepchild and stepparent participated to the study are used. The pitfall here is that the results may only hold for the selective group in which both stepparent and stepchild participated. By comparing the results from both strategies, we aim for drawing more reliable conclusions. For space-saving reasons, we only present the results for the mean-imputed models and discuss the correspondence of the complete-case analyses within the text.

As the distribution of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is very left-skewed within the four research samples, we also estimated models with the opposite value of the logarithmic transformed, inverted relationship measures. The results for these models are not different from the models with the non-transformed variables. We therefore have chosen to present the results for the non-transformed relationship variables, as these are more easily to interpret intuitively.



## 6.4 Results

### 6.4.1 Family relationships in different stepfather and stepmother configurations

Table 6.2 presents the association between the custody arrangement of the child and the different family relationships. First, there are some important associations between the custody arrangement and the (step)parent-(step)child relationships. Children in father custody report a worse relationship with mother than children in mother custody, and the reverse holds for the relationship with father. Similarly, the relationship with a full-time non-residential stepparent is worse than the relationship with a full-time residential stepparent. In other words, the within-household relationships with (step)parents are better than the between-household relationships with (step)parents. These results support the *residence hypothesis*, suggesting that the daily interaction involved in co-residence benefits a close relationship between (step)children and (step)parents. In contrast, the relationship quality reported by stepparents seems to be less conditional of co-residence, especially for stepmothers.

The next question is whether there are differences between full-time and part-time within- and between-household stepparent-stepchild relationships. The relationship with mother is not differently evaluated within joint and mother custody, while the relationship with father seems to be best evaluated in father custody. Similarly, the relationship with stepmother is best evaluated within father custody, while there are no differences in the relationship with stepfather for children in joint and mother custody. In contrast with our expectations, the relationship with part-time residential stepparents is never better than the relationship with full-time residential stepparents. The relationship with part-time residential stepmothers is even worse than those with full-time residential stepmothers. For the relationship quality reported by stepparents, part-time or full-time co-residence does not seem to matter.

**Table 6.2: Non-standardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting all relationship variables within stepfather and stepmother configurations**

DEPENDENT VARIABLES	Sample children with stepfather (N = 353)				Sample children with stepmother (N = 366)			
	Father custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Joint custody	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Reference category = mother custody								
<i>Reported by child</i>								
Relation with stepparent	-0.18	(0.20)	0.18	(0.12)	0.66	(0.22)**	0.16	(0.14)
Relation with father	0.52	(0.19)**	0.23	(0.12)*	0.77	(0.19)***	0.22	(0.12)°
Relation with mother	-0.76	(0.17)***	-0.09	(0.39)	-0.49	(0.16)**	-0.01	(0.10)
Conflict between parent & stepparent	-0.16	(0.34)	-0.20	(0.18)	-0.74	(0.29)***	0.10	(0.19)
Conflict between parents	-0.06	(0.23)	-0.10	(0.13)	-0.39	(0.21)°	-0.11	(0.13)
<i>Reported by stepparent</i>								
Relation with stepchild	-0.47	(0.32)	-0.11	(0.15)	-0.09	(0.21)	-0.01	(0.16)
Conflict with partner	0.03	(0.22)	0.17	(0.10)°	-0.02	(0.17)	-0.13	(0.13)
Relation between partner & his/her ex	-0.12	(0.47)	0.48	(0.21)*	-0.45	(0.30)	0.05	(0.22)
Coparenting with partner	-0.85	(0.50)°	-0.10	(0.23)	1.39	(0.29)***	0.18	(0.22)
Relation with ex-partner of partner	-0.74	(0.52)	0.21	(0.21)	-0.48	(0.30)	0.26	(0.22)
DEPENDENT VARIABLES	Sample stepfathers (N = 234)				Sample stepmothers (N = 263)			
	Father custody		Joint custody		Father custody		Joint custody	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Reference category = mother custody								
<i>Reported by child</i>								
Relation with stepparent	-1.19	(0.34)***	0.09	(0.15)	0.69	(0.27)*	0.15	(0.20)
Relation with father	0.37	(0.37)	0.22	(0.19)	0.84	(0.21)***	0.20	(0.16)
Relation with mother	-0.95	(0.30)**	-0.05	(0.13)	-0.78	(0.23)***	-0.13	(0.16)
Conflict between parent & stepparent	-0.47	(0.80)	-0.23	(0.25)	-0.42	(0.35)	0.35	(0.27)
Conflict between parents	0.09	(0.41)	-0.05	(0.19)	-0.35	(0.29)	-0.17	(0.21)
<i>Reported by stepparent</i>								
Relation with stepchild	-0.55	(0.25)*	-0.08	(0.12)	0.07	(0.17)	0.02	(0.12)
Conflict with partner	0.11	(0.17)	0.19	(0.08)*	0.07	(0.13)	-0.07	(0.09)
Relation between partner & his/her ex	-0.06	(0.37)	0.39	(0.18)*	-0.18	(0.23)	0.40	(0.16)*
Coparenting with partner	-1.08	(0.42)**	-0.01	(0.19)	1.46	(0.23)***	0.45	(0.16)**
Relation with ex-partner of partner	-0.40	(0.42)	0.22	(0.17)	-0.31	(0.23)	0.44	(0.16)**

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Based upon multivariate regression with following variables: custody arrangement, age stepchild, sex stepchild, years since divorce, duration relationship parent and stepparent and multi-actor response variables

Next, we look at the frequency of within-household conflict between the parent and his/her new partner and the between-household conflict between the parents or ex-partners. Overall, the frequency of conflict between both parents and between parent and stepparent seems quite similar in joint and sole custody arrangements. It may be that positive and negative effects of joint physical custody regarding the relationship between parents and between parents and stepparents balance each other out. Stepparents do report a better relationship between the ex-partners in joint custody. On the one hand, this could indicate a selection of more harmonious ex-couples into joint custody arrangements, but this is not confirmed in the results regarding parental conflict. A closer relationship may also create more possibilities for conflict. On the other hand, joint custody may also positively affect the relationship between the ex-partners over time. The latter is no selection effect, but a consequence of the arrangement itself. The better relationship between mother and father in joint custody is not reflected in a better stepparent-stepchild, which indicates either a lack of association between the relationship between parents and the stepparent-stepchild relationship or the effect to be counterbalanced by other associations with joint custody.

In addition, we look at the degree the stepparent report to be involved in the childrearing of the stepchild. Co-residence with the stepchild seems again to be important in this regard. Full-time non-residential stepparents clearly report less coparenting than residential stepparents. A remarkable difference between stepfathers and stepmothers is that stepfathers report no more or less coparenting with the mother regarding children in joint custody compared to mother custody, while stepmothers report less coparenting regarding children in joint custody compared to children in father custody. The lower degree of coparenting by part-time residential stepmothers is not reflected in a better relationship with part-time stepmothers. Either the degree of coparenting by fathers and stepmothers is not related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, or the association is counterbalanced by other associations with joint custody.

Finally, the relationship between stepfather and father is not related to the custody arrangement of the child. Stepmothers do report a better relationship with the mother for children in joint custody compared to children in mother and father custody. This better relationship between mother and stepmother in joint custody is however not reflected in a better relationship with part-time residential stepmothers. This suggests either no association between the mother-stepmother relationship and the stepparent-stepchild relationship or the association being counterbalanced by other associations with the custody type. The results from the multivariate model in which the stepparent-stepchild relationship is related to the custody arrangement and the different family relationships will give us more information on this interrelatedness of family relationships.

#### ***6.4.2 Which factors are associated with a good relationship between stepparents and stepchildren?***

Table 6.3 and Table 6.4 show the results regarding the relationship quality with respectively stepfather and stepmother, reported by stepchildren. Model 1 confirms that

children who live together full-time with their stepmother report a better relationship. We do not find a similar association regarding the relationship quality with the stepfather. Additional analyses reveal that this association is suppressed by the variable expressing the participation of the father. The latter on its turn is explained by the relationship variables in model 2.

The differences according to custody arrangement disappear after the relationship variables are included in model 2. The inclusion of these variables increases the explained variance from 13% to 33% regarding the relationship with stepfather and from 10% to 35% regarding the relationship with stepmother. In sum, mainly the within-household relationships are associated with the relationship between stepparent and stepchild. The quality of the relationship with mother is strongly associated with the relationship with father, the relationship with father is strongly associated with the relationship with stepmother. The relationship with father is however not associated with the relationship with stepfather, and the relationship with mother not with the relationship with stepmother. These results are in line with the research literature that reports a positive spillover in within-household parent-child & stepparent-stepchild dyads and an unrelatedness within the between-household relationship dyads. Also the results for the relationships between parents and stepparents point towards a greater association within the within-household relationship dyads. The frequency of conflict between mother and stepfather is negatively associated with the relationship with the stepfather, the frequency of conflict between father and stepmother is negatively associated with the relationship with the stepmother. The frequency of parental conflict is not associated with the relationship with neither stepfather nor stepmother. The only association within a between-household relationship dyad concerns the relationship between mother and stepmother and the relationship of the child with stepmother. Mothers may thereby be important in supporting the development of a good relationship of the child with the stepparent.

**Table 6.3: Non-standardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting the relationship quality of stepchildren with stepfather**

N = 353	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	3.83	(0.26)***	3.56	(0,23)***	3,55	(0,23)***
Custody type (ref = mother custody)						
Father custody (FC)	-0.18	(0.20)	0.11	(0,19)	0,39	(0,20) <sup>o</sup>
Joint custody (JC)	0.15	(0.12)	0.16	(0,11)	0,14	(0,11)
Girls (ref = boys)	-0.25	(0.10)**	-0.14	(0,09)	-0,15	(0,09) <sup>o</sup>
Age child (ref = 10-13 years old)						
14-17 years old	-0.21	(0.13) <sup>o</sup>	-0.09	(0,12)	-0,06	(0,12)
18-21 years old	-0.38	(0.13)***	-0.18	(0,12)	-0,22	(0,12) <sup>o</sup>
Years since divorce parents	0.02	(0.02)	0.03	(0,02) <sup>o</sup>	0,02	(0,02)
Duration relation parent and stepparent	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0,02)	0,01	(0,02)
Other parent living with partner (ref = no)	0.17	(0.10) <sup>o</sup>	0.19	(0,09)*	0,18	(0,09) <sup>o</sup>
Stepparent own child(ren) relation (ref = no)						
Only non-residential child(ren)	-0.17	(0.14)	-0.16	(0,12)	-0,11	(0,12)
Residential child(ren)	-0.04	(0.13)	-0.09	(0,12)	-0,09	(0,12)
Parent and stepparent child(ren) (ref = no)	0.10	(0.14)	0.15	(0,12)	0,14	(0,12)
Quality relation child with father			0.04	(0,06)	0,04	(0,06)
Quality relation child with mother			0.45	(0,06)***	0,23	(0,09)**
Conflict between stepparent and parent			-0.20	(0,04)***	-0,20	(0,04)***
Conflict between parents			-0.05	(0,07)	-0,07	(0,07)
Coparenting stepparent & partner			0.09	(0,06)	0,01	(0,06)
Relation stepparent with ex of partner			-0.09	(0,06)	-0,10	(0,07)
FC X relation with mother					0,45	(0,15)**
JC X relation with mother					0,25	(0,13) <sup>o</sup>
FC X coparenting stepparent & partner					0,30	(0,22)
JC X coparenting stepparent & partner					0,13	(0,14)
FC X relation stepparent with ex of partner					0,44	(0,36)
JC X relation stepparent with ex of partner					-0,09	(0,13)
Stepparent participated	0.15	(0.11)	0.10	(0,10)	0,15	(0,10)
Father participated	-0.26	(0.11)*	-0.13	(0,10)	-0,11	(0,10)
Mother participated	0.10	(0.19)	0.05	(0,17)	0,11	(0,17)
R <sup>2</sup>		.13		.33		.37

<sup>o</sup>*p*<.10, \**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001

In model 3, three interaction effects between the custody type and relationship variables came out for the relationship with stepfather, one regarding the relationship with stepmother. In the complete-case analysis, the coefficients of the interaction terms with the degree of coparenting between mother and father and the relationship between father and stepfather are significantly different from zero. Therefore, we decided to keep them in the final model. In model 2, the degree of coparenting between stepmother and father seems to be important for the relationship with stepmother, but model 3 shows this only to be the case in mother custody. Similarly, there are indications that coparenting by stepfather and mother is only positively associated with the relationship with stepfather for children in father custody. These findings do not support the limited child-rearing hypothesis, but they also do not suggest higher stepparental involvement to be positively related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship within the same household. The results rather suggest that if children do not at all co-reside with a stepparent, at least some involvement in child-rearing is important for a good relationship. The interaction effect between the relationship with mother and the custody arrangement points in the same direction: a good relationship with mother is even stronger associated with the relationship with stepfather if children live full-time with their father. Finally, a good relationship between father and stepfather seems especially important for a good relationship with stepfather for children in father custody. Here again, fathers may act as allies of the stepparent in developing a good relationship with the stepchild. Finally, none of the interaction effects supports the idea of a stronger association of between-household relationships within joint custody.

With regard to the control variables in Table 6.3 and Table 6.4, girls report a lower relationship quality with stepfathers than boys, while no differences are found between the relationship of boys and girls with stepmothers. Older adolescents report a lower relationship quality with stepparents than young adolescents. If the other parent also has a new partner, children report a better relationship with a stepparent, which may have to do with less loyalty conflicts compared to single parents. We find no differences according to the number of years since parental divorce. The duration of the relationship between father and stepmother is negatively related to the relationship quality. Finally, if the stepmother has children from a previous relationship living in the household, children report a worse relationship with her.

**Table 6.4: Non-standardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting the relationship quality of stepchildren with stepmother**

N = 366	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	3.59	(0.31)**	3.46	(0.26)***	3.42	(0.26)***
Custody type (ref = mother custody)						
Father custody (FC)	0.67	(0.22)***	0.10	(0.20)	0.16	(0.22)
Joint custody (JC)	0.11	(0.14)	0.03	(0.12)	0.01	(0.12)
Girls (ref = boys)	-0.13	(0.11)	-0.01	(0.10)	0.00	(0.10)
Age child (ref = 10-13 years old)						
14-17 years old	-0.15	(0.15)	0.05	(0.13)	0.05	(0.13)
18-21 years old	-0.27	(0.16) <sup>°</sup>	0.14	(0.14)	0.12	(0.14)
Years since divorce parents	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.01)	0.02	(0.01)
Duration relation parent and stepparent	-0.05	(0.03) <sup>°</sup>	-0.04	(0.02) <sup>°</sup>	-0.04	(0.02) <sup>°</sup>
Other parent living with partner (ref = no)	0.22	(0.12) <sup>°</sup>	0.09	(0.10)	0.09	(0.10)
Stepparent own child(ren) relation (ref = no)						
Only non-residential child(ren)	-0.38	(0.27)	-0.13	(0.24)	-0.06	(0.24)
Residential child(ren)	-0.28	(0.17) <sup>°</sup>	-0.24	(0.15) <sup>°</sup>	-0.24	(0.15) <sup>°</sup>
Parent and stepparent child(ren) (ref = no)	-0.04	(0.20)	-0.01	(0.17)	-0.05	(0.17)
Quality relation child with father			0.47	(0.05)***	0.45	(0.05)***
Quality relation child with mother			0.00	(0.07)	0.00	(0.07)
Conflict between stepparent and parent			-0.22	(0.04)***	-0.22	(0.04)***
Conflict between parents			0.07	(0.09)	0.08	(0.09)
Coparenting stepparent & partner			0.18	(0.07)*	0.40	(0.11)***
Relation stepparent with ex of partner			0.12	(0.07) <sup>°</sup>	0.14	(0.07) <sup>°</sup>
FC X coparenting stepparent & partner					-0.31	(0.17) <sup>°</sup>
JC X coparenting stepparent & partner					-0.40	(0.16)*
Stepparent participated	0.22	(0.17)	0.03	0.15	0.08	(0.15)
Father participated	0.17	(0.21)	0.20	0.18	0.20	(0.18)
Mother participated	-0.07	(0.20)	0.05	0.17	0.03	(0.17)
R <sup>2</sup>		.10		.35		.36

<sup>°</sup>*p*<.10, \**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001

Table 6.5 and Table 6.6 report the results for the relationship with the stepchild reported by stepfathers and stepmothers. As for the children, we see in model 1 that living together with the child is positively associated with the relationship quality reported by stepfathers. In model 1, we see no significant differences according to custody arrangement in the relationship quality reported by stepmothers.

The inclusion of the relationship variables in model 2 increases the explained variance, but not as much as for the stepchildren. The mother-child relationship is strongly associated with the relationship quality reported by stepfathers. We find no similar effect of the relationship with father regarding the stepmother-stepchild relationship. We do see for both stepfathers and stepmothers a negative association between the degree of conflict between the parent and stepparent and the relationship of the stepparent with the child. The degree in which stepfathers and stepmothers are involved in decisions regarding the stepchild is positively related to the reported relationship quality. In addition, for stepmothers we see that a good relationship with the mother is important for a good relationship with the child.

In model 3, we see very similar interaction effects between the custody type and the relationship variables as for the relationship reported by the stepchild for stepfathers. The results for coparenting with the mother and the relationship with the father point towards the importance of involvement in childrearing and support by the fathers if the child is living with the father. The interaction between the relationship with mother and father custody however works the opposite way around compared to the child model. This effect only appears in combination with the other interaction terms but also holds in the complete-case analysis. It suggests that the relationship quality with mother is negatively related to the relationship quality with the stepchild reported by stepfathers within father custody. Stepfathers may feel standing at the side-line in case of a close relationship between mother and her non-residential children.

For stepmothers, we found two interaction effects. Analogue the findings for the stepchildren, coparenting of the stepmother is not positively related to the quality of the relationship of the stepmother with the child within joint custody, in contrast to mother and father custody. Finally, a good relationship quality between the ex-partners seem to be negatively related to the relationship of stepmothers with the stepchild in joint custody and, especially, father custody.

Finally, neither age nor sex of the child is associated with the relationship quality reported by stepparents. Also the family configuration and the number of years since parental divorce are not related to the relationship with the stepchild, except for a negative association between the presence of residential children from a previous relationship and the relationship of the stepmother with the stepchild.



**Table 6.5: Non-standardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting the relationship quality with stepchildren reported by stepfathers**

N = 234	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	4.18	(0.21)***	3.99	(0.20)***	3.96	(0.20)***
Custody type (ref = mother custody)						
Father custody (FC)	-0.54	(0.25)*	-0.14	(0.25)	0.49	(0.29) <sup>o</sup>
Joint custody (JC)	-0.09	(0.12)	-0.05	(0.11)	-0.01	(0.11)
Girls (ref = boys)	-0.04	(0.10)	-0.05	(0.10)	-0.05	(0.10)
Age child (ref = 10-13 years old)						
14-17 years old	-0.07	(0.13)	-0.02	(0.13)	-0.02	(0.13)
18-21 years old	0.06	(0.14)	0.16	(0.14)	0.06	(0.14)
Years since divorce parents	0.01	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)
Duration relation parent and stepparent	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.02)
Other parent living with partner (ref = no)	-0.03	(0.11)	0.03	(0.10)	-0.01	(0.10)
Stepparent own child(ren) relation (ref = no)						
Only non-residential child(ren)	-0.04	(0.13)	-0.06	(0.12)	-0.06	(0.12)
Residential child(ren)	0.06	(0.12)	0.04	(0.12)	-0.02	(0.12)
Parent and stepparent child(ren) (ref = no)	0.16	(0.14)	0.21	(0.13) <sup>o</sup>	0.20	(0.12)
Quality relation child with father			0.02	(0.07)	0.02	(0.06)
Quality relation child with mother			0.31	(0.08)***	0.31	(0.11)**
Conflict stepparent with partner			-0.25	(0.09)**	-0.26	(0.09)**
Relation between partner & ex			0.04	(0.06)	0.07	(0.06)
Coparenting stepparent with partner			0.14	(0.04)***	0.12	(0.04)**
Relation stepparent with ex of partner			-0.01	(0.06)	-0.04	(0.07)
FC X relation with mother					-0.54	(0.26)***
JC X relation with mother					-0.08	(0.18)
FC X coparenting stepparent & partner					0.52	(0.15)***
JC X coparenting stepparent & partner					-0.06	(0.10)
FC X relation stepparent with ex of partner					0.75	(0.21)***
JC X relation stepparent with ex of partner					-0.08	(0.10)
Child participated	-0.11	(0.11)	-0.12	(0.10)	-0.08	(0.10)
Same-sex parent participated	0.09	(0.11)	0.16	(0.10)	0.16	(0.10)
R <sup>2</sup>		.05		.18		.26

<sup>o</sup>*p*<.10, \**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001

**Table 6.6: Non-standardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting the relationship quality with stepchildren reported by stepmothers**

N = 263	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	4.21	(0.25)	4.19	(0.24)***	4.22	(0.24)***
Custody type (ref = mother custody)						
Father custody (FC)	0.03	(0.17)	-0.07	(0.18)	-0.30	(0.21)
Joint custody (JC)	0.06	(0.12)	-0.04	(0.12)	-0.02	(0.12)
Girls (ref = boys)	-0.03	(0.11)	0.01	(0.11)	0.02	(0.10)
Age child (ref = 10-13 years old)						
14-17 years old	-0.15	(0.14)	-0.09	(0.13)	-0.10	(0.13)
18-21 years old	-0.17	(0.15)	-0.08	(0.14)	-0.10	(0.14)
Years since divorce parents	0.01	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)
Duration relation parent and stepparent	-0.01	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Other parent living with partner (ref = no)	-0.10	(0.11)	-0.06	(0.11)	-0.04	(0.11)
Stepparent own child(ren) relation (ref = no)						
Only non-residential child(ren)	-0.17	(0.20)	-0.13	(0.19)	-0.08	(0.19)
Residential child(ren)	-0.24	(0.13)	-0.22	(0.12) <sup>o</sup>	-0.20	(0.12)*
Parent and stepparent child(ren) (ref = no)	-0.14	(0.14)	-0.10	(0.14)	-0.09	(0.13)
Quality relation child with father			0.02	(0.08)	0.00	(0.08)
Quality relation child with mother			0.15	(0.08) <sup>o</sup>	0.12	(0.08)
Conflict stepparent with partner			-0.15	(0.08) <sup>o</sup>	-0.15	(0.08) <sup>o</sup>
Relation between partner & ex			-0.15	(0.07)*	-0.06	(0.08)
Coparenting stepparent with partner			0.16	(0.05)***	0.25	(0.06)***
Relation stepparent with ex of partner			0.24	(0.07)***	0.25	(0.07)***
FC X relation between partner & ex					-0.42	(0.15)***
JC X relation between partner & ex					-0.15	(0.10)
FC X coparenting stepparent & partner					0.06	(0.12)
JC X coparenting stepparent & partner					-0.29	(0.10)***
Child participated	0.14	(0.12)	0.08	(0.11)	0.02	(0.11)
Same-sex parent participated	-0.14	(0.13)	-0.09	(0.12)	-0.05	(0.12)
R <sup>2</sup>	.03		.15		.21	

<sup>o</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## 6.5 Discussion

The juridical and normative support of joint legal and joint physical custody has led to an increasing amount of youngsters living part-time with mother and part-time with father following divorce. As a consequence, a growing group of children is living part-time together with the new partner of one or both parents. This chapter focused on the association between part-time stepfamily configurations and the quality of the relationship between stepparent and stepchild. Using a family systems perspective, we focused on how joint custody arrangements are associated with different family relationships, how these relationships are interrelated with the stepparent-stepchild relationship and whether these associations vary across custody arrangements. In line with one of the basic assumptions of the family systems perspective, we find a strong interrelatedness of the different family relationships. A comparison of the stepparent and stepchild perspective learns that the stepparent-stepchild relationship is more strongly related to relationships within the own subsystems than with relationships outside these subsystems: for stepchildren their relationship with mother or father are most important, for stepparents their relationships with the parents. These differences might however also be caused (partially) be shared-method-variance (Sweeting, 2001).

At least some co-residence with a stepparent seems important for of a good relationship quality, confirming the residence hypothesis. The relationship with a non-residential stepparent is clearly worse. The multivariate analyses reveal that the relationship between the custody arrangement and the relationship with stepparents and stepchildren mainly runs via a good relationship with the parent living with the stepparent. This may also explain why there is no difference between custody arrangements in the relationship quality reported by stepmothers, as this relationship showed no association with the relationship with father.

Joint custody seems to be differently associated with the stepfather-stepchild relationship than with the stepmother-stepchild relationship. On average, there is no difference between full-time and part-time residential stepfathers. The relationship of stepchildren with part-time residential stepmothers is however less good than with full-time residential stepmothers. The less good relationship with father in joint custody (compared to father custody) seems to be the most important factor in explaining the lower relationship quality with part-time residential stepmothers compared to full-time residential stepmothers. The better relationship between mothers and stepmothers (positively related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship) does not seem to compensate this negative effect. The lower degree of coparenting of stepmothers with father in joint custody arrangements compared to father custody also offers no explanation, as we saw the degree of coparenting not to be associated with the stepmother-stepchild relationship within joint custody. In sum, opposite to our expectations, the results do not suggest a better relationship with part-time stepparents, but reversely, a worse relationship with part-time stepmothers compared to full-time residential stepmothers.

A good relationship with father is important for a good relationship with stepmother, a good relationship with mother is important for a good relationship with stepfather. When parents have a good relationship with the child, they will be inclined to stimulate a good relationship between stepparent and stepchild (King, 2007). The increase in joint custody and the better relationship with father following divorce could help in this regard to reduce differences between stepfather and stepmother configurations and weaken the existing negative stereotypes around stepmotherhood. The difference in relationship quality between full-time residential stepmothers and part-time residential stepmothers is indeed smaller than the difference between full-time residential stepmothers and full-time non-residential stepmothers.

The relationship with father is not related to the relationship with stepfather, neither is the relationship with mother related to the relationship with stepmother. Hence, there is no positive spillover between those relationships, but there are also no indications of conflict or competition between parent and stepparent of the same sex (King, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). A good relationship with respectively father and mother does not impede a good relationship with stepfather and stepmother. These findings are in line with results from previous studies on stepchildren in sole custody (Buchanan et al., 1996; King, 2007) and additionally learn that they also hold for stepchildren in joint custody.

We find no empirical support for the limited childrearing hypothesis. A higher degree of coparenting with the parent by the stepparent did not seem to be negatively related to the relationship of the stepchild with the stepparent. It may be that other measures of stepparental involvement (such as monitoring or authority) are more important in this regard. Our sample also mainly contains established stepfamilies, and a limited stepchildrearing role is especially in the beginning of stepfamily formation important. For non-residential stepparents, increased coparenting even positively affects the relationship of children with their stepparent. The latter association may suggest that if stepparent and stepchild do not co-reside, at least some involvement of the stepparent is important for the child for establishing a good relationship with the stepparent. The involvement of the stepparent implies in this context also a certain involvement of the non-residential parent in the education of the child.

For stepparents, increased coparenting was positively related to the relationship with both residential and non-residential stepchildren. These results suggest that a certain degree of involvement of the stepparent in the life of the stepchild is important for a good relationship. On the other hand, within joint custody arrangements, the degree of coparenting was found not to be related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship. The lower degree of coparenting by stepmothers within joint custody compared to father custody can therefore not function as a beneficial condition for better stepparent-stepchild relationships by lower stepparental involvement.

The negative association between the frequency of conflict within the new partner relationship and the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is in line with previous

studies that demonstrated the importance of a good partner relationship for the well-functioning of the stepfamily (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Papernow, 1993). If there are many problems between parent and stepparent, it is also hard to establish a strong stepparent-stepchild relationship. Conversely, problems between stepparent and stepchild will also have negative spillover effects on the partner relationship.

The frequency of parental conflict on the other hand is not related to the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, despite the strong association between parental conflict and child wellbeing (Amato, 2010). These results confirm the stronger association within within-household relationship dyads than within between-household relationship dyads. The more explicit presence of the ex-partner in joint custody was also not related to the frequency of conflict between new partners, nor did the average amount of conflict between the ex-partners differ between custody arrangements. Stepparents did report a better relationship between ex-partners with a child in joint custody compared to stepparents of a child in sole custody. This relationship was however negatively related to the, part-time or full-time, within-household relationship between stepmother & stepchild. These results confirm the idea that a stronger bond between the ex-partners may hinder the integration of the stepparent in the family system (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Weston & Macklin, 1990). As the relationship between mothers and fathers within joint custody are on average better, this implies additional challenges for stepfamilies, and especially stepmother configurations, with children living part-time with mother and part-time with father.

The last family relationship that we took into account is those between the stepparent and the ex-partner of his/her partner. In the present research literature, this relationship is largely ignored. Our results point however towards the idea of parents as allies of stepparents in developing a good relationship with the stepchild (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). The importance of this relationship for the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren may encourage researchers to explore deeper the importance of this relationship in the well-functioning of stepfamilies.

In general, we can say that we find strong empirical evidence for a stronger spillover within within-household relationships dyads compared to between-household relationship dyads. We found no evidence for a stronger association of between-household relationships within joint custody compared to sole custody. These results suggest that also in case of joint custody, the family system of mother and father are to a certain extent separate worlds and are not more strongly interrelated than if children co-reside full-time with mother or father.

The results further suggest some differences between stepmothers and stepfathers that are worth further exploring. First, the stepparental involvement of part-time stepfathers was not lower than those of full-time residential stepfathers, while part-time residential stepmothers are less coparenting with father than full-time residential stepmothers. The latter suggests that the stepmother role is more reduced by the presence of the mother in

joint custody than the stepfather role by the presence of the father. Next, the relationship between mother and stepmother is more important for the stepmother-stepchild relationship than the relationship between father and stepfather for the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Third, only in joint custody more frequent coparenting between father and stepmother is not positively related to the relationship of the stepmother with the stepchild. In addition, a good relationship between the ex-partners only seems to negatively affect the relationship with the stepchild of stepmothers, not of stepfathers. All these results suggest more interpersonal strains between the mother and stepmother role than between the father and stepfather role. Finally, residential children from a previous relationship are only negatively related to the relationship of stepmothers with their stepchildren. This again points towards difficulties with combining the mother and stepmother role but intrapersonal in this case.

We also want to reflect on some limitations of the present study. First, the presented results do not allow to make conclusions on the selection of good or bad child dyads and stepparent-stepchild dyads into specific custody arrangements. Custody arrangements can change. For example if children experience problems with a new partner of mother or father, they can decide to live full-time with the other parent. Especially in joint custody, the step to move to the other parent in case of discordant (step)parent-(step)-child relationships will be smaller. Second, a point of further attention is the association of the stepparent-stepchild relationship with the complete family history of the child, in which the present marital status of the parents (and stepparents) is taken into account, as well as additional family transitions since parental divorce. Remarriage, post-marital cohabitation, preceding stepfamily dissolutions and the duration of preceding single-parent family configurations may all have their own influence on the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Finally, role ambiguity is an important concept within systems theory, which was not concluded in the present study. We know from previous studies that uncertainties about the positions and roles of family members are negatively related to the quality of the family relationships (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986), including the relationship between stepparent and stepchild. The multiple residential (step)parental figures within joint custody may be associated with more ambiguity within the family system.

The general conclusion of this chapter is that the differences between non-residential, part-time and full-time residential stepparenthood are mediated and moderated by other family relationships, such as those with and between the biological parents and their partners. These results may be inspiring for future research as they demonstrate the importance of recognizing the variation in stepfamily formations and their internal processes, including part-time steprelationships. Stepfamily processes clearly operate differently according to the custody arrangements of children. The increasing number of children in joint physical custody following parental divorce and the reality of stepfamily formation gives the latter an important social dimension.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Custody arrangements and the partner and parental relationships within stepfamily formations following parental divorce**

This chapter draws in part upon the following publication and conference papers:

Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2013). Samen opvoeden door ouders en plusouders. Verblijfsco-ouderschap en de relaties tussen oude en nieuwe partners binnen nieuwsamenstelde gezinnen na echtscheiding. *Relaties en Nieuwe Gezinnen*, 3(4), 1-32.

Vanassche, S. (2013). Verblijfsco-ouderschap en nieuwsamengestelde gezinnen. *Scheiden in Meervoud*, Antwerpen, 19<sup>th</sup> of April.

Vanassche, S. (2013). Verblijfsco-ouderschap en nieuwsamengestelde gezinnen. *Workshop Gedeeld ouderschap na scheiding: Inzichten uit het onderzoek*, Trefpunt Zelfhulp, Leuven, 20<sup>th</sup> of March.

Vanassche, S. (2012). Joint custody arrangements and the partner and parental relationships within stepfamily formations following divorce. *Second Doctoral Research Seminar*, Leuven, 15<sup>th</sup> of November.

## 7.1 Introduction

The binuclear family structures of children following parental divorce that were described in the first chapters also create a specific setting for the development of the relationships between old and new partners, between parents and stepparents, that currently only have scarcely been touched upon by previous studies. Important in this regard is the current focus on biological ties regarding childrearing following divorce, as described in chapter 1. Since the inclusion of joint legal custody in divorce law in 1995, both parents maintain by law the primary caregivers of the child. Parents are expected to continue their parental tasks and responsibilities together. In addition, as described in chapter 4, an increasing proportion of children is living part-time with mother and part-time with father following divorce. A possible side-consequence of these changes is that they may have weakened the position of stepparents. Although stepparents in the past also did not have legal duties and rights towards the child, the non-custodial biological parent did not have either, expect the right to visit the child (Van Rumst, 2008). The lack of legal ties of stepparents towards stepchildren was however partially compensated by their co-residence with the child, especially for stepfathers. Also nowadays, stepfathers are often co-residing a larger proportion of time with the child than the biological father (see chapter 4). This residential relationship creates a certain involvement and factual rights regarding the education of the child, merely resulting from sharing the same household. Nevertheless, within the context of joint physical custody, this advantage of co-residence for stepparents in comparison with non-residential biological parents disappears. Biological parents nowadays maintain by standard the legal rights on the child and they increasingly maintain the parental roles associated with sharing the same roof. It is currently unclear how this influences the position of stepparents. In addition, joint custody assumes a certain cooperation between the ex-spouses, which may be influential for the relationships between old and new partners. We know little about how this more intense bond between ex-partners influences the new partner relationships.

In this chapter, we focus on the question how the maintenance of a parental bond between ex-partners and joint physical custody of the (step)child are associated with the parental role of the stepparent and the partner relationship between the parent and stepparent. A first goal is to describe the occurrence and frequency of coparental communication of divorced mothers and fathers with respectively their ex-partner and their new partner. Next, we aim to describe the relationship quality between the ex-partners and within the new partner relationship of mother or father. A second goal is to explore the interrelatedness of different dimensions of the relationships between divorced mothers, fathers and a new partner of one of both. We thereby consider the relationship quality, conflict frequency and ambiguous feelings between ex-partners and within the new partner relationship, as well as the frequency of coparental communication, coparental conflict, mutual support and respect and ambiguous feelings about parenthood reported by parents and stepparents. Finally, we explore the association between these different relationships and the custody arrangement of the child.



## **7.2 Theoretical framework**

### ***7.2.1 Binuclear stepfamily systems***

In this chapter, we focus on the relationships between mother, father, and a new partner of mother or father. The whole family system, the family relationships and functioning of the different subsystems are altered following divorce and stepfamily formation (Heterington, 1999). If parents split up, mother and father become ex-partners, substantially changing the pre-divorce partner system. Nevertheless, they remain a parental union towards common children, especially as joint custody following divorce is the social and legal norm nowadays (Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Christopher, 1999, p. 589): “*Former spouses need to establish new rules for parenting together in their new family structure, and at the same time they need to relinquish their roles as marital partners.*” If mother or father starts a new partner relationship, a new partner and stepparental subsystem are established. Coparenting arrangements that were established following divorce might be disrupted when a new member enters the family system (Christensen & Rettig, 1995). In addition, an intriguing relationship between the ex-partner and the new partner are created, with both their own needs and interests towards the child. Overall, the three actors within these specific triads have both partner and parental roles towards each other. Stepfamily formation therefore requires a reassignment of these different roles (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987). All these changes may induce boundary ambiguity or questions about membership of the family and the position and role of old and new family members (Van Bavel, 1995).

### ***7.2.2 Coparental relationships within different custody arrangements***

Both joint legal custody and joint physical custody of children following divorce imply that ex-spouses redefine their parental roles while terminating their spousal roles (Ahrons, 1981). The research literature indicates a large heterogeneity in the coparental relationship between ex-partners (Baum, 2003). Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin (1990) studied the coparental relationship between mother and father in the second year following divorce. They distinguished four coparenting patterns, combining an either low or high degree of cooperative communication and discord: *disengaged*, *conflicted*, *cooperative* and *mixed coparenting patterns*. They found a quite similar distribution of the four patterns across mother, joint and father custody. Similarly, Amato, Kane & James (2011) identified three types of post-divorce coparenting: *cooperative coparenting*, *parallel coparenting* and *single parenting*. They did not distinguish joint custody, but compared non-residential mothers and fathers. Non-residential parents were most likely to be mothers in the cooperative coparenting cluster and least likely to be mothers in the single parenting cluster. These findings are in line with an earlier study of Hawkins, Amato & King (2006) that showed that non-residential mothers on average maintain a closer relationship with their children than non-residential fathers.

Although a cooperative coparenting relationship between ex-spouses results in the most positive outcomes for children (Amato, Kane & James, 2011), it may also hinder the integration of a stepparent in the family system (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Within

stepfamily formations, the question is not only whether parents keep on discussing parental issues with their ex-partner, but also the degree in which they communicate on parental issues with their new partner or the stepparent of the child. In contrast with biological parents, stepparents don't share genes with the child. Their investment in the education of the stepchild might therefore not be seen as an evolutionary interest in passing these genes to the next generations (Berger et al., 2008). The investment in childrearing by stepparents can rather be seen as a relationship effort (Anderson, Kaplan & Lancaster, 1999). Actively coparenting by the ex-partners, however, may make it more difficult to set boundaries around the new partner relationship (Ganong, Coleman & Hans, 2006). Stepparents may feel like being left out, or being perceived as an intruder, disrupting the previous family relationships and positions (Golish, 2003). Especially non-residential stepmothers would often feel left out and experience the coparental relationship between the biological parents as a treat of the new couple bond (Ambert, 1986). Co-residence with the child would be an important moderator, with residential biological parents and residential stepparents investing more in childrearing than non-residential biological parents (Anderson, Kaplan & Lancaster, 1999). It remains nevertheless unclear how part-time co-residence in case of joint physical custody influences the involvement of (step)fathers and (step)mothers in (step)childrearing.

A strong ex-couple bond or intensive coparenting by the biological parents may decrease the stepparental involvement, but the presence of a stepparent may also decrease the involvement of non-residential parents. Stepparents are thereby assumed to act as substitute parents (Stewart, 2010). Ganong and Coleman (2004) report experiences with fathers who couldn't get used to being a part-time father. Some fathers therefore abandon their parental role towards children from previous unions over time, especially when they remarry (Stephens, 1996; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). The results of Amato, Kane & James (2011) support the idea that parental marriage interferes with the quality of post-divorce parenting: residential parents in the cooperative coparenting cluster were the least likely to be remarried. Also Christensen & Rettig (1995) found that ex-partners have less coparenting interaction after remarriage.

Next, coparenting by ex-spouses also maintains opportunities for conflict (Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 1990). These conflicts might involve both parental and non-parental issues. Divorce not necessarily means the end of conflict between the ex-partners. Some post-divorce relationships may even be more discordant than pre divorce. Joint custody is often dissuaded in case of frequent and overt parental conflict (Fehlberg et al., 2011). Moreover, involvement of the stepparent in parental issues creates opportunities for new conflicts between the ex-partners regarding (step)parental issues. We currently know little about how this influences the relationships between parents and stepparents.

Finally, part-time (step)parenthood resulting from joint custody may also induce ambiguity within the family system. Having three of four (residential) (step)parents increases the risk on multiple and ambiguous parental roles (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Clingempeel, Ievoli & Brand, 1984; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Ambiguity is assumed to negatively affect the

quality of the family relationships (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). Common residence is an important boundary maintaining condition (Walker & Messinger, 1979). We therefore may assume that non-residential parents and stepparents are less involved than residential parents and stepparents. It remains however unclear what the position is of part-time residential parents and stepparents.

### ***7.2.3 Partner relationships within different custody arrangements***

Divorced mothers and fathers with a new partner relationship do not only have a parental bond with their old and new partner, but also an affective bond. Within joint custody, the ex-partners are more frequently and explicitly present compared to sole custody, which can be experienced as a threat of the new partner relationship. This presence can be a barrier in the development of a strong couple bond between new partners, negatively influencing the marital quality of the new couple (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Weston & Macklin, 1990). New partner relationships following divorce occur under the watch of the ex-spouses, with their own interests in the quality of the stepfamily system (Ganong, Coleman & Hans, 2006; Schrod, 2011). On the other hand, joint custody with regard to the children from the previous union can also be beneficial for the new partner relationship. It may allow stepparents to invest more time in their romantic relationship (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Due to these contradictory research findings, we have no clear expectations whether joint custody for children from previous relationships is beneficial or not for the new partner relationship.

As already stressed in chapter 6, one of the most challenging relationships within stepfamilies is the relationship between stepparents and their partner's ex-spouse. Besides the tension created by having a common relational partner, they also have common and competing interests in coparenting children (Schrod, 2011). Within joint custody arrangements, new partners may more frequently be confronted with the ex-partner of their partner. We found no studies that investigate whether the more frequent contact with the ex-partner of the partner entails a better relationship between old and new partners, or mainly involve more frequent opportunities for conflict.

## **7.3 The present study**

We use data from the research project Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans et al., 2011) to study the relationships between respectively mother, stepfather and father, and between father, stepmother and mother within stepfamily formations following divorce. The advantage of these data for the present study are the detailed information on the relationship between the ex-partners and the new partner relationship (relationship quality, frequency of conflict, partner ambiguity) and on the coparental relationships between the old and new partners (frequency of coparental communication and coparental conflict, mutual support, respect and parental ambiguity).

In a first step, we describe the frequency of coparental communication and the relationship quality between divorced mothers and fathers with both the ex-partner and the new partner.

Next, we explore the interrelatedness of different relational dimensions between old and new partners within stepfamily configurations following divorce. Finally, we explore whether these relationships vary across custody arrangements.

To estimate more cleanly the associations between the custody type and the different partner and parental relationships, it is important to control for factors that have shown to be related to both. A first group of control variables are socio-demographic characteristics. Previous research has shown that children in joint physical custody are on average younger, more recently experienced the parental divorce and, consequently, are living more recently within a stepfamily formation (Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2011, 2013). Boys would also more often live in joint custody arrangements than girls (Fox & Kelly, 1995; Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs 2011, 2013). In addition, higher educated couples would be more likely to raise their children together after divorce (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Strohschein, 2005).

A second group of control variables are structural characteristics of the family system. First, remarriage of the parent and stepparent may decrease ambiguity regarding the position of the stepparents, but may also involve less coparenting interaction and support from the ex-partner (Christensen & Rettig, 1995). Second, previous cohabitation relationships of the parents may increase ambiguity regarding both partner and parental roles (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). Finally, blending children from different parent-child dyads may be associated with more boundary ambiguity (Stewart, 2005b), negatively influencing the relationships between parents and stepparents.

## **7.4 Data and methods**

### **7.4.1 Data**

We use the data of Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans et al., 2011). We distinguish two main research samples of stepfamily formations for stepmothers and stepfathers respectively, with two additional subsamples in which the stepparent also participated in the study. Participation of the parent was a necessary condition for participation of the stepparent, but not reverse. Consequently, there is an important group of parents for which there is no stepparent data. The first sample consists of divorced mothers with a targetchild between 4 and 18 years old, living together with a new partner (N = 382). From this group, a subsample of 203 stepfathers also participated in the study. The second subsample consists of divorced fathers with a targetchild between 4 and 18 years old, living together with a new partner (N = 366). From this group, a subsample of 236 stepmothers participated in the study.

Regarding the new partner relationship, parents and partners received similar questions. Coparental issues regarding the targetchild were only questioned in reference to the ex-partner to the biological parents, while the new partners received questions regarding their coparental relationship with both biological parents of the child.

**Table 7.1: Descriptives for all variables in both main research samples (n and %)**

Abbrev.	Actor <sup>1</sup>	Concept	Categories	Stepfather configurations		Stepmother configurations	
				n	%	n	%
CP_P	P	Conflict with partner	Never	61	16.1	64	17.5
			Less than once a month	151	39.7	144	39.5
			At least once a month	168	44.2	157	43.0
			Total	380		365	
CP_SP	SP	Conflict with partner	Never	42	21.0	45	19.2
			Less than once a month	74	37.0	104	44.4
			At least once a month	84	42.0	85	36.3
			Total	200	100	234	
QPR_P	P	Quality partner relationship	Low	41	10.8	18	4.9
			Average	146	38.4	106	29.0
			High	193	50.8	241	66.0
			Total	380		365	
QPR_SP	SP	Quality partner relationship	Low	23	11.6	29	12.4
			Average	66	33.2	73	31.2
			High	110	55.3	132	56.4
			Total	199		234	
CEX_P	P	Conflict with ex-partner	Never	164	52.7	146	48.2
			Less than once a month	75	24.1	81	26.7
			At least once a month	72	23.2	76	25.1
			Total	311		303	
QREX_P	P	Quality relationship with ex-partner	(Very) bad	63	20.3	75	24.8
			Neither bad nor good	119	38.3	129	42.6
			(Very) good	129	41.5	99	32.7
			Total	311		303	
QRPEX_SP	SP	Quality relationship partner with ex-partner	(Very) bad	56	28.1	88	37.9
			Neither bad nor good	67	33.7	88	37.9
			(Very) good	76	38.2	56	24.2
			Total	199		232	
EXPAM_P	P	Ex-partner ambiguity	Never	343	91.2	355	98.1
			Rarely – almost always	33	8.8	7	1.9
			Total	376		362	
EXAMP_SP	SP	Ex-partner ambiguity partner	Never or rarely	28	14.2	39	16.7
			Sometimes	74	37.6	65	27.9
			Often - always	95	48.2	129	55.4
			Total	197		233	

**Table 7.1 (continued)**

Abbrev.	Actor	Concept	Categories	Stepfather configurations		Stepmother configurations	
				n	%	n	%
COMEX_P	P	Coparental communication with ex-partner	Never	155	42.4	137	38.2
			Less than once a month	108	29.5	123	34.3
			At least once a month	103	28.1	99	27.6
			Total	366		359	
COFEX_P	P	Coparental conflict with ex-partner	Never	255	68.9	236	65.2
			Less than once a month	82	22.2	89	24.6
			At least once a month	33	8.9	37	10.2
			Total	370		362	
COMP_SP	SP	Coparental communication with partner	Less than once a month	28	14.9	67	32.4
			Once a month or weekly	109	58.0	110	53.1
			At least several times a week	51	27.1	30	14.5
			Total	188		207	
COFP_SP	SP	Coparental conflict with partner	Never	65	34.8	102	49.5
			Less than once a month	77	41.2	72	35.0
			At least once a month	45	24.1	32	15.5
			Total	187		206	
PAAM_P	P	Parental ambiguity	Never	180	48.4	159	44.4
			Rarely	156	41.9	127	35.5
			At least sometimes	36	9.7	72	20.1
			Total	372		358	
QROP_SP	SP	Quality relationship with other parent	(Very) bad	72	38.1	90	41.3
			Neither bad nor good	78	41.3	94	43.1
			(Very) good	39	20.6	34	15.6
			Total	189		218	
RSOP_SP	SP	Respect other parent for stepparental role	Never or rarely	75	41.7	94	46.8
			Sometimes	63	35.0	71	35.3
			Often - always	42	23.3	36	17.9
			Total	180		201	

<sup>1</sup>SP = stepparent, P = parent

Table 7.1 contains the descriptives for all relationship measures. The first column presents the abbreviation that is used to refer to the respective relationships in the results. The second column indicates the data source of the variable, indicating from which actor in the study the information was taken.

#### 7.4.2 Variables

First, we discuss the variables that are constructed from the partner database, that is the mothers and fathers. As none of the original variables even approaches a normal distribution and most are extremely left or right skewed, they are all recoded to ordinal variables. The categories of ordinal variables are ordered, but the distance between the different categories is not necessarily proportional. Depending on the distribution of the original variable, the recoded variables contain two or three categories.

The *frequency of conflict with the ex-partner* is operationalized as the maximum frequency on five types of conflict: 1) *Blame each other*, 2) *Yell or scream*, 3) *Use physical violence*, 4) *Throw or break things deliberately*, and 5) *Not want to talk to each other for a while*. The 7-point frequency scale ranges from 1 = *Never* to 7 = *Daily*. Respondents who reported to have neither personal contact nor contact by telephone or internet with their ex-partner, did not receive this question. As the proportion of respondents reporting frequent conflict with their ex-partner is very low, the maximum frequency of conflict situations was categorized in three groups: 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Less than once a month*, and 3 = *At least once a month*.

The *quality of the relationship with the ex-partner* was questioned on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = *Very bad* to 5 = *Very good*. Again, respondents who reported no longer to have contact with their ex-partner, did not have to answer this question. We recoded the answers in three categories: 1 = *(Very) Bad relationship*, 2 = *Neither bad nor good relationship*, and 3 = *(Very) Good relationship*.

The *frequency of conflict with the current partner* was measured similar as the frequency of conflict with the ex-partner. We distinguish the same categories: 1 = *Never*, 2 = *Less than once a month*, and 3 = *At least once a month*.

The *satisfaction with the current partner relationship* was measured on a 10-point scale, ranging from 1 = *Unhappy* to 10 = *Very happy*. This question is part of the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). As the answers on these questions are very left-skewed, we recode the answers in three categories: 1 = *Low relationship quality (<6)*, 2 = *Medium relationship quality (7-8)*, and 3 = *High relationship quality (9-10)*.

Boundary ambiguity was measured with the Boundary Ambiguity Scale BAS-5 (Boss, Greenberg & Pearce-McCall, 1990). 16 items measure *boundary ambiguity within the partner system* (cronbachs alpha =.82), 6 items measure *boundary ambiguity within the parental system* (cronbachs alpha =.60). All items relate to the ex-partner of the respondent. Examples of items regarding the partner system are: *I feel upset when I imagine my former spouse with another man/woman*, and *I continue to keep alive my hope that I will be reunited with my former spouse*. Examples of items regarding the parental system are *I worry that my children feel caught in the middle between me and my former spouse*, and *It feels like a complete family when the children and I are together without my former spouse*. Answering categories range from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Almost always*. As the

meanscore across all items is extremely right skewed, we recoded the scores for ambiguity in the partner system in two categories: *1 = Never* and *2 = At least rarely*. For parental ambiguity, we distinguish three categories: *1 = Never*, *2 = Rarely* and *3 = At least sometimes*.

Finally, we include two measures of coparenting: *the frequency of coparental communication* and *the frequency of coparental conflict*. The first measure is based upon the answers on two items, measuring the frequency of talking with the ex-partner about the child and taking important decisions regarding the child together. The second measure is based upon the question how often they had a conflict about the child. Answering categories ranged from *1 = Never* to *7 = Daily*. Both measures were recoded into three categories: *1 = Never*, *2 = Less than once a month* and *3 = At least once a month*.

Second, we discuss the variables that are constructed from the new partner database, that is the partners living with mother/father.

The *frequency of conflict with the current partner* was measured similar as in the partner questionnaire. We distinguish the same categories: *1 = Never*, *2 = Less than once a month*, and *3 = At least once a month*.

Also the *satisfaction with the current partner relationship* was measured similar as in the partner questionnaire. We distinguish again three categories: *1 = Low relationship quality (<6)*, *2 = Average relationship quality (7-8)*, and *3 = High relationship quality (9-10)*.

New partners were asked how they perceived the *relationship between their partner and his/her ex-partner* on a 5-point scale, ranging from *1 = Very bad* to *5 = Very good*. We distinguish the same categories as for the partners: *1 = (Very) Bad relationship*, *2 = Neither bad nor good relationship*, and *3 = (Very) Good relationship*.

New partners were also asked how they perceived their own *relationship with the ex-partner of their current partner* on a 5-point scale, ranging from *1 = Very bad* to *5 = Very good*. Answers were recoded in three categories: *1 = (Very) Bad relationship*, *2 = Neither bad nor good relationship*, and *3 = (Very) Good relationship*.

In the questionnaire for the new partners, a selection of items measuring ambiguity within the post-divorce family system was included. Four items measure the *perception of ambiguous feelings about the ex-partner with their partner* (cronbachs alpha stepfathers = .56, cronbachs alpha stepmothers = .61): e.g. *having no problem to call his/herself divorced* and *being recovered from divorce*. Answer categories ranged from *1 = Never* to *5 = (Almost) always*. The distribution of this variable is completely different than the degree of partner ambiguity reported by mothers/fathers. The meanscore across the four items was recoded into three categories: *1 = Never or rarely*, *2 = Sometimes*, and *3 = Often or always*.

New partners were asked the same questions regarding the *frequency of coparental communication* and the *frequency of conflict regarding parental issues* as the ex-partners,



but with regard to the situation between themselves and their partner. Coparental communication was recoded into three categories: *1 = Never or less than once a month*, *2 = Monthly through weekly*, and *3 = At least several times a week*. Conflict regarding parental issues was recoded into three categories: *1 = Never*, *2 = Less than once a month*, and *3 = At least monthly*.

A final measure for stepparents is the degree in which they feel that the ex-partner of their partner is understanding and supportive for their specific needs as a stepparent. Answering categories range from *1 = Never* to *5 = Daily* and were recoded into three categories: *1 = Never*, *2 = Rarely or sometimes*, and *3 = Often or always*.

### **7.4.3 Method**

First we present the crosstabulation of 1) the frequency of coparental communication with the ex-partner and with the new partner, and 2) the quality of the relationship between the ex-partners and the quality of the new partner relationship. Next, we describe the bivariate association between the different family relationships. As all relationship variables can be considered to be ordinal variables, we use spearman correlation coefficients. Finally, we investigate the association between the custody arrangement of the targetchild following divorce and the different relationship variables. We therefore apply ordinal logistic models, in which the likelihood of being in a higher category is modelled cumulatively.

## **7.5 Results**

### **7.5.1 Descriptives**

Table 7.2 presents the crosstabulation of the frequency of coparental communication with the ex-partner reported by respectively mother and father with the frequency of coparental communication between respectively mother and stepfather and between father and stepmother. The total frequency distribution of coparental communication with the ex-partner is very similar for mothers and fathers. Approximately four out of ten mothers and fathers report never to have coparental communication with their ex-partner, one out of three reports sporadic coparental communication about the child and approximately one out of four communicates at least every month with the ex-partner about the child. Only 14% of the stepfathers report never to rarely coparental communication with their partner about the stepchild. For stepmothers, the same percentage equals 32%. 59% of the stepfathers and 54% of the stepmothers report to communicate monthly to weekly with their partner about the stepchild. Finally, 28% of the stepfathers communicate at least several times a week with their partner about the child, compared to 15% of the stepmothers. Overall, stepfathers report more frequent coparental communication with their ex-partner than stepmothers, and stepparents report much more frequent coparental communication with their partner than parents with their ex-partner.

**Table 7.2: Crosstabulation of coparental communication and relationship quality between ex-partners and within new partner relationship (in %, n between brackets)**

Coparental communication between mother and father <sup>1</sup>	Coparental communication between mother and stepfather <sup>2</sup>				Coparental communication between father and stepmother <sup>2</sup>			
	Never or less than once a month	Monthly to weekly	At least several times a week	Total	Never or less than once a month	Monthly to weekly	At least several times a week	Total
Never	6.1 (11)	24.9 (45)	11.1 (20)	42.0 (76)	14.6 (30)	15.6 (32)	7.3 (15)	37.6 (77)
Less than once a month	3.9 (7)	19.3 (35)	8.3 (15)	31.5 (57)	9.8 (20)	21.5 (44)	3.9 (8)	35.1 (72)
At least one a month	3.9 (7)	14.4 (26)	8.3 (15)	26.5 (48)	7.3 (15)	16.6 (34)	3.4 (7)	27.3 (56)
Total	13.8 (25)	58.6 (106)	27.6 (50)	100 (181)	31.7 (65)	53.7 (110)	14.6 (30)	100 (205)

Relationship quality between mother and father <sup>1</sup>	Relationship quality between mother and stepfather <sup>2</sup>				Relationship quality between father and stepmother <sup>2</sup>			
	Low	Medium	High	Total	Low	Medium	High	Total
(Very) bad	1.3 (2)	5.1 (8)	7.6 (32)	14.0 (22)	2.0 (4)	9.2 (18)	14.9 (29)	26.2 (51)
Not bad, not good	5.7 (9)	14.7 (23)	20.4 (32)	40.8 (64)	4.6 (9)	14.9 (29)	23.6 (46)	43.1 (84)
(Very) good	3.8 (6)	13.4 (21)	28.0 (44)	45.2 (71)	4.6 (9)	6.2 (12)	20.0 (32)	30.8 (60)
Total	10.8 (17)	33.1 (52)	56.1 (88)	100 (157)	11.3 (22)	30.3 (59)	58.5 (114)	100 (195)

<sup>1</sup> Reported by biological parent; <sup>2</sup> Reported by stepparent

Next, we can learn something from the combined distributions. Overall, there is a large variation in the combinations of coparental communication within the new partner relationship and between the ex-partners. There is no indication of an association between both. 6% of the mothers reports few or no coparental communication about the child with both their partner and ex-partner, for fathers the same percentage equals 14%. Conversely, 8% of the mothers talks frequent about the child with both the ex-partner and new partner, versus 3% of the fathers. Approximately half of the mothers and fathers have at least occasionally coparental communication with their ex-partner and at least monthly with their new partner. The other half of the mothers and fathers communicates never to rarely with at least one of both, mostly the ex-partner.

In the second part of Table 7.2, the relationship quality between the ex-partners (reported by mother/father) is crossed with the quality of the new partner relationship (reported by the new partner). The distribution of the relationship quality reported by stepmothers and stepfathers is quite similar. Only one out of ten stepparents reports a low relationship quality and more than 55% reports a high relationship quality. Fathers report more frequently a bad relationship quality with the ex-partner than mothers, while mothers report more frequently a good relationship with the ex-partner than fathers.

The combined distribution of the relationship quality between the ex-partners and within the new partner relationship does not suggest a large association between both. Only within a small group of stepfather and stepmother configurations there is either a bad relationship between the ex-partners or between the new partners.

### ***7.5.2 The bivariate association between the different partner and parental relationships***

Table 7.3 presents the correlation between the different family relationships. Correlations above the diagonal relate to the stepfather configurations, correlations under the diagonal relate to the stepmother configurations. The perception of parent and stepparent on the same relationship are positively related, demonstrating a certain degree of correspondence between both perspectives.

More frequent conflict is associated with a lower relationship quality, both between ex-partners and within the new partner relationship. Within stepmother families there is no indication of a significant association between respectively the conflict frequency and relationship quality within the new partner relationship and the conflict frequency and relationship quality between the ex-partners. Within the stepfather configurations, most of these associations are also not significant on .10-level and those who are significant are rather weak in size. In general, we can conclude that the relationship quality and conflict frequency of the new and old partner relationship are independent.

Frequent ambiguous feelings towards divorce and the ex-partner are for mothers and fathers associated with a lower quality of the current partner relationship and a better relationship with the ex-partner. Within stepfather configurations, ambiguous feelings about the ex-partner are also associated with more frequent conflict within the new partner

relationship, and a lower relationship quality reported by stepfather. Ambiguous feelings by the partner on the divorce and ex-parent reported by the stepparent are related in a similar way to the relationship between the ex-partners, but in the opposite way with the quality of the new partner relationship. The latter suggests a different meaning of the ambiguity scale from both perspectives. On the other hand, there is very few variation in the original variables.

The frequency of coparental communication between ex-partners is positively related to the frequency of coparental conflict between ex-partners, but not within the new partner relationship. Within stepmother configurations, the frequency of coparental communication and conflict of father with respectively mother and stepmother are not associated. Within stepfather configurations, there is no association between the frequency of coparental communication of mother with respectively father and stepfather. There are hence no indications that more frequent coparental communication between ex-partners is associated with less frequent coparental communication within the new partner relationship, or the reverse. More frequent coparental communication and conflict between ex-partners is nevertheless related to more frequent coparental conflict and conflict in general between mother and stepfather.

There are also associations between parental and relational bonds. Frequent coparental communication between parent and stepparent is positively associated with the relationship quality between parent and stepparent. The same holds for the coparental communication and relationship quality between ex-partners. Frequent coparental conflict is within both relationship dyads associated with a lower relationship quality and a higher conflict frequency.

Coparental communication and conflict between the ex-partners is not associated with the quality of the new partner relationship and also the association with ambiguous feelings about the ex-partner is rather weak. Within stepmother configurations, there is also no association between the frequency of coparental conflict within the new partner relationship and the relationship quality between the ex-partners or ambiguous feelings towards the ex-partner. Within stepfather configurations, the significant associations are rather weak.

Ambiguous feelings about parenthood following divorce, the quality of the relationships between mother and stepmother and between father and stepfather, and the experienced feelings of respect for the stepparental role by the other parent are all strongly correlated. They are also strongly related to the conflict frequency, relationship quality and the frequency of coparental communication between mother and father. The relationship quality between the stepparent and the other parent is also positively related to the degree in which the stepparent reports ambiguous feelings by his/her partner about the ex-partner. Finally, the quality of the relationship between the stepparent and the other parent is not related to the quality of the new partner relationship.

**Table 7.3: Correlation matrix of relationships between parents and stepparents (spearman correlation coefficients, n between brackets)**

[Stepfather configurations above diagonal, stepmother configurations below diagonal]

	CP_P (380)	CP_SP (200)	QPR_P (380)	QPR_SP (199)	CEX_P (311)	QREX_P (311)	QRPEX_SP (199)	EXPAM_P (376)	EXPAMP_SP (197)	COMEX_P (366)	COFEX_P (370)	COMP_SP (188)	COFP_SP (187)	PAAM_P (372)	QROP_SP (189)	RSOP_SP (180)	
CP_P (365)		0.49*** (198)	-0.31*** (380)	-0.24*** (197)	0.04 (310)	-0.04 (310)	0.06 (197)	0.10* (375)	-0.10 (195)	0.12* (366)	0.08 (370)	-0.14° (186)	0.20* (185)	0.02 (372)	0.01 (188)	0.04 (178)	
CP_SP (234)	0.47*** (234)		-0.27*** (198)	-0.27*** (199)	0.06 (157)	0.14° (157)	0.09 (198)	0.11 (196)	-0.06 (197)	0.12° (192)	0.01 (193)	-0.12° (188)	0.36*** (187)	-0.07 (194)	0.05 (189)	0.12 (180)	
QPR_P (365)	-0.27*** (365)	-0.20*** (234)		0.49*** (197)	0.06 (310)	-0.02 (310)	-0.14* (197)	-0.23*** (375)	0.13° (195)	-0.06 (366)	-0.03 (370)	0.16* (186)	-0.20* (185)	-0.01 (372)	-0.10 (188)	-0.14° (178)	
QPR_SP (234)	-0.30*** (234)	-0.45*** (233)	0.29*** (234)		-0.07 (157)	0.09 (157)	0.05 (197)	-0.20* (195)	0.13° (196)	0.04 (191)	-0.01 (192)	0.07 (187)	-0.23** (186)	-0.13° (193)	-0.03 (188)	-0.04 (180)	
CEX_P (303)	0.05 (302)	-0.02 (194)	-0.02 (302)	0.08 (194)			-0.44*** (311)	-0.23*** (158)	0.09 (311)	-0.06 (156)	-0.03 (304)	0.49*** (305)	-0.08 (150)	-0.17* (149)	0.44*** (310)	-0.32*** (152)	-0.29*** (148)
QREX_P (303)	0.00 (302)	-0.01 (195)	0.01 (302)	0.04 (195)	-0.56*** (302)		0.61*** (158)	0.14* (311)	0.19* (156)	0.41*** (304)	-0.21*** (305)	-0.02 (150)	0.16* (149)	-0.55*** (310)	0.53*** (152)	0.51*** (148)	
QRPEX_SP (232)	0.02 (232)	-0.03 (231)	0.01 (232)	0.02 (231)	-0.56*** (193)	0.69*** (194)		0.11 (195)	0.18* (197)	0.42*** (191)	-0.03 (192)	-0.08 (186)	0.15* (185)	-0.46*** (193)	0.61*** (188)	0.46*** (178)	
EXPAM_P (362)	0.07 (361)	-0.04 (232)	-0.11* (361)	0.00 (232)	0.05 (303)	0.11* (303)	0.03 (230)		-0.09 (193)	0.23*** (365)	0.13* (368)	0.06 (185)	0.00 (184)	0.05 (372)	0.05 (186)	0.07 (177)	
EXPAMP_SP (233)	-0.02 (233)	0.00 (232)	0.11° (233)	0.09 (232)	-0.11 (193)	0.20* (194)	0.23** (232)	-0.04 (231)		0.13° (190)	-0.10 (191)	0.21** (185)	-0.12 (184)	-0.06 (191)	0.19* (187)	-0.01 (177)	
COMEX_P (359)	-0.05 (359)	-0.08 (232)	0.01 (359)	0.12° (232)	-0.11* (300)	0.38*** (300)	0.42*** (230)	0.07 (356)	0.14* (231)		0.30*** (366)	0.03 (181)	0.18* (180)	-0.35*** (364)	0.37*** (182)	0.33*** (173)	
COFEX_P (362)	0.06 (362)	0.03 (233)	0.01 (362)	0.10 (233)	0.39*** (300)	-0.23*** (300)	-0.06 (231)	0.06 (358)	-0.09 (232)	0.27*** (359)		-0.09 (182)	0.15* (181)	0.20*** (365)	-0.07 (183)	-0.08 (174)	
COMP_SP (207)	-0.01 (207)	-0.08 (206)	0.04 (207)	0.17* (206)	0.02 (179)	0.03 (180)	0.05 (204)	0.09 (205)	0.05 (205)	0.04 (205)	0.04 (206)		0.02 (187)	0.04 (184)	0.12 (178)	0.04 (180)	
COFP_SP (206)	0.27*** (206)	0.29*** (205)	-0.08 (206)	-0.27*** (205)	-0.02 (179)	-0.08 (180)	0.01 (203)	-0.05 (204)	-0.02 (204)	0.02 (205)	0.10 (205)	0.11 (206)		-0.02 (183)	0.09 (177)	0.14° (179)	
PAAM_P (358)	0.10* (358)	0.03 (230)	-0.07 (358)	-0.18* (230)	0.38*** (301)	-0.50*** (301)	-0.49*** (228)	0.02 (358)	-0.21*** (229)	-0.40*** (355)	0.09° (355)	-0.20*** (204)	-0.05 (203)		-0.36*** (184)	-0.36*** (176)	
QROP_SP (218)	0.05 (218)	-0.02 (217)	0.01 (218)	0.03 (217)	-0.44*** (179)	0.59*** (180)	0.68*** (215)	0.01 (216)	0.21*** (216)	0.33*** (216)	-0.04 (217)	0.03 (192)	-0.07 (191)	-0.39*** (214)		0.67*** (173)	
RSOP_SP (201)	0.02 (201)	-0.03 (200)	0.03 (201)	0.12° (200)	-0.21* (174)	0.40*** (175)	0.51*** (200)	0.00 (199)	0.12° (200)	0.19* (199)	-0.03 (200)	0.16* (200)	-0.11 (199)	-0.27*** (198)	0.57*** (189)		

° $p < .10$  \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

More frequent coparental communication between stepmother and father is associated with less frequent ambiguous feelings about parenthood following divorce for fathers and a larger feeling of respect for the stepparental role from the mother, reported by the stepmother. There is also a negative association between ambiguous feelings about parenthood by father and ambiguity about the ex-partner by father, reported by stepmother. Finally, only within stepmother configurations frequent ambiguous feelings about parenthood following divorce are associated with more frequent conflict and a worse relationship quality between father and stepmother.

### ***7.5.3 The association between joint custody and partner and parental relationships following divorce***

In tables 7.3 and 7.4, the custody arrangement of the child is related to the different relationships between parents and stepparents within respectively stepfather and stepmother families, controlling for the socio-demographic and structural characteristics of the family that were discussed earlier. We first discuss the differences between the custody arrangements and end with a short discussion of the results for the control variables.

Within the stepfather families, we see more conflict between mother and stepfather in joint custody compared to mother custody. This holds from both perspectives. If the child lives full-time with father, the relationship between mother and stepfather is also better than in joint custody from stepfather perspective. There is nevertheless no difference in relationship quality between joint custody and mother custody. The conflict frequency, relationship quality and frequency of ambiguous feelings between the ex-partners do not seem to differ according to the custody arrangement of the child. Ex-partners do seem to have more frequent coparental communication and coparental conflict in joint custody compared to mother and father custody. There is no difference in the frequency of coparental communication between mother and stepfather according to the custody arrangement of the child. There is however less frequent coparental conflict between both if the child lives full-time with father. Joint custody is associated with less frequent ambiguous feelings about parenthood for mother compared to both mother and father custody. There is no difference between custody arrangements in the relationship between father and stepfather.

**Table 7.4: Odds ratio's from ordinal logistic regression models predicting the relationships between mother, father and stepfather in stepfather configurations**

	CP_P	CP_SP	QPR_P	QPR_SP	CEX_P	QREX_P	QRPEX_SP	EXPAM_P
Intercept - middle or highest category <sup>1</sup>	0.89	0.85	0.44*	0.29*	0.37**	0.46*	0.45	0.11***
Intercept - highest category	6.26***	5.12**	4.15***	2.42	1.19	2.62**	2.00	
Custody arrangement child (ref = joint custody)								
Mother custody	0.68°	0.52*	1.22	1.43	0.86	1.16	0.83	0.98
Father custody	1.23	0.41	0.81	4.83°	0.59	0.80	0.42	1.00
Age child	0.95	0.90°	0.91*	0.88*	0.99	0.96	0.93	1.17
Sex child (ref = boy)	1.09	1.07	1.07	1.37	0.97	1.01	1.03	0.51*
Educational level mother	0.89	0.93	1.08	1.16	0.81	1.20	1.35	1.03
Duration relationship stepfather and mother	1.02	1.16**	0.97	0.93	0.90**	1.04	1.05	0.84*
Stepfather residential children fom previous relationship (ref = no)	0.95	1.08	1.01	1.48	0.99	1.58°	1.06	1.18
Mother and stepfather common child(ren) (ref = no)	1.58°	1.09	0.56*	0.69	1.45	1.30	1.25	3.13*
Mother previous cohabitation relationships after divorce (ref = no)	1.32	1.89	0.90	2.18	1.22	1.04	1.37	0.60
Mother and stepfather married (ref = no)	0.94	1.34	2.25***	4.12***	0.91	0.94	0.75	0.35*
Father in cohabitation relationship (ref = no)	1.04	0.95	1.99**	1.14	0.94	0.91	1.14	1.07
<i>N</i>	359	186	359	185	301	301	185	357

° $p < .10$  \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .00$

<sup>1</sup>Middle category in case of three categories

Note. CP\_P = Conflict with partner - parent; CP\_SP = Conflict with partner - stepparent; QPR\_P = Quality partner relationship - parent; QPR\_SP = Quality partner relationship- stepparent; CEX\_P = Conflict with ex-partner - parent; QREX\_P = Quality relationship with ex-partner - parent; QRPEX\_SP = Quality relationship partner with ex-partner - stepparent; EXPAM\_P = Relationship-ambiguity - parent

**Table 7.4 (continued)**

	EXPAMP_SP	COMEX_P	COFEX_P	COMP_SP	COFP_SP	PAAM_P	QROP_SP	RSOP_SP
Intercept - middle or highest category <sup>1</sup>	0.41°	0.76	0.25***	0.22**	0.74	0.09***	0.07***	0.47
Intercept - highest category	2.85*	3.53***	1.44	4.00*	4.86**	0.97	0.53	2.13
Custody arrangement child (ref = joint custody)								
Mother custody	1.02	0.28***	0.59*	1.38	0.88	1.64*	0.99	0.63
Father custody	0.56	0.21**	0.37°	0.25	0.08°	2.43°		0.18
Age child	0.98	0.93°	0.93°	0.95	0.98	1.02	0.95	0.94
Sex child (ref = boy)	1.11	0.62*	0.54*	1.39	0.75	1.14	1.29	0.88
Educational level mother	1.46°	1.26	0.70*	1.16	0.99	0.84	1.99**	1.20
Duration relationship stepfather and mother	1.03	0.93°	0.95	1.01	1.10°	0.99	1.02	1.05
Stepfather residential children from previous relationship (ref = no)	1.27	1.49°	0.75	0.57	0.55°	0.75	1.17	0.78
Mother and stepfather common child(ren) (ref = no)	0.66	0.93	1.35	0.55°	0.70	0.78	0.78	0.69
Mother previous cohabitation relationships after divorce (ref = no)	0.66	0.92	1.23	1.60	0.73	1.20	1.71	1.21
Mother and stepfather married (ref= no)	1.27	0.76	0.86	1.72°	0.74	0.89	0.70	0.84
Father in cohabitation relationship (ref = no)	1.48	0.86	0.79	1.12	0.77	1.13	1.80°	0.93
N	184	352	354	174	173	356	169	166

° $p < .10$  \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .00$

<sup>1</sup>Middle category in case of three categories

Note. EXPAMP\_SP = Relationship- ambiguity partner - stepparent; COMEX\_P = Coparental communication with ex-partner - parent; COFEX\_P = Coparental conflict with ex-partner - parent; COMP\_SP = Coparental communication with partner - stepparent; COFP\_SP = Coparental conflict with partner - stepparent; PAAM\_P = Parental ambiguity - parent; QROP\_SP = Quality relationship with other parent - stepparent; RSOP\_SP = Respect other parent for stepparental role - stepparent



**Table 7.5: Odds ratio's from ordinal logistic regression models predicting the relationships between mother, father and stepmother in stepmother configurations**

	CP_P	CP_SP	QPR_P	QPR_SP	CEX_P	QREX_P	QRPEX_SP	EXPAM_P
Intercept - middle or highest category <sup>1</sup>	0.47*	0.72	2.20*	0.96	0.31**	0.86	0.79	0.05*
Intercept - highest category	2.99**	5.76***	23.14***	6.40***	1.13	6.38***	4.71***	
Custody arrangement child (ref = joint custody)								
Mother custody	1.17	1.30	1.04	0.67	1.05	0.73	0.32***	0.24
Father custody	2.01°	1.59	0.90	0.62	1.22	0.33***	0.37*	0.00
Age child	0.95	0.93	0.97	1.04	0.94	0.99	1.02	0.99
Sex child (ref = boy)	1.13	0.98	0.94	1.11	1.01	0.75	0.90	2.60
Educational level father	0.93	0.81	0.79	0.86	1.01	0.77	0.69*	0.45
Duration relationship stepmother and father	1.02	0.99	1.03	0.84***	0.93°	0.95	0.97	0.91
Stepmother residential children from previous relationship (ref = no)	1.27	0.78	1.01	1.35	2.13**	0.47**	0.75	0.95
Father and stepmother common child(ren) (ref = no)	1.21	1.33	1.62°	1.23	0.72	0.83	1.11	0.00
Father previous cohabitation relationship after divorce (ref = no)	1.58	0.97	0.60	0.53	0.81	1.32	1.00	0.89
Father and stepmother married (ref = no)	0.90	0.73	1.60°	2.11*	0.68	1.40	1.07	1.76
Mother in cohabitation relationship (ref = no)	1.34	0.93	0.95	1.28	0.59*	1.57°	1.54	1.02
<i>N</i>	346	224	346	224	295	294	222	345

° $p < .10$  \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .00$

<sup>1</sup>Middle category in case of three categories

Note. CP\_P = Conflict with partner - parent; CP\_SP = Conflict with partner - stepparent; QPR\_P = Quality partner relationship - parent; QPR\_SP = Quality partner relationship- stepparent; CEX\_P = Conflict with ex-partner - parent; QREX\_P = Quality relationship with ex-partner - parent; QRPEX\_SP = Quality relationship partner with ex-partner - stepparent; EXPAM\_P = Relationship-ambiguity - parent

**Table 7.5 (continued)**

	EXPAMP_SP	COMEX_P	COFEX_P	COMP_SP	COFP_SP	PAAM_P	QROP_SP	RSOP_SP
Intercept - middle or highest category <sup>1</sup>	1.34	0.79	0.16***	0.12***	0.37*	0.11***	0.43°	0.30*
Intercept - highest category	6.10**	4.20***	0.83	2.46°	2.15	0.62	3.67**	1.67
Custody arrangement child (ref = joint custody)								
Mother custody	0.84	0.38***	0.56*	0.29***	0.66	2.31***	0.36***	0.59°
Father custody	0.68	0.14***	0.30*	5.00**	1.95	1.99°	0.25*	0.43
Age child	0.92°	0.93°	0.97	0.98	0.92°	0.98	0.99	1.01
Sex child (ref = boy)	0.93	0.74	1.39	1.79°	0.83	1.40	0.91	1.08
Educational level father	0.97	1.09	0.69*	1.03	0.79	0.84	0.66*	0.84
Duration relationship stepmother and father	1.07	0.92*	0.91*	1.00	1.09	1.06°	0.96	0.97
Stepmother residential children from previous relationship (ref = no)	0.65	0.68°	1.45	1.19	0.95	2.33***	0.64	0.63
Father and stepmother common child(ren) (ref = no)	1.04	0.91	0.87	0.56	0.75	1.30	1.35	1.11
Father previous cohabitation relationships after divorce (ref = no)	1.23	0.80	1.13	1.18	0.64	1.33	1.35	1.77
Father and stepmother married (ref = no)	0.86	1.14	0.86	1.59	0.99	0.78	1.41	1.03
Mother in cohabitation relationship (ref = no)	2.02*	0.98	1.06	1.06	1.02	0.89	1.27	1.48
N	223	341	344	198	197	342	208	192

° $p < .10$  \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .00$

<sup>1</sup>Middle category in case of three categories

Note. EXPAMP\_SP = Relationship- ambiguity partner - stepparent; COMEX\_P = Coparental communication with ex-partner - parent; COFEX\_P = Coparental conflict with ex-partner - parent; COMP\_SP = Coparental communication with partner - stepparent; COFP\_SP = Coparental conflict with partner - stepparent; PAAM\_P = Parental ambiguity - parent; QROP\_SP = Quality relationship with other parent - stepparent; RSOP\_SP = Respect other parent for stepparental role - stepparent

Within stepmother families, joint custody is associated with less frequent conflict between father and stepmother compared to full-time residential children. These findings are opposite to the results for the stepfather configurations. There is no difference between joint and mother custody in the frequency of conflict between father and stepmother. Fathers report on average a better relationship with their ex-partner in joint custody arrangements than in father custody. Stepmothers report a better relationship between mother and father in joint custody compared to both mother and father custody. In line with the results for the stepfather configurations, fathers report more frequent coparental communication and conflict with their ex-partner in joint custody compared to fathers with children in mother or father custody. In contrast with the findings for stepfathers, stepmothers report more frequent coparental communication with father in joint custody compared to mother custody, but less frequent compared to father custody. In line with the results for mothers in stepfather configurations, fathers report less ambiguous feelings about parenthood following divorce in joint custody compared to mother and father custody. Finally, also the relationship between mother and stepmother is better in joint custody compared to mother and father custody.

With regard to the control variables, we see that being married is associated with a better relationship between parent and stepparent. If the stepmother has residential children from a previous relationship, there is more frequent conflict and a less good relationship between the ex-partners and there are more frequent ambiguous feelings about parenthood. Residential children from the stepfather on the other hand are associated with a better relationship and more frequent coparental communication between mother and father. The duration of the new partner relationship is negatively associated with both the relationship quality and the conflict frequency between the ex-partners. If father also lives together with a new partner, mother reports on average a higher relationship quality with her new partner.

## **7.6 Discussion**

In this chapter, we explored different characteristics of the relationships of divorced mothers and fathers with their ex-partner and a new partner of one of both. The main goal was to get insights in the implications of the evolution towards joint legal and joint physical custody following divorce on the partner and parental bonds between divorced mothers and fathers and their new partners.

A first important finding is that, despite the juridical assumption of joint legal custody since 1995, a large proportion of the mothers and fathers never have coparental communication with their ex-partner, or the other biological parent of the child. Nevertheless, the large majority of the fathers and mothers in the research sample divorced after 1995. This lack of coparental communication between ex-partners is even more pronounced in comparison with the very frequent coparental communication within new partner relationships following divorce. In other words, despite the lack of a framework for the juridical position of stepparents, mothers and fathers often form a parental union with

their new partner, while there is often no parental union with the ex-partner. In case ex-partners do communicate with each other about the child, they do so on a very sporadic basis. Although the more frequent coparental communication results in part from the factual living situation and opportunity for communication, the differences are too large to consider the ex-partner as an equivalent parental partner of mother or father next to the new partner. An important remark in this regard is that the sample of the present study is limited to divorced mothers and fathers that co-reside with a new partner. Earlier studies have demonstrated that new partner relationships interfere with coparental unions of ex-partners following divorce (Amato, Kane & James, 2011). The frequency of coparental communication between ex-partners might therefore be higher if also single mothers and fathers are included. Nevertheless, as previous studies have shown that children benefit from frequent coparental communication between ex-partners (Amato, Kane & James, 2011), an important question is to which degree coparental communication within the partner relationship of the parent may compensate for the lack of a parental union between ex-partners.

The frequency of coparental communication between ex-partners is strongly related to the custody arrangement of the child. Ex-partners with children in joint custody communicate more frequent about the child than parents with children in full-time mother or father custody. Joint custody also involves less frequent ambiguous feelings with mother and father about post-divorce parenthood compared to sole custody arrangements. If the increasing trend of the proportion of children in joint custody arrangements of the last years persists (Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2013), we might therefore expect an increase in the frequency of coparental communication between ex-partners. Nevertheless, we have to be cautious in the interpretation of this finding in terms of cause and consequence. Only if joint custody actually facilitates coparental communication between ex-partners, we might expect an increase over time in the proportion of ex-partners that maintain a strong parental union following divorce. In contrast, if the association described above is merely the result of a selection of more harmonious ex-couples into joint custody arrangements, an increase in this arrangement does not necessary imply an increase in coparenting between ex-partners. There are indications that exactly the changes in divorce law induced a larger heterogeneity within the ex-couples choosing for joint custody, including an increase in the proportion of high-conflict couples (Sodermans, Matthijs & Swicegood, 2013). In the latter scenario, joint physical custody arrangements are not necessarily associated with more coparenting, but might also be combined with two parents *parenting together alone*.

Stepfathers report more frequent coparental communication with mother than stepmothers with father. The frequency of coparental communication depends on the custody arrangement of the child. A part of the differences between stepmothers and stepfathers is caused by the fact that children still live a larger proportion of time in the maternal household (or with stepfather) than in the paternal household (or with stepmother). From stepfather perspective, the evolution from mother custody to joint custody involves on average less time with the child, while the reverse holds from stepmother perspective. Joint

custody could therefore reduce one of the largest differences between stepmothers and stepfathers. In part because of the dominant mother custody following divorce in the last decades, stepmothers more often felt outsiders than stepfathers (Golish, 2003). In joint custody, there is not less frequent coparental communication between mother and stepfather compared to mother custody. There is nevertheless more frequent coparental communication between father and stepmother in joint custody compared to mother custody. An increase in joint custody arrangements therefore implies an increase in the average number of persons with a parental role towards the child. One of the questions for future research is how this relates to the wellbeing of the child.

Also striking is that only for stepmothers part-time co-residence with the child implies less frequent coparental communication with the partner or father of the child than full-time co-residence. There are no differences in the frequency of coparental communication between mother and stepfather in joint and mother custody. These findings suggest a larger tension between the mother and stepmother role than between the father and stepfather role. The larger sensitivity of women for relational affairs might also be important in this regard (Acitelli, 1992; Goldsmith & Dun, 1997). Moreover, these findings are in line with the results of chapter 6 in which also different indications were found for a more complex combination of the maternal and stepmaternal role compared to the paternal and steppaternal role.

Next, we explored how the parental relationships of mothers and fathers with the ex-partner on the one hand and with the new partner on the other hand are related to each other. Mothers and fathers that frequently communicate with their ex-partner do not communicate less about the child with their new partner. Hence, we find no indications of competition between a parental union as parents (or ex-partners) and as parent and stepparent (or new partners). Joint legal custody following divorce therefore does not imply that stepparents are more frequently excluded from important decisions regarding the child. Conversely, the involvement of the new partner in childrearing is no surrogacy for the parental union with the ex-partner.

In addition, we find no indications that more frequent coparental communication about the child between the ex-partners or a better relationship negatively affects the new partner relationship, as suggested by Ganong, Coleman & Hans (2006). Overall, the relationship between the ex-partners and the new partner relationship seem to develop quite independently. A good relationship and frequent coparental communication between the ex-partners does seem to be a condition for a good relationship between respectively mother and stepmother and between father and stepfather. The biological parent might be an important gatekeeper in the establishment of a good relationship between his or her ex-partner and his or her new partner. Conversely, conflicts between the ex-partner and new partner may also negatively affect the relationship between the ex-partners.

Frequent coparental communication is positively associated with the relationship quality, both within new partner relationships as between ex-partners. On the one hand, frequent

coparental communication or a strong parental union might positively affect the relationship quality. The investment of stepparents in the parental union might in this regard be seen as an investment in the partner relationship (Anderson, Kaplan & Lancaster, 1999). On the other hand, a good relationship may facilitate coparental communication. Parents will be less inclined to involve stepparents in childrearing if there are problems within the partner relationship. Together with the frequent coparental communication within new partner relationships following divorce, these results point towards the unique identity of stepfamilies. Men and women who start a relationship with a divorced person with children, also start a relationship with those children.

Despite the positive association between frequent coparental communication and the relationship quality between ex-partners, frequent communication about the child also implies more conflict about the child between ex-partners. This association was not found within the new partner relationship. These results point towards a tension between the separation as partners and continued coparenting. In other words, there might be conflicts between the conjugal and parental union following divorce: raising children with the ex-partner creates the opportunities for child-related conflicts (Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 1990). This is also reflected in the more frequent coparental conflict between mothers and fathers with children in joint custody arrangements compared to other custody arrangements. As these conflicts subsequently negatively affect the relationships between old and new partners, it is important not to let them escalate. The spillover between the partner and parental system of respectively ex-partners and new partners implies that a conflicted parental relationship is difficult to combine with a harmonious partner relationship and reverse.

Within the stepmother configurations we see no association between the frequency of coparental communication and conflict between the ex-partners and the frequency of coparental conflict between father and stepmother. Within stepfather families, we do see that more frequent coparental communication and conflict between the ex-partners is associated with more frequent (coparental) conflict between mother and stepfather. Together with the more frequent conflict between mother and stepfather of children in joint custody arrangements, these results point towards a certain tension in combining the different parental roles. Future studies need to focus in depth on underlying mechanisms. The less frequent co-residence between stepmother and stepchild may explain the lack of a similar association within stepmother configurations.

A final result that is worth reflecting on is the genderspecific effect of the presence of residential stepchildren. If the stepfather has children from a previous relationship living in the household, there is on average a better coparental relationship between the ex-partners than when the stepfather has no residential children. An explanation may be that stepfathers with own children are more sensitive for the parental needs of the father and therefore encourage the coparental relationship between their partner and her ex-spouse. Marsiglio & Hinojosa (2007) use the term *father allies* to describe the process in which stepfathers support a good relationship between the stepchild and his non-residential father.

For stepmothers on the other hand, residential children from previous relationships have the opposite effect, involving a more conflicted relationship between the ex-partners. A possible explanation may lie in the custody arrangements of these stepchildren, who will be more often residing full-time within the stepmother configurations and part-time within the stepfather configurations. While for stepfathers this entails more often shared experiences with the biological father of the stepchild, stepmothers may be more oriented on their own offspring. These findings deserve further attention in future research.

We also want to stress some limitations of the present study. First, as we are working with cross-sectional data, no conclusions can be made regarding the direction of the associations. For example, there may be a selection of parents and stepparents with specific relational characteristics within specific custody arrangements. The variation on certain variables is also very limited. This results in sometimes very dichotomous distinctions, for example between *never* and *ever*. There might also play measurement issues such as social desirability for certain questions. For example, the reported frequency of conflict between the ex-partners and within the new partner relationships is very low. Finally, the results from an additional (non-) response analysis of stepparents learns that stepparents with a lower relationship quality more often did not participate in the study than stepparents with a high relationship quality (Vanassche, 2012). In other words, dysfunctional stepfamilies might be underrepresented in this study.

Overall, we can conclude that a good relationship between ex-partners is not in conflict with a good partner relationship and a strong parental union within that partner relationship. A strong parental union between the ex-partners does not impede the integration of a stepparent within the partner and parental system of the family. Frequent coparental communication and joint physical custody do create additional opportunities for conflict but those are not necessarily negatively affecting the relationships between parents and stepparents. It are hence conflicts that are an intrinsic characteristic of a more intense relationship and communication.





## CHAPTER 8

# **Stepparent-stepchild relationships and adolescent wellbeing: full-time, part-time and non-residential stepparents**

This chapter draws in part upon the following conference paper:

Vanassche, S., Botterman, S. & Matthijs, K. (2012). The importance of parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationships for adolescents' wellbeing in different custody arrangements. *Seminar of the Committee on Family Research 2012*, Leuven, 12-14<sup>th</sup> of September.

## 8.1 Introduction

As demonstrated extensively in the first research chapters, the shift from sole custody towards joint custody made way for part-time residential parents and part-time residential stepparents, challenging the dichotomy-thinking about residential and non-residential relationships. This ‘new’ type of parents and stepparents create challenges for traditional theories on the relationships of children with parents and stepparents and the importance of these relationships for adolescents wellbeing. In the past, children were mostly confronted with a non-residential stepmother living with father following parental divorce, and a full-time residential stepfather living with mother. Part-time residential relationships have only been scarcely touched upon by previous research, and studies on the importance of (step)parental relationships for adolescent wellbeing do not consider variations between sole and joint custody arrangements. Nevertheless, review studies stress the need to study family configurations that involve part-time relationships and to look further at conditional effects of family life (Amato, 2010; Sweeney, 2010).

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, we explore how sole and joint custody arrangements relate to the relationship quality of adolescents with respectively father and stepfather, and with mother and stepmother. Second, we analyze the relative importance of these relationships for several wellbeing outcomes and whether their association with adolescent wellbeing is different in sole and joint custody arrangements. In answering both questions, we built further on the research hypotheses and results of King (2006, 2007) and White & Gilbreth (2001). As those hypotheses are in origin applied on residential stepparents and non-residential parents, we reflect on the integration of joint custody arrangements within the existing hypotheses. In correspondence to King (2007) and White & Gilbreth (2001), we look at relationship quality with parents and stepparents in an accumulative way: which adolescents have good relationships with both parent and stepparent from the same sex, which adolescents have a good relationship with mother/father only, which adolescents have a good relationship with stepmother/stepfather only and which adolescents have no good relationship with both parental figures?

As no preceding studies are found, the analyses are explorative. We aim at strengthen the reliability of the findings by using data from two different research projects: Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans, et al., 2011) and the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche et al., 2012). Both datasets contain the necessary information for the present study but have a different sampling design and field work strategy. Replication of findings across different samples is an important robustness test of the results. In addition, it allows us to look at different indicators of wellbeing.

## 8.2 Adolescents’ relationships with parents and stepparents after divorce

King (2006, 2007) and White & Gilbreth (2001) discussed several hypotheses regarding the relationship quality with either father and stepfather, or mother and stepmother. Overall, these hypotheses focus on the importance of biological and residential ties for having a good relationship with parental figures. First, the *biology hypothesis* suggests that

relationships with biological parents are better than relationships with stepparents, regardless of the custody arrangement (King, 2007). Biological ties are assumed to be stronger than social ties. Frequent explanations are the biological predisposition to defend the needs of genetic relatives (Popenoe, 1994) and the attachment of children to primary caregivers in early life (Bowlby, 1979). Second, the *primacy of residence hypothesis* or *substitution model* argues that adolescents remain a closer bond with their residential parents and develop bonds with their residential stepparents over time (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001). This hypothesis stresses the importance of custody arrangements. The daily interaction involved in sharing residence is thereby assumed to be important for having a good relationship. In this hypothesis, a new partner of a residential parent is seen as a substitute for the non-residential biological parent (White & Gilbreth, 2001). Third, the *irrelevance hypothesis* or *loss model* states that adolescents regard stepparents as meaningless and have strained relationships with non-residential parents (King, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Adolescents are expected to resist to build relationships with new parental figures and remain only emotionally close to their residential biological parent. Finally and fourth, the *accumulation hypothesis* argues that stepparents are seen as additional parents. Adolescents are considered to establish good relationships with all their parental figures (King, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). In other words, good relations are assumed to extend to biological and social ties and to residential and non-residential relationships.

Overall, King (2007) and White & Gilbreth (2001) found empirical support for the accumulation hypothesis, as the largest proportion of adolescents reported a good relationship with both parent and stepparent. This group of adolescents seems to adapt most to their new family configuration as they augment the number of positive parental relationships. Nevertheless, both White & Gilbreth (2001) and King (2006, 2007) showed that there are important differences between adolescents in the likelihood of having close relationships with one or both parental figures. We argue that the question is therefore not which hypothesis is most applicable, but rather which hypothesis is most applicable under which conditions. An important condition that was identified by King (2006, 2007) was the amount of contact with the non-residential biological parent. We built further on these findings by exploring the importance of co-residence in having a good relationship with parents and stepparents. Based upon the research literature, we expect that biological ties (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) and shared residence (Hawkins, Amato & King, 2006; Hetherington, 2003; King, 2006, 2007) are important for good relationships. In addition, we assume that shared residence is even more important for stepparents, as they lack the advantage of biological ties. Finally, we assume that the advantages of secured legal ties and less loyalty conflicts within joint custody (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Greif & Simring, 1982), will be larger than the danger of competing parental roles (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). We therefore rely on previous studies that found no association between the relationship with respectively father and stepfather and between the relationship with mother and stepmother in different custody arrangements (King, 2007; Vanassche & Matthijs, 2012; Vogt Yuan & Hamilton, 2006; White & Gilbreth,

2001). In other words, the relationship with a stepparent would develop independently from the relationship with the non-residential parent (Sweeney, 2010).

A limitation of the hypotheses described above is that they are developed within a sole custody perspective, applicable on respectively residential stepfathers and non-residential fathers, and residential stepmothers and non-residential mothers. In other words, the hypotheses need some adaptation to joint custody arrangements, distinguishing full-time, part-time and non-residential parents and stepparents. Regarding the relationship with father and stepfather, we expect the largest proportion of adolescents with a good relationship with father only in father custody and the smallest proportion in mother custody. Conversely, we expect the largest proportion with a good relationship with stepfather only in mother custody and the smallest proportion in father custody. We expect the largest proportion of adolescents with no good relationship with both in mother custody and the smallest group in father custody. While joint custody is assumed to take an intermediate position in the first three research hypotheses, we expect it to have the largest proportion of adolescents with a good relationship with both father and stepfather, followed by respectively mother custody and father custody. Regarding the relationship with mother and stepmother, the hypotheses are quasi identical, merely switching the expectations for mother and father custody.

**Table 8.1: Research hypotheses regarding the association between custody arrangements and the relationships with parent and stepparents**

Stepfather group	Hypotheses	Stepmother group	Hypotheses
Good relationship with father and stepfather	$J > M > F$	Good relationship with mother and stepmother	$J > F > M$
Good relationship with father only	$F > J > M$	Good relationship with mother only	$M > J > F$
Good relationship with stepfather only	$M > J > F$	Good relationship with stepmother only	$F > J > M$
Good relationship with neither father nor stepfather	$M > J > F$	Good relationship with neither mother nor stepmother	$F > J > M$

*Note.*  $M$  = Mother custody,  $J$  = Joint custody,  $F$  = Father custody

### 8.3 Adolescents' relationships with parental figures and their wellbeing

The relationships between adolescents and their parental figures are considered to be important determinants of adolescent wellbeing. The association between good parent-child relationships and adolescent wellbeing has already been shown abundantly (e.g., Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hines, 1997). There is less research on the importance of good relationships between adolescents and stepparents and hardly any on the importance of good relationships between adolescents and all their parental figures (King, 2006). As with the relationship quality, there are four equivalent hypotheses regarding the importance of relationships with all parental figures (King, 2006; 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). The *primacy of residence hypothesis* or *substitution model* states that residential stepparents are

more important as non-residential biological parents for adolescent wellbeing (King, 2006; 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). The *biology hypothesis* argues that the biological ties are more important for adolescent wellbeing (King, 2006; 2007). The *irrelevance hypothesis* implies that the loss of the parental stability after a divorce causes a decrease in adolescent wellbeing and is not counterbalanced by good relationships with parental figures (King, 2006; 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Conversely, the *accumulation* or *additive hypothesis* expects all parental relationships to have an effect on adolescent wellbeing (King, 2006; 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001). King (2006) additionally adds the *redundancy hypothesis*, which assumes that there is no additional surplus value of having a good relationship with both stepfather and father (or mother and stepmother).

The research findings seem to differ between stepmothers and stepfathers and between different wellbeing dimensions. White & Gibreth (2001) and King (2006) find both fathers and stepfathers to be important in explaining adolescent wellbeing, but residential stepfathers somewhat more than non-residential fathers. The social capital inherent in the stepparent-stepchild and parent-child relationship seems to be more influential regarding adolescents' wellbeing when the (step)child and (step)parent live in the same household (King, 2006). Furstenberg & Seltzer (1983) found that the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship was a better predictor for child adjustment than the relationship with the non-residential biological parent (in: Clingempeel & Segal, 1986). If we try to extrapolate these findings to different custody arrangements, we may expect that both father and stepfather matter, but the relative importance may be depending on sharing residence. For example, the relationship with the biological father may be more important in joint custody compared to mother custody. As there are no preceding studies, it is impossible to formulate clear research hypotheses regarding the relative importance of the relationship with father and with stepfather in different custody arrangements.

Regarding the relationship with both mothers, King (2007) found no association between the closeness with residential stepmothers and adolescent wellbeing. As the relationship with non-residential mothers does seem to matter, these results are more in line with the biology hypothesis. Extrapolating these findings to joint custody arrangements, it would be plausible that stepmothers matter even less in case of part-time co-residence with the biological mother. Again, without preceding studies, the second part of this study remains explorative, questioning whether the importance of a good relationship with respectively mother and stepmother differs between custody arrangements.

#### **8.4 Control variables**

To estimate more cleanly the associations between custody type, the relationship with parents and stepparents and adolescent wellbeing, it is important to control for factors that have shown to be related to these variables. Previous research has shown that children in joint physical custody were on average younger, more recently experienced the parental divorce and, consequently, were living more recently within a stepfamily formation (Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2011, 2013). Boys also more

often lived in joint custody arrangements than girls (Fox & Kelly, 1995; Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs 2011, 2013). In addition, girls and adolescents would experience more troubles in adapting to stepfamily configurations (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). It is therefore important to control for the age and sex of the stepchild, the duration since divorce and the duration of the new partner relationship.

We also have to rule out selection effects in the profile of families within specific custody arrangements. Higher educated and low conflict couples are more likely to raise their children together after divorce (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Strohschein, 2005). In addition, parental conflict has shown to be strongly related to both parent-child relationships and adolescent wellbeing (Amato, 2010).

Finally, different studies have shown a strong association between the relationship between parent and stepparent and the relationship between stepparent and stepchild (King, 2006, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2012). Therefore, we also include the conflict frequency between parent and stepparent as control variable.

## **8.5 Data and methods**

### **8.5.1 Data**

First, the survey data from Divorce in Flanders (SiV) are used (Mortelmans et al., 2011). For this study, we select targetchildren between age 10 and 21 from dissolved reference marriages, who have at least one stepparent and are residing in one or two parental households. Participation and consent of at least one parent was a necessary condition for the participation of the child. In total, 278 adolescents reported on their relationship with their father and a stepfather and 322 adolescents reported on their relationship with their mother and a stepmother.

Second, the survey data from the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (LAGO) are used (Vanassche et al., 2012). For the present study, we use data from the two most recent research rounds (2011 and 2012). The research sample consist of adolescents whose parents are divorced or seperated, have at least one stepparent and are residing in one or two parental households. In total, 343 adolescents reported on their relationship with their father and a stepfather and 339 adolescents reported on their relationship with their mother and a stepmother.

### **8.5.2 The relationships between adolescents and parental figures**

The relationships between adolescents and their parental figures after divorce are measured via 5-point likert scales, questioning how good or bad the relationship is with a certain parent. Answer categories range from *1 = very bad* to *5 = very good*. In general, adolescents report a good relationship with all parental figures. We first compute dummy variables that indicate a good relationship with a certain parent. A good or very good relationship is coded 1, the other categories are coded 0. We then transform the relationship variables of both father figures into a categorical variable with the following

categories: (a) a good relationship with both father figures; (b) a good relationship with father only; (c) a good relationship with stepfather only; and (d) a good relationship with neither father nor stepfather. Identically, we transform the relationship variables of both mother figures into a categorical variable with the following categories: (a) a good relationship with both mother figures; (b) a good relationship with mother only; (c) a good relationship with stepmother only; and (d) a good relationship with neither mother nor stepmother.

### **8.5.3 Adolescent wellbeing**

As the relationship with parents and stepparents may not be equally important for all indicators, it is important to consider several wellbeing indicators (Brown, 2006; King, 2006). We investigate five wellbeing indicators: the positive attitudes of self-esteem and study involvement, the negative feelings of anxiety and depression and the cognitive indicator of life satisfaction. These indicators reflect the psychological wellbeing and state of mind of adolescents and are clearly linked to each other (Gohm et al., 1998; Van der Valk et al., 2007). The SiV-data provide information on life satisfaction, self-esteem and feelings of anxiety. The LAGO-study questions adolescents about their life satisfaction, feelings of depression and study involvement.

Life satisfaction, the cognitive indicator of wellbeing, is measured in SiV and LAGO via the Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965). On a scale from 0 to 10, adolescents are asked how they feel in general, if they are happy and content. 0 means the worst possible life quality and 10 means the best possible life quality one can imagine.

Self-esteem is measured in SiV via 10 items of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, Schooler & Schoenbach, 1989). Examples of items are *I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others* and *I feel that I have a number of good qualities*. There are five answer categories, ranging from 1 = *fully disagree* to 5 = *fully agree*. These ten items of self-esteem form one internally valid scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .84. The self-esteem scale is made by taking the mean of all items.

Feelings of anxiety are measured in SiV via four symptoms of anxiety (Maier et al., 1988): having difficulties to relax; being nervous; being irritable; and being anxious. There are four answer categories, ranging from 1 = *(almost) never* to 4 = *(almost) always*. The four indicators form an internally valid scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .73. The feelings of anxiety scale is made by taking the mean of all items.

Feelings of depression are measured in LAGO via 8 items of the CES-D 8 scale (Radloff, 1977). Adolescents indicate how often they feel or behave in a certain way (e.g. feel lonely, sleep bad, feel depressed) during the last week. There are four answer categories with increasing frequency, ranging from 1 = *(almost) never* to 4 = *(almost) always*. The eight items form an internally valid scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .83. The depression scale was composed by summing all items.

Study involvement is measured in LAGO via a 12-item scale (Brutsaert, 1993). Items measure adolescents' attitudes and behaviors relating to their curiosity to learn, the feeling that school is useful, the understanding of the importance of classes and school for later life, and so on. There are five answer categories, ranging from 1 = *fully disagree* to 5 = *fully agree*. These 12 items form an internally valid scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .86. The study involvement scale is made by summing all items.

#### **8.5.4 Custody arrangement**

In SiV, the custody arrangement is registered in two steps. First, parents are asked whether the adolescent lives with the mother, father, someone else, or both parents alternately. In this latter case, a residential calendar is used to register the custody arrangement in detail, indicating how many days and nights the adolescent spends within their household and within the household of the other biological parent. In LAGO, adolescents themselves are shown a calendar, corresponding with a regular month without holiday periods (Sodermans et al., 2012). They indicate for every day and night whether they spent with their mother or with their father. The proportion of time the adolescent spent with each parent is then used to create the custody arrangement variable. Adolescents residing at least 75% of time with mother are considered to be in mother custody, adolescents residing at least 75% of time with father are considered to be in father custody. Adolescents living at least 25% of the time with each parent are considered to be in joint custody. This implies that adolescents have to spend at least two full days or four half days a week with each parent to be considered as being in a joint custody arrangement.

#### **8.5.5 Control variables**

Age is included as a metric variable and gender is included as a dummy variable, with girls coded one. The highest educational level of parents is included as a metric variable. The duration since divorce and stepfamily formation are controlled for by including two metric variables that measure the years that have passed since respectively the parental divorce and the start of the relationship of the parent with the stepparent. Finally, the current parental conflict and the current parent-stepparent conflict are considered as metric variables. Answer categories of reported conflict by adolescents range from *never* to *daily*.

Table 8.2 presents the descriptives for all study variables in the subsamples of children with respectively a stepfather and a stepmother for both data sources.



**Table 8.2: Descriptives for all study variables in the four research samples**

	SiV			LAGO		
	Stepfather sample	Stepmother sample	Range	Stepfather sample	Stepmother sample	Range
	M (SD) / Prop.	M (SD) / Prop.		M (SD) / Prop.	M (SD) / Prop.	
Good relationship with ...						
father and stepfather	57		0-1	46		0-1
father only	24		0-1	21		0-1
stepfather only	14		0-1	19		0-1
neither father nor stepfather	5		0-1	14		0-1
Good relationship with ...						
mother and stepmother		53	0-1		48	0-1
mother only		37	0-1		40	0-1
stepmother only		7	0-1		8	0-1
neither mother nor stepmother		3	0-1		4	0-1
Wellbeing indicators						
Self-esteem	3.8 (0.5)	3.8 (0.6)	1-5			
Anxiety feelings	1.7 (0.6)	1.6 (0.6)	1-4			
Life satisfaction	7.9 (1.6)	7.9 (1.7)	0-10	7.2 (1.8)	7.3 (1.7)	0-10
Study involvement				23.1 (7.6)	24.5 (7.5)	0-48
Depressive feelings				8.0 (4.4)	7.8 (4.3)	0-24
Custody arrangement						
Joint physical custody	35	31	0-1	34	31	0-1
Sole mother custody	53	61	0-1	57	63	0-1
Sole father custody	12	8	0-1	9	6	0-1
Girls	51	46	0-1	60	58	0-1
Age	15.8 (3.4)	15.9 (3.3)	10-21	15.1 (1.9)	15.2 (2.0)	11-20
Duration since divorce	9.8 (4.6)	9.2 (4.6)	0-21	8.7 (3.8)	8.5 (3.9)	0-20
Duration new relation	8.0 (4.3)	6.5 (4.0)	0-21	5.5 (3.6)	5.5 (3.8)	0-20
Education parents	2.3 (0.7)	2.4 (0.6)	1-3	2.8 (0.9)	2.9 (0.9)	1-4
Bad relationship with mother	14		0-1			0-1
Bad relationship with father		29	0-1		34	0-1
Conflict parents	1.4 (0.6)	1.4 (0.6)	1-7	2.2 (1.1)	2.2 (1.0)	1-5
Conflict father-stepmother	2.6 (1.3)		1-7	2.2 (1.0)		1-5
Conflict mother-stepfather		2.6 (1.3)	1-7		2.3 (1.0)	1-5

### **8.5.6 Analytical strategy**

In a first step, we test whether custody arrangements influence relationships between adolescents and father/mother figures. We first present a crosstabulation of the relationship quality with parents and stepparents in mother, joint and father custody. Next, the relationship quality with parents and stepparents is modeled via multinomial regression techniques, since the relationships are categorized into four groups. A good relationship with both father/mother figures is used as reference group. Exploratory analyses reveal that the group of adolescents with no good relationship with father and stepfather and with no good relationship with mother and stepmother are too small to be modeled separately within the SiV sample, and are therefore excluded from the multinomial logistic regressions to avoid quasi-separation of data-points. In a second step, we run normal linear regression models to test the association between these relationship variables and adolescent wellbeing. In a first model, the overall association is estimated. In a second model, the conditional associations within mother, father and joint custody are presented.

For all models, and for both datasets, we distinguish a stepfather sample and a stepmother sample, corresponding with the samples sizes described above. As we are working with limited sample sizes, we do not limit the discussion of the results to significant results on  $p < .05$ -level, but extend the indications in the tables to  $p < .10$ -level and also take into account the size of the coefficients in discussing the results.

## **8.6 Results**

### **8.6.1 Adolescents' relationships with parental figures after divorce**

Table 8.3 presents the crosstabulation of the custody arrangement of the child and the relationship quality with respectively father and stepfather and with mother and stepmother. The results in both datasets are in general very similar, but more pronounced within the LAGO-data. The percentages in father custody refer to a very small number of cases and have to be interpreted with caution.

Most results are in line with our research hypotheses. Adolescents in joint custody most often have a good relationship with both father and stepfather. A good relationship with father only is most frequently the case in father custody, and the least frequently in mother custody. Conversely, a good relationship with stepfather only is most common in mother custody and least common in father custody. A good relationship with neither father nor stepfather is most common in mother custody. The results regarding the relationship with mother and stepmother are very similar. Adolescents report most frequently a good relationship with both mother and stepmother in joint custody. They more often have a good relationship with mother only in mother custody, and with stepmother only in father custody.

**Table 8.3: Crosstabulation of relationship quality with same-sex parent and stepparent and the custody arrangement of the child (in %)**

	SiV				LAGO			
Good relationship with	M	J	F	Total	M	J	F	Total
Father and stepfather	54	61	53	57	43	57	22	45
Father only	19	26	44	24	14	23	56	21
Stepfather only	19	9	3	14	26	10	9	19
None of both	7	3	0	5	17	10	13	14
Total	54	35	12	100 (N = 278)	57	34	9	100 (N = 343)
Significance test	$\chi^2 = 18.3, df = 6, p < .001$				$\chi^2 = 44.2, df = 6, p < .001$			
Good relationship with	M	J	F	Total	M	J	F	Total
Mother and stepmother	51	56	56	52	43	64	18	48
Mother only	43	31	19	37	48	29	27	40
Stepmother only	5	6	26	7	5	5	45	8
None of both	1	7	0	3	4	3	9	4
Total	61	31	8	100 (N = 322)	63	31	6	100 (N = 330)
Significance test	$\chi^2 = 27.6, df = 6, p < .001$				$\chi^2 = 63.6, df = 5, p < .001$			

*Note.* M = Mother custody, J = Joint custody, F = Father custody

Next, we look at the association between the custody arrangement and the relationship with parents and stepparents in a multivariate way. Table 8.4 presents the results for the relationship with father and stepfather, Table 8.5 for the relationship with mother and stepmother. In general, the findings from the bivariate association remain across all models. In other words, custody arrangements are important to consider when investigating relationships of adolescents with both parents and stepparents. In contrast with the assumptions of the biology hypothesis, biological ties do not suffice for having a good relationship. An important part of the adolescents that does not live together with a biological parent, often substitutes that parent by the residential stepparent. If adolescents live part-time with both father and stepfather, or with mother and stepmother, they most often have a good relationship with both.

Furthermore, the relationship with mother and the degree of conflict between mother and stepfather are strongly related to the likelihood of having a good relationship with father only. Similarly, the relationship with father and the degree of conflict between father and stepmother are related to having a good relationship with mother only. These findings hold in both data sets. Conversely, there are some indications that more frequent parental conflict is associated with a higher likelihood of having a good relationship with the stepparent only, but the results are less consistent.

**Table 8.4: Logit coefficients, standard errors and odds ratio's from multinomial logistic regression models predicting the relationship quality with father and stepfather**

Good relationship with father and stepfather (= ref)															
	SiV						LAGO								
	Father only			Stepfather only			Father only			Stepfather only			None of both		
	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR
Intercept	-1.69***	(0.36)	0.18	-1.84***	(0.44)	0.16	-1.20***	(0.32)	0.30	-1.94***	(0.38)	0.14	-2.41***	(0.44)	0.09
Custody arrangement (ref = joint)															
Mother custody	-0.05	(0.36)	0.95	0.78°	(0.45)	2.18	-0.27	(0.35)	0.76	1.01*	(0.38)	2.75	0.60°	(0.42)	1.82
Father custody	0.14	(0.51)	1.15	-1.53°	(1.12)	0.22	0.80°	(0.60)	2.23	0.27	(0.82)	1.31	0.13	(0.81)	1.14
Girls	0.54°	(0.33)	1.71	0.26	(0.38)	1.30	-0.10	(0.33)	0.90	0.43	(0.33)	1.54	0.50	(0.40)	1.65
Age	0.11*	(0.05)	1.12	0.20**	(0.06)	1.22	-0.01	(0.09)	0.99	0.10	(0.08)	1.11	0.22*	(0.10)	1.25
Duration since divorce	-0.09°	(0.05)	0.92	-0.01	(0.06)	0.99	-0.02	(0.06)	0.98	0.03	(0.05)	1.03	0.01	(0.06)	1.01
Duration new relation	-0.04	(0.05)	0.96	-0.09	(0.06)	0.91	0.09	(0.06)	1.09	0.04	(0.06)	1.04	0.08	(0.06)	1.08
Educational level parents	0.08	(0.24)	1.08	-0.04	(0.28)	0.96	-0.11	(0.19)	0.89	-0.18	(0.18)	0.84	-0.25	(0.22)	0.78
Parental conflict	-0.09	(0.31)	0.91	0.07	(0.35)	1.07	0.18	(0.17)	1.20	0.36*	(0.16)	1.44	0.39*	(0.19)	1.47
Conflict mother & stepfather	0.51***	(0.13)	1.66	-0.05	(0.17)	0.95	0.73***	(0.19)	2.08	-0.29	(0.19)	0.75	0.60**	(0.21)	1.83
No good relationship with mother	1.55***	(0.43)	4.72	-1.44	(1.08)	0.24	1.63***	(0.47)	5.13	0.60	(0.54)	1.83	1.17*	(0.54)	3.21
Wald Chi-Square	53.94***						95.93***								
df	20						30								

° $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 8.5: Logit coefficients, standard errors and odds ratio's from multinomial logistic regression models predicting the relationship quality with mother and stepmother**

Good relationship with mother and stepmother (= ref)															
	SiV						LAGO								
	Mother only			Stepmother only			Mother only			Stepmother only			None of both		
	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR	B	S.E.	OR
Intercept	-1.36***	(0.34)	0.26	-2.25***	(0.55)	0.11	-1.30***	(0.29)	0.27	-2.50***	(0.53)	0.08	-3.83***	(0.76)	0.02
Custody arrangement (ref = joint)															
Mother custody	0.36	(0.33)	1.43	-0.19	(0.60)	0.83	0.48°	(0.30)	1.62	0.35	(0.58)	1.42	0.58	(0.72)	1.80
Father custody	-0.08	(0.63)	0.93	1.34*	(0.70)	3.81	0.89	(0.77)	2.44	3.78***	(0.84)	43.86	2.80*	(1.15)	1.64
Girls	-0.33	(0.29)	0.72	-0.36	(0.49)	0.70	0.15	(0.28)	1.16	-0.21	(0.49)	0.81	0.79	(0.66)	2.21
Age	-0.02	(0.05)	0.98	0.13°	(0.08)	1.14	0.12°	(0.07)	1.13	0.14	(0.13)	1.15	0.24°	(0.15)	1.28
Duration since divorce	-0.05	(0.04)	0.95	0.06	(0.06)	1.06	-0.12**	(0.04)	0.88	-0.05	(0.09)	0.96	-0.12	(0.10)	0.89
Duration new relation	0.08	(0.06)	1.09	-0.17°	(0.10)	0.85	0.06	(0.05)	1.06	0.12	(0.08)	1.13	0.03	(0.10)	1.03
Educational level parents	0.07	(0.22)	1.07	0.06	(0.38)	1.07	0.10	(0.16)	1.11	0.13	(0.30)	1.14	0.44	(0.37)	1.55
Parental conflict	-0.02	(0.24)	0.99	0.70°	(0.36)	2.01	0.03	(0.15)	1.03	0.30	(0.26)	1.35	0.08	(0.32)	1.08
Conflict father & stepmother	0.36**	(0.12)	1.43	-0.20	(0.26)	0.82	0.31*	(0.14)	1.36	-0.55*	(0.28)	0.58	-0.16	(0.32)	0.86
No good relationship with father	2.84***	(0.32)	8.88	-1.33	(1.07)	0.26	1.83***	(0.30)	6.21	0.09	(0.62)	1.09	1.17°	(0.62)	3.21
Wald Chi-Square	81.50***						99.73***								
df	20						30								

° $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

As the relationship with mother and father is strongly related to the custody arrangement, we also tested models without these variables. For the stepfather models, the exclusion of the relationship quality with mother did not substantially change the results. For the stepmother model, adolescents in mother custody more often report a good relationship with mother only than adolescents in joint and father custody. In the SiV-sample, these differences disappear when controlling for the relationship with father, suggesting the association between custody arrangement and no good relationship with stepmother mainly runs via the relationship with the father. In the LAGO-sample, the results do not substantially differ with or without controlling for the relationship with father.

With regard to the control variables, we see that older adolescents more often have a good relationship with only one of the two parental figures in their lives. The results for the other control variables are less consistent in both data sets. Moreover, significant coefficients are small in size.

### ***8.6.2 Adolescents' relationships with parental figures and their wellbeing***

In Table 8.6 and Table 8.7, the results for the linear regression analyses modeling different wellbeing indicators for the stepfather samples are presented. For each wellbeing measure, two models are presented, one with and one without interaction terms between the custody arrangement of the child and the relationship with parent and stepparent. As for the previous models, the results for children in father custody have to be interpreted with caution due to limited sample size.

We first briefly discuss the results for the first models. Under control of the other variables, custody arrangements are not directly related to adolescent wellbeing. The relationships with parents and stepparents are however strongly related to the wellbeing of adolescents. The group of adolescents who have a good relationship with both father and stepfather have higher levels of wellbeing than adolescents who have a good relationship with only one of their father figures or no good relationship with both. These adolescents are more confident about their own capabilities, their self-esteem is higher, they are more involved in school and have lower levels of depression and anxiety. Also their satisfaction about life in general is higher. A good relationship with mother is also important for adolescent wellbeing, indicating that, despite the strong association between the relationship with mother and the relationship with stepfather (Table 8.5), a good relationship with all parental figures is important for adolescent wellbeing. The frequency of conflict between stepparents is not related to most wellbeing indicators, while the frequency of conflict between the biological parents is a strong indicator for all wellbeing indicators, except for study involvement. Finally, we notice that especially girls are more prone to lower scores on the wellbeing indicators that are studied. Previous studies have shown that boys will have more wellbeing problems when externalizing outcomes such as delinquent behavior are considered.

Next we turn to the models presenting the conditional effects of (no) good relationship with father and stepfather in mother, joint and father custody. Although the F-test for the

change in the explained variance by the inclusion of all interaction terms fails to reach a .15 significance-level, the sequential F-tests and their associated p-values for the significant interaction terms are all significant on .10 - level. In combination with the size of the coefficients and the limited sample size, we therefore consider them meaningful to discuss. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that they lack the statistical power to reject the null hypothesis with certainty. Therefore, they have to be considered as trends that need to be further investigated.

In the SiV-sample, the results for life satisfaction and self-esteem suggest a stronger negative influence of having no good relationship with stepfather than of a no good relationship with father in both joint and mother custody. The direction of the slope differences points however towards a stronger impact of a good relationship with stepfather only in joint custody compared to mother custody. For life satisfaction there is an accumulative negative effect of no good relationship with neither father nor stepfather in mother custody. A good relationship with stepfather in this arrangement suffices, but if the tie with father is not substituted by a close tie with stepfather, this is associated with a lower life satisfaction than in case of a good relationship with father only. The feelings of anxiety are only higher for adolescents in mother custody having no good relationship with both father figures and for adolescents in joint custody having a good relationship with stepfather only. The latter is opposite to the findings regarding life satisfaction and self-esteem.

The interaction terms for father custody point for all wellbeing indicators towards a stronger negative effect of no good relationship with father compared to no good relationship with stepfather. The accumulative effect of no good relationship with both fathers within father custody can't be tested as there are simply no adolescents reporting no good relationship with father and stepfather in this arrangement.

The LAGO-sample shows comparable results for life satisfaction as the SiV-sample for adolescents in joint custody, with no good relationship with stepfather being more influential than no good relationship with father. The accumulative negative effect of no good relationship with neither father nor stepfather is again most pronounced in mother custody. The results for depressive feelings show again the strongest negative influence of a good relationship with father only within joint custody, while in mother custody especially no good relationship with neither father nor stepfather is associated with more frequent depressive feelings. Study involvement shows overall no association with the relationship with father and stepfather. Nevertheless, the interaction terms show a negative effect of a good relationship with stepfather only within joint custody. Together with the overall strong association of study involvement with the relationship with mother, it seems that mainly the relationship with residential biological parents is important regarding study involvement. The interaction terms for father custody suggest again a stronger negative association between a good relationship with stepfather only for all wellbeing indicators.

**Table 8.6: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from the OLS-regression models predicting adolescent wellbeing by the relationship with father and stepfather (SiV)**

	Life satisfaction				Self-esteem				Anxiety feelings			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	8.66***	(0.20)	8.72***	(0.23)	4.00***	(0.07)	4.01***	(0.08)	1.38***	(0.08)	1.43***	(0.08)
Joint custody (= ref)												
Mother custody (MC)	-0.14	(0.20)	-0.21	(0.26)	-0.07	(0.07)	-0.09	(0.09)	0.04	(0.08)	-0.06	(0.10)
Father custody (FC)	0.40	(0.32)	0.11	(0.42)	0.14	(0.11)	0.14	(0.15)	-0.04	(0.12)	-0.10	(0.16)
Girls	-0.38*	(0.18)	-0.38*	(0.18)	-0.21**	(0.06)	-0.22**	(0.07)	0.23***	(0.07)	0.23***	(0.07)
Age	-0.06°	(0.03)	-0.05°	(0.03)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Duration since divorce	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.02	(0.03)	0.02°	(0.01)	0.02°	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Duration new relation	0.03	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.03*	(0.01)	-0.02*	(0.01)
Education parents	0.21	(0.14)	0.20	(0.14)	0.10*	(0.05)	0.10*	(0.05)	-0.13*	(0.05)	-0.12*	(0.05)
Conflict parents	-0.42*	(0.17)	-0.40*	(0.17)	-0.13*	(0.06)	-0.13*	(0.06)	0.27***	(0.06)	0.28***	(0.06)
Conflict father-stepmother	-0.10	(0.08)	-0.08	(0.08)	0.02	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	0.05*	(0.03)	0.05°	(0.03)
Bad relationship with mother	-0.93***	(0.28)	-0.95***	(0.28)	-0.13	(0.10)	-0.13	(0.10)	0.27**	(0.10)	0.29**	(0.10)
Good relationship with both fathers												
with father only	-0.53*	(0.23)	-0.72*	(0.37)	-0.21*	(0.08)	-0.23°	(0.13)	0.08	(0.09)	-0.02	(0.14)
with stepfather only	-0.09	(0.27)	-0.50	(0.53)	-0.08	(0.10)	-0.12	(0.19)	0.02	(0.10)	-0.28°	(0.20)
with none of both	-1.40**	(0.44)	-0.73	(0.89)	-0.22	(0.16)	-0.38	(0.32)	0.28°	(0.16)	0.18	(0.33)
MC * with father only			0.12	(0.49)			0.04	(0.18)			0.17	(0.18)
MC * with stepfather only			0.54	(0.63)			0.07	(0.23)			0.42°	(0.23)
MC * with none of both			-0.90	(1.02)			0.22	(0.37)			0.16	(0.38)
FC * with father only			0.73	(0.65)			0.01	(0.23)			0.12	(0.24)
FC * with stepfather only			-0.02	(1.63)			-0.29	(0.58)			0.57	(0.60)
R <sup>2</sup>	.22		.23		.14		.14		.24		.25	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>	5.58***		1.40		6.38***		1.58		3.34***		0.92	

° $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



**Table 8.7: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from the OLS-regression models predicting adolescent wellbeing by the relationship with father and stepfather (LAGO)**

	Life satisfaction				Depressive feelings				Study involvement			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	7.74***	(0.20)	7.84***	(0.24)	6.14***	(0.51)	5.83***	(0.58)	22.7***	(0.91)	23.02***	(1.04)
Joint custody (= ref)												
Mother custody (MC)	0.20	(0.20)	-0.02	(0.28)	0.01	(0.51)	0.56	(0.68)	0.19	(0.91)	-0.35	(1.22)
Father custody (FC)	-0.09	(0.37)	0.49	(0.67)	0.56	(0.93)	0.05	(1.64)	0.64	(1.66)	1.82	(2.97)
Girls	-0.09	(0.19)	-0.12	(0.19)	1.16*	(0.47)	1.21*	(0.47)	2.40***	(0.84)	2.25**	(0.85)
Age	0.04	(0.05)	0.03	(0.05)	-0.07	(0.12)	-0.07	(0.12)	-0.59**	(0.22)	-0.58**	(0.22)
Duration since divorce	-0.03	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.03)	0.10	(0.08)	0.11°	(0.08)	0.01	(0.14)	0.02	(0.14)
Duration new relation	0.03	(0.03)	0.04	(0.03)	-0.14°	(0.08)	-0.16*	(0.08)	0.08	(0.14)	0.06	(0.14)
Education parents	0.13	(0.11)	0.12	(0.11)	-0.14	(0.26)	-0.09	(0.26)	0.15	(0.47)	0.22	(0.47)
Conflict parents	-0.33***	(0.10)	-0.34***	(0.10)	0.66***	(0.24)	0.74**	(0.24)	0.25	(0.43)	0.26	(0.44)
Conflict father-stepmother	-0.07	(0.11)	-0.07	(0.11)	0.33	(0.26)	0.27	(0.26)	-0.27	(0.47)	-0.25	(0.48)
Bad relationship with mother	-0.47°	(0.28)	-0.44°	(0.29)	1.03	(0.70)	1.04°	(0.71)	-4.63***	(1.25)	-4.71***	(1.28)
Good relationship with both fathers												
with father only	-0.72**	(0.26)	-1.12**	(0.39)	0.77	(0.64)**	2.68	(0.96)	0.76	(1.14)	1.61	(1.73)
with stepfather only	-0.53*	(0.25)	-0.63	(0.52)	1.33*	(0.62)	0.82	(1.28)	-1.55	(1.12)	-4.65*	(2.32)
with none of both	-1.67***	(0.30)	-1.55**	(0.55)	2.61***	(0.73)	1.66	(1.35)	-1.75	(1.31)	-2.98	(2.44)
MC * with father only			0.90°	(0.52)			-3.49**	(1.29)			-1.58	(2.33)
MC * with stepfather only			0.30	(0.60)			0.18	(1.48)			4.41°	(2.68)
MC * with none of both			-0.08	(0.66)			1.23	(1.61)			1.78	(2.91)
FC * with father only			-0.44	(0.83)			-1.96	(2.06)			-2.23	(3.70)
FC * with stepfather only			-1.60	(1.26)			4.48	(3.11)			-2.85	(5.62)
FC * with none of both			-0.64	(1.76)			0.33	(2.89)			0.95	(5.23)
R <sup>2</sup>	.21		.23		.16		.19		.11		.12	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>	6.72***		1.80		4.88***		0.81		3.04***		0.65	

° $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table 8.8: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from the OLS-regression models predicting adolescent wellbeing by the relationship with mother and stepmother (SiV)**

	Life satisfaction				Self-esteem				Anxiety feelings			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	8.31***	(0.22)	8.94***	(0.25)	4.14***	(0.07)	4.08***	(0.08)	1.36***	(0.07)	1.34***	(0.08)
Joint custody (= ref)												
Mother custody (MC)	0.01	(0.21)	-0.16	(0.28)	0.01	(0.07)	0.07	(0.09)	0.02	(0.07)	0.06	(0.09)
Father custody (FC)	0.03	(0.37)	-0.22	(0.49)	0.07	(0.13)	0.27	(0.16)	0.03	(0.12)	0.05	(0.16)
Girls	-0.66***	(0.18)	-0.64***	(0.18)	-0.31***	(0.06)	-0.31***	(0.06)	0.26***	(0.06)	0.26***	(0.06)
Age	0.00	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)	0.02°	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.02°	(0.01)	0.02°	(0.01)
Duration since divorce	-0.01	(0.02)	-0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)
Duration new relation	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.04)	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)	0.00	(0.01)
Education parents	0.11	(0.14)	0.09	(0.14)	0.06	(0.05)	0.08	(0.05)	-0.07	(0.05)	-0.07	(0.05)
Conflict parents	-0.63***	(0.15)	-0.61***	(0.15)	-0.20***	(0.05)	-0.21***	(0.05)	0.17***	(0.05)	0.18***	(0.05)
Conflict father-stepmother	0.01	(0.08)	0.00	(0.08)	0.02	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)	0.00	(0.03)
Bad relationship with father	-0.31	(0.23)	-0.30	(0.23)	-0.15°	(0.08)	-0.14°	(0.08)	0.05	(0.07)	0.06	(0.07)
Good relationship with both mothers												
with mother only	-0.50*	(0.22)	-0.88*	(0.37)	-0.11	(0.07)	-0.07	(0.12)	0.11°	(0.07)	0.18	(0.12)
with stepmother only	-0.61°	(0.36)	-0.73	(0.69)	-0.47***	(0.12)	0.00	(0.23)	0.40***	(0.12)	0.43*	(0.22)
with none of both	-2.46***	(0.53)	-2.24***	(0.64)	-0.46*	(0.18)	-0.42*	(0.22)	0.65***	(0.17)	0.75***	(0.21)
MC * with mother only			0.56	(0.43)			-0.06	(0.14)			-0.09	(0.14)
MC * with stepmother only			-0.36	(0.86)			-0.40	(0.29)			-0.14	(0.28)
MC * with none of both			-0.96	(1.13)			-0.03	(0.38)			-0.29	(0.37)
FC * with mother only			-0.18	(0.90)			0.06	(0.30)			-0.22	(0.29)
FC * with stepmother only			0.98	(1.02)			-1.06***	(0.35)			0.08	(0.33)
FC * with none of both												
R <sup>2</sup>	.20		.22		.20		.23		.20		.21	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>	5.95***		1.27		6.06***		1.61		5.92***		.98	

° $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table 8.9: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from the OLS-regression models predicting adolescent wellbeing by the relationship with mother and stepmother (LAGO)**

	Life satisfaction				Depressive feelings				Study involvement			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Intercept	7.75***	(0.20)	7.70***	(0.22)	6.17***	(0.50)	6.23***	(0.56)	23.92***	(0.89)	24.22***	(0.99)
Joint custody (= ref)												
Mother custody (MC)	0.18	(0.21)	0.25	(0.27)	-0.01	(0.53)	0.00	(0.68)	0.41	(0.93)	-0.28	(1.22)
Father custody (FC)	-0.92*	(0.43)	-0.42	(0.87)	1.51	(1.10)	1.12	(2.20)	-2.87	(1.94)	-0.64	(3.92)
Girls	-0.21	(0.19)	-0.21	(0.19)	0.88	(0.48)	0.81°	(0.48)	1.26	(0.85)	1.28	(0.86)
Age	0.00	(0.05)	0.01	(0.05)	0.07	(0.12)	0.07	(0.12)	-0.37°	(0.21)	-0.37°	(0.22)
Duration since divorce	-0.01	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)	0.04	(0.08)	0.05	(0.08)	-0.14	(0.14)	-0.12	(0.14)
Duration new relation	-0.01	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.03)	-0.05	(0.08)	-0.06	(0.08)	0.25°	(0.14)	0.24°	(0.14)
Education parents	-0.11	(0.11)	-0.10	(0.11)	-0.08	(0.28)	-0.08	(0.28)	0.45	(0.50)	0.42	(0.50)
Conflict parents	-0.33***	(0.10)	-0.33***	(0.10)	0.44°	(0.25)	0.42°	(0.25)	0.58	(0.44)	0.53	(0.45)
Conflict father-stepmother	0.03	(0.10)	0.02	(0.10)	-0.09	(0.25)	-0.10	(0.25)	-0.84*	(0.43)	-0.78°	(0.44)
Bad relationship with father	-0.61**	(0.22)	-0.58**	(0.22)	1.36*	(0.55)	1.21*	(0.55)	-0.98	(0.97)	-1.06	(0.99)
Good relationship with both mothers												
with mother only	-0.27	(0.22)	-0.05	(0.37)	0.82	(0.54)	0.50	(0.93)	-0.47	(0.97)	-0.69	(1.66)
with stepmother only	-0.85*	(0.38)	-0.70	(0.77)	1.53	(0.97)	3.71*	(1.95)	-3.78*	(1.70)	-5.69*	(3.47)
with none of both	-1.30**	(0.48)	-1.90*	(0.97)	3.79**	(1.18)	3.31	(2.46)	-2.63	(2.09)	-7.93*	(4.38)
MC * with mother only			-0.28	(0.43)			0.32	(1.10)			0.65	(1.96)
MC * with stepmother only			-0.19	(0.94)			-2.33	(2.37)			2.28	(4.23)
MC * with none of both			0.62	(1.14)			1.55	(2.85)			8.85°	(5.08)
FC * with mother only			-1.15	(1.12)			3.82	(2.84)			-3.53	(5.06)
FC * with stepmother only			-0.62	(1.26)			-2.77	(3.21)			-0.41	(5.66)
FC * with none of both			0.96	(1.73)			-2.87	(4.38)			0.06	(7.80)
R <sup>2</sup>	.16		.16		.13		.15		.09		.10	
F for change in R <sup>2</sup>	4.67***		1.40		3.60***		0.72		2.36***		0.52	

° $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

In Table 8.8 and Table 8.9, the results for the linear regression analyses modeling different wellbeing indicators for the stepmother samples are presented. As for the (step)fathers, we present for each wellbeing indicator a model with and without interaction terms.

Again, custody arrangements are not directly related to the wellbeing indicators under control for the other variables. The most consistent effects are those regarding the relationships between adolescents and their mother figures. The group of adolescents who have a good relationship with both their mother and stepmother often have higher levels of wellbeing than adolescents who only have a good relationship with one of them. Especially no good relationship with mother is consistently negatively associated with adolescent wellbeing. Next to the relationship with mother and stepmother, also the relationship with father matters. Conflict is again mainly negatively associated with adolescent wellbeing if it is situated between the biological parents, and less important when it involves the new partner relationship. The control variables give similar results as in the stepfather sample, with girls being more at risk to have lower levels of wellbeing.

Next, we discuss the results for the conditional effects. As for the stepfather samples, the overall F-change fails to reach significance, but the sequential F-tests and their associated p-values for the significant interaction terms are all significance on .10-level. Therefore, they are considered as trends, that need to be confirmed in the future with stronger empirical evidence and greater confidence.

For the three wellbeing indicators analyzed with the SiV-data, having no good relationship with both mother and stepmother is even worse than having no good relationship with one of both, indicating an accumulative negative effect. This finding holds in mother and joint custody. The relative importance of a good relationship with mother and stepmother differs between the wellbeing indicators and between custody arrangements. For life satisfaction, the impact of no good relationship with stepmother is stronger as for no good relationship with mother within joint custody. In mother custody there is mainly an effect of no good relationship with mother, with an accumulative negative effect of no good relationship with stepmother. Within joint custody, adolescents only report a lower self-esteem if they have no good relationship with mother and stepmother, while in mother custody the relationship with mother is more important. In father custody, a good relationship with stepmother only is more negatively related to the self-esteem of adolescents than in mother and joint custody. Finally, regarding feelings of anxiety, it is mainly the relationship with mother that matters in all custody arrangements.

In the LAGO-data, no good relationship with stepmother is associated with none of the wellbeing indicators in both joint and mother custody, as long as there is a good relationship with mother. Nevertheless, no good relationship with stepmother is associated with lower wellbeing in combination with no good relationship with mother under certain conditions. For life satisfaction and study involvement, this accumulative effect mainly plays in joint custody, while for depressive feelings in mother custody. Finally, a good

relationship with mother only is associated with more depressive feelings and less study involvement in father custody.

## **8.7 Discussion**

The aim of this chapter was twofold. First, we explored how custody arrangements following parental divorce are associated with the relationship of adolescents with respectively father and stepfather and with mother and stepmother. Second, we explored how the importance of these relationships for adolescent wellbeing differs between custody arrangements.

First of all, biological ties do not guarantee good parent-child relationships. We find evidence for the importance of sharing residence with both parents and stepparents. Part-time residence thereby seems to be as beneficial as full-time co-residence, as adolescents in joint physical custody most often have a good relationship with father and stepfather and with mother and stepmother. In other words, adolescents in joint custody most often accumulate good relationships with all parental figures. This advantage of joint custody may be less visible if the relationship quality with parents and stepparents is modeled separately (King, 2006). Although the legal preference for joint physical custody was aimed for maintaining good relations with both biological parents following divorce, it has the additional side-consequence to establish more often a good relationship with stepparents. Joint custody mainly benefits the relationship with stepmothers, as they most frequently were non-residential stepparents in the past. In case of mother custody, adolescents often have no good relationship with stepmother, partially because of the lack of a good relationship with father. With the increasing number of children in joint physical custody following parental divorce, more and more children will establish good relations with their stepmother over time. This may help to reduce some of the negative stereotypes about stepmothers and create a more visible reference group to develop, compare, and evaluate the own stepmother role.

Second, there is clear evidence that the relationship with stepparents also matters for adolescent wellbeing, next to the relationship with biological parents. With the increasing number of children within joint custody, this may imply that an increasing number of children may benefit from a good relationship with stepparents, in addition of a good relationship with both parents. Although we do not find a direct effect of custody arrangements on adolescent wellbeing, they indirectly matter by their association with the relationship with parents and stepparents.

In line with previous studies (King, 2006, White & Gilbreth, 2001), no good relationship with stepfather is more negatively related to adolescent wellbeing than no good relationship with father within mother custody. Somewhat surprisingly we find that this also holds within joint custody. For the relative importance of mother and stepmother we find exactly the reverse. In line with previous studies (King, 2007), the relationship with mother is often more important than the relationship with stepmother, even if the child lives with father. Hence, it seems that fathers are still more easily replaced by stepfathers

than mothers by stepmothers. Although joint custody may help to erase some of the persistent differences between stepmothers and stepfathers, there remain clearly some differences in the stepmother role next to the mother role compared to the stepfather role next to the father role.

There are also clear differences between wellbeing indicators in their association with the (step)parent-child relationships. For example, for adolescents in joint custody, no good relationship with stepfather is more influential than no good relationship with father regarding life satisfaction, depressive feelings and self-esteem, but the reverse holds regarding anxiety feelings and study involvement. To go further into detail about mechanisms that may explain these differences is however beyond the scope of this doctoral thesis.

Furthermore, in line with previous studies, we find strong empirical support for parental conflict to remain strongly negatively related to adolescent wellbeing following divorce (Amato, 2010). Remarkable is that the frequency of conflict between parents and stepparents is not related to most wellbeing indicators. The latter is nevertheless strongly related to the relationship of the adolescent with the stepparent. Together these findings point towards differences in the interrelatedness of the marital and parental subsystem and the stepmarital and stepparental subsystem regarding adolescent wellbeing.

We also want to discuss some limitations of the results that were discussed in this chapter. First, there may be important gender differences in the importance of the relationship with mother and father, and with stepfather and stepmother. The limited sample sizes do however not allow to include additional interaction terms by gender. The limited sample size may even be considered as one of the most important limitations of the present study. This is a common problem within the stepfamily literature. One of the choices that we made following this limitation is that we increased the traditional limit of the p-values from .05 to .10. This implies that we increase the likelihood of erroneously rejecting the null hypothesis. On the other hand, applying a significance level of .05 or lower with very small sample sizes may lead to erroneously not rejecting the null hypothesis. Especially the results regarding the interaction effects are lacking statistical power and therefore need to be interpreted with caution. Future studies need to explore whether the trends that we found can be confirmed with greater confidence. Second, our results are based on cross-sectional data. Hence we cannot make conclusions on the direction of the effects, for example between the quality of the (step)parent-child relationship and the custody type. Custody arrangements can change, for example if children experience problems with a new partner of mother or father. Especially within joint custody, moving to the other parent in case of discordant (step)parent-child relationships may be a small step. Similar, lower adolescent wellbeing may negatively affect relationships with parents and stepparents.

We end with some take-away messages for future research. The results regarding the importance of sharing residence for parental relationships demonstrate the importance for further attention towards family arrangements involving part-time residential relationships.

The current indications points towards joint custody as the best arrangement for good relationships with all parental figures. As the group of families in this custody arrangement is increasing, including part-time stepparenthood into the research agenda may provide new insights on differences between stepmothers and stepfathers. Second, we have indications that the relative importance of a good relationship with parents and stepparents differs between custody arrangements and according to the wellbeing indicators that are studied. These findings stress the importance of more conditional studies and attention for heterogeneity in family structures and processes.





## CHAPTER 9

# Stepfamily members, quality of the parent-child relationship and parental conflict as conditional factors in the association between custody arrangements and adolescent wellbeing

This chapter draws in part upon the following publications and conference paper:

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K., Matthijs, K. & Swicegood, G. (forthcoming). Commuting between two parental households: the association between joint physical custody and adolescent wellbeing following divorce. *Journal of Family Studies*. [accepted] (IF most recent: 1.14)

Sodermans, A.K., Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2013). Verblijfsregelingen en welbevinden van kinderen: Verschillen naar gezinskenmerken. *Relaties en Nieuwe Gezinnen*, 3(11), 1-29.

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (2010). Commuting between parental households. The moderating effect of family complexity on the association between custody arrangement and psychological child wellbeing. *Meeting of the European Network for the Sociological and Demographic study of Divorce*. Valencia, 14-16<sup>th</sup> of October.

## 9.1 Introduction

The post-divorce family structures of children are mainly determined by two structural components: the family configurations of the maternal and paternal household and the custody arrangement of the child. As became clear in the preceding chapters, both dimensions are strongly related. Overall, children in joint custody more often have a (part-time) residential stepfather and stepmother than children in mother custody. The interrelatedness of both factors can therefore not be ignored when studying their association with child wellbeing.

There is a large literature on respectively the individual effects of post-divorce family compositions on child wellbeing (for a recent overview, see Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000; Sweeney, 2010) and the individual effect of custody arrangements on children (for a recent overview, see Bauserman, 2002). There are however very few studies that bridge both research fields. Moreover, according to McIntosh (2009, p.398) “*A key question for the next generation of scholars is to identify for which children joint custody may be beneficial.*” In this chapter, we focus on the question how the family configuration within the parental households moderates the relationship between the custody arrangement following parental divorce and child wellbeing. As the research literature on custody arrangements also stresses the importance of parental conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship as mediating and moderating factors in explaining child wellbeing, these two family process variables are also taken into account. We use data of *Divorce in Flanders* (Mortelmans et al., 2011) and the *Leuven Adolescents and Family study* (Vanassche et al., 2012) to answer our research questions.

## 9.2 Pros and cons of joint physical custody

Numerous studies indicate a small positive effect of joint physical custody (versus sole custody) on child and adolescent wellbeing (Bauserman, 2002; Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1992; Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Glover & Steele, 1989; Shiller, 1986; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). The main reason cited is the greater involvement of both parents, particularly of the father, in the child’s life (Kelly, 1993; Luepnitz, 1986; Rothberg, 1983). Moreover, it leads to more rapid repartnering of mothers (Gunnøe & Braver, 2001; Vanassche et al., forthcoming). The latter is advantageous for mothers and children, because they spend less time in poverty. In addition to this direct positive effect, there is likely to be a selection effect at work (Gunnøe & Braver, 2001; Strohschein, 2005). Higher educated and low conflict couples may be more apt to share the raising of their children after divorce. Therefore, the positive association between joint physical custody and child wellbeing could be spurious and attributable to other factors such as socio-economic status or a positive family climate.

Opponents of joint physical custody warn that it creates feelings of instability from the constant moving from one house to another (Bauserman, 2002; Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1973; Kuehl, 1993; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). Rothberg (1983) described several difficulties related to joint physical custody, like multiple transitions, logistic problems

associated with transiting between homes and elevated stress for children who have difficulty adjusting to two different homes. According to Frankel (1985), joint physical custody is not an optimal solution because parents are hardly ever able to put their marital problems aside for the good sake of the children. Finally, there might be a negative effect of living in two households on the continuity of friendship networks of children (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; King, 2002; Kline et al., 1989).

Joint physical custody also increases family complexity by increasing the likelihood of living (part-time) together with one or more new family members, e.g. a new partner of the mother or father, child(ren) from previous relationships of these new partners, and a newborn halfbrother or –sister. Because joint physical custody increases the likelihood of repartnering for mothers (compared to mother custody), this stochastic association between joint physical custody and the likelihood of living together with a stepparent is even increased (Gunnøe & Braver, 2001; Vanassche et al., forthcoming). Increased family complexity may require a certain adaptation period from child perspective (Jeynes, 2006).

Also one can see that many studies fail to report differences between children in sole and joint physical custody (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Johnston, 1995; Kelly, 1993; Kline et al., 1989; Naedvall & Thuen, 2004; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Wolchik, Braver & Sandler, 1985). Most authors of these studies claim that family process variables are more important than the family structure per se. They argue that it makes no sense to compare custody types without incorporating family process variables (Hakvoort et al., 2011; Kelly, 1993). According to Lee (2002) the influence of joint physical custody on children's behavioural adjustment follows a complex trajectory: in itself it is related to positive outcomes for children, but family processes may suppress any positive effects. In other words, the presence of negative circumstances may counterbalance positive effects of joint physical custody.

In addition of the lack of consensus within the research literature, there could be difficulties with generalizing results to the current Belgian legal context. Earlier research that dealt with the effects of joint physical custody on children was mostly conducted in countries or states without legal defaults. Joint physical custody was therefore often the result of a mutual parental decision and characterized by relatively low levels of parental conflict. When there is a default judicial recommendation, parents with joint physical custody are less likely to be highly cooperative and well-to-do (Fehlberg et al, 2011; Singer, 2008; Sodermans, Matthijs & Swicegood, 2013). In that respect, the new custody legislation may carry unintended consequences. First of all, Fehlberg et al. (2011) state that joint physical custody is increasingly used as a compromise solution among high conflict couples in Australia. This could be the case in Belgium as well, because judges are able to impose joint physical custody against the will of one parent. Furthermore, Belgian lawyers, mediators and social workers increasingly voice concerns that the legal default has created the impression that joint physical custody is a parental right and has become the ultimate goal. This could create situations in which children are forced in joint physical custody arrangements against their will and/or that of one of their parents.

### 9.3 Post-divorce families and child wellbeing

Although there is lack of theory in the field of divorce and child custody research (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Davies & Cummings, 1994), three perspectives are repeatedly put forward to explain variability in child outcomes, each focusing on a different set of post-divorce family variables: 1) the *family structure perspective* is dealing with the presence (or absence) of old and new (step)family members, 2) the *parental conflict perspective* emphasizes the detrimental effects of spousal discord on child functioning, and 3) the *attachment theory* or *parental absence perspective* gives the parent-child relationship a central position.

#### 9.3.1 A new family composition

Supporters of the family structure perspective argue that living in a two-parent family is best for children's functioning. The rather modest but consistent differences between children residing in two-biological-parent families compared to other family forms hold across several domains of wellbeing (Brown, 2010). When it comes to a divorce, children in single-parent families are worst off due to reduced parental attention, lack of paternal role models, and reduced family income (Amato & Keith, 1991, Hakvoort et al., 2011). However, divorced parents may both contribute to fulfil their parental responsibilities, and post-divorce families may function in many respects as a healthy two-parent family (Amato, Kane & James, 2011). Joint physical custody might in this regard be a good strategy to approximate two-parent families, limiting the loss of parental resources following divorce (Breivik & Olweus, 2006). It could help to eliminate some of the stress experienced by families of divorce (Lowery & Settle, 1985) and minimize changes in both structural and functional characteristics of the family. For example, joint physical custody enables more frequent access to both parents, reduces the effects of father absence and decreases the likelihood of financial stress due to the availability of both parents' economic resources.

Next to the maintenance of a (binuclear) two-biological-parent family, joint physical custody is associated with a higher likelihood of living together with a stepparent (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Sodermans, Vanassche & Matthijs, 2013; Vanassche et al., forthcoming). This could be valuable for children in so far as stepparents can provide additional parental resources, either by allowing the biological parent to spend more time on parenting or by acting as additional positive adult role model for the child (Sweeney, 2010). In addition, a stepparent might increase the economic resources of the parental household (Sweeney, 2010). Moreover, the higher emotional and psychological wellbeing of parents in case of repartnering may be associated with higher adolescent wellbeing (Sweeney, 2010). Nevertheless, most research evidence points out that children in stepfamilies do not fare better than their counterparts in single parenthood families (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Explanations for this lack of a positive stepfamily effect (compared to single-parent families) are reduced parental investments (e.g. because the biological parent has to invest

time in the new partner relationship) and the additional stress and instability in the period of stepfamily formation (Brown, 2010; Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000; Sweeney, 2010).

Within joint physical custody arrangements, the contact with stepfamily members may even be more stressful because of frequent movements between both parental households, implying recurrent adaptation to the family configurations of respectively mother and father. Stepfamily dynamics may be particularly complex when step- or halfsiblings are involved (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Sweeney, 2010). Negotiating family roles and establishing relationships with new family members may induce ambiguity in the family system, negatively affecting the wellbeing of the child (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Increased family complexity and ambiguity could therefore suppress the beneficial effects of, for example, a better relationship with both parents within joint custody arrangements. In other words, the association between custody arrangements and adolescent wellbeing may depend on the presence of stepparents and step- or halfsiblings. Research on this complex association between custody type and stepfamily relationships is very scarce.

### ***9.3.2 Parental conflict***

Many studies suggest that parental conflict is more strongly associated with children's emotional wellbeing than family structure (Amato & Keith, 1991; Fischer, 2004; Hanson, McLanahan & Thomson, 1996; Kalter et al., 1989; Kuehl, 1993). Ongoing conflict, blocked communication and power imbalances between parents are problematic for child and family functioning. Kelly (1993) states that parental conflict has a direct effect on children via socialization processes and an indirect effect via diminished parenting and reduced responsiveness of parents. A relatively new tendency is to focus on emotional security for explaining the link between parental conflict and child wellbeing (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Troxel & Matthews, 2004). Parental discord leads to negative child outcomes due to violation of the child's sense of emotional security and their ability to regulate emotional arousal. When children think they are no longer cared for by their parents, their ability to cope with stressful situations is impeded. Hence, it is clear that parental conflict can be an important factor, but one that is frequently neglected in custody research (Bauserman, 2002; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Kelly, 1993).

Many authors argue that joint physical custody is only a preferable option when parental conflict is kept low (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Frankel, 1985; Kaspiew et al., 2009; Kelly, 1993; Lee, 2002; Lowery & Settle, 1985; Luepnitz, 1986; Singer, 2008; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). When conflict is elevated and too overt, joint physical custody is more damaging than any other residential arrangement because children have a higher likelihood of being caught in the middle and used as pawns (Fehlberg et al., 2011). Amato and Rezac (1994) found that contact with the non-custodial parent decreased children's behaviour problems when conflict was low but increased children's behaviour problems when conflict was high. The authors affirm that "*contact and conflict are positively related because contact gives opportunity for conflict to occur*" (p.193). Consequently, they recommend limited access with the non-custodial parent in cases of high conflict.

Despite the negative consequences of parental conflict on children, it may be that “*not all conflict is bad*” because “*most intimate relationships involve some conflict*” (King & Heard, 1999, p.387). The absence of parental conflict could signify that there is no contact between parents whereas a little conflict means that the non-residential parent (usually the father) is at least still involved within the family. Fabricius and Luecken (2007) also state that high father involvement could counteract the detrimental effects of high parental conflict. According to the emotional security hypothesis, joint physical custody is recommended in high conflict cases because the increased father time may compensate bad effects that go out from parental conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Bender (1994) concurs that joint physical custody remains the best custody option for children, even when conflict is high.

### ***9.3.3 The parent-child relationship***

A close relationship with both parents after divorce is associated with positive adjustment and greater emotional security of children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kelly, 1993; Troxel & Matthews, 2004). This attachment theory, originated by Bowlby (1969, 1972, 1980), proceeds from the principle that children have particular attachment bonds with their primary caregivers. Parental absence after divorce may lead to loss of security in parental relationships and to maladjustment in later life (Fabricius, 2003). Spruijt & Duindam (2009) tentatively conclude that a good parent-child relationship is more important for the wellbeing of children than the structural components of their post-divorce family configuration.

The damage following a break in attachment bonds after divorce is one argument used to legitimate the joint physical custody arrangement (Bender, 1994). It promotes a solid parent-child relationship and is related to higher father involvement (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Arditti, 1992; Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Shiller, 1986; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). In a recent study, the relationship between children and their parents was strongest in joint custody families, when compared to sole custody families and was just as strong as in intact families (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). According to Swiss and Le Bourdais (2009), the bond with the non-residential father erodes quickly when fathers do not live with their children on a regular basis.

The current custody legislation promotes joint physical custody to enhance parent-child contact. However, the strength of the emotional bond between parents and children is more important than visitation frequency or time spent together (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Riggs, 2005). Frequency of interaction is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a close relationship to emerge (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). According to Fehlberg et al. (2011) the legal terminology of ‘equal time’ has been introduced by legislatures to stress gender neutrality, but creates the impression that joint physical custody is a parental right. It shifts the attention away from enabling continuity in the parent-child relationship towards equal division of children between mother and father (Mcintosh, 2009). Furthermore, the preference for joint physical custody assumes a good pre-divorce parent-child relationship,

which certainly does not always exist. In case of a poor parent-child relationship, forced contact with both parents could even work reverse. Conversely, Videon (2002) shows that being separated from the same-sex parent with whom the adolescent had a good relationship is associated with higher delinquent behaviour.

#### ***9.3.4 Gender differences***

Research on the importance of family composition, custody arrangement and the relationship with mother and father cannot ignore the possibility of gender-specific effects. Both the sex of the (custodial) parents and stepparents and the sex of the child are important in this regard.

First, the quality of the parent-child relationship is on average higher within same-sex dyads than within opposite-sex dyads (King, 2006). The mother-daughter relationship is often better than the mother-son relationship; the father-son relationship is often better than the father-daughter relationship. In addition, the consequences of the relationship with the same-sex parent versus the opposite-sex parent may be different. The same-sex relationship seems to have a stronger impact on adolescents' wellbeing than the relationship with the opposite-sex parent (Videon, 2002). Hence, the relationship with mother is more strongly related to the wellbeing of girls, while the relationship with father is more influential for boys.

There may also be a difference in the experience of joint custody arrangements between boys and girls. For example, Amato and Rezac (1994) only found an interaction between parental conflict and child-parent contact for the wellbeing of boys. Because the mother is the usual residential parent, the absence of a same-sex role model may make boys more vulnerable. Conversely, Johnston and colleagues (1989) found that especially girls had difficulties in high-conflict joint custody arrangements.

The impact of the presence of a stepfather and/or stepmother, strongly related to custody type, may also differ between boys and girls. The most common finding is that boys have better relationships with stepparents than girls and that the negative influences of living in a stepfamily are larger for girls than for boys (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

### **9.4 Data and methods**

#### ***9.4.1 Data***

We use the data from the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche et al., 2012) and Divorce in Flanders (Mortelmans et al., 2011). Comparing the results from both data sources entails a robustness test of the results.

We use the LAGO-data from the first four research rounds, including information on 7035 adolescents within secondary schools. The research sample for the present study was limited to the 1570 adolescents with divorced parents for whom detailed information was available about their custody arrangement. From this group, 66 adolescents were excluded

because their main residence was not with one of their biological parents and 72 adolescents because they did not complete the question on their custody arrangement.

From the SiV-data, we selected all targetchildren with divorced parents, living with at least one of the parents, that were no older than 21 years at the time they were interviewed. The multi-actordesign of the study allows to use measures regarding parental conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship from both parent and child perspective. For the child perspective, the complete sample of interviewed children no older than 21 years is used (N = 707). For the parent perspective, the sample is restricted to complete child-mother-father triades (N = 301).

In the next two sections we describe the operationalization of all variables that are used in this chapter. Descriptive statistics for both data sources are presented in Table 9.1 and Table 9.2.

#### **9.4.2 Dependent variables**

The dependent variables for the LAGO-sample include two different measures of wellbeing: life satisfaction and depressive feelings. For the SiV-sample, the analyses are restricted to life satisfaction, as depressive feelings is only questioned for children aged 14 or more. Life satisfaction is considered to be a more evaluative measure of wellbeing, while depressive feelings are considered to be an affective measure of wellbeing (Diener, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Although both measures are strongly correlated, life satisfaction is considered to be a more stable measure of wellbeing, that is less influenced by recent events and temporal fluctuations in mental and physical health than depressive feelings (Levin, Dallago & Currie, 2012).

*Life satisfaction* was measured in both projects by asking respondents to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with their life on a scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied) (Cantril, 1965). In the LAGO-sample, 50% of the adolescents indicated 8 or more, 30% reported a 6 or 7, and 20% a 5 or lower. In the SiV-sample, 67% of the children indicated 8 or more, and 13% reported a life satisfaction of 6 or lower.

*Feelings of depression* were measured in LAGO with eight items, known as the CES-D 8 (Radloff, 1977). Respondents had to indicate how often they had felt or behaved in a certain way (e.g. felt lonely, slept bad, felt depressed) during the last week. There were four response categories with increasing frequency, ranging from (almost) never to (almost) always. Cronbach's alpha is 0.83. The depression scale is the sum of all items and ranges from 0 to 24. 50% of the adolescents score less than 7, 25% score more than 10.

#### **9.4.3. Custody arrangement**

Our core independent variable is the custody type in which children reside following parental divorce. Thus we are interested in the actual amount of time that children spend in both parental households, rather than in the formal custody status determined in court.



Both research projects used a residential calendar to measure the proportion of time that children spend with both parents. This calendar is a visual depiction of a normal month with each box representing a part of each day (Sodermans et al., 2012). In the LAGO-study, children had to indicate which days and nights they spend with their mother, their father, or somewhere else. This information was used to make two classifications of custody type, depending on the criteria that are used to define joint physical custody. In the SiV-study, the parents had to complete a similar calendar regarding the child's residential arrangement. If both parents participated in the study, the average proportion of time spend with respectively mother and father was calculated in case both parents indicated a joint custody arrangement. In case the answers of both parents were incompatible, information on the custody arrangement provided by the child was used. In that case, the classification is not based upon a residential calendar, but on a simple question distinguishing between respectively mother, joint and father custody.

In the analyses with the LAGO-data, we apply two different definitions of joint physical custody. The analyses with the SiV-data are limited to the first definition, based on Melli (1999). Under this definition, joint physical custody means that children are living at least one third of time (33%) with each parent and sole custody means that children are living at least two thirds of time (66%) with one parent. According to this *strict joint custody* variable, children must spend at least one-third of time in each parental household to be defined as joint physical custody children. Under this condition, the proportion of adolescents living in joint physical custody equals approximately 25% in both data sources. 66% of the children live at least two-thirds of time with their mother, whereas 10% live at least two thirds of time with father. In the analyses with the LAGO-data, we also apply a second definition of joint physical custody. This *strict sole custody* variable treats children that are living 100% of time in one household as sole custody children, while all other children living at least some time in each household are considered to be joint physical custody children. Under this criterion, 59% are classified as being in joint physical custody, 35% live solely with mother and 6% live solely with father. The predominance of mother custody is reflected in the distribution of both variables. As the number of children in father custody is limited, the results regarding children in father custody have to be interpreted with caution.

**Table 9.1: Descriptives for all study variables (LAGO)**

Categorical variables	Categories	n	%	
Sex	Boys	658	41.9	
	Girls	912	58.1	
Financial problems mother	Never or seldom	900	59.3	
	Sometimes or often	619	40.7	
Financial problems father	Never or seldom	1047	74.2	
	Sometimes or often	365	25.8	
Highest educational level parents	No higher education	589	36.1	
	Higher education	851	63.9	
Custody arrangement (strict sole custody)	Mother Custody (100%)	545	34.7	
	Joint custody (1%-99%)	933	59.4	
	Father Custody (100%)	92	5.9	
Custody arrangement (strict joint custody)	Mother Custody (67-100%)	1034	65.9	
	Joint custody (33%-66%)	385	24.5	
	Father Custody (67-100%)	151	9.6	
Family configuration maternal household	No new partner	752	48.6	
	New partner	601	38.9	
	New partner with children	194	12.5	
Family configuration paternal household	No new partner	641	43.4	
	New partner	599	40.6	
	New partner with children	237	16.1	
Metric variables	Range	N	Mean	S.D.
Age child	11-23	1570	15.2	1.9
Years since divorce	0-20	1427	7.8	4.3
Quality relationship with mother	0-36	1563	21.5	7.6
Quality relationship with father	0-36	1527	16.8	8.9
Parental conflict	0-20	1303	5.9	5.1
Life satisfaction	1-10	1529	7.1	1.9
Feelings of depression	0-24	1563	8.0	4.5

**Table 9.2: Descriptives for all study variables (SiV)**

Categorical variables	Categories	Child perspective (N = 707)		Parental perspective (N = 301)	
		n	%	n	%
Sex	Boys	358	50.6	158	52.5
	Girls	349	49.4	143	47.5
Custody arrangement (strict joint custody)	Mother Custody (67-100%)	442	62.7	173	57.7
	Joint custody (33%-66%)	187	26.5	91	30.3
	Father Custody (67-100%)	76	10.8	36	12.0
Family configuration paternal household	No new partner	270	38.2	126	41.9
	New partner	416	58.8	175	58.1
	Info missing	21	3.0	-	-
Family configuration maternal household	No new partner	355	50.4	160	53.1
	New partner	349	49.6	141	46.8
	Low	184	26.4	77	25.7
Highest educational level father	Medium	307	44.1	116	38.7
	High	206	29.6	107	35.7
	Low	135	19.1	52	17.3
Highest educational level mother	Medium	322	45.5	128	42.5
	High	250	35.4	121	40.2
Parental conflict	Never conflict	308	43.6	97	32.3
	Occasional conflict	200	28.3	107	35.7
	Frequent conflict	138	19.5	55	18.3
	No contact	-	-	41	13.7
	Missing	61	8.6	-	-
	Not good	164	23.4	24	8.0
Quality father-child relationship	Good	301	42.9	125	41.8
	Very good	172	24.5	134	44.8
	No contact	64	9.1	16	5.4
	Not good	77	10.9	15	5.0
Quality mother-child relationship	Good	299	42.5	98	32.7
	Very good	319	45.3	180	60.0
	No contact	9	1.3	7	2.3
Metric variables	Range	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Life satisfaction	0-10	7.9	1.6	7.8	1.8
Age child	10-21	16.0	3.3	15.9	3.3
Years since divorce	1-21	8.9	4.5	8.6	4.4

#### 9.4.4. Moderating variables

The other main variables of interest are those which we expect to condition the association between custody type and adolescent wellbeing (the moderators). All continuous moderators are mean-centred to reduce multicollinearity between the independent variables and interaction terms and to facilitate the post-hoc tests of the simple slopes under specific conditions. This has no effect on the statistical significance of the interaction or on the values of the specific slopes (Holmbeck, 2002).

In LAGO, *the complexity of the family configuration* is measured for each parent using the following categories: 1) parent is not living with partner, 2) parent is living with partner without residential children and 3) parent is living with partner with at least one residential child (a step- or halfsibling from child perspective). In SiV, we only distinguish between mothers and fathers living with a new partner or not, as information on the presence of children of that partner is only available if the parent participated in the study. The presence of a new partner in the household can however also be obtained from the interview with the ex-partner. In both data sources, more than half of the mothers and fathers are living with a new partner. The repartnering rate of fathers is slightly higher than those of mothers. In LAGO, the proportion of fathers living together with children from their new partner is slightly higher than those for mothers. The latter results from the fact that the children of the new partners of mothers are more likely to live with their own mother.

*Parental conflict* was measured in LAGO by five items of the Conflict Awareness Scale (Grych & Fincham, 1993), asking how often the biological parents 1) *argue about money*, 2) *argue about the children's education*, 3) *argue about the children*, 4) *absolutely disagree with each other* and 5) *have severe conflicts*. The five-response Likert scale ranged from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always* and exhibits high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .88). When a maximum of two answers were missing, the mean across the valid answers was imputed. The conflict scale is the sum of all five items and ranges from 0 to 20. The variable is centred around its mean (6) in the multivariate analysis. 267 respondents have a missing value after imputation.

In SiV, *parental conflict* was measured by asking how frequent five specific conflict situations occurred between the parents during the last twelve months: 1) *Blame each other*, 2) *yell or scream*, 3) *use physical violence*, 4) *throw or break things deliberately*, and 5) *not want to talk to each other for a while*. The 7-point frequency scale ranges from 1 = *Never* to 7 = *Daily*. Parents who reported to have neither personal contact nor contact by telephone or internet with their ex-partner, did not receive these questions. Children on the other hand always received these questions. The conflict frequency was operationalized as the highest frequency across all items. We distinguish four categories: 0 = *No contact between ex-spouses/parents*, 1 = *Never conflict*, 2 = *Occasional conflict (Not more than once a month)* and 3 = *At least several times a month*. For the child perspective, an

additional category *information missing* was included, as 9% of the children refused to answer the question regarding parental conflict.

In the LAGO-study, the *quality of the parent-child relationship* was measured for each parent separately with nine items from the Network of Relationship Inventory scale (Furman & Burhmester, 1985). Examples of items are: *Does your mother/father respect you?*, and *Do you share personal feelings with your mother/father?*. The response scale was a five-point Likert scale with increasing frequency. Cronbach's alphas for the NRI measures for mother and father were respectively 0.91 and 0.93. When a maximum of four answers were missing, the mean across the valid answers was imputed. The scale is centred around its mean (17 for fathers, 21 for mothers). Seven respondents had a missing value for quality of the relationship with mother, 43 for the relationship with the father.

The quality of the father-child and mother-child relationship was measured in SiV with a single question for parents and children with five answering categories, ranging from 1 = *Very bad* to 5 = *Very good*. The answers were recoded in three categories: no good relationship, good relationship and very good relationship. The question was not asked to parents and children in case there was no contact between the parent and child. For these cases, an additional category *no contact* is included.

#### **9.4.5 Control variables**

The average *age* of the adolescents is 15 years in the LAGO-sample and 16 years in the SiV-sample. Age is an important control variable as it might be related to both the custody arrangement and wellbeing of the child. The variable is centred around its mean in the multivariate analyses.

In LAGO, the *educational level of the parents* was obtained from the child. The highest educational level of each parent is included as a dichotomous variable, indicating whether or not this parent has a certificate of higher education (university or non-university). A missing dummy variable was coded for the 130 respondents for whom information on this variable was not available. In SiV, respondents were questioned about their personal educational level and the educational level of their ex-partner. Consequently, we can reconstruct the educational level of both parents, also in case only one parent participated in the study. We distinguish between parents with no higher secondary education, parents with only secondary education and parents with a certificate of higher education. Higher educated parents would choose more often for joint custody arrangements than lower educated parents. In addition, educational level would also be important with regard to the wellbeing of children.

We control for *years since parental divorce* by including a metric variable. For the 143 respondents with a missing value on this variable in the LAGO-sample, we imputed the mean (8) and controlled for this imputation by adding a dummy variable to the analyses. The variable was centred around its mean for the analyses on the SiV-sample.

*The financial situation* of both the maternal and paternal household are included for the LAGO-sample as a dichotomous variable, contrasting those who never to rarely experience financial difficulties with those experiencing sometimes or often financial difficulties. Adolescents report considerably more frequent financial problems in the maternal (41%) than in the paternal household (26%). For the 51 respondents with a missing value for the maternal household and 158 respondents with a missing value for the paternal household, an additional dummy variable was included, indicating that information on this variable was not available.

#### **9.4.6 Analytical strategy**

Before testing the conditional effects of the different custody types, we look at the profile, family relationships and wellbeing of adolescents in different custody types. These bivariate analyses also reveal the importance of the control variables in testing the conditional effects of custody type in a multivariate model.

Tests of the conditional associations between custody type and adolescent wellbeing follow the strategy outlined by Holmbeck (2002). First, we present the results of the multivariate model containing custody type, the different moderators and the control variables. For the LAGO-sample, we present results separately for boys and girls. For the SiV-sample, a different model is presented for analyses including respectively the child and parent measures of parental conflict and quality of the parent-child relationship.

Second, we add interaction terms to the model for each moderator, that is the multiplicative term between the moderators as defined above and the dummy variable for custody type, with mother custody as the reference category. For example, for the variable parental conflict (PACO) and the dummy variables JOINT and FATHER for custody type, we construct:

$$\text{PACO\_JOINT} = \text{PACO} \times \text{JOINT}$$

$$\text{PACO\_FATHER} = \text{PACO} \times \text{FATHER}$$

Next, we use post-hoc probing to test the significance of the differences between the custody types under specific conditions (that is values of the moderators). These tests are conducted on the multivariate model, including all variables and the interaction term for the moderator of interest. For the continuous moderators, we respectively subtract and add one standard deviation to the centred moderator to obtain two new variables with respectively a low and high value on the moderator. For example, for parental conflict, with PACO indicating the mean-centred variable parental conflict, we compute:

$$\text{LOWPACO} = \text{PACO} - (5)$$

$$\text{HIGHPACO} = \text{PACO} + (5)$$

Next, new multiplicative terms are constructed with these new variables and the dummy variables JOINT and FATHER for custody type:

LOWPACO\_JOINT= LOWPACO X JOINT

LOWPACO\_FATHER= LOWPACO X FATHER

HIGHPACO\_JOINT= HIGHPACO X JOINT

HIGHPACO\_FATHER= HIGHPACO X FATHER

By doing so, we construct different zero points of the moderator, which allows to generate sample-specific equations. For example, for parental conflict (PACO) and life satisfaction (LIFE), we obtain the equations:

$$\text{LIFE}_{\text{est}} = \text{intercept} + B1(\text{JOINT}) + B2(\text{FATHER}) + B3(\text{LOWPACO}) + B4(\text{LOWPACO\_JOINT}) + B4(\text{LOWPACO\_FATHER}) + \text{control variables}$$
$$\text{LIFE}_{\text{est}} = \text{intercept} + B1(\text{JOINT}) + B2(\text{FATHER}) + B3(\text{PACO}) + B4(\text{PACO\_JOINT}) + B4(\text{PACO\_FATHER}) + \text{control variables}$$
$$\text{LIFE}_{\text{est}} = \text{intercept} + B1(\text{JOINT}) + B2(\text{FATHER}) + B3(\text{HIGHPACO}) + B4(\text{HIGHPACO\_JOINT}) + B4(\text{HIGHPACO\_FATHER}) + \text{control variables}$$

The significance tests for the main coefficients of custody type apply under the condition that the moderator equals zero. The strategy for the categorical moderators is quite similar, but here the reference category is manipulated. The output tables contain the conditional predicted values for the dependent variable, based on the coefficients of the sample-specific equations, including all control variables.

## 9.5 Results LAGO-data

### 9.5.1 *The profile of adolescents and their family in different custody arrangements (LAGO)*

In this section we present the bivariate results for the LAGO-data of the association between custody type and all other independent variables (Table 9.3). We start with a discussion of the control variables.

Girls are more likely than boys to be found in mother custody, whereas boys are overrepresented in joint and father custody, suggesting a preference to live together with the same-sex parent.

Children in joint custody report financial problems less often than those in sole custody, but the differences are more pronounced for fathers than for mothers. Adolescents with higher educated parents are more likely to be in joint custody. Under the strict definition of joint custody, similar results are obtained. These results clearly indicate a selection of higher social classes into joint physical custody. Differences between father and mother custody are small, but a lower proportion of higher educated parents can be found within father custody as compared to mother custody.

**Table 9.3: The profile, family relationships and wellbeing of adolescents in different custody arrangements (LAGO)**

	Strict sole custody typology				Strict joint custody typology			
	Mother custody (100%)	Joint custody (1-99%)	Father custody (100%)		Mother custody (67-100%)	Joint custody (33-66%)	Father custody (67-100%)	
<i>Categorical variables (%)</i>								
Girls	66.4	53.7	53.3	***	61.6	50.4	53.6	***
Financial problems mother	43.8	38.5	46.3	°	40.0	39.2	50.4	°
Financial problems father	30.3	23.0	34.1	**	27.1	21.2	30.1	*
Higher educated parent	49.8	66.2	40.0	***	56.9	69.9	46.3	***
Family configuration mother				°				
No new partner	51.6	47.9	37.5		48.9	50.7	40.8	
New partner	37.5	38.6	50.0		38.1	38.6	44.9	
New partner with children	10.9	13.5	12.5		13.0	10.8	14.3	
Family configuration father				**				***
No new partner	39.5	44.6	51.2		39.1	49.9	53.7	
New partner	46.9	37.9	34.4		44.9	34.0	29.5	
New partner with children	13.6	17.5	14.4		15.9	16.1	16.8	
<i>Metric variables (Mean value)</i>								
Age	15.7	14.9	15.8	***	15.4	14.7	15.7	***
Years since divorce	8.8	7.3	7.5	***	8.4	6.5	7.5	***
<i>Family relationships</i>								
Parental conflict	5.8	5.7	7.7	**	5.6	6.1	7.3	**
Quality relationship with father	10.9	19.7	20.1	***	14.9	20.4	20.2	***
Quality relationship with mother	22.6	21.7	11.7	***	22.3	21.9	14.4	***
<i>Wellbeing</i>								
Life satisfaction	7.1	7.2	6.5	**	7.2	7.2	6.6	***
Feelings of depression	8.1	7.8	8.4		8.0	7.7	8.6	

Note: ° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (Chi-square test for categorical variables, F-test for metric variables)



Sole custody parents are less likely to be living together with a new partner. This holds for both mothers and fathers. No major differences between the custody types are found regarding the presence of children from the new partner.

Adolescents in strict joint custody are on average younger than those in strict sole custody: 14.7 versus 15.7 years. Adolescents in sole father custody have the highest average age, which probably reflects the increasing importance of the child's preference with age: the older children are, the more influence they have on where they want to live, and the more likely they will deviate from the dominant mother custody arrangement. Related to these findings, we also see that adolescents in joint custody experienced the parental divorce more recently than children in sole custody. This finding holds for both custody type classifications but is more profound for the strict definition of joint custody. The average number of years since date of the parental divorce varies from 8.8 years for those in a strict mother custody to 6.5 years for those in strict joint custody, with figures for father custody situated in between. These patterns correspond to the evolution of the last two decades favouring fathers' custody rights following divorce.

Next, the quality of the parent-child relationship and the level of parental conflict were compared according to custody type. The average score on the mother-child relationship equals 22.6 for those in strict mother custody, 21.9 for those in strict joint custody and 11.7 for those in strict father custody. The average score on the father-child relationship equals 10.9 for those living in strict mother custody, 20.4 for those in strict joint custody and 20.1 for those in strict father custody. Comparing the strict sole and strict joint custody measure, we see that living together with a parent seems to be more distinguishing than the amount of time adolescents live with a parent. Adolescents who do not ever live together with one of their parents clearly report the worst relationship quality with that parent.

The level of parental conflict varies between 5.8 for strict sole mother custody, 6.1 for those in strict joint custody and 7.7 for adolescents in strict father custody. The higher parental conflict within father custody may reflect a selection of more problematic family (and mother) situations within this custody type. The small difference between strict and joint custody suggests a declining selection of low conflict couples within joint custody, which can be related to an increased heterogeneity in joint custody families, stimulated by the recent changes in the Belgian law.

Finally, Table 9.3 contains information on the bivariate association between custody type and adolescent wellbeing. Life satisfaction and depressive feelings overall are quite similar for adolescents within mother and joint custody, and somewhat worse in father custody. The association between custody type and the variables discussed above demonstrates however the importance of looking at this association in a multivariate way. For example, the positive association between joint physical custody and adolescent wellbeing (compared to mother custody) can be suppressed by the fact that adolescents in joint custody experienced the parental divorce more recently, or may conversely be stronger because of the overrepresentation of adolescents with higher educated parents.

### **9.5.2 The conditional association between custody type and adolescent wellbeing (LAGO)**

Before presenting the results of the sample-specific equations, we consider the results from the multivariate models without interaction terms (Table 9.4 and Table 9.5). We first discuss the results regarding the control variables. The age of the adolescent, the educational level of the parents and the number of years past by since parental divorce are not or only weakly related to adolescent wellbeing. Financial problems of the mother are more strongly related to the wellbeing of girls, financial problems of the father more strongly to the wellbeing of boys. Additional step-wise analyses show that the most explanatory power comes from the variables parental conflict and especially, the quality of the relationships with father and mother. Parental conflict is positively related to feelings of depression and negatively to life satisfaction. The relationships with father and mother are negatively related to feelings of depression and positively related to life satisfaction. The partner status of mother and father shows no association with either life satisfaction or depressive feelings of boys and girls.

Additional step-wise analyses show that no major differences are found between the different custody types after inclusion of the control variables, except for lower feelings of depression in joint custody compared to mother custody for boys. Also the inclusion of parental conflict does not change the parameters of custody type very much. After inclusion of the relationship quality with both parents, joint custody is positively related to depressive feelings for girls and negatively to life satisfaction for boys and girls. The explained variance is very similar in the models for boys and girls, around 17% regarding depressive feelings and 23% regarding life satisfaction.

**Table 9.4: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting depressive feelings and life satisfaction for boys (LAGO)**

	Depressive feelings (N = 508)						Life satisfaction (N = 498)					
	Strict sole custody			Strict joint custody			Strict sole custody			Strict joint custody		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	7.27	(0.54)	***	7.48	(0,45)	***	7.64	(0.22)	***	7.44	(0.18)	***
Custody arrangement (ref = mother custody)												
Joint Custody	0.18	(0.48)		-0.34	(0,42)		-0.35	(0.19)	°	-0.06	(0.17)	
Father Custody	0.98	(0.96)		1.05	(0,65)	°	-0.35	(0.38)		-0.36	(0.26)	
Parental conflict	0.16	(0.04)	***	0.16	(0,04)	***	-0.02	(0.02)		-0.03	(0.02)	
Relationship with father	-0.16	(0.03)	***	-0.16	(0,03)	***	0.07	(0.01)	***	0.06	(0.01)	***
Relationship with mother	-0.05	(0.03)	°	-0.05	(0,03)	°	0.06	(0.01)	***	0.06	(0.01)	***
Family configuration mother (ref = no partner)												
Partner	-0.25	(0.42)		-0.27	(0,42)		0.09	(0.17)		0.07	(0.17)	
Partner & children	0.09	(0.62)		0.07	(0,62)		-0.14	(0.25)		-0.16	(0.25)	
Family configuration father (ref = no partner)												
Partner	0.22	(0.41)		0.25	(0,41)		-0.05	(0.17)		-0.06	(0.17)	
Partner & children	-0.01	(0.56)		0.02	(0,55)		-0.06	(0.22)		-0.08	(0.22)	
Age	-0.12	(0.10)		-0.15	(0,10)		-0.01	(0.04)		0.00	(0.04)	
Low educational parents (Ref = high)	-0.28	(0.41)		-0.31	(0,40)		-0.08	(0.16)		-0.06	(0.16)	
Financial problems mother (Ref = no)	0.60	(0.41)		0.53	(0,41)		-0.08	(0.16)		-0.06	(0.17)	
Financial problems father (Ref = no)	0.42	(0.46)		0.46	(0,46)		-0.47	(0.19)	*	-0.50	(0.19)	**
Years since divorce	0.04	(0.05)		0.04	(0,05)		0.02	(0.02)		0.02	(0.02)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.17			.18			.23			.23		

Note: °*p*<.10, \**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001

**Table 9.5: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting depressive feelings and life satisfaction for girls (LAGO)**

	Depressive feelings (N = 706)						Life satisfaction (N = 694)					
	Strict sole custody			Strict joint custody			Strict sole custody			Strict joint custody		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	6.84	(0.50)	***	7.15	(0.42)	***	7.60	(0.21)	***	7.46	(0.18)	***
Custody arrangement (ref = mother custody)												
Joint Custody	0.66	(0.40)	°	0.69	(0.40)	°	-0.31	(0.17)	°	-0.29	(0.17)	°
Father Custody	-0.99	(0.84)		-0.36	(0.63)		0.17	(0.35)		-0.02	(0.26)	
Parental conflict	0.11	(0.03)	***	0.11	(0.03)	***	-0.04	(0.01)	**	-0.04	(0.01)	**
Relationship with father	-0.08	(0.02)	***	-0.07	(0.02)	***	0.04	(0.01)	***	0.04	(0.01)	***
Relationship with mother	-0.13	(0.02)	***	-0.13	(0.02)	***	0.08	(0.01)	***	0.08	(0.01)	***
Family configuration mother (ref = no partner)												
Partner	0.41	(0.36)		0.31	(0.36)		-0.22	(0.15)		-0.18	(0.15)	
Partner & children	0.73	(0.52)		0.73	(0.52)		-0.23	(0.22)		-0.23	(0.22)	
Family configuration father (ref = no partner)												
Partner	0.27	(0.37)		0.28	(0.37)		-0.08	(0.16)		-0.09	(0.16)	
Partner & children	0.56	(0.48)		0.58	(0.48)		-0.11	(0.20)		-0.12	(0.20)	
Age	-0.03	(0.09)		-0.05	(0.09)		0.01	(0.04)		0.02	(0.04)	
Low educational level parents (Ref = high)	0.36	(0.34)		0.32	(0.34)		-0.07	(0.14)		-0.05	(0.15)	
Financial problems mother (Ref = no)	1.67	(0.34)	***	1.67	(0.34)	***	-0.69	(0.14)	***	-0.69	(0.14)	***
Financial problems father (Ref = no)	0.26	(0.38)		0.22	(0.38)		-0.15	(0.16)		-0.14	(0.16)	
Years since divorce	-0.03	(0.04)		-0.03	(0.04)		0.03	(0.02)		0.02	(0.02)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.17			.17			.23			.23		

Note: ° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 9.6 and Table 9.7 contain the conditional, predicted values on the wellbeing measures based on the sample-specific equations. As described above, the splitting points for the continuous moderators are one standard deviation above and below the mean.

The association between custody type and wellbeing is clearly conditional on the proposed factors and differs between boys and girls. First, we discuss parental conflict. For boys and girls, there are several indications that those in joint physical custody have a lower score on the wellbeing measures than those in mother custody when there is frequent parental conflict. The results are most pronounced for the strict sole custody typology and for life satisfaction. For girls, the same pattern is observed for depressive feelings and for the strict joint custody typology.

Also the relationship with mother and father moderates the association between custody type and adolescent wellbeing, albeit in a different way. When a bad relationship with father is reported, joint custody is more negatively related to adolescent wellbeing compared to mother custody. This result is found for boys and girls and for both measures of wellbeing with the strict sole custody measure, but not for the strict joint custody typology. This suggests again that the proportion of time spent within each parental household is less crucial, as long as some time is spent in both parental households. Regarding the relationship with mother, we see an opposite, but complementary finding: when there is a very good relationship with the mother, boys and girls report a lower life satisfaction in joint physical custody compared to mother custody. Taken together, these findings suggest that joint physical custody appears a less beneficial custody option when adolescents either do not have a good relationship with father or do have a very good relationship with mother. In that case, a preference of the adolescent for mother custody is very plausible. In case of a very good relationship with mother or a bad relationship with father, joint custody is less positive for adolescent wellbeing than living full-time with mother.

The final results concern the conditional effects according to family complexity. The results for the strict sole custody typology show that if mother and father have no partner, joint physical custody is associated with a lower life satisfaction for boys and girls compared to mother custody. For girls, the same finding is confirmed for the strict joint custody typology for the partner status of father. However, for girls there are also some indications that joint custody is associated with more depressive feelings compared to mother custody in cases where the mother has a new partner. In the strict joint custody model also the life satisfaction of girls is lower in joint custody compared to mother custody in cases where the mother has a new partner. These findings could be interpreted as girls having more difficulties when they live together with two adults taking up father roles. The moderating effect of family complexity hence works in different ways, and is not straightforward.

**Table 9.6: Conditional predicted values on feelings of depression and life satisfaction in different custody arrangements for strict sole custody typology (LAGO)**

	Depressive feelings			Life satisfaction		
	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody
<b>BOYS</b>						
Few conflict	6.5	6.6	7.5	7.7	7.5	7.2
Average conflict	7.3	7.4	8.3	7.7	7.3*	7.3
Frequent conflict	8.1	8.3	9.0	7.7	7.1*	7.3
No good relationship father	8.2	9.5*	8.9	7.2	6.5*	6.4
Good relationship father	7.4	7.6	8.2	7.6	7.3	7.2
Very good relationship father	6.7	5.7	7.4	7.9	8.0	8.0
No good relationship mother	7.6	7.9	8.6	7.1	6.9	6.9
Good relationship mother	7.3	7.5	8.4	7.6	7.3°	7.4
Very good relationship mother	6.9	7.0	5.7	8.2	7.7°	7.9
Mother no partner	7.1	7.5	7.9	7.8	7.2*	7.6
Mother partner	6.8	7.2	9.3	7.8	7.5	6.7°
Mother partner with child(ren)	8.8	7.2	7.4	6.9	7.3	7.1
Father no partner	6.6	7.5	8.1	7.7	7.3°	7.6
Father partner	8.2	7.2	8.8	7.5	7.3	6.9
Father partner with child(ren)	6.3	7.5	1.4	7.7	7.2	9.1
<b>GIRLS</b>						
Few conflict	6.3	6.9	5.2	7.7	7.5	8.4
Average conflict	6.8	7.5°	7.8	7.6	7.3°	7.9
Frequent conflict	7.4	8.1	6.5	7.4	7.1°	7.4
No good relationship father	7.5	8.3°	7.5	7.3	6.8*	6.7
Good relationship father	7.0	7.6	6.1	7.5	7.2	7.5
Very good relationship father	6.4	6.8	4.9	7.7	7.6	8.3
No good relationship mother	8.5	8.7	7.3	6.7	6.7	6.4
Good relationship mother	7.1	7.5	8.0	7.5	7.3	7.3
Very good relationship mother	5.7	6.4	8.7*	8.3	7.8*	7.5
Mother no partner	7.0	7.4	6.2	7.7	7.3*	7.8
Mother partner	6.7	8.2*	5.7	7.3	7.1	7.7
Mother partner with child(ren)	8.4	7.7	8.0	7.3	7.2	6.6
Father no partner	6.8	7.6	4.6°	7.6	7.2°	8.0
Father partner	7.2	7.6	7.1	7.4	7.2	8.0
Father partner with child(ren)	7.2	8.1	7.2	7.5	7.2	6.8

Note: ° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (mother custody = reference category)

Note: Conditional predicted values based on regression coefficients of OLS regression, including control variables

**Table 9.7: Conditional predicted values on feelings of depression and life satisfaction in different custody arrangements for strict joint custody typology (LAGO)**

	Depressive feelings			Life satisfaction		
	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody
<b>BOYS</b>						
Few conflict	6.6	6.4	7.2	7.6	7.6	7.2
Average conflict	7.5	7.1	8.5°	7.4	7.4	7.1
Frequent conflict	8.3	7.7	9.8	7.3	7.2	7.0
No good relationship father	8.8	8.9	9.8	6.9	6.6	6.5
Good relationship father	7.5	7.2	8.5°	7.4	7.3	7.1
Very good relationship father	6.2	5.7	7.1	8.0	8.0	7.7
No good relationship mother	7.8	7.5	8.9	7.0	7.0	6.6
Good relationship mother	7.5	7.2	8.6°	7.4	7.4	7.0
Very good relationship mother	7.1	6.8	8.0	7.9	7.8	7.6
Mother no partner	7.6	7.2	7.7	7.5	7.2	7.5
Mother partner	7.1	6.7	9.3°	7.5	7.7	6.5*
Mother partner with child(ren)	7.4	7.6	8.5	7.3	7.0	7.4
Father no partner	7.3	7.3	8.9°	7.5	7.4	7.1
Father partner	8.0	7.0	7.9	7.3	7.4	7.0
Father partner with child(ren)	7.3	7.4	8.9	7.4	7.3	6.9
<b>GIRLS</b>						
Few conflict	6.8	7.0	5.2°	7.6	7.5	7.8
Average conflict	7.2	7.9°	6.8	7.4	7.1	7.4
Frequent conflict	7.5	8.5*	7.6	7.3	6.9°	7.2
No good relationship father	7.8	8.5	7.0	7.1	6.9	6.8
Good relationship father	7.1	7.8°	6.7	7.4	7.2	7.4
Very good relationship father	6.5	7.2	6.4	7.8	7.4	7.9
No good relationship mother	8.4	8.9	7.8	6.7	6.5	6.8
Good relationship mother	7.2	7.8	7.9	7.4	7.2	7.1
Very good relationship mother	6.0	6.7	7.5	8.1	7.8	7.5
Mother no partner	7.3	7.5	6.5	7.4	7.4	7.2
Mother partner	7.4	8.3	7.0	7.3	6.8°	7.7
Mother partner with child(ren)	7.5	9.1°	8.3	7.4	6.7°	6.4°
Father no partner	7.0	8.2*	6.7	7.5	7.0°	7.6
Father partner	7.5	8.1	6.9	7.3	7.0	7.7
Father partner with child(ren)	8.0	7.4	7.7	7.3	7.5	6.5°

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (mother custody = reference category)

Note. Conditional predicted values based on regression coefficients of OLS regression, including control variables

## 9.6 Results SiV-data

### 9.6.1 *The profile of adolescents and their family in different custody arrangements (SiV)*

Table 9.8 presents the bivariate association between the different independent variables for both samples and the custody arrangement of the child. With regard to the control variables, the association between the sex of the child and the custody arrangement is only significant for the parental perspective. Nevertheless, in both samples, the proportion of girls is lowest in joint custody arrangements and highest in mother custody. Parents of children in joint custody are more often higher educated than parents of children in other custody arrangements. Children in joint custody are on average younger than children that live with mother. This might be related to the finding that children in joint custody experienced the parental divorce more recently.

Next, we see important differences between custody arrangements in the three main family variables of interest. First, in line with the results of chapter 5, full-time residential parents are less often living together with a new partner. Next, children in father custody report more frequent parental conflict than children in joint and mother custody. Children in joint custody less often have missing information on this variable, which might relate to the higher contact frequency between the parents. The latter is confirmed by the results from parental perspective, which demonstrates more frequent occasional or frequent conflict within joint custody arrangements and less frequent contact between the parents in mother and father custody. The differences in conflict frequency between custody arrangements are much smaller if the analyses are limited to parents who have at least some contact. Third, children and parents that do not co-reside report less often a (very) good relationship. The differences according to custody arrangements are again smaller if the sample is limited to parents and children that have at least some contact. The differences between full-time and part-time co-residence are overall very small. Parents overall report a better parent-child relationship than children.

Finally, we only find evidence for a bivariate association between the custody arrangement and child wellbeing for the parental sample, with children in joint custody reporting the highest life satisfaction.



**Table 9.8: The profile, family relationships and wellbeing of adolescents in different custody arrangements (SiV)**

	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody		Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody	
Categorical variabls (%)	Child perspective				Parental perspective			
Girls	51.1	45.5	48.7		54.3	36.3	44.4	*
Educational level father								
Low	31.0	12.4	32.9	***	32.4	12.2	25.0	**
Medium	44.3	45.7	39.5		35.3	42.2	47.2	
High	24.7	41.9	27.6		32.4	45.6	27.8	
Educational level mother								
Low	19.9	9.1	36.8	***	18.5	7.7	33.3	***
Medium	46.4	44.9	43.4		43.9	38.5	47.2	
High	33.7	46.0	19.7		37.6	53.9	19.4	
New partner with father	63.8	52.9	44.7	***	62.4	58.2	38.9	*
New partner with mother	46.2	54.6	56.0	°	43.4	51.7	50.0	
Parental conflict								
Never conflict	46.6	39.0	36.8	***	34.3	34.1	19.4	**
Occasional conflict	23.8	40.6	25.0		32.0	41.8	38.9	
Frequent conflict	18.8	17.1	29.0		15.7	23.1	19.4	
No contact	-	-	-		18.0	1.1	22.2	
Missing	10.9	3.2	9.2		-	-	-	
Father-child relationship								
Not good	28.7	18.2	5.3	***	11.1	3.3	5.6	*
Good	40.1	47.1	48.7		37.2	48.9	44.4	
Very good	16.7	34.2	46.1		43.0	46.7	50.0	
No contact	14.5	-	-		8.7	-	-	
Mother-child relationship								
Not good	8.7	9.6	27.6	***	3.5	3.3	16.7	***
Good	39.4	45.5	51.3		30.8	31.9	41.7	
Very good	51.7	44.9	10.5		65.1	64.8	25.0	
No contact	-	-	10.5		-	-	16.7	
Metric variabls (mean)								
Age child	16.2	14.6	17.7	***	16.5	14.3	17.4	***
Years since divorce	9.7	7.2	8.5	***	9.3	7.4	7.9	**
Life satisfaction	7.9	8.1	7.8		7.6	8.1	7.4	*

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (Chi-square test for categorical variables, F-test for metric variables)

### ***9.6.2 The conditional association between custody type and adolescent wellbeing (SiV)***

Table 9.9 presents the results for the multivariate analyses. In both samples there is no association between the custody arrangement and child wellbeing. Also the presence of a new partner in the maternal or paternal household is not related to child wellbeing. None of both family structure variables is hence explaining variation in the life satisfaction of children.

The frequency of parental conflict and quality of the parent-child relationship only explain a part of the variance in the life satisfaction of children in the sample with the child perspective. A good relationship with mother and father is positively associated with child wellbeing, while frequent parental conflict is negatively associated with the life satisfaction of children. An additional test in which the child perspective is limited to the triads demonstrates that the lack of significant effects relates to the perspective that is used, and not the small sample size.

With regard to the control variables, we find evidence for a higher life satisfaction for boys and for children with higher educated mothers. The paternal educational level, age of the child and duration since divorce are not related to the life satisfaction of children.

Finally, the conditional association between custody arrangements and respectively the presence of stepparents, the frequency of parental conflict and the quality of the mother-child and father-child relationship was tested (Table 9.10). We found no evidence for a moderating effect of parental conflict or the presence of stepparents. The only significant moderating effect concerns the very low life satisfaction of children in father custody with no good relationship with father. We see a similar trend regarding a moderating effect of the relationship with mother in mother custody compared to joint and father custody, but the interaction terms are not significant.

**Table 9.9: Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors from OLS-regression models predicting life satisfaction (SiV)**

	Child perspective			Parental perspective		
	B	S.E.		B.	S.E.	
Intercept	7.89	(0.21)	***	7.41	(0.40)	***
Girls	-0.34	(0.12)	**	-0.58	(0.21)	**
Custody arrangement (ref = mother custody)						
Joint custody	0.01	(0.15)		0.31	(0.26)	
Father custody	0.21	(0.22)		0.26	(0.37)	
Parental conflict (ref = never conflict)						
Occasional conflict	-0.06	(0.15)		-0.01	(0.25)	
Frequent conflict	-0.57	(0.17)	***	-0.50	(0.31)	
No contact				0.01	(0.36)	
Missing	0.08	(0.24)				
Father-child relationship (ref = good)						
Not good	-0.33	(0.16)	*	0.27	(0.41)	
Very good	0.55	(0.16)	***	0.28	(0.23)	
No contact	-0.03	(0.24)		0.80	(0.51)	
Mother-child relationship (ref = good)						
Not good	-0.62	(0.21)	**	-0.42	(0.51)	
Very good	0.58	(0.14)	***	0.33	(0.23)	
No contact	-0.23	(0.56)		-0.56	(0.75)	
Father new partner (ref = no)	-0.08	(0.13)		-0.02	(0.22)	
Mother new partner (ref = no)	0.03	(0.13)		0.15	(0.22)	
Educational level father (ref = average)						
Lower educated	-0.14	(0.15)		-0.08	(0.28)	
Higher educated	0.07	(0.15)	°	0.15	(0.25)	
Educational level mother (ref = average)						
Lower educated	0.03	(0.17)		-0.24	(0.31)	
Higher educated	0.25	(0.15)		0.49	(0.25)	°
Age child	-0.03	(0.02)		-0.03	(0.04)	
Years since divorce	-0.01	(0.01)		-0.01	(0.03)	
N		683			294	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.15			0.13	

Note: ° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 9.10: Conditional predicted values on life satisfaction in different custody arrangements (SiV)**

	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody
Never conflict	7.98	7.95	7.98
Occasional conflict	7.82	7.99	8.27
Frequent conflict	7.4	7.18	7.96
No good relationship father	7.83	7.96	4.73***
Good relationship father	8.05	8.05	8.44
Very good relationship father	8.59	8.59	9.13
No good relationship mother	6.91	7.03	7.59
Good relationship mother	7.94	7.95	8.26
Very good relationship mother	8.51	8.50	8.98
Mother no partner	7.87	8.03	8.02
Mother partner	7.83	7.78	8.13
Father no partner	7.94	7.84	7.94
Father partner	7.87	7.98	8.27

<sup>o</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (mother custody = reference category)

Note: Conditional predicted values based on regression coefficients of OLS regression, including control variables

## 9.7 Discussion

In this chapter we addressed a gap in the research literature by studying the association between custody arrangements following parental divorce and adolescent wellbeing *under specific conditions*. We therefore tested the moderating role of the complexity of the family configuration, the frequency of parental conflict, and the quality of the parent-child relationship in explaining the association between respectively mother, joint and father custody and the wellbeing of adolescents, measured in terms of life satisfaction and depressive feelings. We used information from two different data sources, LAGO and SiV.

Overall, the results for both data sources point towards a more important role for family process variables compared to post-divorce family structure variables in explaining children's emotional wellbeing. Neither the custody arrangement nor the presence of stepparents is directly related to adolescents wellbeing, controlling for family variables such as parental conflict and quality of the parent-child relationship.

The finding that the presence of stepparents following divorce is neither positive nor negatively related to child wellbeing confirms previous studies (Brown, 2010; Coleman, Ganong & Fine; 2000). These results suggest that the positive effects that might be related to the presence of a stepparent (increased parental, financial and social resources), may be counterbalanced by other mechanisms, such as reduced parental investment and increased stress.

It is an intriguing finding that family complexity does not appear to make joint custody more difficult for boys. On the contrary, the results with the LAGO-data suggest that joint physical custody is only associated with lower adolescent wellbeing in case mother and father have no new partner. These results can either suggest that joint physical custody facilitates adaptation towards new (step)family members, for example by limiting the step-parenting role (e.g. Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), or that the positive effects of sole custody only hold with the absence of stepparents. It is only for girls that we find indications that living alternately with two father figures is associated with lower wellbeing. Exploring the underlying mechanisms of these findings certainly deserves attention in future studies.

What can we conclude about the beneficial effects of joint custody compared to sole custody? Boys and girls in joint physical custody are not better off than their counterparts in mother custody, as both groups mostly report a similar level of wellbeing. The LAGO-data give several indications that adolescents in joint physical custody have lower wellbeing under certain circumstances, while we do not find any moderating effect with the SiV-data. We further discuss these findings in relation to their moderating factors below.

We found clear evidence that living together with a parent is strongly, positively, associated with the quality of the relationship with that parent, which in turn is positively related to the wellbeing of the child. This supports the logic behind the recent promotion of joint physical custody by the Belgian legislature. Joint custody creates opportunities for maintaining a good relationship with both parents, which is positively related to the child's wellbeing. We find few differences in the relationship quality between full-time and part-time co-residence. In addition, the comparison of the results from the two definition criteria for joint physical custody with the LAGO-data demonstrate that the differences between the custody types are less pronounced for the strict joint custody measure. This suggests that there is a larger distinction between living 100% with the same parent (strict sole custody) versus living at least some time with each parent, than between living 33% of time with each parent (strict joint custody) versus less than 33% of time. Hence, living in two parental households matters more than time spent within each household. This somewhat contradicts the findings of Fabricius et al. (2012), who argue that at least 30% of parenting time is necessary to achieve qualitative parenting outcomes. It also suggests that every-other-week arrangements (children living exactly 50% of time in each parental household), as is often applied within Belgian jurisdiction, are not crucial for maintaining good relationships with both parents. Those rigid time schedules could be rather a reflection of the power struggle between ex-partners, than the result of a rational decision to obtain the best family and living situation for the child (and ex-partners) in the given circumstances.

The results for both data sources demonstrate that there is a direct negative association between the frequency of parental conflict reported by children and their emotional wellbeing. In line with previous studies (e.g. Amato & Rezac, 1994), the results with the

LAGO-data suggest that joint physical custody is less beneficial in case of high parental conflict. Professionals working with divorced parents recommend avoiding personal contact as an important strategy for reducing a child's exposure to conflict (Smyth, 2004). Judges often apply the same strategy by stipulating that transitions between the parental households are made at school. Issues surrounding parental conflict require further investigation because of the serious consequences it hold for children's wellbeing and development. The results for the SiV-data on the other hand suggest that the larger exposure to parental conflict might be compensated by, for example, a larger parental involvement (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007).

Also the positive association between the quality of the parent-child relationship from child perspective and the emotional wellbeing of children is confirmed with both datasets. In addition, co-residence with a parent with who children have no good relationship (or the reverse) has negative implications for child wellbeing. Therefore, a second requirement to make joint physical custody appropriate appears to be a high relationship quality with father and mother. A legal preference for joint physical custody assumes the child has a good relationship with both parents pre-divorce and that this arrangement provides the best context for maintaining those relationships after divorce. Although the cross-sectional data that we use do not allow us to unambiguously distinguish between cause and consequence, we do have indications that joint physical custody is worse than mother custody when there is not a good relationship with the father. This suggests that joint custody is not always beneficial for the parent-child relationship, or that a good pre-divorce parent-child relationship is an important premise for a good post-divorce parent-child relationship. In addition, we find that joint physical custody is less positive for child wellbeing compared to mother custody when there is a very good relationship with the mother. These results are consistent with some previous studies, and suggest that there is a sizable group of adolescents in joint physical custody who would prefer sole mother custody. Forced parent-child co-residence in case of a poor relationship with father or a very good relationship with mother could also be associated with a high-conflict divorce process, in which both parents defend their custody rights, regardless of the situation prior the divorce. These findings highlight the need for further investigation using longitudinal data.

We also recognize some limitations of our study. As often the case in research on post-divorce family situations, we have relatively small numbers of children in father custody. This makes the results for this group less robust. We did find some clear differences for children in father custody that suggest avenues for future research. Next, our results are based on cross-sectional data. Hence we cannot make definitive conclusions on the direction of the effects, for example between quality of the parent-child relationship and type of custody arrangement. A limitation of the LAGO-data is that they are limited to self-reports of adolescents. Analyzing the association between variables measured with the same person also implies shared method variance, overestimating the association between these indicators (Sweeting, 2010). The different findings for the child and parental perspective with the SiV-data are a nice illustration of this methodological problem. On the other hand, the more optimistic view on the reported relationships of parents compared to

children illustrates the limitation of working with parental reports, which might partially explain the lack of an association between those measures and child wellbeing. Finally, while the SiV-data has the advantage of a multi-actor design, it entails more problems with regards to selectivity compared with the LAGO-data. Both subsamples of the SiV-data that are used in this chapter apply to parents who gave explicit permission to interview the child. In addition, their own participation in the study was a condition for the participation of the child. For the parental perspective, this selectivity bias will even be higher as it entails that both parents of the child participated in the study. A possible explanation for the lack of a moderating effect of, for example, parental conflict on the custody arrangement might be related to an overrepresentation of well-functioning joint custody arrangements in the sample. Moreover, it is very plausible that parents of children with a lower emotional wellbeing less often gave permission to interview the child.

In sum, we can conclude that joint physical custody is not necessarily the best or worst custody arrangement following divorce for adolescent wellbeing. Although joint custody seems to be the best arrangement to maintain good relationships with mother and father, we do not find evidence for a higher child wellbeing. This indicates that there might be other factors that suppress the beneficial effects of these closer relationships. This finding deserves further investigation. Moreover, the results for the LAGO-data indicate that joint custody can be less beneficial than sole custody under certain conditions. A legal preference for joint physical custody, without reference to the stipulating criteria that define the child's best interest (e.g. low parental conflict, good relationships with parents pre-divorce) can carry unintended side effects. Our results support the idea of a more case-specific determination of the best custody arrangement, taking into account the positions of the father, mother and child. Family mediators can play an important role in helping to formulate a custody arrangement that is in the best interest of the child and both parents.





## CHAPTER 10

# Post-divorce family structures and adolescent problem behaviour

This chapter draws in part upon the following publication and conference paper:

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K., Matthijs, K. & Swicegood, G. (2013). The effects of family type, family relationships and parental role models on delinquency and alcohol use among Flemish adolescents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, art.nr. DOI: 10.1007/s10826-012-9699-5 (IF publication year: 1.38) (IF most recent: 1.12).

Vanassche, S., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (2008). Divorce, delinquent behaviour and substance use among adolescents: the role of parental characteristics. *Meeting of the European Network for the Sociological and Demographic study of Divorce*, Oslo, 18-19<sup>th</sup> of September.

Vanassche, S., Bekers, T., Sodermans, A.K. & Matthijs, K. (2008). De invloed van gezinstype op middelengebruik en delinquent gedrag bij adolescenten. *Dag van de Sociologie*. Leuven, 29<sup>th</sup> of May.

## **10.1 Introduction**

Many researchers have reported a relationship between family type and adolescent wellbeing (Amato, 2006; Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Demuth & Brown, 2004; Fischer, 2004; Wells & Rankin, 1991), even over successive generations (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Distinctions are often made between internalising and externalising behaviour. The former concept refers to psychological wellbeing while the latter refers to overt problematic behaviour (Bronseleer, 2007). This chapter focuses on two externalising behaviours: alcohol use and delinquent activity among adolescents. Adolescents living a single-parent family or stepfamily following parental divorce are more prone to delinquent behaviour and substance use than adolescents from intact families (Amato, 2001; Frost & Pakiz, 1990; Wells & Rankin, 1991).

In defining the post-divorce family structure of adolescents, we apply a binuclear family perspective. While most studies only consider one parental household when dividing children into respectively single-parent and stepfamily formations, we look at the presence of stepfamily members in both parental households for children in joint custody arrangements. As described in chapter 3, the increasing number of children co-residing part-time with mother and part-time with father following divorce increases the need to take into account the maternal and paternal household composition when defining post-divorce family structures of children. Moreover, as became clear in chapter 8, the relationships with these part-time stepfamily members may also be important with regard to adolescent wellbeing.

Beyond answering the question of how specific post-divorce family structures increase the risk of externalizing behaviour among adolescents, we aim to identify explanatory mechanisms linking these phenomena. We examine if and how the relationship between family type and externalising behaviour among adolescents is explained by the frequency of parental conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationships and role model factors. We thereby have explicit attention for gender differences. By testing the research hypotheses for two different types of externalizing behaviour, we can make assumptions about the robustness and universality of the findings.

Our analyses are based on data from the second round of the LAGO project. The data were collected in 2010 from 1688 pupils of ten secondary schools in Flanders and thus provides the adolescent perspective on family life.

## **10.2 The impact of parental divorce and post-divorce family structures on externalizing behaviour among adolescents**

Several theoretical perspectives address how parental divorce may influence the behaviour quality of life of the children involved (for a detailed literature review, see Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Fischer, 2004). Other than genetic models and selection theory (both beyond the scope of this chapter), two categories of explanations can be distinguished: those focusing on direct effects of family transitions and perspectives emphasizing the role

of intermediating family processes. The family structure and stress perspective belong to the first category. The former assumes that a normal family situation in which the child is living with both biological parents is necessary for successful socialisation (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Van Peer & Carrette, 2007). Stress theories state that a parental divorce is an abrupt crisis situation, accompanied by multiple changes in life circumstances (e.g. the dissolution of the original family relations, the formation of new family compositions, parental conflicts and a drop in living standards) that may have negative consequences for adolescent behaviour (Van Peer & Carrette, 2007).

The research literature offers considerable support for these perspectives: children of intact families were less likely to use drugs (Cookston, 1999; Doherty & Needle, 1991; Flewelling & Bauman, 1990; Hoffmann, 2002; Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; Jenkins & Zunguze, 1998), drink alcohol (Cookston, 1999; Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; Jenkins & Zunguze, 1998), use tobacco (Jenkins & Zunguze, 1998) and were less prone to exhibit delinquent behaviour (Amato, 2001; Wells & Rankin, 1991) than children from non-intact families.

Gender was also shown to be important in the association between adolescent outcomes and family type (Hay, 2003; Lombaert, 2005). The parental divorce itself appeared to be more harmful for boys (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Seltzer, 1994) while the formation of a stepfamily was more strongly associated with problematic behaviour among girls (Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998). Remarriage and thus re-establishing a two-parent family situation appeared to reduce substance use for boys but had the opposite effect for girls (Needle, Su & Doherty, 1990). Moreover, gender differences have been reported in the timing of the problematic behaviour relative to the divorce. Boys were more inclined to use substances in the period shortly after the divorce, while girls started using substances before the parental divorce took place (Doherty & Needle, 1991). This was explained by the fact that boys blocked out parental conflicts prior to divorce and crashed afterwards, while girls became more anxious when the first parental problems arose. Finally, gender differences were reported across types of externalising behaviour. Hay (2003) argued that girls more often experienced feelings of guilt, which were negatively related to delinquency, but positively related to self-destructive behaviours such as alcohol and drug abuse. Boys on the other hand would be more likely to react on stressful events with aggressive behaviours, such as delinquency (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995).

### **10.3 The role of family process variables in linking family type and externalising behaviour**

For some time, research on the family has been shifting away from family structure per se towards a focus on processes and relationships (Flewelling & Bauman, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Gill, Vega & Biafore, 1998). A major criticism of family structure theory and stress theory concerns their reliance on the so-called deficit-comparison approach (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Operative mechanisms are often vaguely specified and thus any observed relationship might be caused by underlying, uncontrolled family processes

(Leon, 2003) or selection effects (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Sweeney, 2007). Examples of theories seeking explanations in family processes are the parental conflict theory and theories that emphasize changes in social, cultural and economic capital (Fischer, 2004). Negative outcomes for children of divorce might not be caused (only) by the parental break-up itself but (also) by disturbed parent-child relationships and difficult family environments characterised by high levels of overt parental conflict (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) or parental substance use. Here, we focus on three mechanisms that can be linked to problematic behaviour among adolescents: parental conflict, the relationship between parents and children, and parental role models.

### ***10.3.1 Parent-child relationship***

A divorce typically involves both a change in the household configuration and a reorganisation of family roles. It usually takes some times for the family members to adapt to these changes, often resulting in poor parenting on a temporary or long time basis (Brown, 2006). Because parents stop living together after a divorce, children often end up with one residential and one non-residential parent (typically the father). Only in the case of joint physical custody children keep residing with both parents on an alternating basis. In the case of sole custody, the contact with a non-residential parent often declines over time (Emery, 1999). Nevertheless, one of the most important factors for adolescent wellbeing has shown to be the quality of the parent-child relationship, rather than the amount of contact (Whiteside & Becker, 2000). In addition of custody arrangements, parent-child relationships may also be influenced by post-divorce family transitions. For example, some studies found that the presence of a new partner had a negative effect on the parent-child relationship (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hoffmann, 2002).

Strong and positive parent-child relationships have shown to be an essential part of the explanation as to why substance use and delinquent behaviour vary across family types (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Crawford & Novak, 2008; Kierkus & Baer, 2002; Kurdek, 1994; Pett et al., 1999). They may act as mediators in the association between parental divorce and adolescents' problem behaviour (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; Larson & Gillman, 1999; Sun, 2001). In certain situations, adolescents end up in using substances to cope with the negative consequences of poor family relationships (Needle, Su & Doherty, 1990). On the other hand, a positive parent-child relationship has shown to buffer negative effects related to parental divorce (Crawford & Novak, 2008; Denton & Kampfe, 1994).

Prior research on the impact of parent-child relationships on children's outcomes pointed clearly to gender-specific effects (Videon, 2002). The quality of the parent-child relationship was on average better within same-sex dyads than within opposite-sex dyads (King, 2006). Moreover, the consequences of the relationship with the same-sex parent versus the opposite-sex parent was different. The same-sex relationship had a stronger impact on adolescents' wellbeing than the relationship with the opposite-sex parent (Videon, 2002).

In sum, it seems clear that characteristics of both the residential and non-residential parent-child dyad are important predictors of the child's wellbeing (Willems & Maroules, 2004), and that family structure and relationships are strongly related. A parental break-up may put the parent-child relationship under pressure, with elevated levels of problematic child behaviour as a consequence. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between different gender dyads (mother/father versus son/daughter).

### ***10.3.2 Parental conflict***

The family conflict theory is an example of an elaborated stress model and involves the expectation that interpersonal conflict between parents has consequences for the wellbeing of children (Doyle, Wolchik & Dawson-McClure, 2002; Hanson, McLanahan & Thompson, 1996). Enduring conflicts have shown to have a detrimental effect on the children involved (Grych & Fincham, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Leon, 2003; Spruijt, 2007). Such conflicts can be the origin of various behavioural problems among children (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Kristjansson et al., 2009). Also among intact families parental conflict is harmful, and children are sometimes better off after a parental divorce that reduces the conflict level (Amato & Keith, 1991; Fischer & de Graaf, 2001; Jenkins & Zunguze, 1998). On the other hand, if parents continue quarrelling after divorce, the wellbeing of the children may further deteriorate (Dronkers, 1999).

### ***10.3.3. Parental role models***

Parents function as role models socializing their children into specific patterns of behaviour. Higher parental alcohol consumption was related to higher adolescent consumption because children adopt the drinking behaviour of their parents. Furthermore, stress-related depression following divorce may lead to higher parental alcohol consumption and tobacco use. Children may then increase their alcohol consumption as a coping strategy (Denton & Kampfe, 1994). Hence, these role models may be important in explaining the association between divorce and substance use among children (Sweeney, 2007). By including parental exemplary behaviour in our analysis, we want to obtain a better understanding of the complex interplay between parental characteristics and behaviour, family structure and adolescents' outcomes. Again, differential outcomes for sons and daughters can be expected (Hay, 2003). The same-sex parent should act as a more important role model than the opposite-sex parent.

## **10.4 Present study**

Overall, we expect that including the quality of the parent-child relationships, the frequency of parental conflict and the parental role models will diminish the initial association between family type and alcohol consumption and delinquency of adolescents. Our literature review led to four main research hypotheses with explicit attention to gender differences. We expect that:

H1a: Children in non-intact families will exhibit higher levels of alcohol consumption and delinquency than children in intact families.

H1b: Girls in stepfamilies will exhibit higher levels of alcohol consumption and delinquency than girls in single-parent families.

H1c: Boys in single-parent families will exhibit higher levels of alcohol consumption and delinquency than boys in stepfamilies.

H1d: For girls, the association between family type and alcohol consumption will be stronger than between family type and delinquency.

H1e: For boys, the association between family type and delinquency will be stronger than between family type and alcohol consumption.

H2a: Children reporting a good relationship with their parent(s) will exhibit lower levels of alcohol consumption and delinquency than children reporting a poor relationship with their parents.

H2b: The relationship with the same-sex parent will have a stronger impact on alcohol consumption and delinquency than the relationship with the opposite-sex parent.

H3: More frequent parental conflict will be associated with higher levels of alcohol consumption and delinquency among adolescents.

H4a: More frequent alcohol consumption by parents will be associated with higher levels of alcohol consumption and delinquency among adolescents.

H4b: The alcohol consumption of the same-sex parent will be more consequential for alcohol consumption and delinquency than the alcohol consumption of the opposite-sex parent.

## **10.5 Data and methods**

### ***10.5.1 Data***

The data used for this study come from the second round of the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche et al., 2012) and were collected in 2010 in ten different schools in Flanders. Coverage includes two different provinces, and all Flemish educational systems and grades. In total, the second round contains usable questionnaires from 773 boys and 915 girls. As there is an overrepresentation of girls and some small disproportionalities regarding the distribution of educational track, population weights were calculated to make the data representative for Flemish pupils according to sex, grade and educational system.

Further selection of respondents was made according to the following criteria: 1) residence in the household of a biological parent, 2) divorce or separation as the only possible reason why the biological parents do not live together and 3) sufficient information about the

current family constellation. These criteria resulted in a research sample of 1619 pupils of whom 757 boys and 862 girls, for whom the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 10.1. These criteria imply that we restrict the comparison of children living with both biological parents to either children living with a single parent following parental divorce or separation or to children living with a parent and stepparent following parental divorce. Single-parent or stepfamily formations following a parental death and stepfamilies formed by a previously never-married or cohabiting parent's entry into a union with a partner are excluded from the research sample.

### ***10.5.2 Independent variable***

We classify family type into three categories: 1 = *classical two-parent family (married or cohabiting)*, 2 = *single-parent family*, 3 = *stepfamily*. Children in the first group never experienced a parental divorce/separation and their parents still live together. 94% (n = 1058) of the parents of these adolescents are married, 6% (n = 63) are not married. In the second and third group, the adolescents' parents do no longer live together as a result of divorce or separation. 85% experienced the divorce of their parents, 15% their parents separated after unmarried cohabitation. The second group contains those children residing more than 66% of time with one biological (or adoptive) parent without a residing partner. 77% (n = 152) within this group lives in a single-mother household, 9% (n = 18) in a single-father household and 14% (n = 27) commutes between a single-mother and a single-father household. The third category contains adolescents living at least 33% of time with one biological parent and his or her new partner. 62% (n = 155) within this group lives with mother and stepfather, 10% (n = 25) with father and stepmother, 8% (n = 21) commutes between a mother and stepfather and a single father, 7% (n = 18) commutes between a single mother and father and stepmother and 13% (n = 32) commutes between mother and stepfather and father and stepmother. Due to limited group sizes, we do not distinguish according to the sex of the residential parents and stepparents.

### ***10.5.3 Dependent variables***

Adolescents' *delinquent behaviour* in the past year was measured by an 11-item scale also used by Baerveldt, van Rossem and Vermande (2003). Scale items included: 1) *got arrested by the police*, 2) *stole a bike or moped*, 3) *sold something that was stolen*, 4) *broke in somewhere*, 5) *painted graffiti*, 6) *broke something on purpose*, 7) *carried a weapon*, 8) *set something on fire*, 9) *stole something from a shop, coat or bag*, 10) *got involved in a fight* and 11) *hit or kicked someone*. The response items were 1 = *never*, 2 = *one time*, 3 = *two to three times*, and 4 = *four times or more*. Factor analysis revealed that all items loaded on one single factor and that the scale showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89). For those respondents having missing values on less than half of the items, values were imputed based upon the valid answers. The constructed delinquency scale ranged from 11 to 44; the median for boys and girls was 13 and 11 respectively. Because the distribution of the delinquency variable is right-skewed, we constructed a categorical variable with three levels, depending on the overall score on the

scale and the severity of the delinquent acts. This last criterion was determined by an additional factor analysis with two forced factors. The first four items of the scale loaded high ( $>0.67$ ) on a separate factor and are classified as *severe delinquent behaviour*. Respondents with the minimum score of 11 on the delinquency scale were classified as reporting *no delinquency*. Those coded into the *frequent delinquency* category scored more than 15 on the delinquency scale (which represents the upper quartile) or reported at least one of the four severe delinquent behaviours. All others were coded in the category of *sometimes delinquency*.

Boys report more delinquent behaviour than girls ( $X^2 = 95.59$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A higher proportion of boys in single-parent families (44%) and stepfamilies (32%) report frequent delinquency when compared to intact families (37%), while boys from intact families report more often no delinquency (41%) than boys in single-parent (28%) and stepfamilies (34%) ( $X^2 = 6.58$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .16$ ). Girls in intact families are much more likely to report no delinquency (63%) than girls in step- (40%) and single-parent (51%) families, who are more likely to report sometimes or frequent delinquency ( $X^2 = 25.20$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In line with our expectations, boys report more often delinquency in single-parent families relative to those in stepfamilies, while for girls the opposite is true.

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they *consumed alcoholic* drinks (beer, wine, liquors, alcohol pops, premix drinks, etc.) in the past six months. A five-point scale was used with categories: *1 = never*, *2 = one or two times*, *3 = monthly*, *4 = weekly*, and *5 = daily* (WHO ASSIST Working Group, 2002). Based on the initial distribution, we recoded this scale into a two-level categorical variable: adolescents with zero, one/two times or monthly alcohol use (*no or light consumers*) versus adolescents reporting daily or weekly alcohol use (*frequent consumers*).

Boys are more likely than girls to be frequent drinkers ( $X^2 = 15.5$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For boys and girls the association between drinking behaviour and family type was dependent on age. From the age of 16, alcohol is legally allowed in Belgium, and more socially accepted as well. For adolescents below 16 years old, there was a significant positive association between divorce experience and alcohol consumption. Within that age group, boys in single-parent (15%) and stepfamilies (15%) were almost three times as likely to belong to the frequent drinking group than boys in two-parent families (6%) ( $X^2 = 7.3$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). For girls below 16 years old, 24% of those living in a single-parent family consume alcohol on a weekly or daily base, versus 13% of those in a stepfamily and 7% of those in two-parent families ( $X^2 = 14.8$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For boys and girls from 16 years and older the association between drinking behaviour and family constellation is not statistically significant, but again a higher percentage of boys in single-parent families and girls in stepfamilies are frequent drinkers. These findings are in line with the expectation that boys and girls in two-parent families are less frequent users, but the gender differences regarding single-parent and stepfamily configurations are not in line with the hypotheses.



**Table 10.1: Descriptives for all study variables**

Variable	n	% or mean (S.D.)
Sex		
Boys	757	46.8
Girls	862	53.2
Age	1608	15.5 (1.93)
Financial problems		
Never or seldom financial difficulties	1148	70.9
Sometimes or often financial difficulties	299	18.5
Missing	172	10.6
Study track		
General education	741	45.8
Technical education, including arts	420	26.0
Vocational education	456	28.2
Family situation		
Intact family	1121	71.5
Single-parent family	197	12.6
Stepfamily	251	16.0
Relationship with mother		
Low quality relationship with mother	802	50.0
High quality relationship with mother	802	50.0
Relationship with father		
Low quality relationship with father	784	49.4
High quality relationship with father	803	50.6
Parental conflict		
No conflict	1010	62.4
Frequent conflict	405	25.0
Missing	204	12.6
Alcohol use of mother		
No or light alcohol use	1124	72.0
Frequent alcohol use	437	28.0
Alcohol use of father		
No or light alcohol use	770	55.2
Frequent alcohol use	625	44.8
Delinquent behaviour of respondent		
No delinquency	765	48.5
Sometimes delinquency	378	24.0
Frequent delinquency	433	27.5
Alcohol use of respondent		
No or light alcohol use	1228	78.1
Frequent alcohol use	344	21.9

*Note. Unweighted sample*

#### 10.5.4 Mediating variables

The quality of the relationship between the parent and the child was measured by the Network of Relationship Inventory scale (NRI) developed by Furman and Buhrmester (1985). It consists of nine items for the relationship with each parent (examples of items are: *Does your mother/father respect you?*, *Do you share personal feelings with your mother/father?*). The response values form a five-point Likert scale with a higher score indicating a more positive relationship. Factor analyses revealed only one factor. Cronbach's alphas for the NRI measures for mother and father were respectively 0.91 and 0.92. The resultant scale ranges from 0 to 36.

The relationship with mother is better in intact families than in stepfamilies (Wilcoxon-test for boys:  $Z = -2.48$ ,  $p=.01$ ; for girls:  $Z = -2.54$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The relationship with the father is better in intact families than in single-parent families (Wilcoxon-test for boys:  $Z = -3.49$ ,  $p<.001$ ; for girls:  $Z = -6.96$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and in stepfamilies (Wilcoxon-test for boys:  $Z = -3.34$ ,  $p<.001$ ; for girls:  $Z = -8.15$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The stronger association between the father-child relationship and family type is related to the fact that children often reside with their mother after a divorce. Hence the relationship with the father is often transformed into a relationship with a non-residential parent. Boys report on average a better relationship with their father than girls ( $Z=2.15$ ;  $p<.05$ ) while girls have on average a better relationship with their mother ( $Z = -5.07$ ;  $p<0.001$ ).

Mother- and father-child relationship variables are very right-skewed. Therefore both measures were recoded into dichotomous variables for the purpose of multivariate analysis. The median values for the relationship with mother (22 for boys, 24 for girls) and relationship with father (20 for both sexes) were used as a cut-off score to determine whether the adolescents have a *better* versus *worse* relationship with their mother and father. Additional analyses in which the relationship with the mother/father was treated as a metric variable did not yield substantially different results. Also a three-category classification was tested based upon the lower and upper quartile, but the differences between the middle and upper groups in relation to the dependent variables were negligible.

The conflict level between the respondent's parents was measured by five items on the Conflict Awareness Scale (Grych & Fincham, 1993), asking how often 1) *their biological parents argue about money*, 2) *argue about the children's education*, 3) *argue about the children*, 4) *absolutely disagree with each other* and 5) *have severe conflicts*. The five-response Likert scale ranged from 1 = *never* until 5 = *always* and exhibits high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .85). Data was imputed when a maximum of two answers were missing. The conflict scale was composed by summing the five item scores and ranges from 0 to 20.

Girls report on average a higher conflict score than boys (Wilcoxon-test:  $Z=-3.11$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but no significant differences in parental conflict could be found between the three family types (Kruskal-Wallis test:  $\text{Chi}^2= 0.63$ ,  $p=.7$ ). The interquartile ranges show that there is

much more variation in parental conflict among the adolescents in single-parents families (IQR = 10 for boys, IQR = 9 for girls) and stepfamilies (IQR = 7 for boys and girls) than in two-parent families (IQR = 5 for boys and girls).

The conflict variable is very left-skewed so we transformed the measure into a three-level categorical variable for the multivariate analysis. Conflict scores of 7 (third quartile) or more are classified as *frequent conflict*, while respondents with a score from 0 to 6 are treated as the *no conflict* group. Among intact families, 22% of children are in the frequent conflict group; while this is respectively 29% and 32% for stepparent and single-parent families. Respondents with missing values on the conflict variable are coded into a third dummy variable *missing* for the multivariate analyses. This allows to include respondent's with valid information on other variables, who would otherwise be excluded in complete-case analysis (Gelman & Hill, 2007).

To examine parental role modelling the respondents were asked about the alcohol consumption of their mother and father. The response scale was identical to that for the respondents. For inclusion in the multivariate models, the variable was dummy coded like the alcohol consumption of the adolescents: *1 = no or light alcohol consumption of mother/father* and *2 = daily or weekly (frequent) alcohol consumption of mother/father*.

Adolescents in a stepfamily (55%) and single-parent family (60%) report a higher alcohol use by their father than their counterparts in intact families (40%) ( $X^2=37.62$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.001$ ). For the mother this is also true ( $X^2=23.17$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.001$ ): mothers in stepfamilies (40%) have a higher alcohol use than those in single-parent families (31%) and two-parent families (25%).

### ***10.5.5 Control variables***

The average age of the adolescents is 15.3 years. In the multivariate analysis, age is mean-centred. The educational track of the adolescent is included as a variable with three categories: *the general education system (GES)*, *the technical or arts system (TES or AES)* and *the vocational system (VES)*. Parental income is related to adolescents' behavioural outcomes following parental divorce (Leon, 2003). As it is difficult to question adolescents about the income of their parents, a subjective measure of the financial situation was used. Respondents were asked how often their parents experienced difficulties with making ends meet. The scale for this variable ranged from *1 = never* to *4 = always*. For children of divorced parents, this variable was assessed separately for the mother and father, and the measure of the residential parent was used in the analyses. In case of joint physical custody, the mean of the paternal and maternal score was used. Three categories were constructed: *never or seldom financial difficulties* (71.3%), *sometimes or often financial difficulties* (17.9%) and a category for respondents with a *missing* value on this item (10.8%). We included this last category in the analysis in order to not lose these respondents.

### ***10.5.6 Analytical strategy***

We estimated multinomial and binomial logistic regression models to assess the effect of family type on delinquent behaviour and alcohol use respectively. Four models were produced for each outcome variable. Model 1 includes only the family type variable. In model 2, measures of parental conflict and the relationship with mother and father are added. In Model 3, the role model variables are added. In the fourth model we include the control variables age (only for delinquency), educational track and financial situation. This stepwise approach allows to see how the effects of family structure are mediated by family processes, the role modelling and the control variables. We limit the alcohol regression models to adolescents between 11 and 15 years old because we only find significant bivariate associations between family type and alcohol use for adolescents below the legal age to drink alcohol. We present the results for boys and girls separately, but the statistical significance of the gender differences are tested in an overall model that includes the full set of variables.

## **10.6 Results**

### ***10.6.1 Delinquency***

Table 10.2 and Table 10.3 show the results of the multinomial regression models with delinquency as dependent variable for girls and boys. Model 1 shows a positive association between living in a non-intact family and delinquent behaviour. This differs between boys and girls. Girls growing up in stepfamilies exhibit more delinquent behavior compared to those living in intact families. Girls living in single-parent families are also more likely to be in the frequent delinquency category, but the coefficient is much smaller than for stepfamilies. For boys, living in a single-parent family increases the likelihood of reporting delinquency, but there is no significant effect of living in a stepfamily. Adding the family variables in model 2 shows that a good relationship with mother and father is associated with lower delinquency scores for girls. For boys a good relationship with the father and low parental conflict lowers their likelihood of frequent delinquency. The intermediate variables slightly diminish the effect of family type, but most of the effects remain significant. When we include the role model variables into the analysis, we find that girls are more likely to be in the frequent delinquency category when their father is a frequent alcohol consumer. They are more likely to be in the medium category when their mother is a frequent alcohol user. For boys the paternal role model is significant in distinguishing between no and frequent delinquency. Girls and boys in technical and especially in vocational education are more likely to be in the frequent delinquency category than adolescents in general education. When boys report a difficult financial situation of their parents, their likelihood of delinquency increases. For girls, the negative effect of living in a stepfamily on delinquency remains statistically significant in the full model, but for boys there is no longer an effect of family type after inclusion of the other variables.

**Table 10.2: Logit coefficients and standard errors from multinomial logistic regression models predicting delinquency (girls)**

	Model 1 (N = 806)						Model 2 (N = 793)					
	Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent			Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	-0.99	(0.11)	***	-1.50	0.13	***	-0.86	0.18	***	-0.99	0.20	***
Family type (ref = intact family)												
Single-parent family	0.36	(0.25)		0.67	0.28	*	0.30	0.26		0.50	0.29	°
Stepfamily	0.91	(0.23)	***	1.01	0.27	***	0.85	0.24	***	0.82	0.28	**
Good relation with mother							-0.21	0.20		-0.61	0.24	*
Good relation with father							-0.15	0.20		-0.59	0.24	*
Frequent parental conflict							0.16	0.20		0.26	0.23	
-2 log likelihood	1 422.77 (df = 4)						1 379.18 (df=12)					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.04						0.08					
	Model 3 (N = 708)						Model 4 (N = 702)					
	Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent			Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	-0.93	(0.21)	***	-1.12	0.24	***	-1.09	0.24	***	-1.68	0.30	***
Family type (ref = intact family)												
Single-parent family	0.05	(0.29)		0.22	0.31		0.18	0.31		0.26	0.34	
Stepfamily	0.92	(0.26)	***	0.76	0.30	*	0.97	0.26	***	0.74	0.31	*
Good relation with mother	-0.23	(0.21)		-0.69	0.25	**	-0.23	0.22		-0.69	0.26	**
Good relation with father	-0.17	(0.22)		-0.55	0.26	*	-0.17	0.22		-0.44	0.27	
Frequent parental conflict	0.10	(0.22)		0.11	0.25		0.09	0.22		0.08	0.26	
Frequent use mother	0.42	(0.25)	°	-0.02	0.28		0.46	0.25	°	0.21	0.29	
Frequent use father	0.01	(0.23)		0.56	0.26	*	-0.02	0.24		0.59	0.27	*
Age							-0.09	0.05		-0.05	0.06	
Education (ref = general track)												
Technical track							0.23	0.24		0.51	0.30	°
Vocational track							-0.04	0.28		1.08	0.29	***
Financial difficulties							0.23	0.25		0.19	0.28	
-2 log likelihood	1 231.08 (df = 16)						1 202.55 (df = 26)					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.10						0.14					

°p<.10, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001 Note. Weighted sample / Ref = no delinquency

**Table 10.3: Logit coefficients and standard errors from multinomial logistic regression models predicting delinquency (boys)**

	Model 1 (N = 700)						Model 2 (N = 682)					
	Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent			Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	-0.59	0.11	***	-0.11	0.10		-0.38	0.18	*	0.04	0.16	
Family type (ref = intact family)												
Single-parent family	0.59	0.31	°	0.57	0.28	*	0.52	0.32		0.49	0.29	°
Stepfamily	0.17	0.28		0.33	0.24		0.12	0.28		0.26	0.25	
Good relation with mother							-0.07	0.24		-0.25	0.21	
Good relation with father							-0.38	0.24		-0.45	0.21	*
Frequent parental conflict							0.08	0.26		0.64	0.22	**
-2 log likelihood	1647.81 (df = 4)						1568.23 (df = 12)					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.01						0.06					
	Model 3 (N = 592)						Model 4 (N = 591)					
	Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent			Sometimes delinquent			Frequent delinquent		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	-0.54	0.22	*	-0.12	0.19		-0.61	0.25	*	-0.69	0.24	**
Family type (ref = intact family)												
Single-parent family	0.46	0.37		0.67	0.33	*	0.36	0.39		0.56	0.35	
Stepfamily	0.12	0.32		0.46	0.28	°	-0.01	0.33		0.31	0.29	
Good relation with mother	-0.03	0.25		-0.26	0.22		-0.05	0.26		-0.31	0.23	
Good relation with father	-0.46	0.26	°	-0.45	0.23	*	-0.46	0.26	°	-0.47	0.24	*
Frequent parental conflict	0.06	0.28		0.72	0.24	**	-0.04	0.29		0.65	0.25	**
Frequent use mother	0.16	0.29		0.02	0.26		0.18	0.29		0.09	0.27	
Frequent use father	0.44	0.27		0.26	0.24		0.49	0.27	°	0.47	0.25	°
Age							-0.01	0.06		0.04	0.05	
Education (ref = general track)												
Technical track							-0.06	0.27		0.47	0.24	°
Vocational track							0.21	0.30		1.20	0.26	***
Financial difficulties							0.44	0.33		0.64	0.29	*
-2 log likelihood	1328.80 (df = 16)						1284.48 (df = 26)					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.10						0.16					

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  Note. Weighted sample /Rref = no delinquency

Overall our findings indicate that there is a significant association between the family type and delinquent behaviour for both adolescent boys and girls. Especially the delinquent behaviour of girls in stepfamilies and boys in single-parent families is more pronounced than their counterparts in intact families. Hypothesis 1a, 1b and 1c regarding delinquency have support. For girls the effects are larger and more robust, in so far as they persist after adding other variables in the model and they hold for both sometimes and frequent delinquent behaviour. For boys, the effect of family type decreases after controlling for mediating variables and control variables. A good relationship with especially the same-sex parent (hypothesis 2b) is negatively associated with delinquent behaviour but doesn't substantially modify the initial effect of family type. Hypothesis 3 predicted that a low level of parental conflict could also reduce delinquency. We only observe an association between conflict and delinquency for boys, which accounts for little of the original family type effect. We do find parental role models to be important (hypothesis 4a). High alcohol use of the father is associated with higher delinquency for both boys and girls. Delinquency of girls is also influenced by the maternal role model (hypothesis 4b). The parental role models did however not act as a mediator of the family type effect

### ***10.6.2 Alcohol use***

In Table 10.4 and Table 10.5 the results of the binomial logistic regression models for alcohol consumption for girls and boys are presented. Boys and girls between 11 and 15 years old, who are living in broken families, have a higher likelihood of being frequent drinkers than their counterparts in intact families. There is an interesting gender effect, which is the opposite of the results for delinquency: girls seem to drink most frequently in single-parent families, and boys in stepfamilies. The coefficients for the parent-child relationships are not statistically significant. Frequent parental conflict increases alcohol use among girls, but this association disappears after inclusion of the role model variables. Girls whose mother drinks frequently exhibit higher alcohol consumption, while for boys the father is the more important role model. The family process and role model variables entered in models 2 and 3 lead to only small decreases in the family type effects, so no clear evidence for a mediating effect of these variables is found. In model 4 we observe some reduction of the family type coefficients for girls after inclusion of the control variables. Boys and girls in technical education have a higher alcohol consumption than those in general education. There is no effect of the financial situation on alcohol consumption of adolescents in our sample.

**Table 10.4: Logit coefficients and standard errors from binomial logistic regression models predicting frequent alcohol use (girls, 11 to 15 years)**

	Model 1 (N = 396)			Model 2 (N = 370)			Model 3 (N = 339)			Model 4 (N = 339)		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	-2.58	(0.24)	***	-2.59	(0,36)	***	-2.98	(0.46)	***	-3.87	(0.58)	***
Family type (ref = intact family)												
Single-parent family	1.45	(0.40)	***	1.62	(0.42)	***	1.77	(0.44)	***	1.39	(0.48)	**
Stepfamily	0.67	(0.41)	°	0.56	(0.42)		0.53	(0.43)		0.14	(0.47)	
Good relation with mother				-0.02	(0.36)		0.19	(0.37)		0.10	(0.40)	
Good relation with father				-0.32	(0.37)		-0.41	(0.39)		-0.36	(0.41)	
Frequent parental conflict				0.74	(0.35)	*	0.54	(0.37)		0.41	(0.38)	
Frequent alcohol use mother							0.72	(0.42)	°	1.21	(0.46)	**
Frequent alcohol use father							0.33	(0.43)		0.60	(0.45)	
Education (ref = general track)												
Technical track										1.80	(0.49)	***
Vocational track										0.68	(0.58)	
Financial difficulties										0.48	(0.40)	
-2 log likelihood	259.47 (df = 2)			243.54 (df = 5)			225.17 (df = 7)			178.73 (df = 10)		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.06			0.12			0.17			0.25		

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  Note. Weighted sample, ref = zero/light alcohol use



**Table 10.5: Logit coefficients and standard errors from binomial logistic regression models predicting frequent alcohol use (boys, 11 to 15 years)**

	Model 1 (N = 344)			Model 2 (N = 298)			Model 3 (N = 262)			Model 4 (N = 258)		
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.	
Intercept	-2.80	(0.25)	***	-2.55	(0.39)	***	-2.91	(0.50)	***	-3.42	(0.61)	***
Family type (ref = intact family)												
Single-parent family	1.03	(0.53)	°	0.85	(0.63)		0.82	(0.66)		0.70	(0.71)	
Stepfamily	1.07	(0.50)	*	1.19	(0.53)	*	1.24	(0.55)	*	1.12	(0.57)	*
Good relation with mother				-0.62	(0.50)		-0.46	(0.52)		-0.41	(0.54)	
Good relation with father				-0.25	(0.51)		-0.37	(0.55)		-0.38	(0.57)	
Frequent parental conflict				0.57	(0.47)		0.21	(0.52)		0.13	(0.54)	
Frequent use mother							0.26	(0.54)		0.29	(0.56)	
Frequent use father							0.79	(0.57)		1.00	(0.59)	°
Education (ref= general track)												
Technical track										0.92	(0.55)	°
Vocational track										0.79	(0.66)	
Financial difficulties										0.49	(0.62)	
-2 log likelihood	199.35 (df = 2)			166.07 (df = 5)			148.16 (df = 7)			143.94 (df = 10)		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.04			0.08			0.12			0.15		

° $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  Weighted sample, ref = zero/light alcohol use

We may conclude for boys and girls between 11 and 15 years, that there is a significant association between family type and alcohol consumption (hypothesis 1a is supported). Girls in single-parent families and boys in stepfamilies are drinking more often than their counterparts in intact families. This is contrary to hypothesis 1b. For both boys and girls, the effects are quite robust and persist after including other variables into the model. The parent-child relationship was not associated with alcohol consumption, so we cannot confirm hypothesis 2a. No strong support is found for the association between parental conflict and alcohol consumption (hypothesis 3a). We do find a strong impact of parental role models on adolescent drinking behaviour (hypothesis 4a). Mothers are the most important role models for girls, while boys seem to imitate the paternal drinking behaviour (Hypothesis 4b). As we observed earlier for delinquency, neither the family process variables nor parental role models function as important mediators that can explain the family structure effects on alcohol consumption.

### *10.6.3 Summary of gender related results*

Table 10.6 contains a schematic overview of the most important gender differences in the findings. In general, the association between family type and problematic behaviour depends on the outcome variable under consideration and whether we look at boys or girls. When focusing on delinquency, girls fare worse in stepfamilies than in single-parent families, while for boys it is the other way round. This is in line with most findings from the recent literature (hypotheses 1b and 1c). Interaction effects in an overall model confirm the statistical significance of this gender difference with regard to the effect of family structure ( $p < .05$ ). With regard to alcohol use, girls in single-parent families and boys in stepfamilies seem to be the highest consumers. This finding diverges from the general pattern wherein girls experience more problems in stepfamilies and boys in single-parent families. Although we do not find support for a stronger association between family type and delinquency for boys and between family type and alcohol use for girls (hypotheses 1d and 1e), our findings do suggest genderspecific mechanisms in the production of specific types of risky behaviour.

Regarding the family processes, we find that parental conflict is positively associated with delinquency for boys and, indirectly, with alcohol consumption for girls (hypothesis 3). Especially the relationship quality and role model of the same-sex parent are important in predicting problematic behaviour among adolescents (hypotheses 2b and 4b). Interaction effects in the overall model between sex of the adolescent and the parental variables demonstrate these patterns of gender differences, although not all p-values for the interaction terms reach the .05 significance level.

**Table 10.6: Summary of results**

	Boys		Girls	
	Delinquency	Alcohol use (-16)	Delinquency	Alcohol use (-16)
<b>Family type (ref = intact)</b>				
Single-parent family	+			++
Stepfamily		++	++	
<b>Family processes</b>				
Good relation with same sex	--		--	
Good relation with opposite sex			-	
Frequent parental conflict	++			+
<b>Role models alcohol</b>				
Frequent use same sex parent	+	+	+	++
Frequent use opposite sex parent			++	
<i>LEGEND:                    -/+: moderate association                    --/++ strong association</i>				

## 10.7 Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to provide additional insight into the relationship between children's family type and their externalising behaviour. Specific attention has been devoted to gender differences in the effects of family type, parent-child relationships and role models. In terms of building generalizable explanation of these linkages, our study has the advantage of considering two measures of externalising behaviour, delinquency and alcohol use. The first indicator increases with age but is not age-conditional: delinquent behaviour is negative behaviour for all age groups. This is different from alcohol use which is legal from the age of 16 in Belgium. Drinking alcohol is therefore an illegal activity below age 16 and a legal and socially acceptable activity for adolescents of age 16 and older. Frequent alcohol consumption at very young age might be extra problematic due to heightened risk on mental or physical dependence and of harmful consequences for mental and physical health at later ages. Interestingly, we only find an association between family structure and alcohol consumption for respondent under age 16. The association between family structure and alcohol use manifests itself at the point in the life course where legal, social and health barriers are crossed.

The family type in which an adolescent grows up influences his alcohol use and delinquent behaviour considerably. In general, our results show that boys and girls living in single-parent and stepfamilies following a parental divorce show more externalizing problem behaviour than those growing up in intact families. We find different effects, depending on the gender of the child and the outcome under consideration. The general finding that boys fare worse in single-parent families and girls in stepfamilies is evident in our analyses, but only in case of delinquency. For alcohol consumption, we observe the opposite pattern, indicating different mechanisms underlying the association between family type and specific types of problematic behaviour for boys and girls. These findings stress the importance of studying different types of externalising behaviour and deserve further investigation.

A good parent-child relationship, especially with the same-sex parent, was associated with less delinquent behaviour. In conjunction with the finding that boys in single-parent families are particularly likely to exhibit more delinquent behaviour, this result reinforces the importance of a significant male family member for boys in restricting their delinquent behaviour, either by continued contact with the father following divorce, or by the presence of a stepfather. The importance of the quality of the relationship with a stepparent, either as substitution or additional parent, also needs further investigation. In addition, these findings confirm the importance of continuity in parenting quality by both ex-partners, supporting the current normative climate of joint custody following divorce. However, maintaining good familial relationships within the sometimes very discordant atmosphere of marital break-ups can be a real challenge for all family members.

No association was found between alcohol consumption and the parent-child relationship. Different mechanisms are at work for different outcomes, demonstrating the importance of in-depth analysis when exploring specific problematic behaviours. Here we have examined a measure that taps into the closeness between parent and child, but it may be the case that other factors such as parental monitoring and child autonomy play a more important role in the alcohol consumption of adolescents.

The results with respect to parental conflict were also gender-specific. For boys, frequent parental conflict was associated with more frequent delinquency but not with more frequent alcohol consumption. For girls the opposite was true. These findings could be related to Hay's argument (2003) that the higher feelings of guilt by girls in situations of parental conflict are more likely to produce self-destructive behaviour (such as alcohol use), while boys express their anger through more extraverted behaviour (such as delinquency).

Parents also function as important role models as we observe in the strong association between the drinking behaviours of parents and children. These patterns suggest that important socialisation processes are at work. Boys seem to follow mainly their father's role model, while girls are more affected by their mothers' behaviour. Again, the same-sex parent matters most. More frequent alcohol consumption of parents is also positively associated with the delinquency level of their children. Here, we notice a substitution effect from one type of externalising behaviour to another one. It suggests an association between the different behaviours of parents (which cannot be tested with the present data), relating to a more general, parental role or socialisation model. However, the effects of family type on externalising behaviour do not decrease when controlling for alcohol use of the parents. Hence, the role model variables cannot be seen as real mediators between family type and delinquency or alcohol use.

The educational level explains a part of the family type effect. As the educational level of parent and child are highly associated and divorce is more frequent in lower social classes (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006), a selection process could be at work here. A part of the differential outcomes by family type could be due to social class differences. In addition,

parental divorce is associated with poorer educational outcomes (Pong & Ju, 2000). Children of divorced families more often end up in lower educational levels. Since schools are mostly organised in classes according to study track, socialisation processes and peer pressure can become quite important and even strengthen the initial divorce effect.

Lastly, we note that the association between the family type and externalising behaviour is somewhat higher for girls than for boys. Especially for delinquency, we observe a significant interaction effect between family type and sex. This is not in line with the general finding from the literature that boys are more likely to show problematic behaviour after a parental divorce. It may be related to the changed climate regarding custody after divorce. A considerable portion (around 25%) of the pupils with divorced parents in our research sample are living alternately with mother and father. Considering that the relationship with the same-sex parent is salient, this may explain why boys in our sample behave 'better than expected'. Nowadays, they are more likely to maintain positive, continued contact with their father after divorce. Girls, on the other hand, have presence of a maternal role model reduced under this arrangement, at least during the extended amount of time that they reside in their father's household.

We also acknowledge some obvious limitations of our study. Seen the main focus of this doctoral thesis, a major limitation involves the restriction required for our operationalization of family type, only distinguishing between respectively single-parent and stepfamilies. In practice, post-divorce family structures of children are characterized by much more heterogeneity, as became clear in the first research chapters. Nevertheless, the present chapter is a nice illustration of the difficulties that are encountered when constructing more refined classifications. As described in the methods part, a classification including the custody arrangement of the child resulted in very small group sizes. Moreover, we even did not take into account the distinction between simple and complex stepfamily formations. Second, as our dataset is cross-sectional, we cannot make definitive assessments about the direction of the effects. When we write of 'effects' we acknowledge that some portion of the associations may involve reciprocal causation. Moreover, as noted above, selection effects regarding pre-divorce characteristics of parents and children cannot be ruled out (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Longitudinal data would provide considerable analytical leverage on these issues. Lastly, our results regarding the impact of parental role behaviour and parental conflict are based on adolescent reports. Many other studies examine wellbeing and family relationships of children as reported by parents. Obviously the adolescent perspective we capture is not necessarily the reality as experienced by the parents themselves. This raises a fundamental issue regarding differences between factual behaviour, reported behaviour and perceived behaviour. Other studies use measures reported by children under surveillance of parents, in which both selection and desirability play important roles. In the present study we focused on the stories of the children and the family processes as seen through their eyes. We think this perspective is especially important for understanding adolescent wellbeing. It is not however the only vantage point and may be enriched by comparison with adult/ multi-actor reports.

In general, our results for Flemish adolescents track rather closely with findings from previous studies in other contexts: family structure *and* family processes are related to externalizing behaviour of adolescents and parents function as important role models. But the importance of family structure, parental relations and role behaviours varies across the different gender dyads and according to which outcome is under consideration. Our results also provide some suggestion that the conditionality of the links between family type and externalizing behaviour may be grounded in time and place. An example is the reversed pattern of gender effects that may be attributable to recent changes in Belgian law, stressing the need for comparative studies.

# CHAPTER 11

## DISCUSSION

Due to high divorce rates, a legal presumption for joint custody following parental divorce and evolving norms about the parental roles of mothers and fathers, a significant proportion of the adolescents in Flanders grow up in so-called binuclear household configurations, living alternately in the maternal and paternal household. If one or both parents live together with a new partner, this creates binuclear stepfamily formations. In cases where children live full-time with one of the biological parents, the other parent is expected to maintain an active parental role towards the child and to remain involved in childrearing decisions. As became clear within the preceding chapters, this evolution had important consequences for stepfamily formation, family relationships and the wellbeing of children following divorce.

The aim of this concluding chapter is not to repeat all conclusions from the individual chapters, but to summarize the more general conclusions, limitations and directions for future research that result from this doctoral thesis. We start with a brief summary of the most important conclusions regarding the different research topics that were outlined in chapter 1. Next, we reflect on some important methodological challenges that we encountered in conducting our research. Third, we discuss the most important policy-related issues that arise from our results. We end with some directions for future research on post-divorce stepfamilies.

## **11.1 Summary of the research findings**

### ***11.1.1 Research topic 1: Post-divorce family configurations of children***

In chapter 3, we described the post-divorce family configurations of children in terms of their custody arrangement, the presence of a new partner or stepparent in the maternal and paternal household and the presence of step- and halfsiblings. The general working hypothesis was that the custody arrangement of children and the presence of stepfamily members are strongly interrelated. For example, living together with a stepfather is only possible when a child lives at least a certain amount of time in the maternal household. In the research literature, this interplay between custody arrangements and family composition is largely ignored. Many studies do not even explicitly define the criteria they use to distinguish residential and non-residential family members, assuming a strict dichotomy in co-residence: a child lives together with a family member or not. Our results show that reality is much more complex: according to the criteria of co-residence that are used, there are large differences in the proportion of children living in stepfamily formations. Although there is not one criteria to prefer above another, it is important that researchers clearly define their operationalization when they present information on the post-divorce stepfamilies of children.

Overall, our results demonstrate that stepfamilies following divorce are not exceptional living arrangements. From a transversal perspective, the large majority of the children have at least one parent in a new partner relationship. This also might be a partner who is not living in the same household as the parent. This group of non-residential stepparents is often overlooked in other studies. But even if stepparents are defined as partners living



together with the parent, one out of two children with divorced parents have a stepfather, and one out of two have a stepmother. Especially stepmother configurations frequently involve a complex stepfamily formation, including residential children from a previous relationship from the stepparent.

The increasing incidence of joint custody arrangements following parental divorce has important consequences for the post-divorce family configurations of children. Children living alternately with mother and father have a higher likelihood of living together with a stepparent in one of the parental households. Moreover, it is only possible for children in joint custody arrangements to live together with both a stepfather and stepmother. This also implies a greater likelihood of living together with stepsiblings or halfsiblings. Furthermore, as described above, there are more often residential stepsiblings in the paternal household than in the maternal household. If the incidence of joint custody keeps increasing, we might however expect that compositional differences between the maternal and paternal household will diminish. This will follow in part from that fact that stepfathers will increasingly have part-time residential children from a previous relationship. Consequently, divorced mothers will increasingly have part-time residential stepchildren.

Next, due to dominant mother custody, families with children in (full-time) father custody were a very selective group of post-divorce stepfamilies during the last decades. Consequently, also residential stepmother families were often very selective families (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). Such selectivities might explain an important part of the differences in stepfather and stepmother configurations described within the research literature. Currently, residential stepmothers are smaller in number, having fewer of their own kind for support and comparison in creating and evaluating their stepparental role. In line with the incomplete institution hypothesis of Cherlin (1978), we can assume that a part of the differences between stepfathers and stepmothers are related to differences in their reference group. For example, non-residential mothers more frequently have emotional or other problems than residential mothers. This also has consequences for the parental role of stepmothers, who often have to 'replace' the non-residential mother. The increasing prevalence of joint custody will enlarge the number of part-time residential stepmothers. Although there is certainly also a selectivity of families within joint custody arrangements, this evolution will enlarge the heterogeneity in stepmother families. Moreover, the increasing frequency of residential stepmothers may be a catalyst for the evolution of their parental roles, reducing differences between stepfathers and stepmothers. As women are often considered as relationship experts, knowledgeable and skilled in managing and 'reading' the relationships between different family members (Allan, Crow & Hawker, 2011), the increasing number of (part-time) residential stepmothers might induce a more active and negotiated stepparental role. This evolution might open the floor for renewed attention for the position of stepparents within contemporary family life.

Overall, we can conclude that the increased bilocation of children entails a generalized diffusion of complex and dynamic stepfamilies, often including complex kinship

relationships between step- and halfsiblings. Bilocation implies that children may live a certain number of days in a single-parent family, while some days later they might be living in a stepfamily formation. Hence, the vertical family relationships of children with parents and stepparents are continuously switching in time and space. In cases where one or both parental households includes step- or halfsiblings, the horizontal family relationships of children are also conditional in time and space. The relative sibling position of children will then depend on the household in which they reside, thus potentially reducing the importance of (biological) birth order.

### ***11.1.2 Research topic 2: Post-divorce family trajectories of parents and children***

Chapter 4 described the family trajectories of children with divorced parents between birth and age 18, and the post-divorce family trajectories of men, women and children within the first seven years following divorce. While the results in chapter 3 demonstrated that the proportion of children living in stepfamily structures is high from a transversal point of view, chapter 4 demonstrates even larger proportions if we describe the family trajectory over a longer period of time.

The trajectories show that the majority of men and women, mothers and fathers, repartner relatively quickly following divorce. For children, this implies that the transition to a stepfamily formation often occurs quite fast following parental divorce. There is however a considerable variation in the type, timing and order of the relationships that men and women start following divorce. We identified eight trajectories in which ever-divorced men and women started either no, one or more relationships. None of these trajectories could be identified as standard trajectory in terms of frequency. An interesting question for future research is whether post-marital trajectories have become less standardized during the last decades (Shanahan, 2000). However it is also possible that post-marital trajectories may become (again) more standardized in future times. The men and women in the present study divorced in a period in which post-marital cohabitation was gradually replacing remarriage as standard living arrangement for higher order unions. At the end of this evolution, post-divorce family trajectories may become more similar than in time of this transition period.

Taking into account the family transitions of mother and father, the results show that without the criterion of co-residence, nine out of ten children make the transition to a stepfamily formation in the first seven years following divorce. For one out of ten, the duration within a stepfamily formation during that period is nevertheless very limited. If only partners living together with a parent are defined as stepparents, seven out of ten children experience the transition to a stepfamily formation in the first seven years following divorce.

More than 90% of the children within the SiV-sample experience a rather stable family trajectory following parental divorce, either within a stepfamily or in a single-parent family. The finding that few children experience very instable family trajectories is encouraging, given the strong association between family instability and the wellbeing of

children (Brown, 2010; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Especially the accumulation of multiple family transitions would be negatively related to child wellbeing (Amato, 2010). We should note however that the distribution of trajectories reported here are not completely generalizable to all children because the SiV-sample contains no second divorces. Moreover, children can experience additional transitions in the parental household in later years. These transitions would nevertheless occur when they are older and perhaps more resilient. Finally, all of these children experienced the divorce of their parents or at least one stressful family transition. The negative association between parental divorce and child wellbeing has been extensively documented within the research literature. Although we should expect a certain adaption to divorce and its consequences across time, the size of the association between parental divorce and child wellbeing has not declined during the last decades (Amato, 2010).

We also described the post-divorce trajectories of men and women in terms of parenthood. Approximately one out of six men and women gave birth to a child within a cohabitating (including marriage) relationship. Taking into account the transitions in both parental households, one out of six targetchildren within the SiV-sample that were younger than 18 years at time of parental divorce experienced the birth of a halfsibling within the first seven years following divorce. In addition, we explored the transition to stepparenthood. In line with the results in chapter 3, men more often make the transition to (residential) stepparenthood than women if they start a new cohabitation relationship following divorce. One out of six children has at least one parent with residential stepchildren within the first seven years following divorce. Approximately three out of ten children experienced no transition to a stepfamily within that period within both parental households. Four out of ten experienced the transition to a simple stepfamily formation and three out of ten experienced the transition to a complex stepfamily formation within at least one of the parental households.

Finally, it is important to note that there is a large group of children who experienced the parental divorce at later age. In terms of family structure and transitions, these children experienced the same, stable two-parent family structure during childhood and youth as children with never-divorced parents. This group of children constitute an interesting comparison basis for respectively children from intact families and children who experienced parental divorce earlier in childhood or youth. In future studies, they might be used as a kind of experimental group in order to distinguish the importance of respectively family structure and family processes in explaining children's wellbeing.

### ***11.1.3 Research topic 3: The association between custody arrangements and post-divorce family trajectories***

In chapter 5, we explored the association between the parenthood status of men and women following divorce and the likelihood of specific post-divorce family transitions. First, we modeled the likelihood of repartnering, of starting a cohabitation relationship and of remarrying within the first ten years following divorce. Next, we modeled the likelihood

of repartnering with somebody with (residential) children from a previous relationship. Finally, we explored differences according to parenthood status in the likelihood of having a new birth in the first cohabitation relationship following divorce.

Especially full-time residential, minor children limit the likelihood of starting a (cohabitation) relationship following divorce for both men and women. If we interpret this finding in the context of the evolution from full-time mother custody towards joint custody of children following parental divorce, this implies that children increasingly meet a new partner in the maternal household, and increasingly co-reside with the partner from father. In other words, our findings suggest that children increasingly will have a part-time residential stepfather, often in combination with a part-time residential stepmother. Moreover, this trend is not only related to the increasing incidence of joint custody arrangements, but also to the overall increase in repartnering rates following divorce over time. The more frequent repartnering of mothers following divorce, and of divorced men and women in general, is beneficial in terms of their emotional and financial wellbeing (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Williams & Umberson, 2004). For children however, it implies an additional family transition following divorce, which may require a certain adaptation period (Jeynes, 2006). Moreover, it would be beneficial for children that parents do not come up with a new partner too fast, as children first need time to adapt to the parental divorce (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010).

While the custody arrangement of children is more important than being a parent for the partner trajectory following divorce, being a parent or not is more important with regard to the likelihood of repartnering with a(nother) parent and the likelihood of experiencing the birth of a child within a new partner relationship. In that regard, joint custody is not directly related to more complex stepfamily formation by a more frequent presence of stepsiblings and halfsiblings with mother or father. Nevertheless, in case there are stepsiblings or halfsiblings with mother or father, children in joint custody will always (part-time) co-reside with those siblings. This is not the case when there are only stepsiblings or halfsiblings in the household of the non-residential parent. Moreover, we found an increasing trend over time of both repartnering with somebody with children from a previous relationship and of post-divorce childbearing. The combination of these two trends leads by definition to more frequent complex stepfamily formation. In case children from the dissolved marriage are involved, the latter transition implies *multiple-partner fertility*, a phenomena which is currently receiving a lot of attention within the research literature (Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007a, 2007b). Moreover, if children from a previous marriage are involved, both trends lead by definition to more frequent complex stepfamily formation.

Finally, the combination of the findings that fulltime residential children are a burden in the repartnering market and that especially lower educated men repartner with women who have children from a previous relationship might explain why often no beneficial effect of stepfamily formation is found for children. These findings suggest that especially full-time, single mothers start new partner relationships with low educated men. Those stepfathers

may bring few additional resources to the post-divorce family. The latter might change with increasing joint custody arrangements, as divorced parents may attract better partners on the relational market, increasing the human capital within the post-divorce family.

#### ***11.1.4 Research topic 4: The stepparent-stepchild relationship***

The quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship was described in detail in chapters 6 and 8. Overall, we see that very often there is a good relationship between stepparents and stepchildren. Co-residence is an important predictor of good quality relationships, mainly because it is indicative of a good relationship between the child and the parent who has a new partner. In that sense, joint custody arrangements might help to reduce some of the differences between stepfathers and stepmothers, such as the overall lower relationship quality between stepmothers and stepchildren than between stepfathers and stepchildren. If children co-reside a larger proportion of time with their father and his new partner, this might result in a better relationship with both the father and the stepmother. In combination with a larger heterogeneity in families and a reduced parental position of stepmothers in joint custody compared to father custody, some of the differences between stepmother and stepfather families may erode in case of increasing shared residence of children following parental divorce. Finally, because biological ties do not guarantee a good parent-child relationship, joint custody is the arrangement that best facilitates good relationships with all parental figures. An increase in joint custody arrangements might therefore lead to overall better father-child relationships and stepmother-child relationships following divorce, without reducing the quality of the mother-child relationships or the relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren.

The family systems perspective is a useful framework for exploring the determinants of a good stepparent-stepchild relationship and we find strong evidence for the interrelatedness of different family relationships (Minuchin, 1985). However, we also find that not all intra-family relationships are as strongly connected as the concept of linked family systems would imply (Jacobson, 1987). Mainly relationships within the same household are interrelated. The mother-child relationship and mother-stepfather relationship are positively linked to the stepfather-stepchild relationship, while the father-child relationship and father-stepmother relationship are positively associated with the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Conversely, we find no indication that a good relationship with one's father prevents from having a good relationship with stepfather or vice versa. The same holds for the relationships with mother and stepmother. In that regard, the better relationship with both biological parents within joint custody does not make it a less beneficial custody arrangement for the development of strong stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Surprisingly we did not find parental conflict to be related to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, despite the large research evidence of detrimental effects of enduring conflicts between ex-partners on family members and the family system as a whole (Amato, 2010). The relationships between mother and stepmother and between father and stepfather are the only relationships that span both parental households and were found to be related to

the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. These findings support the idea of same sex parents and stepparents as important co-actors in establishing a good relationship with the child (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). This relationship was often ignored within the stepfamily research literature and therefore deserves attention in future research.

#### ***11.1.5 Research topic 5: The relationships between parents and stepparents***

In chapter 7, we focused on the relationships between biological parents and stepparents of (step)children in different custody arrangements. We explored the frequency of coparental communication and conflict and the relationship quality between ex-partners and new partners following divorce.

Despite the current normative climate stressing the importance of the (biological) parental union following divorce, we found relatively little coparental communication between ex-partners. Divorced mothers and fathers appear to view their new partners to be their main collaborators in childrearing.

We found no indication of competition between the relationship with the ex-partner and the new partner relationship, in terms of either the affective bonds or the parental bonds. The frequency of coparental communication between the ex-partners was unrelated to the frequency of coparental communication within the new partner relationship, nor was a good relationship with the ex-partner associated with a lower or higher quality of the new partner relationship.

Despite the lack of competition between the emotional and parental relationships with the old and new partner, more intense coparenting between ex-partners may induce more frequent conflict within the new partner relationship. These findings indicate that combining the different parental roles may sometimes be challenging. One of the mechanisms that might be useful for explaining these empirical results is ambiguity about the role and position of old and new family members. Role ambiguity and boundary ambiguity are important concepts within the stepfamily research literature that cannot be investigated in depth with the two data sources at hand.

We found no difference in the parental involvement between part-time and full-time residential stepfathers, but part-time residential stepmothers were found to be more involved in childrearing issues than full-time non-residential stepmothers. Together, these findings suggest that joint custody leads to an increase in the number of parental figures involved in childrearing. An important question that follows this finding is how this relates to the wellbeing of children. This trend might also have important consequences for social mobility and the intergenerational reproduction of social inequality. In the current research literature, there is almost an exclusive focus on the intergenerational transmission between biological parents and children. The arrival of new parental figures may however reduce the importance of these biological ties for the future socio-economic status of children. An intriguing question is how the additional social, cultural, and financial capital that

stepparents bring to the family influence the social-economic status and social mobility of children.

While we find little communication between ex-partners regarding coparenting issues, the parental unions formed within the new partner relationships may to a certain extent compensate for this lack of coparenting by biological parents. This might be beneficial for the wellbeing of children following divorce. On the other hand, if new parental unions operate independently, children may experience completely different childrearing patterns in both parental households. This might induce ambiguity in the life of children. The relative importance of the two salient parental unions for child wellbeing is a topic that surely deserves attention in future studies.

Our results also indicate that ex-partners who frequently communicate about their children are tend to have a good relationship with each other. In other words, the relationship between affective and parental bonds of ex-partners remain strong after union dissolution. But also within the new partner relationship, the partner and parental systems are strongly related. Being involved in childrearing issues is an important characteristic of a good partner relationship involving children from a previous relationship. These results suggest that divorced parents expect their new partners to gain a parental position with respect to their children from the dissolved union, or at least to collaborate in childrearing issues. This point relates to one of the most important challenges of partner relationships within stepfamilies: the partner and stepparental system are established at the same time, which makes them strongly related (Fine & Kurdek, 1995). It is therefore very important for the new partners to work actively on a strong partner relationship, as this also benefits the other relationships within the family system (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010).

Several of our results point to a stronger interdependence between the maternal role and the position of stepmothers than is the case for the father and stepfather roles. For example, the involvement of the stepmother in childrearing issues is lower in case of joint custody compared to father custody, while the involvement of stepfather is not lower in joint custody compared to mother custody. Moreover, the relationship between mother and stepmother seems more important for the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship than the relationship between father and stepfather for the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship. How might these patterns be explained? First, mother custody is still the most dominant custody arrangement following divorce and may therefore still act as a reference model for the childrearing role of biological parents and stepparents. Second, this finding might mean that, despite the normative discourse about permanent parental responsibility following divorce and gender-neutral childrearing patterns, the maternal role is still more highly valued than the paternal role. Stepmothers are therefore also more frequently expected to take an active role in childrearing than stepfathers (Haverkort & Spruijt, 2012). Given that women have shown to be more sensitive to relational issues than men (Acitelli, 1992; Goldsmith & Dun, 1997), it is logical that they would be more sensitive to the maternal role in case of joint custody than stepfathers to the paternal role.

### ***11.1.6 Research topic 6: Adolescent wellbeing within post-divorce stepfamily formations***

In chapter 8, 9 and 10, we explored the wellbeing of adolescents within different post-divorce family structures. Chapter 8 focused on the importance of the relationships with and between parents and stepparents for different wellbeing dimensions of children in stepfamily configurations. In chapter 9 we explored the interaction effect between the custody arrangement of children on the one hand and the presence of stepfamily members, the quality of the parent-child relationships and the frequency of parental conflict on the other hand in explaining children's emotional wellbeing. Finally, we investigated the importance of family structure and the relationships with and between parents for adolescent problem behavior in chapter 10.

Overall, we find much more evidence for an association between family relationships and adolescent wellbeing than between specific post-divorce family structures and adolescent wellbeing. Few results support the family structure theory, except those for delinquent behavior in which children living in single-parent families or stepfamilies following divorce were compared with children living with both biological parents in one household. Chapter 9 however revealed no differences in emotional wellbeing according to the presence of a stepfather or stepmother. This finding is in line with the research literature, suggesting that 1) the positive and negative dimensions related to stepfamily formation seem to balance each other out (Brown, 2010; Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000) and 2) that family structure is less important than good relationships with parents and stepparents and few parental conflict (Leon, 2003). These findings contrast however, with the fact that stepfamilies are often seen as the solution to the problems of single-parent families (Allan, Crow & Hawker, 2011). The latter might also explain why the challenges of single-parent families receive more public attention than those of stepfamilies. But our results indicate that the presence of a stepparent is not necessarily more beneficial for children, or at least that the current conditions of post-divorce family life are not optimal to make the presence of a stepparent beneficial compared to single-parent formations.

Not only do the relationships with biological parents matter, the relationships with stepparents bear an important relationship to adolescent wellbeing. These relationships are often ignored in studies of child wellbeing following divorce. The new partner of a mother or father is clearly an important person in the life of children and therefore affects their wellbeing albeit in both positive and negative directions. Overall, stepparents might be seen as additional socialization agents in the life of children. The increasing number of children with divorced parents living with a stepparent has important consequences for studies on the transmission of attitudes, values and norms across generations. As the boundaries of families become more fluid, the influence of biological parents on their children is receiving increased competition from (both temporary and more permanent) additional parental figures.

Another finding that deserves further attention is the lack of an association between conflict within the new partner relationship of divorced parents and child wellbeing. This



finding contrasts the consistent negative association between child wellbeing and enduring conflict between mothers and fathers following divorce. Hence, conflict within the pre-divorce parental union seems to remain the most important source of poor wellbeing for children, even though conflict between ex-partners is situated between households, while conflict within the new partner relationship is situated inside the household. It may be that children distance themselves more from problems within the new partner relationship of a parent, while they feel more involved within the problems between their biological parents.

Finally, the results in chapter 8 suggest that a good relationship with the stepfather more effectively compensates or substitutes for a good relationship with father, than the parallel relationships with stepmothers and mothers. This pattern is analogous to the gender differences in the quality and interrelatedness of different family relationships, and contrasts with the normative framework of gender-neutral childrearing patterns. Overall, the evolution in differences between stepmothers and stepfathers cannot be seen as independent of the important changes of the last decades in women's participation in higher education and employment. Although gender differences in employment and educational level decreased significantly in more recent times, both paid and unpaid work continue to be highly gendered: wives and mothers continue to have the main responsibility for the household organization, including domestic services and child care (Allan, Crow & Hawker, 2011). The larger involvement of mothers in childcare compared to fathers may explain why a stepmother less easily 'replaces' the mother while a stepfather more easily becomes an additional parental figure next to the father. Moreover, as women are still more active within the private sphere and men in the public sphere, the family roles of part-time residential mothers and stepmothers are closer related than those of fathers and stepfathers. This might explain some of the larger tensions between mothers and stepmothers as compared to fathers and stepfathers as described above.

## **11.2 Methodological issues**

Next, we discuss some methodological issues that we encountered across the different research chapters. We discuss respectively the operationalization of post-divorce family structures, our experiences with the use of sequence analyses to explore post-divorce family trajectories, some issues related to the data sources that were used, and some more general limitations of the methods that were applied.

### ***11.2.1 Defining post-divorce family structures***

A first methodological issue relates to the operationalization of (post-divorce) family structures. In other words, when do we speak of children in stepfamilies and which criteria do we apply to define post-divorce families of children? Overall, more attention is needed in the research literature for custody arrangements of children in defining their family structures. For example, categorizing children who live 66% of time with a single mother and 33% of time with a father and stepmother as living in single-parent families, is a large simplification of reality. Among others, it has important consequences for the estimated number of children living with a stepmother. In relating custody arrangements, it is also

important to clearly set the thresholds for joint custody. Most studies even do not discuss the criteria that are used to distinguish between custody arrangements or to determine co-residence, assuming a strict dichotomy in custody arrangements. Currently, often the threshold of 33-66% of time is used to define shared residence. The results in chapter 9 demonstrate however that there might be more differences between strict sole custody (living 100% of time with one parent) and no strict sole custody (between 1-99% with both parents).

Also the criteria for defining co-residence of partner and parent need to be well-specified and determined based upon the research question under study. In the current research literature, partners not living with a parent are largely ignored, even though they might have a substantial impact on post-divorce family life of children. Also in the present study we ignored this group in exploring the quality and nature of specific family relationships, and their relationship with child wellbeing.

Even while calling for greater clarity and precision in defining family structures, we acknowledge that not all studies are able to take all characteristics of the family structure into account. In the present study, we were often confronted with too few cases for substantively relevant categories when combining information on the family composition of the parental households and the custody arrangement of children. Thus, as evidenced in chapter 10, categories often have to be simplified or combined because of small group sizes. But wherever possible, as in Chapter 10, we were able to focus on an important group of children who co-reside with both parents following divorce by using information from both parental households to distinguish between children living in single-parent and stepfamilies. The point to emphasize is the value of providing a clear outline of the criteria that are applied to assign children to specific family structures.

### ***11.2.2 A typology of post-divorce family trajectories based upon sequence analysis***

In chapter 4, we explored the potential of sequence analysis for describing the post-divorce family trajectories of men, women and children. The three typologies that were constructed combine information on the type and timing of specific family transitions in the life course and the duration that was spent within specific family configurations. These typologies are indicative of the way individual life courses unfold following divorce, and suggest the utility of bringing these empirical trajectories into a more direct dialogue with life course theory.

A key challenge in relating family trajectories to other outcomes concerns the clear definition and measurement of transitions and durations at specific points in time in its various dimensions. Family trajectories of children between birth and age 18 may be related to specific outcomes at a certain age or in a certain period, during primary or secondary school, for example. Relating this past history to wellbeing measures later in life is only valuable if there is not too much variation in the age of respondents at the time of measurement. The larger the age variation in the sample, the larger the heterogeneity of uncertainty about events between the defined trajectories and the outcomes measured at

time of the interview. For example, relating family trajectories between birth and age 18 to psychological wellbeing at age 20 implies a much lower level of uncertainty than relating these trajectories to wellbeing at age 30. Within a period of 10 years, there may have occurred many other life course events with a substantial influence on the outcomes considered. Although this remark also holds for studies relating individual family transitions to specific outcomes, the clear grounding of trajectories in the unfolding life course makes the time component in relating trajectories to other variables more explicit.

Another challenge in applying sequence analysis relates to the data availability. Reconstructing life trajectories either requires many retrospective questions in cross-sectional surveys, or multiple waves of a longitudinal survey. While the first type of data suffers from memory bias, the second approach requires a certain time frame between the first and last data collection and is subject to increasing non-response rates and selectivity in subsequent waves. Moreover, when working with recent survey data, the life courses that can be reconstructed depend on the age of the respondents and their life stage at time of the survey. Selection on these two domains often quickly reduces the sample size and thus restricts the analytical power of the sample. Population registers or other official records might offer some assistance in this regard, when they contain the necessary information. But with regard to family trajectories, this is typically not the case. Moreover, the data sources also tend to be focused on a single household.

On a final note, we empirically derived a large number of clusters in the three typologies presented earlier, but there was still a considerable amount of heterogeneity within the different clusters. This is true of typologies in general because they necessarily involve a simplification of reality. They are however a valuable alternative to presenting merely the frequency and timing of single family transitions, without taking the sequencing and interdependence of different events into account.

### ***11.2.3 Data sources***

Stepfamilies are seldom a point of emphasis in general social surveys. Therefore, many studies have relied upon specific samples such as clinical samples, quota samples and snowball-selected samples. Although we started for this research project from two large-scale data sources, different research chapters are based on small subsamples of these data. One of the choices resulting from those small sample sizes is that we sometimes increased the traditional limit of the p-values to determine the statistical significance of our results from .05 to .10. The lower the criterion for setting the statistical significance level, the more certainty about the rejection of the null hypothesis. Consequently, we increased the chance of erroneously rejecting the null hypothesis. On the other hand, applying a significance level of .05 or lower with very small sample sizes may lead to erroneously not rejecting the null hypothesis. Overall, we argue that, considering the sample sizes in different chapters, a significance level of .10 is low enough to raise questions about the validity of the null hypothesis.

The limited size of different subsamples demonstrates the need for more homogenous samples that allow in-depth analysis of stepfamily processes. We currently have a tradition of large-scale, heterogeneous surveys allowing overall-mean estimations, and small-scale homogeneous samples for exploratory analysis, which often lack sufficient statistical power. A more conditional approach to the relationship between specific family structures, family processes and individual family members will require more large-scale studies based on either individuals or family systems in a similar life stage.

Another limitation of the two data sources used in this research follows from the fact that both datasets are cross-sectional. We are not able to make firm conclusions about the direction of influence in some of the associations that we found. To get insights in the causal mechanisms between custody arrangements, family relationships and child wellbeing, longitudinal data projects are inevitable. As the SiV-sample was designed as a prospective study and a follow-up study is planned within the next years, the SiV-project may provide some opportunities to overcome this limitation in the near future. However, as longitudinal surveys suffer from additional selectivity bias, thorough analyses of attrition and non-response will be needed. Overall, in working with similar designs, we have to search for an optimal equilibrium between representativeness and limited, random non-response on the one hand and rich data with multiple actors and perspectives on the other hand. The priority for one point of emphasis over the other depends on the research question at hand, resources, and the availability of alternative data sources.

In chapters 3, 8 and 9 we performed parallel analyses on the LAGO and SiV-data. By working with two datasets with different sampling designs and research methods, we were able to compare the advantages and disadvantages of both data sources for research on stepfamily formation following divorce. Moreover, performing similar analyses on different data sets gives an indication on the robustness of the results. Nevertheless, this strategy is seldom applied. Replication studies attend to be highly undervalued. But as society is continuously changing and the social context is a very important moderator of structure and process, both international and intra-national cross-validation of results is very important. A challenge in conducting replication studies is explaining any inconsistencies in the results. Comparable results strengthen the reliability of the findings, but divergent findings raise new questions. Besides questioning the generalizability of the results, discordant results also raise questions about differences in the sample composition, measurement instruments, and the research design and context in general. Summarized, the replication of analyses on different data sources is likely to improve the strength and robustness of results and insights, but it also entails new challenges that require additional time for researchers to deal with.

Which conclusions may be drawn from the comparison of the results that we obtained from the two data sources? The results in chapter 3 illustrate that we obtain very similar results on the composition of post-divorce family formation when using information reported by adolescents and parents respectively. We only find one major difference in the frequency distributions and that involves a question that was not formulated well in either project.

The results in chapter 8 and 9 suggest a somewhat higher wellbeing of children and a better parent-child relationship in the SiV-data compared to the LAGO-data. This might relate to the composition of the samples. The SiV-data only contains children with ever-married parents who had not divorced more than once, while the LAGO-data includes children with both married and never-married parents without exclusion of higher-order divorces. Moreover, there are important differences in the selection strategy for the children. In the SiV-study parents function as gatekeepers for the participation of minor children, while the selection in LAGO is based upon school class membership. Finally, there are important differences in the research setting and measurement instruments. In SiV, children are questioned with a personal interview at home, while children in the LAGO-study completed a written questionnaire at school. The combination of these factors might cause important differences between both data sources in sample selectivity, processes of social desirability, measurement issues and interview effects. Summarized, as described in chapter 2, both data sources have their strengths and weaknesses for the present study

Next, in chapter 9, we find indications that parents provide more optimistic reports on the parent-child relationships than children. This finding stresses the importance of multiple perspectives on the same relationships and the richness of the SiV-data based upon a multi-actor design. On the other hand, different perspectives on the same relationship should not be considered as wrong or right, but as subjective truths. For example, parents and children may apply different criteria to evaluate the quality of the parent-child relationship. Moreover, when relating measures of parents, stepparents and children, the research sample is restricted to the observations from the different actors who participated in the study. But the multi-actor design may induce additional selectivity in the sample, via multi-actor non-response. As parents were important gatekeepers with regard to the participation of both the targetchild and their new partner in the SiV-sample, we may expect an overrepresentation of well-functioning post-divorce (step)family configurations.

Finally, there are also some limitations that follow from adopting only a quantitative approach. Quantitative data may provide a rough view of the underlying mechanisms, but many of the described associations are very complex. For example, the interpretation of interaction terms may often be two-fold: custody arrangements may determine the importance of the quality of the parent-child relationship for child wellbeing, but the quality of the parent-child relationship may also account for the association between the custody arrangement and child wellbeing. In other words, the conditional effect may work in two directions. Our statistical models only allow to determine the existence of an interaction effect, but not to make hard conclusions about the underlying mechanisms. Qualitative data might in this regard provide additional and complementary information about the experience of family members.

### 11.3 Policy relevance

Our results also have some important implications for contemporary family policy and family law. These policy issues all relate, directly or indirectly, to the central focus on the parental union of ex-partners following divorce of the last two decades.

First of all, we see that joint physical custody or part-time co-residence with (minor) children following divorce increases the likelihood of repartnering as compared to full-time co-residence with minor children. The evolution from dominant mother custody towards increasing joint custody therefore has important consequences from gender perspective. This evolution increased the likelihood of repartnering of divorced mothers, without reducing those of divorced fathers. In the discussion section of chapter 5, we described how more gender-neutral custody arrangements following divorce might therefore reduce gender differences in both partner trajectories and overall wellbeing following divorce. This reduction of gender differences following divorce should not be forgotten in the evaluation of the policy measures that seek to promote joint legal and joint physical custody following parental divorce.

A second policy issue partially results from the first one and is even reinforced by the finding that the prevalence of post-divorce family transitions have increased over time. These findings imply that children will increasingly cohabit with a new partner of their mother or father. Moreover, children in joint custody might even co-reside part-time with a partner of both. One of the most important questions in this regard concerns the rights and duties of stepparents vis a vis biological parents. Currently, only inheritance law has some specific regulations for the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Besides the duty to support the household in general (resulting from the relationship with the biological parent), stepparents have no juridical position within civil law. In other words, except in the case of adoption of the stepchild (which is very rare and requires the abandonment of the parental authority by the other biological parent), stepparents almost never have parental duties and rights relating to the child. This holds during the relationship with the parent, but also has consequences in case the relationship of the stepparent and the parent ends. In the latter case, a stepparent has to rely on the general principle of the *affectional bond* to obtain visitation rights. While this bond is mostly seen as an intrinsic character of, for example, the grandparent-grandchild relationship (although grandparents and grandchildren often do not co-reside), there are few cases known in jurisdiction in which these rights were granted to stepparents (Trefpunt Zelfhulp, 2013). On the other hand, chapter 6, 7 and 8 demonstrate that children and stepparents often have a close relationship, and that stepparents are often strongly involved in decision making about childrearing issues. These findings contrast clearly with the very limited juridical framework concerning the stepparental role (Steunpunt Jeugdhulp, 2010). The social and juridical challenges related to steprelationships undoubtedly deserve greater attention from policy makers in the near future.

Another policy-related issue concerns the finding that, despite the legal norm of joint legal custody since 1995, few divorced mothers and fathers that are living together with a new

partner communicate with their ex-partner about their children. Nevertheless, we know from previous studies that children benefit from frequent coparental communication between parents following divorce. These findings seem to indicate that merely imposing joint custody by law in practice does not guarantee that parents will maintain a parental union following divorce. Additional policy measures might focus on the stimulation and facilitation of the parental union between ex-partners. Moreover, the finding that more frequent coparental communication between ex-partners also involves more frequent coparental conflict implies that parents need more support in establishing a cooperative parental union with their ex-partner. One suggestion in that direction concerns the introduction of a parenting plan (Bastaits et al., 2011). Since 2009, a parenting plan is imposed by law if parents divorce in the Netherlands (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). The role of new partners in the education of the child might well be incorporated within this plan. A parenting plan therefore does not have to be a static, formal contract between ex-parents with children, but should function as a basis for recurrent reflection and renegotiation on what is considered the best or most ideal scenario for raising the child(ren) from both parents' perspectives. As stepparents are often important parental figures in the life of children, some basic agreements on their position towards the child(ren) clearly deserves a position within such a parenting plan.

Finally, in contrast with the current focus on biological parenthood following divorce, biological ties do not assure a good parent-child relationship. Nor is shared biological parenthood between ex-partners a guarantee for a strong parental bond following divorce. The evolution from mother custody to joint physical custody of children following divorce is however positively linked to both relationships: children maintain better relationships with both parental figures, and there is a stronger parental union in joint custody compared to mother custody. The preference for joint custody in divorce law can therefore be considered a good strategy to support and maintain the relationship between children and their biological parents and between biological parents who are no longer a couple. Nevertheless, the importance of co-residence with a child also demonstrates the importance of social parenthood following divorce. Our impression is that the central focus on biological parenthood following divorce in the last two decades has shifted the attention from the position of stepparents. Nevertheless, as this research makes clear, these stepparents are very often present and important in the life of children. Family law and family policy may therefore benefit from a renewed attention for the position of stepparents, not as replacement parents, but as additional parents or surplus parents next to both biological parents.

Overall, from policy perspective, we can conclude that binuclear stepfamilies will become more common and more visible in society and therefore more present in the public debates on the support, regulation and needs of specific family relationship and family members. As there are both social and legal norms about which arrangements should be preferred above others, it is important to gain further insights in the family processes and outcomes that are associated with these arrangements. Despite the fact that a substantial number of children are living in a post-divorce stepfamily, the lack of any normative or juridical

framework regarding the parental position of stepparents suggests that stepfamilies surely cannot be considered as completely institutionalized. In contrast with the expectations of Cherlin (1978), the increase in the number of remarried parents and their children did not generate explicit standards of conduct in conjunction with the larger society, or at the most rather less than expected. This can either be interpreted as an uncompleted process, or considered in terms of the more general evolution of de-institutionalization (Brückner & Mayer, 2005).

#### **11.4 Lessons for the future**

We end by setting forth several topics that should motivate new research. Some of these issues have already been mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, but are briefly reintroduced in this section on directions for the future.

One important lesson for future studies is the need for greater attention to the criteria that are applied when describing post-divorce family structures of children. In contemporary family sociology and demography, shared residence of children following divorce and part-time family relationships are often ignored. Moreover, non-residential stepparents attract more focus in the research literature. Stepparents may be non-residential in two different ways. They may either not live together with the parent, or the child may not co-reside with the parent having a new cohabitation relationship. Both types of non-residential stepparents have been largely ignored within the research literature. As mothers with part-time residential children repartner more frequent than mothers with full-time residential children, we might expect the first type to increase over time. Conversely, increasing joint custody will lead to fewer non-residential stepparents of the second type. Non-residential stepparents might be important for children in different aspects, both directly as indirectly, for example by their impact on the wellbeing and availability of the parent of the child.

Another lesson for future studies relates to the fuller acknowledgement of the heterogeneity in stepfamily formations. In the present study, we focused on the variation in stepfamilies according to the custody arrangement of the (step)child. There are nevertheless other factors that contribute to significant heterogeneity in stepfamilies. A first factor relates to the sibling composition of the stepfamily. Although we described and explored the importance of the presence of stepsiblings and halfsiblings in different chapters, this was not the main focus of this thesis. Another structural factor inducing heterogeneity within stepfamilies is the marital status of the new couple. Together with the declining remarriage rates of the last decades, the differences between married and unmarried stepfamilies may either have become smaller or increased over time. Moreover, with the growing proportion of never-married parents, stepfamily formation following the dissolution of non-marital unions will also become increasingly important. Finally, we focused in the present study on heterosexual partner relationships of parents following divorce. The number of cohabiting pairs of the same sex has however been increasing in many western countries during the last decades (Haverkort & Spruijt, 2012). Therefore,



same-sex stepfamily formation following (heterosexual) divorce is increasingly receiving attention in the stepfamily literature.

Third, gender differences in steprelationships need to be further explored. Until recently, residential stepmothers (following divorce) were rare and therefore often ignored. Due to the increasing number of children in joint custody arrangements, residential stepmothers are an increasingly visible and researchable group, prompting the need for deeper exploration of the gender differences in steprelationships and between stepfamily members. Joint custody also entails a more equal comparison basis for stepfather and stepmother families, whereas past studies involved comparisons between a very selective group of residential stepmothers of children in father custody with a much larger and heterogeneous group of residential stepfathers of children in mother custody (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). Finally, only children in joint custody can have both a residential stepmother and stepfather. This creates a unique opportunity to explore differences in the relationships of the same child with respectively a stepfather and stepmother.

Next, our results indicate the need for more conditional framing of core research questions. On the one hand, family processes may function differently according to the family structures (e.g. association of different family relations within different custody arrangements). Some of the results regarding the importance of the respective parent-child relationships within different custody arrangements point in that direction. On the other hand, family structures may have different outcomes according to variations in the family processes. For example, some results indicate that the association between the custody arrangement and wellbeing of adolescents following parental divorce varies according to the quality of the parent-child relationships and the frequency of parental conflict. The need for more conditional studies instead of overall mean-estimations was recently stressed by Amato (2010: 658) with regard to the impact of parental divorce on children in general: *“Rather than ask whether divorce affects children, a more pertinent question may be how and under what circumstances does divorce affect children either positively or negatively?”* We argue that this statement holds for the relationship between specific family structures and child wellbeing in general.

Our results also indicate the need for further exploration of specific family relationships within stepfamilies that have been largely ignored in the research literature. These would include the relationship between father and stepfather and between mother and stepmother respectively. Especially within joint custody arrangements, both of these same-sex parental figures are actively involved in the lives of children. Consequently, the degree of coparenting and the overall relationship quality between the same-sex parent and stepparent may become increasingly important for child wellbeing. Moreover, there are other unexplored grounds within stepfamily research, such as the presence of stepgrandparents, stepuncles and –aunts, stepcousins and –nephews. The relationships with these stepfamily members may also be important for children, but remain currently unexplored. Furthermore, the concept of ambiguity offers potential for studying the post-divorce partner and parental relationships between biological parents and stepparents. One

of the questions is how the increased frequency of involved (step)parents induces ambiguity in the family system regarding childrearing issues. Large inconsistencies in childrearing patterns between the different parental figures may induce ambiguity about the parental roles. This might affect both the quality of the family relationships and the wellbeing of the family members.

Next, in chapter 10, parental role model variables were found to be important factors in explaining externalising behaviour among adolescents. We might expect that other wellbeing dimensions of parents are strongly related to both the custody arrangement of children, the post-divorce family composition, and the wellbeing of the child. It might therefore be interesting to further investigate the mediating role of parental wellbeing in the association between post-divorce family structures and child wellbeing.

Finally, a number of our findings are important in the context of the literature on the reproduction of social inequality and social mobility. An important question in this regard is how stepparents add to biological parents in terms of the intergenerational transmission of social inequality. Stepparents are additional parental figures, with their own socio-economic background, who may invest in (the future of) the child. In that respect, the repartnering behavior of mothers and fathers in terms of upwards or downwards social mobility is also important. We found evidence that part-time residential children are a smaller burden on the relational market than full-time residential children. Joint custody might therefore increase the beneficial effects of stepfamily formation by allowing parents to attract better partners on the relational market. Further insights in the educational gradient of repartnering following divorce and in patterns of homogamy and heterogamy in higher order union formation are a necessary extension of the literature on the so-called *divorce divide*. These processes might extend our understanding of the complex interaction between socio-economic status, family processes and the development of children, with important selection and causation effects, that ensure and may even reinforce the intergenerational transmission of social inequality (Conger, Conger & Martin, 2010).

Overall, the importance of socio-economic differences in stepfamily relationships deserves attention in future studies. First of all, the complex relationships that were described within this thesis require certain communication and relational skills, which not all members in society have acquired with during their primary socialization. Moreover, the financial resources that are needed for certain arrangements are not equally distributed across families. For example, joint custody of children from previous relationships may require larger housing and higher transportation costs, which imposes additional limitations on specific groups of families. Specific custody arrangements and family configurations may therefore be less or more beneficial for specific groups, depending on the conditions under which they occur.

To conclude, we want to stress the need for future research on this topic. As there are both social as juridical norms about which custody and parenthood arrangements should be preferred above others, it is important to get insight in the family processes and outcomes

that are associated with these arrangements. Because the majority of mothers and fathers repartner rather quickly following divorce, stepfamily relationships should not be forgotten.



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## English summary

The evolution towards more equal parenting after divorce for men and women over the past two decades resulted in two changes in Belgian divorce law: joint legal custody became the legal standard in 1995, joint physical custody in 2006. This thesis deals with the demographic and sociological implications of these developments for the formation, structure and functions of stepfamilies after divorce and the family processes within these families. We use two data sources: *Divorce in Flanders* (SIV) and the *Leuven Adolescents and Family Study* (LAGO).

A first group of findings relates to the proportion of children living in a stepfamily formation, and to what extent this proportion is affected by the residence arrangement of the child. Our results demonstrate that stepfamilies following divorce are not exceptional living arrangements: the large majority of the children have at least one parent in a new partner relationship. Compared to children who reside full-time with mother (the traditional custody arrangement), children in shared residence are more likely to be faced with a new partner of mother and to co-reside (part-time) with a new partner of father. This new partner of father (or stepmother) more often has residential children from a previous relationship than a new partner of mother (or stepfather). Joint physical custody therefore leads to more (complex) stepfamily formation.

A second set of questions relates to the structure and characteristics of family relationships within stepfamilies and their association with children's wellbeing. Many children have a good relationship with both their parents and stepparents. Co-residence is an important factor for building and maintaining a good relationship with all parental figures. The relationship of children with their stepfather is strongly linked to their relationship with mother, but is independent of their relationship with the father. Similarly, the relationship with the stepmother is closely related to the relationship with the father, but not with the relationship with the mother. The relationships between the former partners and the new partner relationship are relatively independent of each other, both in terms of emotional interaction, and in terms of co-parenting. Despite the current normative climate stressing the importance of the (biological) parental union following divorce, we found relatively little coparental communication between ex-partners. Divorced mothers and fathers appear to view their new partners to be their main collaborators in childrearing. Ex-partners with children in shared residence do have more frequent co-parental communication with each other than ex-partners with children living full-time with one parent.

A further issue is the relationship between family structure, family relations and child wellbeing. In general, family relationships are more strongly related to the wellbeing of children than family structures, but there are important variations according the residence arrangement of the child. The results indicate the need for more conditional framing of research questions within this field: the interrelatedness of family structures, family processes and the wellbeing of children is very complex. Finally, there are few differences

in the emotional wellbeing of children with divorced parents depending on the presence of a stepparent. The results suggest that the positive and negative effects of living in a stepfamily compared to living in a single-parent family balance each other out.

In addition to the theoretical and methodological reflections that follow from our results, our findings also have important implications for contemporary family policy and family law. These have to do with the almost exclusive focus on biological parenthood after divorce in recent years, and the conspicuous silence about the rights and obligations of the (increasing number of) stepparents. Finally, there are important gender dimensions associated with the evolution towards joint custody of children following parental divorce, both from the perspective of biological parents as from the perspective of stepparents.



## Nederlandse samenvatting

De evolutie naar gelijkwaardig ouderschap van mannen en vrouwen na echtscheiding resulteerde de voorbije twee decennia in twee wijzigingen in de Belgische echtscheidingswetgeving: gezagco-ouderschap werd de wettelijke norm in 1995, verblijfsco-ouderschap in 2006. Dit proefschrift handelt over de demografische en gezinssociologische gevolgen daarvan voor stiefgezinnen die ontstaan na (echt)scheiding. Er wordt gebruik gemaakt van twee databronnen: Scheiding in Vlaanderen (Siv) en het Leuvens Adolescenten- en Gezinnenonderzoek (LAGO). Centraal staat de studie van de gevolgen van de vermelde ontwikkelingen voor de vorming, de structuur en de functies van gezinnen na scheiding, als van de gezinsprocessen.

Een eerste groep onderzoeksvragen heeft betrekking op de vraag hoeveel kinderen in een stiefgezin leven, en in welke mate dat wordt beïnvloed door de verblijfsregeling. De resultaten tonen dat stiefgezinvorming niet uitzonderlijk is, het komt integendeel vaak voor. In vergelijking met kinderen die voltijds bij de moeder verblijven (de klassieke verblijfsregeling), hebben kinderen in verblijfsco-ouderschap meer kans geconfronteerd te worden met een nieuwe partner van de moeder en om (deeltijds) samen te wonen met de nieuwe partner van vader. Bij vader zijn er ook vaker inwonende kinderen van deze nieuwe partner. Verblijfsco-ouderschap leidt dus tot meer (complexe) stiefgezinvorming.

Een tweede groep vragen heeft betrekking op de structuur en de kenmerken van gezinsrelaties binnen stiefgezinnen en de samenhang daarvan met het welzijn van kinderen. Heel wat kinderen hebben een goede relatie met zowel hun ouders als hun stiefouders. Het al dan niet samenwonen is een belangrijke factor voor het opbouwen en onderhouden van een goede relatie met zowel de biologische ouders als de stiefouders. De relatie van kinderen met hun stiefvader is sterk verweven met hun relatie met moeder, maar is onafhankelijk van hun relatie met de vader. Analoog hangt de relatie met de stiefmoeder sterk samen met de relatie met de vader, maar niet met de relatie met de moeder. Ook de relaties tussen de ex-partners en de nieuwe partner zijn relatief onafhankelijk van elkaar, zowel qua emotionele omgang, als qua opvoeding van het (stief)kind. Ex-partners met kinderen in verblijfsco-ouderschap communiceren onderling vaker over het kind dan ex-partners met kinderen die voltijds bij één van beide wonen, maar over het algemeen is de communicatie tussen ex-partners over de opvoeding van het kind beperkt. De ouderlijke band van gescheiden moeders en vaders met hun nieuwe partner is vaak veel sterker dan die met hun ex-partner.

Een volgend punt is de samenhang tussen gezinsstructuren, gezinsrelaties en het welzijn van kinderen. Over het algemeen hebben gezinsrelaties een sterker 'effect' op het welzijn van kinderen dan gezinsstructuren, maar de verblijfsregeling speelt hier wel een rol. De resultaten leren dat er nood is aan een 'conditionele' benadering: gezinsstructuren, gezinsprocessen en het welzijn van kinderen hangen complex samen. Er zijn ten slotte weinig verschillen in het emotioneel welzijn van kinderen met gescheiden ouders

naargelang de aanwezigheid van een stiefouder. De resultaten suggereren dat de positieve en negatieve effecten van het leven in een stiefgezin in vergelijking met een eenoudergezin elkaar opheffen.

Naast de theoretische en methodologische reflecties die uit onze resultaten volgen, zijn er ook beleidsimplicaties. Deze hebben te maken met de bijna exclusieve focus op biologisch ouderschap na scheiding van de voorbije jaren, waarbij het opvallend stil bleef rond de rechten en plichten van (het toenemend aantal) stiefouders. Er zijn ten slotte ook belangrijke genderdimensies verbonden aan de evolutie naar verblijfsco-ouderschap na een ouderlijke scheiding, en dit zowel vanuit het perspectief van biologische ouders als van stiefouders.

## Résumé français

L'évolution vers l'égalité parentale après le divorce pour les hommes et les femmes a entraîné au cours des deux dernières décennies deux changements dans le droit du divorce belge: en 1995, l'exercice en commun de l'autorité parentale devenait la norme juridique, et en 2006, une préférence implicite pour la résidence alternée des enfants en cas d'un divorce parental est inclus. Cette thèse décrit les implications démographiques et sociologiques de ces deux normes de co-parentalité pour la formation, la structure et les fonctions des familles recomposées. Deux sources de données sont utilisées: *Scheiding in Vlaanderen* (SIV) et *het Leuvens Adolescenten en Gezinnenonderzoek* (LAGO).

Une première série de questions de recherche concerne l'évolution du nombre d'enfants qui vivent dans une famille recomposée, et dans quelle mesure ce nombre est influencé par la résidence des enfants. Les résultats montrent que la formation de familles recomposées n'est pas exceptionnel: la majorité des enfants avec des parents divorcés ont au minimum un parent qui vit une nouvelle relation romantique. Comparativement aux enfants qui résident exclusivement chez la mère (l'arrangement de séjour classique), les enfants en résidence alternée sont plus susceptibles d'être confrontés à un nouveau partenaire de la mère et à vivre ensemble (à temps partiel) avec le nouveau partenaire du père. Le nouveau partenaire du père (la belle-mère) a plus souvent des enfants résidant que le nouveau partenaire de la mère (le beau-père). Alors, la résidence alternée conduit à la formation de plus de familles recomposées avec une composition complexe.

Une seconde série de questions porte sur la structure et les caractéristiques des relations familiales au sein de familles recomposées et leur cohérence avec le bien-être des enfants. Beaucoup d'enfants ont une bonne relation avec leurs deux parents et leurs beaux-parents. Vivre ensemble est un facteur important pour la construction et le maintien d'une bonne relation avec tous les figures parentales. La relation des enfants avec leur beau-père est fortement liée à leur relation avec la mère, mais elle est indépendante de leur relation avec le père. De la même manière, la relation avec la belle-mère est liée à celle avec le père, mais pas à la relation avec la mère. Les relations entre les anciens partenaires et le nouveau partenaire sont relativement indépendantes les unes des autres, tant en termes d'interaction émotionnelle qu'en termes d'éducation de l'enfant. Les ex-conjoints avec des enfants en résidence alternée, communiquent plus de l'enfant que les ex-partenaires avec des enfants vivant exclusivement chez un des parents, mais en général, la communication co-parentale entre les ex-partenaires est limitée. Le lien parental des mères et pères divorcés avec leur nouveau partenaire est souvent beaucoup plus fort que celui avec leur ex-partenaire.

Une autre question porte sur le rapport entre les structures familiales, les relations familiales et le bien-être des enfants. En général, les relations familiales ont un plus grand effet sur le bien-être des enfants que les structures familiales, mais cet effet peut diverger selon l'arrangement de résidence. Les résultats montrent qu'il y a une nécessité d'une approche «conditionnel»: les structures et les processus familiales et le bien-être des

enfants cohérents d'une manière complexe. Enfin, il y a peu de différences dans le bien-être émotionnel des enfants dont les parents sont séparés en fonction de la présence d'un beau-parent. Les résultats suggèrent que les effets positifs et négatifs de la vie dans une famille recomposée par rapport à une vie dans une famille monoparentale s'annulent mutuellement.

En plus des réflexions théoriques et méthodologiques, il y a aussi des implications politiques. Celles-ci ont à voir avec l'accent presque exclusivement mis sur la parentalité biologique après un divorce au cours des dernières années, où le silence sur les droits et les obligations des beaux-parents (en nombre croissant) se démarque. Enfin, il y a des aspects *genderspécifiques* importants liés à l'évolution du séjour exclusivement chez la mère après le divorce des parents vers la résidence alternée, tant du point de vue des parents biologiques que des beaux-parents.

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**Sofie VANASSCHE**

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