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The social life of divorced parents. Do custody arrangements make a difference in divorced parents' social participation and contacts?

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Social life is fostered by having a partner and children that create interactions and generate new social networks. For divorced parents, the question is whether these positive relationships remain after marital dissolution. Do children form an additional barrier to social interaction, or do new partners present a means to reconstruct divorcees' social life? In this case, it is important to consider custody arrangements. The research question is how custody arrangements affect divorced parents' possibilities to participate in outdoor home leisure activities and to maintain their social contacts. Focus is placed on the recent post-divorce parenting model of joint physical custody, taking Belgium as a pioneer case study. Multi-level regressions are conducted, using multi-actor data from the Divorce in Flanders survey ($N = 1506$ divorced parents). Results show that joint physical custody helps divorced parents to stay socially integrated. Especially for mothers, joint physical custody has a liberating effect. They engage in more outdoor home activities and better maintain their social networks than sole custody mothers. In this way, the positive effects of social interaction can counterbalance other detrimental effects of divorce and contribute to a higher level of their general well-being. While joint custody for fathers means they may spend more time with their children, their engagement in personal leisure activities and social networks is not altered by this custody arrangement.

Keywords: divorce; custody; parents; social life; participation; Belgium

Introduction

The majority of European countries are faced with high divorce rates and an increasing gender neutrality in custody legislation. In particular, joint physical custody has become the social and legal norm within Europe (Ottosen, 2006). In that respect, Belgium has become an important and interesting case to study, as it has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe. Divorce rates in 2011 suggest that more than 50% of marriages will end in divorce, increasing from only 10% for marriages in 1970. Belgium has very tolerant divorce and custody legislation. The current predominant post-separation model stipulates that both parents should spend substantial amounts of time with their children after divorce. A legal recommendation for joint physical custody was included in the Belgian law in 2006, and led to a further boost in incidence figures for joint physical custody (Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013).

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Bauserman (2002) showed in his meta-analytic review that joint physical custody enables frequent contact between children and their both parents which can buffer detrimental effects caused by the divorce itself for children. Parents, also, should benefit from a joint physical custody arrangement, compared to the more traditional sole mother custody arrangement. Fathers have more contact with their children and a better opportunity to maintain their parent–child bond (Allen & Brinig, 2011; Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011). Mothers who share the childcare tasks with their ex-spouse have more free time to invest in personal, work or leisure activities (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Since 2006, the Belgian custody law requires that the best interest of the parents should also be considered in addition to the interest of the child when settling custody arrangements (Martens, 2007; Vanbockrijk, 2009). Therefore, it is relevant to examine whether parents also benefit from joint physical custody. In this study, we research parents' post-divorce social life.

In the following sections, we consider the social life of divorcees, parents and divorced parents, before introducing the *Divorce in Flanders* data. In the results section, we analyse whether the relationship between divorced parents and their social life differs according to gender. In the conclusion, we consider the effects of custody arrangements on the social life of divorced fathers and mothers, separately, and discuss future research possibilities.

Divorce and the social life

Social connectedness with others can be realised through social networks and the social activities in which one participates (Putnam, 2000). Leisure time activities, such as sports, widen our social network and generate social resources. Spending time in these less organised and often unplanned activities is as important as participating in more formal associations (Putnam, 2000; Seippel, 2006). Participating in social networks and activities create an open mind and although they may seem superficial, their effects are considerably strong. They provide people with resources, social support and information (Almond & Verba, 1963). Further, social contacts and activities are important for an individual's mental and physical health and well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000).

Nevertheless, research on the social life is limited, in the sense that it seldom takes into account the diversity of the divorced population (Milardo, 1987). Predominantly, the focus is placed on the differences between married and divorced people (Kalmijn & Broese van Groenou, 2005). There are, however, mixed results regarding the association between social life and marital status. Some authors state that divorcees have more contact with friends and colleagues than married individuals (Jappens, Wijckmans, & Van Bavel, 2011), who have a smaller friendship network, because they are highly involved with each other (Coser & Coser, 1974; Kalmijn, 2003). Other authors claim that divorcees feel more lonely and are less satisfied with their social life than married individuals (Jappens et al., 2011), because married people can more easily develop larger social networks, reducing the risk of being lonely or unsatisfied (Rotolo, 2000; Van Ingen, 2008). Furthermore, divorcees may become isolated from communal networks, as people often choose to stay in touch with only one partner. As Gerstel (1988) phrases it: 'marriage brings entry into social circles. In turn, divorce dissolves not only marriage but the relationships surrounding it' (p. 343).

Parenthood and the social life

Another factor, as important as one's marital status, is parenthood status, which also leads to contradictory hypotheses. On the one hand, a family life including children can enrich someone's social network, as children can increase the chance to participate in social activities and to be involved in the neighbourhood (Ross, 1995). On the other hand, the presence of children can be a restricting factor for the amount of available time that can be invested in social contacts (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Kalmijn, 2012). Caring for children may interfere with parents' own leisure time (Van Ingen, 2008; Kalmijn & Broese van Groenou, 2005). For instance, staying home for the children may hinder parents' participation in outdoor home leisure activities, like meeting friends, playing sports, etc. Time-use studies emphasise that mothers especially reduce their personal care and leisure time when they have children, while fathers are better able to protect their personal leisure time (Beck & Arnold, 2009; Shaw, 2001).

Divorced parents and the social life

When studying determinants of divorced parents' social life, the custody arrangement of their children is an important factor to consider. In the past, parental tasks were almost completely shifted to mothers after a divorce. Because of the recent push towards joint physical custody in several Western societies, parental tasks are now more equally shared between both parents after a divorce. From a historical point of view, an interesting gender aspect emerges when considering this new development. Joint physical custody led to decreasing childcare task demands for mothers and also provided them with more leisure time (Gunnée & Braver, 2001). Consequently, we expect that divorced mothers have a more active social life when their child is part of a joint physical custody arrangement compared to a more traditional sole mother custody arrangement (H1). Unlike mothers, fathers saw their role in the post-divorce lives of their children increase over the past few decades. Joint physical custody allocates more parenting responsibility to fathers and leads to more father-child contact (Bastaits, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2012; Fehlberg et al., 2011). As a consequence, this can result in limiting a fathers' leisure time. Accordingly, we expect divorced fathers to have a less active social life when their child is part of a joint physical custody arrangement instead of a more traditional sole mother custody arrangement (H2). We formulate no specific hypotheses regarding the social life of divorced mothers and divorced fathers in a sole father custody arrangement, because these parents form a rather exceptional and small group (Sodermans et al., 2013).

Data and method

We use data from the *Divorce in Flanders* survey (Mortelmans et al., 2011). Flanders forms the autonomous Northern region in Belgium that includes about six million inhabitants, or 58% of the total Belgian population. The sample is drawn from the Belgian National Register, which contains data of all Belgian inhabitants on household composition and marital status. The sample is limited to persons who married someone of the opposite sex between 1971 and 2008, have Belgian nationality, live in the Flemish Region, were between 18 and 40 years old at marriage and experienced at maximum, one legal divorce. The sample is representative

of the Belgian population regarding marriage year but not towards marriage status: one-third of the respondents are married, two-thirds of the respondents are divorced. As the *Divorce in Flanders* survey is a multi-actor study, both (ex-)spouses were surveyed. Respondents were interviewed by means of face-to-face Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) in 2009 and 2010. For the purpose of this study, only respondents from dissolved marriages with at least one child with the ex-spouse were selected. This child from both ex-spouses was randomly selected by the computer and all questions with regard to children (including the custody arrangement) related to this target child, who was not older than 18 at the moment of the interview. Our research sample consisted of 1506 divorced parents (677 fathers and 829 mothers), nested in 1135 dissolved marital unions. From 371 dissolved unions both mother and father were interviewed and from 764 unions only one parent was interviewed.

For measuring the social life of respondents, we follow the approach of Kalmijn and Broese van Groenou (2005). Although the measurements may seem rather meagre, they give us vital information on the extent to which people have access to informal social capital (Scheepers, Grotenhuis, & Gelissen, 2002). We distinguish between social outdoor home activities and social contacts. Social outdoor home activities were measured by three different social activities occurring outside the respondents' home. The exact question wording was as follows: 'How often did you do the following activities in your free time in the past 12 months? (1) playing sports, (2) participating in cultural activities like theatre, concerts, museums, and (3) going out to restaurants, bars, movie theatres or parties'. Unfortunately, the specific kind of sport or cultural activity was not further specified in the question. Social contacts were measured by the question: 'How often did you meet the following persons in your free time in the past 12 months? (1) friends, (2) neighbours and (3) own family members, excluding household members'. The answer scales for both social life measurements included seven categories: never; less than once per month; once per month; several times per month; once per week; several times per week and daily. The latter two categories were merged, because the daily category was reported by less than 2% of the respondents.

The residential custody arrangement was registered in a very comprehensive and detailed manner. First, a simple question was posed to differentiate whether the child lived with mother, father or both parents alternately. In this latter case, a residential calendar was used to register the residential arrangement in detail (Sodermans, Vanassche, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2014). A calendar on paper was shown, corresponding with a regular month without holiday periods. Respondents were asked to indicate for every day and night whether the child spent it with the mother or father. The proportion of time the child spends with each parent was used to create the residential custody arrangement. This variable was divided into three categories based on common cut-off criteria (see for instance, Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012; Smyth, Weston, Moloney, Richardson, & Temple, 2008). In sole mother custody, children lived more than 66% of the time with the mother. In sole father custody, children lived more than 66% of the time with the father. In joint physical custody, children lived between 33 and 66% of time with each parent. Joint physical custody was treated as the reference group. In the case that both parents participated in the study and their answers were non-identical, a mean score was calculated. To test for potential bias, we included a dummy variable indicating whether only one parent or both parents participated in the survey, but because this dummy variable

was never significant, it is not reported in the tables. Because we considered gender differences in the association between custody arrangements and parents' social life, we included interactions between parent's sex and their custody arrangement.

We included several control variables. First, the age of the respondent was included as a continuous scale variable. Next, the age of the target child was considered, as younger children have a higher likelihood to be part of a joint physical custody arrangement. Furthermore, younger children also require more care from their parents and consequently may decrease their parents' leisure time (Van Ingen, 2008). Children were between 0 and 18 years old and their age was included as a continuous scale variable. We further included the presence of other children in the household (siblings, half-siblings and stepsiblings) below the age of 12 as a dummy variable. Next, the educational level of parents was considered. Higher educated persons tend to have a more thriving social life and choose more often for a joint physical custody arrangement (Moore, 1990). Education was divided into three categories: low, medium and high. The low educated finished only lower secondary education (on average obtained at the age of 15); the average educated obtained a higher secondary education degree (on average obtained at the age of 18); and the high educated obtained a higher educational or university degree (on average obtained at the age of 22). Furthermore, in addition to education, having a job increases the means to engage in social life and to choose a joint physical custody arrangement (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987; Juby, Bourdais, & Marcil-Gratton, 2005). We differentiated between three employment types: full-time employed (working 95% or more), part-time employed (working 25% to 94%) and not employed (less than 25%). Next, new partners may also interfere with divorced parents' social lives, as they bring entry into new social networks, but also require time that can limit the time spent in these social networks (Kalmijn, 2003; Kalmijn & Broese van Groenou, 2005). The presence of a married or cohabiting new partner in the household was included as a dummy variable. Also the time elapsed since the divorce (i.e. the residential separation) was included as a scale variable. As networks need to be (re)built after a divorce, a stabilisation period can affect the social life of divorcees. Finally, the level of extraversion of the respondents was measured. Extraversion is related to the intrinsic need of individuals to generate social interactions with others and is one of the big five personality traits (Terhell, Broese van Groenou, & van Tilburg, 2004). It was measured by the eight extraversion items of the Dutch Big Five Inventory (Denissen, Geenen, Van Aken, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). Respondents indicated on a five-point scale to what extent they agreed with the following statements: being talkative; tending to be quiet; generating a lot of enthusiasm; being outgoing, sociable; being reserved; being sometimes shy, inhibited; being full of energy and having an assertive personality. The Cronbach's alpha of .79 indicated an internally valid scale. The descriptive measurements of all independent and control variables are reported in Table 1.

This study dealt with dyadic data (i.e. several respondents were part of the same marital union). Consequently, conventional statistical techniques were not appropriate, since the assumption of independency of observations could be violated. Ignoring this nested design would create an underestimation of standard errors and could generate misleading results (Hox, 2002). To control for the nested characteristics of the data, multi-level regressions were conducted, using the PROC GLIMMIX procedure in SAS 9.3. The multi-level procedure modelled individuals (level 1) within marital unions (level 2). The dependent variables were categorical variables with six

Table 1. Descriptive variables of all independent and control variables.

	Divorced parents (<i>N</i> = 1506)
<i>Custody arrangement (%)</i>	
Sole mother custody	59.4
Sole father custody	8.7
Joint physical custody	31.9
<i>Age (mean)</i>	41.5
<i>Sex (%)</i>	
Father	44.9
Mother	55.1
<i>Education (%)</i>	
Low	18.3
Average	44.0
High	37.7
<i>Employment type (%)</i>	
Full-time	68.1
Part-time	19.9
Unemployed	10.3
<i>New partner (%)</i>	52.9
<i>Young children in household (%)</i>	51.3
<i>Age of child (mean)</i>	13.1
<i>Time since divorce (mean)</i>	7.6
<i>Extraversion (mean)</i>	3.8

levels and had a natural ordering (from low to high frequency). Because the intervals between the adjacent levels were unknown, we fitted hierarchical-ordered logit models. This is a generalisation of the logistic regression model that accounts for the ordered nature of the data (Greene & Hensher, 2010). This estimation method regards the categories in the order as given, yet uses no information about the magnitude of the intervals. The magnitude of these intervals is estimated via cut-off points. The full models are shown in Tables 2 and 3. The odds ratios for the custody arrangements are not shown in the tables, but are described in the results section.

Results

Table 2 presents the hierarchical-ordered logistic regressions, modelling the effect of the custody arrangement of the child on the social participation of divorced parents. The effects of the custody arrangement on the social life indicators are directly interpretable for mothers, as they form the reference group. Therefore, we start by discussing the results for divorced mothers. To calculate the effects for fathers, the parameters of the custody arrangement for mothers should be added by the corresponding interaction term for fathers.

For divorced mothers, the custody arrangement of their children is an important predictor for their level of social participation. Mothers who share the custody with the father are more likely than sole custody mothers to actively participate in sports and cultural activities. It can be calculated from the models that the likelihood to participate frequently in sports and cultural activities is, respectively, 29% and 40% higher for joint physical custody mothers in comparison with sole custody mothers. Sole and no custody mothers are, however, not different from each other regarding their level of social participation.

Table 2. Effects of custody arrangements on social participation.

	Social participation					
	Sports		Culture		Going out	
	<i>N</i> = 1495		<i>N</i> = 1495		<i>N</i> = 1495	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Custody (Ref. Joint custody)						
Sole mother custody	-.34*	.16	-.51**	.16	-.20	.14
Sole father custody	-.29	.32	-.33	.34	-.35	.31
Father	.50**	.18	.12	.18	.41*	.17
Educational level (Ref. Average)	-.01	.01	.03*	.02	-.01*	.01
Low						
High	-.40**	.15	-.62***	.15	-.12	.14
Employment (Ref. Full-time)	.78***	.12	.91***	.13	.09	.11
Part-time						
Not	-.08	.14	-.11	.15	-.19	.13
New partner	-.67***	.18	-.68***	.19	-.77***	.17
Young children in household	-.01	.11	-.01	.11	.14	.10
Age	.01	.02	-.03	.02	.01	.02
Age child	-.24*	.12	-.12	.12	-.38***	.11
Time since divorce	-.01	.01	-.01	.01	-.01**	.01
Extraversion	.05	.07	.27***	.08	.50***	.07
Sole mother custody * Father	.03	.22	.18	.40	.37	.38
Sole father custody * Father	.52	.39	.31	.11	.21	.10
Model parameters						
Cut-off point 6	-1.64		-5.38		-3.31	
Cut-off point 5	-.75		-4.33		-1.64	
Cut-off point 4	-.31		-2.53		-.22	
Cut-off point 3	-.05		-1.02		1.08	
Cut-off point 2	.61		1.14		3.30	
-2 Log likelihood	4676.46		3745.88		4576.15	
Deviance test	205.93***		233.09***		207.79***	
Intraclass correlation	.09*		.11*		.02	

Notes: Ordinal hierarchic logistic regressions for social participation (sports, culture, going out).

Values are regression coefficients (β) and standard errors (S.E.).

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

To assess the effects of the custody arrangement of children on the social participation of divorced fathers, we have to interpret the interaction effects. None of the interaction terms are significant which indicates that the associations between the custody arrangement and the social participation indicators are similar for fathers and mothers. Hence, joint physical custody fathers have also a higher likelihood to engage in sports and cultural activities than no custody fathers, though the effects for fathers are somewhat smaller than for mothers. The confidence intervals for the estimated odds ratios for fathers contain the value 1 and the differences are only significant at a p -level of .10. It can be calculated from the models that the likelihood to participate frequently in sports and cultural activities is, respectively, 27% and 28% higher for joint physical custody fathers in comparison with no custody fathers. No significant association was found between custody arrangements and fathers' level of going out.

Table 3. Effects of custody arrangements on social networks.

	Social networks					
	Friends		Neighbours		Family	
	N = 1489		N = 1495		N = 1487	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Custody (Ref. Joint custody)						
Sole mother custody	-.07	.15	.22	.14	.32*	.15
Sole father custody	-.46	.33	.23	.28	.19	.31
Father	.42*	.17	.28	.17	.08	.18
Educational level (Ref. Average)	-.0005	.01	.008	.01	-.01	.01
Low						
High	-.09	.14	.19	.13	-.26	.14
Employment (Ref. Full-time)	-.13	.11	-.18	.11	-.09	.11
Part-time						
Not	-.12	.13	.001	.13	-.01	.14
New partner	.34	.17	.28	.17	.16	.18
Young children in household	-.40***	.11	.05	.10	-.16	.11
Age	-.03	.02	-.02	.02	-.04	.02
Age child	-.08	.12	-.01	.11	-.02	.12
Time since divorce	-.0009	.001	.001	.001	-.003*	.001
Extraversion	.45***	.07	.26***	.07	.12	.07
Sole mother custody * Father	.08	.21	-.33	.20	-.56*	.22
Sole father custody * Father	.34	.40	-.14	.36	-.44	.38
Model parameters						
Cut-off point 6	-1.37		-1.46		-.65	
Cut-off point 5	-.13		-.75		.42	
Cut-off point 4	1.06		-.12		1.39	
Cut-off point 3	1.96		.38		2.10	
Cut-off point 2	3.55		1.41		3.43	
-2 Log Likelihood	4898.17		5263.75		4745.25	
Deviance test	135.62***		68.8***		86.66***	
Intraclass correlation	.07		.00		.09	

Notes: Ordinal hierarchic logistic regressions for social networks (friends, neighbours and family). Values are regression coefficients (β) and standard errors (S.E.). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

With regard to the control variables, we observe a positive relationship between the socio-economic status of parents and their level of social participation. First, education is an important predictor of social participation. The likelihood for highly educated parents to participate in sports and cultural activities is higher than for average educated parents. Low educated parents have a lower likelihood to engage in sports and cultural activities than average educated parents. Education is not related to the frequency of going out, however. Employment is also a vital determinant of the social participation level. Parents who are not employed have lower chances to be socially active. A new partner does not influence the social participation level of divorced parents, but the presence of young children in the household decreases the frequency of sporting and going out. Neither the age of the parent, nor the age of the child, are associated with social participation. There is a negligible positive relationship between the age of parents and their likelihood to engage in

cultural activities. The time that has passed since the divorce does not alter the frequency of participation in social activities. Finally, extraversion seems to play a role in the explanation of why divorced parents participate in cultural activities and go out. More extravert parents are more likely to participate actively, but extraversion does not explain the engagement in sport activities. This is probably due to the fact that playing sports is not always a social event and some sports can be practiced alone, such as running, swimming or going to the gym.

Table 3 presents the hierarchical ordered logistic regressions modelling the effect of the custody arrangement of the child on the social contacts of divorced parents. Except for family members, the frequency by which divorced parents meet their social contacts is not influenced by their children's custody arrangements. Joint physical custody mothers are 37% less likely to meet their family members regularly than sole custody mothers. This effect is not found for divorced fathers (the interaction term is significant). There is no difference in contact between fathers without custody (i.e. child in sole mother custody) and fathers with joint physical custody. Contact with neighbours and friends is similar among all divorced parents, regardless of the custody arrangement of their child.

Socio-economic factors have a lower impact on social networks than on social participation activities. The presence of a new cohabiting partner is negatively related with often meeting friends, while it does not influence the contact with neighbours and family members. This is expected, as couples tend to focus more on each other than on friends. The presence of young children in the household does not influence the frequency of contact with friends, neighbours or family. Neither do the age of parents, the age of the child in custody or the time since the divorce affect the social contacts of divorced parents. Only extraversion is positively and significantly related to meeting friends and neighbours. Extravert parents tend to have more contact with their social networks, yet they do not have more contact with their family network.

The intraclass correlation is rather low in the presented models, indicating that only a small proportion of variance in the outcome variables can be explained by the higher level (i.e. the marital union). Only for playing sports and cultural activities, the random intercept variance is significantly different from zero, indicating that a hierarchical model fits the data better than a single-level model. For neighbours, the intraclass correlation could not be estimated because the random intercept variance was estimated to be zero. Hence, one could argue that a multi-level technique is not appropriate. Nevertheless, we choose to keep the random intercept coefficients in the models, to control for the dyadic data design (Flom, McMahon, & Pouget, 2006), as this approach has no consequences for the estimations of the parameters (Kiernan, Tao, & Gibbs, 2012).

Conclusion

We performed analysis to investigate the way in which custody arrangements affect parents' possibilities to participate in social activities and maintain social contacts after divorce. Our results imply that the custody arrangement does matter for the social life of divorced parents. First of all, joint physical custody is positively related to divorced mothers' participation in sports and cultural activities. Dividing parental care with the ex-partner seems to make extra room for personal leisure activities outside the home. This association remains intact after controlling for the

socio-economic status of mothers, which is a strong, positive indicator of social participation levels. This confirms Bauserman's (2012) statement that a more equally divided custody arrangement has a liberating effect for mothers with respect to their participation in several social outdoor home activities. Yet, for one specific indicator of social participation, going out, the custody arrangement does not seem to matter.

Surprisingly, the social life of joint physical custody fathers seems not to differ from that of non-residential fathers. Thus, while joint custody seems to allow more personal time for mothers, it does not seem to limit personal time for fathers. Two possible explanations could explain this finding. First, only full-time parenthood is an obstacle for parents' social life, whereas co-parents are able to organise a life 'at two speeds'. Their 'built-in break' permits them to save social activities for the week that the children are with the other parent. A second explanation may be that fathers are less inclined than mothers to readjust and reorganise their life according to the presence of children (Shaw, 2001) or rely more easily on informal help from a new partner or parents, as expressed by Jappens and Van Bavel (2012). Fathers' willingness to become joint physical custody parents may even be conditional upon the existence of these informal social networks. For this reason, the presence of children may affect social outdoor home activities of fathers to a lesser extent than those of mothers. Certainly, further research is needed in this area.

We also found that a high socio-economic status enhances divorced parents' social life, as these parents are better off with regard to their social capital. Parents, who are highly educated or are employed full time, will have fewer difficulties engaging in social activities and keeping contact with their social networks, regardless of their marital or parental status. This may be related to financial reasons. Engagement in social activities may be expensive, and unemployed parents may be unable to afford this type of social participation. Our results suggest that joint physical custody may even be reinforcing the division of the divorced population into 'winners' and 'losers' of society (Putnam, 2000). On the one hand, we found that joint physical custody (independently from social status) increases participation in the social life of mothers (and to a lesser extent that of fathers) compared to the more traditional custody arrangement of sole mother custody. Joint physical custody may thus help mothers recover from the divorce by having outdoor home social contacts. It can protect them from other negative consequences resulting from the divorce itself. On the other hand, we know from previous research that joint physical custody is more often the case among higher educated and well-to-do parents (Juby et al., 2005), which is an important factor that increases the chance of having an active social life.

For both fathers and mothers, social networks (as measured by contact with friends, neighbours and family members) are not influenced by the custody arrangement and socio-economic predictors, however there is one exception: joint physical custody mothers have less contact with their family members than sole custody mothers. It is possible that the latter group has a greater need for informal help from their relatives. Socio-economic factors have also a lower impact on social networks than on social participation. This can be related to the fact that one does not have to spend (a lot of) money to meet family, neighbours or friends, while this may not be the case for outdoor home leisure activities. There is a negative association between having a new partner after divorce and the frequency of contacts with friends, which may be explained by the 'dyadic withdrawal' theory. This theory argues that couples focus on each other, withdrawing from other social networks (Kalmijn, 2003).

Future research could search for other factors that explain this aspect of social life. For instance, a good or strained relationship between ex-partners may be a determining factor of social life. Parents that continue to argue about their children after their divorce may have less energy to invest in their social life, as they are less likely to have a positive attitude regarding life in general. Also mental and physical ill-being can influence someone's social life. Future research could expand the range of indicators by including measures of different social activities, such as membership in voluntary associations or involvement in religious activities (see, for instance, Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). It would further be interesting to look at other measurements of social contact, such as the number of close friends and the intentions to maintain social relationships with others.

This study has some limitations. We study cross-sectional data and cannot take into account the social life of mothers and fathers before the divorce took place. Longitudinal panel data are necessary, yet, not available. Nevertheless, we hope to partially account for this limitation by including extraversion as a stable personality characteristic. As our results demonstrate, being extravert is one of the most prominent determinants of securing a good social life after divorce. Extravert parents participate more outside the home and keep in contact with their social networks. Next, the number of mothers without custody is negligible, although this specific group of mothers deserves more attention. No custody mothers are less inclined to participate in surveys because of their social undesirable status and there is also evidence that they have lower levels of well-being (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch 1992). This may lead to selective non-response. The multi-actor study further surveyed both ex-partners, leading to some discrepancies between the answers of mothers and fathers regarding the custody arrangement of their children. When divorced parents tend to overestimate the time their child resides with them, this may cause bias. The selectivity of survey participation can also produce this difference, as divorced parents with full custody are more eager to participate than parents without custody.

In sum, the recent custody legislation favouring joint physical custody has had several (and perhaps unintended) effects for all nuclear family members involved. While father groups were the main lobbyists of joint physical custody in Belgium, with the intention to enhance the continuity of the father-child relationship (Torfs, 2011), it has also caused mothers to have more personal time and a richer social life. Mothers pay a price in the sense of 'losing parental time', but they are rewarded by enhanced social participation possibilities. As a more profound social life is proved to be beneficial for someone's emotional well-being (Kroll, 2010; Shapiro & Keyes, 2007), joint physical custody can buffer some of the negative divorce effects. This is a good demonstration of how subtle changes in legislation may have far-reaching consequences for children and parents (Allen & Brinig, 2011). Even though we find a liberating effect for joint physical custody mothers, we could also confirm earlier findings that fathers gain most from joint physical custody in the long run (Fehlberg et al., 2011). Joint physical custody has facilitated contact between father and children without limiting their social life. We conclude that a joint physical custody arrangement leads both mothers and fathers to experience some advantages. And because the social life is important for someone's well-being, to feel and stay connected with others, joint physical custody can buffer the detrimental effects of divorce and enhance the general well-being of parents after a divorce.

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