

KU LEUVEN

FACULTEIT SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN

Parenting apart together

Studies on joint physical custody arrangements in Flanders

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Koen Matthijs

Co-promotor: Prof. Dr. Gray Swicegood [University of Illinois, USA]

Onderzoekseenheid:

Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek [CeSO]

Proefschrift tot het verkrijgen

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aangeboden door

An Katrien SODERMANS

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0 Preface

All over Europe, more and more children with separated or divorced parents are living in two households. Every few days, they move back and forth between their mother and father. Every month, they spend a considerable number of hours 'on their way' to the other parent. These 'suitcase children' are packed with clothes, school work, games, and personal goods. They say goodbye for a while from one part of their family and prepare for some days with the other. They have to unwind from the days that have passed, where they could have been an only child, living in a city apartment, and wrap up for the days that are coming, in which they might be living together with brothers and sisters (and maybe a dog) in a small village. Different people, different rules, different habits, even different smells. And every week this pattern is recurring...

These children do not only carry material goods on their journey. They also bring memories, thoughts, stories. About the other half of their family. About the bad things that happened in the past week. About the nice talk they had with their father. The families of these children are no longer based at one place, but at two different locations. These children are emotionally attached to their parents through time. These 'mobile families' are typical for the 'post-familial family', in which time, rather than space, shapes the contours (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Jensen, 2009).

In Belgium, this image of the mobile post-divorce child is highly observable. Because of high divorce rates and progressive custody law, it can be estimated that a high proportion of this country's children are commuting on a weekly base between their mothers' and fathers' houses. Because of the geographical dimensions of the country, Belgian children are not expected to travel extremely long distances. There are other examples, like Norway and Germany, where children take trains, boats, and even planes to reach the other part of their family, often on their own. But small countries may also be catalysts for shared parenting practices. When ex-partners live close to each other after divorce, shared residence practices may become more likely.

The challenges that multi-local families and mobile children face are currently a 'hot topic' in Belgium and have received extensive media coverage. Legal experts and family practitioners want to have their say about this relatively new phenomenon. What is it like to live in two houses? Is it possible to really feel 'at home' at two different places? Why does the Dutch word for home, *thuis*, has no plural according to Van Dale (2013)? In any case, the world of mobile children and their families is captivating and largely unexplored. We do not know how many there are, how they organize family life at different locations, and how they feel. The studies presented here aim to unravel a small portion of these compelling questions and want to provide insight in how mobile children and their parents feel and are 'doing family'.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1 Introduction

To understand the modern family, we need to understand the historical family

(Goldscheider, 2001, p. 491)

When studying new family practices, it is important to comprehend the societal and legal context in which they were able to occur. This introductory chapter starts with a general description of how macro-sociological developments, like the Second Demographic Transition, and increasing gender equality, have shaped family life in general and the lives of parents and children in particular, during the past decades. This is followed by a snapshot of recent demographic trends in the area of union formation and dissolution in Belgium and Flanders. Next, the historical and legal contexts in which parental rights and custody practices developed, are outlined. After that, the focus is placed on the changing family lives of Belgian children. Finally, a theoretical framework is provided to understand the relationship between custody arrangements of children and the well-being of children and parents. This chapter concludes with a description of the research questions and the structure of this research.

1.1 THE MODERN FAMILY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Family life underwent remarkable transformations, mainly because the notion of marriage changed a great deal over time. Amato (2009) describes an evolution of three consecutive marriage models: the institutional marriage, the companionate marriage and the individualistic marriage. These broader normative frameworks about marriage, family life and the meaning of close relationships are important steering mechanisms for individual behaviour and relationships between men and women.

During the period of pre-industrialization, relationships between family members were rather distant and husband and wife lived a quite separate life. Marital relationships were work-oriented and served a material goal (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This *institutional marriage* was seen as a formal union, strictly regulated by social norms, laws and religion (Amato, 2009). There was no room for feelings and emotions; the stability and preservation of the family was the common goal. The family was seen as a small 'community of needs', held together by a 'obligation of solidarity' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998).

Together with industrialization and the decline of religious control, came the rise of the Bourgeois family (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Lammertyn & Berghman, 1998; Richards, 1987; van Hoof, 1999). Emotionality became part of family life and marriage received a more romantic connotation: i.e. the expression of a strong tie between two people looking for mutual trust and companionship. This *companionate marriage* fulfilled – beyond the provision of material existence – additional functions, like procreation and child-rearing (Beck & Beck-

Gernsheim, 2002; Cherlin, 2010). Very indicative for this marriage model was the gendered task division and the segregation of life spheres. Husband and wife were team players and derived satisfaction from the fulfillment of complementary roles (Amato, 2009). Men had instrumental functions: they were responsible for the family income and took part in the outside world, through participation in paid work. Women fulfilled the more expressive functions: taking care of the domestic tasks and upbringing the children. Women were seen as 'the heart of the family', available around the clock for their husband and offspring (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). During this male breadwinner/female homemaker marriage model, divorce was very unlikely because both spouses were mutually dependent (Amato, 2009).

In the period that started in the 1970's, family life changed tremendously and so rapidly that many people could observe it with their own eyes (Cherlin, 2010). Marriage rates decreased, divorce rates soared, parenting was postponed, and a variety of new family forms emerged. These developments can be framed within the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), a collective term for changed demographic behaviour in tandem with new societal developments (Van de Kaa, 1987, 2002). A sexual revolution took place, which was a rejoinder to the entangled connection of marriage on the one hand and sex and procreation on the other hand (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). This development went hand in hand with changes in contraceptive practice (e.g. the use of the pill) and led to the postponement of parenthood and the rise in nonmarital births. Having children was removed from the checklist for having a successful life and lifelong childlessness became a valuable option in life (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995; Jensen, 2003). Perhaps, the most crucial aspect that changed during the SDT was the position of women. For the first time in history, women had equal access to education than men. Consequently, more and more women became employed in paid work which brought the gender-specialization model under pressure and resulted in a steady decline of the Bourgeois family ideal.

During the SDT, there was increased emphasis on individualization, emancipation, autonomy and self-actualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Cherlin, 2010; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). "Getting the best out of one's life" became a common life slogan. This individualization trend also resulted in notable consequences for family life: it was incompatible with a standard life biography and urged a "do-it-yourself life history" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The evolutions that occurred during the SDT were further facilitated by legal adaptations in most Western countries that reduced the exit costs of marriage considerably and acknowledged a greater variety of family forms (Beck-Gernsheim, 2012; Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). A multitude of living arrangements emerged, like pre- and postmarital cohabitation, LAT-relationships and longterm singlehood. Beck-Gernsheim (1998) speaks of the 'post-familial family' which means that the 'normal' family has lost its normative power (Beck-Gernsheim, 2012).

Gradually, the meaning of marriage transformed from a lifelong bond into a more fragile connection between people. In an *individualistic marriage* model, the conjugal union is seen as a merely private agreement, based on mutual respect, fair treatment and above all love (Amato,

Chapter 1 Introduction

Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Amato, 2009). Individualistic marriages are characterized by egalitarian relationships between spouses who are considered to be soulmates (Amato, 2009). Both partners are financially self-reliant, and marriage no longer serves an economic function (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Close relationships serve merely to enhance individual happiness and to maximize psychological growth. Consequently, they are more evaluated on a rational base, in terms of benefits and costs. In this context, Giddens (1992) introduced the concept of the 'pure relationship'.

A pure relationship refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it (Giddens, 1992, p.58).

This new idea about romantic relationships had marked consequences for the durability and stability of marriages. If relationships are built on the basis of love and mutual trust, instead of the provisions of financial security, divorce becomes more likely. Coontz states the paradox in these terms: "love has conquered marriage" (Coontz, 2005).

An important factor driving all the developments described above, was social class. Generally, higher educated groups in society tend to be more 'innovative' regarding their demographic behaviour. Initially, they were more often part of unmarried unions (Corijn, 2010), held less traditional and more individualistic value patterns (Martin & Parashar, 2006; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), and were more likely to divorce. However, a shift towards a less individualistic marriage attitude and greater reluctance to divorce has been witnessed among the higher social class during the past decades (Amato, 2009; De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Harkonen & Dronkers, 2006; Martin & Parashar, 2006; Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Today, the educational gradient of divorce has reversed in many countries and people from lower social classes have higher dissolution risks than those from higher social classes. This diverging process, in which divorce reinforces the inequality of family stability, as a new motor of social inequality, is called the 'divorce divide' (Martin, 2004).

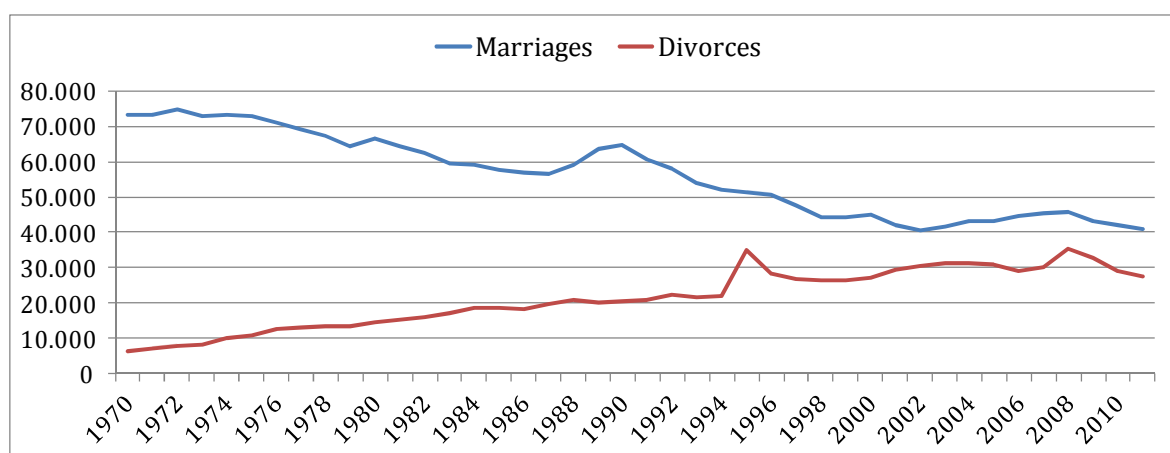
1.2 RECENT TRENDS IN UNION FORMATION AND DISSOLUTION IN BELGIUM AND FLANDERS

Also in Belgium and Flanders, the societal developments portrayed above have been observed over the past four decades. This section will elaborate on increasing divorce rates, the emergence of alternative union types, and how the adaptations to Belgian family law have facilitated these developments.

1.2.1 Rising divorces

Divorce figures rose over the past few decades in Belgium. Between 1970 and 2011 the number of divorces increased by more than 400% (Figure 1). The crude divorce rate (i.e. the number of divorces per 1000 inhabitants) increased from 0,7 to 2,9 between 1970 and 2011 (Algemene Directie Statistiek en Economische Informatie, 2013).

Figure 1 Number of marriages and divorces (Belgium, 1970-2011)



Source: Algemene Directie Statistiek en Economische Informatie (ADSEI), 2013

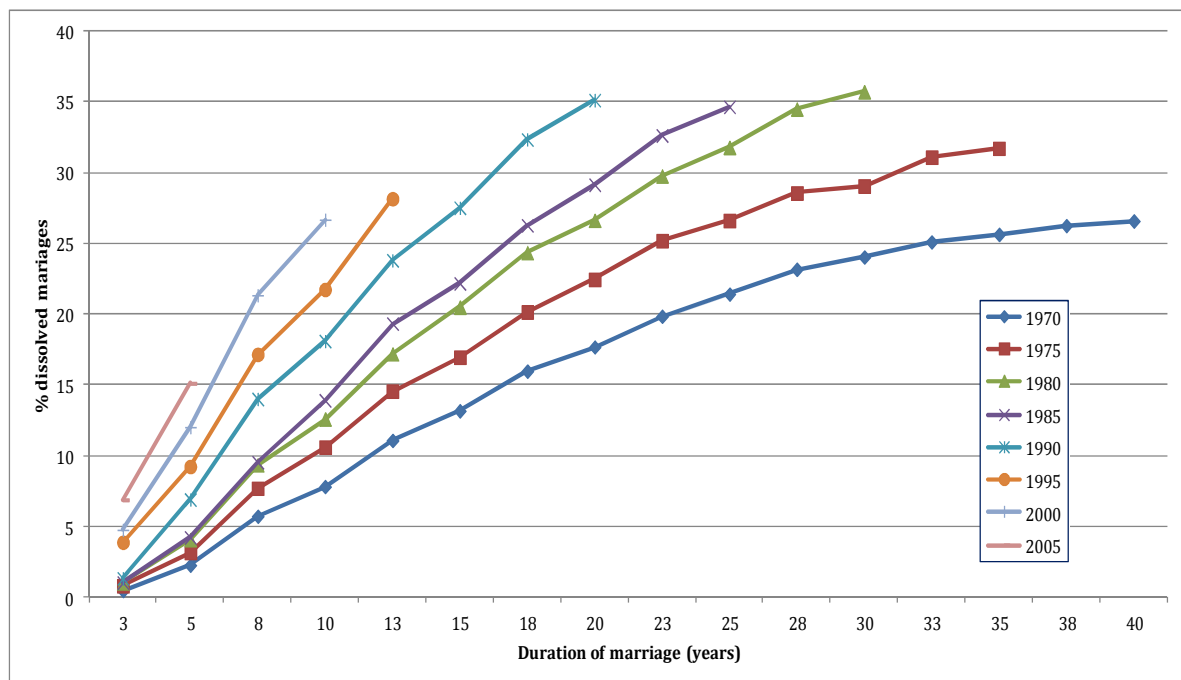
The crude divorce rate is not the most adequate statistic for showing change over time, because it includes the number of divorced people relative to the entire population (Corijn, 2005a; Matthijs, 2009). Another way to visualize the increasing divorce trend is by following different marriage cohorts over time (i.e. the longitudinal divorce figure), as presented in Figure 2. The graph shows the proportion of marriages that ended in a divorce for each marriage duration and for different marriage cohorts in Flanders. The curves are getting steeper with more recent marriage cohorts, which follows from the tendency to divorce more often and after a shorter marriage duration.

Another measure, the total divorce rate for a given year, is computed by adding the divorce rates by duration of marriage for the year in question. It is the divorce rate of a hypothetical generation subjected at each age to the current marriage conditions (Eurostat, 2007). For the marriages in 1970, the total divorce rate in Belgium was 10% while this figure exceeds 50% for marriages in 2011 (Algemene Directie Statistiek en Economische Informatie, 2013; Eurostat, 2007; Matthijs, 2009).

In European perspective, the Belgium divorce rise had started rather slowly. Around the 1990's, the number of divorces started to increase dramatically and the crude divorce rate started to exceed the European average. Currently, Belgium belongs to the leading divorcing countries

worldwide and is situated in the top five in Europe (Eurostat, 2013; OECD Family Database, 2012).¹ Dividing the crude divorce rate by the crude marriage rate estimates the relative proportion of divorced versus married individuals in the population. This ratio was 0,69 for Belgium in 2010, which is the highest in Europe (even higher than in the U.S.). This high figure can be explained by the fact that Belgium combines a very high divorce rate with one of the lower marriage rates.

Figure 2 Longitudinal divorce figure (Flanders, 1970-2010)



Source: Research Centre of the Flemish Government

1.2.2 The emergence of alternative union types

During the last decade, the absolute number of divorces remained rather stable. This does not indicate that partnerships became more stable again, but it rather reflects the changing composition of the group of people who are able to divorce: i.e. the married. Two important changes occurred: people marry less and those who marry do so at increasingly older ages. Between 1970 and 2011 the number of marriages decreased by 44% (Figure 1) and the crude marriage rate (i.e. the number of marriages per 1000 inhabitants) decreased from 7,6 to 4,1. The mean age at first marriage in the 1970's was 24 for men and 21 for women while these figures increased to respectively 30 and 27 for marriages in the 2000's (Corijn, 2012a). These two changes can be explained by the changed meaning of marriage. Today, marriage is no longer

¹ In Europe, only Switzerland, Lithuania and Czech Republic had a higher crude divorce rate than Belgium in 2010 (Eurostat, 2013).

seen as the start of adulthood but rather as the final step in the process of becoming an adult (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001; Corijn, Sodermans, & Vanassche, 2011; Settersten & Ray, 2010). Before marrying, young people want to complete their educational track, travel around the world, get launched in their professional career, and some of them even have children. Therefore, couples opt for a longer period of pre-marital cohabitation (Pasteels, Corijn, & Mortelmans, 2012). A growing number of couples treats this alternative union type as a valuable alternative to (re)marriage (Corijn, 2010, 2012b; Pasteels et al., 2012). It is estimated that the number of unmarried couples has increased from 4% in 1990 until 15% in 2007 (Corijn, 2010).

Because people without a formal partnership registration are difficult to trace in population statistics, it is not easy to calculate their rate of separation (Corijn, 2010, 2012b; Lodewijckx & Deboosere, 2011; Pasteels et al., 2012). Nevertheless, there is growing evidence from several countries that unmarried unions are even more fragile than married unions (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Wobma & De Graaf, 2009). Recently, Pasteels, Lodewijckx and Mortelmans (in press) were able to confirm this for Belgium.

1.2.3 Legal adaptations

Several adaptations to Belgian family law have facilitated the developments described above. Four important trends will be discussed here: the democratizing of the divorce by mutual consent, the adoption of the no-fault divorce, the formalization of unmarried cohabitation, and the legal recognition of family mediation. The removal of gender stereotypes in child custody issues can be seen as a fifth trend, but this will be described separately in section 1.4.

The procedure for divorce *by mutual consent* was gradually shortened and simplified by legal adaptations in 1972, 1994, and to a lesser extent in 1997 (Bastaits, Van Peer, Alofs, Pasteels, & Mortelmans, 2011; Hemelsoen, 2012a; Van Peer, Bastaits, & Mortelmans, 2011). Mutual consent is seen as the most humane grounds for divorce and reflects the changing perception in which divorce, and its consequences, are more and more seen as a mutual spousal decision. Marquet (2007) calls this the ‘contract divorce’ because there is a partial or complete agreement about the conditions of the divorce. The legal adaptations gradually pushed the proportion of fault-based divorce down and made the divorce by mutual consent the most important grounds for divorce by the mid 2000s. The legal reform of 1994 which simplified the divorce by mutual consent was responsible for the divorce peak in 1995, which is clearly visible in Figure 1. In 2006, around 80% of the Flemish divorces were filed by mutual consent (Hemelsoen, 2012a).

In 2007, another adaptation of divorce law resulted in the *abolition of the divorce by fault*. The ‘no-fault’ revolution is a universal trend in Western countries and aims at gradually removing constraints against unilateral marriage dissolution (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). With the same law, a new grounds for divorce – i.e. breakdown of the marriage – was established, the duration of the legal divorce process was shortened and the possibility of receiving life-long alimony from

Chapter 1 Introduction

the ex-spouse was abandoned (Bastaitis et al., 2011; Senaeve, 2011). The 2007 law is described by Hemelsoen (2012a) as the end of marriage-protective divorce law. Since 2007, only two legal grounds for divorce are left: mutual consent and the breakdown of the marriage. This latter grounds reflects the 'right to divorce' and resulted in a decline in the proportion of divorces by mutual consent to about 50%.

Since 2000, Belgian unmarried couples have the possibility to *formally register their partnership* by which they generate additional protection measures, similar to marriage (Senaeve, 2011). By doing so, the legislature officially acknowledged alternative union types, next to marriage. Corijn (2012b) estimated that only a minority of unmarried couples (1 out of 4) preferred this legal type of unmarried cohabitation in 2011. Another legal reformation which can be related to the acceptance of alternative union types was the acceptance of same-sex marriages in Belgium since 2003.

A final domain of legal change was the recognition of *family mediation* as a method of settling family disputes in 2005. The idea behind is that disputes which are settled by mutual consent will be longer-lasting and more easily accepted than those that are imposed (Neale & Smart, 1997).

1.3 PARENTAL RIGHTS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The way family life is organized and the meaning of marriage have important implications for child custody decisions. Basically, custody decisions evolved from a period of paternal supremacy, to maternal dominance, to equal parental rights. The historical picture described in this section summarizes mainly English and American families, simply because there is not much information from other countries. Yet, Friedman (1995) argues that the transformations that were lying at the basis for the changes in custody practices were observed universally and cross-nationally and hence so were the consequences.

1.3.1 From a paternal to a maternal presumption in custody decisions

Many people are convinced that mothers had been the main custodial parent for a long period of time and that extensive father involvement is only a recent phenomenon. This misconception exists because many scholars only describe evolutions that occurred the past four to five decades (Goldscheider, 2001). When we go further back in time, a completely different story emerges. Fathers, instead of mothers, had custodial dominance for the longest time in history. Men used to be the 'guardians' and legal protectors of their children (Friedman, 1995; Luepnitz, 1986; Richards, 1987; Wolchik, Braver, & Sandler, 1985; van Krieken, 2005). The law prescribed the obligation of parenthood as "protecting, maintaining and educating children" (Friedman, 1995). Because only men were able to exert legal rights at that time, it was obvious that fathers retained custody rights after divorce (although divorce was rather exceptional in that period). In

contrast to men, women and children had no legal rights, except showing reverence and respect. Even in case of death of the father, it was more likely that a third party, rather than the mother, would be given custody over the children. At the turn of the 20th century, a shift away from a paternal presumption in courts was observed in most Western societies. Courts gradually started to grant custody to mothers (Friedman, 1995; van Krieken, 2005). Initially, this was limited to the early life stages (the so-called ‘tender years’), when mothers were still nursing. At the age of five, custody rights were usually returned to the father. Nonetheless, this was a revolutionary shift because for the first time in history the (changing) needs of children were considered in making custody decisions (van Krieken, 2005). Custody rights were no longer granted on the base of the ‘obligations of parenthood’ but on a relatively vague principle, called ‘the best interests of the child’. Three developments were lying at the base of this shift towards a maternal presumption: rising divorce rates, the cult of true motherhood and the emergence of the modern concept of childhood.

Although *divorce* was rather exceptional at the beginning of the 20th century, the rate of increase was not. Divorce replaced death as the main reason for family break-up and because custody law prescribed the same rules in case of death and divorce, new guidelines became necessary. Paradoxically enough, the rise of the ‘companionate marriage’ during the period of industrialization reduced the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children (Richards, 1987). Because of the growing emphasis on *true motherhood* and female domesticity (Matthijs, 2002; Matthijs, 2007), mothers became experts in the domestic domain and were exclusively tied to their children. Fathers went out to work and were seldom available. In the same period, the modern concept of *childhood* emerged. Children were increasingly seen as individuals with an agency of their own and childhood was more and more considered as a distinct life stage (Oswell, 2012; Carol Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). The idea of children as “tabula rasa” generated emphasis on the growing importance of nurturance for the well-being and healthy development of children. Consequently, increasing attention was placed on parenting and education. Since fathers were working outside the home, mothers were left with the task of educating the children (Friedman, 1995). The American paediatrician Benjamin Spock’s bestseller ‘Baby and Child Care’, published in 1946, was a very influential source of information, making parents aware of the needs of children. Two important psychology works convinced the scientific world at that time that a maternal dominance in the post-divorce development of children was recommended. Bowlby’s attachment theory (Bowlby, 1968) stressed the importance of the primary caregiver (usually the mother) for the development of children. Separating children from their primary caregiver after divorce was strongly discouraged. Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit (1973) recommended in case of divorce to place children under the custody of their ‘psychological parent’, with whom they had the closest bond. Contact with the other parent was not recommended. In this ‘substitution model’ there was no place for two biological parents: the child remained with one parent (mostly the mother), and a potential stepparent replaced the absent biological parent (Marquet, 2005; van Krieken, 2005).

1.3.2 Towards equal parental rights

Gradually, the 'tender-years doctrine' came under pressure. Fathers movements questioned the traditional view on caretaking with the mother as primary caregiver. Opponents of Bowlby and Goldstein argued that children could have attachment bonds with both parents, and that the unique mother-child bond was simply the result of caretaking practices in a male breadwinner/female homemaker model (van Krieken, 2005). Although her work had been criticized by many, Badinter (1980) argued that the modern concept of motherhood was socially and culturally constructed rather than being an innate characteristic of female human beings. Emotional ties between fathers and children increased because of the fertility decline, and because emotional bonds, in general, became a greater source of personal fulfilment in this period (Neale & Smart, 1997). The paradox was that a *new fatherhood* ideology emerged in a period when more children were growing up without their biological father, because of rising divorce rates (Arteel, De Smedt, & Van Limbergen, 1987; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Lamb, 1976; Neale & Smart, 1997). These children became new subjects for scientific research, 'on fear for a fatherless society' (Coontz, 2004). According to Jensen (2009), the emergence of unmarried unions reinforced the need for a new 'parenting contract' that emphasized the equity in parental roles. Fathers from unmarried unions had a higher risk to be separated from their children because the dissolution risk is higher in these types of unions. Thus, they were in need of a normative framework that safeguarded their position relative to their children.

In a paradoxical fashion, mothers were responsible also for the fall of maternal presumption in custody decisions, because of their striving for equal rights in education and on the labour market (Ahrons, 1980; Goldscheider, 2001; Irving, Benjamin, & Trocme, 1984; Kaltenborn, 2001; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Watson, 1981; van Krieken, 2005). The relationship between motherhood and paid work changed, and more and more children were sent to daycare while mothers were out at work (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995). Feminist movements all over Europe started to demand symmetry in gender roles and pointed to the obligations of fathers concerning child-rearing responsibilities. A model in which one parent was responsible for the economic and social costs of children after divorce, was no longer desirable. Although most countries adopted regulations to guarantee the redistribution of economic costs (e.g. alimony payments), the social costs (e.g. time and parental investment) were still disproportionately carried by one parent, which was usually the mother. Legislation to equalize or compensate these social costs in a new 'parenthood contract' became obvious and necessary (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995).

In today's families, fathers are more involved in their children's lives as ever before (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009). The detraditionalization of gender roles created a new normative climate in which the two biological parents were seen as ultimately responsible for raising their children (van Krieken, 2005). Modern custody legislations state that no custody presumption should be given solely on the basis of gender (Maccoby & Mnookin,

1992). Instead, the child's best interest serves as reference point in a legal climate promoting case-by-case custody decisions. Most countries have incorporated joint legal and joint physical custody into their legislations. Joint legal custody means that both parents have the right to make important decisions concerning the child, even though residence is only with one parent (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Joint physical custody refers to the situation in which children live a substantial amount of time in both parents' households and implies that father and mother should have equivalent roles.

Currently, the 'permanent parental responsibility' principle is widely accepted in our society and is independent upon the co-existence of the partner relationship. After separation, the parental couple is supposed to survive the conjugal couple (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). However, this paradoxical process of dissociating the parental from the conjugal axis may be difficult and unrealistic (Marquet, 2005; Parlevliet, 1985). Parental roles and responsibilities must be redefined. Two roles that used to be interwoven must be uncoupled. Terminating the one while maintaining the other is unfamiliar terrain which many parents are not prepared to handle (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Instead of psychologically separating from each other, the divorcing couple is forced to keep the co-parental relationship as harmonious as possible, in the child's best interest. This may hinder the ex-partners' transformation from being a couple to living their life separately from each other. As Marquet (2005) states: "the principle of the parental couple's indissolubility, in encouraging the couple's continuity at all cost, could smother the transformations that the shift from parent to co-parent requires"

1.4 RECENT TRENDS IN BELGIAN CHILD CUSTODY LEGISLATION

1.4.1 Joint legal custody

In Belgium, like in most other Western countries, sole physical custody was the standard during the largest part of the 20th century. After divorce, one parent received custody rights over the children, the other visitation rights. The custodial parent was responsible for all major decisions pertaining to the child, like education, medical issues, housing,... The visiting parent had no parental rights. Because of the maternal presumption and the 'tender-years' doctrine, children were usually placed under the custody of the mother, where they lived for the majority of their childhood. They typically visited their father one weekend every fortnight.

The principle of joint legal custody was legally rooted within the law of April 13th, 1995.² This law stipulated that both parents were responsible, in proportion to their own means, for housing, living costs, custody, parenting and the education of their children; and came into force on the 3rd of June 1995 (Audoore, 2012). The shared parental responsibility applied to all sorts

² In Dutch: "Wet betreffende de gezamenlijke uitoefening van het ouderlijk gezag." Published in the Belgian Official Gazette (*Belgisch Staatsblad*) on May, 24th, 1995.

of parents: the married, the cohabiting, the divorced, etc. Because both parents received parental rights, the terms 'custody' and 'visitation' were replaced by 'residence' and 'contact' (van Krieken, 2005). The law of 1995 did not stipulate preferences regarding the child's residence. The only guideline was the child's best interest, a principle often attacked by its ambiguous character and its lack of precision (Riggs, 2005; Warshak, 1986, 2007). In reality, many judges relied on the prevailing standards from before the legislative change and mothers remained very often the main residential parent.

1.4.2 Joint physical custody

The next important change in custody legislation occurred more than 10 years later, with the law of July 18th, 2006 that privileged the shared residence of the child.³ This law became effective on September 14th 2006 (for an overview see Martens, 2007 and Vanbockrijck, 2009) and installed the principle of joint physical custody, mainly under pressure from the lobbying work of father rights groups (Torfs, 2011). The new law had two important goals: promoting joint physical custody as the default residential arrangement after divorce and improving the regulations about handing over children to the other parent (Aps, 2007). The legal recommendation for joint physical custody served mainly to reduce the variability in residential arrangements by increasing its predictability in order to lessen the number of disputes in court (Aps, 2007; Vanbockrijck, 2009; Vasseur, 2006). In fact, the law did not make any substantial change to the former situation. First of all, the judge has to ratify an agreement worked out by the parents, unless it is incompatible with the child's best interest (Martens, 2007; Vanbockrijck, 2009). The legislation considers a mutual supported arrangement always as the best option for children. When there is no agreement, the option of joint physical custody must be primordially investigated by the judge when one parent has requested it. After that, joint physical custody can be imposed by the judge, even despite the objections of one parent. The judge must always consider the child's best interest and formulate a solid motivation for his decision against or in favour of joint physical custody (Aps, 2007).

An important innovation of the 2006 law is that both the interests of the child *and* those of the parents became equally important criteria for custody decisions (Torfs, 2011; Vanbockrijck, 2009). Among the parents' best interests, Torfs (2011) understands the right to have contact with the child, to maintain a social life and to build a professional career. The right to continue the contact with both parents serves the child's best interest. The Convention of the Rights of the Child (article 9:3) mentions that "States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis." (<http://www.hrweb.org-/legal/child.html>). The fact that both parental and children's rights need to be protected is a typical characteristic of the 'negotiation

3 In Dutch: "Wet tot het bevoorrechten van een gelijkmatig verdeelde huisvesting van het kind van wie de ouders gescheiden zijn en tot regeling van de gedwongen tenuitvoerlegging inzake huisvesting van het kind". Published in the Belgian Official Gazette (*Belgisch Staatsblad*) on September, 4th, 2006.

family' (Wynants, Willemen, Guislain, & Marquet, 2009). Family welfare is no longer focused on the family system as a whole but on the individual actors. A co-parenting model corresponds to the idea of personal fulfilment and psychological need satisfaction of all individual members of the family (Marquet, 2005).

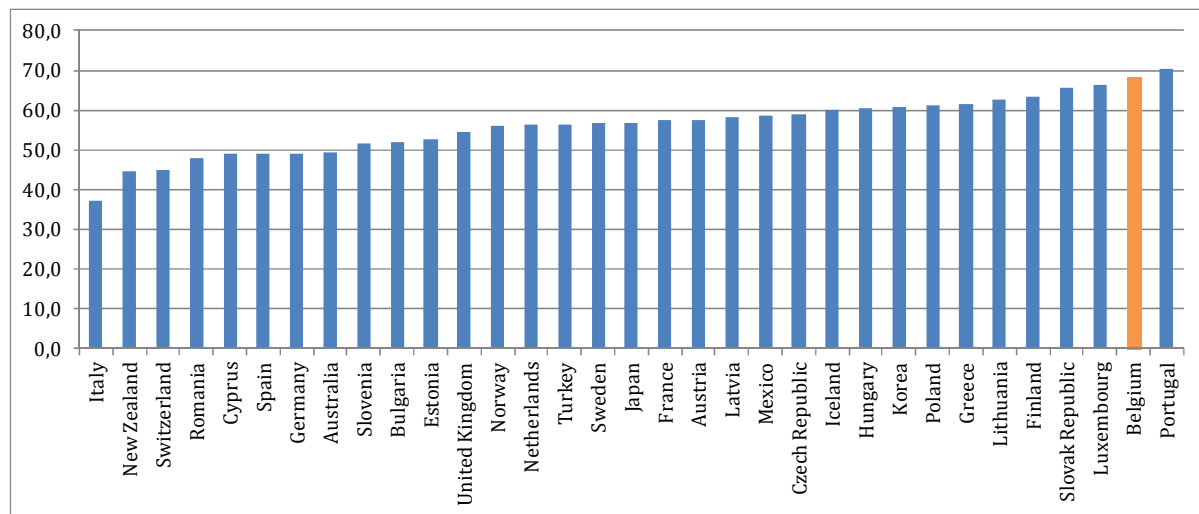
In addition to the best interests of the child and the parents, the law also prescribes that the 'actual circumstances' of each case should be considered when deciding on the residential arrangement. These actual circumstances are not defined, rather they are subject to the personal interpretation of the judge. Jurisprudence research indicates that the factors that are most often considered are the age of the child, the geographical distance between parents, the working schedules of the parents, the preference of the children, and the level of parental agreement (Hemelseoen, 2012b; Vanbockrijk, 2009).

1.5 FAMILY DISSOLUTION AND CHILDREN

The changes that occurred during the SDT also transformed the family life of children significantly. Although the 'traditional' two-parent family is still the dominant configuration in which children grow up, alternative family types are gaining ground (Lodewijckx, 2005a). For children, it has become quite uncertain to predict whether their family will continue to exist. As Jensen and McKee (2003, p.11) state it "Divorce and separation have altered the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life for children". Four important trends are described in this section: more children experience parental divorce or separation, more children are born to unmarried mothers, more children grow up in alternative family types, and more children live in bi-nuclear households.

Every year, a high proportion of Belgian children experience a parental divorce or separation. In 2010, approximately 68% of Belgian divorces involved children: 23% involved one child, 30% two children and 15% three or more children (Corijn, 2005b; Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, 2011). In an international context, this figure is far above the average. Figure 3 shows that Belgium has a very high proportion of divorces involving children, by which it takes (again) a leading position in the world. In absolute figures, approximately 40000 Belgian children and adolescents are involved in a parental divorce annually. When we take into account that divorce procedures can last for several years, the actual number of children yearly involved is much higher. Moreover, separations (without formerly being married) are not included in these figures. When we consider the entire duration of childhood, the figures are even more striking. Lodewijckx (2005) estimated that more than 20% of children in the Flemish Region will have experienced a parental divorce by the time they have reached the age of 18 (figure for 2004). In absolute numbers, this corresponds to 250000 children.

Figure 3 Proportion of divorces involving children, per country (2007, or latest available)



Source: Corijn, 2005b; Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie, 2011; OECD, 2012

The likelihood that children have experienced a parental divorce or separation increases with their age: from 10% among the 0-2 year old children up to 26% for the 12-17 year olds (Lodewijckx, 2005b). Younger children experienced more often a separation of their parents, older children more often a legal divorce. This is related to the trend for more children to be born outside marriage. In 1970, 3% of children were born in unmarried unions while this figure increases to 28% for the children born in 2000, and 50% for the children born in 2011 (Eurostat, 2013). Belgian children born in unmarried unions have a higher chance of experiencing a parental separation than children born in married unions (Lodewijckx, 2005b).

A turbulent family life can be damaging for the development of children (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). After divorce, children and parents need to find a new equilibrium, a new 'ready state' (Robinson, Butler, Scanlan, Douglas, & Murch, 2003). Nevertheless, divorce is seldom an end point, but rather one step in a series of family transitions (Hetherington, 1989). Lodewijckx (2005) estimated that 26% of children lived in a stepfamily only one year after the parental divorce. Four years after the parental divorce, this figure had increased to 44%. Because the average marriage duration of divorced couples tends to decrease, so does the average age at which children experience a parental divorce. Consequently, children's chances to live in a stepfamily, and to experience a second family dissolution, grows (Lodewijckx, 2005a). This trend is reinforced by the fact that post-marital cohabitation is gradually replacing remarriage (Corijn, 2013). Because unmarried unions are relatively fragile (Corijn & Lodewijckx, 2009; Pasteels et al., in press), the proportion of children experiencing consecutive family transitions is expected to rise in the near future.

Because a growing number of parents share the care of the children after break-up, many children live alternately in two parental households. Unfortunately, no official figures are available 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 and scholars have no precise information on the residential arrangements of divorced families, nor on the consequences of these arrangements for children and parents.

1.6 DO CHILDREN PAY THE PRICE OF INDIVIDUALIZATION?

The question is how a predominant striving for self-fulfilment and parental equality can be reconciled with the obligations of responsible parenthood (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995; Marquet, 2005). It is clear that there may sometimes be a mismatch between the interests of children and their parents. Parents are able to (re)constitute their families according to their desiderates, but children may need these families to develop. As stated by Friedman: “When parents divorce, they destroy the pool from which the child’s well-being has previously been provided” (Friedman, 1995, p.11).

The consequences for the younger generation must be seen in the light of changing power balances between parents and children. It is argued that children have lost their ‘symbolic power’, i.e. their central position within the family; (Jensen, 2003; Toulemon, 1995). Today, the love and commitment between parents, rather than the presence of children, is the crucial criterion for the continuation of the partner relationship. Thus, children have been moved ‘from the centre towards the periphery’ of family life (Jensen, 2003). Van de Kaa (1987) described this already in 1987 as an evolution from an era of ‘the king-child with parents’ to that of the ‘king-pair with a child’. It seems a striking paradox that, in times where child welfare is placed high on the policy agenda, the child is diminishing as a barrier to divorce.

The gradual power loss of children was reinforced by the emergence of the “permanent parental responsibility” principle. While the marital bond became more fragile and conditional during the past decades, the parental bond evolved in the exact opposite direction. In a custody model that grants parental rights to only one parent, breaking-up involves a high chance that the other parent loses touch with the child. In a permanent parenting model, when children of divorced parents increasingly grow up in two parental households, children can be ‘easily’ divided and parent-child relationships can be continued. Joint physical custody is grounded in two concepts that became very essential in the modern (post-divorce) family: fairness and gender equality (Smart, 2004; Wade & Smart, 2003). Dividing assets (including children) equally between parents after divorce became very important in a society that puts parental equality high on its priority list. And although most parents operate under the label of the ‘child’s best interest’, they might also be driven by self-interest (Haugen, 2010).

According to Jensen (2009), it is time to ask whether the welfare of children is sacrificed for a ‘fair share’ between parents. Living in two houses calls for a great deal of flexibility from the children involved and can be emotionally demanding. Many children do not want their parents

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to have such a tight grip over their time. According to Smart (2004), children do not see their family as a place of legal rights, but as an arena of feelings, emotions and 'feeling at home'. For children, 'being divided' means a diffusion of family life at two different locations. It means replacing the triadic relationship between child, mother and father to dyadic relationships with each parent separately. "The parental 'we' is substituted for by the individual mother and father, just as freedom from collective dependence is fostered in an individualized society" (Jensen, 2009, p.133). Wade and Smart (2003) conducted conversational interviews with children in four primary schools in Yorkshire to really grasp how it felt like to live in two homes. They concluded that children in joint physical custody were confronted with specific and additional practical and emotional demands.

Children became increasingly aware of the effort involved in maintaining a life across two households and their own contribution to this effort sometimes felt disproportionate. They were the ones who were constantly moving and however committed they were to living with both parents, they found it hard work. Bags had to be packed and unpacked, school books and games kit had to be organized so that they were at the right home at the right time, and homework had to be co-ordinated with changeovers. The constant displacements were demanding and tiring. 'I never actually feel like I just sit down and relax totally', said one child, 'I always seem to be doing something'. [...] But it was not simply that moving backwards and forwards was demanding of children's time and energy. It could be emotionally draining too. Changeovers were often trigger points for intense feelings of irritation or sadness, and children needed time to adjust. (Wade & Smart, 2003, p. 113-114).

But commuting between households could also prepare children for the new challenges in a postmodern society. Bauman (2000) argues that contemporary societies, in which a revenge of nomadism over the principle of settlement is witnessed, are characterized by the power of mobility and flexibility. To paraphrase Bauman, the lighter, the smaller, the more portable,... the better (Bauman, 2000). The relationship between time and space has changed. In such a 'liquid modernity', the image of children as 'family nomads' may represent their socialization into an adult society in need of people 'lighter on their feet' (Bauman, 2001, as cited in Jensen, 2009, p.133).

These considerations all point to the need to investigate the phenomenon of joint physical custody, with special attention for children, the most vulnerable members of the family. Ignoring the perspective of children would neglect their agency, their morality, their narrative capacity, and their ability to give meaning to the world in which they live (Smart et al., 2001).

1.7 CHILDREN'S CUSTODY ARRANGEMENTS AND POST-DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT: STATE-OF-THE-ART

This section describes the conceptual framework in which the relationship between children's custody arrangements and the well-being of parents and children can be explained. No specific theories have been developed particularly in the domain of custody arrangements. Therefore, we have to deductively reason from theories that were developed to explain adjustment to divorce. A detailed literature review is not provided here, because it is included in the empirical chapters. Although the term 'divorce' is typically used, we also refer to separation (i.e. parental break-up of unmarried couples) because we have no reason to assume that the processes described in this section are significantly different according to union type (Dronkers, 2013).

1.7.1 The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective

Broad generalist theories about the consequences of divorce for adults and children have not been developed (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Davies & Cummings, 1994). Many micro-sociological theories (better characterized as conceptual frameworks) have been developed, such as the cumulative stress theory (Fischer, 2004; Kalter, Kloner, Schreier, & Okla, 1989; Lowery & Settle, 1985), the parental conflict theory (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Fischer, 2004), the multiple transition perspective (Amato, 2010) and the economic disadvantage theory (Fischer, 2004). An excellent overview on these conceptual frameworks is given by Amato (2000) and Van Peer (2007).

Because stress frameworks dominate the research literature, Amato integrated several of these into his *divorce-stress-adjustment perspective* (Amato, 2000). This perspective describes individual adjustment to divorce as a function of the number of stressors (also called mediators) that arise from the divorce and the presence of protective factors (also called moderators). Divorce is not treated as a discrete event, but as a process that starts years before the legal divorce and lasts for many years afterwards.

Stressors for children may differ from stressors for parents. For instance, a new partner may bring happiness for a divorced parent, but could be an additional source of strain for children. Other stressors leading to child maladjustment are exposure to parental conflict (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Demo & Acock, 1996; Dronkers, 1995; Troxel & Matthews, 2004; Van Peer, Bastait, & Mortelmans, 2012), a deteriorating relationship with the non-residential parent (Sobolewski & Amato, 2007), and increased family complexity by the formation of stepfamilies. These stressors fulfil a mediating role and may help explain why children of divorced parents have lower subjective well-being than children from intact two-parent families (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Van Peer et al., 2011). There is evidence that these effects are not temporarily, but can have long-term consequences persisting at least until early adulthood (Amato & Keith, 1991; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998; Glenn & Kramer, 1985). Also parents are confronted with divorce-induced

stressors that may impact their well-being negatively. Residential parents (mostly mothers) have to carry alone the burden of parenthood and may experience a deterioration of their economic situation (Booth & Amato, 1991; Bracke, 1998; Fokkema & Dykstra, 2001). Non-residential parents (mostly fathers) may lose contact with their children, and their parental role can become threatened (Van Peer, 2007).

The *divorce-stress-adjustment perspective* also draws attention to protective factors, making some children and parents more or less vulnerable than others as they cope with divorce. Amato (2000) calls them 'shock absorbers' and distinguishes between demographical variables (e.g. gender, age), cultural variables (education, norms), interpersonal variables (e.g. social support), and intrapersonal variables (e.g. coping strategies, self-efficacy).

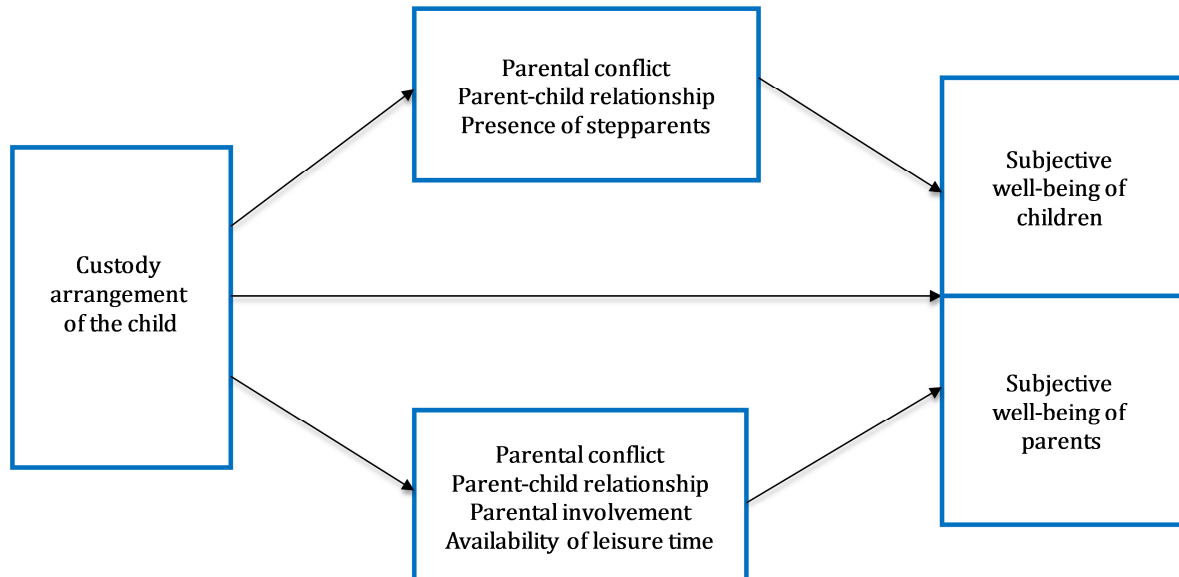
1.7.2 Custody arrangements and the adjustment of children and parents

1.7.2.1 Mediating processes

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective has considerable potential to help explain how custody arrangements of children can affect children and parents after divorce. This is because custody arrangements are related to the potential stressors (*mediators*) that may arise from a divorce (Figure 4).

For children, joint physical custody may on the one hand limit the number of stressors, compared to a sole custody arrangement, because it deals with the potential loss of resources after divorce (Breivik & Olweus, 2006). This can be explained by the parental absence perspective, which argues that an intact two parent family is the best environment for children because parents are seen as important resources for children (Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991a; Benjamin & Irving, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1992). When children experience a parental divorce, and lose contact with their non-residential parent, their well-being could be impaired because of socialization deficits, reduced parental attention, lack of paternal role models and reduced family income (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hakvoort, Bos, Van Balen, & Hermanns, 2011). When children live with both parents alternately after divorce, they are able to maintain solid parent-child relationships. To this end, joint physical custody is able to reduce changes in both structural and functional characteristics of the family. On the other hand, joint physical custody could increase the exposure to divorce-induced stressors for children. Because the parental alliance among co-parents continues after divorce (Whiteside, 1998), additional opportunities for parental discord could arise (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Also, joint physical custody can raise the family complexity for children, because it increases the chances of living together with stepparents and stepsiblings, at two different homes. Moreover, the frequent movements and continuous adaptation to both households may be a stressor in itself (Jensen, 2009).

Figure 4 Mediating variables between children's custody arrangements and the subjective well-being of children and parents



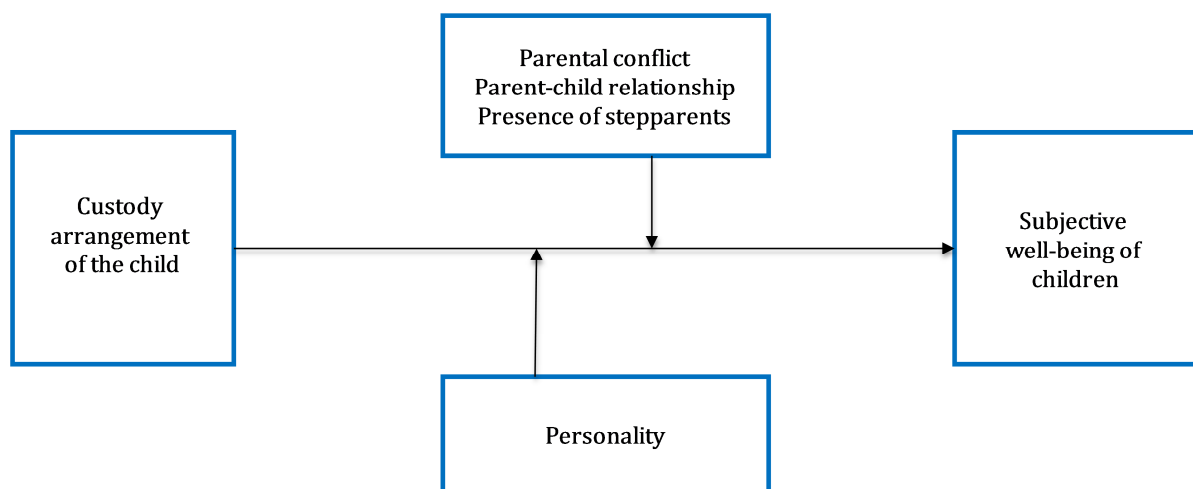
For parents, joint physical custody is also likely to influence stressors arising from the divorce in two ways. On the one hand, joint physical custody parents maintain a closer relationship with their children and are more involved in their children's lives than non-residential parents. The more equal distribution of child-rearing tasks permits both parents to maintain a professional career and to have more available leisure time (Gunnée & Braver, 2001). On the other hand, continued parental conflicts may be a risk factor of joint physical custody leading to lower subjective well-being.

1.7.2.2 Moderating processes

The mediating variables described above could function as *moderating* variables as well (Figure 5). According to the family systems theory, a family consists of several interconnected subsystems: the parental subsystem, the parent-child subsystem, the mother-father-child-subsystem, and the sibling subsystem (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Cox & Paley, 2003; O'Connor, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1997; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). Spill-over processes exist between the several subsystems. Relational processes in one subsystem are likely to interact with processes in other subsystems (Hetherington et al., 1992). For instance, parental conflict may negatively influence the quality of the parent-child relationship. It is therefore that families with higher parental discord are often characterized by weaker parent-child ties (Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). In case of divorce, the different family subsystems become more detached from each other and spill-over effects may be weaker. This is particularly the case when children

reside with one parent, and when there is little interaction between parents. In such a situation, family processes in one subsystem are less likely to influence the well-being of individuals and family processes in other subsystems. But joint physical custody families are disrupted to a lesser extent: children have more contact with both parents and ex-spouses are supposed to have more frequent interaction. Therefore, spill-over processes may become more likely again. For instance, children in joint physical custody situations may be more negatively affected by parental conflict than children in sole custody situations, simply because they feel caught in the middle of these conflicts (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989). The quality of the parent-child relationship may have a stronger positive impact on the subjective well-being of children, when children live together with this parent. Also, the association between the presence of stepfamily members and child well-being is likely to be moderated according to whether children live together with these stepfamily members or not (thus by their custody arrangement).

Figure 5 Moderating variables for the relationship between children's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being

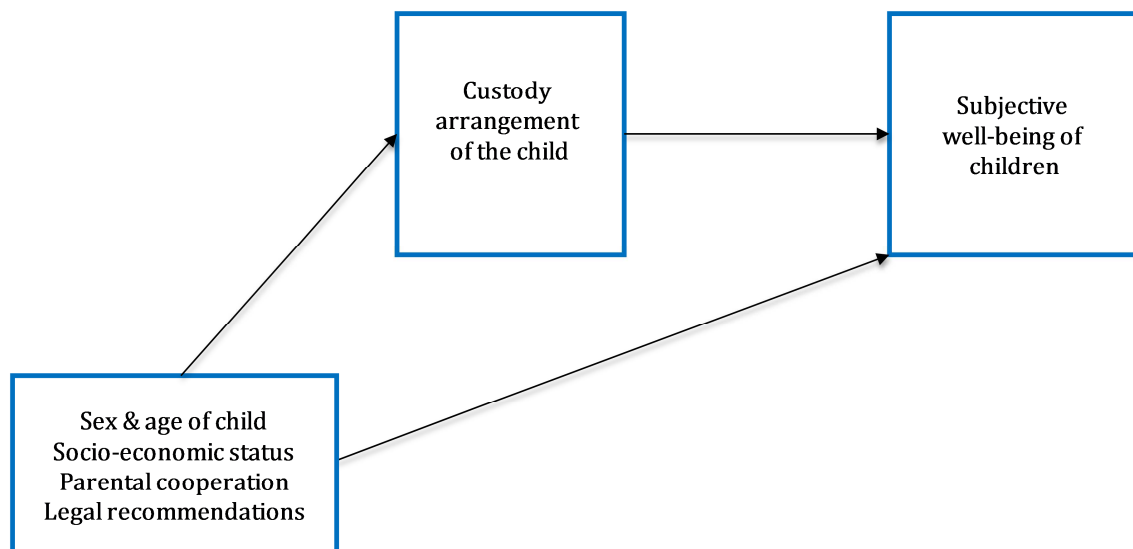


Besides these interpersonal and structural factors, intrapersonal characteristics also can explain variability in the way that children cope with stressful situations (Bray, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). An oft-neglected variable in sociological research is the child's temperament, which is the genetic blueprint for its later personality (Prior, Sanson, Smart, & Oberklaid, 2000). It is known that children with an easy temperament (e.g. sociable) are more adaptable to change and are more likely to elicit positive responses from their environment than temperamentally difficult children (Hetherington, 1989; Troxel & Matthews, 2004). Therefore, it can be expected that the personality of children will moderate the association between their custody arrangement and the psychological well-being.

1.7.2.3 Selection processes

Bauserman's (2002) meta-analysis of numerous studies (mostly conducted in the 1980's and 1990's) on child custody and child well-being led to a positive evaluation of joint physical custody. However, this conclusion may be biased by self-selection mechanisms whereby upper-class and highly educated couples were overrepresented in joint physical custody arrangements (Bauserman, 2002; Fehlbeg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Therefore, the supposed positive effects of joint physical custody on children and adults could be partially attributable to these pre-divorce characteristics, rather than being the result of the joint physical custody condition itself (Figure 6). Moreover, most of the studies reviewed by Bauserman were conducted in a legal context without a default presumption for joint physical custody. Joint physical custody usually was the result of a mutually agreed parental decision and was seldom imposed by a judge. Research evidence from Australia (Fehlbeg et al., 2011) and Sweden (Singer, 2008) suggest that, when there is a legal presumption for joint physical custody, this custody option is less likely to be restricted to cases where parents mutually agree, are highly cooperative and well-to-do. If joint physical custody is increasingly adopted by or imposed on a more heterogeneous group, then generalizations based on earlier studies may no longer apply to the entire population of divorced parents.

Figure 6 Selection processes for the relationship between children's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being



1.7.3 Shortcomings in custody research

Although there are quite a number of prior studies on the relationship between children's custody arrangements and their well-being, a substantial proportion of these share several weaknesses or limitations. We have identified the most common of these and discuss them in the remainder of this section.

First, there is no clear *definition* of joint physical custody. Joint legal and joint physical custody are often mixed up in research results. Also many studies fail to make comparisons with sole custody groups. In Belgium, custody arrangements of children are not registered formally, and as consequence research on custody arrangements must rely on survey data. Under these circumstances, the need for proper definition and valid and reliable measurement is even stronger. A standardized method for measuring custody arrangements, based on a substantively-informed definition, could enhance cross-national comparisons.

Next, criticisms have been raised about the *methodology that researchers have employed*. Small and convenience samples create problems for generalising results and heterogeneous study designs harm the comparability and validity (Warshak, 1986). Few statistical tests are used, in many of the descriptive or single method studies that are reported, and there is a relative paucity of standardized instruments.

There is also an absence of a *multi-actor approach* in most studies dealing with custody arrangements. The parental point of view has received little attention in the past because the focus was mainly on children. If parental outcomes were taken into account, these studies often focused on fathers, while mothers were neglected (King & Sobolewski, 2006).

Finally, there is too much focus on grand means by simply comparing custody arrangements. Many scholars in the custody research have urged for incorporating *intermediating variables* to identify for which children joint custody may be beneficial and for which not (Mcintosh, 2009, p.398).

The studies presented in this research try to overcome most of the shortcomings mentioned above.

1.8 THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The present research is a collection of seven studies dealing with joint physical custody in Flanders. A multi-actor approach is used, to the extent that child outcomes, as well as mother and father outcomes, are explored. The research questions will be answered by means of data from two large-scale, cross-sectional surveys, which will be described in great detail in chapter 2.

Three types of research questions are handled in this study: methodological research questions (chapter 3), demographic/descriptive research questions (chapters 4 and 5) and family sociological research questions (chapters 6 through 9).

Chapter 3 describes the theoretical and empirical validation of the residential calendar, a new instrument to measure custody arrangements. This new instrument provides an answer to the need for a standardized instrument for measuring custody arrangements. The residential calendar enables us to offer a clear definition of joint physical custody, which is consistently used throughout all other studies included in this research.

In chapter 4, the residential calendar is used to estimate incidence figures of physical custody arrangements among adolescents with divorced parents in Flanders. Moreover, chapter 4 includes an examination of whether the custody arrangements of children are associated with their chances of living together with stepparents in the paternal and maternal household.

Selection problems are inherent to cross-sectional studies. Families with joint physical custody might differ from sole custody families on certain characteristics. Moreover, the socio-demographic profile of joint physical custody families may have changed over time, through custody law modifications. In chapter 5, the characteristics of joint physical custody families are explored. Moreover, we examine whether this profile had changed over time. These questions will be explored in the light of three distinct time periods, marked off by two important legislative changes in Belgium (1995 and 2006). This time frame provides us a natural experiment to investigate the impact of legislative changes on post-divorce family practices.

The next two studies investigate the association between children's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being, measured by life satisfaction, mastery and depressive feelings. We will not simply compare children's well-being in different custody arrangements, but also delineate and estimate models that include mediating and moderating factors. In chapter 6, the focus turns to family process variables, like parental conflict, the parent-child relationship, and the presence of stepparents. The same research questions are addressed with two different data sources to cross validate the findings. Children's personality, a quite recently introduced variable in sociological research is the focus of chapter 7.

The two last chapters investigate the association between children's custody arrangements and the well-being of parents. It is very likely that a shift from mother custody towards joint physical custody has yielded different consequences for mothers and fathers. The parental standpoint was often neglected in earlier studies on this topic, probably because of the primary emphasis on the child's best interest in most countries' custody legislations. In Belgium, the interests of children and parents became equally important criteria since 2006. Therefore, it may be relevant, in particular from a policy point of view, to investigate parental outcomes of joint physical custody arrangements in Flanders. The study presented in chapter 8 explores the social life of divorced parents in relation to the custody arrangement of their children. In chapter 9, the

Chapter 1 Introduction

subjective well-being of parents is investigated. The same well-being measures as for children (i.e. self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and depressive feelings) are considered. Two mediating paths will be explored: the level of parent-child involvement and the leisure time activities of divorced parents.

Chapter 10 puts the findings of the studies in a broader perspective. Given the multi-actor dimension of the project, the experiences and outcomes for children, mothers and fathers are all considered.

Because this work is a collection of research articles, some repetition is unavoidable, particularly in the different introductory sections of chapter 3 through 9. The majority of the studies have been presented to the international scientific community during meetings at international conferences. Four chapters (3 through 6) have been published in international peer-reviewed journals. Chapter 8 is published in a Dutch peer-reviewed journal and submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal. Chapters 7 and 9 are also submitted to international peer-reviewed journals. The correct references to the studies and the co-authors who made significant contributions are mentioned on the title page of each chapter.

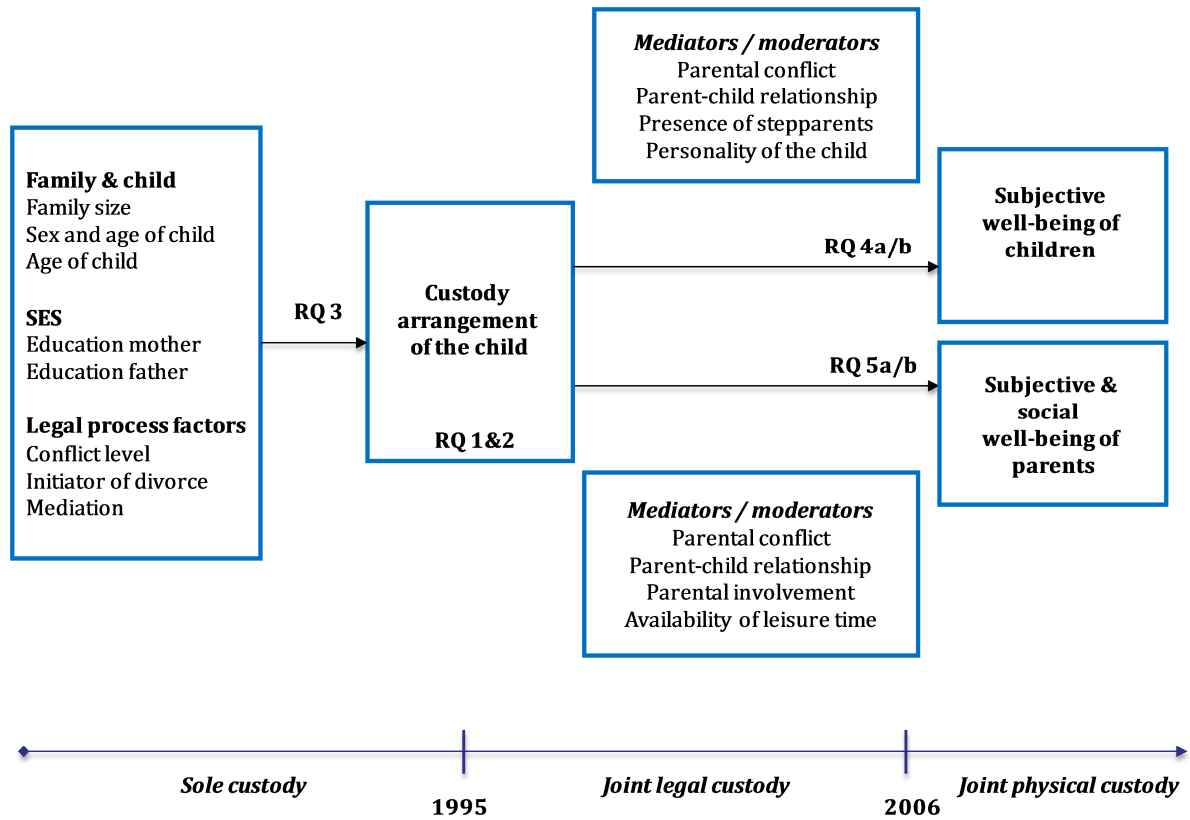
The seven studies presented here are all related to post-divorce custody arrangements but cover a broad range of specific research topics. There are several kinds of research questions, there is attention for different actors and for several types of mediating and moderating factors. Because of this wide scope, several research topics are touched upon only briefly, instead of being analysed in-depth and to the bone. As a consequence, there is more emphasis on the structural component of joint physical custody and less on factors related to the process of co-parenting.

Table 1 outlines the structure of the present research and the research question that are covered in each research chapter. The conceptual scheme in Figure 7 shows how the several research questions are embedded into our conceptual framework.

Table 1 Overview of chapters and research questions

Chapter	Title	Research questions
1	Introduction	
2	Data	
3	Measuring residential arrangements with the residential calendar.	RQ 1: How can custody arrangements adequately be measured?
4	Post-divorce custody arrangements and binuclear family structures of Flemish adolescents	RQ 2: What is the incidence of joint physical custody in Flanders?
5	Characteristics of joint physical custody families in Flanders	RQ 3: What are the characteristics of Flemish joint physical custody families? Was there an evolution over time?
6	Children's custody arrangements and their well-being: the role of family process variables	RQ 4a: What is the role of family process variables (parent-child relationship, parental conflict, the presence of stepfamily members) in the association between children's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being?
7	Custody arrangements, personality, and children's subjective well-being	RQ 4b: What is the role of children's personality in the association between children's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being?
8	The social life of divorced parents: Do custody arrangements make a difference?	RQ 5a: What is the association between children's custody arrangements and the social life of divorced parents?
9	Involved fathers, liberated mothers? Joint physical custody and the well-being of divorced parents	RQ 5b: What is the association between children's custody arrangements and the subjective well-being of divorced parents?
10	Conclusion	

Figure 7 Conceptual scheme



Chapter 2

Data

2 Data

This research makes use of two Flemish data sources: Divorce in Flanders (DiF) and the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (LAFS). The main goal, the study design, and the data collection of both studies will be described in this chapter. There is also attention for the specific strengths and weaknesses of each data source in answering the specific research questions addressed in this research.

2.1 DIVORCE IN FLANDERS (DiF)

2.1.1 Start of the DiF-project

Several years ago, Flanders was lagging behind with regard to scientific evidence on divorce and relationship dissolution (Mortelmans & Pasteels, 2011). Most Belgian and Flemish surveys containing information on the family situation and family processes (e.g. NEGOS, PSBH, GGPS) suffered from one main drawback: the number of ever-divorced persons was insufficient to allow a deep investigation of divorce and relationship dissolution. Therefore, the inter-university consortium *Scheiding in Vlaanderen (Divorce in Flanders)* was established in 2006 as a cooperation between four Flemish universities and the Research Centre of the Flemish Government. The main purpose of DiF was to thoroughly investigate the causes, consequences, and the process of divorce, by means of a large-scale representative survey that oversampled ever-divorced persons. The project had also an important policy function: improving the quality of life of all actors involved in a divorce, ameliorating the quality of social services, and establishing solid (family) policy by formulating adequate societal responses.

Basically, DiF refers to two consecutive research projects that were funded by the government agency for Innovation by Science and Technology (IWT) in the grant programme Strategic Basic Research (SBO). The first research project *Divorce and separation in Flanders. Risk factors, consequences and policy implications* (also DiF 1) was a data collection project which was running from mid 2007 until the end of 2010. The second research project, entitled *Divorce and separation in Flanders. An Analysis of Risk and Enabling Factors, Consequences and policy implications* (also DiF 2), is a data analyses project and is still running. It started in August 2010 and will run until July 2014.

Professor Dimitri Mortelmans (University of Antwerp) was the main supervisor of DiF. Co-supervisors of this project were Professor Koen Matthijs (KU Leuven), professor Piet Bracke (Ghent University), professor Jan Van Bavel (Free University of Brussels, KU Leuven) and Christine Van Peer (Research Centre of the Flemish Government). Two advisory partners in the field of law studies were involved as well: professor Frederik Swennen (University of Antwerp)

and professor Alain Verbeke (KU Leuven). A team of four junior researchers were appointed for the data collection phase (DiF 1). They started their activities in August/September 2007. The research coordination was done by dr. Ann Van Den Troost (KU Leuven), later replaced by Inge Pasteels (University of Antwerp). The junior researchers were: An Katrien Sodermans (KU Leuven), Kim Bastaits (University of Antwerp/Study Centre of the Flemish Government), Belinda Wijckmans (Free University of Brussels) and Elien Colman (University of Ghent). For the data analyses phase (DiF 2), four additional researchers (one for each university) joined the research team. Moreover, two researchers funded by the FWO (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen) and one teaching assistant were involved in the project. Table 2 shows all people that (have) made part of the DiF-research team.

Table 2 The DiF-consortium and the DiF-research team

Partner	Supervision/ Research coordination	Researchers DiF 1 (2007-2010)	Researchers DiF 2 (2010-2014)
KU Leuven	Prof. dr. Koen Matthijs Dr. Ann Van Den Troost	An Katrien Sodermans	An Katrien Sodermans Sarah Dreesen → Graziela Dekeyser → Sarah Botterman Nele Havermans (FWO) Sofie Vanassche (teaching assistant)
University of Ghent	Prof. dr. Piet Bracke	Elien Colman	Elien Colman Sara Symoens Veerle Buffel (FWO)
University of Antwerp	Prof. dr. Dimitri Mortelmans Inge Pasteels	Kim Bastaits	Kim Bastaits Mart Willekens → Griet Vanderheyden
Free University of Brussels	Prof. dr. Jan Van Bavel	Belinda Wijckmans	Belinda Wijckmans → Lyndsay Theunis Maaike Jappens
Research Centre of the Flemish Government	Christine Van Peer	Kim Bastaits	Kim Bastaits

Scientific research only becomes relevant to the broader public when the knowledge and findings coming out of it are clearly transferred. Therefore, an important valorization trajectory was included in the project to optimize the usability and diffusion of the data and results, and to maximize the societal discussion on the risk factors and consequences of divorce. Three strategies were followed to enhance the transferability of knowledge. First, the data was

disseminated for free to academic and non-academic individuals and services. Secondly, different user groups were created with whom the research team collaborated closely during several stages of the project. Third, the results of the project were carried out in several ways. For instance, a comprehensive book 'Scheiding in Vlaanderen' was published in 2011, two large conferences were organized (in 2011 and 2013), several policy papers have been published in the peer-reviewed journal 'Relaties en Nieuwe Gezinnen', and several small-scale seminars have been organized. Finally, research results were regularly communicated on the project's website (<http://www.divorceinlanders.be>) by means of DiF-newsletters and press releases.

2.1.2 Study design

2.1.2.1 Sampling strategy

The sampling frame for DiF was the Belgian National Register (Pasteels, Mortelmans, & Van Bavel, 2011).⁴ The study aimed to obtain a representative sample of marriages (hereafter: the reference marriage) with the following characteristics:

- The data of the reference marriage fell between 1/1/1971 and 31/12/2008
- The reference marriage involved two persons from a different sex
- The reference marriage was the first marriage for both spouses
- Both spouses were minimum 18 and maximum 40 years old at the date of the reference marriage
- Both spouses had the Belgian nationality from birth
- Both spouses were domiciled in the Flemish Region at the date of the reference marriage
- Both spouses had experienced maximum one legal divorce at the sampling date
- Both spouses were alive at the sampling date
- Both spouses were domiciled in the Flemish Region at the sampling date

To obtain this sample of marriages, individuals, and not marriages, were sampled from the National Register. Two stratification criteria were used: the *year* of the reference marriage (between 1971-2008) and the *status* of the reference marriage on the sampling date (intact versus dissolved). The year of the reference marriage was aimed to be proportional to the population figures. The stratification on marriage status was not proportional to the population because this would generate too small a number of ever-divorced individuals to answer the research questions. Therefore, the study aimed at a distribution of 1/3 reference marriages that were still intact and 2/3 that were dissolved at the sampling date. Finally, 17012 persons were selected from the Belgian National Register: 5004 were married and 12008 were divorced

⁴ For a detailed description of the sampling strategy, see Van Bavel (2007).

(Pasteels, Mortelmans, & Van Bavel, 2011). These people made part of 2502 intact reference marriages and 6004 dissolved reference marriages.

2.1.2.2 Multi-actor design

DiF was designed as a multi-actor study, which means that several related actors were included in the research design. The reference marriage of both (ex-)spouses served as the central research entity. Both (ex-)spouses were approached for participation in the study. When the reference marriage was still intact, both partners lived at the same address and formed one household. When the reference marriage was dissolved, both partners lived at different addresses, in two different households.

When studying divorce and its consequences, it is hardly impossible to ignore the child's point of view. Therefore, DiF also aimed at questioning one child of each reference marriage. Preference was given to a resident child instead of an independently living child. This choice was related to the survey method for both types of children. However, not all resident children had equal chance to be selected as target child (see section 2.1.2.4 for a detailed description of the selection of the target child).

Most divorced people engage sooner or later in a new relationship. Because incorporating these new partners' points of view may results in a more complete picture of the post-divorce family, the new (cohabiting) partner was also included in the study. The term 'new partner' is used to emphasize that this person did not belong to the original reference marriage. The selection procedure for new partners is not described in this chapter because this research does not use the data of the new partners.

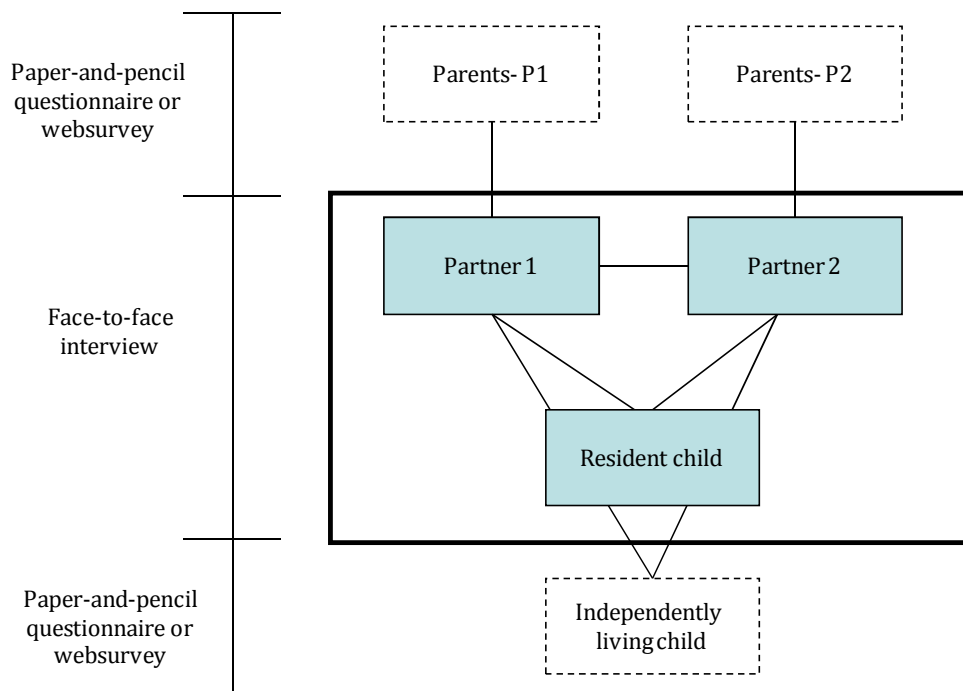
A divorce may also affect both ex-partners' parents. In particular when the couple has children, grandparents may have an important function for their grandchildren and vice versa (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2012). Therefore, DiF also included grandparents in the multi-actor scheme. If possible, one parent from each partner of the reference marriage was questioned. When both (grand)parents were still alive, one of them was randomly chosen. The selection procedure for grandparents is not described in this chapter.

The multi-actor schemes for intact and dissolved reference marriages are respectively shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9.

2.1.2.3 Multi-method design

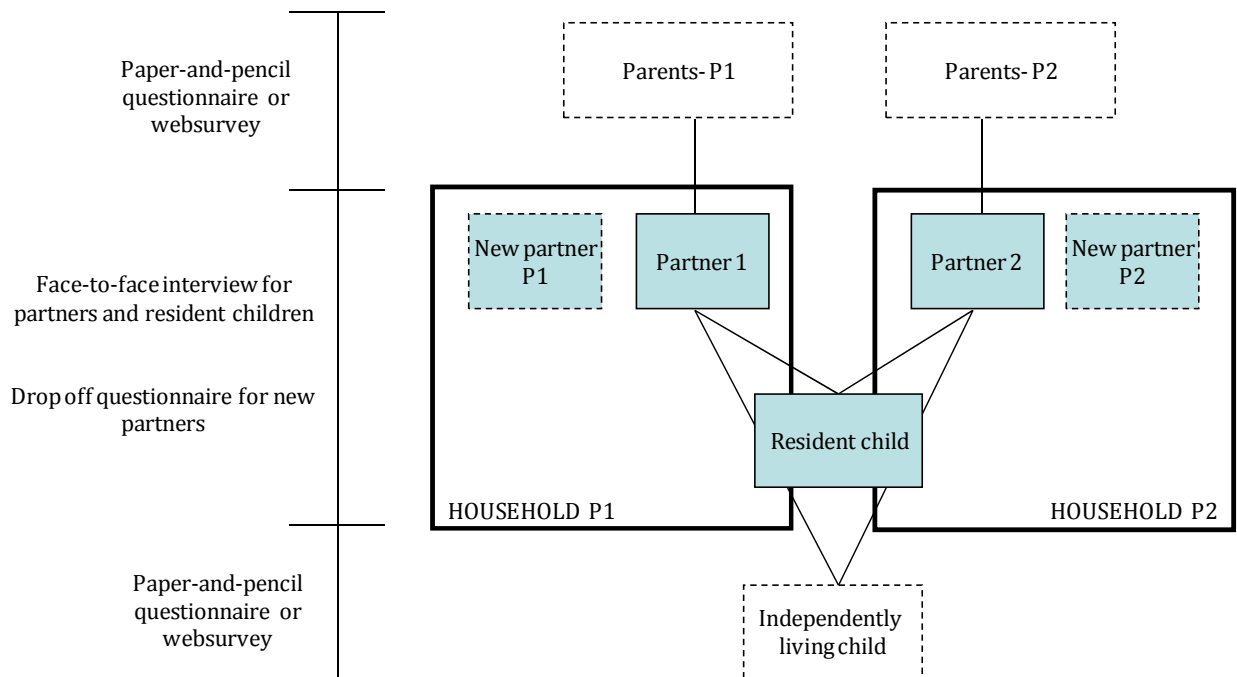
DiF applies a multi-method design, which means that the used survey method varies per actor. Both partners of the reference marriage, as well as the resident child, were interviewed by means of Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI). They were personally approached by an interviewer to participate in the study. For minor children, a parental permission was required beforehand. The structured interviews were conducted within the respondents' households.

Figure 8 Multi-actor scheme for intact marriages



Independently living children, as well as (grand)parents, received a written paper-and-pencil questionnaire, after their address had been provided during the partner interviews. These children had two options to complete their questionnaire: returning the paper questionnaire by post, or completing an online questionnaire, which could be accessed through a personal code.

The new partners received a drop-off questionnaire, which was a paper-and-pencil questionnaire left behind by the interviewer just after the partner interview. This questionnaire had to be returned via normal mail.

Figure 9 Multi-actor scheme for dissolved marriages

2.1.2.4 Selection of the target child

To maximize the value of the multi-actor design, all questioned related to children, for all actors (partners, grandparents, new partners), referred to one specific child. This *target child* was also the child that was approached for an interview or sent a written questionnaire. Target children were always biological or adoptive children of both parents of the reference marriage with identical descent to both parents. In other words: both partners were either the two biological or the two adoptive parents of the child. Not all children had an equal chance to be selected as target child. Several priority rules were implemented to maximize the survey response on the child level. For a correct interpretation of the (extrapolation of) the results presented in this research, it is important to understand how the selection of the target child occurred.⁵ The development of the priority rules relied on two important criteria: the *survey method* for different categories of target children, and *legal procedures for contacting children* in surveys.

The priority rules for target children were in the first place based on the *survey method* for different categories of target children. Two groups of target children could be distinguished according to their living situation: resident target children, who were living in the household of their parents, and independently living target children, who were not living in the household of

⁵ The procedure for the selection of the target child was slightly different for intact and dissolved reference marriages. Because this research only deals with dissolved marriages, the selection procedure for intact reference marriages is not outlined here. For more information, see Pasteels et al. (2011).

their parents. A further distinction could be made within the group of resident target children: those living in the household of both parents (joint physical custody) and those living in the household of one parent (sole physical custody). Resident target children that had reached the age of 10 could be questioned by means of a face-to-face interview. The lower age boundary was included because the questionnaires were not adapted to children below 10 years old. Independently living target children that had reached the age of 18 could be questioned by means of a written paper-and-pencil questionnaire (or an online survey if they preferred so).

Secondly, the priority rules for target children were designed in accordance with the legal *contacting procedure* of children in surveys. In Belgium, both parents are supposed to have joint legal custody rights over their children since 1995. Therefore, important decisions related to the child (e.g. survey participation) should be taken by both parents together. In case of divorce, a third party (e.g. an interviewer) is allowed to believe ‘in good faith’ that a decision taken by one parent is supported by the other parent. However, the legal advisors of the DiF-project recommended to embed an additional question to verify the likelihood that both parents would be on the same line. Therefore, specific rules were designed before minor children could be approached for an interview. The first interviewed partner received the following question “*As mentioned earlier we will also interview other persons. [Name target child] is selected to participate in this research. Is it okay for you that we interview [name target child]? The interview will last approximately 40 minutes.*” If the parent agreed with contacting the target child for an interview, he received a second question: “*Do you think your ex-spouse will object to this?*”. If the answer to this question was ‘no’, the child could be contacted for an interview. If the answer to this question was ‘yes’ or ‘I don’t know’, the procedure for contacting the child was put on hold until the other parent was interviewed and gave his/her explicit permission for contacting the child. If the second partner refused permission or did not participate in the study for another reason, the target child could not be contacted for an interview. When the first parent refused the interview and the second parent was convinced that his/her ex-spouse would object the decision to contact the child, the target child could not be interviewed.

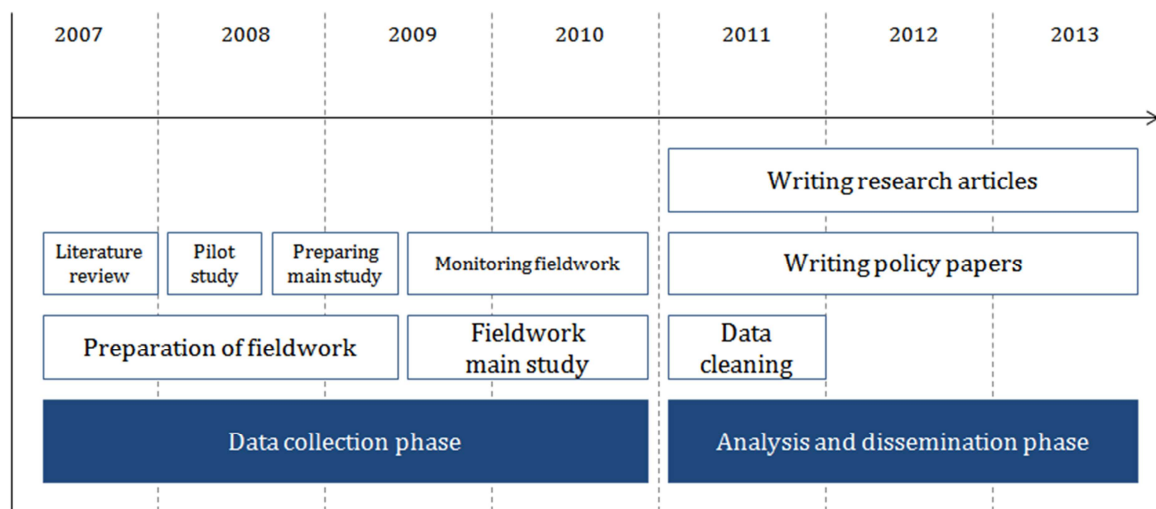
Two important priority rules were applied when selecting a target child: 1) preference was given to children that could be questioned by a personal interview over children that could only be questioned by a paper-and-pencil or online questionnaire, and 2) preference was given to children that were living (either full-time or part-time) in the household of the first interviewed partner over children that lived in the other parent’s household. This resulted in four different groups of target children who received a different priority value. Resident children who had reached the age of 10 and who were living with the first interviewed partner (either in sole or in joint physical custody) received the highest *priority of 1*. Next, resident children who had reached the age of 10 and who were not living with the first interviewed partner (but with the other parent) received priority 2. Independently living target children that reached the age of 18 years old received priority 3. Resident or independently living target children that did not meet the age requirements (named *alternative* target children) received the lowest priority of 4.

Children with a higher priority were selected as target children over children with a lower priority. If several children received the same priority, one child was randomly chosen by a random seed of the computer.

2.1.3 Data collection

Figure 10 gives an overview of all important phases of the DiF-project. Two large phases can be distinguished: a data collection phase (the main goal of DiF 1) and a data analyses and dissemination phase (the main goal of DiF 2). In this section, the data collection phase will be described in detail.

Figure 10 Project overview



2.1.3.1 The fieldwork

In September 2007, the DiF-research team started to prepare the data collection. The first step was a *literature review*, carried out in three ways. Initially, the latest 10 volumes of the most influential sociological journals (e.g. Journal of Marriage and Family, Journal of Family Issues, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships) were screened, in particular those articles about marriage and divorce. Secondly, the covered research topics of several European surveys were inventoried.⁶ Finally, each research member marked out an own research interest and performed a detailed literature review within that field. The purpose of this literature review was to discover neglected research areas and to incorporate similar questions and scales into

⁶ Examples of surveys that were explored are: Generations and Gender Survey (GGPS), Panel Study of Belgian Households (PSBH), European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), European Values Study (EVS), The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), European Social Survey (ESS), Scheiding in Nederland (SIN), Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (PAIRFAM), Sociaal-Culturele Verschuivingen in Vlaanderen (SCV) and Netherlands Kinship Panel study (NKPS).

Chapter 2 Data

the questionnaires to enhance cross-cultural comparisons. Based on the insights from the literature review, and after consultation of several experts and user groups, the questionnaires for the different actors were designed. Two different CAPI-questionnaires were developed (partners and children) and three different paper-and-pencil questionnaires (independently living children, grandparents and new partners). The questionnaires were divided in 13 different content modules (e.g. well-being and health, divorce, relationships, personality). Contact sheets for all actors were also developed.

In the spring of 2008, a *pilot study* was conducted in which 65 partners were interviewed by professional interviewers. The purpose of this pilot study was to evaluate the questionnaire content, the contact sheets, the duration of the interviews and the design of the fieldwork. Afterwards, a debriefing was organized to receive input from the interviewers. The members of the user groups had the opportunity to give feedback on the main findings of the pilot study.

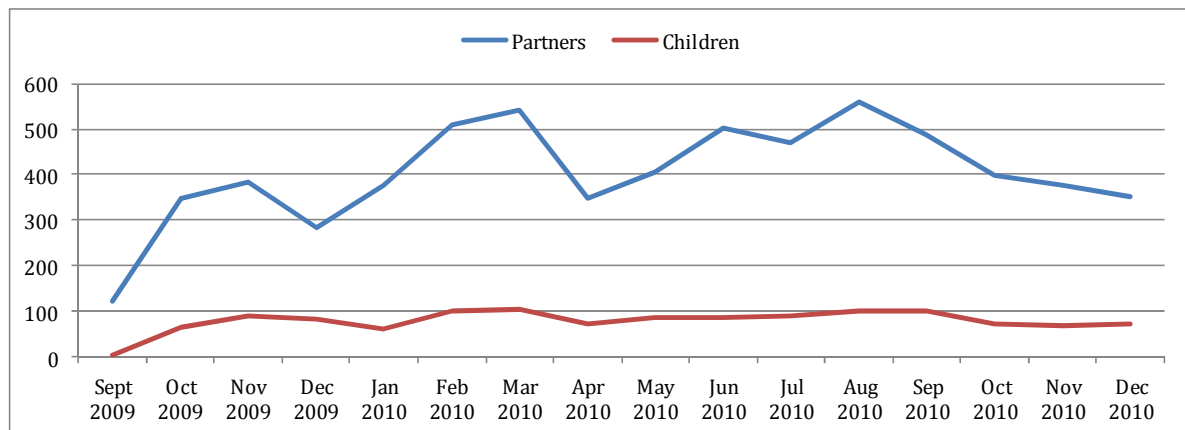
From September 2008 until August 2009, the *main study was prepared*. The most important activities of the research team during this phase involved: adaptation and shortening of the questionnaires, improving the contact sheets, designing the data connection between the several CAPI questionnaires, developing a relational databases management system with a unique identification number for each respondent and reference marriage, writing a data transmission protocol to assure respondents' privacy, writing interviewer manuals, creating answering cards, developing an Access database for monitoring the fieldwork of the written questionnaires, making arrangements with the external fieldwork agency, and organizing several training sessions for interviewers to prepare them for the study.

The main study was conducted between September 2009 and December 2010. The data collection reached cruising speed in January 2010 because the training sessions of the interviewers were lagging behind scheme. The fieldwork was divided in two consecutive steps. Because data transmission was necessary from interview 1 to interview 2 of the same reference marriage (e.g. to transfer information about the selected target child), one partner of each reference marriage was randomly assigned to step 1, the other to step 2. To avoid too long time intervals between interview 1 and interview 2, the fieldwork was also divided in two cycles. Half of the reference marriages were randomly assigned to cycle 1, the other half to cycle 2.

The fieldwork of the face-to-face interviews was conducted by the external agency TNS Dimarso. During the fieldwork phase, the DiF-research team monitored the fieldwork. Each interviewer was asked to record his/her first two interviews. Based on these digital recordings, the research team assessed the interviewers and provided an evaluation report. The research team also attended telephone interviews conducted by the fieldwork agency to control whether respondents were really visited by an interviewer. An intermediate interviewer debriefing was organized to evaluate the progress of the fieldwork. The fieldwork agency provided fieldwork reports on a weekly base and the DiF-research team internally reported weekly statistics about response, interview durations, interviewer performance, etc.

Figure 11 shows the progression of the fieldwork. On average, 404 partners were interviewed on a monthly base. The figure shows large fluctuations in the number of interviews. For the children, the number of interviews per month was more stable with an average of 78 child interviews per month.

Figure 11 Number of conducted partner and child interviews per month (DiF, September 2009 – December 2010)



2.1.3.2 Response

The individual partner response figures are shown in Table 3. Only 90% of the 17012 sampled individuals were eventually contacted by an interviewer. The contact attempts undertaken by the interviewers resulted in 6470 realized partner interviews, which was 38% of the initially sampled individuals and 42% of all contacted individuals. In the end, 1811 married and 4659 divorced individuals were interviewed. The response rate was higher among the dissolved marriages. The refusal rate was higher among the married (50,1%) than among the divorced (36,4%) individuals (Pasteels et al., 2011).

Table 3 Individual response rate of partners (DiF)

	Intact reference marriage	Dissolved reference marriage	Total
N Sampled partners (gross sample)	5004	12008	17012
N Contacted partners	4588	10737	15325
N Interviewed partners (net sample)	1811	4659	6470
% interviewed (of gross sample)	36,2	38,8	38,0
% interviewed (of net sample)	39,5	43,4	42,2

Source: Pasteels et al., 2011

The 6470 interviewed persons that were interviewed were part of 4550 reference marriages, which is 54% of the initially sampled marriages and 59% of the contacted marriages. In total, 1025 references marriages were intact and 3525 references marriages were dissolved. The percentage of interviewed partner dyads was higher among the intact than among the dissolved references marriages. The dyadic response figures are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Dyadic response rates of partners (DiF)

	Intact reference marriage	Dissolved reference marriage	Total
N Sampled reference marriages	2502	6004	8506
N Contacted reference marriages	2294	5371	7665
N Reference marriages with at least 1 interview	1025	3525	4550
% At least 1 interview (of contacted)	44,7	65,6	59,4
N Reference marriages with no interview	1269	1846	3115
% No interviews (of contacted)	55,3	34,4	40,6
N Reference marriages with only 1 interview	239	2391	2630
% 1 interview (of contacted)	10,4	44,5	34,3
N Reference marriages with 2 interviews	786	1134	1920
% 2 interview (of contacted)	34,3	21,1	25,0

Source: Pasteels et al., 2011

For 75% of all divorced reference marriages, a target child was selected. Only in a minority (7,5%) of the cases, this was an alternative target child, which means that no other children met the requirements to be interviewed or could be sent a written questionnaire. In most cases, a resident target child of at least 10 years old (and thus able to participate in an interview) was selected.

Table 5 Selected target children (DiF)

	Intact reference marriage	Dissolved reference marriage	Total
N No target child selected	122	888	1010
N Target child selected	903	2637	3540
% Selected target children	88,1	74,8	77,8
N Alternative target child selected	189	198	387
N Normal target child selected	714	2439	3153
- N Resident	529	1696	2225
- N Independently living	185	743	928

Source: Pasteels et al., 2011

The response figures for the resident target children are presented in Table 6. As explained earlier, two steps were followed before children could be interviewed. First, parents had to give their permission (for minor children). Second, the children had to accept the invitation for a personal interview. A resident target child of at least 10 years old could be selected for 1696 dissolved reference marriages. More than half of these children were minor children and parental permission was granted for only 57% of these children (first level response). The divorced parents that refused to allow a contact attempt for their child mentioned as main reasons “I don’t want to bother my child with an interview” and “the child has difficulties with the divorce”. After the contacting procedures were finished, 1311 children of divorced parents could be contacted for an interview, which is 77% of the initial sample of selected target children. The second level response rate was relatively high: 72% of contacted children from dissolved reference marriages were interviewed. Among adult children of divorced parents, the refusal rate was higher (23,8%) than among minor children of divorced parents (8,8%). The most popular reasons for refusals by children were the length and the topic of the interview.

The median interview duration was 91 minutes for divorced partners. The median interview duration for children of divorced parents was respectively 35 minutes for children between 10 and 14 years old, 49 minutes for children between 15 and 17 years old; and 48 minutes for adult children.

The fieldwork of the written questionnaires was followed up by the DiF-research team and one administrative employee. The Dillman survey methodology was followed. After their addresses had been provided by the partners, respondents (grandparents, independently living children) received an introductory letter, followed one week later by a return questionnaire and a return stamped envelope. The option to complete an online questionnaire was also provided. Non-responders were sent a reminder postcard one week after the questionnaire sent-out, and a replacement questionnaire three weeks after the questionnaire sent-out.

Table 6 Response rates of resident target children (DiF)

	Intact reference marriage	Dissolved reference marriage	Total
N Target child	529	1696	2225
- N Adult target child	266	800	1066
- N Minor target child	263	896	1159
o N With parental permission	229	511	740
o N Without parental permission	34	385	419
% With parental permission (of minor)	87,1	57,0	63,8
% Without parental permission (of minor)	12,9	43,0	36,2
N Contactable target child	495	1311	1806
% response 1 st level (contactable / all)	93,6	77,3	81,2
N Contacted target child	496	1221	1717
N Interviewed target child	379	878	1257
% response 2 nd level (interviewed/contacted)	76,4	71,9	73,2
% Total response (interviewed/all)	71,6	51,8	56,5

Source: Pasteels et al., 2011

Note: All target children in this table are resident target children and at least 10 years old

2.1.4 Strengths of the Divorce in Flanders survey

An important strength of the DiF-study is the specific sampling design. The combination of a wide time scope achieved by including Flemish marriage cohorts between 1971 and 2009, and the oversampling of ever-divorced individuals, provide high scientific and policy relevance about union dissolution of couples from different marriage and divorce cohorts, and of people who are in different stages of their life course. When applied to the research questions addressed in this research project, this design allows us to compare residential arrangements of children from several ages and from parents of different divorce cohorts.

The multi-actor perspective of the project is another noteworthy feature of this study. First, a multi-actor design enables several independent estimates of the same phenomenon. Within ex-couples, hearing both sides of the story may be relevant, as several scholars highlighted the gendered nature of marriage and divorce, in terms of 'his' marriage/divorce and 'her' marriage/divorce (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Matthijs, 1990). Applied to our research questions, this approach permits us to distinguish between mothers and fathers in how they experience joint physical custody arrangements. Moreover, the multi-actor approach enables us to separate the perspectives of the parents and the children. For instance, measures of parental conflict and the parent-child relationship can be assessed by both parents and children. In addition, more reliable estimates of causal models are possible because the problem of shared

method variance can be eliminated (Sweeting, 2001). Second, the answers of all actors can be pooled or aggregated to get more objective (inter-subjective) information on family processes (Dekovic & Buist, 2005). For instance, retrospective information of both partners on the pre-marital disruption relationship quality is more reliably estimated using information of both former partners. Finally, a multi-actor perspective systematically allows for the incorporation of the point of view of the children. Research has shown that, as concerns problem behaviour in adolescents, the teenagers themselves are the most reliable source of information (Begovac, Rudan, Skocić, Filipović, & Szivovicza, 2004; Sourander, Helstelä, & Helenius, 1999). As the research questions in this research project address both well-being dimensions of parents and children, this multi-actor information is highly valuable.

2.1.5 Limitations of the Divorce in Flanders survey

A first limitation of the DiF-data is that we cannot distinguish married and cohabiting couples. The database contains only legally divorced couples, no separated couples. This may be an important drawback in the light of this research. Jensen (2009) argues that fathers from unmarried couples are generally higher involved with their children than fathers from married couples which increases the likelihood for joint physical custody after union disruption.

A second pitfall of the DiF-sample may be the restriction to reference marriages in which both parents experienced maximally one legal divorce at the sampling date. This sample criterion could have adverse implications for the representativeness of the divorced sample. First, it may exclude a considerable part of the divorced families, especially those with a high post-divorce instability, thereby leading to an oversampling of stable post-divorce families. To estimate the magnitude of this bias, the Research Centre of the Flemish Government calculated with National Register data that approximately 10% of the ever-divorced Belgian men and women, who married for the first time between 1971 and 2008, experienced at least two legal divorces. Applied to both ex-partners, this implies that minimal 10% and maximal 20% of the first marriages are excluded from the DiF-sample, which is a relatively acceptable bias. Moreover, the bias is probably lower among the more recent divorce cohorts, in which the target child was still living in the household of the parents, as is mostly the case in our studies.

Third, there are indications that the DiF-data suffers from selective non-response bias. Like in many family surveys, the educational level of parents was not randomly distributed: respondents that participated in the survey were on average higher educated than those that did not participate. More important for our research topic may be the selectivity towards the custody status. For example, fathers who lived (partially) with their child after divorce were more likely to participate in the survey than non-residential fathers. Non-residential mothers were less likely to participate than residential or joint custody mothers. Hence, participating parents were higher involved parents and vice versa.

A fourth limitation is related to the selectivity of the selected target child. As explained earlier, teenagers may be overrepresented because children that were still living in the parental home and that had reached the age of ten were given priority. Moreover, there was a two-step refusal possibility for minor children: on the parental and on the child level. When children encountered many difficulties with the divorce, they could have been less likely to participate in the survey, or their parents could act as gatekeepers by not allowing interviewers to bother them. This could result in a bias in which emotionally good-functioning children are overrepresented in the child database.

2.2 LEUVEN ADOLESCENTS AND FAMILIES STUDY (LAFS)

2.2.1 Start of the LAFS-project

In 2008, Family and Population Studies (FaPOS), a research group at the faculty of Social Sciences of the KU Leuven, headed by professor Koen Matthijs, initiated the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (LAFS). LAFS is a yearly recurring – or a so-called repeated cross-sectional – study. The main purpose of the LAFS-project is to collect information on the family situation, family relationships and various well-being dimensions of 10000 Flemish adolescents at school. Different schools and pupils are questioned every year but pupils are not followed over time. Currently, four data rounds are available and contain information on almost 7000 pupils (which is approximately 2% of the total school population). The fifth data collection round has been completed but the data is not yet released. Therefore, we limit the empirical information of the LAFS-study in this chapter to data collection rounds 1 to 4.

The LAFS-project was developed in collaboration with Ed Spruijt, associate professor at the University of Utrecht, research group of Adolescence. In 2008, Ed Spruijt was coordinator of the Dutch *Scholieren en Gezinnen* project, on which the LAFS-project is partially inspired. The LAFS-project is not funded externally, but is fully supported by own financial means of the FaPOS-research group. Three members of the FaPOS-research group (Sofie Vanassche, An Katrien Sodermans and Graziela Dekeyser) are the main coordinators of the LAFS-project.

Unique about the LAFS-project is the collaboration between the FaPOS-research group and master students sociology at the KU Leuven. Every year, master students are invited to participate in the LAFS-study within the context of their master thesis. Guided by the three FaPOS-coordinators, the master students form a true research team and walk through all inevitable steps of a survey data collection: selecting the research units, developing the questionnaires, contacting the schools, administering the questionnaires, coding and cleaning of the data, etc. This collaboration has added value for both the students as the FaPOS-research team. Master students have more opportunities to learn from each other, and they benefit from a closer follow-up of their master thesis by the FaPOS-coordinators. The FaPOS-research team is

assisted by the students in developing a large database, which can be used for answering PhD-related research questions and publications in international peer-reviewed journals.

In total, 26 master students collaborated in the LAFS-study and an equal number of master thesis came out of it. The LAFS-data have been validated extensively over the past four years. The data was used for several research papers, presented at national and international seminars and workshops, and published in international peer-reviewed journals. In 2011, a LAFS-seminar was organized in Leuven, to present the results to a broader scientific, and socio-legal audience. Moreover, LAFS received considerable media attention through articles in newspapers and magazines. Finally, the LAFS data is included in different PhD-researches of FaPOS-research members.

2.2.2 Study design

2.2.2.1 *Sampling strategy*

The LAFS-study entails a two-stage sampling design. In a first stage, schools are selected by means of a disproportionate quota sample. The schools are selected in two phases. In a first phase, sociology master students were asked to contact their former secondary school. On the one hand, this approach increases the response rate considerably because school directions are more helpful towards ex-pupils than towards external people. On the other hand, this procedure leads to a higher proportion of pupils of private secondary schools, providing only the general educational track, located in the provinces of Antwerp, Flemish Brabant and Limburg. In a *second phase*, this overrepresentation is corrected by a disproportionate stratified sample. The entire Flemish school population is divided beforehand in subgroups (strata), based on a specific combination of school system (public versus private), Flemish province (including Brussels) and municipality. All strata refer to geographical regions of at least 50000 inhabitants. An example of one stratum is: 'public school, located in the province of Antwerp, in the municipality of Mechelen'. The purpose of the strata is 1) to obtain a geographical clustering of schools per survey round (for practical reasons) while maintaining sufficient geographical variation over the total sample, and 2) to guarantee a sufficient proportion of schools from each educational system and region. Within each stratum, preference is given to schools that provide several educational tracks (to compensate for the schools with only general education in phase 1). The sample is not aimed to be proportionate towards the Flemish school population but is aimed to contain a sufficient proportion of schools from each strata.

In a second stage, a cluster sample of classes within the selected schools is taken. All pupils within the sampled classes were surveyed. The purpose was to sample two classes per grade (1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade and 4th grade) and per educational track (general education, technical education, vocational education, arts education). The selection of the classes was assisted by the school management but randomness was pursued as far as possible.

2.2.2.2 Survey method

In a first step, the schools received a notification letter to inform them that they were selected for the LAFS-study. One week later, a master student contacted the school management by telephone to check their willingness to participate in the study and to make already some practical arrangements. The questionnaires were administered in class by means of written self-report questionnaires. Based on the school management desiderates, the questionnaires were administered during a free study hour (e.g. because of sickness of the teacher), during a religion class, or during another moment. There was an instruction form available for teachers and pupils.

The LAFS-questionnaires have always a fixed part with yearly recurring, core themes, and a variable part, with yearly changing topics. The core themes include socio-demographic information about the adolescent's household, the family situation, the marital/relational status of the parents, subjective well-being, school performance, parental conflict, parent-child relationships, the residential arrangement, ethno-cultural characteristics of the family, personality, etc. The changing topics are based on the specific research interests of the master students. Examples of variables themes are: material well-being (LAFS 1), delinquency and substance use (LAFS 2), and contact and relationship with grandparents (LAFS 3 and 5). The questionnaires are divided in three parts. Part A is to be completed by all pupils, part B is to be completed by pupils with divorced or separated parents, and part C is to be completed by pupils with parents that are living together. The questionnaire design has special attention for divorced bi-nuclear families. Pupils of divorced parents were asked to complete any information on their parental household for father and mother separately. This approach is often neglected in many surveys. The scales and questions were kept as similar as possible to comparable surveys (DiF, GGPS, NKPS, etc) and contained many validated scales.

2.2.3 Data collection

2.2.3.1 The fieldwork

The whole research process for one LAFS-round entails an entire academic year. The period between October and December is dedicated to the literature review, the development and pre-testing of the questionnaires, and the contacting of the schools. During February and March, the questionnaires are distributed to the schools, the code book is developed, and the data is coded and inserted into excel-sheets. In April, the data cleaning is performed, the database is constructed and the data is released and can be used for analyses.

2.2.3.2 Response

The LAFS-database contains information on 7035 completed questionnaires collected in 44 Flemish schools (Table 7). Hence, 5% of all Flemish secondary schools and 1,6% of their pupils have participated in the LAFS-study until now.

Table 7 Progression of the fieldwork (LAFS)

	Period of data collection	Number of schools involved	Number of completed questionnaires
LAFS 1	2008-2009	10	1970
LAFS 2	2009-2010	10	1688
LAFS 3	2010-2011	15	2120
LAFS 4	2011-2012	9	1257
LAFS 1-4 (total)	/	44	7035

To assess the representativeness of the LAFS-sample, we compare several sample characteristics with the Flemish school population (figures of 2009-2010). The combined distribution of sex, age and educational tracks of the sample resembles closely those of the entire Flemish secondary school population (Table 8). However, the LAFS-sample contains a slight overrepresentation of girls, pupils from a general (versus vocational) educational track, and pupils in the second and third (versus the first) grade.

Table 9 compares the LAFS-sample and the Flemish school population regarding their composition of school type and province. In LAFS, there is a slight underrepresentation of schools and pupils from subsidized free schools, and an overrepresentation of schools owned by the communities. The LAFS-sample includes a too low number of schools from West and East Flanders compared to the Flemish school population. On the contrary, schools from Antwerp and Limburg are somewhat overrepresented in LAFS.

Table 8 The Flemish school population (2009-2010) and the LAFS-sample (2008-2012) according to sex, grade and educational track (%)

Grade	Educational track/year	Flanders (N=425316)			LAFS (N=7035)		
		Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1	1st year A + 2nd year	13,4	26,5	11,0	11,6	22,6	13,1
	1st year B and vocational prep. Year	2,5	5,7	1,5	2,1	3,6	3,2
	Total first grade	15,9	32,2	12,5	13,7	26,2	16,3
2	General	6,7	7,9	14,6	9,3	9,9	19,2
	Technical	5,8	4,3	10,1	6,1	5,2	11,3
	Arts	0,2	0,4	0,7	0,4	0,9	1,3
	Vocational	4,0	3,3	7,3	2,6	4,2	6,7
	Total 2 nd grade	16,7	15,9	32,6	18,3	20,2	38,6
3	General	5,6	7,1	12,7	6,2	9,0	15,2
	Technical	6,5	5,1	11,7	4,9	5,2	10,0
	Arts	0,3	0,5	0,8	0,3	0,8	1,0
	Vocational	5,4	4,7	10,1	3,6	5,4	9,0
	Total 3 rd and 4 th grade	17,8	17,4	35,2	14,9	20,3	35,3
All		50,8	49,1	100,0	45,7	54,3	100,0

Source: Vanassche, Sodermans, Dekeyser, & Matthijs, 2012

Table 9 The Flemish school population (2009-2010) and the LAFS-sample (2008-2012) according to school type and province (%)

School type	Flanders (N=425316)		LAFS (N=7035)	
	Schools	Pupils	Schools	Pupils
Schools owned by the communities	23	17	27	25
Subsidized free schools	70	75	66	67
Subsidized public schools	7	8	7	8
Province	Schools	Pupils	Schools	Pupils
Antwerp	27	28	39	41
Flemish Brabant	13	14	16	16
Brussels Capital Region	4	3	4	1
West Flanders	22	19	14	11
East Flanders	20	22	11	9
Limburg	14	14	16	22

Source: Vanassche, Sodermans, Dekeyser, & Matthijs, 2012

Table 10 Main sample characteristics of LAFS 1-4 (N=7035)

Categorical variables	%
Sex	
Boy	46
Girl	54
Nationality	
Belgian	93
Non-Belgian	7
Migrants	
First generation	7
Second generation	16
Third generation	6
Religion	
Catholic	59
Islamic	11
No religion	26
Other	4
Education father	
No higher education	38
Higher education, no university	35
University	27
Education mother	
No higher education	35
Higher education, no university	40
University	25
Metric variables	mean
Age	15

Table 11 shows some basic descriptive information about the LAFS-sample. There is a higher proportion of girls, compared to boys. 93% of the pupils has the Belgian nationality. The LAFS-sample includes 16% second and 6% third generation migrants. This variable is constructed by taking into account the respondent's own country of birth, besides that of his parents and grandparents. Almost 6 out of 10 LAFS-respondents is Catholic, 11% is Islamic and 26% has no religion. The mean age of respondents is 15 years.

The distribution of the LAFS-sample towards the marital/relational status of the parents, per LAFS-round, is shown in Table 11. The majority of pupils (on average 69%) has two married parents. One out of four pupils had experienced a parental divorce or separation, a figure which is almost perfectly in line with the population figures of parental divorce experience in Flanders for that age group (Lodewijckx, 2005a). In LAFS-rounds 2 and 4 there is a higher proportion of adolescents that experienced a parental divorce or separation (almost 30%). This is related to the higher proportion of public schools and pupils in the technical and vocational track in these data collection rounds.

Table 11 The relational status of LAFS-respondents' parents according to data collection round (%)

Relational status of parents	LAFS 1	LAFS 2	LAFS 3	LAFS 4	LAFS 1-4
Married and living together	72,3	64,1	72,8	64,7	69,2
Unmarried cohabitation	1,6	3,9	2,2	3,1	2,6
Divorced	16,7	25,6	19,5	25,0	21,2
Separated without being married before	3,5	4,6	3,6	3,9	3,9
Still married but living separately	1,0	0,9	0,3	0,6	0,7
Never lived together	0,5	0,4	0,3	0,1	0,3
At least one parent deceased	4,3	0,6	1,3	2,6	2,2
	N=1970	N=1688	N=2120	N=1257	N=7035

2.2.4 Strengths of the Leuven Adolescents and Family Study

An important advantage of the LAFS-survey is the low non-response rate. Because the questionnaire is administered during a collective moment in class, there is not much opportunity for pupils to skip participation. Hence, LAFS has a very low selective non-response bias when compared to other surveys. Consequently, by aiming at a large heterogeneity in schools (obtained by the different strata), it becomes feasible to reach a large heterogeneity in pupils. Probably, pupils from the LAFS-sample are more randomly distributed over different social classes than the children from the DiF-survey. Related to this, and unlike DiF, the LAFS-database contains information on pupils with separated parents from previous unmarried

unions. The absence of these unions is often reported as a main drawback in other research. Nevertheless, the proportion of this specific group was too low to allow separate analyses.

Besides the fact that a collective survey moment is cost-effective and time-saving, another advantage of the LAFS-survey methodology is the disentanglement of the questionnaire content and the research setting. Questioning youngsters about their family while they are at school could reduce social desirability and lead to “true stories” of children.

2.2.5 Limitations of the Leuven Adolescents and Family Study

Typical for school surveys is the presence of potential context bias. Strange, et al. (2003) explain that the social context in a school or classroom could strongly affect the quality of the collected data. Structural and practical factors, such as the space in the classroom, the interest of the teacher in the research topic, the relationship between the pupils and the teacher, all affect how pupils respond to a specific questionnaire. Another disadvantage of the LAFS-questionnaire is that sick or absent children (truants) may be missed because the questionnaires are administered at school. Finally, all information in LAFS is available from adolescent self-reports. Information with regard to parental education, and parental working status, is probably less reliable when asked to children instead of parents. However, as subjective well-being of adolescents is the main outcome variables in this research, self-report is the most natural, and very likely, the most valid survey method (Breivik & Olweus, 2006).

2.3 DATA SOURCE AND SAMPLE CRITERIA PER RESEARCH CHAPTER

Most research chapters in this research make use of the DiF-database, with two exceptions. In chapter 3, the residential calendar is validated as a new instrument for measuring residential arrangements among children. This chapter makes use of the LAFS-data because the DiF-database only contains parent reports of residential arrangements. Chapter 4 aims to estimate incidence figures of joint physical custody arrangements in Flanders. This chapter makes use of the LAFS-data because of the lower selective non-response when compared to the DiF-data. We believe that the LAFS-data may be more representative for answering the descriptive research questions addressed in this chapter. Chapter 5 compares determinants of custody arrangements over time. This chapter uses data from DiF because these include divorced couples within a very broad time scope, enabling comparisons over time. Chapter 6 deals with the subjective well-being of children. The chapter is divided in study A and B, in which the same research questions are addressed with respectively LAFS and DiF. Testing the same research question with two different surveys may serve as an extra robustness test for our results. In study B, an interesting experiment is incorporated by fully applying the multi-actor design of the DiF-data. We compare whether family processes (e.g. the parent-child relationship, parental conflict) reported by children versus parents have the same predictive power for subjective well-being of children. Chapter 7 deals about personality of children and used the DiF-data because the personality

Chapter 2 Data

scale included in DiF is more wide-used and better validated than the shorter personality scale included in LAFS. Chapter 8 and 9 are dealing about the social and subjective well-being of parents and make therefore use of the DiF-data. Table 12 presents the used data source, research sample and method of analysis for each research chapter.

Table 12 Overview of data source, research sample and method of analysis per research chapter

Chapter	Data	Sample	Method of analysis
3	LAFS 1,2	878 Children	n.a.
4	LAFS 1,2,3,4	1525 Children	Bivariate associations
5	DiF	2207 Parents	Multi-nomial logistic regression
6	Study A: LAFS 1,2,3,4	1570 Children	OLS regression
	Study B: DiF	707 Parent-child dyads/ 301 parent-child triads	OLS regression
7	DiF	504 Children	OLS regression
8	DiF	677 fathers / 829 mothers	Multi-level ordered logistic regression
9	DiF	677 fathers / 829 mothers	Multi-group Structural Equation Modelling

Chapter 3

Measuring residential arrangements with the residential calendar

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3 Measuring residential arrangements with the residential calendar

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of carefully assessing post-divorce living arrangements is increasingly apparent. Because Belgium has among the highest divorce rates in Europe (Corijn, 2005a; Matthijs, 2009), it provides an excellent vantage point from which to investigate the implications of this experience for children. Since 1975, the number of marriages decreased by roughly 40% and the number of divorces grew by more than 400% (Corijn, 2005a). In recent decades, approximately 30,000 marriages were dissolved yearly (from a base of 10 million inhabitants) and in two thirds of these cases children were involved (Van Peer, 2007). That number would even be higher if one includes those involved in nonmarital separations. Research on family structure has clearly documented the expanding range and complexity of children's living arrangements following divorce (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). These developments have occurred within a context of altered beliefs about parenting and custody in most Western countries (Felner, Terre, Farber, Primavera, & Bishop, 1985; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Frankel, 1985; Rothberg, 1983; Warshak, 1986; Wolchik et al., 1985; van Krieken, 2005)

3.2 TOWARDS PERMANENT PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

The first half of the 20th century up till the 1960's witnessed a shift to a maternal preference with regard to childrearing, inspired to some extent by attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) with its emphasis on the unique mother-child bond. This maternal preference sometimes referred to as 'tender-years doctrine' was also evident in the courts. Mothers were usually granted custody over the children whereas father retained visitation rights. In practice, children lived with their mother (and possibly her new partner), and fathers frequently disappeared from their children's lives. Gradually this model lost support. The fertility decline during the last decades of the 20th century increased the emotional ties between parents and children. The increased female workforce participation and reactions from father's rights groups resulted in a "detraditionalization of gender roles" (van Krieken, 2005). Whereas mothers used to be the primary caregivers, this was steadily replaced by an expectation of equality of both parents in child-rearing. This shift was accompanied by an increased research interest on the role of the nonresidential parent on the well-being of children. These developments led to the diffusion of a 'permanent parental responsibility' principle (van Krieken, 2005). Parenting became absolute and unconditional, independent of the relationship between the parents. The idea that "the parental couple should survive the conjugal couple" is often mentioned in this regard (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000).

The principle of permanent parental responsibility was also accepted in custody law. There was a shift from thinking in terms of custody and visitation towards residence and contact, from the loss of one parent towards continued contact after divorce (van Krieken, 2005). In Belgium, two notable changes have occurred in custody law. In 1995, joint legal custody was installed in the law and in 2006 joint physical custody became the preferred model (Sodermans, Vanassche, & Matthijs, 2011). According to Coysh, Johnston, Tschann, Wallerstein, & Kline (1989) "Joint legal custody refers to parents assuming equal responsibility for major decisions about their children, and joint physical custody indicates that the children are living for substantial amounts of time with each parent." (p. 54).

In sum, there has been a shift towards fathers and mothers becoming equally important and mutually exchangeable caregivers. Because maintaining a good parent-child relationship requires spending time together, and divorce splits the marital union in two family systems, children must divide their time between mother and father living in two separate households. Repartnering and remarriage, combined with ex-partners' fertility history, puts children in the middle of a complex, bi- or even multinuclear network of actors. If we want to understand what the evolutions in the area of child custody mean for child development and well-being we need measures of children's post-divorce experience that adequately capture that complexity.

3.3 LIMITATIONS OF CONVENTIONAL MEASUREMENTS OF LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Living arrangements are usually measured by simple predefined custody types that only roughly distinguish between sole and joint physical custody types (Figure 13). Such measures have obvious limitations. The amount of time with each parent is the only dimension that matters, but it is measured quite crudely. Apart from the quantity of time, some authors have shown that it is also important to know the variability of contexts in which children and parents spend time together (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Ricci, 1997; Smyth, 2005). A predefined list of abstract categories may truncate the variability in arrangements.

Figure 12 Example of a conventional scale for measuring the residential situation

Where do you live?	<input type="radio"/>	With my mother
	<input type="radio"/>	With my father
	<input type="radio"/>	Alternating with my mother and father
	<input type="radio"/>	Mostly with my mother, sometimes with my father
	<input type="radio"/>	Mostly with my father, sometimes with my mother

Chapter 3 Measuring residential arrangements with the residential calendar

Other studies have been using divorce filings for collecting residential information, but often there is a significant discrepancy between juridical and actual living arrangements. Moreover there may be a shift in the child's living arrangement throughout time, usually towards more time with the mother, which is not readjusted in court (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

A few studies have considered alternative measurement strategies of residential arrangements. In a Wisconsin study of families with shared child placements (Brown, Joun, & Berger, 2006), parents were asked about the number of days and nights their children spent with them during school year and the holiday period. In another study the average number of days per month that children and parents spent together, as well as the number of transitions between mother and father in an average week, were measured (Coysh et al., 1989). Finally, Smyth (2004) explored different residential arrangements existing in Australia and found greater variability in residential arrangements than usually reported with a conventional measure.

Despite these efforts, we believe that many scales still have important limitations. Respondents may have difficulties parsing the abstract categories typically contained in scales when it comes to living arrangements. It requires some capacity for abstraction to transform ongoing rhythms of daily life, usually concretized in terms of days and nights, into simple categories. Thus, statements about incidence of specific arrangements must be treated cautiously; otherwise misinterpretations about the relative benefits of different custody options are likely to follow. In other words, the categories used in conventional measures often are too ambiguous or too crude to provide the basis for precise intergroup comparisons or for monitoring change over time. The result is a paucity of reliable data on the incidence of specific residential arrangements, at least in most Western European countries.

Here we illustrate the utility of the residential calendar approach to measuring living arrangements and how it surmounts the limitations of conventional measures. It is simple, straightforward and bears close resemblance to the actual ongoing living situations. The study is based on data from a survey of children, but the residential calendar is also suitable for parental reporting.

3.4 METHOD

We tested the usefulness of the residential calendar by including it in two successive waves of a Flemish child survey. In this section we will first give some information on the sample design and characteristics of the survey. We also describe the residential calendar method, compare it with the conventional measure, depict its measurement properties (e.g. reliability and validity), and demonstrate the potential advantages of this instrument.

3.4.1 Participants

The data used for this study came from the first two waves of the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche, Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2011a) and was collected during spring of 2009 and 2010. Data were gathered with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire in 22 different schools in Flanders (roughly the Northern part of Belgium), spread across three different provinces, and all Flemish educational systems and grades. In total 3,641⁷ pupils (roughly between 12 and 18 years old) filled out a questionnaire at school. Information was gathered concerning their sociodemographic profile, their household and family characteristics, their family relationships and several dimensions of their well-being. Children with divorced parents received an additional section querying their residential situation with the residential calendar. The research sample consisted of 878 (25%) children who experienced a parental separation. The distributions according to age, gender, education level and family situation in the sample were quite similar to the distributions in the Flemish population. There was a slight overrepresentation of girls with 55% females versus 45% male adolescents. The majority of children were aged 12 to 19 years and the mean age was 15.

3.4.2 Measurement

To measure the residential situation, we first included a conventional scale. Respondents were asked where they lived and could select their answer from a list of six categories (Table 13). 43% reported a sole mother residence, 21% lived most of the time with the mother and another 22% lived alternately with father and mother. Only 10% lived most of the time or always with their father. Other situations accounted for the remaining 3% of the cases and had to be clarified by the respondents (e.g. with grandparents, siblings, aunt, partner, on their own,...). In total, 64 respondents did not fill out this scale, which generates an item non-response of 7%.

⁷ This sample does not include low-quality data lines (with e.g. high overall non-response, clear patterns in answering behavior,...).

Table 13 Residential situation measured with a conventional scale (N=814)



Where do you live?	F	%
With my father	60	7
For the most part with my father, sometimes with my mother	22	3
Alternating with my mother and father	179	22
For the most part with my mother, sometimes with my father	174	21
With my mother	352	43
Other situation	27	3















Additionally, the residential calendar was included in the survey. This is a visual depiction of a normal month, each box representing a part of every day (Figure 13). Respondents need to indicate if they stay with their mother or father on each day and they have to make a distinction between day and night. Clear instructions were provided followed by an example of a residential situation and a correctly filled calendar.

In total, 687 calendars were completed accurately, which means that exactly 14, 28, 42 or 56 boxes were filled out (corresponding with residential time with the mother or the father), representing complete residential day-night information for respectively one, two, three or four weeks. A few respondents (n=15) filled out a different number of calendar boxes, perhaps implying that they live with someone other than their mother or father during regular time periods.

Figure 13 The residential calendar

"Below you see a schematic representation of a four week period during the school year is shown. Indicate for each day if you stay with your mother or father (a 'V' for father and an 'M' for mother).

A distinction is made between day  and night . For each day you have to specify with whom you have spent most of the time, for each night you indicate which parental household you slept at. When the residential situation is exactly the same every week, you must only fill in one week. When the situation is the same every two weeks, you must only fill in the first two weeks".

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

There are 115 respondents who failed to fill out the calendar but did provide a response on the conventional scale. To examine possible reasons for this non-response, we checked the answers on the conventional scale for those respondents. More than half of them ($n=64$) indicated that they lived exclusively with one parent. Since the conventional scale preceded the residential calendar in the questionnaire, they may have felt prone to skip the calendar believing that the information was redundant. Billiet & Waeghe (2003) warn of sequence effects when two similar questions are placed shortly after each other in a questionnaire. Furthermore, 16 children indicated on the conventional scale that they lived (at least partially) with someone else other than their mother or father, or lived independently or somewhere else. This particular residential calendar was not designed to register such atypical situations although such information might be solicited in future versions of the calendar. For the remaining 35 empty calendars (4% of the research population), we could not find any specific reason for the non-response.

3.5 RESULTS

3.5.1 Comparison of two measures of the residential situation

Although the residential calendar provides information on additional dimensions of residential arrangements when compared to conventional scales, we first calculate the proportion of time with each parent (Table 14). In this way we generate information comparable to the conventional scale. The proportion of time with each parent is calculated from the calendar by dividing respectively the number of boxes containing mother and father time by the total number of filled out boxes. 35% of the children could be classified in a sole parent residence (31% sole mother and 4% sole father residence), the remaining children shared their time between mother and father. Many proposals can be found in literature regarding the threshold for dual residence (Melli, 1999; Melli, Brown, & Cancian, 1997; Smyth, Weston, Moloney, Richardson, & Temple, 2008). Parental time shares between 30% and 70% of time have generally been treated as dual residence situations and are also used in this study.

Table 14 Residential situation measured with the residential calendar (N=687)

Residential situation	F	%
Always with the father (100%)	27	4
For the most part with the father (>70% and < 100%)	36	5
Equal amount of time (30-70%)	146	21
For the most part with the mother (>70% and < 100%)	267	39
Always with the mother (100%)	211	31

To compare cell frequencies between the conventional scale and the residential calendar, we cross-tabulated both measures in Table 15. Respondents who answered 'other situation' on the conventional scale were omitted. The grey-coloured diagonal represents the 76% respondents who obtain the same residential situation with both measurement methods. At first glance, there seems to be reasonable agreement between both measures. To quantify this, the Cohen's Kappa⁸ is calculated. The value of the Kappa statistic was 0,67 (confidence interval 0,63 – 0,72)

⁸ Cohen's Kappa is a measure of association especially suited for balanced tables where columns and rows have the same categories and where the diagonal represents agreement (Goodman & Kruskal, 1979).

and the test of symmetry seemed to be highly significant ($S=111,265$; $df=10$; $p < 0,0001$). Spearman's correlation coefficient was also very high (Spearman's $Rho=0,86$; $p < 0,0001$).

Although fairly high symmetry is found between the measures, 24% of respondents receive a different classification. Row percentages in Table 3 show that sole custody according to the conventional scale has the lowest rate of agreement with the calendar. Only 68% of adolescents who indicated on the conventional scale that they live only with the mother really do so according to information collected by the calendar. For the father this share is even lower (57%). The differentially classified respondents could generally be found in the neighbouring category 'for the most part with the mother' or 'for the most part with the father', which means that their calendar reports indicate spending at least one day or night with the other, non-residential parent.

The discrepancy between the measurements needs further exploration. Why do children report sole residence when they actually spend time on a regular basis with the other parent? To investigate this we looked at these children's residential calendars in finer detail. Children 'incorrectly' reporting sole residence on the traditional scale are often those having exclusively daytime visits with the nonresidential parent or being there on weekends only. This may form a piece of evidence that exclusive parent-child contact during weekends or daytime is not contributing significantly to the child's feeling of living with that parent. In addition, we tested if the overrating of parental time on the conventional scale, was associated with a better relationship with that parent. If that were true, we might argue that a scale with predefined categories measures where children feel home, instead of being a precise registration of the living situation. The results point in that direction. The group of adolescents overestimating time with the father report on average a much better relationship⁹ with their father and a worse relationship with the mother ($F(2;646)=6,78$; $p < 0,01$) than the adequately classified ones. Children overestimating mother time reported a better than average relationship with the mother while children underestimating mother time had a worse than average relationship with the mother ($F(2;665)=2,53$; $p < 0,10$). We checked also if other factors were related with a higher discrepancy between measures derived from the two instruments. A lower educational level of the parents and higher parental conflict seems to increase the discordance between both measures.

⁹ Relationship quality is measured by the Network of Relationship Inventory scale (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)

Table 15 Crosstabulation of residential situation measured by conventional scale and residential calendar (N=676)

Conventional scale	Residential calendar									
	100% with father		For the most part with father (71-99%)		Equal amount of time with mother and father (30-70%)		For the most part with mother (71-99%)		100% with mother	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Always with father	26	56,5	18	39,1	1	2,2	1	2,2	0	0
For the most part with father	0	0	14	93,3	1	6,7	0	0	0	0
Equal amount of time with mother and father	0	0	3	1,9	132	81,5	27	16,7	0	0
For the most part with mother	0	0	0	0	7	4,6	141	91,6	6	3,9
Always with mother	1	0,3	0	0	4	1,3	90	30,0	204	68,2

3.5.2 Additional measures than can be derived from the residential calendar

Offering a more detailed, objective reflection of the child's residence, the residential calendar also provides information on day-night differences. Many authors have emphasized the importance of overnight stays because it permits parents to engage in bed-and-wake rituals resulting in a greater involvement in the child's life (Kelly, 2003; Smyth, 2005). Melli (1999) and Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found that time with the nonresidential parent might have positive implications for the parent-child relationship, even when it is very limited. 6% of the children in our sample had only daytime visits with the nonresidential parent without staying over the night. A majority of these children reported a sole residence relying on the conventional measurement. The residential calendar permits us to distinguish these children from the group of entirely sole residence children.

Another benefit of the residential calendar is the availability of information on the amount of weekday versus weekend time. In considering the qualitative dimensions of parenting, this

might be an interesting feature, because fathers used to be considered as weekend parents, doing pleasant activities with children, whereas mothers more frequently had to participate in the daily routine of school (e.g. making housework). This pattern is evidenced in our results as almost 30% of children had a living arrangement characterized by exclusive mother residence during weekdays with only father visits during the weekend.

Finally, the calendar also enables us to look at transitions between the household of the mother and the father (Table 16). First, all transitions are converted to a monthly total and the sole residence children are excluded from the analyses. 7% of children make two transitions in a month, a large proportion (61%) moves four times per month, which corresponds with going back and forth to the other parent twice a month or once every two weeks. Making six transitions per month is rather seldom (2%). About one fifth of the sample makes eight transitions a month and over 10% moves 12 times or more per month. This analysis includes all types of transitions, without differentiating between daytime-only visits and movements with an overnight stay. Information on the timing of the transitions is also obtainable and relevant. Most transitions are made on Friday evening, closely followed by Monday during the day and Sunday evening, corresponding to the beginning and end of the weekend.

Table 16 Number of monthly transitions between parents for children with shared residence (N=460)

Number of transitions	F	%	Cum F
2	30	7	7
4	279	61	68
6	7	2	70
8	97	21	91
12+	47	10	100

3.5.3 Measurement properties of the residential calendar

While residential arrangements are an objective feature of a person's physical living circumstances, we still need to consider the reliability and validity associated with measures derived from the calendar instrument. By administering the same test twice to the same research population (the *test-retest method*) and then correlating the scores, one indication of reliability can be obtained. In practice, this approach is not always feasible, since respondents' time and research money is scarce (Billiet & Waeghe, 2003). Moreover, when the time interval

between two measurements is short, memory effects can confound the results. At longer time intervals, test-retest consistency is not relevant at all because the residential situation may have actually changed. Another way to realize a reliability test is the *alternate-form reliability*, by including two equivalent but not identical measures in the same survey. What we are able to do here, that is comparing the conventional scale with the residential calendar data collected in the same survey, is an example of this approach. Statistical measures of symmetry presented in the previous section were around 0,8 or higher which is an acceptable standard of evidence of good reliability for the equivalent measures (Billiet & Waage, 2003).

The validity of measures derived from a new instrument is also important to its evaluation. Based on the clarity and simplicity of its design we think that the residential calendar has substantial *face validity*. The degree to which the tool measures what it is supposed to measure is *content validity*. Important in this regard, is that respondents understand the definitions and terms used in the question. To get a grasp on this, we conducted a pre-test prior to the real survey. Roughly 20 test respondents (with equivalent sampling characteristics as the research population) filled out the full questionnaire and were asked to give comments and remarks on difficult or unclear questions. Not a single respondent asked for additional clarifications in the case of the residential calendar. The inclusion of clear, detailed instructions, as well as an example of a filled calendar, may have contributed to that result. Next, we demonstrate substantive *predictive validity* (and *construct validity*) of several measures derived from the residential calendar that are able to predict emotional well-being of children. Towards that end, we performed a multiple OLS regression model with depression¹⁰ as criterion variable and measures derived from the residential calendar as predictor variables (Table 17). In model 1 the total number of transitions between mother and father in a normal month (range 0-56, mean 4,10; SD 5,39) is the main independent variable. A higher number of transitions is associated with higher depression scores. This result suggests that multiple movements between parental households, associated with e.g. joint physical custody arrangements, may be stressful for the children involved. Because the number of transitions is highly related with either having sole or joint physical custody, we control for the relationship¹¹ with the mother (range 0-36; mean 20,63; SD 7,66) and the father (range 0-36; mean 15,78; SD 8,77). In model 2 the type of residential arrangement from Table 14 is the independent variable. The results show that compared with sole mother custody, all arrangements where children live (at least some time) with each parent are associated with increased depression levels, after controlling for the relationship with both parents.

¹⁰ Depression is measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), developed by Radloff (1977), ranges from 0 to 23, has a mean score of 7,97 and a standard deviation of 4,6 among children of divorced parents.

¹¹ The relationship with the parents is measured by the Network of Relationship Inventory scale (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985).

Table 17 OLS regression models with depression as criterion variable (N=656)

Model 1	b	SE b	Standardized Beta	
Constant	7,60	0,218		***
Number of movements per month	0,09	0,032	0,11	**
Relationship with mother	-0,12	0,023	-0,19	***
Relationship with father	-0,14	0,020	-0,26	***
Model 2				
Constant	7,13	0,356		***
Residential arrangement (ref = always with mother)				
Always with father	0,48	1,013	0,02	
For the most part with father	2,08	0,836	0,10	*
Equal amount of time w/ mother and father	1,53	0,541	0,14	**
For the most part with mother	0,98	0,460	0,10	*
Relationship with mother	-0,11	0,025	-0,18	***
Relationship with father	-0,16	0,023	-0,29	***

Note: R^2 model 1 = 0,109; R^2 model 2 = 0,113; * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

3.6 BENEFITS AND ADVANTAGES OF THE RESIDENTIAL CALENDAR

Above we illustrated the use of the residential calendar with data coming from a Flemish survey from child reports. We demonstrated some of the multiple dimensions of residential arrangements that can be addressed with the residential calendar in contrast to conventional approaches. Finally, we provided some evidence that the residential calendar is a reliable and valid measurement instrument. Next, we offer four key arguments for the use of the residential calendar to measure living arrangements.

3.6.1 Social-psychological arguments

Contact between children and parents is the first requirement for establishing or maintaining a solid relationship. Knowing in which context these interactions occur is essential for measuring the effects of parent-child contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Ricci, 1997; Smyth, 2005). According to Lamb & Kelly (2001) the parent-child relationship benefits from a variety of contexts in which parent-child contact occurs. In intact families, both parents are often present and are more likely to be involved in every aspect of a child's life. After a divorce, the shared parenting framework comes under pressure. In many cases parental time loses its routine character after divorce and explicit time slots are reserved for one specific parent. Frequently weekend time is reserved for fathers, whereas mothers are in charge of the daily routine. This has consequences for the relationship between parents and children because weekend time is in general more relaxed and fun than weekday time (Smyth, 2005), and it is experienced in a different way by all actors. The same holds for day-night differences. Sleepovers during weekdays provide a broader opportunity for parenting and involvement through tasks like supervising homework and participating in bedtime and waking rituals (Kelly, 2003). Smyth (2005) conducted a research on living arrangements in Australia and found a variety of options in which families executed shared care. Most of them were intended to give each parent the opportunity to spend time with the child in a variety of contexts. Because the context in which parent-child contact occurs is important for several child and parental outcomes, Smyth (2005) and Smyth and Ferro (2002) stress the value of having an adequate measurement of the different time periods in which parent-child contact occurs. The residential calendar can fill this gap by providing a simple registration method to map residential time very accurately. Certainly, this instrument is able to distinguish different contexts in which parents and children spend time together, like weekends versus weekdays, daytime visits versus sleepovers, etc. For example, as we showed above, living arrangements which are characterized by a high number of transitions may be negatively related to children's emotional well-being.

3.6.2 Developmental arguments

In recent years, some experts in the field have attempted to create scheduling options for sharing the care of children that can serve as guidelines for families after divorce (Emery, 2004; Kelly, 2003; Ricci, 1997; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Decision criteria include developmental stage, age, gender and temperament of children, and the intra-parental conflict level (Smyth, 2004). The different options vary in the proportion of shared time, the number of transitions, the specific time at which handovers take place, the number of overnights with both parents, and the length of separation time with each parent. These aspects all exert an influence on the development of children. Two examples are that parental separation time should be shorter for younger children and direct handovers should be avoided as much as possible between high conflict ex-spouses (Smyth, 2004). Kelly (2003) also recommends that transitions between parents occur just before the weekend and not after it. In that way, parenting time can start with

‘winding down’ instead of ‘gearing up’. (p. 6) When conflict is elevated, handovers via school are preferred. These examples show that shared residence can be implemented in many ways, with differential effects on the well-being of children and parents. Many conventional measurements of the residential arrangement fail to distinguish between these dimensions and as a result may produce misleading conclusions about the association between custody options and child outcomes. We propose the residential calendar as a good alternative to register multiple dimensions of residential arrangements that are important for child development at once. In addition to the amount of shared time, we have information on the number and timing of transitions and we are able to calculate the duration that children are separated from each parent. In this study we are only able to make statements about the residential arrangements of adolescent children (12 to 18 years old). However, the residential calendar has the potential to compare residential arrangements from children at various points in the life-cycle (e.g. toddlers, young children, school-aged children,...) when administered in surveys of parents.

3.6.3 Methodological arguments

Very important when evaluating measurement instruments are the notions of reliability and validity. In the results section of this paper, we were able to illustrate fairly high reliability of the residential calendar (see Cohen’s Kappa). Furthermore, we have no reason to assume that this instrument lacks content or construct validity. We were capable to predict emotional child well-being from two different dimensions that could be drawn from the residential calendar. On the other hand, our results include noteworthy differences in the occurrence of living arrangements, dependent on the measurement method that is used. The residential calendar resulted into lower incidence figures of sole residence than the conventional scale. A detailed inspection of the residential situation showed that children spending little or only weekend time with one parent often reported sole residence with the other parent. Additionally, children having a better than average relation with one parent were more inclined to report sole parent residence when actually spending time with the other parent on a regular basis. We also have some indications that lower-class and high-conflict families are more likely to misreport their residential situation on a conventional scale. If the residential calendar is a more objective instrument to mapping actual living arrangements, it may also be the case that a scale with predefined categories taps more into the subjective feeling of where children feel at home. Yet, living arrangements are objective realities and require measurement methods that capture those realities as accurately as possible.

Another argument in favour of the residential calendar is related to the phenomenon of differential reporting bias, meaning that mothers and fathers give dissimilar answers about the living arrangements of their children (Braver & O’Connel, 1998; Brown et al., 2006). A more objective measurement instrument is likely to reduce this type of bias and provide a better basis for pinpointing its source.

Although the calendar can obviously be used for parent reports, we believe that the residential calendar is particularly well-suited for child reports because it is closely connected to their social living environment. A calendar approach requires less ability to conceptualize a social reality into abstract categories when compared with a scale. Time is per definition experienced and perceived in terms of days and night, weekdays and weekends.

A final methodological benefit of the residential calendar involves the flexibility it offers to construct post-hoc categories of (dimensions of) the living arrangement for specific substantive concerns. A single scale narrows a complex social reality to a limited number of categories beforehand and permits no return to the broader picture. With the calendar, a matrix of information is available and according to the research focus, specific pieces of information could be carefully selected and combined into theoretically meaningful categories.

3.6.4 Policy arguments

The policy significance of having accurate measures of residential arrangements are largely self-evident. In the wake of legal custody reforms, many authors have expressed the need for better methods for measuring the complexity of parent-child contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Argys et al., 2006; Melli, 1999; Smyth, 2005). Knowing the amount of shared time between parents is important in estimating the costs of different residential arrangements (Smyth & Ferro, 2002; Woods & Associates, 1999), and consequently for determining alimony. For example overnight stays require additional expenditures due to the need for furniture, meals and a sleeping room. For this reason, many American states carry out deductions in childcare payments by non-residential parents who are regularly visited by their children (Melli, 1999). Generally, 30% of time is seen as the threshold for these deductions, but without knowing accurately how shared residence is put into practice, it would be difficult to construct tailored support schemes. Again we put forward the use of the residential calendar to evaluate legislative changes within the field of residential custody arrangements.

3.7 LIMITATIONS

Despite the fact that the residential calendar offers several advantages for measuring complex post-divorce living arrangements of children, its usefulness may be conditional upon the nature of the specific research topic. Querying detailed residential information with a calendar is somewhat more time-consuming and requires higher attention from a respondent than a single question with categories. Hence, it may be less useful for scholars who only need a crude measure of the residential situation as control or intermediate variable.

An important future challenge is how to best improve the calendar by adding the capability of registering the time that children live with someone other than mother or father. We can also note that when the residential calendar is used in dyadic surveys, discrepancies between

mothers' and fathers' reports may be higher when compared with a conventional measurement. On the other hand, investigating these differences may be an interesting research topic itself. Lastly, we should reiterate that the empirical results concerning child well-being, presented in this paper, only hold for a specific age group (12 to 18 year old children) and may be different for younger children.

3.8 CONCLUSION

In this paper we explored the residential calendar, an instrument to measure post-divorce living arrangements, by applying it to data collected in a Flemish survey of post-divorce children. Comparison with a conventional measure indicates that the residential calendar is a reliable and valid instrument, likely to provide an objective registration of the custodial situation of children. Furthermore, it affords the option to assess additional dimensions of the residential situation, which are not available with traditional measures, including day-night difference, week versus weekend, number of transitions. All these aspects are extremely relevant in the current debate around joint physical custody, a highly promoted custody type in most Western countries' legislation. Nonetheless, conventional scales can offer a broad rendering on the custodial situation and do reflect how respondents perceive their spent time.

Beyond giving estimates about the amount of time children and parents spend together (quantity of time), the residential calendar gives a more nuanced view on the different contexts in which parent-child contact occurs (quality of time). Social psychologists will certainly claim the need for such measures because it has many implications for the parent-child bond. Moreover, research has shown that the adjustment of children after divorce is highly influenced by certain aspects of their living arrangement (number of transitions, separation time between parents). The residential calendar is able to map this kind of information. On the other hand, individual child characteristics and interparental factors may influence the choice for a specific residential arrangement. For researchers in the area of child development after divorce, but also for social workers and legal advisors, the residential calendar may be a very useful tool to measure post-divorce living arrangements and would appear to offer superior data for evaluating the consequences of future legislative action.

One final argument for the potential of the residential calendar approach draws on a comparison to the time-diary studies within the field of household division and labour market time allocation (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Gershuny & Sullivan, 1998). The introduction and promotion of time-diary method over conventional summary questions assessing time allocation has resulted in more reliable empirical reports and new knowledge in this research field. In particular, the work of Bianchi and her colleagues motivated comparable national time-diary data in more than forty countries, including Europe. We anticipate that future application of the residential calendar method will facilitate some modest progress in the understanding of the consequences of post-divorce living arrangements along similar lines.

Chapter 4

Post-divorce custody arrangements and binuclear family structures of Flemish adolescents

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4 Post-divorce custody arrangements and binuclear family structures of Flemish adolescents

4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the challenging issues for future demography and family sociology is the question 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 would 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 became the norm in many countries and the number of children in joint physical custody is rising. Consequently, an increasing number of children is 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 chance to live 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, 2013). More than one fifth of the children below the age of eighteen experienced a parental divorce (Lodewijckx, 2005a). Second, it has a liberal custody legislation. Joint parental authority is 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. 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, 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 Lodewijckx, 2005), but the reliability margins are relatively high.

The aim of this study is twofold. First, we describe the proportion of adolescents in different residential arrangements for different divorce cohorts. We thereby expect an increase of children in shared residence for the more recent cohorts. Secondly, we illustrate the post-divorce family configurations of adolescents, taking into account their residential arrangement. We thereby focus on the question how different definition criteria alter the distribution of

specific family configurations. To achieve this, we make use of data from the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche et al., 2012). These data are very suitable for the aim of this article due to the particular research design of the study and the measurement instruments regarding the custody arrangement and family configurations of adolescents.

4.2 DATA AND METHODS

4.2.1 The Leuven Adolescents and Families Study

The Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (LAFS) is a repeated cross-sectional study, in which yearly approximately 1800 adolescents are questioned about their family life, family relationships and various dimensions of their well-being. Adolescents are roughly between 12 and 18 years old with a mean age of 15. They are questioned in their classroom at school by an individual paper-and-pencil questionnaire. First, schools are selected via a disproportional, stratified sample. The strata consist of specific combinations of school type (schools owned by the communities, subsidized public schools and subsidized free schools) and regions of at least 50000 inhabitants in all Flemish provinces. Second, two random classes of pupils for each educational track (general, technical, arts and vocational) and grade are selected within the schools.

The design of the study guarantees a sample of adolescents across all social layers, spread across schools that differ in the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of their pupils. There is a very limited selective non-response rate (<1%) compared to other large-scale surveys. A unique characteristic of the questionnaire is that, in case of divorce, detailed information is asked about the family situation of both parental households. In that sense, the LAFS-study is adapted to the binuclear family situation of children following parental divorce. The codebooks of all LAFS-rounds are available at <http://www.soc.kuleuven.be/lagoenglish>.

Currently, four rounds of LAFS have been completed (between 2008 and 2012), resulting in a database with information on 7035 adolescents. The combined sample distribution of sex, age and educational track resembles that of the Flemish secondary school population very well (Vanassche et al. 2012). Approximately 26% of the adolescents experienced a parental divorce or separation¹², which is in line with the population figures reported by Lodewijckx (2005a). Our research sample is limited to the 1525 adolescents with divorced or separated parents, whose both parents were alive at the time the questionnaire was administered and who indicated to live together with at least one of their biological parents. Table 18 shows some basic descriptive statistics.

¹² Parental divorce/separation was retrieved by combining answers on the questions “Do your parents currently live together?” and “What is the current marital status of your parents?”.

Table 18 Descriptives (N=1525)

Variable	%, mean, standard deviation (SD)
LAFS round	25% first round, 29% second round, 28% third round, 18% fourth
Sex	42% boys, 58% girls
Age	Mean 15,2; SD 1,9
Age at divorce	Mean 7,5; SD 4,3
Grade	26% first grade, 39% second grade, 32% third grade, 3% fourth grade
Study track	48% general, 24% technical, 25% vocational, 3% arts
Nationality	94% Belgian nationality, 6% non-Belgian nationality
Religion	53% Catholic, 5% Islamic, 37% no religion, 5% other
Education of father	55% no higher education, 23% higher education, 22% university
Education of mother	49% no higher education, 31% higher education, 20% university

4.2.2 A residential calendar to measure residential arrangements

Residential arrangements, if included at all in surveys, are generally measured rather basic, with 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 by the authors to measure post-divorce residential arrangements (chapter 3). The residential calendar is a visual depiction of a normal month, each box representing a part of a day (Figure 13, page 59). Respondents need to indicate on a monthly base, 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.

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 have not filled out the residential calendar we used their answer on the conventional scale of the residential arrangement. This scale contained the same five categories as listed above.

4.3 RESULTS

4.3.1 Post-divorce custody arrangements

Almost 33% of adolescents lives always with their mother and another 33% indicates to live mostly with their mother. 25% of adolescents lives alternately with their mother and father. Only 4% lives mostly and 5% always with their father. Within the group of adolescents with shared residence, the majority (67%) lives exactly 50% of time with their mother and father. Almost 9% of adolescents with shared residence indicates to spend more time in the paternal household, while 24% spends more time in the maternal household. 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 the role of the father has become more important. As can be derived from Table 19, the proportion of adolescents in shared residence more than triples between the first and last divorce cohort.¹³ Simultaneously, the proportion of adolescents living always with the mother is lower for recently divorced parents.

Table 19 Proportion of adolescents in different residential arrangements, according to divorce cohort

%	1990-1995	1996-1999	2000-2005	2006-2011
Always with mother	52,2	45,7	26,0	27,8
Mostly with mother	27,2	35,1	34,8	28,1
Shared residence	9,8	14,1	29,3	32,8
Mostly with father	6,5	2,9	4,3	4,7
Always with father	6,1	2,2	5,6	6,6
N	92	276	624	320

The differences between different divorce cohorts can partially be due to age differences. Adolescents whose parents divorced more recently, are on average younger than those in older divorce cohorts. Table 20 shows that shared residence is less probable for adolescents older than 16. The finding that older adolescents are more likely to live exclusively with the same parent has been demonstrated by other research as well (e.g. Cancian & Meyer, 1998).

¹³ Year of divorce was calculated by subtracting age at divorce from the respondent's current age

Table 20 Proportion of adolescents in different residential arrangements, according to age and sex

Total %	11-14	15-16	17+	Boy	Girl
Always with mother	25,4	33,6	41,8	26,9	37,3
Mostly with mother	35,6	32,1	29,3	33,2	32,1
Shared residence	30,9	26,1	16,2	29,5	21,8
Mostly with father	3,2	4,1	5,1	4,7	3,6
Always with father	4,9	4,1	7,6	5,8	5,1
N	556	536	433	644	881

Children with shared residence make transitions between the maternal and paternal household on a regular base. The majority of adolescents (67%) moves four times per month, corresponding with living one week with mother, followed by one week with father, the so-called 'every-other-week arrangement'. Around 30% of adolescents moves more frequently between both parental households. Shared residence is more likely for boys than for girls (Table 20). This confirms previous research and is explained by Fox and Kelly (1995) by the fact that fathers do more efforts for gaining custody when sons are involved. Girls on the other hand live more often always with mother (37%) than boys do (27%).

4.3.2 Post-divorce family structures following parental divorce

Table 21 and Table 22 show the cross tabulation of the partner situation of respectively mother and father and the residential arrangement of the adolescent. Almost one out of three adolescents reports their mother to be single, and the same percentage reports the 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 adolescents 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 one out of two adolescents has a stepfather, and one out of two has 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 45% is living with a stepfather, versus 36% with a stepmother. A further restriction of living at least 33% of time with a stepparent reduces the number of adolescents living with a stepmother to 18% while the proportion living with a stepfather remains almost stagnant. Finally, while one third of the adolescents lives at least 66% of time with a stepfather, only 5% of adolescents report to live at least 66% of time with a stepmother.

Table 21 Partner situation of the mother, according to the residential arrangement of the child (N=1505)

Total % Column %	Always with mother	Mostly with mother	Shared residence	Mostly with father	Always with father	TOTAL
No partner	12,6	10,3	8,8	1,3	1,4	34,4
	38,6	31,4	34,9	30,7	26,6	
LAT-relation	4,8	4,8	4,1	0,7	0,4	14,7
	14,6	14,6	16,1	16,1	7,6	
Unmarried cohabitation	8,8	10,1	8,2	1,3	2,3	30,6
	26,8	30,8	32,5	30,7	44,3	
Remarried	6,5	7,6	4,1	0,9	1,1	20,3
	19,9	23,3	16,4	22,6	21,5	

Table 23 presents the post-divorce family configuration of adolescents 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 33% in a household. Under the broad definition of co-residence, one out of six adolescents lives always with mother and one out of six lives fulltime with mother and stepfather. A very small group is living fulltime with a single father or with father and stepmother. Almost one out of six adolescents commutes between two single parental households. More than a quarter of the adolescents is alternately living in a single parent household and a stepfamily. Finally, one fifth lives parttime in two stepfamily configurations. Overall, 65% of all adolescents is currently living at least some time together with a stepparent after the parental divorce.

Table 22 Partner situation of the father, according to the residential arrangement of the child (N=1446)

Total % Column %	Always with mother	Mostly with mother	Shared residence	Mostly with father	Always with father	Total
No partner	9,27	8,71	8,02	1,59	2,21	29,8
	30,5	25,9	30,8	37,1	40,0	
LAT-relation	2,84	4,36	4,84	0,76	0,76	13,6
	9,3	12,9	18,6	17,7	13,8	
Unmarried cohabitation	10,65	14,18	9,13	1,04	1,45	36,5
	35,0	42,1	35,1	24,2	26,3	
Remarried	7,68	6,43	4,08	0,90	1,11	20,2
	25,2	19,1	15,7	21,0	20,0	

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

The four combinations of family configurations are relatively equally divided within the groups of shared residence under both conditions, such as the presence or absence of a stepparent within the mother and father custody group. Overall, approximately three out of four adolescents in shared residence have at least one stepparent, versus one out of two adolescents in mother or father custody.

Table 23 The post-divorce family situation of adolescents, according to two different criteria

%		Child is living at least some time (>0%) in household	Child is living at least 33% in household
Sole custody	Fulltime with single mother	17,5	32,5
	Fulltime with single father	2,9	5,1
	Fulltime with mother and stepfather	15,4	33,1
	Fulltime with father and stepmother	2,5	4,3
Joint physical custody	Alternating with single mother, and with single father	14,3	6,7
	Alternating with mother and stepfather, and with single father	13,0	5,7
	Alternating with single mother, and with father and stepmother	15,3	6,1
	Alternating with mother and stepfather, and with father and stepmother	19,2	6,7
N		1495	1504

4.4 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to describe the post-divorce family configurations of adolescents, with a focus on the increasing number of children with shared residence, and the implications for stepfamily formation.

First of all, we observe an increase in the proportion of adolescents spending at least 33% of time in both parental households between the first and last divorce cohort. Especially for divorces from 2006 onwards, when the legal presumption for shared residence was installed, this figure is rather high, reflecting the diminution of the maternal dominance in custody arrangements. Moreover, we notice a rather inflexible interpretation of shared residence, as the majority of joint custody children can be classified in the every-other-week arrangement (living exactly 50% of time in each parental household). However, the purpose of the law was to stress gender neutrality and to enhance father-child contact, rather than striving for equal division of children between both parents. The relatively high incidence figures of shared residence challenge the current dichotomous post-divorce family concept in terms of single parent families or stepfamilies and raise questions such as how to classify parttime single parent and parttime stepfamily formations. Family typologies applying a binuclear perspective are therefore increasingly meaningful and necessary.

Secondly, a transversal look at the adolescent population learns that the large majority is living with a new partner of mother or father following parental divorce. From a life course perspective, the proportion of adolescents 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 residence, children most often live together with a stepfather, especially if strict co-residence criteria are applied. With the increasing proportion of children in shared residence, we may however expect an increasing number of children living with a stepmother. Complementary, we may expect the proportion of fulltime residential stepfathers to decline. More gender equal residential arrangements may thus diminish existing differences between the parental role of stepfathers and stepmothers.

Overall, our empirical inventory shows that there is an increasing heterogeneity in family and household configurations of parents and children. This has important consequences for the analysis of demographic evolutions and for the sociological reflection on household structures and kinship systems. Moreover, it will increasingly have consequences for official population registrations that are currently not adapted to the demographic reality.

Chapter 5

Incidence and characteristics of joint physical custody families

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5 Characteristics of joint physical custody families in Flanders

5.1 INTRODUCTION

“Children are jointly produced collective goods”. This quote comes from Weiss and Willis (1985) who applied an economic allocation model to explain how ex-spouses divide their goods after a divorce. Almost 30 years later, the debate on “dividing children” continues. Confronted with historically high divorce rates, Western countries have modified family law to try to protect and balance the interests of all family stakeholders, including mothers, fathers and children (Allen & Brinig, 2011). Custody legislation is one arena in which changes have been remarkably rapid. Under the premise of the child’s best interest and driven by fathers’ right groups who rejected the courts’ maternal presumption, legislators moved toward a more gender neutral approach (Buehler & Gerard, 1995; Felner et al., 1985; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Frankel, 1985; Rothberg, 1983; Settle & Lowery, 1982; Warshak, 1986; Wolchik et al., 1985; van Krieken, 2005). This led to the adoption of new concepts, such as ‘equal parental rights’ and ‘joint physical custody’. The latter concept, also called ‘shared residence’, refers to a situation in which children live alternately in the maternal and paternal household following divorce. Belgium introduced joint legal custody in 1995 and in 2006 joint physical custody became the default judicial recommendation. The incidence of joint physical custody in Flanders is estimated to be one fourth to one fifth of all divorced families (Chapter 4).

Bauserman’s (2002) meta-analysis of numerous studies (mostly conducted in the 1980’s and 1990’s) on child custody and child well-being led to a positive evaluation of joint physical custody, but two caveats should be applied to this conclusion. First, most of the research reviewed by Bauserman was conducted in a context where there was no legal presumption for joint physical custody. This arrangement was often the result of a mutually agreed parental decision and was rarely imposed by a judge. Second, the results could have been biased by self-selection mechanisms because upper-class and highly educated couples were overrepresented in joint physical custody arrangements (Bauserman, 2002; Fehlberg et al., 2011). Research evidence from Australia (Fehlberg et al., 2011) and Sweden (Singer, 2008) suggested that, when there is a legal presumption for joint physical custody, this option is less likely to be restricted to cases where parents mutually agree, are highly cooperative and well-to-do. If joint physical custody is increasingly adopted by or imposed on a more heterogeneous group, then generalizations based on earlier studies may no longer apply to the entire divorce population.

This study examines correlates of physical custody arrangements in Flanders and whether these have changed over time, due to the legislative action that made joint physical custody the default residential model. The Belgian situation is an excellent context in which to reconsider this question because it has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe (Corijn, 2012a; Matthijs,

2009) and there has been a legal preference for joint physical custody since 2006. We use the data from the Divorce in Flanders project (Mortelmans et al., 2011), a large-scale representative multi-actor survey. The data enable us to study the link between family characteristics and custody arrangements over a 35-year period, before, between and after the 1995 and 2006 legal reforms. Detailed information on residential arrangements was obtained by means of a residential calendar (chapter 3). The rationale for this study was prompted by legal changes, but custody decisions defined by court order often are not implemented (Juby, Le Bourdais, & Marcil-Gratton, 2005; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Therefore, we examine the actual residential arrangements of children (also called ‘physical custody arrangements’) because the impact of new court practices is most relevant when it refers to daily life of the children and parents.

5.2 JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY: OVERVIEW OF THE BELGIAN AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

Before 1995, sole custody was common after divorce. One parent (usually the mother) retained legal and physical custody rights over the child(ren) while the other parent had only visitation rights. Against the backdrop of father and mother interest groups reacting against this model and increased attention for child empowerment, the idea of shared parental responsibility emerged (Arteel et al., 1987). Legislators in Belgium seemed to recognize the benefits for children in maintaining a strong relationship with both parents, and installed the principle of joint legal custody in 1995 (for an overview, see Martens, 2007). This shift was the judicial expression of a normative climate and targets both biological parents as ultimately responsible for the rearing of their children. Nonetheless, the 1995 law did not set forth a default residential model; the only guideline was the child’s best interest. In 2006, joint physical custody was legally adopted as the default. If parents do not reach an agreement about residential arrangements for their children, the option of joint physical custody must be evaluated by the court and can be imposed by a judge if one parent requests it (even against the will of the other parent, if it serves the child’s best interest). Like the 1995 law, this legislation refrained from stipulating precise criteria for joint physical custody, leaving considerable leeway in judicial decisions (Martens, 2007; Vanboeckrijk, 2009).

The Belgian law does not provide a clear definition of joint physical custody and only mentions that children should live an *equal* amount of time with both parents.¹⁴ Melli (1999) investigated which thresholds for joint physical custody were applied by different states in the U.S. before a reduction in child support could be considered. She found that most states set the threshold between 30% and 35%.

14 The word ‘custody’ may be linked to the concept of parental authority rather than to residential arrangements and therefore, many authors prefer the term ‘residence’ (e.g. shared residence, alternating residence,...). Although we are studying residential arrangements, we prefer to use the terms ‘joint physical custody’, ‘sole mother custody’, ‘sole father custody’ in line with the majority of American research. Moreover, the term ‘custody’ is more appropriate than ‘residence’ to grasp the link with legislative changes, and that is exactly the rationale of this study.

Chapter 5 Characteristics of joint physical custody arrangements

In many European countries there has been a similar movement towards equal parental rights in custody decisions, but only few countries have adopted a legal presumption for joint physical custody so far. The Netherlands considered this legal presumption in 2009 but it was abandoned. Nevertheless, the incidence of joint physical custody increased from 5% to 16% between 1998 and 2008 (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). In Sweden, the possibility for the court to decide on joint physical custody was introduced in 1998 and the proportion of children who lived alternately with both parents rose from 4% in 1992 to 21% in 2005 (Singer, 2008). This residential pattern appears to be less common in Norway, but, following a new law in 2010 that gives courts the power to impose joint physical custody even against the will of a parent, Kitterød and Lyngstad (Kitterød & Lyngstad, 2012) expect an increase in joint physical custody arrangements in Norway. In France, “*residence alternée*” was legalized in 2002 (Kesteman, 2007, 2008). Over 10% of all children were involved in decisions of joint physical custody in 2005. Similar trends can be observed in Southern European countries. Legal reforms in Spain and Italy (in 2005 and 2006 respectively) identified joint physical custody as the default residential model (Lavadera, Caravelli, & Togliatti, 2011; Piconto, 2012).

Outside Europe, there has also been a shift towards a more gender-neutral approach to physical custody decisions. Australia introduced joint legal custody in 1995 and the Australian Family Law Amendment Act in 2006 created a presumption of ‘equal’ shared parental responsibility (Rhoades & Boyd, 2004; Smyth, Rodgers, Allen, & Son, 2012). Nevertheless, a recent report showed that the prevalence of joint physical custody is only 8% in Australia (Cashmore et al., 2010). Custody legislation and prevalence of joint physical custody in the U.S. differs across states. For example, in Wisconsin, 32% of children had a joint physical custody arrangement (Melli & Brown, 2008), whereas in Arizona and Washington State this figure was between 30% and 50% (Nielsen, 2011). Canada has not decided to legislate a preference for joint physical custody (Rhoades & Boyd, 2004) and only 9% of children of divorced couples were found in this custody type (Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009).

5.3 CORRELATES OF CUSTODY ARRANGEMENTS

There is considerable evidence that the socio-demographic profiles of joint physical custody families and sole mother custody families are different. Numerous studies, mostly conducted in the U.S. or Canada, have shown that joint physical custody parents were higher educated and had higher incomes than sole mother or sole father custody families (Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Fox & Kelly, 1995; McIntosh, 2009; Shiller, 1986). Higher educated parents were more likely to be aware of this custody arrangement (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1993), and were better able to pay the costs of this relatively expensive custody arrangement (Juby et al., 2005; Kitterød & Lyngstad, 2012; Melli et al., 1997; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). Educational homogamy and relative income levels between ex-partners may also be important in understanding residential decisions because these factors are linked to the distribution of power between the two parents. Cancian and Meyer (1998) found that joint physical custody was more likely if both ex-spouses

had financially contributed equally during their marriage. When the mother was higher educated than the father this led to more sole mother custody, whereas a paternal educational advantage was linked to higher incidence of joint physical custody (Juby et al., 2005). Joint physical and sole father custody were found to be more likely for boys than for girls (Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Seltzer, 1990), following from a higher paternal involvement with sons (Juby et al., 2005). Joint physical custody should be more feasible when there is only one child because housing large families in two households is more expensive (Juby et al., 2005) but no association between family size and custody was found by Cancian and Meyer (1998). Finally, there is evidence that parents in joint physical custody arrangements typically have the highest degree of parental cooperation (Irving et al., 1984; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Smyth, 2004; Wolchik et al., 1985) and a lower level of parental conflict (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001).

The specific profile of joint physical custody families may at least partially explain why many studies report a positive association between joint physical custody and child adjustment. Upper-class families may have been overrepresented in joint physical custody arrangements and these families typically have better adjusted children (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1993; Fehlbeg et al., 2011; Johnston, 1995; Strohschein, 2005; Wolchik et al., 1985). However, in countries with a legal presumption for joint physical custody, a more heterogeneous group may be sharing the care of children after divorce, and generalizations from earlier studies may no longer hold. As joint physical custody becomes adopted by more countries, the question arises whether its prevalence has also increased among lower educated or more conflicted couples. Donnelly and Finkelhor (1993) argue that low-income families may not have the appropriate skills and resources needed to successfully manage joint physical custody and may be better served with other residential options. Thus changes in the profile of joint physical custody families are likely to alter the association between joint physical custody and child well-being.

In this study, we examine correlates of four different residential arrangements in Flanders: sole mother, sole father, joint physical custody and a new custody option, flexible custody, in which children have no fixed or pre-arranged residential pattern. We focus on education, child-related variables (number, age and sex) and variables reflecting the level of harmony within the spouses' relationship (initiator of divorce, being in mediation, conflict level of the divorce). Subsequently we test whether these correlates have changed over time. The two consecutive legislative changes of 1995 and 2006 are used to distinguish three time periods. This research question is particularly interesting and relevant because the profile of joint physical custody families may partially explain why earlier studies (e.g. Bauserman, 2002; Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Glover & Steele, 1989) reported a positive association between joint physical custody and child adjustment.

5.4 METHODOLOGY

5.4.1 Data and sample

We used data collected by the Divorce in Flanders-study (Mortelmans et al., 2011).¹⁵ This large-scale survey was designed to study causes and consequences of divorce and contains detailed information on a variety of divorce-related issues, including the custody arrangement, background variables of parents and children, and legal process variables. A sample of first marriages (hereafter called the reference marriage) formed between 1971 and 2008 was drawn from the Belgian National Register. The sampling procedures were designed to realize an overrepresentation of divorced individuals: one third of marriages were still intact, the other two-thirds were dissolved. Respondents could not be legally divorced for a second time. Based on estimations with National Register data, between 10% and 20% of first marriages were excluded by this sampling criterion (Corijn, 2013). Between September 2009 and December 2010, 6470 respondents were interviewed by means of face-to-face Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI). The overall response rate was 42% (Pasteels et al., 2011). This response rate was within the normal range of multi-actor studies about similar topics in Europe. For example, the response rate of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2006) was 47%.

The Divorce in Flanders survey was a multi-actor study in which both (ex-)spouses of each reference marriage were contacted separately to participate in the study. One child was randomly selected from each reference marriage. This target child was a mutual biological or adopted child of both ex-spouses and all questions with regard to children (including the custody arrangement¹⁶) pertained to this child. Our subsample was limited to divorced families with a target child below 18 at the time of the residential separation.

Our final research sample includes information on 2,207 divorced families in which there was at least one common (biological or adoptive) child at the time of the residential separation. In 66% of the cases (1463 families) only one parent participated in the survey: 579 fathers and 884 mothers. In 34% of the cases (744 families) both parents participated. For these families we used the answers from one randomly selected parent: 386 fathers and 358 mothers. This procedure resulted in a final subsample of 965 fathers and 1242 mothers. Respondents were between 24 and 71 years old at the time of the interview with a mean age of 46. The age of the respondent at the time of the divorce was between 18 and 68 with a mean age of 35 years.

¹⁵ Flanders is the autonomous Northern region in Belgium that includes about six million inhabitants, or 58% of the total Belgian population

¹⁶ Unfortunately, detailed residential information is only available for the target child. However, different custody arrangements for different children in one family (split custody) may apply. With the limited residential information about the siblings of the target child we could roughly estimate that only 6,5% of families involved a split custody. Hence, our focus on the target child is unlikely to bias the results.

5.4.2 Measures

Appendix 1 shows the frequency distribution of all variables for each divorce cohort separately to illustrate possible compositional changes across time.

Custody type – The custody type (residential arrangement) of the target child immediately after the residential separation was registered by a two-step procedure. First, parents were asked where the child lived immediately after the residential separation. If the child lived with both parents alternately, a residential calendar was presented to record the residential arrangement in detail.¹⁷ The interviewer showed the respondent a calendar on paper, corresponding with a regular month (no holiday periods). The respondent was asked to indicate for every day and night whether the child resided with him/her or with the ex-spouse.¹⁸ Note that the calendar information overruled the answer on the first question if the answers were contradictory. We distinguished four custody arrangements: sole mother custody (child lives at least 66% with mother), sole father custody (child lives at least 66% with father), joint physical custody (child lives at least 33% of time with each parent) and flexible custody (no fixed arrangement). The overall frequency distribution was: 66,4% sole mother custody, 19,3% joint physical custody, 8,8% sole father custody and 5,5% flexible custody.

Divorce cohort – To evaluate the effects of the custody law reformations of 1995 and 2006, we classified respondents in three divorce cohorts. The classification was based on the timing of the residential separation rather than the legal divorce. The couples of divorce cohort 1 (31%) separated prior to April 1995, cohort 2 (55%) between April 1995 and September 2006, and cohort 3 (14%) after September 2006.¹⁹

Parental conflict – The level of parental conflict immediately after the divorce was derived from a retrospective question: “How much conflict was there between you and your ex-spouse after the decision to definitely break up? Give a number from 0 (no conflict) to 10 (a lot of conflict).” As reports on parental conflict may be one-sided and subject to social desirability, the mean conflict score of the mother and father was used for those families in which both parents participated.²⁰ The conflict variable was centred around its mean value (5,3). Appendix 1 shows no difference in average conflict between divorce cohorts.

Mediation – This dummy variable indicates whether or not the parents visited a professional mediator during the divorce process. This was asked by: “Did you visit a mediator regarding your divorce?” On average 11,5% of couples made such a visit but the percentage increased significantly between the first and last divorce cohort.

¹⁷ For more information on the residential calendar, see chapter 3

¹⁸ Respondents were also asked whether changes in the residential arrangement occurred afterwards, but this pertained to only 13,5% of families.

¹⁹ April 1995 and September 2006 refer to the months in which the legal changes came into force

²⁰ The median of this conflict difference measure was 0, and the first and third quartile were respectively -3 and +2.

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Decision to separate – As the power balance between ex-spouses may be important for custody outcomes, we included the initiator of the divorce as a predictor variable in our analyses. A three-level categorical variable was constructed: husband made decision to separate (28,3%), wife made the decision to separate (51,8%), husband and wife together made decision to separate (20%).

Number of children – The family size at the time of the divorce was calculated as the number of mutual biological/adoptive children from both partners of the reference marriage. Children from one spouse with someone else (e.g. with a pre-marital partner) were not included. Because the association between the number of children and the physical custody arrangement may not be linear, a categorical variable was constructed with three levels: one child (37%), two children (47%), and three or more children (17%).

Sex of child(ren) – Earlier research showed that families with all boys were more likely to have joint physical custody than those with only girls (e.g. Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Therefore we included the sexes of all of the children in the family. Families with children of both sexes were the reference category (37%) and they were compared with families in which all children were male (32%) or female (31%).

Age of the target child – The children in our sample experienced the residential separation of their parents on average when they were eight years old. Because a non-linear association with the physical custody arrangement can be assumed based on previous research (e.g. Juby, Le Bourdais, & Marcil-Gratton, 2005), we included both age and age squared of the target child at the residential separation as continuous variables. These variables were centred around their mean values.

Educational level of mother and father – The highest obtained educational degree of father and mother was divided into three categories. 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), the high-educated obtained a higher educational or university degree. Each respondent was asked about their own educational level as well as that of the ex-spouse, a strategy that allows us to include both parents' educational levels even if only one parent participated. We combined the educational level of mother and father in a new variable with five categories, that simultaneously provides information on the educational level and on educational homogamy within couples. The five categories were: father higher educated than mother (19%); both mother and father low educated (14%), both mother and father average educated (24%), both mother and father high educated (19%), mother higher educated than father (24%).

Table 24 Descriptive statistics for all variables, per divorce cohort (% or mean)

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
	Before June 1995	June 1995 – August 2006	After August 2006
Custody type ***			
Sole mother	77,5	63,7	52,9
Joint physical custody	9,1	21,6	33,0
Sole father custody	7,9	9,2	9,3
Flexible custody	5,6	6,5	4,8
<i>M</i> parental conflict (0-10)	5,24	5,36	5,16
Mediator visited ***			
Yes	7,6	12,1	17,6
No	92,4	87,9	82,4
Decision to separate			
Husband	25,7	29,1	30,6
Wife	55,9	50,5	47,6
Both	18,4	20,1	21,9
Number of children ***			
1 child	44,4	33,3	27,9
2 children	42,5	48,2	52,6
3 or more children	13,1	18,6	19,6
Sex of the child(ren) **			
All boys	35,0	32,3	27,4
All girls	33,2	29,4	31,4
Mixed	31,8	38,4	41,4
<i>M</i> age of target child (0-18) ***	6,01	8,04	9,63
Parents' education ***			
Father > mother	23,3	17,5	17,5
Both low	18,7	12,5	6,2
Both average	20,1	25,9	24,4
Both high	15,3	19,7	24,0
Mother > father	22,7	24,5	27,9
Survey participation			
Only mother	42,5	39,2	37,8
Only father	25,3	26,1	28,9
Both	32,2	34,7	33,3
	N=684	N=1211	N=312

Note: ** $p < 0,01$, *** $p < 0,001$

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Survey participation – Preliminary analyses uncovered important differences between families in which both parents participated and those in which only one parent participated. In the latter case, there was for example a higher chance of sole custody (with the participating parent being the residential parent), a lower likelihood of joint physical custody, more parental conflict and a lower educational level. To control for survey participation in our analyses, we created a variable with three categories: both parents participated (33,7%), only father participated (26%), only mother participated (40%).

5.4.3 Analytical strategy

Multinomial logistic regression models provided estimates of the likelihood that parents adopted joint physical custody, sole father custody or flexible custody after the residential separation. Sole mother custody was the reference category. First we estimated a model using the entire research sample (Table 26). All predictor variables were entered in this model, including divorce cohort. Subsequently, because we are interested in changes over time, we included interaction terms between each predictor variable and divorce cohort to assess any significant change across cohorts in the association between predictor variables and physical custody arrangement. A separate multiplicative model was estimated for each predictor variable containing all other predictor variables. Lastly, we ran separate logistic regression models for each divorce cohort to compare correlates of physical custody arrangements across time (Table 28). The bivariate associations by divorce cohort are shown in Table 27 .

5.5 RESULTS

5.5.1 Correlates of custody arrangements

Table 25 shows that the frequency of sole mother custody has decreased over time: the incidence has dropped from almost 80% to approximately 53%. This decrease was nearly balanced by an increase in joint physical custody, which has tripled over three decades. The incidence was less than 10% for couples divorced before 1995, but joint physical custody was the arrangement for 33% of the most recently divorced couples. Sole father custody as well as flexible custody remained low over the three divorce cohorts. The multivariate regression model (Table 1) confirmed that joint physical custody became more likely over time as the odds ratios for divorce cohort 2 and 3 were greater than unity.

Table 25 Descriptive statistics for all variables, per divorce cohort (% or mean)

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
	Before June 1995	June 1995 – August 2006	After August 2006
	N=684	N=1211	N=312
% Custody type ***			
Sole mother	77,5	63,7	52,9
Joint physical custody	9,1	21,6	33,0
Sole father custody	7,9	9,2	9,3
Flexible custody	5,6	6,5	4,8
<i>M</i> parental conflict (0-10)	5,24	5,36	5,16
% Mediator visited ***			
Yes	7,6	12,1	17,6
No	92,4	87,9	82,4
% Decision to separate			
Husband	25,7	29,1	30,6
Wife	55,9	50,5	47,6
Both	18,4	20,1	21,9
% Number of children ***			
1 child	44,4	33,3	27,9
2 children	42,5	48,2	52,6
3 or more children	13,1	18,6	19,6
% Sex of the child(ren) **			
All boys	35,0	32,3	27,4
All girls	33,2	29,4	31,4
Mixed	31,8	38,4	41,4
<i>M</i> age of target child (0-18) ***	6,01	8,04	9,63
% Parents' education ***			
Father higher than mother	23,3	17,5	17,5
Both low	18,7	12,5	6,2
Both average	20,1	25,9	24,4
Both high	15,3	19,7	24,0
Mother higher than father	22,7	24,5	27,9
% Survey participation			
Only mother	42,5	39,2	37,8
Only father	25,3	26,1	28,9
Both	32,2	34,7	33,3

Note: ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

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Overall, there was a negative association between parental conflict and joint physical custody, indicating that cooperative couples were more likely to have joint physical custody compared to sole mother custody (Table 1). This was also the case for flexible custody, though this effect was only marginally significant. Joint physical custody was also more likely when there was a mutual decision to break up compared to a situation in which the man or the wife alone made this decision. When the man was the sole initiator, his relative odds to become the full residential parent decreased. We found no association between the physical custody arrangement and mediation.

Table 26 Likelihoods of joint physical, sole father and flexible custody versus sole mother custody (Multinomial logistic regression odds ratios – N=2207)

	Joint	Father	Flexible
Divorce cohort (cohort 1: Before June 1995)			
Cohort 2: June 1995 - Aug 2006	3,05***	1,26	0,95
Cohort 3: After August 2006	5,48***	1,32	0,79
Parental conflict	0,96*	0,99	0,95°
Mediator visited	1,21	0,89	1,42
Decision to separate (both)			
Husband	0,49***	0,54**	0,88
Wife	0,76°	0,73	1,14
Number of children (1 child)			
2 children	0,99	1,06	0,85
3 or more children	0,80	1,07	0,62
Sex of the child(ren) (mixed)			
All boys	1,08	0,95	1,05
All girls	1,10	0,70	1,32
Age of target child (continuous)	0,98	1,09***	1,12***
Age ² of target child (continuous)	0,99*	1,01**	1,01**
Parent's education (both average)			
Father higher than mother	1,33	1,50°	1,47
Both low	0,50**	1,59°	1,10
Both high	1,60**	0,65	1,14
Mother higher than father	0,61**	0,74	0,93
Survey participation (both)			
Only mother	0,65**	0,31***	0,60*
Only father	1,21	1,73**	1,21
χ^2		381,69	
Nagelkerke R ²		0,22	

Note: Reference category given in parentheses; ° p < 0,10; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001

In general, we observed an overrepresentation of highly educated parents in joint physical custody arrangements. When both ex-spouses were highly educated, their odds of having joint physical versus sole mother custody was 1,6 times higher than for middle-educated parents. When the father was higher educated than the mother, there was a higher likelihood for sole father custody than when both parents were average educated. When the mother was higher educated than the father, the odds for joint physical custody, relative to sole mother custody, decreased. When both parents were low educated, there was a higher likelihood of sole father custody, compared to sole mother and an even lower likelihood of joint physical custody.

The finding that joint physical custody was more likely among boys-only families could not be confirmed by our data as the sex of the children in the family did not predict physical custody outcomes. Similar results were obtained when the sex of the target child was included instead of the sex composition of all children in the family. Moreover, there was no association between family size and the custody arrangement.

Both the age and the age squared of the target child at the time of the separation correlated significantly with the custody arrangement. For joint physical custody, the odds ratio for the quadratic term was negative, which indicated a concave (U-shaped) curve. Additional analyses showed that joint physical custody was most likely when children were between 4 and 12 years old. For father and flexible custody the sign of the quadratic term was positive, which indicated a convex curve. Additional analyses showed that there was a positive non-linear association between the age of the child and the likelihood of father/flexible custody.

5.5.2 Changing correlates of custody arrangements over time

We tested interactions between all predictor variables and the divorce cohort variables to examine whether correlates of residential arrangements had changed over time. We found significant interaction terms between divorce cohort on the one hand and parental conflict ($\chi^2=386,33$), mediation ($\chi^2=387,13$) and parental education ($\chi^2=380,97$) on the other hand.

The association with the highest change over time was parental conflict. The association between conflict and joint physical custody changed between cohort 1 and cohort 2. Before 1995, joint physical custody was significantly associated with low parental conflict. For example, parents with joint physical custody arrangements that divorced before 1995 reported a mean conflict score of 3,9, whereas this figure was 4.7 for sole father custody families and 5,6 for sole mother custody families (Table 2). However, the association between parental conflict and the custody arrangement was absent for couples that divorced after 1995. In the last divorce cohort, the direction of the association reversed, but this association was not statistically significant. The cohort specific multivariate models (table 3) further illustrate this finding.

The association between joint physical custody and mediation also changed over time. The models indicate that the association between mediation and joint physical custody was different

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in cohort 3 and cohort 1. In the first divorce cohort, couples with joint physical custody arrangements were more likely to see a mediator than other couples. For example, 16% of joint physical custody couples in divorce cohort 1 visited a mediator versus 7% of sole mother custody couples, and 4% of sole father custody couples (Table 2). Within the last divorce cohort, mediation gained popularity and was not related with the custody arrangement. The cohort-specific models (Table 3) confirm the decreasing association between mediation and custody type over time.

We found no evidence for a changing association between parental education and joint physical custody over time. However, the cohort-specific models (Table 3) show that there was a higher likelihood for two high educated parents to have joint physical custody in cohort 1 and 2 while this relationship was absent within the last period. This is not because high-educated people opted less frequently for joint physical custody in the last divorce cohort, but because middle-educated parents opted more often for it (Table 2). Because middle-educated parents were the reference group, the difference with high-educated parents became insignificant in the last cohort. In other words, joint physical custody became more widespread among average-educated parents after joint physical custody had been legally adopted (2006).

With regard to the association between sole father custody and parental education, the significant interaction terms showed strong evidence for an evolution over time. A mother that was higher educated than her ex-spouse used to have a higher chance to become the residential parent before 2006, but this pattern of association disappeared after the joint physical custody became the legal default. Additional analyses showed another association that was only present within the last cohort: if the mother had a low educational level (irrespective of the father's education), the likelihood of sole father custody was higher than that of sole mother custody.

Table 27 Bivariate associations of predictor variables with mother (M), joint (J), father (F) and flexible (FL) custody

	Cohort 1: Before June 1995						Cohort 2: June 1995 – Aug, 2006					Cohort 3: After August 2006				
	M	J	F	FL		M	J	F	FL		M	J	F	FL		
M parental conflict	5,6	3,9	4,7	3,9	***	5,5	5,0	5,5	5,0		5,2	5,3	4,5	5,7		
Mediator visited																
Yes	6,6	16,2	3,7	13,2	*	11,7	13,8	9,0	16,2		19,4	15,5	20,7	6,7		
No	93,4	83,9	96,3	86,8		88,3	86,2	91,0	83,8		80,6	84,5	79,3	93,3		
Decision to separate																
Husband	25,6	26,2	28,3	23,7		31,5	20,7	30,0	32,4	***	34,6	28,4	17,2	26,7		
Wife	56,6	52,5	50,9	57,9		51,5	49,0	44,6	54,4		47,3	46,1	55,2	46,7		
Both	17,8	21,3	20,8	18,4		17,0	30,3	25,5	13,2		18,2	25,5	27,6	26,7		
Number of children																
1 child	45,1	48,4	35,2	42,1		33,6	32,6	30,6	35,8		24,9	33,0	17,2	46,7		
2 children	41,3	41,9	48,2	52,6		47,6	51,0	46,9	46,3		54,6	49,5	58,6	40,0		
3 or more children	13,7	9,7	16,7	5,3		18,8	16,5	22,5	17,9		20,6	17,5	24,1	13,3		
Sex of the child(ren)																
All boys	36,3	35,5	27,8	26,3		31,4	33,0	36,9	31,3		27,3	27,2	20,7	40,0		
All girls	31,9	37,1	33,3	44,7		30,0	29,9	19,8	35,8		30,9	35,9	20,7	26,7		
Mixed	31,8	27,4	38,9	29,0		38,6	37,2	43,2	32,8		41,8	36,9	58,6	33,3		
M age of target child	5,6	5,9	7,8	8,8	***	7,7	7,4	10,6	11,1	***	10,0	8,2	11,5	11,3	***	
Parent's education																
Father higher than mother	20,3	36,1	35,3	26,3	***	15,3	18,5	24,3	26,9	***	13,0	18,6	34,5	26,7	***	
Both low	19,9	6,6	17,7	23,7		12,2	8,1	24,3	13,4		7,4	2,0	17,2	0,0		
Both average	19,9	18,0	23,5	21,1		26,8	25,4	25,2	17,9		23,5	30,4	6,9	26,7		
Both high	13,9	31,2	11,8	13,2		18,6	28,1	9,0	16,4		19,8	31,4	17,2	33,3		
Mother higher than father	26,0	8,2	11,8	15,8		27,1	20,0	17,1	25,4		36,4	17,7	24,1	13,3		
Survey participation																
Only mother	47,4	30,7	20,4	26,3	***	45,5	31,4	45,1	29,4	***	46,1	35,9	3,5	26,7	***	
Only father	21,9	30,7	48,2	31,6		21,8	29,9	45,1	29,4		21,8	35,0	44,8	33,3		
Both	30,8	38,7	31,5	42,1		32,7	38,7	37,8	36,8		32,1	29,1	51,7	40,0		

Note: * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001; Chi-square test for categorical variables, F-test for metric variables

Table 28 Likelihoods of joint and sole father custody versus sole mother custody for three divorce cohorts (odds ratios)

	Cohort 1: Before June 1995			Cohort 2: June 1995 – August 2006			Cohort 3: After August 2006		
	Joint	Father	Flexible	Joint	Father	Flexible	Joint	Father	Flexible
Parental conflict (continuous)	0,88**	0,92°	0,86**	0,97	1,03	0,96	1,02	0,99	1,10
Mediator visited (continuous)	2,57*	0,47	2,16	1,28	0,85	1,60	0,76	1,15	0,37
Decision to separate (both)									
Husband	1,06	0,98	0,97	0,36***	0,52*	1,12	0,62	0,15**	0,50
Wife	1,15	0,99	1,30	0,65*	0,62°	1,25	0,85	0,70	0,78
Number of children (1 child)									
2 children	0,90	1,68	1,33	1,08	0,79	0,86	0,74	1,40	0,28
3 or more children	0,63	2,12	0,47	0,83	0,83	0,89	0,78	1,19	0,19
Sex of the child(ren) (mixed)									
All boys	1,12	0,62	0,70	1,14	1,20	1,39	0,95	0,70	0,77
All girls	1,36	1,13	1,49	1,00	0,57	1,51	1,08	0,61	0,55
Age of target child (continuous)	1,01	1,10**	1,13**	0,99	1,13***	1,12**	0,90*	1,01	1,02
Age ² of target child (continuous)	1,00	1,02*	1,01	0,99	1,01	1,01*	1,00	1,01	1,02
Parent's education (both average)									
Father higher than mother	1,79	1,15	0,99	1,26	1,19	1,65	1,29	8,29*	1,92
Both low	0,36°	0,68	0,99	0,69	1,74°	1,26	0,18*	5,75°	---
Both high	2,40*	0,71	0,92	1,56*	0,48°	0,99	1,39	2,33	2,36
Mother higher than father	0,36°	0,40°	0,55	0,78	0,79	1,46	0,38*	2,42	0,36
Survey participation (both)									
Only mother	0,69	0,45°	0,43°	0,58**	0,31***	0,71	0,90	0,06**	0,59
Only father	1,34	2,49*	1,19	1,02	1,71*	1,33	2,04	1,99	1,62
χ^2		109,82			192,67			62,05	
Nagelkerke R ²		0,23			0,19			0,25	
N		654			1211			312	

Note: Reference category given in parentheses; -- cell frequencies are too low; °p < 0,10; *p < 0,05; **p < 0,01; ***p < 0,001

5.6 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Two important legal changes occurred in Belgian custody law within the last three decades. In 1995 and 2006 respectively, joint legal custody and joint physical custody became the legal defaults. These legislative shifts went hand in hand with changes in post-separation parenting behaviours and attitudes. Flanders followed the road toward more gender-neutral parenting. Our study confirms that joint physical custody is more likely among higher educated parents, whereas families with two low educated parents have a lower chance for joint physical custody. Fathers who are higher educated than their ex-spouses are more likely to obtain joint physical custody, whereas mothers who are higher educated than their ex-husband are more likely to become the sole residential parent.

There is a non-linear association between age of the child and the physical custody arrangement, which confirms the findings of Juby et al. (2005). Sole father custody is more likely when children are older and joint physical custody is more likely among the middle age group (between 4 and 12 years old). Flexible custody seems to be more likely when parental conflict is low and when the target child is closer to 18 at the time of the separation. Flexible moving requires cooperation from all partners involved. Previous findings (e.g. Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Fox & Kelly, 1995; Seltzer, 1990) that identified an association between custody arrangements on the one hand and family size and sex of the children on the other hand were not observed in our Flemish data. This could be attributable to sample criteria. Because all respondents were married after 1970, the average duration of the marriages within cohort 1 was shorter than in more recent divorce cohort. This may have caused an artificial positive association between divorce cohort and family size.

Besides the replication of earlier research, the innovative contribution of this study was to demonstrate whether correlates of physical custody arrangements had changed over time, as a result of changing custody legislation. Our results showed that the negative association between parental conflict and joint physical custody disappeared after 1995. Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts (2011) argue that the legal presumption for joint physical custody in Australia could have led to more parental conflict because of the terminology used in the law. The statement of 'equal time' was introduced by the legislator to strive for gender neutrality, but may have created the expectation that joint physical custody is a 'parental right'. The attention has been shifted away from enabling continuity in the parent-child relationship toward an equal division of children between both parents (Mcintosh, 2009). A second reason of the decreased association between parental conflict and custody type may be the higher incidence of court imposed joint physical custody situations due to legal presumptions. An example from the Swedish context learned that since shared residence became the default in Sweden in 1998, joint custody was more often imposed among high-conflict couples (Singer, 2008). The 2006 Belgian law stipulates explicitly that joint physical custody must be investigated (and can be imposed) by the judge, mainly when there is no agreement between parents. Thus the likelihood of joint physical custody may be increased when

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there is a non-cooperative parental climate. Also in Australia, a legal presumption increased the number of court imposed joint physical custody cases (Cashmore et al., 2010; Fehlberg et al., 2011). As noted twenty years ago by Rothberg (1983), parental flexibility and interaction are essential requirements for workable custody arrangements, but may contradict with the rather rigid schedules imposed by courts.

The declining association between parental conflict and joint physical custody may lead to a bifurcation of joint physical custody parents. Like Fehlberg et al. (2011) stated, joint physical custody is on the one hand still popular among low-conflict and cooperative parents, but it is also more and more used as a compromise among high-conflict couples. This may have far-reaching consequences for the children involved, as several studies demonstrate that joint physical custody is not beneficial when parental conflict is high (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Fehlberg et al., 2011; Frankel, 1985; Johnston, 1995). (McIntosh (2009) also warns that the qualities needed to make shared parenting arrangements work (e.g. good communication skills, a cooperative attitude) are not typically characteristics of parents that litigate in court. In Sweden, the legal preference for joint physical custody was cut back in 2006 by amending to the law the indication that this custody arrangement can only work when both parents are able to cooperate (Singer, 2008).

Also with regard to mediation we found a changed association. In earlier times, parents with joint physical custody arrangements more often visited a mediator. Probably, the mediation process assisted them in working out mutually agreed custody arrangements. For recently divorced couples, joint physical custody has become the standard and is more often obtained outside of mediation.

Our results indicate an increased heterogeneity in the educational profile of parents with joint physical custody arrangements over time. In earlier times, when joint physical custody was uncommon, it was quite restricted to a distinct group of upper-class highly educated parents. Recently, the likelihood of joint physical custody among average educated parents has increased. These dynamics may reflect a 'social diffusion' process of joint physical custody over time. Highly educated parents were forerunners with regard to joint physical custody. Their less traditional value pattern could have influenced their readiness to accept gender-neutral parenting. Moreover, they had the financial means to afford it. Currently, enforced by legislative changes, joint physical custody is adopted by a more heterogeneous group and becomes more prevalent among lower educational groups. Still, it is not very common for two low educated parents.

Our results suggest that fathers are increasingly taking up the care of their children if mothers are low educated, especially after 2006. Although the proportion of sole father custody families did not increase over time, the educational profile of sole father custody families has changed. The recent law may have facilitated a readiness to view sole father custody as a viable alternative to sole mother custody. Especially when fathers are educationally (and thus economically) advantaged over mothers, they seem to have the 'power' to gain physical custody rights. Mothers, on the contrary, seem to lose their educational advantage over time. Mothers that were higher educated than their ex-spouse were more likely to get physical custody over their children in earlier cohorts but not in

the most recent cohort. This suggests that the 2006 legal reform has served the rights of fathers more than those of mothers, and that the latter group has started to lose their advantageous position in becoming the residential parent.

Probably, the evolution towards gender neutrality in custody decisions has not ended yet. In that respect, our results can be articulated with the discussion of Martin (2004) on the 'divorce divide'. Divorce rates in the U.S. (and also in Europe, e.g. De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006) have declined among the higher social classes whereas they have risen among lower educated groups (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Harkonen & Dronkers, 2006; Martin & Parashar, 2006). The latter are in fact the most vulnerable members of society (in terms of economic and mental resilience), and they are least able to deal with the consequences of a divorce. Hence, divorce may function as an engine of growing inequality. Assuming that this social diffusion of joint physical custody will continue and that this (relatively expensive) residential arrangement will expand towards the lower social classes of our society, a reconsideration of this custody option for child well-being is important.

This study has a number of limitations. Although the main motive of this study was analyzing the effects of legal changes on custody arrangements, we did not have information about the legal decision or on how the physical custody arrangement became settled (mutual parental decision versus court imposed). Moreover, we had to rely on individual retrospective information, as remembered and reported by parents. Because the survey had a cross-sectional design, recall bias concerning subjective measures, such as parental conflict, and who took the decision to separate, may be likely. Hence, the temporal and causal ordering of conditions present at the divorce and subsequent residential arrangements cannot be parsed out with this type of recall data. Even though we were able to describe the association between family characteristics and custody arrangements and how these changed over time, our ability to draw causal inferences is quite restricted. We only take into account the first residential arrangement after divorce. As physical custody arrangements are likely to change over time (when children age or when new unions are formed), we may miss some families here.

Other limitations follow from the sampling design. The selected target child was not representative for the population of Flemish children of divorced parents. In the selection process, children of at least 10 years old that lived in the household of at least one of their parents were prioritized. Hence, adolescent children were somewhat overrepresented in this study. The reported incidence figures for joint, sole mother and sole father custody showed high resemblance with chapter 4.

Families from which one parent participated scored significantly different on a number of variables compared with families from which both parents participated. It is very likely that families that did not participate were even more different on a number of variables like parental conflict, parental involvement or education.

Another important pitfall is that the sampling design did not include parents that were divorced twice. Hence, our study is restricted to stable post-divorce families. Related to this limitation is the

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one-sided report of parental conflict in case that only one parent participated in the survey. We can assume some uncertainty about the conflict report by this parent, for which we are not able to control. Moreover, we do not have information on cohabitating couples with children who separated without marrying. Since this category of parents is increasingly common, they should be a point of emphasis in future work. Lastly, the low number of cases in father and flexible custody means that results for these categories are potentially less robust.

Despite these limitations, this research holds considerable relevance for family policy in so far as it demonstrates how the socio-demographic composition of joint physical custody families has been shifting in tandem with new laws surrounding physical custody arrangements. According to Allen and Brining (2011) it is important to evaluate legislation changes, since any legislative shift, however subtle, may have far-reaching consequences for children and their parents. The most compelling question raised by our study concerns how much child well-being is affected by a legal presumption for joint physical custody. There is wide consensus that extended parent-child contact after divorce is a positive evolution when considering child well-being, but the increasing occurrence of conflict in joint physical custody situations may be a matter of concern. An Australian report that assessed the impact of a joint physical custody default stated that fathers benefited the most, followed by mothers and in the last place the children, who derived the least benefits (Cashmore et al., 2010). Already there are indications that negotiation and litigation have become more focused on parental rights than on the best interest of children (Fehlberg et al., 2011). After all, children are the key persons for whom the new custody legislation was established.

The changed legal conditions and associated physical custody arrangements make generalizations from previous studies tenuous. New empirical evidence on the well-being of joint physical custody children in low and high conflict situations or between well and less well educated parents, should be a priority. Cross-national comparisons in which custody legislation varies should offer additional insights. We expect to pursue several of these lines of inquiry in further research.

Chapter 6

Children's custody arrangements and their well-being: The role of family process variables

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Study B is published as: Sodermans, A.K., Vanassche, S. & Matthijs, K. (2013). De verblijfsregeling en welbevinden van kinderen: verschillen naar gezinskenmerken. *Relaties en Nieuwe Gezinnen*, 3(11), 1-29.

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6 Children's custody arrangements and their well-being: The role of family process variables

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The majority of Western countries are facing high divorce rates and increasing gender neutrality in custody decisions. In that respect, Belgium is an interesting study case, because it has one the highest divorce rates in Europe (Eurostat, 2013; Matthijs, 2009) and it has a very liberal custody legislation. In 2006, joint physical custody became the default judicial recommendation, generating an increase in the number of joint physical custody arrangements, exceeding 30% for recent divorces (chapter 4). The reason why Belgian policy makers decided to favour this post-divorce living arrangement was the "child's best interest". Frequent contact and a good relationship between children and their both parents after divorce may buffer detrimental effects caused by the divorce itself (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Bauserman, 2002; Johnston, 1995; Lee, 2002).

Nonetheless, research on the effects of joint physical custody on children is relatively scarce and the extant findings are not straightforward. A meta-analysis of Bauserman (2002) pointed in the direction of positive outcomes of joint physical custody on children, but many other studies failed to replicate this association (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Johnston, 1995; Kelly, 1993; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). Moreover, there could be difficulties with generalizing these 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. Thus joint physical custody was 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, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011; Singer, 2008; chapter 5).

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". This study addresses that question gap by investigating under which circumstances joint physical custody is in the child's best interest. Our main goal is to examine the association between the custody arrangement (mother, joint and father custody) and two measures of adolescents' emotional functioning. We thereby focus on the moderating effect of parental conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship and the presence of stepfamily members. Data from four rounds of the Leuven Adolescents and Family study (Vanassche et al., 2012) were used. The research sample consists of 1570 adolescents who experienced a parental break-up.

6.2 DEFINITION OF JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY

It is important to make a distinction between joint legal custody and joint physical custody. The former refers to equal parental responsibilities towards the child, active involvement and shared decision-making, while the latter assumes that the child lives an equal or substantial amount of time with each parent (Bauserman, 2002). Whereas the equal division of parental responsibilities is rather clear, there is more variation in the understanding of living an 'equal or substantial' amount of time with both parents. Although Belgian judges and lawyers have the tendency to interpret this quite strictly as exactly half of time with mother and father (Hemelseo, 2012b), other countries and states show a more flexible interpretation. Melli (1999) investigated which threshold for joint physical custody was applied by different states in the U.S. before a reduction in child support could be considered. She found that most states set the threshold between 30 and 35%. In this study we apply two different definitions of joint physical custody. According to the first definition, based on Melli (1999), 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. We also apply a second definition of joint physical custody, in which sole custody is treated very strictly, and is referring to living 100% of time with one parent. Children who are living at least some time with each parent are treated as joint physical custody children.

6.3 CUSTODY LEGISLATION: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BELGIAN CONTEXT

Joint legal custody was incorporated into Belgian custody law in 1995. This was the juridical expression of the 'permanent parental responsibility' principle (van Krieken, 2005), that refers to the contemporary normative climate identifying biological parents as ultimately responsible for bringing up their children. From then on, both parents were supposed to be responsible, in proportion to their own means, for housing, living costs, parenting and the education of their children. This principle replaced the former situation in which one parent had custody (usually the mother) and the other had visitation rights. Parenting became absolute and unconditional, the parental system has to 'survive' the conjugal system (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). Stable emotional bonds with both parents are thereby seen as beneficial for the well-being of children.

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 residential model in Belgium. 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. Because the criteria for the child's best interest are not stipulated in the law, there is considerable ambiguity regarding custody decisions (Martens, 2007; Vanboeckrijk, 2009).

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.

6.4 JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY AND ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING: THEORY

6.4.1 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 well-being (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, Sodermans, Matthijs, 2011b; Vanassche et al., in press). 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 well-being 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, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989).

Joint physical custody also increases family complexity by increasing the chance 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, a newborn halfbrother or -sister. Because joint physical custody increases the chance of repartnering (particularly for women), this stochastic association between joint physical custody and the chance on living together with a stepparent is even increased (Gunnøe & Braver, 2001; chapter 4).

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 et al., 1985). Most of these authors 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 with 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.

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 different set of family process variables: 1) the parental conflict perspective emphasizes the detrimental effects of spousal discord on child functioning, 2) the attachment theory and parental absence perspective gives the parent-child relationship a central position and 3) the family structure perspective is dealing with the presence (or absence) of old and new (step)family members.

6.4.2 Parental conflict

Many studies suggest that parental conflict is more strongly associated with children's emotional well-being than family structure (Amato & Keith, 1991; Fischer, 2004; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996; Kalter, Kloner, Schreier, & Okla, 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 well-being (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 chance to be 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.

Here we investigate whether the association between joint physical custody and adolescent well-being is moderated by the level of parental conflict. As more research evidence points to low conflict as a necessary condition for well-functional joint custody arrangements, we hypothesize that joint physical custody will be more positively associated with adolescent well-being compared to mother and father custody in case of low parental conflict (H1).

6.4.3 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 (1968, 1973, 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 and Duindam (2009) tentatively conclude that a good parent-child relationship is more important for the well-being 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. Reversely, 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.

Below we examine whether the association between joint physical custody and adolescent well-being is moderated by the quality of the parent-child relationship. Following Videon's (2002) findings, we expect that the association between living together with a parent and adolescent's well-being is more positive when there is a good relationship between parent and child. Therefore, we hypothesize that sole mother and joint custody are more positively associated with adolescent well-being compared to sole father custody when the relationship with mother is good (H2a), and sole father and joint custody are more positively associated with adolescent well-being compared to sole mother custody when there is a good relationship with the father (H2b).

6.4.4 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 well-being (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 chance of living together with a stepparent (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; chapter 4). 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(s) (Sweeney, 2010). Moreover, the higher emotional and psychological well-being of parents in case of repartnering may be associated with higher adolescent well-being (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 (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 et al., 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). Finding new roles and relationships with their new family members could induce ambiguity that negatively affects the well-being 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 well-being 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. Assuming that a higher structural complexity induces additional stress, we hypothesize that joint physical custody is more positively associated with adolescent well-being compared to sole mother and sole father custody in the absence of stepparents and step- or halfsiblings (H3).

6.5 GENDER DIFFERENCES

Research on the importance of joint physical custody and the relationship with mother and father cannot ignore the possibility of gender-specific effects. Sole mother and father custody need to be distinguished from one another.

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' well-being than the relationship with the opposite-sex parent (Videon, 2002). Hence,

the relationship with mother is more strongly related to the well-being 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 well-being 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).

The research questions and hypotheses outlined above will be tested with two different samples, derived from two different data sources. Study A comprises a sample of adolescents from the LAFS-study, while we retest the findings in study B with adolescents from the DiF-study. At the end, a final conclusion will be made.

6.6 STUDY A

6.6.1 Methods

6.6.1.1 Data

The data that are used come from the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (LAFS). The adolescents are surveyed in their schools via a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. LAFS works with a two-stage sampling design. Firstly, schools are selected through a disproportional, stratified sample. Strata characteristics include the school type (free versus public schools) and regions of at least 50000 inhabitants, corresponding to municipalities within the different Flemish provinces. Secondly, two random classes of pupils for each educational track²¹ and grade²² are selected within the schools. All pupils are questioned during the school hours. An important advantage of this sampling design is that it produces a sample of adolescents across all social layers of society, spread across schools that differ in the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of their pupils. There is a very-limited selective non-response rate compared to other large-scale surveys (<1%). The

²¹ The four educational tracks in the Flemish schooling system are: General education, Vocational education, Technical education and Arts education

²² The Flemish schooling system has four different grades, each corresponding with two consecutive years of secondary education. The fourth grade incorporates only one year and exists only in the Vocational study track

separation of the study context and questionnaire content (not questioning children about their family life within a familial context) is used as a strategy to obtain 'true stories' of children.

Currently, four rounds of LAFS are completed, resulting in a database for 7035 adolescents. The combined sample distribution of sex, age and educational track closely resembles that of the Flemish secondary school population (see chapter 2). In a first step, we excluded adolescents with at least one deceased or unknown parent ($n=286$), adolescents whose parents never lived together ($n=20$) and adolescents who provided incomplete or contradictory information on the marital status and living situation of their parents ($n=53$). Of the remaining 6687 adolescents, almost one on four ($n=1708$) had experienced a parental divorce or separation, a figure which is almost perfectly in line with the population figures of parental divorce experience in Flanders for that age group (Lodewijckx, 2005a). The research sample for the present study was further limited to the 1570 adolescents 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.

In the next two sections we describe the variables that are used in this study. Descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 29.

6.6.1.2 *Dependent variables*

The dependent variables include both a positive and a negative measure of psychological well-being. Testing the same research hypotheses on two different outcome measures increases the reliability of the results.

Life satisfaction was measured 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). 50% of the adolescents indicated 8 or more, 30% reported a 6 or 7, and 20% scored 5 or lower.

Feelings of depression were measured 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. Approximately 50% of adolescents has a score of less than 7; 25% has a score of more than 10.

Table 29 Sample characteristics for all study variables (N=1570)

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	SD
Age	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

6.6.1.3 *Independent variables*

Our core independent variable is the custody type in which children reside following parental divorce. 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. We used the residential calendar to measure the proportion of time that children spend with both parents (chapter 3). 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. The 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 the mother and 6% live solely with father. According to the 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. This reduces the proportion of adolescents living in joint physical custody to 25%. Approximately 66% live at least two-thirds of the time with their mother, whereas 10% live at least two thirds of time with the father. The predominance of mother custody is reflected in the distribution of both variables. As the number of children in father custody is limited, we limit the hypothesis testing to the comparison of mother and joint custody. The results for children in father custody are included as additional information.

The other main variables of interest are those which we expect to condition the association between custody type and adolescent well-being (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).

Parental conflict was measured by five items of the Conflict Awareness Scale (Grych & Fincham, 1990), 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 'never' until 'always' and exhibits high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0,88$). 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.

The quality of the parent-child relationship (NRI) was measured for each parent separately with nine items from the Network of Relationship Inventory scale (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Examples of items are: "Does your mother/father respect you?", "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 complexity of the family configuration is measured for each parents 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). 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. 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.

6.6.1.4 Control variables

The average age of the adolescents is 15 years. 95% of the respondents are between 12 and 18 years old, with a relatively even distribution across age categories. This variable is centred around its mean (15,2) in the multivariate analysis.

The financial situation of both the maternal and paternal household are included as a dichotomous variable, contrasting those who never to rarely experience financial difficulties versus those experiencing financial difficulties sometimes or often. 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.

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.

We control for years since parental divorce by including a metric variable. For the 143 respondents with a missing value on this variable, we imputed the mean (8) and controlled for this imputation by adding a dummy variable to the analyses.

6.6.1.5 Analytical strategy

All analyses are performed using the statistical package SAS. Before testing the conditional effects of the different custody types, we look at the profile, family relationships and well-being of adolescents in different custody types (Table 30). 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 well-being 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 (Table 31). Secondly, 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 always 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:

$$\text{LOWPACO_JOINT} = \text{LOWPACO} \times \text{JOINT}$$

$$\text{LOWPACO_FATHER} = \text{LOWPACO} \times \text{FATHER}$$

$$\text{HIGHPACO_JOINT} = \text{HIGHPACO} \times \text{JOINT}$$

$$\text{HIGHPACO_FATHER} = \text{HIGHPACO} \times \text{FATHER}$$

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:

$$\text{LIFEest} = \text{intercept} + B1(\text{JOINT}) + B2(\text{FATHER}) + B3(\text{LOWPACO}) + B4(\text{LOWPACO_JOINT}) + B4(\text{LOWPACO_FATHER}) + \text{control variables}$$

$$\text{LIFEest} = \text{intercept} + B1(\text{JOINT}) + B2(\text{FATHER}) + B3(\text{PACO}) + B4(\text{PACO_JOINT}) + B4(\text{PACO_FATHER}) + \text{control variables}$$

$$\text{LIFEest} = \text{intercept} + B1(\text{JOINT}) + B2(\text{FATHER}) + B3(\text{HIGHPACO}) + B4(\text{HIGHPACO_JOINT}) + B4(\text{HIGHPACO_FATHER}) + \text{control variables}$$

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 regarding the partner status of mother and father is quite similar, but here the reference category is manipulated. The results are presented in two tables, one for the strict sole custody typology (Table 32) and one for the strict joint custody typology (Table 33). Both tables contain the conditional predicted values for depression and life satisfaction, based on the coefficients of the sample-specific equations, including all control variables. We present the results for boys and girls separately.

6.6.2 Results

6.6.2.1 *The profile of adolescents and their family per custody arrangement*

In this section we present the bivariate results of the association between custody type and all other independent variables (Table 30). 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. 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.

Table 30 The profile, family relationships and well-being of adolescents in different custody arrangements (N=1570)

	Strict sole custody typology				Strict joint custody typology			
	100% sole mother	1%- 99% joint	100% sole father		67%- 100% sole mother	33%- 66% joint	67%- 100% sole father	
Categorical variables (%)								
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	
Metric variables (Mean value)								
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	***
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	***
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 < 0,10; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001; Chi-square test for categorical variables, F-test for metric variables

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 30 contains information on the bivariate association between custody type and adolescent well-being. 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 well-being (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.

6.6.2.2 The conditional association between custody type and adolescent well-being

Before presenting the results of the sample-specific equations, we first consider results from the multivariate model without interaction terms (Table 31). Regarding the control variables, age, educational level of parents and number of years past by since parental divorce are not or only weakly related to adolescent well-being. Financial problems of the mother are more strongly related to the well-being of girls, financial problems of the father more strongly to the well-being 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 31 Parameters and standard errors for linear regression analysis modelling depressive feelings and life satisfaction

BOYS	DEPRESSIVE FEELINGS (N=508)		LIFE SATISFACTION (N=498)	
	<i>Strict sole custody</i>	<i>Strict joint custody</i>	<i>Strict sole custody</i>	<i>Strict joint custody</i>
Intercept	7,27 (0,54) ***	7,48 (0,45) ***	7,64 (0,22) ***	7,44 (0,18) ***
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) ***
Mother partner (no)	-0,25 (0,42)	-0,27 (0,42)	0,09 (0,17)	0,07 (0,17)
Mother partner & children (no)	0,09 (0,62)	0,07 (0,62)	-0,14 (0,25)	-0,16 (0,25)
Father partner (no)	0,22 (0,41)	0,25 (0,41)	-0,05 (0,17)	-0,06 (0,17)
Father 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)
Educational level parents (high)	-0,28 (0,41)	-0,31 (0,40)	-0,08 (0,16)	-0,06 (0,16)
Financial problems mother (no)	0,60 (0,41)	0,53 (0,41)	-0,08 (0,16)	-0,06 (0,17)
Financial problems father (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 ²	0,17	0,18	0,23	0,23
GIRLS	DEPRESSIVE FEELINGS (N=706)		LIFE SATISFACTION (N=694)	
	<i>Strict sole custody</i>	<i>Strict joint custody</i>	<i>Strict sole custody</i>	<i>Strict joint custody</i>
Intercept	6,84 (0,50) ***	7,15 (0,42) ***	7,60 (0,21) ***	7,46 (0,18) ***
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) ***
Mother partner (no)	0,41 (0,36)	0,31 (0,36)	-0,22 (0,15)	-0,18 (0,15)
Mother partner & children (no)	0,73 (0,52)	0,73 (0,52)	-0,23 (0,22)	-0,23 (0,22)
Father partner (no)	0,27 (0,37)	0,28 (0,37)	-0,08 (0,16)	-0,09 (0,16)
Father 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)
Educational level parents (high)	0,36 (0,34)	0,32 (0,34)	-0,07 (0,14)	-0,05 (0,15)
Financial problems mother (no)	1,67 (0,34) ***	1,67 (0,34) ***	-0,69 (0,14) ***	-0,69 (0,14) ***
Financial problems father (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 ²	0,17	0,17	0,23	0,23

Note: °p < 0,10; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001; Reference category given in parentheses

Table 32 and Table 33 contain the conditional, predicted values on the well-being 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 well-being 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 well-being measures than those in mother custody when there is frequent parental conflict (H 1). 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 well-being, albeit in a different way. When a bad relationship with father is reported, joint custody is more negatively related to adolescent well-being compared to mother custody. This result is found for boys and girls and for both measures of well-being 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. If we relate these findings to our research hypotheses (H2a & H2b), the conditional differences in adolescent well-being between custody types depart somewhat from our predictions. In case of a very good relationship with mother, joint custody is less positive for adolescent well-being than living fulltime with mother, while in case of a bad relationship with father, joint custody is less positive associated with adolescent well-being than mother custody.

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 as straightforward as predicted (H3).

Table 32 Conditional predicted values on feelings of depression and life satisfaction in different custody arrangement (strict sole custody typology)

	DEPRESSIVE FEELINGS			LIFE SATISFACTION		
	Mother	Joint	Father	Mother	Joint	Father
BOYS						
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
GIRLS						
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: entries are conditional predicted values based on regression coefficients of OLS regression, including control variables; mother custody=reference category; °p < 0,10; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001

Table 33 Conditional predicted values on feelings of depression and life satisfaction in different custody arrangement (strict joint custody typology)

	DEPRESSIVE FEELINGS			LIFE SATISFACTION		
	Mother	Joint	Father	Mother	Joint	Father
BOYS						
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
GIRLS						
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°

Note: entries are conditional predicted values based on regression coefficients of OLS regression, including control variables; mother custody=reference category; °p < 0,10; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001

6.7 STUDY B

6.7.1 Methods

6.7.1.1 Data

In this study, we use data from the DiF-survey (Mortelmans et al., 2011), in which 6470 (ex-) partners and 1257 children were interviewed in 2009 and 2010 via Computer Assisted Personal Interviews. It includes persons who married between 1971 and 2008 for the first time. The sample is drawn proportionally towards marriage year and disproportionally towards marriage status: one third of the partners are married, two thirds of the partners are divorced. If (ex-) partners had children, also a target child was selected. This child was at least 10 years old, not older than 21, and lived with one or both parents. This multi-actor approach gives us the opportunity to look at both the child perspective as the parent perspective. Data from 707 children between 10 and 21 years old, and 301 parents were used.

6.7.1.2 Variables

This study examines the association between the children's custody arrangement and their subjective well-being. Subjective well-being can be defined by an affective and an evaluative component. The first relates to how people feel on a day-to-day basis, the latter denotes how satisfied people are with their life (Diener, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The evaluative component of subjective well-being is life satisfaction, and reflects how happy and fulfilled someone feels (Gilman, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000; Huebner, 2004). It is one of the most stable indicators of subjective well-being, not influenced by short-term events and physical states (Levin, Dallago, & Currie, 2012). Therefore, life satisfaction is the dependent variable used in this study. It was measured via the Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965). On a scale from 0 to 10, respondents were asked how they felt in general, if they were happy and content. The extremes were defined by the respondent himself: 0 meant the worst possible life quality and 10 meant the best possible life quality one can imagine. This one indicator has been used abundantly and it is shown that life satisfaction is a valid and trustworthy measurement of subjective well-being. On average, the life satisfaction of children was rather high, as 67% of the children gave a score of 8 or higher and only 13% of the children gave a score of 6 or lower.

The custody arrangement, the independent variable, was registered in two steps via the parents. First, a question was posed to differentiate whether the child lived with its mother, father, someone else, or both parents alternately. In this latter case, a residential calendar was used in which parents were shown a calendar, corresponding with a regular month without holiday periods (chapter 3). Parents indicated for every day and night whether the child spent with them or the ex-spouse. The proportion of time the child spent with each parent was used to create the custody arrangement variable. If both parents filled in the calendar, the mean amount

of time with each parent was calculated or in case of incongruent answers, the child's answer was used. Children could live in (1) sole mother custody arrangements when they resided at least 66% of the time with their mother and reversely less than 33% of the time with their father; (2) sole father custody arrangements when they resided at least 66% of the time with their father and reversely less than 33% of the time with their mother; or (3) joint custody arrangements when they resided at least 33% of the time with each parent.

Moderators were parental conflict, parent-child relationship and the presence of stepparents. Parental conflict was measured via presenting conflict situations and asking the parents to indicate if these situations happened within the last year with their ex-partner: (1) blame each other; (2) yell or shout at each other; (3) use physical violence; (4) throw something or break something on purpose; and (5) don't talk to each other. Answer categories ranged from 1 (never) to 7 (daily). As conflict levels are rather low, the highest score from all five items was taken to create the categorical variable parental conflict. Categories were (1) never conflict; (2) occasional conflict, at the maximum once a month; and (3) frequent conflict, at least once a month. When there was no contact between parents at all, the conflict question was not given and these observations were a separate category of (4) no contact. For the child measure of parental conflict, the same question was presented to children. They had to indicate how often the conflict situation had occurred over the past 12 months. Categories were (1) never conflict; (2) occasional conflict, at the maximum once a month; and (3) frequent conflict, at least once a month. A considerable proportion of children (9%) refused to answer this question and received a separate code (4) information missing.

The parent-child relationship was measured via the question "How good or bad is your relationship with (name child)? Parents' answers were categorized into (1) no good relationship (i.e. very bad, bad or neutral relationship); (2) good relationship; and (3) very good relationship. If there was no contact with the child, a separate code was given: (4) no contact. For the child report of the parent-child relationship, the same question was presented to children. They had to indicate how good or bad their relationship with their mother/father was. The same four categories as used for the parents were constructed for the children.

The presence of stepparents was indicated by the parents and indicates whether a new partner lived in the household (dummy variable, coded 1). No distinction was made between remarried or cohabiting partners. When only one parent participated in the study, we had no direct information on the presence of a stepparent in the other parent's household. In that situation, we relied on the participating parent's answer on the question "Does [name ex-spouse] currently live together with a new partner?". Around half of the mothers and around 60% of the fathers lived with a new partner. For 3% of fathers the information was missing. A missing category was further included and included in the analyses.

Educational level parents, sex, age, and year since divorce were taken as control variables. Highly educated parents more often chose for a joint custody arrangement (Cancian & Meyer,

1998). Education of both parents was surveyed with both parents: (1) low educated parents don't have a degree of secondary school; (2) average educated parents have a degree of secondary school; and (3) highly educated parents have a degree of higher education. Age is further related to well-being and included in the analyses, centred around its mean. Children are between 10 and 21 years old, with a mean of 16. Years since divorce is related to well-being and to the custody type. Adaptation to the parental divorce takes time and because of legal changes, joint custody is more frequent among those children who more recently experienced a divorce. Centred around its mean, this variable ranged from 1 to 21 years, with a mean of 9 years since the divorce happened.

Table 34 presents the distribution of all variables measured at the child and parental level. In the sample that uses the child perspective (N=707), indicators of parental conflict, and the parent-child relationships are derived from the children's answers. In the sample that uses the parents' perspective (N=301), indicators of parental conflict, and the parent-child relationships are derived from the parent's answers. Table 34 shows no large differences in the distribution of all variables between both samples. The parent sample contains a slightly higher proportion of joint physical custody families, a higher chance that parents were higher educated, a higher chance for occasional conflict and a lower chance for no conflict, than the child sample

6.7.1.3 Analyses strategy

All analyses are performed using the statistical package SAS. First, we examine the profile, relationships and well-being of children within the three different custody arrangements via bivariate analyses, and per sample (Table 35). Subsequently, the results of the multivariate regression analyses are shown (Table 36). The models estimate the effects of the custody arrangement on the life satisfaction of adolescent children, controlled for moderating (parental conflict, the parent-child relationship and the presence of a resident stepparent) and socio-demographic variables (sex, age, education of parents, time since divorce). Finally, in line with the strategy of Holmbeck (2002), we add interaction terms (multiplicative terms of the moderators and the custody arrangement) to the model (Table 37). We use post-hoc probing to test if differences between custody arrangements are significant under specific values of the moderators, by manipulating the reference category (for a detailed description of the strategy of Holmbeck, see 6.6.1.5.)

Table 34 Descriptive measurements of all variables (N=707)

Categorical variables	Category	Child reports (N=707)		Parent reports (N=301)	
		N	%	N	%
Sex	Boy	358	50,6	158	52,5
	Girl	349	49,4	143	47,5
Custody arrangement	Sole mother	442	62,7	173	57,7
	Joint	187	26,5	91	30,3
	Sole father	76	10,8	36	12,0
Resident partner of father	No new partner	270	38,2	126	41,9
	New partner	416	58,8	175	58,1
	Information missing	21	3,0	-	-
Resident partner of mother	No new partner	355	50,4	160	53,1
	New partner	349	49,6	141	46,8
Education father	Low	184	26,4	77	25,7
	Average	307	44,1	116	38,7
	High	206	29,6	107	35,7
Education mother	Low	135	19,1	52	17,3
	Average	322	45,5	128	42,5
	High	250	35,4	121	40,2
Parental conflict	Never	308	43,6	97	32,3
	Occasionally	200	28,3	107	35,7
	Frequently	138	19,5	55	18,3
	No contact	-	-	41	13,7
	Information missing	61	8,6	-	-
Father-child relationship	Not good	164	23,4	24	8,0
	Good	301	42,9	125	41,8
	Very good	172	24,5	134	44,8
	No contact	64	9,1	16	5,4
Mother-child relationship	Not good	77	10,9	15	5,0
	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		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Life satisfaction (0-10)		7,9	1,6	7,8	1,8
Age of child (10-21)		16,0	3,3	15,9	3,3
Number of years past since divorce (1-21)		8,9	4,5	8,6	4,4

6.7.2 Results

6.7.2.1 *The profile of adolescents and their family per custody arrangement*

There is no relationship between the child's gender and the custody arrangement when we use the child sample. In the sample using parent reports, there is a positive association between joint physical custody and the likelihood that the target child is a boy. Highly educated parents have a higher likelihood to choose for a joint custody arrangement versus sole custody. When children live with their father, their mother is usually low educated. Sole custody parents are less likely to have a new partner, compared to joint custody parents. This suggests that upbringing children interferes with the time parents can invest in a new partner. The relationship between custody status and the presence of a new partner is more pronounced among fathers.

Parental conflict is also related to the custody arrangement. Children in father custody report more frequently parental conflict than children in mother and joint physical custody (who hardly differ from each other). Parents with a child in joint physical custody report the highest proportion of frequent conflicts, sole custody mothers the lowest. Parents with a child in sole custody have more often lost contact with each other than joint physical custody parents.

Furthermore, there is a clear relationship between quality of the parent-child relationship and the amount of contact between parent and child. Children who are not living with a parent, have a worse relationship with that parent, than children who are living full-time or part-time with that parent. There is hardly any difference between living full-time or part-time (i.e. in joint custody) with parents. This result suggests that living together part-time is sufficient to maintain a good relationship. Parents are more positive about the relationship with their children than vice versa. To illustrate, 29% of the children in sole mother custody have no good relationship with their father, whereas only 11% of fathers in this situation reports no good relationship with the child. Parents are more likely than children to report a very good relationship.

As expected, younger children are more likely to have a joint custody arrangement. Children in sole father custody are on average the oldest. This relationship is probably related with the recent legal changes.

Finally, there is no bivariate relationship between custody arrangements and life satisfaction in the child sample. The parent sample shows a positive association between joint physical custody and the life satisfaction of adolescents.

Table 35 Profile, family relations and well-being of adolescents in different custody arrangements (N=707)

	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody		Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody	
Categorical variables (%)	Child reports (N=707)				parent reports (N=301)			
Girl	51,1	45,5	48,7		54,3	36,3	44,4	*
Education father								
Low	31,0	12,4	32,9	***	32,4	12,2	25,0	**
Average	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	
Education mother								
Low	19,9	9,1	36,8	***	18,5	7,7	33,3	***
Average	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	
Resident partner of father	63,8	52,9	44,7	***	62,4	58,2	38,9	*
Resident partner of mother	46,2	54,6	56,0		43,4	51,7	50,0	
Parental conflict								
Never	46,6	39,0	36,8	***	34,3	34,1	19,4	**
Occasionally	23,8	40,6	25,0		32,0	41,8	38,9	
Frequently	18,8	17,1	29,0		15,7	23,1	19,4	
No contact	-	-	-		18,0	1,1	22,2	
Information	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 variables (mean)								
Age of 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	*

Note: * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001; Chi² test for categorical variables, F-test for metric variables

Table 36 Parameter estimates and standard errors for linear regression analysis modelling life satisfaction

	Child reports (N=683)			Parent reports (N=294)		
Intercept	7,89	(0,21)	***	7,41	(0,40)	***
Girl	-0,34	(0,12)	**	-0,58	(0,21)	**
<i>Custody arrangement (mother custody)</i>						
Joint physical custody	0,01	(0,15)		0,31	(0,26)	
Father custody	0,21	(0,22)		0,26	(0,37)	
<i>Parental conflict (never conflict)</i>						
Occasionally conflict	-0,06	(0,15)		-0,01	(0,25)	
Frequently conflict	-0,57	(0,17)	***	-0,50	(0,31)	
Parents no contact				0,01	(0,36)	
Information missing	0,08	(0,24)				
<i>Father-child relationship (good)</i>						
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)	
<i>Mother-child relationship (good)</i>						
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 has resident partner (<i>no</i>)	-0,08	(0,13)		-0,02	(0,22)	
Mother has resident partner (<i>no</i>)	0,03	(0,13)		0,15	(0,22)	
<i>Education father (average)</i>						
Low	-0,14	(0,15)		-0,08	(0,28)	
High	0,07	(0,15)		0,15	(0,25)	
<i>Education mother (average)</i>						
Low	0,03	(0,17)		-0,24	(0,31)	
High	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)	
Adjusted R ²	0,15			0,13		

Note: * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001; reference category in parentheses

6.7.2.2 The conditional association between custody type and adolescent well-being

There is no multivariate effect of the custody type on the life satisfaction of Flemish adolescents in the DiF-sample (Table 36). The bivariate effect in the parent sample, as shown in Table 35, has disappeared by including other variables. Family process variables have a significant effect on life satisfaction, but only when we consider the child's perspective. Frequent parental conflict is negatively associated with life satisfaction. Very good mother-child and father-child relationships are positively related with adolescents' life satisfaction, while the opposite is true when parent-child relationships are not good. When the parental perspective is applied, no significant effects of the family process variables were found. This difference was not attributable to the lower sample size in the parent sample.

The presence of resident stepparents is not associated with adolescents' life satisfaction. A highly educated mother is positively related to life satisfaction of adolescents from the parents' perspective. Girls have a lower life satisfaction than boys, while the control variables age and time since divorce are not significantly related to life satisfaction.

The predicted conditional values of life satisfaction, based on specific regression equations with interaction terms, are presented in Table 37. The association between custody and life satisfaction hardly differs when different values of the moderators are taken into account. The association between custody and life satisfaction is only moderated through the father-child relation. When a good father-child relationship is absent, the life satisfaction of adolescents in sole father custody arrangements is lower than that of their counterparts in sole mother custody. For mothers, the trend is in the same direction, but the differences are not significant.

Table 37 Predicted conditional values of life satisfaction in different custody arrangements (N=707)

	Mother custody	Joint custody	Father custody
Never conflict	7,98	7,95	7,98
Occasional conflict	7,82	7,99	8,27
Frequent conflict	7,40	7,18	7,96
Not good relation with father	7,83	7,96	4,73***
Good relation with father	8,05	8,05	8,44
Very good relation with father	8,59	8,59	9,13
Not good relation with mother	6,91	7,03	7,59
Good relation with mother	7,94	7,95	8,26
Very good relation with mother	8,51	8,50	8,98
No stepmother in paternal house	7,87	8,03	8,02
Stepmother in paternal house	7,83	7,78	8,13
No stepfather in maternal house	7,94	7,84	7,94
Stepfather in maternal house	7,87	7,98	8,27

Note: * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

6.7.3 Conclusion

This study has addressed a relative gap in the research literature by studying the association between custody arrangements following parental divorce and adolescent well-being under specific conditions. We therefore tested the moderating role of parental conflict, quality of the parent-child relationship and complexity of the family configuration in explaining the association between respectively mother, joint and father custody and the well-being of adolescents. To further validate our results, the research questions were answered by two different databases, LAFS (study A) and DiF (study B). In both studies, an additional experiment was incorporated. In study A, two different definition criteria for sole and joint custody were applied. In study B, two different samples were used for the same research question: one using child reports and one using parent reports of family process variables.

We first explored the socio-demographic characteristics of the adolescents in different custody arrangements. In the LAFS-sample, boys were more often found in (fulltime or part-time) father residence than girls. In the DiF-sample, boys were more often found in joint physical custody. Both findings confirm earlier research (e.g. Fox & Kelly, 1995) and could imply that fathers do more efforts for gaining physical custody over their child(ren) when sons are involved.

Children in joint physical custody families had experienced the parental divorce on average more recently, were on average younger, and had higher educated parents. We found no evidence for an overrepresentation of low-conflict couples into joint physical custody

arrangements. This result could have two reasons. One possibility is the increased heterogeneity within joint physical custody couples, as shown in chapter 5. Because of the legal preference, high-conflict couples who are not able to reach an agreement concerning the child's residence, may end up with a joint physical custody arrangements as compromise solution. Another possibility is that sharing the care of the children after divorce contains a higher risk that new conflict issues (e.g. regarding co-parenting) emerge. The results from the DiF-sample confirm that occasional conflicts (according to the parents) and frequent conflicts (according to the children) are more likely in joint physical custody arrangements, when compared to sole custody arrangements. Raising children together after divorce, may require more interaction between parents, which could cause opportunities for conflicts. Nevertheless, occasional conflicts between divorced parents do not seem to harm children's well-being, as we see no relationship between this level of parental conflict and life satisfaction.

We found clear evidence that living together with a parent is strongly, positively, associated with the quality of the relationship with that parent. 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 well-being. When relationship quality was held constant (taking out the positive effect of joint custody on the relationship with both parents), joint custody became negatively associated with child well-being in the LAFS-sample, compared to mother custody. The reason can be inferred in part from comparison of the results from the two definition criteria for joint physical custody. The recurrent finding is that the results for both measures are very similar, with the differences between the custody types being less pronounced for the strict joint custody measure. This suggests that the real distinction is made between living 100% with the same parent (strict sole custody) versus living at least some time with each parent, more 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 finding suggests that every-other-week arrangements (children living exactly 50% of time in each parental household), as often applied within Belgian jurisdictions, 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.

What can we conclude about the association between joint custody and adolescent well-being? 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 well-being. However, the LAFS-study indicates that adolescents in joint physical custody have lower well-being under certain circumstances, while this was not confirmed by the DiF-study.

In line with previous studies (e.g. Amato & Rezac, 1994), joint physical custody was less beneficial in case of high parental conflict in the LAFS-sample. 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 holds for children's well-being and development.

A second requirement to make joint physical custody appropriate, according to the LAFS-study, appears to be 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, the LAFS-sample indicates 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 well-being 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 sizeable 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.

Finally, we examined the moderating effect of the presence of stepfamily members. The LAFS-study revealed the intriguing finding that joint physical custody is associated with lower adolescent well-being 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 (Hetherington et al., 1992), or that the positive effects of sole custody only hold with the absence of stepparents. It is only for girls that we found indications with the LAFS-sample that living alternately with two father figures is associated with lower well-being. Exploring the underlying mechanisms of these findings certainly deserves attention in future studies.

In the DiF-sample, no moderating effects could be replicated. The association of the family process variables with life satisfaction were not different according to the custody arrangement considered. The DiF-results rather support the argument that joint custody arrangements are recommended, even in case of high-conflict situations, because the higher parental involvement in this custody arrangement could eliminate certain detrimental consequences of parental

divorce for children (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Also the conditional association between joint custody and parent-child relationships in explaining adolescent well-being could not be replicated in the DiF-study.

The multi-actor design of the DiF-study showed the importance of applying both child and parent perspectives on family functioning. Parents seem to have a more positive view than children on the relationship with their children. Perhaps, parents are more prone to giving socially desirable answers in survey research. The discrepancy is remarkably large between children and parents who are not living together. Non-residential parents may find it hard to admit that their relationship with their child is not good. Multi-actor research is thus very useful to create measurements that consider both sides of the story and form more reliable measurements. Also, discrepancy scores between parents and children can be interesting in itself. Earlier studies already showed for instance that parents systematically underestimate their children's feelings of anxiety and overestimate their children's feelings of optimism (Lagattuta, Sayfan, & Bamford, 2012).

We also recognize some limitations of the two presented studies. 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. Therefore, the hypothesis-testing was limited to the comparison of children in mother and joint custody. We did find some clear differences for children in father custody that suggest avenues for future research. A second limitation is that we did not account for the quality of the relationship with the present stepfamily members, an issue which lies beyond the scope of this study. We do believe that an in-depth analysis of the quality of these relationships can provide important insights regarding the well-being of children in post-divorce family configurations. 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. Finally, our data are mainly limited to self-reports of adolescents. Despite the advantages discussed in the methods section, there are some drawbacks. Children's reports on (timing of) parental divorce experience may be less reliable than parent reports, due to factors such as memory bias and social desirability responding. In addition, analysing the association between variables measured with the same person implies shared method variance, overestimating the association between these indicators (Sweeting, 2001). The DiF-study clearly shows that the association between family process variables (like parental conflict and parent-child relationships) and adolescent well-being disappears when these family process variables are reported by the parents instead of by the adolescents themselves, which is a clear example of this shared variance.

The use of two data sources raises new questions, because we found important differences according to the used database. It is important to reflect on the different results from both studies because any conclusion may have important policy implications. The DiF-sample

suggests that joint custody is an equally good custody arrangement than sole mother custody, no matter the level of parental conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship and the presence of stepparents. The LAFS-sample recommends to be somewhat more cautious and suggests that joint physical custody may be adverse under specific circumstances. The different results may be attributable to several factors. First, the composition of both samples may differ considerably. As already described in chapter 2, children whose parents legally divorced more than once, were not included in the DiF-sample. This could lead to a slight overrepresentation of stable post-divorce relationships, a factor probably related with adolescent well-being, our main outcome variable. For example, the average score on life satisfaction is about one point higher (on a scale from 1 to 10) in the DiF-sample when compared to the LAFS-sample. Second, there are indications that the custody arrangement and the likelihood that parents participated in the DiF-study are not mutually independent. Chapter 5 showed that non-residential parents were less likely than residential and joint custody parents to participate in the DiF-study. Thus, parents that participated into the DiF-survey have a higher likelihood to be highly involved parents than those who did not participate in the study. Hence, the DiF-sample may contain more well-functioning joint physical custody couples. Third, parental permission was needed before children could be approached for participation in the study. When children had difficulties with the divorce, parents were less inclined to grant this permission when compared with well-functioning children. Therefore, 'good divorces' may be overrepresented into the DiF-sample, which could bias the results. This double refusal possibility for children in DiF could result in an overrepresentation of emotionally well-adjusted adolescents when compared to LAFS. The selective non-response is probably even higher in the parent-sample of study B, in which only complete mother-father-child triads were selected. Finally, children from the DiF-survey were interviewed face-to-face, often in the vicinity of their parents, which could induce a higher social desirability in their answering pattern. All these aspects could have important implications for the extrapolation of the results and for the conclusions drawn out of these studies. In relation with our specific research questions, we are somewhat inclined to rely more on the results coming out of the LAFS-study, because of the limitations of the DiF-sample. Anyhow, further research into this topic would be necessary.

In sum we can conclude that joint physical custody is not necessarily the best or worst custody arrangement following divorce for adolescent well-being, but it 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 relationship 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 7

Custody arrangements, personality and children's subjective well-being

This chapter is co-authored by Koen Matthijs (KU Leuven) and is currently under review at Journal of Family Psychology.

7 Custody arrangements, personality and children's subjective well-being

7.1 INTRODUCTION

All over Europe, more and more children are commuting between the homes of their mother and father after parental divorce. Every week they pack and unpack, unwind from mother-time and wrap-up for father-time. These children continuously adapt to different homes, different norms, and different rules. Belgium provides an excellent study context for these 'mobile children', as they are called by Jensen (2009). In this country, divorce rates are among the highest in Europe and the legal system recommends joint physical custody as the preferred post-divorce residential model since 2006. The rationale behind that is that living alternately with mother and father has benefits for parents and children: it allows them to maintain and continue their pre-divorce relationship. But commuting between two homes also requires a great deal of flexibility from children, in particular when parents live not close to each other (Wade & Smart, 2003). The question is whether children's welfare is sacrificed for a 'fair' share between parents (Jensen, 2009).

Many scholars investigated the effects of children's custody type on their post-divorce adjustment (for a meta-review, see Bauserman, 2002). The results are however not straightforward. Lee (2002) refers to it as the "continuity – stability" debate. Some scholars found positive effects of joint physical custody on child adjustment because it brings *continuity* after divorce (Bauserman, 2002; Buchanan et al., 1992; Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Glover & Steele, 1989; Luepnitz, 1986; Shiller, 1986; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009; Wolchik et al., 1985). This is caused by the higher availability of parental resources, both emotionally and financially (Gunnore & Braver, 2001). It is sometimes said that joint physical custody minimizes the structural and functional changes that families undergo after divorce (Lowery & Settle, 1985). Others argue that children need *stability* after divorce. Living alternately in two houses results in elevated stress levels, because of the many movements and a more complex family configuration (Goldstein et al., 1973; Jensen & McKee, 2003; Kuehl, 1993; Rothberg, 1983; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009; Wade & Smart, 2003). Living at two different locations may also have a detrimental effect on the peer and social support network of children (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; King, 2002; Kline et al., 1989; Moxnes, 2003). Finally, there is a higher risk that children feel caught between their parents when there is a high level of parental conflict in joint physical custody situations (Kelly, 1994; Shiller, 1987). Finally, a great number of studies found no association between children's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being (e.g. Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Johnston, 1995; Kelly, 1993; Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989; Naedvall & Thuen, 2004; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Wolchik, Braver, & Sandler, 1985). The reason for this inconsistency may be caused by the complexity of the notion of child adjustment and the lack of attention for intermediating factors (Kelly, 1993; Lee, 2002). This latter point has also been highlighted by

Amato (2010) in his critique that current divorce research focuses too much on mean differences in child well-being.

Some scholars have made efforts to incorporate differentiating factors when exploring the link between custody arrangements and child well-being. These factors can be divided into interpersonal and intrapersonal variables. Examples of interpersonal variables are parental conflict (Kelly, 1993; Lowery & Settle, 1985; Luepnitz, 1986; Singer, 2008; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009; chapter 6) and the parent-child relationship (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Rezac, 1994; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). Intrapersonal factors relate to individual characteristics of the child, like age, developmental stage and sex of the child (Bray, 1991; Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). An understudied factor in this regard is the personality of the child. It is demonstrated that personality plays a major role in the post-divorce adjustment of adolescents, more specifically in the way they cope with daily stressors (Bartley & Roesch, 2011). This study explores the role of personality as a differentiating factor in the association between the custody arrangement and subjective well-being of Flemish adolescents following divorce.

7.2 COPING WITH TRANSITIONS: THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY

When children experience a parental divorce, they encounter possible stressors impacting their psychosocial functioning over time (Amato & Keith, 1991; Glenn & Kramer, 1985; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The way in which children react to these stressors is determined by their capacity to regulate emotions and by their coping strategies (Lee, 2002). The particular coping style that children apply is partially determined by their temperament, defined as individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, assumed to have a constitutional base (Rothbart, Ahadi, & Evans, 2000; Wachs, 2006). Temperament is supposed to influence the way children react on stressful events, such as a parental divorce. For instance, children with an easy temperament (e.g. sociable) are more adaptable to change and are more likely to elicit positive responses from their parents and other adolescents than temperamentally difficult children (Hetherington, 1989; Troxel & Matthews, 2004).

Temperament is the genetic blueprint of the later developed personality (Prior et al., 2000; Rothbart et al., 2000). Therefore, we can assume that personality factors also play a role in the post-divorce adjustment of adolescents. There is wide consensus that personality can be conceptualized with the five-factor model: extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. These Big Five represent personality at the broadest level of abstraction and summarize each a large number of more specific personality characteristics (Denissen, Geenen, van Aken, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; John & Srivastata, 1999; Van Leeuwen, De Fruyt, & Mervielde, 2004). Asendorpf and van Aken (2003) proved that the Big Five model has good external validity and that it can also be applied to describe the personality of children (as from their middle childhood).

The Big Five personality variables have been described in detail by John & Srivastata (1999). *Extraversion* implies an energetic approach towards the social and material world and is linked to characteristics like sociability, activity, assertiveness and positive emotionality. *Neuroticism* is linked with feelings of anxiety, nervousity, sadness and tension, and is also called negative emotionality. *Agreeableness* refers to a prosocial and communal orientation towards others and is opposed to antagonism. It is also related with trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness. *Conscientiousness* describes socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task- and goal-directed behaviour: thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks. The factor *openness to experience* has been connected to characteristics like being artistic, curious, original, intelligent, creative and culturally interested (John & Srivastata, 1999).

The importance of personality factors, in particular extraversion and neuroticism, in explaining subjective well-being has been demonstrated by earlier research (Deneve & Cooper, 1998; González Gutiérrez, Jiménez, Hernández, & Puente, 2005; Hayes & Joseph, 2003). Neuroticism predisposes people to experience less subjective well-being whereas extraversion leads to stronger connections with others, making people more happy (Deneve & Cooper, 1998). Conscientiousness is also considered to be an important predictor for life satisfaction, because it leads to a greater perception of control over one's life (Garcia, 2011). More specifically in the domain of divorce, there is evidence that an easy temperament or personality (socially mature, emotional stable) helps children to cope better with stressors arising from the divorce (Bray, 1991; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

However, personality does not operate in a social vacuum (Prior et al., 2000). The link between personality and child well-being has received considerable research attention, mostly by psychologists, but they often neglected the broader social context. This social context has been studied thoroughly by family sociologists, but they tended to underestimate individual factors. According to Roberts and colleagues (2007) there is an urgent need to explore the interaction between both:

One idea that has not been entertained is the potential synergistic relation between personality traits and social environmental factors. It may be the case that the combination of certain personality traits and certain social conditions creates a potent cocktail of factors that either promotes or undermines specific outcomes. Finally, certain social contexts may wash out the effect of individual difference factors, and, in turn, people possessing certain personality characteristics may be resilient to seemingly toxic environmental influences. A systematic understanding of the relations between personality traits and social environmental factors associated with important life outcomes would be very helpful. (Roberts, 2005, p.338)

In this study, we investigate the legally promoted residential model in which children live alternately with their mother and father after divorce. Although joint physical custody permits children to continue their relationships with both parents, it also puts extra demands on

children. Wade and Smart (2003) conducted conversational interviews with children in four primary schools in Yorkshire to really grasp how it felt like to live in two homes. They concluded that children in joint physical custody were confronted with several practical and emotional demands.

Children became increasingly aware of the effort involved in maintaining a life across two households and their own contribution to this effort sometimes felt disproportionate. They were the ones who were constantly moving and however committed they were to living with both parents, they found it hard work. Bags had to be packed and unpacked, school books and games kit had to be organized so that they were at the right home at the right time, and homework had to be co-ordinated with changeovers. The constant displacements were demanding and tiring. 'I never actually feel like I just sit down and relax totally', said one child, 'I always seem to be doing something'. [...] But it was not simply that moving backwards and forwards was demanding of children's time and energy. It could be emotionally draining too. Changeovers were often trigger points for intense feelings of irritation or sadness, and children needed time to adjust (Wade & Smart, 2003, p. 113-144).

Hence, living in two households requires continuous adaptation to changing situational demands. The aim of this study is to explore whether the subjective well-being of adolescents with divorced parents differs according to their custody arrangement. The innovative nature of this study lies in the expansion of this research question by a 'personality X environment' interaction. It is possible that certain personality factors make children more or less flexible to adjust to this type of residential arrangement. Therefore, our research question is: *"What is the association between children's custody arrangement and their subjective well-being and is this association different according to children's personality?"*

7.3 DATA AND METHODS

7.3.1 Data

Data was used from the DiF-study (Mortelmans et al., 2011), a multi-actor survey for which 6470 ever married partners and 1257 children were interviewed in 2009 and 2010 via Computer Assisted Personal Interviews. The sample included first marriages, concluded between 1971 and 2008 (hereafter: the reference marriage) and was drawn proportionally towards marriage year and disproportionally towards marriage status. One third of the marriages were still intact and two thirds of the marriages were dissolved. From each reference marriage one child was selected. Certain priority rules were applied to the selection procedure of this target child (see Pasteels, Mortelmans, & Van Bavel, 2011) in order to increase the probability of interviewing the child (e.g. at least 10 years old and not living independently). A two-stage response procedure was foreseen for minor children: parental permission was required before the child could be approached for an interview. For 43% of the children with

divorced parents this permission was not granted (as comparison: this figure was only 13% for children from intact reference marriages). Adult children could be approached directly. The response rate on the child level was relatively high (72%). The final sample consisted of 504 children from divorced parents between 14 and 21 years old.

7.3.2 Measures

DiF is a multi-actor study in which information from children and parents from the same (dissolved) marriage is available. For 212 children (42%), information from mother, father and child was available. For 292 children (58%) information from the child and only one parent was available. Personality, subjective well-being, parental conflict and the parent-child relationship were self-reports of children. The custody type and the socio-demographic variables were derived from the parents' answers.

The dependent variable in this study was subjective well-being, which can be defined by an affective and an evaluative component (Diener, 1994, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The negative affective component was *feelings of depression*, measured with the CES-D8, consisting of eight items (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 answer categories with increasing frequency, ranging from (almost) never to (almost) always. Cronbach's alpha was 0,83. The depression scale was composed by summing all items and ranged from 0 to 24. A higher score indicated more depressive feelings. The positive affective component was *feelings of mastery*, also called locus of control, measured with Pearlin's Mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), consisting of seven items. Response categories ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. The score is the sum of the recoded ratings, with a range from 0 to 28, such that a higher rating indicates higher sense of mastery. The evaluative component was *life satisfaction*, measured by asking children to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with their life on a scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). Testing the same research question on three different outcome measures increases the validity of the results and serves as an extra robustness test.

The independent variable was the residential arrangement of the child at the moment of the interview (hereafter *the custody type*). The proportion of time that children lived with their mother and father was measured by means of a residential calendar (chapter 3). Joint physical custody refers to a situation in which children live between 33% and 66% with each parent. Children that live more than 66% of time with their mother or father were respectively classified as sole mother and sole father custody. These cut-off criteria are commonly in use (e.g. (Fabricius et al., 2012; Melli, 1999; Melli et al., 1997; Smyth et al., 2008).

The *Big Five personality* traits extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness to experience, and conscientiousness were measured by the Dutch Big Five Inventory developed by Denissen

et al. (2008). Children had to indicate on a five-point Likert-scale to what extent they agreed with a total of 44 statements. Scale scores for each personality variable ranged from one to five and were centred around their mean values. The five personality scales showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha between 0,75 and 0,81), except for the agreeableness scale which was somewhat worse (Cronbach's alpha = 0,66). Table 38 shows the correlation matrix for the five personality variables and the three measures of subjective well-being. These intercorrelations show fair resemblance to the correlation pattern presented in the article by Denissen et al. (2008) which is another indication of the Big five scale validity. All personality variables, expect openness to experience, were significantly correlated to all well-being dimensions in the expected direction.

Table 38 Correlation matrix (N=504)

	A	C	N	O	Depressive feelings	Life satisfaction	Mastery
E	0,24***	0,18***	-0,34***	0,19***	-0,36***	0,34***	0,36***
A		0,26***	-0,25***	0,02	-0,29***	0,22***	0,26***
C			-0,11*	0,04	-0,21***	0,21***	0,31***
N				0,04	0,53***	-0,39***	-0,41***
O					0,01	-0,01	0,06
Depressive feelings						-0,64***	-0,54***
Life satisfaction							0,43***

Note: * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

We control for two family process variables that are likely to influence adolescent well-being after divorce: the parent-child relationship and parental conflict. The quality of the *parent-child relationship* was measured by the question "How good or bad is your relationship with your mother/ father?" Children's answers were recoded into: 1 (very bad, bad or neutral), 2 (good), and 3 (very good). This variable was included as a continuous variable. To measure *parental conflict*, children were presented several conflict situations and were asked how often these had occurred within the last year between their parents: blame each other, yell or shout at each other, use physical violence, throw something or break something on purpose, and don't talk to each other. Answer categories ranged from 1 (never) to 7 (daily). Conflict levels were rather low, so the highest score from all five items was used to create the parental conflict variable. Categories were (1) never conflict, (2) occasional conflict, corresponding with maximum once a month, and (3) frequent conflict, corresponding with at least once a month. When there was no contact between parents, a separate value was given: (4) no contact.

Finally, some socio-demographic control variables were included, like *age* and *sex* of the child. The highest obtained *educational degree* of father and mother was divided into three categories. 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), the high-educated obtained a higher educational or university degree. Each respondent was asked about his/her own educational level as well as that of the ex-spouse, a strategy that allows us to include both parents' educational levels even if only one parent participated. Finally, we controlled for *years past since parental divorce*.

7.3.3 Analyses strategy

Analyses were done by using the statistical package SAS 9.3. As the dependent variables were all continuous scales, we ran OLS regression models to estimate the effects of our predictor variables on depressive feelings (table 2) and life satisfaction (table 3). In model I we included the child's custody arrangement, the Big Five personality variables, the family process variables (parental conflict, relationship quality with mother and father), and the control variables (age, sex, education of mother and father and the number of years past since divorce). Sole mother custody was the reference category because it has the highest frequency. In model II, we added interaction terms to the models, which were constructed by multiplying the dummy variables for joint physical and father custody with the five (centred) personality variables.

Descriptives are presented in Table 39.

Table 39 Descriptive variables (N=504)

Categorical variables	N	%
Custody arrangement		
Sole mother	330	65,5
Sole father	70	13,9
Joint custody	104	20,6
Sex of child		
Boy	257	50,8
Girl	249	49,2
Relationship with mother		
Not good	74	14,7
Good	232	46,0
Very good	198	39,3
Relationship with father		
Not good	184	36,6
Good	218	43,3
Very good	101	20,1
Parental conflict		
Never	213	42,1
Sometimes	140	27,7
Often	106	21,0
No contact between parents	47	9,3
Education of father		
Low	139	27,9
Average	210	42,2
High	149	29,9
Education of mother		
Low	101	20,0
Average	239	47,2
High	166	32,8
Continuous variables	Mean	SD
Depressive feelings (0-24)	4,69	3,75
Life satisfaction (0-10)	7,80	1,60
Depressive feelings (0-24)	4,69	3,75
Life satisfaction (0-10)	7,80	1,60
Mastery (0-28)	18,74	3,58
Extraversion (1-5)	3,77	0,72
Agreeableness (1-5)	3,60	0,55
Conscientiousness (1-5)	3,27	0,67
Neuroticism (1-5)	2,97	0,78
Openness (1-5)	3,60	0,61
Age (14-21)	17,7	2,24
Years since divorce (1-25)	7,75	4,76

7.4 RESULTS

Table 40 shows that adolescents' custody arrangement was not significantly associated with their level of depressive feelings, life satisfaction and feelings of mastery, after controlling for all other variables. Personality was important for explaining subjective well-being. The Big Five variables increased the proportion explained variance in depression with 27%, in life satisfaction with 17% and in mastery with 24%, compared to a model with only custody arrangement and control variables. Extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness correlated with all subjective well-being dimensions in the expected direction. Extraversion and conscientiousness, the two socially favourable traits, related positively with the positive well-being indicators life satisfaction and mastery, and negatively with feelings of depression. For neuroticism the pattern was reversed. In general, the standardized beta coefficient were highest for neuroticism. Agreeableness was only related with the two affective components of subjective well-being (depressive feelings and mastery) but not with the evaluative component, life satisfaction. Openness to experience was not associated with either of the three well-being dimensions. The mother-child relationship was related with adolescents' subjective well-being, except for depressive feelings. The father-child relationship was only related with life satisfaction. Frequent parental conflict was related with lower well-being (higher depressive feelings, lower life satisfaction and mastery), but occasional parental conflict (less than once a month) was not. The remaining control variables were not significantly related to the well-being indicators, except a positive relation between the adolescent's age and mastery. Additional analyses (not shown) indicated that being a girl was initially positively related with depressive feelings ($\beta = 0,87$; $p < 0,01$) and negatively with mastery ($\beta = -0,82$; $p < 0,05$) but these effects disappeared when adding personality to the model. This suggests that the often reported tendency for girls to experience lower subjective well-being is linked with their specific personality profile (e.g. girls had higher neuroticism scores than boys).

Table 40 Results for linear regression analysis modelling depressive feelings, life satisfaction and mastery

	Depressive feelings				Life satisfaction				Mastery			
	Beta	S.E.	Beta std.	p	Beta	S.E.	Beta std.	p	Beta	S.E.	Beta std.	p
Intercept	5,742	0,904		***	6,343	0,410		***	17,081	0,945		***
Joint physical custody (mother)	-0,229	0,342	-0,028		-0,079	0,155	-0,023		0,400	0,352	0,050	
Sole father custody (mother)	-0,700	0,494	-0,062		0,190	0,223	0,040		-0,195	0,505	-0,018	
Extraversion	-0,898	0,213	-0,173	***	0,430	0,096	0,193	***	0,986	0,218	0,192	***
Neuroticism	1,897	0,208	0,398	***	-0,547	0,094	-0,268	***	-1,236	0,215	-0,259	***
Agreeableness	-0,697	0,276	-0,103	*	0,106	0,125	0,037		0,563	0,284	0,083	*
Openness	0,172	0,236	0,028		-0,056	0,107	-0,021		0,139	0,244	0,023	
Conscientiousness	-0,604	0,222	-0,108	**	0,318	0,100	0,133	**	1,267	0,227	0,229	***
Relationship with mother	-0,405	0,218	-0,075		0,500	0,099	0,215	***	0,474	0,225	0,089	*
Relationship with father	-0,035	0,214	-0,007		0,242	0,097	0,110	*	0,271	0,223	0,053	
Sometimes conflict (never)	0,150	0,346	0,018		0,006	0,157	0,002		0,243	0,355	0,030	
Often conflict (never)	1,422	0,382	0,155	***	-0,387	0,173	-0,098	*	-0,757	0,392	-0,084	*
Conflict missing (never)	0,489	0,532	0,037		-0,110	0,239	-0,020		-0,183	0,543	-0,014	
Sex (boy)	0,178	0,307	0,024		0,084	0,138	0,026		-0,552	0,314	-0,074	
Age	0,006	0,067	0,004		-0,042	0,030	-0,059		0,169	0,069	0,102	*
Education of father	-0,201	0,207	-0,041		0,053	0,094	0,025		0,085	0,212	0,017	
Education of mother	-0,092	0,227	-0,017		-0,012	0,103	-0,005		-0,022	0,230	-0,004	
Years since divorce	-0,017	0,030	-0,021		-0,023	0,014	-0,068		0,061	0,031	0,079	
N		484				486				477		
R ²		0,37				0,30				0,33		
Adjusted R ²		0,35				0,27				0,31		

Note: Reference category in parentheses; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001

Table 41 Results for linear regression analysis modelling depressive feelings, life satisfaction and mastery, including interaction terms

	Depressive feelings				Life satisfaction				Mastery			
	Beta	S.E.	Beta std.	p	Beta	S.E.	Beta std.	p	Beta	S.E.	Beta std.	p
Intercept	5,844	0,900		***	6,377	0,412		***	17,144	0,944		***
Joint physical custody (mother)	0,021	0,354	0,003		-0,168	0,161	-0,049		0,222	0,364	0,028	
Sole father custody (mother)	-0,738	0,495	-0,066		0,147	0,226	0,031		-0,060	0,509	-0,005	
Extraversion	-0,718	0,277	-0,138	*	0,432	0,127	0,194	**	1,178	0,286	0,230	***
Neuroticism	1,863	0,256	0,391	***	-0,489	0,117	-0,239	***	-1,067	0,265	-0,223	***
Agreeableness	-0,462	0,360	-0,068		0,055	0,165	0,019		0,297	0,373	0,044	
Openness	0,102	0,324	0,016		0,082	0,148	0,031		0,103	0,339	0,017	
Conscientiousness	-0,956	0,295	-0,171	**	0,440	0,135	0,184	**	1,746	0,304	0,316	***
Relationship with mother	-0,418	0,219	-0,077	*	0,498	0,100	0,214	***	0,451	0,226	0,084	*
Relationship with father	-0,055	0,214	-0,011		0,238	0,098	0,108	*	0,252	0,223	0,050	
Sometimes conflict (never)	0,178	0,346	0,021		0,020	0,158	0,006		0,275	0,357	0,034	
Often conflict (never)	1,435	0,382	0,156	***	-0,387	0,175	-0,098	*	-0,777	0,393	-0,086	*
Conflict missing (never)	0,496	0,532	0,038		-0,082	0,241	-0,015		-0,099	0,544	-0,008	
Sex (boy)	0,156	0,307	0,021		0,060	0,140	0,019		-0,606	0,315	-0,082	
Age	0,036	0,067	0,022		-0,056	0,031	-0,079		0,140	0,070	0,085	*
Education of father	-0,210	0,205	-0,042		0,054	0,094	0,025		0,064	0,212	0,013	
Education of mother	-0,126	0,226	-0,024		-0,006	0,103	-0,003		0,034	0,231	0,007	
Years since divorce	-0,019	0,030	-0,025		-0,021	0,014	-0,061		0,060	0,031	0,077	
Joint custody X extravert	0,070	0,479	0,008		-0,199	0,219	-0,051		-1,033	0,491	-0,114	*
Sole father custody X extravert	-1,532	0,705	-0,096	*	0,377	0,321	0,056		0,479	0,721	0,031	
Joint custody X conscientious	1,248	0,486	0,128	*	-0,439	0,222	-0,105	*	-1,190	0,499	-0,124	*
N	484				486				477			
R ²	0,40				0,31				0,36			
Adjusted R ²	0,36				0,27				0,32			

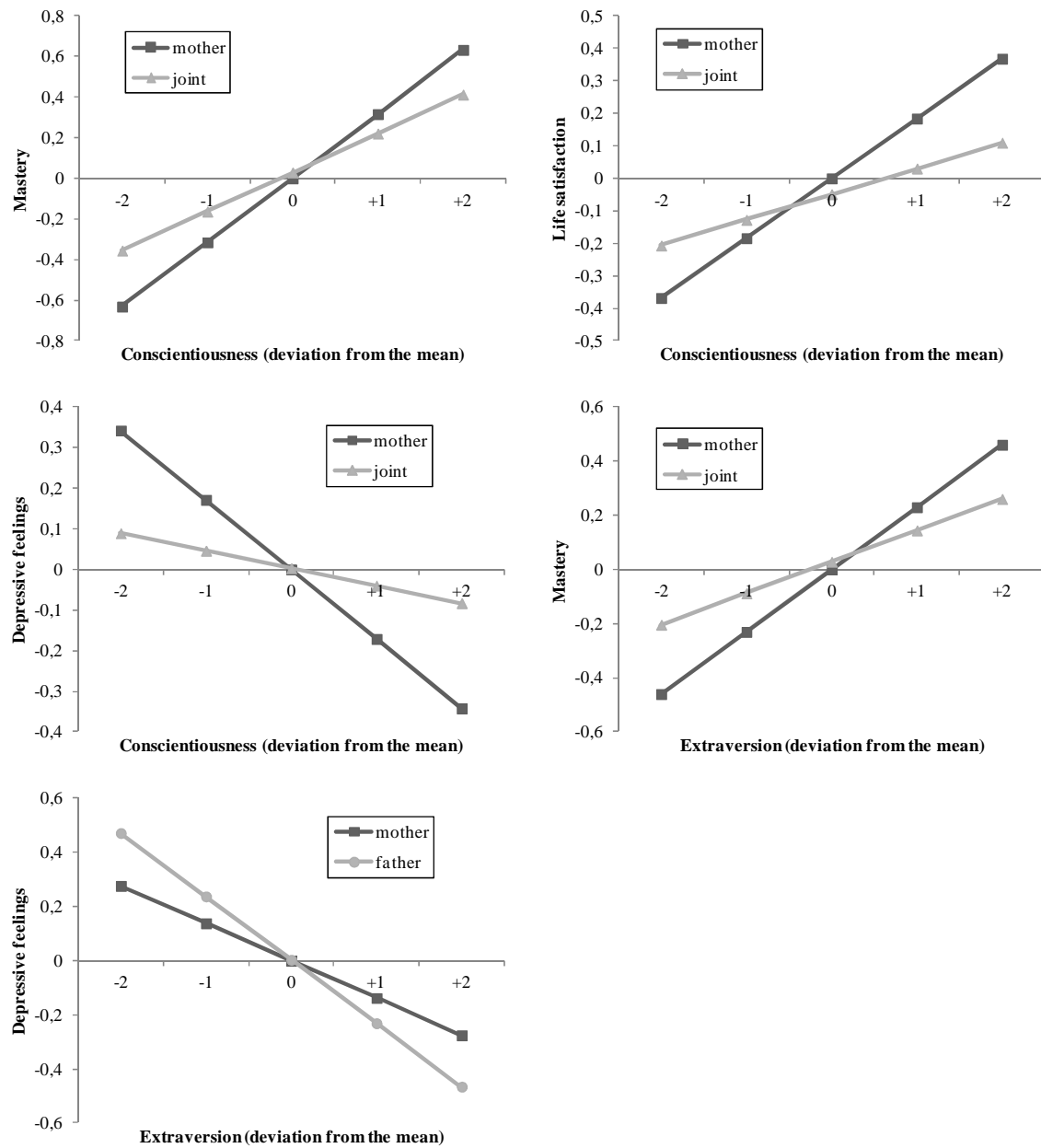
Note: Reference category in parentheses ; * p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01; *** p < 0,001

The novel contribution of this study was the interaction between the adolescents' custody arrangements and their personality in explaining subjective well-being. Table 41 shows a significant interaction between joint physical custody and conscientiousness for all three dependent variables. The effect size of conscientiousness on adolescent's subjective well-being is smaller among children in joint physical custody situations. Calculated from Table 40, the standardized regression coefficients of conscientiousness on depressive feelings, life satisfaction and mastery are respectively -0,17; 0,18 and 0,32 for children in sole mother custody, while they are -0,04; 0,08 and 0,19 for children in joint physical custody. Hence, the positive effect of conscientiousness on subjective well-being is weaker (or even absent) for children in joint physical custody. The same trend is observed for extraversion with regard to mastery. The standardized effect size of extraversion on mastery decreased from 0,23 for children in sole mother custody to 0,12 for children in joint physical custody. Finally, there was also a significant interaction between sole father custody and extraversion for explaining depressive feelings. The standardized regression coefficient of extraversion on depressive feelings decreased from -0,14 for children in sole mother custody to -0,23 for children in sole father custody. Hence, the effect size of extraversion for children in sole father custody was twice as high when compared to sole mother custody. All standardized interaction effects are graphically presented in Figure 14, based on the models in Table 41.

7.5 CONCLUSION

The results presented in this study contribute to the research exploring the link between custody arrangements and adolescent's well-being. Custody type was in itself not related to subjective well-being of adolescents in our sample. This confirms the findings of several other scholars (e.g. Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Johnston, 1995; Kelly, 1993; Naedvall & Thuen, 2004; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990) and could signify that positive and negative forces are counteracting each other (Lee, 2002). Joint physical custody leads to better parent-child contact, which benefits children, but the burden of the transitions and changeovers can create elevated stress.

Figure 14 Interaction effects between custody arrangement and personality



Next, our results confirm the existing knowledge about the role of personality in explaining subjective well-being of adolescents (Bartley & Roesch, 2011; Deneve & Cooper, 1998; Hayes & Joseph, 2003). The total proportion of variance in subjective well-being that could be explained by the five factor model showed fair resemblance to the study of Hayes and Joseph (2003). The most important personality dimensions for explaining emotional well-being were neuroticism and extraversion, which again confirms earlier work (e.g. González Gutiérrez et al., 2005; Hayes & Joseph, 2003). There were some differences in which personality factor related most to several aspect of subjective well-being. Neuroticism was stronger positively related with depressive feelings than with life satisfaction and mastery. Deneve and Cooper (1998) explain this by the fact that neuroticism is related with the tendency to experience negative affect, and this is particularly measured by a depression scale. Conscientiousness was the third most important factor for explaining subjective well-being in our study. The positive association with well-being can be explained given that high conscientiousness is related to task performance, goal achievement, and adaptive social functioning (Hayes & Joseph, 2003; Roberts, et al., 2005) whereas low conscientiousness seems to be correlated with more externalising behaviour and aggressiveness (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003; Muris, Meesters, & Dideren, 2005). Longitudinal studies even show associations between conscientiousness and mortality (Roberts et al., 2007). Another finding similar to earlier research was the absence of any association between openness to experience and subjective well-being, explained by the fact that openness to experience increases both the tendency to experience positive and negative affect (González Gutiérrez et al., 2005). Finally, agreeableness was related to depressive feelings and mastery in the expected direction.

The novel character of this study was the exploration of a ‘personality X environment’ interaction. Our findings indicated a consistent pattern of interactions between conscientiousness and joint physical custody for all three subjective well-being indicators. Generally, individuals high in conscientiousness have higher subjective well-being because they have a higher capacity to self-regulate their behaviour, to adapt to the demands of the social environment in which they live, and to apply a problem-focused coping style (Bartley & Roesch, 2011; Prior et al., 2000). Moreover, conscientious individuals are, because of their higher tendency to plan and to prioritize tasks, more likely to reduce potential stressors in their direct environment (Bartley & Roesch, 2011; Roberts et al., 2005). In this study, higher conscientiousness (being organized, planful, concentrated) was less (or not) related to higher well-being among children in joint physical custody. A first interpretation of this interaction effect is that the protective effects of this personality variable is lower in joint physical custody than in sole mother custody. Maybe, the specific demands of this custody arrangement (making frequent transitions, living at two places, adjustment to two different lifestyles, etc.) interferes with the nature of conscientious adolescents: being organized, ordered, and planful. Therefore, they could be less able to cope with this residential arrangement. An alternative interpretation is that joint physical custody itself is the protective condition that causes that personality

variables are less able to influence well-being. More research is needed to further explore these ideas.

There is also evidence for an interaction between extraversion and father custody in explaining depressive feelings. Additional analyses revealed that in particular extraverted boys who lived with their father had very low levels of depressive feelings. Previous research suggests that the quality of the parent-child relationship is on average higher within same-sex dyads (King, 2006; Videon, 2002), especially between fathers and sons (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Moreover, the perceived quality of important relationships may be more important for individuals with high levels of extraversion (Garcia, 2011). Hence, a good relationship with the father (especially during adolescence) may be an extra protective factor for the post-divorce well-being of extraverted boys, lowering their level of depressive feelings. This conclusion is however quite speculative and further research is needed in this area. Moreover, we have to treat this result with some care because the group of children in sole father custody was not large and this interaction was not replicated for life satisfaction.

This study also has limitations. Probably the largest difficulty is the inability to make causal statements because we are dealing with a cross-sectional study. Another drawback is the selectivity of the non-response in the sample. There may be non-response bias on the parental level but also on the child level. Because parents were required to grant permission before their minor children could be approached for an interview, parents served as important gatekeepers. Almost half of the divorced parents did not grant this permission and the main reason was because the child had difficulties with handling the divorce and talking about this sensitive subject. Hence, it is very likely that happy children from low-conflict divorces are overrepresented in our child sample. Finally, it is important to note that our results apply for adolescents between 14 and 21 years old. For younger children, other factors and processes may be at work and additional research is needed. Nonetheless, adolescence is a crucial period in life in which stressors should be kept as low as possible (Sun & Li, 2008).

Our results showed support for a 'person X environment' interaction, and demonstrate the need for attending to the individual characteristics of the child and responding to them with flexibility and understanding. We hope the results presented here raise awareness among all actors involved with settling custody arrangements, such as policy makers, judges, professional workers, and parents, that it can be important to consider intrapersonal characteristics of adolescents. Under the premise of the child's best interest, it is extremely important to treat children as active agents in the divorce process to guarantee their well-being on the short- and long-term. Too often, children are not well-informed and their specific demands are not taken into account regarding divorce related issues (Jensen & McKee, 2003). Yet, they are the very persons who have to cope with the decisions of their parents and who have to live in two homes when their parents decide to share their children equally.

Chapter 8

The social life of divorced parents: Do custody arrangements make a difference?

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8 The social life of divorced parents: Do custody arrangements make a difference?

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The majority of European countries are faced with high divorce rates and 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 forms an important and interesting case study. It has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe (Eurostat, 2013). Over the last three decades, the number of divorces has increased by more than 400% (Matthijs, 2009). Belgium has a 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 caused a further boost in incidence figures for joint physical custody (chapter 4, chapter 5).

Joint physical custody enables frequent contact with both parents and good parent-child relationships, which can buffer detrimental effects caused by the divorce itself for children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Bauserman, 2002; Lee, 2002). Also parents are supposed to benefit from a joint physical custody arrangement, compared to the more traditional sole mother custody arrangement. Fathers have more contact with their children and an elevated opportunity to maintain their parent-child bond (Allen & Brinig, 2011; Bastais, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2012; Fehlborg et al., 2011). Mothers who share the childcare tasks with their ex-spouse receive more personal time to invest in personal, work or leisure activities (Degarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Unique in the Belgian custody law is that the best interest of the parents should be considered next to the interest of the child (Martens, 2007; Vanbockrijk, 2009). Therefore, this study examines whether also parents benefit from joint physical custody. We research parents' post-divorce social life, more precisely their social participation in outdoor activities and contact with social networks.

8.2 DIVORCE AND THE SOCIAL LIFE

The social life regards the social connectedness with others via social networks and the social activities in which one participates (Putnam, 2000). Leisure time activities such as doing sports widen our social contacts and generate social resources (Seippel, 2006). Spending time in these less organized and spontaneous activities is as important as participating in more formal associations (Putnam, 2000). Simple social interactions between individuals are essential forms of social connections that generate well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Gahler, 1998). Sporadic social networks and activities create a more outward looking view and although they seem superficial, their effects are considerable strong. They provide people with

resources, social support and information (Almond & Verba, 1963). Someone's social life is important for an individual's mental and physical health and well-being (Berkman et al., 2000; Gahler, 1998). The absence of a social life causes individuals to become less integrated, feel disconnected from their social networks and to feel isolated and alienated.

Jappens, Wijckmans and Van Bavel (2011) recently studied the association between divorce and the social life with Flemish data. On the one hand, divorced individuals had more weekly contacts with friends and colleagues than their married counterparts. This finding supports the 'dyadic withdrawal' and the 'greedy institution' hypotheses arguing that married partners have a smaller friendship network because they are highly involved with each other (Coser & Coser, 1974; Gerstel, 1988; Kalmijn, 2003; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). On the other hand, divorcees felt more lonely and were less satisfied with their social life than married individuals. One of the most traditional determinants for a thriving social life is a stable family life. People who are married are more connected with others and develop more easily large social networks (Rotolo, 2000; Van Ingen, 2008). These networks may become weaker following a divorce (Kalmijn & Broese-Van Groenou, 2005). Divorcees may alienate 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).

Research on the relationship between custody arrangements and the social life is limited, as it seldom takes into account the diversity of the divorced population (Milardo, 1987). Predominantly, the focus was placed on the differences between married and divorced people (Kalmijn & Broese-Van Groenou, 2005) or between divorced men and divorced women (Gerstel, 1988).

8.3 PARENTHOOD AND THE SOCIAL LIFE

Another factor, maybe more important than being married or not, is the parenthood status. The literature points in two directions. On the one hand, a stable family life with partner and children is supposed to enhance the social network (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003; Smith, 1994). Children may increase the chance to participate in the associational life and to be involved in the own neighbourhood (Ross, 1995; Stinner, Van Loon, Seh-Woong, & Yongchan, 1990).

On the other hand, the presence of children could be a restricting factor for the available time that can be invested in maintaining individual contacts (Degarmo et al., 2008; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Kalmijn, 2012). Caring for children interferes with parents' own leisure time, especially when considering informal social participation outside the home (Van Ingen, 2008). Children may become a barrier after divorce for engaging in social activities and hinder the frequency of social contacts with family or friends (Kalmijn & Broese-Van Groenou, 2005). Time use studies emphasize that especially mothers reduce their personal care and leisure time when

they have children, while fathers are better able to protect their personal leisure time (Shaw, 2001). For the social life of divorced parents, the custody arrangement of their children is therefore an extremely important factor.

In earlier times, parental tasks were almost completely shifted on to mothers after divorce. Because of the recent shift towards joint physical custody in most Western societies, parental tasks are more and more equally shared between both parents after divorce. From a historical point of view, there is an interesting gender aspect related to this. Joint physical custody led to decreasing childcare task demands for mothers and allowed them more space for personal deployment and leisure time (Dickenson, Heyworth, Plunkett, & Wilson, 1999; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Consequently, we expect that mothers have a more active social life when their child is part of a joint physical custody arrangement instead of 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 allocated more parenting responsibility to fathers and more father-child contact (Bastais et al., 2012; Fehlbeg et al., 2011). As a consequence, this could have resulted in a constraint of fathers' leisure time. We expect 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 about the social life of mothers and fathers in a sole father custody arrangement, because these parents form a rather exceptional and small group (chapter 5).

8.4 DATA AND METHOD

We use data from the DiF-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. It includes persons who married someone of the opposite sex between 1971 and 2008, have the Belgian nationality, are living in the Flemish Region, were between 18 and 40 years old at marriage and experienced at maximum one legal divorce. The sample is drawn proportionally towards marriage year and disproportionally towards marriage status: one third of the respondents are married, two thirds of the respondents are divorced. As the DiF-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. This target child 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, from 764 unions only one parent was interviewed.

We measured social life in two structural ways via social activities and social contacts, in line with Kalmijn and Broese-Van groenou (2005). These measurements may seem rather meagre, but they give us vital information on the extent to which people have access to informal social capital (Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis, & Gelissen, 2002). Social participation was measured by items that related to participation in social activities. The exact question wording was as follows: "How often did you do the following activities in your free time the past 12 months?" Respondents were asked to answer this question with regard to (1) doing sports, (2) participating in cultural activities like going to the theatre, concerts or museums and (3) going out to restaurants, bars, movie theatres or parties. Social contacts were measured by the question: "How often did you meet the following persons in your free time the past 12 months?" Respondents were asked to answer this question with reference to (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 taken together 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, someone else, or both parents alternately. In this latter case, a residential calendar was used to register the residential arrangement in detail (chapter 3). 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 spend with mother or father. The proportion of time the child spend with each parent was used to create the residential custody arrangement. This variable was divided into three categories. In sole mother custody, children lived at least 66% of the time with the mother. In sole father custody, children lived at least 66% of the time with the father. In joint physical custody, children lived at least 33% of time with each parent. These cut-off criteria are commonly used (see for instance Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012; Smyth, Weston, Moloney, Richardson, & Temple, 2008). Joint physical custody was treated as the reference group. In case both parents participated in the study and their answers were non-identical, a sort of mean score was calculated. To test for potential bias we inserted a dummy that indicated whether only one parent (versus both) participated in the study. Because this dummy variable was never significant, it is not reported in the tables below. Because we assessed 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 metric variable. Next, the age of the target child was considered. Younger children have a higher likelihood to be part of a joint physical custody arrangement. Furthermore, younger children require more care of their parents and consequently may decrease their leisure time (Van Ingen, 2008). Children were between 0 and 18 years old and their age was included as a metric

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 stronger social life and chose more often for a joint physical custody arrangement after a divorce (Moore, 1990). Education was divided into three categories. The low educated only finished 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, having a job increases the means to engage in social life and to choose a joint physical custody arrangement (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987; Juby et al., 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, a new partner may also interfere with divorced parents social life, as they bring entry into new social networks (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 metric variable. As networks need to be (re)build after a divorce, a stabilization period can affect the social life of divorcees. Finally, someone's personality was measured by the level of extraversion. 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, 2004). It was measured by the eight extraversion items of the Dutch Big Five Inventory (Denissen et al., 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 0,79 indicated an internally valid scale.

The descriptive measurements of all independent and control variables are reported in Table 42.

Table 42 Descriptive variables of all independent and control variables (N=1506)

Categorical variables	%
Custody arrangement	
Sole mother custody	59,4
Sole father custody	8,7
Joint physical custody	31,9
Sex of respondent	
Father	44,9
Mother	55,1
Education of respondent	
Low	18,3
Average	44,0
High	37,7
Employment type of respondent	
Full-time	68,1
Part-time	19,9
No job	10,3
Respondent has a new partner	52,9
Young children in respondent's household	51,3
Metric variables	Mean
Age (years)	41,5
Age of child (years)	13,1
Time since divorce (years)	7,6
Extraversion (1-5)	3,8

This study dealt with dyadic data (i.e. several respondents are part of the same reference marriage). 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, multilevel regressions were conducted, using the PROC GLIMMIX procedure in SAS 9.3. The multilevel procedure modelled individuals (level 1) within reference marriages (level 2). The dependent variables were categorical variables with six 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 generalization 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

Table 2 and 3. The odds ratios for the custody arrangements are not shown in the tables but are described in the results section.

8.5 RESULTS

Table 43 presents the results of the hierarchical ordered logistic regression analyses modelling the effect of the custody arrangements of the child on the social participation of parents. We report first on the results for divorced mothers and then for divorced fathers. Mothers with sole physical custody are less inclined than mothers with joint physical custody to participate more actively in sports and cultural activities. The effect of mothers having sole custody on the frequency of going out is negative, yet insignificant. Mothers with a child in sole father custody (i.e. mothers who reside less than 33% of the time with their child) do not differ significantly from joint physical custody mothers on neither of the social participation indicators. As mentioned before, this group of non-residential mothers is rather small, which can explain this insignificance. The odds for sole mothers to participate frequently in sports and cultural activities are respectively 29% and 40% lower than those for joint physical custody mothers.

The effects of the custody arrangement on the social life indicators are directly interpretable for mothers, as they form the reference group. To calculate the effects for fathers, the parameters of the custody arrangements for mothers should be added by the corresponding interaction term for fathers. None of the interaction terms are significant. This indicates that the associations between custody arrangement and the three social participation indicators are similar for fathers and mothers. Joint physical custody leads to more engagement for mothers and fathers (compared to sole mother custody) in sports and cultural activities than fathers. The odds for fathers with a child in sole mother custody to participate frequently in sports and cultural activities are respectively 27% and 28% lower than those for joint physical custody fathers. However, the confidence intervals for the estimated odds ratios contain the value 1 (they are only marginally significant at the 0,10 level). Therefore, we have to conclude that fathers with a child in joint and sole mother custody do not differ significantly from each other regarding their frequency of doing sports and cultural activities. No significant differences are present regarding the going out behaviour between fathers whose child is in joint and fathers whose child is in sole mother custody. This insignificant effect was also observed for mothers. Again, the effect of sole father custody is not significant for divorced fathers, because this group is still marginal in size. In sum, the custody arrangement does not seem to matter as much for the social participation level of divorced fathers as it does for divorced mothers.

Table 43 Effects of custody arrangements on social participation

	Sports N=1495		Culture N=1495		Going out N=1495	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Custody (joint custody)						
Sole mother custody	-0,34*	0,16	-0,51**	0,16	-0,20	0,14
Sole father custody	-0,29	0,32	-0,33	0,34	-0,35	0,31
Respondent is father (mother)	0,50**	0,18	0,12	0,18	0,41*	0,17
Age	-0,01	0,01	0,03*	0,02	-0,01*	0,01
Educational level (average)						
Low	-0,40**	0,15	-0,62***	0,15	-0,12	0,14
High	0,78***	0,12	0,91***	0,13	0,09	0,11
Employment (full-time)						
Part-time	-0,08	0,14	-0,11	0,15	-0,19	0,13
Unemployed	-0,67***	0,18	-0,68***	0,19	-0,77***	0,17
New partner	-0,01	0,11	-0,01	0,11	0,14	0,10
Young children in household	-0,24*	0,12	-0,12	0,12	-0,38***	0,11
Age child	0,01	0,02	-0,03	0,02	0,01	0,02
Time since divorce	-0,01	0,01	-0,01	0,01	-0,01**	0,01
Extraversion	0,05	0,07	0,27***	0,08	0,50***	0,07
Sole mother custody * father	0,03	0,22	0,18	0,40	0,37	0,38
Sole father custody * father	0,52	0,39	0,31	0,11	0,21	0,10
Model parameters						
Cut-off point 6	-1,64		-5,38		-3,31	
Cut-off point 5	-0,75		-4,33		-1,64	
Cut-off point 4	-0,31		-2,53		-0,22	
Cut-off point 3	-0,05		-1,02		1,08	
Cut-off point 2	0,61		1,14		3,30	
-2 Log Likelihood	4676,46		3745,88		4576,15	
Deviance test	205,93***		233,09***		207,79***	
Intraclass correlation	0,09*		0,11*		0,02	

Note: Ordinal hierarchic logistic regressions for social participation (sports, culture, going out). Values are regression coefficients (β) and standard errors (S.E.). Significance levels: *p < 0,05; **p < 0,01; ***p < 0,001; reference category in parentheses

With regard to the control variables, we observe a positive relationship between a parent's socio-economic status and his/her social participation. 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. On the contrary, low educated parents will sport less and engage less in cultural activities than average educated parents. Education is not related to the going out frequency of divorced parents. Employment also is a vital determinant of the social participation level. Especially unemployed parents have lower chances to be socially active. Unexpectedly, a new partner does not influence the social participation level of divorced parents. The presence of younger children decreases the likelihood to sport or go out frequently. Neither the age of the parent, nor the age of the child, are associated with social participation. There is only a negligible positive relationship between older parents and their likelihood to engage more often in cultural activities. The time that has passed since the divorce does not alter the chances to participate actively in social activities. Finally, extraversion plays an important role in the explanation of why divorced parents participate in cultural activities and go out. More open parents will also be more likely to participate in cultural activities more often and to go out more often. Extraversion does not explain the engagement in sport activities. Probably, this is caused by the fact that doing sports is not always a social event and some sports can be practised alone, such as running, swimming or going to the gym.

The results for the social contact indicators are reported in Table 44. Most of these social life indicators are not influenced by the custody arrangement. The only significant effect of custody arrangement on social contact regards the contact with family members. The odds of frequently meeting family members is 37% lower for joint physical custody mothers compared to sole custody mothers. This effect is not found when looking at divorced fathers (the interaction term is significant). There is no difference in contact between fathers without custody (i.e. 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.

It is remarkable that social networks are not as influenced by socio-economic factors as social participation activities are. 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. 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 these social networks, yet, they do not have more contact with their family network.

Table 44 Effects of custody arrangements on social networks

	Friends N=1489		Neighbours N=1495		Family N=1487	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Custody (joint custody)						
Sole mother custody	-0,07	0,15	0,22	0,14	0,32*	0,15
Sole father custody	-0,46	0,33	0,23	0,28	0,19	0,31
Respondent is father	0,42*	0,17	0,28	0,17	0,08	0,18
Age	-0,0005	0,01	0,008	0,01	-0,01	0,01
Educational level (average)						
Low	-0,09	0,14	0,19	0,13	-0,26	0,14
High	-0,13	0,11	-0,18	0,11	-0,09	0,11
Employment (full-time)						
Part-time	-0,12	0,13	0,001	0,13	-0,01	0,14
Unemployed	0,34	0,17	0,28	0,17	0,16	0,18
New partner	-0,40***	0,11	0,05	0,10	-0,16	0,11
Young children in	-0,03	0,02	-0,02	0,02	-0,04	0,02
Age child	-0,08	0,12	-0,01	0,11	-0,02	0,12
Time since divorce	-0,0009	0,001	0,001	0,001	-0,003*	0,001
Extraversion	0,45***	0,07	0,26***	0,07	0,12	0,07
Sole mother * father	0,08	0,21	-0,33	0,20	-0,56*	0,22
Sole father * father	0,34	0,40	-0,14	0,36	-0,44	0,38
Model parameters						
Cut-off point 6	-1,37		-1,46		-0,65	
Cut-off point 5	-0,13		-0,75		0,42	
Cut-off point 4	1,06		-0,12		1,39	
Cut-off point 3	1,96		0,38		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	0,07		0,00		0,09	

Note: Ordinal hierarchic logistic regressions for social networks (friends, neighbours, family). Values are regression coefficients(β) and standard errors (S.E.). Significance levels: *p < 0,05; **p < 0,01; ***p < 0,001; reference category in parentheses

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 (the marital union). Only for doing 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-model level. For the model with neighbours, the ICC could not be estimated because the random intercept variance was estimated to be zero. In such a situation, one could argue that a multi-level technique is not appropriate and the random intercept coefficient should be removed from the models. Nevertheless, we choose to keep the random intercept coefficients in the models, analogue to the other models and to control for the dyadic data design (Flom, McMahon, & Pouget, 2006). This approach has no consequences for the estimations of the parameters (Kiernan, Tao, & Gibbs, 2012).

8.6 CONCLUSION

The research question was posed how custody arrangements affect parents' possibilities to participate in social activities and maintain social contacts after divorce. Especially the recent post-divorce parenting model of joint physical custody was under consideration. For this reason, our research population was restricted to those respondents that were parent and had experienced a divorce.

Our results imply that the custody arrangement does matter for the social life of divorced mothers, but not for the social life of divorced fathers. First of all, joint physical custody is positively related to social outdoor participation in sports and cultural activities of divorced mothers. Dividing parental care with the ex-partner makes extra room for personal outdoor activities. This relation cannot exclusively be explained by a selection of high-educated and employed parents into joint physical custody arrangements. In fact, even after controlling for the socio-economic status of mothers, which indeed forms a strong indicator of participation levels, the effect of custody on the mentioned social participation indicators remains intact. This confirms the statement of Bauserman (2012) that a more equally divided custody arrangement has a liberating effect for mothers with respect to their participation in several social outdoor activities. Yet, for a third indicator of social participation, going out to restaurants, bars, etc. the custody arrangement does not seem to matter. This can be possibly explained by the somewhat ambiguous phrasing of the question, which left room for interpretation (several activities were given as examples, such as going out to a restaurant, a bar, and to see a movie).

Unlike for divorced mothers, the custody arrangement does not influence social participation of divorced fathers. As a consequence, the question rises how joint physical custody fathers manage their childcare tasks without downsizing their level of social participation. It is possible that fathers group their social contacts and activities in the childless period to compensate for the less social period when children are present. It is also likely that fathers, more often than mothers, seek formal and informal help with regard to childcare. This help can come from a new

partner or from their own parents. Fathers' willingness to become a joint physical custody parent may even be conditional upon the existence of these informal social networks. For this reason, the presence of children does affect social outdoor activities of fathers to a lesser extent than these of mothers. Further research is needed in this area.

We also found that a high socio-economic status enhances divorced parents' social life. They are better off with regard to their social capital. Parents who are highly educated or have a full-time job will have fewer difficulties to engage in social activities and keep contact with their social networks, regardless of their marital status or custody arrangement. This may be linked to financial reasons. Engagement in social activities is not often for free, and unemployed parents may be unable to afford this type of social participation. Also among divorced parents, this seems to be the case. Our results suggest that joint physical custody may even be reinforcing the division of the divorced population in 'winners' and 'losers' of society (Putnam, 2000). On the one hand, we found that joint physical custody (independently from social status) increases participation in 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 to recover from the divorce and have outdoor social contacts. In this way, it can protect them from other negative consequences going out 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 and neighbours) are not influenced by the custody arrangement and socio-economic predictors. There was 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 higher need for informal help from grandparents. It is remarkable that social networks are not as influenced by socio-economic factors as social participation activities are. 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 can be the case for social outdoor activities. There was 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' and 'greedy institution' theories (Coser & Coser, 1974; Gerstel, 1988; Kalmijn, 2003; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008).

As our results show, 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.

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 regarding 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.

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 groupings were the initial lobbyists of joint physical custody with the intention to enhance the continuity of the father-child relationship, 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 higher engagement in outdoor activities is proved to be beneficial for someone's emotional well-being, 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 mothers, we 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 cutting back their social life.

Social life is measured by different aspects and as a consequence, a single conclusion with regard to the relationship between custody arrangements and social life cannot be made. Future research should consider these different forms of social life separately or expand the range of indicators by measuring 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 that should be taken into consideration. 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 is necessary, yet, not available. Nevertheless, we hope to partially account for this limitation by including extraversion as a stable personality characteristic. Extraversion was a strong and stable determinant. Next, the number of mothers without custody is negligible, although this specific group of mothers deserves more attention. The social undesirability of this post-divorce situation makes this group of mothers less inclined to participate in surveys and therefore, a selective non-response is likely. 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. Divorced parents tend to overestimate the time their child reside with them, causing a response bias. Furthermore, the selectivity of survey participation can produce this difference, as divorced parents with full custody are more eager to participate than parents without custody.

We conclude that a joint physical custody arrangement presents a win-win situation for both divorced parents, as both mothers and fathers seem to experience advantages. Because the social life is important for an individual'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. Yet, the question remains: Does it have the same beneficial consequences for children? For example, joint physical custody means less residential stability for children and may have detrimental effects for the social integration of children within their neighbourhood, home or school. Joint physical custody children may experience more difficulties to participate in youth associations and other voluntary organizations. This question is especially important when parents do not live close to each other. Because joint physical custody is installed in the custody law within many European countries with the child as the focal point, it is essential that future research should give more attention to the consequences for children as well.

Chapter 9

Involved fathers, liberated mothers? Joint physical custody and the subjective well-being of divorced parents

This chapter is co-authored by Sarah Botterman, Nele Havermans and Koen Matthijs (KU Leuven) and is currently under review at Social Indicators Research.

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9 Involved fathers, liberated mothers? Joint physical custody and the subjective well-being of divorced parents

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Concurrent with rising divorce rates, family law within Western countries has undergone radical transformations during the past decades. These legislative adaptations had one thing in common: their direction towards parental neutrality. With the decay of the institutional marriage and the increasing number of children born in consensual unions, parenthood became detached from the conjugal union (Jensen, 2009; van Krieken, 2005). In many countries, the principle of joint parental responsibility was legally implemented. Consequently, a rising number of divorced parents share the care of their children. In Belgium, the legislator adopted a legal recommendation for joint physical custody. In this residential arrangement, children live a substantial (and equal) amount of time with their both parents after divorce.

Earlier research shows a positive association between joint physical custody and child adjustment, mainly caused by a better parent-child relationship (Bauserman, 2002). Yet, also parents are affected by the custody arrangement of their children. Because of historical reasons (mothers used to be the main caregivers), gender neutral parenting arrangements have given fathers the opportunity to become more involved in their children's lives, thereby increasing their levels of well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato et al., 2009; Bauserman, 2012; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). For divorced mothers, joint custody means spending less time with their children (compared to sole mother custody), but also sharing child-rearing tasks, which decreases their parental burden and increases their personal time to engage in leisure activities (Bauserman, 2012; chapter 8).

Despite these implications for the parental life, earlier research on post-divorce custody arrangements usually focused on children (Bauserman, 2012). In response to this research gap, we investigate parents' subjective well-being in relation to their custody status. We thereby explore two intermediating mechanisms: the parental involvement and the availability of leisure time. We focus on the physical residential arrangement of the child (i.e. the amount of parenting time) and not on the legal custody status. Flanders (the northern region of Belgium) represents an excellent case study for three reasons. First, Belgium has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe (Eurostat, 2013). Second, it is a pioneering country with regard to custody law and has a high proportion of joint physical custody arrangements (chapter 4). Third, the 2006 custody law states that both the child's and the parents' best interests should be served in custody decisions which makes joint physical custody even more likely.

9.2 SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONCEPT

Subjective well-being is an umbrella concept that covers “a broad category of phenomena that includes people’s emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgements of life satisfaction” (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p.277). It relates to broader life domains like physical health, economic success and social relationships (Diener, 2012; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Subjective well-being can be defined by an affective and an evaluative component. The first relates to how people feel on a day-to-day basis, the latter denotes how satisfied people are with their life (Diener, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The affective component is shaped by both positive and negative feelings and emotions (Diener, 1994). A negative feeling can be, for instance, depression, which indicates a poor mental health and correlates highly with other negative feelings, like anxiety and anger (Kalmijn, 2009; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). A positive feeling can be self-esteem, which is an individual’s attitude toward himself (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995), and is related with self-efficacy (Amato, 2005) and having a sense of control (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The evaluative component of subjective well-being is life satisfaction, and reflects how happy and fulfilled someone feels (Gilman et al., 2000; Huebner, 2004). It is one of the most stable indicators of subjective well-being, not influenced by short-term events and physical states (Levin et al., 2012).

9.3 THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

We examine the association between custody status and subjective well-being of divorced parents. For this relationship, a social exchange framework is applied. On the one hand, parenthood is rewarding because of the enjoyment of having a solid bond with the child and the fulfilment of the parental role. On the other hand, caring for children can be demanding as well. Often, parenthood comes with child-rearing stress and leaves less time for social leisure activities (Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2003). Adding to this framework, we investigate two intermediate explanations: the parental involvement and the availability of leisure time.

9.3.1 Parental involvement

The parental role is one of the highest valued social roles in society. Consequently, satisfaction with this role is important and leads to higher subjective well-being (Rogers & White, 1998). When a divorce occurs, the family system is disrupted and parental roles become less delimited. Consequently, parents’ subjective well-being may become jeopardized. The continuation of the parent-child relationship acts as an interpersonal resource in coping with this disrupting life event (Amato, 2000; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Joint physical custody confines the disruption in the family system after divorce, because it allows both parents to remain involved in their children’s lives. To maintain a stable bond and to enact the parental role after divorce, parents need to have regular interaction with their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Fabricius et al., 2012; King & Sobolewski, 2006). To this extent, the

residential arrangement of the children is highly relevant. According to Fabricius et al. (2010), children and parents should live at least one third of the time together to enable parental responsiveness and emotional security in their post-divorce relationship. Accordingly, we hypothesize that parenting time increases parental involvement. Joint custody parents are more involved in their children's lives than no custody parents; and sole custody parents are more involved in their children's lives than joint custody parents (H1a). We further hypothesize that, because of a higher parental involvement, joint custody parents have higher levels of subjective well-being than no custody parents and sole custody parents have a higher level of subjective well-being than joint custody parents (H1b).

9.3.2 Availability of leisure time

A profound social life is linked positively to someone's subjective well-being (Gilman et al., 2000; Kroll, 2010; Shapiro & Keyes, 2007). An advantage of joint physical custody, compared to sole custody, is the decline of the parental burden and the increased availability of leisure time (Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Kalmijn & Broese-Van groenou, 2005; Lee, 2002). Parenting time interferes with leisure time and sharing parental tasks may create more time for the social, work and relational life (Degarmo et al., 2008; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Most research demonstrates this for mothers, because the group of sole custody fathers is often too small to compare with joint physical custody fathers. We know from time use studies that mothers reduce their personal leisure time when they need to spend time with their children and that they are less able than fathers to protect some leisure time for themselves (Shaw, 2001). Also, mothers are more constrained by family care responsibilities and spend more time on domestic work, especially when they have sole custody. Yet, also sole custody fathers are more stressed, report more role strain and daily hassles, and engage less in leisure activities compared to fathers with less parental responsibilities (Degarmo et al., 2008; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). We hypothesize that sole custody parents engage less in leisure activities than joint custody parents, and that joint custody parents engage less in leisure activities than no custody parents (H2a). We further hypothesize that, because of a lower availability of leisure time, sole custody parents have lower levels of subjective well-being than joint custody parents, and joint custody parents have lower levels of subjective well-being than no custody parents (H2b).

9.3.3 Gender issues

Sole mother custody used to be the main post-divorce model for a long period of time. Hence, the shift from sole mother to joint physical custody, which receives particular attention in this study, has changed the post-divorce lives of mothers and fathers in a different way. Divorced mothers experienced a shift from being the sole custody parent to being half-time responsible for their children. Fathers experienced a transformation from being hardly to being regularly

involved in their children's lives. Therefore, gender specific comparisons are highly required when testing our hypotheses: joint physical custody mothers need to be compared with sole custody mothers and joint physical custody fathers with no custody fathers. The parental involvement hypotheses (1a and 1b) are particularly tested among fathers while the availability of leisure time hypotheses (2a and 2b) among mothers. We formulate no specific hypotheses about the group of sole custody fathers (and no custody mothers) because this group is fairly small and has not increased over the past decades (chapter 5). Based on our hypotheses, we expect joint physical custody mothers to have higher subjective well-being than sole custody mothers (in particular through higher availability of leisure time) and joint physical custody fathers to have higher subjective well-being than no custody fathers (in particular through higher parental involvement).

9.3.4 Confounding factors

We control for confounding factors that might be correlated with both the custody arrangement and the level of subjective well-being. Highly educated and employed parents are more likely to have joint custody (Juby et al., 2005; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009) and higher levels of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999). The presence of a new inhabiting partner and the age of inhabiting children can influence both the decision to share custody, as well as the adjustment after divorce (Degarmo et al., 2008; Van Ingen, 2008). Also the time elapsed since the divorce is important to consider. Recent divorcees are more likely to choose a joint custody arrangement, yet, may have a lower subjective well-being. The relationship between age and subjective well-being is unclear (Diener et al., 1999). Finally, conflict between ex-partners is an important stressor that influences subjective well-being (Degarmo et al., 2008). The association between parental conflict and custody is, however, not straightforward (Breivik & Olweus, 2006).

9.4 METHOD

9.4.1 Data

The *Divorce in Flanders* survey (Mortelmans et al., 2011) sampled marriages from the Belgian National Register. These marriages were first marriages of both spouses, concluded in the period 1971 to 2008, between two Belgians of the opposite sex, who were between 18 and 40 years old at time of marriage, living in Flanders (the northern part of Belgium). The sample was drawn proportionally towards marriage year, but disproportionally towards marriage status to obtain a distribution of 2/3 dissolved and 1/3 intact marriages. Divorced respondents could have been remarried in the meanwhile, but they were not included in the sample when legally divorced more than once. Respondents were interviewed by means of face-to-face Computer Assisted Personal Interviews between 2009 and 2010. From each marriage (either dissolved or still intact), one child was randomly chosen among all mutual biological (or adoptive) children.

All questions with regard to children, including the custody status, related to this child. Our subsample included all divorced parents ($N = 1506$) with a child that was maximum 21 years old and still living with (at least) one of the parents. For 49 % of the dissolved marriages, both mother and father participated in the study.

9.4.2 Measurement

Subjective well-being is as a multidimensional latent construct, measured via three observable well-being dimensions (absence of depressive feelings, self-esteem and life satisfaction). This subjective well-being index is efficient and concise (O'Hare et al., 2012). The eight-item CES-D scale (Radloff, 1977) is used to measure feelings of depression and reversed to measure well-being instead of ill-being. This scale is often used and shows good psychometric properties (Van De Velde, Levecque, & Bracke, 2011). Respondents indicate how often they felt or behaved in a certain way, e.g. felt lonely, slept bad, felt depressed. Four answer categories range from (almost) never to (almost) always. Self-esteem is measured via the ten-item 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". Five answer categories range from (almost) never to (almost) always. Life satisfaction is measured via Cantril's ladder (Cantril, 1965). On a scale from 0 to 10, respondents are asked how they feel in general, if they are happy and content. The extremes are defined by the respondent himself: 0 means the worst possible life quality and 10 means the best possible life quality one can imagine.

Parents' custody status is measured with the residential calendar (chapter 3) and refers to the actual living arrangement of the child at the time of the interview. The proportion of time the child lives with each parent is calculated and a variable with three categories is constructed: sole custody (more than 66% of the time residential parent), joint custody (between 33% and 66% of the time residential parent) and no custody (less than 33% of the time residential parent). These cut-off criteria are commonly used (e.g. (Fabricius et al., 2012; Melli, 1999; Melli et al., 1997; Smyth et al., 2008). To enable comparisons between mothers and fathers, joint physical custody serves as the reference group.

Parental involvement is measured via three indicators. First, a single-item question measures the quality of the parent-child relationship. Parents indicate on a five-point scale "How good or how bad is your relationship with your child?" Answer categories range from very bad to very good. The majority of parents (91,2 %) reports a good to very good relationship with their child. The second and third indicator are positive and negative communication, measured by openness in communication and problems with communication subscales of the Parents-Adolescent Communication Scale (Barnes & Olson, 1985). Answers on a seven-point scale range from totally disagree to totally agree.

The availability of leisure time is measured via three different forms of participation in social activities: doing sports, participating in cultural events, and going out (Kalmijn & Broese-Van groenou, 2005; Scheepers et al., 2002). All questions have seven-point answering scales ranging from never until very frequently (i.e. daily).

We control for age, education, employment status, the presence of a new inhabiting partner, the presence of young children in the household, time elapsed since the divorce, age of the child and level of parental conflict. Education is divided into three categories. Low educated parents only finished lower secondary education (on average obtained at the age of 15), average educated parents obtained a higher secondary education degree (on average obtained at the age of 18), and highly educated parents obtained a higher educational or university degree (on average obtained at the age of 22). We differentiate between three employment types: full-time employed (working 95% or more), part-time employed (working 25% to 94%) and unemployed (less than 25%). For those with a missing value (13 mothers and 19 fathers), an additional dummy variable is included. The presence of a co-residing new partner and children below 12 years old are included as two dummy variables. Parental conflict is measured via the frequency of having severe disagreements with the ex-spouse, classified in three categories: often, sometimes or never. A separate category is created when there is no contact between ex-partners.

In Table 45, the descriptive statistics of all variables are reported. Exact wordings of scale items are reported in the Appendix.

Table 45 Descriptive measurements

	Mothers N = 829	Fathers N = 677
Categorical variables	%	%
Custody arrangement		
Sole custody	65,5	12,3
Joint custody	28,7	35,7
No custody	5,8	52,0
Educational level		
Low	22,5	14,7
Average	43,1	44,5
High	34,1	40,4
Employment status		
Full-time employed	53,0	88,2
Part-time employed	33,5	3,6
Unemployed	13,6	8,2
Residential new partner	49,5	56,4
Young children in household	30,9	27,5
Quality of the parent-child relationship		
Very bad	0,6	0,3
Bad	0,4	1,9
Not bad, not good	2,6	5,6
Good	29,4	36,6
Very good	67,0	55,6
Parental conflict		
Never	45,2	45,8
Sometimes (less than once a month)	29,6	31,3
Often (monthly or more)	6,8	6,5
No contact	17,1	15,8
Metric variables (range)	Mean	Mean
Depressive feelings (1-4)	3,10	3,23
Life satisfaction (1-10)	7,78	7,78
Self-esteem (1-5)	4,24	4,30
Leisure time (1-6)	2,86	3,46
Openness in communication (1-7)	5,87	5,47
Problems in communication (1-7)	3,44	3,18
Age respondent (24-64)	40,55	43,50
Age child (10-21)	13,07	13,22
Time since divorce (0-26)	7,56	7,29

9.4.3 Method

To measure the two mediating paths from custody arrangement to well-being, we conduct Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), using Mplus (version 5.21) (Wu & Zumbo, 2008). We proceed in two steps. First, measurement models are constructed and tested. Confirmatory factor analyses are performed to measure the latent constructs. Regarding the dependent variable subjective well-being, we construct the latent variables of depression and self-esteem and subsequently perform a second-order confirmatory factor analysis on these two latent variables plus life satisfaction. To test the parental involvement hypothesis, we construct an openness in communication and a problems in communication scale. To test the leisure time hypothesis, we construct the latent concept leisure time, based on the three leisure activities. We perform a simultaneous confirmatory factor analysis in which all these latent constructs are tested simultaneously, the so-called null model. Second, structural models are built and tested in which relations between custody status, the mediating variables and subjective well-being are specified.

Because a considerable number of interviewed mothers and fathers belong to (are nested within) the same dissolved marriage, single-group structural equation modelling could lead to biased results. The dyadic data structure is therefore approached via multi-group structural equation modelling. This imposes the same measurement model for mothers and fathers, making gender comparisons possible (Meuleman & Billiet, 2009).

As we use several categorical variables, we opt for a Robust Weighted Least Square (WLSMV) estimation method instead of a Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation method. WLSMV corrects for not following the assumptions of continuous items and normality of data. It is considered the most preferable estimation technique for ordinal variables in structural equation modelling (Byrne, 2011; Muthén, 2007). WLSMV does not start from the analysis of the sample variance-covariance matrix, but is based on the analysis of the correlation matrix. The evaluations of the models are based on several fit indices. Modification indices and parameter estimates are assessed to modify our model. Because of the size of the sample, we do not rely on the χ^2 and its p-value. Instead, we study the more appropriate Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Weighted Root Mean Square Residual (WRMR). The CFI and the TLI indices are two comparative fit indices that take on values between 0 and 1. Values of 0,90 and higher indicate a good model fit (Byrne, 2011). The RMSEA index penalizes for poor model parsimony and takes the error of approximation in the population into account. Values smaller than 0,08 suggest an adequate model fit and values smaller than 0,05 a good model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The WRMR index assesses the difference between the implied correlation matrix and the correlation matrix in the sample. It is designed especially for confirmatory factor analysis with ordinal items (Byrne, 2011). Values smaller than 0,95 are regarded as indicators of a good model fit (Yu 2002). However, the WRMR

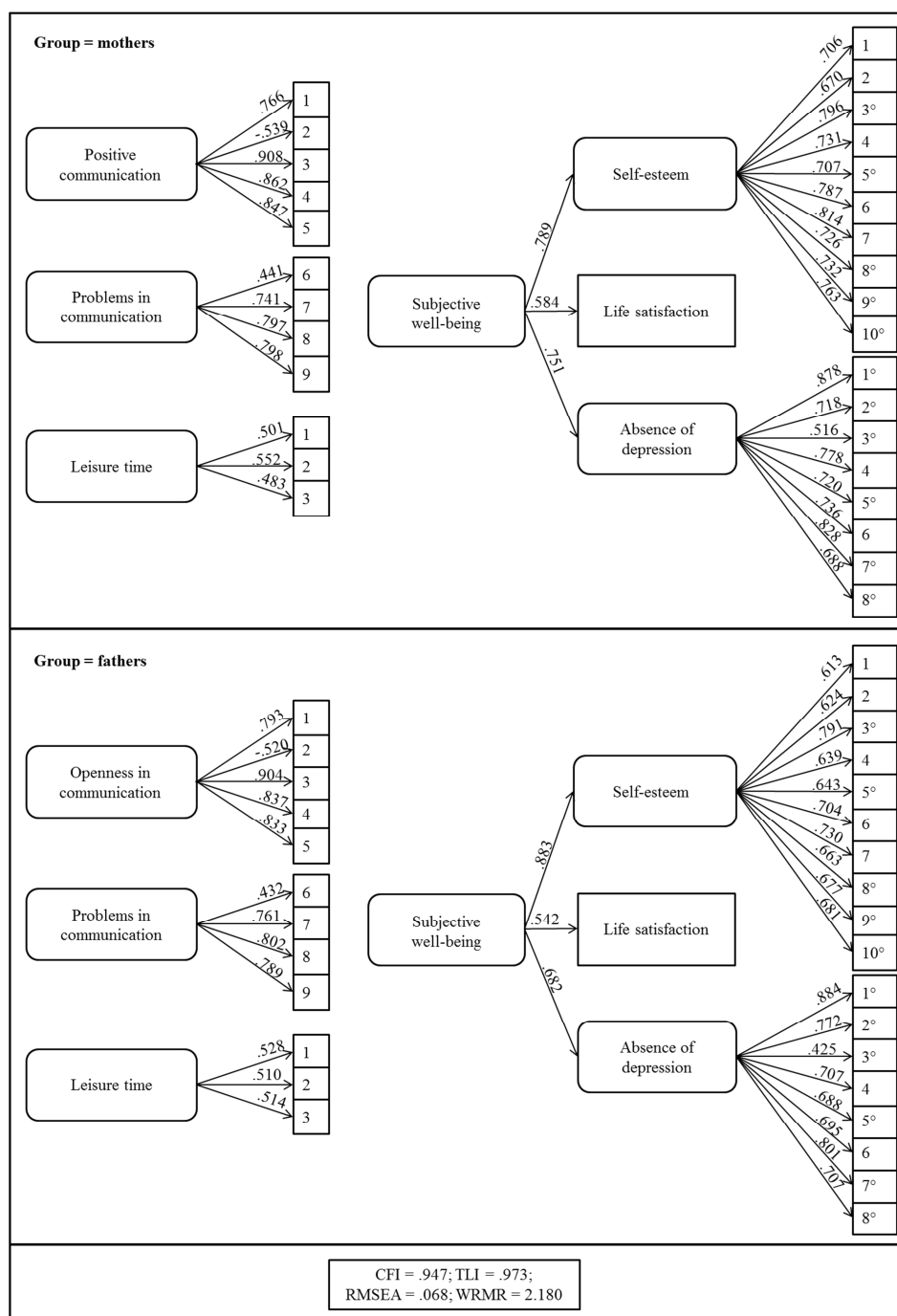
is an experimental fit measure and does not always behave well (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Therefore, we approach this fit index with caution.

9.5 RESULTS

9.5.1 Measurement model

Figure 15 shows the final measurement model in which all latent variables are examined simultaneously via confirmatory factor analysis. The index of subjective well-being is constructed via a second-order confirmatory factor analysis. Based on the separate confirmatory factor analyses, modifications are made. Error correlations are included and these are allowed to differ between fathers and mothers. The threshold of the third item in the depression scale is also allowed to differ between fathers and mothers. Measurement equivalence between fathers and mothers is reached for all latent constructs. Subjective well-being forms a clear index, composed out of self-esteem, life satisfaction and absence of feelings of depression. For fathers, self-esteem is mostly related to the higher order composite of well-being, while for mothers, well-being is more equally determined by self-esteem and feelings of depression. Life satisfaction, which is regularly used as a single measurement of subjective well-being, relates strongly to subjective well-being as a composite index. Correlations between the latent variables are also examined. Perceived openness in communication with the child correlates positively with subjective well-being (for mothers: $r = 0,28$; $p < 0,0001$; for fathers: $r = 0,24$; $p < 0,0001$), whereas problems in the parent-child communication correlate negatively with subjective well-being (for mothers: $r = -0,39$; $p < 0,0001$; for fathers: $r = -0,34$; $p < 0,0001$). Both dimensions of communication are negatively related to each other (for mothers: $r = -0,42$; $p < 0,0001$; for fathers: $r = -0,27$; $p < 0,0001$). Leisure time, composed out of the three leisure activities, relates positively with subjective well-being (for mothers: $r = 0,41$; $p < 0,0001$; for fathers: $r = 0,34$; $p < 0,0001$). This measurement model forms the null model in which no causal relations are specified and is the reference model to which every structural model is compared to.

Figure 15 Final measurement model for two groups solution



Note: Entries are standardized factor loadings (one-directional arrows); Reversed items are presented by °; error terms are not reported here, but are available upon request.

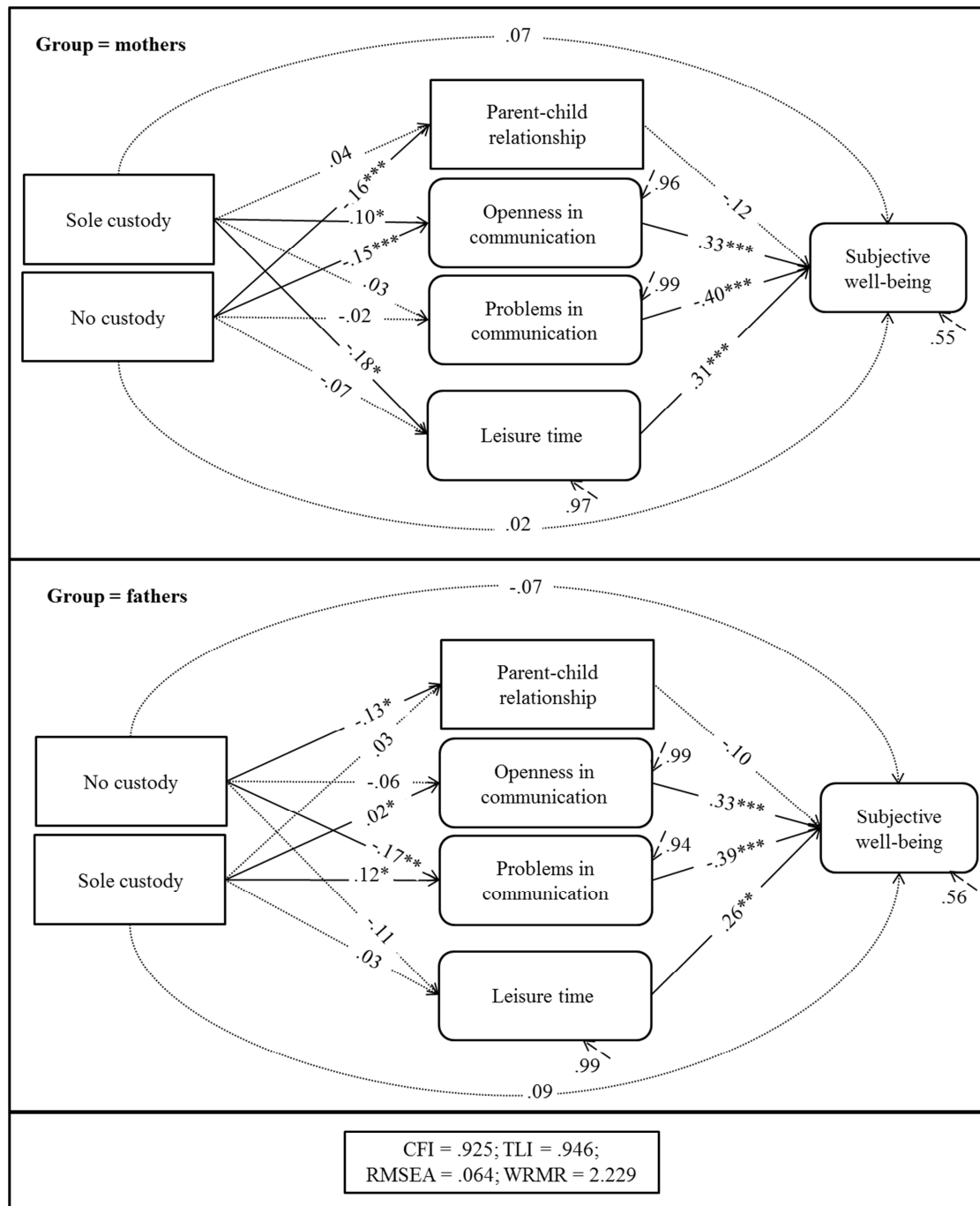
9.5.2 Structural model

9.5.2.1 *Direct effect of custody on subjective well-being*

Figure 16 presents the final structural model in which we specify the direct relations between the observed variables and the latent constructs. We model direct effects of custody arrangements on parents' subjective well-being, parental involvement and leisure time, controlled for the confounding factors. Also the direct effects from the mediating variables of parental involvement and leisure time on subjective well-being are reported. The structural model fits our data reasonably well, examining the fit indices. The direct effects of the control variables on subjective well-being are reported separately in Table 2.

First, we look at the direct effects of the custody arrangement on the mediating variables of parental involvement and leisure time in Figure 2. Sole custody mothers have more open communication with their child than joint custody mothers, who in turn communicate more open with their child than no custody mothers. No significant differences in openness of father-child communication are found according to paternal custody status. For problematic communication, the pattern is reversed: it is only related with paternal custody status. Sole custody fathers report more negative communication with their child than joint custody fathers who in turn report more negative communication than no custody fathers. The quality of the parent-child relationship is not reported differently between sole and joint custody parents, but is lower among no custody parents. We find partial confirmation for hypothesis 1a: no custody parents report a worse parent-child relationship than joint physical custody parents, but these latter do not differ from sole custody parents regarding the quality of their parent-child relationship. Regarding communication, different patterns emerge for mothers and fathers. Openness in communication is only related to custody status for mothers, problems in communication is only related to custody status for fathers.

Figure 16 Final structural model for two groups solution: direct effects of custody type on subjective well-being.



Note: Entries are standardized coefficients. Dotted arrows denote non-significant effects, full arrows denote significant effects (* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$). The short, dashed arrows symbolize error variances of the endogenous variables. Reference group of custody type is joint physical custody.

The availability of divorced mothers' leisure time is related with their custody status. Mothers who live predominantly together with their child engage less frequently in leisure activities than mothers who share parental tasks with their ex-husband. Joint and no custody mothers are not different regarding their frequency of having leisure activities. For fathers, no significant effects of custody status on leisure activities are found. Hypotheses 2a can thus be confirmed for mothers, not for fathers.

Second, we look at the direct effects of the custody arrangement, parental involvement and leisure time on subjective well-being in Figure 2. There is no direct effect of the custody arrangement on subjective well-being, neither for divorced mothers and for divorced fathers. As expected, more time spent on leisure activities and a more open communication between parent and child are positively linked with subjective well-being while problems in communication are negatively linked with subjective well-being. The quality of the parent-child relationship is not related to subjective well-being. All mediating factors have the same effects on subjective well-being, regardless of the gender of the divorcee.

Third, we look at the direct effects of the confounding control variables on subjective well-being (Table 46). The socioeconomic status variables influence strongly the subjective well-being of divorced mothers and fathers. Being highly educated and having a job increases divorced parents' subjective well-being profoundly. While there is no difference in subjective well-being between part-time and full-time working mothers, fathers who only work part-time have a lower subjective well-being than fathers working full-time. Other indicators that point to the relational life of divorcees also affect the level of subjective well-being. While a new inhabiting partner increases divorcees' subjective well-being, conflict with the ex-spouse influences subjective well-being negatively. It has to be noted that for mothers, few conflicts with the ex-spouse decrease their subjective well-being, compared to mothers who report an average level of conflicts with the ex-spouse. This may implicate that having some conflicts with the ex-spouse is considered good for the relationship between ex-partners and mothers' subjective well-being. The other indicators regarding age and time since divorce do not influence the subjective well-being of divorced parents.

Table 46 Direct effects of control variables on subjective well-being

	Subjective well-being mothers N = 829	Subjective well-being fathers N = 677
Education (average)		
Low	-0,04	-0,02
High	0,15**	0,15**
Employment (full-time)		
Part-time	-0,06	-0,17***
Unemployed	-0,24***	-0,15**
Residential new partner	0,18***	0,26***
Young children in household	0,07	0,04
Age of respondent	0,09	0,11
Age of child	-0,09	-0,09
Time since divorce	-0,01	-0,03
Parental conflict (average)		
No contact	-0,07	-0,07
Low conflict	-0,12*	-0,07
High conflict	-0,10*	-0,12**

Note: Entries are standardized estimates (β); * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$; reference category in parentheses

9.5.2.2 Indirect effect of custody on subjective well-being

Joint custody fathers' well-being is negatively influenced compared to no custody fathers because they report more problematic communication with their child (Table 47). Joint custody mothers' well-being is negatively influenced compared to sole custody mothers because they report less open communication with their child. The mediation hypothesis 1b must be rejected. Compared with sole custody mothers, the subjective well-being of joint physical custody mothers is influenced positively by more availability of leisure time. Hypothesis 2b cannot be rejected for mothers. For both mothers and fathers, the total sum of all indirect effects is not significant. Several mediating forces seem to counteract each other.

Table 47 Indirect effects of custody type on subjective well-being through mediating variables

	Subjective well-being mothers N = 829	Subjective well-being fathers N = 677
Sole custody → parent-child relationship	-0,01	-0,01
Sole custody → openness in communication	0,03*	0,01
Sole custody → problems in communication	-0,01	-0,05*
Sole custody → leisure time	-0,05*	0,01
Total indirect effect	-0,08	-0,07
No custody → parent-child relationship	0,02	0,01
No custody → openness in communication	-0,05**	-0,02
No custody → problems in communication	0,01	0,07**
No custody → leisure time	-0,02	-0,03
Total indirect effect	-0,08	0,07

Note: Entries are standardized estimates (β); * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$

9.6 CONCLUSION

We examined the association between custody arrangements and divorced parents' subjective well-being. Two explaining mechanisms were explored: the parental involvement and the availability of leisure time. We especially focused on parents with joint physical custody, the residential arrangement that was recently put forward by the legislator.

Our study found no direct association between custody status and subjective well-being of divorced parents. The results confirmed however some mediating paths, which were gender specific. No custody parents (living less than 33% with their child) report a worse parent-child relationship than joint and sole custody parents, who are not differing from each other. Hence, a legislation in favour of gender neutral parenting arrangements, instead of traditional sole mother custody, may be positive for the relationships between children and both parents. Joint physical custody facilitates continuity in the post-divorce father-child relationship and does not hinder the mother-child relationship. Joint physical custody can be seen as a manner in which the family system can be continued after divorce (Lowery & Settle, 1985). The quality of the parent-child relationship, as measured by a single-item question was not related with the subjective well-being of parents, which was against our expectations.

Though the quality of the parent-child relationship was perceived equally by mothers with sole and joint physical custody, the latter reported less open communication with their child and this indirectly influenced their subjective well-being in a negative direction. Joint physical custody fathers had a better relationship with their child, but also more negative communication than no custody fathers. Spending more time with the child and taking up parental responsibilities on a

daily base seems to offers extended opportunities for conflicts between fathers and their children. Moreover, this problematic parent-child communication was negatively associated with subjective well-being of fathers. Problematic parent-child communication was not related to the custody status of mothers. This finding could be linked to the role identity theory of Maurer and Pleck (2006). Caregiving, although increasingly taken up by fathers, is still seen as a traditional maternal task. The role of the father is somewhat ambiguous and unclear which causes fathers to have more difficulties in taking up the parenting role, in particular after divorce. Mothers, even those who are not living together with their children, have less difficulties than fathers with continuing their parental role after divorce (Degarmo et al., 2008; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). This can be related to the fact that a fifty-fifty sharing of time does not necessarily imply equal sharing of parental tasks (Lacroix, 2006). Very often, mother still take up the main responsibilities for childcare and are more likely to adapt their working time to be available for their children. Future research should give more attention to this issue.

Mothers who share the care have more time for leisure activities than sole custody mothers and this seems to be positively related with their subjective well-being. Dividing parental care with the ex-partner appears to make extra room for personal outdoor activities. Herewith we may confirm the statement of Bauserman (2012) that more equally divided custody arrangements caused a liberating effect for women. Divorced fathers' leisure activities were not influenced by their custody status. As a consequence, the question arises how joint custody fathers manage their childcare tasks without downsizing their level of social participation. It is possible that fathers group their social contacts and activities in the childless period to compensate for the period when children are present. It is also likely that fathers, more often than mothers, seek formal and informal help with caring for the children. This help can come from their new female partner or from their own parents. Fathers' willingness to become a joint custody parent may be even conditional upon the existence of these informal social networks.

This study had some limitations that should be taken into consideration. First of all, we study cross-sectional data and cannot make any causal interpretations. A problem with cross-sectional designs is that they fail to capture causal directions. Happier parents may be more likely to choose for joint custody than emotional disturbed parents. It is already confirmed in earlier research that joint custody parents differ from sole custody parents on a number of variables, like psychological functioning (Wolchik et al., 1985), socio-economic status (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1993) and parental involvement (Fabricius et al., 2012; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Secondly, the group of no custody mothers was small. Nonetheless, this specific group of mothers deserves more attention. The social undesirability of this post-divorce situation makes these mothers less inclined to participate in surveys and there is also evidence that they have lower levels of subjective well-being (Buchanan et al., 1992). As a result, a selective non-response within this survey is likely. Thirdly, the quality of the parent-child relationship was measured with a single item question showing very little item variance. Perhaps, high social

desirability was present as parents have a tendency to report more positive experiences/perceptions than children (chapter 6). Finally, some discrepancies between the answers of divorced mothers and fathers regarding the custody arrangement were possible. Divorced parents tend to overestimate the time that their children resides with them, causing a response bias. Furthermore, the selectivity of survey participation can produce this difference, as divorced parents with sole custody are more eager to participate than parents without custody.

We argue that this study delivered an important contribution to the study of custody arrangements and family functioning. In a landscape where countries are increasingly modifying laws and policies to promote, studying custody arrangements and subjective well-being of divorced mothers and fathers is highly relevant. Our final conclusion would be that a shift towards shared care after divorce has both positive and negative effects for parents. For fathers it means higher involvement in their children's lives, but this extended parenting bring also new difficulties. Joint physical custody is the very expression of the 'changed nature of fatherhood' in which fathers are increasingly willing to be and socially expected to be involved in caregiving (Maurer & Pleck, 2006). For mothers, joint physical custody does not seem to touch their relationship quality with their children, although their bond may be somewhat less close. Moreover, it permits them to have a more active social life, which is rewarding for their general well-being. Hence, joint physical custody may be seen as a continuation of the individualization process and the modernization of the family. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe that female emancipation in the field of education and paid labour transformed the maternal biography from 'living to others' to 'a life of one's own'. Yet, they add that this individualization process is incomplete for women because many of them still take up the majority of domestic and child-related tasks leaving them with frustration and ambivalence. The legal recommendation of shared care practices pushes divorced couples in the direction of gender neutrality and is a continuation of the 'detraditionalization of gender roles' (van Krieken, 2005).

The question arises whether children also benefit from joint physical custody? According to Australian evidence, Fehlberg and colleagues (2011) concluded that shared time parenting favours in the first place fathers, followed by mothers and in the least place the children. For them, commuting between two places means less stability in their post-divorce life. There is also evidence that legislating for joint physical custody may lead to more parental conflicts (Fehlberg et al., 2011; Singer, 2008; chapter 5). Jensen (2009) asks the somewhat provocative question whether the subjective well-being of children is sacrificed for the sake of involved fatherhood and for a 'fair' share of parenting time. It is evident that future research should give more attention to the consequences for children because joint physical custody became the legally recommended custody option in the first place to serve their best interests.

Appendix: Items latent variables

Self-esteem: “To which extend do you agree or disagree with the following statements?”

- I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
- I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
- I am able to do things as well as most other people.
- I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
- I take a positive attitude toward myself.
- On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- I wish I could have more respect for myself.
- I certainly feel useless at times.
- At times I think I am no good at all.

Feelings of depression: “How often, in the past week, did you feel like ...”

- I felt depressed.
- I felt that everything I did was an effort.
- My sleep was restless.
- I was happy.
- I felt lonely.
- I enjoyed life.
- I felt sad.
- I could not get going.

Leisure time: “How often did you do the following activities in your free time the past 12 months?”

- doing sports.
- participating in cultural activities like going to the theatre, concerts or museums.
- going out to restaurants, bars, movie theatres or parties.

Openness in communication: “To which extend do you agree or disagree with the following statements?”

- My child openly shows affection to me.
- There are topics that my child avoids talking about with me.
- I am very satisfied with how my child and I talk with each other.
- I find it easy to discuss problems with my child.
- It is easy for my child to express all his/her true feelings to me.

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- When talking to me, my child has a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid.

Problems in communication: "To which extend do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

- I constantly nag and bother my child.
- I insult my child when I am mad at her/him.
- When talking to my child, I have a tendency to say things that would be better left unsaid.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

10 Conclusion

The purpose of this final chapter is to reflect on our findings from a broader perspective. We depart from the observation that family life has changed over the past decades, and we try to understand how the phenomenon of joint physical custody fits into these new developments. The discussion highlights issues related to the fluidity of family boundaries, the fairness and equality of today's negotiated family, the struggle between mothers and fathers for their children, and the implications of all this for the everyday life of the children involved.

10.1 MELTING FAMILY BOUNDARIES

Family life has changed tremendously. Increasing proportions of couples break-up their relationship, with or without children. More than ever, divorced or separated people engage in new relationships, have new children in these unions, and break-up again. Families are no longer well-defined entities; their boundaries are no longer clearly delimited. The dividing line between those who belong and those who do not belong to the family has lost its sharp edge. Cherlin (2009) uses a 'family-flux' metaphor to describe contemporary family life while Bauman (2000) refers to this melting away of family boundaries by his well-known concept of 'liquid families'.

Our own research has focused on one specific aspect of contemporary family life, which can be seen as the very expression of melted family boundaries: joint physical custody families. In these families, children live alternately with their mother and father and commute between them on regular intervals. Jensen (2009) describes these children as contemporary family nomads. They are not a marginal group in Flanders. Based on our findings, one fourth of all adolescent children with divorced or separated parents are currently living alternately in both parental households. This corresponds to approximately 26000 Flemish youngsters between 12 and 18 years old, or more than 6% of the total child population in that age group. And this figure is likely to increase in the future because adolescents with recently divorced or separated parents have likelihoods exceeding 30% to commute between the homes of their parents. Including primary or pre-school children would elevate this figure to an even higher level.

Our findings suggest that the increase in joint physical custody arrangements started gradually after 1995, the year in which joint parental responsibility was legally adopted. Although this law stipulated no explicit preference about children's residence, it apparently created a general awareness that parents are fundamentally equal caregivers and stimulated divorced parents to divide the care of their children. The subsequent 2006 reform, with its more explicit intention to promote joint physical custody as preferred residential model, did not produce a sudden rise in joint physical custody arrangements, but rather facilitated the continuing gradual increase.

But how can family life continue at two different locations? Bauman (2000) argues that the relationship between time and space has changed in contemporary families. In a traditional nuclear family, boundaries are demarcated by walls and houses, and space is the most important dimension defining where families start and end. Today, in a globalized society, with its modern communication technologies, omnipresent WIFI networks, and well-established social media applications, it does not matter where you are, but with whom you are connected. Time is now shaping the contours of the contemporary family (Jensen, 2009). This permits children and parents to 'do family at a distance'. The *structure* of the original nuclear family disappears, while the *function* remains.

The continuation of family life 'at two different locations' may hold benefits for children through the maximization of available parental resources. Anyhow, putting children in the middle of a complex bi-nuclear family constellation may also induce feelings of ambiguity. Living in two families increases the likelihood that children meet 'strangers' on their family path, such as stepparents, stepsiblings, and halfsiblings. Some of them may be permanent, others may be temporary household visitors. These situations are apt to induce ambiguity because normative expectations about the roles associated with this new relatives are lacking (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington et al., 1992).

The rise in joint physical custody arrangements in Flanders may also be linked to the geographic dimensions of the region. In large countries, like the U.S., Australia, or Germany, divorced parents frequently move to the other side of the country to build up a new life or to move in with a new partner. In such a situation, dividing post-separation childcare implies great practical difficulties. When distances between parents are long and difficult to bridge, children may need to take trains, boats, or even airplanes, to reach the other part of their family. This has created additional concerns for child welfare. In Norway, for instance, the growing number of traveling children has led the Child Ombudsman, as well as airline, ferry and boat companies, to advise minimum age limits for children who are travelling alone (Jensen, 2009). Unlike Norway, Belgium is a small country, and Flemish people are not inclined to cross the language border when they move. For that reason, Flemish divorced parents have a higher likelihood than parents from large countries to live close to each other, making joint physical custody a more feasible option. To that extent, small countries may be catalysts for shared care arrangements after divorce.

10.2 FAIRNESS BETWEEN PARENTS IN AN INDIVIDUALIZED SOCIETY

From perspective of the parents, joint physical custody can be understood within the context of individualization, a process that transformed family life considerably over the past decades. The striving for self-actualization and personal achievement has brought the individual members of the family to the fore, while the well-being of the family as an entity has lost importance (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Feminist movements have fought for the liberation of women on the labor

market and for equal opportunities in education. Fathers' rights groups have initiated the legal and normative shifts towards equal parental responsibility, which have resulted in new policies and regulations that put the concepts of fairness, gender equality and parental equity on centre stage. Joint physical custody arose as the ultimate compromise addressing the needs of both mothers and fathers after divorce. To a certain extent, joint physical custody can be seen as the completion of the individualization process for women. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe how the female biography has evolved during the past decades from 'living for others' to 'a life of one's own'. This process was mainly achieved through paid work, which divided mothers' family time from personal time (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). But the individualization process is considered incomplete for women. Most mothers still carry out the majority of household and parental tasks. Especially among divorced couples, where mothers are appointed as the main caregiver, gender role equality in domestic tasks is far from achieved. The most feasible way to give divorced mothers a life outside the family is by sharing the parenting tasks with the father. By doing so, divorced mothers gain time, compared with mothers who carry the parental burden on their own. This extended time can be applied to invest in a professional career, and it may lead to more rapid repartnering. Moreover, it enhances opportunities for social participation and leisure activities, like doing sports and going to cultural events. A richer social life and more personal time is positively related with maternal subjective well-being, especially in a society characterized by increased emphasis on autonomy, privacy and self-realization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As stated by Bauserman (2012), joint physical custody has liberated women.

Within divorced couples, joint physical custody can thus be seen as the expression of fairness and equality, two very central concepts in an individualistic marriage model, characterized by egalitarian relationships between spouses (Amato, 2009). The question is whether the emphasis on gender equality has not become too far-reaching and neglects the needs of the third party: the children. Our results showed that the '50-50'-shared care arrangement, in which children live about 50% of their time with both parents, is clearly the most popular joint physical custody type in Flanders. This creates the impression that parental equality can be only achieved when father and mother are 'on duty' for an equal amount of time. From a legal point of view, this makes sense. Dividing children equally between two divorcing parents removes potential grounds for discussion and implies perfect parental equality. Each parent gets his or her share. Yet, from a socio-psychological point of view, a '50-50'-shared care model may ignore the actual intentions of the law, which were to stress parental neutrality and to enhance post-separation father-child contact, rather than to establish an equal division of children's time between both parents. According to one British study, flexibility was one of the key success factors that made joint physical custody acceptable for children (Smart, 2004). Moreover, Neale and Smart (1997) formulate explicit reservations with a '50-50'-shared care presumption because it allows needs of the children to be overlooked. Thus, we would recommend policy makers and divorce professionals to develop post-separation residential schedules that are adapted to the actual

circumstances (e.g. working schedules of parents, preferences of children), instead of relying on a '50-50' shared care presumption.

10.3 FIGHTING PARENTS: UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF CUSTODY LEGISLATION?

Gender-neutral policies are important and necessary, but they may have undesired side effects when conflicts and parental power struggles arise on the other side of the equality coin. Our findings indicate that joint physical custody is no longer 'reserved' for highly cooperative parents in Flanders since 1995. Almost certainly, this can be explained by the changed legal framework. Before 1995, only one parent received parental rights after break-up. Therefore, parents who wanted to divide the parental tasks of the children had to be very cooperative and trustful with each other. The non-custodial parents' opportunity to have contact with the child(ren) existed only by the goodwill of the custodial parent. This raised the possibility that joint custody parents acted out of the children's interest by recognising the benefits of growing up with their two biological parents. In other words, a cooperative parental environment was a condition, *sine qua non*, to achieve joint physical custody in a legal context endorsing the fundamental inequality of parents. After 1995, the legal setting changed and supported both ex-spouses' parental rights. The paradox is that the law inducing 'the right to be a parent' has probably removed the inherent requirement to be 'a cooperative parent' that characterized the previous era. Sharing the care after divorce was no longer a practice that was only achievable by more or less cooperative parents, because it was now supported by the law. Where divorced fathers used to be passive actors, hoping to get access to their child, they were suddenly offered an arena in which they could defend and demand their rights. As a result, high conflict parents were now able to adopt joint physical custody.

There are two reasons to believe that the 2006 law reform has reinforced this trend. First, this law stipulates that joint physical custody must be prioritized (and can even be imposed against the will of one parent) when there is no prior parental agreement concerning the child's residence. In this way, a custody arrangement that requires a high level of parental cooperation is considered principally among divorcing parents who are not able to reach an agreement before they go to court. Singer (2008) expresses the concern that dividing children between two quarreling parents can never be in their best interest. Second, César and Waxweiler (2010) argue that the recent Belgian custody law has reshaped the legal landscape from *pleading in favour of* joint physical custody before 2006, towards *pleading against* joint physical custody after 2006. Before 2006, parents seeking joint physical custody had to convince the judge and the other parent of their competency. Today, the parent that rejects joint physical custody must prove the other parent to be incompetent. Hence, this law may encourage parents who want to avoid joint physical custody, to slander the other parent on purpose (Vanassche et al., 2011). While the 1995 law emphasized the obligations and responsibilities of parenthood, the 2006 law emphasizes the rights of parenthood. This subtle but important difference can have major implications for child well-being.

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Moreover, our study indicates that the composition and profile of joint physical custody families has changed over time. In line with the Australian findings of Fehlberg and colleagues (2011), we may expect a bifurcation of joint physical custody families. On the one hand, there is still a group of low-conflict co-parents, acting in the best interest of the child. On the other hand, a group of high conflict parents may be pushed into joint physical custody arrangements, by the current architecture of the law. We must be aware that this evolution may be a potential threat for the children involved. Children risk being 'caught in the middle' when parents express their conflicts through the children (de Graaf & Fokkema, 2006). There is ample research evidence that parental conflict is one of the most important negative predictors for child and adolescent well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991; Fischer, 2004). In Sweden, where the legal context was highly similar to the Belgian one, policy makers redesigned the law several years ago in order to discourage judges from appointing joint physical custody in high-conflict situations (Singer, 2008). We expect that a similar adaptation will be necessary to the Belgian law.

10.4 COMPETING PARENTHOOD

The idea that mothers and fathers are fundamentally equal caregivers is now generally accepted. The 'new father ideology' indicates that fathers, just like mothers, place a high value on the parental role (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Maurer & Pleck, 2006). A recent study by the Federal State Secretary of Families concluded that the majority of Flemish fathers prefer more time with their family and children (Gezinsbond, 2013). However, these developments have also reshaped the relations between the sexes and gave rise to new gender conflicts. Today, when two parents divorce, the amount of parenting time with the children is one of the most important aspects to fight for. Therefore, the custody arrangement of the children may serve as a new indicator for the relative bargaining power of divorcing mothers and fathers. Subtle mechanisms that are steering power distributions within couples have arisen, with education being the most important one. According to our findings, mothers who are higher educated than their partner, have more chance of obtaining sole custody, relative to joint physical custody. When parents are equally educated, joint custody physical is the most expected custody outcome. Lower-educated mothers, even when formerly married to lower-educated fathers, have little chance of obtaining physical custody. Hence, a higher education than the ex-partner seems to give a divorcing parent relative power to obtain more residential time with the child. Another mechanism that drives power balances between mothers and fathers, involves who initiated the divorce. When fathers initiate the divorce on their own, joint physical custody is less likely, and sole mother custody more likely, compared to couples that mutually decide to end their marriage. This suggests a fault-based rule, in which physical custody rights are used by the leaving party to compensate the emotional loss of the abandoned party.

Our results also suggest that mothers and fathers still perceive the status of 'half-time-parent' very differently. Mothers, even those with high education, seem to have more difficulties than fathers with sharing parental tasks equally with their ex-spouse. For instance, why are mothers

who are higher educated than their ex-spouse not inclined to pursue equal shared care, alongside their higher likelihood to have gender neutral attitudes and good-running professional careers? A first explanation may be related to the division of the household tasks prior to the separation. As stated earlier, many mothers still perform the majority of domestic and childcare tasks and choose jobs that allow them to combine work and family more easily than fathers (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995; Mortelmans, Ottoy, & Verstreken, 2003). Sharing the care of the children equally with the ex-spouse after break-up, would imply a sudden break with the previous situation, which is not easily accepted by many mothers (Vanassche et al., 2011). A new partner of the father may further complicate the story. The fear for competition with the stepmother may restrain mothers from handing over the privilege of caring for the children to fathers. A second explanation may be related with the social disapproval of being a half time parent. Although the legal grounds for a maternal presumption in childcare have disappeared, the social grounds may still be there. In this context, symbolic interaction theory can provide useful insights. Individuals acquire role identities, which are self-conceptions based on occupied social roles (Thoits, 1992). Although voluntary and permanent childlessness is more and more accepted in contemporary societies, being a parent is still one of the most important and valued social roles, and is especially pronounced among women (Rittenour & Colaner, 2012). Hence, joint physical custody mothers may have difficulties with accepting the status of half-time parent. Processes as 'maternal gatekeeping' are often described and might illustrate the preference and attempts of mothers to restrict the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children following divorce, out of fear of power loss or threat to personal identity (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-gunn, 2008; De Luccie, 1995; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). A third reason could be that higher educated mothers want to compensate for their failed marriage. Although the role strain theory predicts that the difficulty of combining several roles (e.g. being a mother, a worker) will induce stress (Goode, 1962), there is growing evidence that cumulating several roles is more beneficial for well-being than bargaining between roles (Rittenour & Colaner, 2012). Managing to run a household with children, while combining this with a full-time paid job, might induce feelings of competence and efficacy among higher educated mothers.

Mothers and fathers also organize their post-separation care in different ways. Today, a considerable share of divorced fathers can see their children grow up, instead of spending time with them only during the weekends. Surprisingly, the social life of these fathers seems not to differ from that of non-residential fathers. Thus, while joint custody seems to bring more personal time for mothers, it does not seem to cut it back for fathers. Two possible explanations could explain this finding. First, only full-time parenthood is dysfunctional for parents' social life, whereas co-parents are able to organize a life 'at two speeds'. Their 'built-in break' (Luepnitz, 1986, p.7) 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 reorganize their life according to the presence of children (Shaw, 2001) or rely

Chapter 10 Conclusion

more easily on informal help from a new partner or parents, as expressed by Jappens and Van Bavel (2012). Fathers may have few reservations about obtaining external help with the children (holiday camps, babysits, formal childcare) while the same assistance may induce feelings of ambivalence and guilt among mothers. It may also be the case that fathers have proportionally more resources even at comparable levels of education.

Mothers and fathers are more and more sharing parental tasks after divorce. For the children, the question remains whether the increased involvement of fathers can compensate the reduced parental availability of mothers. Are parents substitutable or do they fulfil different parenting roles? Our evidence points in the direction of the latter. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe, mothers are still the 'heart of the family' and perform the more expressive functions, like listening to children, and talking about emotions. Despite the fact that joint physical custody mothers gain personal time, they seem to pay this off by reduced closeness with their children, which leads to a deterioration of these mothers' well-being. Fathers may fulfil more controlling functions, like setting boundaries, which could explain their higher communication difficulties with their resident children. This gender difference can be linked to the role identity theory of Maurer and Pleck (2006). Caregiving, although increasingly taken up by fathers, is still seen as a traditional female task. The role of the father remains somewhat ambiguous which causes fathers to have more difficulties in taking up the parenting role, in particular after divorce.

The question is how these patterns will develop in the future. On the one hand, we can expect that mothers will become more acceptable of equally sharing care, as the individualization process proceeds and equal parental rights become further socially accepted. On the other hand, the bargaining power of women is expected to increase in the future, because increasingly more women are more highly educated than their spouses (Esteve, Garcia-Roman, & Permanyer, 2012; McDaniel, 2013; Thaler, 2013; Van Bavel, 2012). If mothers remain hesitant towards sharing the care, it will become a greater challenge for fathers to obtain joint physical custody, perhaps becoming a privilege reserved for the higher educated. Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict how things will evolve, because the current situation is relatively new. Because the current generation women is more highly educated than their mothers, they had no role models and they were not socialized to deal with this kind of new 'parenting questions' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

10.5 WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

Divorce and repartnering, seen as expressions of individualization and the tendency to get the best out of one's life, encourage parents' autonomy and self-actualization. These are highly appreciated values in our society and may benefit the well-being of parents in the long run. But these developments go hand in hand with an increased instability of family life, lowering solidarity between members of the family (Cherlin, 2010). Especially for the most vulnerable

family members, individualization can be a threatening process. As Jensen and McKee (2003, p.5) state: "Freedom for adults may carry hidden costs for children".

An important question addressed in this research was the impact of joint physical custody on the welfare of children. As is often the case in social research, there is no clear answer. Our results provide mixed evidence. Amato states that "the polemic nature of divorce scholarship makes it difficult to write on this topic without being identified as either a conservative or a liberal voice" (Amato, 2000, p.1270). The same is true for joint physical custody research. There is the risk of being identified conservative, by treating joint physical custody as a major problem, or either liberal, by seeing joint physical custody as the far-reaching expression of equality between fathers and mothers. To enhance the neutrality of our discussion, we try to highlight both the strengths as well as risk factors associated with joint physical custody for children, coming out of our research.

10.5.1 The revival of family ties

When we compare a joint physical custody arrangement with the previous default sole mother custody, the quality of the father-child relationship gains strength while the quality of the mother-child relationship remains unchanged. From socialization theory, that treats both parents as important agents of socialization for children, our findings may yield important implications for the father-son and the mother-daughter relationship (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). Previous research showed that the relationship with the same-sex parent has a stronger impact on adolescents' well-being than the relationship with the opposite-sex parent (King, 2006; Videon, 2002). Boys in joint physical custody families have more frequent and extended contact with their fathers, whereas access to this paternal role model is often restricted or absent in sole mother custody families. Girls are residing permanently with their mother with decreasing frequency. Monique Van Eyken²³ points out that adolescent girls tend to have more difficulties than boys with joint physical custody (personal communication, September 2011). They are generally more attached to personal stuff, and they express sometimes difficulties with turning to their fathers for typical female matters (such as menstruation, female underwear).

The continued presence of children in both parental households may also provide opportunities to stay connected with extended family members, linked to both family systems. Grandparents, for instance, may serve as important resources for children after divorce (Bridges, Roe, Dunn, & O'Connor, 2007). They can provide direct support to children by being emotionally available or indirect support via helping parents out with practical, financial and child-related issues. When children live in two parental households after divorce, they have a higher opportunity to keep in close contact with both the maternal and paternal grandparents, thereby increasing their available sources of support (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2012). Also the availability of stepparents

²³ Monique Van Eyken (Apart) is an acknowledged family mediator and is especially experienced with involving children in mediation.

may benefit children, as far as they can provide additional parental resources, either by contributing to the general household income, or by acting as additional adult role models for children (Sweeney, 2010). Moreover, the higher emotional and psychological well-being of parents in case of repartnering may benefit adolescent children (Sweeney, 2010). Our results suggest that part-time stepchild-stepparent relationships in joint physical custody arrangements seem to facilitate the adaptation towards new (step)family members. Because children live only part of their time in each parental household, step-parenting roles may become limited and biological parental roles less threatened (Hetherington et al., 1992).

Our findings suggest that the most beneficial aspect of joint physical custody for children is certainly the intensification of family ties. For a long period of time, children who experienced a parental divorce were very likely to lose contact with one of their parents, usually their father. To a certain extent, joint physical custody can be seen as the way to rescue the ‘fatherless society’, as described by Coontz (2004). Nevertheless, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that bonds in divorced families are less obligate and more fragile than those in intact families. When higher order unions dissolve on their turn, relationships with stepfamily members have to be reformulated again by the children involved.

10.5.2 Coping with homelessness

Living in two houses may also contain risks for children. Although most adolescents in joint physical custody have higher educated parents and better parental relationships – two factors known to have strong, positive relationships with subjective well-being – they report no higher subjective well-being than their counterparts in sole mother custody families. This finding was replicated for all well-being indicators and with both data sources. After controlling for potential mediators (e.g. the parent-child relationship) and possible selection effects (e.g. socio-economic status of parents), joint physical custody became even negatively related with subjective well-being of adolescents in the LAFS-sample. Because this was not replicated with the DiF-sample, we are cautious about generalizing from this result. Nevertheless, even the absence of any effect is contradictive with the repeatedly cited meta-analysis of Bauserman (2002), that reports slightly positive effects of joint physical custody on child adjustment. In our sample, the parent-child relationship seems to function as a suppressor variable counterbalancing other (negative) factors related to joint physical custody.

The weekly transitions, the continuous adaptation to two parental households, and the absence of one true home base, are mentioned as potential dysfunctional effects arising from joint physical custody and creating stress and discomfort among adolescents (Jensen, 2009; Wade & Smart, 2003). Furthermore, adolescence is a turbulent period in life in which young individuals are highly oriented to their friends and are more likely to experiment with impulsive and risky behaviour such as sex, drugs and alcohol (Bryner, 2001). Especially in this period, having a stable home base providing children material and emotional security may be important. But age

is not the only variable that matters. Our findings suggest that certain personality factors of children can moderate the association between adolescent's custody arrangements and their subjective well-being. Conscientious adolescents, with a high internal disposition for order and control, seem to have more difficulties with the specific demands that joint physical custody may require, like making frequent transitions, living at two places, and the adjustment to two different lifestyles. This result argues for a more detailed exploration and for the inclusion of intrapersonal factors into the domain of family sociology in future research.

10.5.3 Joint physical custody and growing inequalities

The real problems for child welfare emerge when the advantages and risks of new parenting practices are unevenly divided over certain groups of children in society. Our results show that the diffusion of joint physical custody in society is incomplete today. Although a democratization process occurred, this residential option is still unlikely for children born to two lower educated parents. Joint physical custody is a more expensive option because it requires two dwellings which are fully equipped to accommodate the children (Juby, Le Bourdais, & Marcil-Gratton, 2005). Furthermore, parents from lower social classes may hold more traditional beliefs about the gendered division of work and household tasks, and may be less open for equal parenting practices (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In 'modern' dual-career families, fathers may be more involved in childcare and household chores, and sharing the care after divorce may be a continuation of the pattern that existed prior to the divorce (Neyrand, 1994). These differences may increase the inequality between children with different social standing. McLanahan (2004) argues that the Second Demographic Transition has widened the gap between children from lower and higher social classes. Two cumulating mechanisms account for her conclusion. First, children from higher educated parents are less likely to experience a parental break-up because the educational gradient of divorce has reversed (Harkonen & Dronkers, 2006; Martin & Parashar, 2006). Second, higher educated parents are more able to restrict the negative economic consequences arising from the divorce. If joint physical custody remains less available for lower educated parents, a third mechanism might reinforce this gap: children from higher social classes may have access to more (grand)parental resources than children from lower social classes.

10.5.4 Policies as protectors of child welfare

The developments that occurred during the past decades (growing divorces, alternative family forms, new parenting practices,...) have not only consequences for the individual members of the family, but may also affect the functioning of institutions and value systems (Dronkers, 2011). For instance, de Lange, Dronkers and Wolbers (2011) have shown that all pupils from schools with a high number of single-parent families have lower educational performances, even after controlling for the social-economical position and the size of the school, the proportion of

immigrant pupils in that schools, and the rate of urbanization. High divorce rates, or the way how partnership relationships between two people are conceived, may affect the social cohesion in a society (Dronkers, 2011). Surprisingly enough, all these matters are too often depicted as a private family business, in which states and policies have no rights to interfere. Nevertheless, it is important that contemporary families are embedded in debates about ‘new risks’ and ‘new policies’ in Western welfare states (Mätzke & Ostner, 2010). As children and their families are seen as important resources for future society, it is in the state’s benefit to protect them from harm and to shape the circumstance that will help them thrive.

According to Ostner (2013), there is an ongoing tension between parentalization and de-parentalization, two processes which are occurring at the same time. Parentalization refers to the emergence of all sorts of parents, to the trend that more and more people are taking up parenting roles in our contemporary society. For instance, by adopting joint physical custody as preferred model, the Belgian legislator has implicitly increased the likelihood that children grow up with stepparents. Consequently, more and more social parents emerge, next to the biological parents. This stands in sharp contrast with the lack of legal recognition of the stepparental role. However, there is some change ongoing in this area, because a recent Belgian law has simplified the inheritance rights between stepparents and stepchildren. At the same time, a process of ‘de-parentalization’ is taking place, referring to the state intervention measures, monitoring, assisting, correcting, and eventually taking over, the role of the biological parents. Examples are the legal recognition of family mediation, the recent decision to unify the Belgian family court, the intentions to make parenting plans mandatory, the efforts to enhance the combination between work and life, etc.

Currently, Flanders is reshaping its family and parenting support policy. In the coming years, child or family centres (De Huizen van het Kind) will be established with three main targets: providing preventive health care, giving parenting support, and promoting social cohesion (bonding and bridging) in order to address the needs and requisites of all Flemish families (De Schuymer, 2013). Van Crombrugge (2013) criticizes the too high emphasis on preventive health care in the way how these Flemish child centres will be developed. Instead, he would promote the French model of the ‘Reseaux d’Écoute, d’Appuie, et d’Accompagnement des Parents’ that treats parenting not only as a task of parents, but as a task of all citizens. Parents can be seen as partners in co-educating the next generation (Van Crombrugge, 2013).

11 Final reflection

A salient question remains: who benefits the most from joint custody? Our study revealed that the interests of parents and children are not always in line. What is good for children (e.g. having one stable home base) does not always meet the needs of parents. What is beneficial for parents (e.g. having a new partner) can create difficulties and ambiguity for children. Thus, it is doubtful whether the legislature's intention to serve both the children's and the parents' best interests was a realistic one. Is there not always one winning and one losing party? And should children or parents be given priority when interests are contradictory? The law provides no real answers to these questions and arguments can be found for both perspectives.

The rise in joint physical custody creates new challenges and puts extra demands on the organization of contemporary family life. Joint custody parents have become real distribution centre managers, responsible for the sending and receiving of children. When different children have different time schedules, post-separation family life is transformed into a real challenge of organization, planning, and mapping agendas. Until now, society has not come up with adequate answers to all these issues. An exception is the recent adoption of 'co-parenting contracts' by certain Belgian companies. These contracts allow joint physical custody parents to have alternating time schedules in which they perform a lower number of working hours during the week the children are resident, which are compensated during the week afterwards when the children are not around.

In sum, our findings suggest that joint physical custody brings more benefits for parents than for children. Mothers lose some parental time with their child, which they dislike, but they (re)gain a life of their own. Fathers see their children growing up, without severe constraints for their own social life. Parents enjoy absolute freedom in making important relational decisions, but the children are the very persons who have to cope with these decisions. They have to live in two homes. They have to divide their time between both parents. They risk to be caught in the middle.

On the one hand, the evolution towards joint physical custody may be the start of an adaptation process. Bauman (2000) describes that contemporary societies are characterized by the lightness and fluidity of increasingly mobile power. For power to be free to flow, the world must be cleared from all obstacles. It is the falling apart of human bonds and (family) networks which allows this process. Family nomads, as they are called by Jensen (2009), are less settled, and may be better equipped to navigate through informal networks in a mobile world. On the other hand, families are still the most important socialisation entities, traditional family forms are still highly valued, and children from nuclear families still outperform their counterparts in broken families, on several domains. Thus, commuting children and their 'families-at-a-distance' will need a reasonable number of resources and sufficient support to 'survive' in a mobile world.

12 References

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English summary

Across Europe, increasing numbers of children are commuting between the homes of their mother and father after parental divorce. Belgium provides an excellent context to study this phenomenon because divorce rates are among the highest in Europe and the legal system has recommended joint physical custody as the preferred post-divorce residential model since 2006. This dissertation consists of seven studies involved with measuring, defining and evaluating the consequences of joint physical custody in Flanders. Two data sources are used. The multi-actor study 'Divorce in Flanders' provides information on more than 2000 divorced couples and 700 of their children. The 'Leuvens Adolescenten- en Gezinnenonderzoek' provides information on 1500 adolescents with divorced or separated parents attending secondary schools. Initially, a new instrument for measuring residential arrangements of children was proposed and validated: the residential calendar.

According to prior research, joint physical custody seemed beneficial for children. However, our evidence suggests that the positive association between joint physical custody and child outcomes was partially due to selection effects. After the implementation of the legal changes, joint custody couples are more likely to be in conflict and less likely to have high socio-economic standing than before the legal changes occurred.

The well-being of children in joint physical custody is similar to that of children in other custody arrangements. However, under certain circumstances (high conflict, worse parent-child relationships) joint physical custody can become negatively related to child wellbeing. Our findings are in line with the hypothesis that the specific demands of joint physical custody arrangements can interfere with the nature of conscientious adolescents: being organised, ordered, and planful. These results demonstrate the need for attending to the individual characteristics of the child when settling post-divorce residential arrangements.

The shift towards shared care after divorce has both positive and negative effects for parents. Gender neutral parenting arrangements have given fathers the opportunity to become more involved in their children's lives, but the level of difficult communication with their children has increased. Joint physical custody mothers have a less close bond with their children than sole custody mothers, but have a more active social life, which enhances their general well-being.

New normative frameworks and more gender neutral parenting laws have resulted in the rise of joint physical custody arrangements in Flanders over the past decades. Therefore, balancing the interests of mothers, fathers and children has become more difficult than ever, generating a considerable number of policy issues for the future.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Steeds meer kinderen die een ouderlijke scheiding hebben meegemaakt, wonen afwisselend bij hun moeder en vader. België vormt een ideale context om dit te bestuderen: het heeft één van de hoogste echtscheidingscijfers van Europa, en sinds 2006 wordt verblijfsco-ouderschap er bij wet gestimuleerd. Dit doctoraatsonderzoek is een bundeling van zeven studies aangaande het meten, het definiëren en het evalueren van de gevolgen van verblijfsco-ouderschap in Vlaanderen. Er werd gebruik gemaakt van twee databronnen. Het onderzoek 'Scheiding in Vlaanderen' levert informatie over ruim 2000 gescheiden koppels en 700 kinderen. Het 'Leuvens Adolescenten- en Gezinnenonderzoek' bevat informatie over 1500 middelbare scholieren met gescheiden ouders. Om de verblijfsregeling van de kinderen in kaart te brengen, werd een nieuw instrument ontwikkeld en gevalideerd: de verblijfskalender.

Vroeger onderzoek leert dat verblijfsco-ouderschap gunstig is voor kinderen na scheiding. Kinderen die in beide ouderlijke huishoudens opgroeien, beschikken immers over meer ouderlijke hulpbronnen dan kinderen uit eenoudergezinnen. Onze resultaten tonen aan dat de positieve samenhang tussen verblijfsco-ouderschap en het welbevinden van kinderen deels te wijten is aan schijnverbanden. Ouders die opteren voor verblijfsco-ouderschap zijn gemiddeld hoger opgeleid en maken minder ruzie met elkaar dan ouders die voor een moederverblijf kiezen. Door de wettelijke implementatie van verblijfsco-ouderschap is dat in Vlaanderen veranderd. Ook gemiddeld opgeleide en frequent ruziënde ouderparen opteren nu vaker voor verblijfsco-ouderschap dan vroeger het geval was. Kinderen met verblijfsco-ouderschap hebben een betere relatie met beide ouders dan kinderen met een eenouderverblijf. Het welbevinden van kinderen met verblijfsco-ouderschap is vergelijkbaar met dat van kinderen in andere verblijfsregelingen. Onder bepaalde omstandigheden (veel ouderlijke conflicten, slechte ouder-kindrelatie) blijkt een verblijfsco-ouderschap minder gunstig voor kinderen dan een moederverblijf. Onze resultaten bevestigen dat de eisen die verbonden zijn aan verblijfsco-ouderschap (o.a. het veelvuldig verhuizen) moeilijker zijn voor adolescenten die veel belang hechten aan orde en regelmaat. Het kan dus van belang zijn om rekening te houden met de individuele eigenschappen van kinderen bij het opstellen van verblijfsregelingen.

De evolutie naar gedeeld ouderschap heeft zowel positieve als negatieve gevolgen voor de ouders. Vaders hebben meer mogelijkheden om hun kinderen te zien opgroeien, maar ze rapporteren wel iets moeilijker ouder-kindcommunicatie. Co-moeders hebben een minder hechte band met hun kinderen dan voltijds residentiële moeders, maar ze hebben een actiever sociaal leven, wat positief is voor hun subjectief welbevinden.

Verblijfsco-ouderschap en genderneutraal ouderschap zijn in volle expansie in Vlaanderen. Dat verblijfsco-ouderschap zo verschillende, soms ook conflictueuze gevolgen heeft voor vaders, moeders en kinderen maakt het beleidsmakers extra moeilijk.

Résumé Français

Depuis 1995, chaque parent est supposé être responsable de l'éducation et de la santé de son enfant après un divorce (la garde conjointe). En 2006, le législateur belge a reconnu la résidence alternée. Ce système de résidence peut être bénéfique pour les enfants car elle maximise la disposition des ressources parentales (émotionnelles et matérielles), mais la fréquence des déménagements amène également un stress supplémentaire. Cette thèse de doctorat combine sept études sur la résidence alternée en Flandre. L'innovation de cette thèse est de se focaliser tant sur les parents que sur les enfants. Premièrement, un nouvel instrument est testé pour mesurer les règles de garde: le calendrier de résidence. Par après, l'incidence de la résidence alternée en Flandre est étudiée ainsi le profil des familles optant pour ce mode de résidence. Une grande attention est portée à l'évolution à travers le temps. En conséquence, la corrélation entre le système de résidence des enfants et leur bien-être subjectif est étudiée. Pour conclure, la corrélation entre le système de résidence des enfants et le bien-être subjectif de leurs parents est également étudiée. Deux sources de données seront utilisées: l'étude multi-acteurs 'Scheiding in Vlaanderen' a étalonné des mariages du registre national belge et fournit des informations sur plus de 2000 couples divorcés et 700 de leurs enfants. L'enquête 'Leuvens Adolescenten en Gezinnenonderzoek' questionne des élèves du secondaire sur une base annuelle. Cette thèse utilise des informations recueillies sur 1500 adolescents ayant des parents séparés ou divorcés.

La proportion de jeunes en résidence alternée a augmenté durant les dernières décennies. Aujourd'hui, l'incidence de ce système de résidence est estimé à environ 30%. La résidence maternelle est toujours le groupe majoritaire mais sa popularité a considérablement baissé. Cette évolution reflète la neutralité croissante du sexe des parents dans l'éducation des enfants. Il y a eu aussi un changement important dans le profil des familles qui optent pour la garde conjointe. Avant 1995, la résidence alternée était principalement le mode de résidence choisi par des parents ayant un haut niveau d'éducation et n'étant pas en situation de conflit. Après l'installation de la garde conjointe légale en 1995, la résidence alternée est devenue plus populaire auprès des parents d'un niveau d'études moyen ainsi qu'auprès des couples moins coopératifs. La démocratisation de la résidence alternée a donc probablement eu des effets indésirables sur les enfants concernés. Bien que la résidence alternée semble être la meilleure option pour les enfants pour faciliter une bonne relation avec ses deux parents, elle n'est pas liée au bien-être subjectif des enfants. La résidence alternée peut être extrêmement éprouvante pour les enfants ayant besoin de structure.

L'évolution de la résidence alternée peut être comprise dans une société postmoderne dans laquelle la relation entre le temps et l'espace a changé et dans laquelle le fonctionnement des membres individuels d'une famille et le compromis entre chacun de ses membres est devenu très important. La question qui en découle est de savoir si l'intérêt de l'enfant est ignorée au profit de la balance des intérêts des pères et des mères.

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