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**How do Post-Divorce Paternal and Maternal Family Trajectories Relate to Adolescents' Subjective Well-Being?**

**Abstract**

Previous research on adolescents' well-being has focused mainly on the differences between married and divorced families. Recently, interest has shifted towards the cumulative effects of the various family transitions experienced by children. To contribute to this literature, we investigate the impact of maternal and paternal family trajectories following divorce on adolescents' well-being by analyzing two dyadic subsamples of the 'Divorce in Flanders' study: mothers-adolescents (n=515) and fathers-adolescents (n=365). Results from the sequence analyses and structural equation models show that adolescents' well-being was lower if their mothers were in less stable partnership situations, namely if they had never repartnered, were in a LAT (living apart together) relationship or had had several relationships since their divorce. For fathers, the opposite result was found: adolescents' well-being was lower when their fathers were in seemingly stable partnership situations, i.e. if they had remarried or begun living with a new partner since their divorce.

*Keywords:* family trajectories, mothers, fathers, adolescents' well-being, life course perspective

## Introduction

Children and adolescents now grow up in a large variety of family types (Hagestad, 2003). Moreover, the family types they live in often change over their life course (e.g. parental divorce, entering a stepfamily), leading to cumulative family transitions. Family structure should therefore be regarded not as a static characteristic but as an evolving trajectory, as these multiple and diverse family transitions produce a wide range of individual family trajectories that children and adolescents grow up in. Consequently, each family trajectory is composed of the cumulative transitions the family has been through, including both the number and type of these transitions. This is known as the multiple-transition perspective, a very promising path for future research according to Amato (2010).

Previous studies on children's and adolescents' well-being and the impact of family types focus mainly on the dichotomy between intact and divorced families, according to Amato (2010). Recently, interest has shifted towards studying the well-being of children and adolescents from a life course perspective in order to account for the diversity of family structures they may experience while growing up. Whereas some studies have focused on the number of family transitions as an indication of the complexity of a family trajectory (e.g., Cavanagh & Huston, 2006, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007), others have examined specific types of family transition (e.g., Langton & Berger, 2011; Ryan, Markowitz & Claessens, 2015). Moreover, some studies concentrated only on post-divorce family transitions, neglecting comparisons with children and adolescents growing up in still-married families. To our knowledge, no previous research has concentrated on post-divorce maternal and paternal family trajectories over adolescents' life course and their impacts on their well-being.

This study contributes to the current literature by investigating the impact of post-divorce family trajectories on the well-being of adolescents. Our aim was to move beyond the simple dichotomy of married versus divorced families by identifying different types of post-divorce family trajectory and comparing these both to each other and to still-married trajectories with regard to their relationship to children's well-being. As a consequence, the results reveal which types of post-divorce family trajectories are most and least beneficial to adolescents' well-being. We adopted a gender-inclusive approach by taking both maternal and paternal family trajectories into account, as the latter is highly underrepresented in previous studies. We also examined both the number and type of family transitions in a given trajectory, whereas many previous studies concentrated on only one of these characteristics.

In order to investigate whether maternal and paternal family trajectories are related to adolescents' subjective well-being, multi-actor data from the Divorce in Flanders-DIF<sup>1</sup> dataset was analyzed (Mortelmans, Pasteels, Van Bavel, Bracke, Matthijs, & Van Peer, 2011). This multi-actor dataset was highly suitable for a number of reasons. First, it includes information not only on parents but also on their adolescent children. Second, it contains data on both divorced and still-married parents, enabling comparisons between never-divorced two-parent families and a wide range of post-divorce family trajectories. Third, Belgium is amongst the front-runners in rising European divorce rates (Eurostat, 2015), and is home to a large number of divorced parents with various post-divorce relationship trajectories.

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<sup>1</sup> Flanders is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. For example, concentrating on the family trajectory allows us to take both the number and type of transitions experienced by adolescents into account. We also investigate the impact of both maternal and paternal family trajectories, whereas previous research concentrated mainly on maternal families<sup>2</sup>. Finally, we differentiate between LAT (living apart together) relationships and cohabitation or marriage, as these are viewed as separate steps in parents' relationship trajectories (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015) and should therefore be treated as such in relation to adolescents' family trajectories.

## **Family Trajectories and Adolescents' Well-Being**

### **Family Trajectories**

In recent decades, family constellations and the associated relationship trajectories of men and women have become de-standardized, de-chronologized and de-institutionalized in most industrialized countries (Settersen, 2003; Shanahan, 2000). High divorce rates and entry into new relationships after a break-up are important aspects of the increased variability in family types across Western countries. From a life course perspective, family formation, relationship breakdown and repartnering are all transitions, occurring at different points in time and at different intervals. Consequently, partnership can be considered a multi-stage or even multifaceted phenomenon which changes over the life course, and which should be explored as part of a broader partnership continuum progressing from dating, and dating exclusively, to a committed LAT relationship, then unmarried cohabitation, and finally, marriage. This continuum cannot be considered unidirectional, however, because individuals may progress through certain stages of it more than once during their lifetime and/or skip other stages (Pasteels, Lyssens-Danneboom & Mortelmans, 2017).

Some transitions along this partnership continuum have already been explored exhaustively (e.g. divorce), while others have received less attention (e.g. repartnering). Studies on partnership trajectories as chains of multiple transitions are also rather scarce. The prevalence of partnership trajectories (e.g., Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015; Vanassche, Corijn & Matthijs, 2015) and the determinants of repartnering trajectories (e.g. Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015) are relatively new research topics. In existing studies on partnership formation and dissolution, the experiences of women are the main focus, though interest in men's partnership behavior has slowly grown over the last decade (Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2002; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006). In this study, we analyze how both maternal and paternal relationship trajectories are related to the well-being of their adolescent children.

### **Adolescent Well-Being**

Previous studies of adolescent well-being have concentrated mainly on risk and problem behavior. Ben-Arieh (2000), however, stated that the absence of problem behavior does not necessarily imply that children and adolescents are happy and have high well-being. Moreover, researchers now consider children and adolescents to be active agents who can report on their own lives as the main unit of observation (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011), including in the field of family studies. Rather than clinical observations of well-being, then,

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the DiF dataset did not allow us to investigate the family trajectories of mothers and fathers simultaneously, due to the low number of triads.

indicators of adolescents' subjective well-being would seem to be a more suitable means of investigating how certain family characteristics affect them. This means that more attention should be paid both to the positive indicators of children's well-being and to their subjective well-being (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011; Huebner, Gilman & Laughlin, 1998). This study not only takes measures of adolescents' subjective well-being into account, but also includes positive indicators of this subjective well-being, alongside the well-known negative indicators. The first positive indicator we used is self-esteem, which reflects the affective component of subjective well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995; Huebner et al., 1998). Self-esteem represents a person's feelings of self-acceptance and self-worth (Rosenberg 1965). The second positive indicator was life satisfaction, the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995; Huebner et al., 1998). This involves the adolescent making an overall evaluation of his or her life. Third, and in line with more traditional studies on adolescent well-being, we also include a negative indicator of subjective well-being, namely feelings of depression, in order to detect possible links between family trajectories and negative outcomes.

### **Family Trajectories and Adolescents' Well-Being**

Research on families has shown that the well-being of children and adolescents and the types of families they grow up in are intrinsically linked. Multiple reviews of the literature (Amato, 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2009; Lansford, 2009; Sweeney, 2010) have stated, for example, that growing up in a single-parent family or a stepfamily increases the likelihood that children and adolescents have a lower sense of well-being. As regards parental divorce, researchers agree that the adolescent children of divorced parents are more likely to have a lower sense of well-being than the adolescent children of continuously married parents (Bernardi, Härkönen, Boertien, Rydell, Bastaitis & Mortelmans, 2013; Kelly & Emery, 2009; Lansford, 2009). Nevertheless, family structure is a rather static measure of family life. Recently, researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of taking the family transitions that adolescents experience into account (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009; Sweeney, 2010). This is referred to by Fomby and Cherlin (2007) as the instability hypothesis, which states that disruptions and transitions in family structure are equally or even more important for children and adolescents' well-being than current family structure. Fomby and Cherlin (2007) argue that parents and adolescents can form functioning, balanced families regardless of whether these are two-parent or single-parent families. Consequently, the disruption – and perhaps repeated disruption – of a functioning family structure is more distressing for adolescents than the nature of any particular family structure and reduces their ability to develop normally (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

Fomby and Cherlin (2007) supported their instability hypothesis with evidence that the number of maternal family transitions experienced by adolescents affected their externalizing problem behavior, even when maternal selection variables were controlled for. Other researchers have also established the impact of the number of family transitions on the well-being of youth. Cavanagh and Huston (2006, 2008) found that a higher number of family transitions (mainly those concerning the mother) can exacerbate the externalizing problem behavior of younger children. Milan, Pinderhughes and The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (2006) succeeded in replicating these results, and also found that more family transitions lead to more internalizing problem behavior. Lee and McLanahan (2015) added children's cognitive achievements to this list, as well as confirming the previous results on externalizing and internalizing problem behavior. Based on this instability hypothesis, we expected adolescents whose family trajectories were more turbulent (i.e. a higher number of family transitions) to have a lower sense of well-being than those growing up in more stable family trajectories (i.e. no family transitions/still

married parents or few family transitions). While previous research concentrated mainly on maternal instability, we also took paternal family instability into account, leading to our first hypothesis:

*H1: The subjective well-being of adolescents whose maternal or paternal family trajectory is more turbulent will be lower than that of adolescents whose maternal or paternal family trajectory is more stable.*

Research on family instability has tended to concentrate on either the number of transitions, while failing to consider the type of transition. Yet, previous research demonstrates that the latter is also important. A study by Magnuson and Berger (2009) indicated that the transition to a single-mother family led to more problem behavior among adolescents. Robson (2010) found that the same was true of lower feelings of happiness, but also demonstrated that any family transition had a negative impact on self-esteem. Langton and Berger (2011) found that only a transition from a two-parent biological family to a single-parent family increased adolescents' externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems and negatively affected their self-concept; transitioning from a stepparent family to a single-parent family did not affect adolescents' well-being. Similarly, a recent study by Lee and McLanahan (2015) revealed that the transition from a two-parent family to a single-parent family had a negative impact on younger children's overall well-being. All of these results reveal that certain family transitions are more difficult for children and adolescents to deal with than others, emphasizing the importance of considering the entire family trajectory – including both the number and type of family transitions – when investigating adolescents' well-being in relation to the family in which they are growing up. Based on these studies, we expect family transitions that involve new family members entering the household to affect adolescents' subjective well-being more negatively than when no new members enter the household, leading to our second hypothesis:

*H2: The subjective well-being of adolescents who experience more family transitions in which new family members enter the household of either their mother or father will be lower than that of adolescents who experience fewer family transitions in which new family members enter the household of either their mother or father.*

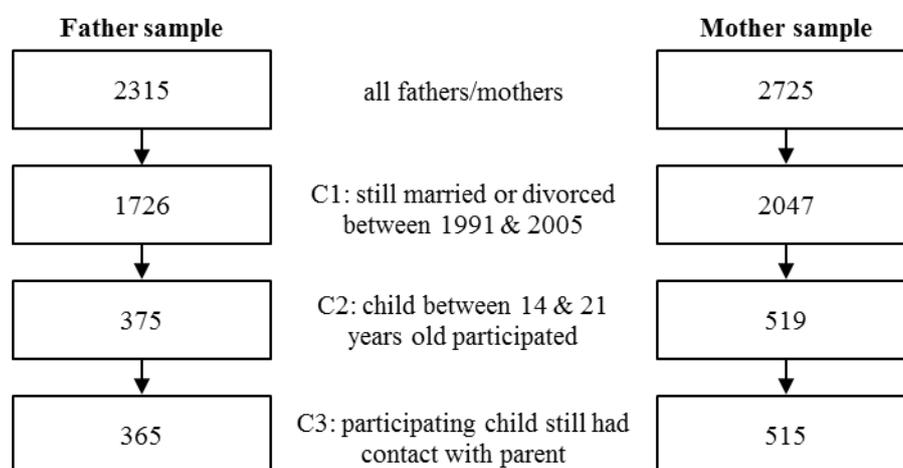
## **Method**

### **Participants**

The multi-actor 'Divorce in Flanders' (DiF) dataset was compiled by randomly selecting addresses for 2,500 married couples and 6,000 divorced couples from the National Register, following approval by the Belgian Privacy Commission. These primary respondents fulfilled the following requirements: Belgian nationality, married between 1971 and 2008, and divorced only once. The response rate was 42.2% (N = 6470), comparable to that of other European multi-actor surveys (Arránz Becker, Brüderl, Buhr, Castiglioni, Fuß, Ludwig, Schröder & Schumann, 2012; Dykstra, Kalmijn, Knijn, Komter, Liefbroer & Mulder, 2005). The primary respondents provided contact information for secondary respondents (children, grandparents and new partners). In each family we interviewed one child of at least 10 years old (if there were multiple children, the child was selected randomly), one grandparent from each partner's family and all possible new partners. Computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) were used to interview the partners and children, while written questionnaires were used to survey grandparents and new partners. Data collection took place between October 2009 and December 2010 (Pasteels, Mortelmans, Bracke, Matthijs, Van Bavel & Van Peer 2011).

In order to investigate the impact of maternal and paternal family trajectories on adolescents' subjective well-being, we analyzed two dyadic subsamples: one sample of mothers and adolescents (N = 515) and one sample of fathers and adolescents (N = 365). The same selection criteria were used for both subsamples and are illustrated in the consort diagram shown in Figure 1. The first selection criterion was that the first marriage of the mothers/fathers was either still intact or had ended between 1991 and 2005 (criterion 1 – C1). In each subsample, married men/women were drawn from the same marital cohorts as male/female divorcees. Older divorce cohorts (divorced before 1991) were too small to be included in the analytical sample. Younger divorce cohorts (divorced after 2005) were excluded due to the limited time available for repartnering. Second, the children interviewed had to be between 14 and 21 years old, as the focus was on adolescents, and they had to have answered questions on all indicators used to measure their subjective well-being (criterion 2 – C2). Third, the adolescents had to have personal contact<sup>3</sup> with their mother/father (criterion 3 – C3). Of our sample, four adolescents (0.78% of those between 14 and 21 years old whose mothers were still married or had divorced between 1991-2005) had no personal contact with their mothers and were excluded from our mother-adolescent sample. Ten adolescents (2.67% of those between 14 and 21 years old whose fathers were still married or had divorced between 1991-2005) had no personal contact with their fathers and were excluded from our father-adolescent sample. None of the adolescents in our sample had left the parental home. This resulted in dyadic samples of 515 mothers and adolescents and 365 fathers and adolescents. These analytical samples were subsamples of the net sample of male and female divorcees whose representativeness in terms of year of marriage and divorce is guaranteed (Pasteels, 2015).

**Figure 1: Consort diagram of sample selection**



The mothers and fathers reported on their relationship histories and background characteristics, while the adolescents reported on their subjective well-being and background characteristics. It was not possible to analyze the mother and father samples simultaneously as they were different: the sample of mothers contained no information on the fathers' relationship trajectories and vice versa. The sample containing information provided by mothers, fathers and adolescents was too small to answer our research questions.

<sup>3</sup> Measured by the question: "How often do you see your mother/father?"

In the mother-adolescent sample, the adolescents were aged 17.6 years on average ( $SD = 2.25$ ), with a minimum age of 14 and a maximum age of 21; 50.7% were boys and 49.3% girls. The mothers were aged 45.4 years on average ( $SD = 4.01$ ), with a minimum age of 34 and a maximum age of 60. Of the mothers, 15.69% had completed lower secondary education or less, 45.29% had completed higher secondary education and 39.02% had higher education qualifications. In the father-adolescent sample, the adolescents were aged 17.5 years on average ( $SD = 2.28$ ), with a minimum age of 14 and a maximum age of 21; 51.5% were boys and 48.5% girls. The fathers were aged 47.3 years on average ( $SD = 4.15$ ), with a minimum age of 35 and a maximum age of 62. Of the fathers, 21.88% had completed lower secondary education or less, 40.44% had completed higher secondary education and 37.67% had higher education qualifications.

### **Measures**

Family trajectories: The DiF dataset contained detailed information about the partnership status of each ex-spouse for every month between the actual divorce (the end of marital cohabitation) and the time of the interview, so that time intervals could be determined for singleness and for post-marital relationships. Using this information, we coded each post-marital one-month period according to the nature of the relationship or period of singleness and the respondent's partnership status in that specific month (see: Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015). The four possible codes were being single, being in a LAT relationship, cohabiting while unmarried and being remarried. It is important to note that our study also included LAT relationships, in which partners do not live in the same household ("living apart together"); this is a particular advantage of the DiF dataset and of this study compared to previous studies.

Based on this monthly time variation measure, we used sequence analysis to classify the entire post-marital relationship trajectories of individual divorcees between 1991-2005. The results were rather similar across cohorts, such that all men and women who divorced between 1991 and 2005 could be assigned to one of the following post-marital trajectories: singleness (C1), committed LAT relationship (C2), cohabitation after a long (C3a) or short (C3b) period of singleness, short second relationship (C4), second marriage (C5) or multiple short relationships (C6) (see Appendix A). This classification was initially created using data on 1,357 men and 1,582 women regardless of their parental status. The information obtained on post-marital relationship trajectories was then linked to our subsample of mothers and fathers who had experienced a divorce. The relationship trajectories of mothers and fathers who were still in their first marriages were labeled as such. Table 1 shows the prevalence of all relationship trajectories for the mothers and fathers included in our analytic samples.

**Table 1**

Relationship trajectories for mothers and fathers					
	Number of transitions	Mothers		Fathers	
		N	%	N	%
Still in first marriage	0	197	38.23	175	47.95
Never had a relationship after divorce	1	115	22.33	66	18.08
In a committed LAT relationship	2	68	18.20	42	11.51
Unmarried cohabitation shortly after divorce	2	55	10.68	34	9.32
Late cohabitation	2	22	4.27	18	4.93
Second marriage	2	15	2.91	11	3.01
Short second relationship	3	27	5.24	10	2.74
Multiple (short) relationships	>3	16	3.11	9	2.47
		<i>n</i> = 515		<i>n</i> = 365	

The small sample sizes forced us to collapse some of the relationship trajectory categories. Unmarried cohabitation shortly after divorce, later cohabitation and second marriage were taken together to indicate a stable post-marital relationship. Multiple (short) relationships and short second relationships were categorized as “At least one short relationship after divorce,” meaning that these parents and their adolescent children had experienced at least one other union dissolution.

Adolescents' subjective well-being: We used three different indicators to measure adolescents' subjective well-being: life satisfaction, self-esteem and depressive feelings. First, life satisfaction gives an overall impression of how the adolescents evaluate their lives in general. Adolescents rated the item “All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with life as a whole these days?”, based on Cantril's (1965) classic measure of life satisfaction, on an eleven-point Likert scale (from 0 = extremely dissatisfied to 11 = extremely satisfied). Second, self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which includes ten items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Following confirmatory factor analysis, single factors were obtained for the mother and father samples. Factor loadings for the mother sample ranged from 0.44 to 0.78, with a good fit for CFI (0.93) and SRMR (0.05) but not for the RMSEA (0.09), though the RMSEA was lower<sup>4</sup> in the overall measurement model. The composite reliability was 0.87. Factor loadings for the father sample ranged from 0.42 to 0.82, with a good fit for CFI (0.93) and SRMR (0.05) but not for the RMSEA (0.09), though the RMSEA was lower in the overall measurement model. The composite reliability was 0.88. For both samples, an error covariance was freed between two items that were worded very similarly in Dutch (i.e., “Positive attitude toward myself” and “Satisfied with myself”).

Third, depressive feelings were measured using the CES-D8 by Radloff (1977), a scale of eight items rated on a four-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = none or almost none to 4 = all of the time). Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that one item had to be dropped for the mother sample (i.e., “Slept restlessly”) because the loading was below 0.4. The same item was also dropped for the father sample. Subsequently, single factors were revealed for the two samples. Factor loadings for the mother sample ranged from 0.49 to 0.75, with a good fit for CFI (0.92) and SRMR (0.05) but not for the RMSEA (0.11), though the RMSEA was lower in the overall measurement model.

<sup>4</sup> MacCallum, Browne and Sugawara (1996) describe 0.08 as a cut-off point indicating a mediocre fit for the RMSEA.

The composite reliability was 0.82. Factor loadings for the father sample ranged from 0.41 to 0.69, with a good fit for CFI (0.93) and SRMR (0.04) but not for the RMSEA (0.09), though the RMSEA was lower in the overall measurement model. The composite reliability was 0.81. For both samples, a method-based error covariance was freed between two reverse-coded items (i.e., “Was happy” and “Enjoyed life”). The overall measurement model for both samples showed a good fit (RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.91; SRMR = 0.05 for the mother sample & RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.92; SRMR = 0.05 for the father sample) and indicated that adolescents' self-esteem is negatively related to adolescents' depressive feelings.

Control variables for the parent and the adolescent: We included a control variable for the adolescents, namely whether or not they lived in the same household as their mother/father (in other words, whether they lived with their still-married parents, with a residential mother/father or in joint physical custody). Adolescents were automatically assigned to the household of still-married parents. As regards the divorced parents, we used the custodial calendar (on which parents reported the nights adolescents spent with them) to determine whether the adolescent was living in the same household as the parent or not. Adolescents were considered to be living in the same household as a parent if they spent more than 66% of nights with that parent or were in joint physical custody (meaning they stayed between 33% and 66% of nights with one parent and between 33% and 66% of nights with the other parent). We found that 97.3% of the adolescents were living in the same households as their mothers, while 76.0% of the adolescents were living in the same households as their fathers. The percentage for fathers seems high, but from previous research we know that divorced fathers are more likely to participate in research if they have the opportunity for greater involvement with their children, and they have this opportunity if their children live with them or are in joint physical custody (Bastaitis, Pasteels, Ponnet & Mortelmans, 2015a; Bastaitis, Ponnet, Van Peer & Mortelmans, 2015b). Both adolescents and parental background characteristics were included as control variables as it stems from the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato, 2000) that individual characteristics of parents and children also are associated with children's well-being. Previous research has shown that, amongst others, child gender and age as well as parents' age and educational level impact children's well-being (Amato, 2000; Goodman and Pickens, 2001; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999; Lansford, 2009). Consequently, age and gender of the adolescents as well as age and educational level of the parents were included as control variables.

### **Analytic Strategy**

As we took a dyadic approach to investigating whether family trajectories are related to adolescents' subjective well-being, we needed to organize our data dyadically. Following Kenny, Kashy and Cook (2006), we restructured our two subsamples' raw data into dyads, such that each data line contained information on both the parent and the adolescent. Our models were estimated using structural equation models and MLR estimation, which is robust for non-normal data (Brown, 2006). We included all three indicators of adolescents' subjective well-being in one SEM model, so that we would be able to compare between indicators. Statistical analyses were performed in Mplus 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Each model showed significant standardized coefficients. The full output of the structural equation models can be found in Appendix B.

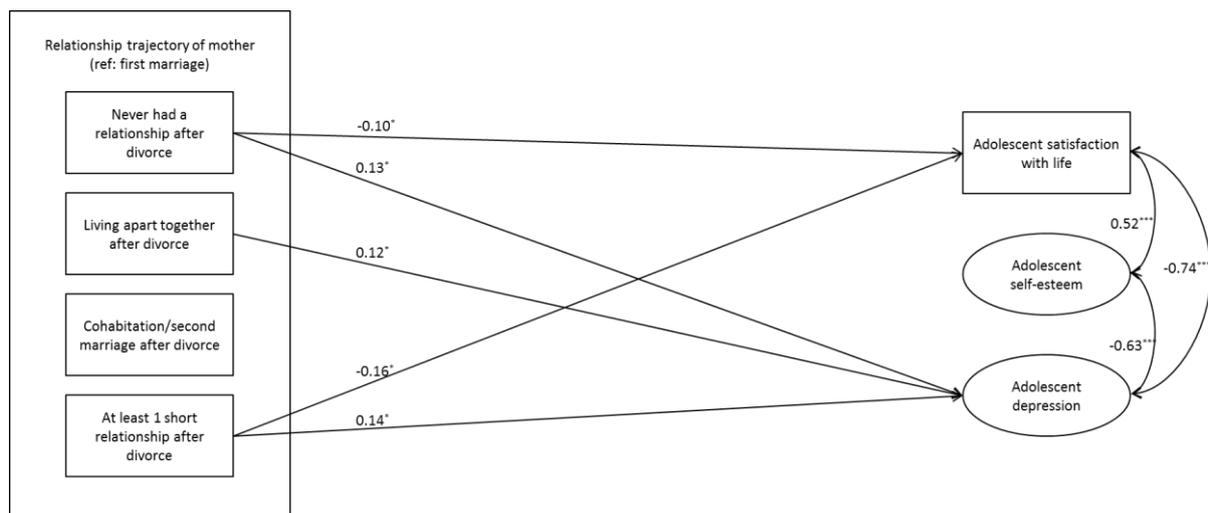
## Results

As outlined in the introduction to this study, we aimed to investigate the impact of a range of post-divorce family trajectories on adolescents' well-being, thus moving beyond the too-simple dichotomy of married versus divorced families. As described above, we distinguished a number of different post-divorce family trajectories and used SEM to investigate similarities and differences between still-married and post-divorce family trajectories with regard to adolescents' well-being. We included both the number and type of family transitions when describing family trajectories, and also covered both maternal and paternal post-divorce trajectories. In what follows, we first discuss the results for the maternal trajectories before addressing the paternal trajectories.

Figure 2 shows the significant results of the maternal family trajectory on adolescents' subjective well-being. The model controlled for all of the background characteristics of both the mother and the adolescent and demonstrated a good fit. First, it appears that adolescents growing up in a maternal 'no new relationship' trajectory have lower life satisfaction and a higher likelihood of depressive feelings than adolescents living with parents who are still married. The same is true when we compare adolescents growing up in a rather turbulent maternal trajectory, in which the mother has had at least one short relationship since her divorce but is now single again, to adolescents living with still-married parents. Adolescents who are being raised in a family in which the mother is divorced and now in a LAT relationship (i.e. maternal LAT trajectory) also appear to have a higher likelihood of depressive feelings than adolescents living with still-married parents; no significant result could be found for life satisfaction, however. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that adolescents living in a rather stable maternal cohabitation/remarriage post-divorce trajectory appear to have the same level of life satisfaction and depressive feelings as adolescents whose parents are still married to each other, as no significant differences were found for this family trajectory.

It should be noted that the effect sizes, while significant, are rather small for the mother-adolescent sample. A rather turbulent maternal trajectory, in which the mother has had at least one short relationship since the divorce, had the strongest impact on adolescents' satisfaction with life and depressive feelings, but the effect sizes remain small. The trajectories of mothers who have never repartnered had the weakest impact on adolescents' satisfaction with life, whereas maternal LAT trajectories had the weakest impact on adolescents' depressive feelings.

**Figure 2: Structural equation model for maternal family trajectories**



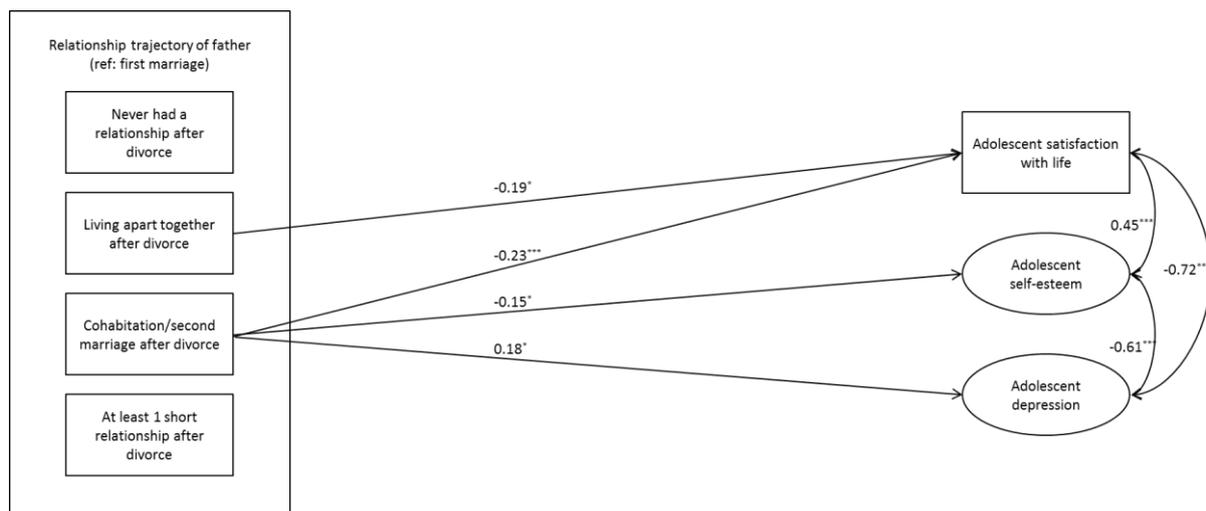
N = 481 – RMSEA = 0.05 CFI = 0.90 SRMR = 0.04

Only showing significant, standardized coefficients, controlled for age and gender of the adolescent and age and educational level of the mother

With regard to the impact of the father's family trajectory on adolescents' subjective well-being, Figure 3 shows the significant results of paternal post-divorce trajectories compared to still-married trajectories, controlling for all of the background characteristics of both the father and the adolescent. This model, which demonstrates an adequate fit, makes it clear that different mechanisms are at play when it comes to paternal family trajectories and adolescents' subjective well-being. In contrast to the maternal post-divorce trajectory results, adolescents growing up in a rather stable paternal cohabitation/remarriage post-divorce trajectory have lower levels of life satisfaction, lower self-esteem and a higher likelihood of depressive feelings compared to adolescents living with still-married parents. Adolescents growing up in a paternal LAT trajectory also have lower life satisfaction than adolescents with still-married parents. With regard to adolescents' subjective well-being, all other paternal family trajectories were comparable to fathers who were still married to adolescents' mothers.

The effect sizes for the father-adolescent SEM were larger than those for the mother-adolescent SEM, but still rather modest. Trajectories in which fathers divorced and then cohabited with a new partner or remarried appear to have the strongest impact on adolescents' satisfaction with life. The weakest impact was found for the same trajectory but in relation to adolescents' self-esteem.

**Figure 3: Structural equation model for paternal family trajectories**



N = 341 – RMSEA = 0.04 CFI = 0.91 SRMR = 0.05

Only showing significant, standardized coefficients, controlled for age and gender of the adolescent and age and educational level of the father

### Discussion

A recent trend in research on adolescents' well-being and family transitions acknowledges the significance of cumulative family transitions for children and adolescents and their well-being. Examples include studies on family instability (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007) and the multiple-transition perspective (Amato, 2010). In this study, we aimed to investigate differences between post-divorce family trajectories and still-married trajectories with regard to the subjective well-being of adolescents. Our goal was to differentiate between various maternal and paternal post-divorce trajectories and to identify beneficial and less beneficial trajectories in terms of adolescents' subjective well-being compared to adolescents living with still-married parents. As we expected both the number and type of family transitions making up a trajectory to have an impact, we tested two hypotheses: *H1: The subjective well-being of adolescents whose maternal or paternal family trajectory is more turbulent will be lower than that of adolescents whose maternal or paternal family trajectory is more stable* and *H2: The subjective well-being of adolescents who experience more family transitions in which new family members enter the household of either their mother or father will be lower than that of adolescents who experience fewer family transitions in which new family members enter the household*. By investigating both maternal and paternal post-divorce family trajectories, we were able to consider possible gender differences at the parental level. In this respect, this study adds to the few previous studies conducted on the multiple-transition perspective (Amato, 2010) by focusing not only on the mother-adolescent dyad but also on the father-adolescent dyad.

With regard to mothers, the results support our first hypothesis. We found that adolescents growing up in a more turbulent family trajectory – and thus experiencing more family instability – had lower levels of life satisfaction and a higher likelihood of depressive feelings than adolescents growing up in a trajectory with still-married parents. These results are in line with the instability hypothesis of Fomby and Cherlin (2007) and our first hypothesis and

indicate that turbulent maternal post-divorce family trajectories are related to adolescents' well-being and might be stressful for them. Our second hypothesis is also supported by these results, as they indicate that transitions in which new family members enter the household are negatively related to the subjective well-being of adolescents. Our results also revealed that adolescents in stable, single-mother trajectories have a lower sense of well-being than adolescents in a still-married trajectory, although the effect sizes were smaller. This result might be due to a lack of parental resources (Thomson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994; Thomson & McLanahan, 2012). Single-mother families face higher financial burdens as they lack the scale advantages of two-parent families (either biological or stepparents) and may therefore spend more time at work, which decreases the amount of time they spend with their children. Single mothers may also experience stress because of the lack of resources and support provided by a partner, which in turn leads to less involvement with their children. Lower involvement might influence children's well-being negatively. The same explanation might also apply to mothers who are divorced and currently in LAT relationships. It is further supported by the fact that we found no differences between adolescents growing up in still-married trajectories and adolescents growing up in maternal post-divorce cohabitation/remarriage trajectories: these mothers are unlikely to lack resources as they are part of two-parent families.

Our results for paternal family trajectories contrast sharply with those for maternal family trajectories. Adolescents experienced lower life satisfaction, lower self-esteem and a higher likelihood of depressive feelings when being raised in a paternal post-divorce cohabitation/remarriage trajectory compared to adolescents in a trajectory with still-married parents. This is in line with our second hypothesis, which stated that family trajectories in which new family members enter the household would be negatively related to the subjective well-being of adolescents. Still, it is not necessary the introduction of a new stepparent in the household as such that explains the relationship with the well-being of adolescents. This introduction of a new stepparent in the household might be paired with possible other changes as well like the addition of stepsiblings, a potential geographical move, a change in the custodial arrangement,... However, all these possible other explanations are set in motion by the introduction of a stepparent in the paternal household. The first hypothesis, which expected more turbulent family trajectories to be negatively related to adolescents' well-being, was not supported by our results; no significant difference was found between even the most turbulent paternal post-divorce trajectory and the trajectory with still-married parents. The only other paternal family trajectory in which differences were found in adolescents' subjective well-being was a paternal post-divorce LAT relationship. Adolescents growing up in this type of trajectory had lower levels of life satisfaction compared to adolescents living with still-married parents. Thus, in contrast to the results for mothers, it seems to be crucial for adolescents that the father is living with his new partner. As this new cohabiting partner is usually a stepmother, it might be that the new mother figure triggers certain negative attitudes in the biological mother. As we know from previous literature, mothers often act as gatekeepers between the father and the adolescent child, even in post-divorce families (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Moore, 2012; Trinder, 2008), attempting either to encourage or restrict fathers' involvement with their adolescent children. If mothers feel threatened in their role by the father's new partner, they might negatively affect the father's involvement or cause a loyalty conflict in the child, both of which can lead to a lower sense of subjective well-being in the child.

Although this study adds to the literature in several ways, it also has its limitations. First, due to the specific nature of our sample, we could not capture the full range of variations in family trajectories for both mothers and fathers. For example, the DiF dataset contained no information on adolescents whose parents cohabit and may separate. Moreover, we could not control for the family trajectory of the mother while investigating the relationship between the paternal family trajectory and children's well-being and vice versa due to the lack of data triads in our sample. So, controlling for possible changes in adolescents' well-being due to transitions occurring for the non-included parent was not possible. Future research would benefit from this additional information. Second, these adolescents' family trajectories were not yet final. As we selected adolescents who were still living with at least one of their parents rather than independently, they might still experience more family transitions, which would again lead to new family trajectories. The fact that these trajectories are ongoing and not yet final could also explain the relative lack of variety in post-divorce family structures. Future research would benefit from investigating the link between family trajectories and the subjective well-being of adult children as well as from using longitudinal data. Third, due to small sample sizes, we were forced to collapse several family trajectory categories. Consequently, the variability in the data on these trajectories decreased. Fourth, when taking up child's gender as a moderator, our sample size was reduced in a way that our structural equation models fitted the data less (especially for the paternal structural equation models). So, although results of these models indicated that for maternal family trajectories, no noteworthy differences between boys and girls were found, and for paternal family trajectories the well-being of boys was mainly related to a paternal post-divorce LAT trajectory, whereas the well-being of girls was mainly related to the post-divorce cohabitation/remarriage trajectory as well as by more turbulence in the paternal post-divorce trajectory, we cannot discuss these differences between girls and boys in a meaningful way. Future research that has access to larger datasets on this topic might take up the gender of the child as a moderator.

While this study has some shortcomings, it clearly indicates that we should move beyond both the married/divorced family dichotomy and investigations of static post-divorce family structures, striving instead to take entire family trajectories into account when examining adolescents' subjective well-being. A life course perspective should be adopted in such research, as the simple dichotomy between married and divorced parents does not reflect the reality in which adolescents grow up. Moreover, parental divorce does not automatically lead to lower subjective well-being among adolescents compared to those in still-married families. Some of the post-divorce family trajectories we identified in our study appear to be less beneficial for adolescents than others. Yet these trajectories differ quite substantially between mothers and fathers, as different gender mechanisms are at play. With regard to maternal post-divorce trajectories, it is turbulence and instability that is negatively related to the subjective well-being of adolescents, whereas in paternal post-divorce trajectories, it is the arrival of new family members (i.e. stepmothers) in the household that is negatively related to the subjective well-being of adolescents. On the one hand, then, we would highly recommend taking this diversity and the multiple-transition perspective (Amato, 2010) into account in future research on adolescents' subjective well-being. On the other hand, we also recommend including paternal family trajectories, as this will provide a more complete picture of how family trajectories impact adolescents' well-being and development and thus improve current theoretical frameworks. As the research on which these frameworks have been based concentrates mainly on maternal family structures and transitions, our findings suggest that these may be implicitly gendered. New theoretical explanations could potentially be developed by taking a paternal or gender-inclusive approach. This study represents a first step in that direction.



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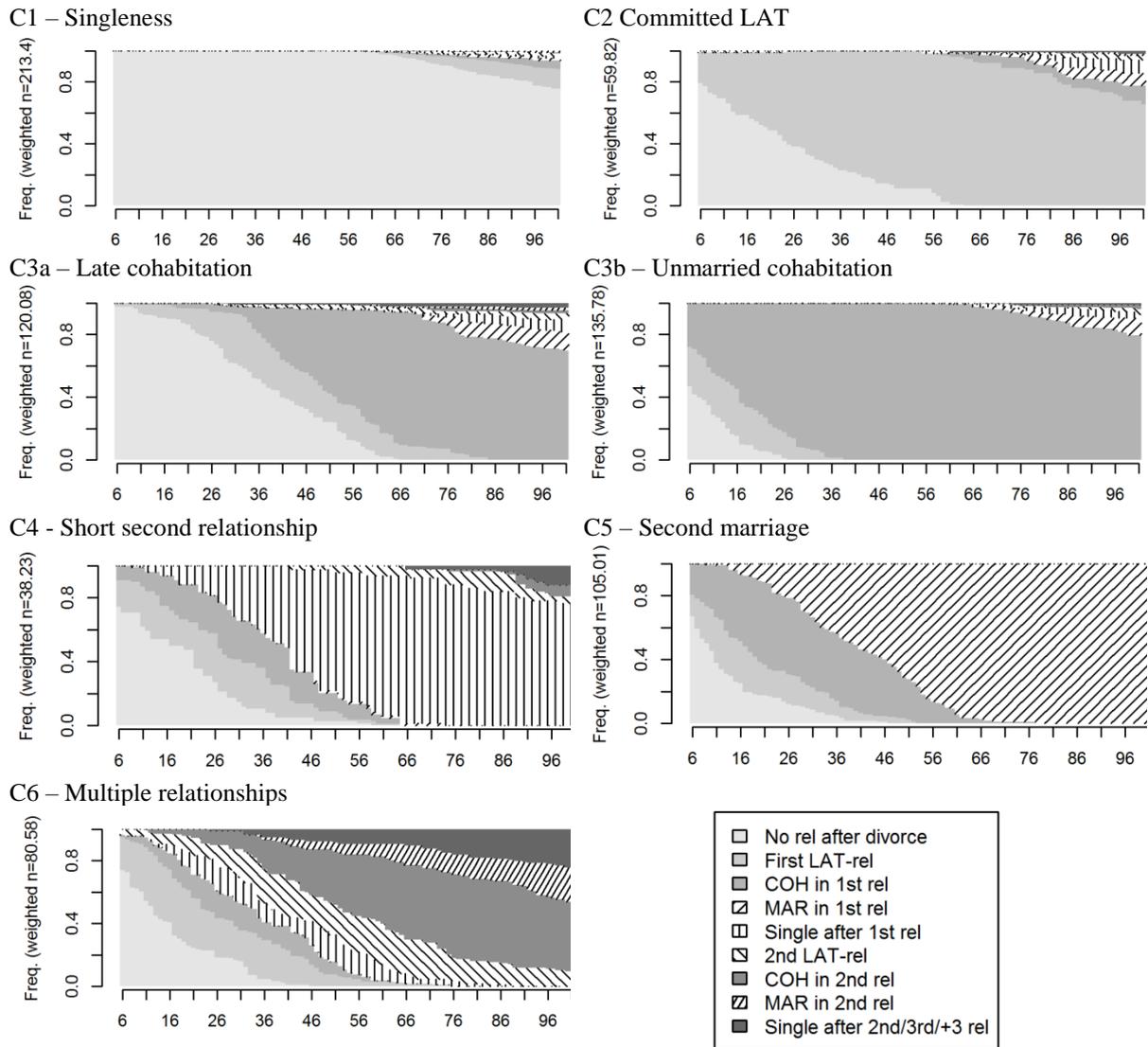
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**APPENDIX A – Post-marital partnership trajectories**

**Figure A.1: Cluster solution of post marital trajectories for divorce cohort 1996-2000**



Source: Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2015, p.152

This figure shows seven distinct post-marital partnership trajectories, with different episodes of being single, being in a LAT (living together apart) relationship, cohabiting while unmarried and cohabitation of higher order marriage. We analyzed data on the post-divorce relationship formations and dissolutions experienced by respondents who divorced between 1996 and 2000 concerning their relationship formation and dissolution since living together in the same household with the spouse had ended. The aim was to reveal patterns in relationship trajectories following a first divorce. The results showed that higher order relationship trajectories can be clustered into seven groups, with each respondent being assigned to only one and only one group.

**APPENDIX B – Structural equation models**

**Table B.1**

Structural equation model for maternal family trajectories

	Adolescents life satisfaction			Adolescents self-esteem			Adolescents depression		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Relationship trajectory of mother (ref: first marriage)									
Never had a new relationship	-0.36	0.18	-0.10 *	-0.02	0.04	-0.02	0.11	0.05	0.13 *
LAT after divorce	-0.29	0.23	-0.07	-0.06	0.06	-0.06	0.13	0.06	0.12 *
Cohabitation/second marriage	-0.18	0.17	-0.05	-0.06	0.06	-0.06	0.05	0.05	0.05
At least 1 short relationship	-0.89	0.36	-0.16 *	-0.13	0.08	-0.09	0.19	0.09	0.14 *
Age adolescent	-0.03	0.03	-0.04	0.02	0.01	0.11	0.00	0.01	0.02
Gender adolescent (ref:boy)	-0.15	0.13	-0.05	-0.15	0.04	0.21 ***	0.13	0.04	0.18 ***
Adolescent lives with mother	-1.62	0.86	-0.18	-0.32	0.18	-0.14	0.29	0.19	0.13
Age mother	-0.02	0.02	-0.04	0.00	0.01	0.05	-0.00	0.01	-0.04
Maternal education (ref: higher secondary education)									
Lower secondary education or lower	0.22	0.21	0.06	0.12	0.05	0.12 *	-0.03	0.05	-0.04
Higher education	0.16	0.13	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.07	-0.06	0.04	-0.09

*n* = 481 RMSEA = 0.05 CFI = 0.90 SRMR = 0.04

\* *p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001

**Table B.2**

Structural equation model for paternal family trajectories

	Adolescents life satisfaction			Adolescents self-esteem			Adolescents depression		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
Relationship trajectory of father (ref: first marriage)									
Never had a new relationship	-0.41	0.25	-0.11	-0.05	0.06	-0.06	0.10	0.07	0.11
LAT after divorce	-0.91	0.41	-0.19 *	-0.08	0.08	-0.08	0.01	0.09	0.01
Cohabitation/second marriage	-0.93	0.27	-0.23 ***	-0.12	0.06	-0.15 *	0.17	0.07	0.18 *
At least 1 short relationship	-0.64	0.54	-0.09	-0.11	0.07	-0.08	0.06	0.11	0.04
Age adolescent	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.19 **	-0.02	0.01	-0.11
Gender adolescent (ref:boy)	-0.32	0.15	-0.11 *	-0.14	0.04	-0.23 ***	0.12	0.04	0.17 **
Adolescent lives with father	-0.05	0.26	-0.01	-0.04	0.05	-0.06	0.15	0.07	0.18 *
Age father	-0.02	0.02	-0.07	-0.00	0.01	-0.05	0.01	0.01	0.07
Paternal education (ref: higher secondary education)									
Lower secondary education or lower	-0.03	0.23	-0.01	-0.15	0.05	-0.20 **	0.08	0.06	0.09
Higher education	0.13	0.16	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.03	-0.01	0.04	-0.01

*n* = 341 RMSEA = 0.04 CFI = 0.91 SRMR = 0.05

\* *p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001