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# How do post-divorce paternal and maternal family trajectories relate to adolescents' subjective well-being?

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## 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 relationship of maternal and paternal family trajectories following divorce with 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.

## 1. 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

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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 trajectories 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 were analyzed (Mortelmans et al., 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.

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.

## 2. Family trajectories and adolescents' well-being

### 2.1. 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 (Settersten, 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.

### 2.2. 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 & Frønes, 2011; Ben-Arieh, 2005), including in the field of family studies. Rather than clinical observations of well-being, then, 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

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

<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.

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