

Family Dynamics and Inequalities in Children's Life Chances: Summary and Key Findings from WP5

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Abstract:

The landscape of European families has changed dramatically over the last decades. Whereas the post-war era family was characterized by stability and two biological parents, several 'non-traditional' forms have become increasingly more common over time such as single mother and step-families. Most research has focused on the average association between parental separation and child outcomes. The research completed within this work package has aimed to move to more complex questions that involve a greater variety of family forms and that aims to identify situations where family structure has greater or smaller impacts on children's life chances. This work package has additionally researched the variation in the effects of different family forms on child outcomes over time, across countries, and between social groups, as well as some of the mechanisms that can be seen responsible for these effects. This final report gives an overview of the research done in this Work Package, and provides general reflections and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Family; Child Outcomes; Separation; Step-families; Family transitions

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Contents

- 1 Introduction..... 3**
- 2 The Effects of Parental Separation Have Not Changed Over Time..... 7**
- 3 The Effects of Family Dynamics on Children Are Complex..... 12**
 - 3.1 Children’s body weight trajectories around parental separation 12
 - 3.1.1 *The implications for policy* 15
 - 3.1.2 *Open Questions for Future Research*..... 15
 - 3.2 Family Trajectories and Wellbeing of Children Born to Lone Mothers in the United Kingdom..... 16
 - 3.2.1 *Implications for Policy* 16
 - 3.2.2 *Open Future Questions* 17
- 4 Family Structure Is Not Equally Important For All Children 18**
 - 4.1 Family structure and socioeconomic status 18
 - 4.1.1 *Consequences for inequality of opportunity* 20
 - 4.2 Family structure and ethnicity 22
- 5 Associations of Family Structure with Child Outcomes Are Partly Causal 23**
- 6 Parenting of Fathers and Mothers Matters 27**
- 7 Effects of Family Structure Not Greater in Contexts with Homogenous Family Structures 31**
- 8 Joint Custody Could Preserve Parental Support Following Separation 37**
 - 9.1 *Summing up*..... 41
 - 9.2 *Recommendations for Future Research*..... 43
- References (* output from this Work Package)..... 48**

1 Introduction

The landscape of European families has changed dramatically over the last decades. Whereas the post-war era family was characterized by stability and two biological parents, several ‘non-traditional’ forms have become increasingly more common over time such as single mother and step-families. The research of this project has aimed to increase our understanding of how these relatively new experiences for children affect their life chances. In doing so, the work package also investigated how families contribute to the intergenerational reproduction of inequality. In this final report, we present the findings made within Work Package 5 of the Families and Societies project. This research spans several years of work done by various teams of scholars from different countries and institutions.

Research on family structure has so far produced relatively uniform evidence on some questions within the research field. Firstly, a large body of research has reported consistent negative associations between growing up in non-traditional family structures and a wide range of desirable child outcomes (For earlier reviews, see Amato 2000; 2001; 2010; Amato and Keith 1991; Amato and James 2010; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Sweeney 2010; McLanahan et al., 2013). The suspects held responsible for these negative associations between non-traditional family structures and child outcomes have been narrowed down to a relatively small group of factors including changes in economic resources, parenting styles, family conflict, family instability, and endogeneity and parental and children’s stress associated to family transitions (Amato 2000; 2010; Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Dronkers 1999; Jonsson and Gähler 1997; Kiernan 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Musick and Meier 2010; Pryor 2004). Family structure is related to many aspects of children’s lives. Children whose parents separated display distinct demographic behavior and have more behavioral problems, lower cognitive ability and attain less education. For some outcomes, such as emotional adjustment and behavioral problems, the stress, conflict and changes in parenting in the years surrounding separation appear important mechanisms. For other outcomes, such as educational attainment, the drops in economic resources following separation play an important role.

Unfortunately, there are also many questions to which no clear answers can be given, such as: Does family structure causally affect child outcomes? Is the entrance of a step-parent in the

household beneficial for children? Are resourceful families able to prevent their children's outcomes from being affected by parental separation? These more complex questions have been central to the research performed within this project.

Regarding the role of family dynamics in the intergenerational transmission of advantage, evidence has accumulated that children of different socioeconomic backgrounds vary in the types and frequency of family transitions experienced. This has raised concerns about family structure forming an obstacle that increases inequality of opportunity between socioeconomic groups (Cherlin, 2014; Esping-Andersen, 2007; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; Putnam 2016; Wax 2007). Research on the consequences of family dynamics, however, has been heavily based on studies from the United States. For Europe, many questions remain unanswered. How are children from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds affected by family transitions in Europe? Does this differ across countries? And does the role of family structure in inequality of opportunity differ across countries? Also these questions have led a considerable share of the research performed within the project.

To contribute to a better understanding of these unanswered questions, we organized the research of this project according to five partial objectives:

- 1) *Analyze the effects of various forms of family configurations.* Most studies have investigated the effects of experiencing parental divorce or growing up in a single family. However, as family forms are becoming more complex, there is increasing need to understand the effects of this family diversity on children's lives (Halpern-Meehin & Tach 2008; King 2009; Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Sweeney 2010). The research done for this objective will be presented in section 3 on family stability and in section 7 on children's living conditions. The studies on family stability address the question of whether it is family stability rather than the type of family structure within which a child grows up which matters for child outcomes. The research presented in section 7 compares the living conditions of children across various types of non-traditional families.
- 2) *Analyze the causal effects of family forms and dynamics.* Although a lot is known about the associations between family forms and dynamics and children's outcomes, a lot remains to be learned about causal effects of these forms and dynamics on

children's lives. Recent research has employed various strategies to address issues of endogeneity (McLanahan et al., 2013), but to varying degrees of success. Our research on the causal effects of family forms is presented in section 5 of this report. We use high-quality data to introduce two new ways of analysing the effects of family forms on child outcomes. The first is based on comparing outcomes between siblings who did and did not (yet) experience parental separation. The second is based on a so-called 'instrumental variable' approach that zooms in on separations that are assumed to be unrelated to pre-existing disadvantages that could cause endogeneity.

- 3) *Analyze parenting and social relationships in family diversity.* How social relations and care are arranged in diversifying families remains a question of great interest. Joint custody, good inter-parental relations and good early child-father relations can substantially improve post-separation contact with the father (Kalmijn, 2015; Peters and Ehrenberg 2008). The research presented in section 6 addresses the relationship between parenting arrangements and child outcomes.
- 4) *Analyze heterogeneity of effects in different cultural and socioeconomic groups.* The majority of existing studies on the effects of family structure focus on homogeneous populations or average effects over diverse populations. Identifying whether certain groups manage to dampen the effects of family structure changes would greatly enhance our understanding of the general theme of how family structure is connected to children's life chances. In section 4 we report on the research of this work package that has looked at whether some socioeconomic or cultural groups are better endowed in dealing with the consequences of different family forms and dynamics. We look both at differences between socioeconomic groups, as well as differences between ethnic groups.
- 5) *Analyze differences across countries and periods.* There are strong reasons to expect variation in the effects of family diversity on children's lives across countries and periods. However, most studies so far find surprisingly little variation in the effects of family diversity across contexts (Amato, 2010). Comparability issues of datasets across time and space have so far prevented from a rigorous investigation of this issue. Section 2 describes how the research of this Work Package has increased our understanding of variation over time. The studies described looked both at how the

living conditions of children growing up in various family structures have changed over time, as well as how the transmission of family structure across generations has changed across cohorts. Differences across countries have been explicitly studied in several studies performed within this Work Package that followed a cross-national empirical approach (Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Bernardi & Boertien, 2016a; Cebolla-Boado et al., 2016). In the conclusion (section 9) of this report we discuss how these studies and the country-specific studies of the project together inform us about differences across countries in the role of family structure.

The research of this work package consisted of 8 deliverables as well as a conference. The deliverables as well as some conference highlights are listed in the Appendix to this report. The report presented below follows a structure organized according to several central themes that defined the research within the Work Package. We discuss the findings on these themes and at the end of the report we provide a general reflection and provide recommendations for future research.

2 The Effects of Parental Separation Have Not Changed Over Time

The increases in divorce and separation are among the most visible features of the past decades of family change in Europe and elsewhere. Children have not been left unaffected. For example, in Sweden the likelihood that children experienced parental separation by age 15 almost doubled (from 20 % to 35 %) between 1970 and 2000, and share remained at a high level since then (Thomson and Eriksson 2013). Comparisons of a longer time period show even more dramatic increases (Gähler and Palmtag 2014).

A long line of research has shown that children from dissolved families experience a host of compromised outcomes, such as lower educational attainment, psychological well-being, and higher instability in their own unions (Amato 2000; 2010; Amato and James 2010; Bernardi et al. 2013). Yet we know little about whether and how these effects have changed over time. There are several reasons to expect that effects of parental divorce and separation are not stable. Divorce and separation have become more accepted and as the share of children who have experienced parental split-up has increased, one would expect its stigma to have decreased. As divorcing has become both legally and socially easier, the conflicts and difficulties surrounding it may have waned and become more transitory (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). Children of divorce are increasingly likely to maintain more contact and more often alternately co-reside with both parents after their break-up (e.g., Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Amato, Meyers and Emery 2009; Gähler and Palmtag 2014). Families and societies can also have become better in handling the aftermaths of divorce and separation. All these would tend to suggest that the effects of family dissolution would decrease over time.

Analyzing the change in the effects of parental divorce and separation places strict demands on data, which is a reason why so few studies have analyzed this question. The data must cover a long time period, include identical measures over time, and samples should be drawn in an identical way (Amato 2001). Such data are, unfortunately, rare. However, some studies have managed to fulfill these conditions and conduct analyses of the effects of parental separation over time.

The existing evidence is somewhat contradictory, but a large body of these analyses has led to conclude that the effects of childhood family dissolution have remained surprisingly stable. Stable effects have been reported on psychological well-being (Sigle-Rushton et al. 2005;

Gähler and Garriga 2013), educational and socio-economic attainment (Biblarz and Raftery 1999; Ely et al. 1999; Sigle-Rushton et al. 2005), parent-child contacts in adulthood (Albertini and Garriga 2011), as well as on the probability that children of divorce experience dissolution of their own marriages and families in adulthood (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Teachman 2002; Amato and Cheadle 2005; Dronkers and Härkönen 2008). There are also some studies, which have found weakened effects over time (for example in the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Wolfinger 1999; 2011; Diekmann and Engelhart 1999; Engelhart, Trappe and Dronkers 2002). Nevertheless, the overall evidence suggests that the effects have remained more stable than one might expect.

These intriguing conclusions of course raise the question of why the effects have been so stable. Three main groups of explanation can be put forward. First, it may be that parental separation operates through mechanisms other than stigma, parental conflict and contact with parents as has been suggested in hypotheses of declining effects. For example, children of divorce experience feelings of shock, grief and anger over the separation of the parents (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Such feelings may well be similar today as decades ago. To the extent that such feelings—or other divorce-related factors which have likely remained stable over time—mediate the effects of parental break-up, the finding of stable effects becomes less surprising.

Second, selection into divorce has changed over time. For example, a growing number of studies shows that educational differentials in divorce have changed, and divorce has become increasingly associated with low levels of maternal education (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006). Controlling for these factors could then reveal a changing effect of parental divorce, which would otherwise remain hidden. The challenge is that not all such factors are measured and thus cannot be controlled for.

Third, and closely related to the previous point, the changing character of divorces can have led to effects which offset the declining effect due lower stigma, better relationship to parents, and the like. An example concerns the changing motives for divorce and the conflict surrounding it. The share of divorces with severe underlying motives (such as family violence) has decreased at the expense of psychological motives and disagreements upon the division of labor (De Graaf and Kalmijn 2006). Some approaches to the effects of parental separation hold that children's outcomes are more negatively affected by dissolutions of

relatively functional families, whereas the dissolution of high-conflict families may actually be beneficial for the child (Amato 2000; 2010; Hanson 1999; Booth and Amato 2001). If the former types of dissolutions are becoming more common at the expense of the latter, the average effect of parental separation may remain stable; indeed, it may even increase.

The research performed within the Families and Societies project contributed to the debate by analyzing change in the effects of parental separation on psychological outcomes, educational attainment, and the risk of own union dissolution in Sweden. The focus on Sweden is motivated by the high-quality and temporal comparability of the data it provides and the fact that Sweden has in many respects been a European forerunner in family change. By focusing on the periods in which parental divorce and separation became increasingly common childhood experiences, the research of the project is able to provide the necessary contextual variation to address the questions.

The research of the project provided contributions to the literature on time trends in the effects of parental separation in the following ways. First, most of the findings regarding these trends come from the United States, with some findings from the United Kingdom (Ely et al. 1999; Sigle-Rushton et al. 2005), Germany (Diekmann and Engelhart 1999; Engelhart, Trappe and Dronkers 2002), or other countries (Dronkers and Härkönen 2008; Albertini and Garriga 2011). A focus on Sweden adds an interesting case to these contexts, and as mentioned above, the comparability of the data over time enables assessing these questions reliably.

Second, the research covers long time periods. In particular, one study covers one century of birth cohorts; more than any other study to our knowledge (Gähler & Palmtag, 2014). During this time, Sweden has changed in several respects and coverage of this long period adds historical depth to the analysis.

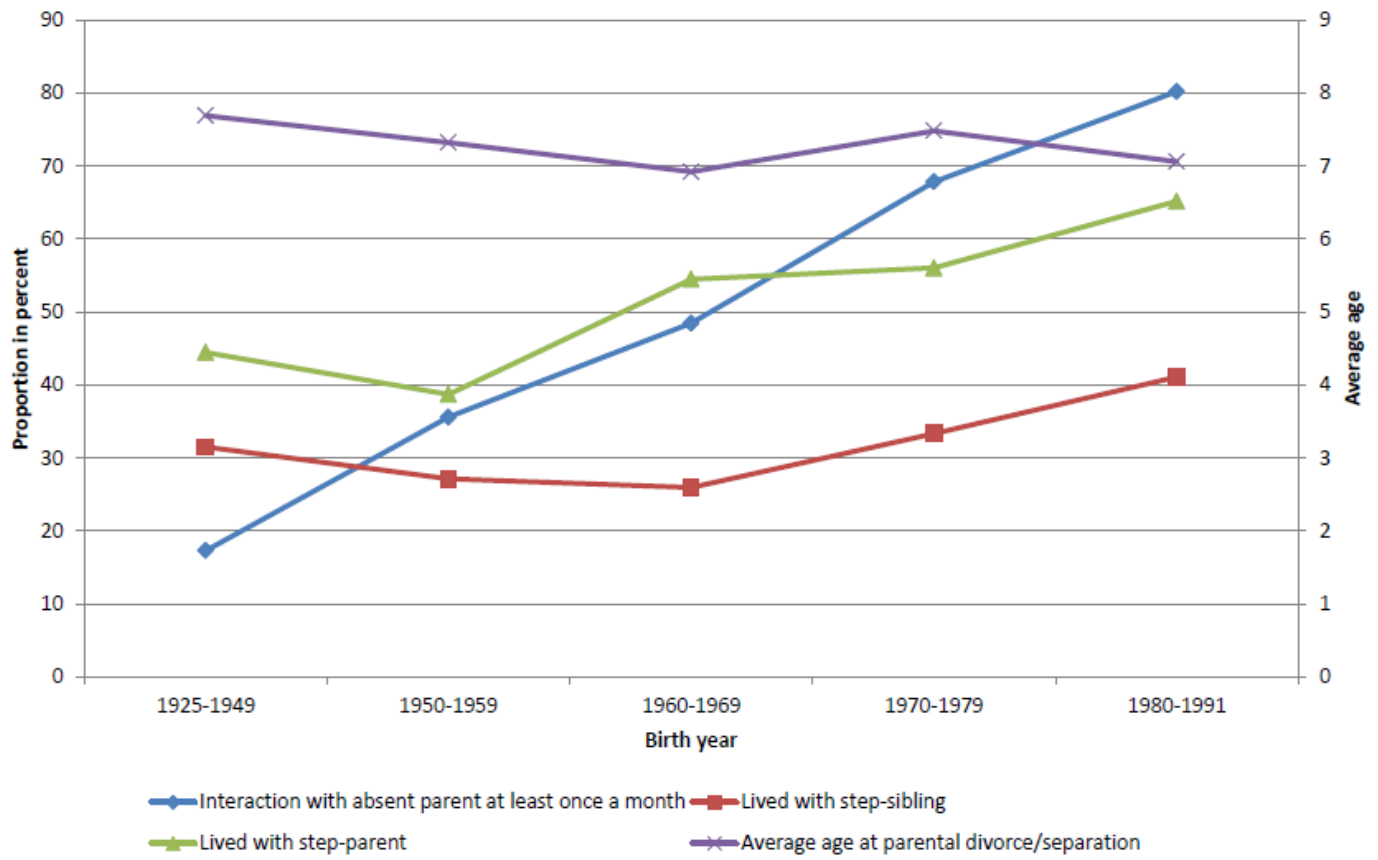
Third, the research addressed how the conditions surrounding parental divorce and separation have changed. Evidence for many of the arguments on changing experiences of parental break-up (such as decreased conflict) are indirect at best. The studies added direct evidence to these arguments by showing how the socio-economic and relational characteristics of parental separation have changed. These measures were used to assess changes in the effects of parental separation over time. Fourth, longitudinal register-data has been employed to analyze whether the intergenerational transmission of divorce and union dissolution has changed over

time. Part of the debate on this question (cf. Wolfinger 1999; 2010; Li and Wu 2008) revolves around data and their use. By using population data, which allow estimating appropriate event history models, the project contributes to this debate. These contributions have primarily been made by the research coming from two studies:

The first study by Michael Gähler and Eva-Lisa Palmtag asks whether the living conditions and experiences of childhood family dissolution have changed over time, and whether this translates into changing effects of parental break-up on psychological well-being and educational attainment. It uses data for one hundred birth cohorts (born 1892-1991) from six waves (1968, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000, and 2010) of the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU). The findings indicate that there have been important changes in the character of parental divorces: they are more likely to involve parents with lower class status, more likely to involve residential moves, step-parents, and step-siblings, but less likely to be associated with severe family discord. Figure 1 displays some of these changes across birth cohorts. At the same time, its effect on psychological well-being and educational attainment has remained unchanged.

The objective of the second study, by Michael Gähler and Juho Härkönen, was to analyze whether the intergenerational transmission of divorce and family dissolution has changed over birth cohorts (1950-1975). By using Swedish population register data, the authors show that the association between childhood family dissolution and the dissolution of own marriages and families has remained very stable despite the increasing overall probability that these partnerships break up. The finding is robust to control variables and model specifications. Overall, the two studies strengthen the general conclusion of stability in the effects of parental separation, despite the sweeping social changes and the character of parental separations.

Figure 1. Post-separation characteristics of families across time in Sweden



3 The Effects of Family Dynamics on Children Are Complex

Research on family structure is increasingly characterized by complexity. Family structures are plentiful including stable single motherhood families, step-parent families, and blended families. The processes each of these family structures put into motion differ and matter differently depending on the child outcome studied. Two main studies within the project aimed to create some order in this complexity. Both studies use the U.K. Millennium Cohort Study, a rich and nationally representative longitudinal study, which provides information on children's BMI, overweight and obesity at 3, 5, 7 and 11 years of age. These two pieces of research are discussed below one by one.

3.1 Children's body weight trajectories around parental separation

The first study within this theme considers the relationship between parental separation and children's physical development in the U.K. A distinctive feature of the analyses is that the authors take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data to analyse children's weight trajectory shortly before the date of separation (to capture potential anticipation effects of the build-up of parental partnership disruption towards separation) and after separation (to capture potential adaptation mechanisms to the new family status in the medium term). Importantly, the authors rely on "child fixed effects" models to account for the potential correlation between children's BMI and unobserved factors associated with parental separation, such as socio-economic background, or time-invariant parental characteristics.

The authors find that parental separation is associated with increases in children's BMI and with the risk of overweight and obesity. The effect of separation on BMI appears to accumulate over time---we do not observe adaptation---but one does not observe any significant anticipation effect before separation. The effects appear more marked for children who experienced parental separation at younger ages. The Figures below illustrate these findings. Figure 2 shows the lagged effect of separation on the standardized BMI scores of children that experience before the age 6 and after the age 6. Figure 3 shows the same but the outcome is now the probability of being overweight. In both figures, outcome measures are standardized by age, sex and month of birth.

Figure 2 Predictive margins of BMI z-scores for time to/from separation (12 months windows) by age at separation, FE model

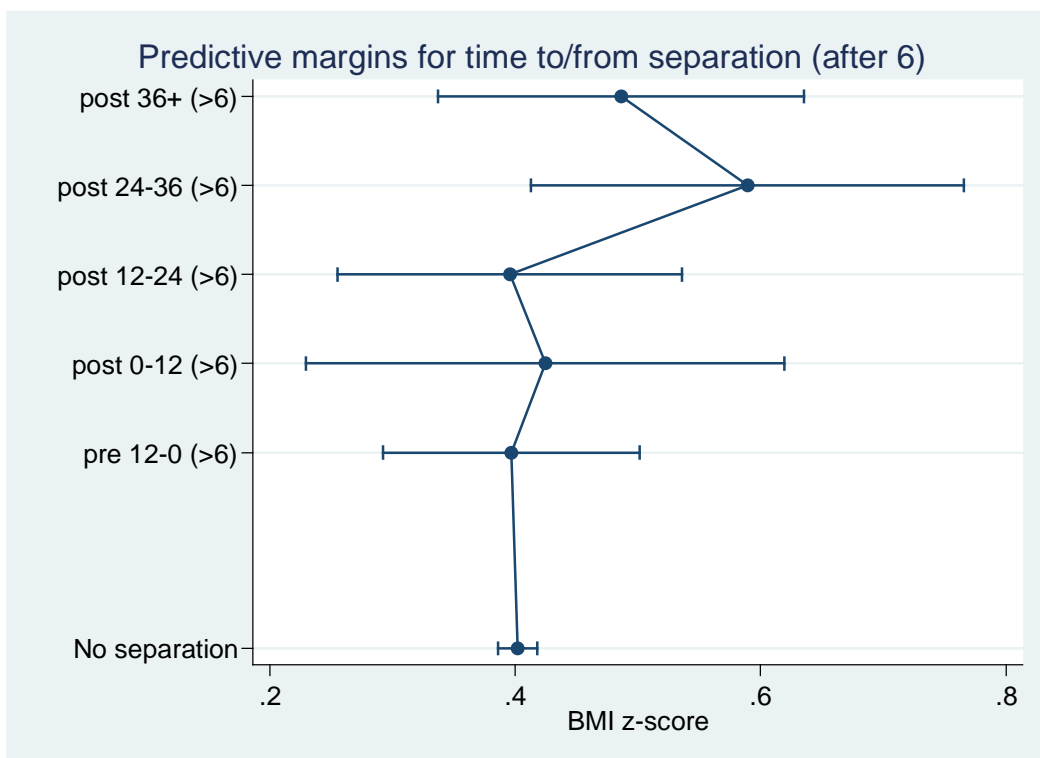
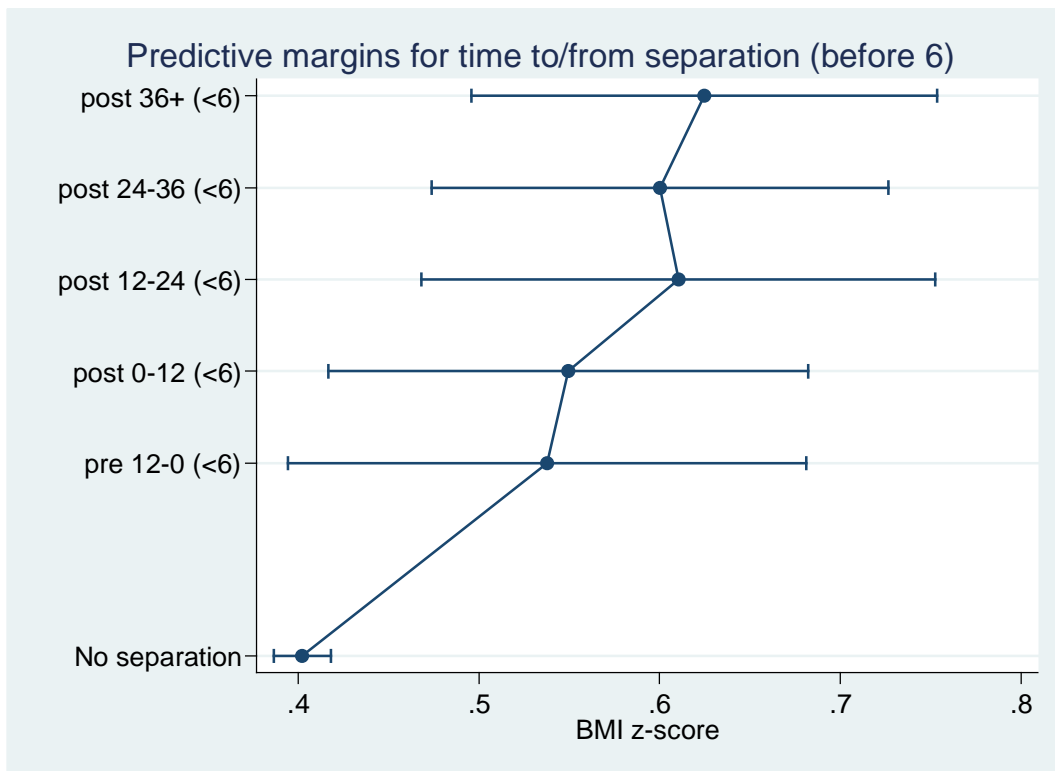
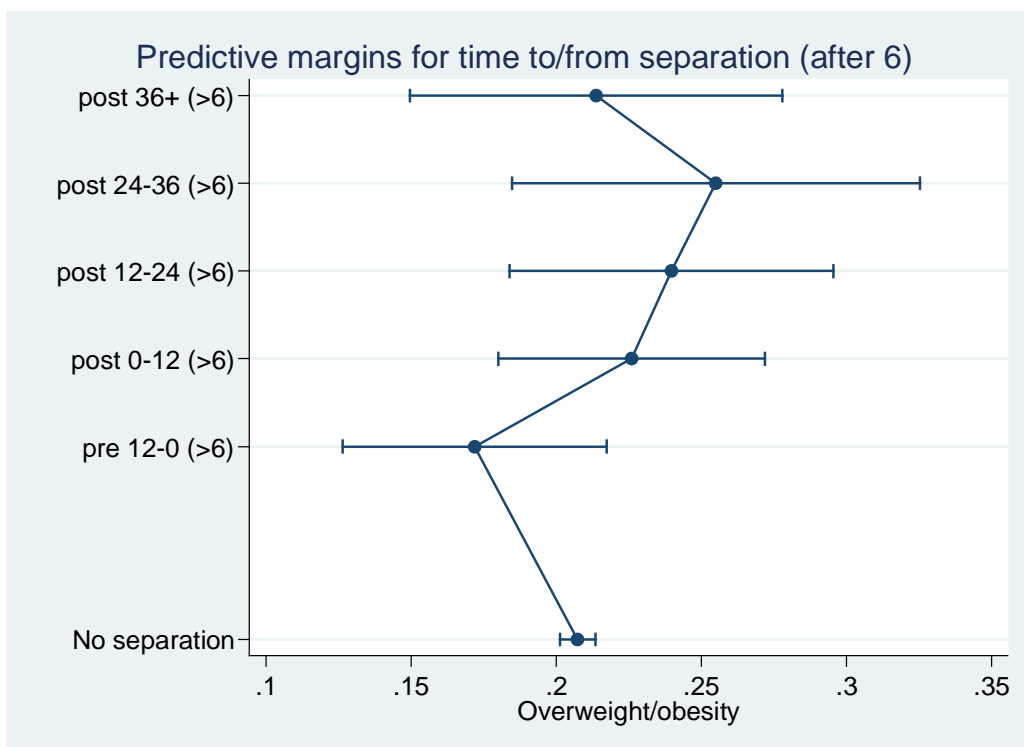
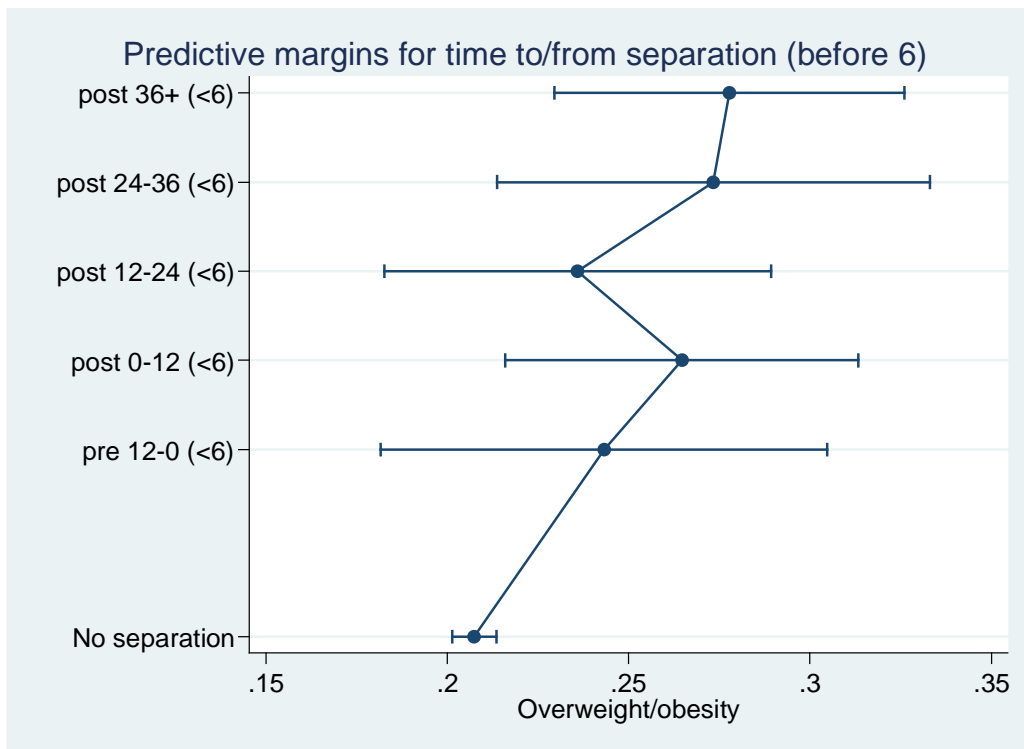


Figure 3 Predictive margins of overweight for time to/from separation (12 months windows) by age at separation, FE model



Note: Predictive Margins are estimated from models that include child age in days (and quadratic age).

3.1.1 The implications for policy

Obesity and overweight status among children is an important policy concern. There are numerous policy interventions applied in various settings, such as school-based, home or community based interventions; broadly speaking, the majority of these interventions aim to prevent non-overweight children to become overweight and obese. The average effect size of the prevention programs that report statistically significant effects was considered clinically “medium size” [i.e. $r = .22$ ($p < .001$) in Stice, Shaw and Marti, (2006)] or “moderate” (i.e. ~ 0.30 mean difference in BMI, Wang et al 2013). These effect sizes are less than (or comparable to) the effect sizes found in the analyses, especially when looking at the results in the longer term and as the time since separation increases. One implication of the findings could be that focusing on the family context may constitute an effective alternative to the school based intervention programs and investigating into the ways in which policies could offset the negative effects of parental separation on changes in BMI. This implication may be supported by the evidence that school based programs with a home-based component are, on average, found to be more effective.

Another implication of the results is that since the association between parental separation and children’s weight gains becomes stronger as time since separation increases, efforts to prevent it should start early and soon after separation takes place. Intervening early could have the potential to prevent – or at least attenuate – the process whereby some children get onto ‘unhealthy’ adiposity trajectories

3.1.2 Open Questions for Future Research

Future research should investigate, whether the effect of separation on physical development leads to differences in late adolescent and adult outcomes. Future waves of MCS data with more data points could allow future research to distinguish exposure to being separated from age of parental separation. Currently, such distinctions can only be done on a subset of MCS sample.

3.2 Family Trajectories and Wellbeing of Children Born to Lone Mothers in the United Kingdom

In this study, a set of outcomes measured at age seven are compared for a nationally representative sample of British children born to lone mothers but who subsequently experienced different family trajectories. The focus lies on three outcome domains: Health, Cognitive Skills and Socio-Emotional Wellbeing.

Table 1 Summary of findings:

	Better than L				Worse than L				Not significant			
	L-B	L-S	L-B-L	B	L-B	L-S	L-B-L	B	L-B	L-S	L-B-L	B
<i>Health</i>												
Obese			✓						✓	✓		✓
<i>Cognitive</i>												
Pattern construction	✓			✓						✓	✓	
Word recognition					✓	✓			✓			✓
Number skills									✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Socio-emotional</i>												
Internalising scale	✓			✓						✓	✓	
Externalising scale								✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 1 above summarizes the main findings for each outcome. The aim of the study was to show whether heterogeneity of family trajectories in early childhood matters for outcomes of children born to lone mothers. It appears that heterogeneity does matter.

Compared to the children of continuously lone mothers, children whose biological father joins the household (L-B) later and forms a stable union fared better in terms of cognitive outcomes (better numerical and pattern construction skills) and socio-emotional outcomes (lower probability to develop internalising disorders). In contrast, the children in trajectories characterised by living with a non-biological father (L-S) or who experienced the dissolution of a union (L-B-L) had numerous traits in common with the children of continuously lone mothers (L).

3.2.1 Implications for Policy

Previous research has paid great attention to father absence; children living with a single mother are a population targeted by social policies in virtually all Western countries. From a substantive point of view, this research highlights the complexity of life experiences and the importance of categorizing groups of children in a way that reflects the extent of disadvantage they experience. Categorizations are common practice in the social sciences, but the

usefulness of dividing a population into categories rests upon the researchers' ability to identify and spell out common sources of disadvantage. For instance, the research of the project highlights the fluidity of their mothers' partnership status for children; this should be contrasted with the common practice of seeing children of lone mothers as a stand-alone category.

The heterogeneity in different family trajectories has different implications for different child outcomes. For example, children living step-fathers have worse verbal skills than children living stably with lone mothers. Policies targeting inequality of learning have paid attention to family structure from a binary point of view [children of lone mothers] but not with a trajectory point of view, which could shed light further cumulative disadvantages that may go unnoticed otherwise.

3.2.2 Open Future Questions

One future question would be how much of these differences persist until later ages: The trajectories will naturally become more complex once the observation window is expanded throughout teenage years, making an analysis as done here more difficult. In that case, it would be more fruitful to treat each trajectory as a single unit and test how much of the gap in child outcomes observed at age 7 that are associated with being in a certain family trajectory has been closed or enlarged over age. A second interesting question regards the better measurement of exposure duration to each parental partner state. The arguments about stability could be better addressed if we know exactly how long that stability lasted. Final research question may look into causality issues more closely and carefully. Children of lone mothers will always be a select sample compared to those that are born to intact households. It is possible that children that experience each of these different trajectories are different and born to mothers that are different from each other. However, with large samples such as those register datasets in Nordic countries, it may be possible to provide a combined effect of exposure duration and specific effect of transitions, for early child outcomes.

4 Family Structure Is Not Equally Important For All Children

Several studies within the Work Package have concentrated on how the effects of family structure differ according to socioeconomic status as well as with ethnicity (Albertini and Dronkers 2009; Augustine 2014; Bernardi and Radl 2014; Biblarz and Raferty 1993; 1999; Biblarz, Raferty and Bucur 1997; Cavanagh and Huston 2006; Elliott and Richards 1991; Grätz 2015; Jonsson and Gähler 1997; Kalmijn, 2010; Mandemakers and Kalmijn 2014; Martin 2012; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). First, the findings made regarding socioeconomic status are discussed, and subsequently the results on ethnicity are reviewed.

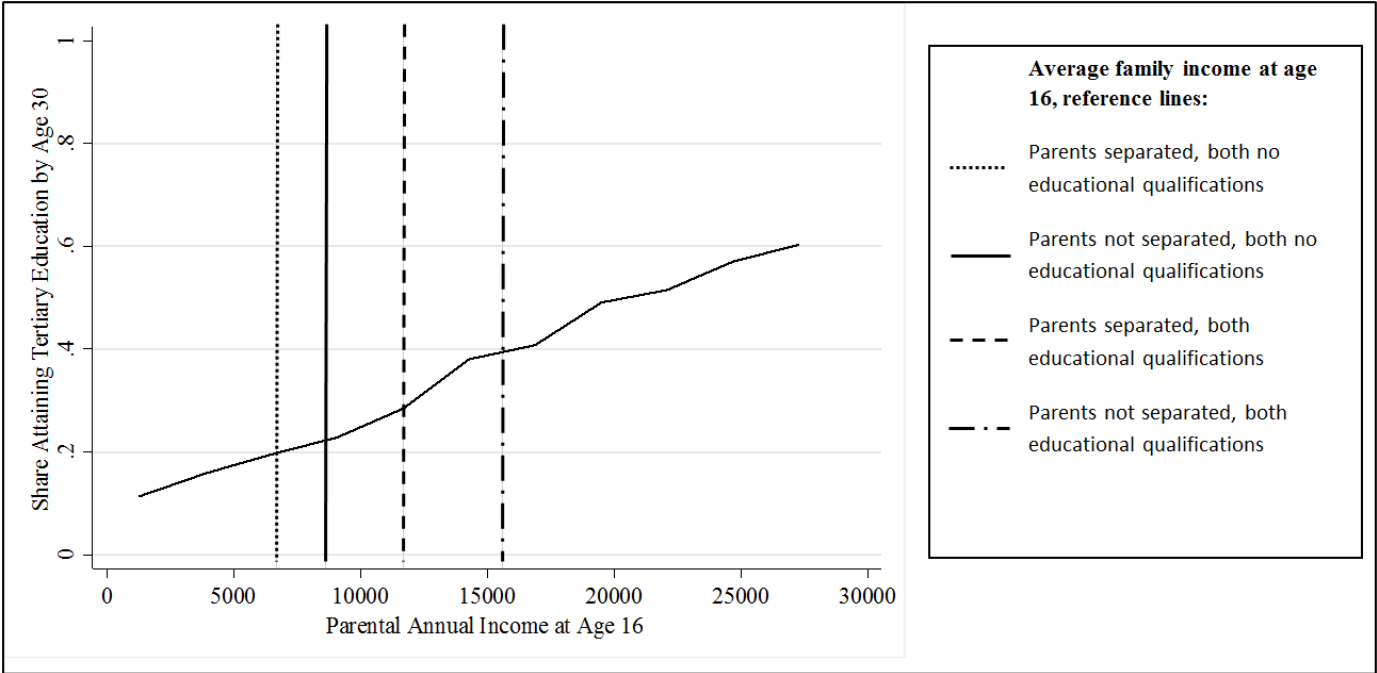
4.1 Family structure and socioeconomic status

Separation is a family event that changes the environment within which children grow up. In some cases, this can be a positive experience as children are relieved from being exposed to conflict between parents. In other cases, parental separation could form a disadvantage for children because it becomes more difficult for one parent to remain equally involved in parenting and because a separation often leads to lower financial resources available in the family. This variety of outcomes has led researchers to ask the question under which conditions families manage to prevent parental separation from being an experience that affects their children negatively. A logical thought could be to expect families with a lot of resources at their disposition to shield their children from processes that could influence them negatively. The research within the project showed, for university attainment in the UK, that the opposite appears to be the case. Parental separation is more influential for the attainment of children from resourceful families.

Thus finding was based on data for a cohort of children born in 1970 in Britain. Once the children under study reached age 30, around 28 per cent of them had attained a university education. The university attainment of children whose parents separated was 8 per cent lower compared to children whose parents remained together during the respondents' childhood. This difference between children whose parents did and did not stay together differed with the educational level of the parents. Whereas children from separated families whose parents both did not have educational qualifications were 6% less likely to complete tertiary education compared to their counterparts from intact families, this difference amounted to 13% for children whose parents both had educational qualifications (upper secondary education or more).

A major factor explaining these differences appeared to be family income. Figure 4 displays how the chances of attaining university education vary with family income. The vertical lines indicate the family income of different types of families. Family income is a major determinant of going to university in Britain, and is lower in families who experienced a separation. A separation has direct costs, can lower the employment of the resident parent, and requires the financing of two separate households instead of one. Such losses in income following separation can be especially consequential if that income was destined to be invested in the university education of children.

Figure 4 Share of respondents attaining tertiary education by parental income at age 16, including vertical reference lines reflecting average income by parental separation and education status



Source: Bernardi & Boertien (2016b) based on data from the British Cohort Study 1970

As observed in Figure 4 lower educated parents normally have relatively low family income, also when they do not separate. These families are therefore situated on a part of the income distribution where further reductions in family income are relatively inconsequential for the educational attainment of their children, because little money is available for university education of the children in the first place. Children from higher educated parents, on the other hand, have more to lose from reductions in family income as their families are situated

on a part of the income distribution where drops in family income are more directly reflected in lower educational attainment of the children.

Another study within this work package (by Bernardi and Radl, 2014) showed how the observation that children from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are affected more by parental separation held across 14 Western countries.

4.1.1 Consequences for inequality of opportunity

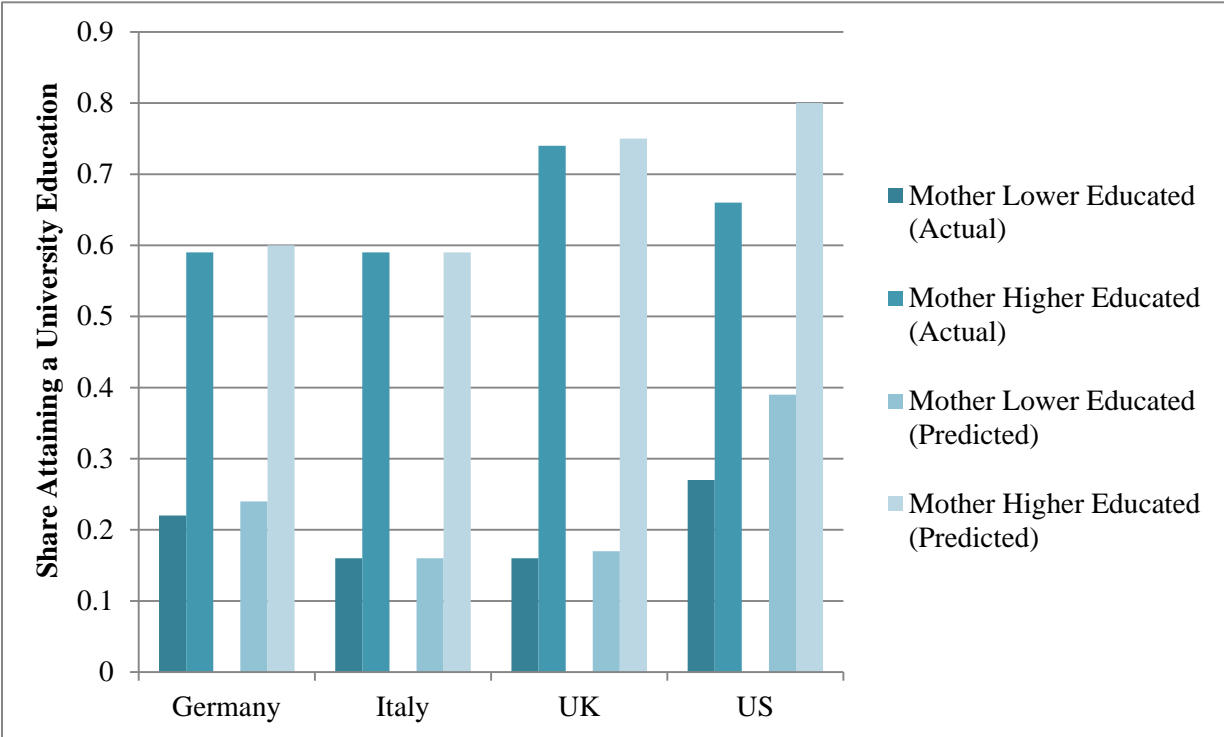
The observation that children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are affected more by parental separation had consequences for research on inequality of opportunity. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are much less likely to go to university than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This used to be the case in the past, and remains to be the case today, despite the expansion of education. The persistence of this inequality of opportunity has led social scientists to look for reasons across a wide spectrum of possibilities. In that regard, family structure has increasingly received attention and is now often held responsible for part of the inequality of opportunities between socioeconomic groups. The findings of the project suggest that these claims might be unwarranted.

Growing up without one biological parent in the household has become increasingly common in Europe, primarily due to the spread of parental separation, and is related to lower educational attainment for children. Given that in several countries it is especially common for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to live without at least one parent in the household, this has led to the concern that family structure has become another obstacle widening the opportunities between children from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This narrative has been especially prominent in the United States, but has flown over to Europe, as parental separation seems increasingly concentrated among lower educated individuals here too.

But, once looking at the numbers, it appears that researchers might have rushed too quickly to the conclusion that family structure matters for inequality of opportunity between socioeconomic groups. Figure 5 displays the university attainment of individuals with different socioeconomic backgrounds for four countries studied: Germany, Italy, the UK, and

the US. Once looking at the darker sets of bars, one can observe that children with lower educated mothers are much less likely to go to university than children with higher educated mothers. To what extent can this be explained by family structure?

Figure 5 Actual and predicted university attainment ‘were all children to grow up with both parents in the household’.



Source: Calculations based on Bernardi & Boertien (2016a)

The lighter bars in Figure 5 are estimates of what attainment would look like in a ‘parallel universe’ where all children would have grown up with both biological parents. In other words, it are estimates of how large inequality of opportunity would be in the absence of non-intact families. The lighter bars are slightly higher than the darker bars, indicating that university attainment in general is predicted to be higher if all children would grow up with both parents present in the household. The *differences* in predicted attainment between children of lower and higher educated mothers, however, remain unchanged. This suggests that family structure cannot really explain why children of lower educated mothers have lower attainment than children of higher educated mothers.

Why does family structure matter little for inequality of educational opportunities? For most countries, the effects of family structure appeared too small to have a major impact on

inequality of opportunity. There were additional reasons found for each of the countries. In Italy, very few children grow up without both parents present in the household. In Germany, both children of lower and higher educated mothers are equally likely to grow up without both their parents. Family structure is therefore not a factor that differentiates the opportunities of both groups. In the UK and the US, it is more common for children of lower educated mothers to grow up without both parents, but the consequences of growing up without both parents appeared much larger for children with higher educated mothers. This cancelled out any amplifying effects family structure could have on inequality of opportunity.

4.2 Family structure and ethnicity

Similar to the literature on differences in the effects of family structure according to socioeconomic status, studies on heterogeneity according to ethnicity point in the direction of smaller effects of parental separation for ethnic minorities (Amato & Keith, 1991; Sun & Li, 2009). The research on this topic comes primarily from the US. One exception is a study on the Netherlands (Kalmijn, 2010). The research within this work package has extended that line of research to Sweden. In addition, previous evidence has not been able to explain why ethnic minorities appear to be less responsive to differences in family structure. One explanation is the higher prevalence of separation and single motherhood among these minorities, making them better prepared to deal with its consequences. Another explanation, similar to the argument presented above for socioeconomic groups, is that ethnic minorities have little to lose from a parental separation. The results of the work package tend toward supporting the former explanation. Also in Sweden different groups of varying descent experience smaller effects of parental separation (especially those from the Horn of Africa), but some socioeconomically disadvantaged groups do not (e.g. respondents of ex-Yugoslavian descent).

5 Associations of Family Structure with Child Outcomes Are Partly Causal

Social science research on family structure initially concentrated on the increasing prevalence of non-traditional family forms and how growing up in different kinds of families affects child outcomes. A large body of research has documented negative associations between growing up in non-traditional families and child outcomes ranging from cognitive abilities, non-cognitive skills, educational attainment and children's own life courses (Amato 2010; Dronkers 1999; Furstenberg and Kiernan 2001; Jonsson and Gähler 1997; Kiernan 1997; Kim 2011; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, and Kravdal 2009; Strohschein 2005). Factors commonly held responsible for these patterns are family conflict, losses in family resources, and changes in parenting styles (Amato, 2010; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Dronkers, 1999; Jonsson & Gähler, 1997; Kiernan, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Musick & Meier, 2010; Pryor, 2004).

More recently, academics have started paying attention to the background characteristics of individuals living in non-traditional households. For instance, several studies have documented how, today, growing up in a single mother household is more common for children of lower educated mothers in many countries (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). The observation that different family forms are not randomly distributed across society gives rise to several research questions that have been central to the research of this work package. A first prominent question, in line with recent developments in social sciences, has been one of causality (Morgan and Whinship 2007). Based on the accumulated evidence, can we actually claim that growing up in a non-traditional family causes worse child outcomes? For instance, if it are especially socio-economically disadvantaged families that break up, or highly conflictive families, do associations between parental separation and child outcomes primarily reflect such differences in economic resources and conflict instead?

Research to date has aimed to address this question, and estimates of actual negative causal effects of non-traditional family forms on child outcomes seem to be smaller than the associations reported in earlier research. At the same time, these designs have not been entirely satisfactory until now (McLanahan et al., 2013).

There are several reasons why research on the effects of family structure should be concerned with the question of causality. As mentioned, non-traditional family forms are not randomly distributed across society. For instance, parental separation is increasingly concentrated among lower educated individuals in many societies today (Härkönen & Dronkers, 2006). Lower educated individuals tend to have less economic, social and cultural capital. Depending on the child outcome looked at, associations with parental separation might therefore reflect differences in such forms of capital available between families that do and do not break up.

Besides socioeconomic disadvantage, family structure is also systematically related to other characteristics that could influence child outcomes. For instance, there might be certain genetic factors that determine individuals' dispositions to certain types of behavior. When comparing across generations, children whose parents separated are more likely to separate themselves too once they grow up (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008). There are many causal interpretations that can be given to this empirical regularity, such as parental separation providing an example to children that separation is a feasible solution to relationship problems. But, it could also be that certain genetic factors are related to separation, which might therefore produce a correlation across generations in the likelihood to separate.

There is a third 'usual suspect', in addition to selection into divorce based on socio-economic resources and genetic traits, when talking about causality in the context of family structure and parental separation in particular. Parental separation often, but not always, follows a period of family conflict. Such family conflict affects child outcomes too, and could therefore be the actual cause of lower child outcomes rather than parental separation itself. It is debatable to what extent the influence of family conflict on our estimates is problematic or not. For instance, one could view parental separation as a process, and pre-separation conflict can form part of that process. It could be that, for many research questions, we are actually interested in disadvantage produced by childhood family dynamics including family conflict, rather than the effects of the actual physical parental separation per se.

However, if we want to come to a good understanding of how effects of childhood family dynamics are produced, the distinction between separation and family conflict is important. Some childhood outcomes might be affected more by the physical absence of one of the parents in the household, whereas others might be influenced more by the extent to which a harmonious home environment exists. The research of this part of the project has been primarily interested in the effect of the parental separation, net of other unobserved

confounders. Reviewing the existing literature on causal estimates of the effects of parental separation, it became clear that none of the employed techniques is able to give a definite answer to the question of causality. The research of the work package advanced on this front by using two advanced techniques: instrumental variables and sibling fixed effect models.

The first paper that resulted from this enterprise is titled ‘The Causal Effect of Parental Separation on Child Education: A new Instrumental Variable Approach’. The paper aims to estimate the causal effect of parental separation on school grades of pupils at the end of primary school. The analysis has been performed for Sweden, which has been a traditional front-runner in the diffusion of divorce. The analysis of this case can therefore highlight patterns that are also likely to apply in the close future to other countries. Moreover, the authors introduce a new instrument to estimate the effects of parental separation: changes over time in sex ratios at the workplace of the mother. Studies so far have not been successful in finding a suitable instrument for looking at the effects of parental separation on the individual level (Gruber, 2000). The idea is that if one has more contact with persons of the opposite sex, this provides access to alternatives to the current relationship, and therefore leads to an increased likelihood of separation. Changes over time in the ratio of people of the opposite sex over time should affect the likelihood of parental separation but are unlikely to be related to school performance of their children. The effects of such separations on child outcomes are therefore more likely to have a causal interpretation than estimates from other methods. Using this method, the authors only find effects of parental separation on school grades of children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

The second paper on this theme is called ‘When Growing Up without a Parent Does Not Hurt: Parental Separation and the Compensatory Effect of Social Origin’. The author employs sibling fixed effects, where estimates are based on variation in exposure to parental separation between siblings. In this design, school grades and school track placement are compared between siblings in Germany. A comparison is made between siblings where at least one sibling experienced a parental separation before obtaining the grades/entering the school track, and at least one experienced separation after the grades were obtained/the school track was entered. This procedure effectively controls for time-invariant family characteristics shared by siblings. The main result of this study is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Results of family-fixed effects models predicting the impact of parental separation on attendance of the upper track (Gymnasium) by father's and mother's education

	Upper track attendance (<i>Gymnasium</i>)			
	(1) Highest level of education of either parent	(2) Education of the father	(3) Education of the mother	(4) Education of the father and education of the mother
Parental separation ^a	-0.10* (0.06)	-0.10* (0.06)	-0.09† (0.06)	-0.10* (0.06)
High parental education X Parental separation ^a	0.19† (0.14)			
High father's education X Parental separation ^a		0.23† (0.17)		0.19 (0.20)
High mother's education X Parental separation ^a			0.18 (0.15)	0.06 (0.17)
Controls for male and birth order	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for birth year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i>	1,825	1,790	1,816	1,781

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Significance levels: † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

^a Parental separation refers to 11 years of childhood (see text).

Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), v28.

Also here the results point at a negative effect of parental separation on school performance that only exists for children from disadvantaged social backgrounds. The results of this project not only give new insights in the causal effects of family transitions but also provide future research with the tools to use new identification strategies in order to look at causal effects in other countries and for other child outcomes.

6 Parenting of Fathers and Mothers Matters

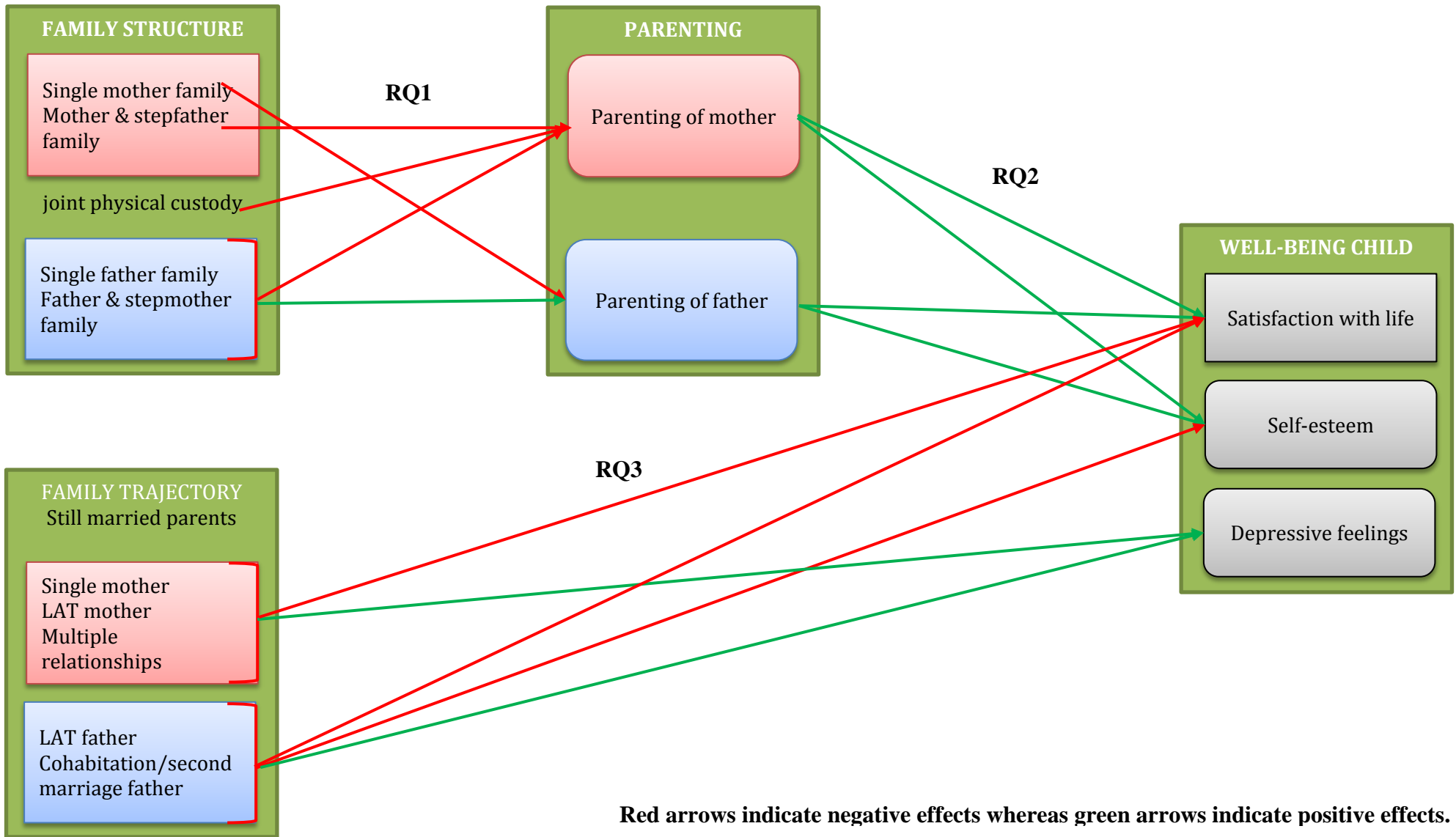
Given the increase in various family types and structures during the past decades in Europe (Lesthaege & Neels, 2002), it is important to investigate how these family changes affect children's living conditions. Especially with regard to their well-being and the way they are raised by both their mother and father, these changes in family constellations can have a significant impact.

In the research of the work package, three research questions were addressed regarding this topic: (RQ1) Are parenting and the family structure after divorce related? (RQ2) Can parenting function as a mediator between post-divorce family structure and children's well-being? (RQ3) Do maternal and paternal family trajectories affect children's well-being?

This research adds to the literature in several ways. First, the studies do not only look at the family constellations and parenting of mothers, but also include those of fathers, whereas previous research mainly concentrated on mothers (e.g., Benson, Buehler & Gerard, 2008; Lengua, Wolchik, Sandler & West, 2000; Wood, Repetti, & Roesch, 2004). Still, a recent trend towards attention for fathering can be identified (e.g., Bastaits, Ponnet & Mortelmans, 2014; Booth, Scott & King, 2010). Second, instead of relying on parental data, children's views on parenting and their well-being were taken into account which is in line with the recent trend of treating children as active agents (Ben-Arieh, 2000; Ben-Arieh & FrØnes, 2011). Third, the analyses on parenting employ Belgian data, which has considerable advantages as Belgium is amongst the front runners regarding the rising European divorce rates (Eurostat; Divorces per 1 000 persons. From [<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do>]) and has a legal preference for joint physical custody since 2006 (Sodermans, Matthijs & Swicegood, 2013).

Figure 6 gives an overview of the main research results of our studies, which are all published or will be published in the future. Regarding the impact of family structure on parenting (RQ1), measured by the dimensions support and control, both actor as well as partner effects were found. Regarding actor effects, it was found that residential fathers (either single or re-partnered) showed higher levels of support whereas single mothers or mothers in joint

Figure 6 Summary of results on parenting



physical custody showed lower levels of control. Regarding partner effects, living in a residential mother family (either single or re-partnered) has a negative impact on the support and control of the father whereas living in a residential father family (either single or re-partnered) has a negative impact on the support of mothers.

Parenting also turned out to be an important mediator between family structure and children's well-being (RQ2). In a second study, results indicated that being more supportive as a parent had a positive effect on children's satisfaction with life and their self-esteem. This holds for both the support of mothers and fathers. On the one hand, certain family structures (such as residential father families or single, residential mother families) had a negative impact on the support of either the mother or the father, which consequently had a negative impact on children's self-esteem and satisfaction with life. On the other hand, certain family structures (such as the residential father families) enhanced the support of the father which in return had a positive effect on children's self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Overall, the results of the second study indicated that parenting can function as a protective factor for children's well-being but should be considered within a specific family structure.

In the last study, a life course perspective was adapted to investigate whether certain family trajectories were less beneficial for children. Evidence was found that for less stable maternal trajectories (i.e. multiple relationship or LAT relationship) children indicated a lower satisfaction with life and a higher level of depressive feelings. Moreover, also children in families where the mother remained single after her divorce indicated a lower satisfaction with life and a higher level of depressive feelings. For paternal trajectories, we found opposite results as it were the families in which fathers divorced and then entered a stable cohabitation or second marriage that had a negative impact on children as they indicated lower satisfaction with life and self-esteem but higher levels of depressive feelings.

In short, it can be concluded that children's well-being should be studied from a family system perspective, as children do not grow up in a social vacuum but in interaction with significant others, mostly their parents. Therefore, family structures, trajectories and parenting should be taken into account when investigating children's well-being in future research. Moreover, the results indicated that the mother but also

the father play a significant role which cannot be denied, so future research should take into account both the maternal and the paternal perspective when investigating children's well-being. For social policy and stakeholders within the family field, it is also of crucial importance to consider the family as a system, even when parents are divorced and are living in separate households. Children (in most cases) still have to commute between both households and adapt to both the maternal and paternal household culture. This can be rather stressful and cause a decrease in their well-being. Consequently, when developing legislation or family programs in "the best interest of the child", the family system of both the mother and the father should be taken into account. Nevertheless, this research is of course limited in certain ways and leaves some questions open for future research, especially since not all family constellations and family forms of our current society are included. On the one hand, same sex couples are gaining research as well as policy interest so investigating their family constellations and children's well-being within those constellations would be an interesting path for future research. On the other hand, as unmarried cohabitation is on a rise in Europe, also such family constellations should be given a prominent place in future family research.

7 Effects of Family Structure Not Greater in Contexts with Homogenous Family Structures

Families of children have become increasingly diverse and complex during the Second Demographic Transition. Besides the traditional family with two biological married parents, other forms of family have become common in many European countries (Iacovou and Skew 2011; OECD 2010; 2015), thus children have increasing probabilities to live for part of their lives in a family with unmarried parents or in families resulting from a union dissolution (sole-parent families with a separated or divorced parent, or step-parent families). .

These increasingly complex family contexts in which children live and grow up lead to an increase in literature focusing on the correlates of the different family configurations with children resources and outcomes, with the aim to verify whether children in “less traditional” families are in disadvantaged positions. Much research has been devoted to analyze the effects of parental separation and divorce on the children. The studies have examined a wide variety of short and long-term consequences, showing in most of the cases that the outcomes are negative: children from dissolved families experience poorer emotional well-being, lower educational attainment, higher instability of their own unions when compared to children from intact families (Amato 2010; 2014; Bernardi et al. 2013; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, and Kravdal, 2009; Ströhschein 2005). At the same time, there is considerable variability in finding across studies (Amato 2001), thus we can hypothesize that – net of other factors – the social context in which the union dissolution takes place plays a role in shaping the different outcomes.

Several theoretical reasons might support this assumption. The “institutionalization” perspective (Kalmijn, 2015) suggests, for example, that, as divorce becomes a more common experience in children and adults’ lives, the negative consequences might fade. In fact, such an increased institutionalization of divorce is likely to be related both to a lower stigmatization of divorce and to new legal and informal rules about to deal with the aftermaths of divorce, which could imply more awareness of the

consequences of divorce for children and better coping strategies to deal with the practical and emotional problems after the union dissolution.

Existing evidence, however, does not clearly support this assumption when we consider cross-country analyses (Amato and James 2010; Kalmijn 2008; 2015). Controversial results have been found even by studies examining whether the effects are diminished over the time period or the birth-cohorts: apart from some studies which have found weakened effects over time (Wolfinger 2011; Engelhart, Trappe and Dronkers 2002), the overall evidence suggests that the effects remained essentially stable (Albertini and Garriga 2011; Gähler and Garriga 2013; Li and Wu 2008; Gähler and Palmtag 2014; Gähler and Härkönen 2014). As yet, although the vast literature, we know little about whether and how the effects of union dissolution on children change across the cultural and legal contexts and whether the possible negative outcomes are negatively associated with the rates of divorce.

Unmarried couples are another new family form which have rapidly spread in the last decades

in Europe (Kasearu and Kustar 2011). Given that unmarried childbearing increasingly occurs in cohabiting unions, a rising share of children are growing in families with cohabiting parents. Unmarried unions are more exposed than married ones to dissolution (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006); in addition, in case of separation, cohabiting parents are legally less protected than if they were married. Thus, at least indirectly, this type of family might represent a higher risk for children's well-being.

Less clear is, instead, whether cohabitation in-itself implies negative outcomes for children. Some authors have hypothesized that unmarried fathers might be less involved either emotionally or materially in their role than married fathers (Townsend 2002; Berger et al. 2008), while other authors have suggested the opposite: cohabiting fathers might be more involved in their paternal role, aiming to demonstrate, just because their less institutional position, to be up to the task (Perry et al., 2012). The few empirical studies which have analyzed the implications for children's outcomes of parent's cohabitation yielded, however, inconclusive results: some showed that unmarried fathers are less involved in the childcare than married fathers (Hofferth, 2006), thus implying possible negative outcome for children; other results indicated

that they are more involved (Bianchi et al., 2014); other research found no evidence that cohabiting and married fathers allocate different amounts of resources to their children (Gibson-Davis, 2008). In addition, the existing research is mostly based on American data, thus little is known about the situation in other societies. No study has explicitly examined whether the association between paternal involvement and the type of union of parents depends on social context. In fact, we cannot exclude that, especially in Europe, where the meaning of cohabitation might be different across the countries, national context matters for understanding whether and how cohabitation is associated to paternal behavior.

Differently from divorce, we might assume that, when cohabitation is less common, cohabiting fathers, just because they are forerunners, might show greater involvement than married ones. As cohabitation spreads out, the differences between cohabiting and married fathers might disappear or even divert.

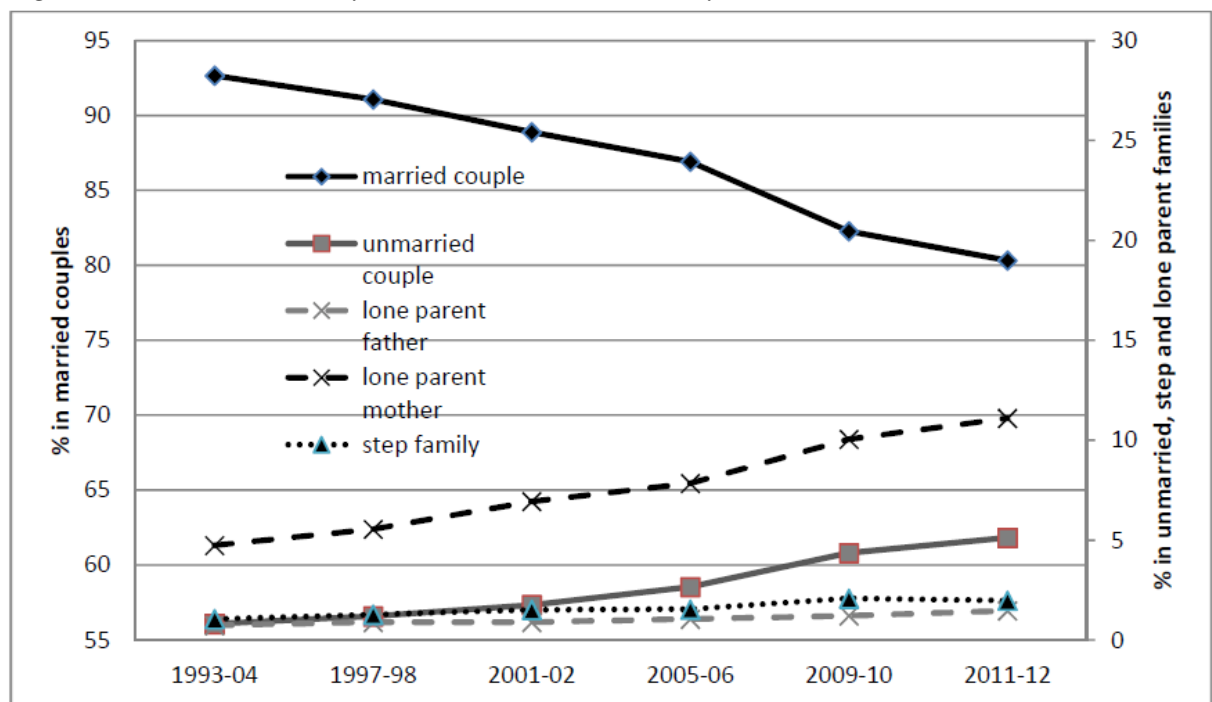
The research of this report tackled these issues by analyzing – for Italy – the association between family forms and children’s living conditions, here represented by both family resources (relational aspects) and children’s psychological well-being. The focus on Italy is motivated by the fact that it represents a still traditional family context. The country has latched on the new family behaviors late with respect to other Western and Northern European countries (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008; Matysiak, Styrac, and Vignoli, 2013; Coleman, 2013): still around 2011, the crude divorce rates (divorces per 1000 people) was equal to 0.9, rather far from those of Germany and France (2.2), Sweden (2.5) or United States (2.8); similarly, cohabiting individuals aged 20-34 represented 24% out of those living with a partner, while in Germany, France and Sweden the same percentages amounted respectively to 44, 55 and 63% (see: <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>). Figure 7 displays how the prevalence of different types of family forms developed over the last decades in Italy.

Therefore, Italy offers the opportunity to examine the implication for the children of the new family behaviors when they are still relatively little common. In particular, it allows us to verify whether, just because the little favorable cultural and legal climate (institutional perspective), children living in families from dissolved unions are

associated with worse conditions than those in intact families and whether cohabiting fathers are more involved in their role than married ones.

The research within this project on living conditions led to four major contributions. The first contribution presents a picture of the characteristics of the family forms in Italy. Besides a preliminary presentation of the Italian families in the European context, the research focused on the living arrangements of children aged 0-17, describing how the families in which they live have changed over the last two decades and changed across geographical areas. To

Figure 7. Children's Family Forms across Time in Italy



understand better the relational context and the living conditions where children live, the presence of cohabiting siblings, the highest level of education of parents, and employment of mothers were considered too. Results showed a large heterogeneity by area of residence in family forms and times of changes. Additional differences by level of education and employment of mothers were also present.

The most relevant change was the very recent diffusion of children in unmarried couples. Currently, they are 6-7% of children in the North-Centre of Italy. Their parents have a high level of education, similar to children in married couples, and mothers are more employed than their peers. To describe new family forms in Italy,

rounds of the cross-sectional survey "Aspects of Daily Life", carried out yearly between 1993 and 2012 by the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT), were used.

The second contribution is based on a study that asked whether father's basic childcare for children aged 0-3 changes according to the type of (cohabiting or marital) union of parents. It used data from the cross-sectional survey "Family and Social Subjects" conducted in Italy by the ISTAT in 2003 and in 2009. The focus was on both the daily basic childcare as a whole and on specific activities of basic care; in addition, also potential differences among married fathers were examined, distinguishing those experiencing premarital cohabitation. The findings indicated that the higher involvement in daily basic childcare of cohabiting fathers disappears when controlling for the structural differences of the couples. At the same time, some signals of a greater fathers' participation in childcare seemed to come from married fathers with pre-marital cohabitation, just for the childcare activities more traditionally left to mothers.

The third study analyzed the non-resident parent-child relationship for children aged 0-17 of divorced or separated parents (Meggiolaro & Ongaro , 2015). By using data from the same two cross-sectional rounds of the ISTAT survey "Family and Social Subjects", the paper examined whether and how the frequency of contacts between non-resident parent and children changes with the repartnering of the (resident or/and non-resident) parents. In contrast to the previous literature on the topic, it considered the case of non-resident mothers. Results show that parents' repartnering – either in the case of resident or non-resident parents - is positively associated with lower non-resident parent-child contact only in the case of non-resident fathers; in the case of a non-resident mother, her repartnering actually is correlated to higher contact.

The fourth study addressed whether adolescents living in families resulted from separation or divorce have lower levels of psychological well-being than those living in more traditional families (Meggiolaro & Ongaro , 2014). Analyses with data from the national representative survey "Health Status of the Population and Use of Health Services", carried out in 2004-2005 by ISTAT suggested that adolescents living in non-traditional families are not necessarily at higher risks of emotional suffering than

others. Only adolescents who live in step-families show a lower level of emotional well-being than those living in two-biological-parent families and this effect is not mediated by family resources.

Overall, the research on Italy did not clearly support the assumption that a context with relatively limited experience of separation and divorce necessarily implies heavy short-term negative consequences for children of divorced parents. At the same time, it is seemed that the possible involvement differences between cohabiting and married fathers mainly depend on individual characteristics of the couples.

8 Joint Custody Could Preserve Parental Support Following Separation

As in many other countries experiencing a parental union disruption is common for children in Sweden. Recent research showed that 28 percent of Swedish children have experienced a parental union disruption before age 15 (Andersson et al. 2016). Of the children whose parents divorced or separated 72 percent were in a shared legal custody arrangement (Statistics Sweden 2013a), which is the legal default option after a divorce or non-marital parental separation. Shared legal custody means that both parents have the right to decide in matters regarding the child, like example school-choice etc. While the parental separation rate has stabilized since the change of the millennium (Statistics Sweden 2013b) shared legal custody has increased (Statistics Sweden 2013a) as has shared physical custody (Statistics Sweden 2014). Shared physical custody means that in additions to having equal rights and obligations in decisions regarding the child, he or she also lives roughly equal time with both parents alternating between two households. Shared physical custody has increased from one percent of children with separated parents in the 1980's to 35 percent in 2013 (Statistics Sweden 2014).

Albeit growing, the literature on shared physical custody is still rather limited compared to that on divorce, lone parenting and other post-divorce family forms. Most of the studies published in recent years have focused on different health outcomes for children (for summaries see for example Nielsen 2011; 2013a; 2013b). Shared physical custody has been assumed to affect children's wellbeing both positively and negatively. In an overview of the literature, Sodermans and Matthijs (2014) suggested that shared physical custody can influence children positively as they will benefit from the continuity of parental involvement and resources. But sharing custody may also have an adverse effect as the adjustment of children depends on stability and living in alternating households might increase stress levels for children.

This report contains two separate studies that together seek to provide more information on shared physical custody arrangements. It is based on two data sets from Sweden, the Swedish Child Survey of living conditions (Child-ULF) and the

Swedish version of the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) study from 2013/14.

The first study by Jani Turunen and Curt Hagquist analyzes differences in perceived parental support and knowledge as reported by the child. Support and knowledge, sometimes referred to as parental monitoring, have been shown to be important mediators between family structure, including shared physical custody and children's outcomes types (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Barnes & Farrell 1992; Bastaitis et al. 2012; Carlson 2006; Kerr & Stattin 2000; Stattin & Kerr 2000; Vanassche et al. 2013). A parental union dissolution can negatively affect both parental support and knowledge. Even though a divorced parent may do its best to maintain a strong bond to the child and help it through a period that can be stressful, two parents in a home have more possibilities to give the child the attention it needs while also working and running the household. The non-residential parent's possibility to offer love and affection, help when needed or keep track of the child's daily life, activities and peers, is arguably reduced by having less access to the child. The co-resident parent's possibility to the same can also be reduced by lack of time as it needs to work and do household work etc. while having the full or main responsibility for childrearing.

The results show that children in equally shared physical custody do not report any differences in either maternal nor paternal support or knowledge compared to those living in an original two-parent household. This indicates that having a co-residential relationship with the child bi-weekly is sufficient to facilitate the same kind of parenting as in a family where both parents live together. Compared to equally shared physical custody children in the other categories of custody sharing report a negative gradient for fathers' support and knowledge. The coefficient for perceived father's knowledge is half of a standard deviation lower in regular sharing settings that are not equal and over a standard deviation for when the child stays with the parent sometimes, with the weekend visiting children in between. Children also report lower maternal knowledge when they stay with the non-residential parent on weekends or sometimes. Maternal support is only significantly different from the equal sharers in the weekend visiting families. Table 3 displays the key results on paternal support from this study.

The second study by Jani Turunen, Emma Fransson and Malin Bergström focuses on how custody arrangements are related to children self-esteem. Research on children's adjustment and wellbeing after a parental divorce has established higher risks for emotional problems and social maladjustment than among those with parents living together (Bjarnason et al. 2012). Parental support has been shown to be important for children's self-esteem, a trait that is

Table 3. Ordinary least squares regression. Perceived parental support.

	Fathers		Mothers	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Living arrangement				
Both parents	-0.03	0.08	-0.04	0.07
Single mother	-0.94***	0.15	-0.17	0.09
Single father	-0.22	0.22	-0.98***	0.27
Shared; 50/50 (ref.)	0		0	
Shared; regularly <50	-0.37**	0.14	-0.16	0.11
Shared: weekends	-0.44***	0.12	-0.38***	0.10
Shared; sometimes	-1.36***	0.14	-0.04	0.11
Child's age				
11	0.49***	0.06	0.37***	0.04
13	0		0	
15	-0.32***	0.05	-0.25***	0.04
Child's sex				
Boy (ref.)	0		0	
Girl	-0.26***	0.04	0.01	0.04
Family affluence				
Low	-0.47	0.25	-0.31	0.20
Medium (ref.)	0		0	
High	0.22***	0.13	0.19***	0.05
Born in Sweden				
Yes (ref.)	0		0	
No	-0.00	0.14	-0.12	0.06
Stepfamily				
Yes	-0.12	0.09	-0.06	0.07
No (ref.)	0		0	
Siblings				
Yes	0.12	0.08	0.01	0.06
No (ref.)	0		0	
Constant	10.39***	0.12	10.88***	0.10
N	6630		6928	

Note: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

Source: Swedish Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) 2013/14

related to later important life outcomes. Today, an increasing number of children in the Western world spend equal time in their two parental households after a

separation. Children in such arrangements report more parental support than children in other post-divorce arrangements.

Self-esteem is constituted during childhood and adolescence, in close relationship with significant others, like parents. High levels of parental support have been found to be associated with higher self-esteem in adolescents (Bastaitis et al., 2012) and secure attachment relationships between children and parents are associated with more perceived self-worth (Doyle et al., 2000).

The study focuses on the relationship between living arrangements and children's self-esteem. The dependent variable, children's self-esteem, is based on three survey items measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Do not agree at all") to 4 ("Strongly agree"). The items "I am satisfied with my look", "I am usually satisfied with myself" and "I think things will be good for me in the future" loaded onto a common factor in an initial exploratory factor analysis. A scale measure was constructed from these three items and analyzed by stepwise multiple ordinary least squares regression.

The results from the stepwise ordinary least squares regression showed a statistically significant negative association between self-esteem and living only with one parent compared with living in a shared physical custody arrangement. The negative association was significant also compared with children in a nuclear family. There was not any statistically significant difference between living in original two-parent setting and in shared physical custody nor was there any statistically significant difference between sharing custody equally and living mostly with one parent. It is however important to note that this category was small and is likely to be rather heterogeneous. It is also interesting to note that the first study discussed in this section showed significant differences in the parent-child relationships between those living in equally shared physical custody and those living mostly with one parent but having regular custody sharing. As self-esteem has been shown to be constituted in close relationship with parents, the association between higher self-esteem and living with both parents may be linked to stronger relationships to both parents for the children in shared physical custody compared with those living only with one parent.

9 Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research

9.1 Summing up

The landscape of European families has changed dramatically over the last decades. Whereas the post-war era family was characterized by stability and two biological parents, several ‘non-traditional’ forms have become increasingly more common over time such as single mother and step-families. The research of this Work Package has aimed to increase our understanding of how these relatively new experiences for children affect their life chances.

The research of this project investigated whether associations between family dynamics and child outcomes could be spurious. These studies on causality found that the relationship between parental separation and cognitive ability is not observed when employing more causally oriented studies. At the same time, it is possible that this conclusion does not hold for other outcomes such as educational attainment. In addition, these designs also ‘controlled away’ the possible influence of conflict preceding parental separation. Results therefore should be interpreted as the actual physical separation of parents not having an effect on school performance.

The question of causality provoked the question of what it is about non-traditional families that could cause more negative child outcomes. One interpretation could be that it is the absence of one of the natural parents in the household that influences children. Another, more recent interpretation, however, puts forward that it is actually the experience of a change in family structure in general that affects children. Family structure changes, such as the exit of a parent or the entrance of a step-parent, can be stressful events for children. It could be the stress related to such changes rather than the absence of a parent per se that affects children.

The research of our work package looked into this hypothesis by comparing children who live in non-traditional but stable households to traditional and stable households. The results did not support the hypothesis that non-traditional family forms affect child outcomes only through family instability.

The finding that family stability per se is not what connects various forms of family structures to child outcomes raises the question what characteristics of family structures are responsible. A commonly pointed at factor is parenting. Parenting is a time intensive activity, and can therefore be affected if a resident parent has to parent by her or himself on a daily basis. The findings of the work package suggested that parenting indeed is different between families where both biological parents are present and other forms of families. For mothers and fathers not residing with their children, providing support seems to be more difficult, which affects children's life satisfaction and self-esteem.

A major question has been whether effects of family dynamics become smaller as non-traditional families become more common. When parental separation and single motherhood are relatively uncommon it could be particularly troubled families that end up in such situations, and there might be social stigma related to such family forms. This might make it particularly hard for such families to deal with the challenges posed by family transitions or raising a child on your own. Children might therefore be affected more in such contexts compared to contexts where non-traditional family forms are more common, do not experience social stigma, and are not necessarily the result of particularly troubled families breaking up.

The research of this work package has addressed this possibility by looking at change over time in the association between non-traditional family forms and child outcomes. Despite the expectation that negative effects should have become smaller over time, the two main papers addressing this question show stable associations over time between parental separation on the one hand and children's psychological well-being and own demographic behaviour on the other hand.

This surprising finding sparks the question whether there are cases or situations where growing up in a non-traditional family is not related to child outcomes. A set of five papers within the project has aimed to identify situations where family structure matters less by looking at differences in the relationship between parental separation and educational attainment across social and ethnic groups. Higher educated parents and parents from advantaged ethnic groups might have more resources to deal with eventual challenges posed by living in a non-traditional family. The results of these

papers, however, reveal that the negative association between parental separation and educational attainment is more pronounced for children from advantaged backgrounds.

The explanation put forward is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have less to lose in terms of parental resources. Parental separation affects family income and the involvement of parents in childrearing. In advantaged stable two-parent families, parents are likely to have the resources to invest in the educational attainment of their children and perform intensive parenting, whereas less space for investment might be present in disadvantaged families. In that case, parental separation poses an additional challenge for children from disadvantaged families, but it might not affect parental investments to a large extent because these are low to begin with.

These and previous observations would lead to a rather pessimistic conclusion in the sense that parental separation only ceases to have effects when there is little to lose anyways. However, two papers within this project that have looked at other child outcomes such as cognitive ability did find parental separation to have no effect among children of higher educated families (Grätz, 2015; Grätz & Härkönen, 2016). This would suggest that effects of non-traditional family forms on certain outcomes can be prevented. In addition, it has to be reminded that associations of non-traditional family forms with child outcomes are relatively modest in comparison to other background characteristics such as parental education or income. The effects of parental separation, step-families and other non-traditional family forms might therefore be hard to avoid, but are at the same time not likely to be very large in comparison with certain other childhood disadvantages.

9.2 Recommendations for Future Research

In this final discussion we briefly highlight some of the areas researched within the project that we think would be particularly interesting to dive into in future research. For each of these areas we provide a reflection on what could be addressed by future research.

9.2.1. Causality

A major question in the research area is whether associations between parental separation and child outcomes reflect causal effects or pre-existing differences in disadvantage between families that separate and who do not. An earlier U.S. review on the question of causality concluded that endogeneity explains only part of the observed associations, and that this is more the case for cognitive ability than for educational attainment (McLanahan et al., 2013). European studies looking at effects of parental death, sibling-fixed effects models and longitudinal methods also argue that endogeneity is likely to play a role.

The studies of this Work Package confirmed for Europe too that only a very limited effect of parental separation on cognitive ability and school grades exists once accounting for time-constant sources of endogeneity (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016a; Grätz, 2015). At the same time, effects of parental separation on transitions within the educational system and educational attainment persist (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016c). Besides showing the differences in the importance of endogeneity for different child outcomes, the studies within this Work Package have made a major contribution by extending findings on the causal effects of parental separation to Germany (Grätz, 2015), Sweden (Grätz & Härkönen, 2016) and the United Kingdom (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016c).

An unaddressed issue that emerged from the discussion of these and other studies on causality is the so-called question of the ‘counter-factual’. From a counterfactual point of view (Holland 1986), the question of the effects of parental separation boils down to the question of what would have been the alternative (counterfactual) situation to the separation. The common answer to the question is a situation in which the parents would have stayed together, but it is not the only possible one (e.g., Manski et al. 1992; Ní Bhrolcháin 2001). For example, the parents could have decided to postpone their separation. One or both of the parents could have decided not to engage in an affair or other disruptive behavior that eventually led to the separation. One could also reformulate the question and ask what would have happened if parents who stayed together would have separated (Ní Bhrolcháin 2001). These are not merely academic speculations, but affect the interpretation of the results.

Different methods—and model specifications within the same family of methods—differ in the counterfactual situation they estimate. This is important at the moment of interpreting results.

To illustrate, many studies use the levels of child well-being before separation as the ‘benchmark’ to compare post-separation levels with. Separation, however, is a process that often starts a considerable time before the physical separation of parents. These processes, such as family conflict, could affect the outcomes of children already before separation, therewith biasing the benchmark downward. The moment at which one measures child outcomes before separation, and sets as the benchmark, differs considerably across studies. Studies therefore differ considerably in the extent to which they estimate the effects of parental separation including the effects of pre-separation processes, or excluding the influence of such. Future research attempting to disentangle issues of causality from endogeneity could pay more attention to the role of such pre-separation processes.

9.2.2 For which children does family structure matter most?

A second major question covered by this work package was whether there are situations in which parental separation is not (or to a lesser extent) associated with child outcomes. The key determinant of the strength of effects appears to be what children can lose from a parental separation (Bernardi & Boertien 2016a; 2016c). If children live in families with little conflict and have high levels of economic resources, they have a lot to lose from a parental separation. This is also one of the explanations offered for the smaller associations observed of parental separation with outcomes of children from disadvantaged ethnic minority groups. This interpretation stands in contrast with the expectation that high post-separation levels of resources enable families to deal better with the possible adverse effects of a separation.

The studies of this work package primarily focused on educational outcomes and especially educational attainment within contexts where access to university education is costly. Future research could provide tests of the arguments put forward by the research of this work package. If what children can lose from family transitions is what determines its effects, disadvantaged children might be affected more in contexts or on outcomes where they have something to lose (e.g. psychological well-

being, or educational attainment in countries with little financial requirements to advance in the educational system).

Other potential questions for future research include how different predictors of family transitions and child outcomes interact in moderating the effects of the former on the latter (cf. Amato and Anthony 2014, for a related question) and how the effects of family structure vary between siblings from the same family.

9.2.3 Cross-national differences and changes over time in the effects of family structure

The research of this work package included several explicitly cross-national studies, and includes country-specific studies that span a diversity of contexts. When zooming out and looking at cross-national differences, it is remarkable that on a general level the relationship between family structure and child outcomes appear relatively uniform across countries. The studies on Italy (Section 7) addressed the question to what extent family forms might be more consequential for children in a more traditional context. The overall answer appeared to be no. On the other side of the continent, Sweden, the effects of non-traditional family structure appeared stable for as long as appeared possible to measure. The (modest) negative association between growing up in a non-traditional family and child outcomes therewith is a solid cross-national finding that also emerges from the research performed within this work package. The cross-national studies of this project came to a similar conclusion (Bernardi & Boertien, 2016a; Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Cebolla-Boado et al., 2016).

The uniformity of this general finding disappears once moving to more complex matters. Whether or not certain family structures are related to given child outcomes appears to differ across contexts, and effect sizes also show considerable variety across countries (Bernardi & radl, 2016; Cebolla-Boada et al., 2016). In addition, studies that addressed similar questions sometimes came to opposite conclusions. For instance, whereas Bernardi & Boertien (2016c) found for the UK that socioeconomically advantaged children are affected more by parental separation, Grätz found the opposite to be the case for Germany. Whereas the research of this work package has provided some general overviews of cross-national associations

between family structure and child outcomes, future research will have to dive into these more complex questions from a cross-national perspective.

A similar call for a more careful examination of the role of context emerges when juxtaposing some apparently contradictory findings that have emerged from research on family structure. Previous research, including studies of our work package, has often pointed out the intriguing stability in the effects of parental separation on several outcomes over time. At the same time, many studies have reported clear cross-national differences in the associations between family structures and child outcomes. These sets of findings seem contradictory. Findings of how parental separation and single parenthood effects are smaller in ethnic/racial/migrant groups in which these family forms are more common also appear contradictory to findings of an opposite relationship between family structure prevalence and its effects. Together, these contradictory results call for more attention to the role of social context in shaping the consequences of family transitions on child outcomes, preferably with systematic development of a supporting theoretical framework that acknowledges the changing selection into different family life courses. In addition to macro-level contexts (countries), researchers could focus on more proximate contexts such as schools (de Lange, Dronkers and Wolbers 2014). Another, somewhat different, question concerns whether living in societies characterized by family instability and complexity affects children regardless of their own family form, as has been already addressed by some researchers (Gruber 2004; Reinhold, Kneip and Bauer 2013; González and Özcan 2013).

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