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## TRANSITIONS IN FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the effects of transitions in family structure on physical health, thoughts of suicide, mental health, relational well-being, and employment situation of adolescents from four family structures: stable intact families, conflict intact families, single-parent families, and step-families. Data were used from the Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development (USAD), a study of developments in the life course of young people during the 1990s. Results are presented from over 2,500 respondents between 15 and 24 years of age. Their parents were also interviewed on a number of topics. Transition in family structure after marital problems, divorce, and remarriage does appear to have significant long-term effects on a number of adolescent well-being variables. Young people from single-parent families have the lowest scores on the different indicators; they are more likely to have relational problems and experience unemployment as compared with youngsters from stable intact families. Adolescents from conflict intact families and step-families have moderate scores. These effects remain after controlling for family income, gender, age, and educational level.

### INTRODUCTION

This article reports on an empirical investigation into the effects of structural changes in family life on adolescent well-being. Four different types of family structure were distinguished: stable intact family, conflict intact family, single-parent family, and step-family. The first structural change in family life is the transition from a stable intact family to a problematic situation in the nuclear family: the conflict intact family. The second structural change is the transition from a conflict intact family to a single-parent family after divorce. The remarriage of the custodial parent, that is, the transition from a single-parent family to a step-family, is the third structural change. The long-term effects of these transitions on adolescent occupational, physical, psychological, and relational well-being were examined.

### **From Stable Intact Family to Conflict Intact Family**

Most empirical studies on changes in family structure have focused on the effects of separation and/or divorce. However, most marital conflicts exist a long time before separation actually occurs. Following the study of Cherlin et al. (1992), we therefore also studied children in families with serious problems who were not yet dealing with separation or divorce. There is still much to investigate on this subject. Cherlin et al, for example,

emphasized that the effects of conflict in troubled families were stronger for boys than for girls.

Dronkers (1993) concluded that there are significant differences in educational career between the children of nondivorced and divorced parents. But the divorce does not seem to be the most important predictor. It is possible that conflicts before separation have a significant effect. We also need more information about the changing family structure during separation and/or divorce. Conflicts in the intact family, preceding the process of separation and divorce, may be important predictors for adolescent well-being. The first interest here is in the transition from a stable intact family to a family in trouble.

### **From Conflict Intact Family to Single-Parent Family after Divorce**

In the Netherlands, van Gelder (1989) examined the literature on the long-term effects of divorce. He established that children of single-parent families have slightly more doubts with respect to future married and family life. They are more active in forming relationships with the opposite sex and at the same time are more critical. Van Gelder also reported that children of divorced parents more often give birth to children outside marriage, get married earlier, and get divorced more often. Finally, they are more critical about their marriage relationship. De Graaf (1991) also reported on the effects of parental divorce on the demographic behavior of women in the Netherlands. He concluded that even after controlling for a number of background characteristics, females from single-parent families leave the parental home at a younger age, live together earlier without getting married, break up relationships more often, and tend to have a more negative opinion of their personal relationships.

Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of studies dealing with the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult well-being. Effect sizes were calculated for 15 outcome variables across 37 studies involving over 81,000 individuals. The authors concluded that parental divorce has significant negative effects on the well-being of the children in their adulthood. A number of variables such as teenage pregnancy, teenage marriage, social well-being, the quality of marriage, divorce, and physical health are involved. This pessimistic conclusion must be tempered however, since although the effect sizes are generally significant, they are weak. Moreover, effect sizes were significantly stronger in clinical studies than in studies based on community samples.

Various authors (including Demo & Acock, 1988) rightly point out that in much research into the effects of divorce, the two-parent family is implicitly or explicitly the norm. This is in accordance with the Freudian approach, that both a father and a mother are necessary for the normal development of a child. Many researchers apply this norm, partly because other theories related to personality development (such as structural functionalism, social learning and symbolic interactionism) are also based on the presence of two parents of different sexes. The theoretical explanations put forward for the occurrence of differences between children of single- and two-parent families mostly assume a family with a biological father and a biological mother as the starting point. Amato and Keith (1991) recognized three commonly adopted theoretical approaches for the explanation of differences between children in single- and two-parent families. The first stresses the economic decline experienced by many single-parent (mother only) families, which has a negative effect in many different ways on the views and behavior of the children. The second approach concentrates on divorce as a stressful experience for children. Divorce often means a long, drawn-out period of family conflict, with problems rarely occurring singly. In addition to the divorce, children often have

to deal with other stressful matters such as moving from their home, changing schools, and losing touch with friends, grandparents, and other family members. The third approach emphasizes the significance of the changed family structure after the divorce. Not only is one parent not in a position to do as much as two, but the daily example of a parent of the other sex is also absent. In addition, contact with the parent who has left may be difficult.

### **From Single-Parent Family to Stepfamily**

From the child's perspective, the structural change to a stepfamily is obvious: a stepchild is a person whose parent or parents have a partner who is not the child's biological parent (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Ganong and Coleman (1987) concluded that, in the functioning of children in stepfamilies, there are differences between stepchildren and children growing up in other family structures, but most of these differences are rather small. Nevertheless, research comparing adjustment and health problems in adolescents from stepfamilies versus other family structures has found lower educational expectations and lower general well-being in adolescents in stepfamilies (Furstenberg, 1987; Hetherington, 1993; Dronkers, 1993; Spruijt & Hendrickx, 1995). Dutch research (Spruijt et al., 1989) showed that particularly adolescents in divided stepfamilies (where the biological parent and the stepmother or stepfather disagree on a number of matters) mentioned many problems, while in most other stepfamilies things go fairly well.

### **Research Problem**

This study sought to gain insight into the differences in well-being between youngsters from stable intact families, conflict intact families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies. This insight may clarify whether the ongoing concern about the consequences of such structural changes as parental conflict and divorce is, in fact, justified. Is it more difficult for the young people who have experienced major disturbances in their life to get along in today's society as compared to other young people?

### **Hypotheses**

Youngsters in a stepfamily have been faced with three transitions in family structure: from stable intact family to conflict intact family, then to a single-parent family, and finally to stepfamily. They have probably had parents who disagreed on a number of matters and, in the worst case, on almost everything. They have been confronted with serious conflict between their father and mother. On the other hand, youngsters living in a stable intact family may not have had to face any changes in their family structure. Youngsters in conflict intact families and in single-parent families are in an intermediate position, having had to face one and two changes in the family structure, respectively.

It was expected that a cumulation of drastic transitions in the family structure will lead to psychological tension that will have a negative effect on youngsters' physical and psychological well-being. This leads to Hypothesis 1: The more young people have been confronted with transitions in their parental family, the less physical and psychological well-being they experience.

Youngsters who have had to face some or all of the changes in family structure noted have experienced a great deal of parental conflict and family problems. As a consequence, they probably are more critical of personal relationships, especially the marriage relationship. And

when cohabiting or married, these youngsters will more often break up relationships than will youngsters confronted with fewer or no drastic transitions. Breaking up relationships more often and being more critical of personal relationships also means they will find it more difficult to establish a stable personal relationship and, in general, they will experience less well-being in a relationship. These observations lead to Hypothesis 2: The more young people have been confronted with transitions in their parental family, the less well-being they will experience in a relationship.

Youngsters in conflict intact families, single-parent families or stepfamilies are faced with one or more drastic changes in the family structure. They have experienced parents in conflict, leading to psychological tension or stress situations with which they have had to cope. Continuing problems in the parental family have consequences for their educational and occupational careers. Bosman and Louwes (1988) concluded that the family transition in the case of divorce is characterized by a number of socially fixed conditions and problems which are difficult to avoid. In particular, the school chances of children seem to be harmed. Dronkers (1993) reported significant differences in school career between children from two- and single-parent families--the latter showed a lower level of achievement.

Drastic changes in family structure, especially parental divorce, also appear to affect general personal characteristics, which influence job opportunities. For example, characteristics such as flexibility and social skills are important, both to schooling and gaining a diploma, as well as in looking for a job or dealing with unemployment (Buwalda & de Vries, 1994). The negative effects of parental conflicts and divorce and, more generally, of drastic changes in family structure, may limit children's chances of getting and keeping a job. This leads to Hypothesis 3: The more young people have been confronted with transitions in their parental family, the more experience they have (had) of being unemployed.

## METHOD

### Operationalization of the Concepts

**Change in family structure.** With respect to the youngsters studied, it is known whether their parents are divorced, and whether the divorced parents are living alone or with a partner (they may or may not be married). The nondivorced parents of the youngsters were asked: Have you thought seriously about splitting up at any time during the last five years? (1 = never to 5 = yes, often). Are you satisfied with your marriage? (1 = very much to 5 = not at all).

Families with a sum score of at least 8 were designated as "conflict families." Those who scored 7 or less were considered as having a stable intact marriage. This implies the following operationalization of the concept "transition in family structure": 0 = no transition (stable intact family); 1 = one transition (conflict intact family); 2 = two transitions (single-parent family); and 3 = three transitions (stepfamily).

**Physical well-being.** A standardized scale (General Health Questionnaire) was used to measure physical health (e.g., Do you sometimes have a headache? Do you often get up tired in the morning? Possible answers: 1 = yes; 2 = no). The physical health scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.74) consists of 13 factors and scores range from 13 to 26. The scores were converted to a ten-point scale with 0 = poor physical well-being and 10 = good physical well-being.

### **Psychological well-being. Three indicators were used:**

1. The Cantrill ladder, measuring mental health: We would like to know how you are feeling (0 = very bad; 10 = very good).
2. The Goldberg scale, measuring psychological stress (e.g., Did you have the feeling of being under pressure all the time during the last four weeks? Did you feel unhappy and depressed during the last four weeks? Possible answers: 1 = not at all; 2 = not more than usual; 3 = more than usual; 4 = much more than usual). The scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.92) consists of 10 factors and scores range from 10 to 40, These scores were also converted to a ten-point scale, with 0 = bad (i.e., much stress) and 10 = good (i.e., no stress at all).
3. Have you thought about suicide in the past 12 months? (1 = often; 4 = never).

**Relational well-being.** Three different indicators were used for the operationalization of the relational well-being concept: one relational life event and two questions on relations. The relational life event is "love pangs" (or breaking up relations) with the following possible responses: 1 = not experienced; 2 = experienced, not making deep inroads into life; and 3 = experienced and making deep inroads into life. The two questions on relationships successively deal with "thinking of splitting up" (1 = never; 3 = often) and "separation/divorce experience of their own" (1 = no; 2 = yes).

**Employment situation or occupational well-being.[1]** For the operationalization of the employment/unemployment situation, two indicators were used: the unemployment history, that is, the number of times out of work (0 = never; 4 = 4 or more) and experience being unemployed or incapacitated in the last three years (1 = not experienced; 2 = experienced, not making deep inroads into life; and 3 = experienced and making deep inroads into life).

**Background characteristics.** To get an impression of the relative weight of the factor "changes in family structure" in explaining aspects of youngsters' well-being, the following background characteristics were included: family income (1 = < U.S. \$150 to 12 = > U.S. \$630 per week), gender (1 = male; 2 = female), age (15-24), and educational level (1 = low; 4 = high) as a proxy variable for their own social class.

### **Sample and Data Collection**

Data (phase 1, 1991) from the Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development (USAD) were used: a Dutch national panel study based on a representative sample of young people. In September-November 1991, 3,393 youngsters, aged 12 to 24 years, answered a large number of oral and written questions about their development and way of life. The topics included physical and psychological well-being, breaking away from parents and becoming independent, relationships, sex, going steady and leaving home, and the relationships between generations. One of the parents of each subject was also interviewed. Data from phases 2 and 3 will become available for analysis in the near future. For this study, data from phase 1, which consisted of 2,517 youngsters aged 15-24 years, were used.[2]

### **Data Preparation and Analysis**

First the frequency distribution was calculated to check for any variation in the type of family structure (see Table 1). As expected, most of the youngsters live in a stable intact family. However, there is sufficient variation to test the hypotheses. The relations between type of

family structure and some background variables (sex, age, educational level, family income) are not strong and not significant, except for family type and sex ( $p = .03$ ): in single-parent families there are slightly more girls than boys)

One of the reasons for the continuing concern about parental conflict and divorce is the possible long-term consequences for the individuals and for society. In this study, the divorce in the two family types (single-parent family and stepfamily) had taken place 10 years earlier on average, that is, before the collection of data in phase 1. The stepfamily had been formed on average 8 years earlier. Thus, this study can be characterized as an investigation into some of the long-term effects of changing family structures.

By using ONEWAY procedures, the hypotheses on the relation between type of family structure and the degree of adolescent well-being were tested. From earlier analyses we know that there are relations between some background variables and the well-being of youngsters. A transition in family structure—for example, parental divorce—often implies a drastic economic decline, and there is a connection between family income and well-being of the youngsters. It is therefore possible that it is not so much the transition in family structure as the concomitant economic decline that is responsible for a lower level of well-being. Similarly there are relations between sex (for example, in general girls experience a lower level of well-being than do boys), age, and educational level. For these reasons ANCOVA procedures were used, controlling for the covariates family income, sex, age, and educational level.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows the mean scores on the different aspects of well-being for the youngsters from stable intact families, conflict intact families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies (ONEWAY). The results of the ANCOVA procedure (controlling for some relevant background variables) are given in Table 3.

Family structure and physical/psychological well-being. Hypothesis 1: The more young people have been confronted with transitions in their parental family, the less healthy they are, physically and psychologically.

Youngsters living in a stable intact family are physically the most healthy. Next are the youngsters living in stepfamilies, and then those from conflict families and finally those from the single-parent families. Table 2 (lines 2 to 4) shows that youngsters from single-parent families score lowest on the different aspects of psychological well-being, and those from stable intact families highest. Youngsters from stepfamilies score better on these variables than do those from single-parent families.

It can be concluded that for both physical and psychological well-being, Hypothesis I is only partly corroborated because the predicted order (more transitions in family structure go hand in hand with a lower level of physical and psychological well-being) has been found, except in stepfamily youngsters. The latter, although faced with more structural changes in the parental family, generally score better on these variables than do youngsters from conflict and single-parent families.

**Family structure and relational well-being.** Hypothesis 2: The more young people have been confronted with transitions in their parental family, the less well-being they will experience in a relationship.

Youngsters from single-parent families and stepfamilies have more experience in the breaking up of relationships (or love pangs) than do others; in particular, they have more experience than do youngsters from stable families. With regard to relational problems, there is a significant difference in the indicators of relational well-being only between the youngsters from single-parent families and all the other youngsters (see Table 2, lines 6 and 7). Youngsters from single-parent families report more conflicts with their partners (thinking of splitting up) and have more divorce experience of their own, as compared with youngsters from the other family types.

With regard to relational well-being, Hypothesis 2 is partly confirmed. As predicted, youngsters from single-parent families have lower relational well-being than do those from intact families. However, conflict intact family youngsters do not differ from stable family youngsters with respect to their relational well-being. Those from stepfamilies suffer the most love pangs, but they do not experience the lowest relational well-being.

A normal step in the relational career of many young people is to leave the parental family and to live with a partner of their own. About two-thirds of the young people who were living away from the parental home during the research period were living with a partner (about 10% of all respondents). Young people from single-parent families live together from an earlier age and also have a child of their own earlier than do others. These results coincide with findings in the literature; however, cohabiting or marrying and having a child at an earlier age are not indicators of low (or lower) relational well-being per se.

**Family structure and employment / unemployment situation (occupational well-being).** Hypothesis 3: The more young people have been confronted with transitions in their parental family, the more experience they have (had) of being unemployed.

Youngsters from single-parent families are unemployed or incapacitated more often than youngsters from the other types of families. The differences between those from stable, conflict, and stepfamilies are very small and not significant.

It was concluded that Hypothesis 3 is only partly corroborated. As predicted, youngsters from single-parent families have been unemployed or incapacitated more often than those from stable intact families and those from conflict intact families, but, however, not less often than stepfamily youngsters. In fact, there is a significant difference in occupational well-being only between the youngsters from single-parent families and all the others.

**The effects of the background variables.** Table 3 shows that after controlling for the covariates of family income, sex, age, and education, all the reported relations between type of family structure and the degrees of well-being remain significant.

Apart from the effects of type of family structure, family income seems to have a particularly negative effect on physical and psychological well-being. These types of well-being are also significantly influenced by sex and age, but not by educational level. The covariates of sex, age, and educational level are related significantly to the unemployment variables and to two of the three relational well-being variables. In general, the well-being experienced by girls is

lower than that of boys. Older youngsters experienced a lower level of well-being as compared with younger groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results have demonstrated significant differences in the various degrees of well-being between youngsters with different transition experiences in family structure. Youngsters from single-parent families have the lowest levels on the different indicators of well-being, and youngsters from stable intact families have the highest. Youngsters from stepfamilies occupy an intermediate position, although their sense of well-being is somewhat comparable to that of youngsters from stable intact families. It is striking that youngsters from stepfamilies do not have the most extreme negative scores, because they have, in fact, undergone the most transitions in their parental family. Occupying an intermediate position also holds true for youngsters from conflict intact families. They are somewhat comparable to single-parent youngsters with regard to their psychological well-being. However, with regard to their relational and occupational well-being, these youngsters are comparable to youngsters from stable intact families.

These results indicate that changing family structures affects adolescent well-being, but not in a simple, cumulative way. It is not correct to conclude that more changes lead to less well-being. In particular, youngsters from stepfamilies, who had experienced the most structural changes, did not show the lowest general well-being. The last transition in these families seems to be more advantageous than the previous two. The results also indicate that it is important to look further than the divorce--that the effects of conflict between parents on the verge of divorce should be taken into account. But the effects clearly become stronger when the parents are in fact divorced.

Transitions in family structure influence the different degrees of well-being of young people, even after controlling for such background variables as family income, sex, age, and educational level. The clear general conclusion is that youngsters from stable intact families have the strongest sense of well-being. Youngsters from single-parent families are the worst off, despite the fact that the divorce may have taken place ten years ago, and even controlling for income.

One conclusion must be that family structure is not the only determining factor. Amato and Keith's (1991) first explanation regarding decline in financial position of the single-parent family cannot be rejected because, apart from the type of family structure, family income does have a significant relationship to physical well-being and to some of the indicators of psychological well-being of adolescents. However, family income is not related to relational and occupational well-being.

Amato and Keith's second explanation concerning the significance of stressful events on adolescents' behavior and views is partly supported and partly rejected by the results--partly rejected because youngsters from stepfamilies score higher on well-being than do youngsters from single-parent families, and partly supported because youngsters from stable intact families evidently have the strongest sense of well-being, while those from conflict intact families occupy an intermediate position.

The third explanation concerns the changed family structure after divorce and the formation of a stepfamily. The intermediate position occupied by youngsters from a stepfamily might



indicate that structural variables in the family (e.g., after divorce the absence of father and husband role, less social control) do indeed play a role in explaining the differences between the four categories. In the stepfamily, the structure of the family changes once again, but then tends to resemble the structure of an intact family. This could explain why youngsters from stepfamilies are, as far as some aspects of well-being are concerned, comparable to youngsters from stable intact families. Clearly, being a member of a two-adult family is in some way more important than having been confronted with some more structural transitions.

1. Almost all unemployed people, including youngsters, consider being out of work as a negative experience. See, for example, de Goede and Maassen (1986,1988). We can therefore speak of occupational well-being.
2. The random selection was based on statistics on households and young persons living independently, from the National Script Panel and the National Mini Census (t Hart, Meeus & Kox, 1993). At most, two persons aged 15-24 per household were selected. A total of 3,525 households were approached. The percentage of refusals was 26.1% and the total of nonresponses from among the households was 35.9%. Control calculations indicate that the random selection deviates slightly from information known about young people based on other sources. There is one important area of deviation: the percentage of different racial (non-Dutch) backgrounds, which are hardly represented.
3. This seems to confirm the results of the study carried out by Morgan, Lye, and Condran (1988), which indicated that parents of girls get divorced more often than parents of boys. After a divorce, youngsters often remain with their mother: of single-parent families after divorce, 91% are single-mother and 9% are single-father families. In stepfamilies, 93% are stepfather and 7% stepmother families. The total number of single-parent families in the Netherlands (population 15 million) in 1994 was about 350,000; the number of stepfamilies was about 150,000 (both married and unmarried partners) (van Delft & Niphuis-Nell, 1988). From 1987 to 1993, there were about 30,000 divorces and 20,000 remarriages per year (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1991).

**Table 1 Distribution of youngsters by type of family structure**

n	%	
stable intact family	2038	81.0
conflict intact family	139	5.5
single-parent family after divorce	249	9.9
stepfamily after divorce	91	3.6
total	2517	100.0

**Table 2 Mean scores of youngsters on the well-being variables by type of family structure**

Legend for Chart:

- A - a) stable intact family
- B - b) conflict intact family
- C - c) single-parent family
- D - d) stepfamily
- E - F value
- F - p value
- G - significant contrasts[a]

	A	B	C
	D	E	F
	G		
Physical well-being			
1. physical health	7.56	7.03	6.44
	7.24	F(3,2475) = 17.144	.000
	a, d - c		
Psychological well-being			
2. mental health	7.97	7.76	7.51
	7.66	F(3,2478) = 10.610	.000
	a - c		
3. psychological stress	7.69	7.09	6.89
	7.49	F(3,2472) = 10.255	.000
	a - b, c		
4. suicide thoughts	1.88	1.75	1.74
	1.82	F(3,2513) = 10.470	.000
	a - b, c		
Relational well-being			
5. love pangs	1.24	1.29	1.34
	1.35	F(3,2495) = 2.576	.050
	a - c, d		
6. conflicts with partner	1.07	1.05	1.21
	1.08	F(3,2513) = 9.759	.000
	a, b, d - c		
7. divorce experience	1.03	1.02	1.08
	1.01	F(3,2426) = 8.824	.000
	a, b, d - c		
(Un)employment situation			
8. unemployment experience	0.058	0.014	0.201
	0.044	F(3,2513) = 14.738	.000
	a, b, d - c		
9. experience of being unemployed or incapacitated in the last three years	0.135	0.072	0.279
	0.146	F(3,2489) = 8.934	.000
	a, b - c		

Scheffe analysis was used to check which of the categories differ significantly. For example, a,b,d - c means that there is no significant mutual difference between types a, b and d. However, there is a significant difference between type c and the other types.

**Table 3 F and p values of the relationships between type of family structure and the well-being variables, controlling for the covariates**

Legend for Chart:

A - F value  
 B - p value of the covariates, family

C - p value of the covariates, income  
 D - p value of the covariates, sex  
 E - p value of the covariates, age  
 F - p value of the covariates, education

	A	B
	C	D
	E	F
Physical well-being		
I. physical health	F(3,1821) = 13.07 (p = .000)	.006
	.000	.115
	.115	
Psychological well-being		
2. mental health	F(3,1821) = 6.76 (p = .000)	.041
	.163	.025
	.822	
3. psychological stress	F(3,1821) = 8.10 (p = .000)	.023
	.000	.010
	.297	
4. suicide thoughts	F(3,1828) = 8.05 (p = .000)	.300
	.100	.004
	.098	
Relational well-being		
5. love pangs	F(3,1793) = 3.00 (p = .029)	.457
	.284	.085
	.424	
6. conflicts with partner	F(3,1793) = 5.63 (p = .001)	.499
	.001	.000
	.040	
7. divorce experience	F(3,1793) = 10.72 (p = .000)	.992
	.003	.000
	.066	
(Un)employment situation		
8. unemployment experience	F(3,1878) = 4.64 (p = .003)	.106
	.011	.000
	.001	
9. experience of being unemployed or incapacitated in the last three years	F(3,1871)=4.28 (p=.005)	.061
	.007	.000
	.000	

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