

Spoilt or deprived? A study on the consequences of post-divorce family configurations for the material well-being of children

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1. Introduction

Different studies have explored the socio-economic and material consequences of divorce for children from the point of view of the parents, and especially the financial consequences for mothers and fathers (Page & Stevens, 2004; Teachman & Paasch, 1994). Studies using a child-perspective are often on the long term: what are the economic consequences for children of divorced parents once they reach adulthood (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001; Frostin, Greenberg & Robins, 2001)? However, in most research, the children's viewpoint is neglected. In this study, we take the living environment from the children as a starting point! Although the material well-being of children confronted with the separation of their parents is surely strongly related to the financial and economic situation of the parents, we believe the material well-being of children is more than a direct outcome of the financial situation of their parents. Using this perspective, the children of divorced parents are more seen as a subject in stead of an object (Van Nuffel, Schillemans, Verschelden, Vettenburg & De Bie, 2004, p.3) .

Besides the focus of existing research on the economic consequences of divorce for adults, studies are often only looking at the consequences for the income or monetary consequences for the ex-partners (Page & Stevens, 2004; Hanson, McLanahan & Thomson, 1998; Lerman, 2002; Andreß, Borghloh, Bröckel, Gieselmann & Hummellsheim, 2006; Poortman, 2000; McManus & Diprete, 2001) or the risk of living in poverty (Aassve, Betti, Mazzuco & Mencarini, 2007; Teachman & Paasch, 1994). Very few studies use a subjective measure of economic well-being (Andreß & Bröckel, 2007) or non-monetary deprivation measures (Aassve, Betti, Mazzuco & Mencarini, 2007).

This study wants to deal with the two deficits in the literature ascribed above by investigating the impact of divorce and post-divorce family arrangements on the material well-being of children, looking at both monetary (e.g. pocket money, earnings from student jobs) and non-monetary issues (e.g. housing, personal possessions, ...). Therefore, children with divorced parents were questioned about various dimensions of their financial & material well-being.

2. The economical impact of a divorce for ex-partners

The financial consequences of divorce are often found to be different for men and women: even after controlling for selection-effects, a divorce or separation is often found to diminish the income and socio-economic status of women, while the economic well-being of divorced men often remains almost equal or even improves (Teachmann & Paasch, 1994; Poortman, 2000; Lerman, 2007). There are however also indications that the negative economic impact of a divorce for men is more situated in the fields of housing, consumer goods, ... in stead of in pure monetary terms (Aassve, Betti, Mazzuco & Mencarini, 2007). This is another reason to look further then the monetary part when studying economic consequences of divorce. Of course, the consequences for both men and women are dependent of their income and labour situation before and after divorce, the custody and allowance arrangements, ...

There are three main explanations for the positive effect of being married or living together as a couple for the economic well-being of individuals: scale advantages, sharing risks and labour division (Lerman, 2002; Corijn 2007 & Jansen, 2008). The fact that women have (more) negative consequences compared to men can be partially explained by a different labour market investment and having the children in custody.

Not all individuals experience (long-term) negative economic consequences of a divorce. Next to an extension of the labour market participation, remarriage or re-cohabitation is a strategy to improve the life standard following divorce (Amato, 2000; Corijn, 2007; Jansen, 2008). Hence, when studying the financial and material consequences of a divorce, it is important to know whether the ex-partners already started a new relationship, live together with a new partner or remarried.

3. The economical impact of a divorce for children

A study of Petit & Casman (2008) in Flanders shows that intact and step families live more in a house, while single parent families live more in an apartment. All post-divorce families are also more renting a house, while intact families are more often the owners of a house. Especially children in new extended families complain about a lack of space in their home, while mainly children from single-parent families complain about problems with the living environment (noise, pollution, criminality, lack of privacy, unpleasant environment, ...). Concerning family activities and facilities, single parent families go less on a yearly holiday, and in all post-divorce families children less often have access to a computer or the internet.

Research on the specific impact of divorce on the material well-being of children is however scarce. Also the above study of Petit & Casman (2008) is mainly centred around 'adult' measures of economic well-being, extracted to the life of the involved children. However, the negative consequences of divorce for the parents are not necessarily as negative for the children: for example, a parent can try to fulfil all the needs of the children by disproportionably diminishing his own resources or needs (Page & Stevens, 2004, p. 105). In addition, it is possible that parents try to compensate the time and energy that they can not invest in their children with financial/material means, for example by giving more pocket money (Lont & Dronkers, 2002, p. 5). Finally, with the increasing number of children who's parents exercise joint custody following divorce, more and more children still have two sources of financial means following divorce!

In sum, not much is known about the material consequences of divorce for children. This leads us to formulate the following research questions:

1. Does parental divorce has an influence on the material well-being of the involved children?
2. Does the custody arrangement of children following divorce has an influence on their material well-being?
3. Does it makes a difference for the material well-being of the children whether their parents have a new partner?
3. Does it makes a difference for the material well-being of the children whether they have biological, half of step siblings?
4. How is the material well-being of children related to their life satisfaction?

Seen the very few previous studies on this topic, this research is explorative and no hypothesis are formulated.

4. Data

4.1 Sample

To test our research questions, data from 2052 11 to 20 year old Flemish adolescents were gathered, concerning children and their living situation, different dimensions of their well-being (material wellbeing, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, social support, educational achievement ..) and their family relationships. The dataset contains information from a written questionnaire from first, second and third¹ grade pupils from 10 secondary schools in three Flemish provinces. Both Catholic and state system were selected as well as pupils within the general (GES), technical (TES) and vocational (VES) education system.

22 % of the boys and girls (N=443) in the sample experienced a parental divorce, from which 33,12% lives alternately in the two parental households and 40,87 % has often contact with the non-residential parent. These can be compared with children from 'intact families' and children who don't have contact with the non-residential parent.

4.2 Variables

The independent variables are variables related to the family type and custody arrangement following divorce. The information on these variables will be combined in different ways, according to the type of analysis that are run. In a first step, children from so-called 'intact' families will be compared with children with divorced/separated parents. In a next step, a differentiation will be made according to the custody arrangement: children living with only one biological parent following parental divorce and children living alternately with both biological parents following parental divorce will be compared. Third, the children with divorced parents will also be grouped according to whether their residential parent(s) has/have a new partner or not. Finally, also the presence of biological, half and/or step siblings will be taken into account, allowing to make a difference between simple and complex step families.

The dependent variables (Indicators of material well-being and life satisfaction):

For children with divorced parents, these questions were asked for the households of mother and father separately

- Quality of housing:
 - o Own bedroom (no/yes)
 - o Enough space in the house (no/yes)
 - o Type of dwelling (home/apartment)

¹ Also some pupils from the fourth grade filled out the questionnaire

- Home ownership (owner/renter)
- Quality of living environment: damage or graffiti; noise, garbage or junk and crime or violence, questioned on a 4-point scale (never to always).
- Personal belongings (No because of financial reasons/No because of other reasons/Yes: received from both parents/Yes: received from father/Yes: received from mother/Yes: received from somebody else/Yes: own purchase).
 - MP3-player
 - Personal television
 - Cell phone
 - Personal computer or portable
 - Stereo
 - Game console
 - Bicycle
 - Motorbike
- Yearly on vacation? (No because of financial reasons/No because of other reason/Yes).
- Family facilities (No because of financial reasons/No because of other reason/Yes).
 - Computer
 - internet
- Personal budget:
 - Amount of pocket money from respectively mother & father
 - Earnings from student job in school holidays
 - Earnings from student job during school year
- Satisfaction with housing, living environment, family facilities, own possessions and pocket money on a 6-point scale
- How did following aspects change when you compare the situation before and after the divorce of your parents (got worse/stayed equal/got better):
 - Housing
 - Living environment
 - Family facilities
 - Personal belongings
 - Pocket money
 - In general
- Life satisfaction is measured using the Cantrill-ladder (10-point scale)

The control variables are gender, age, educational level of the child, educational level of parents, work situation of parents, years since divorce.

4.3 Analytic strategy

The analysis will consist of studying the association between different classifications of family type and custody arrangement following divorce (see section on independent variables) and different measures of material well-being and the general life satisfaction (see section on dependent variable). Different multivariate techniques will be used for these analyses, depending on the nature of the dependent variable.

5. References

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