

Title: Gender differences in relationships between divorced parents and their adult children: The role of past physical custody arrangements

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Short abstract

Compared with divorced mothers, divorced fathers have less contact and lower quality relationships with their adult children. Sole mother custody being the most prevalent postdivorce arrangement is key in explaining this difference. The rise in joint physical custody (JPC) may, however, level the playing field among younger cohorts. Using recent, longitudinal data of divorced parents from the Netherlands (New Families in the Netherlands), we examine (a) the extent to which there are gender differences in parents' contact with their adult children and the closeness of their relationships, and (b) the role of past custody arrangements in gender differences. NFN traced custody arrangements up to ten years since the parental union dissolution in 2010. As custody arrangements can change over time, we take a dynamic perspective. We assess the effects of ever having sole physical custody (SPC) and ever having JPC, as compared to always being a non-resident parent; as well as the duration spent in SPC and JPC. Preliminary analyses show that there are still gender differences in this cohort: for example, half of mothers reported being very close to the child, while 25% of fathers did so. In subsequent analyses we will address the role of past custody arrangements.

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Background and research questions

Divorce not only has consequences for children, but also for parents (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Whereas mothers typically face economic consequences, in terms of financial declines and falling into poverty (Hogendoorn et al., 2020), fathers experience social losses after divorce. Fathers see their children less often after a divorce, are less involved in their lives and have lower quality relationships with their children (Amato & Booth, 1996; Grätz, 2017; Kalmijn, 2013). This is not only the case in the short term, when children still live at the parental home, but also in the longer term, when children have entered adulthood and have started living independently. Divorced fathers for instance also face a higher risk of losing contact with their children altogether in the longer term (Kalmijn, 2023).

Physical custody arrangements are key in explaining this gender difference. Having custody creates greater opportunities to engage with and be involved with children. And because earlier postdivorce parent-child relationships are important for the relationships that parents have with their adult children later in life (Spaan et al., 2022), custody arrangements set the stage for parent-child relationships when children have left the parental home. Because sole mother physical custody has been (and still is) the most common custody arrangement (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017), divorced fathers have poorer relationships with their adult children than mothers.

The rise in joint physical custody (JPC) in recent decades may have led to a smaller gender difference in the relationship between parents and their adult children among more recent divorce cohorts. Driven by legal reforms and the rise in egalitarian gender roles, arrangements where children live about half of the time with either parent have become increasingly popular in many countries (Hakovirta et al., 2023; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017). This may have increased the father's opportunities to stay involved with the children after divorce, even leading to an increase in their involvement as compared to the predivorce situation (Koster & Castro-Martín, 2021).

So far, most studies have focused on examining parent-child relationships in adulthood for cohorts in which mother custody was by far the most common arrangement, which is not surprising because more equal arrangements as JPC are relatively recent. Hence, most existing datasets contain few adult children who grew up in JPC. In this study, we use unique data from the Netherlands about a more recent divorce cohort that was followed for up to ten years after divorce (New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) survey). By that time, about one quarter of the focal children had left the parental home. This allows us to examine gender differences in parent-child relationships in adulthood for a recent cohort, in which nearly thirty percent of parents opted for JPC at the time of divorce (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017). In addition, as custody arrangements were traced over this ten-year period, we can examine the role of past arrangements for later parent-child relationships. Because custody arrangements, particularly JPC, can change over time, we adopt a dynamic approach and look at trajectories instead of assessing the custody

arrangement at one moment in time. As far as we are aware, this is the first study to assess the role of past custody arrangements for parent-child relationships in a dynamic way using a prospective design.

Our research questions are: (1) is there a gender difference in the extent to which parents have contact with and feel close to their adult children; and (2) what is the role of past custody arrangements for parent-(adult) child relationships and to what extent do these arrangements account for any observed gender differences in relationships? Therefore, we look at both the quantity and quality of parent-child relationships. The custody trajectories can be summarized in several ways. First, we consider whether respondents ever had sole physical custody (SPC), ever had JPC, or always were the non-resident parent (i.e. never had physical custody). Second, we consider the (relative) duration of each custody arrangement from the time of separation until the child left the parental home.

The role of custody arrangements and gender

When children coreside with a parent after divorce there are more opportunities to engage with and build good quality relationships with that parent (Grätz, 2017; Koster & Castro-Martín, 2021). In addition, the longer children coreside with a parent, the more opportunities there are to do so. Sole custody is an arrangement in which children primarily reside with one parent, implying many opportunities to engage with the child. At the other end of the spectrum are parents who do not have custody (i.e., non-resident parents) with few opportunities to build strong relationships. JPC falls in between, as children live part-time in either parental home. SPC parents are thus most likely to build strong relationships with their children during youth, followed by JPC parents and non-resident parents, respectively.

Strong parent-child relationships during youth, in turn, can be seen as investments that may pay off later in life. From a social exchange perspective, earlier investments are expected to be reciprocated later in life (Kalmijn, 2014). In addition, strong relationships during youth may encourage strong family-oriented norms, also implying stronger relationships later in life. Previous research indeed shows a positive association between past parental investments and the strength of parent-child relationships later in life (e.g., Spaan et al., 2022).

When the arguments above are combined and specified toward our measures for past custody arrangements, we hypothesize:

H1. Compared to always being the non-resident parent, ever having had SPC and ever having had JPC are positively associated with parent-child contact and parent-child closeness after the child left the parental home, with effects being stronger for SPC than for JPC.

H2. The longer parents had SPC and the longer parents had JPC arrangements, the more contact parents have with their adult child and the closer is the parent-child relationship.

Gendered custody arrangements are furthermore expected to lead to a gender gap in parent-child relationships. Although JPC has increased in the Netherlands, little over two thirds of parents opt for sole custody for the mother at the time of divorce, while sole father custody is rare, less than 10% (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017). In addition, JPC arrangements are relatively

unstable and often change in the direction of mother custody. Mothers therefore have more opportunities than fathers to invest in their children, in turn leading to stronger relationships in adulthood. Though custody arrangements are likely key, other factors may also imply gender differences. For example, mothers are often kinkeepers, who facilitate relationships between family members (Hornstra & Ivanova, 2023). Regardless of their earlier investments, mothers may therefore also have stronger ties to their children than fathers. We hypothesize:

H3. Divorced mothers have more contact and closer relationships with their adult children after they left the parental home and this gender difference is partly explained by past custody arrangements.

Data & Method

We use data from the three waves of the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) survey, which sampled — from population registers — a cohort of couples who had minor children and divorced or dissolved their cohabiting union in 2010 (Poortman et al., 2014, 2018, 2021). Parents were first interviewed about two years after divorce/separation (2012/2013); the second and third waves were collected, respectively, five (2015/2016) and ten years (2020) after divorce, and included a refreshment sample. Respondents answered questions about the same focal child in all waves and provided extensive information about family life before and after divorce. Our analytical sample consists of parents who participated in both wave 2 and wave 3, and whose children were at least 18 years old and had left the parental home by wave 3 (N=742).

Our outcomes are frequency of contact and perceived closeness of the relationship with the focal child, as reported by the parents in wave 3. For frequency, we use separate measures for three different modes of contact: in person, by telephone and via social media (including Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram, etc), all of them measured in an eight-point scale ranging from “Less than once a year” to “Daily”. Closeness was measured in a five-point scale ranging from “Not close at all” to “Very close”. We construct measures of custody arrangements — most importantly, occurrence and relative duration of different arrangements — based on retrospective reports of where the child lived in each semester since separation.

We deal with potential confounding by adjusting for a set of relevant of demographic attributes (e.g. education of both parents, age of child at separation) and aspects of family life before and after separation (e.g. level of conflict between parents, repartnering of either parent). There are specific methodological challenges in studying the effects of custody in a dynamic way, i.e., by focusing on *trajectories*. Notably, time-varying covariates can both confound and mediate the relationship between custody and the outcomes of interest (Wodtke et al., 2011). To address these challenges, we estimate marginal structural models using inverse probability of treatment weights (IPTW), a strategy that allows for proper inference under dynamic treatment regimes (for early sociological applications, see e.g. Wodtke et al., 2011; Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

Preliminary findings

Figure 1 shows histograms of our three measures of parent-child contact as reported by mothers

and fathers. First, it is clear that contact via social media is the most frequent, which highlights the importance of accounting for different modes of contact when assessing parent-child relationships. Second, mothers have more frequent contact with children in each of the modes: for example, about 80% of mothers report “Several times per week” or “Daily” contact via social media, compared to about half of fathers. The gender differences are also apparent in the perceived closeness of the relationship, as shown in Figure 2: about half of mothers said they were very close to the child, while only 25% of fathers did so. Our subsequent analyses will further explore these differences and address the role of past custody arrangements.

Figure 1 – Frequency of contact between respondent and adult child, by mode of contact and respondent’s gender

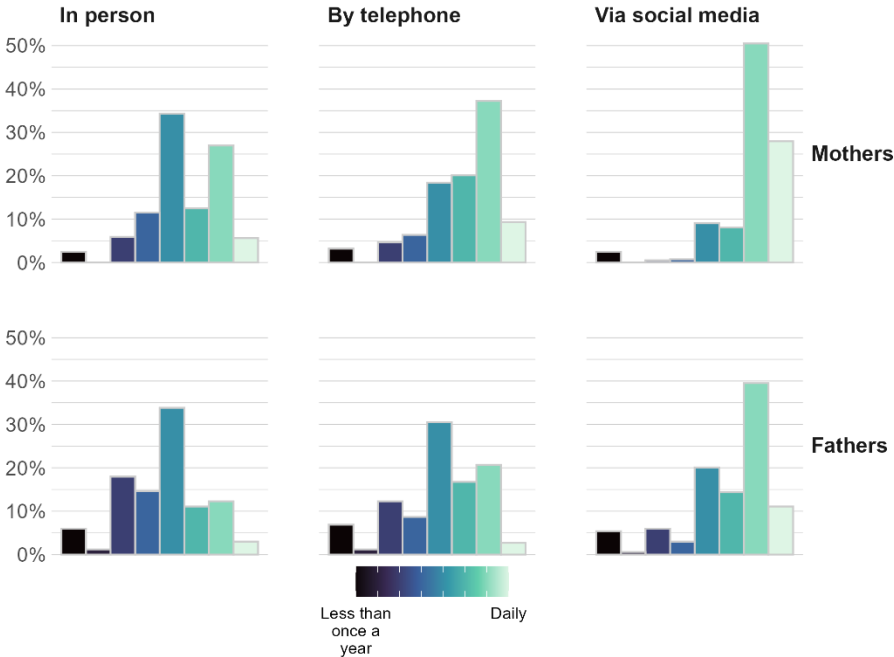
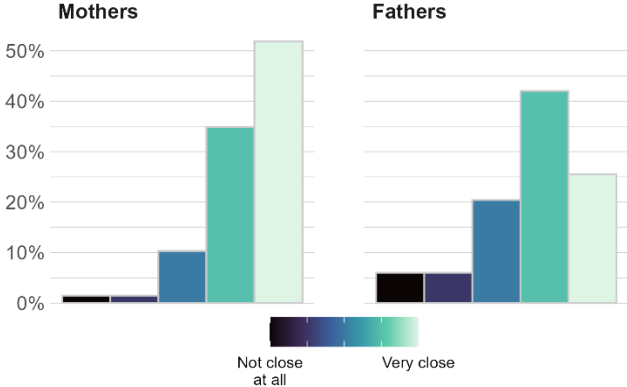


Figure 2 – Closeness of the relationship between respondent and adult child, by respondent’s gender



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