The Effects of Parental Conflicts and Divorce on the Well-Being of Pupils in Dutch Secondary Education

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The conclusions of this article, investigating the well-being of Dutch youth with a large national sample of more than 9000 pupils in Dutch secondary education, are: 1. The well-being of pupils living in single-mother families is higher than that of pupils living in two-parent families with much parental conflict; 2. The well-being of pupils living in single-mother families with no parental conflict and with much contact with the departed father is lower than that of pupils living in two-parent families without parental conflict; 3. The degree of parental conflict after divorce is more important for the well-being of the children than the degree of contact with the departed father.

Introduction

In their survey of the effects of parental divorce on the well-being of children in the USA, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994: 9) formulated two questions that had to be asked with regard to the possible consequences of growing up in single-parent families[1] for the children:

1. Are children who were raised by only one natural parent less successful in adulthood, on average, than comparable children raised by both natural parents under comparable circumstances (income, education, etc.)?
2. Would children raised by only one natural parent have been more successful in adulthood if their parents had not divorced?

By using data collected in the USA, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994: 9) demonstrated very clearly that the first question must be answered positively (for an extensive review see Amato and Keith, 1991). Clear but smaller negative effects of growing up in single-mother families on the well-being of children were also found in the Netherlands (Borgers, Dronkers, and Van Praag, 1996; Bosman and Louwens, 1984, 1988; Bosman, 1993; Dronkers, 1994; Spruijt 1993; Spruijt and de Goede, 1996). These Dutch effects correspond to the effects found in other European countries. Kiernan (1992) analysed the effect of single-parent families (caused either by divorce or death) on school dropout rates in England. She found negative results, and they were stronger for single-parent families caused by divorce than for single-parent families caused by death (see also Cherlin *et al.*, 1991).

In Germany, Heekerens (1987) compared girls from two-parent families with those from single-mother families and found only a few differences. However, Diekmann and Engelhardt (1995) found a significant effect of parental divorce on the divorce risks of their children in Germany. Oggenfuss (1984) compared longitudinally children from single- and two-parent families during their educational and occupational life course in Zürich (Switzerland) and found lower educational attainment and an early occupational start for children from single-parent families. McNab and Murray (1985) found a pattern of lower achievement, particularly in mathematics, by Swedish children living with single mothers. Murray and Sandqvist (1990) found that Swedish children with single mothers, at the age of

13, scored lower on educational attitudes and achievement measures in late childhood, selected less demanding courses in junior high school, and had lower levels of educational attainment at the age of 21 compared with children with two parents. However, some of these European results appear to show smaller effects than those found in the USA (Borgers, Dronkers, and Van Praag, 1996), suggesting that studies on the effects of divorce from the USA are not automatically applicable to European societies.

The second question formulated by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994: 11) is more difficult to answer and, at the same time, more controversial:

> To really answer the question, we would need to run an experiment that randomly assigns people to two- and one-parent families. Otherwise, we cannot rule out the possibility that some third variable is both causing parents to live apart and causing children to do worse in school. Adjusting for known characteristics reduces the possibility that family structure is serving as a proxy for some other variable, but it does not eliminate the possibility.

An obvious third factor is the serious conflict between the two parents, which can lead to divorce. With regard to this factor McLanahan and Sandefur (1994: 30–1) state the following:

Parental conflict is often cited as a cause of both family disruption and the loss of parental resources. Before we can say that parental conflict is the principal explanation for why children from divorced families are less successful than children from intact families, several factors must be taken into account. First, we must know something about the source and the degree of conflict. Second, we need to ask whether the parents' separation puts an end to conflict or whether it increases conflict. Third, the effects of conflict must be evaluated along with other factors that are triggered by family disruption.

These two authors do not say much about the significance of parental conflict and about research concerned with it, but their study suggests that they did not see parental conflict as an important factor. Acock and Demo (1994: 45), on the other hand, find that 'reviews of the USA literature demonstrate that it is precisely these experiences – conflicts in marital and parent–child relationships – that mediate the effect of family structure on children's well-being'.

There are hardly any European empirical studies dealing with the second question formulated by McLanahan and Sandefur. Only one Swedish study (Gähler, 1994), that makes a distinction between growing up in two-parent families with serious marital conflicts between the parents, and growing up in single-mother families caused by divorce, reports that growing up with a bad relationship between the non-divorced parents has a stronger negative effect on children's well-being than growing up in a single-mother family caused by divorce.

Objective of the Article

The aim of this article is to verify empirically for a European society to what extent a bad relationship between non-divorced parents has a stronger negative effect on the well-being of pupils in secondary education than growing up in a single-mother family. Given the differences in effects of parental divorce on children between the USA and European societies, there might also be differences in the effects of parental conflicts and divorce on their children. The answer to the second question formulated by McLanahan and Sandefur must be negative for the Netherlands, if the level of well-being of pupils in Dutch secondary education whose non-divorced parents have serious conflicts is lower than the level of well-being of comparable children in Dutch secondary education raised in single-mother families. If there is no difference in the level of well-being, or if the level of well-being of the children of divorced parents is lower, the answer should be positive.

Further differentiations within the single-mother category will be made in order to go more deeply into McLanahan and Sandefur's three annotations of the conflict explanation. This will be achieved by dividing the single-mother families into single-mother families with and without continuous conflict between ex-partners. Subsequently, the well-being of secondary-school pupils from different family types will be compared, after controlling for relevant characteristics.

It is true that we have not carried out an experiment like the hypothetical one suggested in the

article by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994: 11), but this differentiation between single- and two-parent families, based on the degree of conflict between (ex-)partners has never been made in any European study that has investigated the influence of parental conflict before and after divorce, except the Swedish study by Gähler (1994).

Another reservation must also be stated. In this research we use cross-sectional data, whereas longitudinal data, by means of which the well-being of a large number of pupils and the way the relations between their parents develop are studied over a longer period of time, are actually more suitable for trying to provide an answer to McLanahan and Sandefur's second question. As a consequence, the causality of any differences that are found is questionable. One can argue that a child's poor state of well-being (measured in terms of durg use or bad health) can stimulate serious conflicts between its parents, instead of the causality assumed by McLanahan and Sandefur (serious conflicts between parents and/or divorce result in negative impact on their children). Although the former causality of the relationship between parental conflict and children's well-being might be relevant, it is difficult to assume that it is more important than the latter causality. One can also argue that parental conflicts before divorce are something completely different from parental conflicts after divorce. Although this difference in the nature of parental conflict might be relevant from the perspective of the adults, one can doubt whether that difference is relevant from the perspective of the children.

Another reservation is that the degree of parental conflict before the divorce is not measured, but we have only the extent of post-divorce quarrels in single-parent families, although the former might be more consequential than the latter. In any case, a study with cross-sectional data cannot distinguish between these two possible causalities or the difference in the nature and measurement of parental conflict before and after the divorce, only an longitudinal study can provide answers to questions like these. The data necessary for such a longitudinal study are still lacking in Europe. We hope that the outcomes of this research will promote the building and analysis of these longitudinal data.

Hypotheses

There is an extensive literature in the USA about the possible causes of the negative effects of parental conflicts and divorce on the well-being of their children. Recent important reviews of this literature are those by Acock and Demo (1994), Amato and Keith (1991), Amato and Booth (1991), McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), and Simons *et al.* (1996). We will not reiterate these reviews here, nor summarize their most important conclusions. But we have used these literature and reviews to formulate our hypotheses.

The aim of these hypotheses is not the explanation of all differences in well-being among secondary-school pupils as such. Control variables are only used to avoid spurious conclusions about differences in well-being between different groups of secondary-school pupils. Neither is the aim of these hypotheses to estimate the effects of parental conflicts and divorce on the well-being of children, among other factors. The aim of these hypotheses is to make a systematic comparison between of the well-being of different groups of secondary-school pupils, in order to begin to answer the question posed by McLanahan and Sandefur.

The following hypotheses will be tested:

H1 The well-being of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict is higher than that of pupils from two-parent families with some parental conflict, and again higher than that of pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict.

The reasons given in the literature for this hypothesis are self-evident: conflict between the parents will affect the effectiveness of the child-rearing process, thus affecting children's well-being, because much time and energy are spent on quarrelling. Another reason is that adolescents are more or less intentionally used in parental conflict, and they in turn use this conflict for their own purposes. Lastly, children witnessing parental battles may be more consumed by anxiety, fear, withdrawal, or self-blame. If this hypothesis is correct, we can assume that our subjective indicators of well-being and parental conflict are reliable and that the rejection of the other hypotheses cannot be explained by unreliable indicators.

H2 The well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school pupils raised in two-parent families with much parental conflict.

The reason for this hypothesis is our assumption that, due to the diminished daily contact between the parents as a consequence of divorce, the average intensity and frequency of conflict between them will diminish, which will lead to greater effectiveness of the child-rearing process, thus increasing the level of children's well-being. The lesser intensity and frequency of conflict between the divorced parents will leave more time and energy for the children, who will be used less in their parents' conflicts, and thus will be less able to use these conflicts for their own purposes. Children who no longer witness the conflicts between their divorced parents may be less consumed by anxiety, fear, withdrawal, or self-blame than children who have to witness the serious quarrels of their non-divorced parents.

H3 The well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in single-mother families is lower than that of pupils raised in two-parent families without parental conflict.

The reason for this hypothesis is a combination of two considerations. Parental divorce can affect the effectiveness of child-rearing, because neither parents' authority nor children's confidence in their parents can ever be restored to the former level. As a consequence of the probability of a less profitable division of available financial means between two households, the average financial and social position of the single-mother family will be weaker than it used to be before divorce (Sörensen, 1994). Also, the anxiety, fear, withdrawal, or self-blame of children, caused by the parental divorce, may have become permanent. Therefore, the average level of well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families is lower than that of secondary-school pupils from comparable two-parent families without parental conflict.

H4 The well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in single-mother families in which ex-partners have been able to solve their conflicts is higher than that of pupils raised in single-mother families in which ex-partners continue their conflicts after their divorce.

The reason for this hypothesis is a consequence of the first hypothesis. On-going conflicts between parents can continue to affect the effectiveness of the child-rearing process after divorce, because much time and energy will be spent on quarrelling and also because, more or less intentionally, the offspring will be used in this conflict, and may in turn use it for their own purposes. Also, children witnessing parental battles may be more consumed by anxiety, fear, withdrawal, or self-blame.

The power of the negative effect of living in a single-mother family can depend on the amount of time elapsed since the divorce. On the one hand, if the divorce took place long ago, parents and children might have had the time to adjust to the new situation. The conflicts and tension related to divorce lie far behind them, and they might have begun to feel the advantages of the separation (for example, parental conflict may have diminished or even disappeared). The literature indicates that the first 18 months after divorce are the most difficult for mother and children, because in that period the most painful part of the adaptation process must take place. On the other hand, the longer the post-divorce period is, the more strongly they may have been affected by the negative aspects of living in a single-mother family (for example, the poor financial situation, weaker parental authority, etc.) and this could eventually have a stronger negative effect. Bosch *et al.* (1994) found indications that, in the Netherlands too, parental divorce has lasting effects on adult children's behaviour, after controlling for relevant characteristics. Children from single-mother families get married and have their first child at younger ages. It is therefore important to differentiate between the average well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in recently formed single-mother families and that of secondary-school pupils raised in longstanding single-mother families.

This leads to the following hypotheses:

H5 The well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in longstanding single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school pupils raised in recently formed single-mother families.

The reason for this hypothesis is that, in the long run, the positive effects of parental divorce will be stronger than the negative ones because, within a European social welfare system, the financial and social situation of single-mother families is not as

bad as in North America. Therefore, the effectiveness of the child-rearing process and the family's financial and social position could improve to some extent in the long run.

H6 The well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in longstanding single-mother families is equal to that of secondary-school pupils raised in former single-mother families in which the parent has remarried or cohabits with a new partner.

The longer the post-divorce period, the greater the chance that single-mother families will become two-parent families again, because the parent who has been left behind with the children will remarry or will start living together with a new partner. If we assume that, by means of (self-)selection, parents who remarry or cohabit with a new partner are better adjusted to post-divorce circumstances, this means that the average well-being of secondary-school pupils raised in former single-mother families caused by divorce, in which the parent has remarried, must be higher than that of secondary-school pupils raised in single-mother families in which the parent is still single. On the other hand, introducing a new partner into the family could become a new source of tension for the children, and that might result in lower levels of well-being for secondary-school pupils raised in former single-mother families compared to secondary-school pupils raised in longstanding single-mother families.

Data and Methods

In this article we use data from the Pupil Survey 1994 conducted by the Dutch National Institute for Budget Research (NIBUD) in collaboration with the SCO-Kohnstamm Institute and the Foundation for Economic Research, both of the University of Amsterdam, and the Social Cultural Planning Office at the end of the year 1994. The survey involved a sample of 25 000 secondary-school pupils. During school hours, these pupils were asked to fill out a written questionnaire containing a large number of questions about school, home, incomes, spending, the way they handled money, the way they spent their time, school and study, about living independently, work, political preferences, and religious convictions, and about health and well-being. 17 770 pupils returned usable questionnaires which were then processed. Finally, this database was reweighed on the characteristics 'province of residence', 'denomination of the school', and the combination 'school type'and 'grade', in order to make it representative of the total population of pupils in secondary education (Warnaar, 1995).

Our questionnaire contains items about the family category in which the pupil was growing up at the time of the survey. We have no information about family categories in which the pupils had lived earlier, but we have information about the time elapsed since their parents' divorce (see below). The pupil could choose between the following categories: two-parent family (father, mother, and children), single-mother family, and single-father family. We have eliminated all pupils who said they no longer lived at home, as well as those who lived in other kinds of families than the ones mentioned before (foster families or children's homes). We have also deleted all pupils living in single-father families, because selection processes make them different from single-mother families. The pupils also had to answer whether the father and the mother of the family in which they lived were both their natural parents. If the answer was negative the pupil had to explain what had happened to his or her natural parents (divorced or deceased) and how old he or she was when it happened. We have deleted all pupils one of whose natural parents was dead.

As the age of the pupil was known, we could calculate how many years had elapsed since parental divorce. So it was possible to differentiate between recently formed and longstanding (ex-)single-parent families. We define recently formed (ex-)single-parent families as those that have existed for less than three years, and we define longstanding single-parent families as those that have existed for longer than three years. This life is chosen because of the intensely difficult adjustment period of 18 months ensuing after parental divorce.

The pupil was also asked how often he or she had contact with the departed father (less than once a month, once a month, twice a month, one time each week, more than once a week). Two groups were distinguished: little contact (twice a month or less), much contact (once a week or more often). This differentiation corresponds with the most common

arrangements concerning parental access existing in the Netherlands between children and their departed father, which is twice a month. In the last part of the questionnaire the pupils had to answer whether there had been any serious quarrels between their parents in the last year on a scale (never, once or twice, sometimes, often, very often). Three groups of two-parent families were distinguished: no quarrels, few quarrels (once or twice, sometimes), frequent quarrels (often, very often). The percentage of secondary-school pupils who said that both their natural parents had quarrelled seriously once or more during the past year is 36 per cent.

The answers to these questions enabled us to distinguish nine family categories, in which secondary-school pupils grow up: two-parent families without parental conflict; two-parent families with some degree of parental conflict; two-parent families with much parental conflict; recently formed single-mother families without parental conflict; recently formed single-mother families with parental conflict; longstanding single-mother families without parental conflict; longstanding single-mother families with parental conflict; longstanding ex-single-parent families without parental conflict; longstanding ex-single-parent families with parental conflict. As there were hardly any step-parent families for which the period between divorce and remarriage was shorter than three years, these families were not included in our analysis. We could not differentiate on the factor 'natural parent' within step-parent families, as we did not have sufficient data.

We have also eliminated pupils younger than 14 years of age because we are not sure whether pupils of that young age will underestimate the degree of parental conflict (there are indications that these young pupils did underestimate their parental conflicts). The few secondary-school pupils older than 21 have also been eliminated. Finally, we have included only those pupils who were born in the Netherlands, have Dutch nationality, and consider themselves Dutch, in order to avoid biased results caused by differences in cultural traditions (such as Islamic or Caribbean traditions).

All these selections (children living in single-father families, in foster or children's homes; children one of whose parents had died; pupils who didn't answer the question about the amount of conflict between their (divorced) parents; pupils younger than 14 or older than 21 years of age; pupils who were not born in the Netherlands, did not have Dutch nationality, or did not consider themselves to be Dutch) reduced the number of usable questionnaires from 17 770 to 9816.

Considering the interval character of the indicators, multivariate regression analysis (ordinary least squares) was applied. The missing values were replaced by the means of valid scores on the relevant variables. For reasons of space, we will not show all parameters of the independent and control variables.

Indicators of Well-Being

Our choice of the subjective indicators of well-being are comparable with the indicators of well-being for children from single-mother families used by Acock and Demo, by McLanahan and Sandefur, and by Simons *et al.* These seven indicators are coded in such a way that a high score means a low degree of well-being:

1. *Use of Drugs*: this scale represents the sum of four questions referring to the use of tranquillizers, soft drugs, mind-expanding drugs, and hard drugs in the last 12 months (0 = never used; 4 = used all types of drugs). Cronbach alpha for this scale is not high, but acceptable: 0.60.
2. *Illness*: this scale represents the sum of nine questions that refer to the frequencies of nine types of illness during the last 12 months (0 = never been ill). Cronbach alpha for this scale is not high, but acceptable: 0.65.
3. *Violence and crime*: this scale represents the sum of thirteen questions about the frequencies of taking part in thirteen types of violence and crime during the last 12 months (0 = never been involved). Cronbach alpha for this scale is satisfactory: 0.76.
4. *Depression*: this scale represents the sum of 31 questions on which the pupil had to indicate whether a certain statement applied to him or her (62 = lowest psychical well-being; 31 = highest psychical well-being). This scale has been developed by Kienhorst (1988: 75–86) and is composed of items from six subscales (Self-rating

Depression Scale, Depression Adjective Check List, Hopelessness Scale, Self-esteem Scale, Family Scale, Rational Behaviour Inventory). Cronbach alpha for the scale is satisfactory: 0.78.

5. *School failure* compared with that of a pupil's classmates. The answers run from success in school (1) to failure in school (5).
6. The frequency of *school truancy* during the past month, running from zero (never) to 31 (every day).
7. *Thoughts about suicide* during the past year. The answers run from never (1) to very often (5).

Control Variables

The following control variables were used to control for possible differences in characteristics between pupils from two-parent families and those from single-mother families:

1. School type attended by the pupil, ranging from the lowest type (junior vocational school) to the highest type (grammar school);
2. Age of the pupil (14 to 21 years);
3. Gender of the pupil;
4. Urbanization level in the area in which the pupil lives, ranging from countryside to city;
5. Educational level of the father and of the mother separately, ranging from the lowest level (primary education) to the highest level (university);
6. Number of hours the mother spends working outside the household;
7. Significance of religion in the pupil's life;
8. Number of brothers and sisters, both within and outside the family in which the pupil lives;
9. Occupational level of the father (low, average, or high).

Results

Two-Parent Families, Mother Families, and Parental Conflict

We will begin the analysis by including the total number of two-parent families, all single-mother families, and all step-families caused by parental divorce, combined with the *parental conflict* variable. This leads to nine family categories. The mean scores on the seven indicators of well-being exhibited by secondary-school pupils are given in Table 1. The variance between groups is significant on all indicators, but this does not mean that these between-group differences are important. The Eta^2 values are indicated at the bottom of the table. These values can be interpreted as percentages of variance of the indicator concerned, explained by the nine family categories. They explain a substantial amount of variance in depression, thoughts about suicide, and frequency of illness. Secondary-school pupils with frequently quarrelling non-divorced parents mostly score lowest on the seven well-being indicators, generally even lower than secondary-school pupils from single-mother families headed by the mother or children from step-families.

Table 1. *Average scores on the seven indicators of well-being for the nine categories of families, divided according to the degree of parental conflict*

	Drugs	Illness	Violence	Depression	Failure	Truancy	Suicide	N
2-parent no conflict	4.2	13.9	2.7	53.8	3.0	1.0	1.2	5461
2-parent some conflict	4.3	18.3	3.5	56.3	3.0	1.5	1.4	3275
2-parent much conflict	4.6	26.0	5.7	59.2	3.2	1.4	1.9	399
Mother recently conflict	4.7	27.2	5.3	58.5	3.4	1.4	1.7	94
Mother recently no conflict	4.3	20.3	2.2	55.8	2.7	0.7	1.3	52
Mother long conflict	4.4	25.8	4.3	57.7	3.1	1.7	1.7	127
Mother long no conflict	4.5	20.0	4.1	56.0	3.1	1.5	1.4	207
Step long conflict	4.6	24.8	5.9	57.9	3.2	1.7	1.7	114
Step long no conflict	4.4	15.8	6.0	55.1	3.2	1.0	1.3	87
Average total population	4.3	16.4	3.2	55.6	3.0	1.2	1.3	
S.d. for total population	0.8	18.7	13.1	4.4	0.8	3.0	0.7	
Valid N (weigh)	9202	8702	9106	8865	9777	9162	9717	9816
Eta^2	0.02	0.03	0.00	0.06	0.01	0.01	0.04	

Table 2 shows to what extent these differences remain significant after controlling for differences in characteristics of parents and children. Table 2 indicates the standardized parameters of the family categories after adding the above-mentioned control variables. To determine the significance of differences between the different categories we use different reference categories in the different sections of Table 2. In each section the parameters indicate to what extent the scores of the pupils in the respective category differ from the scores of the pupils in the reference category, after controlling for differences in characteristics. A negative effect means that the well-being of those pupils is higher than that of pupils in the reference category.[2]

The first hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils in two-parent families without parental conflict is higher than that of secondary-school pupils in two-parent families with some degree of parental conflict, and the well-being of the latter is higher than that of secondary-school pupils in two-parent families with much parental conflict) is confirmed in the first section of Table 2, where two-parent families with much parental conflict form the reference category. Apart from school truancy, the level of well-being exhibited by secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with a low degree of parental conflict and by those from two-parent families without parental conflict is higher on all indicators. Differences in well-being between pupils from two-parent families with a low degree of parental conflict and those from two-parent families without parental conflict are also significant in most cases (see the fifth section of Table 2).

The second hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict) is partly confirmed in Table 2. In the first section it appears that in 18 out of 42 cases the well-being of secondary-school pupils in all single-mother families (including step-parent families) is significantly higher than that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict (particularly on 'thoughts about suicide' and 'depression'). Only on one indicator (school failure) does it appear to be lower (recently formed mother-families with parental conflict). Thus, in 24 cases there is no significant difference between the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families and that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict.

The third hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families is lower than that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict) is confirmed by the first line of the second section of Table 2. On almost all indicators except one (school failure) the well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding mother-families without parental conflict lies significantly lower than that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict. However, the second hypothesis has not been confirmed for secondary-school pupils who grow up in longstanding step-families without parental conflict (the first line in the third section). Except for 'school failure' there are no significant differences between the well-being of these pupils and that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict. The same holds for recently formed mother-families without parental conflict (the first line of the fourth section).

The final section of Table 2 shows that the greatest differences have been found between the well-being of secondary-school pupils from (ex-)single-mother families with parental conflict and that of pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict, whereas differences between the well-being of secondary-school pupils from (ex-)single-mother families without parental conflict and that of children from two-parent families without parental conflict are minimal. McLanahan and Sandefur's annotation ('Does parental conflict end after divorce?') is thus correct. In situations where parents continue to quarrel seriously after divorce (although the nature of the conflict might be changed), the well-being of their children will be lower. The third hypothesis has been confirmed, particularly for children whose divorced parents continue to quarrel.

The fourth hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families in which ex-partners have been able to solve their conflict is higher than that of pupils from single-mother families in which ex-partners continue to quarrel after divorce) is, on the whole,

Table 2. *The parameters of the nine categories of families (divided according to parental conflict) on the seven well-being indicators, controlled for other characteristics of parents and pupils*

	Drugs	Illness	Violence	Depression	Failure	Truancy	Suicide
I. Two-parents with much conflict as reference category							
1. Two-parent no conflict	−0.19**	−0.25**	−0.14**	−0.45**	−0.16**	−0.06*	−0.40**
2. Two-parent few conflict	−0.12**	−0.14**	−0.10**	−0.27**	−0.13**	0.02	−0.28**
3. Mother recently conflict	0.01	0.00	−0.01	−0.02	0.03*	0.00	−0.03*
4. Mother recently no conflict	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02*	−0.05**	−0.05**	−0.02	−0.05**
5. Mother long conflict	−0.02*	−0.00	−0.02	−0.04**	−0.01	0.01	−0.02*
6. Mother long no conflict	−0.02	−0.04*	−0.02*	−0.09**	−0.03**	0.00	−0.09**
7. Step long conflict	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04**	−0.01	0.02	−0.03**
8. Step long no conflict	−0.02	−0.03**	−0.01	−0.08**	−0.01	−0.01	−0.07**
R^2 total equation	−0.03	0.09	0.03	0.10	−0.02	0.08	0.06
II. Longstanding mother-family without conflict as reference category							
1. Two-parent no conflict	−0.13**	−0.12**	−0.05	−0.12**	−0.05	−0.07*	−0.08*
2. Two-parent few conflict	−0.06	−0.02	−0.02	0.03	−0.01	0.01	0.02
3. Two-parent much conflict	0.02	0.05**	0.03*	0.13**	0.05**	0.00	0.12**
4. Mother recently conflict	0.02	0.03**	0.01	0.05**	0.05**	0.00	0.03**
5. Mother recently no conflict	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	0.00	−0.03*	−0.02	−0.01
6. Mother long conflict	−0.01	0.03**	0.00	0.04**	0.01	0.01	0.05**
7. Step long conflict	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.03*	0.02	0.01	0.03**
8. Step long no conflict	−0.01	−0.01	0.01	−0.02	0.01	−0.02	−0.01
III. Longstanding step-family without conflict as reference category							
1. Two-parent no conflict	−0.08	−0.06	−0.09	−0.04	0.10*	0.01	−0.01
2. Two-parent few conflict	−0.02	−0.04	−0.05	0.11*	−0.07	0.08	0.09
3. Two-parent much conflict	0.04	0.07**	0.02	0.16**	0.03	0.03	0.16**
4. Mother recently conflict	0.03	0.04**	0.00	0.06**	0.04**	0.02	0.05**
5. Mother recently no conflict	−0.01	0.01	−0.01	0.01	−0.04**	−0.01	0.00
6. Mother long conflict	0.00	0.05**	−0.01	0.06**	0.00	0.03	0.07**
7. Mother long no conflict	0.02	0.02	−0.01	0.02	−0.02	0.02	0.02
8. Step long conflict	0.03	0.03*	0.00	0.05**	0.00	0.03*	0.05**

continued

Table 2. *continued*

	Drugs	Illness	Violence	Depression	Failure	Truancy	Suicide
IV. Recent mother-family without conflict as reference category							
1. Two-parent no conflict	−0.05	−0.11	0.01	−0.11	0.15**	0.06	−0.02
2. Two-parent few conflict	0.02	−0.01	0.04	0.04	0.17**	0.13*	0.08
3. Two-parent much conflict	0.06	0.05	0.06*	0.13**	0.12**	0.05	0.15**
4. Mother recently conflict	0.03*	0.03	0.02	0.05**	0.09**	0.03	0.05**
5. Mother long conflict	0.01	0.03*	0.01	0.04*	0.06**	0.04*	0.06**
6. Mother long no conflict	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.06**	0.04	0.02
7. Step long conflict	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.06**	0.04*	0.05**
8. Step long no conflict	0.01	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.05**	0.01	0.00
V. Two-parents without conflict as reference category							
1. Two-parent few conflict	0.06**	0.10**	0.03**	0.15**	0.03**	0.07**	0.10**
2. Two-parent much conflict	0.07**	0.10**	0.05**	0.18**	0.07**	0.02**	0.16**
3. Mother recently conflict	0.04**	0.05**	0.02	0.07**	0.06**	0.01	0.05**
4. Mother recently no conflict	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02	−0.02*	−0.01	0.00
5. Mother long conflict	0.02*	0.06**	0.01	0.07**	0.02*	0.02*	0.07**
6. Mother long no conflict	0.04**	0.04**	0.02	0.03**	0.01	0.02*	0.02*
7. Step long conflict	0.04**	0.05**	0.02*	0.06**	0.03*	0.03**	0.05**
8. Step long no conflict	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02*	0.00	0.00

**$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

confirmed by the sixth line of the second section in Table 2. The well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding mother-families with parental conflict is significantly lower than that of pupils from longstanding mother-families without parental conflict on scales measuring illness, depression, and thoughts about suicide. The third section of Table 2 (the last line) shows a comparable significant difference between the well-being of children from longstanding step-families with parental conflict and that of children from longstanding step-families without parental conflict (on scales measuring illness, depression, school truancy, and thoughts about suicide). The fourth section (fourth line) shows a similar result for recently formed mother-families. In step- or single-mother families with parental conflict children use drugs more often, exhibit higher levels of depression and school failure, and think about suicide more often than children in comparable families without parental conflict.

The fifth hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school pupils from recently formed single-mother families) has barely been confirmed by the results given in Table 2. Only one significant difference has been found between recently formed mother-families without parental conflict and longstanding mother-families without parental conflict (fifth line, second section; sixth line, fourth section): children in recently formed mother-families estimate their school failure lower than children in longstanding mother-families do. This difference is not in accordance with the fifth hypothesis. An analysis of differences in the well-being of children from recently formed and longstanding mother families with parental conflict (not shown here) indicates that there are no significant differences between children's well-being in these two categories, except for the use of drugs and school failure. In these two cases the fifth hypothesis has been confirmed: pupils with long divorced, quarrelling parents use fewer drugs and have, according to themselves, fewer school failures than children with recently divorced quarrelling parents.

The sixth hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding single-mother families is equal to that of secondary-school pupils in step-families in which the parent has remarried or cohabits with a new partner) is confirmed in the second and third sections of Table 2. There are no significant differences between the well-being of children from longstanding mother-families without parental conflict and that of children from longstanding step-families without parental conflict. An analysis of differences between the well-being of children from longstanding mother-families with parental conflict and that of children from longstanding step-families with parental conflict (not shown here) indicates that these children do not differ in well-being. This result could also be seen as a confirmation of the sixth hypothesis.

The Cumulative Effect of Contact with the Departed Father and Parental Conflict

The amount of contact with the departed father can explain some of the negative effects of living in a single-mother family. If parental conflict continues after the divorce, a large amount of contact between the departed father and the child might lower the pupil's well-being, because this contact might be used by the parents in their conflict. If parental conflict stops after the divorce, a large amount of contact between the departed father and the child might increase the pupil's well-being, because the child can maintain satisfactory relations with both parents and can receive non-threatening help from both parents. In this section we analyse this cumulative effect of the amount of contact with the departed father and parental conflict.

The combination of amount of contact with the departed father with amount of conflict between the divorced parents gives 12 categories of (ex-)single-parent families. The mean scores on well-being indicators are given in Table 3. In Table 4 the differences between the categories are tested for their significance. Table 4 has been constructed in the same way as Table 2. It shows the standardized parameters of the categories after adding the above-mentioned control variables. This table also contains a number of sections in which different categories function as the reference category.

The second hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school

Table 3. *Average scores on seven well-being indicators for 12 categories of (ex-) single-parent families, divided according to conflict and contact with the departed father*

	Drugs	Illness	Violence	Depression	Failure	Truancy	Suicide	N
Mother recently conflict few contact	4.8	37.8	18.5	58.3	3.4	0.6	1.8	16
Mother recently conflict much contact	4.6	24.6	2.3	58.5	3.4	1.6	1.7	78
Mother recently no conflict few contact	4.3	22.2	3.0	56.2	3.1	1.1	1.4	16
Mother recently no conflict much contact	4.3	19.5	1.9	55.7	2.6	0.5	1.2	36
Mother long conflict few contact	4.5	28.7	5.4	58.2	3.0	0.9	2.0	41
Mother long conflict much contact	4.4	24.5	3.8	57.5	3.2	2.0	1.6	86
Mother long no conflict few contact	4.5	20.8	4.0	56.4	3.0	1.6	1.4	103
Mother long no conflict much contact	4.4	19.3	4.2	55.7	3.1	1.5	1.4	104
Step long conflict few contact	4.6	23.5	5.1	58.6	3.1	1.7	1.7	70
Step long conflict much contact	4.6	26.4	7.1	56.8	3.3	1.7	1.5	45
Step long no conflict few contact	4.4	17.4	4.2	55.6	3.2	1.4	1.2	57
Step long no conflict much contact	4.5	12.7	9.3	54.3	3.0	0.4	1.4	30
Eta^2	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.06	0.01	0.01	0.04	

Table 4. *The parameters of 16 categories of families; the (ex-) single-parent families are divided according to the combination of parental conflict and contact with the departed father*

	Drugs	Illness	Violence	Depression	Failure	Truancy	Suicide
I. Two-parents with much conflict as reference category							
1. Two-parent without conflict	−0.19**	−0.25**	−0.14**	−0.45**	−0.16**	−0.06*	−0.40**
2. Two-parent with some conflict	−0.12**	−0.14**	−0.10**	−0.27**	−0.13**	0.02	−0.28**
3. Mother recently conflict few contact	0.01	0.02**	0.04**	−0.01	0.01	−0.01	−0.01
4. Mother recently conflict much contact	0.00	−0.01	−0.03**	−0.01	0.02*	0.01	−0.03*
5. Mother recently no conflict few contact	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.02**	−0.01	−0.01	−0.03**
6. Mother recently no conflict much contact	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.04**	−0.05**	−0.02	−0.05**
7. Mother long conflict few contact	0.00	0.01	−0.01	−0.02	−0.02	0.00	0.01
8. Mother long conflict much contact	−0.02*	0.00	−0.02	−0.03**	−0.01	0.02	−0.03**
9. Mother long no conflict few contact	−0.01	−0.02*	−0.02	−0.06**	−0.03**	0.00	−0.06**
10. Mother long no conflict much contact	−0.02	−0.03**	−0.02	−0.07**	−0.02	0.00	−0.06**
11. Step long conflict few contact	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.02*	−0.01	0.01	−0.02
12. Step long conflict much contact	0.00	0.01	0.00	−0.04**	0.00	0.01	−0.03**
13. Step long no conflict few contact	−0.02	−0.02*	−0.02	−0.05**	0.00	−0.01	−0.06**
14. Step long no conflict much contact	−0.01	−0.03**	0.01	−0.06**	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04**
R^2	0.03	0.09	0.03	0.10	0.02	0.08	0.06
II. Longstanding step-family without conflict and much contact as reference category							
1. Two-parent without conflict	−0.12	0.01	−0.21**	0.06	−0.04	0.07	−0.06
2. Two-parent with some conflict	−0.07	0.11	−0.17**	0.20**	−0.01	0.14	0.05
3. Two-parent with much conflict	0.02	0.10**	−0.03	0.20**	0.05	0.05	0.13**
4. Mother recently conflict few contact	0.02	0.05**	0.04**	0.03**	0.02	0.00	0.02
5. Mother recently conflict much contact	0.01	0.04*	−0.04*	0.08**	0.05*	0.03	0.03
6. Mother recently no conflict few contact	−0.01	0.01	−0.02	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00
7. Mother recently no conflict much contact	−0.01	0.01	−0.03	0.02	−0.03*	0.00	−0.01
8. Mother long conflict few contact	0.00	0.04**	−0.02	0.05**	0.00	0.01	0.05**
9. Mother long conflict much contact	−0.01	0.05*	−0.03	0.06**	0.02	0.04*	0.03
10. Mother long no conflict few contact	0.01	0.03	−0.03	0.04*	0.00	0.03	0.01
11. Mother long no conflict much contact	−0.01	0.03	−0.03	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00
12. Step long conflict few contact	0.01	0.03	−0.02	0.06**	0.01	0.04*	0.04*
13. Step long conflict much contact	0.01	0.04**	−0.01	0.03*	0.02	0.03	0.01
14. Step long no conflict few contact	−0.01	0.02	−0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01	−0.01

continued

Table 4 *continued*

	Drugs	Illness	Violence	Depression	Failure	Truancy	Suicide
III. Longstanding mother-family without conflict and much contact as reference category							
1. Two-parent without conflict	−0.10*	−0.12**	−0.05	−0.10*	−0.06	−0.07	−0.08
2. Two-parent with some conflict	−0.03	−0.02	−0.02	0.06	−0.03	0.01	0.02
3. Two-parent with much conflict	−0.03	0.05**	0.03	0.14**	0.04	0.00	0.13**
4. Mother recently conflict few contact	0.02	0.04**	0.05**	0.02*	0.02	−0.01	0.01
5. Mother recently conflict much contact	0.02	0.02	−0.01	0.05**	0.04**	0.01	0.03*
6. Mother recently no conflict few contact	−0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.01	0.00
7. Mother recently no conflict much contact	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	0.00	−0.04**	−0.02	−0.01
8. Mother long conflict few contact	0.01	0.03*	0.00	0.03*	0.00	−0.01	0.05**
9. Mother long conflict much contact	−0.01	0.02	0.00	0.03**	0.01	0.02	0.03*
10. Mother long no conflict few contact	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.00	0.00
11. Step long conflict few contact	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.04**	0.00	0.01	0.04**
12. Step long conflict much contact	0.01	0.02*	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
13. Step long no conflict few contact	−0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	−0.01	−0.02
14. Step long no conflict much contact	0.00	−0.01	0.02	−0.02	0.00	−0.01	0.00

**$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict) has also been partly confirmed in Table 4. With two exceptions (pupils from recently formed mother-families with parental conflict in which there is not much contact with the departed father experience more violence and are more often ill than pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict), the well-being of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict is equal to, or lower than that of secondary-school pupils from (ex-)single-parent families. For the combination *no parental conflict* and *much contact with the departed father* we notice the greatest difference between the well-being of these pupils (in terms of illness, depression, and thoughts about suicide) and that of pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict (third line in the second and third section).

On the other hand, there appears to be no significant difference between the well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding mother-families with parental conflict and not much contact with the departed father and that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict (seventh line in first section of Table 4). The eighth line in the first section indicates that three indicators (use of drugs, depression, and thoughts about suicide) of well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding mother-families with much parental conflict and much contact with the departed father is higher than that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families with much parental conflict. This shows that much contact with the departed father can have a positive influence on the child's well-being, even if there is much parental conflict in the family.

The third hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families is lower than that of secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict) is confirmed by the first line in the second section of Table 4. Secondary-school pupils from longstanding step-families without parental conflict and much contact with the departed father exhibit a lower level of well-being than secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without parental conflict on one indicator (experiencing violence). Secondary-school pupils from longstanding mother-families without parental conflict and much contact with the departed father score lower on three indicators (use of drugs, illness, and depression) than secondary-school pupils from two-parent families without conflict (first line in third section of Table 4). These two family categories show the smallest differences in well-being compared to the two-parent category; other categories show more, and larger, differences in well-being. This suggests that more contact with the departed father increases the pupil's well-being, but only if parental conflict has ceased.

The fourth hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families without parental conflict is higher than that of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families with parental conflict) is partly confirmed by the 13th line of the second section of Table 4 for longstanding step-families with much contact with the departed father. Secondary-school pupils from longstanding step-families with parental conflict and much contact with the departed father exhibit a lower level of well-being on two indicators (illness and depression). The fourth hypothesis is also partly confirmed by longstanding mother-families in which the child has much contact with the departed father (ninth line in the third section of Table 4). On two indicators (depression and thoughts about suicide) pupils have a lower well-being if their parents continue their conflicts, despite the contact with the departed father.

Analyses (not shown here) indicate that secondary-school pupils from longstanding mother-families in which there is not much contact with the departed father and no parental conflict score better on two indicators (illness, thoughts about suicide) than secondary-school pupils from comparable families with parental conflict. The difference in outcomes between the third and the fifth lines of the first section of Table 4 (recently formed mother-families in which there is not much contact with the departed father) appears to be in favour of the fourth hypothesis: if there are any differences, they appear to be to the advantage of secondary-school pupils in families without parental conflict. The same goes for the difference between the fourth and the sixth lines of the first section of Table 4. The importance of contact with the departed father is only supported for the category of recently formed mother-families. The

difference in outcomes between the third and fourth lines of the first section in Table 4 shows that the well-being of pupils is lower for those pupils with a small amount of contact with the departed father, although the amount of parental conflict in these two family categories is the same. Something similar appears from the difference between the fifth and the sixth lines of the first section in Table 4. The fourth hypothesis appears to apply in all situations, whereas the importance of contact with the departed father is only clear in recently existent mother-families.

The fifth hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school pupils from recently formed single-mother families) has only barely been confirmed by the results of Table 4. The seventh line of the third section shows that on just one indicator (school failure) there is a significant difference, but that this difference contradicts the fifth hypothesis. The fourth line of the last section shows only one significant difference in well-being between recently formed and longstanding mother-families with parental conflict and not much contact with the departed father (more violence of pupils in recently formed mother-families).

The sixth hypothesis (the well-being of secondary-school pupils from longstanding single-mother families is higher than that of secondary-school pupils from ex-single-parent families in which the parent has remarried or cohabits with a new partner) has been confirmed by the 11th line of the second section of Table 4. There are no significant differences in the well-being by secondary-school pupils from comparable family categories when the only difference is that the remaining parent has remarried or lives together with a new partner.

Conclusion and Discussion

Given the acceptance of our second hypothesis, the second question posed by McLanahan and Sandefur can temporarily be answered negatively: 'secondary-school pupils raised by only one natural parent exhibit a higher level of well-being than they would have exhibited if their seriously quarrelling parents had remained together.' This answer holds true only for frequent and very frequent serious parental quarrels. In the case of one or two serious quarrels per year, the interim answer to the second question is positive: 'secondary-school pupils raised by only one natural parent exhibit a lower level of well-being than they would have exhibited if their not so seriously quarrelling parents had remained together.'

The annotation by McLanahan and Sandefur with regard to parental conflict should be regarded as the most important issue. The seriousness and frequency of parental conflict must be included in the analysis, because the degree of conflict appears to be relevant in explaining the well-being of their children. Therefore, the other annotation by McLanahan and Sandefur is also correct. If divorce cannot put an end to quarrels between ex-partners, children's well-being will be improved much less by divorce. However, even in the worst case, the well-being of secondary-school pupils from single-mother families with continuing parental conflict is, in a considerable number of cases, higher than that of secondary-school pupils raised in two-parent families with much parental conflict and, thus, the second question must still be answered negatively.

McLanahan and Sandefur's annotation that one should take stock of the factors triggered by divorce is also correct. Rejection of the fifth hypothesis implies that there are almost no additional long-term positive effects of parental divorce for the well-being of secondary-school pupils, compared to the positive effects of parental divorce in the short term. Acceptance of the sixth hypothesis about step-families also underlines the importance of weighing the negative long-term effects resulting from divorce itself.

Our results indicate that negative effects of parental conflicts and divorce on the well-being of children are not confined to the USA, but can also be found in Europe. These negative effects on the well-being of adolescents are not only found in a short period after the divorce but are also found long after the parental divorce has occurred. These negative effects are clearly connected to the degree of parental conflict after the divorce. This all suggests that young people have their own interests in the handling of parental conflicts and divorce, which do not necessarily correspond with the marital happiness of their parents.

Given the nature of our data this answer is only a temporary one. Analyses with longitudinal data are

necessary to overcome the limitations of our cross-sectional data (problems with causality; differences between parental conflict before and after divorce; subjective versus objective measurement of parental conflict, contact with the departed father, and well-being). However, as long as these longitudinal data are not available, cross-sectional data are the second-best option for us to use to begin addressing questions such as those formulated by McLanahan and Sandefur. Social scientists should not avoid addressing important questions because the ideal data are not yet available, leaving the field of social debate open to far less informed people.

Notes

1. Unless we say expressly otherwise, the single-parent families or the single-mother families discussed in this article are the result of divorce and not of other circumstance (for instance death).
2. We made comparable analyses with four categories of families (two-parents, recent mother-family, long-standing mother-family, and step-family), the mentioned control variables, and parental conflict as the independent variable. These analyses show significant effects of the last three categories of families (with two-parent families as the reference) and significant effects of parental conflict on the well-being of children. We do not present these analyses here because we are primarily interested in the combinations of parental conflict and family-forms on the well-being of the pupils and not in the effect of parental conflict *per se*.

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The more elaborated Dutch version of this article was first presented as a paper for the Dutch Educational Research Meeting in Groningen, 19–21 June 1995. This longer version also gives the results for single-parent families in which secondary-school children live with their father and the mother has departed (so-called single-father families). Shorter Dutch versions of this paper were published in *Comenius* (1996) and *Werkelijkheid van het Recht* (1997). The first more elaborated English version was presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in New York in 1996.

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