

Effects of Family Structure and the Experience of Parental Separation: A Study on Adolescents' Well-Being

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Abstract: Large numbers of studies, mostly from the U.S., have addressed the effects of parental separation and divorce, pointing to disadvantages of children and adolescents growing up in separated families. However, evidence on this topic varies across countries and is limited for Germany. Using longitudinal data from waves 1 and 3 of the German Family Panel pairfam, we investigated differences in adolescents' well-being by comparing stable nuclear families (n = 1968), single mother families (n = 360), and stepfather families (n = 214), as well as an additional smaller group of adolescents whose parents separated between waves 1 and 3 ("prospective separators"; n = 76). Adolescents' satisfaction with different domains of life (family, education/work, and their general life satisfaction) as well as their self-esteem were used as indicators of well-being. A series of multiple regression analyses tested the effects of family structure on well-being at T1 and changes in well-being over time, controlling for various background factors. Furthermore, likely mediation effects of infrequent contact to the non-resident father and economic strain were tested. The findings show (relatively minor) effects of parental separation, namely lower well-being among youth¹ in single mother families compared to nuclear families. Disadvantages of youth in single mother families could only be partly explained by the higher financial strain generally experienced in these families. Youth in stepfather families reported a similar overall well-being as adolescents in nuclear families, but indicated a greater decrease in family satisfaction over time. Pre-separation disadvantages among prospective separators were limited to greater dissatisfaction with school. Infrequent contact with the non-resident father did not affect adolescents' well-being. Effects of family structure did not differ between boys and girls, but maternal education moderated the effects of family structure on adolescents' life satisfaction. Overall, the findings are in line with other evidence from Germany, which points towards only limited disadvantages of youth in separated or divorced families.

Keywords: Parental separation · Divorce · Stepfamily · Adolescent well-being · Economic deprivation

¹ The terms "youth" and "adolescent" are used interchangeably.

1 Introduction

Only few recent changes in family life have received as much public and scientific attention as the increasing instability of marriage. Ever since the “Golden Age of Marriage” of the 1960s started to wane, divorce became a prominent issue not only among demographers and family sociologists, but also among developmental and clinical psychologists seeking to determine the impact of parental divorce for the children involved. Meanwhile, marital instability has increased considerably across many countries – as reflected in the crude divorce rate for Europe (EU-27), which doubled from 1.0 divorces per year per 1 000 inhabitants in 1970 to 2.0 divorces by 2010 (*Eurostat* 2013). At the same time, marriage rates declined, cohabitation increased, and a rising share of children is born to unmarried parents. In the U.S., the percentage of births to unmarried women increased relatively steadily since the 1960s, peaking in 2009 and levelling off since, with 40.6 percent in 2013 (*Curtin et al.* 2014). Other countries show similar trends, albeit at different levels. Given that unmarried childbearing increasingly occurs in cohabiting unions and that such unmarried unions have a higher risk of breakup (e.g. *Liefbroer/Dourleijn* 2006), even when joint children are involved (*Bastin et al.* 2012; *Schnor* 2012), it is no longer only the instability of parents’ marriages, but also the instability of unmarried unions which has become an issue for child development.

Not surprisingly, concerns about the impact of these changes on the next generation are high. However, the focus and theoretical framing have changed over the years. While early studies from the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s (*Hetherington/Stanley-Hagan* 1999) on the effects of parental divorce were largely guided by a common deficit model assuming that children from divorced homes are per se worse off than children from nuclear families, these generalising assumptions proved to be inadequate. The initial methodological approach, which relied on simple comparisons of children’s development in nuclear and separated (single parent) families, also turned out to be insufficient. As pointed out by *Amato* (2010: 661), “focusing on the average effects of divorce masks the substantial degree of variability that exists in people’s adjustment”. Over the past decades, large numbers of studies have contributed to a refined understanding of relevant conditions that may – or may not – occur in the context of divorce and may contribute to or ameliorate the many challenges in children’s and adolescents’ coping with parental breakup (for an overview see *Amato* 2010). Accordingly, understanding the effects of parental breakup has become a complex enterprise.

This paper starts by providing an overview of relevant perspectives, models, and findings focusing on several key issues: the role of economic deprivation in linking family structure to child development, the influence of children’s contact with the non-resident parent on children’s well-being, effects of interparental conflict, the influence of pre-separation stress in families which eventually separate, and costs and benefits of stepfamily formation. The majority of such findings come from the U.S., but we will also look into evidence from Europe, particularly from Germany. The empirical analyses presented here investigate adolescents’ well-being in different family types and address the mediating role of financial hardship and reduced

contact with the non-resident father. We focus particularly on the experience of parental separation in mid- to late adolescence using prospective data from the German family panel pairfam, through which we can address possible strains prior to and following parental separation.

2 Perspectives on the Effects of Divorce

Research on the well-being of children and adolescents in divorced or separated homes has examined a wide variety of consequences, including emotional well-being and mental health (*Chase-Lansdale et al.* 1995; *Strohschein* 2005), behavioural problems and delinquency (*Burt et al.* 2008; *Fergusson et al.* 1992), cognitive competencies (*Sanz-De-Galdeano/Vuri* 2007), academic achievement and educational attainment (*Francesconi et al.* 2010; *Hilmert* 2002), as well as life-course trajectories with respect to home-leaving, employment and earnings, partnership stability, and early childbearing (*Cherlin et al.* 1995; *Ross/Mirowsky* 1999). Given the many empirical studies which address differences in children's well-being by family structure, several meta-analyses have sought to integrate available empirical evidence. In an update of his earlier meta-analysis (*Amato/Keith* 1991), Amato reviewed empirical evidence from studies mainly conducted in the U.S. during the 1990s (*Amato* 2001) and found consistent evidence for overall disadvantages among children from divorced families when compared to children from nuclear families, even though the effect sizes were rather small.

Elaborating on this approach and looking at evidence from Europe, a recent meta-analysis covered 17 studies from Europe (*Amato* 2014), encompassing investigations on behavioural and emotional problems (from Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Greece, Germany, and Norway), research on educational achievement (from Italy and Sweden), studies that have looked at health problems, substance use (alcohol and tobacco), and risky sexual behaviour (from Germany, France, Greece, the Netherlands, and Slovakia), two studies on delinquency (from Denmark) and one study on attachment security (from Germany). Almost all of these studies reported poorer outcomes for children with divorced parents than for children with continuously married parents. The weighted effect (accounting for differences in sample size) revealed a mean value of $-.17$ across all studies – a value which proved small and very similar to the overall effect sizes from American studies. Accordingly, *Amato* (2014: 15) concluded that “irrespective of national and cultural characteristics, the gap between children with divorced and continuously married parents is about the same on both sides of the Atlantic.”

At the same time, there is considerable variability in findings across studies and countries (*Amato/James* 2010). While some authors stress the dramatic consequences which parental breakup may have for the offspring's well-being (*Wallerstein et al.* 1988), others highlight the coping potential in divorced families (*Hetherington/Kelly* 2002). Such divergent views also find support in evidence from Germany: several studies based on large samples did not find higher depressiveness, impaired self-esteem, more problems in peer relations, or increased behaviour problems among

children and adolescents from separated single parent families compared to nuclear families (Walper 2002; Walper/Wendt 2005; Wendt/Walper 2007). Furthermore, a recent study on the effects of parental separation on young children whose parents cohabited, but were not married when the children were born, found no evidence for increased emotional or behavioural problems among those who experienced parental separation (Walper/Langmeyer 2014). Similarly, the large-scale PISA assessment of academic competencies among 15-year-old adolescents did not suggest any differences between youth from single parent and two-parent families in Germany, whereas marked differences were found in other countries, such as the U.S. (Ehmke *et al.* 2004). However, other research conducted in Germany reported increased emotional and behavioural problems for up to two years after parental separation (Schmidt-Denter 2000), an increased likelihood of insecure attachment representation for boys in single parent families (Gloger-Tippelt/König 2007), and – in a clinical sample – more instances of conduct disorder among youth raised in separated single parent families (Steinhausen *et al.* 1987).

In seeking to account for the variability of findings across as well as within samples and to better understand the origin of differences between children from separated and nuclear families, researchers have long pointed out that divorce is not a uniform single event, but typically comes along with other stressors triggered by union dissolution (Amato 2000; Hetherington/Stanley-Hagan 1999). This *divorce-stress-adjustment perspective* views disadvantages among offspring from separated families as caused by divorce-related stressors and differences in coping resources. In contrast, the *selection perspective* cautions against overestimating the causal role of separation and disadvantages and points towards common causes for parental separation and offspring strain (Amato 2000). Both perspectives shall be shortly reviewed.

2.1 Parental Separation as Stressor

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato 2000) points out that parental breakup is neither a uniform nor a single event, but instead is likely to be embedded in a longer series of events and stressors which partly precede but mostly follow separation or divorce. Such stressors differ in prevalence and strength, and they occur in the context of varying coping resources. Both factors – divorce-triggered stressors and the available coping resources – jointly shape the individual experience and outcomes of parental separation.

Prominent divorce-related stressors are (1) economic problems which arise when available financial resources have to cover the expenses of two households, (2) reduced contact to the non-resident parent, and (3) conflict between parents (e.g. about child custody and child-support payments). Findings from many countries have shown that single parenthood is linked to an increased risk of income poverty and downward mobility (Amato 2010), even though effects of family structure on income vary by family policy and welfare programmes, with a weaker effect in Scandinavian countries than in the U.K. and the U.S. (Garriga/Härkönen 2009). Poverty, in turn, has been shown to increase the risk for compromised child development in

terms of health, education, emotional well-being, social relations, and behavioural problems (Conger *et al.* 2000; Duncan/Brooks-Gunn 1997; Walper 2009). In line with the *economic strain hypothesis*, several findings suggest that a large share of the disadvantages found for children in single parent families can be explained by the increased risk of inadequate financial resources (see also Amato 2010; McLanahan 1999), at least in countries where divorce typically leads to financial hardship (Garriga/Härkönen 2009).

Support has also been provided for the *interparental conflict hypothesis*, as children's increased emotional and behavioural problems in divorced families could be largely accounted for by the higher prevalence of intense conflict between separated parents (e.g. Schick 2002). Similarly, looking at subgroups of children with different developmental trajectories after parental separation, more negative trajectories were linked to more severe problems in the post-divorce relationship (Schmidt-Denter 2001). In general, for nuclear as well as for separated families, interparental conflict has been pointed out as a major stressor for children, because it is likely to spill over into parenting (Buehler/Gerard 2002; Erel/Burman 1995), contributes to loyalty conflicts, and undermines children's emotional security in the family system (Davies *et al.* 2002; Walper/Beckh 2006). However, since post-divorce conflict may have its roots in pre-separation marital problems, it is less clear whether increased interparental tension and conflict in the post-separation period can be interpreted as resulting from parental breakup, or whether it actually preceded the parents' decision to separate. In general, it is quite likely that conflict was already present in the pre-divorce period. Accordingly, interparental conflict is also a factor addressed by the selection perspective.

In contrast, parental separation is very likely to affect a child's relation to the non-resident parent, at least in terms of frequency of contact. Many studies find that contact with the non-resident parent – usually the father – diminishes as time goes by, especially if the father lacks the economic resources to provide for the children and if the interparental relation is strained (Amendt 2004). A decrease in contact with the non-resident parent can also be observed if the children were very young at the time of parental breakup and once they reach adolescence and invest more time in peer relations (see Walper/Krey 2009). In legal decision-making, counseling, and public debate, considerable concern relates to such effects, because it is commonly held that children thrive on a continuous relation to both parents despite parental breakup. Interestingly, however, available evidence does not suggest that the frequency of contact is a crucial variable for well-being (Amato 1993, 2010). In a meta-analysis of links between child well-being and several aspects of non-resident fathers' involvement, almost no effects of contact *frequency* were found, whereas the *quality* of fathers' parenting had the strongest effect (Amato/Gilbreth 1999). Furthermore, a study from Germany on adolescents who never had contact to their separated father evidenced no differences in well-being compared to adolescents in nuclear families (Walper/Wendt 2011). A longitudinal study from the U.S. involving a large sample of adolescents from separated families even found that the link between fathers' engagement and adolescent behaviour had to be interpreted in the opposite direction: Fathers' engagement did not affect their child's subsequent

well-being, but an increase in adolescents behavioural problems led to a decrease in paternal involvement in the subsequent year (*Hawkins et al.* 2007). While the effects of contact frequency on children's well-being seem to be less reliable, contact does affect the chances of establishing a close relationship with the non-resident parent (*Walper/Krey* 2009; *Whiteside/Becker* 2000).

Finally, union dissolution opens the options for parents to repartner and remarry, thus potentially triggering additional changes in children's family composition and parenting experiences. In Germany, about eleven percent of all minors are estimated to live with a stepparent in their primary household (*Steinbach* 2008). Furthermore, in about 5 percent of all nuclear and 17 percent of stepfamilies, at least one parent has one or more children outside of the household, suggesting a secondary or "weekend" stepfamily constellation. Although parents usually benefit from the support of a new partner (*Schmidt-Denter* 2001), the advantages of such changes are less clear for children (*Coleman et al.* 2000; *Sweeney* 2010). Typically, they not only have to adapt to a new person in the household, who is likely to claim influence on decisions and may be inexperienced in child rearing, but they also lose some of the time and attention of their biological parent. Adolescence has specifically been pointed out as a difficult phase in stepfamily life, and some studies suggest more negative findings for girl's adjustment in stepfamilies (*Coleman et al.* 2000; *Hetherington/Jodl* 1994). Integrating findings from 61 studies, a meta-analysis found that stepchildren generally fare worse than children in nuclear families (with both biological parents) regarding academic achievement and psychological well-being (*Jeynes* 2006). When compared to children in single parent families, however, stepchildren did not show any advantages. They did not differ in psychological well-being and showed lower scholastic achievement than youth from divorced single parent families.

2.2 The selection perspective

While the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective highlights the causal role of divorce-related stressors in explaining disadvantages of children whose parents separated, the selection perspective addresses possible differences between stable and disrupted families preceding parental breakup, which may affect not only the likelihood for separation or divorce but also for children's compromised development. Likely factors are parents' personality problems, low socio-economic resources, problems in the parents' relationship, but also genetic factors that play a role in social behaviour (*Amato* 2000; *Garriga/Härkönen* 2009).

Several approaches have been developed to address issues of selectivity (see *Amato* 2010; *Garriga/Härkönen* 2009). Taking into account pre-disruption differences in family characteristics and child well-being is one of the main methods for estimating selection effects. In fact, much support for the selection perspective came from prospective longitudinal studies which were able to trace family characteristics and child development across time prior to parental separation (e.g. *Block et al.* 1986; *Cherlin et al.* 1991). Many of these findings suggested that disadvantages in child development can be observed well ahead of their parents' separa-

tion. Interestingly, boys seemed to be more strongly affected in the pre-separation period than girls. In the study by *Cherlin et al.* (1991), effects of parental breakup were considerably reduced once such pre-separation differences were taken into account. In some cases, the effects of parental separation disappear when controlling for children's pre-divorce well-being and competencies. For example, a study based on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study observed teenagers from divorced families before and after the divorce and compared them to youth from intact homes (*Sanz-De-Galdeano/Vuri* 2007). The authors did not find that parental divorce negatively affected adolescents' cognitive skills when controlling for pre-divorce competencies.

However, selection effects such as these are not consistently found in all studies on the topic (e.g. *Allison/Furstenberg* 1989; *Forehand et al.* 1997). In a study on urban youth in Germany, only limited pre-separation differences were found when comparing adolescents from stable and instable families one year prior to parental separation, in the year of parental breakup, and one year later (*Schwarz* 1999). Pre-separation disadvantages were restricted to adolescents' relationships to parents and peers, but were not found for their transgression proneness (positive attitudes to delinquency) or their self-derogation. Other data suggest a combination of selection effects as well as additional stresses caused by parental separation (*Cherlin et al.* 1998; *Cherlin et al.* 1995; *Sigle-Rushton et al.* 2005). For example, a 14-year longitudinal study which compared children of unmarried or divorced mothers to children with married mothers drew from information about the mothers' development during their adolescent years, long before the children were born (*Emery et al.* 1999). As expected, children from single mother families showed increased problematic behaviour, which could partly be explained by the higher delinquency of these mothers during their adolescent years. It is quite likely that mothers' earlier problem behaviour prompts risky choices in mate selection and contributes to problems with the child's father, thus triggering partnership instability at a later stage. Furthermore, problems in self-regulation or anti-social traits may undermine mothers' parenting competencies, thus reducing the chances for positive child development. At the same time, parental separation seems to have caused additional problems in child development.

Given such direct similarities in parents' and children's behaviour, addressing genetic issues seems to be a logical next step, even more so since some evidence points to genetic influences on the likelihood to divorce (see *Amato* 2010; *Garriga/Harkonen* 2009). However, when comparing the effects of parental divorce in biological and adoptive families, child outcomes in terms of problem behaviour and substance use were similar for biological and adopted children (e.g. *Amato/Cheadle* 2008; *O'Connor et al.* 2000). Accordingly, it is unlikely that these effects of parental separation can simply be attributed to genetic selectivity.

Overall, there is evidence for selection effects which often, but not consistently, lead to increased problems among children even prior to parental separation. In general, these findings are not at odds with the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, even more so since increased strain among youth shortly before their parents' separation could still be seen as part of the separation process as a whole. This

phase of decision making is often particularly stressful for the adults involved. Thus, selection and socialisation may jointly be at work.

2.3 Differential effects across contexts and child characteristics

Some attention has been paid to the question of whether the negative consequences of divorce fade as divorce becomes more prevalent and a more common experience in children's lives. Such an increased "institutionalisation" of divorce is likely to reduce the risk of stigmatisation and may facilitate successful coping with the demands of parental breakup given that many peers share the same experience. However, comparing the disadvantages of children from divorced families across time, the meta-analysis by *Amato* (2001) does not provide evidence of a linear trend. Although effects in the 1980s were less marked than in older studies conducted up until the 1970s, more recent findings from the 1990s show an increase in disadvantages for children from divorced families. Since most of these studies were conducted in the U.S., where social benefits for single parent families had been cut back during the 1990s, such changes in policy have been suggested as a likely explanation (see *Amato* 2001). Findings from other countries point towards similar evidence. A large multi-country study based on data from the Generations and Gender Survey provided no support for the „institutionalisation hypothesis“, which would have predicted less disadvantages for divorced families where divorce is highly prevalent. Instead, these data indicated larger effects of parental separation on the offspring's educational attainment in countries and at times with higher divorce rates (*Bernardi/Radl* 2014).

Such findings also raise issues of self-selection into divorce. When divorces are rare, the threshold to separate is high. Hence, couples with highly dysfunctional relationships are more likely to select into the group of those who opt for divorce. Since many findings show that children's well-being is undermined by frequent and intensive interparental conflict (*Fincham* 1998; *Krishnakumar/Buehler* 2000), one might expect more negative consequences of parental breakups for children in such highly stressed families. However, prospective studies suggest otherwise (see *Amato* 2010): when tracing the effects of divorce for families with more or less problems in the parents' pre-divorce relationship, it rather seems that children from high-conflict families have less to lose and more to gain if their parents separate. In contrast, offspring from previously unstressed marriages showed considerable disadvantages in their adult life (e.g. *Amato et al.* 1995).

Many studies have addressed the issue of children's vulnerabilities, examining age and gender as likely moderators. Although some findings are in line with the wide-spread notion that younger children are more dependent on a well-functioning family and thus more vulnerable to family disruption (*Allison/Furstenberg* 1989; *Emery* 1988), other researchers have suggested that it is adolescent children who are particularly vulnerable to parental breakups (*Chase-Lansdale et al.* 1995). The majority of findings do not suggest differential effects by children's age (*Amato* 2001). Similarly, gender differences in children's coping with parental breakup are not very clear. In line with evidence suggesting that boys are more vulnerable to

family stress than girls (e.g. *Gloger-Tippelt/König* 2007), pre-separation distress was found to be higher among boys whose parents break up during childhood (*Block et al.* 1986; *Cherlin et al.* 1991). In general, however, divorce does not seem to affect boys and girls differently (e.g. *Fergusson et al.* 1994). For the adolescent years, the evidence is even less consistent.

Since divorce has been found to be more prevalent among families with low socio-economic resources, studies usually control for parental education, occupation, or a SES (socioeconomic status) composite when estimating the effects of divorce. However, little attention has been paid to differential effects of parental separation depending on parents' SES resources. In a recent study using data from the Generations and Gender Survey (covering 14 countries), *Bernardi and Radl* (2014) investigated the long-term consequences of parental separation for children's educational attainment, focusing on the likelihood of achieving tertiary education. Comparing the effects of parental breakup for families with different levels of parental education, they found no evidence for the "social origin compensation hypothesis", which claims that parents with higher SES resources are better able to cope with divorce and protect their children from negative consequences. Rather, their data provided clear support of the „floor effect“, i.e. for weaker effects of parental breakup among families with low parental education whose children face substantially lower chances for tertiary education anyway. Interestingly, this „floor effect“ was not observed in countries with early tracking, i.e. early performance-based selection into different school tracks (like in Germany). In these countries, offspring from families with higher as well as lower parental education experienced markedly lower chances for tertiary education when their parents separated. In the following study, we sought to follow up on these issues by looking at various aspects of adolescents' well-being, including their satisfaction with their domain of education and work.

2.4 Research Questions

In the following analyses, we compare adolescents' well-being in different family structures over a 2-year time period. We employ a broad concept of parental separation, including all cases with both parents alive but not living in a union, irrespective of whether they have been married in the past or not or whether they are still formally married but separated and no longer live in an intact partnership. When testing possible disadvantages of adolescents in stable single parent households and stepfamilies as opposed to nuclear families, we control for important background factors and explore whether both types of separated families are linked to similar disadvantages (separation disadvantage hypothesis) or whether either of these two types of separated families is less likely to promote adolescent well-being (single mother or stepfamily strain hypothesis). Although single parent families are more likely to suffer from financial hardship and may thus provide a more stressful environment for youth development, available evidence does not suggest advantages of stepfamilies compared to single parent families for children's well-being (*Jeynes* 2006). Hence, we expect similar disadvantages for youth from both types of separated families when compared to adolescents from nuclear families. Further-

more, we seek to explore effects of a recent parental separation employing a prospective design. Based on previous findings from prospective studies, we expect to find lower well-being among adolescents prior to parental separation than among adolescents from nuclear families (pre-separation strain hypotheses).

Secondly, we investigate whether *changes* in outcomes differ across time by family type. In this respect, we expect a reduction in adolescents' well-being after parental separation among those whose parents separated between both waves, while controlling for pre-separation well-being and background factors (post-separation strain hypothesis). These analyses also explore whether other types of separated families show different trends in adolescents' well-being than nuclear families do.

Thirdly, we ask whether infrequent contact to the non-residential parent and/or economic deprivation explain any effects of family type on changes in well-being across time. Such evidence would suggest that contact and/or economic resources function as mediating links between family structure and adolescent outcomes. While public discourse gives major importance to the amount of contact children have to their non-residential parent, research on the topic has not found substantial effects of such contact on children's and adolescents' well-being. Hence, we include this factor, but do not expect it to explain differences in adolescents' well-being when comparing youth from separated families to those from nuclear families. In contrast, economic deprivation has been pointed out as an important mediator for explaining disadvantages of youth in single mother families, who are most likely to be hit by financial strain. We expect to replicate this finding (economic strain hypothesis).

Finally, we test whether adolescents' gender and parental education moderate the link between family structure and adolescent well-being. With respect to parental education, we expect to find more negative effects of a recent parental separation, single motherhood, and stepfamily life in the less educated group (resource hypothesis). Although previous findings have not pointed to the significance of a child's gender as a factor that moderates the effects of parental separation, prospective studies have suggested that boys may be more strained prior to parental separation. Thus, we test such moderation effects for T1 differences between family types as well as for T3 changes in adolescents' well-being in different family types.

3 Method

3.1 Sample

The paper's sample was drawn from the German Family Panel pairfam (Huinink *et al.* 2011), a three-cohort longitudinal study on family development with annual assessments, which started in 2008/2009 for three birth cohorts. Participants were recruited through register data and personal visits of the interviewer, who conducted the interviews in the participants' home. For our purposes, the sample was restricted to the adolescent cohort (born 1991–1993). Adolescents were mostly 15 to 17 years old during wave 1, with only very few younger or older participants. Of the

initial adolescent cohort in wave 1 ($n = 4334$), 72.3 percent were re-interviewed two years later for wave 3 ($n = 3132$). Our analysis are based on the data from the first three waves of pairfam, release 4.0 (Nauck *et al.* 2013).

Data on household composition in waves 1 and 3 was available for 3128 adolescents. The family type was identified by the adolescents' report on whether both parents currently lived in a joint household and the adolescents' household composition at their main residence. In a first step, the sample was restricted to youth whose parents were both still alive ($n = 3019$) and who lived with at least one parent in waves 1 and 3 ($n = 2760$). This second criterion excluded youth who had left the parental home prior to wave 3 ($n = 259$). As might be expected, the likelihood of having left the parental household differed for youth from higher- and lower-track schools. Adolescents who had already left the parental home by wave 3 were less likely to be on the higher school track than those who still stayed with their parents (35.1 percent vs. 44.6 percent; $\text{Chi}^2 = 8.69$; $\text{df} = 2$; $p < .01$). In a second step, we selected family types of sufficient group size. Adolescents who lived with a single father ($n = 57$) or with their father and his new partner/a stepmother ($n = 27$) in waves 1 and 3 could not be considered due to their low prevalence in the sample. For similar reasons, newly formed or separated stepfather families ($n = 27$ and 31) were not included in the analyses. In addition, we excluded all cases in which no information about either maternal or paternal education was provided (5.1 percent of all cases; $n = 160$).

Based on data for waves 1 and 3, we categorised all remaining cases as stable nuclear families (with both biological parents in adolescents' household, $n = 1968$), stable single mother families (biological mother, without a partner in the household; $n = 360$), stable stepfather families (biological mother and her partner in the household; $n = 214$), or prospective separators, i.e. families who started as nuclear families in wave 1 but experienced parental separation between waves 1 and 3 ($n = 76$). In total, $n = 2618$ adolescents who participated in waves 1 and 3 were available, among these up to 2483 had complete data for our analyses. As analyses regarding selective drop-out across time revealed, longitudinal drop-out was not randomly distributed between nuclear and separated families ($\text{Chi}^2 = 13.44$; $\text{df} = 1$; $p < .01$). Adolescents from separated families were more likely to drop out by wave 3 than adolescents from nuclear families were (32.5 percent vs. 26.8 percent).

Table 1 provides an overview of the sample, subdivided by family type as well as providing totals. As shown in the last column, adolescents' average age during wave 1 was 15.92 years ($\text{SD} = .88$), and about half of the sample was female. Almost half of all adolescents were currently enrolled or had already finished grammar school ("Gymnasium"), the highest school track which – if successfully finished – provides access to university studies. The share of families with high maternal education (university or advanced technical college entrance qualification) was about a third. One-fifth of the adolescents had a migration background, i.e. they and/or at least one of their parents were not born in Germany. In line with population statistics, only a minority (18.0 percent) of participants lived in eastern Germany.

To test for significant differences by gender, maternal education, migration background, and region of residence between the subgroups defined by family type,

Tab. 1: Descriptives of the Sample by Family Type

	Nuclear Families	Prospective Separators*	Single Mother Families	Stepfather Families	Total
N	1968	76	360	214	2618
Age at T1					
M	15.90	15.91	15.97	15.95	15.92
SD	.87	.80	.89	.94	.88
Gender (% Female)	47.4	53.9	47.2	46.7	47.5
School Track (% Grammar School)	48.2	42.7	33.9	35.5	45.1
High Maternal Education (% yes)	32.9	27.6	27.2	26.6	32.5
Migration Background (% yes)	21.3	11.8	23.3	11.2	20.8
Region (% East)	16.9	22.4	18.3	26.2	18.0
Economic Deprivation T2/3					
M	2.10	2.55	2.91	2.32	2.24
SD	.87	.92	1.01	.90	.93
% With Contact to Non-Resident Father at T3	--	97.3	77.7	76.7	79.7

* Adolescents whose parents separated between waves 1 and 3

Source: pairfam data release 4.0

Chi²-Tests were carried out. The share of adolescents in grammar schools proved significantly lower in single mother families and stepfather families than in nuclear families (Chi² = 34.28; df = 3; p < .01). A similar pattern was found for maternal education. The share of high maternal education (graduation from grammar school) proved significantly lower in single mother families and stepfather families than in nuclear families (Chi² = 8.03; df = 3; p < .05). Significant differences were also found by region (Chi² = 12.39; df = 3; p < .01): Adolescents in stepfather families were more likely to live in eastern Germany, while regional distribution did not differ for the other family types. Furthermore, migration background differed significantly across family types (Chi² = 15.42; df = 3; p < .01): Prospective separators and adolescents in stepfather families were less likely to have a migration background than youth in single mother families.

In order to inspect the financial situation of the family, we decided not to rely on household income, which was only available as reported by adolescents. Instead, we used a presumably more valid indicator: a two-item-scale which was assessed in wave 3 and measured financial strain in the household (see indicators below). Analyses of variance comparing the four family types revealed highly significant effects of family type (F = 85.37; df = 3; p < .001): Economic deprivation was significantly lower in nuclear families than in all types of separated families. According to post-hoc tests, youth from single mother families reported significantly higher economic deprivation than youth from stepfather and prospective separation families. Stepfather families and prospective separators did not differ significantly.

Finally, we compared the share of adolescents' who still had contact to their non-residential father in wave 3 and found significant differences between the three types of separated families ($\text{Chi}^2 = 16.11$; $\text{df} = 2$; $p < .001$). As might be expected, youth in recently separated families (prospective separators) were less likely to have lost contact to their biological fathers at T3 than youth in stable single mother and stable stepfather families. No significant differences regarding age or gender were found.

3.2 Indicators

Economic Deprivation. To assess *Economic Deprivation* in the household, two items from a larger scale were used in wave 3 indicating the inadequacy of the family's budget for ordinary living expenses (e.g. "My parents often have to forego something because they have to watch their budget"). The indicator was computed as the mean of both items. More specific information on this, as well as all other indicators used in our analyses is presented in table 2.

Contact to Father. For separated families, information on the frequency of contact to the non-residential father was assessed by a single question: "How often are you in contact with your father, adding up all visits, letters, phone calls, etc.?" For the purpose of our analyses, we focused on the effects of infrequent contact and recoded the categories into a dichotomous variable combining the categories "con-

Tab. 2: Description of Indicators

Variable	Number of items	Source	Response format	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean (standard deviation)	
					Wave 1	Wave 3
Economic Deprivation	2	Schwarz et al. (1997)	1 = not at all correct to 5 = completely correct	.89 (W3)	2.24 (.93)	
Contact to Father	1	pairfam	1 = daily to 7 = never 10 = contact never existed	-		1.87 (1.75)
Satisfaction with Family	1	pairfam	0 = very dissatisfied to 10 = very satisfied		8.83 (1.54)	8.55 (1.58)
Satisfaction with School, Education, Career	1	pairfam	0 = very dissatisfied to 10 = very satisfied		7.36 (1.85)	7.42 (1.98)
Overall Life Satisfaction	1	pairfam	0 = very dissatisfied to 10 = very satisfied		7.99 (1.47)	7.90 (1.45)
Self-Esteem	3	Adapted from Rosenberg (1965)	1 = not at all to 5 = absolutely	.78 (W3)	4.13 (.74)	3.98 (.82)

tact never existed", "never" and "less than several times per year" into the category *infrequent (no or rare) contact* ($n = 186$; coded as 1), while the other categories (from "several times per year" up to "daily") served as reference category indicating *more frequent contact* ($n = 2407$; coded as 0). Although this coding implies a loss of information about variations in frequency of contact, it provided a variable which was less confounded with family structure than the original categories.

Adolescents' Well-Being. To assess adolescents' well-being in waves 1 and 3, we relied on indicators which were similarly measured in both waves. Three single-item indicators gave information about adolescents' satisfaction with their family, school/work, and life in general. The items were introduced with the question "How satisfied are you with the following domains of your life?". The domains were named "Family" and "School, Education, Career". Overall life satisfaction was assessed with the question "All in all, how satisfied are you with your life at the moment?".

Furthermore, a 3-item-indicator of *self-esteem* was included in both waves. Since the assessment mode of self-esteem was changed between waves 1 and 2 from computer-assisted personal interviews (wave 1: CAPI) to computer-assisted self-completed interview (waves 2 and later waves: CASI), the scale had to be corrected for mean-level differences which emerged between wave 1 and later waves (with higher levels of self-esteem reported in the CAPI than in the CASI interviews). In order to correct for mean level differences without changing the rank order of participants at each wave, the scale was z-standardised for the entire sample of each wave. Due to the loss of sample size for the present analyses (with a higher loss in wave 1 than in wave 3), the distribution of the self-esteem scales does not completely match the original means and standard deviations. More detailed information on all indicators used in the present analyses can be found in the scale manual for the pairfam project report, available online (Thönnissen *et al.* 2014).

3.3 Analyses

Multiple regression analyses were used to test effects of family structure on adolescents' well-being at waves 1 and 3 (T1 and T3), controlling for adolescents' age, gender, maternal education, migration background, and region of residence. Family type was dummy-coded using nuclear families as the reference category for comparisons with recent separators, single mother families, and stepfather families (each coded as a dichotomous dummy variable). For each dependent variable, five analyses were conducted:

- (1) In model 1, data for T1 inform about mean differences between youth from different family types, with a special focus on possible pre-separation strain among those whose parents later separated in the following two years (between T1 and T3). These first analyses control for background variables only.
- (2) In model 2, we added interaction effects between family type and gender or maternal education to test whether pre-separation well-being among prospective separators was more compromised for boys or youth from families with lower maternal education than their respective counterparts. In addition, these analyses examined similarities and differences in the effects of single motherhood

and stepfamily life between boys and girls and between families with higher or lower educational resources.

- (3) The third model used data for T3 as dependent variables to assess changes in well-being between both waves, controlling for the stability of the respective outcome variable across time. It tested effects of family type, controlling for the background variables as well as for effects of the outcome variable at T1.
- (4) Model 4 added the effects of infrequent contact to the biological father at T3 and economic deprivation at T3 as likely mediators between family structure and adolescent outcomes. In these latter analyses, we were interested in seeing (a) whether youth from separated family types evidenced less favourable changes in well-being across the two-year time period than youth from nuclear families, (b) whether infrequent contact to the father and/or economic deprivation affected adolescent outcomes, and (c) whether and to what extent the effects of family structure were diminished when introducing infrequent contact to the father and economic deprivation as additional predictors. Given that infrequent contact to the father is only found in separated families and economic deprivation has been shown to be substantially higher in single mother families (see sample description), both are potential mediators which may explain disadvantages in adolescent well-being when comparing separated to nuclear families (for tests on mediator effects see *Baron/Kenny* 1986). Furthermore, particular attention was paid to effects of a prospective separation between T1 and T3. If a recent parental separation was more stressful than the pre-separation period, adolescents' well-being should be significantly compromised over time for this group of prospective separators (controlling for the previous level of the respective outcome at T1).
- (5) In a final model, we tested interactions between family type and adolescent gender or maternal education, using multiplication terms between the dichotomous family type variables and either gender or education (each variable coded 0/1). All interaction terms were entered simultaneously (controlling for the predictors used in the model 4 for T3). If any interaction term proved significant, the multiple regression analyses were repeated separately for the relevant subgroups (males vs. females or adolescents with higher- vs. lower-educated mother) to allow for more detailed comparisons.

4 Results

Satisfaction With Family. The findings for multiple regressions on adolescents' satisfaction with their family are depicted in table 3. As shown in the first column for family satisfaction at T1, youth from single mother families indicated significantly lower satisfaction with family life, whereas youth in stepfather families did not differ from nuclear families. Furthermore, youth in nuclear families whose parents separated within the subsequent two years (prospective separators) also indicated significantly lower satisfaction with their family at T1, even though this effect was rather weak. There were neither age nor gender differences, nor did the region of

residence or a migration background have any effect. However, adolescents with highly-educated mothers reported significantly lower satisfaction with family life than youth with a less highly-educated mother. As can be seen in model 2, no interaction effects were found, i.e. the effects of family type did not differ by adolescent gender or educational resources.

At T3 (model 3), disadvantages of separated families had slightly increased, as evident in significant negative changes when controlling for family satisfaction at T1. This particularly holds for prospective separators, whose family satisfaction showed a significantly stronger decline than found among youth in nuclear families. Youth in single mother or stepfather families also indicated a small, but significantly stronger decrease in satisfaction with their family than youth in nuclear families, but these effects were weak overall. As can be seen in model 4, these effects were not diminished when controlling for economic deprivation and infrequent contact to the father even though economic deprivation had a significant negative effect on adolescents' satisfaction with their family. As expected, infrequent contact to the

Tab. 3: Effects on Adolescents' Family Satisfaction at T1 and T3: Standardised Regression Coefficients

	T1		T3		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Gender (Male)	-.006	-.005	.017	.016	.008
Age	-.021	-.022	-.010	-.010	-.010
Migration Background	.039	.038	.021	.035	.034
Maternal Education	-.096**	-.091***	-.012	-.028	-.044*
Region (East)	.022	.021	-.014	-.001	-.003
Prospective Separators ⁺	-.084**	-.042	-.106***	-.099***	-.150***
Single Mother Families	-.139**	-.152***	-.081***	-.059**	-.080*
Stepfather Families	-.024	-.016	-.054***	-.050**	-.061*
Family Satisfaction T1			.393***	.387***	.388***
Economic Deprivation				-.089***	-.089***
Infrequent Contact to Father				.004	.008
Prosp.Sep. X Gender		-.053			.032
Single Fam. X Gender		.029			.022
Stepfather Fam. X Gender		-.010			-.006
Prosp.Sep. X Education		-.012			.057
Single Fam. X Education		-.013			.007
Stepfather Fam. X Education		.000			.027
R ²	.031	.031	.186	.192	.193
N	2481	2481		2427	

Note: Significance: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

⁺ Adolescents whose parents separated between waves 1 and 3

Source: pairfam data release 4.0

father did not affect adolescents' satisfaction with their family. Model 5 introduced the interaction terms, but none of these proved significant.

Satisfaction With School, Education, and Occupation. Similar to the previous analyses, youth from single mother families as well as prospective separators reported lower satisfaction with their education or work situation at T1 when compared to adolescents from nuclear families (see Table 4). This indicates not only disadvantages of youth with single mothers, but also pre-separation strain in the scholastic or occupational domain among adolescents whose parents later separated. However, both effects were rather small. Adolescents from stepfather families did not differ from youth who lived with both biological parents. Age, gender, maternal education, and migration background showed no effects. There were small effects for region, as youth from eastern Germany tended to report less satisfaction with their education and work than youth from western Germany. In model 2, no interaction effect emerged. Regarding change across time (model 3), prospective separators as well as youth from single mother or stepfather families did not differ

Tab. 4: Effects on Adolescents' Satisfaction with School, Education, and Occupation at T1 and T3: Standardised Regression Coefficients

	T1		T3		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Gender (Male)	-.008	-.012	.057**	.055**	.060**
Age	.038	-.038	-.018	-.017	-.018
Migration Background	-.010	-.009	-.047*	-.029	-.031
Maternal Education	-.026	-.024	-.015	-.035	-.031
Region (East)	-.052*	-.051*	-.043*	-.028	-.030
Prospective Separators ⁺	-.052**	-.062*	-.021	-.012	-.023
Single Mother Families	-.090***	-.102**	-.032	.001	.016
Stepfather Families	-.027	-.013	-.010	.000	.017
Satisfaction with School, Education, and Occupation T1			.208***	.197***	.197***
Economic Deprivation				-.106***	-.106***
Infrequent Contact to Father				-.014	-.016
Prosp.Sep. X Gender		.028			-.009
Single Fam. X Gender		.009			.006
Stepfather Fam. X Gender		-.011			-.026
Prosp.Sep. X Education		-.018			.033
Single Fam. X Education		.011			-.035
Stepfather Fam. X Education		-.010			.004
R ²	.011	.010	.050	.059	.059
N	2481	2481		2426	

Note: Significance: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

⁺ Adolescents whose parents separated between waves 1 and 3

Source: pairfam data release 4.0

from youth in nuclear families. A small gender effect was found, as male adolescents reported a slightly stronger increase in satisfaction than female adolescents. Economic deprivation proved to predict lower satisfaction with this domain but did not explain any effect of family structure (model 4), as there were no such effects in model 3. Interestingly, satisfaction with this domain was substantially less stable than family satisfaction. No interaction effects between family structure and gender or maternal education were found (model 5).

Overall Life Satisfaction. Table 5 shows a summary of multiple regressions on adolescent's life satisfaction. A significant effect of family type was found at T1 and T3 (model 1), with lower overall life satisfaction at T1 and more negative changes (T3) reported by youth from single mother families (see model 1 and 3). The latter effect was reduced to insignificance when controlling for economic deprivation (model 4), which proved to be a highly significant predictor of compromised life satisfaction. Infrequent contact to the father did not affect overall life satisfaction. As for the control variables, males and younger adolescents proved more satisfied

Tab. 5: Effects on Adolescents' Life Satisfaction at T1 and T3: Standardised Regression Coefficients

	T1		T3		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Gender (Male)	.074*	.063**	.057**	.055**	.062**
Age	-.067*	-.069**	-.028	-.029	-.028
Migration Background	.018	.017	-.045*	-.013	-.014
Maternal Education	-.024	-.006**	.017	-.019	-.039
Region (East)	-.028	-.028	-.070***	-.042*	-.043*
Prospective Separators ⁺	-.001	.014	-.030	-.014	-.012
Single Mother Families	-.076*	-.062***	-.076***	-.018	-.052
Stepfather Families	-.013	-.040	-.015	.002	.021
Life Satisfaction T1	-		.335***	.308***	.311***
Economic Deprivation	-			-.188***	-.190***
Infrequent Contact to Father	-			-.020	-.014
Prosp.Sep. X Gender	-	-.008			-.023
Single Fam. X Gender	-	.023			.011
Stepfather Fam. X Gender	-	.032			-.035
Prosp.Sep. X Education	-	-.019			.025
Single Fam. X Education	-	-.060*			.048*
Stepfather Fam. X Education	-	.010			.008
R ²	.014	.015	.134	.163	.164
N	2483	2483		2426	

Note: Significance: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

⁺ Adolescents whose parents separated between waves 1 and 3

Source: pairfam data release 4.0

Tab. 6: Effects on Adolescents' Self-Esteem at T1 and T3: Standardised Regression Coefficients

	T1		(3)	T3	
	(1)	(2)		(4)	(5)
Gender (Male)	.213***	.197***	.113***	.115***	.107**
Age	-.009	-.010	.001	.000	.001
Migration Background	.049*	.049*	.016	.026	.026
Maternal Education	.016	.026	-.010	-.021	-.027
Region (East)	-.028	-.028	-.025	-.016	-.017*
Prospective Separators ⁺	-.023	-.029	-.001	.002	-.031
Single Mother Families	-.012	-.011	-.052**	-.049*	-.071*
Stepfather Families	-.016	-.050	-.017	.010	.013
Self-Esteem T1	-		.380***	.369***	.369***
Economic Deprivation	-			-.075***	-.075***
Infrequent Contact to Father	-			.040	.043*
Prosp.Sep. X Gender	-	-.020			.023
Single Fam. X Gender	-	.024			.023
Stepfather Fam. X Gender	-	-.036			.000
Prosp.Sep. X Education	-	-.014			.033
Single Fam. X Education	-	-.036			.009
Stepfather Fam. X Education	-	.016			-.007
R ²	.047	.047	.131	.164	.165
N	2482			2416	

Note: Significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

⁺ Adolescents whose parents separated between waves 1 and 3

Source: pairfam data release 4.0

than females and older adolescents, while maternal education and migration background did not matter. A small effect of region emerged at T3 (model 3), indicating a slightly stronger decrease in life satisfaction among youth in eastern than in western Germany. In model 4, however, controlling for economic deprivation, this effect was no longer significant. Finally, both tests for interaction effects (model 2 and 5) evidenced differential effects of single motherhood among families with higher or lower educational resources. However, the effect differed for both models, i.e. changed over time. Separate regression analyses (as in model 1) were conducted for both educational groups. Among families with higher maternal education, youth from single mother families reported lower life satisfaction than youth from nuclear families ($\beta = -.153$, $p < .001$), while no such effect was evident among youth with less highly-educated mother ($\beta = -.046$, n.s.). While this finding does not support the resource hypothesis, changes over time (model 3) were more in line with the resource notion. These changes were less favourable for youth from less resourceful families ($\beta = -.102$, $p < .001$) than for adolescents with a higher-educated mother ($\beta = -.004$, n.s.).

Self-Esteem. Finally, turning to adolescents' self-esteem, table 6 shows the findings from our regression analyses. As can be seen, no effects of family type were found at T1. Prospective separators did not differ from youth in nuclear families, neither prior to parental separation (T1), nor shortly after (T3). Similarly, we did not find any disadvantage of youth in stepfather families at either measurement point. Only at T3 did adolescents growing up with a single mother indicate slightly lower self-esteem. Although significant, this effect was very weak and could not be accounted for by the negative effects of economic deprivation on adolescents' self-esteem (model 4). There were no interaction effects (model 5).

With respect to the control variables, males consistently reported higher self-esteem than females at T1 and T3, and youth with a migration background had slightly higher self-esteem than youth without a migration background. Age, maternal education, and the region of residence did not have any significant effects at T1 (model 1) or over time (model 3). No interaction effects were found in model 5.

5 Discussion

The aim of the current study was to assess the effects of family structure on different aspects of adolescent well-being across a period of two years. We not only wanted to explore possible disadvantages for adolescents in stable single mother and stepfather families compared to nuclear families, but also took the opportunity of following a group of adolescents whose parents separated within the two-year interval between the two longitudinal assessments. This group of so-called "prospective separators" allowed for addressing issues of selectivity and pre-separation strain that may compromise adolescents' well-being prior to parental separation. We also examined whether changes in adolescents' well-being differed by family type and expected to find more negative change among prospective separators. Secondly, we explored the mediating role of infrequent contact to the non-residential parent as well as economic deprivation in linking family structure to adolescent outcomes in well-being. Finally, we tested whether gender and maternal education moderated the effects of family structure at T1 or across time. In the following, we summarise and discuss the overall pattern of results linking our findings to the hypotheses previously specified. We end with a brief outline of strengths and limitations of our study and of challenges for future research.

5.1 Effects of Family Type

Effects of family structure on adolescents' well-being were evident for all outcome variables, but differed with respect to the domain under consideration. Most consistent evidence was found for disadvantages of youth from single mother families, who reported lower satisfaction with family life and with the domain of education and occupation as well as a limited overall life satisfaction compared to their peers in nuclear families at T1. These youth with single mothers also evidenced a stronger decrease in family satisfaction, overall life satisfaction, and self-esteem than youth

in nuclear families. Although these findings are in line with the large body of research on parental separation (*Amato* 2010), it should be noted that the effects are mostly very small. As might be expected, the most pronounced effects were found for family satisfaction, indicating that the problems faced by these youth are indeed rooted in the family system and not in confounded external factors.

In contrast, there was almost no evidence for disadvantages of adolescents raised in stepfather families. At T1, they did not differ in any of the outcome variables from youth in nuclear families. When looking at changes over time, only family satisfaction was found to show a stronger decline among youth living with a stepfather, while the other three indicators did not reveal any less advantageous changes than found for youth in nuclear families. Overall, these findings suggest that the majority of stepfamilies manage to adjust successfully to the challenges of stepfamily life and provide a positive context for adolescents' well-being. This finding is noteworthy, since other evidence has instead focused on the challenges and problems in stepfamily life (*Amato* 1994; *Sweeney* 2010). Contrary to the findings from the large body of data available from international studies (*Jeynes* 2006), our data do not suggest that adolescents raised in a stepfamily are similarly strained or even worse off than youth living in a single mother family. The slightly stronger decrease in satisfaction with family life may indicate that stepfamily life becomes more stressful in late adolescence when autonomy is more fully established. However, this effect was quite small and should not be over-interpreted.

With respect to prospective separators, the expected pre-separation strain at T1 was evidenced by lower family satisfaction than found for youth from stable nuclear families. Furthermore, such pre-separation impairment of well-being was also evident in the domain of education and work, which these adolescents were less satisfied with than those from stable nuclear families. It should be noted that – contrary to youth from single mother and stepfather families – prospective separators were not less likely than their peers from stable nuclear families to be enrolled in or have finished the highest track of schooling. This may suggest that such problems with education/work were not yet evident at the end of elementary school but rather emerged more recently, reflecting distractions emanating from discord at home. While these effects are in line with other evidence suggesting higher levels of strain in the pre-separation phase (e.g. *Cherlin et al.* 1991), they prove to be rather weak. Moreover, neither overall life satisfaction nor adolescents' self-esteem suggest any major general pre-separation strain extending into adolescents' outlook on life. Overall, our findings at least partly resemble other evidence from Germany, which provided only limited evidence for pre-separation effects (*Schwarz* 1999). Similarly, more negative changes across time are restricted to family satisfaction, indicating that family problems increase when parents separate. This finding is no surprise. Rather, it must be emphasized that this effect is quite limited, not only in content, but also in size. Neither did we find any signs for a spillover of post-separation problems into the domain of education or work, nor did the experience of parental separation seem to affect more general features of well-being, such as life satisfaction or self-esteem.

In summary, while the expected effects of parental separation were evident for almost every outcome variable, these effects proved rather weak and fell below the average effect sizes reported in meta-analyses for data, most of which come from the US (*Amato 2001*). The most pronounced effects were found for adolescents' family satisfaction, which – along with adolescents' satisfaction in the domain of education and work – also provided support for the expected pre-separation strain. An additional decrease in well-being shortly after a recent parental separation was only evident for family satisfaction. Finally, stepfamilies seem to provide a rather unobtrusive context for adolescents' well-being.

5.2 The Mediating Role of Infrequent Contact to the Father and Economic Deprivation

Our analyses also tested for possible mediation effects of infrequent contact to the father and economic deprivation. Throughout the analysis, infrequent contact to father had no effect on adolescents' well-being and thus could not explain any effects of the family type. Overall, these findings are well in line with other studies (*Amato/Gilbreth 1999*).

Economic deprivation, however, proved to mediate at least some of the effects of family structure. Such mediation effects of economic deprivation were restricted to disadvantages of single mother families (who experienced the highest financial strain). The stronger decrease in overall life satisfaction which was found among adolescents in single mother families could be fully accounted for by the higher economic deprivation reported by these youth. With respect to family satisfaction, however, only partial mediation was found, and our results for self-esteem did not indicate any mediation by economic deprivation. Although self-esteem decreased more strongly in single mother families than in nuclear families, this effect remained unchanged when controlling for financial conditions.

Overall, these findings are at least partly in line with other evidence suggesting that a substantial share of disadvantages found for children raised by a single mother can be accounted for by the increased financial problems these families face (e.g. *McLanahan 1999*). At the same time, parental separation seems to also play a distinct role, as particularly evident in cases of recent separations. Elevated post-separation strain among prospective separators, as evident in reduced family satisfaction, could not be explained by economic deprivation. This suggests that a recent separation does provide a unique stressor which cannot be reduced to financial problems.

5.3 The Moderating Role of Gender and Maternal Education

We also addressed possible moderating effects of gender and adolescents' school type to test for differential effects of family type in the respective subgroups. In line with other findings, gender did not moderate any effects of growing up in a single mother family. While other evidence suggests that girls fare worse than boys in stepfather families (*Hetherington/Jodl 1994*), we did not find stronger disadvan-

tages in well-being among girls (or boys) growing up with a stepfather. Similarly, we could not replicate earlier findings indicating stronger pre-separation strain among boys. While the group of prospective separators may have been too small to detect such effects, the overall pattern suggests rather homogeneous effects of family type for males and females.

Maternal education was found to moderate the effects of family type in one case only: for adolescents' overall life satisfaction. At the same time, this effect was complex and not easy to interpret. Contrary to the *resource hypothesis*, but in line with the *floor effect* found by *Bernardi and Radl* (2014), our data also indicate a "divorce penalty" among more privileged youth only: Negative effects of parental separation at T1 were restricted to youth with a higher-educated mother. In this subgroup, youth from single mother families indicated lower life satisfaction than those from nuclear families, while no such difference was found for adolescents with a less highly educated mother. It may well be that adolescents from families with higher educational resources have more to lose when their parents separate, at least in terms of financial resources. Interestingly, however, support for the resource hypotheses was found when looking at changes across time. Adolescents' life satisfaction decreased more strongly in single mother than nuclear families with a lower education, while no such effect was found among adolescents with a higher-educated mother. As expected, the decrease in life satisfaction among youth from less resourceful single mother families could be fully explained by financial strain. This suggests that financial resources linked to parental education play a major role in differential outcomes of single parenthood.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study used a large sample of adolescents in Germany for systematically testing several research questions regarding the effects of parental separation on adolescents' well-being. Taking a broad view on separation and re-partnering, we did not only focus our analyses strictly on parental divorce or on remarried families, but also included youth whose parents were still or never married but separated, and those who lived with their mother's new partner, no matter whether they were married or not. Overall, our data provide support for the detrimental effects of increased financial strain among single mother families, while the role of contact to the non-residential father for adolescents' well-being seems to be much less marked. This latter finding is well in line with broad evidence from international studies (*Amato/Gilbreth* 1999) as well as studies conducted in Germany (*Walper/Wendt* 2011; *Walper/Krey* 2009), but not with current legal practice, which places much emphasis on preserving the continuity of adolescents' relationship to their non-custodial parent, even against the children's will. Furthermore, we could identify increased pre-separation strain in the subgroup of prospective separators, who also seem to face additional post-separation strain, not with a broad impact on general well-being, but more specifically in the domain of family life. Finally, we found evidence for the moderating role of socio-economic resources as addressed by maternal education.

Nevertheless, these findings should be interpreted with caution. First, as pointed out above, the effects of family structure were mostly very weak. Many of them would have remained undetected using a smaller sample. While the large sample may be considered an advantage of this study, the subgroups in focus differ considerably in size. Particularly the group of prospective separators was very small in comparison to the large group of nuclear families. Restricting the number of nuclear families by selecting a random subsample or by matching them to the separated families might have solved this problem. However, such procedures carry other risks. We decided to capitalise on the full sample to provide a broader picture of adolescents growing up in different family types.

Second, we restricted our analyses to adolescents who still lived with their mother in any case. Although the number of adolescents who had already moved out by age 17 to 19 (the majority age range at T3) was small, our selectivity analyses showed that offspring from separated families is overrepresented in this group. Hence, we may underestimate the effects of family structure if those who were most strained by their parents' separation moved out earlier.

Third, we could only rely on a limited range of outcome variables. Indicators of adolescents' depression differed at both measurement points and thus could not be considered. Information about adolescents' problem behaviour was not available at either measurement point. Hence, we may underestimate psychological and behavioural problems that have been pointed out to be more sensitive to negative effects of parental separation (Amato 2001).

Finally, our analyses did not inform about some key variables previously discussed, such as the role of interparental conflict and the number of family transitions adolescents went through prior to our study. Some of these data are available in the pairfam panel, and can be addressed in future analyses.

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