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# Breaking down break-ups

Studies on the heterogeneity in (adult) children's outcomes following a parental separation

Eva-Lisa Palmtag

Doctoral Thesis in Sociology at Stockholm University, Sweden 2023

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## Studies on the heterogeneity in (adult) children's outcomes following a parental separation

**Eva-Lisa Palmtag**

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Friday 10 March 2023 at 10.00 in Hörsal 8, hus D, Universitetsvägen 10 D.

### Abstract

This thesis comprises three studies investigating heterogeneity in children's outcomes post parental separation. The studies analyse diversity in outcomes after parental separation, applying both a retrospective long-term approach and a child perspective. The aim is to identify conditions that might buffer negative outcomes, intensify them or add additional stress. The data used comes from the nationally representative Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU). The first two studies (I and II), take a long-term perspective to investigate outcomes among adult children of divorce or separation compared to adult children from intact families, emphasizing the diversity among separated families. Study III takes a short-term perspective to further understand the diversity in the parent-child relationship after separation.

**Study I** focuses on the link between four post-separation childhood circumstances – inter-parental conflict, post-separation contacts with the non-resident parent, age at separation, and the experience of living with a stepparent – and later parent-child contact. The results show that a separation in childhood associates with later intergenerational contact. In general, adult children with separated parents have less frequent contact with their parents compared to children in intact families. Lowest rate of contact is found within the father-child subsystem as the father tends to be the non-resident parent. However, children with regular contact with the non-resident parent showed higher rates of adult contact with the father, without the contact with the mother being negatively influenced. These results support equal contact distribution between children and both parents in childhood after a parental separation.

**Study II** uses a similar approach but focuses on variance in the adult child's health and the main heterogeneity aspect under investigation is family conflicts. The results show that both parental separation and conflicts in the childhood family associates with children's self-rated health in adulthood. Although parental separation can lower the degree of parental conflict, parent-child conflicts are still associated with a higher risk of less than good self-rated health in adulthood after controlling for separation. These results support the spillover hypothesis and suggest that parental quarrels spill over into the parent-child relationship. It underlines the importance of considering children's own participation in family concerns during childhood.

**Study III** applies a "here and now" approach and investigate how children's perception of the relationships with their parents is influenced by residence arrangements and other post-separation circumstances. The findings indicate that shared residence arrangements enable children to maintain a social relationship with both parents post-separation to a higher degree compared with children in a sole parental residence. Additionally, the study found no significant difference in emotional support seeking patterns between children in shared residence arrangement and those in intact families. These results support previous research highlighting the benefits of shared residence when it comes to maintaining high levels of parent-child contact as well as support after the parental break-up. Collectively, these three studies contribute to the field of family sociology and separation (divorce) research by providing new insights into the effects of parental separation on child outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Divorce, intergenerational contact, inter-parental conflict, joint physical custody, non-resident parent, parent-child conflict, parent-child relationship, separation, shared residence, Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU).*

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**"Children are one third of our population and all of our future."**
*Source: Select Panel for the Promotion of Child Health, 1981*

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Study III Palmtag, E-L. (Unpublished manuscript): Whom to turn to? The influence of childhood living arrangements on children's perceived parental support. *Manuscript.*

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# Acknowledgement

*Skrivandet ger skilda resultat*
*En vill ha ditt huvud på ett fat*
*Visst ska man lyssna på kritik*
*Men ingen åsikt är den andra lik*

*Somliga, dom säger för sakralt*
*Andra säger sentimentalt*
*En tredje tycker historien är banal*
*Och en fjärde ropar mer moral*

*Vad vet jag om all världens politik*
*Vad vet jag om att jobba i fabrik*
*Jag vet, den är begränsad, min erfarenhet*
*Men jag vill gärna ändra på det*
By: Ulla-Carin Nyquist, ”Lyssna till ditt hjärta”, 1988

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away (actually in a lecture hall at SU campus) I listened to a lecture by Michael Gähler on the topic of divorce. Towards the end of that lecture, he talked about children in shared residence and concluded that this was a research niche where there was a lack of research and a large knowledge gap. He told us students that this was where we could make a contribution and encouraged us to do so. I took him by his word and got hooked that day. This was a topic close to my heart. It took me several years to convince him that I could use LNU for a shared residence study – but that is history now.

Michael, Micke, M, I owe you a large thank you! As my main supervisor you have seen all my good and bad sides. You have tried to pull me up from procrastination and periods of impostor syndrome. But you have also tried to redirect me when I had research ideas that might have been out of scope. Sometimes, I didn’t understand until later that you were actually right (go figure), and that you were giving me small discrete clues, often politely embedded in questions, all the time. Most importantly, you gave me space, time and trust – to test, fail, rethink and redo. And you always had time for me, even in times when you had more than enough to do yourself. So, I might have given you some extra grey hair but it worked; here you are with a printed copy of my doctoral thesis in your hands.

I also had two wonderful co-supervisors, Juho Härkönen and Karin Halldén. Juho, you encouraged me to apply for the doctoral position and to study divorce. With your great knowledge in the field, you always helped in times of need and solved any query that I might have had. Thank you for the "Kids' Nights" and for being a great networker. It has also been very nice to have someone in the supervisor team that understands why one week in October usually involves some free time in the forest *or* a visit to the Annual Divorce Conference that often happen to overlap. A hard choice to make at least if you ask me.

Karin, you have been a great supervisor. In the beginning you had your doubts whether you were a good fit as a supervisor as divorce and separation is not your field. But you rock! You pushed me when I needed it, gave me deadlines and goals, and you encouraged me to take some time off now and then. That is very important. And apart from being a great researcher you have a heart of gold and you have given me so much emotional support. Thank you!

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Writing an acknowledgment is both the most difficult part to write but also the most enjoyable part to deal with. Hard, because I do not want to forget anyone and because it generally is the most read part of a thesis. Yet it is a nice task because by trying to remember who to thank, I realised how many friendly, generous, helpful, fun, understanding and supporting colleagues and friends I have here at Stockholm University and especially at SOFI, the Sociology and Demography Department.

When you are reading this, I hope that you can feel my sincere *Thank You!* Thank you for being there, for the "Hej" and the smile in the corridor, for the discussions in the lunchroom, for having the time to answer a quick question, for taking a "fika" with me, for brewing the morning coffee, for sharing your tomato seeds, for giving me comments on drafts, for all the jokes about elevators that never work, for calling or texting me just to check in, and for all the laughs. It has been a pleasure to come to work and to be at Stockholm University, thank you all!

Then I want to give two groups of employees some extra attention – and that is our great admin and our research assistants. The (current and previous) administrator crew are really working like spiders in the web to try to keep track of us and our projects. I want to send a special thanks to Katarina Hagelin. Du är en pärla! Tack för fina samtal, promenader och cirkelträningen. Jag hoppas att vi får mer tid för det snart, både du och jag.

I also want to raise a toast for all the amazing assistants that we have (and had) at SOFI. There wouldn't be as much research done if it wasn't for you! Thank you for all the hours you spent on data, organisation and cheering up the place with fresh ideas. I also want to give all the doctoral students a cheer, there will be times of doubt but you got this! And my door (phone / email) will always be open for you.

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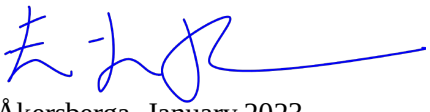

Åkersberga, January 2023

# Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna avhandling är att ”separera separationer” (["*break down break-ups*”) – att utforska vad som gör att en skilsmässa eller separation mellan föräldrar påverkar barn på olika sätt.

Under 2020 upplevde nära 66 000 barn under 18 år i Sverige att deras föräldrar gick skilda vägar (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2021). Ser man i stället till hela barndomen så motsvarar det att ungefär vart fjärde barn har föräldrar som separerade innan de fyllde 18 år. Flera av dessa har också upplevt ytterligare separationer mellan en förälder och en styvförälder (Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; Statistiska centralbyrån, 2021; för uppgifter om barn under 15 år, se Andersson et al., 2017; Andersson & Philipov, 2002).

De flesta av oss ser kanske en separation som något negativt. När vi hör ordet "skilsmässa" kan vi associera det med konflikter och ett hem som splittras i två. Och naturligtvis kan det vara så men det är viktigt att skaffa sig en nyanserad bild av omständigheterna kring en separation. Det finns studier som visar att barn tenderar att anpassa sig till omständigheterna efter ett par år (Amato, 2010; Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). Att föräldrarna separerar kan också vara positivt för vissa barn (Amato, 2010) och för andra kan det till och med vara förknippat med sämre förutsättningar om föräldrarna fortsätter att bo tillsammans (Amato, 2006). Likväl visar tidigare studier att majoriteten av barn med separerade föräldrar i allmänhet klarar sig sämre jämfört med barn som lever med båda föräldrarna, både som barn och senare som vuxna (Amato, 2010, 2014; Härkönen et al., 2017). Barn med separerade föräldrar har till exempel lägre betyg och färre utbildningsår jämfört med sina kamrater i intakta familjer (Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014; Grätz, 2015; Gähler & Palmtag, 2015). De har i allmänhet också sämre välbefinnande och fler beteendeproblem, högre mortalitet (se Amato, 2014 för en litteraturöversikt, Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; Larson & Halfon, 2013; Thomas & Högnäs, 2015) och en högre risk att själva separera i vuxen ålder (Tosi & Gähler, 2016; Wolfinger, 2005).

Sammantaget finns det stor enighet inom fältet om att separation generellt har ett negativt samband med barns levnadsförhållanden både i barndomen och i vuxen ålder. Forskare försöker nu att skaffa mer kunskap om skillnader i hur barn påverkas och under vilka omständigheter vissa barn klarar sig bättre än andra efter en föräldraseparation (Amato, 2010). Denna avhandling innehåller tre studier som med hjälp av data från den riksrepresentativa

Levnadsnivåundersökningen (LNU) avser att fokusera just denna heterogenitet. De två första studierna (I och II), antar en retrospektiv ansats för att undersöka de långsiktiga sambanden medan Studie III antar ett ”här-och-nu”-perspektiv och fokuserar hur barn med separerade föräldrar uppfattar sina relationer med båda föräldrarna.

Studie I fokuserar sambandet mellan fyra faktorer i samband med föräldrarnas separation i barndomen – konflikter mellan föräldrarna, kontakt med den frånlevande föräldern, ålder vid separation samt att ha bott med en styvförälder – och senare kontakt mellan föräldrar och barn i vuxen ålder. Resultaten visar att en separation i barndomen påverkar senare kontakt inom familjen. Generellt sett har vuxna barn med separerade föräldrar mindre frekvent kontakt med sina föräldrar jämfört med barn från intakta familjer. Den lägsta kontaktfrekvensen har barn med sina pappor, den förälder som oftast är frånlevande. De barn som hade en regelbunden kontakt med sin frånlevande förälder hade också oftare kontakt med sin pappa i vuxen ålder, utan att kontakten med mamman påverkades negativt. Resultaten i Studie I understryker vikten av en jämlik kontakt i barndomen mellan barnet och båda föräldrarna efter en separation.

Studie II använder ett liknande tillvägagångssätt men fokuserar sambandet mellan familjekonflikter under barndomen och barns hälsa i vuxen ålder. Resultaten visar att både föräldrars separation och konflikter i barndomsfamiljen påverkar barnets självskattade hälsa i vuxen ålder. En separation kan leda till lägre förekomst av konflikt mellan föräldrarna, trots det är förekomsten av konflikter mellan en förälder (eller båda) *och* barnet fortfarande förknippade med en högre risk för annat än god självskattad hälsa i vuxen ålder. Detta samband kvarstår även efter kontroll för separation. Dessa resultat stödjer ”the spillover hypothesis” och tyder på att föräldrars gräl spiller över till relationen mellan föräldrar och barn. Resultaten understryker vikten av att också överväga barns eget deltagande i familjefrågor under barndomen, för att främja deras hälsa under livsloppet.

Studie III tillämpar ett "här-och-nu"-synssätt och undersöker hur barns upplevelse av sin relation med båda sina föräldrar påverkas av deras boendearrangemang och andra levnadsförhållanden efter separationen. Resultaten tyder på att ett så kallat växelvis boende gör det möjligt för barn att upprätthålla en social relation med båda föräldrarna efter en separation i högre grad än barn som bor med en ensamstående förälder. Dessutom uppvisas ingen signifikant skillnad mellan barn i växelvis boende och barn i intakta familjer vad gäller barnens emotionella stöd från båda föräldrarna. Dessa resultat stödjer den tidigare forskning som lyfter fram fördelarna med växelvis boende när det gäller att upprätthålla höga nivåer av både kontakt och stöd mellan föräldrar och barn efter det att föräldrarna separerat. Tillsammans bidrar dessa tre studier till det familjesociologiska fältet och till forskning om separation (skilsmässa) genom att ge nya insikter om heterogeniteten i sambandet mellan föräldrars separation och barns levnadsvillkor.

# Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to "break down break-ups" – to explore how parental separations and the following family break-up can be an event that many children share but likely experience in different ways. Living in a society where parental separation[1] is common, and complexity in post-separation living arrangements is steadily increasing, has sparked my research interest in how children fare under these circumstances. Most of us will think of a parental separation as something negative. When we hear the word "divorce" we might associate it with conflicts, sadness, and breaking up a household into two. And of course a separation can be all of that; however, keeping a nuanced picture of the circumstances surrounding a parental separation in mind can make an important difference. Even if this thesis has the aim of highlighting the heterogeneity in children's outcomes after a parental separation, the discussions in the included studies are slightly biased towards the investigation of the negative influences. Yet, studies also indicate that many children tend to adjust to the circumstances after a couple of years (Amato, 2010; Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). For some children there are even positive outcomes after the parental separation and in other cases parents staying together might cause even worse outcomes for the children (Amato, 2006, 2010).

Nonetheless, most separations include a great deal of stress for the family members, and a family break-up is life changing in many ways. The majority of children tend to experience some negative outcomes within this process, some of which are short term whereas others will last until adulthood. In the included studies I build on previous research by investigating how and under which conditions children manage to do "well" even though they might have experienced a stressful period during their parents' separation. Given that Sweden is seen as a forerunner when it comes to demographic changes (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020) and the individualistic way of life, one important question is whether differences between family forms still are present today. A second question is what makes some children more resilient to these stressful events.

[1] Parental separation is the main term used to indicate a divorce between married parents or a separation between cohabiting parents. The term intact family is used for families with two parents with biological and/or legal ties to the child regardless of whether the parents are married or cohabiting.

About 20,000 to 25,000 couples divorce in Sweden every year (Statistics Sweden, 2022), not counting the number of cohabitations that end in a separation. Since the late 1980s, around 45–55 percent of all children in Sweden have been born to cohabiting parents (Andersson et al., 2017; Andersson & Philipov, 2002). Therefore, it is highly relevant to also investigate cohabitating families. In 2020, as many as 66,000 children under the age of 18 experienced a parental separation in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2021). That includes divorces as well as separations. From a childhood perspective, about one in four children experiences a parental separation before the age of 18, and some children are even involved in repeated separations within their households (Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; Statistics Sweden, 2021; for data on children below 15, see: Andersson et al., 2017; Andersson & Philipov, 2002). A separation might be hard on the couple that decides to move apart, but compared to children, adults have more possibilities and resources to act and work for the best possible outcome. For children, the decision is usually not theirs to make and, in most cases, they will be separated from one of their parents on a daily basis. This might turn their world upside down and add stress to their life.

The main goal for most parents is to support their children, to be able to help them throughout childhood and see them become well-adjusted, happy adults (Galambos & Ehrenberg, 1997). Yet, with a high frequency of parental separation, this goal could be more difficult to achieve as the circumstances compared to intact family environments change. Previous studies show that children with separated families, on average, do worse on several life dimensions than children from intact families (Amato, 2014; Härkönen et al., 2017). For example, children with separated parents have less academic success, lower grades and less years of education compared to their peers with intact families (Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014; Grätz, 2015; Gähler & Palmtag, 2015). Moreover, research points out that children with separated parents in general have worse well-being and more behavioural problems, such as risky habits and conduct disorder (see Amato, 2014 for a review). Several of these outcomes are not isolated to childhood. Adult children with parents that separated in childhood also tend to leave the nest earlier, meet a partner and become parents at younger age than adults who grew up in an intact family (Tosi & Gähler, 2016; Wolfinger, 2005). Additionally, they have a higher risk of divorcing themselves, lower levels of well-being as well as a higher mortality risk (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; Larson & Halfon, 2013; Thomas & Högnäs, 2015).

To summarise, there is a large agreement established within the field *that* parental separation influences children, but scholars still seek to better understand *who* is influenced, under *which* circumstances, and *why* some children do worse than others after separation (Amato, 2010). In other words, children with separated parents are not a homogenous group, but if they

continuously are defined as such, important variations on the individual level will be overseen or even misinterpreted (Härkönen et al., 2017).

There are many possible sources of heterogeneity within the group of children with separated parents. Raley and Sweeney frame it as: "Divorce is a stratified and stratifying life event: It varies across groups in both its likelihood of occurring and its consequences" (Raley & Sweeney, 2020, p. 81). Common sources for social stratification, such as parents' socioeconomic status or demographic characteristics such as age and gender, are responsible for some of the variety in children's outcomes post-separation (see reviews by Amato, 2010; Härkönen et al., 2017; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). However, there are other sources which can be associated with each other and can co-occur, or separately explain some of the heterogeneity in children's consequences after a separation. One such source is family conflicts. In some cases, we see that a parental separation actually increases the well-being of children, for example when it helps them to escape a disruptive family life (Booth & Amato, 2001). In some families where parents manage to keep a low level of conflict post-separation (sometimes labelled a "good divorce"), children are better able to buffer negative outcomes of the separation (Ahrons, 1994; Ivanova & Kalmijn, 2020). A second source of heterogeneity is children's living arrangements post-separation. Some children stay most of their time with one parent, with no or few overnight stays with the non-resident parent. In these families there is further diversity in the frequency of contact with the non-resident parent (Kalmijn, 2015a; Skevik, 2006), while others stay about the same amount of their time with both parents in so-called shared residence. Recent studies indicate that children in shared residence tend to do better on several dimensions compared to their peers in sole parental residence (Bjarnason et al., 2012; Fallesen & Gähler, 2021; Fransson et al., 2018; Låftman et al., 2014; Steinbach, 2019; Turunen et al., 2021).

In connection to new living arrangements, children might also experience stepfamily constellations if one or both parents repartner as an additional source of heterogeneity. Research shows that the majority of children with separated parents enter a stepfamily during childhood (Jalovaara & Andersson, 2018; Turunen, 2011). A stepparent is not only associated with more resources (economic support and parental time investment) coming into the household, but might also involve stress for the children. A (new) disruption of the family structure with a change from a sole parental household to a stepfamily is something that the child needs to adapt to. This could lead to role competitions and (more) conflicts (Sweeney, 2010). Parenting and the time that parents spend with their children is a further source for heterogeneity within the group of children with separated parents. Parental monitoring is, together with parental support, an important part of parental behaviour that influences children's development and adjustment to their living conditions (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Studies show that family type and children's living

arrangements post-separation influence the amount of time that the parents spend with their children (Fallesen & Gähler, 2019). Parental monitoring in general is lower post-separation (Amato & Fowler, 2002; Bastaits et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 1992), yet it correlates higher with positive outcomes among adolescents in single parent families compared to intact families (Amato & Fowler, 2002). Furthermore, if children perceive that they have support from their parents, it can help them buffer stressful events such as a separation (Berkman et al., 2000; Cohen, 2004).

It is within this important research area that this thesis has its origin and makes its contribution. As pointed out, the overall aim is to investigate the heterogeneity in children's outcomes post parental separation and to expand the knowledge on how a parental separation in childhood relates to children's living conditions (residence, parental support, intergenerational contact and self-rated health), both in a short-term perspective and into adulthood. Previous research does not shed much light on if and how childhood circumstances post-separation can explain later heterogeneity in intergenerational contact. Taking an explorative approach, Study I contributes with an investigation of the association between four post-separation childhood circumstances – inter-parental conflict, post-separation contact with the non-resident parent, age at separation, and the experience of living with a stepparent (as well as gender) – and later parent-child contact. Study II connects to this and contributes with a thorough investigation of variance in adult children's self-rated health (SRH) based on parental separation and family conflicts, which seldom has been investigated in the same analysis. A novel focus is placed on the parent-child conflict in addition to the common focus on inter-parental conflicts. The heterogeneity within the subsample of adults who underwent parental separation in childhood is further investigated using three of the post-separation circumstances (ever lived with a stepparent, age at separation, and having weekly contact with the non-resident parent). In Study III, the focus shifts to investigate the heterogeneity in childhood, focusing on the "here-and-now". Study III aims to extend the knowledge on diversity in the parent-child relationship in childhood, focusing on whether and if so how this heterogeneity has associations with their post-separation living arrangements.

Essential questions to reflect upon are: Why is this important and why should we care about (adult) children of separation? Why is it important to investigate if and how children adjust differently to their parents' separation?

First, since 1 January 2020, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child became law in Sweden (Swedish Parliament, 2022). This strengthens children's rights and underlines that parents as well as public officials should act in the best interest of the child, involve them in decisions that concern them and support them to ensure a good development during their upbringing. As one in four children experiences at least one parental separation during their childhood, the study of this family process is of high relevance. Additionally,

even if separation rates fluctuate, there are no clear signs that they will decrease considerably in the near future. Therefore, even in the future we will have many children in society that are at risk of experiencing a parental separation. Hence, studies on these issues may contribute with important information that can serve as a basis for new family interventions or other tools to support children (and families) before, during and after a separation.

Second, it is important to take on a life course perspective. If a parental separation lowers children's possibilities to receive, for example, high levels of education and attain good health, these outcomes could also spill over to other life domains. Poor well-being as well as low education are shown to correlate with for example unemployment and low income (Mirowsky & Ross, 2005). Learning more about how children adjust differently following a parental separation can contribute with important knowledge on how to support them and their families throughout their life course.

Finally, parental separation can impose weaknesses in the family support system, and increasing family complexity might alter the norms of family obligations (van Houdt et al., 2018). If intergenerational contact and the exchange of support decrease, it could leave adults as well as older people more dependent on the welfare state (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). With a Swedish population that is ageing and with a lagging investment in public spending on eldercare, older people in need of care have already for decades been facing a decrease in the availability of public care (Kridahl & Duvander, 2021). If separation rates remain high, and the European population continues to age, this could imply additional economic and social strains for several countries (Eurostat, 2022).

## Research aims and outline of the thesis

This thesis aims to extend our knowledge on (adult) children's outcomes after a parental separation. To explain the heterogeneity in these outcomes among separated families, it sheds light on which conditions might buffer negative outcomes, and what might intensify them or add additional stress. This aim is investigated within the three studies that make up this thesis.

Taking a long-term perspective, the first two studies investigate how adult children with separated parents are doing compared to adult children from intact families, but with the main focus on within-group differences among separated families. Using the adult child's retrospective information about childhood, Study I investigates how intergenerational contact in adulthood is influenced by parental separation in childhood, controlling for children's diversity in childhood circumstances such as parental conflict, contact with the non-resident parent, having a stepparent, and so on.

Study II uses a similar approach but focuses on the adult child's health. In this study, several conflict measures are included to investigate if there is a

long-term relationship between family type, family conflict and health outcomes. The main heterogeneity aspect under investigation in Study II is the diversity in family conflicts and how they might add to the separation outcomes.

Both intergenerational contact and family conflicts are highly related to the parent-child relationship (as theorised in Study II). To find out more about this relationship, Study III adds to the other studies by taking on a short-term perspective and showing a snapshot of the childhood circumstances reported by the child "here and now". There is nowadays a larger diversity in how and with whom children reside after a parental separation. Therefore, Study III puts the focus on children's living arrangements post parental separation, to explore how children's perception of their relationship (emotional support and relationship quality) with both parents is influenced by their residence and other post-separation circumstances.

It should be noted that Study I and II both face the risk of memory bias (the respondent forgets events) as well as recall bias (when respondents' memory of past events is influenced by current circumstances) (Granström, et al., 2017). However, it can be assumed that stressful events such as a separation or frequent conflicts are critical life events, which respondents will remember well into adulthood. Furthermore, previous research comparing data from the LNU panel has shown high levels of consistency for panel respondents' answers to the conflict questions at different time points with only 5 percent altering their statements (see Tosi & Gähler, 2016). The reliability in the family type measurement could arguably be even higher as it can be assumed to have less issues with recall bias.

Next this introductory chapter discusses the historical context with a focus on Sweden. Then central theoretical perspectives that have guided the three included studies are presented. This is followed by data and methodological considerations including a discussion about research ethics. A summary of the three studies is provided before the final section, which includes suggestions for future research and concluding remarks about the main contributions and their possible implications, which close this introductory chapter.

## The Swedish context

This dissertation draws on survey data from the national representative Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU) to investigate (adult) children's separation outcomes (see the Data section for more information). The main emphasis of all three studies lies on childhood circumstances. The historical time frame when the respondents experienced their childhood spans from 1925 when the oldest respondent was born (in Study II, based on LNU 2000) until 2010, where the youngest respondents were 10 years old and participated in Child-LNU (Study III). During these 85 years there have been quite some

changes in the family context and the family policy landscape that concerns children and their families. The following section addresses aspects that are central to give a broader context for the studies included in this thesis. First, you will find a brief description of how family structure has changed over the time period, with a focus on parental unions. Secondly, a description of the trend of children's increasing contact frequency with the non-resident parent and the parallel change of children's living arrangements post parental separation will be presented. This presentation of the Swedish context will be followed by a short discussion of gender and residence.

## Family structure

The main changes to the family structure that occurred over the period (1925–2010) are a decrease in marriages, an increase in cohabitations and an increase in union dissolutions (see, e.g., Gähler & Palmtag, 2014; Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020; Simonsson & Sandström, 2011). For the older cohorts of respondents in my data (born between 1925 and the end of the 1950s), the most common family pattern was an intact family where the parents were married, and they had a low risk of experiencing a parental divorce (see Figure 1). The era after the Second World War is often referred to as the *Golden Age of Marriage*, yet this peak was relatively short, and after the 1960s the overall marriage rate went down. Instead, cohabitation was increasingly accepted as an alternative to marriage, and so was non-marital childbearing (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). In addition, the divorce rate first increased steadily, almost parallel to the sinking marriage rate, with a peak in 1974 with the introduction of the non-fault divorce. Thereafter the divorce rate levelled off at approximately 20,000–23,000 couples yearly at the turn of the last century (Andersson & Kolk, 2015; Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020).

The long tradition of cohabitation as an established form of union in Sweden has diminished the social stigma in the general opinion to a level that it hardly exists. This can also be linked to the so-called sexual revolution that occurred in the 1970s (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Additionally, over time marriage and cohabitation have become more and more similar in terms of legal rights concerning children. Nowadays, parents regardless of the form of union have the same rights concerning parental leave and other social insurance benefits as well as child custody following a separation (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). Yet, there are still some differences between the two union forms. One such difference is the "consideration period" that married couples with children under the age of 16 years have after they have filed for divorce. After a period of at least six months, the couple is either free to request to complete the divorce or to withdraw the divorce application (Sveriges domstolar, 2022a). Recent data have shown that one out of ten couples withdraw their application before the divorce is finalised (Sveriges domstolar, 2021). This can in part explain one other difference between cohabiting and married parents – that

there is about twice the risk that cohabiting parents separate compared to married parents (Statistics Sweden, 2013). To summarise, the proportion of children that experience a parental separation has increased during the time period with the increase in both divorces and separations.

Apart from these two differences, it is debatable to what extent it matters for children's everyday life whether their parents are married or cohabiting. Moreover, within the LNU survey no differences were made in the retrospective questions concerning parents' union form. Building on this henceforth, if not expressed otherwise, the term (parental) separation will be used interchangeably for a divorce between married parents and a separation between cohabiting parents.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents that experienced a parental separation before the age of 16 based on retrospective reports from the adult LNU-data (including respondents from all six waves, 1968, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000 and 2010) (for a description of the sample, see Gähler & Palmtag, 2014). In addition to this historical description, Figure 2 shows a snapshot of family forms that the children in Child-LNU (wave 2000–2010) lived in at the time of the interview. Figure 2 is not representing the true proportion of experienced parental separation within each birth cohort. Instead, it is a "here-and-now" picture of 10–18-year-olds' experience of parental separation during these two time windows. Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 exclude children that experienced the death of a parent, and the yearly values for each line represent five years moving averages. The lines are therefore indications and not equivalent to a 100 percent of children's family forms for a specific year. As described earlier, Figure 1 shows the steady increase in parental separation for birth cohorts after the 1950s and the curve shows a levelling tendency around the birth cohorts after the year 1975. Despite the difference in data source, it is interesting to see that the two lines match quite well for the overlapping cohorts born in 1982–1990. Furthermore, Figure 2 extends the trend line with 10 more birth cohorts compared to the chronological comparison described by Gähler and Palmtag in 2014. This gives us the possibility to see that the increasing trend of parental separations at the end of the time scale in Figure 1 appeared to continue for some years during the 1990s in Figure 2. Then the proportion of parental separations seems to have levelled off just below 30 percent for the birth cohorts born around the turn of the last century. Again, it should be kept in mind that Figure 2 shows the results of two cross-sectional studies with a different age category for the childhood data. The share of separations could therefore be somewhat underestimated for the cohorts in these figures that were below the age of 16 at the time of the interview (born 1985–1990 in Child-LNU 2000) compared to these cohorts in Figure 1. The reason for this is that they did not yet experience the whole age range 0–16. Additionally, for the cohorts born in 1982–1984 (Child-LNU 2000), the indications in Figure 2 are somewhat

higher due to the extended time frame from 16 to 18 years, where they had "additional" time to risk the experience of a parental separation.

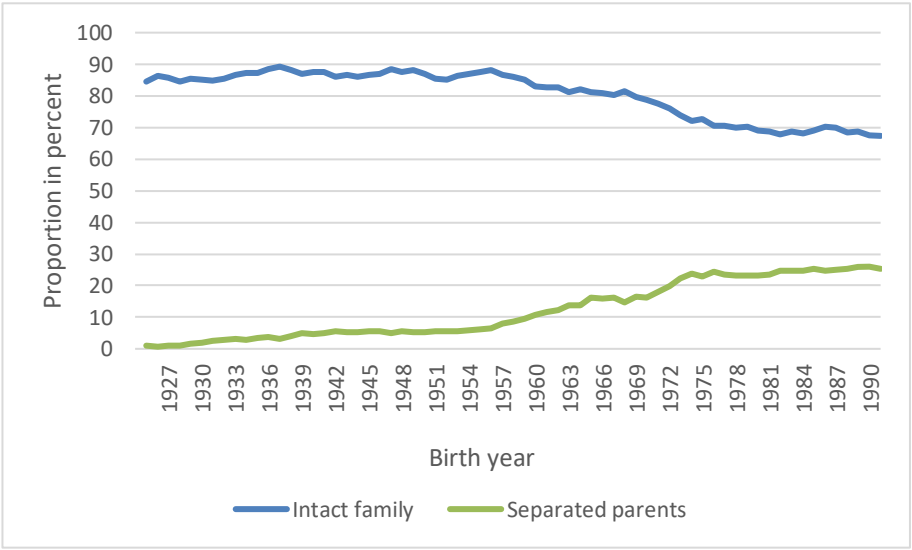


**Figure 1**: Childhood family type by birth year (1925–1991). Five years moving averages (adapted from Figure 1, p. 54 in Gähler & Palmtag, 2014). Data from LNU 1968, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000 and 2010.

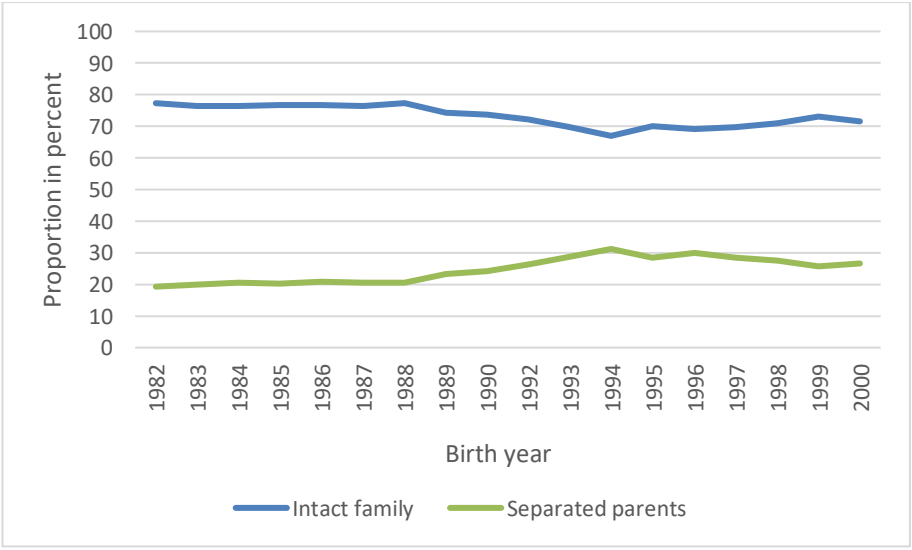


**Figure 2**: Children's family type at the time of interview by birth year (1982–2000). Five years moving averages. Data from Child-LNU 2000 and Child-LNU 2010.

## Children's living arrangements and non-resident parental contact

Sweden has a relatively long history of family policy that promotes gender equality among parents and female labour market participation (see Duvander, 2017, for a detailed review). With the introduction of a *parental* leave policy in 1974, the Swedish government took an important step to strengthen fathers' role in childcare and parenting that previously was seen as solely "mothers' business" (Duvander, 2017). Over the years, the father's role in the family has shifted from the primary breadwinner towards a dual earner and dual caregiver model (Roy, 2014). As a result, the norm of equal responsibility for children among mothers and fathers is now strong in Sweden (Duvander, 2017). Evidence can also be found in fathers' (small) increase and mothers' decrease in time spent on household chores (Boye & Evertsson, 2014; Duvander, 2017). Nonetheless, the care patterns are still clearly gendered. Mothers use the largest part of parental leave and do the largest share of care and domestic work, even in couples defined as dual caregivers (Boye & Evertsson, 2014; Eriksson, 2019). The introduction of joint legal custody (in 1992) as default following a divorce further strengthens both parents' rights and responsibility to be involved with their children (Duvander, 2017; Duvander & Jans, 2009; Turunen, 2017). If the parents where cohabiting at the time of birth, the mother still gets the sole custody of the child. In case both parents agree on shared custody during cohabitation, they have to get an approved agreement signed by the authorities. After such an agreement they will both have custody also in the case of a separation (Sveriges domstolar, 2022b). On 1 March 2022, a new law paragraph was implemented in Sweden. If parents do not agree on child custody, accommodation, or access right, they first have to get help from the municipality before they have the right to leave the case to the court. If parents do not settle an agreement after this informational conversation with the municipality, they receive a certificate that they have had this conversation, which they will need to bring to court (Sveriges domstolar, 2022b).

According to Swedish register data, 79 percent of all children with separated parents in 2013 were registered at their mother's place. However, Swedish register data do not show the true picture of children's living arrangements after a separation, as children officially only can be registered at one address at the time (Statistics Sweden, 2015). Therefore, survey data is needed to give a more nuanced picture of reality.

Even if sole maternal residence is still the most common living arrangement for children post-separation, with a recent share of 53 percent of all children below 18 years of age mostly living with their mother, it has been steadily decreasing over the years. Instead, there has been an increase in the share of both sole paternal and shared residence over the years (Rudander, 2018; Statistics Sweden, 2014). These changes are linked with the

aforementioned promotion of gender equality in Sweden and the strong preference among parents for shared parenting in intact families, which contribute to the increase in involvement also after separation, with increasing contact frequency and the will to continue to share a household with the child (Duvander, 2017; Duvander & Jans, 2009; Turunen, 2017).

At first, the share of children in separated families who had no contact at all with the non-resident parent (usually the father) decreased. In 1984–85, as many as 28 percent of the children did not have any contact with the non-residential parent, whereas this share was down to 13 percent in 2002–2003 (Statistics Sweden, 1995; Statistics Sweden, 2005). The change in the number of children who had a more frequent contact (at least once a week) during the same time period was more modest (from 21 percent to 26 percent) (Statistics Sweden, 1995; Statistics Sweden, 2005). Accordingly, the remaining children met the other parent 1–2 times a month. In a longer historical perspective, the share of those who saw their non-resident parent at least once a month was only about 20 percent of all children with separated parents in the 1940s, whereas it rose to about 80 percent in the beginning of the 2000s (Gähler & Palmtag, 2015). This increase is then highly connected to – and in some statistics entangled with – the later increase in children's shared residence arrangements in separated families. In the mid-1980s, merely 1 percent of all children with separated parents lived in a shared residence arrangement, about the same amount of time with both of their parents. In 2014, this number reached a level of 35 percent (Figure 3) (Statistics Sweden, 2014). Later data from Statistics Sweden are not straightforward to compare with earlier years, as Statistics Sweden changed their sampling criteria after 2014 (Statistics Sweden, 2020). In the later calculations, based on their survey measuring living conditions (Undersökningarna av Levnadsförhållanden, ULF), they include all families with at least one biological parent in the household to calculate the living arrangements. In calculations from 2014 and earlier, they excluded families where one parent was absent (unknown, dead or abroad) and where the child could not have a shared living arrangement. This equals a share of approximately 20 percent of all children that are not living in an intact family. Consequently, if we disregard the possible selection into parents moving abroad or the father being "unknown", the proportion of 28 percent for shared residence that Statistics Sweden reports for 2018 should resemble approximately 34 percent and thus be similar to the level of 35 percent reported by Statistic Sweden in 2014 (own calculations based on data from Statistics Sweden, 2020). Since the trend has steadily been increasing (see Figure 3) during the last 30 years and there are no signs of a decrease in the shared parenting norm, this is likely an underestimation. Alternatively, the development has indeed stalled during recent years.

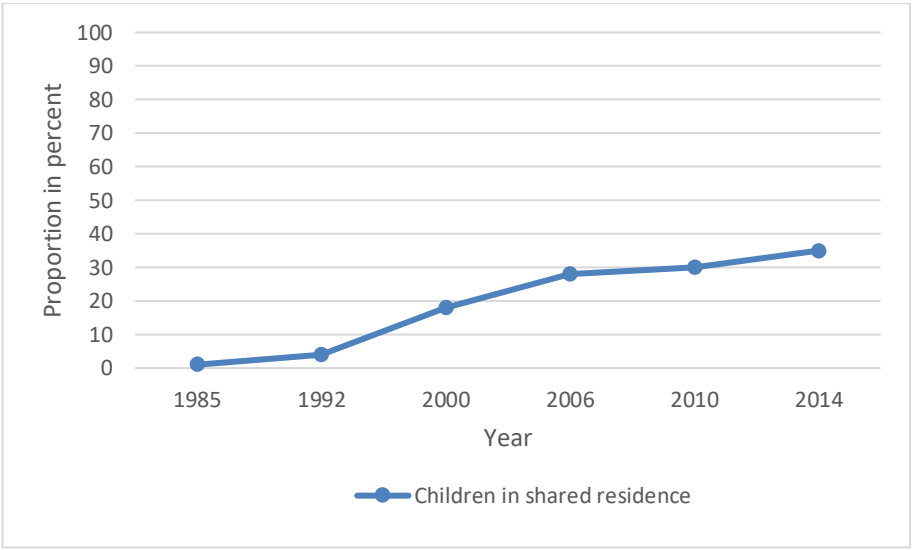


**Figure 3**: Share of children with separated parents, below age 18, in shared residence (50–50). Source: Statistics Sweden (2014).

## Gender and residence

As previously described, Swedish (heterosexual) families are still highly gendered when it comes to the division of childcare and domestic tasks. Mothers are doing a larger share of unpaid work and childcare (Boye & Evertsson, 2014; Eriksson, 2019), even though Sweden is seen as a forerunner when it comes to gender equality and has a steady increase in the share of children living in shared residence (Garriga et al., 2021; Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). Women are not only the main caregivers but are also frequently shown to be the main kinkeepers in the family system (Bernhardt & Gähler, 2003; Brown & DeRycke, 2010; Fingerman et al., 2020; Kalmijn et al., 2019; Lye et al., 1995; Rosenthal, 1985). The influence of gender on contact and on relationships in the family is a common theme in all the three studies included in this thesis. The bond between mother and daughter seems to be the strongest and most resilient bond over the life course (Fingerman et al., 2020; Kalmijn et al., 2019; Rosenthal, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). This is also confirmed in Study I where the mother-daughter contact in adulthood on average was influenced the least by separation in childhood. Parallels can also be drawn to the exchange of support and care work within the family. This exchange follows a clear matrilineal pattern over the life course where mothers give as well as receive more care, and where daughters are more likely to provide care compared with sons (Kridahl & Duvander, 2021). Couples tend to step into more traditional gender patterns when they become parents, both in the way

they divide domestic tasks and their gender norms (Boye & Evertsson, 2014; Fox, 2009).

The fact that sole maternal residence is the most common living arrangement for children after parental separation might be connected to these gender patterns and to "doing gender" in families (Trinder, 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Being the resident parent and the most active networker also provides mothers with more power following a separation as they can act as gatekeepers. As such they have the possibility to either make sure to increase contact between the child and the father (gate-opening) or purposely lessen the interactions between the child and the father (gate-closing) (Trinder, 2008).

That the father most commonly becomes the non-resident parent after a parental break-up and what outcomes this has for the family has been widely studied. One central finding is that non-resident fathers have a lower contact frequency with their children compared to resident as well as non-resident mothers (Juby et al., 2007; Kalmijn, 2007; Study I). Moreover, there is likewise a variation in the amount of contact that fathers have with their children within the group of separated fathers (Kalmijn, 2015a & 2015b; Westphal et al., 2014). Some fathers keep a daily contact with their non-resident child whereas others only keep contact on a monthly basis (Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; Kalmijn, 2015a; Skevik, 2006). Studies show that for example fathers' education, children's age at divorce, and residential moves explain some of this variation (Kalmijn, 2015a; Westphal et al., 2014). The norm changes in society towards "the new father(hood)" (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; O'Brien & Moss, 2010; Roy, 2014) have been suggested as a possible explanation for the increase in fathers' involvement and father-child contact over time, as discussed in the previous section (see also Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; van Spijker et al., 2022; Westphal et al., 2014). Westphal et al. (2014) show that the father's part in childrearing (such as reading, playing, and bringing children to school) during marriage was positively associated with the father-child contact post-separation. Fathers are becoming more involved in early childrearing, and this increases their possibilities to create stronger and closer bonds with their children, especially if they keep a frequent contact also post-separation (Duvander & Jans, 2009; Poortman, 2018).

When fathers move away and become the non-resident parent, they have less opportunities compared with the mother to maintain a close relational bond with the child. Furthermore, men repartner to a larger extent and quicker compared to women after a separation (Amato & Dorius, 2010; Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2002; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Related to this, the theory of fathers "swapping families" has been posed (cf. Manning & Smock, 2000). The ties become weaker as the new family requires more attention and the parental obligations are shaped by residence, thus the father "swaps" his responsibility focus to the new family (Kalmijn, 2007, 2015c; Manning & Smock, 2000).

# Sociological perspectives on childhood

Childhood is a term often used in everyday language and very much intertwined with all of us, either we are children "living" our childhood or we are adults that have "lived" our childhood. Early sociological perspectives considered childhood to constitute a period in which the child is a becoming adult. The main goal of childhood was to socialise the child and develop an adult ready for society. According to the well-known structural-functionalist Talcott Parsons, the child was dependent on and committed to the family and the parents (Parsons & Bales, 1956, p. 19). Parsons highlights that an important part of society is to socialise children or the so-called "'barbarian invasion' of the stream of newborn infants" into society's norms and into adults (Parsons, 1991, p. 143). Here the family was the most important institution for the task of socialisation, with the mother as the first and most significant role model for the child (Parsons, 1949, p. 185; Parsons & Bales, 1956, p. 18). The child did not have a place as acting agent but could fulfil the important function to secure a "good" marriage as the spouses could take on the role as parent (Parsons & Bales, 1956, p. 21). As to "status", here Parsons argued that children themselves cannot have a status in society that is not connected to the status of the child's parents (Parsons, 1949, p. 195). In the sense of social class, this is still a common perspective, and in research we still apply the parents' class position to the child.

Early sociological theories can, however, seem somewhat outdated nowadays, as they mainly build on the notion of the nuclear family with the male breadwinner. Furthermore, they were constructed in an era when children were not seen upon as having their own position in society, other than that of the "becoming adults". Consequently, during the 1980s a large shift in the view of the "new" sociology of childhood took place (Qvortrup et al., 2009). Within this shift, childhood was still seen as a period, but the value of the child and what the period of childhood means changed significantly. Children are now regarded as active agents that should be accepted, recognised and understood in their "here and now" context – their childhood. As such, children as a group and childhood as a period and structure are in their own right worthy of and highly relevant to study (Qvortrup et al., 2009). The individual childhood period starts at birth and ends with adulthood, and constitutes a phase where the child develops and gradually becomes more mature, independent, and competent (Qvortrup, 2009).

Childhood can additionally be viewed as a permanent generational structure just like "adulthood" or "old age". This permanent structure is integrated in a historical period. With the growing interest in children's own perspectives, and their "here and now" experiences in childhood, researchers have also taken on a new and maybe additional way to investigate children's status from their point of view. By asking children about their own resources and their possibilities of action, it has become possible to draw a new map of children's social statuses (Jonsson & Östberg, 2010; Qvortrup et al., 2009).

It is worth noting that Qvortrup and colleagues (2009) state that the Sociology of Childhood that they refer to is based on concepts that mostly refer to "normal" childhood. These concepts are not only constructed within modern society but also most commonly apply to the context of Western societies, where most children in their childhood have the possibility and obligation to go to school, and where most children are protected against child labour and the larger majority do not have to worry about having food for the day. These perspectives aim to attain basic knowledge on children as agents and on the different life stages and contexts surrounding them, but the theory does not claim to have the solutions on how to help children survive or deal with pressing social issues, for example in societies where more individuals struggle with poverty and pure survival (Qvortrup et al., 2009). It can be highlighted that this also applies to the following theoretical perspectives that are discussed in the later section "Sociological perspectives on social relations".

Based on large-scale and representative survey data, the results in this thesis contribute with an extension of our understanding of how the living conditions and circumstances in childhood not only influence children "here and now" but also have outcomes that can be cumulative and linger into adulthood, like "the long arm of childhood", following a life-course perspective (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). In two studies within this thesis (Study I and Study II), adult children are the anchor respondents and report retrospective information about their childhood. In this sense, childhood is investigated as a period. However, they also lived their childhood in a historical context (childhood as a generational unit in time); therefore, the context also contributes with information on how to interpret the data and the results from these studies. For example, many of the respondents in Study I experienced their childhood before 1980, which indicates that they were children when the rate of divorce was increasing, in an era when most children lived only with their mothers after a separation but with a steady increase in the contact frequency with the father. Regarding Study II, the main sample was extended with the Younger-LNU, consisting of young adults who reflect on the childhood period that they just left, during the 1990s and early 2000s. Their historical period was influenced by changes such as the so-called "daddy month" that linked 30 non-transferable days of paid parental leave to each parent and increased fathers' uptake of paid parental leave (Duvander &

Johansson, 2012) which, in turn, is associated with a higher contact frequency between fathers and children post-separation (Duvander & Jans, 2009). It can be discussed if and how the meaning of a parental separation might have changed for these cohorts, as the composition of families that separate as well as the context has changed over time (for a discussion about the Swedish case, see Gähler & Palmtag, 2015). However, previous study results on LNU data did confirm that there is still an association between family type, conflicts, and economic hardship in childhood (Gähler & Palmtag, 2015). This underlines the importance of continuing to study parental separation over the broader range of cohorts. In contrast to the first two studies, the respondents in Study III are still in their childhood and give "here-and-now" reports on their living conditions as children. To conclude, it is worth to keep in mind the conception of childhood as both a period in an individual's (and group of children's) life and a generational segment that is placed in historical time.

# Sociological perspectives on social relations

The purpose of the coming paragraphs is to unravel some of the complexity that family relationships and processes can constitute. The guiding theoretical framework is presented with a focus on parent-child and parent-parent interactions, as these are the main relationships in focus of the included studies. A family can of course also involve child-child (sibling) interactions as well as different triadic constellations (or higher level interactions) where groups are shaped within the family. However, a detailed description of all these ties are outside of the scope of this thesis.

## Family system theory

The family system approach describes the family as an overarching system that contains smaller subsystems (e.g., the parental subsystem and the parent-child subsystem) (Cox & Paley, 1997). The approach proposes that each family member is embedded in the family system and cannot fully be understood if the environment (the family) is not investigated simultaneously. The subsystems are hierarchically ordered and have clear but flexible borders so that each member knows how to interact within each subsystem, and at the same time they are able to support each other across the border (Cox & Paley, 1997). This means that some family members may be viewed as more important than others when it for example comes to providing support or being experienced (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). This can, however, become challenging if the roles within the family become unclear or change at a quick pace, as in the case of a parental separation. Here, a parent might leave not only the parental subsystem but also the first family system to create a new branch with a new parallel family system, where the child might become part of a growing second family system. A separation can temporarily alter the roles within the family if, for example, the child feels a need to comfort the parent(s). If a stepparent enters one or both of the family systems, this might help to fill the empty part in the parental subsystem, but it could also cause role conflicts if the child does not see this part of the system as empty or does not see a need for an exchange.

Family system theory is applicable not only to the study of events in childhood but also throughout the whole life course (Fingerman & Bermann,

2000). The family milieu with its values, rules and roles is present during family gatherings, during holidays, weddings or funerals. They are present in the day-to-day interactions that continue within the family also when children are adults, when there are good news, such as a new job or baby announcements, or when there are crises, such as a job loss, illness or maybe a separation. In all of these events, the subsystems share the beliefs about their world within the larger system of the family, for better and for worse. Not all interactions are good and not all family milieus are healthy for all the included members. Yet, in adulthood, changes happen all the time and the family system is dynamic and might evolve with these changes (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000).

## The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, introduced by Paul Amato, aims to describe why there is a heterogeneity in how children (and adults) react and adjust to the turbulence and disorder that a parental separation can trigger (Amato, 1993, 2000). The perspective synthesises theoretical assumptions from several theories with a special focus on stress and resources into a combined model that is meant to work as a theoretical guide for researchers in the field. The joint assumption is that a parental separation is a stressful event for the family members involved and that a divorce (separation) is not viewed as a discrete event that occurs suddenly. Rather, a separation is seen as a process that begins (sometimes long) before the actual break-up and ends long after the physical moving apart (Amato, 1993, 2000). This process consists of several steps of disengagement. The number of strings that need to be detached can of course depend on the time the couple spent together and the events binding them together as well as the number of shared possessions they accumulated as a couple. Furthermore, each of these steps can act as stressors for the family as a whole and/or its subsystems.

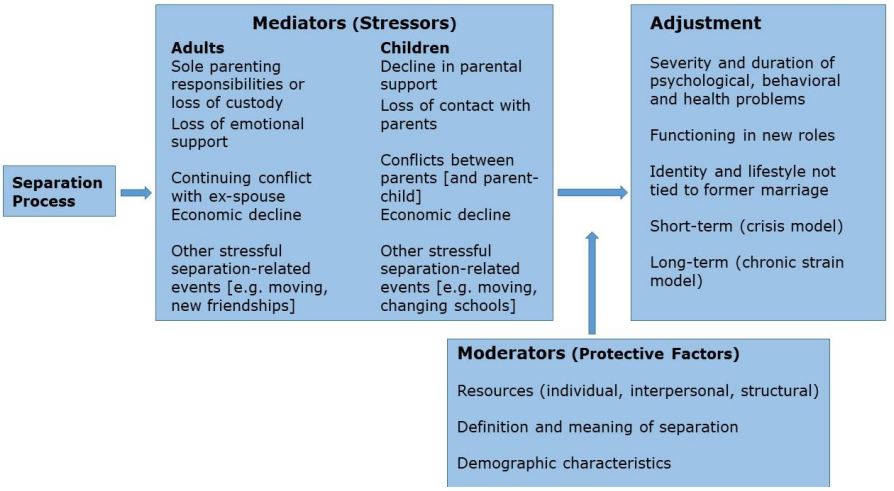


**Figure 4**: The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. A theoretical framework to explain the process of divorce [separation] and children and adults' adjustments thereto. Model based on Amato, 2000, own added comments in square brackets.

Figure 4 shows a flowchart over the separation process according to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. A separation influences individuals through so-called mediators (stressors), which are mechanisms that interfere with the individual's well-being and functioning. With children in focus it can be seen that the stressors that follow the break-up include factors such as: a decline in parental support and contact; conflicts within the family system; economic concerns; repeated events such as moves between housing or households, adjusting to new stepparents and step/halfsiblings, and change of schools and friend networks (Amato, 2000). These mediators within the separation process can start new processes and create additional stress, which in turn can influence the individual even more. However, the mediators can also be outcomes per se. Take economic decline as an example; it could influence adults' and children's health, school attendance, general level of living and so on, yet economic concerns could also be the outcome of a separation.

Within Figure 4, an arrow also shows what Amato (2000) calls protective factors or moderators, which can influence the connection between children's possible stressors and their adjustment to the separation. These moderators are what makes individuals resilient and (partly) protected against the stressors and events that could negatively influence their emotions, behaviours or health, and can thus help predict the heterogeneity in their outcomes (Amato, 2000). For children, one moderator can be their age. If they are very young they might not be aware of all the events around them and if they are in their

adolescence, they might be old enough to understand the necessity of ending a dysfunctional relationship. Moderators can also be the social support networks (e.g., family members, friends and teachers) that children can be embedded in or their own learned coping skills (via social learning and role models) (Amato, 2000). Connected to the diversity in outcomes and their severity, the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective proposes two opposing models, the crisis and the chronic strain model, to explain the individual adjustment to the separation process. Following the crisis model, the large majority of individuals involved in a separation process will over time adjust back to the same level of well-being as before the separation. The individual's resources, such as social support, structural support or personal coping skills, determine the speed of recovery and adjustment. In contrast, the chronic strain model assumes that these resources will only regulate the level of stress that the individuals' experience, but they will not help them to reach the same level of well-being as before the separation process began (Amato, 2000). Even if the models are partly contradicting each other, they both permit heterogeneity in outcomes after a separation based on the resources that the individual has access to and depending on the amount of time that has passed since the actual break-up event.

The assumption that the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective builds on is that most families experience some level of stress connected to the separation. For this reason, the perspective builds on how to explain these stressors (mediators) and which protectors (moderators) that can mitigate them. However, the perspective does not exclude the possibility that the process can lead to positive or mixed outcomes for both children and adults (Amato, 2000). If the theoretical map included mediators that counteracted stress rather than causing it, parameters such as "declining conflicts between ex-spouses" could be added for two conflicting spouses who separated and then improved their communication. Or the economic stability for the child could be improved if a parent managed to leave an economically disruptive partnership. It is also important to note that members of the family that experience the separation might all have their own path of stress and speed of adjustment to the different stages of the process. This could depend on the degree of involvement in the decisions (adult versus child, initiating spouse versus non-initiating spouse etc.) or the amount of coping skill that the person possesses (Amato, 2000).

## Emotional security and the spillover hypothesis

One common explanation for why some children are more distressed by their parents' conflicts and separation highlights the parent-child relationship and its role for the child's emotional security (Harold & Sellers, 2018). The emotional security hypothesis argues that children's image of the family

relationships is an important source for their own emotional security, and parental conflicts can intervene with their desire to preserve emotional security (Cummins & Davies, 2002). The desire to feel emotional security also regulates the child's reactions, such as anger, fear and emotional distress, to their parents conflicts (Cummings & Davies, 2002). The child might feel a need to intervene in the dispute, take sides or maybe withdraw from the situation to escape mixed-up feelings. All of this stirs up the emotional security that the child has established in the family context (Harold & Murch, 2005). If the child is exposed to frequent conflicts, their reactions to the circumstances could have long-term implications for their well-being (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Children can also interpret their parents' behaviour towards each other as the framework for how the parents act. The child could then fear that the parents will act the same way towards them, which could make the child feel distressed (Harold & Murch, 2005).

*The spillover hypothesis*

Similar to the emotional security hypothesis, the spillover hypothesis focuses on how family members influence each other via behaviours and mood, and how the atmosphere in one part of the family system can *spill over* to the rest of the family members. As discussed above, not only can parental conflicts as such stress the family members, but there are several stress factors within the parental separation process that all can influence the family (sub)system. Here, the spillover hypothesis can be a theoretical instrument to understand the link between the parental separation (and/or parental conflict) and the parent-child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995).

In brief, the spillover hypothesis can be summarised in four mechanisms through which emotions spill over between the family subsystems. The first mechanism refers to how parents might detour from their own quarrels by instead shifting their attention to the child's flaws or behaviour issues. In this way, the focus shifts via "scapegoating" or overprotection of the child and suppresses the parents' own ongoing conflict (Erel & Burman, 1995). The child can initiate this in an attempt to draw the attention away from the parental issues or via a parent that is unable to deal with the inter-parental problems. The outcome of scapegoating could be either that the parents unite in their concern over the child or that the negative attention towards the child decreases the parent-child relationship quality (Erel & Burman, 1995).

In contrast to this, the second spillover mechanism instead focuses on the link between the behaviour in the parental subsystem and how this can work as a behaviour model for the child, via social learning. This suggests that any kind of behaviour (warm and loving or hostile and dysfunctional) in the parental subsystem will be copied by the child, which then will use this role setting in their interaction with the parents (Erel & Burman, 1995).

Parenting behaviour is also in focus for the third mechanism, which deals with the socialisation hypothesis and the fact that conflict and separation

might influence parents' consistency in their disciplinary behaviour. If parents are unclear in their communication with each other about childrearing and inconsistent in their parenting towards the child, it can worsen the parent-child relationship (Erel & Burman, 1995).

The final mechanism deals with family stress and how stress within family subsystems can go in different directions. Tensions and increased needs in any of the subsystems could cause additional stress and spillover to each of the other subsystems in the family. As discussed, parental conflicts can lead to less emotional availability of the parent(s) towards the child and thus influence the parent-child relationship. However, if the parent(s) become more involved in childrearing and engaged in the parent-child relationship at some point, this can also lead to a decrease of the satisfaction within the parental subsystem. Stress in the family subsystems can also stem from triggers and factors outside of relations, such as chronical illness or economic problems (Erel & Burman, 1995). Figure 5 depicts the theoretical links according to the spillover hypothesis connected to the included studies.

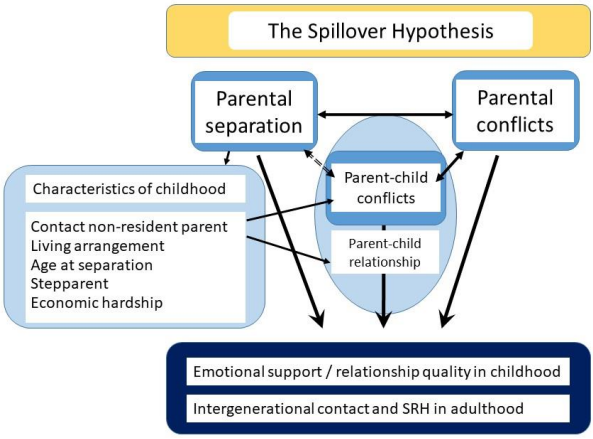


**Figure 5**: Map of theoretical framework based on the spillover hypothesis.

# Data and methodological considerations

This thesis draws on data from the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU). In the following section, the LNU survey is introduced together with short descriptions of its accompanying surveys among partners and children living in the same household. After presenting the description of the data, non-response and selection will briefly be discussed.

## LNU

The LNU[2] is the empirical data source for all three studies in this thesis. The LNU is a multidimensional panel survey that builds on a random representative sample of approximately 1/1000 individuals from the Swedish adult population (aged 18–75 years[3]). The first wave was conducted in 1968 and this sample was then used as the core sample for conducting the later waves in 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000, 2010, and the recently finalised wave of 2020. Because of panel attrition, age restrictions and migration, each new wave had to be updated with a refresher sample to keep the LNU survey representative of the Swedish population within the age span.

As the name reveals, the main aim of the LNU is to describe and measure the general living conditions in Sweden. When the LNU was first introduced in 1968, it was a new and ground-breaking survey as it was the first of its kind in Sweden, and among the first internationally, to try to capture the *overall picture* of people's level-of-living in one and the same questionnaire (Erikson, 2014). Building on this first wave, the extensive standardised questionnaire covers areas such as education, housing conditions, working conditions, economy, and health, but also earlier childhood conditions, family composition, and social relations in general. The interviews are standardised and performed either face-to-face or via telephone.[4] Moreover, to keep the work load for the respondent as low as possible, additional individual data

[2] The main source of reference for this section is Swedish Institute for Social Research, 2022.
[3] In the first three waves, the minimum age was 15 years.
[4] Additionally, a short version of the questionnaire in the form of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire was distributed in the final field stage of LNU 2010 to increase the participation rate. Furthermore, in the recently completed wave of 2020, self-administrated web-based as well as paper-and-pencil questionnaires are included as main survey modes.

such as taxation information, educational records and residential area are collected via register data. This makes the LNU data very rich on information concerning the main respondent (also called anchor).

Since LNU 2000, if the anchor respondent has a partner and/or children (age 10–18) living in the same household, they are also invited to participate in shorter surveys (Partner-LNU and Child-LNU). The Partner-LNU is a short paper-and-pencil version of the LNU main questionnaire but adds valuable data on family constellations. In the cross-sectional Child-LNU, all children aged 10–18 years that are living at least one third of their time in the anchor household are also invited to participate. The Child-LNU covers similar areas as for the adult respondent, but is adapted for children's everyday life. The questions touch upon social relations, social support, health, and the school environment, but also topics like bullying, pocket money, and household chores. The interviews were conducted using an audio-questionnaire. Children's answers are kept confidential from their parents and siblings as the child hears the questions in headphones and only ticks boxes in a pre-printed answer sheet where the questions are hidden. The Child-LNU has been conducted twice, in 2000 and in 2010, and a third edition is part of the recently completed LNU 2020. Similar to the main LNU when it was first introduced, the Child-LNU has been a forerunner among Swedish child surveys. The Child-LNU was the first national representative survey among large age groups of children that aimed to capture the welfare of the children through their own reports of their situation. With the possibility to connect the children's responses with data from one and sometimes two parents, the Child-LNU data is also very rich on accurate contextual as well as relational information from the adults in the household. Consequently, the Child-LNU fulfils a very important task, giving the children a voice of their own on *their* perspective on *their* level-of-living, and the result is a compilation of exceptional multidimensional survey data (Jonsson & Östberg, 2010).

Starting in 2010, a new panel was initiated parallel to the main anchor survey, where the core sample were former child respondents (henceforth called Younger-LNU) who were part of the Child-LNU sample in 2000. The respondents in Younger-LNU were aged 20–28 years in 2010 and were interviewed with the same survey questions as the adult anchor respondents. Using survey weights constructed by Statistics Sweden, which correct for the oversampling of young adults, it is possible to append the data from the Younger-LNU to the main LNU data without losing the representability of the merged sample (Swedish Institute for Social Research, 2022).

In each of the three studies included in this thesis, different data sets were constructed to fit the purpose of each research aim. The gross sample for Study I and II derives from the anchor LNU 2000 (5,142 respondents, response rate 76.6%) and LNU 2010 (4,415 respondents, response rate 60.9%). In Study II, additional data were added from Younger-LNU, which increased the gross sample size with 929 respondents (response rate 62.6%). Finally, Study III

draws on data mainly from the Child-LNU 2000 (1,304 respondents, approximate response rate 85.3%) and Child-LNU 2010 (920 respondents, approximate response rate 71.7%), but also includes required data from the anchor respondents in those waves. The approximation of the response rate among children is based on the identification of the gross sample of children. The gross sample builds on all children that fulfil the inclusion criteria in each wave (mentioned above). In Child-LNU 2000 the gross sample was calculated to be 1,529, and in Child-LNU 2010 the gross sample was 1,283 (Jonsson & Östberg, 2010; Swedish Institute for Social Research, 2022). The more detailed composition of the analytical samples are described in the data sections in each paper.

Considering all the datasets within the LNU umbrella, they collectively entail very rich and broad information on the level of living in Sweden. The research opportunities offered through these large data sets and the research questions that can be answered are immense. And even though the LNU has already laid the foundation for a vast series of studies, we have only scratched the surface of the possibilities that exist using these data.

## Non-response and selection into survey participation

A common issue within social science research that relies on survey data is the issue of selection. Even in a randomised and nationally representative sample such as that of the LNU there is a risk of potential selection bias, as the non-response among individuals could be non-random (non-response bias, self-selection bias). This also applies to later drop-outs between the waves in the panel approach (attrition bias). According to the non-respondent statistics for LNU 2010, the panel members that participated in the most recent wave were more likely to participate again compared to panel members that had a gap of one wave or more since their last participation. Yet, compared to the new samples drawn among young adults and immigrants, the panel members were more likely to participate, and children were the group with the lowest non-response rate in 2010.

The information given by Statistics Sweden about the demographics of the non-responders also tells us that there are no large systematic differences between the respondents and the non-respondents when it comes to variables such as gender and age (based on the non-response to LNU 2010 and the response rate of 60.9%). Although the differences are small, the younger adults (age 21–35) are the least prone to participate compared to the middle and oldest cohorts, and women participated to a slightly larger extent compared to men (62.5% of the women compared to 60.1% of the men). Civil status according to registers also shows small variabilities among the groups. Singles (as in never married) were the smallest group among the respondents, mostly because they could not be reached via the contact attempts made. One

possible reason for this could be that being single (according to the registers) is more common among younger cohorts. A lower response rate was found in the category "born outside of Sweden", where about 49 percent of the individuals participated in the survey. It is difficult say if and how this has influenced the results in the thesis, but families with parents born outside of Sweden usually separate to a lower extent and when they do, they are less likely to choose a shared residence arrangement (Jonsson et al., 2022, p. 115; Statistics Sweden, 2014). According to the report from Statistics Sweden, as described, there is only small variation in the response rates based on other demographic variables. Considering this and the fact that all the included studies yield results that are in line with findings from other studies with different biases, it is my conclusion that the non-response should not alter the analyses to any large degree (Arfken & Balon, 2011). However, there could of course be other and larger selection issues on variables that have not been controlled for which could cause misinterpretations (Swedish Institute for Social Research, 2022).

## A note on selection

For all of the included studies, there are underlying risks for the selection of individuals into different groups or behaviours. This implies that there can be unobserved characteristics among these individuals that the studies do not control for but which influence the findings. This can lead to under- or overestimations of the results. Possible selections that have been discussed in the studies are parents' selection into certain post-separation family constellations and/or a low or high contact frequency with their child due to (conflict driven) behaviour or preferences (Albertini & Garriga, 2011; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Previous research has shown that the prevalence of children's shared residence post-separation is higher among parents with a strong socioeconomic status (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2021; Garriga et al., 2021; Nielsen, 2018). Also other circumstances could influence families to select into different living arrangements for the children. The literature discusses issues such as health and job opportunities. Sole parental living arrangements could be the best option, for example, if one parent has health issues that make it hard for them to care for the child, or likewise if the child has health issues that make frequent moves a challenge. It is more common that families have shared residence arrangements when the mother worked full-time before the separation (Thomson & Turunen, 2021). Moreover, parents that opt for shared residence are more likely to have a cooperative relationship also after the separation, as this arrangement includes more frequent contact and situations that need negotiation compared to a sole parental living arrangement. Yet, when a shared living arrangement is decided by legislation or when the court

has ordered the arrangement, high-conflict families will be more common also within this category (Thomson & Turunen, 2021). It should also be noted that fathers (as well as mothers) may self-select into a frequent contact or shared residence if they are child-oriented. Child-oriented fathers might also, in general, be keener on maintaining a good relationship with the child both in childhood and over the life course. I have tried to minimize the impact of potential selection by controlling for relevant conditions. Here a rich dataset such as LNU is of great value. Issues on selection are further discussed in the respective paper.

## Ethical considerations

All research in this thesis is based on the well-established ethical guidelines from Vetenskapsrådet (the Swedish Research Council), found in the document Good Research Practice (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017), and The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity published by All European Academies (2017) (ALLEA). Four key principles, which should guide all research conducted, can be summarised as follows:

- Reliability – the researcher is responsible for the quality of the research through all steps of the procedure (design, method, analysis and use of resources).
- Honesty – the researcher is responsible for the transparency of the research process where all steps (invention, implementation, review and reports) are communicated in an objective, open and complete manner.
- Respect – the researcher should respect the society within which the researcher acts, including other actors and the environment.
- Responsibility – the researcher should take responsibility for all the steps within the research process from the starting idea to the completed study and publications, but also for prospective consequences. (Stockholm University, 2022).

Building on all four principles, this thesis deals with data that concerns human individuals and accordingly it should be conducted in a way that respects and protects each individual respondent. There is an important balance between gain and potential harm that the research could cause the individual respondent, where the benefits always have to outweigh the possible harm.

Considering the possible harm that the research conducted within this thesis could cause the respondents, the risk of disclosure of personal information is the most evident risk. In conjunction with data collection, all respondents (adults as well as children) gave their informed consent to take part, meaning that they were informed about the nature of the survey, how it would be conducted as well as the collection of additional information from register data. All participants were also informed that they at any time could withdraw

their contribution. To keep all individual data confidential, the data has been de-identified and the linking key information is kept outside of Stockholm University and is not made available for any researcher to use. The data are stored on safe servers linked to Stockholm University. Study results are always reported in a categorical group manner to prevent individual data from being identified. Thus, the risk of disclosure of personal information is minimal. The research has been approved by the Regional Ethics Committee of Stockholm (EPN, #2009/1802-31/5).

# Summary of the empirical studies

This thesis investigates the heterogeneity in children's outcomes after a parental separation in childhood and how different childhood characteristics and conditions work as stressors or protective factors between these associations. As discussed throughout this introductory chapter, a separation interferes not only with the possibilities for children to have regular contact with all members of the family but also with their possibilities to exchange support (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, Silverstein et al., 2002). Exchanging different kinds of support – be it emotional, instrumental or financial – is a key element of maintaining a relationship with someone. Furthermore, a high-quality parent-child relationship is said to be one of the most essential aspects for the well-being of both generations, throughout life (Thomas et al., 2017). Therefore, the studies included in this thesis aim to investigate how children can manage to keep an ongoing relationship with both parents after their separation (Study III); what circumstances support and explain the diversity in parent-child contact over the life-course (Study I); and whether these childhood characteristics connected to separation and conflict linger on into adult life and the adult child's well-being (Study II).

**Study I: Does it matter anymore? A study of childhood characteristics and separated families' contact in adulthood**

**Study I** investigates how intergenerational contact in adulthood is influenced by a parental separation in childhood. The background to this study lies in previous results that show differences in the contact frequency between separated families and intact families (see, e.g., Albertini & Garriga, 2011; de Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Lye, 1996; Skevik, 2006). The contribution of Study I is that it extends the knowledge on the potential heterogeneity in the frequency of intergenerational contacts following a parental separation. To understand this association better, the study explores four childhood circumstances that might act as stressors or moderators: parental conflicts, age at separation, post-separation contact with the non-resident parent, and the experience of having a stepparent. An additional focus was on possible gender differences in contact and how a separation might alter this. Study I utilises data from LNU 2000 and LNU 2010 where the respondent represents the adult child with retrospective reports on childhood circumstances. In the initial part of the study, it was established that family type in childhood associates with

intergenerational contact in adulthood. Children with separated parents on average have less contact with their parents and especially with their fathers compared to children from intact families. In general, the report of parental conflict in childhood also associated with a reduced contact frequency between the parents and the child. However, in the in-depth analysis, including only separated families, this association was not significant anymore. One possible interpretation could be that conflicts might decrease in intensity or dissolve when the parents separate, whereas they might endure in intact families.

A gender gap in contact was visible in the results. Mothers' intergenerational contacts with children are not as influenced by a separation as the father-child contacts are, and the mother-daughter bond is the most resilient. This can be due to the living arrangements post-separation, which this study could not control for. However, it might be due to the fact that women commonly act as kinkeepers and are more involved in networking. The results further indicated that daughters had less frequent contact with the father than sons, which on the other hand might be due to the preference of interacting with one's own gender. The most important finding in the in-depth analysis was that frequent contact with the non-resident parent during childhood is positively correlated with later father-child contact. Additionally, the contact with the non-resident parent did not decrease the later contact with the mother. These findings suggest that the father-child contact is the most vulnerable after a parental separation, yet a frequent contact during childhood acts as a protector for this bond. It is therefore important to further investigate the meaning of children's living arrangements post-separation for maintaining the relationships with their parents.

### Study II: Like ripples on a pond: The long-term consequences of parental separation and conflicts in childhood on adult children's self-rated health

Parental separation and parental conflicts are highly intertwined and often co-occur. As variables they show similar consequences for children, resulting in poorer academic attainment, behavioural problems and lower well-being (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Gähler & Palmtag, 2015; Grätz, 2015; Hanson, 1999; Harold & Sellers, 2018). Yet, few studies include both measures in the same analysis when investigating children's outcomes. Moreover, children's own participation in conflicts are seldom accounted for. To extend the body of existing research, **Study II** explores how different forms of conflict in childhood and parental separation additively and interactively predict self-rated health in adulthood. Furthermore, to bridge with the results in Study I, a subsample was analysed to investigate if the associations between different family conflicts and self-rated health in adulthood were any different within the group of separated families, controlling for post-separation circumstances. The data structure is cross-sectional and childhood events are reported

retrospectively. Study II bases its theoretical framework on the "spillover" hypothesis (see Figure 5 above), which theoretically links how emotions and behaviour in one family subsystem can spill over to the other. As Figure 5 shows, both parental separation and parental conflicts are assumed to have a direct association with self-rated health in adulthood. At the same time, they influence each other. What is more interesting is the link between parental conflicts and the parent-child relationship, which Study II measures via the parent-child conflict. This relationship is seldom included in earlier studies, but is arguably an important aspect of childhood that has been overseen.

The left side of the map in Figure 5 shows common post-separation stressors and protectors that are included in the second part of the analysis to investigate if and how they influence the association between childhood conflicts and self-rated health in adulthood. First, the results could confirm that both parental separation and parental conflicts in childhood have independent association with later self-rated health, meaning that there is an additive negative relationship. Children that experienced parental separation had less good self-rated health if they also experienced parental and/or parent-child conflicts. However, there was no evidence of any interaction between parental conflict and separation. Hence, the associations are not dependent on each other. Second, the additional analysis including only separated families showed that parental conflict did not seem to matter for children with separated parents, whereas conflicts between the child and a parent showed a strong association with later self-rated health in adulthood. Again similar to the conclusion in Study I one possible interpretation could be that within intact families parental conflicts tend to linger on during childhood and are therefore associated with more negative outcomes for children. However, if the parents separated, the conflicts might diminish and instead the child could have more reason, or maybe more opportunities, to have disputes with a parent.

The results underline the importance of considering children's involvement when studying the separation process and its outcomes. The results further suggest that counselling for families to help them through a separation should not neglect a focus on parent-child conflicts, as well as on parents' role modelling, to prevent children from experiencing negative long-term health outcomes.

### Study III: Whom to turn to? The influence of childhood living arrangements on children's perceived parental support

**Study III** investigates children's relationship with both parents during childhood, using a "here-and-now" perspective to explore if the parent-child relationship is influenced by a parental separation. This is essential as social relations, and especially parent-child relationships, are highly important for children's development and wellbeing (Bastaits et al., 2012; Berkman et al., 2000; Låftman & Östberg, 2006). As previous studies found that children in

shared residence tend to do better on several living conditions compared to children in sole parental residence post parental separation (Bjarnason et al., 2012; Fallesen & Gähler, 2021; Fransson et al., 2018; Låftman et al., 2014; Steinbach, 2019; Turunen et al., 2021), Study III additionally explored if there is a heterogeneity in children's parent-child relationship based on their living arrangements post-separation. Investigating the child's combined measure of parental support – instead of studying mothers and fathers separately – contributes with knowledge on how children's "total" parental support and relationship quality changes with a separation and between living arrangements. As Sweden has a high share of children in shared residence arrangements, with approximately 35 percent of all children with separated parents living this way, the results can contribute with knowledge on this type of family arrangement that can benefit other societies where this new family form is still on the rise (Statistics Sweden, 2014).

The study uses data from both waves of Child-LNU, from 2000 and 2010, with a total sample of 2,064 children, where the subgroup of separated families contains 455 children. Using linear probability models, the first analysis shows that children in separated families are less likely to turn to both parents when worried (emotional support) and to report that they get on very well with both parents compared to children in intact families. Moreover, when comparing intact families with children in separated families divided based on their living arrangements, the results further indicate that only children in sole parental residence – and not children in shared residence – differ significantly to children in intact families. Then in the final step of the analysis it was confirmed that children in sole parental residence also have lower values on both the dependent variables compared to children in shared residence. Furthermore, there is a difference between paternal and maternal residence where children in sole paternal residence seem to score even lower compared to children in sole maternal residence on both the perception of emotional support and the likelihood of getting on well with both parents.

To sum up, shared residence seems to enable children to continue a parallel relationship with both parents also post-separation, which seems harder for children living in sole parental residence. As sole parental residence is still the most common post-separation arrangement, these insights can contribute with knowledge to the discussion on how children can be supported to become more resilient towards the negative outcomes following a parental separation.

# Concluding remarks

## Conclusions and implications

What is left now is to conclude this thesis by summarising how the aim – to "break down break-ups" by exploring the heterogeneity in children's outcomes after a parental separation – was met.

Throughout the thesis, I have repeatedly confirmed previous findings that separated families are different compared to intact families. Children in separated families have less intergenerational contact, worse self-rated health in adulthood and perceive less support and a lower relationship quality with both parents in childhood compared to children in intact families (Study I, II, III). These are not novel findings as such, but they validate existing research and contribute with added value and additional understanding of the Swedish context.

Yet, it is in the additional analyses, where the aim has been to understand the heterogeneity in the consequences of parental separation, in "breaking down break-ups", that the main contributions of this thesis lie. Study I shows that the main decline in intergenerational contact in adulthood occurred within the father-child subsystem, most likely due to the father's likelihood to be the non-resident parent. Here, the within-group analyses showed that a protective factor was frequent contact with the non-resident parent in childhood. These results suggest that part of the variance in children's contact with their parents after a separation is driven by residence, and the distribution of contact between the child and *both* parents in childhood post-separation (Study I) as a source of heterogeneity.

In contrast, Study II did not find support for the contact with the non-resident parent being important for the later self-rated health in adulthood. However, another dimension of the parent-child relationship played an important role here, namely the presence of parent-child conflicts in childhood. This indicates conflict as the source of heterogeneity in children's outcomes, with indications of a diversity in parents' ability to keep the children outside of their own quarrels and stress. The findings suggest that events in the parental subsystem could spill over to the rest of the family system and increase the risk of conflicts in the parent-child subsystem. These seem to be larger stressors for the child with separated parents. So, if interventions and separation guidance are directed towards the conflicting couple, they might miss out on a severe source of stress for the child – their

disputes with their parent(s). Further, the findings emphasise parents' important responsibilities as role models: how they act towards each other and towards the child could start ripples that last longer than the moment in which they act.

Connected to this, Study III focused on children's experience and own reports about their childhood "here-and-now". The findings underlined that children perceive more support from both parents in an intact family compared to a separated family. Again, the more "broken down" analysis that divided children's living arrangements post parental separation informed us that with a shared parental residence, children manage to keep a social relationship with both of their parents to a higher degree compared with children in a sole parental residence. Here children's living arrangements are, again, confirmed to be a possible source of heterogeneity in children's outcomes post parental separation. The subdivided group of living arrangements also confirmed previous findings that children in shared residence resemble children in intact families when it comes to their relationship with both parents, a fact that was hidden in the first crude dichotomy of separated versus intact families (Study III).

All of these findings underline the importance of dividing (breaking down) the group of separated into further subgroups, such as residential groups, as they are not one homogenous mass of individuals. This will provide an understanding about which children, and under which circumstances, are the most vulnerable as well as resilient to their parents' separation. Moreover, it could inform researchers as well as policy actors of where interventions and resources would be most beneficial. Furthermore, the findings support previous studies that argue that it is advantageous for children to keep a regular contact with both parents after separation. Likewise, it disproves those who have spoken against shared residence and considered it to be more harmful for children than sole parental residence. It is, however, important to note that my study results do not give indications of shared residence or a frequent contact with both parents being in the best interest of *all* children or under *all* circumstances. As most children in Sweden today still live in a sole maternal residence when their parents separate, future studies should investigate how and if policies should promote parents to share the responsibility even more than they already do.

If we take a step back and discuss the larger picture, these results also offer suggestions about the gender patterns that are visible in the data. As mentioned, the results indicate how the gender gap in intergenerational contact could be narrowed by an increase in fathers' (the non-resident parents) contact frequency in childhood. The indications that the involvement of fathers also is important after a separation highlights the role that the father's parenting has in their child's lives and the value it has both for the father-child relationship over the life course and for the well-being of both generations. Yet, norms about mothers as "the parent", or at least as "the caregiving

parent", are still very strong in society and among practitioners and legal representatives (Brandén et al., 2018). Therefore, encouraging parents to share the responsibility for the children and their residence after a separation (and before) not only facilitates mothers' possibilities of taking (a larger) part in the labour market but also benefits fathers' social relations and their chances of exchanging support with their children through the life course. The one take away is that children will gain more benefits and resources if they also have the opportunity to exchange emotional and instrumental support with their fathers and not just receive a "cheque". This will benefit them over the whole life course, regardless of family form.

The questions that are of interest to pose as final conclusion are: Does this thesis answer any questions that could benefit society at large or the individual families that separate? Does it advance previous knowledge and address any novel areas from which the research community could gain? Well, the answer is yes, to some extent. The collected knowledge gained in this thesis does not offer any applied answers to how families or children can be supported in the separation process. There is always a risk of overinterpreting the relevance and value of single study results or small subsets of studies. Instead, the findings should be evaluated in connection with previous knowledge and the context in which they are conducted. Most importantly, this thesis does not claim to provide causal interpretation, nor do the findings eliminate the possibility of reverse causality. Instead, the results, with support from previous findings, offer an indication of the direction of the different associations under investigation. It is within this framework that the suggestions made above indicate how to make most use of the added knowledge stemming from this thesis.

## Future studies

### The "new" fatherhood in shared residence and its influence on children: A study of work-life balance

As described throughout the thesis, the share of children that live in shared residence post-separation is increasing. This also increases the share of households where single fathers, at least partly, have the main responsibility for all family obligations and household chores. Since women started to increase their labour force participation in the mid-20th century, there has been an ongoing discussion about the "double burden" (often defined as accumulation of responsibilities; Väänänen et al., 2004) that women face, managing both the demands of paid work and taking the main responsibility of the household. This has been addressed extensively in the literature (see, e.g., Väänänen et al., 2004).

Over the last four decades, Swedish mothers in the labour force have on average lowered their amount of unpaid work with more than 50% (from approx. 34 hours a week in 1974 to 15 hours a week in 2010) (Boye & Evertsson, 2014). During the same time period, there has been a notable change in the amount of unpaid work for fathers as well, going from almost 3 hours a week to about 8.5 hours a week (Boye & Evertsson, 2014). Even though the change for fathers may be slow, researchers have lately increased their interest in the overall changing roles of fathers. Throughout European societies, the norms around the father's role in childrearing and their involvement in children is gaining importance – the so-called "new fatherhood" – and policy changes concerning e.g. parental leave are made to support this (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; O'Brien & Moss, 2010; Roy, 2014). Nonetheless, scholars argue that there still seems to be a lag in the actual socialisation and practice of men (and women), where the traditional role of the "working father" as the breadwinner of the family and the mother as the main caregiver still seems to be the underlying ideal (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; O'Brien & Moss, 2010). However, with current norm changes in society towards a standard of shared residence after a separation, this lag in gender roles and responsibilities in the family has gotten a recent boost instead. Some fathers increase their involvement and engagement in children after a separation, a change that has been coined "divorce activated fathers" (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002, as cited in Garriga et al., 2021). Accordingly, researchers now argue that men are increasingly facing the same double burden as women – dealing with the main responsibility for the household and childrearing as well as paid work (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). Qualitative research has pointed out that children in shared residence indicate that they re-evaluated their relationships with their fathers and mothers, which partly was connected to the increased time they spent alone (Berman, 2015).

The changing role of fathers and its outcomes have been well studied (see, e.g., Lamb, 2010), but not so much focus has been put on the work-family conflict for men (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; Roy, 2014) or on how this could influence fathers' health or the father-child relationship. Studies concerning outcomes after separation are often centred on single mothers and when men are considered it is often in the role of the non-residential parent (Bailey, 2007). Considering the growing number of fathers sharing a household with their children after divorce, including increased family responsibilities and the lingering expectations on the "working father", further studies should aim to investigate the associations between these two trends. How can these different role expectations influence fathers' work-family balance, and how does it connect to fathers' relationship with their children and children's outcomes in these families? How do children react to the possibly changing role model of their father?

More specifically, a focus could be on fathers' working conditions and how they can facilitate or hinder men to perform their role as father and main caregiver (role stress versus role balance).

### Same-sex partnerships and family dissolution

This thesis only investigates trends and outcomes within mixed-sex partnerships and family transitions. However, there is an increasing trend, in Sweden, not only for same-sex registered partnerships and marriages, but also in the prevalence of entering same-sex parenthood as well as a later family dissolution (Kolk & Andersson, 2020). These parallel trends will increase the number of children that experience a separation between their same-sex parents. Therefore, it is important to point out that more research is needed within the field to increase our understanding of how family complexity amongst same-sex parents influences children (Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

### Building a panel

Longitudinal data is, in general, something that is lacking when it comes to the study of children's living arrangements and is often asked for in the conclusions of reviews (see, e.g., Berman & Daneback, 2020; Steinbach, 2019). With the data from the recently completed LNU 2020 becoming available, there is a possibility to construct very interesting longitudinal data containing three waves of panel data for the respondents that participated in Child-LNU 2000, Younger-LNU 2010 and the recent LNU 2020. These respondents have personally contributed with information about their living conditions, covering the age span of 10–18 years (in 2000), 20–28 (in 2010) and 30–38 (in 2020). Additionally, there are parental data covering their childhood between birth (and even before birth) and the year they first participated. In some cases, the parents also continued their participation in LNU, thus expanding the information even more. And considering that there also are partners (and parents) participating in Partner-LNU, the complexity of this longitudinal panel is large, but so are the possibilities to investigate these children's living conditions and the possible heterogeneity in outcomes after separations, conflicts or other life changing events over a large part of their early life course.

Connecting to a life course perspective and the accumulation of experiences, a potential research focus could be to create a family biography around these child respondents. A family biography could include information about family experiences throughout childhood (e.g., the number and type of events, the timing of the event, etc.) and changes in the family structure over the individual's life course. This could include information from both their childhood family and their "own" family as an adult (e.g., partnerships or children) (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). The usefulness of such a biography

lies in the possibilities of linking life events connected to the family environment and outcomes connected to education, work or health over the life course. Having such a rich material could extend our possibilities of investigating when, how, and for whom family ties shape life trajectories (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020).

## Final remark

To close, I would say yes, it matters what happens in childhood (Study I). There are ripples on the pond, but they can also be of a good nature (Study II). It is up to the parents and the children to whom they chose to turn, so nurture that contact and the relationship (Study III). With that said, I can only end with a *"to be continued"*…

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