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Divorced parents and social contact

A study on the effect of social contact on the subjective well-being of divorced parents

Abstract

Previous research repeatedly found the positive effect of social contact on persons' subjective well-being. Divorced parents report lower subjective well-being and lose a great amount of social contact which puts them at risk for mental health issues. This research aimed to find out to what extent increased social contact influences divorced parents' subjective well-being and whether the type of social contact or gender matter in the effect. Using the NFN data from 2593 respondents, multiple linear regressions were done to test the hypotheses. The results show a strong effect between having frequent social contact and divorced parents' subjective well-being. Specifically, frequent contact with friends was found to be the best predictor for higher subjective well-being and no moderating effect was found from gender.

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1. Introduction

Research on the consequences of divorce for parents shows concerning results regarding mental health effects. Divorce is found to decrease parents' life satisfaction during the first years after divorce and divorce increases the chance of depression (Andreß, & Bröckel, 2007; Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). In explanation, divorce is one of the major stressors for parents because it causes multiple secondary changes within their lives. For example, parents lose contact with former friends and in-laws, which increases the risk for social isolation (Wang, & Amato, 2000). Furthermore, parents encounter financial hardships following divorce and struggle with single parenting. These stressors cause poor mental health and heightened emotional vulnerability (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). Since divorced parents are significantly more at risk for negative psychological maladies, this study looks at social factors that could increase their well-being.

Having many moments of social contact is consistently manifested as an important predictor for well-being (Berkman, Glass, Brissete, & Seeman, 2000; Hombrados-Mendieta, García-Martin, & Gómez-Jacinto, 2013). This study will use this variable as well since social contact might be very beneficial for divorced parents because they lose a significant proportion of their social contact after separating (Botterman, Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2013). With the vanishing of social contact, parents also experience a serious decrease in availability of social support (Wijckmans, & Van Bavel, 2011). Social support is a very important predictor of psychological well-being since it provides a sense of belonging and feelings of commitment (Lin, 1986).

Yet little research has been conducted on social contact concerning divorced parents and there are no studies that differentiate between different types of contact. This is nevertheless very important to look at because not all social contacts might provide as much social support for divorced parents. Specific knowledge on what type of social contact is the most beneficial might contribute to effective policymaking regarding divorced parents. Moreover, previous studies have suggested that gender differences exist in divorced parents' subjective well-being and social contacts (Cable, Bartley, Chandola, & Sacker, 2013). Women report higher life satisfaction after a divorce than men (Andreß, & Bröckel, 2007), but men are found to be better at creating new, support-receiving friendships following divorce (Gerstel, 1988). It is important to look for gender differences regarding social contact, to implement higher functional policies for divorced mothers and fathers, thus this variable will be included as well.

In this thesis, there will be looked at the plausible relationship between higher social contact frequency and subjective well-being among divorced parents. Furthermore, attention will be drawn to two co-variables: the type of social contact and gender. The following main question will be answered in this thesis: *‘What is the effect of frequent social contact on the subjective well-being of divorced parents?’* Moreover, the first sub-question reads: *‘Does the type of social contact matter regarding divorced parents’ subjective well-being?’* and the second sub-question reads: *‘Does gender influence the effect of frequent social contact on the subjective well-being of divorced parents?’*

The dataset that will be used to answer these questions is the New Families The Netherlands, first wave (Poortman, Van der Lippe, & Boele-Woelki, 2014). The data was collected by Utrecht University in collaboration with Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The dataset includes all relevant information on legal arrangements of divorced and separated parents in the Netherlands and is, therefore, an adequate instrument to answer the current research questions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Divorced parents, social contact and subjective well-being

Social contact is a widely known factor that positively influences people’s mental health. Contact with others is an important predictor for people’s subjective well-being and level of social integration and thereby, social contact decreases the chance of depression (Aseltine, & Kessler, 1993). Émile Durkheim was one of the social-health founding fathers and argued that weak social integration causes disappointment and misery because our desires will not be fulfilled (Thoits, 1999). More recent studies on social embeddedness (i.e. frequency of meeting with others) show that it improves an individual’s subjective well-being (Arpino, & de Valk, 2018; Siedlecki, Salhouse, Oishi, & Jeswani, 2014). Higher social embeddedness proves to be a strong predictor for having more positive affect (i.e. positive emotions) and having higher levels of life satisfaction, which together cover subjective well-being. A study that looked at ‘why happy people are happy’ also confirms this effect (Diener, & Seligman, 2002). It shows that ‘very happy people’ have the most extensive interpersonal lives. They are less often alone and spend the most time socializing with family members, friends and romantic partners compared to ‘average’ and ‘unhappy’ people.

The mechanism behind the positive effect of social contact on subjective well-being can be deduced to social support. Social support entails “various forms of aid and assistance

supplied by family members, friends, neighbours, and others” (Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981, p. 435). Social support is a broad term, but two main components can be distinguished: enacted support (i.e. actual received support) and perceived support (i.e. perceived available support). After divorce, parents obtain perceived support by knowing and thinking that they can rely on close contacts for comfort and help during this difficult time (Schwarzer, Knoll, & Rieckmann, 2004). Divorced parents acquire received support from close contacts that show love, understanding, and who take care of extra chores. Social support thus gives this feeling of comfort and in turn is associated with greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, happiness, and general well-being (Nguyen, Chatters, Taylor, & Mouzon, 2016).

Frequent social contact is essential for divorced parents because they are found to struggle with mental health issues. During the first two years after a divorce, parents are found to have lower life satisfaction (Andreß, Bröckel, 2007). Moreover, they are emotionally vulnerable due to increased stressors like financial hardship, single parenting, and changes in social relationships (Aseltine, & Kessler, 1993). Durkheim’s description of “anomic suicide” explains the poorer mental health of divorced parents. He argues that normative, rapid changes in the social structure (e.g. divorce) cause people to be confused and normless, which ultimately leads to disappointment and despair. Although Durkheim’s theory dates from the nineteenth century, his reasoning still applies to our modern society. Divorced parents experience these normative and rapid changes. In explanation, they no longer conform to the social norm of being married and they might lose a significant number of social contacts (Botterman et al., 2013; Umberson, 1987). Fewer moments of social contact in turn increase divorced parents’ dissatisfaction with their social life and increases the chance for loneliness.

In summary, divorce might cause parents to struggle with mental health issues and they are, furthermore, socially disadvantaged due to a decrease in social contact. Increased frequency of social contact with family members, friends, or important acquaintances might lead to higher embeddedness, more social support, thus higher subjective well-being. Previous research repeatedly found a positive relation between social contact and higher subjective well-being. Regarding these scientific findings, the following hypothesis is derived:

H1: The more frequent social contact with family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances, the higher divorced parents’ subjective well-being.

2.2 Divorced parents, type of social contact and subjective well-being

The link between divorced parents' subjective well-being and different types of social contact has barely been made. The theorizing will thus be done from more general theories and findings, however, the expectation is that they are adequately applicable to divorced parents' situation.

The convoy model of social relations (Kahn, & Antonucci, 1985) shows that individuals can have five different types of support-providing contacts: family, friends, co-workers, neighbours and other valuable relations (Nguyen et al., 2016). The types of social contact vary in level of social support provision and thus differ in their effect on subjective well-being. As argued by Kahn and Antonucci (1980), three concentric circles divide the types of contact according to closeness and provision of social support.

The outer circle comprises of social contacts who are less close to an individual compared to the two inner circles, but who are important enough to be placed in one's contact network (Fuller, Ajrouch, & Antonucci, 2020). Neighbours and other acquaintances like co-workers are placed in this outer circle. Although they score lowest on subjective closeness to an individual, they are nonetheless important contributors of social support (Nguyen et al., 2016). Other studies also confirmed the relation between contact with neighbours and higher subjective well-being (Mars, & Schmeets, 2011; Helliwell, & Putnam, 2004). Helliwell & Putnam (2004) for example found that more frequent social contact with neighbours is systematically related to higher subjective well-being. While there is evidence available for the contribution of contact with neighbours to individuals' subjective well-being, the convoy model of social relations points out that the effect does not equal the effect of contact with friends and family on subjective well-being. The study of Mars & Schmeets (2011) confirms this statement too. The study found that the variation in happiness levels between those who are and those who are not in contact with their neighbours was only 9%. This contrasts the variation between the happiness level of those who see their family or friends once a week versus people who never see them, which was considerably 26% and 23%.

The inner circle within the convoy model of social relations comprises persons who are subjectively the closest to an individual and provide the most social support (Nguyen et al., 2016). The model shows that largely parents, spouses and children are in the inner circle. The middle circle thus comprises of contacts who provide mediate support, such as friends. However, studies that compared contact with friends and contact with family and their relation to divorced parents' subjective well-being found contrasting results. The few existing studies suggest that for divorced parents, contact with friends might be more important for

their subjective well-being than contact with family members (Milardo, 1987; Tolsdorf, 1981; Malo, 1994). The main argument given by Milardo (1987) points out that family members are often critical about the separation whereas friends are unlikely to be. Critical family members provide less social support and alternatively increase stress levels among divorced parents (Tolsdorf, 1981). Friends, however, provide expressive support and feedback that are required during difficult circumstances such as divorce (Huddleston, & Hawking, 1993). Moreover, friends are more likely to understand the justification for divorce and give their approval due to the homogenous character of friendships (Milardo, 1987). Friends will provide more aid and advice (i.e. social support) to divorced or divorcing parents, which might result in higher happiness levels (Chopik, 2017).

In summary, contact with neighbours positively affects divorced parents' subjective well-being, however, this effect is expected to be less strong than the effect of family and friends on subjective well-being. In turn, friends are expected to provide more social support after separation than family, and thus have the strongest effect on subjective well-being. The following hypothesis is therefore derived:

H2: Frequent social contact with friends increases divorced parents' subjective well-being the most, followed by contact with family and, lastly, contact with neighbours.

2.3 Divorced parents, gender and subjective well-being

Many studies have been investigating gender differences in the consequences of divorce. From the economic perspective, women are repeatedly found to be disadvantaged after divorce (Leopold, 2018). However, indistinct and contradictory results have been found on the well-being and social perspective.

A study on the well-being perspective found that men have significantly lower life satisfaction than women during the first four years after divorce (Andreß, & Bröckel, 2007). This can be contributed to the fact that most women are the initiators of divorce and thus feel relief after ending their stressful marriage (Leopold, 2018). Men furthermore strongly rely on their spouse, whereas women also rely on other family members (Moore, 1990). Regarding the social perspective, men have somewhat higher chances for loneliness and social isolation after divorce (Dykstra, & Fokkema, 2007; Wang, & Amato, 2000). However, men are nevertheless better at creating new friendships after divorce and they receive a significantly larger amount of social support from friends than women (Kalmijn, 2012; Kalmijn, & van Groenou, 2005). Developing new and intimate friendships during the divorce process is a key coping mechanism to handle the new situation (Milardo, 1987). Besides, the ability to receive

support from close friends during divorce is a greater buffer for distress than support from family. Women are found to rely more on family members for social support during their whole life-course than men and even more after divorce (Milardo, 1987; Moore, 1990). As argued before, family members provide lower social support after divorce because of their critical and disapproving standing point (Milardo, 1987; Tolsdorf, 1981). A study by Cable et al. (2013) moreover points out that women's psychological well-being is higher if they have more contact with friends and acquaintances.

In summary, no clear evidence exists that points out gender differences in the relation between more social contact and higher subjective well-being among divorced parents. What is known is that men are better at creating new, support receiving friendships following divorce and that women turn to their family after divorce. Women thus can benefit more from increased social contact, especially with friends. Based on this theorizing, the following hypothesis is derived:

H3: More frequent social contact increases divorced mothers' subjective well-being more than divorced fathers' subjective well-being.

3. Methods

3.1 Data

To answer the current study's research question, '*What is the effect of social contacts on the well-being of divorced parents, and will this depend on the type of social contact or the sex of the parent?*', the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) dataset will be used (Poortman, Van der Lippe, & Boele-Woelki, 2014). The first wave took place during 2012-2014 and contains data on the legal arrangements of divorced or separated parents. The random sampling was done by Statistics Netherlands (CBS), they filtered according to two features: being divorced or separated and having at least one minor kid with the (ex) partner. Parents answered questions about their 'focal child', which is the child that was closest to 10 years old during the survey. The total sample consists of five target groups, the main sample includes two target groups: recently (after 2009) divorced and separated parents. Three control groups are included, namely parents that were still married or cohabiting and parents that officially divorced before 2009. To represent the five target populations correctly, 7500 persons were approached of which one third was expected to participate in the study. The study was designed as a *multi-actor* survey, which encompasses the request of both (ex) partners' participation in the study. Respondents received a letter that asked them to participate in the

online survey, which 80% of the participants did. The last reminder letter included a written questionnaire which could be returned by post, 20% of the participants used this method. Both parents from a former family were approached to participate in the study, in 30% of the cases the two of them participated. Looking at the household level, we see a high response rate of 57% (n = 3416). The personal level entailed a lower response rate, 39% (n = 4481) of persons that received the invitation decided to participate. Several groups within the sample were underrepresented: fathers, parents with a non-western ethnicity, parents with low-income or with welfare, and younger parents.

For the current study, some selections are made to measure the specific target group. First, only respondents that met the sample requirements were selected, which included heterosexual divorced respondents (n = 4467) and parents whose child still lives at home (n = 4371). Secondly, cases with missing values on at least one of the variables used in the analysis were excluded through listwise deletion. After these selections, the total number of respondents counted 2593 from 1881 households.

3.2 Operationalizations

Dependent variable

Subjective well-being is often measured through three components; positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction. As examined by Busseri and Sadava (2011), the conceptual model of subjective well-being has indeed a tripartite structure according to their Model 1. This study will measure the three components of subjective well-being via two widely used scales.

Positive and negative affect are measured on the grounds of ‘Bradburn’s Affect balance Scale’ (Bradburn, 1969). The scale consists of 10 different statements that reflect on daily positive and negative feelings and that must be answered with no (0) or yes (1). First, the scores for the five positive affect questions will be summed. The statements are (over the past few weeks, have you ever felt): “Particularly excited or interested in something?”, “Proud because someone complimented you on something you had done?”, “Pleased about having accomplished something?”, “On top of the world?” and “That things were going your way?”. Secondly, the negative affect scores will be summed as well. The negative affect statements are (over the past few weeks have you ever felt): “So restless that you couldn’t sit long in a chair?”, “Very lonely or remote from other people?”, “Bored?”, “Depressed or very unhappy?” and “Upset because someone criticized you?”. Lastly, the Affect Balance Scale score is calculated by subtracting the negative affect score (NAS) from the positive affect score (PAS). The scores range between -5 and 5, whereas a higher score

refers to higher subjective well-being. Only respondents who answered all 10 statements are included in the analysis, which reduced the number of cases ($n = 4453$). The mean Cronbach's alpha of the 'Affect Balance Scale' after emerging the statements is found to be .663, which indicates a high reliability of the scale.

Life satisfaction was measured on the grounds of 'The satisfaction with life Scale' (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The scale measures a person's cognitive judgement of satisfaction with life through a 5 item questionnaire. The statements ask respondents to rate their life satisfaction through a 7-point Likert style response scale, ranging from 'completely agree' (6) to 'completely disagree' (0). The statements are as follows: "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal", "The conditions of my life are excellent", "I am satisfied with my life", "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life" and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing". Only respondents who answered all 5 items are included in the analysis which reduced the number of cases slightly ($n = 4433$). The Cronbach's Alpha of 'The satisfaction with life Scale' is found to be .869 which indicates a high reliability of the scale.

Independent variables

To operationalize social contact, there will be looked at the frequency of social contact with others. Respondents were asked to report how often they see their mother, father, other family members, neighbours and acquaintances on average. The initial 5 categories are merged into a social contact scale which measures the mean score of respondents' contact frequency. The answer options for the frequency of social contact entail: 0 'never', 1 'once per month', 2 'several times per month', 3 'once per week', 4 'various times per week' and 5 '(almost) every day'. Only respondents who answered all 5 questions are included in the analysis. This higher response rate decreased the number of cases ($n = 2663$). The Cronbach's Alpha of the social contact scale is found to be .642 which indicates the minimum accepted reliability of the scale.

The type of social contact is operationalized through the question 'How often in the past month have you seen the following persons?'. The initial 5 categories (e.g. mother, father, other family, neighbours, friends and acquaintances) are merged and recoded into four new variables: parents, other family members, friends and neighbours. These are dichotomous variables with scores 'no frequent contact' (0) and 'frequent contact' (1). Only respondents

who answered at least 4 questions are included in the analysis and this decreased the number of cases ($n = 2593$).

The third dependent variable is gender. Gender is operationalized through the question ‘What is your gender?’. This is a dichotomous variable where the respondent could answer with male (0) or female (1).

Control variables

The first control variable that is included in this thesis is the age of respondents. Their age might influence the effect on subjective well-being because the older people age, the less social contact they will have. Therefore, the effect is expected to be stronger for younger parents. The age of the respondent is measured according to their given age during the survey. The scores range from 21 to 69 years.

The second control variable is the age of the focal child. The younger the child, the more hours a parent spends taking care of the child due to the lower level of independence. Thus, if the child is older and able to take care of him or herself, the parent has time to spend with their social contacts. Therefore, the effect might be stronger for parents with a younger child, since they could benefit the most from social contact. The scores of the focal child’s age range from 0 to 22 years.

Third, lower educational attainment is expected to increase the effect on subjective well-being. Parents with lower educational attainment are generally found to have lower income and less access to social and financial resources. They therefore might benefit the most from increased social contact. Educational attainment is measured through the highest obtained educational degree by the respondent. This is a continuous variable ranging from incomplete elementary (0) to post-graduate (9).

Lastly, the residence where the focal child lives the most is important regarding parents’ time for social contact with others. Care for the child takes up much time, which the parent cannot spend on social contact (Botterman et al., 2013). If the child stays more often with the other parent, the effect is expected to be stronger for that parent. The respondents were asked with whom the focal child lives the most of the time. The variable was split into three dichotomous variables (e.g. resident parents, nonresident parent and shared residence) with the scores no (0) or yes (1). The option ‘other’ is excluded from the analysis.

The descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent and control variables are shown in Table 1 down below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of social contact, affect, life satisfaction, type social contact and control variables

	Mean	S.D.	Range
Dependent variables			
Affect	1.839	2.251	-5-5
Life satisfaction	3.455	1.293	0-6
Independent variables			
Social contact	2.425	0.911	0-5
Type social contact			
Parents	0.483		0-1
Other family	0.233		0-1
Neighbours	0.138		0-1
Friends	0.311		0-1
Female	0.615		0-1
Control variables			
Education	5.678	1.862	0-9
Residence child			
Resident parent	0.462		0-1
Nonresident parent	0.252		0-1
Co residence	0.270		0-1
Age respondent	40.050	6.314	21-69
Age child	9.310	3.879	0-21
<i>N</i>		2593	

3.3 Analysis

To test the hypothesized positive effect of social contact on parents' well-being and to test whether the effect increases per type of social contact or gender, six multiple regression will be done. Three models will be estimated, which will be done for both measures of affect and life satisfaction. In Model 1, the effect of frequent social contact on parents' affect level and life satisfaction will be measured, controlling for parents' educational attainment, the residence of the focal child, age of the parent and age of the focal child. In Model 2, the dependent dichotomous variables of contact with parents, other family, friends and neighbours will be added. There will be measured whether contact with whom changes the effect of frequent social contact on affect and life satisfaction. Thereafter, Model 3 measures

whether gender changes the main effect of frequent social contact on affect and life satisfaction, by adding the dependent and interaction variables of gender to the model. Furthermore, the model will also control for parents' educational attainment, the residence of the focal child, age of the parent and age of the focal child. An incremental F-test was done to measure whether the interaction of gender and social contact improved model 3.

4. Results

4.1 Effects of social contact on parents' affect level

Model 1 tests the effect between more frequent social contact and divorced parents' well-being, controlled for educational attainment, the residence of the focal child, age of the respondent and age of the focal child. The results are shown in Table 2, model 1. The outcomes in model 1 show that more frequent social contact significantly increases divorced parents' affect level ($b = 0.304$; $t = 6.077$; $p < .001$). Furthermore, statistically significant effects are found between the level of affect, educational attainment ($b = 0.096$; $t = 3.932$; $p < .001$) and the age of the parent ($b = 0.034$; $t = 3.629$; $p < .001$).

Model 2 measures the effect of frequent social contact with different types of contact on the affect level of divorced parents. Only frequent contact with friends is found to significantly increase divorced parents' level of affect ($b = 0.393$; $t = 4.096$; $p < .001$). This indicates that seeing one's friends at least several times per week relates to a higher level of affect. Other types of contact, however, show no statistically significant results. The control variables educational attainment ($b = 0.090$; $t = 3.660$; $p < .001$) and age of the parent ($b = 0.032$; $t = 3.414$; $p < .001$) are found to significantly relate to level of affect.

Table 2. Multiple linear regressions of social contact and affect (N=2593)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Social contact	0.304***	0.050			0.254***	0.050
Contact with parents			0.085	0.097		
Contact with other family			0.112	0.127		
Contact with neighbours			0.223	0.137		
Contact with friends			0.393***	0.105		
Female					-0.322	0.270
Female * social contact					0.081	0.100
Education	0.096***	0.024	0.090***	0.024	0.095***	0.024
Nonresident parent ¹	-0.006	0.110	-0.007	0.110	-0.118	0.157
Co-residence ¹	0.195	0.108	0.187	0.108	0.146	0.119
Age parent	0.034***	0.009	0.032***	0.009	0.032**	0.010
Age child	0.017	0.015	0.016	0.015	0.019	0.015
Intersect	-1.014**	0.515	-0.319	0.372	-0.733	0.369
R2	0.042		0.036		0.030	

¹Resident parent as reference group, *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05

Model 3 tests whether gender differences appear within the main effect of social contact on divorced parents' affect level. An incremental F-test was done and showed no statistically significant change within the model after adding the interaction variable. Two control variables show statistically significant effects on level of affect; educational attainment ($b = 0.095$; $t = 3.907$; $p < .001$) and age of the parent ($b = 0.032$; $t = 3.405$; $p < .01$).

4.2 Effects of social contact on parents' life satisfaction

The second component measuring parents' subjective well-being is life satisfaction and the results are shown in table 3. A multiple linear regression resulted in a positive statistically significant effect between social contact and life satisfaction ($b = 0.164$, $t = 5.729$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that seeing social contacts more often relates to higher life satisfaction

among divorced parents. Statistically significant control variables that relate to life satisfaction are educational attainment ($b = 0.081$; $t = 5.821$; $p < .001$), co-residence ($b = 0.286$; $t = 4.658$; $p < .001$) and the age of the focal child ($b = 0.018$; $t = 2.059$; $p < .05$).

Table 3. Multiple linear regressions of social contact and life satisfaction (N=2593)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Social contact	0.164***	0.029			0.142**	0.036
Contact with parents			0.044	0.055		
Contact with other family			0.127	0.065		
Contact with neighbours			0.123	0.073		
Contact with friends			0.225***	0.055		
Female					-0.096	0.154
Female * social contact					0.035	0.057
Education	0.081***	0.014	0.080***	0.014	0.081***	0.014
Nonresident Parent ¹	-0.116	0.063	-0.133*	0.063	-0.127	0.090
Co-residence ¹	0.286***	0.061	0.273***	0.062	0.284***	0.068
Age parent	0.002	0.005	0.002	0.005	0.002	0.005
Age child	0.018*	0.009	0.015	0.009	0.018*	0.009
Intersect	2.292***	0.209	2.606***	0.192	2.297***	0.211
R2	0.042		0.041		0.042	

¹Resident parent as reference group, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Model 2 measures, by means of a multiple linear regression, whether differences exist between several types of social contact and life satisfaction. The outcomes show that having frequently contact with one's friends (i.e. several times per week) indicates a statistically significant higher life satisfaction ($b = 0.225$; $t = 4.112$; $p < .001$). No other types of social contact are found to indicate a change in divorced parents' life satisfaction. The control variables that as well relate significantly to life satisfaction are educational attainment

($b = 0.80$; $t = 5.697$; $p < .001$), being the non-resident parent ($b = -0.133$; $t = -2.107$; $p < .05$) and co-residence ($b = 0.273$; $t = 4.431$; $p < .001$).

To assess whether differences exist between men and women, a multiple linear regression was done, results are shown in table 3 – Model 3. The main effect of frequent social contact on life satisfaction slightly decreases ($b = 0.142$; $t = 3.168$; $p < .01$). An incremental F-test was done and showed no statistically significant change within the model after adding the interaction variable. Three control variables indicate an effect on life satisfaction, which are educational attainment ($b = 0.081$; $t = 5.808$; $p < .001$), co-residence ($b = 0.284$; $t = 4.187$; $p < .001$) and age of the focal child ($b = 0.018$; $t = 2.096$; $p < .05$).

5. Conclusion and discussion

The current study aimed to examine the influence of social contact with family, friends and neighbours on divorced parents' subjective well-being. This study looked at subjective well-being as a tripartite variable consisting of positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction (Busseri, & Sadava, 2011). This was done because previous research repeatedly showed that more social contact with close relations correlates with, more positive affect, less negative affect and higher life satisfaction (Arpino, & de Valk, 2018; Siedlecki, Salthouse, Oishi, & Jeswani, 2014). However, very few studies focused on divorced parents' subjective well-being and frequent social contact. This is however important to study since parents have a higher risk of poor mental health, social isolation and lower life satisfaction after divorce (Andreß, & Bröckel, 2007; Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Dykstra, & Fokkema, 2007; Wang, & Amato, 2007). Knowledge on this topic might increase the effectiveness of policies regarding divorced parents' subjective well-being, by decreasing the risk factors they face after divorce. This study, therefore, gives new insight and information about the relationship between parental well-being and social contact. Several types of contact (e.g. parents, other family, friends and neighbours) were included in the study because each type might have had a larger or smaller effect on parental subjective well-being. Gender differences were also taken into account because previous research found that, following divorce, men and women differ in their life satisfaction and on whom they rely upon for social support (Andreß, & Bröckel, 2007; Kalmijn, 2012; Kalmijn, & van Groenou, 2005).

The first hypothesis stated that more frequent social contact relates to higher subjective well-being among divorced parents. The results show, in line with hypothesis 1, that more frequent social contact with family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances relates to

higher positive affect and higher life satisfaction among divorced parents. Consistent with this study's results, previous research found that social contact, through the supply of social support, increases well-being (Arpino, & de Valk, 2018; Siedlecki et al., 2014). However, few studies elaborated on divorced parents' well-being in correlation with social contact. This study thus provides first and forward evidence on the relationship between more frequent social contact and divorced parents' subjective well-being.

The second hypothesis stated that more frequent social contact with friends would increase divorced parents' subjective well-being the most, contact with family members in between and contact with neighbours the least. The results only show partial evidence for this hypothesis: only frequent contact with friends increases parents' life satisfaction. No evidence was found for an increase in the parents' level of affect. This is in line with several other studies arguing that contact with friends might be the most important predictor for subjective well-being (Milardo, 1987; Tolsdorf, 1981; Malo, 1994). However, in contrast with this study's findings, previous research showed relations between contact with family members, neighbours and higher well-being (Mars, & Schmeets, 2011). One explanation for the lack of evidence concerning family and neighbours might be that recently divorced parents experience disapproval and judgment from family members and neighbours (Milardo, 1987).

The third hypothesis states that the effect of more frequent social contact on higher subjective well-being is stronger for divorced mothers than fathers. The results indicate no evidence for this hypothesis. The literature argued that men are more likely to turn to close friends for social support, rather than family members or neighbours (Kalmijn, 2012; Kalmijn, & van Groenou, 2005). In turn, contact with friends was argued to increase parents' subjective well-being the most, thus women would benefit the most from more social contact. The results however are in contrast with the literature. Explanations for this could be the overrepresentation of women in the sample or an incorrect theoretical assumption.

The current study includes two limitations. First, the usage of secondary data caused limited operationalization of social contact. The NFN dataset only includes frequency measures of social contact. Other studies also considered the quality of the relationship, network size and received support in their operationalizations of social contact. Thus, the variable might have measured only a fragment of the whole effect. Future research should consider taking the aspects of social contact into account (e.g. quality of the relationship, networks size and received support) concerning divorced parents' well-being to create a clearer image of the effect. A second limitation is the lack of existing and recent literature, about divorced parents' well-being. No studies linked social contact to parents' subjective

well-being before and no studies looked at types of social contact and gender differences within this effect. The theoretical framework consists of theories that do not apply specifically to divorced parents' situation which might have led to slightly inaccurate hypothesizing and excluding important variables of influence in the effect. However, this limitation is a strength at the same time because this study is one of the first to provide empirical evidence for the relationship between divorced parents' subjective well-being and social contact. Yet, more studies need to be conducted because only a fragment of the whole effect is explored.

In conclusion, the current study pointed out that more frequent social contact is a very important indicator of divorced parents' subjective well-being. Through social embeddedness and receiving support, divorced parents are found to regain their life satisfaction and improve their level of affect. Meeting often with friends is the key to improve divorced parents' mental health, due to their better understanding and their higher provision of aid and support.

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