

MATTHIJS KALMIJN *University of Amsterdam*

How Childhood Circumstances Moderate the Long-Term Impact of Divorce on Father–Child Relationships

Using retrospective survey data collected in the Netherlands in 2012, the author examined how childhood circumstances moderate the effect of an early parental divorce on relationships between fathers and adult children. Using adult children's reports about the frequency of contact and the quality of the relationship, he found strong negative effects of parental divorce. These effects are moderated by 3 childhood conditions. The more fathers were involved in childrearing during marriage, the less negative the divorce effect on father–child relationships. Father's resources also moderated the effect, with a smaller divorce effect for more highly educated fathers. Finally, high levels of interparental conflict reduce the impact of divorce as well, generalizing the stress relief effect to a new outcome. In general, the study shows that the impact of divorce is heterogeneous; that childhood circumstances play an important role in this; and that, under specific conditions, there is virtually no negative effect of parental divorce.

Many studies have documented that parental divorce has a negative impact on relationships

between fathers and adult children. Adult children of divorced parents have less frequent contact with the father than children of married parents, they report more conflict with the father, and they perceive the quality of the relationship more often as poor (Albertini & Garriga, 2011; Aquilino, 1994; Daatland, 2007; de Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Kalmijn, 2015; Lin, 2008; Pezzin & Schone, 1999; Shapiro & Cooney, 2007). Relationships with divorced mothers are negatively affected as well, but these effects are more modest than they are for fathers (Aquilino, 1994; Daatland, 2007). Negative effects have been found in Europe and in the United States and hence are not unique to a specific national context. In a more general way, these findings demonstrate that childhood circumstances can have a lasting influence on personal relationships.

The impact of divorce on parent–child relationships is relevant for both children and fathers. Because the socioeconomic resources of the father are important for the life chances of children, children may be harmed if they have a weak relationship with their father during the transition to adulthood. Children may also suffer emotionally from having no contact with their father (Amato, 1994; Fischer, 2004). The problem is relevant for fathers as well. Research shows that many fathers are unhappy about the reduction in contact with their minor-age children after divorce (Parkinson & Smyth, 2004; Spillman, Deschamps, & Crews, 2004). When fathers are older, weakened ties to adult

Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam,
Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, Building REC B/C, Room
B6.08, 1018 WV Amsterdam, the Netherlands
(matthijskalmijn@gmail.com).

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children may also lead to less emotional and practical support in times when such support is needed. Older divorced men without a partner may become particularly vulnerable during old age (Lin, 2008).

Although the long-term effects of divorce on father–child relationships are well established empirically, it is clear that there is heterogeneity in these effects. Not all divorced fathers see the ties to their children deteriorate and, if there are negative effects, they vary in degree. As a result, it is important to shift the focus from estimating the divorce effect itself to studying factors that moderate this effect. Some studies have analyzed variables that affect father–child contact in samples of divorced fathers, but these variables may be relevant for married fathers as well such that it is unclear whether they moderate the impact of divorce (Aquilino, 2006; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; de Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009). Other studies have focused on events occurring after the divorce, such as repartnering and (second) family formation, to see whether and how these changes moderate the effect of divorce (Aquilino, 2006; Clark & Kenney, 2010; Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007). Few studies, however, have looked at the moderating role of circumstances during marriage for the long-term effects of divorce on father–child relationships.

One reason for this gap in the literature lies in data limitations. Panel studies are generally not long enough to examine the long-term impact of parental divorce on father–child relationships. Retrospective studies can be used for this purpose, but the amount of information on the parental home in such studies is often limited. In this study, I analyzed a new nationally representative survey that was designed to collect extensive retrospective information on the biological father and mother, on their marriage, and on the way the child was raised by his or her parents when they were still together. Adult children were the respondents in the survey, and all reports on the father and mother were obtained retrospectively from the adult children. These data allowed me to examine three important childhood circumstances that may moderate the long-term effect of parental divorce on father–child relationships.

First, I looked at the involvement of fathers in childrearing during marriage. To what extent is the involvement of fathers beneficial for the relationship in the long run, and is this

an especially “protective” factor for divorced fathers? Research has shown that sharing roles during marriage has positive effects on the chances of joint custody and on visitation arrangements after divorce (Juby, Le Bourdais, & Marcil-Gratton, 2005). Less is known about the ramifications of role sharing for the father–child relationship in the long run. Second, I looked at marital conflict. To what extent do conflicts between the father and the mother during marriage moderate the long-term impact of divorce on father–child relationships? Research has found that the effect of divorce on child well-being is less negative when there was much conflict during marriage (Hanson, 1999). This so-called *stress relief hypothesis* may be relevant for a broader set of outcomes after divorce, including parent–child relations (Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, & Bates, 2010). Third, I looked at the resources of the father. Are fathers with more resources—more education and better jobs—better able to secure the ties to their children when these are older? Previous studies have shown that better educated nonresident fathers have more frequent contact with their minor-age children after divorce than less well educated fathers (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008). If and to what extent this translates into better relationships with adult children is not well known.

I studied two outcomes: (a) the frequency of contact with the father and (b) the perceived quality of the relationship with the father. These two indicators are often used in research on adult intergenerational relationships. Contact frequency is typically seen as a measure of intergenerational support and solidarity (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). For older parents, contact is both a form of social support and a condition for the exchange of other, more instrumental forms of support. Contact frequency is related to the quality of the relationship, but contact and quality are not equivalent. Frequent contact can be driven by normative obligations (Gans & Silverstein, 2006), in which case it does not need to coincide with a high-quality relationship. Frequent contact can also go together with frequent conflict and lead to feelings of ambivalence toward parents (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008). Finally, children may have close ties with their parents without seeing them often, for instance, because of geographic constraints (Hank, 2007). Finally, research has shown that the quality of the parent–child tie is

the most important predictor of the well-being of older parents, more important than contact and support (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2009). For all those reasons, contact and quality provide important complementary insights into the nature of intergenerational relationships.

The new data were collected in the Netherlands, a country with a divorce rate that is similar to that in other Western European countries but lower than in the United States (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). Gender role attitudes in the Netherlands have become considerably more egalitarian in the past few decades and are now more egalitarian than the European average (Kalmijn, 2003). Men's share of household work is similar to that in other Western European countries although somewhat lower than in the United States (Knudsen & Waerness, 2008). In 1998, policies about postdivorce arrangements changed in the Netherlands, and this has resulted in more frequent visits of children to divorced fathers (Spruijt, 2006). Most of the respondents whom I analyzed, however, experienced the divorce of their parents before these changes took place (83%).

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

The goal of this study was to compare children whose parents divorced during childhood (i.e., when the children were living at home) to children whose parents remained married during childhood. For both groups, I considered three aspects of childhood circumstances: (a) father's involvement in childrearing, (b) interparental conflict, and (c) father's resources. For children of divorced parents, these circumstances apply to the time the parents were still together (predivorce circumstances). The first question was, "To what extent do circumstances affect the relationship between father and adult child many years later, regardless of whether the parents divorced (main effects)?" The second question was, "To what extent do these circumstances moderate the difference in father–child relationships between married and divorced fathers (interaction effects)?" For each of the three circumstances I developed two hypotheses (discussed below): one about the main effect of childhood circumstances and one about the interaction effect.

Although it is clear that fathers vary in terms of their resources, the conflicts they have with

the mother, and the degree to which they are involved in the child's life, there are other sources of heterogeneity that apply specifically to divorced fathers. One source of heterogeneity lies in events or conditions occurring after the divorce, for instance, visiting arrangements, alimony payments, repartnering, family formation, and so on. Such factors can affect postdivorce relationships between fathers and children and, in doing so, mediate the impact of childhood circumstances on adult intergenerational relationships. These postdivorce factors were not considered here given that they will not lead to spurious interaction effects, although they could in principle mediate the interaction effects. Circumstances that have to do with the divorce itself also can lead to heterogeneity. One of these is the age at which children experience the divorce of their parents. When parents divorce at an early age of the child, the long-term effect of divorce on the father–child relationship tends to be more negative (Aquilino, 2006; Kalmijn, 2015). To address this issue, I included the age at divorce in the models, and I examined whether the interactions of parental divorce with father involvement, conflict, and resources are affected when the age of the child at the time of the divorce is taken into account.

Father Involvement

Studies of intergenerational solidarity have traditionally argued that relationships between parents and their adult children can be seen as exchange relations (e.g., Kalmijn, 2014; Silverstein, Conroy, Wang, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2002). Parents invest time, energy, and money in children when they are at younger ages. At a later age, when parents themselves are in need of support, adult children reciprocate by giving social, emotional, and—in some contexts—financial support back to their parents. The exchange process is often believed to be subtle and implicit. Exchange also has a long-term effect: The support that parents provide to their children works as an investment in the relationship that sets in motion a cycle of exchange that strengthens the parent–child tie in the long run. Longitudinal studies have revealed indirect evidence for both extended and immediate reciprocity in intergenerational relationships (Leopold & Raab, 2011; Silverstein et al., 2002).

In this study I first examined the investment perspective for all fathers, regardless of marital

status. To make the perspective testable, I looked at variation in father's involvement in childrearing (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Although gender roles have become less traditional, in contemporary society there are both traditional fathers who spend little time with their children and more egalitarian fathers who spend much time with their children (Hook & Wolfe, 2012; Roeters, van der Lippe, & Kluwer, 2010; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). On average, fathers spend more time on what is called *interactional care* than on physical care, even though contemporary fathers also spend more time on physical care than fathers in the past (Hook & Wolfe, 2012). According to the investment perspective discussed above, I expected the following main effect for fathers: *The more fathers were involved in childrearing during marriage, the stronger the relationship they have with their adult children* (Hypothesis 1A).

Do investments in a child work differently for fathers who divorce and fathers who remain married? As long as fathers are married to the mother of their children, they benefit from the investments that the mother made (Seery & Crowley, 2000). Children often see their parents together, so the relationship of the adult child with the father will continue independently of how much fathers invested in the children at an earlier age. Mothers may also actively manage the father-child relationship, thus strengthening the father-child tie at an adult age (Seery & Crowley, 2000). Fathers who are divorced, in contrast, rely more strongly on their own investments (Kalmijn, 2007; Stephens, 1996). In other words, the investments fathers made in the child will pay off more if he is alone than when he is married to the mother of his child. The effect of father involvement on the father-child relationship will therefore be stronger for divorced fathers than for married fathers. This implies the following moderator hypothesis: *The more fathers were involved in the child's life during marriage, the less negative the long-term effect of divorce on father-child relationships* (Hypothesis 1B).

Interparental Conflict

Many authors have shown that conflicts between parents have negative effects on children's well-being (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Orbuch, Thornton, & Cancio, 2000; Schoppe-Sullivan, Schermerhorn,

& Cummings, 2007). Moreover, authors have argued that marital conflict and divorce interact: The effect of divorce on child well-being is less negative when there was much conflict in the marriage (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hanson, 1999; Jekielek, 1998). Under these conditions, a divorce provides a relief from a tense and difficult situation, and this can be positive for the child.

Most research on marital conflict has focused on child well-being; fewer studies have examined parent-child relationships. What role will marital conflict play for the relationship between the father and the child many years afterward? In general, one would expect that conflict between parents will have a negative long-term effect on the parent-child relationship. One reason for this lies in spillover effects: When there is much conflict between parents, the relationship between the parent and the child is also less warm, less supportive, and more conflict ridden (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). Because exposure to conflict is unpleasant for children, children will also try to limit exposure to their parents' conflict. When children are living at home, this is often not possible, but when they start living on their own they can distance themselves from their parents. This could lead to a gradual decline in the parent-child relationship, a decline that may not be turned around when the quality of the parents' marriage improves again. In sum, one would expect that *the more conflict the parents had when the child was young, the weaker the relationship that fathers have with their adult children* (Hypothesis 2A).

When parents divorce, marital conflict could play a different role. A divorce between parents with high levels of conflict may lead to a stress relief effect. According to Yu et al. (2010), under conditions of high parental conflict, "children are freed from a dysfunctional family environment and may genuinely welcome the shift to a calmer single-parent family" (p. 283). This effect could also lead to better parent-child relationships in the long run. When high-conflict parents separate, children are able to see their parents separately, so the conflicts they had during marriage will not be as visible. The child can focus on his or her relationship with one parent at a time, without being in the middle of their problematic relationship. In other words, parental conflict will have a less negative effect

on father–child relationships when the parents separate than when they remain married. This implies the following moderator hypothesis: *The more conflict the parents had when the child was young, the less negative the long-term effect of divorce on father–child relationships* (Hypothesis 2B). In a previous test of this hypothesis for 22-year-old children in the United States, Yu et al. (2010) confirmed this interaction effect for mother–child relationships but not for father–child relationships.

Father's Resources

Fathers also differ in the resources they have and, because these resources are positively related with their involvement in childrearing (Sayer, Gauthier, & Furstenberg, 2004), it is important to incorporate resources into the analysis of childhood effects. With *resources*, I refer to cultural and socioeconomic resources, as indicated by father's education and occupational status. First, one has to consider the possible main effects of father's resources. Research has generally shown that better educated children and parents have less frequent face-to-face contact with each other, although there is no negative effect on the quality of the intergenerational tie. The effects on contact frequency are partly due to geographic constraints and in part to a more individualistic orientation to family relationships (Kalmijn, 2006). That the quality of the intergenerational tie is not affected suggests that family ties of higher status groups are characterized by "intimacy at a distance" (van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). On the basis of these considerations, I proposed the following hypothesis: *The more resources that fathers had during childhood, the less often fathers have face-to-face contact with their adult children, whereas there is no effect on the quality of the tie* (Hypothesis 3A).

To what extent would the resources of the father moderate the impact of divorce? Several recent studies have examined how father's (and mother's) education moderate the impact of divorce on child outcomes (Bernardi & Radl, 2014; Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014), but less is known about how relationships between adult children and their fathers are affected. One argument is based on financial resources. A resourceful father may live in a more attractive home, he may have more consumer goods to share, and he may pay child support more often (Ryan et al.,

2008; Shehan, Berardo, Owens, & Berardo, 2002). These advantages may strengthen the tie with the child in the short run and may therefore have a positive effect on the father–child tie when the child is making the transition to adulthood. Note that repartnering, which is more common among high-earning divorced men, may work against this effect (Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). A second argument is that resourceful fathers may be more effective in working out postdivorce agreements with the mother. More highly educated fathers may also be more aware of public knowledge about the negative effects of divorce on children because education is strongly associated with reading habits (van de Werfhorst & Kraaykamp, 2001). These arguments emphasize the cognitive and cultural aspects of status rather than the financial aspects. In sum, my last moderator hypothesis was as follows: *The more resources the father had when the child was young, the less negative the long-term effect of divorce on father–child relationships* (Hypothesis 3B).

METHOD

The data I used come from the survey Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS), which is publicly available through www.lissdata.nl. A unique feature of this survey is that even though it uses Internet questionnaires, it is based on a representative probability sample of households in the Dutch population. The response rate at the household level was 48%, which is about average for response rates in the Netherlands and similar to regular face-to-face interview surveys (Scherpenzeel, 2009). All household members 16 years of age and older were asked to complete short online questionnaires. Respondents were paid when they completed a questionnaire. The Netherlands is in the top 10 countries with the highest Internet penetration rates (World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database Online, www.itu.int/pub/D-IND-WTID.OL). Households without Internet (or without broadband) received a broadband Internet connection.

I used a special biographical module that was held in 2012 and that contained detailed retrospective questions on family background ($n = 5,247$). In 2013, the nonresponding members of the panel were approached again and asked to fill out the questionnaire ($n = 319$). The module was presented only to household

members who were the head of the household or the partner of the head (single persons were included). Of the eligible household heads who were in the original panel, 89% answered this module. Respondents in the survey were the (adult) children, and they reported on their childhood and their parents. Research in the Netherlands does not suggest that there are large discrepancies between parent and child reports on contact, and there is little evidence that contact is underreported when people are more dissatisfied with their relationship (Mandemakers & Dykstra, 2008).

I excluded respondents who were not living with both their biological parents when they were born ($n = 104$), respondents whose father was no longer alive ($n = 3,377$), and respondents whose biological parents stopped living together before the respondent left home for reasons other than separation or divorce ($n = 44$). I also deleted data from respondents who lived with their father after divorce ($n = 48$) in the main analyses, but I checked how this affected my findings by estimating models that included this group. Respondents who live with their father after a divorce are probably a rather select group but interesting in that their investment opportunities will not be interrupted by the divorce. Divorces that occurred recently (0–9 years ago; $n = 15$) were excluded because I was interested in long-term effects. The number of respondents in the final analyses was 1,978. The median age of all respondents (regardless of parental marital status) was 39, with 90% of the cases falling between the ages of 24 and 56. The respondents with divorced parents experienced the divorce in the years 1969–2004 (when the oldest and most recent 5% of the distribution was excluded). The average divorce year was 1987.

Variables and Models

The main independent variable was parental divorce. Children who grew up with both their parents were contrasted to children whose parents divorced when they were still living at home. Repartnering was not included as an additional variable because it is a potential mediator, and my interest was in the overall effects of divorce and childhood circumstances. Of the 1,978 respondents, 183 had divorced parents (9.3%). The median number of years since the divorce was 26, and the median age of the respondent at the time of divorce was 9.

In an additional analysis, I made a distinction between divorces that took place when the child was young (6 years or younger) and divorces that took place at an older age (7 or older). This categorization follows the study conducted by Aquilino (2006), who found that the most important differences are between these two age groups.

The first dependent variable was the frequency of face-to-face contact between the father and the adult child in the past 12 months. Respondents could choose from a number of frequency categories. I analyzed this outcome with ordered logit models because this model does not assume that distances between adjacent categories are the same across the range. I used the following categories: 1 = “never”; 2 = “once”; 3 = “a few times”; 4 = “about monthly”; and 5 = “weekly, a few times per week, or daily.” I combined weekly, a few times per week, and daily because all three can be considered as quite frequent contact; the more meaningful variation is in the lower end of the distribution. The second dependent variable was the perceived quality of the relationship between the father and the child. This was measured on a 5-point scale: 1 = “poor,” 2 = “not so good,” 3 = “reasonable,” 4 = “good,” and 5 = “very good.” This dependent variable was also analyzed with an ordered logit model. The direction of the dependent variables was such that a positive effect means a better quality relationship and more frequent contact.

Father involvement in the child’s life was measured with five questions about how childrearing tasks were divided between the father and the mother (see Table 1 for details on all items and scales). The tasks reflect the interactional rather than the physical aspect of childrearing. Interactional care is correlated with the warmth and closeness in a relationship (Hook & Wolfe, 2012). The scale is the standardized sum of the standardized items, and the reliability is reasonable ($\alpha = .73$). Higher values reflect higher levels of involvement. Parental conflict was measured with questions about four types of conflicts occurring between the parents when the respondent grew up and, in the case of a divorce, when the parents were still together. The reliability of this scale is very good ($\alpha = .87$). Higher values reflect higher levels of conflict. Two measures of paternal resources were used: educational level and occupational status, the two most important variables in

research on social stratification and intergenerational reproduction. Occupational status was measured by recoding 10 broad occupational groups to the average International Standard Socio-Economic Index score, as suggested by Ganzeboom (2005). Education level was the highest level of completed schooling by the father, scaled to the approximate number of years that it takes to complete the degree.

As shown in Table 1, nonresponse in the items for the scales (“don’t know” and “not applicable”) was not very high. Item nonresponse was solved internally, which means that when a respondent had a missing value on one item in a scale, I used the scores that this respondent had on the other items in the scale. To do this, I first regressed each item of a scale onto the other items of a scale for a sample of respondents who had valid scores on all items. To predict a missing value for a given item, I took the weighted average of the other valid items for that individual, where the regression coefficients were used as weights. In essence, this is a regression imputation of missing items, which is a better strategy than simply taking the unweighted averages of the items.

As control variables, I used the respondent’s age, sex, number of siblings, education level,

marital status, and degree of urbanization of the place of residence (ranging from rural to highly urbanized). These variables are known to be related to intergenerational relationships. Women generally have better relationships with their parents than men, more highly educated children have less frequent face-to-face contact, married children see their parents less often, and there tends to be better contact with extended family members in small towns compared to large cities (Grundy & Read, 2012; Kalmijn, 2006; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008; Schilling & Wahl, 2002; Ward, Deane & Spitze, 2014). Means and standard deviations of the control variables are presented in Table 2.

In the ordered logit models, missing values on all variables and scales were imputed using multiple imputation with chained estimation (*mi impute* in Stata). Interaction effects with divorce were included in the estimation procedure. The dependent variables were also included in the procedure, although there were no missing values on these variables (von Hippel, 2007). The number of imputations was 20, and estimates for the combined data sets were obtained using Rubin’s rules in the procedure *mi estimate* in Stata. This procedure does not give fit statistics for the final models.

Table 1. *Descriptive Information on Items and Scales Measuring Childhood Circumstances: Adult Children Reporting About Their Parents*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	<i>N</i>
Father’s resources					
Father’s ISEI	47.81	18.88	17	82	1,856
Father’s years of schooling	10.55	3.25	6	17	1,709
Father involvement ^a					
Bringing child to school	2.29	1.03	1	5	1,792
Talk to child about personal matters	2.17	0.87	1	5	1,783
Going on outings with child	2.66	0.83	1	5	1,807
Going with child to family/friends	2.81	0.54	1	5	1,899
Scale of father involvement ($\alpha = .74^b$)	0.00	1.00	–2.53	3.72	1,919
Interparental conflict ^c					
Fierce discussions between parents	1.94	0.72	1	3	1,808
Parents strongly blaming each other	1.76	0.77	1	3	1,760
Parents refusing to talk to each other	1.38	0.66	1	3	1,780
Quarrels between parents escalating	1.24	0.56	1	3	1,837
Scale of conflict ($\alpha = .87^b$)	0.00	1.00	–0.98	2.65	1,874

Note. Data are based on the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences, 2012–2013 (Biographical Module). Min = minimum; Max = maximum; ISEI = International Standard Socio-Economic Index.

^aAnswers were “almost always by mother,” “more often by mother,” “more or less equal,” “more often by father,” and “almost always by father.” ^bReliability coefficient calculated before imputation. Scales constructed as mean of standardized items. The resulting scale is standardized as well. ^cAnswers were “never,” “incidentally,” and “frequently.”

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Variables Used in the Analyses

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	<i>N</i>
Child is daughter	.58	.49	.00	1.00	1,978
Child's age	39.31	9.76	18.00	73.00	1,978
Child's schooling	12.55	2.87	6.00	17.00	1,970
Child married	0.54	0.50	0.00	1.00	1,978
Degree of urbanization of municipality	3.13	1.29	1.00	5.00	1,961
Number of siblings	1.90	1.40	0.00	10.00	1,952
Father divorced	.09	.29	.00	1.00	1,978
Contact with father (as coded in model)	4.09	1.09	1.00	5.00	1,978
Perceived quality of tie with father	3.88	1.03	1.00	5.00	1,978

Note. Data are based on the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences, 2012–2013 (Biographical Module). For the scales of childhood measures, see Table 1. Min = minimum; Max = maximum.

Because the age of the sample varied, some respondents needed to look back further in time than others. It is possible that retrospective reports are less accurate for older respondents. In these cases, reports can be biased more strongly by current circumstances. Previous research on the quality of retrospective measures of parental resources has shown that there is both systematic error in retrospective reports, which leads to an overestimation of childhood effects on current resources, and random error in retrospective reports, leading to an underestimation of such effects (de Vries & de Graaf, 2008). The sum of these two tendencies is uncertain and will probably vary from case to case. It was difficult to solve this issue with the present data. In principle, it is possible to examine interactions with age, but if there are age interactions they may also reflect cohort interactions. For this reason, the age variable does not help solve the problem of retrospective bias.

RESULTS

I started with a descriptive analysis of the differences in father–child relations between children of married and divorced families. The data in Table 3 show that children with divorced fathers had less frequent contact with their father than children with married fathers. This is not a new finding, but the magnitude of the difference has not often been discussed. Among respondents with divorced fathers, 26% never saw their father; among respondents with married fathers, this was exceptional (3%). It is not just the frequency of contact that is affected: Approximately 23% of respondents with divorced fathers evaluated the relationship with the father as

“poor,” as opposed to only 3% of respondents with married fathers. Despite these differences, I also noted that a substantial number of children with divorced fathers had frequent and good contact with their father. The distributions for children with divorced fathers were quite heterogeneous. Note that differences between married and divorced fathers can in part be due to possible confounding factors such as personality differences, mental health problems, and cultural orientations of the father (or the child). Given the magnitude of the differences, it is unlikely that the entire effect of parental divorce is spurious.

I also looked at the association between the two indicators of the father–child relationship. Quality and contact frequency were positively related, but the correlation differed between married and divorced fathers. The Pearson correlation between contact and quality (treated as linear variables) was .49 among married fathers and .72 among divorced fathers (a significant difference, $z = 4.75, p < .01$). One interpretation of this difference is that among married fathers, contact is partly a by-product of having contact with the mother and hence is less dependent on the quality of the father–child tie. This would be consistent with the reasoning behind the moderator hypothesis about father involvement (Hypothesis 1B). It is also possible that normative obligations play a weaker role in families who experience a divorce, leading to a stronger association between contact and quality in this group.

Contact

Ordered logit models for contact are presented in Table 4. When the coefficients are expressed in

Table 3. Relationships With Fathers According to Adult Children

Relationship variable	Parents together when child was living at home		χ^2 test
	Parents together when child was living at home	Parents divorced when child was living at home	
Current face-to-face contact with father			
Never (1) ^a	3.3	26.2	286.1*
Once (2)	1.6	8.7	
A few times (3)	13.5	30.6	
About monthly (4)	32.9	22.4	
About weekly (5)	29.0	9.3	
Several times a week (5)	16.0	0.6	
Daily (5)	3.6	2.2	
<i>N</i>	1,795	183	
Current perceived quality of relationship with father			
Poor (1) ^a	2.8	23.0	211.8*
Not so good (2)	3.6	10.9	
Reasonable (3)	17.0	28.4	
Good (4)	45.5	26.8	
Very good (5)	31.0	10.9	
<i>N</i>	1,795	183	

Note. Data are based on the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences, 2012–2013 (Biographical Module).

^aNumbers in parentheses refer to the coding in the ordered logit model.

* $p < .05$.

exponential form (i.e., e^b) they can be interpreted as odds ratios (ORs; Long & Cheng, 2004). For example, the effect of years of schooling in Table 4 (Model 1) is $-.05$; in exponential form, this is $.95$. This means that for each year increase in schooling, the odds of being in contact category $j > k$ rather than in contact category $j \leq k$ decline by 5%. For example, the odds of having at least weekly contact (rather than less than weekly) decline by 5% for each year increase in schooling, as do the odds of having at least monthly contact (rather than less than monthly), and so forth (Long & Cheng, 2004, p. 273).

Model 1 confirms the negative effect of parental divorce on contact. In addition, contact was more frequent when the child was younger, when the child was less well educated, when there were fewer siblings, and when he or she lived in a less urbanized area. These effects are broadly consistent with the literature.

Two of the childhood variables had significant main effects (Model 1). The more conflict there was between parents when the child was growing up, the less often the child had contact with the father as an adult. This points to the long arm of marital conflict. There also was a significant negative effect of father's education on current contact. Fathers with more education had less frequent face-to-face contact with their adult

children. Father's occupation did not affect contact. These effects are broadly consistent with Hypotheses 2A and 3A. In contrast to Hypothesis 1A, father's prior involvement in childrearing did not affect current contact, but the effect was marginally significant and in the expected direction.

To evaluate the magnitude of the main effects, I calculated ORs. These indicate how much the odds of being in contact category $j > k$ rather than in contact category $j \leq k$ are changed by a 1-*SD* change in the independent variable (all interpreted here in the positive direction). Note that the three childhood variables were standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). For conflict, the OR was 1.67, whereas for father's education it was smaller, 1.21.

In Model 2, I added interactions of childhood variables and parental divorce. In line with expectations, there was a positive and significant interaction effect between parental divorce and father involvement. The main effect refers to married fathers and was almost zero ($b = 0.035$). The sum of the main effect and the interaction effect refers to divorced fathers and was positive ($b = 0.035 + 0.362 = 0.397$). In other words, when divorced fathers were more involved in the child's life when the children were young, they were more likely

Table 4. Ordinal Logit Regression of More Frequent Father–Child Contact: Regression Coefficients and *p* Values

Predictor	Model 1 (<i>N</i> = 1,978)		Model 2 (<i>N</i> = 1,978)		Model 3 (<i>N</i> = 1,978)		Model 4 (<i>N</i> = 2,026)	
	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>
Daughter	0.146 [†]	.10	0.160 [†]	.07	0.160 [†]	.07	0.149 [†]	.09
Age	-0.023*	.00	-0.024*	.00	-0.024*	.00	-0.023*	.00
Years of schooling	-0.049*	.00	-0.047*	.00	-0.048*	.00	-0.047*	.00
Married	-0.159 [†]	.09	-0.155	.10	-0.155	.10	-0.165 [†]	.08
Urbanization	-0.125*	.00	-0.132*	.00	-0.133*	.00	-0.139*	.00
Number of siblings	-0.151*	.00	-0.156*	.00	-0.157*	.00	-0.153*	.00
Father divorced	-1.783*	.00	-2.057*	.00			-1.683*	.00
Divorced age ≤ 6					-2.574*	.00		
Divorced age 7+					-1.854*	.00		
Father involvement	0.087 [†]	.06	0.035	.49	0.035	.48	0.032	.52
× father divorced			0.362*	.01	0.309*	.03	0.505*	.00
Parental conflict	-0.510*	.00	-0.550*	.00	-0.550*	.00	-0.549*	.00
× father divorced			0.339*	.02	0.345*	.02	0.290*	.03
Father's education	-0.190*	.01	-0.247*	.00	-0.246*	.00	-0.248*	.00
× father divorced			0.608*	.01	0.693*	.00	0.513*	.01
Father's occupation	-0.038	.59	-0.008	.91	-0.009	.90	0.006	.93
× father divorced			-0.251	.37	-0.342	.23	-0.192	.40
Cutpoint 1	-5.712*	.00	-5.758*	.00	-5.812*	.00	-5.715*	.00
Cutpoint 2	-5.281*	.00	-5.319*	.00	-5.370*	.00	-5.291*	.00
Cutpoint 3	-3.766*	.00	-3.785*	.00	-3.831*	.00	-3.769*	.00
Cutpoint 4	-2.099*	.00	-2.106*	.00	-2.150*	.00	-2.120*	.00

Note. Data are based on the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences, 2012–2013 (Biographical Module). “Weekly,” “several times a week,” and “daily” are combined. Missing values were imputed with multiple imputation.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05.

to see their children when they were adult and living on their own. I also observed a significant interaction of marital conflict with parental divorce. For children of married fathers, there was a negative effect of parental conflict on contact frequency, but for children of divorced fathers this effect was weaker, although still negative ($b = -0.550 + 0.339 = -0.211$). Finally, there was a positive interaction with father's education. For married fathers, the educational effect was negative; for divorced fathers, the implied effect was positive ($b = -0.247 + 0.608 = 0.361$). In other words, more highly educated divorced fathers had more frequent contact with their adult children than divorced fathers who were less well educated.

In Model 3 in Table 4, I added the child's age at divorce to the model. It is clear that experiencing a divorce at an early age has a more negative long-term effect on the amount of contact with the father. The effect of divorce for children who experienced the divorce at age 6 or earlier was more negative than the effect

for children who experienced the divorce at an older age. The difference between these two coefficients was significant ($\chi^2 = 5.58, p = .02$). The interaction effects of divorce and the three childhood variables did not change when the age at divorce was included. Note that Model 3 assumes that the interactions with involvement, conflict, and father's resources were the same for the two age groups. It is possible that there were differences in this respect, but the sample of divorced families was not large enough to test such three-way interactions convincingly.

In Model 4, I added fathers who lived with their children after divorce ($n = 48$) to the sample. In this somewhat larger sample, the interaction between father involvement and divorce became stronger (Model 4). The other interaction effects remained significant, however. I will come back to this finding when I discuss the models for the quality of the relationship.

To interpret the interactions in light of my hypotheses, I calculated how a 1-*SD* change in the moderator variable changes the overall effect

of parental divorce. To do this, I divided the interaction effects with parental divorce by the overall effect of parental divorce. The overall effect is obtained from Model 1 in Table 4. A 1-*SD* increase in father involvement reduced the average divorce effect on contact by 20% in Model 2 (i.e., 0.362/1.783) and 28% in Model 4 (i.e., 0.505/1.783). For a 1-*SD* increase in conflict, the reduction in the divorce effect was 19%. For a 1-*SD* increase in education, the reduction was 34%. These results are in line with all three hypotheses (1B, 2B, 3B) and show that the impact of parental divorce on father–child relationships was clearly less negative when fathers were highly involved in childrearing, when they had much education, and when there was much conflict between parents.

Perceived Quality

The models for the quality of the relationship are presented in Table 5. There was a significant effect of parental divorce, in line with the

descriptive results. The control variables had weaker effects on quality than on contact. The relationship was perceived as better when the respondent was younger, when there were fewer siblings, and when the child was less educated. Daughters had a somewhat better relationship, on average, with the father than sons did.

Let us now look at the childhood variables in Model 1. Marital conflict had a significant negative effect: The more conflict parents had during childhood, the lower the quality of the relationship between the father and his adult child many years later. Father's education and occupation did not have main effects on the quality of the tie. In the models for contact, we saw no overall effect of father involvement; here we did see a significant positive effect. In other words, the more fathers were involved in the child's life during marriage, the better the relationship with their adult children later. In sum, for the quality of the tie, two hypotheses were confirmed (1A, 2A). When evaluating the magnitude of the

Table 5. Ordinal Logit Regression of Higher Quality Father–Child Relationship: Regression Coefficients and p Values

Predictor	Model 1 (<i>N</i> = 1,978)		Model 2 (<i>N</i> = 1,978)		Model 3 (<i>N</i> = 1,978)		Model 4 (<i>N</i> = 2,026)	
	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	<i>p</i>
Daughter	0.246*	.00	0.260*	.00	0.261*	.00	0.250*	.00
Age	−0.020*	.00	−0.020*	.00	−0.020*	.00	−0.019*	.00
Years of schooling	−0.027	.10	−0.022	.17	−0.023	.16	−0.018	.27
Married	0.038	.69	0.045	.63	0.045	.63	0.025	.78
Urbanization	0.065†	.06	0.061†	.08	0.061†	.08	0.056	.10
Number of siblings	−0.082*	.01	−0.087*	.01	−0.088*	.01	−0.086*	.01
Father divorced	−1.213*	.00	−1.649*	.00			−1.177*	.00
Divorced age ≤ 6					−1.835*	.00		
Divorced age 7+					−1.580*	.00		
Father involvement	0.270*	.00	0.247*	.00	0.247*	.00	0.240*	.00
× father divorced			0.161	.26	0.143	.32	0.336*	.01
Parental conflict	−0.636*	.00	−0.680*	.00	−0.680*	.00	−0.677*	.00
× father divorced			0.425*	.01	0.429*	.01	0.382*	.01
Father's education	−0.002	.97	−0.066	.34	−0.066	.34	−0.066	.34
× father divorced			0.854*	.00	0.886*	.00	0.518*	.03
Father's occupation	0.018	.77	0.034	.60	0.034	.60	0.036	.56
× father divorced			−0.279	.35	−0.306	.31	−0.096	.69
Cutpoint 1	−4.501*	.00	−4.502*	.00	−4.515*	.00	−4.315*	.00
Cutpoint 2	−3.706*	.00	−3.689*	.00	−3.702*	.00	−3.537*	.00
Cutpoint 3	−2.137*	.00	−2.096*	.00	−2.108*	.00	−1.984*	.00
Cutpoint 4	0.041	.90	0.093	.77	0.082	.79	0.152	.62

Note. Data are based on the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences, 2012–2013 (Biographical Module). Missing values were imputed with multiple imputation.

†*p* < .10. **p* < .05.

main effects (in Model 1), one can see that the effect was stronger for conflict ($OR = 1.89$) than for father involvement ($OR = 1.31$).

To what extent do the childhood variables moderate the negative effect of divorce on the quality of the father-child tie? Model 2 shows that there were two significant interaction effects. First, there was a positive interaction with marital conflict. The main effect of marital conflict was $b = -0.680$, which refers to married fathers. The effect was weaker—less negative—for divorced fathers (the implied effect was $b = -0.255$). Hence, it appears that marital conflict is less detrimental in the long run for father-child relationships when parents divorced. There also was an interaction with father's education. For married fathers, there was no positive effect of education on quality, but for divorced fathers there was a positive effect (the implied effect was $b = 0.788$). Hence, highly educated divorced fathers were better able to maintain high-quality relationships with their children than divorced fathers who had a lower level of education. Finally, there was no significant interaction with father involvement, in contrast to what was found for contact. Father's occupation again had no main effect and no interaction effect with divorce.

In Model 3, I added the child's age at divorce to the model. I noted that the father-child relationship was more negatively affected when the child was younger when the parents' divorce occurred. The difference between the age groups was not significant, however ($\chi^2 = 0.64$, $p = 0.42$). The interactions between parental divorce and the three childhood conditions did not change between Models 2 and 3.

Model 4 estimated the interaction effects again, now for a sample that included fathers who lived with their children after divorce. In this larger sample, the interaction between divorce and father involvement became larger and passed the significance level. That the effect was significant in Model 4 suggests that if there is a "payoff" of father's involvement for later ties to his children, this works in part through post-divorce living arrangements. Previous research has shown that sharing roles during marriage has positive effects on the chances that the father has (joint or sole) custody (Juby et al., 2005). In other words, more involvement during marriage may be related to more intensive father-child relationships in the long run via postdivorce living arrangements that were more favorable

to the father. Readers should keep in mind that children who live with their father after a divorce are a select group, and hence there may also be alternative interpretations involved in this finding.

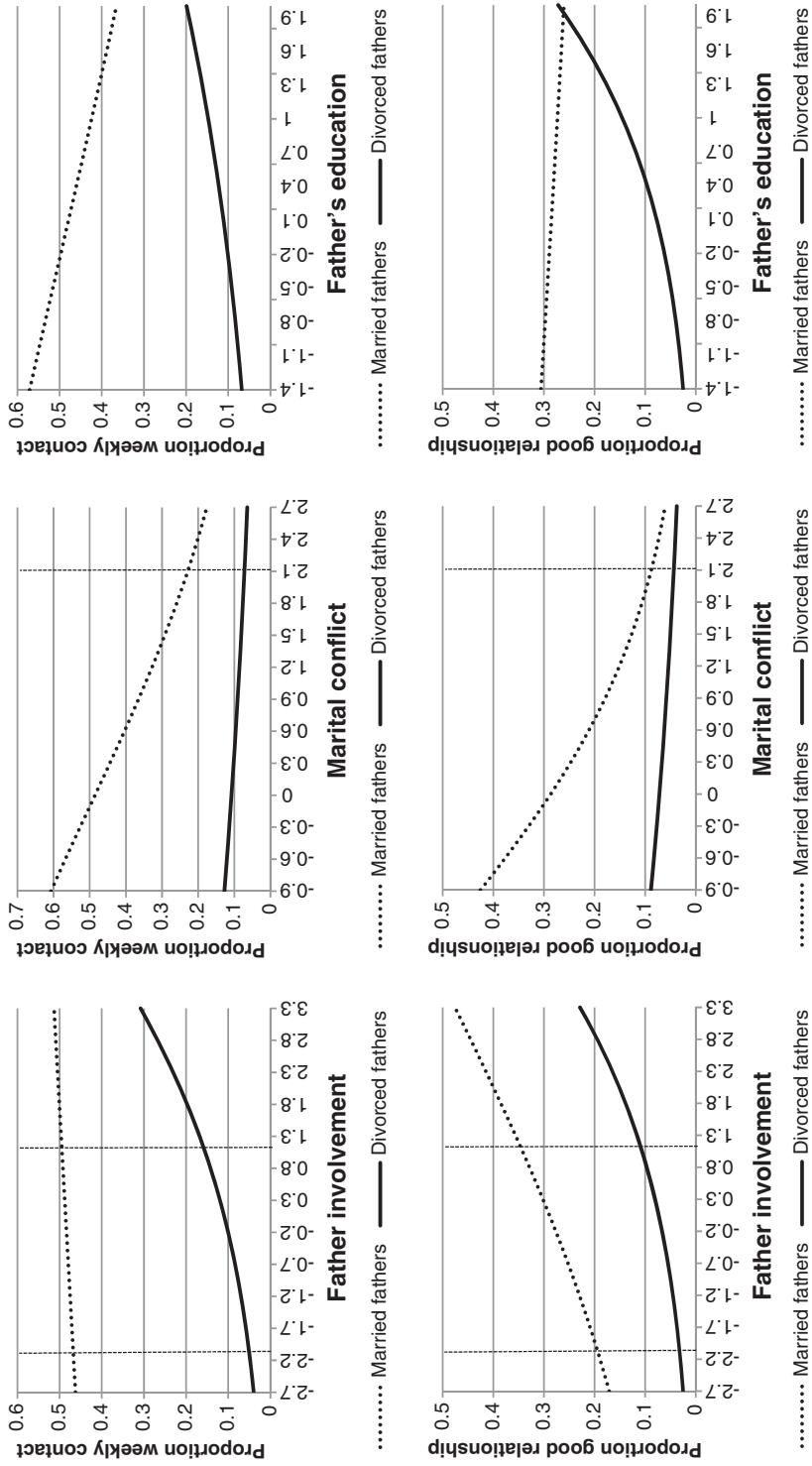
To decide about the validity of the moderator hypotheses, I evaluated how the effect of divorce was modified by the three childhood circumstances by comparing the interaction effects to the overall effect of divorce. A 1-*SD* increase in father's education had the strongest moderator effect: It reduced the divorce effect by 70% (i.e., $0.931/1.221$). This is clear confirmation of Hypothesis 3B. The effect was substantial for conflict as well, in line with Hypothesis 2B: Each 1-*SD* increase in conflict reduced the divorce effect by 35%. The moderator hypothesis about father involvement (1B) received mixed support because it was significant only in the sample that included children who lived with their father. In this case, the moderator effect was 28%.

Closing the Gap?

Because most childhood circumstances reduce the gap between married and divorced fathers, it is important to examine whether the gap "closes." To evaluate this, in Figure 1 I present graphs of the interaction effects. The ordered logit models were used for the imputations, and predictions refer to weekly contact and very good quality relationships (expressed in proportions). The observed ranges of father involvement, father's education, and marital conflict were used to illustrate the interaction effects. The horizontal axes contain the standardized scores for the moderator variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). With vertical lines, I show where the 5% highest and lowest values in the distribution are. Father's education did not have extreme values, and there were also no extreme values on the lower side of the conflict variable. In these cases, no vertical line was drawn. Predictions were made while holding all other variables constant at the mean. Hence, the proportions reflect the differences between married and divorced fathers when these groups would be similar in all other measured respects.

One can see that there was only a small gap left in contact and quality when there was much interparental conflict. Note that the decline in this gap was largely caused by the fact that it was parental conflict among married fathers that

FIGURE 1. ADULT FATHER–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS BY PARENTAL DIVORCE AND CHILDHOOD CIRCUMSTANCES.



Note. Predicted proportions are evaluated at the mean of the other variables in the model.

leads to poor father–child relationships. The gap in contact with the child also declined when there was much father involvement, but even at high levels of involvement there still was a gap left. Finally, for highly educated fathers, there was only a small difference in the quality of the tie to the child and the amount of contact between married and divorced fathers. These calculations suggest that the gap was less problematic under specific childhood circumstances. At the same time, however, the gap did not go away entirely, so additional explanations are still needed to understand the differences.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that childhood circumstances have a lasting effect on father–child relationships. Moreover, childhood circumstances modify the impact of an early parental divorce on relationships between fathers and their adult children.

First, the analyses point to the importance of role sharing during marriage. When fathers were more involved in the child’s life—regardless of marital status—they had a better quality relationship with their adult children. More important, this effect was greater for divorced fathers than for married fathers. The interpretation of this interaction is that for fathers who are divorced, a low level of prior investments in the child can lead to a downward spiral in the relationship. Under those conditions, postdivorce arrangements will probably be less beneficial for the father, and maintaining ties to his children without a female kinkeeper may be more difficult. In a sense, divorced fathers rely more on their own investments, hence the stronger effect of father involvement in childrearing on father–child relationships.

This finding is important because it implies that when fathers are highly involved during marriage, they experience less negative consequences of a divorce, at least in terms of the relationships they have with their children. In a more general sense, this also suggests that the increasingly egalitarian gender roles in marriage will eventually reduce the gender gap in the (social) consequences of divorce. The finding that involvement during marriage plays an important role echoes findings from past research that have shown that role sharing leads to better custody and visiting arrangements for

fathers immediately after divorce (Juby et al., 2005). It is also consistent with cross-national research in Europe that suggests that the effect of divorce on adult father–child relations is less negative in more gender-egalitarian countries (Kalmijn, 2008). Future research could examine the extent to which the effect of role sharing during marriage on the long-term father–child relationship is mediated by more favorable circumstances immediately after divorce.

Second, the analyses showed that the amount of conflict between parents is an important factor. When main effects were compared using standardized variables, interparental conflict turned out to be the most relevant for the future relationship between fathers and children. Some studies have shown that marital conflict has negative spillover effects: Young children have poorer relationships with their parents when parents frequently have conflict. The present analyses show that there is a long-term effect of marital conflict as well. However, when parents are divorced, marital conflict had a weaker effect on adult father–child relationships. This finding echoes the so-called stress relief effect in research on child well-being (Hanson, 1999). In the present study, the stress relief effect generalized to the quality of the father–child relationship (Yu et al., 2010). Under conditions of high interparental conflict children are better able to interact with their father if they are not in the middle of these conflicts, as is more likely to be the case if parents remain married. When parents are married and have high levels of conflict, children may find it unpleasant to visit their parental home and gradually become more distant from their parents.

Third, I examined the extent to which the resources of the father moderate the divorce effect. I expected that high-resource fathers would be better able to maintain a good relationship with their children after divorce than low-resource fathers. I found positive evidence for this hypothesis, but only for father’s education, not for father’s occupation. The more education the father had, the less negative the effect of divorce on the quality of the father–child tie and on the frequency of contact. It is important to note that this finding was obtained while controlling for marital conflict and father involvement. Hence, the interpretation must be sought in arguments not related to conflict and gender roles. It is possible that high-status fathers are better able to provide a

more comfortable home environment for the child and are more likely to pay child support. Because only the father's education, and not father's occupation, yielded a significant interaction effect, this explanation seems less plausible. Occupational status is more closely linked to material well-being and income than education. High-status fathers may also be more aware of the possible negative effects of divorce on children and be more skilled in negotiating good arrangements after divorce. That education is a more important moderating variable than occupation suggests that cognitive skills in handling the divorce and its aftermath may indeed be more relevant. My finding also suggests that relatively enduring resources of the father (e.g., education) are more important in this case than the resources he happens to have during childhood.

In contrast to previous studies, the present analysis is based on nationally representative retrospective survey data. One important advantage of the retrospective design is that it was relatively easy to examine long-term effects of divorce and childhood circumstances. The average time between the divorce and the measurement of the relationship was 26 years. Most previous studies have been prospective. Such studies tend to be short, such that consequences of divorce are examined for adolescents or young adults. A disadvantage of the retrospective design is that reports about the past can be biased. The extent to which this is true is difficult to answer conclusively with the present data. Past methodological studies have shown that retrospective reports on childhood circumstances have both random and systematic measurement error and that these two sources of error work against each other (de Vries & de Graaf, 2008). As a result, the direction of bias in the effects of childhood variables is not necessarily upward.

Finally, I need to offer a caveat about the causal nature of the effects. It is clear that other characteristics of fathers and children may be related to father–child relationships and to the risk of divorce. Examples are personality differences, differences in mental health, or different cultural orientations. If such factors play a role, then the main divorce effects can be biased in an upward fashion. The magnitude of the main effects is such that it is hard to believe that the entire effect would be spurious. These possible confounders could also bias the moderator effects, although it requires more complex

theorizing to evaluate the direction in which this would go. To address these concerns, either more complex statistical methods based on instrumental variables (Kim, 2011) or better theoretical arguments about what these unmeasured factors could be, in combination with new data that measures these factors, are needed.

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