

# **Grandparent-grandchild relationships and Grandchildren's Well-being after Parental Divorce. Does Lineage Matter?**

Maike Jappens<sup>1</sup> & Jan Van Bavel<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Interface Demography, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

<sup>2</sup>Family & Population Studies, University of Leuven

Due to demographic changes of the last decades, grandchildren and grandparents now share several decades of their lives with each other. At the same time, many of them will be confronted with a divorce in the parent generation. Divorce raises the risk of extended family relations being weakened or even severed. But, as grandparents are often considered as latent resources activated in times of family crisis, the increase in divorce also raises the importance of grandparents for the support and well-being of their grandchildren (e.g. Bengtson 2001).

We know rather little, however, about how important grandparents actually are for the well-being of grandchildren after the divorce of their parents. In an on-going study, we found that the strength of grandchild-grandparent relationships is positively associated to grandchildren's subjective well-being, and that, in line with their latent function, having a close grandparent relationship makes more of a difference for the well-being of children of divorce than for children with married parents (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2015).

As pointed out by Sear & Coall (2011), a clear limitation in the literature on grandparent influences on grandchild outcomes is the lack of distinction between grandparent lineages (for exceptions see Lussier et al, 2002 and Tanskanen & Danielsbacka; 2012), while evolutionary perspectives and historical studies on child survival do suggest that matrilineal kin is more beneficial to grandchildren's well-being than patrilineal kin. Therefore, in our study, we will examine the quality of relationships with maternal versus paternal grandparents and explore if they associate differently with grandchildren's subjective well-being after parental divorce.

## **Data & method**

We use data from the multi-actor survey "Divorce in Flanders" (DiF). Flanders is the Dutch speaking, Northern part of Belgium. In the context of this survey, partners from married and divorced anchor couples, and a common child, were interviewed between October 2009 and December 2010. We select two subsamples of 975 and 906 children between 10 and 25 years old still living with at least one parent and with at least one maternal/paternal grandparent still alive. About two-thirds of these children have divorced parents, for one third the parents are in their first marriage. We merge information given by the children with the data provided by one or both participating parents.

We will consider different indicators of grandchildren's subjective well-being, but in this abstract we only present results for *self-esteem*, measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, consisting of 10 items to be rated on a five-point scale. We used principal components analysis to create an index where higher scores represent higher levels of self-esteem. The *quality of relationship with maternal/paternal grandparents* was assessed by asking grandchildren, for every grandparent still alive, if they had contact, and if yes to rate their relationship on a five-point scale from very bad to very good. We selected the highest rating among the available grandparents and constructed a variable with 3 categories: not having a

good relationship (very bad, bad, neither bad nor good, no contact) – having a good relationship with at least one grandparent (reference category) – having a very good relationship with at least one grandparent.

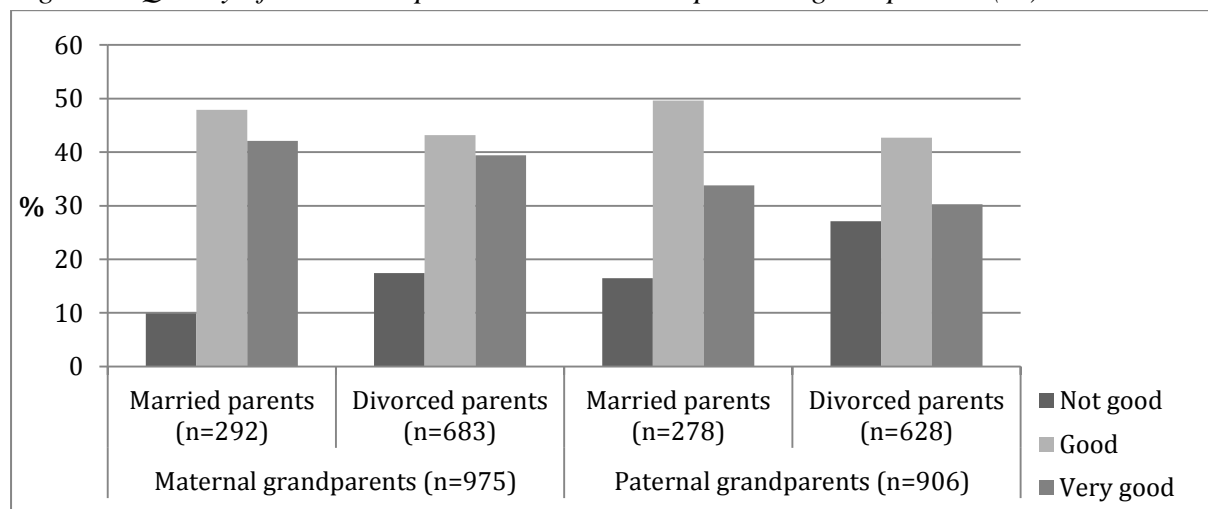
**Parental divorce and relationships with maternal vs. paternal grandparents**

Figure 1 shows the percentages of grandchildren having no good, good or very good relationships with grandparents by the marital status of the parents. As to maternal grandparents, 42.1% of grandchildren with married parents and 39.4 % of grandchildren with divorced parents reported to have a very good relationship with them. But significantly more grandchildren from divorced parents (17.4%) than those from intact families (9.9%) did not have any good maternal grandparent relationship.

For relationships with paternal grandparents we see the same pattern, but very good relations are in general less common when compared to maternal grandparents (33.8% with married parents and 30.3% with divorced parents), and differences between grandchildren with divorced and married parents are more pronounced. While 16.2% of grandchildren from intact families reported not to have any good relationship with paternal grandparents, for children with divorced parents this percentage amounts to 27.1%.

These outcomes are in line with the ‘*matrifocal bias*’ in kin relations that is also found in other studies. Based on the paternity uncertainty hypothesis in evolutionary theory, as well as on the idea of woman as the traditional ‘kinkeepers’ in Western cultures, maternal family relations are expected to be stronger than those on the paternal side. After a divorce in the parent-generation, this matrifocal bias would persist or be accentuated, as paternal grandparents can no longer count on the mother as the kinkeeper (Hagestad, 1985). Moreover, children usually reside with a custodial mother after divorce, leaving grandparents on the father’s side fewer chances to develop close relationships with their grandchildren (Jappens & Van Bavel, in press).

Figure 1: Quality of relationships with maternal and paternal grandparents (%)



## Relationships with maternal/paternal grandparents and grandchildren's well-being

Table 1 presents results from linear regression analyses with self-esteem-scores as the dependent variable. Model 1 shows that the quality of relationships with maternal grandparents matters for grandchildren's self-esteem. Compared to the reference group of grandchildren having a good relationship with a maternal grandparent, those having a very good relationship report significantly higher scores of self-esteem. For relationships with paternal grandparents, on the contrary, we find no (statistically significant) association with grandchildren's self-esteem. These differential findings for maternal and paternal grandparents are in line with the study by Tanskanen & Danielsbacka (2012).

Table 1: Linear regression analyses modeling grandchildren's self-esteem

### a) Relationship with maternal grandparents

	All grandchildren				Divorced parents	
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Relation with grandparents (ref.=good)						
Not good	-0.14	0.09	-0.34	0.19	-0.11	0.11
Very good	0.24	0.07 **	0.01	0.12	0.29	0.09 **
Relation with grandparents * divorce parents						
Divorced parents * not good			0.28	0.22		
Divorced parents * very good			0.33	0.14 *		
Divorced parents	0.02	0.07	-0.15	0.10		
Adjusted R Square	0,14		0,15		0,18	
n	975		975		635	

### b) Relationship with paternal grandparents

	All grandchildren				Divorced parents	
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Relation with grandparents (ref.=good)						
Not good	-0.10	0.08	-0.14	0.16	-0.09	0.11
Very good	0.08	0.08	-0.07	0.13	0.15	0.10
Relation with grandparents * divorce parents						
Divorced parents * not good			0.06	0.19		
Divorced parents * very good			0.22	0.16		
Divorced parents	-0.07	0.07	-0.16	0.10		
Adjusted R Square	0,11		0,15		0,18	
n	906		906		586	

\*p<0,05, \*\*p<0,01, \*\*\*p<0,001

Control variables models 1 & 2: age, sex, education parents, quality of relationship with mother and father, number of maternal grandparents alive

Extra control variables models 3: residence arrangement, repartnering mother and father, level of parental conflict and years passed since divorce.

In the respective Models 2, we introduce an interaction term between having divorced parents and the quality of relationships with the grandparents. The results show that very good quality relations with maternal grandparents especially matter for the self-esteem of grandchildren whose parents have divorced. When parents are married, we do not find a significant association between the quality of relations with maternal grandparents and grandchildren's self-esteem. For children with divorced parents, a very good relationship

with a maternal grandparent is associated with higher levels of self-esteem when compared to grandchildren with a good grandparent relationship. As to relationships with paternal grandparents however, again we see no (significant) associations.

Models 3 only include grandchildren whose parents are divorced. Also when taking into account various divorce-related characteristics, including the post-divorce residence arrangement of the child, we see that grandchildren with a very good relationship with a maternal grandparent report more self-esteem, while the quality of relationships with paternal grandparents does not explain any variance in grandchildren's self-esteem.

Although this abstract only presents results for children's self-esteem, regressions using other well-being indicators yield similar results. Also including the quality of relationships with maternal and paternal grandparents in one model leads to the same conclusions.

### **Conclusion & outlook**

Our study shows a clear distinction between grandchildren's relationships with maternal and paternal grandparents. First, like in other studies, relationships with maternal grandparents are reported to be closer than those with paternal grandparents, and differences between maternal and paternal grandparents are accentuated when parents are divorced. Second, we also found that, when grandchildren do have close relationships with their paternal grandparents, this does not seem to play a significant role in their subjective well-being. The strength of relationships with maternal grandparents, on the contrary, is positively associated to grandchildren's well-being, above and beyond the relationships they have with parents. Moreover, in line with the idea of grandparents as a latent resource, close relationships with maternal grandparents seem especially valuable for grandchildren who have gone through a parental divorce.

We will refine our future analyses and search to understand the different impact of relationships with maternal and paternal grandparents on grandchildren's well-being.

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