

**Children's personality and coping with residential instability after divorce:  
Evidence for an asymmetric Matthew effect**

**Abstract**

Recent changes in custody law have made joint physical custody the preferred residential model after divorce. Living alternately with mother and father after divorce would be beneficial for children's subjective well-being, caused by elevated parent-child contact and a better parent-child relationship. However, commuting between parental households may put children under stress, as they continuously need to adapt to two different family settings. Coping with transitions, for example a parental divorce, is known to be highly affected by children's personality, known as the Big Five. Children with an 'easy' temperament or personality are supposed to be more resilient against stressors and can better handle changing situational demands, like present in a situation of joint physical custody. In this study, we will investigate whether the association between children's custody arrangement and their subjective well-being differs according to their personality, more specifically the level of extraversion and neuroticism. We also incorporate the quality of the relationship with mother and father. Data are used from three rounds of the Leuven Adolescents and Families studies. We find evidence for an asymmetric Matthew effect. For children with a resilient personality (i.e. high extraversion, low neuroticism) the custody arrangement does not affect well-being. Children with a more vulnerable personality (i.e. high in neuroticism or low in extraversion) experience a cumulative disadvantage in custody arrangements that deviate from standard mother custody. For girls, joint custody seems less beneficial, while boys seem to profit least from father custody. Nonetheless, compensation effects exist between having a difficult personality and a good parent-child relationship, under specific circumstances.

Keywords: custody, subjective well-being, personality

## **1. Introduction**

Many countries are facing the trend that children live alternately with mother and father after divorce. In Belgium, joint physical custody recently became the preferred residential model. In practice, most children live one week in the mother's household, followed by one week with father. This would allow children to maintain better relationships with both parents, positively affecting their well-being. However, it requires a lot of flexibility from the children involved. Every week they have to pack and unpack, unwind from mother-time and wrap-up for father-time, adjust to different norms and rules, and get along with different family member. Moreover, children have to cope with two different lifestyles and two sets of expectations and values.

A long debate has been held about the pros and cons of joint custody, but the results are not straightforward. Bauserman's (2002) meta-analysis points in the direction of slightly positive effects on child adjustment, but selection effects could not be ruled out. Parents who opt for joint custody are mostly higher educated and have more financial resources, which can explain the beneficial effects on well-being. Kelly (1993) emphasizes that it makes no sense simply comparing children in sole and joint custody, but it is crucial to incorporate differentiating factors. A first set of factors that have been taken into account by researchers are family process variables. For example, many studies have shown that joint physical custody is only a preferable option when parental conflict is kept low (Kaspiew et al. 2009; Kelly 1993; Lowery & Settle 1985; Luepnitz 1986; Singer 2008; Spruijt & Duindam 2009). Others have focused on the role of the parent-child relationship (Amato & Gilbreth 1999; Amato & Rezac 1994; Furstenberg & Nord 1985; Gunnoe & Braver 2001; Kelly 1991; Spruijt & Duindam 2009). Another way of looking at the link between the custody arrangement and child adjustment is to consider individual characteristics of the child. As stated by Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999:137) "The great diversity in response to divorce is related to the interaction of risk and protective factors associated with individual characteristics of the child". Typical factors that have been explored in this area involve age, developmental stage (e.g. Bray 1991) and sex of the child (e.g. Crosbie-Burnett 1991). A rather innovative approach is to incorporate the personality of the child, conceptualised as a crucial factor that can make children more or less vulnerable in stressful situations, like frequent transitions between two parental households. This approach is taken in this article. We study children's personality as a differentiating factor in the association between the custody arrangement and child well-being. To achieve this we use data from three rounds of the Leuven Adolescents and Family study, a survey that was collected between 2010 and 2012, containing child-reported information about family relations, custody arrangements and measures of personality and emotional well-being.

## **2. Joint physical custody**

In 1995, the 'permanent parental responsibility' principle was accepted in Belgian custody law. From then onwards, both parents were supposed to be responsible, in proportion to their own means, for housing, living costs, parenting and the education of their children. This replaced the former situation in which one parent had custody (mostly the mother) and the other had visitation rights (mostly the father). The law of 1995 did not stipulate a preferred residential model after divorce, the only guideline was "the child's best interest". As a consequence, a wide range of possible residential arrangements emerged. In 2006, a legally presumption for joint physical custody was installed in the law. This referred to a situation in which children live alternately

with mother and father after divorce. Again, the law retained from stipulating criteria for joint physical custody. It is the responsibility of the judge to evaluate whether a custody arrangement is in the child's best interest. The law has a signalling function, raising the awareness that parents are fundamentally equal and that parenthood continues after divorce. Because of this legal presumption, Belgium is a front runner with regard to the carrying out of joint physical custody arrangements in Europe. A recent Belgian study showed that the proportion of joint physical custody families is higher among the group that divorced after the law reform of 2006 (Sodermans, Vanassche and Matthijs 2011). Moreover, it creates an ideal study context to examine outcomes of joint physical custody on child and adolescent well-being.

### **3. Joint custody and emotional well-being of children: Continuity versus stability**

Many scholars have investigated the effects of custody type on child adjustment (for an overview see Bauserman 2002), but the cumulative results are not straightforward. Lee (2002) refers to it as the "continuity – stability" debate. Some studies emphasize the beneficial effects of joint custody on child well-being (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1992; Crosbie-Burnett 1991; Glover and Steele 1989; Luepnitz 1986; Spruijt and Duindam 2009; Shiller 1986; Wolchik, Braver, and Sandler 1985), apparently associated with increased parental involvement and fewer economic difficulties (Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). The results of these studies imply that children need *continuity* after divorce. Like stated by Lowery and Settle (1985:461) "joint custody could help to eliminate some of the stress experienced by families by decreasing the incidence of other changes associated with it. Hence, joint custody may minimize changes in both structural and functional characteristics of the family.

On the other hand, the supporters of the *stability* approach claim that children may experience more stress in joint physical custody situations, due to multiple transitions and a more complex family configuration (Kuehl 1989; Bauserman 2002; Spruijt and Duindam 2009; Goldstein, Freud and Solnit 1973). Rothberg (1983) describes several difficulties related to joint physical custody, like multiple transitions, logistic problems associated with moving back and forth and elevated stress of children having troubles to adjust to two different homes. Also, King (2002) refers to the possible negative effect of living in two households on the continuity of friendship networks of children.

Also, numerous studies have failed to identify an association between custody type and child adjustment (Lee 2002; Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1992; Donnelly and Finkelhor 1992; Naedvall and Thuen 2004; Pearson and Thoennes 1990). The reason for this inconsistency is probably caused by the complexity of the notion 'child adjustment'. Different forces are interacting with each other like within a system (Lee, 2002) and various intermediating factors are in play.

In line with Amato's (2010) critique on divorce research focusing too much on mean differences in child well-being, we argue that it is essential to consider intra- en interpersonal factors before deciding which custody arrangement is in the child's best interest. Indeed, this stability-continuity debate is little nuanced and does not take into account individual child factors. We try to contribute to this debate by taking up a risk and resilience perspective and by considering the role of the child's personality in studying the link between custody arrangement and child well-being.

#### 4. Coping with transitions: risk and resilience and the role of personality

When children experience a parental divorce, they have to cope with stressors that may have an impact on their psychosocial functioning over time (Amato & Keith, 1991; Glenn & Kramer, 1985; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The way in which children react and adapt to stressful life events is dependent upon the extent to which they can regulate their emotions and upon the coping mechanisms and strategies they use (Lee, 2002). According to Wachs (2006) temperamental factors will determine the particular coping style that children apply. Temperament can be defined as individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation assumed to have a constitutional basis (Rothbart, Ahadi and Evans 2000). In other words, temperament is an innate characteristic of a human being and influences the way children react on stressful events like a parental divorce. Children with an easy temperament (e.g. sociable) are more adaptable to change than temperamentally difficult children and are more likely to elicit positive responses from their parents and other adolescents, which may buffer the negative impact of stressors (Hetherington, 1989; Troxel & Matthews, 2004). Moreover, it is the co-existence of having a difficult temperament and the presence of stress that makes children vulnerable. Under low stress conditions, no differences in coping could be observed between temperamentally easy and difficult children.

Temperament can be linked to personality (Rothbart, Ahadi and Evans 2000), that is generally seen as a five dimensional model also known as the “Big Five”. The five dimensions are extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness, and represent personality at the broadest level of abstraction. Each dimension summarizes a large number of more specific personality characteristics (Denissen, Geenen, van Aken, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; John & Srivastata, 1999). According to Asendorpf and Van Aken (2003) children as from middle childhood can be characterized by the Big Five and the five personality variables also have good external validity.

A brief overview of the personality variables may be appropriate, as described by John & Srivastata (1999). *Extraversion* implies “an energetic approach towards the social and material world” and is linked to characteristics like sociability, activity, assertiveness and positive emotionality. *Neuroticism* is linked with feelings of anxiety, nervous, sadness and tension and is also called negative emotionality. *Agreeableness* refers to a prosocial and communal orientation towards others and is opposed against antagonism. It is also linked to trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty and tender-mindedness. *Conscientiousness* describes “socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task- and goal-directed behaviour, such as thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, and planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks”. The factor *openness*, in the past also labelled as ‘openness to experience’ or ‘intellect’ has been linked to characteristics like artistic, curious, original, wide interest, intelligent, creativity, and cultural interest.

In this article, we will focus on extraversion and neuroticism as they have repeatedly been found as the two most important personality dimensions for explaining emotional well-being (González Gutiérrez, Jiménez, Hernández, & Puente, 2005; Hayes & Joseph, 2003). For example, neuroticism is opposite to emotional stability and the personality dimension most related to internalizing behaviour; as it was related to anxiety and depression (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). Children high in negative emotionality (i.e. high in neuroticism) are more likely to perceive a stressful situation as a threat and create more negative arousal (Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, & Curran, 1999), whereas high scores on emotional stability (i.e. low neuroticism) have

been linked to being flexible to changing situational demands (Asendorpf, Borkenau, Ostendorf, & Van Aken, 2001). Kaiseler, Polman, & Nicholls (2012) found that neuroticism was associated with less adaptive coping strategies while the other four personality dimensions were associated with more effective coping strategies.

Summarized, high extraversion and low neuroticism are positively related to general outcomes in social, cognitive and emotional well-being. They could also be labelled as ‘social desirable behaviour’. There is evidence that children with an easy temperament or personality (socially mature, emotional stable) are more resilient with regard to divorce, stress and multiple transitions between parental households (Bray 1991; Hetherington, Bridges and Insabella 1998).

In this study, we want to investigate how the custody arrangement after divorce is associated with two measures of emotional child well-being after divorce (life satisfaction and depressive feelings) and whether this association differs by the child’s personality. We expect that the association between joint physical custody and child well-being runs differently for children with a ‘difficult’ personality (high neuroticism, low extraversion) than for children with an ‘easy’ personality (low neuroticism, high extraversion). This difference is explained from a risk and resiliency framework. Multiple transitions and living in two households requires continuous adaptation to changing situational demands. Children with a resilient personality type are more flexible and will probably better adjust to this type of residential arrangement.

## **5. The parent-child relationship**

When studying outcomes of custody arrangements on child well-being, one cannot ignore the quality of the parent-child relationship. A close relationship with both parents is associated with positive adjustment and more emotional security of children after divorce (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Kelly, 1993; Troxel & Matthews, 2004). The current custody legislation promotes joint physical custody to enhance parent-child contact. In this way, it should enable a solid parent-child relationship (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Ardititi, 1992; Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Kelly, 1991; Shiller, 1986; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). However, the strength of the emotional bond between parents and children is more than visitation frequency or time spent together (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Riggs, 2005). Frequency of interaction is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a close relationship to emerge (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Furthermore, the preference for joint physical custody assumes a good pre-divorce parent-child relationship, which certainly not always exists. Hence, the effect of custody on children’s well-being may be conditional upon the quality of the relationship with father and mother. For example, in case of a poor parent-child relationship, forced contact with both parents could even work reverse. For these reasons, we will incorporate the quality of the parent-child relationship in the analysis of this study.

## **6. Methodology**

### **6.1 Data**

Data is used from the Leuven Adolescents and Families Study (Vanassche, Sodermans, Dekeyser, & Matthijs, 2012). Currently, four data collection rounds have been completed. Every year, approximately 1800 pupils (roughly between 12 and 18 years) are questioned within the context of their secondary school regarding their family life, family relationships and various dimensions of their well-being. The schools are not randomly selected, but the distributions

according to sex, age, education level and family situation in the sample are quite similar to the distribution in the Flemish population. A standardized, paper-and-pencil questionnaire is used for the data collection. Our research sample (N=1183) is limited to all children of divorced parents who participated in rounds 2, 3 and 4 and for whom detailed information is available about their custody arrangement. Round 1 is omitted from the analysis because personality was not measured. In the next two sections we describe the operationalization of all variables that are used in this study. Descriptives of all study variables can be found in Appendix 1.

## 6.2 Variables

As dependent variable, we include both a positive and negative dimension of subjective well-being, i.e. life satisfaction and depressive feelings. Testing the same research hypotheses on two different outcome measures increases the reliability of the results and serves as an extra robustness test. *Life satisfaction* was measured by asking respondents to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with their life on a scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). *Feelings of depression* were measured with eight items, known as the CES-D 8 (Radloff, 1977). Respondents had to indicate how often they had felt or behaved in a certain way (e.g. felt lonely, slept bad, felt depressed) during the last week. There were four answer categories with increasing frequency, ranging from (almost) never to (almost) always. Cronbach's alpha is 0.83. The depression scale was composed by summing all items and ranges from 0 to 24.

Our core independent variable is the *custody type* in which children reside following parental divorce. The amount of time that children spend with both parents was measured using a residential calendar (Sodermans, Vanassche, Matthijs, & Swicegood, forthcoming). In this study, joint physical custody refers to a situation in which children live at least one third of time in each parental household. When they live at least two thirds of time with mother or father they are respectively classified as sole mother and sole father custody.

The *Big Five personality* traits extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness were measured by the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) developed by Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann (2003). Each personality trait was measured by two expressions about the way children see themselves. A seven response Likert scale was used ranging from "strongly disagree" until "strongly agree". Examples are: I see myself as "Extraverted, enthusiastic", "Critical, quarrelsome", "Dependable, self-disciplined", "Anxious, easily upset". For each of the five personality traits, a scale ranging from 1 to 7 was constructed. There are 164 respondents with missing values on the personality variables. The majority of them (56,1%) participated in round 2 of the LAGO data collection, when the personality measure was included at the very last page of the questionnaire. Due to time constraints, some respondents did not manage to fill in the questionnaire completely. In round 3 and 4, the personality measure was included somewhere in the middle of the questionnaire, resulting in a higher response. We did not perform data imputation for the missing values on the personality scales, as this is one of the core variables in this study. Boys and girls differ on all personality variables. Only for extraversion, boys have a higher score than girls. The biggest difference can be found for neuroticism: girls have a mean score of 3.77 and boys score 3.28.

As can be seen in the correlation matrix (Table 1) there is a high correlation between the personality variables. Openness is highly positive correlated with all other personality variables,

but highly negative with neuroticism. This latter variable is negatively correlated with all other variables, except with neuroticism for girls. Extraversion is also not correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness, but both variables are positively associated with each other. Extraversion and neuroticism are negatively correlated among boys, but not among girls. These intercorrelations show fair resemblance to those tested on the more extended Dutch BFI (Big Five Inventory) validated by Denissen et al. (2008), which is an indication of the scale validity. All variables are mean-centred.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

We tested bivariate associations between custody type and personality. No significant associations could be found, except that girls in father custody are somewhat more agreeable and neurotic.

The *quality of the parent-child relationship* serves as another moderator in this study and is measured for each parent separately with nine items from the Network of Relationship Inventory scale (Furman & Burhmester 1985). Examples of items are: “Does your mother/father respects you?”, “Do you share personal feelings with your mother/father?”. The response scale was a five-point Likert scale with increasing frequency. Cronbach’s alphas for the NRI measures for mother and father were respectively 0.91 and 0.93. Data imputation was done when a maximum of four answers were missing. The scale is centred around its mean (16.5 for fathers; 21.5 for mothers). Seven respondents had a missing value for quality of the relationship with mother, 20 for the relationship with the father.

When studying the association between custody and well-being, it could be important to control for *parental conflict*. Research has shown that this factor is associated with children’s well-being after divorce and it could also be related to the custody type. Parental conflict was measured by five items of the Conflict Awareness Scale (Grych & Fincham 1993). The five response Likert scale ranged from ‘never’ until ‘always’ and the scale shows a high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha=0.88). The conflict scale was composed by summing all items and ranges from 0 to 20. When the conflict variable was missing, the mean (5.8) was imputed. The variable is centred around its mean.

Finally, some socio-demographic control variables are included. The average *age* of the adolescents is 15 years. 95% of the respondents is between 12 and 18 years old, with a relatively equal distribution across the different ages. This variable is also centred around its mean (15.3). The *financial situation* of both the maternal and paternal household are included as a dichotomous variable, distinguishing between experiencing never to rarely financial difficulties versus experiencing sometimes or often financial difficulties. Adolescents report considerably more frequent financial problems in the maternal household (39.5%) than in the paternal household (23.5%). For the 32 respondents with a missing value for the maternal household and 102 respondents with a missing value for the paternal household, an additional dummy variable was included, indicating that information on this variable was not available. The highest *educational level* of both parents is included as a dichotomous variables, indicating whether or not this parent has a certificate of higher education (university or non-university). For the 91 respondents with a missing value, an additional dummy variable was included, indicating that information on this variable was not available. We control for *years past since parental divorce*

by including a metric variable. For the 56 respondents with a missing value on this variable, we imputed the mean (8) and controlled for this imputation by adding a dummy variable to the analyses.

### **6.3 Analyses strategy**

Analyses are done by using the statistical package SAS 9.3. To answer our research question, we first regressed both measures of well-being on the custody arrangement (Table 2). We also included the Big Five, relationship quality with mother, relationship quality with father, and all control variables in the models. As the independent variables are metric, we estimated OLS regression models. The parameters for joint and father custody are estimated, sole mother custody serves as reference category since it is still the default custody arrangement and it has the highest prevalence. Because all five personality variables are included in the same model while being intercorrelated (see correlation matrix in Table 1), we tested for multicollinearity by calculating the variance inflation Factor. This parameter was within acceptable limits, as values were never higher than 1.4 (Kennedy, 1992). The models for life satisfaction and depressive feelings are presented for boys and girls separately.

Next, we tested interactions between the independent variable custody type and the Big Five personality variables extraversion and neuroticism. To avoid oversaturation of our models, we did not enter all these interactions terms at once, but we ran separate models for each personality variable. We also included interaction terms between the moderators, thus between custody and the relationship quality with mother and father. Finally, we included three-way interactions between custody type, personality and relationship with the mother and the father. All continuous moderators were mean-centred. All models with significant interactions between custody and personality are shown in Table 3. The significant interactions are discussed in detail in the results section and graphically presented.

## **7. Results**

We first discuss the results of the global models for life satisfaction and depressive feelings presented in Table 2. Joint custody is related with lower subjective well-being of girls, as measured by both depressive feelings and life satisfaction. Boys in sole father custody report higher levels of depressive feelings when compared to mother custody, after controlling for all other variables. There is no significant association between custody type and life satisfaction of boys.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The personality of adolescents is important for explaining subjective well-being. The proportion explained variance increases approximately with 10% when these variables are added to the models. For boys, all personality traits except openness are important for explaining emotional well-being. Neuroticism and extraversion have the highest association with well-being. Somewhat surprising is that the relationship for agreeableness with well-being runs in the unexpected direction. Higher scores on agreeableness seem to get along with lower life satisfaction and more depressive feelings. This can be explained by the fact that all personality



variables are added together in the model. The correlation matrix (Table 1) shows high intercorrelations among the personality variables. Hence, when these variables are entered simultaneously, suppression effects may take place. In an additional set of analyses where we included each personality variable separately in the model, associations for all personality variables were in the expected direction. Results of these additional analyses can be retrieved from the authors on request

For girls, only extraversion and neuroticism predict emotional well-being. Neuroticism has the largest coefficient. For girls, all coefficients are in the expected direction: extraversion is positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively with depressive feelings. For neuroticism, the association runs inversely.

The relationship quality with the father is also important for predicting emotional well-being. A good relationship is related with higher life satisfaction and less depressive feelings. This is also true for the relationship quality with the mother, but for depressive feelings of boys there is no effect.

Our real matter of interest is whether there are interactions between custody arrangement and personality in explaining well-being of boys and girls. In other words, is the association between custody type and well-being different according to children's personality, and how do these interactions run for different levels of the parent-child relationship?

As stated before, this study will only focus on the personality variables neuroticism and extraversion because of two reasons. First, as found in many other studies (e.g. González Gutiérrez, Jiménez, Hernández, & Puente, 2005; Hayes & Joseph, 2003) and confirmed by our results, these two personality variables seem to be most important in explaining well-being of children. Secondly, after running interaction models for all five personality variables, the results of the extraversion and neuroticism models showed the highest robustness when mutually comparing life satisfaction and depressive feelings. The results of the interaction models for the three remaining personality variables can be provided by the authors on request. Table 3 contains all models where at least one significant interaction term was found between custody type and extraversion or between custody type and neuroticism. Graphs are used to visualize the significant three-way interactions.

#### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

We start with the results of extraversion for boys. There is a significant and rather strong interaction effect between extraversion and father custody for predicting boys' life satisfaction (Figure 1). Low extraverted boys report the highest life satisfaction in father custody. This suggests that shy boys prefer to live with their father. High extraverted boys, on the other hand, report the lowest satisfaction with their life when living predominantly with the father. For those type of boys, mother custody or joint custody seems more beneficial.

This could be linked to the finding that extraversion has a different relationship with adolescents' well-being according to the relationship with the father. Like already derived from the global model, extraversion is beneficial for adolescents' emotional well-being. However, this association is weaker when there is a good relationship with the father. Or else, a better relationship with the father is related with higher levels of life satisfaction, but this effect is

stronger for low extraverted boys. This may point to the existence of a compensation effect. For shy boys, a good relationship with the father, often present in father custody, can buffer any negative effects going out from their personality.

#### FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

For girls, the association between the custody arrangement and well-being is highly dependent on the interplay between the quality with mother and the level of extraversion (Figure 2). For high extraverted girls, the custody arrangement is not that predictive for well-being, except that those in father custody with a good relationship with mother report high levels of depressive feelings. This sounds evident: girls who feel well connected with their mother, want to live with their mother. This may be especially true for high extravert individuals, who find relationships highly important in their life. Low extravert girls report on average more depressive feelings and lower life satisfaction in all custody arrangements. Only when shy girls live with their mother and have a good relationship with that mother, their well-being is higher.

#### FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Consistent with the results for boys, there is a compensation effect between girls' level of extraversion and the relationship with the mother. A higher level of extraversion goes along with better well-being, but this association is weaker when there is a good relationship with the mother. Like for boys, a solid band with the same-sex parent may counterbalance any negative effects going out from being shy. However, the significant three-way interaction in both well-being models suggests that there is an important exception on this rule, namely when girls are in joint custody. Low extraverted girls in joint custody report a relatively high level of depressive feelings and low satisfaction with life, and a good relationship with the mother can only moderately buffer this. Hence, we conclude that low extraverted girls who have a good relationship with their mother prefer living with their mother over joint custody.

Next, we look at neuroticism. There is a large interaction effect between father custody and neuroticism for boys' depressive feelings (Figure 3). Boys whose personality is characterized by a high level of neuroticism report more depressive feelings than emotional stable boys, and in father custody being neurotic is extremely negative for well-being. For life satisfaction a similar trend can be observed in the figure, although the interaction term is not significant. Hence, emotional stable boys seem to feel good in father custody, while boys high in neuroticism are unhappy with their life when they reside predominantly with the father. Boys that are situated on the risk-full side of the neurotic personality dimension (i.e. being high neurotic) feel better when they live predominantly or partially with their mother. Note that this was different for extraversion: shy boys prefer father custody over mother custody.

Also for neuroticism, we find a trade-off between having a difficult personality and the relationship quality with the same-sex parent. A qualitative good relationship with the father is able to compensate for any negative effect of being neurotic. Yet, this is not true in father custody. Highly neurotic boys in father custody report the highest level of depressive feelings and

a good relationship with the father is not able to buffer this. Furthermore, the three-way interaction indicates that for these boys, a good relationship with the father is even associated with higher levels of depressive feelings.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

While neurotic boys fare worse in father custody, neurotic girls have lower life satisfaction in joint custody. The global model already showed that girls have lower emotional well-being in joint custody. This finding can be nuanced by the interaction models (Figure 4). For low neurotic girls the custody type is not that important for explaining life satisfaction, but for high neurotic girls, joint custody is associated with lower life satisfaction than mother custody. Hence, emotional unstable girls prefer mother custody, just like their male counterparts. Nonetheless, fathers can play an important role for these girls, as the positive effect going out from a good father-daughter bond is stronger for emotional unstable girls. Neurotic girls in mother custody who report a good relationship quality with their father have the highest levels of life satisfaction.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

For depressive feelings of girls, the results are similar (Figure 4). High neurotic girls report in general more depressive feelings than low neurotic girls. Nonetheless, when emotional stable girls are in a situation of joint custody without having a good relationship with their mother, they feel more depressed than in mother custody. A three-way interaction is found between neuroticism, relationship quality with mother and joint custody. In general, relationship quality with mother is supposed to be negatively linked to depressive feelings. This is not the case for high neurotic girls in joint custody as the relationship quality with the mother has no effect for these girls.

## **8. Conclusion**

The results presented in this article shed a new light on the association between custody arrangement and adolescent's well-being. On average, our results show that girls have lower emotional well-being in joint versus mother custody, while boys report more depressive feelings in father custody when compared to mother custody. However, when personality is considered, some interesting results show up. For resilient individuals, i.e. emotional stable or high extravert, who are well able to cope with change and stress, the custody arrangement is not that important. For the more vulnerable girls, mother custody seems definitely the best option, while for vulnerable boys, mother or joint custody seem reasonable well alternatives. These findings point into the direction of a Matthew effect. As said by Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999:133) "The psychologically rich may get richer and the poor get poorer in dealing with the challenges of divorce." This can be partially confirmed by our results. For children with a risk-full personality (being low extravert and high neurotic), who have already more difficulties to cope with parental divorce, a suboptimal custody arrangement could work adverse for their well-being.

Those individuals having an easy personality (i.e. extravert and emotional stable) are able to cope with any type of custody arrangement.

The results could be linked to the fact that joint custody has positive and negative aspects that counterbalance each other. On the one hand it has beneficial consequences for child well-being as there is on average a better relationship with both parents. On the other hand, it could also increase stress levels because of the multiple transitions associated with it, leading to a less stable family situation (Kuehl 1989). Exactly on the association between the stressors and emotional well-being (what is sometimes called ‘coping’), personality can play a role, by enhancing or lowering children’s resiliency against those stressors. Neuroticism is seen as a rather stable personality trait, associated with a higher likelihood to respond negatively to stressful situations (Liu, Wang and Li 2012). Moreover, it is linked to less adaptive coping strategies (Kaiseler, Polman and Nicholls 2012). Our results confirm that for girls with a more ‘difficult’ personality, e.g. higher levels of neuroticism, the impact of stressors arising from a more turbulent residential arrangement, on subjective well-being increases. Those girls may be less able to cope with living in two different households, adjusting to two different lifestyles, two sets of expectations and values, etc. For children with an ‘easy’ personality, who are well able to cope with changing situational demands, the effect of the stressors from joint custody will be weaker. For these individuals, the custody arrangement does not matter that much.

Extraversion is another personality dimension that is important for well-being. It is related with characteristics as being enthusiastic, sociable, and not quiet (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that important interactions show up between extraversion and relationship quality. Emotional unstable or shy adolescents feel better when they have a good relationship with their same-sex parent. It is even better when they also live with the same-sex parent. For shy boys there is a clear advantage of living with the father, while shy girls prefer living with the mother.

Another interesting finding is that compensation effects exist between having a vulnerable personality and a good relationship quality with parents, especially with the same-sex parent. For neurotic or shy boys and girls, a good relationship with parents can play an important role for their level of well-being, while for more resilient personalities this effect is weaker. However, under specific circumstances, this trade-off between relationship quality and personality does not hold. Our results indicate that for low extraverted girls, joint custody is not a preferred option, while for neurotic boys, father custody seems not a good alternative. This last finding could be linked to the fact that mothers are supposed to fulfil expressive functions in the family system, while fathers perform instrumental functions (Finley, Mira and Schwartz 2008). For adolescents in these specific situations, even a good relationship quality with the mother or father is not able to buffer this. The compensation effect is also absent for girls in father custody. For them, a good relationship with the mother is even related to lower well-being. This sounds not too surprising: girls who get along well with their mother but who do not live together with that mother feel sad.

What could we conclude with regard to the preferred custody type after divorce? For a considerable part of the children, the recently promoted joint custody options seems a good alternative. Nevertheless, joint custody is never associated with better well-being than sole mother custody. A smaller part of the children who are allocated with less social desirable personality traits, does not benefit from alternative custody arrangements.

Obviously, our study suffers from some limitations. First, the group of children in father custody is rather small, which could make the results for this group less robust. Secondly, we cannot make any conclusions about causality, as we are dealing with a cross-sectional design. In our statements, we tried not to make any conclusions about causal effects, but we emphasized that we were discussing associations between the variables involved. An interesting recommendation for future work may be to also incorporate the personality of the parents, since it can have implications for well-being of children in two ways. A direct impact may run via genetic links, an indirect impact via dysfunctional parenting or communication patterns. Finally, our results can only be generalised to adolescents roughly between 12 and 18 years old. For younger children, other research is needed. Nonetheless, adolescence is a crucial period and it is important to keep stressors low during these period of children's life.

Our results may have implications for policy makers, judges and professional workers involved in setting custody arrangements as they show that it is important to consider child characteristics when deciding on the custody arrangement. Obviously, it is not viable to settle residential arrangements for each child individually, especially when divorcing parents have more than one child. Nor do we recommend that personality tests become part of the standard procedure before deciding on the custody arrangements. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness among all involved actors that a bad fit between a child's personality and the presence of stress could make them vulnerable. Next to children's age and developmental stage, the specific character of a child should not be ignored when making decisions for the post-separation life of children. Under the premise of the child's best interest, it should be extremely important to treat children as important agents in the divorce process to guarantee their well-being on the short- and long-term.

## Appendix 1 Descriptive variables

<i>Categorical variables</i>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Custody arrangement</b>	<b>1183</b>	
- Sole mother	776	65.6
- Sole father	110	9.3
- Joint custody	297	25.1
<b>Family situation mother</b>	<b>1161</b>	
- No partner	559	48.2
- Partner	457	39.4
- Partner and children	145	12.5
<b>Family situation father</b>	<b>1111</b>	
- No partner	495	44.6
- Partner	444	40.0
- Partner and children	172	15.5
<b>Highest education of parents</b>	<b>1183</b>	
- Low	446	37.7
- High	737	62.3
<b>Financial problems of mother</b>	<b>1183</b>	
- Never to seldom (low)	684	57.8
- Sometimes to always (high)	467	39.5
- Missing	32	2.7
<b>Financial problems of father</b>	<b>1183</b>	
- Never to seldom (low)	803	67.9
- Sometimes to always (high)	278	23.5
- Missing	102	8.6
<i>Metric variables</i>	<b>mean</b>	<b>sd</b>
<b>Personality variables</b>		
- Extraversion (1-7)	4.80	1.31
- Agreeableness (1-7)	5.26	1.06
- Conscientiousness (1-7)	4.91	1.17
- Neuroticism (1-7)	3.56	1.25
- Openness (1-7)	5.00	1.16
<b>Relationship quality with parents</b>		
- Relationship with mother (0-36)	21.7	7.66
- Relationship with father (0-36)	16.6	9.29
<b>Control variables</b>		
- Parental conflict (0-20)	5.77	4.73
- Age (11-21)	15.3	1.93
- Years since divorce (0-20)	7.9	4.20

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**Table 1 Correlation matrix of personality variables**

	Boys				Girls			
	A	C	N	O	A	C	N	O
E	0.04	0.02	-0.18***	0.22***	-0.05	0.05	-0.06	0.21***
A		0.34***	-0.34***	0.25***		0.13**	-0.29***	0.16***
C			-0.19***	0.26***			-0.21***	0.18***
N				-0.22***				-0.17***

Note: E=extraversion, A=agreeableness, C=conscientiousness, N=Neuroticism, O=Openness

Note: \*\*\*p < .001; \*\*p < .01; \*p < .05; °p<.10

**Table 2 Parameters and standard errors for linear regression analysis modelling life satisfaction and depressive feelings**

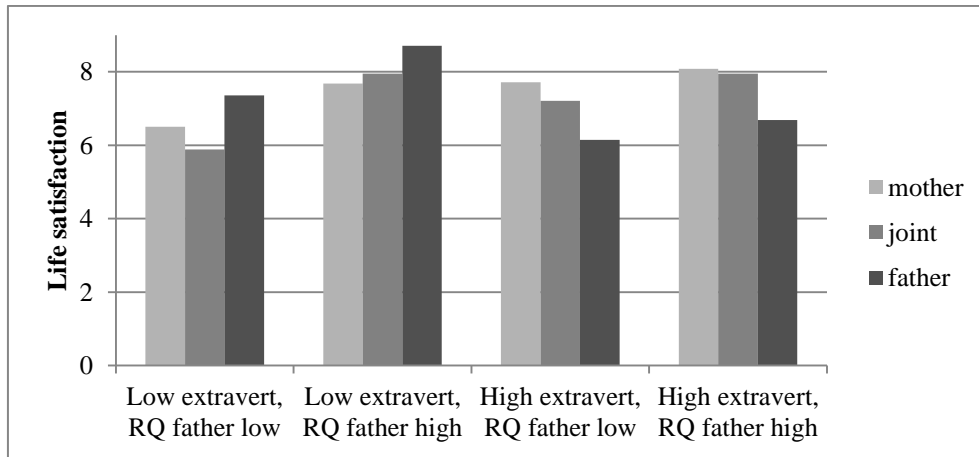
	Girls						Boys					
	Depressive feelings			Life satisfaction			Depressive feelings			Life satisfaction		
<i>Intercept</i>	7,44	(0,319)	***	7,34	(0,138)	***	7,44	(0,328)	***	7,47	(0,142)	***
<i>Custody arrangement (ref=sole mother)</i>												
Joint custody	0,83	(0,428)	°	-0,35	(0,185)	°	-0,18	(0,419)		-0,10	(0,180)	
Sole father custody	-0,66	(0,669)		-0,17	(0,289)		1,50	(0,655)	*	-0,42	(0,285)	
<i>Personality variables</i>												
Extraversion	-0,45	(0,130)	***	0,20	(0,057)	***	-0,64	(0,142)	***	0,22	(0,061)	***
Neuroticism	0,94	(0,142)	***	-0,26	(0,062)	***	0,95	(0,163)	***	-0,23	(0,070)	**
Agreeableness	0,12	(0,173)		0,01	(0,076)		0,52	(0,184)	**	-0,21	(0,079)	**
Openness	0,01	(0,154)		-0,02	(0,067)		0,04	(0,163)		-0,11	(0,070)	
Conscientiousness	0,23	(0,147)		-0,10	(0,063)		-0,55	(0,176)	**	0,25	(0,076)	***
<i>Relationship quality with parents</i>												
Relationship with mother	-0,12	(0,024)	***	0,07	(0,010)	***	0,01	(0,029)		0,04	(0,013)	**
Relationship with father	-0,08	(0,020)	***	0,04	(0,009)	***	-0,11	(0,025)	***	0,05	(0,011)	***
<i>Control variables</i>												
Parental conflict	0,10	(0,034)	**	-0,04	(0,015)	*	0,12	(0,042)	**	-0,01	(0,018)	
Age	-0,11	(0,096)		0,04	(0,042)		0,03	(0,102)		-0,01	(0,044)	
Low educational level parents (ref=high)	-0,05	(0,355)		0,02	(0,154)		-0,16	(0,393)		-0,12	(0,169)	
High financial problems mother (ref=low)	1,77	(0,348)	***	-0,65	(0,151)	***	0,52	(0,395)		-0,08	(0,170)	
High financial problems father (ref=low)	0,33	(0,389)		-0,12	(0,168)		0,06	(0,460)		-0,34	(0,198)	°
Years since divorce	0,01	(0,040)		0,01	(0,017)		0,03	(0,048)		0,01	(0,021)	
R <sup>2</sup> (adj)	0,27 (0,24)			0,28 (0,26)			0,31 (0,27)			0,29 (0,25)		
N	574			565			422			420		

Note: \*\*\*p < .001; \*\*p < .01; \*p < .05; °p < .10

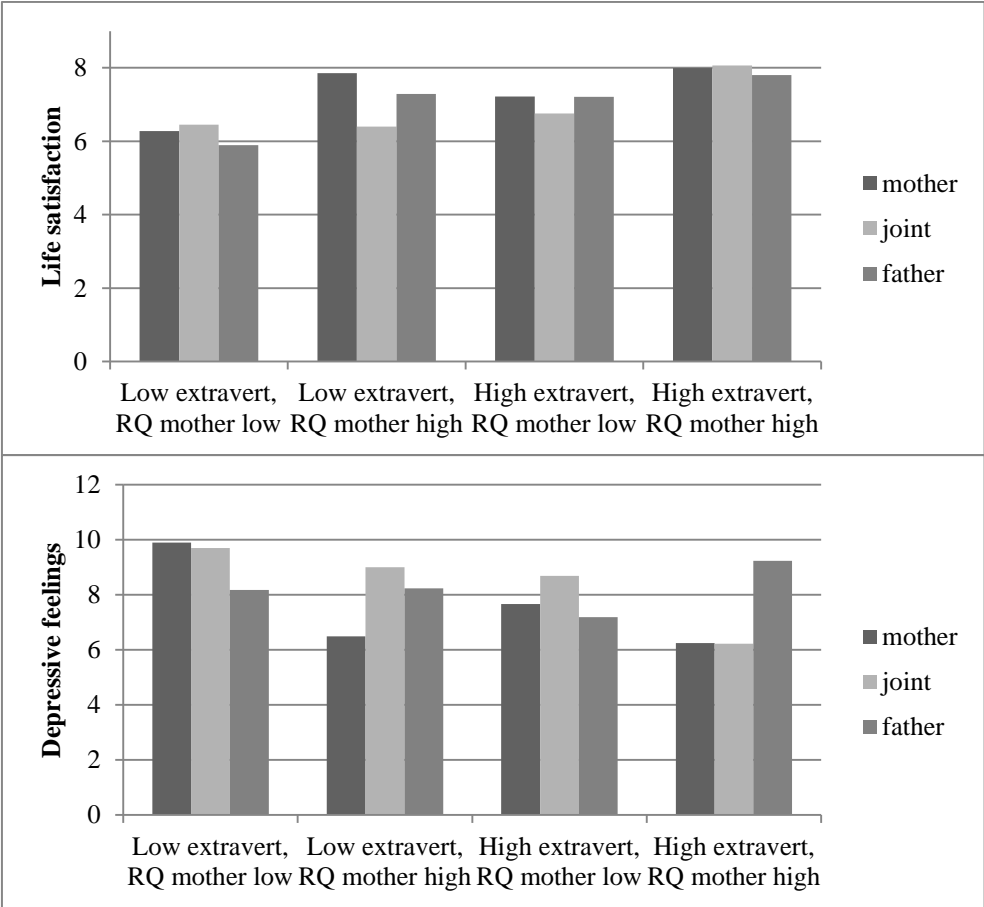
**Table 3 Parameters for linear regression analysis modelling life satisfaction and depressive feelings including interaction terms**

	Extraversion			Neuroticism		
	Life satisfaction boys	Depressive feelings girls	Life satisfaction girls	Depressive feelings boys	Depressive feelings girls	Life satisfaction girls
Intercept	7,53 ***	7,57 ***	7,34 ***	7,44 ***	7,58 ***	7,32 ***
Joint custody	-0,22	0,83 °	-0,42 *	0,08	0,75	-0,26
Sole father custody	-0,26	0,63	-0,29	0,39	0,86	-0,31
Relationship quality mother	0,05 **	-0,16 ***	0,08 *	-0,01	-0,15 ***	0,08 ***
Relationship quality father	0,05 ***	-0,07 **	0,04 ***	-0,10 ***	-0,07 **	0,04 ***
Personality	0,29 ***	-0,47 **	0,21 **	1,04 ***	0,84 ***	-0,13 °
Joint custody X Relationship mother	-0,02	0,05	-0,04	0,08	-0,01	-0,01
Joint custody X Relationship mother	0,04	-0,01	0,03	-0,10	0,03	0,00
Joint custody X Personality	-0,06	-0,25	0,17	-0,39	0,17	-0,31 °
Father custody X Relationship mother	0,01	0,23 **	-0,01	0,01	0,21 *	-0,01
Father custody X Relationship mother	0,01	0,02	0,03	0,12	0,01	0,02
Father custody X Personality variable	-0,92 *	0,47	0,14	1,49 *	0,50	-0,07
Personality X Relationship mother	0,02	0,05 *	-0,02 *	-0,01	0,01	-0,01
Personality X Relationship father	-0,02 *	0,01	0,01	0,02	-0,01	0,02 *
Personality X Relationship mother X joint custody	-0,02	-0,09 °	0,05 *	0,01	0,12 *	-0,01
Personality X Relationship mother X father custody	-0,01	0,01	-0,04	-0,02	0,01	-0,01
Personality X Relationship father X joint custody	-0,08 *	0,05	0,02	0,10	0,05	0,02
Personality X Relationship father X father custody	0,07 *	0,10	0,01	-0,20 **	-0,01	0,01

Note: \*\*\*p < .001; \*\*p < .01; \*p < .05; °p < .10; all models controlled for: remaining personality variables, parental conflict, age, financial problems, education of parents, years since divorce

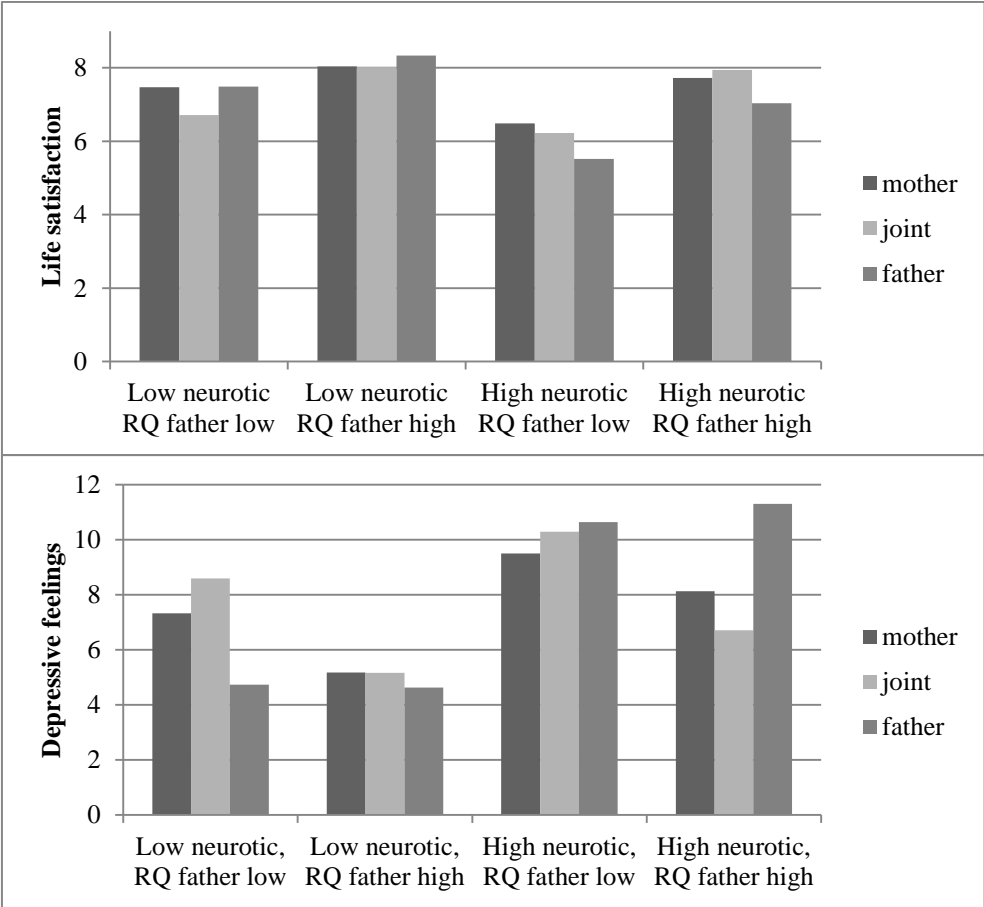


**Figure 1 Predicted values on life satisfaction for boys with different levels of extraversion and relationship quality (RQ) with father in three different custody arrangements**

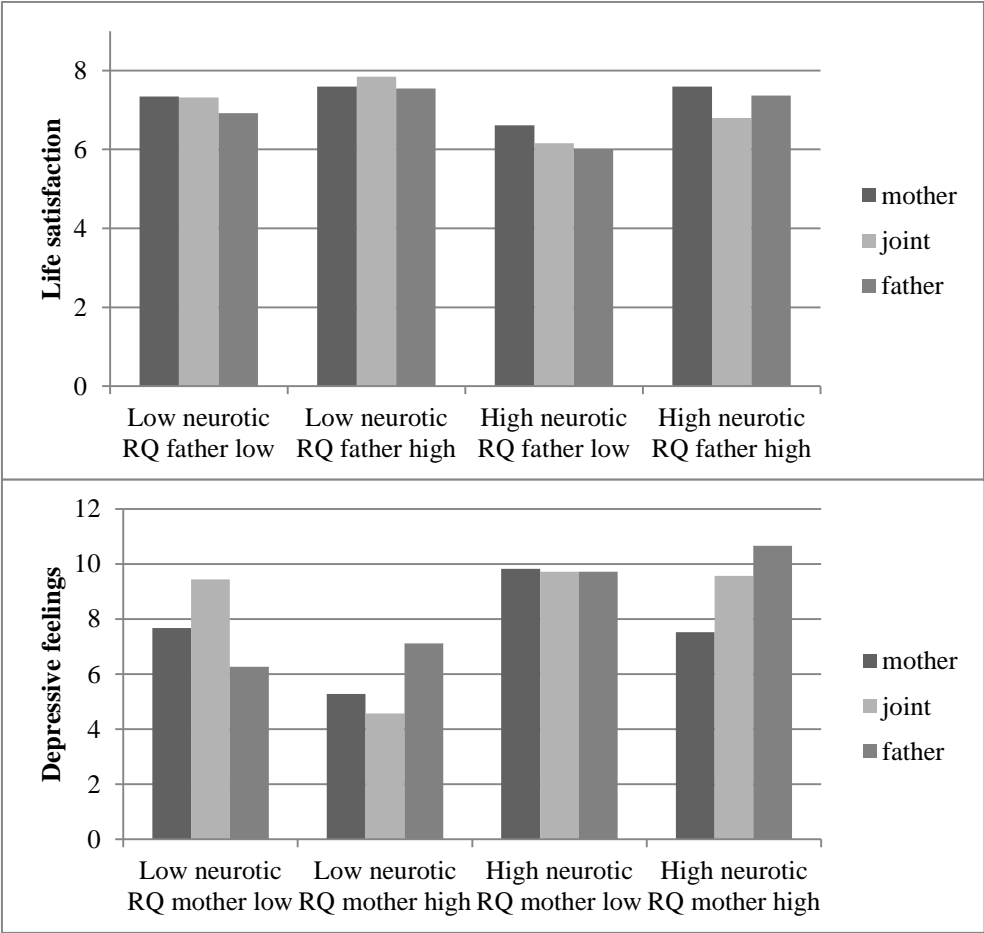


**Figure 2 Predicted values on life satisfaction and depressive feelings for girls with different levels of extraversion and relationship quality (RQ) with mother in three different custody arrangements**





**Figure 3 Predicted values on life satisfaction and depressive feelings for boys with different levels of neuroticism and relationship quality (RQ) with father in three different custody arrangements**



**Figure 4 Predicted values on life satisfaction and depressive feelings for girls with different levels of neuroticism and relationship quality with father/mother in three different custody arrangements**