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Family Well-Being: What Makes A Difference?

**Study Based on a Representative
Sample of Parents & Children in Ireland**

Report prepared by

**Kieran McKeown
Jonathan Pratschke
Trutz Haase**

Kieran McKeown Limited

*Social and Economic Research Consultant,
16 Hollybank Road, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.
Phone 01-8309506 E-mail: kmckeown@jol.ie*

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Why are some families happier than others? Why do some parents and children have higher levels of well-being than others? These questions are of interest to everyone but are of particular interest to family researchers and to those concerned with family policy and services. Everyone knows that families are important but how exactly do they influence our well-being? That is the key question at the heart of this study.

‘Well-being’, which is increasingly used as a synonym for ‘happiness’, covers both physical and psychological well-being as well as the quality of relationships between parents and the quality of parent-child relationships. The study builds upon the findings of a large body of research which has identified four broad sets of influences on the well-being of parents and children:

- (1) family type as indicated by whether one lives in a one- or two-parent household and whether the parents are married, cohabiting, single or separated;
- (2) family processes, notably the way in which conflicts are addressed, the inter-generational history of family relationships, attitudes to parenting and family roles, etc.
- (3) individual characteristics notably personality traits such as positive and negative emotionality as well as psychological independence and interdependence; and
- (4) family circumstances such as life events, education, social class, hours worked, etc.

The study collected data on all of these variables in order to identify which of them has the most influence, either directly or indirectly, on the well-being of parents and children.

The study involved surveying a representative sample of 1,500 households where there was at least one child under the age of 18 in order to identify the different family types in Ireland. In addition, we carried out an in-depth study where the parents (or parent) and one child (aged 11-16) completed a questionnaire. A total of 250 families were included, divided into four different family types as follows:

- 100 two-parent married families (this being the first marriage for both parents)
- 50 two-parent cohabiting families (where both parents have never been married before)
- 50 one-parent single families (where the parent is a mother, never married and not in a relationship)
- 50 one-parent separated families (where the parent is a mother, separated and not in a relationship).

Family Types in Ireland

The survey revealed that by far the largest family type in Ireland comprises two-parent married families which constitute two thirds (66%) of the total. A further 8% are two-parent cohabiting families in which both parents are single. One-parent families where the parents are single (9%) or separated (7%) and not in a relationship constitute a significant minority of all families. Finally, there is a miscellaneous category comprising parents who are re-married following separation or widowhood (5%), as well as one-parent families who are single, separated or widowed and in a non-cohabiting relationship (5%).

A family is not the same as a household since all family members may not live together in one household, even though the Irish Constitution and official statistical publications tend to treat families and households as the same. The difference between a family and a household is underlined by our finding that a quarter of all children (24%) do not live in a household containing both their biological parents; most of these children live with their mother in one-parent single and separated families, although the father continues to play an important role in many of these families.

Family types in Ireland have a strong social class dimension in the sense that one-parent families, both single and separated, are more concentrated in lower socio-economic positions involving unskilled occupations. The dramatically lower marriage rates – and the correspondingly higher rates of lone parenthood – among lower socio-economic groups can be seen in other EU countries and the US as much as in Ireland and draws attention to the role of economic considerations in shaping different family types. In practice this means that a person's prospects of marriage, including the prospect of having a marriage that lasts, are strongly related to their economic prospects. The practical outcome of these processes for those living in a weak economic position, is that mothers often parent alone, fathers often live outside the family home, and children live with only one parent. Another implication is that a higher proportion of one-parent families and their children live in poverty because of their weak economic position. Moreover the potential for increased income polarisation between one- and two-parent families, and between families which are 'work rich' and 'work poor', is likely to grow as dual earning continues to rise.

Marriage seems to precede parenthood in the majority of cases, but other patterns are also evident: cohabitation may precede both parenthood and marriage, just as parenthood may precede marriage. In other words, the family can take a variety of forms depending on the relationships – both legal and associated with residency – linking parents to each other and to the children. The traditional route to family life – marriage, cohabitation and parenthood – is no longer the only possible or permissible sequence of events. In fact, a variety of family types have emerged which seem to have less to do with lifestyle choices and more to do with the economic circumstances in which men and women find themselves. The key question is whether the well-being of parents and children varies systematically between the different family types.

Physical and Psychological Well-Being of Parents

We found that the physical and psychological well-being of men and women is shaped primarily and directly by three factors: personality characteristics, family processes and socio-economic environment. Once we control for factors such as these, the particular type of family in which one is living has little or no impact on well-being, with the exception of one-parent single families where mothers tend to have lower levels of psychological well-being than other parents.

The personality characteristics of parents are important determinants of their physical and psychological well-being, particularly the traits of negative emotionality, which diminishes well-being, and psychological

independence, which increases well-being. Negative emotionality is a personality trait characterised by relatively frequent negative emotional states such as feeling distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery or afraid; it is typically associated with a tendency to dwell upon and magnify mistakes, frustrations and disappointments and is linked to self-reported stress and poor coping. The trait of psychological independence refers to relatively frequent feelings of self-reliance, independence, assertiveness, forcefulness, willingness to take risks and ambition. These personality traits, but especially negative emotionality, have the largest direct influence on physical and psychological well-being.

The key family processes which affect the physical and psychological well-being of parents are the mother-child relationship (particularly in one-parent families) and the couple relationship (in two-parent families). We compared the well-being of mothers in four different family types and we found that the family process which had the most influence on well-being was the quality of the mother-child relationship although relationship difficulties with a partner also influenced her physical well-being. In two-parent families, we found that the well-being of men and women was heavily influenced by the quality of the couple relationship and the ability to satisfactorily resolve conflicts and arguments. Our study distinguished four styles of resolving conflicts:

- a problem-solving style which typically involves discussing problems and finding solutions which are acceptable to both;
- a conflict-engaging style which involves attacking and insulting the partner;
- a conflict-withdrawing style which involves not wanting to hear what the partner has to say or refusing to talk any further;
- a conflict-compliant style which involves an excessive willingness to agree and to give in without presenting or defending one's position.

The results indicate that problem-solving styles promote well-being while engaging, withdrawing and compliant styles reduce it.

The broader socio-economic environment of the family also has some direct influence on physical and psychological well-being particularly through the occurrence of negative life events such as the death of a friend, financial problems or problems at work as well as through feeling financially secure. Other aspects of the environment beyond the immediate family also have a significant, though indirect, effect on the well-being of parents notably their support networks, the quality of their own parents' couple relationship and the family's social class position. This seems to suggest that the network of resources available to parents through their participation in life outside the family contribute indirectly to their physical and psychological well-being. These findings also highlight the importance of the supports provided by extended family as well as the inter-generational aspect of family life in that the couple relationship of one's parents continues to exercise its influence on the children and even the grandchildren.

Couple Relationships

We examined the quality of relationships among married and cohabiting couples by measuring the extent to which they experienced those relationships as fulfilling and intimate. The results showed no differences in the quality of relationships between married and cohabiting couples.

The two main influences on the quality of couple relationships are relationship skills and personality traits. The key relationship skill is the ability to resolve arguments. Put simply, couples who are able to state that ‘by the end of an argument, each of us has been given a fair hearing’ and ‘overall I’d say we’re pretty good at solving our problems’ tend to have more satisfying relationships. By contrast, couples who acknowledge that ‘our arguments are left hanging and unresolved’ and ‘we go for days without settling our differences’, tend to have less satisfying relationships. We also found that the use of aggression such as shouting and insulting as well as pushing, slapping, hitting and kicking, had a negative effect on the couple relationship when used by men but had a similarly negative effect on men’s physical well-being when used by women. In some relationships, possibly those involving conflict, the mother-child relationship tends to improve as the couple relationship deteriorates, and *vice versa*, suggesting that these two sets of relationships may represent alternative expressions of intimacy for women.

The key personality traits which have a positive influence on the couple relationship are women’s positive emotionality and men’s psychological interdependence. It seems likely that these psychological traits create an emotional ‘climate’ that is conducive to warmth and empathy in the relationship. Positive emotionality refers to more frequent feelings of being enthusiastic, strong, interested, alert, determined and active. Psychological interdependence is characterised by the frequency of feeling affectionate, sympathetic, understanding, compassionate, warm, and gentle. It is interesting to observe that while psychological *independence* is good for physical and psychological well-being, psychological *interdependence* is good for relational well-being, suggesting the importance of a balance between these two aspects of the personality. As with physical and psychological well-being, the broader socio-economic environment – particularly the couple’s support networks, the quality of their own parents’ couple relationship, and their social class position – all contribute indirectly to the quality of the couple relationship.

Women seem to exercise a greater influence on the quality of couple relationships than men in the sense that their characteristics tend to have greater statistical importance. This applies also to physical and psychological well-being where the characteristics of women have greater influence on the well-being of men than *vice versa*. This may account for the fact that women are often described as the emotional barometers of relationships.

Well-Being of Children

We defined the well-being of children as having a positive dimension called ‘life satisfaction’ (comprising satisfaction with self, family, friends, home and school) and a negative dimension called ‘psychological disturbance’ (comprising anxiety, depression, anger, disruptive behaviour and physical symptoms). Our

measurement of well-being was based on the responses of children themselves, all of whom were in the 11-16 age range.

Overall, once we controlled for a range of explanatory variables, we found practically no statistically significant variation in the well-being of children in the four family types studied, indicating that the parents' marital status and the presence of one or two parents in the household do not, of themselves, affect the child's well-being. The only significant effect was associated with the psychological disturbance of children in cohabiting families, which may be attributable to the younger age of these children. We found that child well-being is directly influenced by four main factors. The first and most important of these is the presence of unresolved problems between the child and its parents. These unresolved problems, as reported by the child, cover areas such as behaviour (notably homework, progress at school, drinking, smoking, drugs and behaviour in general), family issues (notably helping out around the house, doing things as a family, communication and relationships with parents or relatives) and personal autonomy (notably pocket money and how it is spent, friends including boyfriends / girlfriends, hobbies, fun activities and going to church). From the perspective of the child, these unresolved conflicts are associated with a major reduction in life satisfaction and a significant increase in psychological disturbance.

The second major influence on the well-being of the child is the characteristics of the mother. The characteristics which promote child-well-being are the mother's physical and psychological well-being, her supportiveness to the child in terms of offering help and encouragement, her satisfaction with being a parent, and her skills in resolving conflicts with her partner. The factors which reduce child well-being are the mother's negative emotionality and whether her own parents are separated, a finding which again confirms the inter-generational dimension of family life, possibly because of its effects on the acquisition of skills for parenting and couple relationships. An interesting finding regarding the mother's style of resolving conflicts with her partner is that withdrawing and compliant styles promote the well-being of children even though they reduce the physical and psychological well-being of mothers suggesting that, where there are conflicts in the couple relationship, mothers may adopt a style which protects children from the negative effects of those conflicts.

The third influence on the well-being of children is the father's supportiveness. Fathers exercise an influence in all family types including those where they do not live with the child. Although fathers exercise less influence than mothers on the well-being of children, even in two parent families, their supportiveness increases the child's life satisfaction and reduces their psychological disturbance and is strongly related to the mother's supportiveness, suggesting that supportive parents may reinforce each other's supportiveness.

The fourth factor is family income. Children tend to show fewer signs of psychological disturbance as family income rises. This however is one of the least influential of the direct factors affecting child well-being although social class also has an indirect influence as does the mother's support network and her age.

These findings highlight the fact that the well-being of children is almost entirely and directly in the hands of their parents through whom almost all outside influences on their well-being are mediated. They also show that

mothers exercise a considerably greater influence on the well-being of children than fathers, even in two-parent households, possibly because they spend more time with the children; however it may also be due to the fact that the characteristics of mothers are more influential in setting the ‘climate’ or ‘atmosphere’ of the family – both through the parent-child relationship but also through the couple relationship – than the corresponding characteristics of fathers.

Parent-Child Relationships

We measured the parent-child relationship in terms of whether the parent felt supported or satisfied with the parental role, by their level of involvement and communication with the child and ability to set age-appropriate limits. Our survey found that once we control for a range of explanatory variables, the quality of parent-child relationships varies little between the different family types. The only statistically significant effect is associated with the mother-child relationship in cohabiting families, which tends to be stronger. However, this may be attributable to the younger age of children in these families.

The parent-child relationship is influenced by four main factors. The first of these is the psychological well-being of both parents and, for mothers, their physical well-being as well. In other words, the well-being of parents seems to spill over into their relationships with their children.

The second factor, confined to two-parent families, is the couple relationship and the way in which conflicts are resolved within it. Parent-child relationships are enhanced when parents adopt that a problem-solving style to resolving difficulties in the couple relationship and are harmed with they adopt a conflict-engaging style. This too suggests that the quality of the couple relationship spills over into the parent-child relationship.

The third factor, unique to mothers, is positive emotionality: the more positive her emotional states, the more positive her relationship with the child. The fourth factor, unique to fathers, is his attitude to the parenting roles of men and women. Fathers who have a more ‘egalitarian’ attitude to parenting roles (such as those who believe that ‘fathers should help with looking after the child’) have a significantly better relationship with their children than ‘traditional’ fathers (who are more likely to believe that ‘women should stay at home and take care of the children’). This factor has the single greatest influence on the father-child relationship.

These findings highlight how the parent-child relationship is overwhelmingly influenced by the characteristics of parents and, in two-parent families, by the relationship between the parents. It is also significant to discover that the parent-child relationship is not directly influenced by circumstances outside the immediate family although there are indirect effects via support networks, the grandparents’ couple relationship as well as a modest influence exercised by social class.

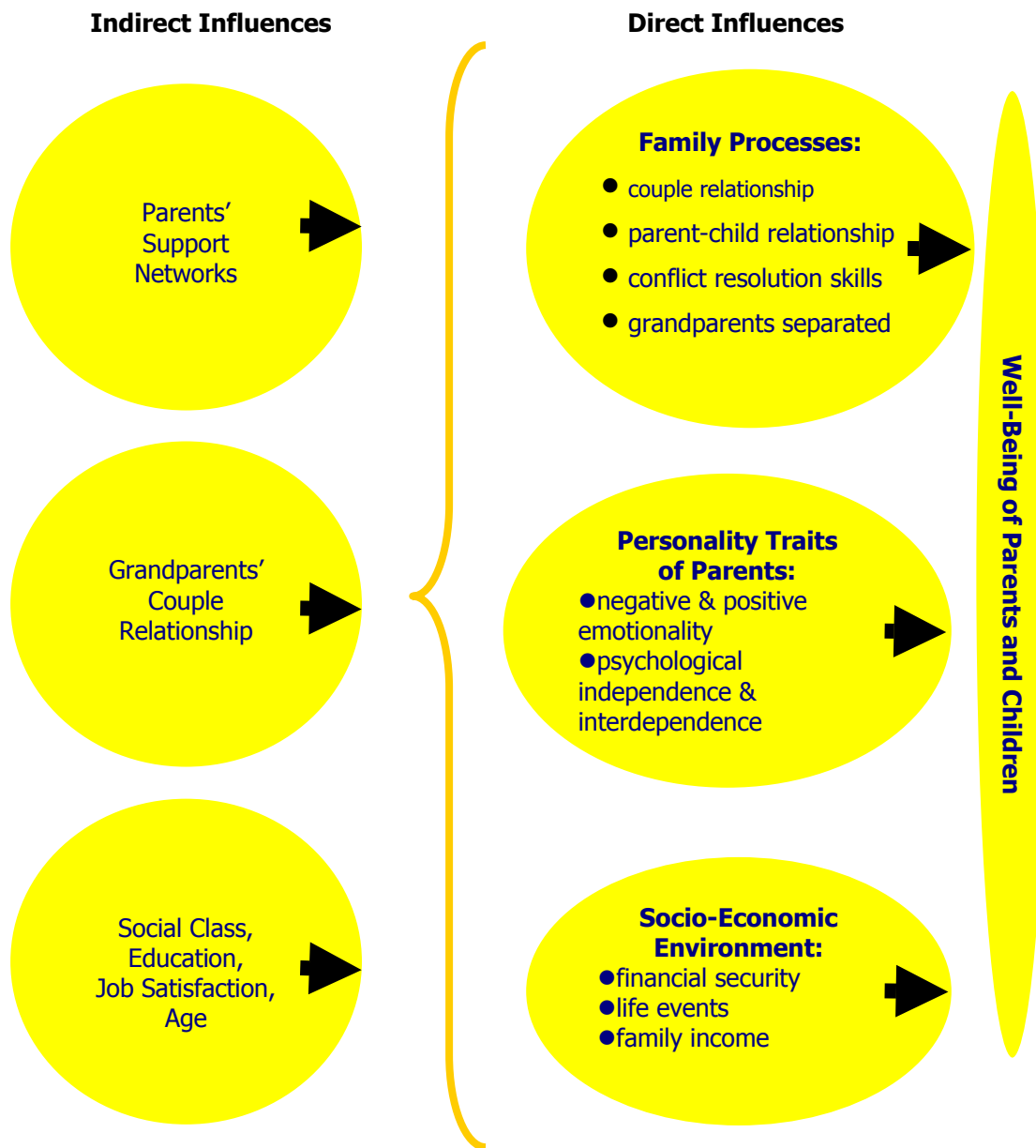
Conclusion

This study shows that the physical and psychological well-being of parents and children are shaped primarily by family processes, particularly processes involving the ability of resolve conflicts and arguments, and by the

personality traits of parents. The type of family in which one lives – such as a one- or two-parent household and whether the parents are married, cohabiting, single or separated – has virtually no impact on family well-being.

We have found that the environment outside the immediate family has less direct influence on family well-being than internal dynamics within the family itself, although selected aspects of that environment, notably support networks, the quality of the grandparents’ couple relationship and social class position, have an indirect effect. If the family is likened to a boat at sea, then the core aspects of what makes a person feel well in terms of their physical, psychological and relational well-being are directly affected by what happens within the boat and indirectly affected by what happens in the sea around the boat. The key influences on family well-being are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Model Summarising the Direct and Indirect Influences on Family Well-Being



Implications

The study points to the importance of an inclusive concept of the family which focuses on the set of relationships which link parents to each other and to their children, even where the parents are not living in the same household. An important finding is that non-resident fathers continue to exercise a significant influence on the well-being of their children as do their grandparents. This clearly indicates why we need a concept of family that is broader and richer than the concept of household which is currently how most people, including policy makers and family practitioners, understand the family. Even our Constitution treats the family and the household as the same thing although our experience, and the findings of this study, teaches us that this is not always so.

These findings have important implications for family policy by drawing attention to the need for measures which develop and support relationship skills since these are crucial in determining the well-being of families. All families, irrespective of type, need these skills if parents and children are to experience well-being. At the same time, interventions to support families also need to acknowledge the influence of parents' psychological traits and the broader socio-economic circumstances of the family. In other words, interventions to support families need to be mindful of all of the factors which operate systematically to influence the well-being of its members and their relationships.

One of the significant gaps in our knowledge of families, which could be addressed by a larger national study, is the extent to which children and their parents fall below agreed 'thresholds' or 'benchmarks' of well-being. In order to plan services for families and deliver them in a targeted way it is necessary to know the nature and extent of needs which exist and to evaluate the effectiveness of different ways of addressing those needs. This information does not exist at present although it could be provided through a full national study involving both 'community' and 'clinical' samples and including a fuller range of family types than has been possible in this research project. Although this report is considerably more than the 'pilot study' which was originally envisaged, it offers a framework for a national study of the family which could yield significant benefits to those concerned with promoting family well-being in all its forms.

Chapter One

Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to assess the well-being of Irish families and to shed light on the factors that influence this. The well-being of families is fundamentally important to the well-being of both the individuals who constitute them and of society as a whole. Families can generate different levels of well-being for their members, and the ways in which they influence well-being are often difficult to understand, much less measure. That is what makes this a particularly important and challenging study.

A study of this nature has never been undertaken in Ireland before, and this report represents the pilot phase of a larger research programme that will culminate in a full national study of family well-being. As such, it is designed to identify the most important issues, both substantive and methodological, which arise when studying this topic, while also providing preliminary findings on the well-being of Irish families. For this reason, the results of the report should be read as necessarily tentative, given the rather limited sample size, but nevertheless indicative of the results that would be obtained from a full national study of family well-being. In addition to reporting our research results, we will also seek to draw out the main implications of this pilot study for future research on family well-being in Ireland.

1.2 The Family in Context

Considerable evidence suggests that experiences within the family have a major influence on the well-being of adults and children¹. For adults, there is extensive research using data from the US², Britain³, Germany⁴, Belgium and Ireland⁵ to show that marriage is strongly associated with life satisfaction and with physical and mental health⁶. For children, there is equally compelling evidence that family conflict and instability contribute to the emergence of behavioural and psychological problems⁷, while family income is a major determinant of children's educational outcomes and subsequent careers⁸. The well-being of children is closely connected with that of their parents, with research showing that parent-parent relationships impact on parent-child

¹ For more detailed reviews, see McKeown and Sweeney, 2001; McKeown, Lehane, Rock, Haase and Pratschke, 2002.

² Oswald and Blanchflower, 1999.

³ Theodossiou, 1998.

⁴ Winkelmann and Winkelmann, 1998.

⁵ Sweeney, 1998.

⁶ See also Stack and Eshleman, 1998; Waite, 1995.

⁷ Amato, 1993; Amato and Keith, 1991; Amato, Loomis and Booth, 1995; Cooksey, 1997; Downey, 1994; Goodman, Emery and Haugaard, 1998; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Hines, 1997; McLanahan, 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; McLanahan and Teitler, 1999; Najman, Behrens, Andersen, Bor, O'Callaghan, and Williams, 1997; Seltzer, 1994; Thomson, Hanson and McLanahan, 1994.

⁸ Duncan, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Cameron, & Heckman, 1999; Heckman, 1999.

relationships⁹. These research findings highlight the importance of families for individual well-being, while simultaneously drawing attention to the consequences for society when families do not function adequately.

We know that there is no simple relationship between family well-being and individual well-being. In some cases, the problems of poor relationships in families can be compounded by lack of income, education, living space and a secure environment, and these can magnify the penalty that individual members pay for family dysfunctions. In other cases, the very dearth of material and social supports reinforces the resilience of good relationships within the family, illustrating their capacity to make an independent contribution to individual well-being. It is all the more important, therefore, to try to understand how family well-being is influenced by a range of factors both inside and outside the family.

The degree of interdependence between family members and their capacity to influence each other's well-being is enormous, particularly in the case of children, whose well-being is so intimately intertwined with that of their family. The well-being of the family, therefore, can be thought of in terms of the well-being of a system of relationships, each of which is characterised by an extraordinarily high degree of mutuality.

It is necessary to point out that in the industrialised Western countries, the family is neither a homogenous nor a static institution. A great diversity of family types can be observed in Ireland, although not to the same extent as in many other European countries. The key change underpinning this diversity has been the emergence of different family forms outside the framework of the marital relationship. Families based on the first marriage for both parents still constitute the largest proportion of all families, but a growing proportion take a different form: the parents may be single and undertake parenting alone or with a cohabiting partner who, in turn, may or may not be the biological parent of the child; similarly, the parents may be separated or divorced and may live on their own or with a cohabiting partner; parents may also remarry following the dissolution of a previous marriage to create what is variously termed a step-family or blended family. Over their lifetime, a child or adult may experience a number of these different family types as relationships between parents break down and new ones are formed.

Although marriage remains central to many families in Ireland and elsewhere – and its importance is underlined by the growth in remarriage following divorce – it is also true that the marriage rate has been falling for some time¹⁰. This is partly due to the postponement of marriage associated with a rising age at marriage, but it is also facilitated by a growth in cohabitation. Similarly, although the majority of households in Ireland (56%) have children¹¹, a growing proportion do not. In addition, there has been a pronounced growth in one-person households in recent years, and these now constitute more than a fifth (22%) of the total¹². Thus, despite the importance of marriage for many people, a growing proportion of people do not live within this kind of family, signalling a greater diversity in lifestyles than was possible or permissible in previous generations. This, in turn,

⁹ Erel and Burman, 1995.

¹⁰ Central Statistics Office, 2002: 62.

¹¹ Central Statistics Office, 1997.

¹² Central Statistics Office, 2002: Table 17.1.

reflects the influence of personal autonomy and economic development, which are generally seen as the main engines of change in relation to the diversity of families and households¹³.

The immediate causes of the growth in different family types also include changes in attitudes towards family formation and marriage, as well as changes in public provisions for one-parent families, in particular. The number of births outside marriage now stands at just under half (45%) of all first births in Ireland, and the increase in marital breakdown is estimated at roughly 15%-20% of all marriages¹⁴. Traditionally, marriage was viewed as a gateway to parenthood, and this is still the case for a majority of Irish people. However, parenthood may often be followed by marriage or accompanied by cohabitation; in other European countries, for example, there is now an identified pattern in which some couples “first cohabit, then have children, and then marry”¹⁵. Equally, children may begin life in a two-parent household before moving to a one-parent household following the break-up of their parents’ relationship; they may re-experience a two-parent household at a later stage in their life, if the parent enters a new relationship involving marriage or cohabitation. In Canada, for example, one in four children born in the early 1960s saw the break-up of their parents’ relationship by the time they reached the age of 20; a similar proportion of children born in the 1970s had the same experience by the time they reached 15, while the same proportion of children born in the 1980s had experienced this by the time they were 10, indicating “the growing frequency and increasing tendency for younger and younger children to be impacted by family breakdown”¹⁶. This, in turn, “increases the probability that the children will subsequently experience at least one if not two blended families based on the conjugal trajectories of the parents after their separation”¹⁷. As we will see in the next chapter, the likelihood of births outside marriage and of marital breakdown are not randomly distributed in Ireland, and seem to have a strong association with socio-economic position, particularly social class position.

There have also been changes affecting all family types, notably a reduction in family size and, perhaps related to this, an increasing involvement of women in work outside the home. In 1997, the average number of children per family in Ireland was 2.3¹⁸, reflecting a longer-term decline in total period fertility rates¹⁹, which have been below replacement levels for some time in many EU states, including Ireland. Parallel to these developments, there has been a growth in women’s employment: nearly five out of ten women of working age were in the labour force in 2001²⁰, compared to just three out of ten twenty years previously²¹. More significantly, over half

¹³ McRae, 1999.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, 1999.

¹⁵ Van Widenfelt, Hosman, Schaap, and Van der Staak, 1996: 164.

¹⁶ Marcil-Gratton, 1998: 14.

¹⁷ Ibid: 23.

¹⁸ McKeown and Sweeney, 2001: 19.

¹⁹ Central Statistics Office, 2002: Table 3.8. The definition of the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) given by the CSO is: “The TFR represents the theoretical average number of children who would be born alive to a woman during her lifetime if she were to pass through her childbearing years (ages 15-49) conforming to the age specific fertility rates of a given year. The rate refers to a theoretical female cohort”.

²⁰ Central Statistics Office, 2002: Table 2.2.

²¹ Central Statistics Office, 1991: Table 1B.

of all mothers work outside the home, and this proportion rises where the children are aged 5-14²². Men's participation in the labour force has remained steady at around seventy per cent over the past decade.

These developments have altered the traditional view, whereby fathers had the role of family breadwinner, and have created greater diversity, including families with two earners as well as those with just one or even none at all. Again, as we will see in Chapter Two, the number of earners in the family is strongly associated with family type, if only because one-parent households normally have only one earner and this, in turn, has implications for the economic well-being of different kinds of families. The greater participation of women in the labour force has also triggered a major expansion in childcare services²³, as well as facilitating a re-shaping of parenting roles, with fathers frequently taking a more active role in parenting, obviously depending on family circumstances²⁴. Thus, the diversity of different family types is likely to be matched by a diversity within each type of family in accordance with the roles and relationships between parents and between parents and their children, and depending upon the broader socio-economic context in which each family finds itself.

These developments require a definition of the family which is inclusive of the different family types that exist in Ireland today, whilst clearly identifying the core features of what constitutes a family. One definition that meets these criteria conceptualises the family as a set of relationships which connect parents to each other and to their children, including families where all members do not live in the same household. These relationships can take on a variety of forms, depending on the legal status of the relationship between the parents (married, single, separated, widowed) and on whether the child is living with one or both parents (one- or two-parent households). In other words, relationships – in all their diversity – are at the heart of family life, and family well-being is influenced by the dynamics of those relationships as well as by the uniqueness of each individual family member and the external environment created by the wider society, the economy and public policy.

These developments mean that the study of the family is an extremely complex field of research. Given the importance of families to the well-being of adults and children – and the private and public implications of this reality – these changes also highlight the importance of the present study in examining how well-being varies between different family types and identifying the main factors that influence this. We will now proceed to describe the methodology adopted here in order to shed greater light on the relationship between well-being and family type.

1.3 The Key Research Question

The key research question that we seek to tackle in this report is whether, and to what extent, the well-being of men, women and children is influenced by the family in which they live. In order to answer this question it is necessary to examine the possible influences on well-being of: (1) family structure (i.e. one- or two- parent family and whether the parents are single, separated, married or cohabiting); (2) family processes (notably the

²² National Economic and Social Council, 2003, Table 8.1.

²³ See for example the National Development Plan, 2000-2006 (Ireland, 1999).

²⁴ See McKeown, 2001.

parent-child relationship and the relationship between parents); (3) family circumstances (notably social class, family income and support networks); and (4) individual characteristics (such as attitudes and personality traits). It is also necessary to distinguish between physical well-being, psychological well-being and relational well-being, and to measure all of these concepts using powerful and precise measurement instruments.

This formulation acknowledges the complexity of what is conventionally meant by the term ‘family’. In particular, it allows for further differentiation of one- and two-parent families into married and cohabiting, on the one hand, and single and separated on the other, in recognition of the fact that ‘within-group’ variations can often be as great as ‘between-group’ variations. In addition, it acknowledges that an adequate understanding of the family requires that we take into account not just the structure of the family but also family processes and circumstances as well as the psychological characteristics of family members. By setting up the question in this way, our study will be able to assess the unique contribution of different factors to the well-being of family members.

1.4 Measurement Instruments

We define the well-being of parents as having four conceptually distinct components: (1) physical well-being (2) psychological well-being (3) the quality of the parent-parent relationship (4) the quality of the parent-child relationship. These dimensions of well-being and the scales which we have used to measure them are summarised in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Well-Being of Parents

Type of Well-Being	Scale for Measuring Well-Being
Physical Well-Being	Revised Symptom Checklist ²⁵
Psychological Well-Being	Scales of Psychological Well-Being ²⁶
Quality of Couple Relationship	Marital Satisfaction Scale ²⁷ Social Intimacy Scale ²⁸
Quality of Parent-Child Relationship	Satisfaction with Parenting – PCRI Involvement with Child – PCRI Communication with Child – PCRI Limit-Setting – PCRI Autonomy – PCRI ²⁹ Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-PC) ³⁰

²⁵ Adapted from Derogatis, 1992.

²⁶ Adapted from Ryff, 2001.

²⁷ Adapted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew, 1998.

²⁸ Adapted from Miller and Lefcourt, 1982.

²⁹ All PCRI scales adapted from Gerard, 1994.

³⁰ Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor and Runyan, 1995.

The well-being of children has two conceptually distinct components: (1) physical well-being and (2) psychological well-being. These two dimensions and the scales used to measure them are summarised in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Well-Being of Children

Type of Well-Being	Scale for Measuring Well-Being
Physical Well-Being	Health and Daily Living Scales ³¹
Psychological Well-Being	Beck Youth Inventories of Emotional and Social Impairment: Self-Concept, Anxiety, Depression, Anger and Disruptive Behaviour ³² Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale ³³

In addition to the measurement of well-being, a key purpose of the study is to assess how well-being is influenced by different factors. In the case of parents, we collected information on a wide range of factors which may influence their well-being, and these are summarised in Table 1.3. Clearly, these factors may also impact on the well-being of children, in addition to those listed in Table 1.4. Information on the items listed in Table 1.4 was collected using a self-completion questionnaire which was administered to the children who participated in this study.

Table 1.3 Factors Which May Influence the Well-Being of Parents

Name of Factor	Scale or Variable for Measuring Factor
Age, sex, socio-economic characteristics	Questions on age, sex, length of relationship, housing, education, hours worked, income, financial well-being, religious practices, quality of parents' marital relationship
Social Class	A new scale based on employment status, occupational category, work role autonomy and farm size
Personality variables	Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS) ³⁴ Bem Sex-Role Inventory ³⁵
Social Support Network	New scale
Job Satisfaction Scale	New scale
Life Events	New scale ³⁶
Home Environment	New scale
Cigarettes and Alcohol	New scale ³⁷
Gender Role Orientation	PCRI Gender Role Orientation Scale ³⁸

³¹ Adapted from Moos, Cronkite, Billings, and Finney, 1986.

³² Adapted from Beck, Beck & Jolly, 2002.

³³ Adapted from Huebner, 2001.

³⁴ Adapted from Watson, Clark, and Tellegen, 1988.

³⁵ Adapted from Bem, 1974.

³⁶ Developed on the basis of work by Sarason, Johnson and Siegel, 1978.

³⁷ Developed on the basis of work by Moos, Cronkite, Billings, and Finney, 1986.

³⁸ Adapted from Gerard, 1994.

Division of House Work	New scale ³⁹
Areas of Conflict	New scale
Ways of Resolving Conflict	Conflict Resolution Style Inventory ⁴⁰
Ability to Resolve Conflicts	Ineffective Arguing Inventory ⁴¹
Forms of Conflict	Conflict Tactics Scale II ⁴²
Conflicts with Children	Parent-child Conflict Tactics Scale II ⁴³

Table 1.4 Factors Which May Influence the Well-Being of Children

Name of Factor	Scale or Variable for Measuring Factor
Age and sex	Standard questions
Educational attainments	Number of subjects passed and failed in the Junior Certificate
Experiences at school	New scale
Out-of-school activities	Question on participation in a range of out-of-school activities
Cigarettes and Alcohol	Scale adapted from the Health and Daily Living Scale ⁴⁴
Parental Involvement	Parenting Style Scale ⁴⁵
Unresolved Problems with Parents	New Scale

1.5 The Data

The data on which this report is based was collected in two stages. The first involved a survey to establish the proportion of different family types in Ireland, based on households with at least one child aged 0-17 (persons over the age of 17 years are not regarded as children in Irish law). The survey was based on a representative sample of 1,500 households in Ireland, and was carried out in October-November 2002. The sample was constructed at 100 sampling points using quotas to ensure that the households selected matched the known characteristics of Irish households with children, in terms of social class, age of mother, number of children, and geographical distribution. The results of this survey will be presented in Chapter Two and in the Appendix included at the end of this report.

The second stage involved a much more detailed survey that assesses the well-being of parents and children in different family types, this time using a quota to collect data from a sufficient number of individuals in each kind of family. Both mothers and fathers were asked to complete questionnaires in two-parent families, but only mothers in one-parent families; one child aged 11-16 was asked to complete a questionnaire in each family, with the exception of families with cohabiting parents, where there was an insufficient number of children aged 11-16. A total of 669 questionnaires were completed: 274 by mothers, 161 by fathers and 234 by

39 New scale developed on the basis of work by Cowan and Cowan, 1988.

40 Kurdek, 1994.

41 Ibid.

42 Strauss, Hamby, Boney-McCoy and Sugarman, 1996.

43 Strauss, Hamby, Finkelhor and Runyan, 1995.

44 Developed on the basis of work by Moos, Cronkite, Billings, and Finney, 1986.

45 Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg and Dornbusch, 1991.

children. The distribution of these completed questionnaires by family type is summarised in Table 1.5, and the results will now be reported in Chapters Three to Seven.

Table 1.5 Number of Parents and Children Surveyed in Each Family Type in Ireland, 2003

Family Type	Mothers	Fathers	Children***	Total Interviews
1. Two Parents: Married*	107	107	107	321
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	54	54	14	122
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship**	59	-	59	118
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship**	54	-	54	108
Total	274	161	234	669

* This is the first marriage for both parents.

** A relationship refers to “a steady relationship for at least six months”.

*** All children are aged 11-16 years.

1.6 Structure of Report

The report has seven chapters as follows:

Chapter One	Introduction and Methodology
Chapter Two	Types of Family in Ireland
Chapter Three	Physical and Psychological Well-Being of Parents
Chapter Four	The Quality of Couple Relationships
Chapter Five	Physical and Psychological Well-Being of Children
Chapter Six	The Quality of Parent-Child Relationships
Chapter Seven	Summary and Conclusion

Chapter Two

Types of Family in Ireland

2.1 Introduction

The term family, as we use it in this report, refers to the set of relationships which link parents with each other and with their children. These relationships assume a variety of forms depending on the legal status of the relationship between the parents (married, single, separated, widowed) and on whether the child is living with one or both parents (one- or two-parent households). As a result, the underlying reality denoted by the term 'family' manifests itself in a variety of forms; the purpose of this chapter is to describe those different forms, as they present themselves in Ireland today.

This chapter is based on a survey of a representative sample of 1,500 households in Ireland, which was carried out in October-November 2002. The survey was designed to collect information on family structure in households with at least one child aged 0-17. The data were collected at 100 sampling points, using quotas to ensure that the selected households matched the known characteristics of Irish households with at least one child aged 17 or under, in terms of social class, age of mother, number of children and geographical distribution. As a result, the profile of different family types which emerges from this survey provides an accurate portrait of family types in Ireland.

We begin our analysis with an overview of family types (Section 2.2), distinguishing between families and households (Section 2.3). Against this background, we analyse how different family types vary according to their urban-rural location (Section 2.4), the age of family members (Section 2.5) and their socio-economic characteristics (Section 2.6). We conclude the chapter with a brief summary of the key findings (Section 2.7).

2.2 Overview of Family Types

Families with children in Ireland fall into four main types: (1) two parents who are both married for the first time, which we will refer to as 'two-parent married families'; in the research literature, these are sometimes referred to as 'intact' or 'traditional' families (2) two parents who are single and cohabiting, which we will label as 'two-parent cohabiting families' (3) one parent who is single and not in a relationship, which we will label as 'one-parent single families' and (4) one parent who is separated⁴⁶ and not in a relationship, which we will refer to as 'one-parent separated families'.

⁴⁶ The term 'separated' comprises those who are legally separated, divorced, whose marriages have been annulled and those who are living apart from their spouse but are not legally separated. In our sample, 7% of the 'ever married' population were separated, which is similar to the estimate (6%) provided by the 1996 Census of Population. The proportion in our sample who are legally separated / divorced / marriage-annulled (56%) is higher than in the 1996 Census of Population.

By far the largest family type in Ireland comprises two-parent married families, which constitute two thirds (66%) of the total (see Table 2.1). In addition, nearly a tenth of families also involve two-parent cohabiting families (8%). If all two-parent families are added together – including remarried parents as well as cohabiting parents following separation (5%) – we find that nearly eight out of ten (79%) families comprise two parents and children.

Nevertheless, a fifth (21%) of all families contain only one parent, and these are quite evenly divided between those who are single (9%) and those who are separated (7%); there is also a third group comprising single and separated parents in non-cohabiting relationships (4%) as well as widow(er)s who are not in a relationship (1%). Given the lower incidence of these family types, an accurate and comprehensive assessment of family well-being within all of these different types can only be undertaken in the context of a full national study. An interesting finding is that the proportion of lone parents who are in “a relationship for at least six months” is relatively small (4% of 21%); in other words, most lone parents (80%) are genuinely ‘lone’ in the sense of not having an intimate partner for at least this period of time.

Our estimate of the proportion of lone parent families in Ireland (21%) is somewhat higher than that derived from other sources, including the 1996 Census of Population (14%), the 1997 Labour Force Survey (14%) and the 1997 Living in Ireland Survey (15%)⁴⁷. This may be influenced in part by the fact that these sources are based on households with children under 15, whereas our estimate is based on children under 18, although this is unlikely to account for the above differences. Thus, the latter are most likely attributable to actual changes in family structure in Ireland since the mid-1990s. Comparable data at EU level suggest that “the rate of lone parenthood in Ireland is ... just below the EU average”⁴⁸.

Most lone parents are mothers. Almost all of the respondents (99%) in one-parent single families are women, while nine out of ten (90%) of those in one-parent separated families are female (see Table 2.2), mirroring the results of the 1996 Census of Population. It is worth observing that, because fathers do not reside in these families, we know nothing about the quality of their relationship with the mother or their children and, as other commentators have noted, this is “a major weakness in the data base on family life in Ireland today”⁴⁹. Once again, we will simply highlight this issue as an important question to be addressed in the future, perhaps in the context of a larger national study.

⁴⁷ See Fahey and Russell, 2001: 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid: 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid: 32; see also McKeown, 2001.

2.3 Families and Households

The term ‘family’ is not synonymous with ‘household’, even though the Irish Constitution⁵⁰ and official statistical sources – notably the Census of Population, the Labour Force Survey (and its replacement, the Quarterly National Household Survey), Vital Statistics, and the Living in Ireland Survey – tend to treat them as equivalent. The difference between a family and a household is most evident in relation to lone parent households, where both parents are part of the *family*, but only one of them is in the *household*. The converse is also true, as two or more families may share the same household. Our survey reveals that 1% of families live in a shared household, and this is more common among one-parent single (3%) and one-parent separated (3%) families (see Table 2.3 in the Appendix to this chapter at the end of the report; all further references to tables in this chapter should also be interpreted as referring to this Appendix).

The difference between the family and the household is also underlined by the fact that a quarter of all children (24%) do not live in households containing both of their biological parents (Table 2.4). Most of these children live with their mother in one-parent single or separated families.

2.4 Urban and Rural Distribution

All family types, with the exception of one parent single families, are distributed between urban and rural Ireland in a broadly similar proportion to all households with children aged 0-18 (see Table 2.5). By contrast, one-parent single families are more concentrated in urban areas, above all in Dublin. It seems likely that this pattern is the result of migration by single parents from rural to urban areas, possibly due to the greater availability of local authority accommodation in these areas, and particularly in Dublin. Other studies have found that one-parent families, both single and separated, are much more likely than any other family type to live in local authority accommodation, itself a reflection of their disadvantaged position in socio-economic terms⁵¹.

2.5 Age of Family Members

The ages of parents and children reflect the family life cycle, which (according to the definition that we will adopt in this report) begins with the birth of the first child. The results of the survey indicate a clear life cycle pattern across the different family types. Two-parent married families and one-parent separated families tend to be older than either two-parent cohabiting families or one-parent single families. In the former, the average age of parents is around 40, while in the latter the average is around 30 (Table 2.6). These findings are similar to those yielded by the 1997 Labour Force Survey⁵², and are consistent with the fact that the majority of single

⁵⁰ According to Kennedy (2001: 8), “The Irish language version of the 1937 Constitution which, in the case of dispute, is the definitive version, reflects this very point. In the Irish text, the Family is ‘An Teaglach’; the home is also ‘an teaglach’ ... The Irish word ‘an teaglach’ makes the household coterminous with the Family”.

⁵¹ Haase, 1999; Nolan and Whelan, 1999.

⁵² Fahey and Russell, 2001: 46-47.

mothers (80%) give birth before the age of 30, while the majority of married mothers (70%) give birth after the age of 30⁵³.

This age difference is also reflected in the average age of children: in two-parent married families the average age of children is 9 years, compared to 12 years in one-parent separated families; the slightly older age of children in the latter group of families suggests an earlier age at marriage, and is consistent with the known association between separation and age at marriage⁵⁴. The average age of children in two-parent cohabiting families is 4 years, rising to 6 years in one-parent single families (Table 2.7 and Table 2.8).

The variation between family types in terms of their stage in the family life cycle is also reflected in the number of children in each family type. The average number of children in two-parent married families (2.3) is similar to that in one-parent separated families (2.4); by contrast, the average number of children in two-parent cohabiting families (1.7) is also similar to that in one-parent single families (1.8) (Table 2.9). Finally, the age variation between family types is also reflected in the fact that parents in two-parent married families have often been in a relationship for longer than parents in two-parent cohabiting families (Table 2.10).

The younger age profile of two-parent cohabiting families and one-parent single families may be due to two inter-related factors. The first is that these are relatively new family forms and are to be found mainly among younger people. The second is that these family forms remain young because, as parents get older, they tend to marry and form two-parent married families. The survey provides some evidence in support of the second hypothesis, as 12% of two-parent married families have children who are older than the length of their marriage, suggesting that these families previously existed as either cohabiting or single-parent families; indeed, as some studies have suggested, it is possible that some families may begin the family cycle as a one-parent single family, later becoming a two-parent cohabiting family and then a two-parent married family⁵⁵. These explanations are not mutually exclusive and it seems likely that both processes are at work as new patterns of entry and exit to family life emerge.

2.6 Socio-Economic Influences on Family Types

Family types in Ireland have a strong social class dimension, in the sense that one-parent families, both single and separated, are heavily concentrated in lower socio-economic strata. Two thirds (66%) of one-parent families may be located within the 'unskilled manual' social class categories (DE), twice the percentage of two-parent cohabiting families (31%) and four times the percentage of two-parent married families (16%) (Table 2.11). Conversely, two-parent married families tend to be concentrated in higher social classes, while two-parent cohabiting families tend to resemble the overall class profile of Irish families in general.

⁵³ Cullen, 2002: Table E3.

⁵⁴ Kiernan and Mueller, 1999; Clarke and Berrington, 1999.

⁵⁵ Murphy and Wang, 1999.

This raises the question of whether social class, possibly in association with other variables, is more likely to be a cause or consequence of different family structures. The results of our survey shed considerable light upon this question, by revealing that parents' education levels also vary considerably according to family structure. As education is one of the strongest influences on social class location, and usually precedes rather than follows family formation, this suggests that social class should primarily be viewed as a causal factor in relation to family structure, with the social class background of the family of origin playing a key role. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the education level of one-parent families (both single and separated) is significantly lower than that of two-parent families (whether married or cohabiting). For example, the highest level of education obtained by more than half of all single parents (56%) and nearly two thirds of all separated parents (64%) did not go beyond the Junior Certificate (see Tables 2.12a, 2.12b and 2.12c).

The lower education levels of separated parents relative to single parents probably reflect the influence of age, as the former tend to be older than the latter, and education levels have tended to rise over time. By contrast, parents in two-parent families, both married and cohabiting, are twice as likely to have a Third Level education as parents in one-parent single families and three times more likely than parents in one-parent separated families. These findings are in line with the results of the 1997 Labour Force Survey⁵⁶ and with research conducted in the UK⁵⁷ and the US⁵⁸. It is safe to infer from this that, in most cases, social class drives, rather than is driven by, family structure. Naturally, this does not exclude the possibility that family structure may influence social class position in certain cases, or that this influence may be channelled, at least in part, by variables such as age at marriage (in the case of one-parent separated families)⁵⁹.

Unlike education levels, employment patterns are likely to be both a cause and a consequence of different family forms, given that two-parent families have two potential earners, while one-parent families have only one. Our survey reveals that both single and separated mothers are more likely to be economically active than their married or cohabiting peers. This is in line with the results of the larger and more authoritative Quarterly National Household Survey⁶⁰. In two-parent families, the majority of mothers are engaged in home duties, both those who are married (60%) and those who are cohabiting (55%); this is higher than the corresponding proportions of mothers in single (41%) and separated (38%) one-parent families (see Tables 2.13a, 2.13b, 2.13c). Another difference between the employment patterns of mothers and fathers is that fathers are much more likely to be employed full-time. For most mothers, employment tends to be fairly equally divided between those in full-time employment and those in part-time employment. By contrast, the majority of fathers in two-parent households are in full-time employment, both those who are married (77%) and those who are cohabiting (80%); even fathers in one-parent separated families are more than twice as likely to be in full-time employment (66%) as one-parent separated mothers (24%).

⁵⁶ Fahey and Russell, 2001: 47-49.

⁵⁷ McRae, 1999: 7.

⁵⁸ Rosenzweig, 1999.

⁵⁹ Kiernan and Mueller, 1999; Pullinger, 1998.

⁶⁰ Quarterly National Household Survey, 1998-2002; see National Economic and Social Council, 2003, Table 8.1 for a synopsis of women's employment rates, 1995-2002.

It could be argued that the role of social class in shaping family structure has become more influential over time as attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation, births outside marriage, separation and divorce have become more flexible. Public policy on the family may also serve to reinforce rather than redress the influence of social class, as a team of researchers at the Economic and Social Research Institute have observed: “The Irish State’s policies combine today to perpetuate and even exacerbate class inequalities in family formation and functioning. The life chance of marriage is now more strongly related to one’s class of origin”⁶¹. Similarly in the US, low male earnings not only reduce the likelihood of marriage but also increase the likelihood of divorce⁶², while poverty has been shown to reduce men’s capacity to be fathers, both in the US⁶³ and in the UK⁶⁴.

The way in which economic resources influence low rates of marriage and high rates of single parenthood has been documented in a number of qualitative studies of single lone mothers in Britain⁶⁵, which show that “most of these mothers would have married before having their children; but the option was either not open to them or the young man in question was not worth marrying, often because of poor employment prospects or personal irresponsibility. Setting up a home with a man without a job or in low-paid work with few prospects seems a poor alternative to lone motherhood⁶⁶. Similarly, other studies have found that socio-economic disadvantage is strongly related to marital breakdown and may even be compounded by it⁶⁷. These considerations suggest that, for those in a weak economic position, family type is less a matter of lifestyle choice than of adaptation to economic circumstances; in other words, family types emerge and adapt to the socio-economic and policy environment in which both men and women find themselves and, within those constraints, seek to create an ‘optimal’ arrangement.

The practical outcome of these processes for those in a weak economic situation is that mothers often raise their children alone, fathers often play no part in family life and children frequently live with just one of their biological parents. Another implication is that a higher proportion of one-parent families live in poverty. Although the risk of poverty is similar for one- and two-parent families where there is only one earner – that is, taking account of both the socio-economic status of the parents⁶⁸ and the number of children⁶⁹ – it is precisely because lone parents tend to have a weaker socio-economic position than other parents that the proportion of lone parent households living in poverty (29%) tends to be higher than the corresponding proportion of two-

⁶¹ Breen, Hannan, Rottman and Whelan, 1990: 121.

⁶² Levine and Pitt, 1995: 37.

⁶³ Morehouse Research Institute, 1999: 12; Wilson, 1996.

⁶⁴ Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams, 1999a.

⁶⁵ Berthoud, McKay and Rowlingson, 1999; Rowlingson and McKay, 1998; Allen and Bourke Dowling, 1998, 1998.

⁶⁶ Ibid: 10 and 16; see also Wilson and Neckerman, 1986; Roberts, 1996.

⁶⁷ Kiernan and Mueller, 1999; Clarke and Berrington, 1999.

⁶⁸ For example, a two-parent household where there are two children with the father working and the mother on home duties has a broadly similar risk of poverty (11.3%) to a lone parent household where the mother has one child, belongs to Social Class 5 and is working (13.4%) (See Nolan and Watson: 1999: Tables 3.2 and 3.5, pp. 46-55). By contrast, the risk of poverty in a lone-mother household, where the mother has one child, belongs to Social Class 5 and is not working is extremely high (80%) and is surpassed only by the risk of poverty experienced by lone fathers (87%) in similar circumstances (see Nolan and Watson, 1999: Table 3.2, p. 46). As Watson and Nolan observe, “when one controls for other factors, female-headed households have a lower risk of poverty than non-couple households headed by males” (ibid: 47).

⁶⁹ For example, the risk of poverty for children rises with the number of children in the household, so that two-parent households with four or more children have a similar risk of poverty (45.4%) to children in one-parent households (44.4%) (see Nolan, 2000: Table 4.6, p. 45).

parent households (19%)⁷⁰. This point is worth emphasising, as it is important to be aware that the material well-being of one-parent households is shaped less by the fact that these household have only one parent than by the socio-economic characteristics of that parent. At the same time, it is also important to note that the number of parents in the household, and therefore the number of potential earners, is becoming increasingly important as the gulf between families with two earners and no earners widens. In our survey, we found that half of all one-parent households – both single (51%) and separated (46%) – have no earner, while a third of two-parent households – both married (35%) and cohabiting (33%) – have two earners (see Table 2.14). This underlines the potential for an increased income polarisation between one- and two-parent families, and between families which are ‘work-rich’ and ‘work-poor’, which is likely to grow as dual-earning continues to rise⁷¹. Thus, family type, like the social class processes which shape it, has important consequences for men, women or children.

An interesting finding, which may reflect the influence of social class, is that the proportion of children with a physical or mental disability is significantly higher in one-parent families, both separated (11%) and single (9%), compared to two-parent families, whether married (5%) or cohabiting (4%) (see Table 2.15). In 1996, the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities estimated that 3% of children aged 0-14 had a disability⁷².

2.7 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have described the structure of the family in present-day Ireland, drawing on a survey of a representative sample of 1,500 Irish households with at least one child aged 0-17. We defined each family type by reference to the relationships which link parents with each other and with their children, as these relationships can take on a variety of forms depending on the legal status of the relationship between parents and on whether the child is living with one or both parents.

The results of the survey reveal that families with children in Ireland fall into four main types as follows: (1) two parents who are both married for the first time, which we will refer to as ‘two-parent married families’ (2) two parents who are single and cohabiting, which we will label as ‘two-parent cohabiting families’ (3) one parent who is single and not in a relationship, which we will label as ‘one-parent single families’ and (4) one parent who is separated and not in a relationship, which we will refer to as ‘one-parent separated families’.

By far the largest family type in Ireland comprises two-parent married families, which constitute two thirds of the total. In addition, nearly a tenth of families also involve two-parent cohabiting families. If all two-parent families are added together, including remarried parents as well as those who are cohabiting following separation, we find that nearly eight out of ten families comprise two parents and children. Conversely, a fifth

⁷⁰ Nolan and Watson, 1999, Table 2.1, p. 18. Of course we know nothing about the risk of poverty among non-resident fathers.

⁷¹ The labour force participation rate of women in Ireland increased from 39% in 1996 to 47% in 2000, close the EU average; the labour force participation rate of men remained virtually unchanged in this period at around the EU average of 70% (see Labour Force Survey, 1996; Quarterly National Household Survey, 2000; see also Nolan, O’Connell and Whelan, 2000; McKeown and Sweeney, 2001: 28-29).

of all families comprise one parent only, mainly the mother, and these are fairly evenly divided between those who are single and those who are separated; we also find single and separated parents in non-cohabiting relationships as well as widow(er)s who are not in a relationship.

All family types, with the exception of one-parent single families, follow roughly the same distribution between urban and rural areas as Irish households in general. However, one-parent single families are significantly more concentrated in urban areas, Dublin in particular. It seems likely that this pattern is the result of migration by single parents from rural to urban areas, possibly attracted by the greater availability of local authority accommodation in urban areas, especially in Dublin.

The age of parents and children reflects a 'family life cycle' which has a clear pattern across the different family types. Two-parent married families and one-parent separated families tend to be older, and to have older children, than either two-parent cohabiting families or one-parent single families. The variation between family types in terms of their stage in the family life cycle is also reflected in the number of children in each family type. The younger age profile of two-parent cohabiting families and one-parent single families seems to be due to the fact that, as parents get older, they tend to marry and to constitute two-parent married families.

Family types in Ireland have a strong social class dimension in the sense that one-parent families, both single and separated, are heavily concentrated in lower socio-economic groups. Social class seems to act more as a cause than a consequence of different family types, as they are both strongly associated with education, which is usually chronologically prior to both. Our survey reveals that the education levels of parents in one-parent families, both single and separated, are significantly lower than those of parents in two-parent families, both married and cohabiting. We also found that both single and separated mothers are more likely to be in the labour market than married or cohabiting mothers. Another difference between the employment patterns of mothers and fathers is that fathers are much more likely to be employed full-time.

It can be argued that the role of social class in shaping different family types has become more influential over time, as attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation, births outside marriage, separation and divorce, have become more flexible. Moreover, the potential for increased income polarisation between one- and two-parent families, and between families which are 'work-rich' and 'work-poor', is likely to grow as dual earning continues to rise.

Overall, the results of the survey suggest that the majority of parents and children live in two-parent married families, while a significant minority of families involve mothers and children living apart from the father in one-parent families. Marriage seems to precede parenthood in the majority of cases, but other patterns are also evident: cohabitation may precede both parenthood and marriage, just as parenthood may precede marriage. The traditional pathway to family life – marriage, cohabitation and parenthood – is certainly no longer the only acceptable sequence, and a variety of family types have emerged, although these often have less to do with genuine lifestyle choices than with the need to adapt to adverse socio-economic circumstances.

⁷² Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, 1996: 288.

Chapter Three

The Physical and Psychological Well-Being of Parents

3.1 Introduction

To feel well, both physically and psychologically, is a positive holistic experience that involves much more than merely the absence of symptoms, although the latter obviously constitutes an important – albeit partial – measure of overall well-being. In this chapter, we will analyse two related aspects of parents' well-being – physical and psychological – as well as the extent to which these vary among parents in different types of family. We will begin by summarising the scales used to measure physical and psychological well-being (Section 3.2), before describing its variation between family types (Sections 3.3 and 3.4). A more detailed analysis will then be provided, based on the techniques of Structural Equation Modelling, with the aim of identifying factors which have a significant influence on parents' physical and psychological well-being (Section 3.5). We will conclude this chapter with a brief summary of the key findings (Section 3.6).

3.2 Scales for Measuring Physical and Psychological Well-Being

We measured the physical well-being of parents using a shortened version of the Symptom Check List (SCL)⁷³. The full version of the SCL has 90 items covering nine primary symptom dimensions (somatisation, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism) and three global indices of distress. For the purposes of this study, we reduced this scale to a total of 19 items from the somatisation, anxiety, hostility and 'general' sub-scales. The general sub-scale reflects overall well-being and comprises the following items: 'poor appetite', 'overeating', 'trouble falling asleep' and 'sleep that is restless or disturbed'. Rather than asking about the past week, as in the original scale, we decided to use the past year as the temporal frame of reference. Whereas the original scale uses a five-point response scale with the following identifiers (not at all, a little bit, moderately, quite a bit, extremely), we have decided to use a frequency scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all the time), as we believe this to be more appropriate for a symptom self-report scale. Prior research using the original scale indicates that it has good validity and reliability, and this is also true of our own shortened version, which has an alpha (reliability) coefficient of .91 (based on 306 cases).

We measure psychological well-being using the short version of Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being⁷⁴. This measurement instrument comprises six sub-scales of psychological well-being, which were constructed in order to measure the dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance. Each scale, in its original form, has 14 items, although the author has also developed 9-item and 3-item versions; in this study we have used the 3-item version for each of the six scales, changing the agree/disagree response scale from a six-point to a seven-point format. Although the

⁷³ Derogatis, 1992.

⁷⁴ Ryff, 2001.

reliability of these scales is rather low (as measured by ‘coefficient alpha’, which is equal to .44 for adults in two-parent families), this is primarily due to the small number of items in each (the full version has, in contrast, very good reliability)⁷⁵.

3.3 Variations in Parents’ Physical Well-being

When interpreting the results of the statistical analysis presented below, it is worth remembering that parents with *fewer* physical symptoms have *higher* levels of physical well-being, and vice versa. Our results indicate that the physical well-being of parents (both mothers and fathers) varies systematically from one family type to the next, with statistically-significant differences between the different types⁷⁶.

The overall picture for mothers is illustrated in graphical form in Figure 3.1. This is a ‘box-plot’, in which the shaded area represents the middle 50% of cases, while the line across the shaded area is the ‘median’, which divides the highest 50% of cases from the lowest 50%. The lines extending above and below the box are referred to as the ‘whiskers’, and denote the ‘main body of the data’ (defined as all cases that fall within 1.5 box lengths from the upper or lower edge of the box). Cases with relatively extreme values may therefore fall outside the ‘whiskers’, and these are referred to as either ‘outliers’ (marked by the symbol ‘o’) or ‘extreme values’ (marked by the symbol ‘*’). The latter are situated more than three box lengths from the upper or lower edge of the box.

Inspection of Figure 3.1 reveals that married mothers have fewest physical symptoms. Cohabiting mothers have more symptoms than married mothers, single mothers have even more and separated mothers have the largest number of symptoms. Separated mothers also have the greatest range of symptoms, which implies that the situations of these women are rather diverse. The particular symptoms which have the greatest influence on the well-being of mothers are ‘poor appetite’, ‘overeating’, ‘trouble falling asleep’ and ‘sleep that is restless or disturbed’.

The physical well-being of fathers is summarised in Figure 3.2; only fathers in married and cohabiting families are included, as the study was unable to include fathers in single and separated families for reasons described in the previous chapter. The results indicate that married fathers have a higher level of physical well-being than cohabiting fathers although this finding is at the boundary of statistical significance. Further analysis reveals that cohabiting fathers have more symptoms than their married counterparts, as measured by all of the sub-scales, especially ‘general’ symptoms such as ‘poor appetite’, ‘overeating’, ‘trouble falling asleep’ and ‘sleep that is restless or disturbed’) and ‘hostility’ (such as ‘feeling easily annoyed or irritated’, ‘temper outbursts you cannot control’, ‘having urges to break or smash things’ and ‘getting into frequent arguments’).

⁷⁵ See also Ryff and Keyes, 1995.

⁷⁶ Throughout this report, we will use the term ‘statistically significant’ to refer to findings which have no more than a 5% chance of being observed as a result of chance sampling variations. Statistical significance is assessed using the ‘Chi Square’ test for nominal variables and the ‘t test’ for continuous variables.

Of course, the fact that the physical well-being of parents varies in a statistically significant manner between family types does not necessarily imply that family type is the only or even the main influence on well-being, as one or more intervening factors may account for the observed differences. In order to identify variables which have a strong influence on physical well-being, it is necessary to take into account a wide range of other influences. We will turn to this question later in this chapter, after we have analysed how the psychological well-being of parents varies by family type.

Figure 3.1 Physical Symptoms of Mothers

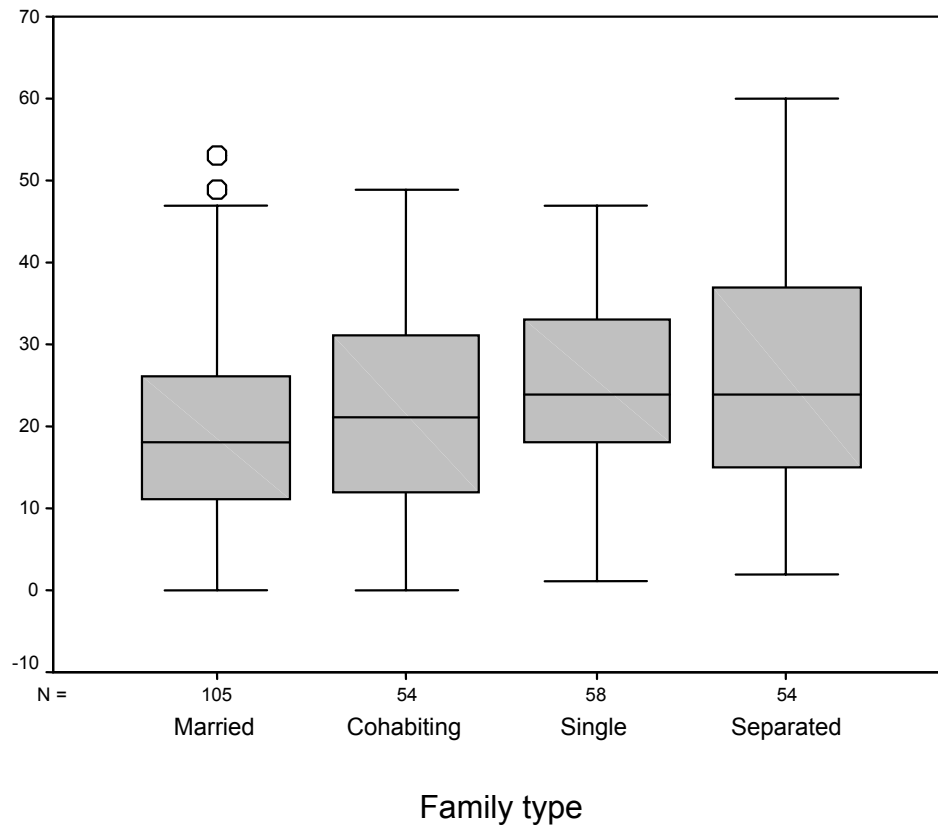
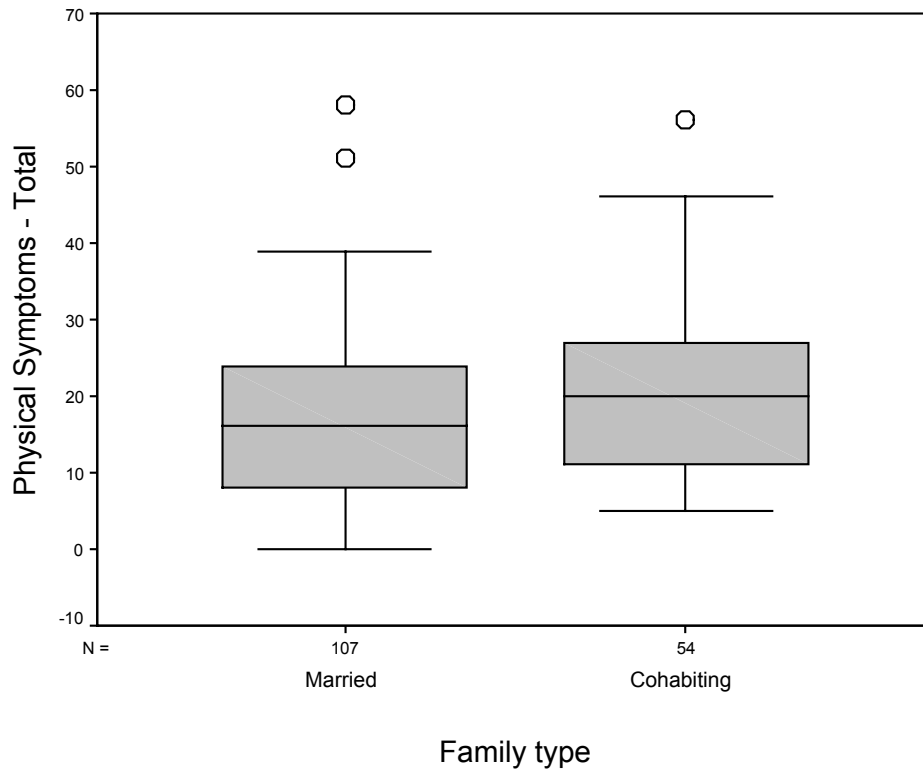


Figure 3.2 Physical Well-Being of Fathers

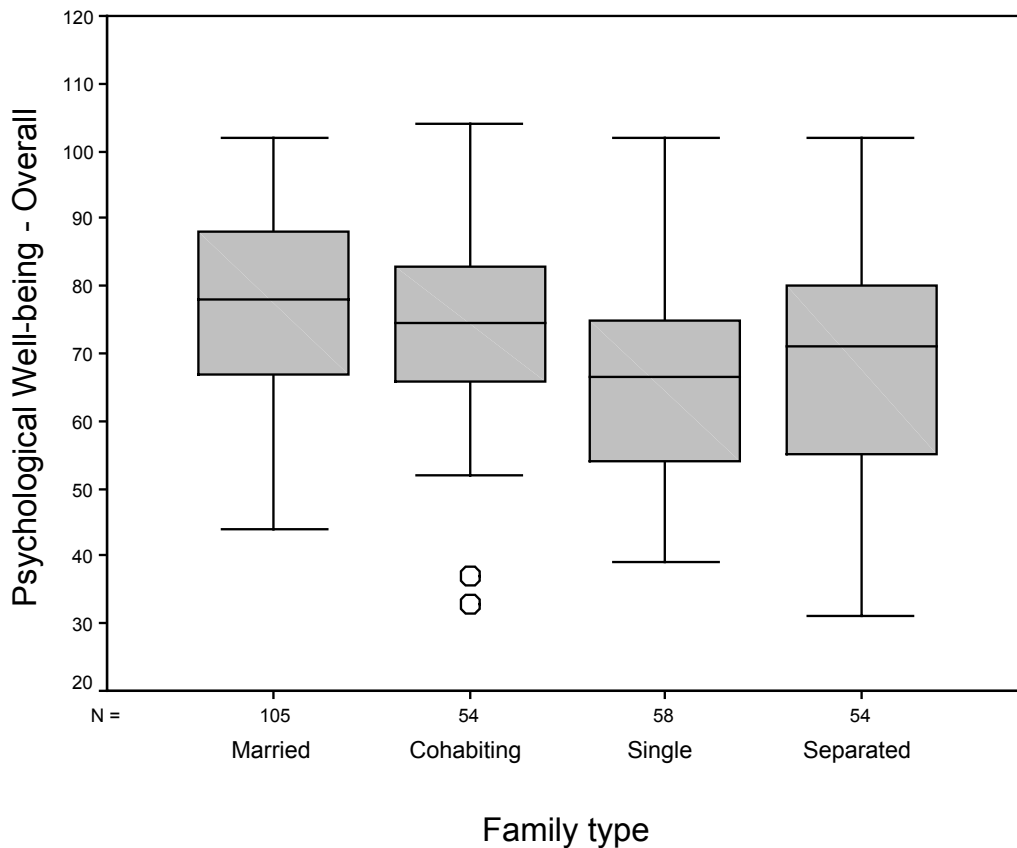


3.4 Variations in Parents' Psychological Well-being

The results of our survey indicate that the psychological well-being of mothers varies in a statistically significant fashion across the four family types; by contrast, the psychological well-being of fathers does not differ significantly between those who are married and those who are cohabiting. The scoring method for this scale is such that the *higher* the score the *higher* the parental well-being and vice versa. Bearing this in mind, the results presented in Figure 3.3 show that married mothers have the highest level of psychological well-being, followed by cohabiting mothers, separated mothers and, finally, single mothers, who have the lowest level of psychological well-being. Of the six dimensions which make up our overall scale of psychological well-being, the three with the greatest variability between family types are self-acceptance, positive relations with others and purpose in life.

As in the case of physical well-being, it is necessary to point out that the statistical relationship between psychological well-being and family type may itself depend on other variables, and these need to be examined in more detail before we can reach any conclusions about the determinants of psychological well-being.

Figure 3.3 Psychological Well-Being of Mothers



3.5 Factors Influencing Parents' Physical and Psychological Well-being

In order to describe the factors which influence the physical and psychological well-being of parents, we will provide the results of two distinct analyses. We will begin (in Section 3.5.1) by examining the influence of individual factors in relation to the well-being of *mothers in the four different family types*, as data on fathers exists for only two family types (married and cohabiting families). This obviously facilitates the most direct and powerful test of the influence of family type on physical and psychological well-being. However, the main limitation of this approach is that it excludes consideration of how the couple relationship influences physical and psychological well-being because single and separated mothers are not, according to the definition adopted in this report, in a relationship. Thus, the second analysis (described in Section 3.5.2) will examine the *well-being of men and women in married and cohabiting families*, allowing us to explore the influence of the couple relationship.

The method of analysis that we will use to examine the determinants of physical and psychological well-being is known as Structural Equation Modelling⁷⁷. This powerful methodology is particularly suitable when we are concerned to explore the complex relationships that exist between a number of dependent variables – physical and psychological well-being, for example – and a set of explanatory variables. The strength of the causal relationships depicted in the model (represented by an arrow pointing from cause to effect) is measured by a standardised regression coefficient, which expresses causal effects using a common metric (standard deviation units)⁷⁸. According to Cohen (1988), effect sizes in the region of 0.2 may be described as ‘small’, those around 0.5 as ‘medium’ and those around 0.8 as ‘large’. Positive regression coefficients indicate a direct relationship (i.e. high values on one variable co-occur with high values on another), whilst those with a minus sign before them denote an inverse relationship. Because the regression coefficients are standardised, they can be compared with each other; each coefficient measures the impact of a given variable, controlling for all other explanatory variables included in the model. The overall fit of the model to the data is estimated in Structural Equation Modelling using statistics which are designed to test if the model provides an adequate representation of the real-world processes under study. A computer programme called EQS was used to estimate all models and to calculate the effect coefficients.

3.5.1 Well-Being of Mothers in Married, Cohabiting, Single & Separated Families

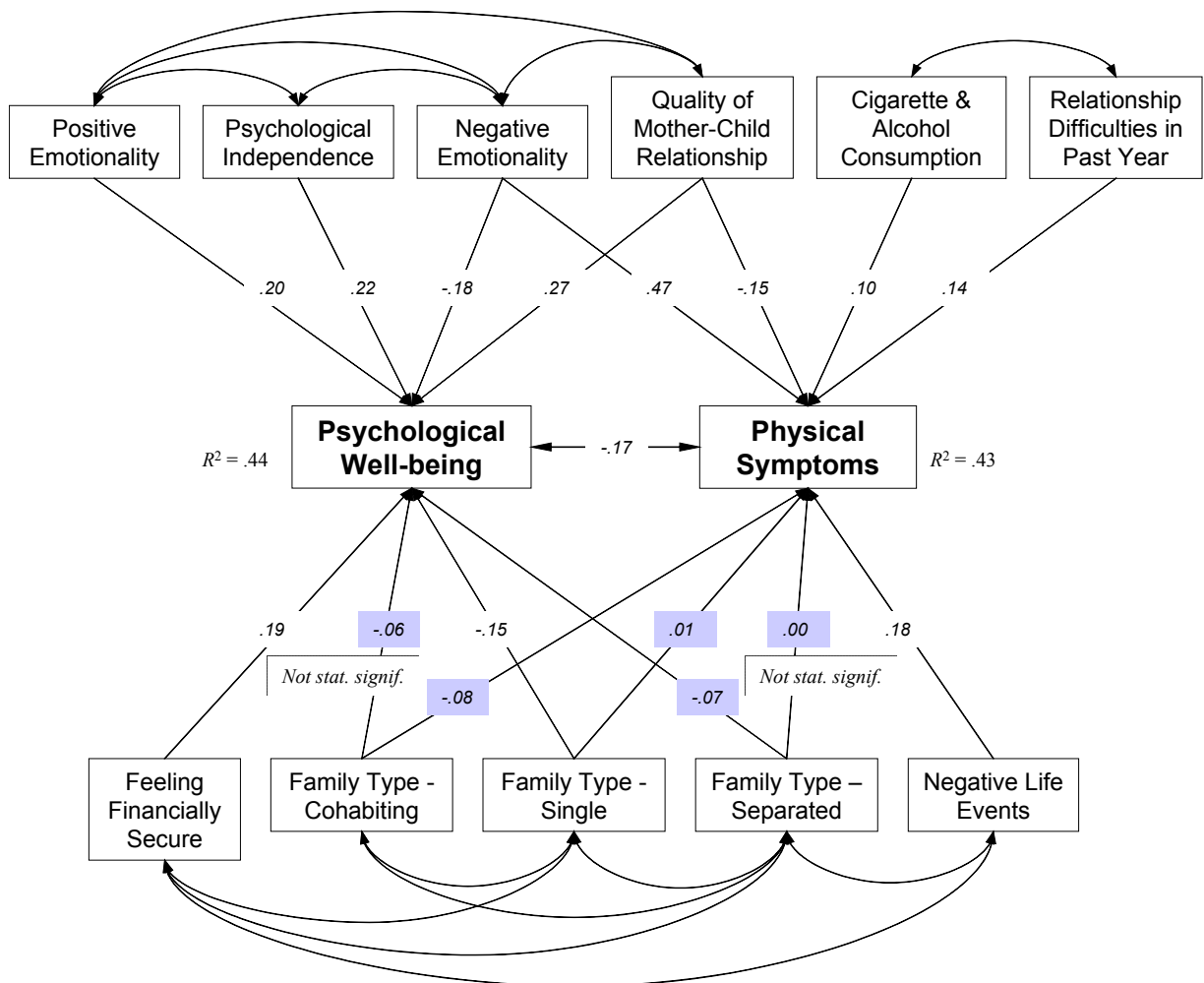
The results of the analysis of mothers' well-being are presented in the ‘path diagram’ in Figure 3.4. This diagram provides a simplified representation of the statistical model (which is a ‘path model’), where variables are linked by either one-headed arrows (which denote a relationship of cause-and-effect) or two-headed arrows (which represent correlations between variables). The model shown in Figure 3.4 explains about 40% of the variability in physical symptoms and psychological well-being, and the overall fit of the model exceeds the most

⁷⁷ Bentler, 1995; Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 1994; Kaplan, 2000; Loehlin, 1992.

⁷⁸ In this report we will use notions of ‘causality’ following the approach outlined in Pearl (2000) and Pratschke (2003).

commonly-used cut-off criteria (with a CFI of .96 and an RMSEA of .054⁷⁹), suggesting that no important relationships have been omitted. These indices should be treated as a guideline only, as a ‘model-generating’ strategy was adopted, as we excluded all variables and effects not supported by the data in order to construct a concise, and hopefully more robust, model of well-being.

Figure 3.4 Physical & Psychological Well-Being of Mothers in Married, Cohabiting, Single & Separated Families (234 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

⁷⁹ Following Hu & Bentler (1999), we will adopt a cut-off value of .95 for the CFI, interpreting this as indicating a “relatively good fit between the hypothesised model and the observed data” (p. 1). This criterion was originally proposed by Carlson & Mulaik (1993) in the wake of criticism of the tendency on the part of applied researchers to treat values greater than .90 as indicating close fit. It is worth pointing out, however, that our incremental and largely data-driven approach to model specification excludes a strictly statistical interpretation of indices such as the CFI. As a result, we cite this index primarily as a guide to the likely replicability of our results using new data. In fact, when fitting the models reported in this and later chapters, we used the results of earlier models to refine the specification of our final models, with the aim of developing a parsimonious and hopefully robust representation of the key causal influences that operate within this area.

When interpreting the results of this model, it is worth recalling that physical symptoms (shown to the right of Figure 3.4) are *negatively* associated with well-being, as a larger number of symptoms coincides with a lower level of well-being. Thus, looking first at physical symptoms, we see that the largest single influence is the mother's personality (.47), in the form of negative emotionality. This variable measures a personality trait characterised by more frequent experience of negative emotions such as feeling distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery or afraid. A key result, from the perspective of this study, is that the only statistically significant direct effect of family type is associated with the psychological well-being of mothers in one-parent single families, which is significantly lower than that of other mothers. The model reveals that family processes – in the form of the mother-child relationship (-.15) and relationship difficulties within the couple (.14) – are important influences on mothers' physical well-being. Negative life events (.18) in the past year (such as the death of a friend or close acquaintance, financial problems, a drastic fall in income, problems or stress at work, trouble with the law or experiencing robbery or assault) as well as the consumption of cigarettes and alcohol (.10) also have a significant influence on physical well-being.

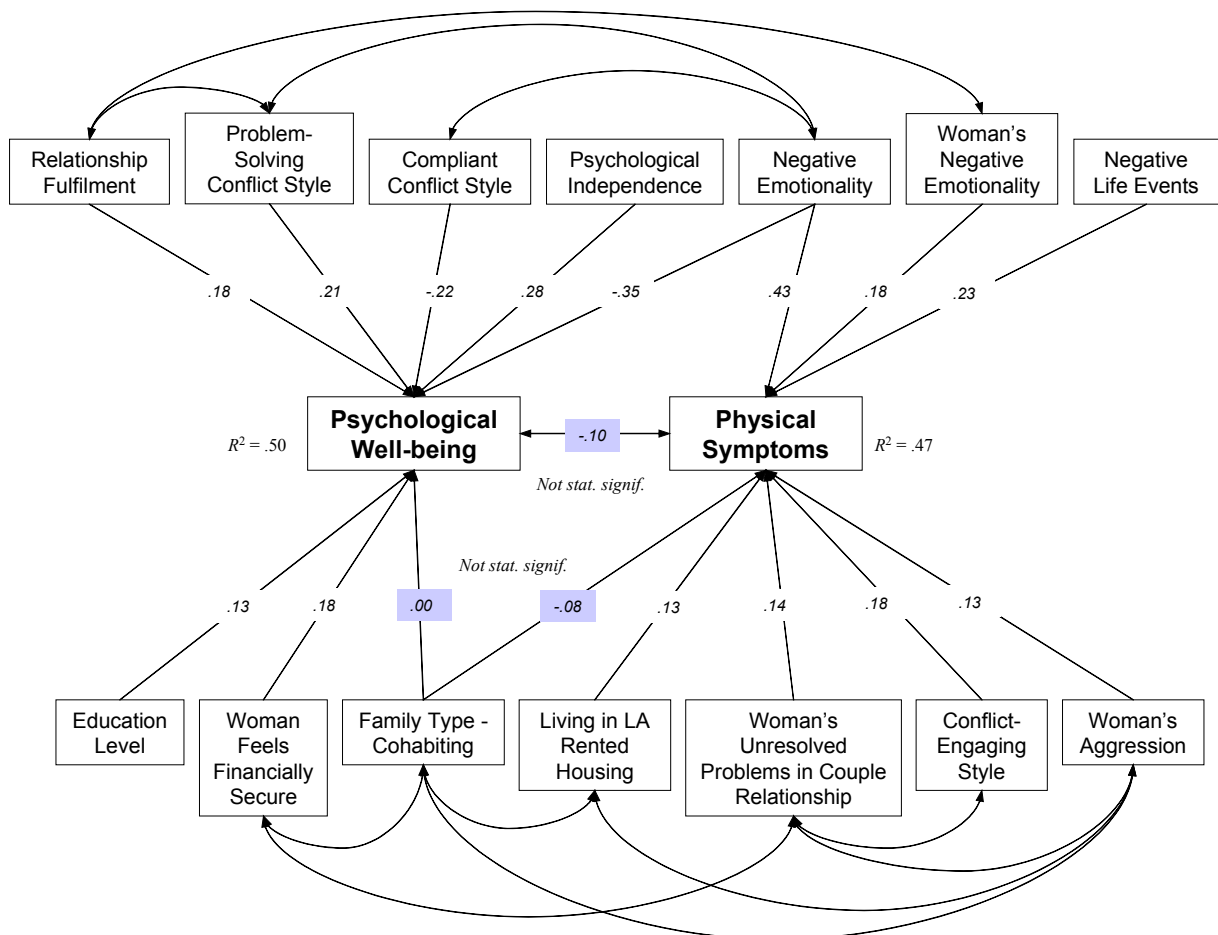
Turning to psychological well-being (shown to the left of Figure 3.4), which is positively scaled, the main influences involve personality characteristics once again: psychological independence (.22) and emotionality, in both its positive (.20) and negative (-.18) forms. Psychological independence boosts women's psychological well-being; this personality trait is associated with feelings of self-reliance, independence, assertiveness, forcefulness, willingness to take risks, dominance, aggression, individualism, competitiveness and ambition. Positive emotionality (which measures the personality trait associated with feeling enthusiastic, excited, strong, interested, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive and active) increases psychological well-being, while negative emotionality reduces it. Psychological well-being is directly related to the mother-child relationship (.27), the second-largest effect in the model, while mothers who feel more financially secure have significantly higher levels of psychological well-being (.19).

Overall, these results show that personality characteristics have a strong influence on the physical and psychological well-being of mothers, particularly the balance of positive and negative emotions and psychological independence, which may facilitate the maintenance of a healthy balance between the needs of the self and those of other family members. The parent-child relationship also has a significant influence on both the physical and psychological well-being of mothers, while difficulties in the relationship with one's partner also impact on physical well-being. It is noteworthy that family type only has a significant influence on the psychological well-being of mothers from one-parent single families, and the only measure of the socio-economic situation of the family that has a statistically significant influence on well-being is feeling financially secure.

3.5.2 Well-Being of Mothers and Fathers in Married and Cohabiting Families

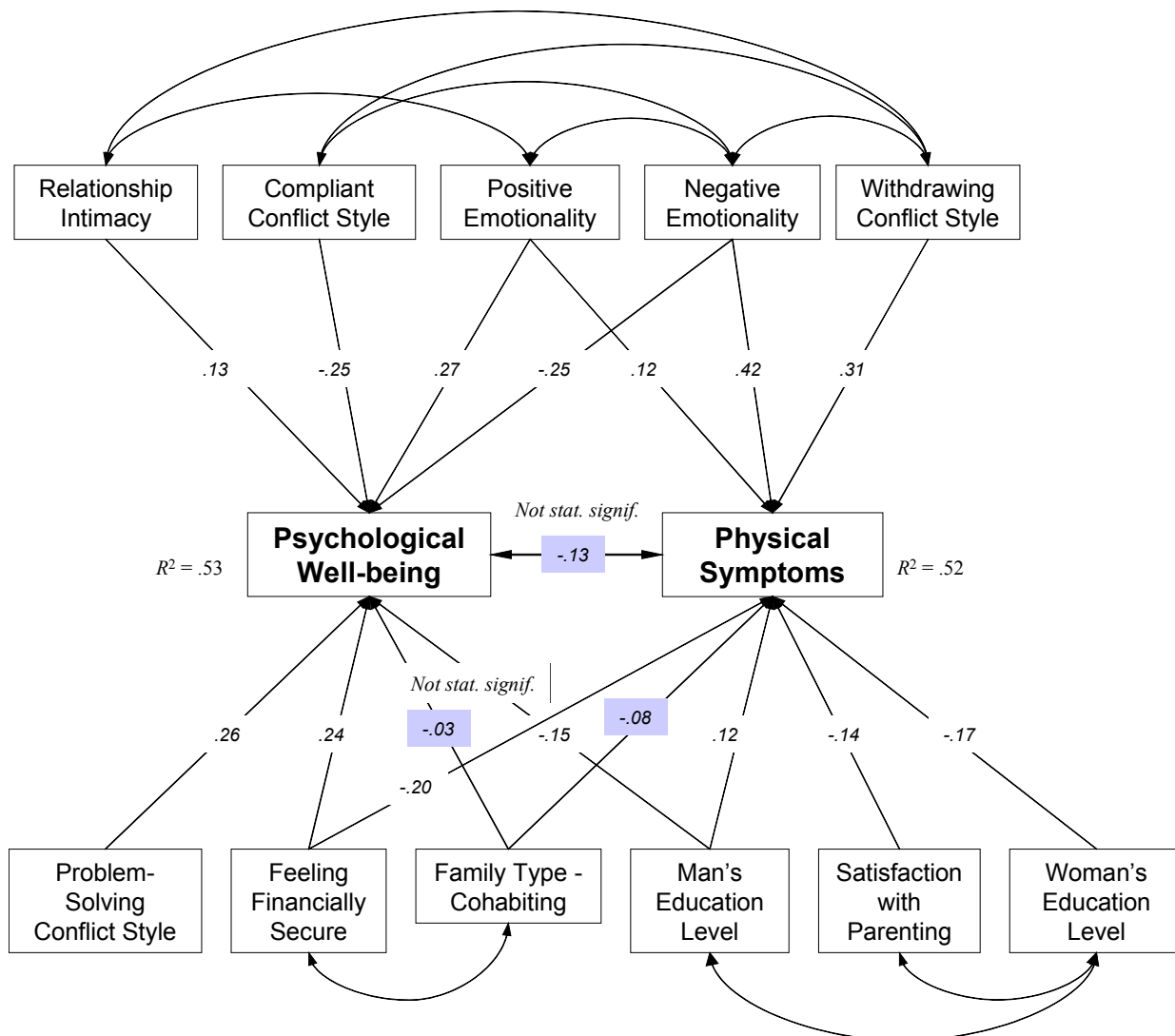
The results of the analysis based on fathers and mothers in married and cohabiting relationships, are summarised in Figures 3.5 and 3.6. Both models explain about 50% of the variability in physical and psychological well-being, while the overall fit of these model is acceptable (with a CFI of .94 and a RMSEA of .053 for the model represented in Figure 3.5 and a CFI of .96 and a RMSEA of .056 for that shown in Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.5 Physical & Psychological Well-Being of Fathers in Married & Cohabiting Families (161 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

Figure 3.6 Physical and Psychological Well-Being of Mothers in Married & Cohabiting Families (161 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

The results show that the main factors which influence the physical and psychological well-being of married or cohabiting fathers and mothers are personality attributes (notably positive and negative emotionality and psychological independence), relationship characteristics (notably intimacy, fulfilment and conflict resolution style), socio-economic characteristics (feeling financially secure, education and housing type) and lifestyle variables (smoking and alcohol). No statistically significant effects are found in relation to the distinction between married and cohabiting parents, suggesting that marriage, per se, has no independent effect on parental well-being once we control for key relationship, personality and contextual factors.

Beginning with the physical well-being of fathers, it is apparent that their physical symptoms are strongly influenced by personality traits such as their own negative emotionality (.43) and, interestingly, their *partner's* negative emotionality (.18). As we noted earlier, negative emotionality is a *personality trait* associated with the frequency with which one experiences negative *states* such as feeling distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile,

irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery or afraid. Negative life events over the past year also have a significant impact (.23), as does the father's use of conflict engagement as a response to problems in the relationship (.18). This scale includes responses such as 'launching personal attacks', 'exploding and getting out of control', 'getting carried away, saying things that aren't meant', and 'throwing insults'. Other significant influences include the extent to which the man's *partner* perceives unresolved problems in the relationship (.14), whether she uses physical or psychological aggression against him (.13) and whether the family rents their house from the Local Authority (.13). It is very interesting to find a statistically significant influence between aggression by the *female* partner, on the one hand (as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale II, which includes items such as 'I insulted or swore at my partner', 'I slapped my partner' and 'I threatened to hit or throw something at my partner'), and the physical well-being of the *male* partner, an issue that we will return to at the end of this chapter.

The physical well-being of married and cohabiting mothers is also strongly affected by their negative emotionality (.42), although, unlike fathers, they are not affected by their partner's attributes. This suggests that women may have a key role in providing the emotional 'climate' for family interactions. As in the case of fathers, negative emotionality is most strongly associated with physical symptoms, whilst positive emotionality promotes psychological well-being (.27) (although there is a small cross-loading on physical symptoms, suggesting that emotionality per se may be associated with a higher level of symptoms). In terms of the standardised effects, the next largest influence on the physical symptoms experienced by married and cohabiting mothers is associated with relationship characteristics, such as having a 'withdrawing' approach to conflict resolution (.31). The latter scale includes responses such as 'remaining silent for long periods of time', 'reaching a limit and refusing to talk any further', 'not wanting to hear what my partner has to say', and 'withdrawing, acting distant and not interested'.

The mother-child relationship, as before, has an influence on physical well-being: mothers who are more satisfied as parents tend to have fewer physical symptoms (-.14). The education level of both the mother herself and her partner influence the mother's physical symptoms in an intriguing manner, the former having an ameliorative effect (more highly-educated mothers experiencing fewer symptoms) and the latter a pejorative effect (mothers with more highly-educated partners experience *more* symptoms). This is unlikely to represent a statistical artifact, as the partner's education level also has a negative effect on psychological well-being, and we must therefore seek concrete explanations. The most plausible hypothesis is that the negative influence of the partner's education level (once we control for that of the mother herself) captures social class differences in women's role, status and well-being, perhaps characterised by greater social isolation and a more exclusive focus upon family-related and domestic tasks. Clearly, this hypothesis is rather tentative and the above pattern of effects should be studied carefully before any firm conclusions are drawn.

Turning to psychological well-being, we can see from Figures 3.5 and 3.6 that personality attributes have the largest standardised effects: for fathers this takes the form of negative emotionality (-.35) and psychological independence (.28) and positive emotionality (.27); for mothers this takes the form of negative emotionality (-.25). In terms of standardised effect sizes, the next most important influence is associated with relationship

variables: fathers whose relational needs are fulfilled to a greater extent (such as the need for intimacy, companionship, sex, security and emotional involvement) have higher levels of psychological well-being (.18). Similarly, fathers who have a positive problem-solving approach to conflicts in their relationship have higher levels of psychological well-being (.21), while those with a 'compliant' conflict resolution style tend to have lower levels (-.22). Our measure of positive problem-solving includes responses to conflict such as 'focusing on the problem at hand', 'sitting down and discussing differences constructively', 'finding solutions that are acceptable to each of us', and 'negotiating and compromising'; our measure of 'compliant' conflict styles includes 'not being willing to stick up for myself', 'being too willing to agree', 'not defending my position' and 'giving in with little attempt to present my side'. Other statistically significant factors include the partner's sense of financial security (.18) and the father's own education level (.13).

The determinants of mothers' psychological well-being are somewhat similar, although they give greater weight to intimacy (.13) rather than fulfilment (our intimacy scale includes items on showing affection, understanding feelings and feeling close). Conflict resolution styles (.26 for positive problem-solving and -.25 for compliant conflict style) also have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of mothers. Interestingly, however, it is the *mother's* (rather than the *partner's*) sense of financial security that influences the psychological well-being of both partners (.24 for the mother and .18 for the father), suggesting once again that mothers' expectations may play a key role in relation to the well-being of individual family members. Interestingly, mother's sense of financial security influences their physical symptoms (-.20) almost as much as their psychological well-being.

Overall, the results of these two models underline the importance of personality characteristics, family processes and social class (as measured by education levels and feeling financially secure) in determining physical and psychological well-being. The primacy of negative emotionality arises from the fact that individuals with this trait have a "tendency to dwell upon and magnify mistakes, frustrations, disappointments, and threats"⁸⁰. Other research has shown that negative emotionality is linked to self-reported stress and poor coping⁸¹, health complaints⁸², the frequency with which unpleasant events are reported⁸³, and also appears to heighten the negative psychological and even physiological consequences of marital conflict⁸⁴. A synthesis of the research has concluded that individuals high in negative emotionality are: "a) more likely to experience distress and dissatisfaction; b) more introspective and dwell more on their failures and shortcomings; c) tend to focus on the negative side of the world in general; and, therefore, d) have a less favourable self-view and are more dissatisfied with themselves and their lives"⁸⁵.

The quality of the couple relationship and the style of resolving conflicts within it are clearly central to the physical and psychological well-being of both men and women; a positive problem-solving approach to

⁸⁰ Watson and Clark, 1988:466

⁸¹ Clark & Watson, 1986.

⁸² Beiser, 1974.

⁸³ Stone, 1981.

⁸⁴ Suls and Wan, 1993; Smith and Brown, 1991; Smith and Gallo, 1999; G. E. Miller et al., 1999.

⁸⁵ Burke, Brief and George, 1993: 402-403.

resolving conflict increases well-being, while approaches to conflict which are compliant, withdrawing or engaging decrease well-being. Socio-economic circumstances have a relatively small direct effect on well-being via perceptions of financial position and education levels, although other measures, including social class position and family income do not have any direct predictive power.

In order to investigate this rather surprising finding, we constructed a series of Multiple Regression models in which the influence of socio-economic context on key variables in the above models (notably positive and negative emotionality, psychological independence and interdependence) was explored. These models are summarised in the Appendix to Chapter Three. We found that, for the women in our sample, negative emotionality is strongly influenced by support networks (the standardised regression coefficient is $-.31$), whether their parents are/were separated ($.20$) and by the social class location of their own family ($-.16$). Support networks were measured by responses to the question “If you needed their help, how supportive do you think the following people would be?”, followed by a list of ten different groups. For the men in our sample, negative emotionality is influenced by job satisfaction ($-.19$) and whether their parents are/were separated ($-.21$).

As far as positive emotionality is concerned, the key influences for women are their support networks ($.40$) and overall family income level ($.12$), whilst for men, positive emotionality is influenced by job satisfaction ($.33$), but also by their own age ($-.17$), support networks ($.16$) and social class position ($.15$). For women, psychological independence is negatively associated with support networks ($.16$) and the happiness of their parents’ relationship ($-.14$). For men, by contrast, the only significant influence is job satisfaction ($.23$). It is also interesting to note that feeling financially secure is, for women, related to family type ($-.30$ for one-parent separated families compared to married, $-.29$ for one-parent single families compared to married and $-.12$ for cohabiting families vis-à-vis families with two married parents), as well as family social class ($.23$) and their own job satisfaction ($.14$).

Thus, the influence of the socio-economic context is mediated by variables that reflect individual attributes and feelings, and its effect on parental well-being is therefore ‘channelled’ through these variables. The socio-economic context includes, crucially, the resources available to the family and their access to rewarding work opportunities, but also the support networks of family members and even their experiences in their family of origin. For example, the stability of their own parents’ marriage has a significant influence on the tendency of the adults in our sample to experience negative emotions such as guilt, fear, shame, hostility etc. Following an influential strand in social psychological theory⁸⁶, we can therefore distinguish between the family, on the one hand, and the various ‘ecological niches’ (such as support networks, the couple relationship of one’s own parents, and economic circumstances such as income and job satisfaction) within which it is situated. To the extent that we pay attention to personality traits and family processes as direct determinants of family well-being, we should not forget that these are also sensitive to the wider context, which may consequently place constraints on our ability to intervene and to assist families experiencing difficulties.

⁸⁶ Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989.

3.6 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter we have shown that, when considered in isolation from other factors, the physical and psychological well-being of parents varies significantly from one family type to another. However, this association is largely spurious, and practically disappears when we take into account a limited number of explanatory factors. The only statistically significant effect of family structure that remains is associated with the psychological well-being of mothers in one-parent single families: mothers in one-parent single families have poorer psychological well-being than mothers in all other family types.

In order to identify factors which influence physical and psychological well-being, we undertook two distinct analyses. First, we examined the well-being of mothers in married, cohabiting, single and separated families. We then analysed the well-being of men and women in married and cohabiting families, using this data to explore the influence of the couple relationship on individual well-being.

The results of the first analysis show that personality characteristics exercise an important and moderately strong influence on the physical and psychological well-being of mothers and fathers, particularly psychological independence and what we have referred to as positive and negative emotionality. Family processes such as the parent-child relationship and styles of conflict resolution have a significant influence on both physical and psychological well-being, while difficulties in the relationship with one's partner also impact on the physical well-being of mothers.

The results of the second analysis also underline the importance of personality characteristics and family relationships in determining physical and psychological well-being. Attributes such as negative emotionality and psychological independence represent primary influences on the physical and psychological well-being of men and women. Although these represent relatively stable aspects of the psychological make-up of the individual, our data suggest that these are also sensitive to the socio-economic context such as support networks, the couple relationship of one's own parents, and economic circumstances such as income and job satisfaction. The quality of the couple relationship and styles for resolving conflict appear to play a central role for both men and women; a positive problem-solving approach to resolving conflicts increases well-being, while approaches to conflict which are compliant, withdrawing or engaging decrease well-being. Although 'objective' measures of the socio-economic context such as family income and social class position do not appear to have a 'direct' effect on well-being (their influence being mediated primarily by personality factors) once we have controlled for the factors discussed above, women's feelings of financial security and both women's and men's education levels are nevertheless significant predictors, particularly as far as psychological well-being is concerned.

We have drawn attention to three 'thought-provoking' findings and we sought to provide plausible explanations for these that draw on the sociological and social psychological literature. The first concerns physical and psychological aggression by women and its effects on the physical well-being of their male partners. In a meta-analysis of a large number of studies of aggression in intimate heterosexual relationships, one researcher found

that women have a slightly higher rate of reported aggression against their partners, and that this pattern, rather than being restricted to the United States, is even more marked in other Western countries⁸⁷. Nevertheless, Archer found that significantly more women than men are actually injured by their partners, although gender differences in relation to this are relatively small. Thus, it is quite possible that aggression by their partners may have detectable effects on the physical well-being of fathers in Irish families, even though our research does not identify an analogous effect on the well-being of mothers. The second ‘surprising’ finding that we drew attention to in this chapter involves the effect of men’s education levels on their partner’s physical and psychological well-being, which we found to be negative. Although we can only provide a tentative explanation for this finding, we believe that it is likely to represent a robust result; future research on family well-being could fruitfully investigate this issue in greater detail. Finally, we showed that one of the *indirect* influences on physical and psychological well-being is the stability of the parents’ marriage, which hints at the existence of powerful inter-generational effects that may be mediated by personality factors such as negative emotionality and psychological independence. We will return to this issue later, as ways of handling parents’ experiences in their own ‘family of origin’ also appear to have an influence on their approach to conflict resolution and on their children’s well-being.

These findings underline the complexity of the relationship between ‘family types’ and ‘well-being’. Despite our initial finding that, when taken in isolation from other variables, the well-being of men and women varies according to the structure of their families, this association is largely ‘spurious’, in the sense that it disappears when additional factors are introduced. This underlines the appropriateness of the theoretical framework, measurement instruments and statistical methods employed in this chapter: our results show that it is possible to go beyond the surface appearances to shed light on the key factors that influence the well-being of mothers and fathers, namely personality attributes, family processes and socio-economic background factors.

These findings have important implications for family policy, as they suggest that couple relationships and parent-child relationships contribute to physical and psychological well-being within the framework provided by personality attributes and external circumstances. Although personality traits are relatively stable over time, this should not be taken as implying that their influence on well-being is cast in stone; on the contrary, parents can, with the appropriate assistance, come to recognise the effects of their emotional states on other family members and to tackle the depression and anxiety which may accompany negative emotional states. Moreover, it is possible to reduce the impact of negative events and financial uncertainty by providing support mechanisms for families and by working towards the reduction of social class and income inequalities. Clearly, however, the family research agenda and the policy-making process must develop in tandem in order to improve the evidence base available to policy-makers and to sharpen the focus of applied social research.

⁸⁷ Archer, 2000: 666; see also McKeown and Kidd, 2002.

Chapter Four

The Quality of Couple Relationships

4.1 Introduction

Intimate relationships which are experienced as fulfilling and satisfying are, as the analysis presented in the previous chapter shows, important to the physical and psychological well-being of men and women. This conclusion finds extensive support in the scientific research literature on married couples. In this chapter, we will explore the factors which influence the quality of intimate relationships between married and cohabiting couples. We will begin by describing the scales that we used to measure relationship quality (Section 4.2), moving on to examine whether there are statistically significant differences between married and cohabiting couples in this respect (Section 4.3). This is followed by an analysis of the factors which influence the quality of the couple relationship (Section 4.4), and the chapter concludes with a brief summary of the key findings (Section 4.5).

4.2 Scales for Measuring the Quality of Couple Relationships

We used two scales to measure the quality of couple relationships: Rusbult's Fulfilment of Needs Scale⁸⁸ and Miller's Social Intimacy Scale⁸⁹. The former measures the extent to which a given intimate relationship fulfils the respondent's need for intimacy, companionship, sex, security and emotional involvement. Whereas the original version of this scale uses a four-point response scale ('don't agree at all', 'agree slightly', 'agree moderately', 'agree completely'), we decided to adopt a five-point scale anchored at each extreme by the phrases 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree', including a mid-point that is labelled 'neither agree nor disagree'. Each of the five items has the same format ('My partner fulfils my needs for intimacy / companionship / sex / security / emotional involvement'), but each also contains a brief explanation in parentheses in order to unify the respondents' frame of reference: intimacy (sharing personal thoughts, secrets, etc), companionship (doing things together, enjoying each other's company), sex (expressing affection, kissing, sexual intimacy, etc), security (trust my partner, feel comfortable in a stable relationship, etc), and emotional involvement (feeling emotionally attached, feeling good when the other feels good, etc). The scale has excellent psychometric properties, including high reliability (coefficient alpha for our sample is .93).

The second scale, the Miller Social Intimacy Scale, has been used to assess intimacy in the context of a wide range of relationships and friendships. As such, it provides a different perspective on relationship quality when compared with traditional measures of marital satisfaction. It measures the psychological significance of marital and other close relationships and is based on a sizeable literature which suggests that intimacy is an effective predictor of health outcomes. The original scale has 17 items, which we reduced to seven, while also improving the readability of some of the items; respondents are asked to respond to each item using a ten-point response

⁸⁸ Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew, 1998.

⁸⁹ Miller and Lefcourt, 1982.

scale. Examples of component items include: ‘how often do you show your partner affection?’; ‘how often do you share very personal information with your partner?’; ‘how often do you feel close to your partner?’; ‘how important is it that your partner understands your feelings?’. As before, this scale has highly satisfactory psychometric properties in terms of reliability (coefficient alpha is .84).

4.3 Variation in Couple Relationships

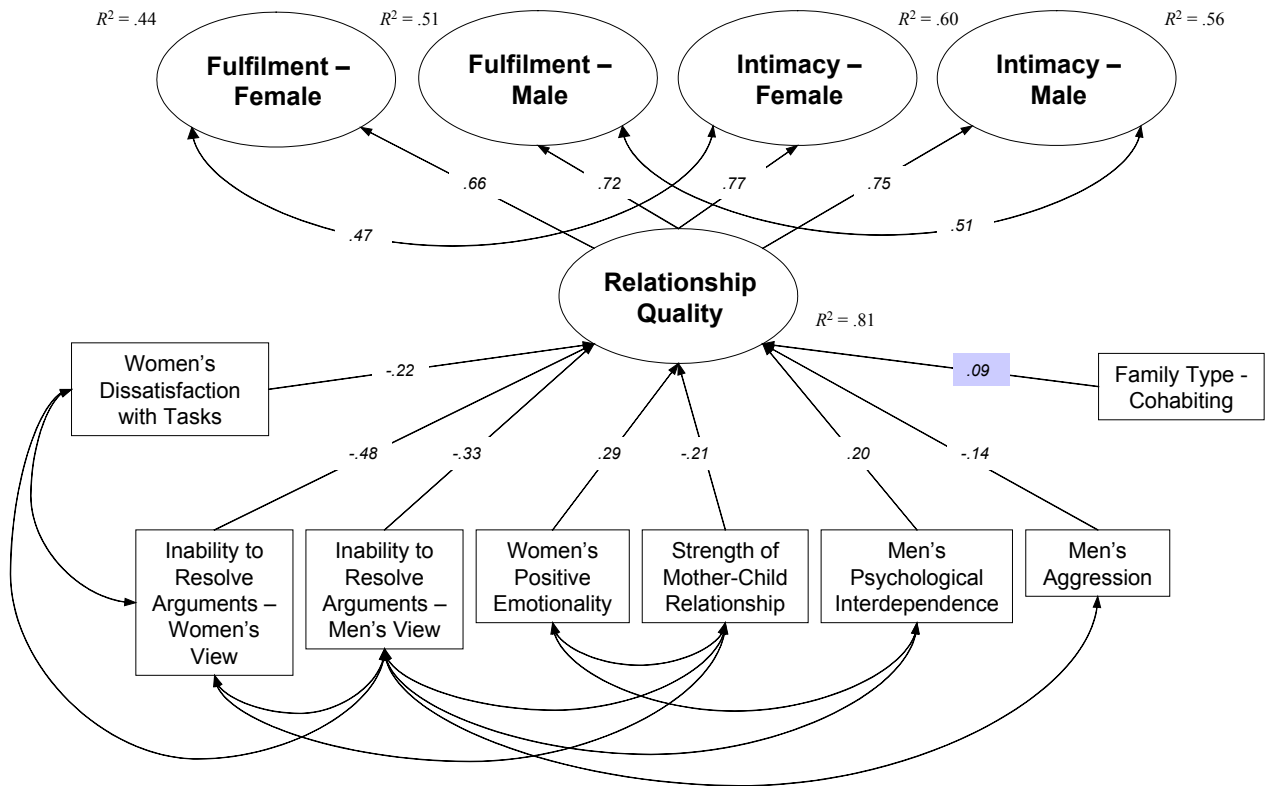
The results of our survey found no statistically significant differences in relationship quality between men and women in married and cohabiting families, even when these variables are taken in isolation from other factors. The question nevertheless remains as to what factors influence fulfilment and intimacy in the context of these couple relationships.

4.4 Factors that Influence the Quality of Couple Relationships

In the following analysis, we conceptualise the quality of the couple relationship as a ‘latent’ variable, so-called because it is observed indirectly through our measurement of fulfilment and intimacy as experienced by married and cohabiting men and women. In other words, relationship quality as used in Figure 4.1, is defined as the ‘unobserved cause’ of the associations between the way men and women experience fulfilment and intimacy in their relationships and these associations were estimated using Second-Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model. The model in Figure 4.1 explains 81% of the variability in the quality of couple relationships – an extremely high percentage in the context of family research – and the overall fit of the model is highly acceptable (with a CFI of .94 and a RMSEA of .056), given its size and complexity.

The results indicate that the quality of couple relationships is determined by two main clusters of variables: (i) relationship skills / behaviours and (ii) personality attributes. Family structure – whether the couple is married or cohabiting – does not have a statistically significant influence on the quality of the couple relationship.

Figure 4.1 Quality of Couple Relationship in Married & Cohabiting Families (161 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

The key relationship variable which influences the quality of couple relationships is the partners' ability to resolve arguments, as measured by the following four items: 'by the end of an argument, each of us has been given a fair hearing', 'overall, I'd say we're pretty good at solving our problems', 'our arguments are left hanging and unresolved', 'we go for days without settling our differences'. Women's responses are more influential than men's, in terms of the standardised coefficients (-.48 compared to -.33), although both are significantly related to relationship quality as well as being quite strongly correlated (.55). In addition, women's dissatisfaction with the sharing of household tasks, childcare and decision-making has a negative influence on the quality of the couple relationship (-.24). Previous research has shown that men's involvement in family tasks influences both their wives' marital satisfaction and their own⁹⁰; this research has observed that role arrangements and marital satisfaction seem to move in tandem, implying a 'circular' rather than a 'linear' model of causality. This is consistent with our earlier research on unhappy marriages⁹¹, which suggested that dissatisfaction with the sharing of domestic tasks may not only represent a *cause* of dissatisfaction in intimate relationships, but may also be an *effect* of relationship difficulties.

Our analysis also reveals that men's physical and psychological aggression towards their partner (.14) has a negative effect on relationship quality, itself being related to men's perceptions of the couple's ability to resolve their differences (.19). Aggression is measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTSII), as we noted in the

⁹⁰ Cowan and Cowan, 1988: 117-118.

previous chapter. This finding sheds further light on the consequences of aggression within families; whereas in the previous chapter we reported that aggression by women has a measurable and statistically significant effect on the physical well-being of their partners, we may conclude that aggression by men also has adverse effects on intimate relationships.

Interestingly, and initially rather counter-intuitively, there appears to be a certain trade-off between the quality of the couple relationship and the mother-child relationship (-.21), since a weak mother-child relationship tends to encourage a relatively stronger couple relationship and vice versa. These two sets of relationships may come to represent *alternative* expressions of maternal intimacy, and this may be particularly important in situations where couples are experiencing relationship difficulties. This could account for the inverse relationship between the couple relationship and the mother-child relationship (as measured by the PCRI scales for satisfaction, communication, involvement, limit-setting and independence), although obviously further research on this issue would be both useful and important.

Psychological traits also play a very influential role in determining relationship quality. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, high positive emotionality “reflects the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert”, whereas low positive emotionality “is characterised by sadness and lethargy”⁹². Women’s positive emotionality has a positive influence on relationship quality (.29); men who are high in psychological interdependence (defined in terms of the frequency with which they feel shy, affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive to other’s needs, understanding, compassionate, soft-spoken, warm, tender and gentle) tend to have more fulfilling and intimate relationships (.20). Husbands’ psychological interdependence has been linked with the extent to which spouses occupy a central place in each other’s day-to-day leisure activities and with husbands’ involvement in household work⁹³: “Husbands and wives who have expressive personalities are more affectionate, engage in more maintenance, report lower levels of marital conflict, and are more in love and satisfied with their marriage. Expressive men are seen by their wives as engaging in more maintenance behaviour; husbands married to expressive women see less conflict in their marriage”⁹⁴.

In the previous chapter, we observed that women’s influence in two-parent families tends to be more pervasive than men’s, in the sense that their characteristics tend to influence not only their own physical and psychological well-being but also that of their partner. A similar phenomenon is apparent in terms of relationship quality, which is influenced by women’s views on the division of tasks, women’s positive emotionality, the strength of the *mother*-child relationship, and especially by women’s views on the resolution of differences within the relationship. This finding is consistent with the view that women are more likely to function as ‘barometers’⁹⁵ in intimate relationships and to ‘mend or end’⁹⁶ difficult relationships. In other words, women seem to exercise more influence than men on the well-being of two-parent families, at least as far as adult well-being is

⁹¹ See McKeown, Lehane, Rock, Haase and Pratschke, 2002: pp. 59-60.

⁹² Watson et al., 1988: 1063.

⁹³ Huston and Geis, 1993; Huston and Houts, 1998: 119; Lamke, 1989; Lamke et al., 1995.

⁹⁴ Huston & Houts, 1998: 143.

⁹⁵ Floyd and Markman, 1983.

⁹⁶ Kiecolt-Glaser, 2001: 25.

concerned; as we shall see in Chapter Five below, women also exercise more influence than men on the well-being of children. Nevertheless, men's views about the couple's ability to resolve their differences, their degree of psychological interdependence and (in a negative sense) their aggression towards their partners also have a considerable impact on the relationship, reinforcing the basic point that couple relationships are sensitive to the attributes and behaviours of *both* partners.

Although the socio-economic context of the couple relationship appears to have no influence on fulfilment and intimacy, in-depth analysis of the variables shown in Figure 4.1 (see the Appendix to Chapter Three at the end of this report) reveals that this nevertheless has an *indirect* impact. For example, the female partner's perceptions about ineffective arguing are shaped by her support network (-.34) and education level (-.16), and the male partner's perceptions are influenced by his support network (-.22), the happiness of his parents' relationship (-.19) and the social class position of the family (-.16). Thus, the two key predictors of the quality of couple relationships depend, in turn, on the extent to which the partners feel supported, on their access to resources as well as on education level (for the female partner) and the happiness of the parents' marriage (for the male partner).

4.5 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the quality of intimate relationships among married and cohabiting couples using scales which measure relationship fulfilment and relationship intimacy. The results of our analysis of the survey data reveal no statistically significant differences in the quality of intimate relationships between men and women in married and cohabiting families.

We undertook a detailed analysis of relationship quality using a large number of variables, and found that the two main influences on relationship quality are relationship skills / behaviours and personality traits. The key relationship skill in this context is the ability to resolve arguments. Women's views are more influential than men's in terms of the impact of this variable on the couple relationship, although both perspectives have a distinct contribution to the explanation of variations in relationship quality. The key personality traits which have a positive influence on couple relationships are women's positive emotionality and men's psychological interdependence. Women's influence on the couple relationship, as on physical and psychological well-being, tends to be more pervasive than men's, in the sense that their characteristics tend to have greater explanatory power on the dependent variable in the model.

These results lead us to the disarmingly straightforward conclusion that one of the main differences between couples who experience their relationships as fulfilling and intimate and those who do not is their ability to resolve arguments. Naturally, it is easier to identify this influence than to show how it relates to other aspects of the relationship. We have also observed that the ability to resolve arguments is influenced above all by the partners' support networks, suggesting that social support can help to defuse unresolved conflicts within the couple relationship (see Appendix to Chapter Three). Thus, couples who are able to state that 'by the end of an argument, each of us has been given a fair hearing' and 'overall I'd say we're pretty good at solving our

problems' tend to have more satisfying relationships. By contrast, couples who acknowledge that 'our arguments are left hanging and unresolved' and 'we go for days without settling our differences', tend to have less satisfying relationships.

We may therefore conclude that the quality of couple relationships depends above all on the learned skills of being able to listen to the other person, to resolve arguments without generating negative emotions and without unleashing aggressive behaviour. Perhaps the significance of support networks derives precisely from the fact that they enhance and promote such skills, but may also be an indicator of the presence of such skills. Personality traits such as positive emotionality and psychological interdependence may create an emotional 'climate' that is amenable to successful outcomes in this respect, but this does not exclude the possibility that improving 'relationship skills' can boost relationship quality. On the contrary, improved relationship skills and behaviours are likely to have a particularly beneficial impact precisely where one or both partners have a tendency towards negative attributions and self-representations or towards an overly individualistic response to relationship difficulties.

Chapter Five

The Well-Being of Children

5.1 Introduction

The experience of being well, both physically and psychologically, refers to a range of positive experiences such as “having a sense of control over one’s fate, a sense of purpose and belongingness, and a basic satisfaction with oneself and one’s existence ... life satisfaction or gratification in living”⁹⁷. Well-being is not reducible to the absence of symptoms. However, as we have seen in the case of parents (Chapter Three), the presence of symptoms can provide an indicator of well-being and we use that insight to assess the well-being of children in this chapter. As with parents, we used self-report instruments to measure symptoms and for this reason, all children were aged 11-16 and are therefore capable of completing the child questionnaire which we distributed. Our concept of child well-being combines both a physical and a psychological dimension as well as a range of positive and negative symptoms which we describe in more detail in the next section (Section 5.2). We report on the variation in child well-being in different family types (Section 5.3) before undertaking a more detailed analysis of the factors which shape the well-being of children (Section 5.4). We conclude with a brief summary of the key findings (Section 5.5).

5.2 Scales for Measuring Children’s Well-being

The scales for measuring children’s well-being that we will use in this chapter cover both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects of children’s experience of life. The former are measured using the short version of the Multi-Dimensional Students Life Satisfaction Scale⁹⁸. The full version of this measurement instrument has 40 items covering five sub-scales: family, friends, school, living environment and self. We retained all five sub-scales, as we believe that a multi-dimensional perspective on life satisfaction is important, although we reduced the overall number of items to 21 (four items for each of four different sub-scales and five items for the fifth). Moreover, in contrast to the original version, which uses a four-point scale (never, sometimes, often, almost always), we decided to use a six-point ‘agree-disagree’ scale, as this seems more appropriate given the actual wording of the items. In order to provide more detailed information on the home environment dimension, we added a new item specifically related to this (“I feel secure in my neighbourhood”). Some examples of the items for each of the sub-scales are: family (‘I enjoy being at home with my family’), friends (‘I have a lot of fun with my friends’), school (‘I wish I didn’t have to go to school’), home environment (‘I like where I live’), and self (‘I am a nice person’). We decided to treat the Beck Self-Concept Scale⁹⁹ as a further indicator of positive well-being, as this includes items such as ‘I like myself’, ‘I do things well’, ‘I like my body’, ‘I am a good person’, effectively enriching the last sub-scale of the life satisfaction scale. Coefficient alpha (i.e. reliability) for the items that comprise these six sub-scales is .82.

⁹⁷ Cowen, 1991: 404.

⁹⁸ Huebner, 2001.

We also collected data on a range of negative symptoms associated with anxiety, depression, anger, disruptive behaviour and physical symptoms, using scales that were developed specifically for children within the age range of our sample. The first four concepts mentioned above were measured using the Beck Youth Inventories for anxiety, depression, anger and disruptive behaviour¹⁰⁰. The following are some examples of items from the different scales: anxiety ('I worry', 'I am afraid that I will make mistakes, I have problems sleeping'); depression ('I think that my life is bad', 'I feel lonely', 'I feel sad'); anger ('I feel like screaming', 'I think life is unfair', 'I hate people'); and disruptive behaviour ('I do mean things', 'I skip school', 'I tell lies'). All of these scales utilise a four-point frequency scale. Physical symptoms were measured using a scale derived from the Health and Daily Living Scale¹⁰¹. We selected just four items from the original scale (covering symptoms such as upset stomach, headaches, nightmares and trouble falling asleep) and added a fifth item (had to miss school due to illness). In contrast to the original version, which uses a 'yes/no' response format, we decided to use a five-point frequency scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, all the time), as this is likely to yield a more sensitive instrument with a more adequate distribution of responses. Obviously, the higher the child's score on negative symptoms, the lower his or her well-being and vice versa. The overall reliability (coefficient alpha) for these items is .94.

5.3 Variations in Children's Physical Well-being

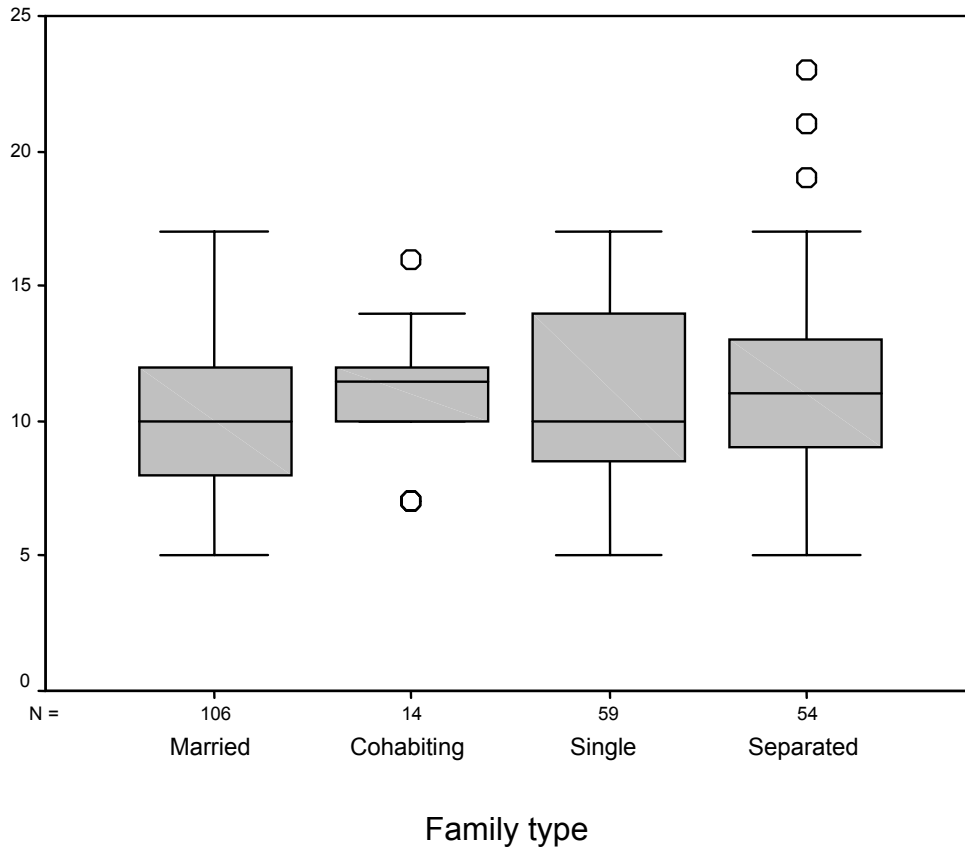
The results show no statistically significant *overall* differences in the well-being of children in different family types. However, we found significant differences on two of the subscales, physical symptoms and satisfaction with the living environment. The differences that exist in relation to physical symptoms is illustrated in Figure 5.1, which shows that children in married families have the fewest physical symptoms and therefore the highest level of physical well-being. Children in one-parent single families, by contrast, have more symptoms than children in married families and children in one-parent separated families have the largest number of physical symptoms; the number of children whose parents are cohabiting (14) is too small to make any safe generalisations.

⁹⁹ Beck, Beck & Jolly, 2002; see also Steer, Kumar, Beck, and Beck, 2001.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

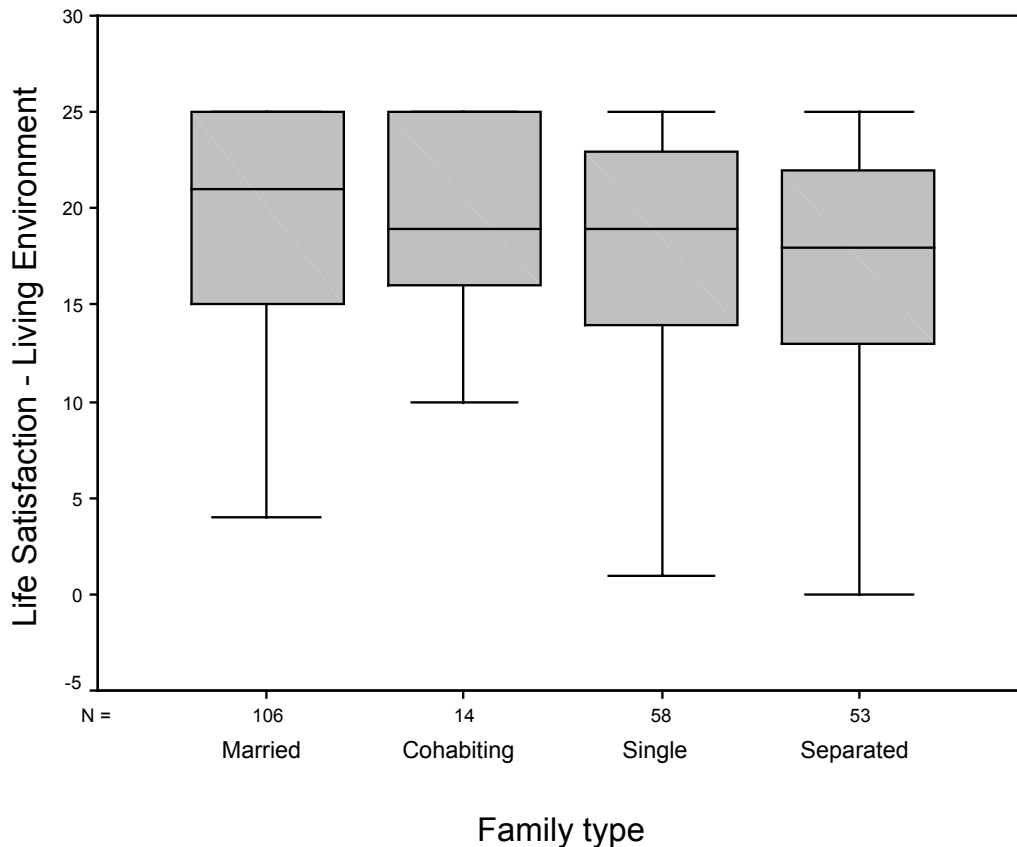
¹⁰¹ Moos, Cronkite, Billings, and Finney, 1986.

Figure 5.1 Physical Symptoms of Children in Different Family Types



Children’s perceptions of their living environment are summarised for each family type in Figure 5.2, which shows that children in one-parent single and separated families have a less positive perception of their environment than children in two-parent married families. The following four items were used to measure satisfaction with the living environment: ‘I like where I live’; ‘I wish I lived in a different house’; ‘I wish I lived somewhere else’; ‘I like my neighbourhood’.

Figure 5.2 Children’s Perceptions of the Living Environment for Different Family Types



It is important to interpret these results with care since, as we have emphasised elsewhere, it is not necessarily the case that the differences that we observe between individuals in different kinds of families are attributable to those family types themselves. For this reason, we will now undertake a more detailed analysis of the factors which shape the well-being of children, and this will help to clarify, *inter alia*, the significance of family type in shaping the well-being of children.

5.4 Factors Influencing the Well-being of Children in All Family Types

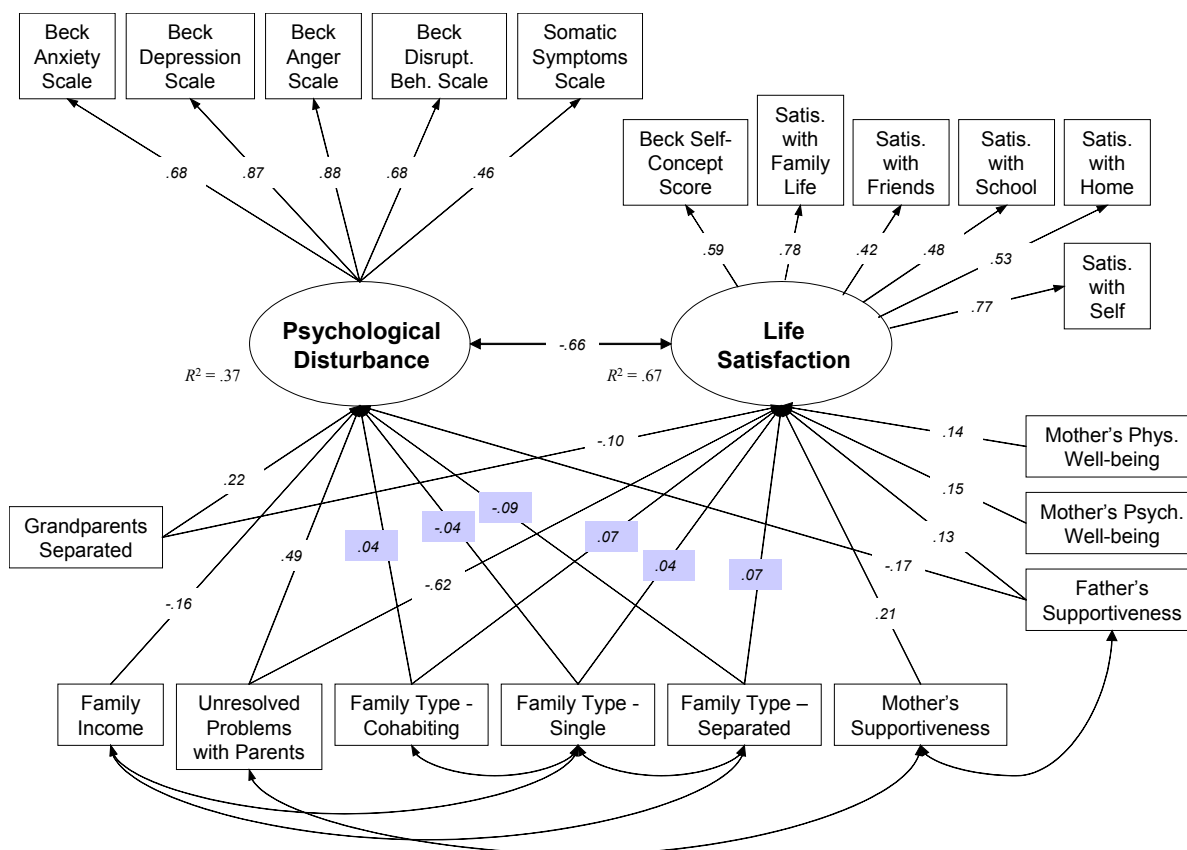
In order to identify the factors which influence the well-being of children, we will present the results of two distinct analyses. First, we will examine child well-being in all four family types, as this offers the most direct test of the influence of family type. However, this model has the double limitation of excluding fathers and the couple relationship, and a complete analysis should take both of these factors into account when assessing the well-being of children within two-parent families. Accordingly, the second analysis examines the well-being of children in married and cohabiting families, where the influence of fathers and the couple relationship can be explored. We will report on the results of each of these analyses in Section 5.4.1 and Section 5.4.2 respectively. The method of analysis used, as explained above in Chapter Three, is Structural Equation Modelling, which is ideally suited to the issues under scrutiny in this chapter.

5.4.1 Well-Being of Children in Married, Cohabiting, Single & Separated Families

The results of the first analysis are summarised in Figure 5.3. This model contains two latent variables – life satisfaction and psychological disturbance – which represent the shared variability in our measures of positive well-being and negative symptoms as described above. The principal advantage of adopting a ‘latent variable’ approach to the measurement of well-being is that it enables us to control for measurement error in the individual items and sub-scales, guaranteeing a more accurate analysis.

Our model explains 67% of the variability in life satisfaction and 37% of the variability of psychological disturbance, suggesting that psychological disturbance may have endogenous or other causes that cannot easily be predicted on the basis of family, parental and individual attributes. The overall fit of the model is highly satisfactory (with a CFI of .95 and a RMSEA of .047), although once again it is important to note that the final model is the result of an iterative ‘data-driven’ strategy, in which model modifications were guided by diagnostic tests and residuals.

Figure 5.3 The Well-being of Children in Married, Cohabiting, Single & Separated Families (234 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

The results indicate that the well-being of children is subject to five distinct influences. The first of these, and by far the most significant, is the child's experience of unresolved problems with his or her parents. These unresolved problems are reported by the child, and cover three areas: behaviour (such as homework, progress at school, drinking, smoking, drugs and behaviour in general), family conflict (such as helping out around the house, doing things as a family, communication and relationships with parents or relatives) and autonomy (such as pocket money and how it is spent, friends including boyfriends / girlfriends, hobbies, fun activities and going to church). Unresolved conflicts are associated with a major reduction in life satisfaction (-.62) and a significant increase in psychological disturbance (.49).

The second group of variables influencing the well-being of children is their mother's physical (.14) and psychological (.15) well-being and the extent to which the child perceives their mother as supportive (.21). The latter is measured by the child's response to items such as 'I can count on him / her to help me out, if I have some kind of problem', 'he / she encourages me to do my best in whatever I do', 'he / she encourages me to think independently' and 'he / she helps me with my school work if there is something I don't understand'. Children who experience their mothers as unsupportive are also significantly more likely to have unresolved problems with their parents (-.37).

The third influence on the well-being of children is, unsurprisingly, their father's supportiveness. Fathers who are experienced as supportive appear to provide a buffer against psychological disturbance (-.17), and children with supportive fathers also have higher levels of life satisfaction (.13).

The fourth factor influencing the well-being of children is whether or not their grandparents are/were separated: this contributes significantly to psychological disturbance (.22) and life satisfaction (-.10). This effect expresses, as we suggested in the previous chapter, the long-term, inter-generational transmission of parenting and relationship skills, and is in line with the results of existing research on the covariates of behavioural and psychological disturbance amongst children. For example, some social psychologists have suggested that parenting practices may constitute an important mediator in the intergenerational transmission of behavioural problems, as unfavourable practices tend to model hostility and impatience to the child as well as failing to reward cooperation and patience¹⁰².

The fifth and final factor is family income: children whose families have a lower income tend to have a higher level of psychological disturbance and *vice versa* (-.16).

Figure 5.3 also reveals that family type has *no statistically significant impact* on child well-being when the above variables are taken into account. A similar result emerged from our analysis of parental well-being in Chapter Three and the couple relationship in Chapter Four, and this reinforces our earlier conclusion that it is family processes and their wider context rather than the structure of the family which influence the well-being of family members. In this context, the most important family processes seem to involve the resolution of

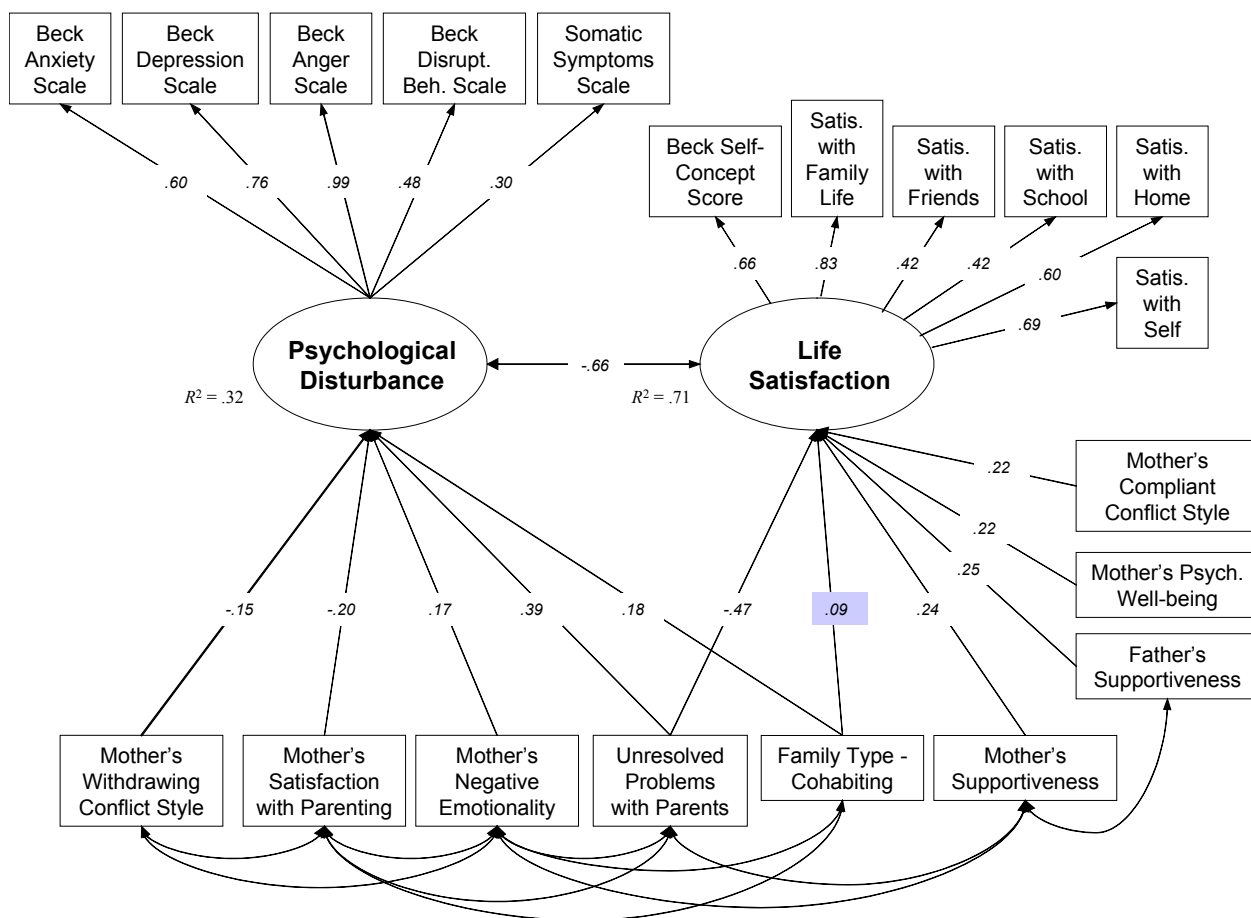
¹⁰² Rutter and Cox (1985).

problems between the child and its parents and the supportive involvement of both parents in his or her life, an important precondition for this being the physical and psychological well-being of the mother, in particular.

5.4.2 The Well-Being of Children in Married and Cohabiting Families

The results of the second analysis are summarised in Figure 5.4, which has an analogous structure to the previous model. As before, we can explain a much higher percentage (71%) of the variability of life satisfaction than of psychological disturbance (32%). The overall fit of the model is not fully satisfactory (with a CFI of .92 and a RMSEA of .066), and there is clearly some room for improvement in this respect.

Figure 5.4 Well-Being of Children in Married & Cohabiting Families (121 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

The results indicate that the well-being of children in two-parent families is primarily influenced by three clusters of variables. The first, and the single most important influence, is once again the child's experience of unresolved problems with his or her parents. This is associated with a major reduction in the child's life satisfaction (-.47) and a significant increase in psychological disturbance (.39).

The second cluster of variables that influence the well-being of children are related to their mother's attributes. Mothers influence the well-being of children in a variety of ways and, taken together, these have an enormous influence on the well-being of children, typically much greater than the influence of fathers, even in two-parent families. Mothers influence the well-being of children through their own psychological characteristics, their conflict resolution skills, their supportiveness and their satisfaction with being a parent. Beginning with psychological characteristics, it is clear that the mother's psychological well-being contributes to the child's life satisfaction (.22) while her negative emotionality contributes to the child's psychological disturbance (.17).

The ways in which mothers resolve conflicts with their partners also influence the well-being of children, presumably due to the effect of parental conflict as well as the wider relevance of the conflict resolution styles themselves. Our scale identified four possible ways of resolving conflict – compliant, withdrawing, engaging and problem-solving – and the results in Figure 5.4 indicate that mothers with a compliant style tend to have children with higher levels of life satisfaction (.22) while those with a withdrawing style reduce the child's psychological disturbance (-.15). The sub-scale for measuring a compliant conflict style included items such as the following: 'not being willing to stick up for myself', 'being too willing to agree', 'not defending my position', 'giving in with little attempt to present my side'; the sub-scale for measuring a withdrawing conflict style included items such as the following: 'remaining silent for long periods of time', 'reaching a limit and refusing to talk any further', 'not wanting to hear what my partner has to say', and 'withdrawing, acting distant and not interested'. It is worth noting that this result is somewhat at variance with the finding in Chapter Three where we found that mothers with a withdrawing conflict style had reduced physical well-being, while those with a compliant style had reduced psychological well-being. One possible explanation for this may be that, in two-parent families where there is a considerable amount of conflict between parents, a mother's compliance or withdrawing may shield the child from parental arguments, even though it reduces the mother's physical and psychological well-being.

Mothers who are experienced as supportive increase their child's life satisfaction (.24) while their satisfaction with being a parent has the effect of reducing the child's psychological disturbance (-.20). It is clear from this therefore that the influence of mothers on the well-being of children is quite pervasive and operates positively as well as negatively. One of the reasons for this is that most mothers probably spend more time with their children but there may be other reasons as well.

The third influence on children's well-being involves the supportiveness of their fathers, as experienced by the child (.24). Moreover, this variable is strongly associated with the supportiveness of the mother (.66), suggesting that these may be mutually reinforcing or that they are encouraged by the same set of contextual factors.

It is also apparent from Figure 5.4 that children in cohabiting families tend to have a higher level of psychological disturbance than children in married families, although we must immediately underline the fact that this result is based on a relatively small sub-sample of children, who tend to be younger than those in married families.

5.5 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has examined the overall well-being of children, which we have defined in terms of a positive dimension called 'life satisfaction' (comprising satisfaction with the self, family, friends, home and school) and a negative dimension called 'psychological disturbance' (comprising anxiety, depression, anger, disruptive behaviour and physical symptoms). Overall, we found no statistically significant variation in the well-being of children in the four different family types that we have chosen to study in this report.

In order to identify influences on child well-being we undertook two different analyses. First, we examined the well-being of children in the four family types (married, cohabiting, single and separated families) using data on mothers and children. Second, we analysed the well-being of children in married and cohabiting families, exploring the influence of couple relationships.

The results from the first analysis indicate that child well-being is influenced by five key factors. These are: unresolved problems between the child and its parents, the supportiveness and well-being of mothers, the supportiveness of fathers, whether the child's grandparents are separated or divorced and family income. This suggests that the specific structure of one-parent single and separated families may be related to the parents' experiences in their own family of origin, suggesting a form of inter-generational transmission of relational well-being. It also implies that family type may have an indirect influence on children's well-being via the availability of resources. The results of the second analysis also underline the importance of unresolved problems between the child and its parents, as well as the characteristics of mothers and fathers, although the marital stability of the child's grandparents and family income were not significant explanatory factors in the context of the second model.

A significant result to emerge from the second analysis is that mothers influence the well-being of children in a wide variety of ways and, taken together, these have the greatest influence on the well-being of children, much greater than the influence of fathers. Mothers influence the well-being of children through their own psychological characteristics, their conflict resolution skills, their supportiveness and their satisfaction with being a parent. The pervasiveness of maternal influences is most likely due to the fact that mothers in two-parent families typically spend more time with their children and to social expectations regarding women's greater responsibility for children's well-being.

These findings highlight the importance of family processes in promoting the well-being of children. Family structure does not appear to play a major role in influencing the well-being of children, although there is evidence that children in cohabiting families experience a higher level of psychological disturbance. Similarly, family processes appear to have a much greater role than objective measures of the socio-economic context, such as income, working hours or social class. In this context, family processes refer not only to the ability to resolve conflicts between parents and children but also to the supportive presence of both parents, regardless of family structure. As in the previous two chapters, it is possible to identify indirect contextual effects which influence children's well-being via the mediating influence of relationship or personality variables. For

example, the key explanatory variables discussed here – problem areas with parents – is influenced by the social class position of the family (-.25) and the mother's age (.22) and support network (-.22) (see Appendix to Chapter Three).

As far as family policy is concerned, these results highlight the importance of parenting skills – particularly skills for resolving conflict and supporting children – in promoting children's well-being, in addition to the need to facilitate the supportive involvement of both parents in the lives of their children, irrespective of family type. Moreover, there is evidence that certain kinds of families may require additional material support and that promoting the well-being of mothers, in particular, can have positive knock-on effects on the well-being of their children. The fact that the stability of the grandparents' marriage has a significant influence on the well-being of children is an interesting finding, particularly as it builds on earlier research by the authors and other researcher on the inter-generational transmission of relational well-being. The most plausible explanation for this cross-generational effect involves the impact of marital difficulties in the parents' families of origin on their own relationship and parenting skills and on aspects of their personality. This clearly highlights the complexity of the family system, a recurrent theme in this study, and underlines the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the causal pathways that mediate between the external context, the well-being of parents and that of their children.

Chapter Six

The Quality of Parent-Child Relationships

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we analyse the parent-child relationship from the perspective of parents, in contrast to our focus in the previous chapter which was on how children perceive their parents. We will begin our analysis by describing the scales used to measure the parent-child relationship (Section 6.2), moving on to the differences that may be observed between different family types (Section 6.3). The main focus of our analysis will be on the factors which influence the quality of parent-child relationships (Section 6.4). We will conclude with a brief summary of the key findings (Section 6.5).

6.2 Scales for Measuring the Parent-Child Relationship

We will use the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI)¹⁰³ as our main guide to the nature of the parent-child relationship. The original version of the PCRI contains 78 items across seven dimensions – support, satisfaction with parenting, involvement, communication, limit-setting, autonomy and role orientation – as well as an additional ‘social desirability’ scale that assesses the consistency of responses. We have decided to collect data on satisfaction, involvement, communication, limit-setting, autonomy and role orientations, selecting just five items per dimension. We will use only the first five of these sub-scales as indicators of a latent variable, which we will refer to as the ‘parent-child relationship’, and this will be the dependent variable of interest in this chapter. The PCRI scales has been shown to have acceptable reliability and validity and have been used before in Ireland¹⁰⁴.

6.3 Variation in Parent-Child Relationships

We found no statistically significant differences in the quality of parent-child relationships between the different family types. The question nevertheless remains as to what are the key factors influencing the parent-child relationship, and this will be the topic of the following sections.

6.4 Factors Influencing Parent-Child Relationships

In order to identify the factors which influence the parent-child relationship, we once again undertook two distinct analyses, with the aim of shedding light on the impact of family type and on the role of relationship variables. The first analysis examines the mother-child relationship in all four family types, excluding fathers and relationship variables from the analysis; the second examines the parent-child relationship in married and cohabiting families. We will begin by reporting the results of our analysis of the mother-child relationship in the four different family types (Section 6.4.1), followed by those relating to the parent-child relationship in

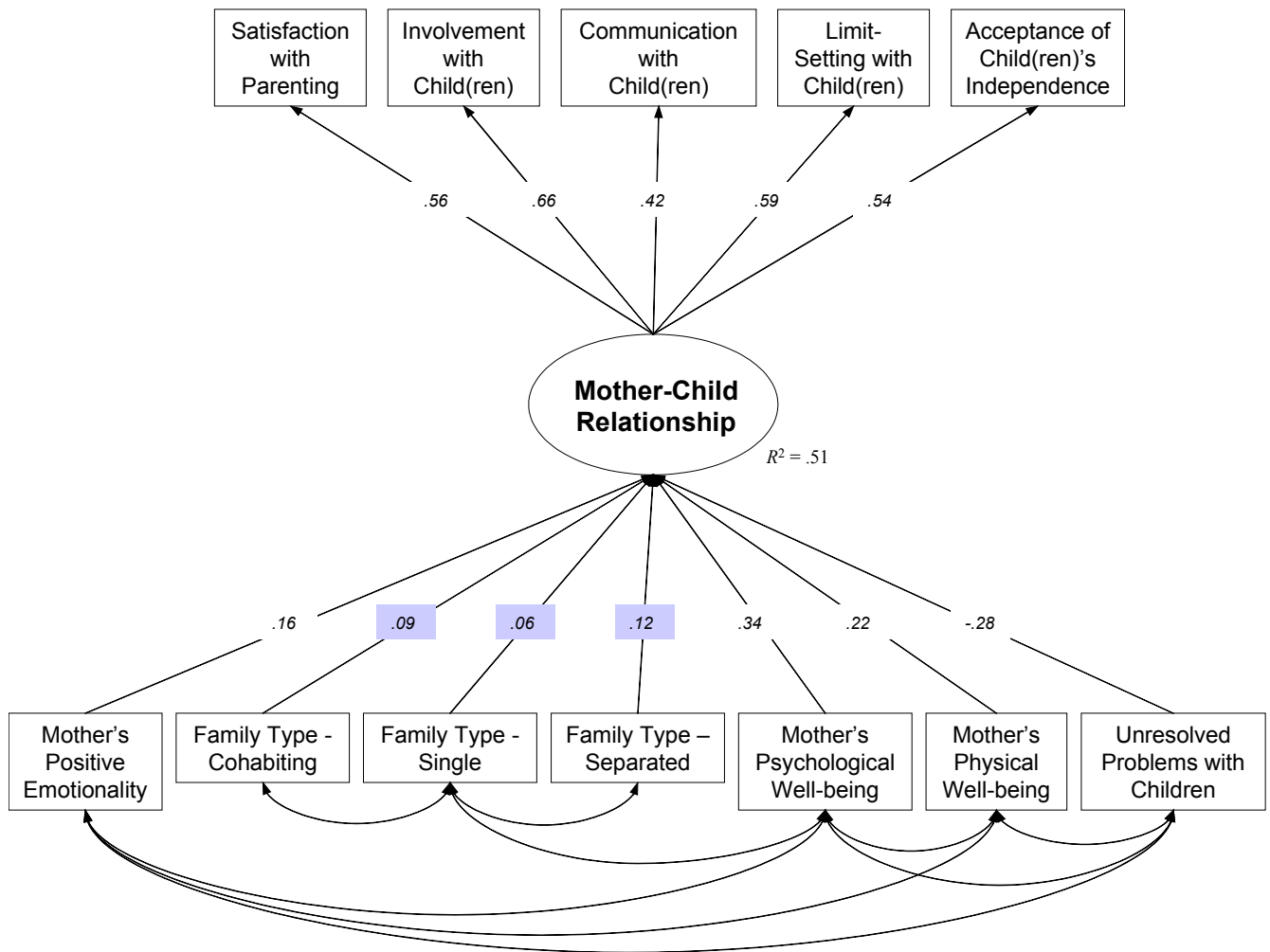
¹⁰³ Gerard, 1994.

married and cohabiting families (Section 6.4.2). The method of analysis used, Structural Equation Modelling, was described in Chapter Three.

6.4.1 Mother-Child Relationships in Married, Cohabiting, Single & Separated Families

The results of the first model are presented in Figure 6.1, which has a single latent variable, measuring the mother-child relationship, with five indicator variables (situated at the top of the diagram) and a total of seven explanatory variables (situated at the bottom). The model explains 51% of the variability in the mother-child relationship, and the overall fit of the model is highly satisfactory (with a CFI of .97 and a RMSEA of .04).

Figure 6.1 Mother-Child Relationships in Married, Cohabiting, Single & Separated Families (234 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

¹⁰⁴ See McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2001.

From our first analysis, it emerges clearly, once again, that family type has little or no effect on the mother-child relationship, which instead is influenced by three clusters of variables. The first of these is the well-being of mothers, both physical (-.22) and psychological (.34). Mothers who have fewer physical symptoms tend to have better relationships with their children, as do those with higher levels of psychological well-being (defined, as we noted in an earlier chapter, in terms of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance). In other words, the physical and psychological well-being of mothers has a 'spill-over' effect on their relationships with their children.

The second cluster encompasses unresolved problems between the child and its parent(s) (-.28). These unresolved conflicts are reported by the child and cover three areas: behaviour (such as homework, progress at school, drinking, smoking, drugs and behaviour generally), family conflict (such as helping out around the house, doing things as a family, communication and relationships with parents or relatives), and autonomy (such as pocket money and how it is spent, friends including boyfriends / girlfriends, hobbies, fun activities and going to church). The influence of this variable indicates that the mother's perception of her parenting role is influenced not just by her own characteristics, but also by the perceptions and experiences of the child as well. It is also worth noting that the direction of causality may also run in the opposite direction in certain circumstances, as a poor parent-child relationship (i.e. one that is characterised by low levels of involvement, communication, satisfaction, etc.) is likely also to give rise to a larger number of conflicts and difficulties with children.

The third influence on the parent-child relationship is the mother's positive emotionality (.16). As we noted earlier, this attribute reflects the tendency to feel enthusiastic, active and alert, and individuals with high levels of positive emotionality have higher levels of energy, concentration and pleasurable engagement¹⁰⁵. Mothers who are higher on this personality trait tend to have better parent-child relationships, presumably due to their ability to communicate a positive, hopeful outlook on life and to dedicate energy and attention to their children.

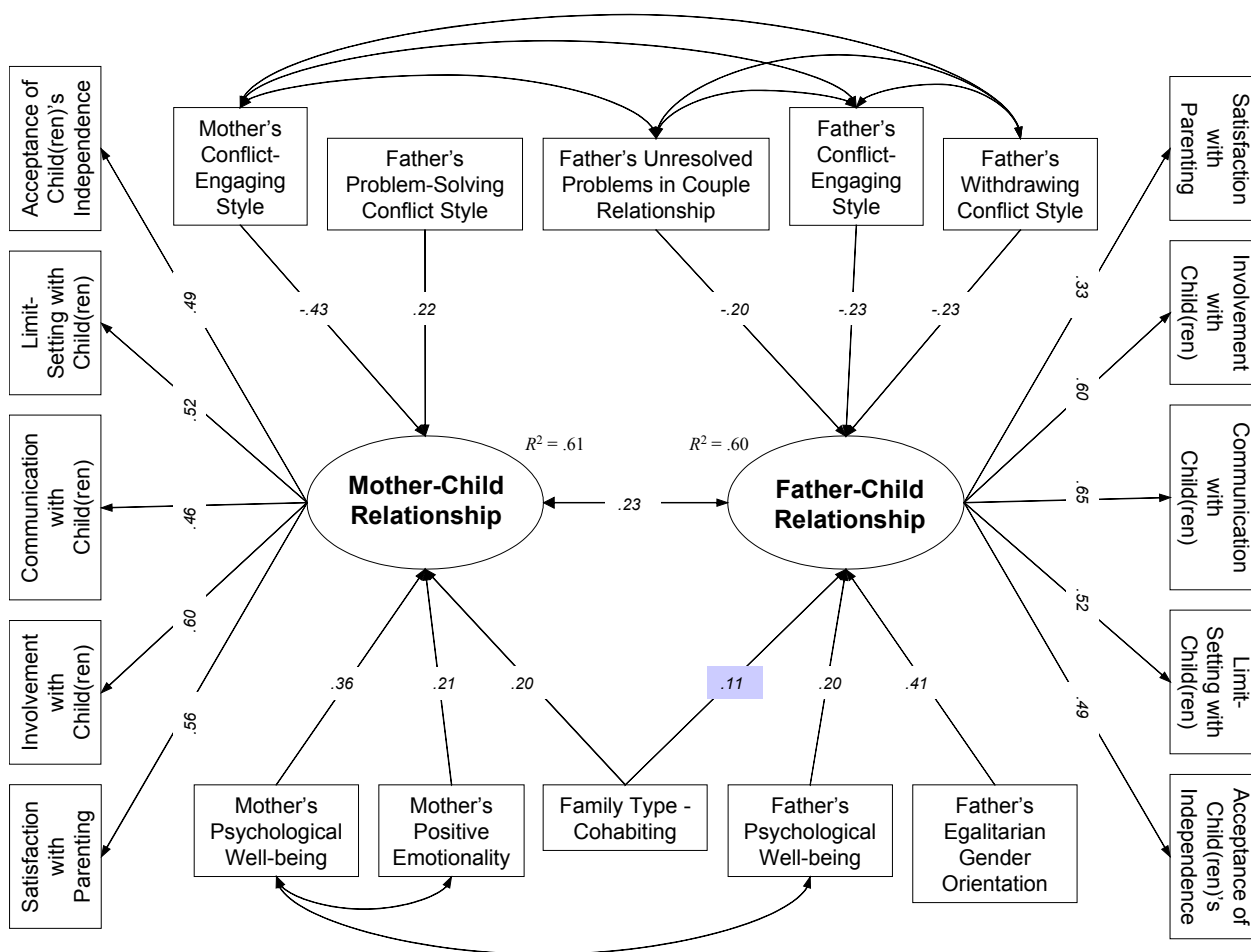
It is noteworthy that none of the family type variables have any statistically significant influence on the parent-child relationship, although it is interesting that the coefficients all point towards a stronger relationship between the mother and child *outside two-parent married families*. As we noted in Chapter Four, there seems to be a complex relationship between the quality of a mother's couple relationship and her relationship with the child, and this may also underlie the direction of the aforementioned effects. It is also striking that, once we control for the variables shown in the diagram, the parent-child relationship is not directly influenced by measures of the family's socio-economic circumstances. However, as we noted in earlier chapters, this does not mean that the social context is unimportant; it merely means that contextual influences are mediated by variables such as unresolved problems with parents (which is determined by the family's social class, mother's age and mother's support network) and positive emotionality (which is sensitive to the mother's support network above all).

¹⁰⁵ Watson et al., 1988: 1063.

6.4.2 Parent-Child Relationships in Two-Parent Families

The results of the second analysis, which is based on fathers and mothers in married and cohabiting relationships, are summarised in Figure 6.2. This model is more complex than that shown in Figure 6.1, as it includes two latent variables (measuring the mother-child and father-child relationships) rather than one. Each latent variable has five indicators, which are shown along the left- and right-hand sides of the diagram. A series of explanatory variables – ten in all – are included at the top and bottom of the diagram. This model explains a higher percentage of the variability of the two latent variables than was the case with the previous model (in the region of .60), and the overall fit of the model is acceptable, particularly in the context of a large and complex structure (the CFI is .94 and the RMSEA .052). We will begin by discussing the determinants of the mother-child relationship, before moving on to the father-child relationship. These represent quite distinct elements of the family system, and they have a relatively weak correlation (.23).

Figure 6.2 Parent-Child Relationships in Married & Cohabiting Families (161 Cases)



*Regression coefficients which are shaded are not statistically significant.

The mother-child relationship is basically influenced by four sets of variables. The first includes the mother's psychological characteristics, notably her psychological well-being (.36) and positive emotionality (.21), both of which are quite strongly correlated (.50). These were also key explanatory factors in relation to the mother-child relationship, as we showed in the previous section. The second factor is the mother's style for resolving conflicts with her partner. Our scale identified four contrasting approaches to resolving conflict – compliant, withdrawing, engaging and problem-solving – and the results displayed in Figure 6.2 indicate that mothers with an 'engaging' conflict style have significantly poorer relationships with their children (-.43). This is the largest single influence on the mother-child relationship in two-parent families. The sub-scale for measuring 'conflict-engaging' includes items such as 'launching personal attacks', 'exploding and getting out of control', 'getting carried away, saying things that aren't meant', and 'throwing insults'. Clearly, this is likely to have a direct impact on the parent-child relationship, in the sense that it may indicate a more conflictual approach to parenting, as well as having an indirect impact via parental conflict.

The existing psychological research reinforces the importance of this finding. For example, one study found that marital conflict leads to a higher level of behaviour problems amongst children¹⁰⁶, due primarily to changes in the quality of the parent-child relationship, lack of emotional availability, the adoption of less optimal parenting styles¹⁰⁷ and the effects of witnessing conflict on children's sense of 'felt security'. Another group of researchers has shown that the relationship between marital conflict and children's psychological disturbance is mediated by parental rejection and the use of guilt induction to control the child¹⁰⁸.

The third influence, which also involves skills for resolving conflicts, is the influence exercised by the *father's* positive conflict resolution style (.22). The sub-scale for measuring a positive problem-solving style includes items such as 'focusing on the problem at hand', 'sitting down and discussing differences constructively', 'finding solutions that are acceptable to each of us', and 'negotiating and compromising'.

The final variable that influences the mother-child relationship is family type, and the mother-child relationship appears to be stronger in cohabiting than in married families. This is most likely due to the younger average age of these children, although other factors may also have a role.

Turning now to the father-child relationship, it is apparent that this is also influenced by four main impacts. The first and most significant of these is the father's egalitarian gender orientation (.41). Our Gender Orientation scale, derived from a sub-scale of the PCRI¹⁰⁹, uses five items to distinguish parents who have a 'traditional' view of men's and women's family roles from those who have a more 'egalitarian' view. The five items are: 'women should stay at home and take care of the children', 'a father's major responsibility is to provide financially for his children', 'fathers should help with looking after the child', 'mothers should work outside the home only if necessary' and 'a woman can have a satisfying career and be a good mother too'. The strength of this effect represents a significant finding, pointing to the importance of fathers' perceptions of their parenting

¹⁰⁶ Katz and Gottman, 1993.

¹⁰⁷ Easterbrooks & Emde, 1988.

¹⁰⁸ Fauber, Forehand, Thomas and Wierson, 1990. See also Davies and Cummings, 1994.

role. In short, 'egalitarian' fathers tend to have significantly better relationships with their children than 'traditional' fathers, perhaps due to their greater emotional availability and their stronger practical involvement in caring.

The second influence on the father-child relationship involves the father's style of conflict resolution in the context of their intimate relationships. Fathers who have a 'conflict-engaging' style (-.23) or a 'withdrawing' style (-.23) tend to have a correspondingly poorer relationship with their child. The sub-scale for measuring a withdrawing conflict style includes items such as the following: 'remaining silent for long periods of time', 'reaching a limit and refusing to talk any further', 'not wanting to hear what my partner has to say', and 'withdrawing, acting distant and not interested'. It is noteworthy that engaging in and withdrawing from conflict are related (with a correlation of .5), and are also correlated with the mother's tendency to engage in conflict (.3 and .5), suggesting a pattern in these relationships which combines engagement and withdrawal in couple conflicts, with knock-on effects for the parent-child relationship. The relationship between conflict resolution styles and parenting is complex, however; as we noted in Chapter Five, the extent to which mothers withdraw from conflict is associated with lower levels of psychological disturbance among children, and their 'compliance' is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, again among children. However, mothers' 'compliance' also reduces their own psychological well-being and 'withdrawing' from conflict is associated with a greater number of physical symptoms amongst mothers. Similarly, fathers' 'compliance' reduces their psychological well-being and conflict engagement increases their physical symptoms.

The third influence on the father-child relationship relates to unresolved problems in the couple relationship, as perceived by the father (-.20). This again highlights how difficulties in the couple relationship spill over into the parent-child relationship.

The fourth and final variable is the father's psychological well-being (.20), which has a positive effect on the father-child relationship. However, psychological well-being is nearly twice as influential for mothers' relationship with their children and also has a significant effect on their children's well-being (see Chapter Five).

Overall, the key finding to emerge from the above analysis is that the couple relationship and the ways in which conflicts are resolved within it have a major influence on the parent-child relationship, as far as both mothers and fathers are concerned, and the psychological well-being of both parents also has a significant influence. In addition, and rather surprisingly, we found that fathers' gender role orientation strongly influences their relationship with their children, with 'egalitarian' fathers having a significantly better relationship with their children than 'traditional' fathers. When we look at the determinants of these key variables – unresolved problems between parents, conflict resolution styles, positive emotionality and cohabiting vs. married families – we find that these function in part as a transmission belt for contextual influences that are rooted in the social, cultural and economic circumstances in which family members live. For example, conflict resolution styles are

¹⁰⁹ Gerard, 1994.

influenced by experiences in one's family of origin, support networks and education levels (for women) and by social class, job satisfaction and experiences in one's family of origin (for men).

As is evident from Figure 6.2, one of the factors that influences the mother-child relationship is family type, cohabiting families being characterised by stronger mother-child relationships, all else being equal. This is one of the few cases in which we found a significant effect for family type. However, it is interesting to observe that the choice between cohabitation and marriage is sensitive to contextual factors such as age, the male partner's education level and the happiness of both the male and the female partner: cohabiting partners are more likely to be younger, to have higher education levels and to have experienced higher levels of parental discord and dissatisfaction (see also the Appendix to Chapter Three at the end of the report).

6.5 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter we used a standardised scale – the Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI) – to measure the parent-child relationship. The results indicate that there are apparently no statistically significant differences in the quality of parent-child relationships between the different family types studied in this research project. Nevertheless, in order to identify the factors which influence the parent-child relationship we undertook two distinct analyses, the first of which examined the mother-child relationship across all four family types, and the second of which examined the parent-child relationship in married and cohabiting families, where the influence of fathers and the couple relationship can be explored.

The results of the first analysis revealed that the key factors influencing mother-child relationships in all four family types are the mother's physical and psychological well-being, her positive emotionality and the existence of unresolved problems between the child and his or her parents. The results of the second analysis showed that the couple relationship and the way in which conflicts are resolved within it are major influences on the parent-child relationship, for both mothers and fathers. The psychological well-being of both parents also has a considerable influence, and a major influence on the father-child relationship is the father's perception of the parenting roles of men and women, with 'egalitarian' fathers having a significantly better relationship with their children than 'traditional' fathers.

These findings reveal the central importance of family processes and their predominance over family structure in shaping the parent-child relationship, particularly the nature of the couple relationship and ways of resolving conflict within it. It is also striking to discover that the parent-child relationship is not directly influenced by the socio-economic circumstances within which family members live, reinforcing the impression that internal family processes tend to mediate the impact of the external context as far as the well-being of family members and the nature of their relationships are concerned.

These findings have important implications for family policy, as they draw attention to the factors which influence good parenting and imply that the latter has a degree of independence from the socio-economic context in which families find themselves. Good parenting is directly influenced by the psychological well-

being and attributes of parents, by the quality of the couple relationship and, above all, by their approach to interpersonal conflict. In the case of fathers, good parenting is also facilitated by an attitude which does not strongly differentiate between the parenting roles of men and women, all of which indicates that effective interventions to promote effective parenting need to consider the parent-child relationship not in isolation but within the overall context of family relationships and in accord with the individual attributes of parents.

Chapter Seven

Summary and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This study offers a unique insight into the workings of Irish families and provides an indication of what a larger national study might be expected to achieve. It shows that the physical and psychological well-being of parents and children are shaped primarily by family processes, (particularly those which involve the ability to resolve conflicts and arguments, and by the personality traits of parents, rather than by family type, as defined in terms of parents who are married, cohabiting, single or separated. Moreover, it reveals some of the indirect causal pathways which mediate the influence of social, cultural and economic contexts in the lives of families.

Although it should not be mistaken for a full, definitive national study of family well-being, this research report nevertheless goes beyond what would normally be expected from a 'pilot study'. In fact, in addition to evaluating a series of measurement instruments – some of which were designed explicitly for this study – and methodological techniques, we have formulated a number of hypotheses regarding the determinants of family well-being in Ireland. Although some of these are far from surprising, in the sense that they reinforce common-sense views or well-established research findings, others are more unexpected and challenging. In this chapter we will summarise our main findings, highlighting what we consider to be the most interesting or important insights, and identify issues that require further research. In addition, we provide a brief assessment of the effectiveness of the measurement instruments and methodological techniques adopted for the purposes of this study, with a view to clarifying the priorities and potential benefits of future research.

7.2 Results of Survey of Family Types

The results of our initial survey of Irish families led us to identify four main family types: (1) two parents who are both married for the first time, (2) two parents who are single and cohabiting, (3) one parent who is single and not in a relationship and (4) one parent who is separated and not in a relationship. By far the largest of these comprises two-parent married families, which constitute two thirds of the total. In addition, nearly a tenth of families involve two-parent cohabiting families. Conversely, a fifth of all families comprise one parent only – mainly the mother – and these are fairly evenly divided between those who are single and those who are separated; we also found single and separated parents in non-cohabiting relationships as well as widow(er)s who are not in a relationship. Given the lower incidence of the latter group, an accurate and comprehensive assessment of family well-being in different types of family can only be undertaken in the context of a larger study.

Family types in Ireland, as elsewhere such as the UK and the US, have a strong social class dimension in the sense that one-parent families, both single and separated, are heavily concentrated in lower socio-economic groups. Social class seems to act more as a cause than a consequence of different family types, since they are both strongly associated with education, which is usually chronologically prior to both. The results of our survey also indicate a clear life cycle pattern across the different family types: two-parent married families and one-parent separated families tend to be older than either two-parent cohabiting families or one-parent single families. This is also reinforced by the fact that 12% of two-parent married families have children who are older than the length of their marriage, suggesting that these families previously existed as either cohabiting or single-parent families.

It is worth observing that, because fathers do not reside in many of the one-parent families studied here, we know little about the quality of their relationship with the mother or their children or about their well-being. This issue should be addressed in future research, although collecting data from these fathers is likely to generate considerable methodological difficulties.

7.3 Impact of Family Type on Family Well-Being

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that family type has little if any independent effect on the well-being of family members and on the quality of family relationships. Once we control for key individual attributes, family processes and contextual effects, this variable generally has no additional explanatory power. This is all the more surprising given the relatively striking differences observed between the different family types when viewed in isolation. The only statistically significant effects of family type involve children's psychological disturbance in cohabiting families (which is associated with a standardised regression coefficient of .18), mother's psychological well-being in single-parent families (-.15) and the quality of the mother-child relationship in cohabiting families (.20).

However, as the average age of children in cohabiting families is lower than in married families, it would be hazardous to draw any conclusions in relation to the effects that involve these families. Younger children tend to score more highly on disruptive behaviour, anger, anxiety, etc., as well as needing a stronger relationship with their parents in terms of involvement, communication, limit-setting, etc. Thus, the only plausible effect of family type that remains is the psychological well-being of mothers in one-parent single families. As this variable is defined in terms of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance, it is quite plausible that single parents might have slightly lower scores, particularly given the inherent difficulties involved in raising children on one's own and in the context of the specific economic factors that often lead to single parenthood. Thus, the only effect of family type that has a statistically significant, robust impact on family well-being is the impact of raising children in a one-parent single family on the psychological well-being of mothers.

7.4 Determinants of Well-Being

Naturally, the purpose of our research was not merely to assess the effects of family type on well-being, but also to investigate the determinants of well-being itself: what are the key factors that influence the well-being of mothers, fathers and children in Irish families? In all of our models, encompassing individual well-being as well as relationship quality, two factors of primary importance emerge: the way in which conflict is handled within the family and the personality traits of family members.

Our study has shown that the core aspects of what makes a person feel well – in terms of their physical, psychological and relational well-being – are intricately bound up with family processes and experiences. In terms of conflict, conflict resolution styles clearly play an important role in relation to the physical and psychological well-being of mothers and fathers: a positive, problem-solving approach enhances well-being, whilst conflict-engagement, withdrawing from conflict and excessive compliance all have a negative impact. In terms of the fulfilment and intimacy of married or cohabiting partners, it is the ability to resolve their differences that bears the greatest explanatory load. Similarly, unresolved problems between children and their parents have a negative impact on the mother-child relationship and a particularly strong effect on children's psychological disturbance.

Interestingly, however, we found that where mothers withdraw from conflict in the couple relationship, and where they comply with their partner's demands, this seems to protect children from the potentially negative effects of witnessing conflict between their parents, reducing psychological disturbance and increasing children's satisfaction with life. The final model presented in Chapter Six shows that, to the extent that fathers or (particularly) mothers engage in conflict when there are problems in their relationship, the parent-child relationship tends to suffer; a positive, problem-solving approach by the father tends to enhance the *mother-child* relationship, whilst a withdrawing approach by fathers has a negative effect on their own relationship with their children. As we have already observed, however, women who withdraw from conflict or comply with their partners appear to pay a high price in terms of their own well-being. Finally, unresolved problems in the couple relationship also tend to interfere with the father-child relationship, underlining the interdependence of all relationships within the family.

Turning now to personality factors, we were not surprised to find that traits associated with mothers' and fathers' emotions play a key role in accounting for differences between families, as these attributes – which we have referred to as positive and negative 'emotionality' (that is, the tendency to experience positive or negative moods) – have received enormous attention within the research literature on families over the past ten years¹¹⁰. Social psychologists have shown, for example, that emotional states ('moods') frequently 'spill over' from one setting to another and from one person to another¹¹¹, and the importance of emotional warmth to child development and relationship success has been emphasised repeatedly by family researchers. In fact, it is easy to imagine how negative emotionality might influence intimate relationships when we recall that individuals

¹¹⁰ Leonard & Roberts, 1998.

high on negative emotionality tend to have a more negative view of themselves and their surroundings, to dwell more on their own shortcomings and those of other people and to feel more dissatisfied with their lives¹¹².

Negative emotionality has a major influence on the physical symptoms and psychological well-being reported by both mothers and fathers. Although positive emotionality contributes to women's psychological well-being, it also has a small association with physical symptoms, suggesting that higher levels of emotional arousal *per se* may give rise to negative effects. The negative emotionality of their mother (but not father) has a negative impact on children's psychological well-being, and positive emotionality enhances the mother's relationship with her children, as well as contributing to the fulfilment experienced by both partners within the couple relationship. The physical well-being of married and cohabiting fathers is affected not only by their own negative emotionality, but also by that of their partners, suggesting that women may play a key role in providing the emotional 'climate' for family interactions. Mothers appear to influence the well-being of children in a wide variety of ways – through their own psychological characteristics, their conflict resolution skills, their supportiveness and their satisfaction with being a parent – and this may be due to the fact that mothers in two-parent families typically spend more time with their children and to social expectations regarding women's greater responsibility for children's well-being; however it may also be due to the 'climate' created by mothers within the family since their characteristics affect not only the parent-child relationship but also the couple relationship to a much greater extent than the corresponding characteristics of fathers.

Two other personality traits appear to play an important role within the family, namely psychological 'independence' (associated with more frequent feelings of self-reliance, independence, dominance, aggression, individualism, ambition, etc.) and 'interdependence' (associated with shyness, sympathy, understanding, warmth, tenderness, etc.). These two constructs seem to work in tandem, independence enhancing individual autonomy and self-esteem, interdependence encouraging greater sensitivity to the needs of others and a closer involvement in the lives of children and other family members. For example, we found that psychological independence is associated with greater psychological well-being for both mothers and fathers, whilst men's psychological interdependence boosts the quality of the couple relationship. These findings are fully in line with the results of previous, published research.

In addition to unresolved problems, conflict resolution styles and personality traits, we identified a considerable number of other variables that influence the well-being of mothers, fathers and children and the quality of their relationships. Some of these express the interdependence of family members: mothers' physical and psychological well-being has a direct effect on the mother-child relationship and on children's life satisfaction, as does the perceived supportiveness of both mothers and fathers; men's fulfilment in the context of their intimate relationships boosts their psychological well-being; the quality of the mother-child relationship reduces the physical symptoms reported by mothers but may, in certain circumstances, coincide with a decline in the quality of the couple relationship; relationship difficulties appear to exacerbate mothers' physical symptoms, and unresolved problems between the mother and father seem to impair the father's relationship with his

¹¹¹ Repetti, 1987.

¹¹² Burke, Brief, & George, 1993: 402-403.

children. These findings reinforce the fact that the well-being of family members and the quality of their relationships are closely intertwined, and that these elements have a combined influence on overall family well-being. In this sense, this study points to the importance of an inclusive concept of the family which focuses on the set of relationships which link parents to each other and to their children, regardless of family structure and even whether the parents are living in the same household or not.

Five other sets of contextual variables were found to have an impact – at times a dominant impact – on family well-being: negative life events, the division of domestic tasks and decision-making, gender role identities, the quality of the grandparents' relationship and aspects of the family's socio-economic situation. Firstly, negative life events (such as the death of a loved one, a drastic fall in income, loss of job, etc.) tend to reduce the physical well-being of both mothers and fathers, increasing the number of symptoms that they report. It is worth noting that these events do not influence the quality of the couple relationship, nor do they interfere with children's well-being, suggesting that parents are typically able to 'cushion' their children against direct impacts of this sort (although clearly negative events may have a knock-on effect on children's life satisfaction via reduced maternal physical well-being).

Secondly, women's satisfaction with the division of domestic tasks has a significant impact on the quality of the couple relationship, higher satisfaction corresponding to greater relationship intimacy and fulfilment. Family researchers have shown that role arrangements and relationship quality tend to move in tandem, and dissatisfaction with the sharing of domestic tasks may not only represent a *cause* of dissatisfaction in intimate relationships, but also be an *effect* of relationship difficulties. It has also been suggested that the strain of domestic chores can reinforce negative emotional states, increasing women's vulnerability to depressive symptoms¹¹³.

Thirdly, we found that the extent to which men embrace a 'traditionalist' or 'egalitarian' view of mothers' and fathers' roles within the family has a major influence on the quality of the father-child relationship. In fact, this variable had the highest standardised regression coefficient of all those with an influence on the father-child relationship. Thus, fathers with a more 'egalitarian' orientation – that is, those who do not believe that 'women should stay at home and take care of the children', that 'a father's major responsibility is to provide financially for his children' or that 'mothers should work outside the home only if necessary', and those who believe that 'fathers should help with looking after the child' and that 'a woman can have a satisfying career and be a good mother too' – tend to have closer, more satisfying relationships with their children.

Fourthly, we found that whether or not the mother's parents are separated has a direct measurable effect on the psychological and physical well-being *of their own children*. Children whose grandparents are separated tend to have higher levels of psychological disturbance and lower levels of life satisfaction. This may reflect the inter-generational transmission of parenting skills, in line with the results of existing research on the determinants of psychological disturbance. Thus, the most plausible explanation for this cross-generational effect involves the impact of marital difficulties in the *parents'* families of origin on their own relationships, parenting skills and on

aspects of their personality. Although additional (preferably longitudinal) data would be needed in order to reach firmer conclusions, this finding nevertheless highlights the complexity of the family system, a recurrent theme in this report, and underlines the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the causal pathways that mediate between the external context, the well-being of parents and that of their children.

Finally, we come to the influence of the socio-economic context on family well-being. We identified a number of direct impacts associated with income levels (higher income is associated with lower levels of psychological disturbance among children), feeling financially secure (which boosts the psychological well-being of both parents) and education levels (higher levels of education tend to reduce the physical symptoms reported by women and to enhance men's psychological well-being, although higher levels of education among men appear to reduce their partner's psychological well-being and to exacerbate their physical symptoms). Although these are clearly of considerable importance, we also found that the social, cultural and economic context has a pervasive influence on family well-being via the mediating influence of conflict resolution styles, unresolved problems in relationships and personality attributes. This is consistent with an 'ecological' approach to the study of family well-being, which emphasises the sensitivity of processes, behaviours and attributes within the family to external socio-economic structures and processes, the influence of the latter being transmitted from one context to another by various causal pathways. Thus, the primary importance of relationship and personality variables in accounting for differences in family well-being are perfectly consistent with the hypothesis that the external context has a crucial impact, particularly in relation to resources and social support networks.

In earlier chapters we referred to a supplementary analysis of the determinants of the key explanatory variables that appear in our statistical models, the results of which are included in the Appendix to Chapter Three. We estimated 23 Multiple Regression models to investigate whether the variables with the strongest direct effects on family well-being were themselves sensitive to the socio-economic context of family life, and we found that support networks influenced nearly all of these – with a significant effect on unresolved problems, conflict styles, positive and negative emotionality and psychological independence – representing the most important and pervasive aspect of the external environment. Once again, this is in harmony with previous research findings, which suggest that satisfaction with support networks is a strong predictor of health status, life satisfaction, psychological adjustment, emotional well-being, social skills and parenting capacities.

Job satisfaction is another important explanatory factor, particularly in relation to men's well-being and psychological attributes, although it is interesting to find that women's job satisfaction tends to increase (or at least, to correlate with) men's egalitarianism. Thus, men whose partners are satisfied with their jobs tend to have a more 'egalitarian' view of gender roles. Social class has a statistically significant impact on 7 of the 23 key variables (influencing children's unresolved problems with their parents, for example, as well as women's feelings of financial security and men's tendency to engage in conflict), and family income influences two more (women's positive emotionality and negative life events). The nature of their own parents' relationship has a considerable impact on women's and men's conflict resolution styles, emotionality and psychological

¹¹³ Nolen-Hoeksma & Girgus, 1994; Nolen-Hoeksma, Larson, & Grayson, 1999.

independence, amongst other variables¹¹⁴. When we looked at predictors of the decision to form a cohabiting family, we found that, in addition to the age of the partners, this is also associated with higher male education levels and the happiness of both partners' parents' relationship. The happier the parents' relationship, the less likely it is that their children will form a cohabiting family – suggesting an association between cohabitation and the negative modelling of marital interactions. There is also evidence that less satisfying relationships among parents encourage greater psychological independence amongst their female children. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that relationship and parenting skills and personality attributes such as positive and negative emotionality, psychological independence and interdependence may transmit inter-generational effects associated with family well-being. These effects are relatively small, accounting for a small percentage of the overall variability of conflict resolution styles, for example.

7.5 Challenging and Surprising Findings

On a number of occasions throughout this report we have drawn attention to 'surprising' or 'counter-intuitive' findings, as we believe that these can often lead to new and interesting insights. We have sought to place these findings in the context of the international family research literature and to provide plausible explanations wherever possible. As one of the aims of this report is to assess the feasibility and potential benefits of a larger, national study of family well-being in Ireland, we will provide a brief summary of what we consider to be our most 'challenging' findings, before indicating how these can be investigated in future research projects.

The first counter-intuitive finding that we encountered relates to the well-being of mothers in married and cohabiting families. As we observed in Chapter Three, the partner's education level has a negative impact on women's physical and psychological well-being: mothers with more highly-educated partners experience more physical symptoms and lower psychological well-being. As one's *own* education level is positively related to overall well-being for both women and men, this result is rather surprising. The most plausible explanation is that the negative influence of the partner's education level (once we control for that of the mother herself) captures social class differences in women's roles, status and well-being, perhaps characterised by greater social isolation and a more exclusive focus upon family-related and domestic tasks. This obviously represents a tentative hypothesis, one that could fruitfully be investigated in the context of a larger study.

In Chapter Four we reported another counter-intuitive finding, which implies the existence of a certain trade-off between the quality of the couple relationship and that of the mother-child relationship, since a weak mother-child relationship tends to encourage a relatively stronger couple relationship and *vice versa*. We suggested that the mother-father and mother-child relationships may represent, to a certain extent, alternative channels for maternal intimacy. This may be particularly important in situations where couples are experiencing relationship difficulties or, for example, where the presence of young children may (perhaps temporarily) reduce relationship satisfaction. In this context, the direction of causality may run in both directions: low levels of fulfilment and

¹¹⁴ Surprisingly, parental separation appears to be associated with lower negative emotionality among men, although this counter-intuitive finding is rather difficult to interpret.

intimacy within the couple relationship may in certain cases encourage women to forge stronger bonds with their children.

As we noted earlier, our survey also generated some (rather circumstantial) evidence that the mother-child relationship tends to be stronger outside the context of two-parent married families, and that this, rather than favouring children's well-being, may have at least some negative effects. It is possible to hypothesise that, where the relationship between the father and his children is weaker, the mother may seek to increase her level of involvement in an attempt to compensate for the father's absence, a difficult if not impossible task. It is also possible that the younger average age of children in cohabiting families may produce the 'spurious' finding that these families are characterised by stronger mother-child relationships and a larger number of problems. We have not been able to develop a more confident interpretation of these effects, primarily due to the size of our sample and the difficulties that we encountered in sampling non-married families. Nevertheless, this is clearly an important issue for future research, as the precise relationship between family type, the couple relationship, the parent-child relationship and children's well-being is of great relevance from both a research and a policy-making perspective.

The final 'challenging' finding that we encountered involves the physical well-being of fathers, which, as we showed in Chapter Three, is influenced by the extent to which his partner uses physical and psychological aggression against him. We measured physical aggression by asking how many times respondents had carried out various violent acts against their partner over the past year, including twisting their arm, punching them, slamming them against a wall, slapping, kicking and so on, and we measured psychological aggression in an analogous manner by asking about threats, accusations, psychological cruelty, etc. We noted that previous research using this measurement instrument has shown that women have, if anything, a slightly higher rate of reported aggression against their partners. Although this finding was originally based on American research, further work has demonstrated that this pattern, far from being restricted to the United States, is even more marked in other Western countries, although significantly more women than men are actually injured by their partners in all contexts. Thus, it is quite possible that aggression by women – whether physical or psychological in nature – may have an effect on the physical well-being of fathers in Irish families, even though our research does not identify an analogous effect on the well-being of mothers. Nevertheless, as we reported in Chapter Four, the quality of the couple relationship is influenced by the *male* partner's aggression, rather than that of the female.

7.6 Key Insights for Policy-Makers

This study seeks to provide an 'evidence base' for generalising about the factors which influence family well-being in Ireland, although our conclusions are necessarily tentative due to the relatively small sample size and the fact that many of our measurement instruments are either new or have never been used before in Ireland. In each chapter, we identified findings with important consequences for policy-makers, and we will summarise these briefly before discussing the overall achievements of the study and the prospects for future research on family well-being in Ireland. Clearly, the family research agenda and the policy-making process must move in

tandem in order to improve the evidence base available to policy-makers and to sharpen the focus of applied social research.

At the end of Chapter Three, we observed that couple relationships and parent-child relationships contribute to physical and psychological well-being within the framework provided by personality attributes and external circumstances. Although personality traits are relatively stable over time, this should not be taken as implying that external interventions are pointless; on the contrary, parents can, with the appropriate assistance, come to recognise the effects of their emotional states on other family members and to tackle the depression and anxiety which may accompany negative emotional states. Moreover, it is possible to reduce the impact of negative events and financial uncertainty by providing support mechanisms for families and by working towards the reduction of social class and income inequalities.

In Chapter Four we observed that the quality of couple relationships depends, above all, on the learned skills of being able to listen to one's partner and to resolve arguments without generating negative emotions and without unleashing aggressive behaviour. We reached the unsurprising conclusion that one of the main differences between couples who experience their relationships as fulfilling and intimate and those who do not is their ability to resolve arguments. Naturally, it is easier to identify this influence than to design policy measures that enhance the conflict resolution skills of couples. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that the ability to resolve arguments is influenced above all by the partners' support network, suggesting that various forms of social support can help to defuse conflict within the relationship. Perhaps the importance of support networks to conflict resolution styles derives precisely from the fact that they enhance and promote relational skills. In this context, personality traits such as positive emotionality and psychological interdependence may create an emotional 'climate' that is amenable to the resolution of disagreements.

In Chapter Five we emphasised the role of a related set of skills – parenting skills – in promoting children's well-being. Furthermore, we argued that children's well-being is enhanced by the supportive involvement of both parents in the lives of their children, irrespective of family structure. Our analysis of the indirect effects of the socio-economic context revealed that families may, in particular circumstances, require additional material and social support and that promoting the well-being of parents can have positive knock-on effects on the well-being of their children; we know this to be true from our data on mothers but further data on non-resident fathers may also show this to be true for them as well. The fact that the stability of the grandparents' marriage has a significant influence on the well-being of children highlights the complexity of the family system and underlines the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the causal pathways that mediate between the external context and the well-being of parents and their children.

The findings of this research project have important implications for family policy, as they draw attention to the factors which influence good parenting and imply that the latter has a degree of independence from the socio-economic context in which families find themselves. Good parenting is directly influenced by the psychological well-being and attributes of parents, by the quality of the couple relationship and, above all, by their approach to interpersonal conflict. In the case of fathers, good parenting is also facilitated by an attitude which does not

strongly differentiate between the parenting roles of men and women, all of which indicates that effective interventions to promote effective parenting need to consider the parent-child relationship not in isolation but within the overall context of family relationships and in accord with the individual attributes of parents. Family processes and their wider context – rather than the structure of the family – have the greatest influence on family well-being, and the most important family processes seem to involve the resolution of problems, the avoidance of overt forms of conflict and aggression, as well as the supportive involvement of family members in each others' lives. In this context, the well-being and attributes of the mother appear to play a particularly important role in setting the 'emotional climate' of family interactions and in facilitating the relationships between other family members.

7.7 Results of the Pilot Study and the Agenda for Future Research

The results of this pilot study are extremely promising, both in terms of the substantive findings of the research itself and the prospects for future development. In fact, we view this report as forming part of a broader research programme on family well-being in Ireland, an extremely complex and challenging area of study. As a result of this complexity, we believe that it is important that each study be based on the published findings of other researchers, as well as seeking continually to refine the measurement instruments, theoretical hypotheses and methodological techniques that we utilise.

In terms of measurement instruments, it has become clear that our new scales – measuring support networks, job satisfaction, social class position, life events and conflict areas – provide very accurate estimates of the concepts that they are intended to measure. Similarly, the scales that we have adapted from the existing research literature – including positive and negative affect, psychological independence and interdependence, physical and psychological well-being, relationship fulfilment and intimacy, parenting roles, task division, conflict resolution styles, ineffective arguing, conflict tactics and parenting scales – have demonstrated considerable sensitivity and explanatory power. In particular, we believe that our key dependent variables – dealing with relationship quality and individual well-being – are highly satisfactory. The main priority should therefore be to identify ways of refining and improving these scales, perhaps by increasing the number of items where scale reliability is rather low, or by eliminating items with only a weak association with the overall scale. Similarly, it would be useful to extend key variables such as those relating to conflict resolution and problem areas in relationships, with a view to providing a more nuanced picture.

Clearly, the amount of information that can be obtained from children by using a self-report questionnaire is limited, and this technique is only appropriate for children over approximately 10 years of age. Thus, it would be useful in the context of future research projects to explore alternative forms of data collection involving, for example, teacher reports of children's behaviour and educational attainments. In addition, it may be useful to develop a more diversified measurement scale for parenting styles, embracing psychological control in addition to parental supportiveness and strictness. As we mentioned above, it would also be important, in the context of a larger national study, to collect data on the relationship between fathers and their children, where they do not live in the same household.

In terms of the potential benefits of a larger study, these may be divided into three areas: coverage of a wider variety of one-parent households, construction of a larger sample and collection of additional data. In relation to the first area, we noted in Chapter Two that a small proportion of Irish families comprise single, separated and widowed parents in non-cohabiting relationships (4%), widow(er)s who are not in a relationship (1%) and ‘blended’ families formed as a result of the second marriage of at least one of the partners. Given the difficulties involved in identifying these families within the population as a whole, this task can effectively only be tackled within the context of a much larger study. Although we collected data from 1,500 households during the first phase of this research project, we nevertheless experienced difficulties in locating a sufficient number of cohabiting parents with children in the appropriate age range. These difficulties would undoubtedly be much greater in relation to less common family types.

In terms of the second area – the construction of a larger sample – it is evident that this would enable us to increase the precision of our estimates, would facilitate more complex statistical models and would allow us to estimate the proportion of families in each category which fall below specific ‘thresholds’ of well-being. In fact, one of the challenges of research on family well-being is to identify appropriate national ‘benchmarks’. Although normative data are available for some of our instruments, it is not clear whether these are appropriate within the Irish context. Thus, one of the benefits of a larger study would be that it would enable us to estimate with greater precision the distribution of the Irish population in relation to our key indices of physical, psychological and relational well-being.

The aim of establishing valid ‘benchmarks’ for family well-being can also be approached by collecting more limited amounts of data from *specific kinds of populations*. For example, it would be useful to establish mean values for physical well-being, psychological well-being and life satisfaction in ‘clinical’ samples. This might be achieved by surveying families who are known to Health Boards as being ‘at risk’, due to addiction problems, psychiatric disturbance, physical abuse and so on. In this context, it is worth mentioning the potential of ‘targeted’ forms of data collection in which clusters of families are sampled within a limited number of geographical areas. This sampling strategy dovetails with new methodological techniques which allow us to explore contextual influences on family well-being in much greater detail.

The third area – collection of additional data – is obviously the most uncertain in terms of its potential benefits. As we mentioned earlier, it would be useful to collect information from different sources, including fathers who do not live with their children and perhaps also teachers. Similarly, by improving and extending some of the measurement instruments included in our questionnaires, it may be possible to shed additional light on the findings that we have presented in this report. At the same time, there are clearly limits – both financial and logistical – and we feel that the benefits of a broad focus should not be sacrificed. In fact, one of the strong points of this research project is its extensive scope when compared with the rather selective perspective that characterises much of the published social psychological research. In contrast, we have chosen to study a very wide range of psychological, social, cultural, economic and developmental factors, and we believe this to be of fundamental importance as far as future research on families in Ireland is concerned.

7.8 Conclusions

When viewed in isolation from other variables, the well-being of men and women varies according to family type. However, this association almost completely disappears when we control for other factors, and in this study we have sought to explain why this is the case. We have also identified which factors have the greatest explanatory power in relation to the physical, psychological and relational well-being of Irish families. Our ability to shed light on a range of different mechanisms that influence well-being underlines the power of the theoretical framework, measurement instruments and statistical methods that we have employed. Despite the unavoidable complexity of family relationships, our results show that it is possible to identify various causal pathways – both direct and indirect – that influence the well-being of mothers, fathers and their children. These findings have a number of implications for family policy, as they suggest that the couple relationship and parent-child relationships contribute to the physical and psychological well-being of children, within the context of personality attributes and family circumstances. By identifying the ways in which the external environment, relationship processes and individual attributes influence individual well-being, more sensitive and effective forms of family support can be designed.

Appendix to Chapter Two

Types of Family in Ireland

Table 2.1 Family Types in Ireland

Family Type	%
1. Two Parents: Married (1)	66
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting (2)	8
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship (3)	9
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship (4)	7
5. Other (5)	10
Total	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Notes:

(1) This is the first marriage for both parents.

(2) The term 'single' refers to a person who has never been married.

(3) A relationship refers to "a steady relationship for at least six months".

(4) The term 'separated' refers to those who have been married but are now divorced, whose marriages have been annulled, who are legally separated or living apart.

(5) 'Other' refers to a range of two-parent families (5%) and one-parent families (5%). These two-parent families comprise remarried parents (2%) and cohabiting parents following separation, divorce or widowhood (3%). These one-parent families comprise single parents in a non-cohabiting relationship (3%), separated parents in a non-cohabiting relationship (1%) and widowed parents not in a relationship (1%).

Table 2.2 Gender of Respondents in Each Family Type

	% Men	% Women	Total
1. Two Parents: Married	19	81	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	22	78	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	1	99	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	10	90	100
5. Other	15	85	100
Total	17	83	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.3 Families in Separate and Shared Households in Each Family Type

Family Type	% in	% in	Total
	Separate*	Shared**	
	Household	Household	
1. Two Parents: Married	99	1	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	100	0	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	97	3	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	97	3	100
5. Other	97	3	100
Total	99	1	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

* A 'separate household' is one occupied a family unit where parents and children (or parent and child) live together in the same household.

** A 'shared household' is one occupied by more than one family unit.

Table 2.4 Children Living with Both Biological Parents in Each Family Type

Family Type	Children living with both biological parents?		
	Yes	No	Total
	1. Two Parents: Married	98	2
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	90	10	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	0	100	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	2	98	100
5. Other	38	62	100
Total*	76	24	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

* Note that the survey yielded only three step children and no foster or adopted children.

Table 2.5 Distribution of Family Types in Dublin, Other Urban and Rural Areas

	Dublin	Other Urban	Rural	Total
1. Two Parents: Married	23	30	47	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	19	32	49	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	41	35	24	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	32	25	43	100
5. Other	23	30	47	100
Total	25	30	45	100
Households with children in Ireland*	29	34	37	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

* Source: JNRR – Joint National Readership Research, 2002

Table 2.6 Ages of Men and Women in Each Family Type

	Men			Women		
	Mean	Min	Max	Mean	Min	Max
1. Two Parents: Married	40	24	56	38	22	59
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	31	22	45	27	19	38
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	-	-	-	30	18	45
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	42	35	59	40	24	56
5. Other	39	21	69	35	18	58

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.7 Mean Ages of Children Aged 0-17 in Each Family Type

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
1. Two Parents: Married	9	0	17
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	4	0	13
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	6	0	17
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	12	1	17
5. Other	9	0	17

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.8 Ages of Children in Each Family Type

Family Type	Age Ranges of Children			Total %
	Under	Over	Both	
	11 yrs	11 yrs		
1. Two Parents: Married	42	26	32	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	93	2	5	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	69	13	18	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	15	44	41	100
5. Other	54	19	27	100
Total*	48	24	28	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

* Note that the survey yielded only three step children and no foster or adopted children.

Table 2.9 Mean Number of Children Aged 0-17 in Each Family Type

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
1. Two Parents: Married	2.3	1	8
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	1.7	1	6
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	1.8	1	5
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	2.4	1	8
5. Other	-	-	-

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.10 Duration of Relationships in Two-Parent Families

Family Type	Duration of Relationship (%)						Total
	1-2	3-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21+yrs	
	yrs	yrs	yrs	yrs	yrs		
1. Two Parents: Married	4	10	19	23	23	21	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	10	26	44	18	2	0	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.11 Social Class of Respondent in Each Family Type

	Social Class (%)						Total
	AB	C1	C2	DE	F1	F2	
1. Two Parents: Married	11	30	28	16	11	4	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	5	26	33	31	2	3	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	3	17	12	66	0	2	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	2	18	13	66	0	1	100
5. Other	5	26	20	47	1	1	100
Total	9	27	25	29	7	3	100
Ireland*	12	24	27	30	5	2	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Social class of respondents was determined by the occupation of the chief income earner.

Legend:

AB = higher professional / managerial; C1 = lower professional, supervisory and other non-manual;

C2 = skilled manual; D = semi-skilled and unskilled manual; E = totally dependent on welfare income due to unemployment, sickness, old age, etc; F1 = farmers with more than 50 acres; F2 = farmers with less than 50 acres.

* Source: JNRR – Joint National Readership Research, 2002

Table 2.12a Highest Level of Education of Parents in Each Family Type

	None	Junior	Leaving	3 rd Level	Degree or	Total
		Cert	Cert	Diploma	Higher	
1. Two Parents: Married	4	22	46	16	12	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	4	24	42	23	7	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	14	42	32	9	3	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	19	45	27	8	1	100
5. Other	10	28	39	17	6	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.12b Highest Level of Education of Men in Each Family Type

	None	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	3 rd Level Diploma	Degree or Higher	Total
1. Two Parents: Married	8	31	41	11	9	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	8	30	44	14	4	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	25	31	31	13	0	100
5. Other	13	27	40	13	7	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Table 2.12c Highest Level of Education of Women in Each Family Type

	Primary School Only*	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert	3 rd Level Diploma	Degree or Higher	Total
1. Two Parents: Married	6	28	49	12	5	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	6	30	42	17	5	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	15	41	33	8	3	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	21	46	25	7	1	100
5. Other	10	34	37	16	3	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

* This includes those who have received no formal education.

Table 2.13a Employment Status of Chief Income Earner in Each Family Type

	1= FTE	2= PTE	3= SE	4= UE	5= HD	6= F	7= Oth	Total
1. Two Parents: Married	77	2	7	4	0	9	1	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	80	6	3	6	2	3	0	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	30	26	2	6	34	1	1	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	33	25	0	11	30	1	0	100
5. Other	62	11	2	6	14	2	3	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Legend:

1= employed full-time (FTE) 2= employed part-time (PTE) 3= self-employed (SE) 4= unemployed (UE)

5= home duties (HD) 6= farmer (F) 7= other, including student or retired (Oth)

Table 2.13b Employment Status of Men in Each Family Type

	1=	2=	3=	4=	5=	6=	7=	Total
	FTE	PTE	SE	UE	HD	F	Oth	
1. Two Parents: Married	77	2	8	5	1	7	0	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	80	4	4	7	2	2	1	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	64	9	9	9	9	0	0	100
5. Other	66	2	0	12	5	5	10	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Legend:

1= employed full-time (FTE) 2= employed part-time (PTE) 3= self-employed (SE) 4= unemployed (UE)

5= home duties (HD) 6= farmer (F) 7= other, including student or retired (Oth)

Table 2.13c Employment Status of Women in Each Family Type

	1=	2=	3=	4=	5=	6=	7=	Total
	FTE	PTE	SE	UE	HD	F	Oth	
1. Two Parents: Married	19	18	1	1	60	1	0	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	20	24	0	1	55	0	0	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	20	27	2	7	41	0	3	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	24	26	0	12	38	0	0	100
5. Other	30	25	0	5	39	0	1	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Legend:

1= employed full-time (FTE) 2= employed part-time (PTE) 3= self-employed (SE) 4= unemployed (UE)

5= home duties (HD) 6= farmer (F) 7= other, including student or retired (Oth)

Table 2.14 Number of Earners in Each Family Type

Family Type	Number of Earners			Total
	None	One	Two	%
1. Two Parents: Married	7	58	35	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	14	53	33	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	51	49	0	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	46	54	0	100
5. Other	41	47	12	100
Total	18	55	27	100
Households in Ireland with children 0-15*	15	49	36	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Source: Labour Force Survey 1996, Special Tabulations in McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998, Table 1.2.

Table 2.15 Children with Disabilities in Each Family Type

Family Type	Type of Disability			Total
	None	Mental	Physical	%
1. Two Parents: Married	95	4	1	100
2. Two Parents: Single & Cohabiting	96	2	2	100
3. One Parent: Single Not in a Relationship	91	6	3	100
4. One Parent: Separated Not in a Relationship	89	10	1	100
5. Other	96	3	1	100
Total	94	5	1	100

Based on representative sample of 1,500 households with at least one child aged 0-17, October-November 2002.

Appendix to Chapter Three

Contextual Effects on Family Well-Being

In this Appendix, we report on a series of Multiple Regression models which help to shed some light on the determinants of the key explanatory variables that figure in the models presented in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six. For each of these models, we will report the standardised regression coefficients for the predictors, the associated p value and the overall R² (i.e. the proportion of variance explained by the predictors). When fitting these models, a number of predictor variables associated with the socio-economic context were initially entered into the model, and those with no significant effect on the dependent variable were then removed one at a time. The aim was to generate a number of concise, robust models which identify the indirect influence of the social, cultural and economic context on the well-being of family members.

Model 1 Children's Unresolved Problems with Parents

$$R^2 = .168$$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	-.25 (p = .003)
Mother's Age	.22 (p = .009)
Mother's Support Network	-.22 (p = .009)

Model 2 Mother's Positive Emotionality

$$R^2 = .171$$

Predictors:

Family Income	.12 (p = .048)
Mother's Support Network	.40 (p = .000)

Model 3 Mother's Negative Emotionality

$$R^2 = .160$$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	-.16 (p = .028)
Mother's Support Network	-.31 (p = .000)
Mother's Parents Separated	.20 (p = .007)

Model 4 Father's Positive Emotionality

$R^2 = .226$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	.15 (p = .031)
Father's Job Satisfaction	.33 (p = .000)
Father's Support Network	.16 (p = .038)
Father's Age	-.17 (p = .019)

Model 5 Father's Negative Emotionality

$R^2 = .066$

Predictors:

Father's Job Satisfaction	-.19 (p = .014)
Father's Parents Separated	-.21 (p = .008)

Model 6 Mother's Psychological Independence

$R^2 = .02$

Predictors:

Happiness of M's Parents' R'ship	-.14 (p = .047)
Mother's Support Network	.16 (p = .017)

Model 7 Father's Psychological Independence

$R^2 = .048$

Predictors:

Father's Job Satisfaction	.23 (p = .003)
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Model 8 Father's Psychological Interdependence

$R^2 = .224$

Predictors:

Father's Support Network	.48 (p = .000)
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Model 9 Father's Egalitarianism

$R^2 = .074$

Predictors:

Father's Age	-.16 (p = .033)
Father's Education	.20 (p = .010)
Mother's Job Satisfaction	.15 (p = .050)

Model 10 Mother's Feeling Financially Secure

$R^2 = .244$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	.23 (p = .003)
Mother's Job Satisfaction	.14 (p = .029)
Cohabiting vs. Married	-.12 (p = .046)
Single vs. Married	-.29 (p = .000)
Separated/Div. vs. Married	-.30 (p = .000)

Model 11 Mother's Negative Life Events

$R^2 = .073$

Predictors:

Family Income	-.16 (p = .010)
Happiness of M's Parents' R'ship	-.15 (p = .028)
Mother's Support Network	-.14 (p = .041)

Model 12 Mother's Unresolved Problems in Relationship

$R^2 = .156$

Predictors:

Mother's Support Network	-.21 (p = .021)
Father's Support Network	-.25 (p = .005)

Model 13 **Father's Unresolved Problems in Relationship**

$R^2 = .185$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	-.13 (p = .076)
Father's Job Satisfaction	-.18 (p = .029)
Father's Support Network	-.31 (p = .000)

Model 14 **Mother's Ineffective Arguing**

$R^2 = .118$

Predictors:

Mother's Education	-.16 (p = .033)
Mother's Support Network	-.34 (p = .000)

Model 15 **Father's Ineffective Arguing**

$R^2 = .117$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	-.16 (p = .036)
Happiness of M's Parents' R'ship	-.19 (p = .014)
Father's Support Network	-.22 (p = .004) ?

Model 16 **Mother's Conflict-Engaging Style**

$R^2 = .157$

Predictors:

Mother's Education	-.24 (p = .001)
Mother's Support Network	-.36 (p = .000)

Model 17 **Mother's Positive Problem-Solving Style**

$R^2 = .137$

Predictors:

Mother's Age	-.14 (p = .065)
Father's Parents Separated	.20 (p = .008)
Mother's Support Network	.33 (p = .000)

Model 18 **Mother's Compliant Style**

$R^2 = .02$

Predictors:

Mother's Education	-.17 (p = .031)
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Model 19 **Mother's Withdrawing Style**

$R^2 = .152$

Predictors:

Cohabiting vs. Married	.27 (p = .000)
Mother's Education	-.24 (p = .002)
Mother's Support Network	-.23 (p = .002)

Model 20 **Father's Conflict-Engaging Style**

$R^2 = .08$

Predictors:

Family Social Class	-.14 (p = .060)
Father's Support Network	-.26 (p = .001)

Model 21 **Father's Positive Problem-Solving Style**

$R^2 = .081$

Predictors:

Father's Job Satisfaction	.19 (p = .014)
Father's Parents Separated	.14 (p = .060)
Mother's Support Network	.16 (p = .038)

Model 22**Fathers' Compliant Style**

$R^2 = .04$

Predictors:

Father's Parents Separated	-.15 (p = .058)
Father's Support Network	-.19 (p = .016)

Model 23**Father's Withdrawing Style**

$R^2 = .125$

Predictors:

Father's Parents Separated	-.14 (p = .059)
Happiness of M's Parents' R'ship	-.19 (p = .013)
Father's Support Network	-.27 (p = .001)

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