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Joint physical custody and mothers' life satisfaction in Belgium, Finland, and Germany

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ABSTRACT

Joint physical custody (JPC) is an increasingly common care arrangement in which children live about equally with their parents after separation or divorce. This study examined the association between JPC and mothers' life satisfaction in Belgium, Finland, and Germany. The objective was to determine whether mothers with (asymmetric or symmetric) JPC differed in terms of life satisfaction from mothers with sole physical custody (SPC) and whether there were country-specific differences. Using data from the studies Divorce in Flanders, Survey among Separated Families in Finland, and Family Models in Germany, we estimated OLS regression models for resident mothers in SPC and JPC families with minor children. Results showed significant differences between countries. Mothers in Belgium did not differ in terms of life satisfaction depending on their child's physical custody arrangement. However, mothers with symmetric JPC had higher life satisfaction than their counterparts with SPC in the Finnish sample, while both asymmetric and symmetric JPC mothers reported higher life satisfaction than SPC mothers in Germany. These differences, however, disappeared after introducing control variables to the regression models. Findings suggest that selection into different physical custody arrangements may explain the positive link between JPC and mothers' life satisfaction; a finding with far-reaching implications.

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1. Introduction

Joint physical custody (JPC), an arrangement in which children live about equally with each parent after family dissolution, is an increasingly common post-separation care arrangement for children in Western countries (e.g. Hakovirta et al., 2023; Steinbach

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et al., 2021). While there is a large amount of research on its consequences for children (Berman & Daneback, 2020; Steinbach, 2019), less is known concerning how JPC affects parents' well-being, and the existing evidence is mixed. Some studies report that parents who share physical custody of their child(ren) have higher life satisfaction than parents in sole physical custody (SPC) families, where traditionally mothers are the primary caretakers of children (Steinbach, 2019). This finding may be due, in part, to higher levels of contact with children for fathers and lower time pressures for mothers (Bergström et al., 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2016). However, scholars also point to the potentially negative correlation between JPC and parents' well-being (especially in high-conflict families). Such negative relationships may result from more frequent interactions between the separated or divorced parents (e.g. to streamline children's household transitions or negotiate the sharing of child-related expenditures) and frequent separation from the child (Fritzell et al., 2020; Harris-Short, 2010; Sodermans et al., 2015). Previous empirical research, on balance, is conceptually (e.g. using different definitions of JPC), methodologically (e.g. applying various methods to investigate JPC), and contextually (e.g. using samples from different countries or regions) heterogeneous, and systematic cross-national comparisons of the association between physical custody arrangements and parental well-being are scarce (Steinbach, 2019).

This lack of consistent empirical evidence highlights the need for further investigation into this area of study, including work that remains attentive to the potentially gender-specific implications and consequences of physical custody arrangements. Given the importance of life satisfaction for individuals (Erdogan et al., 2012), this study examined the life satisfaction of resident mothers practicing either JPC or SPC and compared mothers from three European countries: Belgium, Finland, and Germany. Through similar measures and methodologies, harmonized surveys allowed us to not only consider potential differences in the life satisfaction of mothers across borders but also to determine the extent to which variations in life satisfaction may be ascribed to the institutional contexts in the individual countries. Notably, the selected countries have quite different policies concerning JPC: Whereas JPC has been the presumptive arrangement in Belgium since 2006 (Vanassche et al., 2017), Finland passed family laws regarding JPC in 2019 (Tolonen et al., 2019), and this physical custody arrangement is not yet established by law in Germany (Helms & Schneider, 2020). Moreover, the three countries have distinct child support and family policies, as well as varying expectations of gender roles in both the private sphere and the labour market. These dissimilarities provide an interesting comparative baseline to consider how – and if so, to what extent – physical custody arrangements are associated with mothers' life satisfaction.

Using survey data collected in each country, we first investigate how mothers with asymmetric JPC (children that live at least 30% but less than 50% of the time with their nonresident parent) and symmetric JPC (50:50 arrangements) fare vis-à-vis mothers with SPC in terms of life satisfaction. Second, we consider the persistence of these results in light of both individual, familial, and institutional factors. As such, we contribute not only to understanding how multiple configurations of physical custody are related to the life satisfaction of mothers but also gain insight into how the country context may be attributing to post-separation adjustment.

2. Background

2.1. JPC and mothers' life satisfaction

Separation and divorce can negatively impact a person's life satisfaction, particularly when children are involved (Leopold, 2018; Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). A growing corpus of literature devotes attention to how JPC potentially mediates these consequences, with varying results. On the one hand, some studies indicate that JPC benefits a mother's well-being and life satisfaction to a greater extent than SPC (Augustijn, 2023b; Riser et al., 2022; Sodermans et al., 2015). One noteworthy advantage of practicing JPC is the more equal distribution of parenting responsibilities between the mother and father. With the additional time made available to mothers, those with JPC may have an easier time pursuing paid employment and balancing paid employment with childcare once employed. With literature showing that divorce negatively impacts mothers' economic well-being (Mortelmans, 2020), JPC may serve as a protective factor (Augustijn, 2023a), allowing mothers to be more financially stable and experience greater life satisfaction.

Moreover, mothers in JPC families benefit from having more leisure time than mothers in SPC families (Sodermans et al., 2015), which may additionally contribute positively to life satisfaction and the chances of re-partnering (Vanassche et al., 2015). Insofar as having a new partner can increase a mother's life satisfaction and well-being (see Augustijn, 2022), a JPC arrangement may play a critical indirect role in improving life satisfaction. As separation or divorce negatively affects social contacts and social integration, JPC can alleviate these deleterious effects by offering mothers more time for social engagement (Kalmijn & van Groenou, 2005). JPC can also improve maternal life satisfaction through enhancing co-parental cooperativeness (Augustijn, 2023b). Bauserman (2012), for instance, claims that JPC reduces conflict between separated parents, as rather than considering who wins or loses custody, physical custody is shared equally.

On the other hand, a body of literature bolsters a counterargument on JPC's utility. For instance, as children move repeatedly from one parental household to the other, parents must communicate, coordinate, and make joint decisions more frequently. As organizing transitions for children can be quite complicated (Smyth et al., 2003), parents may need to make thorough and time-consuming preparations, which can negatively impact their life satisfaction by increasing perceived time pressures and parental stress (van der Heijden et al., 2016). JPC may also increase the risk of interparental conflict arising or may worsen existing conflicts, directly affecting the life satisfaction of mothers.

Furthermore, JPC mothers, by implication, spend less time with their children than their SPC counterparts. The repeated separations and attenuation of time with children can lead to worry (e.g. about the father's parental skills or the level and quality of care children are receiving), anxiety, and loneliness (Fritzell et al., 2020) – all of which may be correlated with worsening maternal life satisfaction. Mothers may also be concerned about their children's physical and mental well-being, as well as potential influences from the father's social network. Specifically, mothers may be worried about the parenting skills of the father's new partner and the influence this partner has on their children (Fehlberg et al., 2011). Moreover, if conflict does not subside, JPC has been found to be damaging to parents' health due to the difficulties in avoiding friction (Harris-Short, 2010).

Finally, discussions about JPC are regularly associated with the issue of self-selection by more highly educated, financially stable, and better-cooperating parents (Steinbach, 2019). Considering that JPC parents have become more heterogeneous in countries where this arrangement is more common, positive outcomes may become less prominent over time (Kitterød & Wiik, 2017; Sodermans et al., 2013). As such, considering differences in mothers' life satisfaction across countries with varying levels of JPC institutionalization can be highly useful for understanding the association between physical custody arrangements and maternal well-being, and how this link can be expected to evolve.

2.2. The institutional contexts

There are striking differences in the legal framework surrounding JPC in Belgium, Finland, and Germany. In Belgium, JPC has been the legal presumption since 2006. Since then, courts are obligated to first consider the viability of JPC in case of parental dissensus concerning physical custody, after which either symmetric or asymmetric JPC is generally imposed if it is not in violation of the best interests of the child (Sodermans et al., 2013). This legal procedure led to an early popularization of JPC in Belgium, even among parents making private agreements. Five years after its legal introduction, JPC was already estimated to cover 35% of physical custody arrangements, defined as children spending at least 33% of the time which each parent (Sodermans et al., 2011). In Finland, a change in the Child Custody and Right of Access Decree came into force in 2019, legally acknowledging JPC and defining it as a child living at least 40% of the time with each parent. A recent study identified 31% of physical custody cases as JPC (Miettinen et al., 2020). In Germany, meanwhile, the government has not yet passed laws or adopted policies that would encourage courts or parents to opt for JPC (Steinbach & Helms, 2022). In addition, for a court to order parents to practice JPC, it must usually be demonstrated that it is in the child's best interest (Helms & Schneider, 2020). As such, SPC remains the dominant physical custody arrangement in Germany, with a recent study estimating that no more than 5% of children live in a JPC family (Walper et al., 2021).

Accounting for differences in the broader institutional setting is also important, as the uptake and outcomes of JPC may be moderated through, for example, the dominant child support scheme, labour market conditions, and family policies. When setting child support orders in Belgium, the amount due is calculated considering the time spent with each parent, thus allowing child support reductions for any 'extra' step away from SPC (Claessens & Mortelmans, 2018). If parents' financial capacities are equal, no child support is ordered to be paid, thus promoting the equal uptake of care. Furthermore, parents with a 50:50-time division can opt to automatically share tax-related child benefits (FOD Financiën, 2023; Mortelmans & Fuselier, 2024). In Finland, child support is reduced depending on how many nights a child spends with the liable parent. However, in JPC cases, child support orders are still more than half of the SPC level, which potentially discourages the sharing of care (Hakovirta et al., 2022; Hakovirta & Eydal, 2020). Moreover, in Finland, parents practicing JPC tend to share the child related expenses informally, rather than pay child support (Haapanen et al., 2024; Miettinen et al., 2020). As of now, Germany has no clear legal ruling for

child support calculation in JPC cases. Additionally, in most cases, a care arrangement is only recognized as JPC if the parents have a 50:50 division of time. As such, even in asymmetric JPC families, nonresident parents may still have to pay the same amount of child support as they would have in SPC families, thus potentially disincentivizing the uptake of JPC (Augustijn, 2023a).

Other aspects that may motivate or hinder the uptake of JPC can be found in the (implicit) assumptions concerning gender roles underlying welfare state contexts. Korpi et al. (2013), for example, identify Finland as a dual earner-dual carer model, exemplified by the provision of generous universal benefits and services for families, along with the promotion of gender equality in paid work and childcare. Meanwhile, Belgium and Germany are considered to uphold a traditional family support model. Both countries provide high levels of cash and tax benefits for families with children. Still, support for early childhood education and care is generally meagre, which can be considered as promoting traditional gender roles. This, nevertheless, is more characteristic of Germany than Belgium. Whereas the overall maternal employment rate is around 75% in both countries, Germany has a stronger gap in part-time employment for mothers and fathers with young children (59.8%, Belgium: 39.7%) (Statbel, 2023; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023), suggesting a stronger female-oriented care regime. Moreover, the overall Belgian earnings gap, measured as the difference between the relative average earnings of working-age women and men, is quite similar to Finland (both around 25%) and significantly lower than Germany (42%) (European Commission et al., 2021).

These factors are crucial to consider. Physical custody arrangements can embody expectations about equality in mothers' and fathers' care roles, and gender equality on an institutional scale can, in turn, positively affect life satisfaction – particularly for women (Audette et al., 2018; Tesch-Römer et al., 2008). As such, the societal and political climate surrounding the division of childcare provides an important backdrop to understanding how JPC affects mothers' life satisfaction. By comparatively considering three very different JPC contexts, where sharing physical custody has been institutionalized for quite some time (Belgium), recently (Finland), and not at all (Germany), we aim to identify whether JPC as 'the norm' in post-separation childrearing has a differential impact on life satisfaction.

3. Method

3.1. Data

The Belgian data are drawn from the multi-actor survey Divorce in Flanders (DiF; Mortelmans et al., 2011), for which individuals in a first marriage or having experienced one divorce were randomly sampled from the Belgian Public Register. Cohabiting parents (whether factual or legal) and those who separated other than through divorce were thus not considered in the sample. The sampling criteria identified heterosexual (ex-)marriages, legally formed between 1971 and 2008, of which both (ex-)partners were born with Belgian nationality. The sample was proportionally stratified by marriage year, with an oversampling of divorced individuals (two-thirds) in each stratum. Both (ex-)partners were contacted individually for participation in a CAPI interview between 2009 and 2010, resulting in a total dataset of 6,365 respondents, of which 4,590 were

divorced. During the interview with the first respondent, a target child was selected (if possible) for whom both responding parents received in-depth questions on (e.g. living arrangements and well-being). To be selected, a target child must first be the biological or adoptive child of both parents. Second, selections were made in the following sequence: i) a child between the ages of 10 and 18 living in the household of one or both parent(s) (who was then also invited to participate in a CAPI interview); ii) a child over the age of 17 not living in the household of either parent (who was then invited to participate in a written questionnaire); iii) a child under the age of 10 living in the household of one or both parent(s) under the age of 10; and finally iv) a child under the age of 18 not living in the household of either parent. If more than one child fit the active selection category, a target child was selected at random by the CAWI programme.

Data for Finland come from the Survey among Separated Families in Finland (SSFF), conducted among separated families with minor children in 2019. Two simple random samples, one for the resident parents (the child's official address was with this parent) and one for the non-resident parents, were drawn from a register database compiled by the Social Insurance Institution (Kela). The database included all parents with a child aged 1–17 who were not living with the child's other parent and who had a valid email address in Kela's registers. Sampled nonresident and resident parents received an email inviting them to participate in a web-based survey. The dataset of 3,449 respondents includes 2,156 resident parents and 1,293 nonresident parents. Through a random sampling procedure, only one child of the parent was identified as the target child. In the survey, parents were asked to report about the arrangements regarding this child (the child was referred to by their year of birth throughout the questionnaire).

Data from Germany are drawn from the Family Models in Germany (FAMOD) study, a convenience sample of 321 nuclear families and 1,233 post-separation families living in Germany (Steinbach et al., 2020). Data were collected between July 2019 and January 2020. FAMOD was conceptualized as a multi-actor study with four groups of respondents, including a parent – the anchor respondent (interviewed via CAPI) – who had at least one biological child under the age of 15 who was registered with them at the time of data collection (target child). The FAMOD sample is stratified according to family type (nuclear, SPC, and JPC family) and age of the target child (age groups: 0–6 years and 7–14 years). For post-separation families to be able to participate in the survey, the target child had to have contact with both biological parents. If more than one child could have been selected as a target child, the selection of the target child was based on two criteria. First, children in joint physical custody were preferred to children in sole physical custody, and children in sole physical custody were preferred to children in nuclear families. Second, the interviewer was supposed to select the youngest child (Steinbach et al., 2020). Although a convenience sampling procedure based on a quota sample was applied, a comparison of the families in the FAMOD data with families in other German data sets revealed similarities in key sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, which confirmed the quality of the FAMOD data (Steinbach et al., 2020).

3.2. Analytical samples

Selections were made across datasets to ensure comparability between the samples, beginning with the exclusion of nuclear families, fathers, and nonresident mothers, as

well as resident mothers with a missing value on the dependent variable. To match the FAMOD data, the Finnish sample was further restricted to mothers with a target child aged 1–14, and the Belgian sample to mothers with target children under the age of 18 (as limiting to 14 years would reduce the sample size to 467 mothers). This resulted in a sample of 681 resident mothers for Belgium (SPC: 472, asymmetric JPC: 45, symmetric JPC: 164), 1,602 for Finland (SPC: 1,022, asymmetric JPC: 270, symmetric JPC: 310), and 1,075 for Germany (SPC: 678, asymmetric JPC: 239, symmetric JPC: 158).

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Dependent variable

In all studies, maternal life satisfaction was measured with a single item. In the Belgian study, respondents were asked the question ‘How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life nowadays?’ The response categories ranged from very dissatisfied (0) to very satisfied (10). In the Finnish study, life satisfaction was measured through the question ‘From 1 to 10, how satisfied you are with your life at the moment?’, with the response categories varying from very dissatisfied (1) to very satisfied (10). The German questionnaire asked the question ‘All in all, how satisfied are you with your life at the moment?’ The response categories were the same as in the Belgian study and thus ranged from very dissatisfied (0) to very satisfied (10).

3.3.2. Independent variable

In the Belgian and German studies, the target child’s residential arrangement was measured with a residential calendar that covered a typical month without holidays. In this calendar, the anchor respondents indicated on which days and nights the target child was living with the mother or the father. In the Belgian study, respondents were asked to report an entire month, whereas in the German study, the first two weeks of the month. However, if the last two weeks of the month differed from the first two, the respondents were asked to complete a second two-week calendar. In case the anchor respondents did not fill out the residential calendar in a way that allowed determining the target child’s residential arrangement, the respondents’ (short) self-assessment about their physical custody arrangement was used in both studies. In the Finnish study, the target child’s residential arrangement was measured with a question about the number of overnight stays with the nonresident parent during a typical month (range 1–30; less often than 1 night/month; never). We differentiated between three residential arrangements: *SPC* (0; child spends less than 30% of the time with the father), *asymmetric JPC* (1; child spends between 30% and 49% of the time with the father), and *symmetric JPC* (2; child spends 50% of the time with the father).

3.3.3. Covariates

Several covariates were identical across datasets; others were measured (slightly) differently, but nonetheless warranted identical coding for the analysis. In all three studies, the number of transitions that the target child made between parental households during a typical month was measured with a residential calendar by counting how often the child moved from one household to the other. Another control variable was the mother’s age, which was calculated by subtracting her year of birth from the year

of data collection. Concerning the mother's educational level, the Belgian dataset includes a calculation of the three-category ISCED-score, giving way to the categorization of the highest obtained education level as *low* (0; no diploma to lower secondary education), *medium* (1; higher and post-secondary education) and *high* (2; tertiary level education). The Finnish questionnaire considers the highest educational attainment, which we classified as *low* (0; basic level education and general secondary level education (matriculation)), *medium* (1; vocational secondary level education), and *high* (2; tertiary level education). In the German data, a mother's educational level was based on her general school-leaving certificate, and three groups were differentiated: *low* (0; no school-leaving certificate or the lowest formal qualification), *medium* (1; intermediary secondary qualification), and *high* (2; at minimum, a certificate fulfilling the entrance requirements for a university of applied sciences). Based on the mother's partnership status, we distinguished between three groups: *no partner* (0), *partner with whom she is not co-residing* (1), and *partner with whom she is co-residing* (2).

To account for the mother's weekly working hours, we divided the respondents into four groups: *0 hours* (0), *1–19 hours* (1), *20–36 hours* (2), and *more than 36 hours* (3). The questions for measuring the mother's working hours were: 'How much time per week do you spend on all your jobs combined, including overtime and preparation time?' (Belgium), 'What is your regular weekly working time?' (Finland), and 'What are, on average, your real weekly working hours, including overtime?' (Germany). Concerning the mother's subjective economic situation, the Belgian questionnaire asked 'How hard or easy can your household get by with its available family income?', with a categorical answer scale ranging from *very difficultly* (1) to *very easily* (6). In the Finnish study, this was measured as 'How is the financial situation of your family at present', with response categories ranging from *very bad* (0) to *very good* (4), and the German study asked, 'How is the financial situation in your household?' The response categories for this item ranged from *very bad* (4) to *very good* (0). To determine the mother's number of children, all biological and adoptive children that the mother reported were considered. We also controlled for the age of the target child. In the Belgian and German studies, the time since the separation from the biological father of the target child was calculated by subtracting the year of the parental break-up from the year of data collection; in the Finnish study, it was measured with a question asking how many years ago the respondent separated from the other parent.

Finally, to assess the interparental relationship quality between the separated parents, the Belgian questionnaire asked 'How would you describe your current relationship with your ex?', for which the responses were recoded to *no contact* (0), *bad* (1; responses 'very bad' and 'bad'), *neutral* (2; response 'not bad, not good'), and *good* (3; responses 'good' and 'very good'). In the Finnish data, a summary measure on the interparental relationship was created on the basis of two separate questions on how friendly or quarrelsome the respondent saw the relationship (response options varying from fully disagree to fully agree), with additional information about whether the parents were in contact: *no contact* (0), *bad* (1; summary measure ranging from 0 to 1.4), *neutral* (2; summary measure 1.5–2.9), and *good* (3; summary measure from 3 to 4). The German study used the question 'How well do you get along with the biological father of [target child]?' For the analysis, we distinguish between four groups: *no contact* (0), *bad* (1; responses 'poorly' and 'very poorly'), *neutral* (2; response 'neither well nor

Table 1. Descriptive Sample Statistics: Percentages or Means.

	Belgium (N = 681)		Finland (N = 1,602)		Germany (N = 1,075)	
	M / %	SD	M / %	SD	M / %	SD
Mother's life satisfaction	7.8	0.1	6.8	0.4	7.8	0.1
Physical custody arrangement						
SPC	69.3		63.8		63.1	
Asymmetric JPC	6.6		16.9		22.2	
Symmetric JPC	24.1		19.4		14.7	
Number of children's transitions between parental households	3.5	0.2	4.9	0.1	7.1	0.2
Mother's age	40.0	0.2	38.8	0.2	36.9	0.2
Mother's educational level						
Low	13.3		7.8		15.0	
Medium	44.9		43.1		43.3	
High	41.7		49.1		41.8	
Mother's partnership status						
No partner	35.1		41.1		49.9	
Partner, not co-residing	14.8		25.4		6.8	
Partner, co-residing	50.1		33.5		43.4	
Mother's weekly working hours						
0 h	14.5		19.0		9.6	
1-19 h	4.3		2.4		10.7	
20-36 h	32.9		21.6		49.1	
More than 36 h	48.3		56.9		30.6	
Mother's self-rated economic situation (family/household – 0 = Bad)	2.9	0.0	2.0	0.2	2.8	0.0
Mother's number of children	2.1	0.0	2.4	0.3	1.5	0.0
Age of target child	12.5	0.1	9.4	0.1	7.7	0.1
Time since separation (years)	5.8	0.1	5.1	0.1	4.0	0.1
Interparental relationship quality						
No contact	14.8		2.8		3.9	
Bad	20.3		17.4		8.9	
Neutral	33.2		20.3		41.3	
Good	31.7		59.6		45.9	

Note: Divorce in Flanders (DiF), Survey among separated families in Finland (SSFF), Family Models in Germany (FAMOD); SPC = sole physical custody, JPC = joint physical custody.

poorly'), and *good* (3; responses 'well' and 'very well'). The descriptive sample statistics for all variables – separately for each country – are presented in [Table 1](#).

3.4. Analytical strategy

Statistical analyses were conducted in STATA 18. Missing values on the covariates (Belgium: $n = 36$; Finland: $n = 39$; Germany: $n = 112$) were imputed using multiple imputation (chained equations with 50 imputations) (White et al., 2010). To investigate the association between physical custody arrangements and resident mothers' life satisfaction, we estimated OLS regression models for each country. The first models in [Table 2](#) show the findings of the bivariate regression models (*Model 1*); in the second model, we controlled for all covariates (*Model 2*). To examine if there were statistically significant differences in the relationship between physical custody arrangement and mother's life

Low	Ref.	0.09	0.03	Ref.	-0.05	Ref.	-0.01	Ref.	-0.02	-0.01
Medium	-0.35	0.15	0.558	0.09	0.13	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.09
High	0.063	0.03	0.01	0.730	-0.19	-0.05	-0.03	-0.09	-0.19	-0.03
	-0.20	0.15	0.821	0.14	0.159			0.09	0.14	
	0.314			0.159				0.306	0.159	
Mother's partnership status	Ref.	0.62	0.13	Ref.	0.26	Ref.	0.04	Ref.	0.35	0.08
No partner	0.19	0.10	0.001	0.18	0.152			0.08	0.18	
Partner, not co-residing	0.001	0.44	0.13	0.59	0.10	0.16	0.17	0.000	0.59	0.17
Partner, co-residing	0.77	0.10	0.000	0.10	0.000			0.06	0.10	
	0.15			0.000				0.000	0.000	
Mother's weekly working hours	Ref.	0.93	0.11	Ref.	0.57	Ref.	0.10	Ref.	0.56	0.07
0 h	0.33	0.25	0.820	0.20	0.005			0.13	0.20	
1-19 h	0.006	0.15	0.04	0.33	0.16	0.09	0.06	0.000	0.33	0.06
20-36 h	0.39	0.12	0.07	0.16	0.043			0.09	0.16	
More than 36 h	0.042	0.23	0.11	0.227	0.49	0.13	0.09	0.008	0.49	0.09
	0.41	0.11	0.07	0.11	0.18			0.08	0.18	
	0.19	0.038	0.31	0.038	0.006	0.48	0.37	0.000	0.038	0.37
Mother's self-rated economic situation	0.39	0.56	0.06	1.03	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.62	1.03	0.02
(family/household - 0 = Bad)	0.06	0.05	0.000	0.06	0.000			0.03	0.06	
	0.000	0.01	0.01	0.09	0.06	0.04	0.02	0.000	0.09	0.02
Mother's number of children	0.07	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.06			0.03	0.06	
	0.417	0.707	-0.02	0.144	0.333	-0.01	-0.02	0.333	0.144	-0.02
Age of target child	-0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
	0.03	0.515	0.01	0.699	0.390	-0.11	-0.03	0.390	0.699	-0.03
Time since separation	0.884	0.00	0.01	-0.06	-0.02			-0.02	-0.06	
	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
Interparental relationship quality	0.835	0.696	0.63	0.696	0.003	0.02	0.05	0.082	0.696	0.05
No contact	0.21	0.04	0.06	0.21	0.02	0.41	0.05	0.02	0.21	0.05

(Continued)



Table 2. Continued.

	Belgium				Finland				Germany				Pooled data	
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B SE p-value	β	B SE p-value	β	B SE p-value	β	B SE p-value	β	B SE p-value	β	B SE p-value	β	B SE p-value	β
Bad														
Neutral														
Good														
Constant	7.86		6.43		6.74		5.40		7.70		4.08		5.61	
Adjusted R ²	0.08		0.62		0.05		0.29		0.07		0.34		0.22	
N	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
	0.00		0.16		0.01		0.16		0.01		0.37		0.27	
	681		1.602		1.602		1.602		1.075		3.358		3.358	

Note: Divorce in Flanders (DIF), Survey among Separated Families in Finland (SSFF), Family Models in Germany (FAMOD); SPC = sole physical custody, JPC = joint physical custody.

satisfaction between countries, we leveraged a pooled dataset (*Model 3*). In [Table 2](#), we report unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), p -values (p), and standardized coefficients (β), though the description of the findings concentrates on the standardized coefficients.

4. Results

The results of the bivariate regression models (*Model 1*) in [Table 2](#) display notable differences among the three countries regarding the link between physical custody arrangements and mothers' life satisfaction. In the Belgian sample, mothers with asymmetric JPC ($\beta = -0.06$, $p = 0.099$) and symmetric JPC ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.246$) did not differ from their counterparts with SPC. In the Finnish sample, we also did not find differences between mothers who were practicing asymmetric JPC ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.347$) and mothers who were practicing SPC, but mothers with symmetric JPC reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those with SPC ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.000$), even though the coefficient was small in magnitude. The bivariate association between physical custody arrangements and mothers' life satisfaction was different yet again in the German sample, with mothers living in asymmetric JPC families ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.005$) and symmetric JPC families ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.003$) reporting higher levels of life satisfaction than those in SPC families. Again, the coefficients were relatively small. Moreover, the adjusted R^2 for each country also shows that physical custody arrangements explained either no (Belgium: 0%) or very little (Finland and Germany: 1%) of the variance in mothers' life satisfaction.

After entering all covariates in the multivariate regression models (*Model 2*), for Belgium, the negative association between asymmetric or symmetric JPC and mother's life satisfaction became larger in magnitude, although the association was statistically significant only for asymmetric JPC (asymmetric JPC: $\beta = -0.07$, $p = 0.049$; symmetric JPC: $\beta = -0.06$, $p = 0.114$). We also observed some changes in the Finnish and German samples. The initially significant differences between JPC and SPC mothers in the two countries disappeared, with mothers in Finland (asymmetric JPC: $\beta = -0.01$, $p = 0.876$; symmetric JPC: $\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.149$) and Germany (asymmetric JPC: $\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.168$; symmetric JPC: $\beta = 0.01$, $p = 0.685$) no longer differing in terms of their life satisfaction levels as a function of their physical custody arrangement. These findings indicate that the relationships between physical custody arrangements and mothers' life satisfaction were spurious and could be explained by factors other than the physical custody arrangement. In addition, the explanatory power of the multivariate models increased sharply after controlling for the covariates (Belgium: $R^2 = 16\%$; Finland: $R^2 = 16\%$; Germany: $R^2 = 37\%$).

With respect to the associations between the covariates and mothers' life satisfaction, we found both similarities and differences between the three countries. Compared to mothers who did not have a partner, mothers with a new partner reported higher life satisfaction in both Belgium (no co-residence: $\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.001$; co-residence: $\beta = 0.23$, $p = 0.000$) and Finland (no co-residence: $\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.001$; co-residence: $\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.000$). In both countries, the association was stronger for mothers who were residing with their new partner. In Germany, only mothers who were residing with a new partner had higher life satisfaction than those without a partner ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.000$).

In both the Belgian and German samples, longer working hours were generally associated with higher life satisfaction. In contrast, in the Finnish data, only mothers with more than 36 weekly working hours reported higher life satisfaction than mothers who were not employed ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = 0.038$). In all three countries, the mothers' economic situation was positively related to their life satisfaction, with a better economic situation predicting higher levels of life satisfaction. As the standardized coefficients show, the mother's economic situation was the covariate most strongly associated with her life satisfaction in all three countries (Belgium: $\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.000$; Finland: $\beta = 0.31$, $p = 0.000$; Germany: $\beta = 0.48$, $p = 0.000$). In the German sample only, we found that the more time had elapsed since the separation, the lower the mothers' life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = 0.003$). The quality of the interparental relationship was unrelated to mothers' levels of life satisfaction in the Belgian sample, but there were some differences in the other two countries. In the Finnish sample, mothers who did not have contact ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.011$) or who had a good relationship ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.000$) with the father of their child, reported higher life satisfaction than mothers with a bad interparental relationship. In the German sample, mothers with a neutral ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.000$) or a good ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.000$) interparental relationship had higher life satisfaction than those with a bad interparental relationship. The number of transitions that the child made between the parental households, the mother's age, her educational level, and her number of children were unrelated to levels of life satisfaction in all three samples.

We pooled data from each country to examine if the observed differences between countries in the associations between children's physical custody arrangements and mother's life satisfaction were statistically significant (*Model 3*). Interactions between country and custody arrangement showed that, in contrast to Belgium, asymmetric-JPC and symmetric-JPC were positively associated with mother's life satisfaction in Finland and Germany (statistically significantly only for symmetric-JPC; for Finland, $\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.038$ and for Germany, $\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.021$).

5. Discussion

A growing research literature has examined associations between children's physical custody arrangements and the well-being of children and parents, typically by comparing JPC to (most frequently, mother) SPC arrangements (see recent reviews by Bauserman, 2012; Berman & Daneback, 2020; Steinbach, 2019). The existing literature generally suggests that JPC is positively associated with a range of well-being indicators for both parents and children, though the commonly cross-sectional nature of available data and the underlying differences between families with different physical custody arrangements make it challenging to assess causality. Selection processes among post-separation families lead to, among others, families with JPC being generally more socially and economically advantaged (e.g. in terms of earnings and education), exhibiting lower levels of parental conflict (Steinbach, 2019), and being more satisfied with their physical custody arrangement than families with SPC (Riser et al., 2022).

In addition to these selection effects, scholars have presented arguments as to why practicing JPC may both positively and negatively affect mothers' well-being. Whereas sharing physical custody and parenting responsibilities more equally with the father may have many advantages for mothers (e.g. a better balance between paid employment

and childcare and more leisure time), possible negative experiences resulting from practicing JPC – such as stress due to increased discussions with the ex-partner or worries concerning their parenting capacities – also need to be acknowledged. Moreover, the growing normativity of JPC in a larger societal context may dilute any positive outcomes that JPC can have for parents. As it has been found that the heterogeneity of parents practicing JPC increases when sharing physical custody of children after family dissolution becomes normalized; thus, the positive outcomes of JPC may also become less prominent over time (Kitterød & Wiik, 2017; Sodermans et al., 2013).

This study took a comparative approach and investigated the life satisfaction of mothers with JPC and SPC in Belgium, Finland, and Germany – countries with differing social and legal contexts concerning physical custody. Using data from the DiF, SSFF, and FAMOD surveys, we estimated OLS regression models for resident mothers in post-separation families with minor children. Our results suggested noteworthy differences between the three countries. Whereas we did not find any differences between (asymmetric and symmetric) JPC mothers and SPC mothers for Belgium, mothers with symmetric JPC in the Finnish sample had higher levels of life satisfaction than their counterparts with SPC. In contrast, mothers in Germany with asymmetric JPC and symmetric JPC reported higher life satisfaction than their counterparts with SPC. The (bivariate) differences between physical custody arrangements in Finland and Germany we initially observed, however, disappeared after we introduced control variables in the regression models.

There are several explanations for these findings. First, we may observe positive selection into JPC decreasing over time in Belgium (Sodermans et al., 2013). The fact that at the time of data collection, JPC had been legally instated as the physical custody presumption for a longer time in Belgium than in Finland and Germany may indicate that the process of decreased positive selection had a larger, more wide-ranging effect in Belgium relative to the other countries. As such, unobserved heterogeneity within the groups of Finnish and German mothers might lead to higher levels of life satisfaction among those practicing JPC (Fritzell et al., 2020). This is related to the second explanation, which supports the argument that the ‘normalization’ of JPC diminishes its positive outcomes over time (Kitterød & Wiik, 2017). The finding that mothers with symmetric JPC reported higher levels of life satisfaction in Finland and that both mothers with symmetric and asymmetric JPC did so in Germany seemingly aligns with the institutionalization of JPC across the countries, with Belgium being an early adopter, followed by Finland more recently, and Germany not yet having a legal presumption of JPC. This is mirrored in how their child support policies potentially influence JPC uptake, with Belgium being the most motivational and Germany most discouraging, at least from the (financial) perspective of the paying parent (see *supra*).

This study is not without limitations. First, the Belgian data does not pertain to previously cohabiting couples, limiting the inferences to divorce settings. This has to do with the data being somewhat dated, which is also important to highlight considering the supposed normalization of JPC over time. For instance, according to recent findings, mothers practicing JPC in Wisconsin (US) are less satisfied than those with SPC, supposedly because the longstanding legal presumption leads to JPC regardless of mothers’ preferences (Riser et al., 2022). It is possible that such a negative association might also be found in Belgium with more recent data. Nevertheless, the country differences uncovered

with data collected four years after and in the year of the legal presumption of JPC already suggest significant changes in the association between JPC and mothers' life satisfaction over time. A second notable limitation is the German FAMOD study consists of a convenience sample, suggesting the findings of this analysis cannot be generalized across all post-separation families. However, this approach had to be taken, given that JPC is a rather uncommon arrangement in Germany. Third, our outcome variable – mothers' life satisfaction – was measured with a single item, which may result in low content validity, sensitivity, and reliability. However, there are also advantages associated with single-item measures, such as the reduction of common method variance that may be introduced as respondents endorse several items on, for instance, a composite satisfaction scale (see Hoepfner et al., 2011). Such common method effects may lead to overstated observed associations. Furthermore, Cheung and Lucas (2014) find that, specifically for life satisfaction, a single-item measure performs similarly to multiple-item measures. Future work may benefit from composite measures of satisfaction in different areas that may more comprehensively capture the notion of 'life' satisfaction. Finally, in the present study, we could not investigate nonresident mothers and compare the life satisfaction of mothers to that of fathers or among fathers with different kinds of physical custody arrangements. However, the baseline that the current comparison creates will be insightful for future investigations of gender differences.

The finding that mothers with JPC did not differ from their counterparts with SPC in the Belgian sample has implications for other countries, especially regarding striving for legislative changes that would make JPC the default physical custody arrangement. Whereas our study did not provide evidence that practicing JPC harms Belgian mothers in terms of life satisfaction, we also did not find any advantages of having JPC. It can be expected that findings for Finland and Germany will change accordingly in the future if JPC becomes more widespread in these countries. However, the results of our study do stress the importance of the conditions under which a physical custody arrangement is practiced and suggest that they have greater implications for mothers' well-being than the arrangement itself. Whereas there were some differences between the three countries, our findings generally demonstrated that factors like the mothers' partnership status, working hours, and self-rated economic situation were all related to their life satisfaction. That is, having a new partner (or co-residing with one), working longer hours, and having a positive economic situation were linked to higher levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, at least for Finland and Germany, we also found evidence that a good relationship quality between the separated parents was positively associated with how mothers rated their satisfaction with life. Because it seems likely that JPC has an impact on these factors (see *supra*), the question of whether and how physical custody arrangements affect mothers' post-separation living conditions is a topic that warrants much closer and more detailed investigation by researchers in the future.

Data availability statement

Divorce in Flanders (DiF):

The data that support the findings for Belgium are openly available in the Social Sciences and Digital Humanities Archive [SODHA] at <http://doi.org/10.34934/DVN/2DKXBL>.

Survey among Separated Families in Finland (SSFF)

The data that support the findings for Finland are currently only available to authorized researchers. Anonymized data will be made openly available later through the Finnish Social Science Data Archive.

Family Models in Germany /Familienmodelle in Deutschland (FAMOD):

The data that support the findings for Germany are openly available at GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA6849 Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13571>.

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