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RETHINKING MATERNAL GATEKEEPING FROM A LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE: A STUDY OF POST-SEPARATION FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The article examines how maternal gatekeeping practices evolve in the post-separation trajectory and identifies the main relational and contextual factors shaping these processes over time.

Background: Studies of maternal gatekeeping have only recently begun to include post-separation families based on cross-sectional research designs. This paper is theoretically grounded in a life-course and human agency framework, and it both offers a novel understanding of maternal gatekeeping as a dynamic process and examines its relational embeddedness.

Methods: The data stem from the prospective qualitative study “The multiple paths of lone parenthood,” which has been ongoing in Switzerland for over a decade and includes four waves of semi-structured interviews with mothers who have experienced lone parenthood ($N = 88$ interviews).

Results: Most mothers reported *active facilitation* practices at the beginning of their trajectory, encouraging the father-child relationship. Subsequently, shifts toward *hands-off* or *active gate-closing* practices took place over time along with the evolution of relational circumstances, such as the father’s involvement or children’s autonomy, or by an accumulation of negative experiences.

Conclusion: The relationship with the non-resident father creates ongoing moral dilemmas for mothers over the post-separation trajectory. Indeed, these mothers must navigate social norms that emphasize the importance of ensuring father-child contact while safeguarding the child’s well-being and ensuring that the father complies with visitation arrangements and alimony.

Implications: Professional support and legal regulations should consider the moral dilemmas experienced by mothers by establishing measures to relieve separated mothers of the need to take the initiative to obtain the father’s compliance with their obligations.

Keywords: coparenting, family relations, longitudinal research, parent involvement, qualitative methodology, separation

From a life-course perspective, separation or divorce can be understood as a critical life transition (Cooney, 2022; Knöpfli et al., 2016). Through parental separation, previous family roles and arrangements are disrupted, and family members must find a new equilibrium between challenges and available resources, between individual and family priorities, and between life domains. Necessary adaptations begin in the pre-separation climate and with the decision to separate and they continue with the (legal) separation process, the reorganization of households, the sorting of work and childcare and the adoption of new family roles within lone-parent families or shared custody arrangements. Subsequently, for some, the family configuration may continue to evolve with new couple formations and remarriage into stepfamilies, as well as the eventual arrival of new children into blended families.

Understanding how the links between connected individuals, such as family members, evolve through life transitions is also crucial from a life-course perspective, which highlights the interdependence of human lives (or “linked lives”) (Carr, 2018). Indeed, separation and divorce require the parents, children, and other family members to adjust to the new relational realities of lone-parent families and stepfamilies. The relationship between the ex-partners and their new co-parental roles constitute crucial aspects of such reconfigurations.

In fact, a key concern of research on post-separation families has been the involvement of the non-resident father and the consequences of this for the children’s well-being, in a context where sole or main custody for mothers was prevalent. Earlier studies focused on the effects of economic support, contact frequency, and the quality of the father-child and parenting relationships on children’s outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Subsequently, research has highlighted the need to study the co-constructed nature of fathering as tied to family processes involving other family members, notably the children and their mothers (Nixon et al., 2012a; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Parental ties are not broken by separation, and the quality of the co-parenting relationship and the support of the resident mother both influence the relationship between the non-resident father and the children (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Walper et al., 2020). Furthermore, these interdependences occur in a context where co-parenting is gaining ground as a cultural ideal (Westerling, 2016; Eikrem & Jevne, 2022).

In shifting the focus from parent-child dyads to the exploration of triadic relationships, the literature on parenting in post-separation families connects with a series of studies on *maternal gatekeeping*, which refers to the ways in which mothers support or undermine the father's involvement in the children's daily lives (Puhlman & Pasley, 2013; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Although maternal gatekeeping was originally studied in non-separated families, this line of research has increasingly included post-divorce families or those in which the father has never resided in the household (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Sano et al., 2008; Trinder, 2008). However, such studies have focused on identifying types of gatekeeping by means of cross-sectional designs, without considering the family trajectory in which these practices evolved.

Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the literature by analyzing maternal gatekeeping as part of long-lasting and evolving interactions between parents and their children after separation. We draw on four waves of interviews from a qualitative longitudinal project that has been following lone-parent families in French-speaking Switzerland for over 10 years to examine the main drivers of stability and change in gatekeeping practices over time. By basing our theoretical perspective on a life-course framework, we aim to provide a more complex understanding of the mother's agency in managing the relationship with the non-resident father. We show how mothers' gatekeeping practices evolve over time as they are embedded in relational processes involving the non-resident parent and the children and changing life circumstances. Moreover, we identify factors influencing maternal gatekeeping that have not been considered by previous studies, namely the mothers' motivations to protect their own well-being and the pressure of social norms prescribing the importance of father-child contact.

In the following, the first section reviews the state of the art of research on maternal gatekeeping in post-separation families. We then present the article's theoretical grounding and originality. Thirdly, we define the different types of gatekeeping used in the analysis. After a short description of the main specificities of the Swiss context, we introduce the methodological approach and the data. The main findings are presented in five sub-sections, and these are discussed in the subsequent section. The conclusion addresses the article's implications and limitations and presents future avenues for research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Maternal Gatekeeping in Post-Separation Families: A Developing Field

Studies on maternal gatekeeping, including on post-separation families, have been rising in number over the last two decades. Along with the advancement of the field, the conceptualization of maternal gatekeeping has undergone two main theoretical developments: 1) it has moved from its initial focus on mothers' restrictions of the father-child relationship to also include their facilitative practices; and 2) it has shifted from considering gatekeeping as a unidirectional process to conceptualizing it as being embedded in multidirectional relationships. Early studies emphasized the restrictive or discouraging dimension of maternal gatekeeping (Arendell, 1992), defining it as "a collection of beliefs and behaviors that ultimately inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work by limiting men's opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999: 200). Thereafter, scholars broadened the concept to include a positive dimension in maternal gatekeeping, as research has shown that, most of the time, mothers encourage or facilitate father-child relationships and contact (Walker & McGraw, 2000; Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Seery & Crowley, 2000). It has also been argued that maternal gatekeeping often reflects middle-ground, ambivalent situations combining various types of behavior to different extents and that it, thus, should be understood as a dynamic and transactional process, with possible interdependencies between mothers and fathers rather than as a unidirectional process from mothers to fathers (Trinder, 2008; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013).

We concur with these theoretical propositions. However, we argue that by establishing gatekeeping typologies and categorizing the mothers' practices into given types, empirical studies have tended to reify processes that should be conceptualized as dynamic and complex. For instance, in their identification of eight ideal types of gatekeeping, Puhlman and Pasley (2013) searched for the causes for the mother's behavior more in their individual attributes (e.g., attitudes, internal conflicts, feelings, mood changes) than in relational factors (e.g., the father's and children's actions or the broader family dynamics). In this way,

they implicitly adopted a unidirectional and individualistic perspective, labeling mothers as “ambivalent,” “confused,” or “opinionated” gatekeepers instead of examining their practices and their interactional nature. Other studies have aimed to identify types of gatekeeping empirically. For example, Trinder’s (2008) work on custodial mothers in England and Nixon and Hadfield’s (2018) research on Irish families identified similar typologies, although their labels differed. These typologies comprised mothers actively supporting father-child contact (*proactive gate-opening* or *active facilitation*); mothers leaving the door open but not actively supporting or undermining the relationship (*passive gatekeeping* or *hands-off*); mothers facilitating the relationship provided that certain conditions were met (*contingent gate-opening* or *conditional facilitation*); and mothers restricting father-child contact (*gate-closing*). Cross-sectional studies such as these have the value of showing the diversity of gatekeeping practices but do not allow for a deep understanding of the processes shaping such practices and are likely to overestimate their stability over time. Indeed, according to Trinder (2008, p.1307), “individuals did not appear to switch between approaches but instead adopted and experienced the same approach consistently”.

Moreover, studies have identified factors that may explain mothers’ gatekeeping behavior, including maternal beliefs regarding paternal competence, the quality of the parental relationship, and concerns about child well-being (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Sano et al., 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). However, the mothers’ own interests and motivations (such as their needs for reconciling work and family life or for free time) are rarely considered. More generally, these elements have not been articulated into a coherent theoretical framework discussing the different mechanisms at play.

Additionally, the studies that have focused on identifying categories of gatekeeping are somewhat disconnected from those that have analyzed a specific aspect of the transactional nature of gatekeeping, that is, the bidirectional influences between maternal gatekeeping and negotiations around alimony payments, which have yielded diverging results. For example, Sano et al.’s (2008) analysis of mothers’ narratives in post-divorce, low-income families in rural US communities showed that mothers tended to maintain an open, proactive attitude toward father-child interaction despite the absence or irregularity of child support

payments. Aware of the limited economic opportunities in their communities, mothers prioritized the promotion of father-child contact and did not use gatekeeping as a negotiation mechanism to obtain alimony. The actions of some mothers that may have been perceived as evidence of gate-closing by the father (e.g., expressing concerns about their child-rearing methods) were not intended to discourage their involvement but represented attempts to achieve more acceptable behavior from them. In contrast, Moore (2012) found clearer bidirectional associations between maternal gatekeeping and the father's control of the money flow ("paternal banking"), except for in couples with egalitarian arrangements prior to and after separation. In particular, in the context of parental role battles post-separation among middle-class Irish families, maternal gatekeeping and paternal banking appeared to be mechanisms used to exert control within the relationship. Within these gendered power dynamics, the father's restriction of the flow of money influenced and was, concurrently, a response to maternal gatekeeping. These two studies show that maternal gatekeeping may be embedded in the broader negotiations of roles and responsibilities after separation, in which parents may actively seek to shape each other's behavior. However, the conditions under which mothers use gatekeeping as a negotiation mechanism and the potential outcomes of this remain unclear. Overall, the developing field of maternal gatekeeping has generated relevant empirical findings, but the interpretation of these findings remains descriptive. In the next section, we argue how a life-course perspective can help to overcome some of the limitations identified with the previous literature and advance our understanding of gatekeeping as a dynamic, relational process involving parents and children.

Analyzing Gatekeeping Practices through a Life-Course Perspective

The life-course perspective, understood as the dynamic study of individual behavior and decision-making over the life course (Bernardi et al., 2019), provides a suitable and comprehensive approach for advancing the current understanding of maternal gatekeeping in at least two main directions: 1) conceptualizing maternal gatekeeping as a dynamic and long-lasting process that is likely to evolve as parents (and children) exert continual and reciprocal influences over the post-separation trajectory; and 2) identifying and

conceptualizing a broader range of factors that may influence a mother's gatekeeping practices over time. In this way, we aim to enhance our understanding of maternal agency in relation to the non-resident father. As a theoretical paradigm, the life-course perspective comprises a set of interrelated assumptions and concepts that are used to explore the connection between individuals, life domains, and social and historical contexts over time (Elder, 1998; Shanahan et al., 2016). A core concept of the life-course paradigm is *human agency* (Elder, 1994), that is, the notion that "individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances" (Bernardi et al., 2019:3). From this perspective, it is assumed that individuals "[consciously or unconsciously] try to improve, or at least maintain, aspects of their physical and mental well-being over time, all the while avoiding other considerable losses" (Bernardi et al., 2019: 2). Relatedly, in this paper we conceptualize *maternal agency* as a mother's decisions and practices aimed at maintaining or enhancing their own well-being and that of their children, bounded by a particular historical, societal, and normative context. Moreover, in this next part, we discuss how we can gain a better understanding of mothers' gatekeeping practices by examining how the interdependencies between three axes of analysis (multidomain, multilevel and multidirectional) shape life course processes.

Firstly, the *multidomain* axis refers to the interconnections between domains of life that individual trajectories are composed of (such as employment, family, social relationships, health); indeed, resources, decisions and events in one domain may affect others through spillover processes (Lutz, 2014; Hanappi et al., 2017; Bernardi & Bolano, 2023). Since our focus is on the reconfiguration of parental and parent-child relationships over the post-divorce trajectory, factors stemming from the family domain are likely to be the most salient in this context (e.g., the degree of father's involvement, the children's personal autonomy and wishes, eventual repartnering). However, interdependences with other domains (e.g., the need to adjust work schedules or to make time for leisure or social relationships) may also shape gatekeeping practices.

Secondly, *multilevel* refers to the interdependencies between different levels of analysis (Bernardi et al., 2019; Elder, 1998; McMillan & Copher, 2005), which here we analytically distinguish into three main

levels of interest: 1) the individual; 2) the relational; and 3) the societal. Firstly, each person has specific internal resources and psychosocial predispositions. At this level, we focus on the mother's beliefs about the desirability of father-child contact and the standards for such a relationship and their personal motivations (e.g., for free time, needs for work-family reconciliation, new relationships). Secondly, the relational level captures how individuals are linked to other individual life courses (*linked lives*), which affect their life experiences and influence their decisions (Bengtson, Elder, & Putney 2005; Carr, 2018). At this level, the quality of the parental relationship, concerns about the children's well-being, or the consideration of their wishes and increasing autonomy are relevant. Thirdly, at the societal level, individuals are affected by the institutions and the informal and formal social norms (and sanctions) that regulate their lives. These constitute (dis)incentives when making decisions and contribute to shaping beliefs, motivations, and relational dynamics. In this sense, previous studies have highlighted the importance given to the father's presence in the children's lives (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Sano et al., 2008), but this has not so far been conceptualized as a social norm shaping mothers' gatekeeping. Other factors may include judicial resolutions (which tend to attribute custody to mothers) and the limited institutional options to obtain compliance with custody and alimony violations.

Finally, the *multidirectional* or *temporal* axis refers to the interplay between: 1) an individual's situation and circumstances at a given point in time; 2) their past experiences; and 3) their goals and expectations about the future (Bidart, 2019; Kuh, 2019), connecting with discussions on the temporal embeddedness of agency (Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Sánchez-Mira & Bernardi, 2021). Previous studies have focused on the first temporal dimension by analyzing maternal gatekeeping at a specific point in time. In contrast, with the prospective design of this study, we aim to analyze how gatekeeping practices change over time as individual, relational, and contextual circumstances shift and mothers evaluate their past or project themselves into the future. For instance, change can be driven (relationally) because the child(ren) become more active in managing the relationship with the father and the mother hands over some of that responsibility. Change can also be produced through the effects of *time*, such as when there is an accumulation of situations and events leading to a point of no return.

Overall, anchoring the understanding of maternal gatekeeping in a conceptualization of agency in the life course supports a reconceptualization of the previous categories used to analyze gatekeeping practices, as we explain in the next section.

Defining Gatekeeping Practices Through the Lens of Agency

Our analysis of gatekeeping practices drew on previous categorizations as a starting point (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Trinder, 2008), and we redefined these categorizations in accordance with the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Following a retroductive logic, we moved from the theory to the data and back to define our analytical categories. A first general consideration is that the previous definitions have tended to collapse beliefs, motivations and goals, behaviors, and outcomes into their definition of gatekeeping. In contrast, our analysis focuses on the factual dimension of mother's practices, that is, the specific actions they implement with the conscious or unconscious aim of shaping the father-child relationship, which we argue provides more clarity to the analysis. From this perspective, the crucial aspect in distinguishing between types of gatekeeping is what mothers actually do or do not do to keep the door open, whether they attempt to establish requirements for the father-child relationship, and in which circumstances they actively attempt to restrict contact. Accordingly, we next describe the types of gatekeeping we have distinguished in our empirical analysis of gatekeeping practices and how they change over time.

Firstly, we use the term *active facilitation* (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018) to refer to those practices in which mothers engage to ensure and promote the continuity of the father-child relationship. Secondly, we introduce the term *negotiating gatekeeping* to describe situations where mothers may threaten to restrict the father's access to the children, with the aim of obtaining more acceptable behavior from the father, for instance, regarding their standards for childcare or compliance with agreed schedules. Moreover, although threats of limiting access to the children may be regarded as a negotiating tactic, they do not necessarily reflect the mother's ability to enforce their demands. Indeed, we argue that there is a need to be cautious in using the label *conditional facilitation*, which has been employed in previous studies to refer to situations in which mothers support the father-child contact provided that certain requirements are fulfilled (Nixon &

Hadfield, 2018; Trinder, 2008 called this *contingent gatekeeping*). At least in the Swiss context (see Context of the Study section for more detail), mothers' options to establish and enforce specific requirements are severely limited, and hence the term is likely to apply to a reduced number of cases. Fourth, the term *hands-off* (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018) refers to situations where mothers neither proactively enhance nor restrict father-child contact. A lack of action does not necessarily mean a lack of intentionality, as one can still expect a specific outcome from not engaging. "Hands-off" thus appears to be a more accurate term than "passive" (Trinder, 2008), which seems to imply an absence of intentionality. In fact, this gatekeeping approach may have varied outcomes, as father-child contact may be maintained or not depending on the child's wishes or judicial decisions. Finally, *active gate closing* refers to actions aimed at discouraging or preventing father-child contact.

In summary, in our analysis, we distinguish between five types of gatekeeping practices: *active facilitation*, *negotiating gatekeeping*, *conditional facilitation*, *hands-off*, and *active gate closing*. We do not conceptualize these types of practices as completely distinct or mutually exclusive but rather as fluid. Mothers may shift between practices relatively frequently, and different types of practices may coexist in time and apply to different dimensions of the relationship, thus reflecting some degree of ambivalence.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This article examines maternal gatekeeping in Switzerland, a country with a gender regime that has been characterized as a *modified breadwinner model*, where the combination of a fiscal policy favoring households with a sole or main earner and the lack of affordable childcare tends to encourage women moving to part-time employment or undergoing long withdrawals from the labor market following the birth of their first child, with the men continuing to work full-time (Bornatici et al., 2020). In this context, the transition to parenthood is a critical factor in the gendering of life trajectories, situating women in a position of vulnerability in the event of later separation or divorce (Le Goff & Levy, 2016; Zufferey et al., 2020).

The Swiss legal and policy framework privileges the *heterosexual married couple* (Engeli & Roca-Escoda, 2019) to the detriment of other family configurations, including lone-parent families, thus increasing the

exposure of these families to different forms of vulnerability (Larenza, 2019). This institutional setup is slowly changing. For instance, in 2014 a reform abolished the distinction in parental duties and responsibilities for those children born within a marital union and those born out of wedlock (Zufferey et al., 2020). Overall, the Swiss case constitutes a strong normative context, both in terms of regulations and social norms, prescribing the reproduction of the nuclear family model through the institution of marriage (Rossier et al., 2023) and exerting important pressures on mothers, who continue to hold the main responsibility for children's everyday lives before and after separation. Estimates suggest that the percentage of shared custody arrangements (defined as a 30%–70% or more egalitarian time division) was only 14.1% in 2018 in Switzerland (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2023). However, these data do not capture the potential impact of the 2017 legislative change that invited judges to routinely investigate the possibility of a joint physical custody agreement, regardless of whether both parents agreed on it (Zufferey et al., 2020). Therefore, it remains to be seen whether this reform will have comparable effects to those observed in countries like Sweden, Belgium, or Spain, where shared custody has been effectively promoted through legislation. In the meantime, households with sole custody and visitation arrangements continue to be headed by women in Switzerland (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2023), which is why we focused on this population in our study (see the Data and Methods section for sample details). These lone mothers are often faced with the asymmetrical distribution of rights and responsibilities that characterizes these arrangements. For instance, they have limited possibilities to enforce their rights in case of violation of alimony or visitation arrangements by the non-resident parent, as shown by Larenza (2019).

Overall, the Swiss context, characterized by a legal and institutional framework that continues to prescribe the reproduction of a nuclear family ideal and traditional gender scripts, is likely to impose specific challenges on lone mothers, who do not conform to such normative standards. Therefore, Switzerland is a particularly interesting case study for analyzing the complex interrelations of individual processes, social norms, and institutional regulations involved in the family transitions (Walther et al., 2022).

DATA AND METHODS

This work used data from the project “The multiple paths of lone parenthood”, a qualitative longitudinal study on the transition to lone parenthood and subsequent life transitions that followed the same families over a decade (2012–2022) in French-speaking Switzerland. The article is based on an analysis of the prospective narrative interviews conducted over the first four waves of the project (W1–W4; a fifth and final wave was still being conducted at the time of writing the article). Each wave was thematically focused and examined accordingly: the transition to lone parenthood in W1 (2012–2013); the role of public policies in lone mothers’ vulnerability in W2 (2015); parents’ social support in W3 (2018); and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in W4 (2020). Key themes were explored in all the waves, including 1) subsequent family transitions (repartnering, family recomposition); 2) changes in other life domains (childcare, employment, residence, health); and 3) the relationship with the non-custodial parent (custody, support payments, everyday organization, relationship with the child). For this article, we focus predominantly on the last theme (for the specific questions asked to the participants, see Appendix A). Data from W1-W4 has been published through SWISSUbase and can be accessed upon request (Bernardi et al., 2023).

For W1, the criteria for inclusion in the sample ($N = 40$) were having sole or main custody of young children and not living with another adult at the time of the interview. The participants were recruited using personal contacts, mailing lists for lone parents and family associations, contact boxes at a kindergarten, and flyer distribution in public places visited by parents and children. This multiple-entry sampling strategy was combined with limited snowballing (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011) to avoid an overrepresentation of participants from the same socio-economic background and to increase the proportion of those of a lower socio-economic background (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Only about one fourth of the participants were recruited via the lone parents’ associations, which was aimed at avoiding a too homogeneous sample of respondents who could be expected to be more vocal and have a more similar profile than those unrelated to an association. We also limited the interviews to parents who had experienced a relatively recent transition to lone parenthood (i.e., mostly within 1–5 years) and who had children who

still required a relatively high amount of care (i.e., children aged between 0 and 10 years). Due to attrition, at W4 26 lone parents remained in the sample. To maintain a homogeneous sample and given the specific focus on maternal gatekeeping, we decided to exclude the two fathers, one widow, and one lesbian mother from the analysis. Therefore, the final sample for this study included 22 mothers who participated in the study in the first four waves, and we examined their gatekeeping practices with respect to the 22 fathers.

At this stage of the project, many families had passed through several transitions, transforming the initial sample of lone parents into a more heterogeneous group of family configurations (for the sample characteristics of W1 and W4, see Appendix B). At W4, there were a few stepfamilies, with three mothers cohabitating with new partners and the child(ren) from their previous partnership (Gisela, Sarah, Léonie), and blended families, with two mothers having repartnered and had another child (Leila, Marie-Jo), the latter having separated again since. Alizée had repartnered and had a child but was not cohabitating with the child's father. Alexandra had repartnered with the original father of her child, and they were cohabitating. Seven mothers had repartnered but were not cohabitating, and eight had not repartnered. In all, most of our respondents (17 of 22) were either not in a partnership or were not cohabitating with their new partners at W4. The sample experienced less change with respect to custody arrangements, with 19 of 22 mothers still holding sole custody of their children (with or without visitation arrangements) at W4. The ages of the children in the families also reflected the complexity of the family trajectories, with the youngest being a 4-month-old infant born into the sample to a 23-year-old; the majority (27 of 37) of the children were between 10 and 16 years old. Overall, despite our efforts in recruitment, participants of lower socioeconomic background were underrepresented in the sample from the start and selectively dropped out in the subsequent waves. Therefore, the sample on which we draw for this paper is mostly composed of respondents with mid-to-high educational levels in mid-level white-collar occupations. This characteristic needs to be considered in interpreting the findings, since the variation in material and social resources associated with different educational levels potentially influences gatekeeping practices.

This article is based on the analysis of 88 semi-structured interviews collected during W1 to W4 by a team of interviewers who changed over the years. The project's Principal Investigator (PI) has remained the same during its whole duration (2012–2022), participated as interviewer in the pilot interviews for W1 and ensured the training of interviewers and the consistency of interviews and analyses across waves thereafter. All interviewers had access to the audios and transcripts of previous waves, which they read in preparation for the subsequent interviews. All members of the team read and discussed the transcriptions of the first interviews of each wave in *ad hoc* sessions. Moreover, interviewers involved in W2 to W4 overlapped in time in their participation in the project, which facilitated the transmission of information and participation in such joint discussions. From W1 to W3, the interviews were carried out face-to-face, mainly in the homes of the participants and all of them were audio-recorded. At W4, due to the social contact restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted remotely (by phone or using videoconferencing tools) and were either audio- or video-recorded. On average, the interviews lasted 90 minutes, but were slightly shorter in W4. This difference was mainly due to the mode of conduction rather than to the interviewer, with interviews by phone video-conference lasting shorter than face-to-face interviews. All the interviews (W1–W4) were transcribed and anonymized. Hence, the participant names are pseudonyms. The excerpts presented in the findings were translated from French by the authors.

Our analysis initially aimed to identify trajectories of gatekeeping and their main drivers and encountered some of the challenges involved in conducting longitudinal qualitative analysis (Neale, 2021; Saldana, 2003; Bernardi, 2021). The process of analysis consisted of three main steps or components, drawing on previous research (Lewis, 2007; Thomson & Holland, 2003): 1) A cross-sectional analysis of each case, based on an initial coding of the data by means of NVivo ; 2) A longitudinal examination of each case, based on the construction of synthetic matrixes or case profiles and summary case narratives; 3) A comparison of cases and groups of cases based on the prior two steps.

The initial coding of individual cases followed the principles of content analysis, given that we were building on previous categorizations of gatekeeping (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Trinder, 2008) and had theoretically informed ideas regarding which factors may contribute to shaping gatekeeping practices over

time. We started with a basic, pre-defined coding system with two main themes: 1) “type of gatekeeping”, subdivided by gatekeeping types; and 2) “main driving forces” (based on Bidart et al., 2013), to identify the main mechanisms that generate change in gatekeeping practices, or alternatively account for their stability. This coding system was open and flexible and evolved significantly throughout the coding process, which was carried out using NVivo software. We combined both inductive and deductive reasoning in a “back and forth” movement between the theory and the coding of the data, which led us to redefine some of the initial gatekeeping types and include new ones, and to identify driving forces that were not anticipated theoretically. Subsequent rounds of coding were conducted by the article’s first author, after which the coding system was discussed in team meetings through a joint analysis of selected cases, and revisions were then inserted into NVivo.

Drawing on this initial coding, we elaborated longitudinal case profiles, or matrixes, synthesizing the essential information for each case across all waves, alongside narrative case summaries. These two tools offered a better visualization of the salient components of each trajectory, allowing the identification of patterns of stability and change over time and their drivers. We identified shifts or continuities in practices in three main ways: 1) prospectively across the accounts from the different waves; 2) within the accounts of each wave; and 3) in the participant’s retrospective accounts of their previous practices.

On this basis, our initial aim was to identify the sequences of gatekeeping practices constituting each trajectory and then conduct across-case comparisons in order to group the most similar cases into types of trajectories based on their starting points, degree of stability, and directions of change in gatekeeping practices. However, given the complexity of the individual trajectories and their drivers, the clustering exercise ultimately appeared to oversimplify complex processes. The identification of longitudinal sequences was also not always straightforward, as in a few cases the interviewees reported different types of gatekeeping practices within a single wave or in their retrospective accounts, and it was hard to determine whether these practices had occurred simultaneously or sequentially (and in which order). Nonetheless, based on the main sequences identified across the cases over time, it was still possible to identify key patterns of stability and dynamics of change that were common to several cases within the sample. As a

result, we shifted the focus of our analysis from the identification of types of trajectories to examining the main processes that shape gatekeeping practices, their stability and change over time, and the drivers that explain them. These patterns are presented as five main lines of findings in the following Findings section.

FINDINGS

The first four sections of the findings present the key patterns and processes shaping gatekeeping practices in our sample. 1) Firstly, most of the mothers showed active facilitation practices (at the beginning of their trajectory), and their reasons for continuing their gate-opening behavior were found to be broader than previously highlighted. 2) Secondly, the mothers tended to become less active in their gate-opening over time for a variety of reasons. 3) Thirdly, gatekeeping practices reflected attempts to negotiate better standards for the father-child relationship, and mothers were rarely able to unilaterally enforce specific requirements for such contact. 4) The mothers often struggled to balance the normative pressure to support the father-child relationship with ensuring their children's well-being.

Two or more of these patterns could be present in a single case. Therefore, we do not present here groups of cases but rather processes that were common to the trajectories of several participants, and we specify in each occasion which cases were affected. Finally, the fifth section of the findings analyzes transversal aspects regarding the dynamics of stability and change in maternal gatekeeping and their drivers.

Openness in Principle and in Practice and the Broader Reasons for it Over Time

The element that was most salient as a common pattern in the sample was the shared belief that, at least in principle, it is desirable and positive for children to have a relationship with their fathers. Most of the mothers were quite explicit about this, and none of them expressed thoughts contrary to such proposition. This may appear a trivial finding, as one could hardly expect these women to endorse a position contrary to dominant social norms that prescribe the importance of paternal involvement for adequate child development and well-being (Andrews et al., 2004). However, it still seems worth noting that when mothers appeared reluctant to father-child contact or attempted to restrict it, this was not due to *a priori* beliefs about the lack of importance or desirability of such a relationship. Conversely, this behavior was often caused by

a desire to make the father comply with certain standards for the relationship or concerns about the children's well-being. We explain these cases in more detail in the third and fourth subsections of the Findings. However, before that, it should be highlighted that, for most mothers in the sample and for the larger part of their trajectory, such openness in principle meant in practice that they either actively supported the father-child relationship, encouraging the father-child relationship in specific ways (*active facilitation*) or that they did nothing to actively discourage it (*hands-off*). Among the mothers who actively promoted the relationship, we identified similar strategies to those of Trinder's (2008) proactive gate-opening mothers, such as generally encouraging or providing practical support to make contact possible (e.g., providing a venue for visits, being flexible over schedules, facilitating phone contact).

In several cases, mothers who supported the father-child relationship had experienced a "peaceful" separation process, a sufficiently good parental relationship thereafter, and the father had been continuously present for his children (Paule, Céline, Aline, Natacha, Leila). Among these mothers, we found only two cases where, at a given time, there was a shift in the custody arrangement toward shared custody (Natacha) or main custody for the father (Leila). This finding seems in line with the quantitative literature showing that the mother's gatekeeping is predicted by the parental relationship quality before the separation (Walper et al., 2020; Austin et al., 2013). However, in other cases with more complicated parental relationships, such as Alexandra's and Tania's cases, the mothers still continued to support the father-child relationship over time. These mothers had their children in extra-matrimonial relationships where the father already had children from their unions, did not acknowledge their paternity until years later, and were involved only irregularly over time. These cases suggest that the importance attributed to the father's involvement prevailed over the tensions and ambivalences of the parental relationship. These findings increase the complexity of the association between the quality of the parental relationship and maternal gatekeeping and highlight the important impact of social norms on maternal practices.

Moreover, being able to anticipate and organize their lives was also found to be a main driver of mothers actively promoting the father's involvement in the child(ren)'s life. Tania's excerpt illustrates well the

combination of motivations underpinning such an approach to gatekeeping, including seeking greater regularity and anticipation of the father-child visits:

[Tania] I told him “Listen, she’s a little girl, how do you expect her to understand that you’re her father, that you come here to see her, and that you don’t have much time, and that she has to welcome you with open arms... you can’t explain that to a little girl, and if you don’t come regularly...”. I was always fighting against him, telling him “come regularly...”. [...]

[Interviewer] For you or for your daughter? You wanted him to come regularly...?

[Tania] For both... for her, so that she would be comfortable with him, and for me, so that I could organize my life too, because otherwise I can’t... [...] He tells me in the morning “I’ll come in the afternoon”... [...] He calls me, and he says “Are you home?”, and if I say yes, he tells me “I’ll be there in 30 minutes”... I don’t like that... (Tania, W1).

Finally, maintaining a supportive approach to the father-child relationship did not mean these mothers were completely satisfied with the conditions under which the relationship developed. A few mothers shared some concerns about the adequacy of the father’s childcare and yet continued to promote the contact (Aline, Paule). It would appear that the child’s experience was deemed good enough that they did not feel the urge to stop promoting such contact, unlike mothers in more serious situations (see *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* section below). Most remarkable is Sarah’s case, as she had concerns about the child’s well-being due to the father’s alcoholism but continued to proactively attempt to involve the father in the child’s daily life by seeking legal counsel to try to force the father to respect the visitation arrangements.

Overall, our findings show that active facilitation practices were not exclusively or mainly driven by a guarantee of the child’s well-being, as previous studies have suggested, but that more complex interactions of factors were involved, including the mother’s own needs and the normative importance of ensuring the paternal presence in the child’s life. In the next section, we discuss the factors that drove change towards other gatekeeping practices over time.

Why Mothers Become Less Active in Gate Opening over Time

Over time and for different reasons, a significant proportion of the mothers stopped implementing specific actions to encourage the father-child relationship, thus moving to a *hands-off* approach to gatekeeping. In

some cases, the father-child relationship became more satisfactory for the mothers due to increased paternal involvement as the children grew older. This pattern applied to Tania's case above, as she ultimately obtained the desired involvement from the father. Additionally, Alizée became less active because the father felt more prepared to take care of the child, while Rachel did so because she felt the relationship between the father and the daughter had become stronger and the child could manage it autonomously. However, in this sample, a move from active facilitation to hands-off could be also driven by the opposite situation, that is, by the mother's failure to obtain the expected involvement from the father, who was often completely absent. Several mothers sought to establish a father-child relationship but were not able to due to the father's lack of interest or institutional barriers (for fathers living abroad) (Sylvie, Béatrice, Elisa, Marie-Jo, Sarah). As a result of frustration from those failed attempts, the mothers readjusted their expectations about the father-child relationship and stopped encouraging contact or allowed their increasingly autonomous children to manage the relationship themselves.

A slightly different case is that of Léonie, who also readjusted her expectations after attempting for a long time to obtain the involvement of the father, who left before the birth of the child. Initially, Léonie showed great interest in making the father-son relationship possible and started the administrative procedures for paternity acknowledgment even though she did not know the father's whereabouts. It was very important for her that the child had the father's last name and that he had regular contact with him and his grandparents, which again demonstrates the significant influence of the two-parent ideal. After multiple failed attempts to obtain paternity recognition or a father-son relationship, and after repartnering, Léonie adjusted her expectations and moved to a hands-off approach. She stopped contacting the father and his family and pursuing the administrative procedures. At W3, she was afraid that the biological father would appear and disrupt her new family situation, although this did not lead her to adopt gate-closing practices. She did not try to stop the legal procedure for paternity recognition despite knowing that if it progressed, the father would reappear in their lives:

There are times when I wonder about this; I say to myself, well of course he [the biological father] could come back tomorrow to ask to see Nicolas [the child], and, and then I think I would have a big

problem. [...] I couldn't see myself letting my son go with this stranger even if legally..., no, legally he has no right because he didn't acknowledge him [...] Yes, and I don't think I would want to turn his [the child's] world and mine upside down. [...] But uh, it's certain that [the fear] it always remains somewhere, well there's always that. [...] (Léonie, W3).

At W4, with the father still missing and the legal procedure blocked, Léonie and her new partner decided to start the formal process for him to adopt the child.

In summary, in this sample, shifts from active facilitation to hands-off could be explained either by (a) the growing involvement of the father, meaning less proactiveness was required from the mother, or (b) unsuccessful attempts to involve the father, leading to the mother giving up, combined in some cases with (c) repartnering situations that attenuated the need for the father's presence, which even became undesirable as a new two-parent family took shape. A common driver underlying these moves toward hands-off gatekeeping was the child's increasing autonomy, who were considered by their mothers as being more able to manage contact with the father independently. All these drivers reflect the effect of the passing of time, with changing and accumulating circumstances eventually leading the mothers to change their gatekeeping practices. A new equilibrium where mothers were not required to be constantly taking action with respect to the father constituted a relief that contrasted with the reality of the following group of mothers.

Gatekeeping as Negotiation: Attempts to Achieve the Desired Standards for the Father-Child Relationship

In two cases, the mothers supported the father-child relationship in principle but were unsatisfied with the father's lack of respect for the alimony and visitation arrangements, and they attempted to do something about this. These mothers had a negotiating approach to gatekeeping, meaning that they issued and occasionally enacted threats to limit father-child contact in order to try and make them comply with the agreed arrangements. Both mothers continued to encourage contact but tried to influence the father's behavior, although these attempts were not necessarily successful.

For instance, Gisela attempted to obtain, with some success, more regularity in the visitation arrangements by issuing and acting on threats of not allowing the father to see the children if he did not adjust to the agreed schedule:

It changed a little, because for 3 weeks, I refused him every time he wanted to take them if he didn't warn me at least 3 days in advance. And then, he got very, very upset, but he said "yes, okay, I don't like it, but I understand." (Gisela, W1)

Gisela faced more constraints concerning alimony, as she did not have a formal agreement on this matter and, thus, could not enforce the informal arrangements with the father. During the first waves of the study, she attempted in vain to obtain a regular payment. The father would pay alimony irregularly, and demanding his contribution became burdensome for Gisela, who disliked being forced to be in contact with him for this reason. During W1 and W2, she made legal inquiries but decided not to launch a legal procedure to obtain alimony because she was afraid that this would worsen her relationship with their children and because she could not afford the costs. However, eventually, she decided to take legal action, and she obtained an alimony agreement at some time between W3 and W4.

Similarly, Vanina's gatekeeping was mostly driven by her attempts to achieve more formal and regular visitations from the father and ensure his compliance with alimony; to this end, Vanina issued, but did not act on, threats of not letting him see the child. With similar results to Gisela, Vanina managed to obtain new informal arrangements that were relatively accepted by the father, but she never undertook legal action out of fear that he would disappear from the child's life:

No, that instability, no, I can't. The only solution is that we establish something official. But that will put him in a state where I'm just afraid he'll go abroad and drop everything. That's it, it's my fear that makes me not do it. (Vanina, W1)

Vanina's case also illustrates how different types of gatekeeping can overlap at a given stage of the trajectory. Indeed, concurrently, Vanina showed both a negotiating attitude toward the father and implemented active facilitation practices such as making excuses for his absence to the child and trying to favor their contact over the phone. Eventually, Vanina became tired of her ex-partner's behavior and stopped encouraging contact (W2). As the motivator behind this lack of action, Vanina intended for her son

to discover his father's "true character." This motivation differs from the moves to hands-off practices described in the previous section, where mothers were either satisfied or had adjusted their expectations about the relationship with the father. Vanina was still attempting to shape the father's behavior, and at the same time, she hoped that her son would share her perspective regarding the father's actions.

[Vanina] It's also been a while since I let my son observe who his father is. Before, it was always "Daddy is busy, Daddy is busy," I always put it on that, and when Kali, so the dad, he would say "Yes I'm going to pick him up" or "Yes I'm going to bring you this or that" [...] or whatever, and then he wouldn't come. And it happened again 2 weeks ago. [...] And then two or three times, [...] when he didn't answer the phone, even though he's been saying to me for 3 days, "Why doesn't daddy call me?"...

[Interviewer] And what answer do you give him?

[Vanina] I tell him "Listen, we can always call him again, we can try again, you know the phone is always available, try again." But that's it. I leave him with that. (Vanina, W2)

These two cases show that practices perceived as restricting father-child contact may reflect the mother's attempt to obtain more acceptable arrangements. Both Gisela and Vanina wanted the father to be involved and faced moral dilemmas about taking legal action to obtain a formal solution; therefore, their gatekeeping must be understood as part of a strategy of negotiation with the non-resident father. Our findings also illustrate the constraints that mothers faced in obtaining paternal compliance with agreements in the context of the asymmetrical distribution of rights and responsibilities that characterizes sole custody arrangements. Over time, these permanent tensions and negotiations between the parents resulted in an accumulation effect, whereby managing the relationship with the father became increasingly burdensome for the mother. This issue seemed to be even more significant for the mothers we refer to in the next section.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Pressure of Social Norms

Despite showing different gatekeeping practices and trajectories of change over time, all the cases presented in this section involved situations that potentially put the children at risk, such as the father's alcoholism and episodes of psychological or physical abuse or violence. In these more extreme cases, mothers faced particularly strong moral dilemmas in finding the right way to support the child(ren)'s contact with their

father but also ensure the child's well-being. Ensuring paternal contact was important for mothers even in situations of clear risk, which provides a clear illustration of the normative salience of the two-parent ideal. In this regard, Anouk's case is similar to Sarah's, which we already described in the first section, as they both aimed to maintain and actively promoted the father-child relationship despite their concerns about the child's well-being due to the father's alcoholism. As with Sarah, it was very important for Anouk to ensure the relationship between father and child. Therefore, she established an informal visitation arrangement whereby he was only allowed to see his son after having taken an alcohol test. Anouk persisted in her approach over the four waves and introduced new protocols as previous mechanisms failed and the child became older and was able to contact her in case of any issues. In this sense, Anouk seems to be the only case in our sample where the mother managed to establish specific requirements to guarantee the child's well-being during the paternal visits and enforce them relatively successfully; we have labeled these practices as *conditional gatekeeping*. However, this constant balancing between safeguarding her child's well-being and maintaining father-child contact was very demanding for Anouk and became increasingly so, as she felt like she was running out of options.

A commonality between the following cases (Viviane, Delia, Sophie, Antoinette) is that these mothers started with an active facilitation approach at the beginning of the trajectory but adopted gate-closing practices at a later stage. This shift in gatekeeping occurred due to the mothers' concerns about child well-being within conflictual relationships with the father, including episodes of psychological violence or dangerous situations, in which child services or judicial authorities were often involved. These mothers faced moral dilemmas in deciding to limit the father's contact with the children, which again highlights the pressure of social norms in shaping maternal gatekeeping. In Viviane's case, it was important for her that the father was present and took care of their son, who was born prematurely and developed autism spectrum disorder. However, the father never involved himself in the way she expected, and Viviane reported several events of child mistreatment. Viviane contacted the child protection authorities, who eventually removed the father's visitation rights after he refused to comply with visits through a meeting point. After some time, Viviane started allowing the father to see his son informally, despite him continuing to put the child at risk.

The influence of social norms regarding the importance of the father's presence in the child's life was demonstrated clearly in Viviane's account of why she allowed contact:

For various reasons... uh... bad conscience, personal torment about removing my son from his father, feeling guilty, and then especially the social pressure, which is quite important, about it... uh... this made me on several occasions organize informal stuff... (Viviane, W2)

At W2 and after a critical event where the father put the child at risk, Viviane decided to ask the child protection authorities for help again. This moment represents a turning point in her account, as she realized that, by allowing an informal arrangement with the father, she was risking losing custody of the child herself. As a result, she decided to hinder further contact:

So, there was this episode with a social worker. [...] She told me that I was risking my custody rights and my parental authority by doing things where I put my son in danger, that I had to stop, and especially that I had to stop believing [small laugh] that he could benefit in some way by seeing him, and that toxic parents do exist and that he is one of them, and that his ambivalence toward this child translates into a risk-taking that increases as he [the child] grows up... [...] (Viviane, W2)

Viviane's following excerpt reflects how, despite her being aware that her son was at risk when with his father, the burden of having the sole responsibility for stopping the contact was overwhelming for her, and hence, the intervention of the public authorities was crucial.

What's super difficult is to decide on your own without institutional support. No, no, it's not the worry; anyway, I always had it with him, so, and then he always messed around, always a little, but it's not so much that, it's really carrying the load, the responsibility of the decision, to take a child away from his father. (Viviane, W2)

Delia's case is very similar to Viviane's. In the early stages of her trajectory, Delia expressed a strong conviction that her son needed a paternal figure growing up, and this belief led her to return to the common household after they first separated. After their definitive separation, child protection services decided to temporarily remove the father's visitation rights because of his violent behavior, but Delia did not respect the legal resolution and continued allowing him to see the child, even forcing the child to do so. However, concurrently, Delia mentioned occasionally preventing the father from seeing the child because both she and the child feared him. This apparent coexistence of active facilitation and gate-closing practices seems

to reflect Delia's struggle with balancing the normative pressure regarding the importance of the father's presence in the child's life and preserving her and the child's well-being. After the justice system eventually removed the father's visitation rights, Delia adopted a hands-off approach, respecting the judicial decision and her son's choice to stop his relationship with his father. As with Viviane, the judicial decision and the child taking responsibility for the relationship with the father were important for removing some of the pressure on Delia regarding making the decision of hindering contact.

In turn, Sophie had a very difficult separation involving violent situations, including the father attempting to kidnap the children. Therefore, she sought protection and judicial supervision of father-child contact through child protection services and a women's association. In Sophie's case, the influence of the normative importance of the father's contact is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that she remained in contact with him with updates about the children despite the problematic relationship. The situation fluctuated over time and involved a complex legal process, the intervention of social services, and the subsequent removal and obtention of the father's visiting rights until he eventually moved abroad. The distance from the father and the fact that her children were gaining autonomy to manage the relationship made Sophie move to a hands-off gatekeeping approach.

Finally, Antoinette's case is perhaps less extreme, but she also shifted toward a gate-closing approach as the father's visits became more problematic for her and the children. At first, she continued to encourage the children to visit the father despite the children often suffering at the father's house. However, by W2, the children had stopped visiting the father after a series of stressful events, which caused Antoinette to decide to end the visitation arrangements to protect them.

Overall, the shift towards gate-closing approaches in these four cases seemed to be incremental and driven by an accumulation of difficult situations that endanger the children, eventually reaching a point of no return. The influence of the normative importance of the presence of the father was clear in the mothers' attempts to maintain contact despite the difficult situations and, on occasion, even against legal decisions. Ultimately, the role of the judicial institutions or the children being able to manage the relationship with

the father more autonomously appeared to be important factors in relieving the mother of some of the pressure of managing the father-child relationship.

Explaining Stability and Change

The longitudinal component of this study offered valuable analytical insights into how gatekeeping practices take shape over time, which can be synthesized into three main findings applying to the overall sample: 1) an observed trend towards stabilization; 2) change as being mainly driven by gradual and accumulative processes; and 3) the important role of children growing up.

Firstly, we observed that gatekeeping practices were more dynamic at the early stages of the trajectory and tend to stabilize over time, reflecting the adaptations in family roles and relationships after separation, with different drivers and outcomes. For some mothers, the new equilibrium appeared to be reached more easily and with positive outcomes; for instance, some mothers could take a less active approach to gate-opening after having reached a relatively satisfactory arrangement with the father. A similar, hands-off approach could result from the opposite situation, where attempts at involving the father had failed. In turn, a stabilization in a sort of permanent dynamism occurred for other mothers, with the constant tensions and negotiations becoming entrenched and increasingly burdensome. Finally, growing concerns about child well-being eventually led to the adoption of a gate-closing approach for a few mothers.

Connected to the first main pattern, a second finding is that change was generally a gradual process involving an accumulation of experiences eventually reaching a point of no return (Gladwell, 2000). Indeed, this pattern was observed for those mothers who, after successive frustrating attempts to involve the father in the child's life, ultimately adopted a hands-off approach; or in Gisela's decision to undertake legal action after successive failed attempts to obtain compliance with arrangements informally. A series of stressful events close together in time also triggered Antoinette's move to a gate-closing approach. Relatedly, change could be experienced as a result of trigger points (Neale, 2019), such as when Viviane realized that she may lose the custody of her child, which she viewed as a sort of epiphany. In a few cases, change could also be circumstantial, such as when Sophie's ex-partner moved abroad and disappeared from the family's life.

Moreover, changes do not necessarily occur in a linear or irreversible manner (Saldana, 2003); for example, Viviane decided to establish an informal arrangement with the father after his visitation rights were removed, but she then later resorted to child protection services again.

Third, children's aging and their growing autonomy was crucial for understanding change in gatekeeping practices. Throughout the sample, mothers became less active as the children became able to take more responsibility for their relationship with their father, consistently with previous studies (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018), a change that respondents experienced as a relief.

DISCUSSION

By examining how maternal gatekeeping practices evolve in the post-separation trajectory and identifying the main relational and contextual drivers of these processes, this article contributes to the literature in three key ways. Firstly, this paper offers an understanding of maternal gatekeeping as a dynamic and long-lasting process over the post-separation trajectory. Secondly, this work contributes to conceptualizing a broad range of drivers that shape mothers' practices over time. Finally, and based on the former contributions, it improves our understanding of mothers' agency in relation to the non-resident father.

Regarding the first contribution, we found that most mothers in the sample showed active facilitation practices at the beginning of their trajectory, which supports results from previous studies highlighting that mothers tend to have a proactive gate-opening approach (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Sano et al., 2008; Trinder, 2008). In our sample, a shift toward hands-off or gate-closing approaches occurred over time, indicating that the stage in the trajectory is likely to influence the type of maternal gatekeeping practices identified. Furthermore, our findings suggest that those practices most commonly found in cross-sectional studies (active facilitation and hands-off in Nixon & Hadfield, 2018) are likely to occur in sequence, thus highlighting the relevance of adopting longitudinal approaches.

In all, our findings confirm that previous studies have overestimated the stability in maternal gatekeeping. Indeed, gatekeeping practices are more dynamic at the early stages of the trajectory and tend to stabilize over time. This pattern can be understood from a life-course perspective as part of the transition to a new

family configuration, which demands adjustment to new family roles and expectations in relation to the non-resident father. The actual adaptations required depend on a combination of factors, which together may make the transition more or less difficult or extended in time.

Relatedly, the second contribution of this work concerns the identification of a broader range of drivers across different levels of analysis that contribute to shaping maternal gatekeeping practices over time. These drivers include not only individual attributes and relational dynamics but also institutions and social norms. The first influencing factor mostly absent from previous studies is the mothers' motivations to protect her own time, autonomy, or well-being, which is strongly related to them ensuring that the fathers respect the visitation arrangements. For example, in this study, the mothers mentioned seeking regularity and consistency in the father-child contact not only to protect the child's well-being but also to allow them to plan their everyday lives, have time for themselves, or meet people and potentially start a new relationship. This aspect constitutes one component of the moral dilemmas faced by custodial mothers that was not significantly highlighted in previous studies. A reason for this may be that these concerns are less salient in mothers' experiences or are not seen as legitimate enough to be voiced given that child well-being is often perceived to take precedence over that of the mother.

Another component of mothers' moral dilemmas is related to the influence of the normative importance of the two-parent ideal (Zartler, 2014). While the father's presence has received some attention from research investigating child outcomes in post-separation families (Amato, 2000; Saini et al., 2017; Stadelmann et al., 2010), this aspect has not yet been analyzed in depth as a social norm that may potentially shape mothers' practices. Indeed, a significant proportion of the mothers in our study struggled with trying to conform to such normative expectations. As a result, they attempted to ensure that the father was present at the expense of their own time and energy and, in some instances, despite his presence being detrimental to their children's well-being and their own. In some cases, the mothers kept insisting that the children saw their fathers despite them clearly being at risk, against the children's wishes, or when the fathers showed little interest in maintaining the relationship. Although in all cases the mothers eventually realized that this dynamic was not sustainable and shifted their gatekeeping practices, these examples illustrate the strong

pressure that social norms exerted on them and contrast with previous studies highlighting that child well-being is the primary driver of gatekeeping (Trinder, 2008; Nixon & Hadfield, 2018).

In this study, the influence of social norms regarding the importance of the father-child relationship appeared most evident among mothers facing particularly risky situations and, hence, greater moral dilemmas. However, this influence could also be detected among mothers who promoted contact despite having a conflictual relationship with the father or who abstained from undertaking legal procedures out of fear he would disappear from the children's lives. More generally, the influence of this norm is reflected in the principled declaration of openness to the father-child relationship that was pervasive in the sample.

This consideration relates to our third contribution, namely the advancement toward a more complex understanding of maternal agency in managing the relationship with the non-resident father. As argued theoretically, analyzing gatekeeping practices separately from motivations and outcomes allows a more accurate discussion of mothers' agentic behavior and their ability to enact change. In this sense, we have shown that gate-closing practices were often the result of an accumulation of stressors for mothers who initially supported the father-child relationship rather than resulting from the mother not desiring father-child contact. Additionally, adopting a given gatekeeping approach was not equivalent to achieving the desired outcome, as seen in cases where mothers did not manage to involve the fathers despite actively attempting to do so. In turn, in line with Sano (2008), practices that are perceived as restricting father-child contact may reflect the mother's attempts to obtain more acceptable arrangements.

Taken together, these findings offer a more complex picture of mothers' constrained actions in managing the relationship with the non-resident father. Several factors may hamper the mothers' attempts to shape the fathers' behavior, such as a lack of formal mechanisms to enforce compliance with visiting schedules or alimony, a lack of economic resources preventing them from seeking legal advice, or the fear of harming their own relationship with the children. While these constraints were most evident among mothers with negotiating gatekeeping practices, they were also identified among other cases and can, thus, be conceptualized, along with the role of social norms, as structural factors conditioning maternal agency.

Relatedly, rather than conceptualizing the different gatekeeping approaches as distinct and mutually exclusive types, it may be more useful to consider them as sets of fluid practices that may significantly shift and overlap as circumstances change or mothers struggle to find the right way to act. To some extent, all mothers evaluated whether the father-child relationship fit their standards and attempted to shape the father's behavior accordingly, although this aspect only became salient in the accounts of mothers who deemed the father's standards insufficient. Therefore, it appears crucial to identify the boundaries for mothers to adopt a more active role in gatekeeping. Similarly, overlapping practices that would apparently correspond to different types of gatekeeping can also be understood as signs of tensions in the parental relationship and moral dilemmas.

Finally, from the lens of agency, the trend toward stabilization in gatekeeping practices over time can also be understood as a shift away from pragmatic agency, which demands a constant evaluation of circumstances and taking actions accordingly (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Indeed, although this type of agency may be prioritized in moments of contextual shock (Sánchez-Mira et al., 2021) or across major life transitions, it may be unsustainable over extended periods of time. Consequently, most mothers eventually became less active in their gatekeeping; importantly, their children's growing autonomy had a crucial role in this process, and becoming less active was experienced as a relief rather than a loss of control. Overall, as we argued in the introduction and have shown through our analyses, understanding family relations can be only achieved by considering the effect of temporal processes and family dynamics.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

Our study has shown the relevance of studying the evolution of parental relationships after separation from a life-course perspective. We have demonstrated how a broader range of drivers than previously identified, including maternal well-being and social norms, interact in complex ways to shape the dynamics of gatekeeping practices over time. The findings also provide implications for policies and the regulation of parental responsibilities during and after separation.

Given that co-parenting is promoted by regulation and increasingly by social norms (Westerling, 2016; Eikrem & Jevne, 2022), ex-partners are expected to stay in contact and work together as parents after separation. While some mothers find stability in relatively satisfactory arrangements, for many others, managing the relationship with the non-resident father becomes an ongoing moral dilemma throughout the post-separation trajectory. This permanent tension can detract from the time or energy they need for other aspects of their lives and can have negative effects on their well-being. Such findings must be understood in the light of the gendered, asymmetrical distribution of parenting roles, which means mothers are still socially attributed the responsibility of managing family relationships and daily organization, either formally through judicial decisions regarding custody, because of the lower involvement of fathers with the children prior to separation, or through the internalization of gender norms.

Maternal gatekeeping is also conditioned by social norms and regulations that emphasize the two-parent ideal and the importance of the father's presence in the children's lives for their development. However, the enforcement of the father's rights to visitation can be problematic in situations of conflict or violence or, more frequently, in cases where visitation arrangements are not respected. These situations have detrimental consequences for the custodial parent, who, according to current practice, has the responsibility to demand that the other parent respect their financial and visitation obligations but often lacks mechanisms to obtain compliance. In this study, the shifts observed toward hands-off and gate-closing practices suggest that the earlier involvement of professionals at the time of separation may prevent the deterioration of non-collaborative relationships. Furthermore, shifting the responsibility for father-child contact from parents to a neutral third party (like a public agency or a social service) may avoid an accumulation of factors leading to gate-closing and consequent relational impoverishment for the child.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, to analyze gatekeeping as a transactional process, multiple perspectives would be desirable, namely those of the non-resident parent and the children. According to our findings, mothers not only "shape father involvement through their roles as 'gatekeepers'" (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008, p. 389) but also adapt their gatekeeping behaviors to the father's actions, consistent with observations from previous studies (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018; Sano et al., 2008; Trinder, 2008).

However, without the father's perspective regarding their involvement with the children and their perceptions of maternal gatekeeping, we are limited in our analysis of this reciprocal process. As noted by Sano et al. (2008), fathers may assign different meanings to the same actions; for instance, they may avoid contact with their children for other reasons than a lack of interest, such as not wanting to be treated like a "visiting uncle" (Arendell, 1992, p. 570, in Sano et al., 2008; Nixon, Green & Hogan, 2012b).

In turn, including the children's perspectives would be highly valuable for understanding the mother's gatekeeping in relation to their attempts to ensure a positive experience for the children and protect their well-being during father-child contact. Contrasting the children's experiences with those of the mothers may help disentangle the extent to which different factors (social norms, legal constraints, practical considerations) interact with or even prevail over the preservation of the child's desires and well-being, as well as how the perspectives of the mother and child may differ. Another interesting angle to explore through children's perspectives would be the normative relevance of the father's presence in the children's lives. In this regard, Nixon et al. (2012a) advocate for the need to question permanence and obligation as defining dimensions of parent-child relationships by showing that their young respondents were aware of the father's lack of commitment to maintaining contact and that the children acted and thought as if they were also free to leave the relationship. Therefore, it would be pertinent to contrast the importance attributed by mothers and children to the maintenance of the relationship with the non-resident father as the children age and gain more autonomy in managing such contact.

Another future avenue for research would be to examine the development of maternal gatekeeping alongside other processes of family reconfiguration, including the arrival of new partners or children. Our findings suggest that the relationships with the ex-partner and with an eventual new partner may influence each other. For example, an unresolved or conflictual relationship with an ex-partner may prevent time or psychological resources being available for investing in a new relationship. Moreover, the arrival of a new partner may trigger a shift toward hands-off gatekeeping practices, as the father's involvement in the child's life may appear less crucial with the reconfiguration of a new two-parent household. While our findings hint in this direction, the few cases of step and blended families within our sample prevented us from

exploring these hypotheses in more detail. Despite these limitations, our study offers important insights into the processes shaping maternal gatekeeping over time, thus enhancing our understanding of the evolution of parenting relationships after separation.

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