FAMILY LIFE

IN POSTDIVORCE FAMILIES

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Chapter 1

SYNTHESIS

This chapter benefitted from the feedback of Anne-Rigt Poortman and Tanja van der Lippe.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, families in Western societies were considered to comprise two married different-sex parents and their children, who all resided in the same household (Bengtson, 2001). This so-called nuclear family did family life together: nuclear family members went on vacation and celebrated birthdays and each other's achievements together. Naturally, this nuclear family was a cohesive unit (i.e., the family is a tight-knit unit). Whereas there were always families that deviated from this norm, for example through the death of one of the parents, the nuclear family remained the norm in societies at large, as well as in scientific studies of the family. Non-nuclear family structures are still pegged against nuclear families to highlight their presumed shortcomings (Sanner & Jensen, 2021).

The substantial increase in the rates of divorce and repartnering since the 1960s and progressively more liberal gender norms have challenged the dominance of the nuclear family (Allan et al., 2011; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). This becomes most obvious in the share of children who nowadays experience the divorce/separation and potential subsequent repartnering of their parents before their 18th birthday. In the Netherlands – the context of this study – about 21% of minors have divorced parents, and 16% of minors have at least one stepparent, meaning that they live in stepfamilies (Statistics Netherlands, 2020). Such families – referred to as postdivorce families in the following – usually do not live under one roof: they are spread out over several households. Resultingly, children might even perceive themselves to be part of two families if both their biological parents repartner (Zartler & Grillenberger, 2017). This implies that postdivorce families are configured substantially differently than nuclear families and most likely do not function like them. For example, in nuclear families, it is (supposedly) self-evident what the boundaries of the family are, that family life is done with both biological parents and their children, that such families are experienced as cohesive, and that relationships among family members are experienced as clear or unambiguous. Among postdivorce families, the absence of clearly-defined societal norms about family behavior and relationships makes these aspects of postdivorce family life less self-evident (Cherlin, 1978, 2020; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). For example, with whom should children's birthdays be celebrated, if the parents have divorced and no longer live under the same roof? Who is considered kin after divorce in the first place?

Postdivorce families are, furthermore, becoming increasingly heterogeneous, meaning that they have diverse family structures (Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Sanner & Jensen, 2021). Family structure, hereby, refers to both whom a family comprises and in which households the individual family members reside. Previously, it was the norm for children to live with their

biological mothers after divorce. The mother was often granted sole custody, with the father maintaining visitation rights. This highly gendered division of childrearing has become more equitable as nowadays an increasing share of children follow a shared residence arrangement (i.e., joint physical custody), and a non-negligible share of children lives full-time with their father (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017; Vrolijk & Keizer, 2021). This implies that children and parents are nowadays more likely to experience discontinuous family relationships. This discontinuity can complicate the creation of, for example, a sense of cohesion, and complicate practical aspects of postdivorce family life. Furthermore, an increasing share of (divorced) parents in the Netherlands chooses long-term cohabitation or living-apart-together (LAT) relationships over remarriage (van der Wiel et al., 2018). In postdivorce families, this implies that there are not only multiple parental figures (i.e., biological parents and stepparents) but also multiple types of stepparents: it is no longer self-evident that children will live in the same household as their stepparents. Growing family complexity and diversity in terms of family structures goes together with a complication of interpersonal relationships in postdivorce families, such as difficulties in establishing high relationship qualities among stepfamily members. The fact that LAT stepparents, for example, do not reside in the same household as their stepchildren might complicate forming close interpersonal relationships among stepfamily members (Kobayashi et al., 2017).

The emergence of postdivorce families to begin with, and the increasing heterogeneity among postdivorce families in terms of family structures and interpersonal relationships specifically, thus substantially complicates our concept of "family" and raises fundamental questions, such as: how do individuals experience living in, and how is family life "done" in such diverse postdivorce families? As the concept of family is central to how Western societies are organized (Bengtson, 2001), illuminating in-depth how family life is done and experienced across different family structures is essential for, amongst others, lawmakers, policy makers, and family researchers, but also for society at large. The concept of family is, of course, central to family law, but also other legal domains – immigration, citizenship, and inheritance law to name a few – rely on some definition of family. Gaining deeper insights into how postdivorce families are done and experienced can allow for crafting legislation that aligns more with individuals' lived reality and is thus more representative of the population. For family researchers, understanding postdivorce families and the heterogeneity among them is important, for example, for understanding potential differences in well-being between different types of postdivorce families.

This dissertation aims to contribute to understanding the consequences of postdivorce family heterogeneity for postdivorce family life. Specifically, it aims to answer the following central questions:

How are postdivorce families done and experienced?
How does this depend on postdivorce family structures and interpersonal factors?

To give a broad overview of postdivorce family doing and experiences, I investigate four outcomes that have been mentioned time and again to be particularly problematic for postdivorce family members (Furstenberg, 2020; Pink & Wampler, 1985; Raley & Sweeney, 2020), and how these outcomes are driven by aspects of postdivorce family structure as well as interpersonal factors – specifically relationship qualities between individuals. First, I investigate the issue of kinship, namely who is considered part of postdivorce families. Family boundaries in nuclear families are self-evident, but divorce substantially blurs the boundaries of the concept of family and kinship, leading to potentially great variation in who is considered kin among different types of postdivorce families. Second, I focus on parents' perceptions of cohesion in different postdivorce families. Perceptions of cohesion might be linked to the structural complexity of the family, but little is known about how perceptions of cohesion differ among family structures. Third, I investigate with whom family rituals – specifically children's birthdays– are celebrated in postdivorce families. Naturally, a divorce makes it less self-evident that such rituals are celebrated with both the child's biological parents. Investigating with whom rituals are celebrated across different types of postdivorce families allows for novel insights into how postdivorce families are done. Lastly, I focus on ambiguous relationships in postdivorce families. It is often claimed that ambiguity is a common – if not universal – experience in postdivorce families, yet little is known about which structural and interpersonal factors contribute to the emergence of ambiguity, nor is it well-established which relationships are especially likely to be experienced as ambiguous. For each of the studied topics, I aim at a rich description, as well as at a theory-driven explanation of how postdivorce family structures and interpersonal factors may drive these outcomes. Taken together, investigating these four topics offers a broad and deep overview of how family life is done and experienced in contemporary postdivorce families in the Netherlands.

1.2 BACKGROUND

In the following section, I sketch the central themes underlying the state of the art of the literature on postdivorce family doing and experiences and summarize the respective empirical literatures to identify important shortcomings and gaps.

1.2.1 The nuclear family approach in studying postdivorce families.

As mentioned in the introduction, it seems "obvious" that postdivorce families are by definition not nuclear families: family members do not reside in one household and there are often multiple types of parental figures and other family members (e.g., stepparents and stepsiblings; Bengtson, 2001; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). These important structural differences between nuclear families and postdivorce families notwithstanding, the bulk of the research on postdivorce families in general and postdivorce family life, in particular, follows what I call the "nuclear family approach". By that term, I mean the tendency of researchers to prioritize studying core relationships – especially those between parents and children.

When postdivorce (step)families started to be researched to any meaningful extent by family researchers in the 1970s, it was almost universally assumed that divorce had a negative effect on parents and children in particular (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). In this era of scholarship, postdivorce families were, thus, seen as deviant family forms, and suboptimal contexts for childrearing (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Studies from this period, thus, often adopted a "deficit comparison" lens, which entailed putting postdivorce families against control groups of non-divorced families across various different dimensions to ascertain how much worse parents and children were doing in terms of, for example, well-being or relationship qualities (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Sanner & Jensen, 2021). Studies on postdivorce family life in this period tended to largely focus on comparing relationship qualities and problematic behavior (e.g., delinquent behavior or drug use) between children with non-divorced and divorced parents, or conflicts between stepparents, biological parents, and stepchildren (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). In other words: studies of postdivorce family life have largely sought to study the consequences of parental divorce for a small range of individual bilateral ties, and mostly so by pegging these (implicitly or explicitly) against the nuclear family default, i.e., by highlighting the "deficit" that supposedly exists in postdivorce families.

In the following decades – the 1980s and 1990s in particular – research on postdivorce families became more mainstream within family science and – to an extent – departed from this deficit comparison lens on postdivorce

families. The focus of empirical investigations, however, largely remained on studying relationships among core postdivorce family members (e.g., parents, children, and stepparents), though studies increasingly looked beyond parent-child relationships. Chiefly, relationships between stepparents and their stepchildren, as well as in recent years, those among (step/half/biological) siblings were increasingly studied (see overviews by Ganong et al., 2022; Hank & Steinbach, 2018; Sanner et al., 2018). Studying these dyads arguably sketches a more complete picture of contemporary postdivorce families, yet at the same time keeps the focus on relationships more or less among core postdivorce family members. In other words, besides merely studying the (formally) dissolved nuclear family, now the "new" nuclear family comprising both former partners and their children was studied. The bulk of these empirical studies on postdivorce families investigates properties of very specific dyads as outcomes, such as conflict between stepparents and stepchildren.

Whereas (step)parent-(step)child relationships are certainly important to investigate as they relate to important outcomes such as intergenerational solidarity or well-being (see e.g., Visser et al., 2017), this focus has inevitably led to some equally relevant outcomes having gotten less attention. First, besides a few small-scale studies from the last century (e.g., Ambert, 1988; Anspach, 1976; Duran-Aydintug, 1993), the "extended family" and kin seem to have largely been forgotten (Furstenberg, 2020). That is to say: whereas the "core" of the postdivorce family has been extensively charted (and is increasingly being charted by studies considering sibling complexity), relatively little is known about family relationships outside this core, and outcomes at the family level (i.e., cohesion, family boundaries). Exceptions are the literature on grandparenting in postdivorce families (e.g., Chapman et al., 2016; Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016; Westphal et al., 2015), as well as that on family boundaries (Castrén, 2008; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999; Suanet et al., 2013), though the latter still routinely focuses on the in/exclusion of core family members, rather than studying the entirety of potential relationships in postdivorce families.

Relatedly, in terms of substantive research questions, the focus of the literature on postdivorce family life has largely remained on exploring aspects of interpersonal relationships, chiefly relationship qualities, solidarity, and conflict. The focus on these specific outcomes mostly on the individual level is striking, given that, for example, whom to invite to children's birthday parties or creating cohesion are mentioned by stepfamily members to be particularly problematic areas of postdivorce family life (Costa, 2014; Ganong et al., 2019; Pink & Wampler, 1985), yet we know surprisingly little about them descriptively (e.g., with whom are birthdays celebrated), as well as in terms of their drivers (i.e.,

what determines whom a birthday is celebrated with?). To the extent that family experiences (e.g., cohesion) and doing family (e.g., rituals) have been studied, they have so far been treated as theoretically relatively separate phenomena. For example, the literature on family rituals is almost exclusively qualitative and largely does not consider theoretical arguments from the more quantitative literature on family experiences.

1.2.2 Understanding relationships in postdivorce family constellations.

To understand the determinants of aspects of family life in postdivorce families, the few extant studies have largely used Family Systems Theory (FST) as an explanatory framework. In a nutshell, FST argues that families are highly interconnected relational systems where relationships between the individual family members form a complex and interdependent web (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). In other words: family relationships are expected to reciprocally influence each other, often in unpredictable ways (de Bel & Van Gasse, 2020).

Inspired by FST's notion that family relationships influence each other, studies on postdivorce family doing and experiences for the most part give primacy to relationship qualities as explanatory factors (e.g., Ganong et al., 2019; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Jensen & Ganong, 2022). These studies have, generally speaking, found that high relationship qualities are beneficial for, for example, celebrating family rituals together (Bakker et al., 2015; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Costa, 2014) or perceiving one's family as cohesive (Ganong et al., 2019; Jensen & Ganong, 2022; King et al., 2018). It seems to be especially the child-stepparent relationship that is key for, amongst others, celebrating family rituals together or feeling that the family is cohesive (Costa, 2014; King et al., 2018). Note that most of these studies are qualitative and/or use convenience samples, which means that these results are prone to selection bias and cannot be used to make inferences about the population level.

What is striking is that other relevant factors – particularly family structure (i.e., whom the family comprises and where family members reside) – are often either not at all or only coarsely examined in studies on postdivorce family life. Usually, only the most common postdivorce family form is considered, meaning stepfamilies those formed by a mother, their resident child, and a resident stepfather (Costa, 2014; Ganong et al., 2019; Pink & Wampler, 1985). The increasingly popular shared residence arrangements are often not at all considered. For several reasons, this broad neglect of family structure as a factor explaining how postdivorce family life is done and experienced is surprising.

First, family structure is known to set the stage for how relationships can unfold. This is increasingly the focus of studies on, for example, the determinants of parental involvement and relationship qualities between parents and children after divorce (e.g., Arat et al., 2021; Becker et al., 2013; Kalmijn, 2013), but not yet in the literature on postdivorce family doing and experiences. However, it appears plausible that, for example, if the stepparent is nonresident (i.e., the stepparent is a living-apart-together/LAT stepparent), it might be more difficult to celebrate family rituals together than if the stepparents were resident. This is to say that it is too simplistic to assume that relationship qualities alone sufficiently explain how postdivorce family life unfolds.

Second, the increased heterogeneity and diversity in postdivorce family structures are the key demographic change in the postdivorce family landscape (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). By only focusing on relationship qualities, a part of the picture might be missing. In so far as family structure is at present considered in studies on postdivorce family doing and experiences, the range of postdivorce families examined is in many studies somewhat unrepresentative of the present-day diversity among postdivorce families. For example, to the extent that the influence of residence arrangements is considered, comparisons are usually confined to families with resident children versus those with nonresident children (e.g., Jensen & Ganong, 2022; King et al., 2018; King & Boyd, 2016). Only a few studies have examined the influence of shared residence arrangements, which are increasingly common in Western Europe and the United States. The role of sibling complexity (i.e., which different children the stepfamily comprises) is a topic of increasing interest among family researchers, yet studies examining the roles of sibling complexity on postdivorce family doing and experiences are few (Sanner & Jensen, 2021). In that vein, due to the innate complexity of contemporary stepfamilies, it is striking that most empirical studies investigate either the perceptions of parents or children but make often limited effort to study how these perspectives intertwine on a theoretical level to shape outcomes at the individual and family level. This limited focus complicates an overall assessment of postdivorce family life, as different actors' perspectives do not necessarily overlap.

Third, the notion of "swapping families" is often used to illustrate the presumed negative consequences of parental repartnering on their involvement with their children from their previous relationships (Manning & Smock, 2000), as well as their participation in family activities with their "previous family" (Bakker et al., 2015). In other words, the swapping families thesis already presupposes that structural changes to the family (i.e., having a new partner or children with him/her) drive how postdivorce families are done

and experienced. Curiously – to my knowledge – the swapping families thesis has not been expanded to also investigate how other structural differences between postdivorce families (e.g., residence arrangements) might drive different postdivorce family doing. Let alone investigate in a more fine-grained way whether, for example, all types of repartnering (e.g., LAT, cohabitation, remarriage) elicit the same extent of swapping families.

A big reason for this lacuna is that the bulk of empirical studies on stepfamilies originates from the United States, where postdivorce families are somewhat less diverse than in Western Europe. Shared residence arrangements, for example, are less common in the US than in the Netherlands. Furthermore, gathering large-scale probabilistic survey data on postdivorce families is notoriously difficult due to the lack of a comprehensive national population register accessible to researchers. To the extent that topics at the family level are considered at all in US-based studies, these, thus, are frequently limited to using nongeneralizable samples (e.g., Jensen & Ganong, 2022; King, 2009; Leake, 2007).

1.2.3 Ambiguity (i.e., uncertainty) regarding postdivorce family relationships and family membership.

Family relationships, roles, and boundaries in postdivorce families have time and again been described as "ambiguous". Ambiguity itself is an ambiguously-defined concept in family studies, as various more or less substantially diverging definitions exist (Boss, 2004; Gibson, 2013; Jensen, 2021; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999; Van Houdt et al., 2018). For the purposes of this dissertation, I most closely follow the definition by Jensen (2021), who conceptualized ambiguity as uncertainty about the nature of relationships and changes to relationships within stepfamilies. This contrasts with other usages of the word ambiguity in the sense of having multiple meanings or contradictory qualities. That definition more closely corresponds to the concept of ambivalence (Girardin et al., 2018).

Based on Cherlin's incomplete institutionalization thesis (Cherlin, 1978, 2020), many researchers have argued that individuals lack clear "blueprints" for how postdivorce families are supposed to function (see Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Accordingly, individuals are left to their own devices, leading to divergent approaches towards postdivorce family life and divergent individuals' experiences in stepfamilies. Due to the ever-increasing heterogeneity among postdivorce families, ambiguity is assumed to be a common, if not universal, experience (Arat et al., 2021; Jensen, 2021). Furthermore, ambiguity is sometimes used as a catch-all term to explain variation in different family behaviors (e.g., relationship patterns) that cannot be sufficiently explained by other mechanisms studied (e.g., Arat et al., 2021; Ganong & Coleman, 1997; van Houdt, 2021b).

Even if such "unexplained variation" would be solely due to ambiguity, what is striking is that there is relatively little empirical research on ambiguity itself. In other words: whereas ambiguity is often used as an (often untested) argument or mechanism, there is barely any research on ambiguity as such, under which circumstances it might arise, and how individuals might deal with it. The few empirical studies on ambiguity have largely focused on boundary ambiguity. Boundary ambiguity refers to a state of the family system as a whole in which individuals disagree about who belongs to said system. In other words, boundary ambiguity considers diverging opinions about family membership, rather than the nature of individual relationships within families. Boundary ambiguity can occur if, for example, a stepparent considers their stepchild a family member, but not vice-versa. Stewart (2005) has shown that boundary ambiguity is quite prevalent in stepfamilies, especially when the stepfamily comprises nonresident stepchildren. Relatedly, Brown and Manning (2009) found boundary ambiguity to be more pronounced in cohabiting than in remarried stepfamilies.

Regarding ambiguity about the nature of family relationships as such, on a theoretical level, one can distinguish between two subdimensions of ambiguity – ambiguous loss and ambiguous gain (Boss, 2004; Jensen, 2021). Ambiguous *loss* refers to a relational loss imbued with uncertainty and unclear facts. Pauline Boss, who introduced the concept, gave a loved one missing-in-action as an example of ambiguous loss. In that situation, one is left wondering where one's loved one is, which makes achieving closure difficult, if not impossible (Boss, 2002, 2016, p. 197). In postdivorce families, an example of ambiguous loss could be children losing contact with one of their parents after divorce and being unsure about why their relationship has changed due to their parents' divorce (Allen, 2007). Jensen (2021) recently promulgated the theoretical flip-coin of ambiguous loss – ambiguous *gain*. Ambiguous gain is defined as relational acquisition imbued with unclear facts, which is speculated to occur when children gain a stepparent and them being not clear about the nature of their relationship or failing to co-create a clear relationship with their stepparent. Both ambiguous gain and loss are considered to be stressful for those involved (Jensen, 2021).

Note that whereas ambiguity can, thus, plausibly occur in postdivorce stepfamilies, there is – to my knowledge – no empirical investigation of which relationships are especially prone to being considered ambiguous, why that might be the case, and how adolescents deal with ambiguity, given that it is commonly considered to be stressful.

1.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS DISSERTATION

With this dissertation, I contribute to the literature on postdivorce family doing and experiences in the following ways.

First, I move beyond the nuclear family approach in research on postdivorce families. Much extant research on family life in postdivorce families has focused strongly on studying relationships among "core" postdivorce family members – meaning chiefly those between (step)parents and step(children). Little is known about outcomes on the family level (e.g., who celebrates family rituals together), or the wider family or kinship system (e.g., who is considered kin, beyond (step) parents and (step)siblings). To the extent that these aspects are studied, the data used is usually several decades old and from Anglo-Saxony, which makes it doubtful if these findings apply to the contemporary Dutch postdivorce family landscape. In this dissertation, I contribute to the extant literature by explicitly considering family-level outcomes such as kinship and cohesion, by studying these outcomes in the Dutch context, and by doing so using detailed and recent data.

Second, I contribute by moving beyond relationship qualities to explain postdivorce family life, by bringing aspects of family structure into the equation. Whereas relationship qualities have been shown to influence various family-level outcomes, neglecting family structure essentially assumes that different types of stepfamilies are functionally the same. However, it is known from studies on, for example, parent-child relationships in postdivorce families that aspects of family structure – such as children's residence arrangements, and whether parents have additional family obligations – can lead to vastly different opportunity structures for family members to interact, and diverging outcomes. Given that postdivorce stepfamilies are nowadays highly diverse in terms of their structures, it seems too simplistic to assume that relationship qualities alone explain outcomes at the family level and that there is no systematic variation in how postdivorce families are done and experienced across different postdivorce family structures. Throughout this dissertation, I study how aspects of family structure and the mechanisms associated with them (e.g., swapping families) explain family-level outcomes, such as kinship perceptions or perceptions of cohesion. In so doing, I contribute to extant studies by highlighting the need to pay close attention to how family structure influences family outcomes.

Third, I consider both family experiences as well as doing family (i.e., behavior), both as outcomes and mechanisms. Prior studies have, by and large, treated subjective experiences and behavior as relatively separate phenomena. However, I argue that contemporary postdivorce family life cannot be understood by studying these factors in isolation: subjective experiences

shape family behavior, and vice versa. To give a more complete assessment of contemporary postdivorce family life and its drivers, I study both subjective experiences and behavior as outcomes but also show the ways these aspects are connected on a theoretical level in the respective empirical chapters.

Fourth, I study postdivorce family life by combining multiple actors' perspectives in theory and empirics, as well as different research methodologies and paradigms. For once, I consider outcomes related to parents, children, and behavioral outcomes on the family level. Most prior research focuses either on the perspectives of parents or children, which complicates an overall assessment of postdivorce family life, as parents' and children's perspectives do not necessarily overlap, but are to some extent interdependent. To capture these different perspectives, I make use of quantitative as well as qualitative data and methods.

Fifth, this study is one of the first to empirically investigate and assess the role of ambiguity. Whereas ambiguity is frequently asserted to be a common aspect of postdivorce family life, little is known about how and why ambiguity arises and manifests itself in postdivorce families, besides the few studies explaining boundary ambiguity and not perceptions of ambiguity as such. This dissertation is a first attempt at describing in detail how children of divorced parents experience ambiguous relationships, what factors might contribute to such perceptions, and how children of divorced parents deal with ambiguity.

1.4 DATA

The empirical studies contained in this dissertation are based on two data sources: the large-scale quantitative NFN data and qualitative interview data.

1.4.1 The NFN data

The NFN data were collected in three waves in 2012/13 (Wave 1), 2015/16 (Wave 2), and 2020 (Wave 3) (Poortman et al., 2014, 2018, 2021). NFN aimed at collecting data about postdivorce families, though waves 1 and 2 also include a "control group" of non-divorced families. In all waves, parents were asked various questions about themselves, their family situation, as well as a so-called "focal child", which was chosen based on his or her age in wave 1. Statistics Netherlands (CBS) sampled the data for wave 1 using population register information, which allowed for sampling on specific criteria, such as marital status. The main sample of wave 1 comprises different-sex parents with minor children who divorced or separated in 2010 (in short: the divorced sample). The "control group" consists of currently married or cohabiting different-sex parents with minor

children (in short: the non-divorced sample). For both samples, both (former) partners were approached via physical mail and invited to complete an online survey. The final reminder contained a traditional paper-and-pencil version of the questionnaire. The response rate of the non-divorced sample for wave 1 was 45% on the individual and 56% on the household level, totaling 2,173 individual responses. Response rates for the divorced sample were somewhat lower (39% on the individual level and 58% on the former household level), totaling 4,481 individual responses. These response rates are relatively high considering the potentially difficult-to-reach target group of recently divorced parents and the main online mode of the survey and are comparable to those of other family surveys in the Netherlands (E. de Leeuw et al., 2018). Participants of Wave 1 who allowed to be approached again were invited to complete a follow-up survey in 2015/16 – wave 2. For the non-divorced sample, 70% did so, yielding 1,336 individual responses (the response rate on the household level is 74%). For the divorced sample, 63% participated again in Wave 2, which yielded 2,544 individual responses (response rate on the former household level 69%). To account for panel attrition in the divorced sample, a replacement sample was recruited (drawn identically as for wave 1). This replacement sample contained 920 individual responses. In total, the divorced sample of wave 2 thus contains 3,464 individual responses.

Wave 3 – collected in 2020/21 – only contains a divorced sample. For wave 3, parents from the divorced sample who participated in at least one of the previous two waves were approached. The response rate was 68% among persons and 72% among former households, yielding 3,056 individual responses. For several reasons, the NFN data are highly suitable for this dissertation. First, NFN contains recent and large-scale probabilistic data. Second, besides comprising a large sample of married/cohabiting parents, NFN contains an oversample of divorced/separated parents living in diverse postdivorce families. This allows for examining postdivorce family life across diverse types of postdivorce families. To the extent that previous studies on postdivorce family life (e.g., kinship perceptions) have used quantitative data, these were usually older, smaller, and non-representative (i.e., convenience) samples, mostly from the United States (see e.g., Allan et al., 2008; Anspach, 1976). These data are, thus, limited in the inclusion of more emergent types of postdivorce families, such as those in which children follow shared residence arrangements or those with an LAT stepparent, and do not necessarily generalize to Western Europe. As NFN is recent and oversampled postdivorce families, it includes relatively large numbers of these emergent types of postdivorce families. For example, more than 25% of the children on which parents reported in wave 2 followed a

shared residence arrangement or had an LAT stepparent. Other recent datasets oversampling postdivorce families are rare, but the few there are contain smaller sample sizes of parents in less common postdivorce family types and/or less extensive measures of postdivorce family life (e.g., pairfam). Third, NFN includes unique and extensive information on postdivorce family life. Wave 2, for example, includes extensive information about who participates in different family rituals in postdivorce families, but also whom parents consider kin. Wave 3 includes unique information about perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. To my knowledge, no previous data sets include (extensive) measures of family ritual participation, and only a few include measures of cohesion or kinship perceptions (e.g., NKPS). Those that do have measures on cohesion and kinship, however, usually only include a small number of divorced parents.

1.4.2 Qualitative interview data

To understand life in postdivorce families – specifically ambiguity – from adolescents' perspectives, I conducted 30 semi-structured qualitative interviews with children of divorced parents from late 2021 to early 2022. Interviewees were approached via the researchers' network, an organization for children of divorced parents, and subsequent snowball sampling. The interviewees were (late) adolescents – between 16 and 20 years of age – had different-sex parents who had divorced at least three years previously, and, at the time of the interview, had at least one stepparent. All interviewees saw themselves as part of a stepfamily. Respondents were selected to achieve a variation in gender, post-divorce residence arrangements, number of stepparents, presence of step- or half-siblings, and duration of the stepfamily bond. The sample also varied in terms of educational background and included respondents from urban and rural regions. The sample consists of 15 male and 15 female respondents. Respondents were part of diverse stepfamily constellations: 18 had two stepparents, 25 had stepsiblings, and nine had half-siblings.

Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, a mixed-mode strategy was adopted to protect the respondents' and my health. During the first two months of the fieldwork (September and October 2021), respondents were asked to specify their preference for either a face-to-face interview or an online interview (via Microsoft Teams). After the introduction of an "evening lockdown" in November 2021, all further interviews were conducted online.

All interviews started with the question "Who is part of your family?". This usually elicited a description of all mentioned people, as well as details of their family history. Subsequently, I asked follow-up questions about each mentioned family member, such as important memories or the development

of the relationship, and probed how respondents considered their relationship (e.g., was it unclear to them etc.). In the last phase of the interview, I asked whether there were any other people that had not been mentioned, and if the interviewees considered them family members. If this was the case, we asked similar questions to get to know more about them.

This qualitative interview data is highly suitable for this dissertation as it targets a) an age range commonly not studied in family research, b) explicitly covers family relationships with a broad range of family members, and c) due to its design allows to empirically assess ambiguity vis-à-vis a wider range of stepfamily ties than what has been attempted in previous studies.

1.5 FOUR EMPIRICAL STUDIES

The remainder of this dissertation consists of four empirical chapters, each of which addresses a different part of the core research questions on how postdivorce family life is done and perceived and how this is shaped by postdivorce family structure and interpersonal factors. Note that this dissertation is not meant to be exhaustive, as it was not always warranted or possible to make all possible distinctions and comparisons or to investigate all outcomes from both parents' and children's points of view. For example, whereas the chapter on parents' kinship perceptions makes comparisons between married and divorced parents, this was not possible for the other chapters due to the lack of the respective reference group in the datasets used.

1.5.1 Chapter 2: Who do married and divorced parents consider kin?

This chapter uses the married and divorced samples of NFN wave 2 to analyze how married and divorced parents differ in whom they consider part of their kinship network, and how divorced parents' kinship perceptions differ by repartnering status and children's postdivorce residence arrangements. Kinship perceptions are important to study, as kin constitute a latent support network that can be activated in times of need. Studying how kinship perceptions differ between married and divorced parents, and among divorced parents, can reveal the circumstances under which parents and their children might be especially likely to lose access to resources embedded in kinship networks and allows for an empirical assessment of how family boundaries might be reconfigured through divorce.

Extant research on kinship in the context of divorce for the most part only investigated a small range of biological relatives, does not compare married and divorced parents, and largely overlooks the heterogeneity among postdivorce

families. This study extends previous research by systematically comparing married and divorced parents' kinship perceptions, by investigating kinship perceptions vis-à-vis biological relatives and in-laws, by considering different types of relatives (i.e., parents, siblings, nieces/nephews, aunts/uncles, and cousins), and by examining the role of repartnering and residence arrangements for postdivorce kinship perceptions.

The findings show that kinship perceptions differ substantially between married and divorced parents, but only regarding in-laws. Biological relatives are considered kin to equally high extents by married and divorced parents. Among both biological relatives and in-laws, parents were most likely to be considered, and cousins were least likely to be considered kin. Divorced parents are less likely to consider their former in-laws kin than married parents are to consider their in-laws kin. These differences are even more pronounced among parents who repartnered after divorce: in the case of repartnering, former in-laws are considered kin to an even smaller extent, but the new in-laws are considered kin to a higher extent than are former in-laws, which indicates swapping families. Furthermore, former in-laws are less likely to be considered kin in case divorced parents' children are nonresident, as opposed to (part-time) resident. This highlights the central role of children in keeping kin together. In conclusion, kinship patterns only differ for in-laws between married and divorced parents. Resident children may lead parents to consider former in-laws kin, whereas repartnering leads to the exclusion of former in-laws.

1.5.2 Chapter 3: Parents' perceptions of cohesion in diverse stepfamilies.

Chapter 3 uses NFN wave 3 to analyze differences in perceptions of cohesion between different types of postdivorce stepfamilies. Perceptions of cohesion refer to individuals' feeling that their (step)family is a tight-knit unit, as opposed to an unstructured amalgam of individuals. Cohesion is important to study, as it positively relates to parents' and children's well-being. Extant studies on cohesion have comprehensively investigated the links between bilateral relationship qualities and cohesion but have largely overlooked how perceptions of cohesion differ between postdivorce stepfamily structures. In this study, I contribute to the literature on cohesion by investigating how stepfamily structure affects cohesion above and beyond relationship qualities. I examine different aspects of stepfamily structure as well as their interplay while controlling for relationship qualities: having a shared biological child (i.e., a "concrete baby"), the current partner also having a child from a previous relationship (i.e., the stepfamily

being a complex family as opposed to a simple one), as well as the residences of the respective children.

Results showed that parents assessed their stepfamilies on average as very cohesive (around 4 on a scale from 1 to 5). Having a shared biological child was associated with higher perceptions of cohesion, whereas living in a complex stepfamily was associated with lower perceptions of cohesion. Perceptions of cohesion were lower when parents' children from their previous union and/or potential stepchildren were nonresident as opposed to resident. When looking at the interplay of children's residence arrangements, simple stepfamilies with a resident focal child and complex stepfamilies in which both children were resident were regarded as more cohesive than complex stepfamilies in which children's residence arrangements were dissimilar, meaning that the negative effect of having a stepchild appears to be attenuated by all stepfamily members sharing a common household. These findings suggest that the closer the stepfamily structure approximates that of a nuclear family (i.e., the couple has a biological child, and everybody lives under one roof), the more cohesive the stepfamily may be perceived to be. The fact that family structure – above and beyond relationship qualities – appears to affect perceptions of cohesion illustrates the value of and necessity to pay close attention to family structure when studying family-level outcomes like perceptions of cohesion.

1.5.3 Chapter 4: Family rituals in postdivorce families.

Chapter 4 uses the divorced sample of NFN wave 2 to investigate with whom parents celebrate family rituals (specifically, their child's birthday) in postdivorce families, and how this is influenced by aspects of family structure (residence arrangements, (type of) repartnering, having stepchildren) as well as relationship qualities. Rituals are recurring family routines imbued with special significance. In first-time families, rituals are usually celebrated together with both a child's biological parents, but how rituals are celebrated in postdivorce families is less self-evident. This study contributes to the extant literature by being the first to use large-scale quantitative data to analyze with whom rituals are celebrated in postdivorce families, and how this differs across postdivorce family structures and by relationship qualities.

Results showed that only 34% of parents celebrated their child's birthday together with the ex-partner. Among repartnered parents, 87% celebrated the birthday with the current partner, and in 25% of cases jointly with the ex-partner and the current partner. The ex-partners' presence at the focal child's birthday was more likely when parents and their current partners had a good relationship with the ex-partner, and less likely when parents had repartnered or

when the ex-partners had sole custody or additional biological or stepchildren. The presence of the current partner and joint presence of the ex-partner and the current partner was more likely in case the current partner coresided with the biological parent and when the ex-partner had a new partner; and was less likely when the ex-partners had sole custody and when parents' relationship with their ex-partner was good.

Overall, these findings indicate that family rituals appear to be – for the most part – celebrate in the "new family configuration". Repartnering and poor relationship qualities between the former couple seem to drive this effect.

1.5.4 Chapter 5: Adolescents' experiences with ambiguity in stepfamilies.

Chapter 5 investigates adolescents' perceptions of ambiguity (i.e., unclarity about family relationships) in postdivorce stepfamilies. Ambiguity is important to investigate, as it might lower children's well-being. Whereas it is frequently alleged that relationships in stepfamilies are ambiguous, this claim has only received a limited empirical foundation. In this study, I analyzed semi-structured interviews to investigate which family relationships adolescents experience as ambiguous, how ambiguity emerges and develops, and what strategies adolescents develop to deal with ambiguity.

Results showed that especially relationships with stepparents, stepsiblings, and biological parents were prone to ambiguity. Two key categories explained the emergence of ambiguity: *information* (i.e., incomplete/contradictory knowledge about family relationships), and *relationality* (i.e., the ways in which family relationships were assessed and compared to each other). For example, some respondents felt that either their biological parent or stepparent was deliberately not disclosing parts of their relationship, which made respondents question their relationship with the respective person. Not liking the stepparent or perceiving them as having a negative influence on the respective biological parent likewise created a "barrier" for respondents to comprehensively co-construct a relationship with them. Respondents used three strategies to deal with ambiguity. *Improving relationships* entailed respondents building a meaningful and clear relationship with the respective alter. *Accepting ambiguity* entailed merely (reluctantly) tolerating the relationship as it is, and *creating distance* involved respondents attempting to evade ambiguity by, for example, changing their residence arrangement.

These results indicate that ambiguity was common in postdivorce stepfamilies, yet mostly confined to relationships between adolescents and co-resident stepparents, stepsiblings, and biological parents. The fact that

adolescents developed differing strategies to deal with ambiguity and that some managed to overcome it shows their resiliency and agency in managing postdivorce family transitions.

1.6 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the insights provided by these four empirical chapters, in the first part of this section, I sketch the main conclusions of the dissertation. In the second part, I reflect on the broader implications of these conclusions.

1.6.1 From parent's point of view, the postdivorce family is – by and large – experienced and done as a new nuclear family.

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that postdivorce families are "obviously" not nuclear families. However, the results of my studies show that postdivorce families seem to be (by parents) experienced as and done in a family configuration – a "new nuclear family" – that appears to be substantially influenced by the nuclear family ideology. For example, after a divorce, parents appear to no longer consider their former in-laws kin, even though they were often married for years and likely built bonds with them. Family rituals are most often celebrated without the former partner, even though they are usually celebrated that way in non-divorced families. Divorce seems to already cause a shift to a family that, largely, no longer includes the former partner. Subsequent parental repartnering makes the swapping of families complete: repartnered parents were even less likely to consider their former in-laws kin or celebrate their child's birthday with the ex-partner. Instead, the new in-laws take the place of the former ones, and family rituals are now celebrated with the new partner.

That is to say: rather than conceptualizations of family extending and creating a new "extended postdivorce family", in parents' mind, a new nuclear family appears to replace the previous one. This creation of a new nuclear family from fragments of previous relationships became particularly obvious when considering that having a shared biological child with the new partner and all potential stepchildren residing in the same household improved parents' perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. One can speculate that – at least for parents – passing as a nuclear family seems to be desirable, despite postdivorce families arguably not being conventional nuclear families. Note that, as I will discuss below, these experiences do not necessarily match with those of their children.

1.6.2 Whom the family comprises and where family members live – above and beyond relationship qualities – shapes how postdivorce families are done and experienced.

Previous research on postdivorce family doing and experiences in postdivorce families has largely overlooked the role of family structure, i.e., whom the family comprises and which households the family members reside. I found evidence, however, that there is substantial variation in how postdivorce families are done and experienced in different postdivorce family structures, even after accounting for the role of relationship qualities.

First, regarding family structure, a key aspect of postdivorce family structure that appears to drive postdivorce family experiences and doing appears to be residence, namely in the form of (step)children's residence arrangements as well as stepparents' coresidence with the child's biological parent(s). Parents with whom the biological child resides after divorce (i.e., resident parents) are less likely to swap families with respect to their kinship perceptions as well as them doing family without the ex-partner. Interestingly, part-time residence of the child was consistently found to be equal to full-time residence, which may indicate that at least some minimum amount of coresidence is necessary for this to happen. Regarding the residence of a stepchild, having a resident stepchild was more beneficial for parents' experiencing their postdivorce family as cohesive than having a non- or part-time resident child. As for stepparents' residence, stepparents were more often found to be doing family (i.e., being present at the child's birthday) when they resided with the parent, compared to when they were only in a living-apart-together (LAT) relationship. Given that oftentimes new relationships start as LAT relationships before parents eventually decide to cohabit, this finding might imply that these often rather new and potentially unstable relationships are not considered meaningful (enough) family members by parents, or that parents wish to not (yet) do family these new partners to protect their children in case their new relationship does not work out in the end. Furthermore, on a theoretical level, residence clearly illustrates the connections between subjective experiences and behavior. Residence offers opportunities for family members to build cordial relationships and experience their family as cohesive, which, in turn, affects behavior like celebrating family rituals together or the strategies adolescents use to deal with their stepfamily relationships.

Second, regarding relationship qualities, much research has focused on the roles of relationship qualities for, for example, support exchange within postdivorce families, my findings highlight that only certain relationships substantially affect how postdivorce family life is done and experienced.

Specifically, it was mostly parents' relationship qualities with the current partner, ex-partner, and the current partner's relationship with the stepchild that substantially influenced family doing and experiences in stepfamilies. In other words: it is the relationship with the new family members and the ex-partner that takes precedence, whereas the relationship with parents' own existing biological children seemed less relevant for evoking perceptions of cohesion. Implicitly, parents' might be more sensitive to how well the new stepfamily member is getting along with themselves and their existing child, perhaps taking the quality of the relationship with their own children for granted, even though their children might – as stated above – have totally different perceptions. On the other hand – as exemplified in the study on ambiguity – children might also strategically avoid telling their parents how they feel about their stepparents and potential stepsiblings to avoid hurting their feelings.

Overall, these findings show that family life is not experienced identically across different family structures, and substantial differences in how family is done and experienced remain even after accounting for relationship qualities. Thus, accounting for family structure is important.

1.6.3 Ambiguity is a common, though not universal, experience in postdivorce families. Especially children might experience ambiguity whereas their parents might not.

It is often claimed that ambiguity regarding family relationships in postdivorce families is a common, if not universal and permanent experience. In line with claims made in various studies, I indeed found evidence of adolescents perceiving some of their postdivorce family relationship as ambiguous.

However, the results showed that not all family relationships were prone to being experienced as ambiguous, and neither were experiences of ambiguity necessarily permanent. In other words, ambiguity might be a common, but not universal, experience in postdivorce families, and there were certain conditions under which relationships were more likely to be experienced as ambiguous than under others.

These conditions can be subdivided into aspects related to family structure and interpersonal factors. Regarding family structure, it appears that it is not so much family composition as much as residence that contributes to some family relationships being experienced as ambiguous. "Too quick" co-residence with a stepparent (and, by extension, potential stepsiblings), especially in the case of sole residence with the respective biological parent, contributed to perceptions of ambiguity as the interviewed adolescents felt that their biological parent had acted too quickly and did not sufficiently take their feelings and considerations

into account. Therefore, they already felt negative towards the respective new family members and felt unable or unwilling to co-create a shared reality with them. Acquired stepfamily members with whom the relationship was ambiguous were usually not considered family members, or respondents were at least reluctant to fully consider them as such. In other words, for children, it is not given that their acquired stepfamily members count as family, and this consideration is potentially more conditional on how their relationship with the respective steprelative develops (see also Aeby et al., 2014; Castrén, 2008). Regarding interpersonal factors such as relationship qualities, a poor relationship quality also contributed to respondents not being willing to sufficiently clarify the relationship with the respective alter. So, also with respect to ambiguity, both family structure and interpersonal factors are important and interrelated mechanisms driving this outcome, implying that these should not be studied in isolation.

Perceptions of ambiguity – despite what has been suggested – might also not be a permanent experience. The interviewed children developed a range of strategies to deal with ambiguity, with one of the three main strategies being explicitly aimed at clarifying their family relationships sufficiently by making concerted efforts to co-create a shared reality with the person with whom the relationship was ambiguous. The remaining strategies aimed at minimizing the time spent around persons with whom the relationship was ambiguous – for example by changing their residence arrangement or moving out of the parental household altogether. This illustrates that family structure – specifically residence – as a determining factor of (the ambiguity) of postdivorce family life is and can be flexibly used by stepfamily members to adapt to changed circumstances, and that children have agency and show resiliency in navigating challenging family transitions.

Overall, these findings suggest that for children family relationships and questions of who is a family member may be experienced as ambiguous, especially vis-à-vis stepparents, stepsiblings, and biological parents. Family structure (residence in particular) as well as interpersonal factors are important contributors to ambiguity, implying that ambiguity is a more common experience in co-resident postdivorce families than in other types of postdivorce families.

1.6.4 What might be beneficial for parents might not be beneficial for children.

As discussed above, from children's perspectives, coresidence might not always be ideal or conducive to a positive experience in stepfamilies. Whereas coresidence of all stepfamily members appears beneficial for the way parents

experience life in postdivorce families (e.g., in terms of increased perceptions of cohesion), I found that coresiding with stepparents and stepchildren was often – at least temporarily – experienced as burdensome by adolescents and contributed to stress due to ambiguity. This underscores the need to research multiple perspectives: what might be beneficial from parents' perspectives might thus not necessarily align with children's perceptions. This also goes for, for example, parents' tendency to do family with their new partner instead of the child's other biological parents, which might not align with what their children. Relatedly, parents' strong tendency to no longer consider their former in-laws kin also did not match with children's perceptions, who reported in the qualitative interviews that they continued to see them as family, which has also been reported in earlier studies (Aeby et al., 2014). It stands to argue that whereas parents appear to experience their postdivorce family as a single new nuclear family, children might see themselves as having two new nuclear families - one on each side of their family (Zartler & Grillenberger, 2017). In other words: parents' and children's experiences in postdivorce families might be inherently different and sometimes diametrically so, and children might wish to do family differently than their parents.

Such mismatches can have important consequences for parents and children. Differing opinions about family membership can lead to perceptions of boundary ambiguity (Stewart, 2005), which has been associated with lower well-being for parents and children. Arguably, parents could make parenting decisions (e.g., celebrating the child's birthday without the ex-partner, moving in with the new partner) that their children disagree or only reluctantly agree with to keep the family peace (Zartler, 2014). For family researchers, the potential for such mismatches underscores that families are inherently socially constructed, and that the researchers' definition of "family" might not match with those of their research subjects (Sanner et al., 2020). Postdivorce families are in the eyes of the beholder.

1.7 BROADER REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Union dissolution and subsequent postdivorce family formation are increasingly common in modern societies, to the point where fewer and fewer families fit the nuclear family description of a family consisting of two biological parents and their biological or adoptive children. Having said that, it is somewhat puzzling why postdivorce families appear to be molded into a new nuclear family, rather than a more embracive postdivorce family that consistently includes more than two multiple parental figures and perhaps also activates kin (also "former" kin) to a greater extent. One potential reason is that – for parents – doing so would

require them to maintain ties to their ex-partner. Given that many divorces do not end amicably (Saini, 2012), parents' reluctance to incorporate their ex-partners into an extended postdivorce family is understandable.

Another potential reason is that the nuclear family ideology is particularly strong and that other family types are still – to an extent – considered deviant and deficient. In the media (e.g., movies, music, literature), portrayals of postdivorce (step)families as functional and normal remain the exception rather than the norm. For every "Modern Family", there are still countless "A Cinderella Stories" and "Snow Whites". Such stigma may be internalized by parents and children. Stepparents might also find themselves without adequate role models that they can use to build amicable bonds with their stepchildren. "Passing" as a nuclear family could, thus, be seen as parents aspiring to a certain cultural ideal and a coping strategy to shield themselves from stigma. Whether adhering to a nuclear family configuration as a postdivorce family is particularly beneficial is debatable, as some postdivorce families might not feel free to adopt family boundaries or ways of doing family that might be more appropriate for them. In that sense, advances to make postdivorce families more normative by, for example, giving stepparents a secure legal position or releasing children's books that do not portray stepparents as "wicked" are more than welcome and offer hope for family relationships in postdivorce families to unfold more positively in the future.

On the other hand, practical and logistical reasons might play a role, too. Maintaining a more extensive kinship network is inherently time-consuming and exhausting, for parents and children. If both a child's parents have repartnered and desire to (as shown in this dissertation) do family each by themselves, the child needs to visit two families each holiday and is, thus, involved in two families with their own respective rules and idiosyncrasies. As the child grows older and perhaps enters a relationship his/herself with a partner whose parents are also divorced, visits to potentially four families (two on each side) have to be made. Even though the Netherlands is a rather small country, these different families might be spread out across the country, and it might simply be too time consuming and impractical to "do family" with all potential family members in the same room, at the same time. This might be even more so if some members of these multiple new nuclear families do not get along.

Despite the strong tendency of parents to do family in a new nuclear family configuration after divorce, it remains important to recognize the heterogeneity among postdivorce families – and the consequences of such heterogeneity for how postdivorce families are done and experienced as shown in this dissertation. More nuance than ever is required when dealing with this topic. Paying attention to residence arrangements appears particularly important in that respect. Not

only is it increasingly common for children to not live (full-time) with their mother after a divorce, but it is also increasingly common for children to change their residence arrangements – often multiple times – be it for practical reasons or to escape situations of ambiguity and discomfort. Having the option to choose between different residence arrangements thus, on the one hand, might complicate family relationships because they become increasingly discontinuous in time and space, but they, on the other hand, offer parents and children the flexibility to shape their family structures flexibly according to their needs.

As shown, some residence arrangements (e.g., full-time residence) might be beneficial for parents' perceptions of cohesion but might be a source of ambiguity for children, meaning that parents' and children's experiences and preferences might be at odds with one another. Therefore, it is important for researchers to not just study different actors' perceptions in postdivorce families, but to also explore all relevant actors' experiences in one and the same situation. In any case, empirical studies that rely on self-reported data from one family member's perspective need to be upfront that they study one perspective only and not an "objective fact" about a family. This is the reason why, for example, the study on cohesion in this dissertation refers to parents' perceptions of cohesion only, rather than just "cohesion" as such. The latter is, in my opinion, essentially impossible to measure "objectively", as inherently subjective phenomena like cohesion, ambiguity, or kinship perceptions are bound to individuals' viewpoints and cross-validation of perspectives is in practice difficult to do in any consistent way.

1.8 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results and conclusions of this dissertation should be evaluated with some important limitations in mind.

First, whereas a strength of this dissertation is that family relationships were examined outside of the Anglo-Saxon context, it should be kept in mind that just like findings from Anglo-Saxony, findings from the Dutch context should not be expected to generalize to other contexts, including to other (Western) European countries. As is well-known and as has been repeatedly argued in this dissertation, postdivorce family life is influenced by family norms, which differ between countries. For example, in southern Europe, family norms are stronger and less up for negotiation than in the Netherlands (Kalmijn & Saraceno, 2008). Secondly, in most countries, sole mother residence remains the norm and legal default after divorce (e.g., in Austria), but in the Netherlands shared residence is stimulated and is common nowadays, and a small but non-negligible share of

parents opt for sole father residence (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). Thus, the opportunity structure for parents and children in the Netherlands differs from that of other countries. For example, it could be that in countries with stronger and more conservative (postdivorce) family norms, more parents would celebrate their child's birthday together after divorce. I invite future researchers to verify if the central findings presented in this dissertation apply to other contexts, using a country-comparative approach.

Second, whereas, as mentioned before, a strength of this dissertation is that both parents' and children's perspectives were considered, I was not able to strictly cross-validate the two perspectives, meaning that the empirical chapters focus either on parents' or on children's perspectives, but not both at the same time. As neither parents nor children can give a completely "accurate and unbiased" account of their family lives, it is possible that both the quantitative survey questions, as well as the qualitative interview questions, might have been answered in a self-serving and thus biased way. For example, parents' assessment of the degree of cohesion of their stepfamily might be biased upwards, whereas the contributions to and role of the ex-partner in postdivorce family life might be downplayed.

Third, on a conceptual level, the study on ambiguity raises questions about how concepts like family boundaries or cohesion are commonly measured in family surveys. In the NFN data – as well as in, per my knowledge, all comparable data sets – family boundaries are treated as dichotomies: the respondent must indicate whether they consider a certain person to be part of their family (1) or not (0). However, as the study on ambiguity revealed, many aspects of family relationships (including boundaries) are not that clear-cut. Whether somebody is considered family might not be a dichotomy, but a continuum: somebody might "feel like family, but not quite". In statistical terms, this implies that family boundaries do not represent a true dichotomy, but an underlying latent construct (Kuha & Mills, 2020) that is at present measured coarsely using binary questions. As a way forward and for future survey collections, I strongly encourage researchers to design and validate measurements of family boundaries that incorporate such a latent approach, for example by asking "to what extent do you consider X family?". As mentioned above, "cohesion" is also in the eyes of the beholder. A potential way to measure cohesion in a more complete and "objective" way would be to ask multiple family members to assess the cohesion of their family and aggregate the results in some way. This, however, raises further issues which will be difficult to satisfactorily tackle in family surveys, such as: is it sufficient to ask only family members who share one household? Does the opinion of an LAT stepparent carry as much weight as that of a resident

biological parent? Does the opinion of a stepsibling who only just started living in the household count as much as that of a resident stepparent? To tackle these questions, I suggest greater collaboration between applied family researchers and methodologists when developing and pretesting survey questions.

Fourth, although three waves of the NFN data are currently available, I was not able to make use of a longitudinal design, as the key variables of interest were only measured in one wave each. This cross-sectional nature has two important implications. First, all studies should be strictly interpreted as cross-sectional in nature, meaning that none of the results described in these chapters should be interpreted causally. For example, in chapter 2, differences in kinship perceptions between married and divorced parents should not be interpreted as "the effect of divorce" or "changes due to divorce". Second, the picture painted of postdivorce families in this dissertation is somewhat static. It, would, of course, be desirable that family researchers have access to ample longitudinal and quasi-experimental data drawn on postdivorce family relationships to draw a more dynamic and accurate picture of reality and to make concrete causal inferences. However, as is well known among family researchers, collecting such data is exceedingly difficult and costly, especially if one desires to have sufficient statistical power for making comparisons between rather small groups and their interactions (i.e., families with father residence or a nonresident stepmother). In other words: collecting such high-quality data borders on the impossible. As a way forward, I propose that family researchers should pay greater attention to developments in computational social science, for example natural language processing (NLP). Text mining and (un)supervised machine learning methods offer methods to analyze vast amounts of textual and other data (i.e., online posts about stepfamilies). As several inspiring recent contributions (e.g., Ammari et al., 2018, 2019; Mann & Carter, 2021) have shown, analyzing such textual data can reveal novel insights into postdivorce family relationships. These data sources and methods appear to be entirely disregarded by family researchers at present.

These limitations notwithstanding, this dissertation has been a first step to shedding light on how family is done and experienced in diverse post-divorce families. Doing so will remain important as the postdivorce family landscape becomes increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented. Accordingly, that parents' and children's experiences in postdivorce families become less uniform, and some parents and children might be somewhat disadvantaged in terms of having lower well-being or less access to resources from their kinship networks.

Chapter 2

WHOM DO MARRIED AND DIVORCED PARENTS CONSIDER KIN?

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The authors jointly developed the core ideas of this chapter. Fang wrote the main part of the manuscript and conducted the analyses. Poortman substantially contributed to the manuscript.

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Kin are important for parents and children: they form a latent network that can provide crucial emotional and practical support in times of need (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2005; Riley, 1983). Particularly divorced parents and their children may need the support of their kin to compensate for the partial loss of the socioeconomic resources of the partner (Gerstel, 1988). Divorced parents' ties with their kin may, however, be disrupted compared to married parents' (Curran et al., 2003; Kalmijn & van Groenou, 2005), which can hamper access to kin-based resources, leading to potentially negative consequences for these parents and their children, such as lowered well-being (Curran et al., 2003; Hughes, 1988; Milardo, 1987). In this study, we investigate how married or cohabiting (in short: married) and divorced or separated (in short: divorced) parents differ in whom they consider kin, focusing on blood relatives and in-laws.

Studying such subjective perceptions of kinship is vital for several reasons. From an individual perspective, kin matter for people's construction of a sense of self and constitute a safety net for times of need (Riley, 1983). Understanding whom parents consider kin and the role that divorce plays therein could uncover groups of parents that are especially at risk of losing a substantial part of their support system following divorce or who might suffer psychologically from (potentially radical) changes to their family or kinship boundaries (Coleman et al., 2022). From a sociological perspective, little is known about what exactly people understand to be their family or kin in this era of unprecedented family diversity and how and why divorce and cultural norms attached to (postdivorce) family relationships influence such perceptions of kinship (Jensen, 2021; Lück & Castrén, 2018; Lück & Ruckdeschel, 2018). Understanding these issues in greater detail is vital for understanding how cultural norms and family structure transitions shape individual kinship perceptions, what patterns of intergenerational solidarity among married and divorced parents nowadays look like (Bengtson, 2001), and for informing how researchers conceptualize one of the key units of analysis of sociological research (Lück & Castrén, 2018; Schwartz, 1993).

There are, to our knowledge, only a few studies that directly compare married and divorced parents' conceptualizations of kinship (e.g., C. L. Johnson, 1989; Milardo, 1987; Rands, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Widmer, 2006). Most studies comparing married and divorced parents consider (differences in) kin behavior between the two groups, like as contact frequency with various relatives (e.g., Ambert, 1988; Anspach, 1976; E. M. Brown, 1982; Gerstel, 1988; Gürmen et al., 2021; Kalmijn & van Groenou, 2005), but such differences may not equate to differences in people's perceptions about who is kin. Kin relationships are often

latent, meaning that someone can be considered kin without much contact with them (Riley, 1983). Per this argument, it might not be so much (close) contact with kin that is important for getting support in time of need, but rather that one has people one considers kin in the first place. The few studies making such explicit comparisons between married and divorced parents' conceptualizations of kinship mostly date from the previous century, are often situated in the American context, rely on non-probabilistic convenience samples, and usually focus only on blood relatives (e.g., C. L. Johnson, 1989; Milardo, 1987; Rands, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Widmer, 2006). Findings from these studies might thus not translate to present times or the Western European context and paint an incomplete picture of kin relationships.

In this study, we contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we consider differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider blood relatives and in-laws kin. Considering in-laws is crucial as bonds with in-laws are more negotiable than those with blood relatives (i.e., "blood is thicker than water"; Neyer & Lang, 2003). It might be, thus, especially the extent to which in-laws are considered kin that differs between married and divorced people (e.g., Ambert, 1988; Duran-Aydintug, 1993; Serovich et al., 1992). Such a "loss" of in-law bonds can be problematic, as it is assumed that in-laws provide considerable support to married couples and their children (Goetting, 1990).

Second, we contribute by considering the present-day diversity among divorced parents. In addition to divorce being less stigmatized and family values having become more liberal (Kalmijn & Saraceno, 2008), there is greater diversity among post-divorce families than in previous decades. Divorced parents may be repartnered (see e.g., Castrén & Widmer, 2015) and their children can follow various residence arrangements after divorce, with a marked prevalence of shared residence arrangements. Such diversity has rarely been considered vis-à-vis who is considered kin but doing so is important from a practical and theoretical perspective. From a practical perspective, investigating postdivorce heterogeneity could identify parents who consider only a few relatives kin, which can make these parents and their children especially vulnerable due to potentially limited access to kin-based resources. Additionally, investigating heterogeneities allows for testing theoretical concepts that explain why people consider their relatives kin in greater detail than was possible before, such as the idea that parents might "swap families" after repartnering (i.e., parents might substitute the new in-laws for the former in-laws) or that having children residing in one's household facilitates relationships with relatives in general and in-laws, in particular, (e.g., Ambert, 1988).

Therefore, this study specifically considers how married and divorced parents differ in the extent to which they consider their blood relatives and (former) in-laws kin. Second, we consider postdivorce heterogeneity by distinguishing between different postdivorce residence arrangements (i.e., residential parents, non-residential parents, and shared residential parents (i.e., joint physical custody) and repartnering. For divorced parents who repartnered, we also investigate the extent to which they consider their "new" in-laws kin. Third, we investigate how married and divorced parents differ concerning which specific relatives they consider kin: parents (in-law), siblings (in-law), aunts and uncles (in-law), nieces and nephews (in-law), and cousins (in-law). Investigating differences between married and divorced parents in such detail yields insights into which specific parts of the latent kin network of divorced parents differ from that of married parents.

Our study is situated in the Netherlands, an in the European context more individualistic than familialistic society (Kalmijn & Saraceno, 2008). As Dutch people are – on average – less "family-minded" (particularly when it comes to the inclusion of more distant family members in their kinship networks) and may take a more individualistic approach to whom they consider kin, differences between married and divorced parents in whom they consider kin might be especially pronounced, with potentially negative ramifications for Dutch parents and their children. We analyzed data from the second wave of the New Families in the Netherlands survey (NFN; 2015/16; Poortman & van Gaalen, 2019). NFN comprises two subsamples: one among married or cohabiting parents (N=1,336) and another among parents who dissolved their marital or cohabitation relationship in 2009/2010 (N=3,464). Both samples provided information about kin perceptions of various blood relatives and (former) in-laws, offering the unique opportunity to examine kinship in detail.

2.2 BACKGROUND

We base our theoretical arguments on two factors that influence the extent to which relatives are considered kin: kinship norms (i.e., societal norms prescribing who should be considered kin) and behavioral aspects of kin relationships, such as contact frequency and exchanged help (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schneider, 1980; Thomson, 2017). Norms are stronger and more clearly defined for blood relatives than in-laws, particularly during marriage (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schneider, 1980), which may lead to differences in the extent to which they are considered kin by married and divorced people. The same applies to behavioral aspects of kin relationships: divorced parents typically have less contact with their (former) in-laws than married parents (Anspach, 1976), which may lead to differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider them kin.

2.2.1 Differences in the Extent to Which Married and Divorced Parents Consider Blood Relatives and In-laws Kin

Blood relatives are a key part of the social network of married and divorced parents (Neyer & Lang, 2003). Whether married and divorced parents differ regarding the extent to which they consider their blood relatives kin is uncertain. Kinship norms about whether blood relatives are kin might be unaffected by divorce (Neyer & Lang, 2003). Ties to certain blood relatives – chiefly parents and siblings – may be more intense for divorced people (Anspach, 1976; Gürmen et al., 2021; C. L. Johnson, 1988), which might be a consequence of divorcees requiring emotional or practical support. High(er) postdivorce contact or closeness, however, probably does not substantially affect whether parents consider their blood relatives kin given that it is the norm to consider them kin irrespective of actual contact (Schneider, 1980). Divorce might cause friction among blood relatives (Agllias, 2016; Carr et al., 2015), though it is, based on such previous research, not clear if this also influences the extent to which blood relatives are considered kin. We, thus, do not hypothesize about differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider blood relatives kin.

As for in-laws, spouses are expected to consider them as much their kin as their blood relatives, which has been referred to as the "principle of equity" (Jallinoja, 2011; C. L. Johnson, 1989; Lopata, 1999; Moore, 1990). After divorce, the principle of equity no longer applies. Relationships with the then "former" or "ex-" in-laws become ambiguous and, overall, "voluntary" (Duran-Aydintug, 1993; Finch & Mason, 1990; Santos & Levitt, 2007): in-law ties are "thinner" than blood ties and thus more prone to disruption (Neyer & Lang, 2003). Only a few parents seem to consider their former in-laws kin (Finch & Mason, 1990). One possible reason is that, especially in the case of conflictual divorces, parents might feel hurt by their ex-partner and proceed to also cut ties with the former in-laws (Ambert, 1988; Duran-Aydintug, 1993). Additionally, parents' former in-laws might feel forced to "side" with the ex-partner (Castrén, 2008), and may cut ties with the parent. Ultimately, both divorced parents and their former in-laws may minimize contact with each other, which could lead to estrangement and, ultimately, them no longer considering one another kin. We, thus, hypothesize that:

> H1: Married parents are more likely to consider their in-laws kin than divorced parents are to consider their former in-laws kin.

2.2.2 Postdivorce heterogeneity: Residence arrangements.

Children facilitate contact between parents and their relatives: much contact between parents and their relatives centers around children, such as birthdays or Christmas celebrations (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). As postdivorce residence arrangements determine where the child lives after a divorce it is plausible that the extent to which divorced parents consider their relatives kin may differ by residence arrangement. In the Netherlands, the most common residence arrangements include mother residence (about two-thirds), shared residence (i.e., joint physical custody; about one quarter), and sole father residence (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). So, any divorced parent might either be residential, shared residential, or nonresidential.

Residential parents might be the ones who are primarily responsible for hosting such child-related family events, which necessitates them maintaining contact with their blood relatives. Though resident parents may have more contact with blood relatives than nonresident parents, it is – as elaborated – questionable whether differences in contact frequency translate to different perceptions about whether they are kin.

Regarding in-laws, however, "having the child" is often the most important reason to maintain contact with them (Ambert, 1988). Parents' former in-laws are still their children's relatives. These in-laws are often involved in the child's life: they may be present at family events such as the child's birthday and children may visit them regularly. If parents are residential, they might, thus, be intermittently in touch with their former in-laws to plan such activities. This is presumably less so in the case of shared residence, an arrangement where both former partners divide childcare tasks more equitably and where the child resides part-time in both parental households. In the case of shared residence, both parents might host family events separately, which gives them less reason to maintain contact with their former in-laws. Non-residential parents might have even less reason to maintain contact with their former in-laws, which, as explained, can negatively affect the extent to which they consider their relatives kin. We hypothesize that:

> H2: Sole residential parents are most likely to consider their former in-laws their kin, followed by shared-residential and, lastly, nonresidential parents.

2.2.3 Postdivorce heterogeneity: Repartnering and new in-laws.

Postdivorce repartnering might affect the extent to which parents consider their blood relatives and former in-laws kin (Duran-Aydintug, 1993). As outlined above, blood relatives might be important sources of emotional and practical

support for divorced parents. This need for support might be attenuated following repartnering, as parents can get support from their new partners instead, which might weaken bonds with their blood relatives. Additionally, conflict could arise between parents and their blood relatives if their blood relatives disapprove of the new partner, but it is not clear if this would reduce the extent to which parents consider their blood relatives kin.

Upon repartnering, parents gain "new" in-laws, which they are expected to consider kin (C. L. Johnson, 1989). Concurrently, relationships with the former in-laws may become even more complex and may deteriorate following repartnering. For once, repartnered parents may minimize involvement with their former in-laws and instead focus on being involved with their new in-laws to signal to their new partner and in-laws that they are their family now (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006; Prentice, 2008). Additionally, the former in-laws might also distance themselves from the divorced parent, which may further strengthen parents not considering them kin. Overall, we hypothesize that:

H3a: Repartnered divorced parents are less likely to consider their former in-laws kin than are single divorced parents.

H3b: Repartnered divorced parents are more likely to consider their new in-laws kin than their former in-laws.

2.2.4 Differences in the Extent to Which Married, Divorced, and Repartnered Parents Consider Blood Relatives and In-laws of Varying Genealogical Distance as Their Kin

Kinship structures in Western societies are hierarchical (Firth et al., 1970; Lee et al., 2003; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, pp. 172–185; Schneider, 1980). This implies that whom parents consider kin may differ greatly among blood relatives and in-laws (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Schneider, 1980). Kin relationships are commonly classified based on genealogical distance, meaning the number of "steps" one (or, in the case of in-laws, the partner) is removed from the relative in question, (Kalmijn, 2010; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Thomson, 2017). From a perspective of evolutionary biology, the "steps" indicate the proportion of shared genes with a relative (Dunbar, 2008). The genealogical distance to one's parents is one – due to the direct biological link with one's parents – that to siblings is two (i.e., distance one from self to parent + distance one from parent to sibling), that to aunts/uncles and nieces/nephews three, and, lastly, that to cousins is four (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Kinship norms are strongest for relatives with the shortest genealogical distances (Kalmijn, 2010; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Thomson, 2017). For example, people give the most help to and expect the most help from their parents, children, and siblings than more distant relatives (Höllinger & Haller, 1990; Kivett, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), feel closest to them and have the most contact with them (e.g., Caplow, 1982; Leigh, 1982; Neyer & Lang, 2003). Collectively, these factors can influence whether someone is considered kin (Thomson, 2017). We thus hypothesize that:

> H4a: The greater the genealogical distance, the less likely that married and divorced parents consider a blood relative or in-law kin.

As we previously outlined, it is uncertain whether married and divorced parents differ in the extent to which they consider blood relatives kin. Whether potential differences between married and divorced parents would be especially strong for certain relatives is equally unclear. Due to stronger and more clearly defined kinship norms, parents might be more loyal to closely related blood relatives even in the presence of divorce-related conflict. Ties to distant blood relatives might be relatively more affected, given that they were likely less strong, to begin with. As these arguments are rather speculative, we refrain from giving a hypothesis about whether differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider their blood relatives kin differ by genealogical distance.

In contrast, differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider their in-laws kin might be especially strong for distant in-laws. Parents may facilitate their children's relationships with their former in-laws, but this is likely particularly (and perhaps exclusively) so for the child's closest relatives (e.g., the child's grandparents). Parents might have little to no contact with distant former in-laws, which makes these relatives particularly likely to no longer be considered kin. We hypothesize that:

> H4b: The difference in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider their (former) in-laws kin increases with genealogical distance.

Note that, in this step, we do not consider differences within the group of divorced parents according to repartnering and residence arrangement to not distract from the main topic of this study and due to the complexity of the resulting analysis.

2.3 DATA & METHOD

2.3.1 Data & Sample

We used the survey New Families in the Netherlands (NFN; Poortman & van Gaalen, 2019). Because questions about kinship were not asked in Wave 1 (2012/13), we only used Wave 2 (2015/2016). For Wave 1 Statistics Netherlands, based on population registers, drew two random samples: one among married or cohabiting parents (in the following: married sample) and a second one among parents who divorced or separated from a cohabiting partner in 2010 (in the following: divorced sample) (Poortman et al., 2014). For both samples, both (former) partners were approached via mail and invited to complete a web version of the survey. The final reminder included a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The response rate of the married sample for Wave 1 was 45% on the individual level and 56% on the household level, totaling 2,173 responses. Note that for 62% of households both partners responded. For the divorced sample, the response rate was 39% on the individual level and 58% on the former couple level, totaling 4,481 individual responses. For 30% of households, both former partners responded. Despite the mainly online mode and potentially difficult-to-reach target group, these response rates are comparable to similar surveys in the Netherlands, where survey participation rates are low and declining (E. de Leeuw et al., 2018).

For Wave 2, all participants of Wave 1 from both samples were invited to complete a follow-up survey in 2015/2016 (Poortman et al., 2018). Of those who permitted to be contacted again and were eligible to be approached, 61% did so, yielding 1,336 responses (response rate on the level of the household 67%). For the divorced sample, 63% of participants who permitted to be contacted again and who were eligible responded, yielding 2,544 responses (response rate on the level of the former couples 69%). An additional random sample among divorced parents (drawn identically as for Wave 1) was also approached to participate in the second wave to compensate for panel attrition. The response rate for this "refreshment sample" was 32% on the individual and 52% on the former couple level, yielding 920 responses. Combined, Wave 2 contains 1,336 responses from married/cohabiting parents and 3,464 responses from formerly married/cohabiting parents in the Netherlands. For 49% of households of the married sample and 17% of households of the divorced sample, both (former) partners responded.

Compared to the respective population of interest, the samples are selective on several criteria. Regarding the married sample, like in Wave 1, men, non-native Dutch, and those with relatively low incomes are underrepresented. Furthermore, cohabiting people and those with young children were oversampled and are thus, somewhat overrepresented. The divorced sample is relatively

more select than the married sample. Most notably, men, non-native Dutch, respondents with low incomes and welfare recipients, formerly cohabiting partners, and younger people are underrepresented. Note the selective panel attrition in both samples. In the divorced sample, women, older respondents, those who reported high life satisfaction, and those with high socioeconomic status (highly educated and with paid work) were more likely to respond again. In the married sample, higher educated, older, and female respondents were more likely to participate again.

We excluded respondents who had answered "not applicable" on all dependent variables (N=18; 0.38%). We excluded respondents in the married sample who were not first married (N=140; 2.92%), respondents in the divorced sample who divorced earlier (i.e., for whom this was not the first divorce) (N=418; 8.71%), divorced respondents who specified the child's main residence as "other" (N=249; 5.19%), and respondents with missing values on the covariates (N=88, 1.8%), as our analytical approach, unfortunately, is mathematically incompatible with multiply imputing missing values. In total, we analyzed data from 3,887 respondents from 3,175 (former) households.

2.3.2 Measures of Dependent Variables

All respondents were presented a list of five relatives: "your parent(s)", "your brothers/sisters", "your nephews/nieces", "your uncles/aunts", and "your cousins". Respondents in the married sample were, furthermore, asked about their current partners' parents, brothers/sisters, nieces/nephews, aunts/uncles, and cousins (i.e., their in-laws), and respondents in the divorced sample were presented a comparable list of their ex-partners' parents, brothers/sisters, etc. (i.e., their former in-laws). Repartnered divorced respondents were, additionally, presented a comparable list of their respective current partner's relatives (i.e., their current partner's parents, siblings, etc.).

For each potential relative, respondents were asked: "When you think of 'your family' (in Dutch: 'gezin') and 'your relatives' (in Dutch: 'familie'), do you consider [relative] to be part of your immediate family, your relatives (outside of your immediate family) or neither?". Answer options were: 1 *Family*, 2 *Relatives*, 3 *Neither,* or *Not applicable* (*e.g., deceased*). Note that the option *Family* was only rarely chosen (in total N=913 times). The answers are recorded in separate variables. We dichotomized the answer (0=Neither, 1=Family/Relatives) and assigned respondents who answered *Not applicable* as missing on the respective variable. By restructuring the data from wide to long, these up to fifteen variables per respondent were collated into a single dependent variable representing whether someone is considered kin. This yielded two new variables ("blood

relative" and "type of relative"). *Blood relative* is a dummy variable classifying whether an observation concerns a blood relative (0) or in-law (1). *Type of relative* is a categorical variable classifying whether an observation concerns a parent (0), sibling (1), aunt or uncle (2), niece or nephew (3), or cousin (4). These two variables allowed us to select observations about either blood relatives or in-laws or different types of relatives. As these variables are only used to select observations and not used as predictors, they are not discussed in the following.

2.3.3 Measures of Independent Variables

Divorced. This dichotomous variable indicates whether the respondent belongs to the married (coded as 0) or divorced sample (1).

Repartnered. This dichotomous variable indicates whether divorced respondents have a new cohabiting or married partner (yes=1).

Type of in-law. This variable, used in the analyses of parents considering their in-laws as their kin (see Analytical Strategy), indicates whether an observation refers to a single divorced parent reporting on his/her former in-laws (0), a repartnered divorced parent reporting on his/her former in-laws (1), or a repartnered divorced parent reporting on his/her new in-laws (2). Note that this implies that descriptive statistics such as means for this variable have no substantive meaning.

Residence arrangement. Divorced respondents were asked where the focal child (see *Data & Sample*) resided most of the time: "with me", "with my ex-partner", or "with both (approximately) equal". We coded these responses into dichotomous variables measuring whether the respondent was a nonresident parent (1) or a shared resident parent (2), with shared resident parent as the reference group (0).

2.3.4 Measures of Control Variables

We control for basic social-demographic characteristics (e.g., age and gender). In addition, we control for whether the current union (for the married sample) or the previous union (for the divorced sample) was cohabitation or marriage. Note that because the focus of this study is on the differences according to divorce, residence, and repartnering, we do not theorize about differences within the groups of intact and divorced parents based on whether their (previous) relationship was cohabitation or marriage. Such distinctions would be based on different theoretical reasoning and are beyond the scope of this study.

Respondent's Gender. We control for respondents' gender (0= man, 1=woman) as women typically are more family-minded than men, and gender

relates to differences vis-à-vis, amongst others, becoming the resident parent and repartnering choices. *Age respondent* and *age child,* respectively, indicate the age of the respondents and the focal child measured in years and were included because older respondents and those with younger children might be relatively less likely to, e.g., divorce and might more frequently be in contact with their relatives and might, thus, more likely consider them kin. *Education respondent* and *education (ex-)partner* measure, respectively, the respondents' and their (ex-) partners' highest obtained level of education (1=incomplete elementary school to 10=post-graduate). Education levels are both related to central independent variables, such as divorce and choosing residence arrangements, as well as to the propensity to rely on kin for support and thus potentially also for considering relatives kin. We treated these variables as continuous, as using separate dummy variables yielded similar results in the analyses. Note that the ages of the respondent and the child, and the education level of the respondent and the (ex)partner, are moderately correlated with each other (education levels: r=.46, p<.001; ages: r=0.68, p<.001), but that the VIFs for these variables in no model exceeded the value of 2. *Married* is a dummy referring to whether respondents' (previous) union was 0 "cohabitation" or 1 "marriage/registered partnership". We control for union status as marriage carries stronger family norms than cohabitation, meaning that union status can influence the propensity to divorce or repartner and to consider relatives kin (married parents might be more likely to consider their relatives kin than those who cohabit). *Religious* indicates whether respondents identify as belonging to a religious denomination (1). We control for religiosity as religiosity both negatively affects, e.g., the propensity to divorce and positively affects the propensity to consider relatives kin, due to religious family norms. *Employed* indicates whether the respondent is currently in paid employment (1). We account for employment as it relates to divorce and repartnering and employed respondents might rely less on kin support than unemployed respondents, wherefore they might be less likely to consider their relatives kin. Note that for some relatively time-invariant control variables we used information from wave 1 as these questions were no longer asked in Wave 2 (i.e., parent's education, former union type, and religion). Table 2.1 gives an overview of the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analyses.

Table 2.1: Summary of descriptive statistics of independent and control variables used in the analyses.

	M	Sd	Range
Measures of independent variables			
Divorced (ref=married)	.72	[1]	0-1
Repartnered[2]	.27	[1]	0-1
Residence arrangement[2]			
Resident	.46	[1]	0-1
Non-resident	.25	[1]	0-1
Shared resident	.29	[1]	0-1
Measures of control variables			
Respondent's Gender (ref=male)	.60	[1]	0-1
Age respondent	45.85	6.60	20-79
Age child	13.37	3.81	2-24
Employed (ref=unemployed)	.87	[1]	0-1
Education respondent	6.86	1.83	1-10
Education (ex-)partner	6.29	2.17	1-10
Married (ref=cohabiting)	.71	[1]	0-1
Religious (ref= not religious)	.35	[1]	0-1
$N_{individuals}$	3,887		
$N_{(former)\ households}$	3,175		

Note: [1]: Standard deviations not presented for dichotomous variables. [2]: Values refer to divorced respondents only. *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 2 (2015/16).

2.3.5 Analytical Strategy

We grand-mean centered the continuous variables and estimated several multilevel logistic regression models. We used multilevel models as some observations are from both (former) partners, which implies that these observations might be dependent. Of the various techniques for controlling for such dependencies, multilevel models are generally preferred for data that is nested by design (as is the case with the NFN data) (Aarts et al., 2014).

Models 1A and 1B estimate how married and divorced parents differ in how far they consider their blood relatives (1A) and (former) in-laws kin (1B). Model 1A includes all blood relatives (i.e., parents, siblings, nieces/nephews, aunts/uncles, and cousins), whereas Model 1B includes (former) in-laws (i.e., (former) parents-in-law etc.). Models 1C-1F consider divorced respondents only and estimate how single and repartnered divorced parents differ in the extent

to which they consider blood relatives (Model 1C) and former in-laws (Model 1D) kin, and how residence arrangements affect the extent to which blood relatives (Model 1E) and former in-laws are considered kin (Model 1F). All these models, thus, include multiple observations per respondent (i.e., multiple blood relatives or (former) in-laws). Models 2A-2E show how married and divorced people differ in the extent to which blood relatives they consider kin (model 2A: parents, 2B: siblings, 2C: aunts and uncles; 2D: nieces and nephews; 2E: cousins). Models 3A-3E, similarly show the extent to which the various (former) in-laws are considered kin (3A: parents-in-law; 3B: siblings-in-law; 3C: aunts/uncles in-law; 3D: nieces/nephews in-law; 3E: cousins-in-law). As some observations are from both (former) partners (see above), all models include random intercept terms on the (former) household level. Therefore, the variance of all models is partitioned between the level of the individual respondents and the (former) household levels, allowing for unbiased estimates of the person-level parameters. Models 1A-F, which include multiple observations per respondent, additionally include a random intercept term on the level of the individual.

Instead of interpreting the regression coefficients, we calculated and plotted predicted probabilities and their respective significance levels (see Figures 2.1-2.5, full overview in Appendix Tables A.4-A.6) as we are interested in the differences between the probabilities of married and divorced parents considering relatives kin, rather than (more obscure) raw effects themselves or effects of other covariates (see Appendix Tables A.1-A.3 for the full models). Besides being intuitive to interpret, predicted probabilities can be compared across models as they occur in the natural metric of the dependent variable and are unaffected by the identification problem inherent in logistic regression (Mize et al., 2019). We calculated the predicted probabilities (i.e., average marginal effects) and computed standard errors and p-values (Mize et al., 2019; Williams, 2012), meaning that one can test for statistically significant differences between predicted probabilities from the same or different models, with these differences being "average discrete changes" (ADC, see Mize, Doan, & Long, 2019, pp. 182–184).

2.4 RESULTS

Figure 2.1 shows the predicted probabilities of married and divorced parents considering their blood relatives and in-laws kin. This figure is based on Models 1A and 1B (see Appendix Table 2.1; the corresponding predicted probabilities are summarized in Appendix Table A.4). The figure shows that there appears to be no difference between married and divorced parents in the extent to which they consider their blood relatives kin – the respective predicted probabilities are

equally high (0.96) and did not statistically significantly differ from one another (ADC: 0.00, p>.05). Figure 1, furthermore, shows that the predicted probabilities of (former) in-laws being considered kin are lower than those for blood relatives. More importantly, married parents have a statistically significantly higher predicted probability (0.83) than divorced parents (0.22) of considering their (former) in-laws kin (ADC: -0.61, p<.001) which is in line with our hypothesis (see H1). While the difference between these predicted probabilities is large, the results indicate that a substantial minority of divorced parents still consider their former in-laws kin.

Figure 2.1: Predicted probabilities of considering blood relatives and (former) in-laws kin.

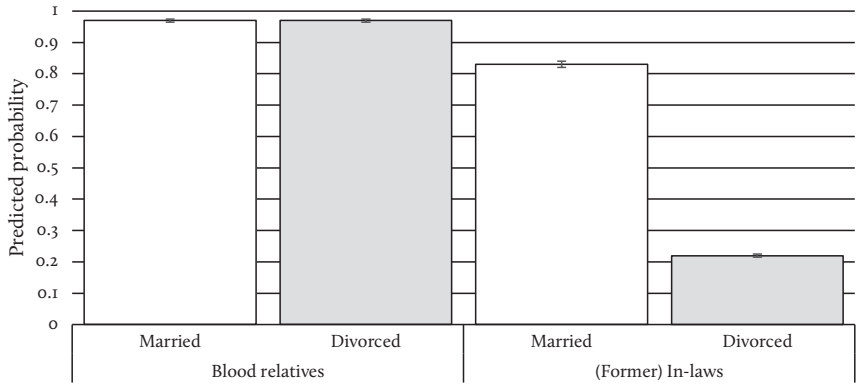


Figure 2.2 shows differences in the extent to which divorced parents consider their blood relatives and former in-laws kin, per postdivorce residence arrangement. This figure is based on Models 1C and 1D (see Appendix Table A.1; see Appendix Table A.4 for the corresponding predicted probabilities). As the figure shows, there is no difference between the three residence arrangements vis-à-vis considering blood relatives kin (ADCs all 0.01 and p>0.05). In comparison, there are statistically significant differences between the three residence arrangements vis-à-vis considering former in-laws kin. Contrary to our hypothesis H2, residential (not shared-residential) parents are most likely to consider their former in-laws kin (0.24), followed by shared residential (0.23), and, lastly, non-residential parents (0.16), with the differences between non-residential and residential/shared residence being statistically significant (see Appendix Table A.4).

Figure 2.2: Predicted probabilities of considering blood relatives and (former) in-laws kin, by postdivorce residence arrangement.

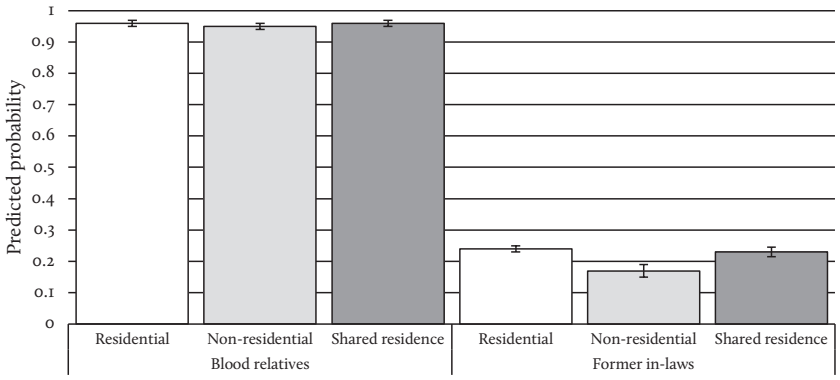


Figure 2.3 shows differences in the extent to which divorced parents consider their blood relatives and former and new in-laws kin, by repartnering. These predicted probabilities shown in this figure were calculated from Models 1E and 1F (see Appendix Table A.1; see Appendix Table A.4 for the predicted probabilities). The left part of figure 2.3 shows that single and repartnered divorced parents are about equally likely to consider their blood relatives kin (predicted probabilities 0.96, and 0.95, respectively, ADC: 0.01, $p>.05$). As the right part of figure 2.3 shows, the differences for in-laws are bigger. First, in line with hypothesis 3b, repartnered parents are less likely to consider their former in-laws kin than single divorced parents (predicted probabilities 0.16 and 0.30, respectively, ADC: 0.14, $p<.001$). Furthermore, repartnered parents are more likely to consider their new in-laws than their former in-laws kin (predicted probabilities 0.78 and 0.16, respectively, ADC: -0.62, $p<.001$), which aligns with our expectations (see H3c). Additionally, although not hypothesized, there was a difference between the extents to which married parents consider their in-laws and repartnered parents considered their new in-laws kin (predicted probabilities 0.83 and 0.78, ADC: 0.05, $p<.001$, analyses not shown).

Figure 2.3: Predicted probabilities of considering blood relatives and (former) in-laws kin, by repartnering.

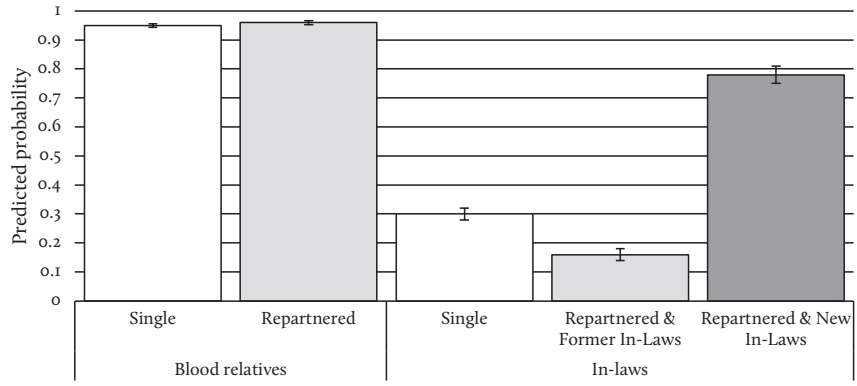
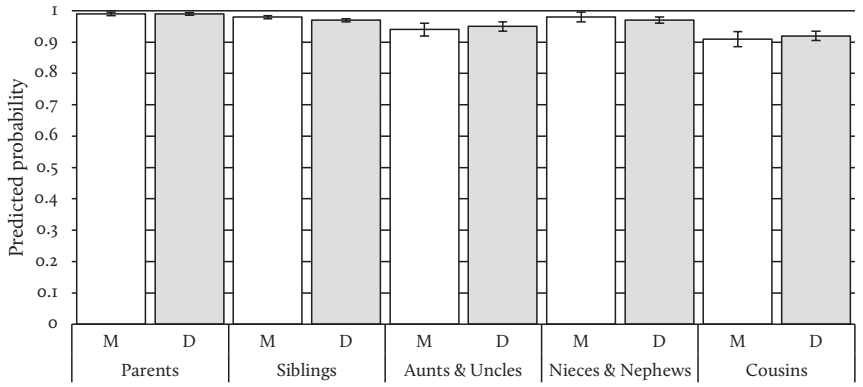


Figure 2.4 shows the predicted probabilities of married and divorced parents considering their various blood relatives their kin (see Appendix Table A.2 for the full regression models and Appendix Table A.5 for the predicted probabilities and differences between them). As the figure shows, married and divorced parents consider their parents most often kin, followed by siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, and, lastly, cousins. All blood relatives are considered kin to high extents (ranging from 0.99 for parents to 0.91 for cousins). The differences in the extent to which blood relatives are considered kin all differ statistically significantly from one another, except for the difference between siblings and nieces/nephews (see Appendix Table A.5). Siblings and nieces/nephews were considered kin to about equally high extents. Nevertheless, these findings generally align with our hypothesis that genealogically distant relatives are less likely to be considered kin than closer relatives (see H4a). However, per our hypothesis, there should only be differences between degrees of relatedness, but not between relatives of the same degree of relatedness. Our results, though, show that nieces/nephews were more likely to be considered kin than aunts/uncles. The differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents considered their blood relatives kin were not statistically significant, and the differences in the extent to which married and divorced parents consider their blood relatives kin do not substantially vary with genealogical distance (see Appendix Table A.5).

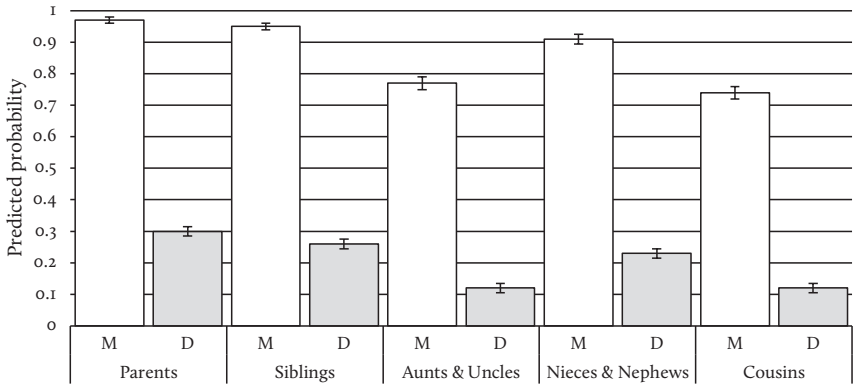
Figure 2.4: Predicted probabilities of considering blood relatives kin, by type of relative



(M= Married, D= Divorced).

Figure 2.5 shows the predicted probabilities of married and divorced parents considering their (former) in-laws kin (see Appendix Table A.3 for the regression models and Appendix Table A.6 for the predicted probabilities and the differences between them). As the figure shows, parents and siblings-in-law (of married parents) are considered kin to relatively high extents (predicted probability 0.97 and 0.95 respectively), but this is less so for aunts and uncles (0.77), nieces and nephews (0.91), and cousins (0.74). The predicted probabilities for former in-laws follow the same order, though they are much lower in absolute terms. For example, the predicted probability of former parents-in-law being considered kin is 0.30, while those of former aunts and uncles-in-law and former cousins-in-law are only 0.12. As Appendix Table 6 shows, these decreases along genealogical distance are statistically significant for married and divorced parents, which is in line with our hypothesis 4a. Furthermore, all differences between married and divorced parents are statistically significant and generally of the same magnitude: the difference is largest for siblings (-0.69), followed by nieces and nephews (-0.68), parents and aunts/uncles (both -0.66), and, lastly, cousins (-0.62). We do not observe a clear pattern regarding whether these differences vary with genealogical distance, let alone increase (as we hypothesized). Only some of the differences are statistically significant (see Appendix Table A.6). This leads us to conclude that our hypothesis regarding differences between married and divorced parents along with genealogical distance (see H4c) is, overall, not supported.

Figure 2.5: Predicted probabilities of considering in-laws kin, by type of relative



(M= Married, D= Divorced).

Additional Analyses

As women often have stronger ties to their relatives, we fully interacted all models with parents' gender to test for gender differences. We only found (small) gender differences in the extent to which divorced parents considered their former in-laws kin. For reasons of parsimony, we do not show the full regression models and instead only present those predicted probabilities where we observed gender differences (see Appendix Table A.7). Women were more likely to consider their former in-laws kin than men, with the gender differences being largest for former nieces/nephews in-law (women had a 0.09 higher probability of considering them kin than men) and smallest for aunts/uncles and cousins (difference in probabilities 0.04). This finding is in line with the results of related studies reporting that women maintained more contact with their former in-laws than men (e.g., Ambert, 1988; Serovich et al., 1992).

2.5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Who is considered kin differs for married and divorced parents. With this study, we extended the literature on kinship in several ways, namely by making direct comparisons between whom married and divorced parents consider kin, by focusing on both blood relatives and (former) in-laws, by focusing on the heterogeneity among divorced parents regarding residence arrangements and repartnering, and by examining different types of blood relatives (i.e., parents, siblings, aunts/uncles, nieces/nephews, and cousins). To our knowledge, this is

the first study investigating kinship in the context of divorce so comprehensively. The results of our study lead to several conclusions.

First, married and divorced parents consider their blood relatives kin to equally high extents. Thus, whereas divorced parents' kin behavior might be different from that of married parents (Kalmijn & van Groenou, 2005), our results suggest that this does not translate to different perceptions about blood relatives being kin. Blood relatives form a robust latent kin network also for divorced parents (Riley, 1983), which can benefit themselves and their children.

Second, we found that whereas almost all married parents considered their in-laws kin, the probability of divorced parents considering former in-laws kin was low (0.22). This aligns with the principle of equity: married parents generally consider their in-laws kin, but this ends with divorce (Jallinoja, 2011). So, it is not just contact with the in-laws that is often lower for divorced parents (Duran-Aydintug, 1993): divorced parents also have different perceptions about whether they are kin in the first place (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). This might imply that parents could become reluctant to facilitate contact between their child and former in-laws, which may entail a loss of latent resources for the child if the ex-partner does not sufficiently maintain contact with his/her relatives (Serovich et al., 1992).

Third, we found considerable differences among divorced parents in the extent to which former in-laws are considered kin. Specifically, non-resident parents were less likely to consider their former in-laws kin than resident or shared resident parents. This aligns with contentions from previous research that ties to former in-laws are oftentimes maintained for the sake of the children (Ambert, 1988): in the absence of a resident child connecting the relatives, ties to former in-laws are depreciated more readily. Moreover, repartnered parents were less likely to consider their former in-laws kin than single parents, but they did consider their new in-laws kin to high extents (0.78). This suggests substitution between former and new in-laws: the former in-laws come to be no longer considered kin following repartnering (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), and the new in-laws may – to an extent – take their place. Repartnered parents, though, were less probable to consider their new in-laws kin than married parents were to consider their in-laws kin. These findings indicate that non-residential and single parents might have the smallest latent kin network, which implies that they might be in an especially vulnerable position after divorce. On the flip side, residential parents – who have the most childcare responsibilities – also have the largest latent kin network, which means that they can also count on the most support from their kin.

Fourth, we found that the principle of genealogical distance (Rossi & Rossi, 1990) structures the extent to which blood relatives and (former) in-laws are considered kin, though different from what previous studies described. For both blood relatives and in-laws, parents were most probable to be considered kin, followed by siblings, nieces/nephews, aunts/uncles, and, lastly, cousins. This is somewhat in contrast with previous prior research, which argued that nieces and nephews are considered kin to the same extent as aunts and uncles, as they are of the same degree of relatedness (Kalmijn, 2010; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). A possible explanation is that our sample concerned only parents, and their children might have contact with the parents' nieces and nephews (in-law) (i.e., the child's cousins of likely equal age), which might be facilitated by the respondent and, thus, lead to parents to consider them kin more readily than their aunts and uncles. We generally found no or only negligible differences in the extent to which the differences between married and divorced parents differed for different blood relatives and in-laws.

Naturally, our study comes with limitations. First, our results only reflect parents' views, which might diverge from those of their children. Children might consider the ex-partner's (i.e., their other biological parents') relatives kin to much higher extents than their parents. Second, we used cross-sectional data. A longitudinal design would be necessary for concrete causal inferences about the effect of divorce on who is considered kin. For example, parents who eventually divorce might have been less "family-minded" to begin with (i.e., selection effects). We suggest future researchers make use of longitudinal data but, to our knowledge, such data, especially containing information on repartnering and residence arrangements, is unavailable. Third, background information on the various relatives is not available in NFN, meaning that we could not control for factors such as the different relatives' age, gender, physical distance from the respondent, or relationship quality, which may influence whether they are considered kin. Some of our theoretical arguments were based on interpersonal factors like contact or conflict, but these are impossible to explicitly test using this dataset (or any dataset known to us). Fourth, the sample used is selective according to several criteria, such as country of origin and socioeconomic status, with the divorced sample being more selective than the married sample. Though the direction of potential bias arising from this selectivity is difficult to ascertain, inferences about the population should be made with care. Lastly, all divorced respondents were divorced in 2009/2010, meaning that the results pertaining to divorced parents presented in this paper only reflect kin perceptions about five to six years after divorce.

Overall, our findings indicate that divorce appears relevant for how parents make sense of kinship and might cause parents to substantially reframe relationships with people they once considered kin. In general, considerations of who is kin appear to be substantially informed by rather rigid notions of biological relatedness and appear to be rooted in the nuclear family ideology. This can be most clearly seen in divorced parents' tendency to "swap" former in-laws with new in-laws when they repartner. In other words: blood and legal bonds are still "thicker than water" (Neyer & Lang, 2003). However, our findings also reveal (limited) flexibility and continuity in who is considered kin after divorce: a substantial share of divorced parents still considered their former in-laws – especially former parents-in-law – kin without having a concrete normative obligation to do so. Clearly, ties to former in-laws are to an extent continued on a voluntary basis after divorce. These findings beg the question in how far societal norms and definitions of kinship based on blood or law are still appropriate in this era of unprecedented family diversity and whether they are perhaps too limiting or inappropriate for divorced families in particular (see e.g., Zartler, 2014). More embracive kinship conceptualizations based on – for example – shared children instead of blood or marital bonds are common among various non-Western populations and could serve as a useful starting point for informing more appropriate kinship conceptualizations among postdivorce families (e.g., Clark et al., 2015; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993; Taylor et al., 2022). Efforts could also be made to stimulate more embracive conceptualizations of kinship that rely on individuals' own accounts of who their kin are instead of relying on scholarly definitions of kinship, for example when designing family surveys (Sanner et al., 2020).

Chapter 3

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COHESION IN DIVERSE STEPFAMILIES

This chapter has been submitted to an international journal.

This chapter is joint work with Anne-Rigt Poortman and Anne Brons. The authors jointly developed the core ideas of this chapter. Fang wrote the main part of the manuscript and conducted the analyses. Poortman and Brons substantially contributed to the manuscript.

An earlier version of this chapter has been presented at the Dutch Demography Day (Utrecht; November 16th, 2022).

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Cohesion in families refers to the feeling that one's family is a tight-knit unit, rather than a loose and disconnected amalgam of individuals (Favez et al., 2018). Creating cohesion in stepfamilies is challenging (Favez et al., 2018; Pink & Wampler, 1985), as stepfamilies comprise different fragments: a parent and their child(ren) and a new partner and their potential child(ren). Merging these fragments requires time and effort from all stepfamily members (Ganong et al., 2019). Depending on which fragments need to be integrated into a new stepfamily, creating cohesion might be more or less difficult: creating a cohesive stepfamily might, for example, be more difficult when both partners have a child from a previous relationship. In this paper, we address how these different fragments (i.e., stepfamily structure) may affect parents' perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.

Investigating how perceptions of cohesion vary between different postdivorce stepfamily structures is important as a lack of cohesion can negatively affect the well-being of stepfamily members, particularly that of children (Duncan et al., 1994; Shigeto et al., 2014), which is key in these times of exceptional stepfamily heterogeneity (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Many parents and children live in structurally complex stepfamilies, such as those where both parents have a child from a previous union and also a shared biological child (Sanner & Jensen, 2021).

In this study, we first describe how cohesive parents perceive their stepfamilies to be. We focus on the perception of a biological parent (i.e., the so-called focal parent; the respondent) who has a child from the previous union (i.e., the so-called focal child). The focal parent subsequently entered a co-residing relationship with a new partner, thereby forming (at least by definition) a stepfamily. The stepfamilies we investigate in this study thus, comprise at least the focal parent, the focal child, and the current partner. Additionally, the current partner may also have a child from a previous relationship, and the new couple can also have a biological child together. Parents were asked to indicate how cohesive they perceived their respective stepfamily to be. Next, we focus on differences in perceptions of cohesion according to postdivorce family structure. By family structure, we, in the following, refer both to stepfamily composition (i.e., whom the stepfamily comprises) as well as the extent to which stepfamily members share a household (i.e., residence).

For example, we investigate differences in perceptions of cohesion between stepfamilies with a shared biological child of the step couple and those without a shared child. Such a shared biological child is often called a "concrete baby", based on the idea that a common child "cements" bonds among stepfamily members (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). Despite the "concrete baby effect" being

a popular contention in family studies, empirical evidence remains scant (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Additionally, we consider differences in cohesion between simple (i.e., only the focal parent has a child from a previous union) and complex stepfamilies (i.e., both current partners have a child from a previous union; Henderson & Taylor, 1999). Creating cohesion might be more difficult in complex than in simple stepfamilies, as more individuals need to be integrated into a new family. Furthermore, we consider the interplay between having a shared biological child and the stepfamily being a simple or complex one. A shared child induces more complexity in complex stepfamilies, as more ties between individuals are established. Thus, a shared child might impact perceptions of cohesion differently in complex and simple stepfamilies. Lastly, besides considering which children the stepfamily comprises, we also consider where the different children live (i.e., children's residences). Coresidence might offer parents and children valuable opportunities for bonding and building cohesion (Fang et al., 2022), so stepfamilies with nonresident children might be considered less cohesive. In complex stepfamilies, it is not a given that the respective children's residence arrangements are the same: for example, the parent's biological child from their previous union might reside in the parental household, whereas the stepchild does not. This introduces unique challenges for creating cohesion. Therefore, we also consider the combinations of the children's residence arrangements vis-à-vis cohesion.

With this study, we, go beyond the scant extant literature on the antecedents of stepfamily cohesion in several ways. Besides this study being one of the few to explore the antecedents of cohesion, the limited previous studies have – to our knowledge – focused almost exclusively on the role of relationship qualities in stepfamily cohesion (e.g., Ganong et al., 2019; King et al., 2015; King & Boyd, 2016). We go beyond examining the role of relationship qualities by also exploring systematic differences in cohesion between different stepfamily structures while controlling for relationship qualities. An additional contribution of our study is that this study is one of the first to test if having a shared biological child positively influences perceptions of cohesion and whether the hypothesized (positive) concrete baby effect applies invariantly across simple and complex stepfamilies.

We use the third wave of the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) survey, collected in 2020 (N=3,056; Poortman et al., 2021). NFN is a longitudinal survey based on a probability sample of Dutch parents who divorced or separated in 2010. NFN is one of the few surveys to include items measuring stepfamily cohesion, and in addition, includes detailed measures of family structure. Using this data provides a unique opportunity to investigate parents' feelings of cohesion towards their respective stepfamily across a wide range of postdivorce families.

3.2 BACKGROUND

3.2.1 Having a shared child and cohesion

In some stepfamilies, the step couple might have a biological child together (Sanner et al., 2020). Such children are sometimes called concrete babies, based on the idea that shared biological children cement (i.e., make more solid and durable) stepfamily bonds (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). There are several reasons why parents might perceive stepfamilies with a shared child as more cohesive than those without.

One set of explanations focuses on shared children potentially improving parents' attitudes about their stepfamily (Ivanova & Balbo, 2019). For example, per the commitment hypothesis, having a child is a strategy to signal a commitment to each other. The step-couple might want to have a child together to show each other that they are serious about their new relationship, that they have moved on from their prior unions, and that they wish to focus on their new family (Vikat et al., 1999). Signalling commitment can increase perceptions of cohesion, as parents might feel that family is "here to stay". Additionally, per the uncertainty reduction hypothesis, having a shared child might reduce uncertainty about the new relationship and family (Downs, 2004). Stepfamilies are less institutionalized than first-time families (Cherlin, 1978), implying that parents might feel ambiguity regarding their stepfamily relationships. By having a child, the stepfamily becomes more like a first-time (nuclear) family, which reduces uncertainty and can, thus, benefit perceptions of cohesion.

A second set of explanations goes beyond parents' perspectives and relates to the family as a system (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). The birth of a shared child has been argued to tightly integrate all family members into a truly "new" family, as it establishes blood ties between all stepfamily members (Bernstein, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1988). For example, parents' children from their prior relationships become biologically related to the new child (as half-siblings). Such biological relatedness can lead to closer and more amicable bonds between all family members (Sanner et al., 2018), which might give parents the impression that their stepfamily is now complete, tight-knit, and cohesive (Ganong & Coleman, 1988).

On the other hand, a shared child might also induce friction between stepfamily members, particularly between the parents and their existing biological children, as, the existing children might oppose the birth of the child. Additionally, newborns require a lot of care and attention. Parental attention might shift away from the existing children (Baham et al., 2012), which might lead the existing children to feel resentment toward their (step)parents. Focal parents might pick up on such frictions, which can reduce their perceptions

of cohesion. However, limited prior research generally points towards a positive association between having a shared child and parents' assessment of relationship qualities (Ganong & Coleman, 1988; Ivanova & Balbo, 2019). We, therefore, hypothesize that:

H1a: Parents perceive stepfamilies with a shared child as more cohesive than those without a shared child.

3.2.2 Cohesion in simple and complex stepfamilies

Some stepfamilies are simple, meaning that only one of the partners has a child from a previous relationship, whereas other stepfamilies are complex, meaning that both partners have a child from a previous relationship. In general, stepparents often struggle with establishing a cordial relationship with their stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011). Stepparents might be unsure what stepparenting style to adopt vis-à-vis their stepchild, or how to define their role (Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen, 2021). Such ambiguity and potentially resulting friction between stepfamily members might make it difficult for parents to consider their stepfamily as cohesive.

Both parents bringing a child from a previous relationship into the stepfamily introduces unique challenges for (step)parents and (step)children (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Landon et al., 2022). In such complex stepfamilies, both the focal parent and their current partner need to get to know their new stepchild simultaneously, and the children also need to get to know each other. Both partners now simultaneously have the role of a biological parent and stepparent, which can be taxing and confusing (Pylyser et al., 2018), for example, because they have different (perceived) rights and responsibilities to their stepchild than their biological child (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). While this in principle also applies in simple stepfamilies, both parents experiencing such difficulties at the same time can be an additional burden. Furthermore, the presence of two children introduces logistical challenges, such as finding common activities for all to partake in or establishing family rituals and routines (Garneau & Pasley, 2017). For the children, it may also be difficult to establish a relationship with their stepsiblings, and there is potential for disagreements and conflict (Landon et al., 2022; Sanner et al., 2018). Parents may pick up on such conflicts between the children, potentially lowering their perceptions of cohesion.

A counterargument would be that simple stepfamilies are "asymmetrical": only one of the two partners has a child and parenting experience. In complex families, the playing field between the two partners might be leveled, as both the parent and the current partner have parenting experience and might be

able to form bonds with their stepchildren more intuitively, which may foster cohesion (Henderson & Taylor, 1999). However, given the greater potential for conflict between the children and greater difficulties in organizing family life in complex stepfamilies, we expect that:

> H1b: Parents perceive complex stepfamilies as less cohesive than simple stepfamilies.

3.2.3 The interplay between a shared child and living in complex stepfamilies for cohesion

A shared child might increase cohesion in simple stepfamilies more than in complex ones. In simple stepfamilies, having a shared child might reduce the perceived asymmetry between the two partners, as now both partners have a biological child (Henderson & Taylor, 1999). In complex stepfamilies, the addition of a concrete baby induces comparatively more complexity (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). Complex stepfamilies in principle comprise more ties between family members than simple stepfamilies, so the addition of a shared biological child increases the number of bilateral ties to a greater extent than in simple stepfamilies. The addition of more bilateral ties necessarily dilutes parents' time and attention more so in complex stepfamilies than in simple ones, which can lead to children in these complex stepfamilies in particular feeling sidelined (Ganong & Coleman, 1988; Hetherington & Jodl, 2014). Parents might sense such feelings and, resultingly, perceive their stepfamily as less cohesive. We, therefore, expect that:

> H1c: The positive effect of a shared child on parents' perceptions of stepfamily cohesion is lower in complex stepfamilies than in simple stepfamilies.

3.2.4 (Step)children's residence arrangements and cohesion

Parents' perceptions of cohesion might not just depend on whom the stepfamily comprises, but also on the extent to which they share a household with their (step)children. Whereas a shared biological child with the current partner will by default live in the common household, parents' biological child from their previous union, as well as potential stepchildren, can live either full-time (i.e., they are resident) or part-time in the common household (i.e., they follow a shared residence arrangement), or they can be nonresident (i.e., they live with the respective ex-partner or independently). Note that we do not consider

stepfamilies without any (part)time resident children (e.g., simple stepfamilies without a (part-time) resident focal child).

Having a resident (step)child might offer the most favorable conditions for perceiving one's stepfamily as cohesive. As the child lives in the household, parents have regular and frequent opportunities to partake in shared family activities, such as shared family dinners, or for bonding and co-creating a meaningful relationship with the child (Cartwright, 2012; Fang et al., 2022). Such aspects of doing family can signal to all those involved that the shared experiences they are co-creating are congruent with what is expected of a cohesive family (Finch, 2007). Furthermore, viewed from a normative perspective, having a resident child might give parents the impression that they are part of a "normal" and cohesive family, as this configuration corresponds most closely to the societal stereotype of what a family constitutes (i.e., two parents with one or more resident children; Jones, 2003).

In the case of shared residence, the child in question spends about equal amounts of time in the focal parent's household as well as in the household of the respective ex-partner, and thus regularly alternates between the two households. This introduces logistical difficulties for planning everyday stepfamily life – for example, it becomes more difficult to practice family routines and rituals that involve all core stepfamily members (Author). In other words, family relationships are discontinuous, which can be difficult to navigate for parents and children (Zartler & Grillenberger, 2017). Children may perceive themselves as having two distinct families and social lives rather than one big family and such attitudes might spill over into parents' perception of stepfamily cohesion. Furthermore, shared residence implies that parents are still (consciously) involved with their respective "previous families". They, for example, need to coordinate aspects of their child's life with the ex-partner, and may still practice family rituals – such as children's birthdays – together. This continued involvement with the ex-partner can make it hard for parents to create a clear boundary between their "previous" and their current family, which can reduce perceptions of cohesion compared to when the child is resident.

Compared to shared residence, nonresidency of the (step)child likely leads to even lower perceptions of cohesion. In the case of nonresidency, the (step) child in question is not structurally embedded into the household, implying fewer opportunities for parents to bond with the (step)child for engaging in shared family activities, or even for simply seeing the (step)child growing up and performing the role of a (step)parent (Kielty, 2006). This is especially so regarding stepchildren – parents with nonresident stepchildren are less likely to consider them as "their own" children (van Houdt, 2021b), and may not truly

feel like they are a meaningful part of the stepchild's life. Taken together, these factors likely hamper the development of perceptions of cohesion in case of nonresidency. In sum, we hypothesize that:

> H2a: Parents perceived stepfamilies with a resident focal child as most cohesive, followed by those with a part-time resident, and, lastly, those with a nonresident focal child.
>
> H2b: Parents perceived stepfamilies with a resident stepchild as most cohesive, followed by those with a part-time resident, and, lastly, those with a nonresident stepchild.

3.2.5 Combinations of residence arrangements and cohesion

Besides just looking at residence arrangements in isolation, it is pertinent to also look at their combinations to give a more realistic representation of cohesion in different types of stepfamilies. For the sake of simplicity – and to assure big enough cell sizes– we combined "residence" and "part-time residence" and consider three combinations of residences.

First, we consider simple stepfamilies where the focal parent's biological child resides part- or full-time in the household. Second, we consider complex stepfamilies in which both children reside part- or full-time in the same household, meaning that the children's residences are symmetrical. Third, we consider complex stepfamilies in which one child is (part-time) resident and the other is nonresident, meaning that the children's residences are asymmetrical. For reasons illustrated above, the first combination is likely to be the most cohesive one – due to the absence of a stepchild and because the focal child's residency in the parental household offers ample structural opportunities for bonding and creating cohesion.

The other two combinations both involve complex stepfamilies and are, therefore, likely perceived as less cohesive than simple stepfamilies due to their additional complexity. Furthermore, cohesion might differ between the two types of complex stepfamilies. Symmetric residence arrangements may facilitate creating shared routines and rituals between all family members, as both children reside in the same household. Stepfamily members have ample opportunities to get to know one another and build family routines and could resolve potential conflicts relatively easily. Asymmetric residence arrangements are likely more challenging to navigate than symmetrical ones. For once, practicing family rituals and routines is more difficult when only one child lives in the common household (Manning & Lamb, 2003). Furthermore, due to one

child not living in the common household, stepfamily members might perceive the status of the nonresident child as a stepfamily member as ambiguous, implying that they might be unclear about if and how the nonresident child should be incorporated into stepfamily life in the first place, and to what extent. Furthermore, focal parents might also develop feelings of guilt towards the nonresidential children, as they might feel that they are missing out on a substantial part of family life, compared to the residential child. For example, if their child is nonresidential, parents might feel guilty about spending more time with their stepchild than with their biological child (Kalmijn, 2018). If it is the current partner's child that is nonresidential, parents might feel guilty that their partner gets to spend rather little time with their biological child, whereas he or she spends comparatively much time with their stepchild. Concerning differences in the extent to which these three stepfamily configurations are considered cohesive, we, thus, expect that:

> H2c: Parents perceive stepfamilies with only a resident focal child as most cohesive, followed by stepfamilies with symmetric residence arrangements, and, lastly, those with asymmetric residence arrangements.

3.3 DATA & METHOD

3.3.1 Data & Sample

We used the third wave of the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN; 2020) survey (Poortman et al., 2021). As only wave 3 contained items measuring perceptions of stepfamily cohesion, we only used this wave. For wave 1, in collaboration with Statistics Netherlands, a random sample of different-sex parents who had dissolved their marriage or cohabitation in 2010 was drawn (Poortman et al., 2014). Both former partners were invited to participate in an online survey (the final reminder contained a printed questionnaire), resulting in 4,481 individual responses (response rate on the individual level: 39%, response rate on the former household level: 58%). Respondents who permitted to be contacted in the future for a follow-up survey were invited to participate in wave 2 in 2015/16 (Poortman et al., 2018). The response rate on the individual level was 63%, and that on the former household level 69%. In addition, to compensate for panel attrition, a refreshment sample was drawn identically as for wave 1 (response rate on the individual level: 32%, on the household level: 52%). Together, the second wave contains 3,464 individual responses from 2,892 former households. For wave 3, all respondents of the previous two waves who permitted to be contacted again were approached to fill in an online questionnaire in 2020. The response rates of wave 3 were comparable to those

for wave 2: 68% on the individual level and 72% on the former household level, yielding 3,056 responses. For about 19% of former households, both former partners participated. The response rates of all NFN waves are comparable to those of similar family surveys in the Netherlands, a country known for low and declining survey participation rates (E. de Leeuw et al., 2018).

Response propensities in wave 3 – like in waves 1 and 2 – were found to be selective based on several criteria. Specifically, men, former cohabiters, younger people, people with a non-Dutch background, and those with low incomes or on welfare are underrepresented in all waves. Regarding the propensity to respond again in wave 3, high socio-economic status was the strongest predictor for responding again in wave 3. Additionally, women, older people, and repartnered respondents were more likely to participate again in wave 3.

We excluded several respondents in line with the aim of our study. First, we excluded single parents (N=1,013) and those with living-apart-together (LAT) partners (N=578), as the questions about stepfamily cohesion were not shown to these groups. Second, we excluded respondents who had only nonresident (step)children (N=644), as cohesion is of greater importance for parents who still have at least one (part-time) resident child, and because it is dubious if parents consider themselves as part of a stepfamily in the absence of any resident children. As we used multiple imputations to handle missing data, we did not exclude further cases. The final sample includes 821 respondents, nested in 766 former households.

3.3.2 Measures of Dependent Variable

Respondents were shown four statements intended to measure perceptions of stepfamily cohesion and asked in how far they agreed with those statements, with answer options ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The statements were: "In my stepfamily, we have close relationships with each other", "In my stepfamily, we keep each other informed on important events", "My stepfamily is more disjoint than a unit", and "In my stepfamily, we are very involved with each other". Note that these items are like those of the "family cohesion scale" in the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS; (Dykstra et al., 2005). We reverse-coded the third statement so that a higher value on all statements would correspond to a more positive assessment of cohesion and combined all statements into a scale by taking the mean. Cronbach's α indicated good reliability of the scale (0.88).

3.3.3 Measures of Independent variables.

Having a shared child. Parents were asked whether they had or adopted a child with their current partner (1=Yes).

Complex stepfamily. Respondents were asked whether their current partner had a child/children from a previous relationship (1=Yes). If so, we considered the stepfamily complex, and otherwise simple.

Residence focal child. Respondents were asked where their "focal child" resided most of the time: "with me" (i.e., residential), "with the ex-partner" (i.e., nonresidential), "about equally with both" (i.e., part-time residential), or "alone". The focal child who was chosen in one of the previous waves based on the child's age. In wave 1, the age of the focal child was centered around 10 years, in wave 2 around 15 years, and in wave 3 around 18 years. Parents were asked to respond on the same focal child as in the previous wave(s) they participated in.

As our hypotheses related to differences between (part-time) residence and nonresidence as such (without making a distinction between types of nonresidence), we recoded "alone" as nonresidential. Accordingly, this variable captures whether the focal child is resident (0), part-time resident (1), or nonresident (be it alone or living with the ex-partner; 2). Additional analyses showed that about 8% of focal children lived alone. In no model were the differences between the child residing with the ex-partner and by themselves substantial or statistically significant.

Residence of the stepchild. Respondents who indicated that their current partner had a child from a previous union were asked where these children resided most of the time, with the answer options being the same as for the focal child's residence (i.e., with the current partner, with the ex-partner, about equally with both, or alone). Like outlined above, we recoded "alone" and "with the ex-partner" as "nonresident", as we were not interested in the differences between these types of nonresidence. Thus, the constructed variable takes on four discrete values: having a resident stepchild (0), having a part-time resident stepchild (1), having a nonresident stepchild (be it alone or living with the ex-partner; 2), and having no stepchild (3). Additional analyses showed that about 19% of stepchildren lived alone, but the differences between having a nonresident stepchild and having a stepchild living alone vis-à-vis cohesion were negligibly small and in no model statistically significant. Note that whereas our hypotheses are about differences among potential stepchildren's residence arrangements, we included the "having no stepchild" category, as otherwise the main effect of the focal child's residence would only refer to differences in stepfamilies with a stepchild.

Combinations of residence arrangements. This variable was constructed from the previous two variables. Note that we combined some categories due to otherwise too small cell sizes for reliable parameter estimation. Specifically, this variable takes on three discrete values: 0 ((part-time) resident focal child, no stepchild), 1 ((part-time) resident focal child and (part-time) resident stepchild), and 2 (focal/stepchild is (part-time) resident, the respective other child is nonresident).

3.3.4 Measures of control variables

We controlled for a range of various factors that might confound the relationships between our independent variables of interest and stepfamily cohesion (Kohler et al., 2023).

We, first, controlled for the child's, focal parents', and current partner's *age* – measured in years. We controlled for age, as older respondents and those with older children might be less likely to, e.g., coreside or view their stepfamily as cohesive (King et al., 2015). The correlations between these variables were moderate (e.g., r=0.45 for the correlation between the age of the parent and the age of the partner), but in no estimated model were the VIFs high.

Second, we controlled for the focal child's and parent's sex ("*child female"* and "*respondent female"*), as gender relates to, e.g., selection into becoming the resident parent and women might be less inclined to view their families as cohesive (King & Boyd, 2016).

Third, we control for the *education level of the focal parent* and the *education level of the current partner* as highly educated parents might select themselves into, amongst others, instituting a shared residence arrangement for their children, and might be more inclined to take the necessary actions to build stepfamily cohesion. Respondents were asked to, respectively, indicate their own and their current partner's education level on a scale from 1 (=incomplete primary education) to 10 (=postgraduate education). We treated these two ordinal variables as continuous, as dummy variables yielded similar results in the analyses.

Fourth, we control for the *duration of the stepfamily* (or, more accurately, the duration of the parents' current relationships, i.e., the time since they started dating), as more established stepfamilies might select themselves into living together and might be assessed as more cohesive. This variable was computed by subtracting parents' indication of the year in which their current relationship started from the year of fielding the survey (2020).

Lastly, we controlled for *relationship qualities* as relationship qualities might confound or mediate the relationship between central independent variables

and cohesion. For example, stepfamilies with good relationships might be more likely to choose to share a household, and high relationship qualities have been demonstrated to be conducive to cohesion. Regarding mediation, it is possible that, e.g., coresidence improves relationship qualities, which, in turn, improves perceptions of cohesion.

Respondents were asked to assess the quality of the relationship between themselves and the focal child, themselves and their current partner, and that between the focal child and the current partner on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (perfect). Note that focal parents were not asked about the relationship quality between themselves and their potential stepchild. The answers are recorded in three separate variables. As relationship qualities are likely to correlate, we estimated Pearson's correlations between the three relationship quality measures. Correlations were low to moderately high (r=.12 for the respondent-child and respondent-partner relationships; r=.72 for the respondent-child and child-current partner relationship, and r=.28 for the respondent-partner and child-current partner relationships), but as the VIFs for these variables in no estimated model exceeded 5, we proceeded to include them simultaneously as predictors.

Table 1 includes an overview of all variables used in the analyses, after imputing missing values (see below).

Table 3.1: Descriptive statistics of variables in the analyses, after imputation.

	M	Sd	Range
Measure of dependent variable			
Stepfamily cohesion	4.09	0.77	1-5
Measures of independent variables			
Shared child	.19	[1]	0-1
Complex stepfamily	.60	[1]	0-1
Residence focal child			
Resident	.31	[1]	0-1
Nonresident	.53	[1]	0-1
Part-time resident	.16	[1]	0-1
Presence & residence stepchild			
No stepchild	.45	[1]	0-1
Resident stepchild	.12	[1]	0-1
Nonresident stepchild	.35	[1]	0-1
Part-time resident stepchild	.08	[1]	0-1
Combinations of residence arrangements			
Resident focal child – no stepchild	.37	[1]	0-1
Both resident (i.e., symmetrical)	.19	[1]	0-1
One is resident, the other nonresident (i.e., asymmetrical)	.44	[1]	0-1
Measures of control variables			
Age child	17.68	3.80	10-26
Age parent	48.86	6.45	42-68
Respondent female	.54	[1]	0-1
Age partner	47.91	7.68	26-70
Child female	.49	[1]	0-1
Duration stepfamily	8.29	2.62	0-11
Education focal parent	7.01	1.71	2-10
Education partner	6.90	1.83	2-10
Focal parent female	0.55	[1]	0-1
Relationship child-stepparent	7.04	1.90	1-10
Relationship focal parent-child	7.90	1.80	1-10
Relationship focal parent-current partner	8.32	1.10	1-10
$N_{individuals}$	821		
$N_{former\ households}$	766		

Note: [1]: Standard deviations not presented for dichotomous variables. There were only negligible differences in pre- and post-imputation descriptive statistics. *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 3 (2020/21).

3.3.5 Analytical strategy

First, to give an overall impression of the extent to which parents assess their stepfamilies as cohesive, we plotted histograms of the dependent variable, as well as the individual subitems that comprise the dependent variable.

We handled missing values by using multiple imputations by chained equations (mice) in R (van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). Mice is an algorithm that creates *M* complete data sets from a predictor matrix. We imputed *M*=10 complete data sets and verified the performance of the imputation algorithm by comparing pre- and post-imputation descriptive statistics for the variables and examined density plots of the imputed variables. All our analyses were conducted on these ten complete data sets, with results (e.g., regression coefficients, standard errors, etc.) pooled across the imputed data sets using Rubin's rules.

To test our hypotheses about how different aspects of stepfamily structure are associated with stepfamily cohesion, we estimated a series of multiple linear regression models. As for about 20% of households both former partners participated, we clustered standard errors on the level of the former household to account for dependency between observations.

We estimated eight multiple linear regression models. The 'a' models include all control variables except for those related to relationship qualities, whereas the 'b' models also include relationship qualities. We estimate these separate models as most prior research has only considered the influence of relationship qualities on perceptions of cohesion, whereas our interest lies in testing whether aspects of family structure affect perceptions of cohesion independently of relationship qualities. This can be tested best in a full model which also includes relationship qualities, but we nevertheless present also the 'a' to show that our main relationships of interest are not substantially affected by controlling for relationship qualities.

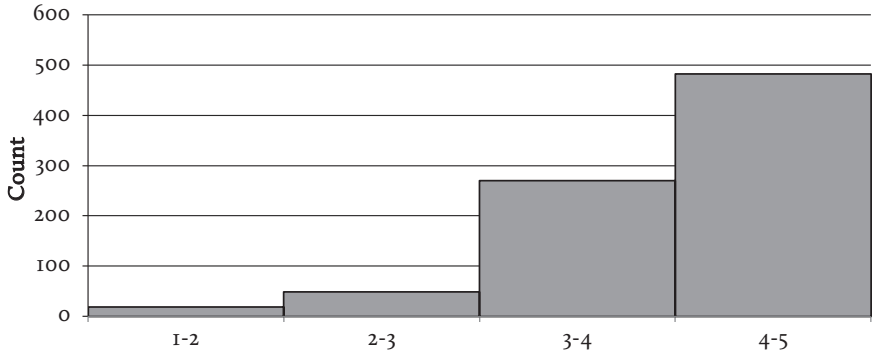
Models 1a/b estimate the relationship between having a common child and living in a complex stepfamily vis-à-vis cohesion. Models 2a/b test if the influence of having a common child on cohesion differs between simple and complex stepfamilies. Models 3a/b assess whether perceptions of cohesion differ along the focal child's or potential stepchild's residence arrangements. Lastly, Models 4a/b estimate whether perceptions of cohesion differ along with combinations of residence arrangements. To facilitate interpreting effect sizes, we calculated a pooled Cohen's d by calculating the average of the individual Cohen's ds from all ten imputed data sets.

3.4 RESULTS

3.4.1 Descriptive results

We start by describing how cohesive focal parents consider their respective stepfamilies. Figure 3.1 plots the frequency distribution of perceived stepfamily cohesion. As the considerable left skew indicates, most parents appear to perceive their stepfamilies as moderately (3) to very cohesive (5), with a mean of 4.09. Only 6.7% of parents assign their stepfamilies a cohesion score lower than 3 (i.e., lower than the midpoint of the scale), whereas 67.8% assign their stepfamilies a 4.0 or higher.

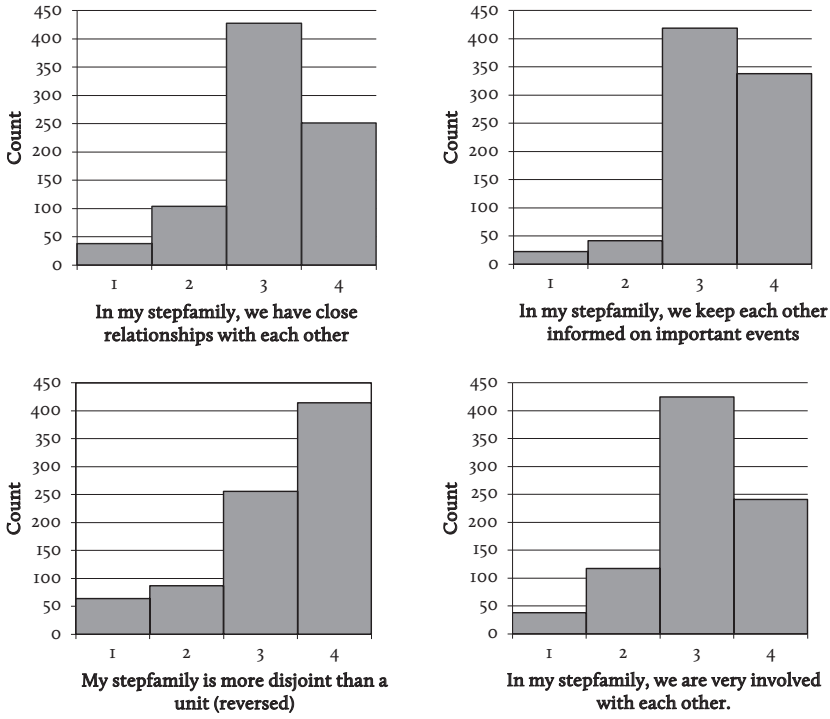
Figure 3.1: Frequency distribution of stepfamily cohesion scores.



To verify that this skewed distribution was not merely driven by one of the items that constitutes the cohesion scale, we plotted the frequency distributions of all four constituent items (see Figure 3.2).

As Figure 3.2 shows, the four individual items follow similar patterns. The major exception is the item "My stepfamily is more disjoint than a unit (reversed)", which monotonically increases, whereas for the other three items, fewer respondents choose the highest score possible (5) than the second highest score (4). Overall, Figures 1 and 2 show that most parents perceive their stepfamilies as very cohesive, across all dimensions.

Figure 3.2: Frequency distributions of individual items constituting the cohesion scale.



3.4.2 Regression results

Model 1a and 1b (see Table 3.2) test hypothesis 1a (stating that stepfamilies with a shared child are perceived as more cohesive than those without a shared child) and 1b (stating that complex stepfamilies are perceived as less cohesive than simple stepfamilies). As Model 1a shows, parents, indeed, perceived stepfamilies with a shared child as more cohesive than those without (B=0.14, p=.036). After controlling for relationship qualities in Model 1b, this association remained essentially the same (B=0.15, p=.015). This means that parents, on average, perceived stepfamilies with a shared child as 0.15 points more cohesive than those without. This regression coefficients corresponds to Cohen's d values of 0.18 and 0.19, respectively, indicating small effects. Furthermore, Models 1a and 1b show that conform hypothesis 1b, parents perceived complex stepfamilies as less cohesive than simple families, with the difference being 0.37 points before and 0.34 points after controlling for relationship qualities. This corresponds to Cohen's d values of -0.52 and -0.47, respectively, indicating moderate effects.

Note that, with respect to the control variables, the relationship quality between the focal parent and the current partner and that between the current partner and the focal child had statistically significant positive effects on cohesion at the conventional 5% significance level. This was consistently so across all models, with one exception (see Model 4b in Table 3: relationship quality between the child and the focal parent was not statistically significantly). Additionally, in some models the age of the focal child had a small negative (and statistically significant) association with cohesion (Models 1a–d and Model 3b). All other control variables were not statistically significantly associated with cohesion.

Models 2a and 2b test hypothesis 1c, stating that the effect of a shared child is stronger in simple than in complex stepfamilies. The interaction terms in both models were very small in magnitude and not statistically significant (B=-0.05, p=.978 and B=0.04, p=.972 respectively). Accordingly, we conclude that hypothesis 1c is not supported.

Model 3a and 3b (see Table 3) test hypotheses 2a and 2b, regarding differences in parents' perceptions of cohesion vis-à-vis the focal child's and potential stepchild's residence arrangements. Regarding hypothesis 2a (i.e., the focal child's residence), the coefficients follow the expected directions but are not always significant. When not controlling for relationship qualities (Model 2a), stepfamilies with a nonresident focal child were perceived as less cohesive than those with a resident focal child (B=-0.34, p=.002, d=-0.46). Changing the reference category showed that stepfamilies with a part-time resident focal child were perceived as more cohesive than those with a nonresident stepchild (B=0.28, p=.004, d=-0.37). After controlling for relationship qualities, only the difference between having a resident and nonresident focal child was statistically significant (B=-0.19, p=.047, d=-0.25), which indicates that stepfamilies with a nonresident focal child were perceived as 0.19 points less cohesive than those with a resident focal child. This is – as indicated by Cohen's d – a small effect. This indicates partial confirmation of hypothesis 2a.

Regarding hypothesis 2b (i.e., differences in cohesion by the stepchild's residence arrangement), without controlling for relationship qualities (i.e., in Model 3a), parents perceived stepfamilies with a nonresident stepchild as less cohesive than those with a resident stepchild (B=-0.27, p=.010, d=0.39). Stepfamilies with a part-time resident stepchild did not differ from stepfamilies with a resident stepchild vis-a-vis parents' perception of cohesion. Changing the reference category showed that stepfamilies with nonresident or part-time resident stepchildren were perceived as less cohesive than those without stepchildren (B=-0.32 and -0.18 respectively, both p<.001). The other contrasts

were not statistically significant. After controlling for relationship qualities (i.e., in Model 3b), the model coefficients changed slightly (though they remained statistically significant). In addition, in Model 3b also the difference between having a resident stepchild and a part-time resident stepchild was statistically significant (B=-0.17, p=.034, d=-0.24), whereas the difference between a nonresident and part-time resident stepchild remained not statistically significant (B=0.08, p=.331). Taken together, these results mean that having non-resident or part-time resident stepchildren was associated with lower perceptions of cohesion compared to having a full-time residence stepchild or no stepchild. Stepfamilies without stepchildren and those with full-time resident stepchildren were perceived as about equally cohesive. This partially supports hypothesis 2b.

Lastly, Models 4a and 4b test hypothesis 2c about perceptions of cohesion potentially differing by combinations of residence arrangements. As the results show, perceptions of cohesion were lower in stepfamilies that have one residential and a nonresidential child (i.e., asymmetric residence arrangements) than in stepfamilies that consist of only a residential focal child (B=-0.36, p<.001, d=-0.52; and B=-0.29, p<.001, d=0.41, respectively). Changing the reference categories showed that in Model 4a, the difference between symmetric and asymmetric residence arrangements was negative and statistically significant (B=-0.24, p=.008, d=-0.32). In Model 4b, this difference was smaller and not statistically significant (B=-0.13, p=.080). These results indicate that stepfamilies with asymmetric residence arrangements were perceived as less cohesive than those with only a resident stepchild, whereas symmetric residence arrangements were not associated with reduced perceptions of cohesion. These results partially confirm hypothesis 2c.

Table 3.2: Summary of multiple linear regression models predicting stepfamily cohesion from stepfamily composition.

	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2a		Model 2b	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Shared child	0.14*	0.07	0.15*	0.05	0.15*	0.07	0.16*	0.06
Complex stepfamily (ref: simple)	-0.37***	0.06	-0.34***	0.05	-0.34***	0.05	-0.33***	0.05
Shared child x complex stepfamily					-0.05	0.13	0.04	0.12
Control variables								
Age child	-0.02*	0.01	-0.02**	0.00	-0.02**	0.01	-0.02**	0.01
Female child	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.04
Age parent	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Female parent	-0.04	0.05	-0.06	0.05	-0.04	0.05	-0.06	0.05
Education parent	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.01
Age current partner	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00
Education current partner	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.01
Duration of stepfamily	0.00	0.01	-0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	-0.00	0.01
Relationship child-stepparent			0.09***	0.02			0.09***	0.02
Relationship focal parent-child			-0.04	0.02			-0.04	0.02
Relationship focal parent-current partner			0.21***	0.03			0.21***	0.03
Intercept	4.40***	0.22	2.46***	0.30	4.40***	0.23	2.45***	0.30
Adj. R2	.096		.228		.096		.228	

Table 3.3: Summary of multiple linear regression models predicting stepfamily cohesion from children's residence arrangements.

	Model 3a		Model 3b		Model 4a		Model 4b	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Shared child	0.17**	0.01	0.17**	0.06	0.25**	0.09	0.25**	0.09
Residence focal child (ref: resident)								
Part-time resident	-0.05[1]	0.06	-0.06[2]	0.06				
Nonresident	-0.34**	0.07	-0.19*	0.06				
Residence stepchild (ref: resident)								
Part-time resident	-0.14	0.10	-0.17*	0.08				
Nonresident	-0.27[3]*	0.11	-0.26[3]**	0.09				
No stepchild	0.04[4,5,6]	0.09	0.03[4,5,6]	0.08				
Combination of residence arrangements (ref: resident focal child – no stepchild)								
Both resident (i.e., symmetrical)					-0.12	0.17	-0.16	0.13
One is resident, the other nonresident (i.e., asymmetrical)					-0.36[8]***	0.08	-0.29[9]***	0.08
Control variables								
Age child	-0.01	0.01	-0.02*	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Female child	0.07	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.10	0.07	0.06	0.06
Age parent	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Female parent	-0.04	0.06	-0.04	0.06	0.02	0.10	0.00	0.09
Education parent	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02
Age current partner	-0.01	0.00	-0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01

	Model 3a		Model 3b		Model 4a		Model 4b	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Education current partner	0.03*	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02
Duration of stepfamily	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.01	0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Relationship child-stepparent			0.09**	0.02			0.08	0.03
Relationship focal parent-child			-0.04	0.02			-0.03	0.03
Relationship focal parent-current partner			0.21**	0.03			0.23***	0.05
Intercept	4.14***	0.25	2.17***	0.31	3.94***	0.36	1.18***	0.48
Adj. R2	.085		.217		.100		.228	

Note: [1]: The difference between nonresident and part-time resident was statistically significant. [2]: The difference between nonresident and part-time resident was not statistically significant. [3]: The difference between having a nonresident and a part-time resident stepchild was not statistically significant. [4]: The difference between nonresident stepchild and no stepchild was statistically significant. [6]: The difference between no stepchild and having a part-time resident stepchild was statistically significant. [7]: The difference between having no stepchild and having a resident stepchild was statistically significant. [8]: The difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical was statistically significant. [9]: The difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical was not statistically significant.

3.4.3 Additional Analyses

As perceptions of cohesion might differ between mothers and fathers or alongside focal children's age, we estimated fully-interacted models to test for statistically significant gender and age differences, both including and excluding relationship qualities as control variables. In no model did we find any statistically significant differences along parents' gender or the focal child's age.

3.5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Perceptions of cohesion in postdivorce stepfamilies are important to investigate, as they are associated with several outcomes for parents and children, like higher well-being (Pink & Wampler, 1985; Shigeto et al., 2014). With this study, we extended the scant literature on cohesion in postdivorce families in two ways. First, we describe in detail how cohesive parents consider their stepfamilies to be. Second, we go beyond examining the role of relationship qualities for perceptions of cohesion by illustrating how perceptions of cohesion differ across family structures, meaning who comprises the stepfamily (i.e., one or two stepchildren, presence of shared biological children), and the extent to which stepfamily members share a common household (i.e., (step)children's residence arrangements). The results of our study lead to several main conclusions.

First, parents assessed their stepfamilies as very cohesive – on average 4.09 on a scale from 1 to 5. Only very few parents (<10%) considered their stepfamilies to lack cohesion. This is surprising, given that creating cohesion has been argued to be problematic in stepfamilies (Ganong et al., 2019; Pink & Wampler, 1985). The average score on cohesion also appears to be higher than in the general (Dutch) population (see e.g., Komter & Knijn, 2006; van Gaalen et al., 2008). There are several reasons why this might be the case. First, the age of parents and children was higher in the data used in these previous studies. Younger parents whose stepfamilies are relatively "new" might be more optimistic about cohesion than older parents. From a theoretical perspective, cohesion among postdivorce stepfamilies might be higher precisely because creating a stepfamily is "difficult", as parents might develop strategies to build cohesion (Ganong et al., 1999), whereas cohesion in non-divorced families might be taken for granted and not actively worked on to the same extent. Selection and survivorship might play a role, too. Parents with desirable traits (e.g., having better conflict-resolution skills) might select themselves into forming a stepfamily, wherefore they on average judge the cohesion of their stepfamilies to be very high. Regarding survivorship bias, it is possible that, if relationships among stepfamily members are poor and/or cohesion is low, parents might have dissolved the stepfamily before the survey was administered.

Second, perceptions of cohesion were higher in stepfamilies in which the step couple had a common biological child – a so-called "concrete baby". This finding gives weight to the "concrete baby hypothesis" per which a shared child cements stepfamily relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 1988), and aligns with a recent study showing a positive relationship between having a shared child and aspects of family functioning (Ivanova & Balbo, 2019). An important caveat is that – among the aspects of family structure considered in this study – having a shared child showed one of the weaker associations with cohesion, so the "importance" of a shared child should not be overstated.

Third, perceptions of cohesion were lower in complex stepfamilies (i.e., where both partners have a child from a previous union) than in simple stepfamilies (i.e., where only one of the partners has a child from a previous union). These findings dovetail with burgeoning literature demonstrating that increasing family complexity complicates family relationships (de Leeuw et al., 2022; Sanner & Jensen, 2021). Complex stepfamilies being perceived as less cohesive might point to the innate difficulty of merging two existing families into one new family, both for parents and children. Not only is it difficult for parents to be a biological parent and stepparent at the same time, also children may struggle with acquiring stepparents and stepsiblings (Ganong et al., 2011; Landon et al., 2022). Merging two families with potentially differing norms, values, and habits requires all family members to adjust to the new situation, which may explain why these families are perceived as less cohesive. Interestingly, the effect of having a shared child did not differ between simple and complex stepfamilies, meaning that the positive effect of having a shared child for perceptions of cohesion might apply to various family structures.

Fourth, how cohesive parents considered their stepfamilies depended on the children's residence. Full-time residence of parents' biological children from their previous union was associated with higher perceptions of cohesion than nonresidence. Similarly, full-time residence of a potential stepchild was associated with higher perceptions of cohesion than part-time residence or nonresidence. Regarding combinations of residence arrangements, stepfamilies in which the children's residence arrangements were asymmetrical – i.e., one of the children was resident and the other was nonresident – were considered less cohesive than those with symmetric residence arrangements or simple stepfamilies in which the child was resident. Taken together, these findings indicate that cohesion might be difficult to establish when parents and children do not share one household – for example, because there are not enough opportunities for structural engagement with the (step)child (e.g., by celebrating family rituals together) that can bolster cohesion (Fang et al., 2022).

The abovementioned findings should be evaluated with some important caveats in mind. First, the data set we used is cross-sectional, meaning that we cannot rule out reverse causality or make causal claims. While it seems plausible from a theoretical perspective for family structure to affect cohesion, without longitudinal data it is impossible to assert whether, for example, perceptions that one's stepfamily is incohesive could cause parents to decide against having a biological child with their partner. To our knowledge, there is no longitudinal data set on postdivorce stepfamilies that include both measures of cohesion and detailed measures of family structure. Second, it is pertinent to reflect on the role of selection and survivorship bias that hamper the generalizability of our findings. As is well-known in family research, sampling difficult-to-reach populations such as divorced parents in a representative manner is difficult. Resultingly, most data collection efforts suffer from selective non-response, in the sense that respondents with lower subjective well-being or higher levels of conflict with their current or ex-partners tend to be systematically underrepresented. This might also apply to the NFN data used in this study. Relatedly, the sample sizes for some family structures (e.g., those with part-time resident stepchildren) were small, which might lead to somewhat unreliable parameter estimates. Furthermore, the design and sampling strategy of the NFN data restricted the study of cohesion to specific types of stepfamilies: those that had formed between 2009 and 2020 and still existed at the time the survey was administered, and in which the step-couple was either cohabiting or married. This implies that our findings might reflect perceptions of cohesion in stepfamilies that are, amongst others, marked by low levels of conflict and stability. This is possibly one of the reasons for the high average perceived stepfamily cohesion in our data set. Incohesive stepfamilies might have dissolved before the survey was administered. One can speculate as to how this might bias our findings: the fact that we did find effects of family structure of cohesion among this select group of stepfamilies may imply that differences could be more substantial when investigating cohesion among a more diverse sample of postdivorce stepfamilies. Whereas this assertion seems plausible, it is impossible to test without a more representative data set, which, to our knowledge, is currently not available. A further design limitation of the NFN survey is that respondents were not asked to rate the relationship quality between the focal child and potential stepchild(ren), or that between themselves and their potential stepchild(ren). Though some of our arguments about complex stepfamilies vis-à-vis cohesion rest on speculations about the quality of the biological child-stepchild dyad, we were unable to test such mechanisms. Lastly, only parents were asked to assess the cohesion of their stepfamily, meaning that

their perceptions might not reflect those of other family members – cohesion is in the eyes of the beholder.

Overall, our study provides unique insights into how parents' perceptions of cohesion in postdivorce stepfamilies depend on aspects of family structure, above and beyond known correlates like relationship qualities. Besides the importance of relationship qualities for fostering perceptions of cohesion, this study points at the importance of aspects of stepfamily structure for perceptions of cohesion, such as whether the stepfamily is simple or complex, whether the stepcouple has a shared biological child, and in which household the respective children reside.

Whereas parents, overall, perceived their stepfamilies as quite cohesive, note that the parents considered in this study were part of relatively long-lasting stepfamilies with high average relationship qualities. The fact that we found differences in cohesion among different types of postdivorce stepfamilies among this already select group highlights the need to go beyond relationship qualities and carefully consider stepfamily structure as a factor affecting perceptions of cohesion. Specifically, it appears important to carefully study the influence of interaction opportunities and cohesion, as residence is an important aspect of family structure affecting parents' perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.

Chapter 4

FAMILY RITUALS IN POSTDIVORCE FAMILIES

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

Family rituals are recurring family practices ranging from the ordinary (e.g., family dinners) to the extraordinary (e.g., Christmas and birthday celebrations) (C. Johnson, 1988). They are imbued with special meaning and commemorate, honor, and celebrate important occasions during the year and life course (Fiese et al., 2002; Imber-Black & Roberts, 1998; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Organizing and partaking in them serve multiple purposes, like allowing attendees to engage in emotional exchange, maintaining contact with family members, or showing that one cares about someone (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Fiese et al., 2002; Rancew-Sikora & Remisiewicz, 2020). From a sociological perspective, family rituals – and family practices and routines in a wider sense – unveil the intricacies of and diverging loyalties in families by showing how family is "done" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Fiese et al., 2002; Morgan, 1999, 2011a) and may even define and reify family boundaries (e.g., Allan et al., 2011, pp. 69–71; Finch, 2007; Richlin-Klonsky & Bengtson, 1996; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007).

It is presumed that all families practice family rituals (Fiese et al., 1993), but who partakes in them differs between family types (Bakker et al., 2015; Berg-Cross et al., 1993; Costa, 2014). In Western first-married families with biological children family rituals usually involve at least the child and both biological parents (Braithwaite et al., 1998). Who partakes in family rituals in postdivorce families is more ambiguous (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014). Little societal norms exist promulgating with whom family rituals are to be celebrated (Cherlin, 1978), leading to potentially great variation within the group of divorced parents.

Several, mostly qualitative, studies investigated how family rituals are practiced in postdivorce families (e.g., Bakker et al., 2015; Costa, 2014; Imber-Black et al., 1988; C. Johnson, 1988; Pett et al., 1992; Smart & Neale, 1999; Whiteside, 1989). These studies show how parents and children perceive practicing different family rituals, such as birthdays or Christmas, after divorce. Key findings are that many family rituals continue after divorce (Imber-Black et al., 1988; Pett et al., 1992; Smart & Neale, 1999), chiefly those related to children (Bakker et al., 2015; Costa, 2014; C. Johnson, 1988), though oftentimes in modified forms. Children's birthdays, for example, are not always jointly celebrated by both biological parents (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014), meaning that children may have more than one birthday celebration (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014; C. Johnson, 1988; Zartler, 2014). Several reasons have been stated for this, such as a poor relationship with the ex-partner (Costa, 2014; C. Johnson, 1988) or, in case of repartnering, a desire to promote the role of the stepparent (i.e., parent's current partner) (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Whiteside, 1989).

These predominantly qualitative studies outline with whom parents may practice family rituals (e.g., with the ex-partner) and usually focus on parents' and children's perceptions about practicing family rituals in different configurations. Whereas some reasons for why parents practice family rituals with, e.g., the ex-partner, have been stated, the mechanisms proposed have not been explicitly tested. A better understanding of what determines who partakes in family rituals after divorce would benefit our overall understanding of family interactions after divorce. Additionally, contemporary postdivorce families may not only include multiple parental figures after parents repartner (i.e., biological and stepparents), but also multiple types of parental figures – such as cohabiting or living-apart-together (LAT) stepparents (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Moreover, more children grow up in shared residence arrangements (i.e., joint physical custody) instead of mother-residence (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). Existing studies offer little leads about how these more recent and emergent types of postdivorce families practice family rituals.

In this large-scale, quantitative, study we investigate with whom divorced parents practice family rituals, focusing on the child's parental figures. We focus on children's birthdays as these are special, meaningful, family rituals (De Carlo & Widmer, 2011, p. 230), and norms and children's expectations about celebrating them with both biological parents may be stronger and less negotiable than for other family rituals (Costa, 2014). We consider whether divorced parents (i.e., the so-called focal parents) celebrated their (focal) child's birthday (1) with their ex-partner, (2) their current partner, and (3) whether they celebrate jointly with both. Investigating who attends children's birthdays and what factors shape who attends birthdays matters, first, because of the potential ramifications for children and the parents involved. First, children usually want both of their biological parents present at their birthdays (Zartler, 2014), so the absence of parent's ex-partner might impact children's well-being. Divorced parents might wish their current partners to be present, for example, to promote their role as a stepparent and to show to them that they count as family members. If they are absent from the child's birthday, this could have implications for the strength of family relationships in the new stepfamily. A joint celebration with both the ex-partner and current partner might imply greater availability of social capital to parents and children (Widmer, 2006) and greater child well-being (King, 2006; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007), but potentially also loyalty conflicts (see Fiese et al., 2002). Second, a closer understanding of the forces that shape who celebrates family rituals together after divorce adds to existing theoretical explanations of the forces that shape postdivorce family interactions and how family is done after divorce (Fiese et al., 2002; Morgan, 2011b).

To show how family rituals in postdivorce families reify the old or new family and when that is the case, we focus on the family structural and qualitative determinants of which parental figures celebrate children's birthdays together in postdivorce families. First, we consider both the child's biological parents' new family context (i.e., their (type of) repartnering and having (step) children with the new partner). Having a new partner may lead parents to practice family rituals without the ex-partner (Braithwaite et al., 1998). Second, we focus on the relationship quality between the different parent-parent dyads, which affects biological parents' and current partners' willingness to celebrate the child's birthday with each other (Costa, 2014). Lastly, we consider the child's residence arrangement, which regulates parents' opportunities for access and bonding with the child (Bakker et al., 2015). In our analyses, we, furthermore, control for other factors that might influence who attends the child's birthday, such as the geographical distance between both biological parents and the age of the child. We, where possible, take the perspectives of all relevant actors into account (i.e., the focal parent, child, ex-partner, and current partner). This is in keeping with extant studies on family rituals, which point to the intricate processes that determine who attends family rituals and why (e.g., Bakker et al., 2015; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014). While the actual reasons are impossible to test using survey data, taking all relevant perspectives into account enriches and nuances our theoretical understanding of the forces that shape who attends children's birthdays, particularly in more recent types of postdivorce families not considered in previous studies (e.g., those with LAT stepparents) and provides a more global assessment of the overall effect of the different actors' respective actions and considerations.

We used the second wave of the survey New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) – a recent and especially suitable dataset for this study (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2019). NFN includes rich and unique data about a large sample of diverse, more recent, and emerging postdivorce families in the Netherlands – for example, those with shared residence arrangements and LAT stepparents. Compared to other countries, shared residence arrangements are common in the Netherlands, with about 20% of parents following such arrangements, though sole (mother) residence remains the most common arrangement (about two thirds; (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). This makes the Netherlands an excellent setting for investigating the effect of this particular residence arrangement on the attendance of family rituals. NFN is also, to our knowledge, one of the few surveys that include information on the attendance of a child's birthday (but see e.g., Dykstra et al., 2005). By using this dataset, we were able to consider how a broad range of contemporary postdivorce families celebrates children's birthdays.

4.2 BACKGROUND

Below, we outline our theoretical expectations regarding the effects of family structure (repartnering and having biological children and stepchildren) and relationship quality on birthday attendance. Though postdivorce family structures, e.g. in terms of children's residence arrangements or parental repartnering, typically differ between men and women (e.g., Bakker & Mulder, 2013; Vanassche et al., 2015), we do not expect gender differences in birthday attendance as previous studies on family rituals in the broader sense do not mention gender differences as to who partakes in them (Bakker et al., 2015; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014). We also a priori do not expect clear differences in the effects of family structure and relationship quality on birthday attendance for men and women, i.e., interactions between these factors and parents' gender. The limited and indirect evidence (pertaining to parental involvement instead of family rituals) regarding interactions with gender is mixed: for example, some studies found different effects of repartnering for fathers and mothers (e.g., Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2015), whereas others found the opposite or no conclusive gender differences (e.g., Koster et al., 2021). We thus discuss the impact of family structure and relationship quality on birthday attendance irrespective of gender.

4.2.1 Repartnering, Having (Step)children, and Birthday Attendance

Repartnering and having shared biological or stepchildren (in short: (step) children) with the new partner may indicate that parents have established a "new" family. Consequently, they might be less involved with their "old" family, i.e., the ex-partner (Smart & Neale, 1999, p. 72; Whiteside, 1989), and prefer practicing family rituals with the current partner (Bakker et al., 2015; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014; Whiteside, 1989). Practicing family rituals without the ex-partner, and with the current partner, might also serve to spend time with and show loyalty to the current partner, or be a result of the current partner opposing involvement with the ex-partner, e.g., out of jealousy (L. H. Ganong & Coleman, 2017, p. 11). We, therefore, theorize that the repartnering of either the focal parent or the ex-partner reduces the probability of the ex-partner, and increases the probability of the current partner being present at the child's birthday. We, furthermore, presume that joint presence is reduced by the repartnering of the ex-partner, as then both the focal parent and the ex-partner have a new family and may seek to integrate the child into their own – separate – new families by practicing family rituals separately. These effects may be stronger the more committed parents are to their new union, with marriage potentially embodying relatively more (formalized) commitment

than cohabitation or LAT (Brines & Joyner, 1999). Note that, in the following, we use "formalization" as a shorthand to indicate the stronger interpersonal and legal commitment of marriage versus cohabitation and LAT, respectively.

Similarly, we argue that either the focal parent or ex-partner having (step)children with a new partner may imply even more commitment to their respective new family than repartnering alone. Furthermore, the focal child having half- or stepsiblings might cause the child or the focal parent to prefer celebrating the birthday with the new family members, for example, because of bonds between the focal child, its (step)siblings, and the current partner. Therefore, we expect a positive effect of having (step)children on the current partner's presence at the child's birthday, and, logically, a negative effect on joint presence. The effect of having biological children may be stronger than that of having stepchildren, as having biological children is typically a deliberate decision signifying commitment to the new partner, whereas stepchildren are frequently an involuntary "package deal" (L. H. Ganong & Coleman, 2017, p. 136). We hypothesize that:

> H1a: Repartnering of either biological parent reduces the probability of the ex-partner being present at the child's birthday, with this effect being stronger the more formalized the new union is.
>
> H1b: Repartnering of the ex-partner, and the extent to which the new union of either the focal parent or the ex-partner is formalized, increases the probability of the current partner being present at the child's birthday and/or reduces the probability of the ex-partner and current partner being jointly present at the child's birthday.
>
> H1c: Either biological parent having (step)children with their respective current partner reduces the probability of the ex-partner being present at the child's birthday, increases the probability of the current partner being present, and decreases the probability of their joint presence at the child's birthday.

4.2.2 Child's Residence Arrangements and Birthday Attendance

Residence arrangements define biological and stepparents' opportunities for access to the child and contact with each other. These include shared residence, where the child resides about equally with both biological parents or sole (mother/father) residence, where the child primarily resides with one of its biological parents. In the Netherlands, mother residence is the most frequent, followed by shared residence, and, lastly, father residence (Poortman

& van Gaalen, 2017). Shared residence approximates the pre-divorce situation: both a child's biological parents make joint parenting decisions. Therefore, it has been argued that parents who practice shared residence might also practice family rituals with each other (Bakker et al., 2015; Smart & Neale, 1999). Additionally, low-conflict parents might select themselves into shared residence arrangements, which may increase the probability of them jointly celebrating the child's birthday (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). Sole-residence, conversely, is the classical approach to post-divorce parenting, where one parent (usually the mother) makes largely autonomous parenting decisions (Smart & Neale, 1999). The choice for sole-residence might, in itself, indicate that parents prefer minimal involvement with each other, and, therefore, prefer to celebrate children's birthdays without the ex-partner (Bakker et al., 2015). Sole-resident parents, furthermore, have the opportunity to celebrate the child's birthday "first", and without the nonresident ex-partner.

The probability of the current partner being present at the child's birthday is expected to be highest in case of sole residence of the child with the focal parent. First, it appears obvious that parents who live together would also celebrate their (step)child's birthday with each other. Possible reasons are that sharing a household with the child in question means that the current partner has more access to the child and more opportunities for interaction. Research on closeness with stepparents after divorce, for example, showed that coresiding with a child fosters the development of strong bonds between the child and the stepparent (King, 2006), potentially resulting in them wanting to celebrate the birthday with each other. Second, sole-resident parents might be especially keen on cementing their new family by practicing family rituals with their new partner, e.g., to solidify their role as the stepparent (Whiteside, 1989). In comparison, shared residence provides current partners with less access to the child, albeit likely more frequent and regular than if the child were residing with the ex-partner. In the latter arrangement the child, current partner, or even focal parent might not wish the current partner to be present at the child's birthday, as there might be few meaningful bonds between the child and current partner.

Consequently, joint presence of the ex-partner and current partner may be especially likely in case of shared residence vis-à-vis sole-residence, as sole-residence may lead family rituals to be practiced in the new family context (i.e., with the current and without the ex-partner). We hypothesize that:

> H2a: Compared to shared residence, sole residence of the child with either biological parent reduces the probability of the ex-partner, and the ex-partner and current partner being jointly present at the child's birthday.

H2b: Compared to shared residence, sole residence of the child with the focal parent increases the current partner's probability of being present at the child's residence, while sole residence with the ex-partner decreases it.

4.2.3 Parental Relationship Quality and Birthday Attendance

Researchers have argued that the better the relationship with someone, the greater the willingness to interact with that person (Lawler, 2001). Hence, the better the relationship between the focal parent and the ex-partner or the current partner, the more likely it is that they will, respectively, celebrate the child's birthday together (Costa, 2014; Whiteside, 1989). Low relationship quality may decrease their willingness to interact with each other and lead to biological parents celebrating the child's birthday separately (Bakker et al., 2015). Although parents might hide or put aside conflict for the sake of the child, many may avoid practicing family rituals together in such a situation to protect their own or the child's emotional well-being (Costa, 2014). These arguments imply that the better these relationships are, the more likely it is that the ex-partner and current partner are jointly present at the child's birthday. Similarly, it has been suggested the better the relationship between the ex-partner and the current partner, the more they might be willing to celebrate the child's birthday together (Costa, 2014; C. Johnson, 1988). Amicable relationships between them might, furthermore, lessen the child's loyalty conflicts, or the feeling of needing to "pick sides" (Hornstra et al., 2020), increasing the probability of their respective individual and joint presence at the child's birthday. We hypothesize that:

H3a: The better the relationship between the focal parent and the ex-partner the more likely that the ex-partner and the ex-partner and current partner are jointly present at the birthday.

H3b: The better the relationship between the focal parent and the current partner the more likely that the current partner and the ex-partner and current partner are jointly present at the child's birthday.

H3c: The better the relationship between the ex-partner and the current partner the more likely that the ex-partner, the current partner, and both of them are jointly present at the child's birthday.

Additionally, per family systems theory, family relationships are interrelated (Allen & Henderson, 2017, p. 104; Jensen, 2017). Thus, the focal parent's relationship with the ex-partner can influence the ex-partner's as well as the current partner's presence at the child's birthday (and vice-versa). For

example, a recent study on interparental relationships in diverse stepfamilies showed that when parents' relationship with their ex-partners is strained, they might encourage the stepparents' (i.e., the current partners') involvement with the child (Hornstra et al., 2020), by, in this case, celebrating the child's birthday with the current partner. Likewise, when the focal parent's relationship with the current partner is strained, they might prefer celebrating the birthday with the ex-partner. Thus, the better the relationship with one partner (ex-partner or current partner), the less likely it is that the other partner is present. On the other hand, good relationships with one partner might increase the probability of the other partner being present. The higher the quality of the relationship with the ex-partner, the more might the focal parent be able to convince the ex-partner to "allow" the current partner to be present, and the less might the ex-partner object or feel threatened by the presence of the current partner (and vice-versa). Given these contrary expectations, we refrain from giving a hypothesis about such "cross-relationship" effects.

4.3 DATA & METHOD

4.3.1 Data and Sample

We used the second wave of the survey New Families in the Netherlands (NFN; 2015/2016; (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2019) which includes information about birthday attendance in postdivorce families not asked in wave 1. For wave 1 (2012/2013), a random sample of parents with minor children who divorced or separated in 2010 was drawn by Statistics Netherlands (Poortman et al., 2014). Both parents were approached by mail and invited to complete the survey online. The response rate for wave 1 was 39% on the individual level and 58% on the level of the former couple, yielding 4,481 responses. About 30% of the responses are from both ex-partners. These response rates are, despite the online mode and the potentially difficult-to-reach target group, comparable to similar Dutch surveys (e.g., Dykstra et al., 2005).

For Wave 2, participants of wave 1 were invited to complete a follow-up survey in 2015/2016 (Poortman et al., 2018). 63% of the original participants did so, yielding 2,544 responses (response rate on the level of the former couples 69%). An additional random sample (drawn identically as for wave 1) was approached to participate in wave 2: this "refreshment" sample had a response rate of 32% on the individual and 52% on the former couple level, yielding 920 responses. In total, wave 2 contains responses from 3,464 formerly married and formerly cohabiting parents in the Netherlands. 17% of these responses are from both former partners.

The sample is selective on several criteria. Women, the native Dutch, respondents with high incomes, formerly married parents, and older people are overrepresented. Panel attrition was selective: those with high socioeconomic status (highly educated and with paid work) were more likely and men, younger respondents, and those with lower life satisfaction were less likely to respond again in wave 2. The group of formerly cohabiting parents is somewhat more selective than that of formerly married parents, as men with (more than) two children and older children, as well as women from urbanized areas, are overrepresented.

Like in wave 1, in wave 2 respondents were asked to provide information about a "focal child". Those who completed wave 1 were asked to report on the same focal child. For the refreshment sample, and for re-approached respondents who could not recall the focal child, the focal child was determined similarly as for wave 1. In wave 1, the focal child's age was centered around the age of 10 years. In wave 2, collected about three years later, the focal child's age was centered around the age of 13 years. If all of the respondent's children were younger than 13, the oldest child was selected to be the focal child, otherwise the youngest child.

We excluded cases according to several criteria. First, we excluded cases in which the respondent did not celebrate the child's last birthday (N=481, 14%) because the question about their current partner's and ex-partner's attendance apply only to parents who had attended their child's last birthday themselves and the objective of our study was to discern with whom family rituals are celebrated, rather than if they were celebrated at all. This does not imply that in 14% of cases the child's birthday was not celebrated at all. We conducted additional analyses among a subsample limited to responses from both former partners (N=572) showing that in 74.7% of cases (N=427) both biological parents celebrated the child's birthday (but not necessarily together with each other), in 23.4% of cases (N=134) only one biological parent did so and only in 1.9% of cases (N=11) did neither biological parent celebrate their child's birthday. Second, we excluded cases where the child's residence arrangement was specified as "other" (N=220, 6.4%). Third, we excluded cases with missing values on the variables of interest (N=312, 7%). Missing values were low to moderate, ranging from 0 to 8.8% (on the variable "stepchildren of ex-partner", see below). In total, the "total" sample contained 2,451 responses from 2,134 former households and was used to investigate the ex-partner's presence at the child's last birthday. The presence of the current partner and the ex-partner's and current partner's joint presence can, logically, only be investigated among a sample of respondents who are currently in a relationship. We, thus, limited a second "repartnered sample" to only those respondents currently in a relationship (N=1,524 respondents from N=1,374 former households).

4.3.2 Measures of Dependent Variables

Ex-partner present (total sample). This variable captures whether the respondent celebrated the child's last birthday together with the ex-partner (0=no, 1=yes).

Current partner present (repartnered sample). Respondents who indicated currently being in a relationship indicated whether they celebrated the birthday with their current partner (0=no, 1=yes). These two dependent variables are not mutually exclusive: respondents who celebrated their child's birthday with both ex-partner and current partner are coded 'yes' on both variables.

Ex-partner and current partner present (repartnered sample). This variable captures whether both the ex-partner and current partner were present (0=no, 1=yes). The 'no' group is heterogeneous: it includes respondents who celebrated their child's birthday alone or only with either their ex-partner or current partner.

4.3.3 Measures of Independent Variables

Repartnering of the respondent. Respondents were asked whether they "currently [had] a steady partner" (0=no, 1=yes).

Type of union of the respondent. Respondents who indicated currently having a steady partner were asked about relationship status: "steady partner, but not living together or married (LAT)", "living together unmarried" or "married". For the total sample, we created three dummy variables indicating whether the respondent had a LAT partner, a cohabiting partner, or a new spouse, with "no partner" as the respective reference category. For the repartnered sample, we constructed two dummy variables indicating whether the respondent has a cohabiting partner or spouse, with "LAT partner" as the reference category.

Repartnering of the ex-partner. Respondents were asked whether their ex-partner currently had a steady partner (0=no, 1=yes).

Type of union of the ex-partner. If their ex-partners were currently in a relationship, respondents were asked whether their ex-partners had a "steady partner, but not living together or married" (i.e., LAT), was "living together unmarried" (i.e., cohabitation) or was "married". We recoded the responses into three dummy variables indicating whether the ex-partner had a LAT partner, a cohabiting partner, or a spouse, with "no partner" as the reference category.

Biological child of respondent and current partner. Repartnered respondents were asked whether they "had or adopted children with [their] current partner" (0=no, 1=yes). We assigned respondents without a current partner "0" on this variable.

Stepchildren of respondent. Repartnered respondents indicated whether their current partner had children from a previous relationship (0=no, 1=yes). We, again, assigned respondents without a current partner "0" on this variable.

Biological child of ex-partner and ex-partner's new partner. Respondents were asked if their "ex-partner and his/her new partner had or adopted children" (0=no, 1=yes). We assigned ex-partners without a current partner "0" on this variable.

Stepchildren of ex-partner. Respondents were asked whether "the new partner of [the] ex-partner has children from a previous relationship" (0=no, 1=yes). We assigned ex-partners without a current partner "0" on this variable.

Child's residence arrangements. Respondents were asked where the focal child mostly resided: "with me", "with my ex-partner", or "with both (approximately) equal". We coded these responses into dichotomous variables measuring whether the child resides with the respondent or with the ex-partner, with shared residence ("with both (approximately) equal") as the reference category.

Parental Relationship Quality. Respondents rated the quality of the respective relationship with their ex-partner, their current partner, and that between the current partner and the ex-partner on a scale from 1 (*very poor*) to 10 (*excellent*). Note that the variables capturing the relationship quality with the current partner and between the current partner and ex-partner depend on the respondent having a current partner. For the analyses of the ex-partner's presence at the child's birthday (i.e., for the total sample), we assigned respondents without a partner the respective mean on these variables. This means that the effect of the dummy for repartnering (see above) refers to the difference between respondents without a partner and repartnered respondents with average relationship qualities. The effect of the mean-imputed "relationship quality" variables refers to respondents with a new partner only, when a variable for repartnering is included (Poortman & Kalmijn, 2002).

4.3.4 Measures of Control Variables

We control for various (social-demographic) factors that might influence who attends the child's birthday. Following previous studies on family rituals (or parental involvement in general), we control for, for example, parents' age and education levels and the geographical distance between the households of both former partners (e.g., Bakker et al., 2015; Costa, 2014; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2015).

Child's age. The child's age is important to control for as (joint) birthday celebrations might be less relevant for older children. The age of the focal child is measured in years.

Child's and respondent's gender. The gender of the respondent and the focal child were both coded with a dummy variable, with "male" as the reference category.

Respondent's and ex-partner's level of education. Respondents indicated, respectively, their and their ex-partner's highest attained level of education on a scale from 1 (*incomplete elementary school*) to 10 (*post-graduate education*). We treated these measures as quasi-continuous, as alternative specifications yielded similar results in the analyses.

Geographical distance between the respondent's and ex-partner's households. The distance between parents' homes might be a constraint for attending the child's birthday. Respondents indicated the travel time (in minutes) from their home to that of their ex-partners for a typical one-way journey. Values exceeding 600 were recoded to a maximum of 600 to prevent exceedingly large values from having too much influence on the results.

Former union type. This variable indicates whether the respondent and the ex-partner were previously cohabiting (0) or married (1).

Refreshment. This variable indicates whether the response came from the main sample (0) or the refreshment sample (1) (see above).

Table 4.1 presents descriptive statistics for all independent and control variables, by total sample and by repartnered sample.

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics of independent and control variables, by sample

	Total sample			Repartnered sample		
	M	**Range**	**Sd**	**M**	**Range**	**Sd**
Independent variables						
Repartnering respondent	.62	0-1	[a]		-	
Respondent type of union						
No partner	.38	0-1	[a]		-	
LAT	.23	0-1	[a]	.37	0-1	[a]
Cohabiting	.25	0-1	[a]	.41	0-1	[a]
Married	.14	0-1	[a]	.22	0-1	[a]
Repartnering ex-partner	.73	0-1	[a]	.74	0-1	[a]
Ex-partner type of union						
No partner	.27	0-1	[a]	.26	0-1	[a]
LAT	.25	0-1	[a]	.25	0-1	[a]
Cohabiting	.33	0-1	[a]	.34	0-1	[a]
Married	.15	0-1	[a]	.15	0-1	[a]
Biological child of respondent and current partner	.10	0-1	[a]	.16	0-1	[a]
Stepchildren of respondent	.38	0-1	[a]	.61	0-1	[a]
Biological child of ex-partner and ex-partner's new partner	.12	0-1	[a]	.13	0-1	[a]
Stepchildren of ex-partner	.45	0-1	[a]	.44	0-1	[a]
Child's residence arrangements						
Shared residence	.32	0-1	[a]	.33	0-1	[a]
With respondent	.49	0-1	[a]	.44	0-1	[a]
With ex-partner	.19	0-1	[a]	.23	0-1	[a]
Relationship quality with ex-partner	5.66	1-10	2.42	5.54	1-10	2.36
Relationship quality with new partner	8.26	1-10	0.85	8.28	1-10	1.08
Relationship quality between new partner and ex-partner	5.11	1-10	1.96	5.23	1-10	2.47
Control variables						
Child's age	13.24	3-24	3.68	13.06	3-23	3.65
Child's gender	.49	0-1	[a]	.49	0-1	[a]
Respondent's gender	.64	0-1	[a]	.61	0-1	[a]
Highest education respondent	6.89	1-10	1.76	6.94	1-10	1.73
Highest education ex-partner	6.18	1-10	2.18	6.20	1-10	2.18
Distance between household of focal parent and ex-partner (minutes)	24.60	0-600	54.92	24.56	0-600	47.22
Former union type	.72	0-1	[a]	.74	0-1	[a]
Refreshment sample	.26	0-1	[a]	.28	0-1	[a]
$N_{respondents}$	2,451			1,524		
$N_{former\ couples}$	2,134			1,374		

Note: [a]Standard deviations not presented for dichotomous variables. *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 2 (2015/6).

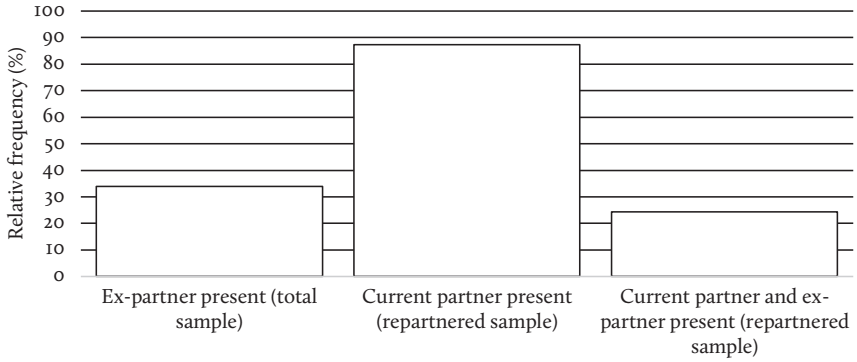
4.3.5 Analytical Strategy

We, first, describe the presence of the ex-partner, the current partner, and their joint presence using descriptive statistics. To test the hypotheses about relationship quality and family structure, we used linear probability models (LPM). We did not opt for multinomial logistic regression as our dependent variables are not mutually exclusive categories with a common base. This is because we were interested in, for instance, what predicts the presence of the ex-partner, not what predicts "only the ex-partner being present, and not the current partner". Furthermore, LPM, unlike logistic regression, allows for comparisons of coefficients across models. We also ran all models as logistic regression models, which yielded the same conclusions. For analyzing the ex-partner's presence we used the total sample. We used the repartnered sample for analyzing the current partner's presence and joint presence. We estimated two models for every analysis. For analyzing the ex-partner's presence, model 1 includes the dummy variables for repartnering, and model 2 uses the categorical type-of-union variables. In the analyses of the current partner's presence and joint presence, models 3 and 5, respectively, include the respondent's type of union and the dummy variable for repartnering of the ex-partner, whereas models 4 and 6, respectively, include the categorical type-of-union variables for the respondent and ex-partner. We clustered the standard errors of all models on the level of the divorced/dissolved union to account for possible dependencies between observations due to the partial multi-actor design (see Rogers, 1993).

4.4 RESULTS

4.4.1 Descriptive findings

Figure 4.1: Relative frequencies of ex-partner's and current partner's presence at the child's last birthday, by group.



We, first, describe who was present at the child's last birthday. Figure 4.1 shows that 34.0% of all respondents celebrated the child's last birthday with the ex-partner. 87.3% of repartnered respondents celebrated the child's birthday together with their current partner. In 24.4% of cases were both the ex-partner and current partner jointly present at the child's birthday. Additional analyses among the "repartnered" sample (not shown) show that 7.9% of respondents celebrated the child's birthday "alone" (without either the ex-partner or current partner). 4.8% celebrated the child's birthday only with the ex-partner and 62.9% did so only with the current partner. Taken together with our explanations in the Data section, these findings imply that though most parents do celebrate their respective children's birthdays after divorce, they usually do so without their ex-partner. Next, we systematically explore the factors related to the presence of the ex-partner, current partner as well as their joint presence at the child's last birthday.

4.4.2 Presence of the Ex-partner

Table 4.2 shows the results of two linear probability models estimating the probability of the ex-partner's presence at the child's last birthday.

Table 4.2: Summary of linear probability models predicting the ex-partner's presence at child's last birthday (N=2,451)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Repartnering respondent (ref. = no partner)	-0.07***	0.02		
Respondent type of union (ref. = no partner)				
LAT			-0.04[b]	0.03
Cohabiting			-0.08***	0.03
Married			-0.11***	0.03
Repartnering ex-partner (ref. = no partner)	-0.09***	0.03		
Ex-partner type of union (ref. = no partner)				
LAT			-0.04[c]	0.03
Cohabiting			-0.11***	0.03
Married			-0.11***	0.03
Biological child of respondent and current partner	-0.06	0.03	-0.03	0.03
Stepchildren of respondent	-0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.02
Biological child of ex-partner and ex-partner's new partner	-0.08***	0.03	-0.06*	0.03
Stepchildren of ex-partner	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.02
Child's residence arrangements (ref. = shared residence)				
With respondent	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02
With ex-partner	-0.06*[a]	0.03	-0.05*[a]	0.03
Relationship quality with ex-partner	0.08***	0.01	0.07***	0.03
Relationship quality with new partner	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
Relationship quality between new partner and ex-partner	0.02***	0.01	0.02***	0.01
Control variables				
Child's age	0.01***	0.01	0.01***	0.01
Child's gender	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Respondent's gender	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Highest education respondent	0.02*	0.01	0.01*	0.01
Highest education ex-partner	0.02***	0.01	0.02*	0.04
Distance between household of focal parent and ex-partner (minutes)	-0.00**	0.00	-0.00*	0.00
Former union type	-0.08**	0.02	-0.07**	0.02
Refreshment sample	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Intercept	-0.02***	0.02	-0.02***	0.02
R^2	.25		.26	

[a]The difference between residence with respondent and residence with ex-partner is statistically significant (p< .05). [b]The difference between LAT and marriage is statistically significant (p< .01). [c]The differences between LAT and cohabitation/marriage are statistically significant (p< .05). *Note*: Robust standard errors clustered on the level of the former household. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands wave 2.

Model 1 shows that, as expected (see H1a), repartnering of the focal parent and the ex-partner reduced the probability of the ex-partner being present at the child's birthday. In model 2, we tested if these effects differ between marriage, cohabitation, and LAT. For both the focal parent and ex-partner the effects follow the expected order, with marriage having the strongest negative effect, followed by cohabitation, and, lastly, LAT. However, compared to being single, the effect of LAT was not statistically significant, while those of cohabitation and marriage were. Additionally, for the focal parent, the difference between LAT and marriage was statistically significant and for the ex-partner that between LAT and marriage or cohabitation.

Our expectations regarding the presence of (step)children (see H1c) were partly confirmed. In models 1 and 2, we found a statistically significant negative effect of the ex-partner having biological children, but not of having stepchildren. The respondent having (step)children, however, did not statistically significantly affect the ex-partner's presence.

Considering the child's residence arrangement, we expected shared residence to be associated with a higher probability of the ex-partner's presence (H2a). However, not shared residence but residence with ex-partner stands out in that this arrangement reduces the probability of the ex-partner's presence compared to shared residence and compared to residence with focal parent. Residence with the focal parent, compared to shared residence, did not reduce the probability of the ex-partner being present.

We found that relationship qualities influence the ex-partner's presence, but different from how we expected. As expected (see H3a and H3c), models 1 and 2 show that the better the focal parent's relationship with the ex-partner, and the better the relationship between the ex-partner and the current partner, the more likely that the ex-partner was present at the child's birthday. Contrary to our expectations (see H3b), there was no statistically significant effect of the focal parent's relationship quality with the current partner. Additionally, the child's age and the respondent's and ex-partner's education level are positively related to the ex-partner's presence, while previous marriage (compared to cohabitation) and increased geographical distance reduced the probability of the ex-partner's presence.

4.4.3 Presence of the Current Partner

Table 4.3 presents two linear probability models estimating the probability of the current partner being present at the child's birthday.

Table 4.3: Summary of linear probability models predicting the current partner's presence of the child's last birthday (N=1,524)

	Model 3		Model 4	
	B	SE	B	SE
Respondent type of union (ref. = LAT)				
Cohabiting partner	0.19***	0.02	0.19***	0.02
Married	0.19***	0.02	0.19***	0.02
Repartnering ex-partner (ref. = no partner)	0.07**	0.02		
Ex-partner type of union (ref. = no partner)				
LAT			0.08**	0.03
Cohabiting			0.07*	0.03
Married			0.04	0.03
Biological child of respondent and current partner	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.03
Stepchildren of respondent	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.02
Biological child of ex-partner and ex-partner's new partner	-0.05	0.03	-0.03	0.03
Stepchildren of ex-partner	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Child's residence arrangements (ref. = shared residence)				
With respondent	0.01	0.02	0.11	0.22
With ex-partner	-0.07*[a]	0.03	-0.07**[a]	0.03
Relationship quality with ex-partner	-0.01*	0.01	-0.12*	0.05
Relationship quality with new partner	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Relationship quality between new partner and ex-partner	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Control variables				
Child's age	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.03
Child's gender	-0.21	0.17	-0.20	0.17
Respondent's gender	-0.01	0.22	-0.01	0.22
Highest education respondent	-0.01	0.05	-0.02	0.05
Highest education ex-partner	-0.01	0.04	-0.01	0.04
Distance between household of focal parent and ex-partner (minutes)	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Former union type	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Refreshment sample	-0.00	0.02	-0.00	0.02
Intercept	0.72***	0.09	0.72***	0.09
R^2	.10		.10	

Notes: [a]The difference between residence with the respondent and residence with the ex-partner is statistically significant (p< .05). *Note*: Robust standard errors clustered on the level of the former household. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands wave 2.

Regarding repartnering, the results confirmed our expectation that married and cohabiting current partners have higher probabilities of being present at the child's birthday than LAT parents – the difference between cohabitation and marriage was, however, not statistically significant. Model 3 additionally shows that the current partner is more likely to be present when the ex-partner of the respondent is repartnered. Regarding the effects of the ex-partner's type of union, model 4 shows that the ex-partner having a cohabiting or LAT partner increased the probability of the current partner being present (compared to being single), whereas being married did not. Contrary to H1c, the presence of (step)children did not affect the current partner's presence.

Sole residence of the child with the ex-partner stands out in models 3 and 4, as it reduces the probability of the current partner being present, compared to shared residence, as well as residence with the focal parent. Contrary to our expectations (see H2b), we found no statistically significant effect for residence with the focal parent vis-à-vis shared residence.

Additionally, we found that the better the relationship quality between the focal parent and ex-partner, the less probable it is that the current partner was present at the child's last birthday. We found no statistically significant effect of the focal parent's relationship quality with the current partner or of the relationship quality between the current partner and the ex-partner, contrary to H3b/c. None of the control variables statistically significantly affected the outcome.

4.4.4 Joint Presence of Ex-partner and Current Partner

Lastly, Table 4.4 presents the outcomes of two linear probability models estimating their joint presence.

Table 4.4: Summary of linear probability models predicting the ex-partner's and current partner's joint presence at child's last birthday (N=1,524)

	Model 5		Model 6	
	B	**SE**	**B**	**SE**
Respondent type of union (ref. = LAT)				
Cohabiting partner	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Married	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03
Repartnering ex-partner (ref. = no partner)	0.02	0.03		
Ex-partner type of union (ref. = no partner)				
LAT			0.07	0.04
Cohabiting			-0.01	0.03
Married			-0.00	0.04
Biological child of respondent and current partner	-0.04	0.03	-0.04	0.03
Stepchildren of respondent	-0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.02
Biological child of ex-partner and ex-partner's new partner	-0.10**	0.03	-0.08**	0.03
Stepchildren of ex-partner	-0.04	0.03	-0.05	0.03
Child's residence arrangements (ref. = shared residence)				
With respondent	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03
With ex-partner	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.03
Relationship quality with ex-partner	0.04***	0.01	0.04***	0.01
Relationship quality with new partner	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Relationship quality between new partner and ex-partner	0.04***	0.01	0.04***	0.01
Control variables				
Child's age	0.01*	0.01	0.01*	0.01
Child's gender	-0.03	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Respondent's gender	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Highest education respondent	0.01*	0.01	0.01*	0.01
Highest education ex-partner	0.01*	0.01	0.01*	0.01
Distance between household of focal parent and ex-partner (minutes)	-0.00***	0.01	-0.00***	0.01
Former union type	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.03
Refreshment sample	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Intercept	-0.41***	0.10	-0.41***	0.10
R2	.25		.25	

[a]The difference between residence with the ex-partner and residence with the respondent is statistically significant (p<.05). [b]The difference between LAT and cohabitation/marriage is statistically significant (p<.05). *Note*: Robust standard errors clustered on the level of the former household. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands wave 2.

In neither model did the focal parent's or the ex-partner's union type affect the probability of joint presence. Regarding our expectations about having (step) children, models 5 and 6 show that the ex-partner having a biological child reduces the probability of joint presence, whereas having a stepchild does not. Congruent with all previous models, the respondent having (step)children with the current partner did not affect joint presence.

Our expectation that joint presence is most common in shared vis-à-vis sole residence was not met – in neither model did sole-residence of the child with either biological parent affect the probability of joint presence. Note that, though not hypothesized, we did find a statistically significant negative effect for residence of the child with the ex-partner, compared to residence with the focal parent, in models 5 and 6 ($b=-0.09$, $p<.05$, not shown in Table 4.4).

Models 5 and 6 show that the better the focal parent's relationship with the ex-partner, and the better the relationship between the ex-partner and the current partner, the more likely joint presence is. Again, the relationship quality with the current partner had no statistically significant effect on the outcome. Of the control variables, the child's age and both parent's education levels positively related to joint presence, while the respondent being previously married (compared to cohabiting) with the ex-partner and geographical distance reduced joint presence.

4.4.5 Additional Analyses and Robustness Checks

Though previous, related, literature on (step)parents' postdivorce involvement with their (step)children paints an inconclusive picture regarding gender differences (e.g., Koster et al., 2021; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2015), we nonetheless explored the effect of gender in more detail by estimating separate linear probability models for men and women and testing for statistically significant differences (using "suest" in Stata; see Appendix Table B.1). To the extent that we found differences between men and women, they referred to the presence of the ex-partner. First, the effect of the repartnering of the ex-partner was more strongly negative for men. Second, the negative effect of the respondent having biological children with the current partner only applied to men. We observed almost the mirror image of this in the negative effect of the ex-partner having a biological child or stepchild, which was more strongly negative for women (i.e., when the ex-partner was male). Our interpretation of these findings is that repartnering plays a stronger role for women than men when it comes to no longer celebrating the child's birthday together with the ex-partner, whereas for men, this is only so when they also have new biological or stepchildren after repartnering.

We performed several robustness checks. First, we restricted the sample to minor children, as birthday celebrations with (step)parents might be less relevant for young adults. The findings for these analyses were similar to the ones presented in the paper. Second, as having (step)children and repartnering are logically associated, we calculated each model by including only either the repartnering or (step)children variables before computing the "full" models presented in this paper. The only substantial difference compared to the full models was that, without controlling for focal parent's union type, the effect of the focal parent having biological children with the current partner on the probability of the current partner's presence was statistically significant ($b=0.03$, $p<.05$). Third, we controlled for parents' work hours (i.e., potential work-family conflict) and religiosity (i.e., family norms); both were unrelated to birthday attendance. Lastly, to rule out bias from dependency between the responses from both former partners even after clustering standard errors, we randomly included only one observation from each former household. This did not yield different results than those presented in the paper.

4.5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Family rituals serve vital functions, such as showing that one cares about one another. This is particularly so for children's birthdays – a family ritual that children and parents alike frequently look forward to celebrating (Costa, 2014; Pett et al., 1992). After divorce, it is ambiguous who practices family rituals together – because of the different types of parental figures (i.e., biological and cohabiting or LAT stepparents) and the advent of newer postdivorce residence arrangements (e.g., shared residence). This study contributed to the limited prior research by investigating with whom divorced parents celebrated their children's last birthday: the ex-partner, the current partner, or jointly with both. To our knowledge, this study is the first large-scale, quantitative, study investigating how these more recent and emergent types of postdivorce families practice family rituals like birthdays.

We found that family rituals in postdivorce families mostly concern the new family: only 30% of parents celebrated their child's birthday with their ex-partner, but nearly 90% did so with their current partner. About 25% celebrated the birthday jointly with both. For the majority of divorced parents, celebrating the child's birthday with the current partner – the child's stepparent – may be the "default" (Costa, 2014). This does not mean that a substantial portion of parents does not celebrate the child's birthday at all: in most cases, both parents did – just separately from each other. Also after divorce, birthday celebrations are nearly-universal family rituals (see Costa, 2014).

Parents' new family context proved critical for understanding who celebrates the child's birthday together (Braithwaite et al., 1998). The tendency to celebrate the child's birthday without the ex-partner was strongest when parents had a new partner and biological or stepchildren with him or her – showing that the advent of a new family shifts parents' focus away from their old family (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Costa, 2014; Whiteside, 1989). The effect of repartnering differed between relationship types: married and cohabiting partners were more likely to be present at the child's birthday than LAT partners. This shows that the more formalized parents' current unions are, the more likely that they practice family rituals with the new than the old family. Our additional analyses showed that the effects of repartnering of the ex-partner and that of having biological children with the current partner applied particularly to men, whereas the effects of the ex-partner having biological children or stepchildren applied particularly to women. This may imply that mothers more readily shift to practicing family rituals without their ex-partners (i.e., already upon repartnering), than fathers (i.e., only when also having children with the new partner).

Another major finding is that parent's willingness to interact with each other is an important precondition for who is present at the child's birthday. The better the quality of relationships between the members of the households of the child's two biological parents, especially between the former partners, the more likely that the ex-partner, and that the ex-partner and current partner are jointly present at the child's birthday (see Costa, 2014). Interestingly, the current partner's presence was negatively affected by the quality of the relationship between the biological parents, suggesting that parents may facilitate the stepparent (i.e., the current partner) being more involved when they are not on good terms with their ex-partner. To our knowledge, this effect has not been mentioned regarding family rituals, but aligns with findings from research on interparental relationships in stepfamilies (Hornstra et al., 2020). Notably, the quality of the relationship with the current partner was unrelated to the current partner's presence at the child's birthday. This may be a result of celebrating together with the current partner being the default, which is not dependent on relationship quality, or a consequence of our respondents having high relationship qualities with their current partners, with little variation.

Our last major finding is that living together with the child, by offering structural opportunities for engagement and bonding, may, par excellence, create a new family that practices family rituals together: current partners who reside with the child and the focal parent are more likely to be present at the child's birthday than those who do not. When looking at the ex-partner's

presence, the role of structural opportunities is less clear. Besides parents who opted for shared residence perhaps having stronger preferences to celebrate birthdays together with their ex-partner (Bakker et al., 2015), we assumed that sole residence would entail fewer opportunities for non-resident parents to be involved, compared to shared residence. Although effects differed between models, we found support for our hypothesis that the ex-partner is less likely to be present in case of sole residence vis-à-vis shared residence, but only when the ex-partner is the resident parent (and not the focal parent). While we are, from a theoretical perspective, unsure about why this effect does not seem to apply when the focal parent is the resident parent, there could be several empirical explanations for this finding, such as recall bias and social desirability vis-à-vis birthday celebrations. For example, when the child lives with the ex-partner of the responding focal parent, respondents might be more inclined to admit or recall that they celebrated the birthday without the ex-partner. We also assumed that shared residence would increase joint presence. This was not the case, challenging the assumption that shared residence facilitates joint family rituals (Bakker et al., 2015; Smart & Neale, 1999).

Our results need to be interpreted with some caveats in mind. First, as we used cross-sectional data, we cannot make causal claims. For example, the relationship quality with the ex-partner might be lower because of his or her lack of willingness to jointly practice family rituals. Future research would benefit from using panel data. Second, our analytical sample is by definition restricted to parents who celebrated their child's last birthday. Although the parents who did not celebrate might have had practical reasons for doing so (e.g., being ill), it could also indicate that they are less involved in their children's lives, possibly limiting the generalizability of our results. Studying the reasons why parents do (not) celebrate their child's birthday would be based on different theoretical notions which are beyond the scope of the present study. For example, it seems plausible that the strength of the parent-child relationship would be a key factor in determining whether parents and their children decide to celebrate the child's birthday together. We encourage further research into this understudied aspect of family rituals. Third, our sample was somewhat selective in terms of, amongst others, socioeconomic status, urbanization, and age, which might limit generalizability. Fourth, our findings regarding the different union types (LAT, cohabitation, and remarriage) might be confounded by the respective length of the relationship as LAT relationships are, for example, usually the first step before cohabitation. As NFN includes no information on the length of parents' new relationship, our findings might at least partially reflect relationship duration. Fifth, we could not account for the quality of the

relationship between the different child-(step)parent dyads, as this information is not contained in NFN. Future research should consider this, as the quality of the child-parent relationship might be an important determinant of who attends birthdays. Lastly, though we controlled for major sources of logistical reasons vis-à-vis being present at the child's birthday (e.g., illness, work, and geographical distance), we cannot entirely rule out the role of logistical reasons for (not) being present at the child's birthday.

Overall, this study shows that nearly every child's birthday in postdivorce families is celebrated, but most biological parents do not celebrate children's birthdays together. Parents' loyalties appear to shift to the new family, especially when the relationship with the ex-partner is strained. Structural opportunities for access to the child (such as coresidence) as well as relationship qualities and structural aspects of parents' new relationship seem to matter for with whom the child's birthday is celebrated after divorce. Given that it is rather the new than the ex-partner with whom the birthday is celebrated, an open question remains whether this is in the interest of the child. Limited prior research suggests that children define their families more inclusively (Castrén & Widmer, 2015), and want both of their parents present at family events (Zartler, 2014); our findings may reflect parents' efforts to reify what should constitute their new families (Whiteside, 1989). For the child, celebrating together with parents who do not get along with each other may be stressful and disappointing, but so might be having two separate birthdays (see Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). Given the importance of family rituals throughout the life course, we encourage researchers to investigate family rituals and the consequences for child wellbeing.

Chapter 5

ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH AMBIGUITY IN STEPFAMILIES

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This chapter is joint work with Ulrike Zartler (University of Vienna). The authors jointly developed the core ideas of this chapter and the underlying data collection. Fang wrote the main part of the manuscript and conducted the data collection and the analyses. Zartler substantially contributed to the manuscript.

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

High rates of divorce, repartnering, and multipartner fertility imply that adolescents commonly acquire new parental figures, step- and half-siblings, and step-relatives (King, 2009). Stepfamilies are nowadays most often formed after divorce, representing complex processes that require reorganization of the relations between children and parents (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). In the case of parental repartnering, relationships with new stepparents and step-relatives must be forged and negotiated. Such processes of reorganization are often stressful (Amato, 2010), which is partly rooted in their ambiguous nature (Jensen, 2021).

Ambiguity – perceptions of unclarity about relations within families – is considered taxing. It can block cognition, coping, and stress management, and can catalyze a wide range of negative consequences for parents and children (Boss, 2004). For example, young people living in stepfamilies might be unclear about how to relate to their biological parents and relatives as well as to their newly acquired stepparents and step-relatives (Boss, 2007; Jensen, 2021), which can diminish their well-being. Ambiguity can also further incongruent views of family membership (i.e., boundary ambiguity) or roles (i.e., role ambiguity), which can associate with negative outcomes for individuals, such as stress, reduced feelings of belongingness, or lower parental involvement (Brown & Manning, 2009; Stewart, 2005).

Whereas it has oftentimes been taken for granted that many family relationships in stepfamilies are ambiguous (Arat et al., 2021; van Houdt, 2021a; van Houdt et al., 2020), only a few studies assess which family relationships are perceived as ambiguous, when and why that occurs, and how ambiguity is dealt with (see Jensen, 2021). This is in contrast to the plethora of studies investigating other pertinent phenomena in stepfamilies, like ambivalence or the development of bonds between stepparents and stepchildren (Amato, 2010; Jensen, 2021). The few studies that deal with ambiguity more concretely usually investigate ambiguity from parents' (Afifi & Keith, 2004; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006) or from relatively young (10-14 year-old) children's perspectives (Castrén & Widmer, 2015; Stewart, 2005). However, adolescents' experiences with ambiguity might differ from those of younger children, for example, because adolescence is a life phase in which reflections about identity, personality, and family life become salient, or because adolescents gain independence from their parents.

In this study, we give in-depth insight into adolescents' experiences with ambiguity in postdivorce stepfamilies. We aim to answer three research questions: 1) which family relationships do adolescents experience as ambiguous, 2) how does ambiguity emerge and develop, and 3) what strategies do adolescents develop to deal with ambiguity. Our study is based on data collected in the

Netherlands that, like other Western European countries, has a moderate to high level of divorce and, like the Nordic countries, is rather individualistic and liberal in its family values (Kalmijn & Saraceno, 2008). Therefore, postdivorce stepfamilies are common.

5.2 BACKGROUND

5.2.1 Family Stress, Ambiguous Loss, and Ambiguous Gain

The concept of ambiguity is most directly related to family stress theory (Hill, 1949) and the Contextual Model of Family Stress (CMFS; Dahl & Boss, 2020). Both approaches seek to explain how families and the individuals they are composed of respond to stress exerted on the family system. They consider different types of stressors, one of which being ambiguous stressors (Jensen, 2021). Ambiguous stressors are considered taxing as they are difficult or even impossible to resolve, and have wide-ranging negative (psychological) implications for individuals and families (Dahl & Boss, 2020).

Two types of ambiguous stressors are commonly distinguished. First, ambiguous loss denotes a relational loss imbued with uncertainty and unclear facts (Dahl & Boss, 2020): loved ones (more or less) suddenly vanish (Boss, 2002, p. 39), with little or no clarity about the underlying circumstances. Perceiving ambiguous loss requires a (strong) emotional attachment to the person lost so that the loss causes grief (Dahl & Boss, 2020). It can be subdivided into physical (type 1) and psychological ambiguous loss (type 2). Type 1 refers to a loved one being physically absent, but psychologically present: family members do not know where their loved ones are, or if they are even alive (e.g., Boss, 2004, 2016), which might occur when loved ones suddenly break off contact, become estranged, or are missed-in-action (Boss, 2002). Type 2 loss occurs when a family member is physically present, but psychologically absent, for example when family members suffer from memory loss or personality changes induced by chronic illnesses (Boss & Couden, 2002).

The second type of ambiguous stressor is ambiguous gain, which denotes a relational acquisition that entails unclarity and unclear facts (Jensen, 2021). Ambiguous gain, too, can be subdivided into two types: Type 1 denotes a physical, but not mental, gain of a family member, and is theorized to primarily occur in stepfamilies, for example when children gain a stepparent, but do not consider them as such (Jensen, 2021). Type 2 ambiguous gain denotes a situation where a relative is acquired mentally but not physically, which could occur when individuals learn about their own adoption: they suddenly gain new (biological) parents, even if there is no physical engagement with them. As

such, ambiguous gain might occur if family members lack (clear) facts or fail to co-create emotional connections (Jensen, 2021).

Ambiguous loss or gain are no singular and temporary events. On the contrary, ambiguity rather has to be considered a characteristic or dimension of interpersonal relationships (see e.g., Arat et al., 2021). Thus, in the following, we depart from the stressor terminology and more holistically speak of ambiguous relationships or ambiguity. In that vein, ambiguous loss and gain are conceptualized as subdimensions of the overarching phenomenon. We define ambiguous relationships as imbued with uncertainty or unclear facts resulting from relational changes to the family system – either of psychological or physical departure.

5.2.2 Ambiguity in Stepfamilies

The term ambiguity has often been used to describe family relationships in postdivorce stepfamilies (e.g., Arat et al., 2021; Gibson, 2013), as divorce and repartnering represent substantial changes to the family – entrances or departures – which children often lack clear information about. Why exactly some relational changes would be experienced as ambiguous and others not, is unclear (Jensen, 2021). Many studies assume that the absence of societal norms about stepfamily relationships on the macro level causes ambiguity (i.e., within stepfamilies/between individuals (e.g., Arat et al., 2021; Gibson, 2013; van Houdt et al., 2020). Whereas (lacking) societal norms set the stage for how (stepfamily) relationships unfold, per family stress theory and the CMFS, it seems plausible that whether or not a relational loss or acquisition is experienced as ambiguous depends on micro-level aspects like the ways individuals react to such changes, and the extent to which they (are able to) reframe or create a relationship with the person in question (Jensen, 2021). Whereas empirical investigations of which conditions contribute to perceptions of ambiguity are largely absent (see Jensen, 2021), we, in the following, draw on extant studies on the relationship development in stepfamilies to guide theorizing about the conditions under which adolescents might experience relational gains or losses in stepfamilies as ambiguous.

Divorce itself can substantially affect parent-child relationships (e.g., Cole & Cole, 1999), to the point where the common household and ensuing depreciation of contact with one or both parents can lead to this change being experienced as ambiguous by children (Afifi & Keith, 2004; Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Dahl & Boss, 2020). Children are usually strongly emotionally attached to their parents, so decreased contact and living in different households can cause grief and unclarity about how to relate to their parents (Allen, 2007; Betz

& Thorngren, 2006), especially when children are not given clear explanations for the situation, or if both parents convey contradictory accounts (Abetz & Wang, 2017).

Divorce and stepfamily formation can also affect adolescents' relationships with their biological relatives. Relatives often pick sides after divorce; parents may cease considering them family (Fang & Poortman, 2023), and stop facilitating contact with them or even undermine their relationship (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016). Thus, adolescents' relatives – for example their grandparents – might be mentally present in the form of memories but physically absent. Adolescents might not understand why the relationship has changed, and they might not obtain satisfactory clues from their parents or grandparents (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016), which can lead to perceptions of ambiguity.

Parents' repartnering and stepfamily formation per se might also induce ambiguity. Parents' attention might shift towards their new partner (and potential new step-relatives; Fang & Poortman, 2022), leaving children unclear about their parents' commitment to themselves, their place in their parents' life, and the conceptualization of their relationship with their parents (Emery & Dillon, 1994). Children often lack clear information about how their stepparent came into the picture, and may, thus, experience this acquisition as confusing (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). To lessen the ambiguity of such relational gains, Jensen (2021) speaks of the need for stepparents and stepchildren to actively co-create a shared reality, meaning that they engage in activities to get to know one another, and establish the facts about their relationship.

This recommendation dovetails with studies showing that stepparents and stepchildren must make concerted efforts to establish cordial interpersonal relationships (Ganong, Coleman, Sanner, & Berkley, 2022). Ganong and colleagues have identified numerous affinity seeking and affinity maintaining strategies used by stepparents to build relationships with their stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999, 2019), which involve stepparents spending time with their stepchildren and gaining their trust (Ganong et al., 2022). These strategies are only effective if children are receptive to them (Ganong et al., 2011). For adolescents, gaining a stepparent might especially be considered ambiguous when efforts to build a meaningful relationship fail or are not taken. They could also reject such efforts because they reject their stepparent or they want to show their disapproval of the new union (Ganong et al., 2011). In that case, stepparents and stepchildren would be hard-pressed to co-create or clarify any facts about their relationship. Ambiguity in relations with other step-relatives might be the result of similar mechanisms. For example, stepsiblings may be distant if they dislike each other from the start (Ganong, Sanner, et al., 2022), thus fail to

establish a meaningful connection (Landon et al., 2022), or perceive differential treatment by their (step)parents (Noller, 2005). Therefore, children might find it difficult to clarify unknowns about them.

5.3 DATA & METHOD

5.3.1 Data & Sample

This article is based on 30 semi-structured qualitative interviews with children of divorced parents, conducted in 2021 and 2022. The respondents were between 16 and 20 years old, had different-sex parents who had divorced at least three years previously, and, at the time of the interview, had at least one stepparent. All interviewees saw themselves as part of a stepfamily. Instead of imposing a specific stepfamily definition on respondents' narrations (Sanner et al., 2020), we asked for their subjective family constructions. We selected respondents to achieve a variation in gender, post-divorce residence arrangements, number of stepparents, presence of step- or half-siblings, and duration of the stepfamily bond (see Appendix Table C.1). The sample also varied in terms of educational background, and included respondents from urban and rural regions. The sample consists of 15 male and 15 female respondents. Respondents were part of diverse stepfamily constellations: 18 had two stepparents, 25 had stepsiblings, and nine had half-siblings. As is common in the Netherlands (Arat et al., 2021), some parents had been married, whereas others had cohabited. We approached potential respondents in several ways, namely via students at the first author's university, an organization for children with divorced parents (www.villapinedo.nl), and subsequent snowball sampling. The study was granted ethical soundness by the ethics board of the first author's university. In line with the guidelines of the ethics board, and the legal guidelines for scientific research in the Netherlands, we obtained informed consent from all interviewees for participation, recording, data storage, and the usage of quotes from pseudonymized interview transcripts. As all participants were at least 16 years old, it was not required to obtain consent from their parents. Interviewees were compensated with €20.

In light of COVID-19 related restrictions, we adopted a mixed-mode strategy to protect the respondents' and the researchers' health. During the first two months of the fieldwork (September and October 2021), respondents were asked to specify their preference for either a face-to-face interview (which was chosen by ten respondents) or an online interview (via Microsoft Teams, which was preferred by five interviewees). The offline interviews took place at the respondents' houses, public locations such as a quiet café, or a quiet room at

the first author's university. For the online interviews, respondents were asked to seek out a quiet place where they would not be disturbed. After the introduction of an "evening lockdown" in November 2021, we decided to conduct all further 15 interviews online. Regarding the richness narrations and the interview duration, we found no differences with regard to the interview mode (see e.g., Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

We used the same interview guide for offline and online interviews. All interviews started with the question "Who is part of your family?". This usually elicited a description of all mentioned people, as well as details of their family history. Subsequently, we asked follow-up questions about each mentioned family member, such as important memories or development of the relationship. Next, we asked whether there were any other people that had not been mentioned, also if they were not considered family members. If this was the case, we asked similar questions to get to know more about them. Subsequently, we aimed at gaining a greater understanding of the family context by asking about difficulties or benefits the respondents encountered with living in a stepfamily, significant memories they had of their family, and tips for children, young people, and parents living in stepfamilies. The interviews were conducted in Dutch by the first author, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and pseudonymized.

5.3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on the verbatim transcripts and aimed at respecting the respondents' frames of relevance. We used one of the main procedures of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017): the triphasic coding scheme comprising open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). We started by developing codes from multiple close readings of the data, and subsequently related them to categories at higher levels of abstraction, and examined how categories were (dis)similar and/or related. This offered a systematic, yet flexible, way of discovering meaning deeply grounded in data. During all phases, we wrote memos containing code notes and theoretical notes, and used (hand-drawn) diagrams to understand how different categories and parts of the data related.

We started with open coding, i.e., we coded the interviews line by line to grasp the core idea of each part of the interview, frequently using *in-vivo* codes (e.g., "It kinda feels weird" or "I really don't consider her part of the family"). Then, we compared these smaller analytical parts for their similarities and differences, first within one interview transcript and then between different transcripts. Through these constant comparisons, it became obvious that interviewees used

markedly different vernacular for different family relationships. Specifically, some family relationships were described with terms relaying uncertainty, unknowingness, usually coupled with expressions of confusion (e.g., "I don't know how to describe my relationship with [my stepmother]", "My relationship with [my stepfather] is just very difficult to grasp, very uncertain"), which we – based on our theoretical sensitization – expected to signal ambiguity. We, thus, preliminarily grouped these codes together under the category "potentially ambiguous relationships". In the subsequent steps, we paid special attention to this central phenomenon, and continued to constantly compare these relationships to those that were coded as being potentially not ambiguous.

Next, we applied axial coding, which entails exploring the connections between the categories and understanding how and under what circumstances ambiguous relationships developed, how they were perceived by the interviewees, and what the consequences were in terms of strategies. Thus, for each relationship identified as potentially ambiguous during the open coding, we reflected on the initial and intervening conditions, interactions and roles, intentions and functions, strategies and consequences, and actions or inactions. We contrasted these relationships with those we had identified as potentially not being ambiguous – by using such counterexamples, we were able to more clearly distinguish factors related to the emergence of ambiguous relationships from those which applied to interpersonal relationships in stepfamilies in general, or simply "negatively" experienced relationships.

Lastly, selective coding aimed at synthesizing the different categories that had been developed, elaborated, and mutually related into one cohesive narrative. We found that two key categories best explained the emergence of ambiguity, namely information and relationality. We identified three distinct strategies that interviewees used to deal with ambiguity: improving relationships, accepting ambiguity, and creating distance. Note that in the results section, words between quotation marks represent excerpts from the interviews.

5.4 RESULTS

The narratives of our interviewees centered around ambiguity they perceived vis-à-vis their stepparents, stepsiblings, and biological parents. Relationships with other (step)relatives, such as step-grandparents, were rarely perceived as ambiguous, as respondents did not consider these relationships meaningful enough to their lives. This highlights that ambiguity may only arise in relationships that are emotionally significant or evaluated as important enough to care about them. As we will explain in the following, however, not all emotionally meaningful relationships are prone to ambiguity, as additional

conditions need to be in place for ambiguity to arise. Therefore, relationships with, for example, biological siblings or halfsiblings, were usually not considered ambiguous.

Ambiguous relationships were characterized by respondents as being "unclear", "confusing", "strange", "hard to grasp", and "uncertain": "The relationship with [my stepmother] is just so confusing, I don't really understand what is going on and how I could even begin to describe our relationship. It's just all very unclear to me." [Int. 14].

We found that adolescents either did not consider step-relatives with whom the relationship was ambiguous their family members, or stated that said individuals were – per definition – their family members, but that they did not "feel" as such:

I really don't consider [my stepmother and stepsiblings] part of my family (…). Well, I guess by definition they are, but to me they really are not. How can I consider them family if I don't even know how to think about our relationship? [Int. 22]

Ambiguity was perceived as negative and undesirable. Respondents frequently bemoaned that ambiguity, as well as interaction with people with whom the relationship was ambiguous, made them feel uncomfortable, and elicited negative bodily sensations: "It just feels incredibly strange and awkward, every time I am around her [stepmother]. She's just a very strange person. It's like my stomach ties into a knot every time I am around her." [Int. 2]

In the following, we outline our findings regarding the main reasons and conditions for ambiguous relationships to emerge: a) information, comprising the subcategories of lack of information and conflicting information, and b) relationality, comprising the subcategories of character differences, character changes, and links between ambiguous relationships.

5.4.1 Reasons and Conditions Under Which Ambiguity Emerges

5.4.1.1 Information

One key reason for ambiguity was a lack of (clear) information. This applied to acquired stepfamily members, like stepparents or stepsiblings, thus representing ambiguous gain. Our respondents felt that both a lack of information about their new family members as well as conflicting information contributed to the emergence of ambiguity.

Lack of information

Respondents frequently characterized acquired stepfamily members as "strangers". They found it "weird", "awkward", "strange", and "confusing" to be suddenly confronted with new persons in their lives – or even living in their house – that they had not chosen for and whom they knew little about, which indicates the ambiguous nature of such a gain:

> I was thinking something like: so awkward, what is that guy doing here, there is a total stranger in our house! Before that, I only lived with my mother in that house and so I was thinking: I don't want anybody else to be here! [Int. 21]

Lack of information did not mean that respondents had no information whatsoever about an acquired family member, as they were aware of some key facts. Rather, respondents felt they lacked information that would be necessary to start co-creating a shared reality with the other person. In their words, they felt that they did not really know the other person, and lacked intimate knowledge about their hobbies, political opinions, likes, or dislikes:

> It's not like [my stepfather] is a total stranger. I mean I know that he's a man, his age and all that, but I just don't know him as a person if you know what I mean. Like, what makes him tick. That's just a big question mark. [Int. 6]

In some cases, respondents felt that they were provided incomplete information by either their biological parent or stepparent about how and when their relationship had started, for example when they had started dating. They found this confusing and felt that their parent or stepparent had something to hide:

> After the divorce, my stepfather came into the picture very quickly, actually literally a week after the divorce was he in the picture already and I really started wondering: what was their relationship before the divorce when she was still with my father? I always found that really strange. And my mother never explained this to me. [Int. 1]

Conflicting information

Besides receiving incomplete information, some respondents received contradictory information from multiple sources about the same person or situation, which they found difficult to reconcile, resulting in perceptions of ambiguity and confusion:

> My mother and [stepfather] told me different things about when they met, how their relationship started and all that. I honestly don't know whom or what to believe, like, agree on a version of the story already. Just super weird and confusing. [Int. 20]

Such contradictory information seemed to prevent respondents from constructing (or co-constructing) their own facts and considerations about an acquired family member. It confused respondents and, if already considerable time had elapsed, made them feel that it would be inappropriate for them to clarify such (oftentimes fundamental) issues "only now":

> I still don't know what or whom to believe. My dad says one thing and my stepmother another. It's been so long it also feels weird to only now ask them and try to get a straight answer. I don't know, it just feels like this is just how it's going to be. [Int. 6]

5.4.1.2 Relationality

Oftentimes, what contributed to perceptions of emerging and persisting ambiguity was relationality, referring to the way in which respondents evaluated and judged the character of the alter and how ambiguous relationships were seen to influence other family relationships. This applied to both gained and lost family members. Below, we outline the subcategories of relationality that emerged from the data: character differences, character changes, and links between ambiguous relationships.

Character Differences

Many respondents compared, for example, their stepparent's character and demeanor to their own, to those of previous stepparents, or of other family members. When the stepparent's character was "too different" from these reference points, respondents felt a lack of a fit, and perceptions of ambiguity emerged. For example, one respondent juxtaposed the relationship with her stepmother (which she perceived as ambiguous) with that with her stepfather (which she did not consider ambiguous):

> With my stepmother, the click just isn't there. She is a nice woman, I have a good relationship with her, but the click is just different than with my stepfather. My stepfather is a friend and, yeah, a sort of example for me, I do lots of things with him. I exercise a lot, I run a lot and bike a lot, and he introduced me to it, and then we

> started exercising together (…) With my stepmother it's different, I oftentimes feel uncomfortable around her. [Int. 25]

Respondents frequently compared their stepparent to an archetype they constructed based on imaginations about stepparents' desired behaviors and roles in the family system. This archetype did not resemble to the classic "wicked stepmother" stereotype, but addressed a very positively framed person, essentially, a stepparent who would join the family at an appropriate time and had a character that matched well with those of other family members. Ambiguity was especially perceived when there was a severe and – in their perspective – irremediable mismatch between this archetype and the stepparent they had acquired:

> I just keep comparing her to what I think a stepmother should do, and she's just not like that at all: just less nice and … I don't know, I always imagine what I would want a stepparent to be like and she's just nothing like that. [Int. 5]

> I guess we all have an idea of what we think a stepparent should or would be like. And I don't know, he's nothing like it. So, in a way I feel this barrier between us, which makes it feel really difficult to really get to know him and clarify our relationship. [Int. 8]

Regarding timing, many respondents bemoaned the "too sudden" entrance of their stepparents into their lives or the fast progression of their parents' new relationship, either after the one with their other biological parent or with a former stepparent:

> [My father] in the meantime had a new relationship and I immediately was like: I don't like you, you are the replacement of [my former stepmother]. My father really did not understand that I did not like her. I just could not relate to her, it was so, so awkward. [Int. 14]

The issue of timing also related to "too quick" coresidence with the stepparent:

> It's not like there was any tension, but it was just uncomfortable. There's suddenly somebody in your house whom you do know because you've seen her before, but all of a sudden, she is living with you and that makes it so definitive. (…) Again, it's not like he's not a nice person, it's not like there's any tension or that we're fighting, it's just uncomfortable. [Int. 25]

This quote highlights that an ambiguous relationship is not necessarily the opposite of a good relationship: respondents felt they could be on friendly terms with their stepparent, yet they still perceived the relationship as ambiguous.

Character Changes

Some respondents observed radical character changes in their biological parents, which contributed to perceptions of ambiguity, and were usually elicited by a) the biological parents' mental health problems or b) the stepparents' assumed influence on the biological parent. Biological parents' mental health problems were, for example, blamed on the aftereffects of divorce and stepfamily formation. Some respondents reported that their parents' personality changed due to related depressive symptoms, or due to seeing their ex-partners quickly forming a stepfamily whereas they themselves remained single. Respondents also perceived radical changes when their parents lost interest in their former hobbies. Resultingly, respondents felt confused: they experienced feelings of affection for their parents, but the observed personality changes made it difficult for them to express such affection: "It was so weird, he didn't feel like my father. I can't put it in other words, it was just so strange. It was almost as if I was sitting next to a sort of stranger." [Int. 23]. Another respondent whose father suffered from mental problems after divorce similarly lamented that: "It's like [my father's] body is here, but he, or at least who he was is not." [Int. 9].

Similarly, respondents also perceived ambiguity vis-à-vis their biological parent due to the assumed "bad influence" of their stepparent, who was in some cases claimed to change the biological parent in comprehensive and "unacceptable" ways:

> Back then he really wasn't focused on money at all, and now that he is together with her, he's extremely money-focused: everything has to be expensive and nice and big, that's just so different from how he used to be. That's so difficult to watch because I really feel like he is changing for the worse, it's like he's a different person now. I barely recognize him at this point. [Int. 22]

> She has just changed completely regarding her political views since she met him, she now believes in all that corona conspiracy bullshit. I find it hard to relate to her now, and to even know what our relationship is like. Everything has changed. [Int. 12]

Regardless of the reasons for character changes, important facts and characteristics of their parents suddenly changed. Respondents kept comparing

the status quo to what they were used to in the past, and deemed the change "too extreme" and unacceptable. In a way, the biological parent appeared to be physically present, but psychologically absent (at least in the way they had remembered them). The feeling that their parent "was there, but not really" had a negative effect on the respondents' well-being. Most reported feeling powerless in, for example, trying to improve their parents' mental health or "changing him/her back".

5.4.1.3 Links Between Ambiguous Relationships

For a few of our respondents, experiences of ambiguity in one relationship had the potential to elicit perceptions of ambiguity in other relationships, specifically concerning stepparents and their children (i.e., the stepsiblings). Specifically, some respondents who considered the relation to their stepparent ambiguous felt that such ambiguity spilled over to the relationship with their stepsibling. We found this to be the case when relationships were considered ambiguous due to the character of the stepparent deviating vastly from an archetype that respondents had constructed, or when the stepparent moved in quickly with the biological parent, and respondents were caught off guard by how fast their partnership progressed. Under such circumstances, these respondents felt unable to differentiate between these two relationships:

> [My stepmother and stepsister] moved in quickly with my dad, ridiculously quickly actually – I was really taken aback by that. I think both are horrible. I think [my stepmother] is a straight-up gold digger (…) and I have a hard time separating her daughter from her, I see her in her daughter. Her daughter, she is also just terrible, I can't help but I see her as a sort of queen and I just can't stand that. [No. 22]

> He is already so terrible for my mum, I don't understand our relationship. On some level, I understand that this should not affect my relationship with [my stepsister], but it just doesn't feel that way. It's just as if my judgement about [my stepsister] is affected, or clouded, by my relationship with [my stepfather]. [Int. 9]

These quotes point to ambiguous relationships perhaps not always being independent of each other: rather, they can be linked, can feed into one another, and may form chains of ambiguity. Perceptions of ambiguity might, thus, be a package deal.

5.4.2 Strategies to Manage Ambiguity

Respondents developed three strategies to manage ambiguity: a) improving relationships, b) accepting ambiguity, and c) creating distance.

5.4.2.1 Improving Relationships

The strategy of improving relationships was employed in a stepwise process to resolve perceptions of ambiguity, mostly vis-à-vis gained family members.

Step 1: Gathering information. In the first step, respondents made efforts to gather information about the person with whom the relationship was ambiguous: they attempted to comprehensively get to know, for example, their stepparent, and to obtain information about how the relationship between the stepparent and their biological parent had started and developed. This first step was often perceived as long and arduous, until missing information was obtained, or uncertainties eliminated:

> It is very difficult to really establish a relationship that just isn't there. It took me a year, a year and a half perhaps (…) during which I got to know more about him by having frequent conversations and really got to know him as a person. [Int. 16]

This quote illustrates that it was crucial for respondents to be able to look beyond the role of the respective person and get to know them better. Accordingly, frequent conversations co-created comprehensive knowledge about the person in question and their interpersonal relationship:

> I really tried to get to know my stepfather as a person, not just as his role. To see how he ticks, what he likes and dislikes, things like that. It took a while, but eventually I could see him as a person, like as who he is, which made my relationship much less unclear. [Int. 17]

Step 2: Co-creating a shared reality. If gathering information was successful, respondents tried to subsequently co-create a shared reality – and, in general, a better interpersonal relationship, using the information they had obtained. This step centered around establishing further rapport by finding common things to do together, mostly in the form of shared hobbies. This strategy was usually applied to gained family members, but one respondent described employing this strategy to deal with his ambiguously lost biological father:

> I now make sure to spend lots of time with my father, one-on-one. We don't have a lot of things in common, but we can always go and watch a football match (…). We can listen to music and talk about

> it, we also watch tv together. I am now trying to explicitly invest in our relationship because well, of how awkward it was. [Int. 12]

The strategy of co-creating a shared reality aims at mimicking the process of getting to know someone but was employed only months or even years after the first encounter. It was considered important to make this long process happen in an "organic", non-artificial way: "The most important thing is to keep an open mind and to be willing to get to know somebody but to definitely not force it. So don't try to do 'nice' things if nobody really cares for it." [Int. 7]

The success of this strategy necessarily hinged on reciprocity: the willingness of the alter to engage in co-creating a shared reality laid the basis for an improvement of the relationship. Many respondents did not consider this strategy feasible, as they had a "hunch" that spending additional time with a person who caused them emotional discomfort would not be successful. They assumed that their, for example, stepparent would not be interested in engaging in such activities, or that they could simply see no way in which the relationship could ever be different. Despite the selective ways in which our respondents applied this strategy, those who employed it felt that they managed to overcome ambiguity and, in some cases, even to establish a cordial relationship with the gained or lost family member.

5.4.2.2 Accepting Ambiguity

Strategies based on accepting ambiguity aimed at finding ways to "learn to live with" ambiguous relationships, as they supposedly would not change. This shows the sequentiality of strategies to manage ambiguity: if improving relationships was not deemed successful or feasible, two sub-strategies were applied (suppressing or reframing negative emotions and seeking professional help).

Suppressing or reframing negative emotions. "Learning to live with it" mostly took the form of ignoring or "swallowing" the negative emotions respondents felt when they had to interact with a family member with whom the relationship was ambiguous. This often went together with reframing ambiguity and negative emotions as a normal part of family relationships, and with feelings of resignation: "Uhm yeah, it is just the way it is, you have such weird relationships in any family, I think. I more try telling myself that, well, this is just the way things are." [Int. 18]

When applied to gained family members, such as stepparents, this strategy of suppressing or reframing negative emotions stemming from ambiguity was sometimes framed as an altruistic endeavor undertaken for the sake of the

happiness of the respondents' biological parents. Justifying their inaction vis-à-vis ambiguity by pointing out that the stepparent made their biological parent happy allowed respondents to find something positive in the negative emotions they were persistently experiencing:

> I try to be OK with it and accept the situation as it is because it's something I do for my mother, like: I do it for you because he makes you happy. So, I try to give her that feeling. For me, it's really more of a thing that I have to do it for my mother instead of that it makes me happy. [Int. 12]

Seeking professional help. Some respondents sought professional help (e.g., from a psychotherapist or life coach) to confront and eventually accept ambiguity. Only a minority of our respondents reported seeking professional help to deal with ambiguity – and oftentimes lasting negative psychological impacts from their parents' divorce – though those who did emphasized that they had considered it helpful in accepting ambiguous relationships:

> At some point, I just hit rock bottom and had to seek the help of a coach. It never got diagnosed, but I'm pretty sure there were months when I was depressed. (...) It really just went downhill. At some point I just couldn't deal with these emotions anymore. I just couldn't. [Int. 9]

The respondents who obtained such treatment reported that they were finally able to understand that they were not the "cause" of ambiguous family relationships. They emphasized that they now understood that every person has their unique "luggage" they carry around, and their luggage was negative emotions stemming from the consequences of their parents' divorce and ambiguous family relationships in their stepfamilies:

> I really got a new perspective on how we all have to deal with our own problems in the past, we all carry our own luggage, so to speak. And sometimes there's just nothing that you can do but to just accept it for what it is and try to not let it get to you. That's in general my biggest takeaway from therapy: learn to accept things. [Int. 7]

Understanding that other family members carried their own luggage allowed respondents to empathize and to connect with them in more satisfying ways. Ultimately, they could accept these relationships more easily for what they were – ambiguous – and they felt that the negative emotions deriving from such ambiguity were considerably lessened, though they were not completely

absent. However, despite the reduction of negative feelings by the application of these two sub-strategies, most respondents still tried to avoid confrontation with negative emotions and kept contact with family members with whom the relationship was ambiguous to a minimum.

5.4.2.3 Creating Distance

Strategies of creating distance aimed at evading ambiguity and the related negative emotions by mentally or physically removing oneself from situations and places where one would be exposed to ambiguity and the associated negative emotions and bodily sensations. Based on the data, we differentiate between mental and physical creation of distance.

Mental creation of distance. This sub-strategy was employed by respondents who shared a household with acquired stepparents or stepsiblings with whom the relationship was ambiguous. Respondents mentally subdivided their shared household into two zones, the first encompassing the shared areas of the house (e.g., the living room, kitchen, or bathroom), the second zone comprising the private parts of the house, which they considered as their space (e.g., their own room). Respondents adjusted their behavior in the shared areas to create as little friction as possible with their acquired family members. In the shared part of the house, they – often grudgingly – accepted the presence of acquired family members. Only in their private zones did they allow themselves to feel negative emotions stemming from ambiguity:

> [My sister and I] are both like: 'Downstairs, that's not our home', because that's where [our stepfather] always is. Only our rooms are our territory, where we can be ourselves, and downstairs that is just not our home. (…) On paper, the house belongs half to our mother and half to our stepfather. So, our own rooms are her part of the house and downstairs is his part of the house, which I avoid. [Int. 25]

In the part of the home they considered their own, respondents felt at ease, allowed themselves to be their authentic selves, and did not feel affected by the negative effects of ambiguity: those feelings stayed proverbially on the other side of the door. Splitting the household in this way, thus, allowed respondents to clearly distinguish between areas where they would be exposed to ambiguity and the negative emotions associated with it, and areas that would be untainted by such experiences. This also means that respondents who applied this strategy aimed at temporally limiting their exposure to the negative effects of ambiguity by minimizing the time they spent in the shared area of the house. Application of this strategy came with its problems and caused additional burdens: it

oftentimes led respondents to not feel at home in their own home, and made them feel like they had to be disingenuous because they were concealing parts of their identity in the shared parts of the house:

> I feel like I can't truly be myself outside of my own room. I definitely behave differently there, like I feel like I can't truly be myself. I try to not do or say things that would cause conflict, for example. It's a bit weird to do this in what should be your own home, but what can you do? [Int. 12]

Respondents accepted these drawbacks as they perceived the benefits of applying this strategy to outweigh the downsides. They considered the avoidance of interactions with persons with whom the relationship was ambiguous and the related reduction of discomfort to be major advantages.

Physical creation of distance. Strategies aimed at physically creating distance involved moving out of the parental household in an attempt to reduce the negative effects of ambiguity. This was achieved either by changing residence arrangements and living with the other biological parent or by starting to live independently. Changing the residence arrangement was applied by respondents who did not consider themselves old enough to live independently from their parents yet and who had a good relationship with the other biological parent. Moving out was only feasible for respondents who had sufficient financial means (e.g., from student loans or [side]jobs). Many of our respondents were not yet ready to move out but wished to do so eventually, and imagined that moving out would improve their well-being as well as their family relationships. Respondents who had changed their residence arrangement or moved out felt relieved:

> I just had to get out of there, so when I finally moved to my dad, I felt such a sense of relief, like I was finally out of there and could stop feeling so shitty. [Int. 30]

> Things just became much less chaotic and weird. When I started living by myself, I got this sense of: oh wow, it's so calm here. And then I started analyzing, like oh wait, some things that happened were really, really weird. (…) I see [my parents and stepparents] a whole lot less now, and I'm really fine with that. [Int. 11]

In sum, moving out provided relief and the opportunity to reflect on experiences with ambiguity. This allowed respondents to "close that chapter" of their lives and feel unaffected by experiences with ambiguity. Like respondents

who managed to improve relationships or to accept ambiguity, respondents who created distance tried to reduce contact with family members with whom the relationship was ambiguous.

5.5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we investigated ambiguity in postdivorce stepfamilies in detail and from adolescents' perspectives. Going beyond existing studies which oftentimes merely allege that stepfamily relationships are prone to ambiguity, and are usually based on parents' or children's perspectives, we analyzed 30 semi-structured interviews with Dutch adolescents (aged 16-20) to investigate how young people in stepfamilies perceive ambiguity, which family relationships they experience as ambiguous and why, and which strategies adolescents develop to manage ambiguity.

Overall, respondents considered ambiguity undesirable, and as negatively impacting their well-being. However, it is important to note that ambiguity is not a universal phenomenon in *all* stepfamilies. Although a majority of our respondents experienced ambiguity, there were also respondents who did not make this experience. Moreover, ambiguity is not typical for *all* relations in *all* stepfamilies. Relationships with stepparents, stepsiblings, and biological parents turned out to be particularly prone to ambiguity, whereas those with other biological relatives (e.g., siblings) or acquired relatives (e.g., step-grandparents or halfsiblings) were generally not prone to ambiguity. This underlines that, on the one hand, consistent with earlier theoretical expectations, ambiguity requires the respective individual being "meaningful" to oneself, which explains why relationships with distant relatives – who were generally not perceived as a meaningful part of respondents' lives – were not considered ambiguous (Boss, 2004; Jensen, 2021). On the other hand, not all relationships that were meaningful to respondents exhibited ambiguity, which contrasts earlier statements that relationships in postdivorce stepfamilies are per se ambiguous due to the lacuna of societal norms vis-à-vis stepfamilies (e.g., Arat et al., 2021; Gibson, 2013; Stewart, 2005). We found several reasons and conditions that can explain why some meaningful relationships in postdivorce stepfamilies were marked by perceived ambiguity, whereas others were not.

First, consistent with prior theoretical and empirical studies (Allen, 2007; Boss & Couden, 2002; Jensen, 2021), we found that ambiguity was predicated on the lack of clear facts that adolescents felt would be crucial to comprehensively co-construct a shared reality with the respective alter. This applied to acquired relationships – such as when respondents doubted the information they were given by their biological parent about their newly acquired stepparent. Second,

we identified relationality as another main contributor to ambiguity, which aligns with earlier speculation that there are additional specific conditions under which ambiguity may emerge (see Jensen, 2021). These conditions related to the way in which respondents evaluated and judged the character of the alter, preventing respondents from co-constructing a shared reality with them. For example, respondents compared their stepparent to a (positively framed) archetype they had constructed, and perceptions of ambiguity developed when their stepparent and the archetype were vastly and, supposedly, irremediably incongruent. When adolescents considered the stepparent to deviate too much from this reference point, they were unwilling or unable to try to co-create a meaningful relationship with them, and ambiguity persisted. This was in contrast to stepparents with whom respondents "clicked" relatively effortlessly, in which case they found it very easy to co-create a shared reality with them, bypassing ambiguity. We also found that ambiguous relationships can be linked and may form chains of ambiguity. For example, an ambiguous relationship with a stepparent could spill over to an ambiguous relationship with a stepsibling (see also Hornstra et al., 2022). Perceptions of ambiguity might, thus, be package deals. Notably, these factors became particularly salient in case the stepparent in question was coresident with respondents, especially when stepparents moved in quickly with respondents' biological parents, causing respondents to be overwhelmed with the speed at which the relationship moved along.

Consistent with qualitative investigations about how individuals manage stepfamily relationships (Ganong et al., 2011; Ganong et al., 2019; Landon et al., 2022), we found that adolescents developed three distinct strategies to deal with ambiguous family relationships: improving relationships, accepting ambiguity, and creating distance. This heterogeneity in how the participants tried to handle ambiguity highlights that individuals have agency in dealing with ambiguity, even though it is emotionally difficult to handle it. Usually, the three strategies were applied sequentially. Initially, adolescents tried to improve relationships, aiming at co-creating facts by making concerted efforts to get to know the person with whom the relationship was ambiguous. Successful application of this strategy resulted in decreasing or even disappearing ambiguity. This strategy was the only one in which respondents actively attempted to change a relationship, closely resembling the affinity seeking and affinity maintaining strategies used by stepparents to establish cordial relationships with their stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999, 2019), as well as strategies used by stepchildren to "change trajectories" in the relationship with their stepparents by improving the relationship from poor to close (Ganong et al., 2011). The key difference between these strategies mentioned in previous studies is that the strategy of

improving relationships was applied to diverse biological and step-relationships, not just stepparents. In case the strategy of improving relationships was not successful, adolescents resorted to either of the other two strategies. Strategies aimed at accepting ambiguity attempted at finding a way to live with persistent ambiguity, mostly by ignoring the negative emotions emanating from ambiguous relationships, by reducing contact, or by seeking professional (psychological) help. This strategy can be considered an extreme case of merely tolerating the presence of someone in their lives, though it should be noted that it is not so much the person that adolescents attempt to tolerate, but that they tried to assuage the feeling of ambiguity itself. This became particularly obvious in strategies of creating distance, which aimed at removing oneself either physically from the common household (i.e., moving out) to avoid having to deal with ambiguity, or mentally subdividing the common household into a private zone where respondents could be themselves, and a common zone in which they tried to adjust their behavior to make interactions with family members more bearable. Once either one of these latter two strategies was applied, respondents appeared to not make new attempts to improve relationships. The absence of renewed attempts at resolving ambiguity after the strategy of improving relationships had been perceived to be unsuccessful, coupled with strategies aiming at merely tolerating ambiguity, might indicate adolescents' perception of themselves as passive agents, including their eventual resignation, and the difficulty to overcome ambiguity (Boss, 2016).

We hypothesize that attempts to evade ambiguity rather than resolve it might contribute to ambiguity persisting long-term. The strategies of accepting ambiguity and creating mental distance are also concerning for other reasons. Accepting ambiguity often entailed ignoring negative emotions emanating from ambiguous family relationships, but ignoring feelings can lead to frustration and resentment, and contribute to mental health problems or an impaired relationship with the biological parent (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). Creating mental distance and hiding certain aspects of one's personality can be problematic as adolescents are still developing and searching for their own personality and identity. Some of our respondents also used different strategies vis-à-vis different family members, which can be taxing and confusing. These factors might be another explanation for why children struggle with living in stepfamilies (Hornstra et al., 2022).

As our data suggest that ambiguity might contribute to poor well-being among adolescents living in postdivorce stepfamilies (see e.g., Jensen & Harris, 2017), social workers, therapists, and other professionals could be made aware of the causes and consequences of ambiguity so they can help adolescents

who struggle with their parents' divorce and stepfamily lives. This seems especially pertinent in view of the tendency of some adolescents to suppress their negative emotions or pretend to be someone that they are not. For parents and stepparents, an advice based on our data would be to provide sufficient, concrete, and consistent information about family relationships – especially regarding stepparents – and to address adolescents as active co-constructors of their stepfamily.

We conclude with suggestions for future research and some limitations of this study. First, all interviewees grew up in the Netherlands, which is known for its individualistic family values. Adolescents growing up in countries with different, more rigid, family values might perceive ambiguity differently and develop different strategies. Future research could examine the connection between cross-country differences in family values and ambiguity. Second, our interviewees were aged between 16 and 20, so no extrapolations can be made to other age groups. Especially strategies used to deal with ambiguity might be different among younger children, as the strategies our respondents used demanded a high level of reflexivity and independence (e.g., in terms of geographical mobility) that younger children do not possess. Finally, because all interviewees were only interviewed once, it was difficult to determine the temporal development of ambiguity. A longitudinal approach could yield a more detailed picture of how ambiguity emerges and how perceptions and strategies change over time. Lastly, note that this study focused on ambiguous relationships in stepfamilies, not relationships in stepfamilies in general, or general patterns of relationship developments in stepfamilies (see e.g., Anderson, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Ganong et al., 2019 for pertinent studies). Thus, naturally, not all (step)relationships our interviewees experienced were negative, though our data showed that ambiguous ones were experienced as such.

Overall, our results show that ambiguity in stepfamilies seems to have a negative impact on adolescent well-being. In more than half of the cases, ambiguity was not completely resolved by our interviewees, and instead, they resorted to deal with it mostly by themselves, for example by suppressing the negative emotions they were feeling, which may compound negative emotions stemming from ambiguous relationships. Thinking more broadly, ambiguity could also exist in other family forms, and in other types of social relationships (e.g., those with flatmates or coworkers), with potentially similar effects on well-being. We, therefore, encourage more research into the antecedents and consequences of ambiguity in personal relationships in general and (step) families in particular.

Appendices

APPENDIX A – CHAPTER 2
APPENDIX B – CHAPTER 4
APPENDIX C – CHAPTER 5

APPENDIX A – CHAPTER 2

Appendix Table A.1: Summary of Mixed Effects Logistic Regression Models Predicting Married and Divorced Parents' Considering their Blood Relatives and In-Laws as Kin.

	Model 1A: Blood relatives	**Model 1B: In-laws**	**Model 1C: Blood relatives by residence**	**Model 1D: In-laws by residence**	**Model 1E: Blood relatives by repartnering**	**Model 1F: In-laws by repartnering**
	B (SE)	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**
Divorced	0.10 (0.18)	-8.84*** (0.34)				
Repartnered					-0.07 (0.19)	
Type of in-law (ref. single, former in-law)						
Repartnered & former in-law						-1.36*** (0.12)
Repartnered & new in-law						3.79*** (0.12)
Residence (ref. resident)						
Non-resident			-0.08 (0.31)	-1.60*** (0.18)		
Shared resident			0.08 (0.27)	-0.34* (0.14)		
Female	0.21 (0.17)	0.95*** (0.10)	-0.01 (0.27)	0.51*** (0.14)	0.07 (0.16)	0.33** (0.11)
Employed	0.40 (0.25)	-0.03 (0.15)	0.49 (0.29)	-0.45* (0.18)	0.50 (0.26)	-0.04 (0.16)
Education resp.	0.06 (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	0.06 (0.06)	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)	0.01 (0.03)
Education (ex)-partner	0.02 (0.04)	0.05* (0.02)	0.01 (0.05)	0.06* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.03)
Married	-0.19 (0.19)	0.01 (0.11)	-0.04 (0.24)	0.59*** (0.14)	-0.03 (0.25)	0.08 (0.12)
Age resp.	-0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03** (0.01)
Age child	0.01 (0.03)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.04)	0.09*** (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.08*** (0.02)
Religious	0.51* (0.18)	0.41*** (0.10)	0.71** (0.24)	0.50*** (0.12)	0.66** (0.21)	0.34** (0.11)
Intercept	5.43***(0.36)	4.20*** (0.25)	6.12*** (0.98)	-4.02*** (0.61)	4.75*** (0.90)	-1.80** (0.47)

	Model 1A: Blood relatives	Model 1B: In-laws	Model 1C: Blood relatives by residence	Model 1D: In-laws by residence	Model 1E: Blood relatives by repartnering	Model 1F: In-laws by repartnering
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Variance Components and Model Fit						
SD(σ^{person})	2.34	0.00	2.37	4.88	2.70	2.29
SD($\sigma^{household}$)	2.00	4.43	2.03	0.00	0.45	0.00
$N_{observations}$	18,073	17,813	12,528	12,294	12,528	12,294
$N_{persons}$	3,859	3,811	2,683	2,257	2,683	2,257
$N_{households}$	3,175	3,129	2,356	2,314	2,356	2,314
AIC	5,241	11,873	3,607	8,293	3,807	18,616

Notes: *: p<.05; **: p<.01; ***: p<.001. *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

Appendix Table A.2: Summary of Mixed Effects Logistic Regression Models Predicting Married and Divorced Parents' Considering their Different Blood Relatives as Kin.

	Model 2A: Parents	**2B: Siblings**	**2C: Aunts and Uncles**	**2D: Nieces and nephews**	**2E: Cousins**
	B (SE)	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B(SE)**
Divorced	-0.22 (0.39)	-0.49 (0.32)	0.25 (0.17)	-0.34 (0.24)	0.20 (0.13)
Female	-0.03 (0.32)	-0.27 (0.25)	0.23 (0.16)	0.24 (0.22)	0.24 (0.12)
Employed	-0.41 (0.50)	0.26 (0.35)	0.33 (0.23)	0.26 (0.30)	0.19 (0.18)
Education resp.	0.26** (0.09)	0.19** (0.07)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.08 (0.06)	0.01 (0.04)
Education (ex)-partner	-0.01 (0.08)	0.10 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)	-0.04 (0.03)
Married	0.81 (0.50)	0.10 (0.29)	-0.27 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.25)	-0.20 (0.14)
Age resp.	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.28)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.06* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Age child	-0.13* (0.06)	-0.02 (0.54)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.02)
Religious	0.63 (0.33)	0.95** (0.26)	0.17 (0.17)	0.48* (0.22)	0.25* (0.13)
Intercept	4.75*** (1.45)	4.85** (1.27)	2.68***(0.73)	4.361***(1.23)	2.04***(0.61)
Variance Components and Model Fit					
SD($\sigma^{household}$)	0.00	1.56	1.01	0.71	0.60
$N_{persons}$	3,343	3,684	3,760	3,491	3,795
$N_{households}$	2,856	3,061	3,111	2,908	3,124
AIC	441	832	1,650	850	2,246

Notes: *: p<.05; **: p<.01; ***: p<.001. *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

Appendix Table A.3: Summary of Mixed Effects Logistic Regression Models Predicting Married and Divorced Parents' Considering their Different Blood Relatives as Kin.

	Model 3A: Parents in-law	**3B: Siblings in-law**	**3C: Aunts and Uncles in-law**	**3D: Nieces and nephews in law**	**3E: Cousins in-law**
	B (SE)	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B (SE)**	**B(SE)**
Divorced	-5.06*** (0.39)	-4.59*** (0.32)	-3.66***(0.22)	-4.02***(0.27)	-3.54***(0.21)
Female	0.66***(0.13)	0.46**(0.10)	0.40***(0.11)	0.63*** (0.11)	0.41*** (0.11)
Employed	0.10 (0.19)	-0.11 (0.17)	-0.13 (0.17)	-0.03 (0.17)	-0.20 (0.17)
Education resp.	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)
Education (ex)-partner	0.07* (0.03)	0.07** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)
Married	0.21 (0.14)	0.14 (0.13)	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.05 (0.12)	-0.18 (0.13)
Age resp.	0.03* (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Age child	0.04 (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Religious	0.15*(0.12)	0.23* (0.11)	0.20 (0.10)	0.30** (0.10)	0.19 (0.11)
Intercept	1.04 (0.56)	1.14* (0.49)	2.33*** (0.35)	0.82 (0.47)	0.98* (0.48)
Variance Components and Model Fit					
SD($\sigma^{household}$)	1.11	0.96	0.78	0.86	0.83
$N_{persons}$	3,164	3,637	3,702	3,585	3,725
$N_{households}$	2,686	3,010	3,053	2,978	3,071
AIC	2,958	3,319	3,127	3,356	3,210

Notes: *: p<.05; **: p<.01; ***: p<.001. *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

Appendix Table A.4: Predicted Probabilities and Average Discrete Changes of Considering Blood Relatives and In-Laws Kin (based on Models 1A-1F)

	Predicted Probabilities	Average Discrete Changes
Considering blood relatives kin (based on Model 1A, N=18,073)		
Married	.97	
Divorced	.97	
Diff. Married – Divorced		0.00 (0.01)
Considering in-laws kin (based on Model 1B, N=17,813)		
Married	.83	
Divorced	.22	
Diff. Married – Divorced		-0.61 (0.01)***
Considering Blood Relatives Kin, by Residence (based on Model 1C, N=12,528)		
Sole resident	.96	
Non-resident	.95	
Shared resident	.96	
Diff. sole resident – nonresident		0.01 (0.01)
Diff. nonresident – shared resident		0.01 (0.01)
Diff. shared resident – sole resident		0.00 (0.01)
Considering In-laws Kin, by Residence (based on Model 1D, N=12,294)		
Sole resident	.24	
Non-resident	.17	
Shared resident	.23	
Diff. sole resident – nonresident		-0.07 (0.01)***
Diff. nonresident – shared resident		-0.06 (0.01)***
Diff. shared resident – sole resident		0.01 (0.01)*
Considering blood relatives kin, by repartnering (based on Model 1E, N=12,528)		
Single	.96	
Repartnered	.95	
Diff. Single – Repartnered		0.01 (0.01)
Considering in-laws kin, by repartnering (based on Model 1F, N=12,294)		
Single, former in-law	.30	
Repartnered, former in-law	.16	
Repartnered, new in-law	.78	
Diff. single & repartnered, former in-law		0.14 (0.01)***
Diff. single, former in-law & repartnered, new in-law		-0.48 (0.01)***
Diff. repartnered, former in-law & repartnered, new in-law		-0.62 (0.01)***

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Models control for gender, employment, respondents' and (former) partners' education level and previous marital status, age of the respondent and of the child, and respondents' religiosity. Predicted probabilities and average discrete changes are calculated using only sample-specific observations. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

Appendix Table A.5: Predicted Probabilities, Average Discrete Changes, and Cross-Model Differences of Parents Considering their Blood Relatives Kin, Based on Regression Models Shown in Appendix Table 2.

	Predicted Probabilities and Differences between Divorced and Married Parents					Pairwise Comparisons of Differences between Divorced and Married Parents (Average Discrete Changes)									
	Parents (Model 2A; N=3,343)	Siblings (Model 2B; N=3,684)	Nieces/ Nephews (Model 2D; N=3,491)	Aunts/ Uncles (Model 2C; N=3,760)	Cousins (Model 2E; N=33,795)	Parents-Siblings	Parents-Nieces/ Nephews	Parents-Aunts/ Uncles	Parents-Cousins	Siblings-Nieces/Nephews	Siblings-Aunts/ Uncles	Siblings-Cousins	Nieces/ Nephews – Aunts/Uncles	Nieces/Nephews – Cousins	Aunts-Cousins
Married	.99	.98	.98	.94	.91	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)*	0.05 (0.01)***	0.08 (0.01)***	0.00 (0.01)	0.04 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***
Divorced	.99	.97	.97	.95	.92	0.02 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.01)***	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)***	0.05 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***	0.05 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***
Diff. Divorced – Married	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.0 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Models control for gender, employment, respondents' and (former) partners' education level and previous marital status, age of the respondent and of the child, and respondents' religiosity. Predicted probabilities and average discrete changes are calculated using only sample-specific observations. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

Appendix Table A.6: Predicted Probabilities, Average Discrete Changes, and Cross-Model Differences of Parents Considering their In-Laws Kin, Based on Regression Models Shown in Appendix Table 3.

	Predicted Probabilities and Differences between Divorced and Married Parents					Pairwise Comparisons of Differences between Divorced and Married Parents (Average Discrete Changes)									
	Parents (Model 3A; N=3,164)	Siblings (Model 3B; N-3,637)	Nieces/ Nephews (Model 3D; N=3,585)	Aunts/ Uncles (Model 3C; N=3,702)	Cousins (Model 3E; N=3,725)	Parents-Siblings	Parents-Nieces/ Nephews	Parents-Aunts/ Uncles	Parents-Cousins	Siblings-Nieces/Nephews	Siblings-Aunts/ Uncles	Siblings-Cousins	Nieces/ Nephews – Aunts/ Uncles	Nieces/Nephews – Cousins	Aunts-Cousins
Married	.97	.95	.91	.77	.74	.02 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***	0.20 (0.01)***	0.23 (0.01)***	0.04 (0.01)***	0.18 (0.01)***	0.21 (0.01)***	0.14 (0.01)***	0.17 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***
Divorced	.30	.26	.23	.12	.12	0.04 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.01)***	0.18 (0.01)***	0.18 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***	0.14 (0.01)***	0.14 (0.01)***	0.11 (0.01)***	0.11 (0.01)***	0.00 (0.01)
Diff. Divorced – Married	-0.67 (0.01)***	-0.69 (0.01)***	-0.68 (0.01)***	-0.65 (0.02)***	-0.62 (0.02)***	-0.02 (0.01)***	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04 (0.02)*	0.07 (0.02)***	0.03 (0.01)	0.06 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Models control for gender, employment, respondents' and (former) partners' education level and previous marital status, age of the respondent and of the child, and respondents' religiosity. Predicted probabilities and average discrete changes are calculated using sample-specific observations. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

Appendix Table A.7: Gender Differences in the Predicted Probabilities of Divorced Parents Considering their Former In-laws Kin.

	Predicted Probabilities of Considering Former and New In-Laws Kin and Differences between Men and Women						
	Former In-Laws (single)	Former In-laws (repartnered)	Parents	Siblings	Nieces/ Nephews	Aunts/ Uncles	Cousins
Men	.27	.14	.21	.27	.16	.09	.09
Women	.33	.18	.27	.19	.25	.13	.13
Diff. Women - Men	.06 (0.02)**	.04 (0.02)**	.06 (0.01)***	.08 (0.02)***	.09 (0.02)***	.04 (0.01)**	.04 (0.01)**

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. Models control for gender, employment, respondents' and (former) partners' education level and previous marital status, age of the respondent and of the child, and respondents' religiosity. Predicted probabilities and average discrete changes are calculated using sample-specific observations. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed test). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

APPENDIX B – CHAPTER 4

Table B.1: Summary of Linear Probability Models Predicting Presence at the Child's Last Birthday, by Gender

	Presence of Ex-partner						Presence of Current Partner						Joint presence					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B (SE)	W. B (SE)	Δ	M. B (SE)	W. B (SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ
Repartnering respondent (ref. = no partner)	-.07* (.03)	-.06* (.03)																
Respondent type of union (ref. = no partner)																		
LAT				-0.04 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.04)													
Cohabiting				-0.01* (0.04)	-0.10* (0.04)		0.21*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.02)		0.21*** (0.04)			0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)		0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	
Married				-0.11* (0.05)	-0.12** (0.04)		0.24*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.03)		0.25*** (0.04)			0.05 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)		0.05 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	
Repartnering ex-partner (ref. = no partner)	-.16*** (.03)	-.05* (.02)	**				0.07 (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)					0.12 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)				
Ex-partner type of union (ref. = no partner)																		

	Presence of Ex-partner						Presence of Current Partner						Joint presence					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B (SE)	W. B (SE)	Δ	M. B (SE)	W. B (SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ
LAT				-0.14**	0.12					0.06	0.10*					0.01	0.10*	
				(0.04)	(0.04)					(0.05)	(.04)					(0.05)	(0.05)	
Cohabiting				-0.17***	-0.08	*				0.07	0.07					0.01	-0.01	
				(0.04)	(0.03)					(0.04)	(.03)					(0.05)	(0.04)	
Married				-0.18**	-0.08*					0.03	0.05					0.02	-0.02	
				(0.06)	(0.04)					(0.05)	(.04)					(0.06)	(0.05)	
Bio. child of respondent & current partner	-.13** (.04)	.01 (.04)	*	-0.10* *0.05)	0.03 (0.04)	*	-0.06 (0.04)	0.04 (0.03)	*	-0.06 (0.04)	0.04 (0.02)	*	-.12** (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	*	-0.12** (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	*
Stepchildren of respondent	-.02 (.04)	-.03 (.03)		-0.02 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.03)		-0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)		-0.03 (0.03)	.03 (0.03)		-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)		-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)	
Bio. child of ex-partner & new partner	.01 (.04)	-.13*** (.02)	**	0.02 (0.05)	-0.10** (0.03)		-0.02 (0.04)	-0.07* (0.32)		-0.01 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.02)		-0.03 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)		-0.04 (0.05)	-0.12** (0.05)	
Stepchildren of ex-partner	.02 (.03)	-.05* (.02)	*	0.02 (0.04)	-0.06* (0.03)		0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)		-0.06 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.02)		-0.02 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)		-0.02 (0.04)	-0.07* (0.03)	
Relationship quality with ex-partner	.07*** (.01)	.08*** (.01)		0.07*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.01)		-0.01*** (0.01)	-0.14* (0.01)		-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)		0.05*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)		0.05*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	
Relationship quality with new partner	.00 (.01)	.01 (.01)		0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)		0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	

	Presence of Ex-partner					Presence of Current Partner					Joint presence				
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B (SE)	W. B (SE)	Δ	M. B (SE)	W. B (SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ	M. B(SE)	W. B(SE)	Δ
Relationship quality between new partner and ex-partner	.02** (.01)	.01* (.01)		0.02* (0.01)	0.01 0.01		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)		0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)		0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	
Child's residence (ref. = shared residence)																		
With respondent	-.02 (.03)	.01 (.02)		-0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.03)		0.03 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.03)		0.03 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.02)		-0.03 (0.06)	0.05 (0.03)		-0.04 (0.06)	0.06 (0.03)	
With ex-partner	-.06* (.03)	-.06 (0.4)		-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.05)		-0.04 (0.03)	-0.15** (0.15)		-0.04 (0.03)	-0.15** (0.06)		-0.05 (0.04)	-0.10* (0.05)		-0.05 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)	
N individuals	890	1,561		890	1,561		890	1,561		591	933		591	933		591	933	
R^2	.25	.25		.24	.26		.11	.11		.21	.21		.21	.21		.21	.21	

Notes: M= Men, W= Women. Δ = Levels of statistical significance of difference between men and women, based on Wald's tests. Analyses control for child's age and gender, respondent's and ex-partner's highest education, geographical distance between household of respondent and ex-partner, former union type and refreshment sample. Robust standard errors clustered on the level of the former household. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). *Source*: New Families in the Netherlands wave 2.

APPENDIX C – CHAPTER 5

Table C.1: Overview of interviewee characteristics

No.	Age and Sex	Age at divorce	Residence arrangement	Current no. stepparents	Relationship duration father – stepmother (years)	Relationship duration mother – stepfather (years)	# Bio. Siblings	# Step siblings	# Half siblings	Former stepparents?
1	18, M	8	shared residence	2 (M, F)	5	7	1 (M)	1 (M)	0	No
2	20, F	14	mother residence	2 (M, F)	5	4	1 (F)	4 (M)	1 (M)	No
3	16, F	10	mother residence	2 (M, F)	3	5	1 (M)	1 (M)	0	Yes
4	20, M	5	own apartment	1 (M)	-	10	0	1 (F)	0	Yes
5	19, M	14	shared residence	2 (M, F)	4	4	0	1 (F)	Yes	No
6	19, F	12	own apartment	2 (M, F)	2	6	1 (M)	3 (2M, 1F)	0	No
7	18, F	4	mother residence	2 (M, F)	10	1	2 (M)	0	0	Yes
8	17, M	10	mother residence	2 (M, F)	7	5	1 (M)	3 (M)	1 (M)	No
9	19, F	16	own apartment	2 (M, F)	3	2	2 (F)	4 (3 M, 1F)	0	No
10	20, F	14	mother residence	2 (M, F)	6	6	1 (M)	2 (M)	0	No
11	19, F	6	own apartment	2 (M, F)	7	2	1 (F)	2 (M)	2 (M, F)	Yes
12	19, M	10	shared residence	1 (M)	-	2	1 (F)	2 (M)	0	Yes
13	19, M	15	mother residence	1 (F)	4	-	1 (M)	0	0	Yes
14	20, F	11	own apartment	1 (F)	5	-	2 (M, F)	2 (M, F)	0	Yes
15	18, M	15	mother residence	1 (F)	1	-	1 (F)	0	0	No
16	18, M	2	shared residence	1 (M)	-	3	1 (M)	2 (M)	0	Yes
17	20, F	16	mother residence	2 (M, F)	0.5	2	1 (M)	7 (3 M, 4F)	0	No
18	17, F	8	mother residence	2 (M, F)	6	7	2 (M, F)	5 (2 M, 3 F)	0	No
19	16, M	11	father residence	1 (M)	-	4	1 (M)	2 (M, F)	0	No

No.	Age and Sex	Age at divorce	Residence arrangement	Current no. stepparents	Relationship duration father – stepmother (years)	Relationship duration mother – stepfather (years)	# Bio. Siblings	# Step siblings	# Half siblings	Former stepparents?
20	17, M	2	mother residence	2 (M, F)	12	12	0	1 (M)	1 (M)	No
21	18, F	2	own apartment	2 (M, F)	10	10	0	0	1 (M)	No
22	18, F	7	shared residence	2 (M, F)	4	3	3 (M)	4 (2 M, 2F)	0	Yes
23	17, M	6	father residence	2 (M, F)	10	2	1 (M)	2 (M, F)	1 (M)	No
24	20, F	8	own apartment	1 (M)	-	6	1 (F)	2 (M, F)	0	Yes
25	16, F	9	mother residence	2 (M, F)	4	3	2 (M, F)	2 (M, F)	0	No
26	17, M	3	shared residence	1 (M)	-	10	2 (M, F)	2 (M, F)	1 (M)	Yes
27	16, M	6	father residence	1 (F)	10	-	2 (F)	0	1 (F)	Yes
28	17, F	9	mother residence	1 (M)	-	8	2 (M)	2 (M, F)	0	No
29	16, M	11	mother residence	1 (M)	-	5	2 (M)	2 (M, F)	0	No
30	18, M	12	father residence	1 (M)	-	5	1 (F)	1 (M)	0	No

Nederlandse samenvatting

INLEIDING

Het traditionele gezin zoals we dat kennen bestaat uit twee getrouwde heteroseksuele ouders en hun biologische kinderen, die allemaal onder één dak wonen. Hoe het gezinsleven in kernfamilies eruitziet is over het algemeen duidelijk: leden van het kerngezin gaan bijvoorbeeld samen op vakantie en vieren samen elkaars verjaardagen. De aanzienlijke toename van het aantal echtscheidingen sinds de jaren 60 en de steeds liberaler wordende gendernormen stellen de dominantie van het kerngezin in de samenleving echter op de proef. Dit wordt het duidelijkst zichtbaar in het percentage kinderen dat tegenwoordig voor hun 18e verjaardag te maken krijgt met de scheiding en het herpartneren van hun ouders. Zo heeft in Nederland ongeveer 21% van de minderjarigen gescheiden ouders en 16% van de minderjarigen minstens één stiefouder.

Dergelijke scheidingsgezinnen wonen meestal juist niet onder één dak: de leden zijn verspreid over verschillende huishoudens. Met andere woorden, dit soort families zien er wezenlijk anders uit dan kerngezinnen, en het gezinsleven ziet er waarschijnlijk ook anders uit, en wordt ook anders ervaren. In kerngezinnen is het min of meer vanzelfsprekend wie er bij de familie hoort, dat men de verjaardagen van de kinderen samen viert, dat zulke gezinnen als cohesief worden ervaren, en dat de relaties tussen gezinsleden over het algemeen duidelijk zijn. Door een scheiding zijn deze aspecten van het gezinsleven minder vanzelfsprekend. Met wie moeten de verjaardagen van de kinderen gevierd worden als de ouders gescheiden zijn? Wie wordt er überhaupt als deel van de familie beschouwd na een scheiding?

Inzicht krijgen in hoe het gezinsleven in scheidingsgezinnen eruitziet en ervaren wordt is cruciaal om te begrijpen hoe een steeds groter deel van de ouders en kinderen in Nederland hun dagelijks leven en omstandigheden ervaart, vooral omdat dergelijke ervaringen gevolgen kunnen hebben voor hun welzijn. Een gebrek aan cohesie in het gezin is bijvoorbeeld in verband gebracht met problematisch gedrag bij jongeren en een lagere levenstevredenheid bij ouders. Door de toename van het aantal ouders dat een scheiding meemaakt, kunnen steeds meer ouders en kinderen dergelijke negatieve gevolgen ervaren. Verder staat het concept “gezin” centraal in de manier waarop Westerse samenlevingen zijn georganiseerd. Daarom is het essentieel voor onder andere wetgevers, beleidsmakers en gezinsonderzoekers, maar ook voor de maatschappij als geheel om te belichten hoe het gezinsleven in verschillende gezinsstructuren eruitziet en ervaren wordt. Het concept gezin staat natuurlijk centraal in het familierecht, maar ook andere juridische domeinen – immigratie en erfrecht om er maar een paar te noemen - zijn gebaseerd op een definitie van gezin of familie. Door meer inzicht te krijgen in hoe het gezinsleven in

scheidingsgezinnen eruitziet en ervaren wordt, is het misschien mogelijk om ook wetgeving beter daarop aan te laten sluiten. De centrale onderzoeksvragen van mijn proefschrift zijn: *Hoe ziet het gezinsleven in scheidingsgezinnen eruit, en hoe wordt het gezinsleven in scheidingsgezinnen ervaren? Hoe hangt dit af van de gezinsstructuur en interpersoonlijke factoren na de scheiding?* Deze vragen te beantwoorden is om drie redenen interessant en belangrijk.

Ten eerste gebruikt het grootste deel van het huidige onderzoek naar het gezinsleven na een scheiding, de "kerngezinbenadering". Met die term bedoel ik dat onderzoekers over het algemeen de neiging hebben om zich te focussen op het onderzoeken van aspecten van kernrelaties binnen scheidingsgezinnen, zoals relatiekwaliteit of conflicten, grotendeels tussen (stief)ouders en (stief)kinderen. Terwijl dergelijke relaties zeker belangrijk zijn, heeft de kerngezinsbenadering er onvermijdelijk toe geleid dat sommige mogelijk even relevante uitkomsten minder aandacht hebben gekregen. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan hoe het gezinsleven eruitziet en ervaren wordt buiten relatiekwaliteit of conflict om. Dan gaat het bijvoorbeeld om wie men moet uitnodigen voor de verjaardagsfeestjes van de kinderen of het creëren van een gevoel van cohesie door stiefgezinsleden die ook vaak worden genoemd als bijzonder problematische aspecten van het gezinsleven na een scheiding. Daar weten we verrassend weinig over. In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik daarom vier belangrijke uitkomsten van het gezinsleven na scheiding die in de literatuur onderbelicht zijn gebleven, namelijk wie na een scheiding als verwant wordt beschouwd, percepties van cohesie in stiefgezinnen, met wie ouders na een scheiding gezinsrituelen vieren, en hoe en waarom kinderen van gescheiden ouders sommige van hun gezinsrelaties mogelijk als ambigu (d.w.z. onduidelijk) ervaren.

Ten tweede beschouwen de weinige studies die dergelijke uitkomsten hebben onderzocht over het algemeen (alleen) relatiekwaliteit als mogelijke verklaring. In de bestaande literatuur blijkt een hogere relatiekwaliteit tussen gezinsleden (met name tussen ouders en hun kinderen) gepaard te gaan met een positievere gezinsbeleving na de scheiding. Het is opvallend dat één van de kenmerken van de huidige scheidingsgezinnen in de bestaande literatuur nog niet voldoende aandacht heeft gekregen, namelijk de toegenomen heterogeniteit in termen van gezinsstructuren. Vroeger was het bijvoorbeeld gebruikelijk dat kinderen na een scheiding bij hun biologische moeder woonden, maar tegenwoordig is co-ouderschap een populaire optie. Dit betekent dat kinderen en ouders tegenwoordig steeds vaker te maken hebben met discontinue gezinsrelaties. Verder kiest een steeds groter deel van de (gescheiden) ouders in Nederland voor langdurig samenwonen of een latrelatie in plaats van hertrouwen. Dit betekent dat er niet alleen sprake is van meerdere

ouderfiguren (d.w.z. biologische ouders en stiefouders), maar ook van meerdere soorten stiefouders: het is niet langer vanzelfsprekend dat kinderen in hetzelfde huishouden wonen als hun stiefouders. De toenemende complexiteit en diversiteit van gezinsstructuren kan samengaan met een complicatie bij het creëren van bijvoorbeeld een gevoel van cohesie, en kan praktische aspecten van het gezinsleven na een scheiding bemoeilijken. Daarom onderzoek ik in dit proefschrift in detail hoe heterogeniteit binnen de groep gescheiden gezinnen zich verhoudt tot hoe het gezinsleven eruitziet en ervaren wordt.

Ten derde is de focus op ervaringen in scheidingsgezinnen interessant, omdat keer op keer is beweerd dat familierelaties na een scheiding als ambigu worden ervaren, wat betekent dat individuen onzeker zijn over hoe deze relaties eruitzien. Het meest voorkomende argument is dat aangezien gezinnen na een scheiding steeds meer afwijken van de maatschappelijke norm van het kerngezin, individuen "blauwdrukken" missen om hun familierelaties vorm te geven, wat onzekerheid over deze relaties kan veroorzaken. Met andere woorden: impliciet wordt verondersteld dat ambiguïteit niet alleen een veel voorkomend, maar misschien zelfs een universeel fenomeen is na een scheiding en betrekking heeft tot misschien wel alle familierelaties. Hoewel dit misschien plausibel lijkt, is het opvallend dat dergelijke beweringen nauwelijks empirisch zijn onderbouwd. Gezien de hierboven genoemde toegenomen heterogeniteit binnen de groep scheidingsgezinnen, lijkt het aannemelijk dat sommige gezinsstructuren meer vatbaar zijn voor ambiguïteit dan andere. Met dit proefschrift lever ik een bijdrage aan de bestaande literatuur door een gedetailleerd overzicht te geven van de percepties van (jongeren over) ambigue familierelaties na scheiding, de factoren die bijdragen aan dergelijke ervaringen, en de manieren waarop jongeren omgaan met ambiguïteit.

In dit proefschrift maak ik gebruik van twee databronnen. Ten eerste gebruik ik gegevens uit het survey Nieuwe Families in Nederland (NFN), verzameld door de Universiteit Utrecht in samenwerking met het Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS). Het CBS trok een willekeurige steekproef van gescheiden en niet-gescheiden ouders met minderjarige kinderen. De ouders zijn in 2012/13 voor het eerst benaderd (Wave 1) en gevraagd een online survey in te vullen. Ongeveer 5.000 gescheiden en 2.200 niet-gescheiden ouders hebben aan deze eerste wave deelgenomen. In 2015/16 (Wave 2) en 2020 (Wave 3) werden ouders opnieuw benaderd voor follow-up surveys. Ten tweede heb ik eind 2021 en begin 2022 30 jongeren geïnterviewd over hun ervaringen met het leven in stiefgezinnen, om in detail te kunnen onderzoeken of en hoe ambiguïteit over familierelaties zich zou kunnen ontwikkelen. De geïnterviewde jongeren

leefden in verschillende gezinsstructuren, om een zo breed mogelijk beeld van de ervaringen van jongeren in stiefgezinnen te geven.

SAMENVATTING PER HOOFDSTUK

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit vier empirische hoofdstukken. Per hoofdstuk worden de contributies en de belangrijkste bevindingen samengevat.

Hoofstuk 2: Wie rekenen getrouwde en gescheiden ouders tot hun verwanten?

In dit hoofdstuk analyseer ik hoe getrouwde en gescheiden ouders verschillen in wie ze tot hun verwanten rekenen, en hoe dit onder gescheiden ouders verschilt bij wel of geen herpartnering en de verschillende verblijfsregelingen van hun kinderen na de scheiding. Verwantschap is belangrijk om te bestuderen, omdat verwanten een slapend netwerk vormen dat mogelijk geactiveerd kan worden in tijden van nood. Bestaand onderzoek naar verwantschap in de context van scheiding onderzoekt kijkt meestal alleen naar biologische verwanten (en gaat dus niet in op de (ex-)schoonfamilie), vergelijkt getrouwde en gescheiden ouders niet en gaat grotendeels voorbij aan de heterogeniteit tussen gezinnen na de scheiding. In deze studie wordt daarom getracht om de verwantschapsopvattingen van getrouwde en gescheiden ouders (d.w.z. wie wordt als verwant beschouwd) te vergelijken, verwantschapsopvattingen ten opzichte van zowel biologische verwanten als ook de (ex-) schoonfamilie te onderzoeken, verschillende soorten verwanten te beschouwen (d.w.z. ouders, broers en zussen, nichten/nichten, tantes/ ooms en neven en nichten), en de rol van hertrouwen en verblijfsregelingen voor verwantschapsopvattingen na scheiding te onderzoeken.

De resultaten laten zien dat verwantschapsopvattingen substantieel verschillen tussen getrouwde en gescheiden ouders, maar alleen wat betreft de (ex-)schoonfamilie. Biologische verwanten worden door getrouwde en gescheiden ouders in gelijke mate als verwanten beschouwd. Van zowel biologische verwanten als schoonfamilie worden ouders het vaakst als verwant beschouwd en neven en nichten het minst vaak. Gescheiden ouders beschouwen hun voormalige schoonfamilie minder vaak als verwant dan getrouwde ouders hun schoonfamilie. Dit verschil is zelfs nog duidelijker voor ouders die na de scheiding een nieuwe partner hebben. Bovendien wordt in dat geval de nieuwe schoonfamilie in grotere mate als onderdeel van de verwantschap beschouwd dan de voormalige schoonfamilie, wat duidt op "swapping families". Ook wordt de voormalige schoonfamilie minder vaak als verwant beschouwd als de

kinderen van gescheiden ouders uitwonend zijn, in tegenstelling tot (parttime) inwonend. Deze resultaten wijzen erop dat verwantschapsopvattingen alleen voor schoonfamilieleden verschillen tussen getrouwde en gescheiden ouders. Inwonende kinderen kunnen ertoe leiden dat ouders de voormalige schoonfamilie als verwant beschouwen, terwijl herpartneren leidt tot uitsluiting van de voormalige schoonfamilie.

Hoofdstuk 3: Percepties van ouders over cohesie in diverse stiefgezinnen

Hoofdstuk 3 zoomt in op verschillen in percepties van cohesie tussen verschillende typen stiefgezinnen na een scheiding. Percepties van cohesie verwijzen naar het gevoel van individuen dat hun (stief)gezin een hechte eenheid is, en geen "los zand". Cohesie is belangrijk om te bestuderen, omdat het een positief verband heeft met het welzijn van ouders en kinderen. Bestaande studies naar cohesie hebben uitgebreid onderzoek gedaan naar het verband tussen relatiekwaliteit en samenhang, maar hebben grotendeels over het hoofd gezien hoe percepties van cohesie verschillen tussen verschillende typen stiefgezinnen. In deze studie onderzoek ik hoe gezinsstructuur percepties van cohesie kan beïnvloeden, naast relatiekwaliteit. Ik onderzoek verschillende aspecten van gezinsstructuur en hun onderlinge wisselwerking: het hebben van een biologisch kind met de huidige partner (d.w.z., de stiefouder), of beide huidige partners een kind hebben uit een eerdere relatie of maar één van hen (d.w.z., dat het stiefgezin een complex gezin is of niet), en de verblijfsregelingen van de respectieve kinderen.

De resultaten toonden aan dat ouders hun stiefgezinnen gemiddeld als zeer cohesief beoordelen (gemiddeld ongeveer een 4 op een schaal van 1 tot 5). Het hebben van een gezamenlijk biologisch kind wordt geassocieerd met een hogere beleving van cohesie, terwijl het leven in een complex stiefgezin wordt geassocieerd met een lagere beleving van cohesie. De perceptie van cohesie is lager wanneer de kinderen van de ouders uit hun vorige relatie en/of potentiële stiefkinderen uitwonend zijn. Als we kijken naar het samenspel van de verblijfsarrangementen van de kinderen, dan worden niet-complexe stiefgezinnen met een inwonend kind en complexe stiefgezinnen waarin de kinderen van beide ouders inwonend zijn als cohesiever beschouwd dan complexe stiefgezinnen waarin de verblijfsregelingen van de kinderen verschillend zijn. Over het algemeen suggereren deze bevindingen dat hoe dichter de samenstelling van het stiefgezin die van een kerngezin benadert (d.w.z. men heeft samen een biologisch kind en alle stiefgezinsleden wonen onder één dak), hoe cohesiever het stiefgezin wordt ervaren.

Hoofdstuk 4: Gezinsrituelen na scheiding.

Hoofdstuk 4 onderzoekt met wie ouders familierituelen vieren (specifiek de verjaardag van hun kind) na een scheiding, en hoe dit wordt beïnvloed door aspecten van de gezinsstructuur (verblijfsregelingen, (soort) herpartneren, het hebben van stiefkinderen) en relatiekwaliteit tussen gezinsleden. Rituelen zijn familieroutines die een speciale betekenis hebben. In kerngezinnen worden rituelen meestal samen gevierd met de beide biologische ouders van het kind, maar hoe rituelen worden gevierd in gezinnen na een scheiding is minder vanzelfsprekend. Dit onderzoek draagt bij aan de bestaande literatuur door als eerste grootschalige kwantitatieve data te gebruiken om te analyseren met wie rituelen worden gevierd na een scheiding, en hoe dit verschilt tussen gezinsstructuren en relatiekwaliteit na een scheiding.

Uit de resultaten blijkt dat slechts 34% van de ouders de verjaardag van hun kind samen met de ex-partner (dus de andere biologische ouder van het kind) viert. Van de ouders die een nieuwe partner hebben, viert 87% de verjaardag met de huidige partner, en in 25% van de gevallen met de ex-partner én de huidige partner. De aanwezigheid van de ex-partners op de verjaardag van het kind is waarschijnlijker wanneer de ouders en hun huidige partners een goede relatie hebben met de ex-partner, en minder waarschijnlijk wanneer de ouders een nieuwe partner hebben, de nieuwe partner ook een kind uit een eerdere relatie heeft, of wanneer het kind niet bij de ouder woont. De aanwezigheid van de huidige partner en de gezamenlijke aanwezigheid van de ex-partner en de huidige partner is waarschijnlijker wanneer de huidige partner samenwoont met de biologische ouder en wanneer de ex-partner een nieuwe partner heeft; en was minder waarschijnlijk wanneer het kind bij de ex-partner woont.

Over het algemeen geven deze bevindingen aan dat familierituelen - voor het grootste deel - gevierd lijken te worden in de "nieuwe gezinsconfiguratie". Het opnieuw aangaan van een relatie en de conflictueuze relatie tussen de ex-partners lijken de drijvende kracht achter dit fenomeen te zijn.

Hoofdstuk 5: Ervaringen van jongeren met ambiguïteit in stiefgezinnen.

Hoofdstuk 5 onderzoekt de ervaringen van jongeren met ambiguïteit (d.w.z. percepties van onduidelijkheid over familierelaties) in stiefgezinnen. Ambiguïteit is belangrijk om te onderzoeken, omdat dat het welzijn van jongeren zou kunnen verlagen. In deze studie analyseerde ik semigestructureerde interviews om te onderzoeken welke familierelaties jongeren mogelijk als ambigu ervaren, wat bijdraagt aan het ontstaan van ambiguïteit, en welke strategieën jongeren gebruiken om met ambiguïteit om te gaan.

De resultaten tonen aan dat vooral relaties met stiefouders, stiefbroers en -zussen en biologische ouders gevoelig zijn voor ambiguïteit. Twee belangrijke factoren dragen bij aan het ontstaan van ambiguïteit: informatie (d.w.z. onvolledige/tegenstrijdige kennis over familierelaties) en relationaliteit (d.w.z. de manieren waarop familierelaties werden beoordeeld en met elkaar vergeleken). Sommige jongeren hebben bijvoorbeeld het gevoel dat hun biologische ouder of stiefouder opzettelijk delen van hun relatie geheimhouden, waardoor respondenten hun relatie met de betreffende persoon in twijfel trekken. De stiefouder niet mogen of denken dat hij/zij een negatieve invloed heeft op de respectievelijke biologische ouder creëert eveneens een "barrière" voor de respondenten om een duidelijke band met hen op te bouwen. Jongeren gebruiken drie strategieën om met ambiguïteit om te gaan. *Relaties verbeteren* houdt in dat jongeren een betekenisvolle en duidelijke relatie opbouwden met de respectieve ander. Het *accepteren van ambiguïteit* houdt in dat ze de relatie (met tegenzin) tolereren zoals die is, en het *creëren van afstand* houdt in dat jongeren de ambiguïteit proberen te omzeilen door bijvoorbeeld hun verblijfsarrangement te veranderen.

Deze resultaten laten zien dat ambiguïteit wel een veel voorkomende ervaring is in stiefgezinnen, maar meestal beperkt blijft tot relaties tussen jongeren aan de ene kant en hun stiefbroers en -zussen en biologische ouders aan de andere kant. Het feit dat jongeren verschillende strategieën gebruiken om met ambiguïteit om te gaan, toont hun veerkracht en dat ze zelf actie kunnen ondernemen tijdens familietransities na een scheiding.

CONCLUSIES

De vier centrale conclusies van dit proefschrift zijn: (1) Ouders beleven het gezin na scheiding als een nieuw kerngezin; (2) De gezins- en huishoudenssamenstelling (meer nog dan relatiekwaliteit) bepaalt hoe het gezinsleven eruitziet en ervaren wordt; (3) Ambiguïteit is een veel voorkomende ervaring in gezinnen na een scheiding; (4) Wat goed is voor de ouders is misschien niet altijd goed voor de kinderen.

Ten eerste stelde ik aan het begin van dit proefschrift dat gezinnen na een scheiding "overduidelijk" geen kerngezinnen meer zijn. Het is echter opmerkelijk dat gezinnen na een scheiding (door ouders) lijken te worden ervaren en – volgens ouders – eruitzien als een "nieuw kerngezin". Het lijkt alsof hun percepties van wat familie is en met wie familieactiviteiten horen gedaan te worden aanzienlijk worden beïnvloed door de kerngezinideologie. Bijvoorbeeld, na een echtscheiding lijken ouders hun voormalige schoonfamilie niet langer als verwanten te beschouwen, ook al waren ze vaak jarenlang getrouwd en

hebben ze waarschijnlijk een band met hen opgebouwd, maar ze kennen hun nieuwe schoonfamilie wel snel de status van verwanten toe. Familierituelen worden meestal gevierd zonder de voormalige partner, maar wel met de huidige partner. In plaats van dat er na een scheiding een "uitgebreide" familie wordt gevormd, lijkt er in de ogen van de ouders een nieuwe kernfamilie te ontstaan ter vervanging van de vorige. Deze creatie van een nieuw kerngezin uit fragmenten van eerdere relaties wordt vooral duidelijk wanneer men bedenkt dat wanneer ouders een gedeeld biologisch kind met de nieuwe partner hebben en alle potentiële stiefkinderen die in hetzelfde huishouden wonen, de perceptie van de ouders is dat de cohesie van het stiefgezin groter is. Men kan speculeren dat - tenminste voor ouders - het wenselijk lijkt om dan door te gaan als een kerngezin.

Ten tweede blijkt dat de gezinsstructuur - met name de verblijfsarrangementen - bij uitstek van invloed is op hoe het gezinsleven in gezinnen na een scheiding eruitziet en ervaren wordt. Ouders bij wie het biologische kind woont na de scheiding zijn bijvoorbeeld meer geneigd de verjaardagen van de kinderen zonder de ex-partner te vieren dan ouders met een niet-inwonend kind. Het hebben van een inwonend stiefkind is bevorderlijker voor ouders om hun gezin na de scheiding als cohesief te ervaren dan het hebben van een niet inwonend kind. Wat betreft de verblijfplaats van stiefouders, blijken stiefouders vaker aan het gezinsleven deel te nemen (bijv. door aanwezig te zijn op de verjaardag van het kind) wanneer ze bij de ouder woonden, vergeleken met wanneer ze alleen een lat-relatie hebben.

Wat relatiekwaliteit betreft, hebben alleen bepaalde relaties een substantiële invloed op hoe het gezinsleven na de scheiding eruitziet en ervaren wordt. Specifiek zijn het vooral de relatiekwaliteit van de ouders met de huidige partner, de ex-partner en de relatie van de huidige partner met het stiefkind die beïnvloeden hoe het gezinsleven eruitziet en ervaren wordt. Met andere woorden: het is de relatie met de nieuwe gezinsleden en de ex-partner die bepalend is, terwijl de relatie met de eigen bestaande biologische kinderen van de ouders minder relevant is voor bijvoorbeeld het creëren van percepties van cohesie. Impliciet zouden ouders' gevoeliger kunnen zijn voor hoe goed het nieuwe stiefgezinslid met henzelf en hun bestaande kind omgaat, waardoor ze de kwaliteit van de relatie met hun eigen kinderen misschien voor lief nemen.

Ten derde vond ik dat ambiguïteit een veel voorkomende, maar niet (zoals wordt gesuggereerd) universele ervaring zou kunnen zijn in scheidingsgezinnen. Vooral relaties met stiefouders, stiefbroers en -zussen en biologische ouders worden als ambigu ervaren, en alleen onder bepaalde omstandigheden. Het blijkt dat het verblijfsarrangement ertoe bijdraagt dat sommige familierelaties als

ambigu worden ervaren. "Te snel" samenwonen met een stiefouder (en dus ook met potentiële stiefbroers en -zussen) draagt bij aan percepties van ambiguïteit. Nieuwverworven stiefgezinsleden met wie de relatie ambigu is, werden meestal niet als gezinsleden beschouwd, of de geïnterviewde jongeren zijn op zijn minst terughoudend om hen volledig als zodanig te beschouwen. Met andere woorden, voor kinderen is het niet vanzelfsprekend dat hun verworven stief-familieleden meetellen als familie, en deze overweging is mogelijk meer afhankelijk van hoe hun relatie met de respectievelijke stief-verwante zich ontwikkelt. Een slechte relatiekwaliteit draagt er ook toe bij dat respondenten niet bereid zijn om de relatie met de betreffende persoon duidelijk te maken. Zowel de familiestructuur als interpersoonlijke factoren zijn dus belangrijke mechanismen die ambiguïteit sturen, wat betekent dat ze niet los van elkaar bestudeerd kunnen worden.

Percepties van ambiguïteit zijn mogelijk ook geen permanente ervaring. De geïnterviewde jongeren ontwikkelden een reeks strategieën om met ambiguïteit om te gaan, waarbij een van de drie belangrijkste strategieën expliciet gericht is op het voldoende verhelderen van hun familierelaties. De overige strategieën zijn gericht op het minimaliseren van de tijd die ze doorbrachten in de buurt van personen met wie de relatie ambigu was - bijvoorbeeld door hun verblijfsarrangement te wijzigen of helemaal uit het ouderlijk huis te verhuizen. Dit illustreert dat gezinsstructuur - in het bijzonder verblijfsarrangementen - als bepalende factor (van de ambiguïteit) van het gezinsleven na een scheiding flexibel gebruikt wordt en kan worden door stiefgezinsleden om zich aan te passen aan veranderde omstandigheden, en dat kinderen veerkracht tonen bij het navigeren door uitdagende familietransities.

Ten slotte, wat goed is voor ouders is misschien niet (altijd) goed voor hun kinderen. Bijvoorbeeld, terwijl het samenwonen van alle stiefgezinsleden onder één dak gunstig lijkt te zijn voor de manier waarop ouders het familieleven na een scheiding ervaren (zoals in termen van een verhoogde perceptie van cohesie), vond ik dat het samenwonen met stiefouders en stiefkinderen vaak - in ieder geval tijdelijk - als belastend wordt ervaren door kinderen. Dit geldt bijvoorbeeld ook voor de neiging van ouders om bij familieactiviteiten vooral hun nieuwe partner te betrekken in plaats de andere biologische ouder van het kind, wat misschien niet overeenkomt met wat hun kinderen willen. De sterke neiging van ouders om hun voormalige schoonfamilie niet langer als familie te beschouwen kwam ook niet overeen met de percepties van kinderen, die in de kwalitatieve interviews rapporteerden dat ze hen als familie bleven zien. Het is aannemelijk dat terwijl ouders hun gezin na de scheiding als één nieuw kerngezin lijken te ervaren, kinderen zichzelf misschien zien als lid van twee nieuwe kerngezinnen.

De ervaringen van ouders en kinderen in scheidingsgezinnen kunnen dus inherent verschillen en soms diametraal tegenover elkaar staan.

Dergelijke mismatches vormen interessante uitdagingen voor gezinsonderzoekers in termen van hoe men de perspectieven van meerdere actoren kan integreren om een completer beeld te krijgen van hoe gezinnen na een scheiding werken. Voor ouders en kinderen kunnen verschillende opvattingen over gezinslidmaatschap leiden tot percepties van ambiguïteit over grenzen ("boundary ambiguity"), wat in verband is gebracht met een lager welzijn voor ouders en kinderen. Het is aannemelijk dat ouders ook beslissingen over de opvoeding van hun kinderen kunnen nemen (bijv. de verjaardag van het kind vieren zonder de ex-partner, bij de nieuwe partner intrekken) waar hun kinderen het niet mee eens zijn of slechts met tegenzin mee instemmen om de vrede in het gezin te bewaren. Dit benadrukt het belang voor ouders en kinderen om duidelijk met elkaar te communiceren en een manier te vinden om het gezinsleven te organiseren die voor hen werkt.

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"I made it through the wilderness,
Somehow I made it through."
Madonna (1984): *Like a Virgin*

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Ask me what I earned from all those tears.
Ask me why so many fade, but I'm still here."
Taylor Swift (2022): *Karma*

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About the author

Christian Fang (né Zielinski) was born on July 29th, 1995, in Oberhausen, Germany. After obtaining his Abitur in 2014, he studied Geography at Ruhr-University Bochum. During that time, he visited Utrecht University during an Erasmus exchange in 2016. He returned to Utrecht University in 2017 to pursue a research master's in Urban and Economic Geography.

In September 2019, he started as a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology at Utrecht University, as part of the Interuniversity Center for Social Science Theory and Methodology (ICS). He wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Anne-Rigt Poortman and Tanja van der Lippe. As part of his PhD training, in spring 2022, he was a visiting researcher at the Department of Sociology of the University of Vienna, hosted by Ulrike Zartler. Chapter 5 is the result of that visit. During his PhD, he taught statistics to bachelor students and supervised bachelor theses.

He currently works as a statistical researcher in the demography team of Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek).

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FAMILY LIFE IN POSTDIVORCE FAMILIES

Traditionally, families in Western societies were considered to comprise two married different-sex parents and their children, who all resided in the same household. This so-called nuclear family did family life together: nuclear family members went on vacation and celebrated birthdays and each other's achievements together. Naturally, this nuclear family was a cohesive unit (i.e., the family is a tight-knit unit). The substantial increase in the rates of divorce and repartnering since the 1960s have challenged the dominance of the nuclear family. Postdivorce families usually do not live under one roof: they are spread out over several households. This implies that postdivorce families are configured differently than nuclear families and most likely do not function like them. This dissertation uses large-scale quantitative and qualitative data to explore how family life in postdivorce families is organized, and the role that postdivorce family diversity (e.g., in terms of children's residence arrangements or the type of parental repartnering) plays for postdivorce family life.

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