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Descriptive Finding

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The long-term improvement in father–child relationships after divorce: Descriptive findings from the Netherlands

Frederique van Spijker¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Little is known about how the negative effect of parental divorce on father–child relations has changed over time. Existing cohort studies do not contain questions on father–child relationships after divorce and the investigated time period is often short.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to describe long-term changes in the association between parental divorce and father–child contact.

METHOD

We used pooled cross-sectional surveys from the Netherlands (N = 24,172) containing retrospective questions about respondents' relations with parents during childhood. We compared divorce cohorts to examine trends. We used interaction effects of cohort and education to compare trends across educational groups.

RESULTS

The results show that father–child relations after divorce improved across cohorts. There was a spectacular decline in the share of children who did not see their father after divorce, and if they did maintain contact there was also an increase – albeit more modest – in the perceived quality of the tie. Ironically, because the share of non-existent relationships declined so quickly, there was also an increase in the overall share of poor relationships with fathers. We further observe strong educational differences in post-divorce relationships with fathers, but these differences declined across divorce cohorts.

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CONCLUSIONS

The quality of father-child relations after divorce improved considerably across cohorts. This trend is interpreted in terms of the institutionalization of divorce (less stigma and better legal arrangements for fathers) and changing gender roles.

1. Introduction

Although there is a clear negative overall association between divorce and father-child relations (Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010), little is known about how this has changed over time. Long-term trends are difficult to study since most social and demographic surveys from the 1960s and 1970s do not contain questions on father-child relationships in childhood. One study comparing divorced fathers in different surveys in the United States shows increases in father-child contact between 1976 and 2002 (Amato, Meyers, and Emery 2009). Three other trend studies rely on surveys collected at one point in time and use a retrospective design. By comparing divorce cohorts, these studies – done in the United States, the Netherlands, and Belgium-Flanders – also reveal increased contact between divorced fathers and children and increased joint custody (Kalmijn and De Graaf 2000; Sodermans et al. 2013; Westphal, Poortman, and van der Lippe 2014).

In this descriptive study we use a pooled set of cross-sectional surveys from the Netherlands that contain retrospective questions about the quality of respondents' relations with their parents during childhood. One of the special features of the survey is that for children whose parents divorced, the questions specifically refer to the quality of the relationship with parents after divorce. As a result, we are able to describe changes in post-divorce parent-child relationships over a long period of time (1950–2009).

Several studies have shown that post-divorce relationships are socially stratified. Specifically, highly educated fathers and fathers with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to maintain good relationships with their children after divorce (Kalmijn 2015). Such fathers may offer more attractive resources to their children, which provide an incentive for them to visit more often (Ryan, Kalil, and Ziol-Guest 2008). In addition, more-highly educated fathers tend to invest more in their children during marriage and these investments may strengthen their role after divorce (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). In this note we describe educational differences in post-divorce relationships with fathers and mothers and we examine how possible differentials have changed over time.

The context of this research note is the Netherlands. Dutch divorce rates increased from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s and since then have fluctuated without a clear trend. Until the end of the 1990s the legal system normally awarded parental authority and the daily-caretaker role to the mother, while fathers were offered regular visiting

arrangements and mothers had to inform and consult them concerning important issues (e.g., school choices, medical treatments). The legal system then began to recognize divorced fathers' right to occupy a position beyond mere guardianship (Spruijt and Duindam 2009), and in 2009 co-parenting became the default (Poortman and Van Gaalen 2017). The time that married fathers spend on domestic and childcare activities has increased over time (Bucx 2011).

2. Data and methods

We use pooled survey data from the 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013 Dutch Family and Fertility Surveys (*Onderzoek Gezinsvorming*) conducted by Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The 2013 survey was carried out in cooperation with the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI). The samples were based on a two-stage probability design to ensure the data were nationally representative. In the first stage municipalities were chosen and in the second stage citizens in these municipalities were randomly selected. In 1998 the target population consisted of people between 18 and 52 years old who were living independently. From 2003 onwards the age range increased to include people between 18 and 62 years old. The sample sizes of the surveys ranged from 10,167 (1998) to 10,255 (2013). All interviews were conducted by trained interviewers from Statistics Netherlands. The response rates ranged between 57% and 73%. We only include respondents who grew up in a divorced or separated family and lived with their mother after divorce ($N = 2,362$). We do not include children who lived with both their parents after divorce (co-parenting arrangements in the period were uncommon). If a parent died during childhood the respondent is excluded from the analyses. Respondents with a missing value on any of our measures are also excluded from the analyses. The variables that are used to measure highest completed education of the parents contained the most missing values (9.4%). We checked the results after using multiple imputation for imputing parental education and the results were similar.

In the four surveys, the questions about parent–child relationships in divorced families concern what the respondents thought of their relationship with their father/mother in the childhood year(s) after the divorce. Childhood is defined as the period when the respondent was still living in the parental home. In all of the surveys the respondents were asked to describe the relationship with their parent as 'poor', 'reasonable', or 'good'. They could also indicate that there was 'no contact at all' with or between the respective parent(s). Changes over time in the parent–child relationship are measured by comparing divorce cohorts; i.e., the year in which the divorce or separation occurred. The control variables are gender, highest completed parental education, and the child's age when parents divorced. Education is coded in three general categories to make

them comparable: (1) primary school or lower vocational (including 1st year of middle vocational), (2) general secondary or 2nd–4th year of middle vocational, (3) higher vocational or university (tertiary). The highest educated parent was used to construct the variable.

Retrospective data can be affected by several types of bias (De Vries 2006). One form of bias is that the longer ago an event took place the less accurately it is reported. To address this, we control for the length of time since the divorce.

First, we present descriptive statistics for respondents from divorced families (Table 1). Next, we estimate (1) logit models predicting the odds of ‘no contact’, and (2) ordered logit models predicting relationship quality with the divorced father (Table 2). We estimate cohort effects in a first model and add interactions of cohort and education in a second model.

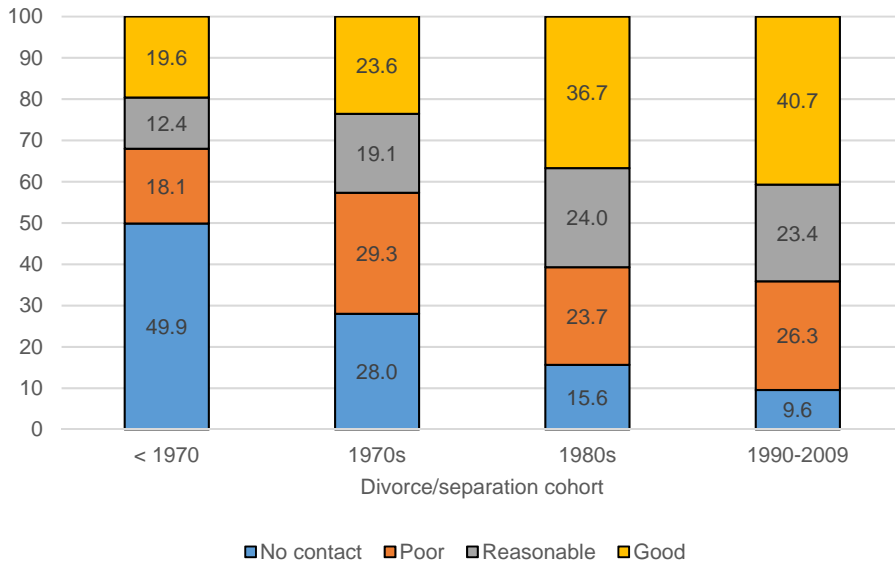
Table 1: Descriptive statistics of variables in sample

	Mean	s.d.	Min	Max	N
Daughter vs. son	0.56				2,032
Age at separation	9.80	5.32	0.00	35.00	2,032
Year of divorce	1979	12.3	1938	2009	2,032
Length of time since divorce (in years)	27.33	12.14	1.00	75.00	2,032
Parents lower education	0.58				1,841
Parents middle education	0.20				1,841
Parents higher education	0.23				1,841
No contact father	0.25				2,032
Quality relation father	2.07	0.85	1.00	3.00	1,524
Quality relation mother	2.65	0.66	1.00	3.00	2,032

Source: Dutch Fertility Surveys 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013.

3. Results

In Figure 1 we present our most important descriptive results. The share of children who had no contact with their father after divorce declined from 49.9% for divorces occurring in the 1950s and 1960s to a low of 9.6% for divorces occurring in the 1990s and 2000s. The high number of children in the oldest cohort who have no contact with their father is remarkable and the trend is quite strong and linear. We also see changes when looking at the other categories. The share of poor relationships increased from 18.1% to 26.3%, whereas the share of good relationships increased from 19.6% to 40.7%, so the latter trend is considerably stronger than the former.

Figure 1: Father–child relations after divorce

Not shown here – but worth mentioning in order to put the results regarding fathers in perspective – is that after divorce, relationships are better with mothers than with fathers – a finding that is well known. More importantly, there is virtually no change across cohorts in the relationship between children and mothers after divorce. In all cohorts a large majority (74% to 77%) of the children evaluated their relationship with their mother as good. Only about 10% of the children of divorced parents had poor relationships with their mother, and this is stable across cohorts.

Table 2 shows the results of the logistic regression analyses for the father–child relationship. The coefficients are log odds ratios; i.e., effects on the log odds of reporting no contact (Model 1, Model 2) and effects on the odds of having a high-quality relationship rather than a low-quality relationship, conditional on the fact that there is a relationship (Model 3, Model 4).

Table 2: Logit and ordinal logit regression of post-divorce relations with fathers

	Model 1 No contact father (logit)	Model 2 No contact father (logit)	Model 3 Quality relation father (ologit)	Model 4 Quality relation father (ologit)
Divorce cohort	-.475 [*] (.000)	-.581 [*] (.000)	.229 [*] (.014)	.287 [*] (.006)
Daughter vs. son	.205 ⁻ (.083)	.209 ⁻ (.078)	-.017 (.868)	-.015 (.884)
Age at separation	-.045 [*] (.000)	-.044 [*] (.000)	-.050 [*] (.000)	-.051 [*] (.000)
Length of time since divorce (in years)	.006 (.593)	.004 (.692)	.003 (.771)	.003 (.723)
Parents middle education	-.544 [*] (.001)	-.467 [*] (.005)	.269 [*] (.037)	.301 [*] (.022)
Parents higher education	-.599 [*] (.000)	-.612 [*] (.000)	.099 (.423)	.110 (.424)
Middle education x cohort		.239 ⁻ (.082)		-.152 (.191)
Higher education x cohort		.310 [*] (.046)		-.067 (.560)
Constant	-.896 [*] (.004)	-.916 [*] (.004)		
Constant 1			-1.029 [*] (.000)	-1.019 [*] (.000)
Constant 2			.099 (.724)	.110 (.695)
N	1,841	1,841	1,401	1,401
Chi-2	219.9	225.6	34.8	36.6
Log-likelihood	-902.5	-899.6	-1504.1	-1503.2

Note: P-values in parentheses. Year of separation centered and divided by 10.

Source: Dutch Fertility Surveys 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013.

⁻ $p < 0.10$; ^{*} $p < 0.05$

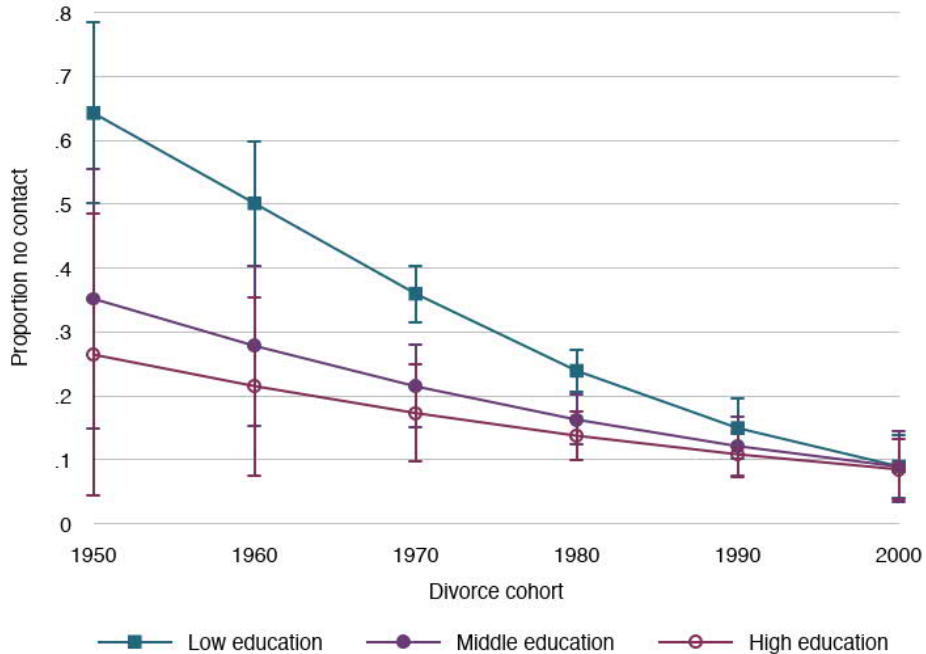
The logit model shows a negative and significant effect of divorce cohort, confirming that the odds of having no contact have declined over time. The ordinal logit model shows a positive effect of cohort, confirming that the quality of the father-child relationship – as measured – has increased. In other words, an increasing share of children have contact with their father, and where there is contact an increasing share of children have a good relationship with their father.

Education has a strong negative effect on the odds of having no contact with the father and a somewhat weaker positive effect on the quality of the relationship. In other words, higher-educated fathers are more likely to have contact with their children, and if they have contact the relationship is more likely to be good. The difference is primarily between the lower-educated and the two higher groups.

In the second model we add interactions between education and divorce cohort. For the logit model of no contact the interactions are positive (high and middle, compared to low) and statistically significant. This shows that the decline in the share of children who did not have contact with their father was smaller in higher-educated families than in lower-educated families. In Figure 2 we plot predicted values holding all other variables

constant at their mean values. The figure shows that in all educational groups there was a decrease in the odds of having no contact. However, the improvement was largest for lower-educated fathers.

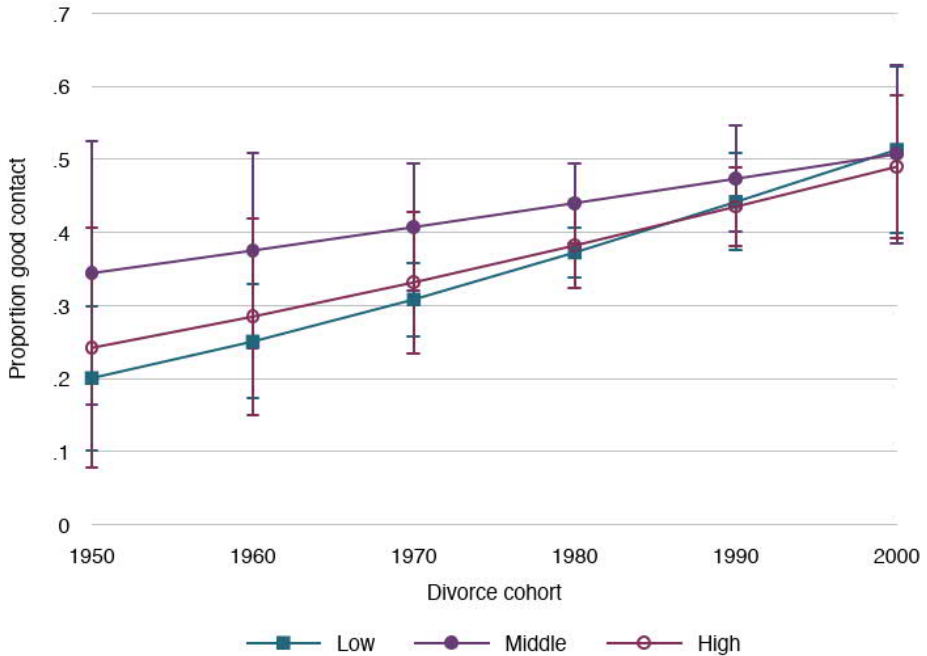
Figure 2: Predictive margins of no contact, by parental education



Note: Low education is primary school or lower vocational (including 1st year of middle vocational), middle education is general secondary or 2nd–4th year of middle vocational, higher education is higher vocational or university (tertiary).

The model for the quality of the father–child relationship does not reveal significant interactions between cohort and education, but the pattern is quite similar. The overall trend is positive and the interactions are negative for the middle- and higher-educated groups. Figure 3 illustrates this and shows that in all educational groups the odds of having a good relationship with the father increased, while this increase was stronger for lower-educated fathers. Both graphs show that there was a convergence over time between educational groups in post-divorce father–child relationships.

Figure 3: Predictive margins of good contact, by parental education



Note: Low education is primary school or lower vocational (including 1st year of middle vocational), middle education is general secondary or 2–4th year of middle vocational, higher education is higher vocational or university (tertiary).

4. Conclusion

We have demonstrated a long-term decline in the share of children having no relationship with their father after divorce. Where a relationship existed, the share of poor father-child relationships after divorce declined. These trends are not only statistically significant but also substantial in magnitude, especially for the number of children who had no contact with their father at all after divorce. A different way of looking at this is to consider how often there was no contact with the father in the early days of the upward trend in divorce. Almost half of the children whose parents divorced in the 1950s and

1960s did not see their father after divorce, a phenomenon that seems to have gone unnoticed. We believe this trend can be interpreted in a number of ways.

First, in many western countries, gender norms regarding the division of domestic and childcare tasks have become more equal. As a result, men spend more time on these activities than in the past, and have especially increased the time that they spend on their children (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). Based on this increased investment in children, one would expect father–child relationships in general, including father–child relationships in divorced families, to have improved over time. Our finding that educational differences have become smaller over time is consistent with this interpretation. Gender-role attitudes have traditionally been strongly stratified by education, and there is evidence that the trend toward more liberal gender-role attitudes in the 1970s and 1980s was more pronounced among the lower educated (Brewster and Padavic 2000; Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011).

Second, in the past decades the divorce laws have been liberalized and this has benefitted the position of divorced fathers. Whereas in the past it was more difficult for non-resident fathers to remain involved in their children’s lives because the custody laws regarding the living arrangement settlement generally benefitted the mother, currently the law acknowledges the role of divorced fathers and co-parenting has become increasingly important (Poortman and Van Gaalen 2017). At the same time, less stigma is attached to divorced fathers due to increased divorce rates and the normative acceptance of divorce. This has been a gradual process, to which a series of legislative changes and slowly changing norms have contributed. Our finding that the trend especially emerges in the distinction between any contact versus no contact is consistent with this interpretation.

Our findings have several important implications. On the one hand, improvements in the father–child relationship after divorce are beneficial for both the child and the father. A recent meta-analysis has shown that having a good relationship with the father is positively associated with children’s well-being (Adamsons and Johnson 2013), although which types of post-divorce father involvement matter for children is the subject of debate. On the other hand, concerns remain, especially regarding interparental conflict. Some legal scholars have argued giving fathers more influence in the post-divorce process risks increasing tensions and conflict between ex-partners. The shift away from a ‘full-stop’ model to a more ‘open’ model implies more heterogeneity in the quality of the post-divorce relationship between parents. For this reason, as co-parenting and shared parenting become the norm, it remains important to monitor trends in father–child relationships vis-à-vis the other relationships involved in the divorce process.

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