Parenting and child adjustment after divorce: family relationship quality, parental stress, and child adjustment in post-divorce families
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General Introduction
1.1 Introduction

In the last four decades, the meaning of marriage has changed immensely, and families have become more complex and diverse. In the Netherlands, the number of marriages each year has decreased by almost one-third since 1970 (Latten, 2005). It is no longer self-evident that couples will get married before they start living together. For a large group of Dutch citizens, living together without being married is a realistic option, at least for some time (Latten, 2005). Couples often start with a period of cohabitation before they choose to formalize their relationships with a cohabitation agreement, partnership registration or marriage. Even so, around 20 % of all cohabiting couples never formalize their relationships at all (CBS, 2010). Relationship formation has become a more individual matter, as demonstrated by recent legal developments in the Netherlands. Many rights and obligations that were once exclusively reserved for married couples are currently assigned to unmarried cohabiting couples as well (Latten, 2005). Furthermore, recent research on marital status and relationship quality showed no differences between married and unmarried cohabiting couples (e.g., McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

During the same period (from around 1970 until now), the number of divorces has tripled and around 14 times more children are born outside of marital relationships (Latten, 2005). Recent figures also show that around half of all divorced parents begin cohabiting with new partners within three years (CBS, 2010). Overall, it can be said that processes of relationship formation and dissolution have become more dynamic in the last four decades.

As a consequence of these processes, children may grow up with either married parents or unmarried cohabiting parents. Moreover, they are increasingly likely to be raised in “post-divorce family structures”, including single-parent families, stepparent families, patchwork (or blended) families (i.e., families in which both parents have children from previous relationships), and shared-parenting families (i.e., families in which the child lives in two households; partially with the mother and partially with the father). In the Netherlands, 15.3 % of all under-age children are currently living in single-mother families, and 6.1 % are living in stepfamilies. The majority of these family constellations originate from parental divorces and separation (E-Quality, 2008). Since 1998, both parents retain parental custody over their children after a divorce. Most ex-partners maintain contact with each other after the divorce in order to consult with each other about child-rearing issues.

Several theories and studies support the assumption that the actual structure of the family structure is of less influence on the wellbeing of children as are the processes that take place within these various family constellations (e.g., Golombok, 2000). The main goal of this research was therefore to investigate these processes within various family constellations. In this thesis, two processes that are frequently associated with the psychosocial adjustment of children, the quality of family relationships (§1.2) and the experience of parenting stress (§1.3), are examined in a variety of family constellations.
1.2 Family relationships

1.2.1 Family systems perspective

General Systems Theory was developed with the goal of detecting general principles that can be applied to all types of systems in all fields of research (Von Bertalanffy, 1950). According to this theory, a system is characterized by several components (or subsystems) that interact with and mutually influence each other. Changes in one part of a system influence all other parts of the system (White & Klein, 2008). This theory can be very useful for understanding families and family functioning.

When applied to families, system theory views a family not only as a group of people together, but also as “an aggregate of particular relationships and shared memories, successes, failures and aspirations” (Boss, 2002, p. 21). A family can be considered as a complex system composed of various subsystems (e.g. the parental subsystem, parent-child subsystems, and sibling subsystems). Family members participate within various subsystems. For example, parents participate in both the parental subsystem and the parent-child subsystem; children participate in the parent-child subsystems and sibling subsystems. Furthermore, several authors make a distinction between the marital subsystem and the co-parental subsystem (e.g., Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Feinberg, 2003). The marital relationship often refers to the romantic and emotional bond between partners; the co-parenting relationship refers to interactions between parents and their responsibilities regarding their children and child-rearing issues (Adamsons & Pasley, 2010).

As systems, post-divorce families are even more complex. These families are often characterized by more subsystems than are intact families, especially when divorced parents find and cohabitate with new partners (CBS, 2010). In general, therefore, children in post-divorce families are faced with more family relationships than are children in intact families, and these relationships are more complex. For instance, in addition to participating in parent-child subsystems and sibling subsystems, many children become part of stepfather-child and/or stepmother-child subsystems, and possibly even half-sibling and/or stepsibling subsystems. These relationships are often of a different nature, and the previous histories of the involved members are generally shorter than is usually the case with intact families. The distinction between the marital subsystem and the co-parental subsystem is particularly applicable to divorced couples. The majority of divorced parents in the Netherlands maintain contact with each other after divorce because they share parental custody of their children. The nature of this contact is often based on some conception of co-parenting.

Several studies have demonstrated that various family subsystems mutually influence each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as well as the functioning of children (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996; Golombok, 2000). A clear understanding of child development and child behavior thus requires examining the entire family system.
1.2.2 Spillover and compensation processes between family subsystems

As mentioned before, a change in one part of a system influences all other parts of the system (White & Klein, 2008). All subsystems within a particular system are thus related to each other. To understand the associations between two or more family subsystems, the literature frequently describes two perspectives: the spillover perspective and the compensatory perspective (Erel & Burman, 1995). According to the spillover perspective, emotions and behavior in one family subsystem spill over into other subsystems. For example, a warm relationship between both parents increases the likelihood that these parents will also have warm relationships with their children. According to the compensatory perspective, emotions and behavior in one family subsystem compensate for the emotions and behaviors in other family subsystems. For instance, when the relationship between parents is discordant, siblings might seek support from each other by maintaining warm relationships.

The interrelatedness of various subsystems is assessed in several studies, most of which clearly support the spillover perspective (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006; Erel & Burman, 1995). Post-divorce families have been less broadly studied, however, and the studies that do exist (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993) do not always include all family systems and subsystems in which children were involved.

1.2.3 Family relationships and children's adjustment in various family constellations

Many studies of intact families show that the quality of various family relationships and the psychosocial adjustment of children are strongly associated with each other. In this context as well, post-divorce families have been studied less extensively, and not all studies have included the myriad of systems and subsystems within these families. Nevertheless, in both intact as well as in post-divorce family structures, the quality of family relationships seems to be strongly linked to the psychosocial adjustment of children. Children who grow up in a warm, harmonious family in which family members have good and warm relationships with each other and, if appropriate, with extended family members (e.g., the father’s new partner, step-siblings), tend to report lower levels of problem behavior and to exhibit higher levels of wellbeing (e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1993; Wilkinson, 2004; Snyder, Bank, & Burraaston, 2005; Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001).

1.3 Parenting and parental stress

1.3.1 Parenting

Parenting can be considered a self-regulative and adaptive process (Hermanns, 1998). However, situations, processes, or personal characteristics of parents and/or children sometimes interfere with parenting by disrupting this self-regulative and adaptive process. These situations, processes, and characteristics are often identified as risk factors (Hermanns, 1998). In the literature, parental divorce and growing up in a post-divorce family structure are associated with risk factors. The higher the number of risk factors to which a child is exposed, the greater
is the probability that the child's developmental outcome will be negatively affected (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Sameroff, 2010).

1.3.2 Stress

There is no unambiguous definition of stress. Some researchers state that stress is change, and it is neither good nor bad in and of itself. Whether it is perceived as positive or negative depend upon the system or, in this case, the family (e.g., Boss, 2002). Other researchers define stress as a physical, mental, or emotional response to an event that causes physical or mental tension (e.g., Franken, 1994). Stress can also refer to an outside event or force that can affect a person's physical or mental state. These events or forces are often called stressors.

In stress theory, a distinction is made between stressful life events and chronic sources of stress (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Liu, & Needham, 2005). Stressful life events refer to specific events of relatively short duration, while chronic stressors are of longer duration. According to the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Horowitz, Schaefer, Hiroto, Wilner, & Levin, 1977), a widely used measurement for stressful life events, divorce and marital separation are among the most stressful life events. Furthermore, divorce can cause several chronic stressors, including financial problems and ongoing conflicts between ex-partners. Both stressful life events and chronic stressors can be considered as risk factors that threaten the post-divorce adjustment of children (Kitson, 2006). From this perspective, differences between intact families and post-divorce families are caused by the stress and strains inherent in relationship dissolution (Williams & Umberson, 2004).

1.3.3 Parenting stress

Parenting stress is a specific sort of stress, which generally refers to the feelings experienced by parents when they are unable to cope with the demands associated with parenting. Parenting stress is frequently associated with less adaptive parenting behavior, lower quality of the family relationships, and child adjustment problems (e.g., Ang, 2008; Bornstein, 2002; Helms-Erickson, 2001). Within different family constellations, different stressors may be more prominently present.

In single-parent families, the parent lacks the presence of the other parent. A second adult in the household can provide child-rearing assistance and emotional support (Thompson & Esminger, 1989), and the absence of a partner often leaves the parent with nobody else with whom to share the day-to-day responsibilities and stresses associated with raising a child (Golombok, 2000). Furthermore, the economic resources of single-parent families (particularly single-mother families) usually decline sharply after divorce (e.g., Bouman, 2004). In the Netherlands, a substantial proportion of all divorced single mothers have incomes around the welfare level (Bouman, 2004).

Around half of all divorced or separated parents in the Netherlands begin cohabiting with new partners within three years (CBS, 2010). In general, when single parents remarry or cohabitate with new partners, their family income increases. On average, the family income of stepfather
families is only slightly lower than that of intact families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Other stressors may be more prominent in stepfamilies, however, due to the increased complexity of family subsystems. Members of stepfamilies must cope with family relationships that are more complex, and it might be necessary for stepparents to adapt their parenting styles (Cherlin, 1978).

1.4 Thesis outline

1.4.1 Aim of the study

In this thesis, five empirical studies are presented in each of five chapters. Although these chapters can be read individually, a common thread unites them. All of the studies are based on a dataset concerning mothers and their children (8-12 years old), obtained from municipal registration offices, elementary schools, and the social networks of student assistants. The methods sections of the empirical chapters thus overlap considerably.

The main goal of these studies was to investigate processes within various family constellations. They address two family processes that are frequently associated with the psychosocial adjustment children: the quality of various family relationships and the extent to which parents experience parenting stress. These family processes are studied within intact families, divorced single mother families, and stepfather families. Several studies have shown no differences between married and cohabitating couples regarding the quality of their relationship (e.g., McLanahan & Beck, 2010). In this paper, therefore, the term “divorce” also refers to marital separation and relationship dissolution amongst unmarried cohabitating couples with children.

Associations between various family subsystems in intact families and the psychosocial adjustment of children are investigated in Chapter 2. Multiple informants were used to gather data: mothers were asked about their marital satisfaction, and children were questioned about their relationships with their mothers, fathers, and siblings. Chapter 3 examines family subsystems in divorced families (e.g., relationships between divorced parents, mother-child relationships, and non-resident father-child relationships) and associations with children’s adjustment. This study is comparable to the study described in the previous chapter, although divorced mothers were questioned about both the quality of their relationships with their ex-partners, as well as about their co-parenting relationships with their ex-partners. Chapter 4 concerns children growing up in stepfather families, examining family subsystems within and outside the household. Children were asked about conflicts and acceptance within their relationships with non-resident fathers and stepfathers. The study also investigates associations between these relationships and child adjustment. Chapter 5 describes a comparison between intact families, divorced single-mother families, and stepfather families regarding the level of parenting stress experienced by mothers. It also includes an examination of links with the psychosocial adjustment of children. Chapter 6 provides confirmation of the existence of spillover processes between the relationships of mothers with their ex-partners and their relationships with their children. It also tests a model using divorced the level of parenting stress experienced by mothers as a mediator. A final chapter (Chapter 7) presents a general conclusion and discussion of the various studies.
References


