Post-separation families: Residential arrangements and everyday life of separated parents and their children

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1. Introduction

‘A family, that is what we still are, although we do not live under the same roof anymore. As partners we are separated because we no longer wanted to live together, but as parents, we are still attached. That is how we felt about it, and still do.’

(Alice, a shared residence mother of 15- and 18-year-old sons)

1.1 A new kind of family: the post-separation family

This dissertation is about separated parents and their children, their residential arrangements, and the organization and practising of their everyday post-separation (family) life. In recent decades, divorce and separation became common life events in most Western countries (OECD, 2011). Nowadays, in the Netherlands, 1 out of 40 couples experiences the break-up of their marriage or their cohabiting relationship annually (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). Consequently, 30% of all Dutch children under age 18 witness the separation of their parents (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014).

All separated parents have to decide, or in case of a failing private agreement let judicial court decide, were their children will live, with whom and for what period of the week. In The Netherlands, as in most other Western countries, the dominant post-separation residential arrangement is the resident mother arrangement in which the children stay with their mother and have contact with their non-resident father on a regular basis. In 2013 66% of the Dutch children with separated parents were involved in a resident mother arrangement (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). Although a resident mother arrangement is still the most common post-separation arrangement, the popularity of the resident mother arrangement is diminishing over the last decade and other arrangements gained popularity. Nowadays, 7% of the Dutch children with separated parents live with their father in a resident father arrangement (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). There is also a growing category of separated parents who are involved in a shared residence arrangement, in which the children live with both parents alternately and the care for the children is divided (nearly) equally in terms of residential arrangement, (financial) responsibility, caregiving, supporting school-related activities and spending leisure time. Between 2006 and 2013 the percentage of
Dutch children with separated parents living with both parents on an equal or nearly equal basis has increased from 16 to 27% (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). In other Western countries the category of separated families maintaining a shared residence arrangement has also become substantial in recent years (Mortelmans et al., 2011; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Willen and Richards, 2006).

The aim of this dissertation is twofold. The first objective is to acquire a better understanding of the choice of a particular post-separation residential arrangement by looking into the life course characteristics of separated parents. The second aim is to gain insight into the organization and practising of daily (family) lives of post-separation families involved in different residential arrangements. These aims are related to two gaps that were identified in the literature on separated families.

Firstly, relatively little is known about the families who opt for or maintain a shared residence arrangement, in which the conventional, gendered parenting roles are abandoned, applied less strictly, or reversed. Despite today’s growing popularity of shared residence arrangements, most existing studies on separated families ignore the group of shared residence families and are only concerned with separated families involved in the dominant resident mother arrangement.

The lack of knowledge about shared residence families is not only remarkable because shared residence arrangements are becoming more widespread in society, but even more because shared residence arrangements are often presented, in scholarly literature, policy frameworks and political and social debates, as an arrangement that is in the best interest of the child (Kurki-Suonio, 2000). It can be questioned whether the (assumed) positive impact of living in a shared residence arrangement on children’s well-being is due to the arrangement as such or due to the specific characteristics of the parents involved in the arrangement. The questions arise who these parents are and why they opt for a shared residence arrangement. In this dissertation these questions are addressed by comparing the life course characteristics of separated parents in the Netherlands involved in different residential arrangements.

Secondly, although considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the (negative) consequences of separation for ex-partners and their children (e.g. Hetherington and Kelly, 2002; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Wallerstein et al., 2000), it is still relatively unknown how separated parents organize and practise everyday (family) life. The type of residential arrangement chosen after separation has considerable consequences for the organisation of everyday life of the post-separation family. Whereas resident mothers and resident fathers run the risk of becoming overburdened because they have no partners with whom to share responsibilities (Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; Sanik and Mauldin, 1986), shared residence parents might
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become a dual-location household (Green et al., 1999; Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009b), which makes day-to-day life more fragmentary and complicated.

Furthermore, most contemporary family researchers recognize and emphasize the continued endurance of family life after separation (e.g. Simpson, 1998; Thompson and Amato, 1999), but do not provide much insight into how this continued family life is organized or practised. Some exceptions are the study of Smart and Neale (1999), who were the first scholars who emphasized the importance of family practices in post-separation family research, and Haugen’s (2010) qualitative study on the children’s experiences of shared residence arrangements. Although separation will disrupt family life to some degree, part of the former family life is likely to remain. It can be said that separated families challenge the often taken-for-granted family practices and, in so doing, may create their own particular ways of ‘doing family’. Given the growing diversity and complexity among the post-separation residential arrangements at present, in the Netherlands as well as in other Western countries, it becomes all the more interesting to study everyday life after separation. Therefore, the second part of this dissertation focusses on the organization and practising of everyday (family) life of separated families involved in different post-separation residential arrangements.

1.2 Research questions

The main research question addressed in this dissertation is: How can the choice of a particular post-separation residential arrangement be explained, and how do separated parents involved in different types of post-separation residential arrangements organize and practise everyday (family) life?

The four empirical studies, presented in this dissertation (chapters two to five), each address a different part of the main research question. Chapter two aims to acquire a better understanding of the choice of a particular post-separation residential arrangement by looking into the life course characteristics of separated parents. The research question addressed in the chapter is: What life course characteristics of separated parents are associated with the two most common types of post-separation residential arrangements?

The chapters three, four and five take up the second part of the research question and aim to gain insight into the organization and practising of everyday life of post-separation families involved in different post-separation residential arrangements. Chapter three aims to explain the differences between single resident mothers and single shared residence parents in organizing everyday life by addressing the research question: How do separated parents shape and balance post-separation
life, with what results and how can we explain the differences? In the chapter the differences found between the groups of single parents are explained by different commitments in the work and care domains.

Chapter four focuses on family practices after separation, by addressing the research question: Which family practices of the pre-separation family continue after separation, how are they conducted and with whom? The focus in the chapter is on two central elements of family life: routines and rituals.

Chapter five aims to gain insight into the perceptions of separated parents on their dual-locally living children’s residential experience. The three questions addressed are: (1) Do parents report they took into account their children’s (future) residential experience while negotiating the post-separation residential arrangement, and what were their considerations about this issue?; (2) How do separated parents perceive their children’s residential experiences?; and (3) What elements (of the physical, social and temporal dimensions) are perceived by parents to affect their children’s residential experience?

1.3 Life course trajectories and commitments

Life course theory has a central role in the theoretical background of this research. The life course approach originates from the early 1980s (Elder, 1978; Hareven, 1978; Willekens, 1991) and provides a way of thinking about how human lives are socially organized (Elder et al., 2003). According to this approach, human life consists of various life events, belonging to different domains of life and their corresponding careers (also denoted as trajectories), such as the housing, occupational, educational and family careers. Together, these interrelated, parallel careers form a life course (Elder et al., 2003; Willekens, 1991).

According to Giddens’ (1991; 1994) work on the life course as a project of the self, individuals are active agents who shape their own life course by making conscious decisions and reflecting continuously on these decisions, rather than following standard scripts. He called this process reflexivity. In this context the choice of a non-standard residential arrangement after separation not only become a more realistic option, but also a matter of continuous reflection, decision-making and change.

Critics of reflexive modernization question the ability of people to reflect on the circumstances of their lives, the extent of reflexivity and to which a person’s ability to reflect on their own situation actually affects their action or behavior (Alexander, 1996; Walters and Whitehouse, 2011). Stryker and colleagues (e.g. Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2011) therefore emphasize the importance of focusing on the impact of social structures on social behavior. Accordingly, in the theoretical point of
view underlying this dissertation individuals shape their own life courses in relation to their preferences and the resources and restrictions inherent in their life course on the one hand (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1991; 1994, Stets and Burke, 2000) and, on the other hand, the opportunities and constraints structured by social institutions and cultural and normative ideas and patterns (Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2011).

In this dissertation, the life course approach provides a theoretical framework not only to explain the choice of a particular type of post-separation residential arrangement, which can be understood as an outcome of preferences, resources and restrictions arising from people’s life course trajectories, but also to gain a better understanding of the organization of post-separation everyday life.

In general, daily life is dedicated to activities and commitments in the different domains of life and people have multiple social roles in these domains. According to Burke and Reitzes’ (1991) work on identity theory, individuals categorize and identify themselves by these social roles and therefore hold multiple identities. To maintain their identities, people develop commitments that connect them with these identities (Burke and Reitzes, 1991). The term commitment refers to a choice with long-term consequences (Becker, 1960). Someone’s diverse commitments can be competing and conflicting, because commitments compete for an individual’s time and energy. In this dissertation, as in other studies (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2000; Bielby and Bielby, 1989; Karsten, 1995; Nippert-Eng, 1996), organizing daily life is understood as an act of balancing all commitments in the work, care and leisure domains.

1.4 Practising family life

Another important theoretical point of view underlying this study is the assumption that family members actively construct their family by practising family life. Since the middle of the 1960s, ideas about what constitutes a family have changed dramatically. Social, economic and cultural changes on the macro level, such as individualization, secularization, economic restructuring and emancipation, have weakened the traditional social structures of class, gender and religion (SCP, 2011). These processes resulted in the decline of the nuclear family and increasing family heterogeneity (Silva and Smart, 1999; Van Eeden Moorefield and Demo, 2007). The traditional nuclear family, in which the father works full-time as primary wage earner and the mother stays at home to care for the children, is being replaced by the dual-earner family (De Meester, 2010). Furthermore, other types of family arrangements, such as cohabiting unions, single-parent families, stepfamilies, gay and lesbian families have become more prevalent, thereby becoming more conventional and visible in society.
A particular non-standard family type is the dual-location family or household, in which couples or parents no longer live in one shared residence (Green et al., 1999). Examples of dual-location families are Living-Apart-Together (LAT) couples and commuter partnerships (Van der Klis, 2009). Post-separation residential arrangements in general, and shared residence arrangements in particular, might form a part of this growing category of geographical non-standard households.

In order to recognize family pluralism, diversity and fluidity, today’s family scholars refer to ‘family practices’ (e.g. Morgan, 1996; 2011; Smart and Neale, 1999) and ‘doing family’ (Morgan, 1999; Smart, 2000) instead of referring to ‘the family’ or ‘being family’. This scholarly focus on family practices fits in with the work of Giddens (1991; 1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) on the late modern age, in which family membership has changed from being a given to being a choice, depending upon the interactions of the members.

In this dissertation practising family life has been conceptualized by the concepts routines and rituals, which are both important to the well-being of the family (Fiese et al., 2002). Rituals, in particular, can play an important role in displaying family. Finch (2007) introduced the concept of ‘family display’. She argued that families not only need to be ‘done’, but also need to be ‘displayed’. Display is defined by Finch (2007: 67) as ‘the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant other audiences that certain of their actions do constitute “doing family things” and thereby confirm that these relationships are “family” relationships’. Today’s diverse, fluid and complex character and structure of family relationships increase the need for family display, because relationships become less recognizable as constituting family relationships. Family display might also be particularly important for post-separation families.

1.5 Data and methods
This dissertation is based on a mixed methods research design, combining large-scale longitudinal survey data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005; 2007) and Divorce in the Netherlands 1998 (abbreviated in Dutch as SIN) (Kalmijn et al., 2000) with data from in-depth interviews with a selection of relevant respondents from the NKPS survey (NKPS Minipanel). The mixed methods design of this study made it possible to test hypotheses about causal relationships between variables on the basis of a multivariate analysis and then to interpret the findings and the direction of causality by analysing the qualitative Minipanel data. Furthermore, selecting respondents from NKPS survey respondents made it possible to choose
separated parents with an adequate variation in post-separation residential arrangements and several other background characteristics.

**NKPS survey data**

At the time of analysis the NKPS survey data consisted of two waves (the third wave became available in 2012). The first wave, containing information on 8,161 inhabitants of the Netherlands, was conducted in 2002–2003 among a representative sample of the Dutch population aged between 18 and 79 and not living in an institution (for example, a care institution or prison). The overall response rate was 45%. The second wave, conducted in 2006–2007, was based on follow-up interviews with 6,670 respondents (82%) from wave one.

The NKPS survey data contains a wealth of information about family relations in the Netherlands. Besides many important background variables such as socio-economic and household characteristics, the dataset includes the required detailed information about the residential arrangements of separated parents and their children at the time of the interview: co-residence, locations, the number of nights spent in the maternal and paternal residence (this information was necessary to identify the type of post-separation residential arrangement of the family), and frequency of contact between the child and his/her non-resident parent.

Only those respondents were selected from the dataset who had experienced a divorce or the dissolution of an unmarried union. In general, one should be cautious taking these two categories together. Recent studies on the Dutch case, however, show that the impact of union dissolution on couples with children does not differ substantially between married and unmarried couples (Spruijt, 2007). In this dissertation the two categories are combined and therefore the term *separated* refers to parents who experienced a non-marital dissolution as well as to parents who experienced a legal divorce. Furthermore, the selected respondents had at least one child with the ex-partner, whereby at least one of the children was aged 18 or younger and lived with one parent or with both alternately, the ex-partner was still alive, and information about the division of the overnight stays of the child(ren) between both parents was available. The selection contained 295 respondents.

**SIN survey data**

The SIN survey was conducted in 1998-1999 and contains information on 2,346 Dutch-speaking inhabitants of the Netherlands aged between 30 and 75 years not living in an institution and who were in their first marriage, divorced once or divorced once and currently remarried. The overall response rate was 58%. Divorced persons were
oversampled, but among these, those who had not remarried or entered a new cohabiting relationship were slightly underrepresented.

The SIN survey data contains information about the life course of married and divorced individuals, their partners and ex-partners. Background variables on the socio-economic and household characteristics were available and also the required information to identify the type of post-separation residential arrangement of the family. For the respondent selection of the SIN data the same criteria were used as for the selection of respondents of the NKPS dataset. The selection contained 380 respondents.

**NKPS Minipanel**

An *NKPS Minipanel* is a small-scale in-depth study among NKPS survey respondents. The funding for the first two NKPS waves, provided by the Major Investments Fund of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) [grant number 480-10-009], The Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, Utrecht University, the University of Amsterdam and Tilburg University, included an opportunity to apply for such in-depth studies. As required for NKPS Minipanels, the qualitative data gathered have been made accessible (rendered anonymous) to other academic researchers. The available data include the research proposal and design, the interview instructions, background information, correspondence with respondents and the transcripts of the interviews (for more information see www.nkps.nl).

The Minipanel designed to address the research questions in this dissertation consisted of 35 in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in 2008–2009. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling (Mason, 1996). In addition to the selection criteria used for the selection of respondents in the survey data, respondents were only selected if the children lived with them for at least 50% of the time, because I was especially interested in the story of the resident parents. The selection included parents involved in a shared residence arrangement and mothers involved in a resident mother arrangement. Sixty respondents, classified as being a resident mother or a shared residence parent, were asked to participate. The response was 63.3%; this was lower among resident mothers than among respondents with a shared residence arrangement. The final sample contained 20 resident mothers, 15 shared residence parents (7 fathers, 8 mothers) and no resident fathers. In the Netherlands, the number of resident fathers is small (7% of all children of divorce live with their fathers: Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). At the moment of separation all 35 interviewed parents were in a heterosexual relationship. In two cases the relationship ended because one of the parents ‘came out’ as homosexual. Within the sample
variation was guaranteed in terms of the respondents’ place of residence (figure 1.1), level of education and the number and the age of their children. More detailed information on the characteristics of the respondents is provided in the following chapters of this book.

Figure 1.1 Overview of respondent’s places of residence

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the definition, experience, and evaluation of the current post-separation residential arrangement and on separated parents’ experience of daily life. Beyond raising topics from the topic list,

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1 Figure 1.1 was made by Michelle Hu, RIGO Research en Advies
2 See Appendix II for the topic list.
the role of the interviewer was limited, in order to give the respondents ample time to tell their narratives. The interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes; they were recorded and fully transcribed.

The combination of survey data and qualitative data gathered among the same respondents provided several advantages. Firstly, the survey data were the ideal source for finding eligible respondents. Secondly, information from the survey could be used to prepare the interviews and tailor them towards the situation of the respondent. Unfortunately, the agreement concerning the collection of interview data from the NKPS respondents did not allow the interviewing of respondents’ ex-partners or children. Interviewing both parents and children could provide highly relevant information on the discrepancy between the perceptions of parents and those of their children.

**Methods**

In order to address the first research question, survey data from the NKPS and SIN were pooled. The main advantage of pooling the two data sets was to increase the number of respondents. The final pooled dataset contained 675 respondents.

Logistic regression analyses were performed to estimate the effects of life course characteristics of separated parents on the choice of a post-separation residential arrangement. The regression models were used as a convenient way to describe multivariate associations between these variables, rather than as causal models; the results for these variables should be seen as sophisticated descriptive statistics (cf. Aassve et al., 2003). Data from the in-depth interviews were used to interpret the associations arising from the survey data.

Research questions two, three and four were addressed using the qualitative Minipanel data. The interview data were coded, classified and analyzed thematically with the help of ATLAS.ti. The analytical strategy was twofold: a top-down approach was used, drawing relevant themes from the literature; and a bottom-up approach was used, drawing relevant themes derived from the interview material.

In each of the chapters quotations from the interviews were used to underline the research findings. To protect the privacy of the respondents, the quotes have been rendered anonymous. To enhance the comparability of the separate chapters the same pseudonyms were used across all chapters.

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3 Software for qualitative data analysis created by Thomas Muhr at Scientific software. See www.atlasti.com for more information.
1.6 Reading guide

The next four chapters (two to five) of this dissertation each present an empirical study addressing a different research question. Chapter two, three and four are (slightly different versions of) articles published in international peer-reviewed academic journals. Chapter five is under review for publication in an international peer-reviewed academic journal, after revision and resubmission⁴. Finally, chapter six, consisting of the conclusion and discussion, recaptures the findings of the previous chapters, reflects on the findings in light of the literature and important political and social debates, reflects on the used data and methods and discusses an agenda for future research.

⁴ See Appendix I for an overview of the articles.