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

Bakker, W.

Citation for published version (APA):
Conclusion and discussion
6. Conclusion and discussion

This dissertation focused on separated parents and their children, their decision on the residential post-separation arrangement, and on the organization and practising of their everyday post-separation (family) life. The main research question addressed in this study was: *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?*

This question was explored in four empirical studies, each addressing a different part of the research question, that were presented in separated chapters in this dissertation. Having arrived at the end of the study, the final task is to answer the research question by recapturing the findings of the previous chapters, to reflect on the findings in light of the literature and important political and social debates, to reflect on the used data and methods and to discuss an agenda for future research.

6.1 Summary of main findings

The aim of this dissertation was twofold. The first objective, addressed in chapter two, was 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. Chapter three, four and five focused on different, but all essential, elements of everyday live; organizing and balancing daily activities, family routines and rituals and residential experiences. Together, these three chapters address the second objective of this dissertation: gain insight into the organization and practising of everyday (family) life of post-separation families involved in different residential arrangements.

The choice of a post-separation residential arrangement

All separated parents have to choose and organize a post-separation residential arrangement for their children. A resident mother arrangement, in which the children live with their mother and have regular contact with their father, is still the most common post-separation residential arrangement. However, since the year 2000, the popularity of the resident mother arrangement is diminishing and other arrangements, in particular shared residence arrangements, gained popularity. Children involved in a shared residence arrangement live with both parents alternately. The parental care for these children – in terms of (financial) responsibility, care giving, supporting school-
related activities and spending leisure time – is divided on an equal basis. In 2001 5% of all Dutch children with separated parents were involved in a shared residence arrangement, in 2005 this group consisted of 15% of all Dutch children with separated parents and nowadays it is even 27% (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014).

The popularity of shared residence arrangements is remarkable, because shared residence arrangements are in contrast with the more conventional, gendered Dutch culture of maternal care by which arrangements in which children do not live fulltime with their mother used to be an exception, while having a visiting arrangement with their father used to be typical after separation. The questions arise who those shared residence parents are and why they opt for a shared residence arrangement. Therefore, in chapter two of this dissertation the focus was on understanding the choice of a particular post-separation residential arrangement by looking into the life course characteristics of separated parents. A comparison was made between the two most common types of post-separation residential arrangements: parents involved in a shared residence arrangement and mothers involved in a resident mother arrangement. The research question addressed in chapter two was: *What life course characteristics of separated parents are associated with the two most common types of post-separation residential arrangements?*

In chapter two, a life course approach (Elder, 1978; Hareven, 1978; Willekens, 1991) was used to provide a theoretical framework to explain the choice of a particular post-separation residential arrangement. The choice of a post-separation residential arrangement can be understood as an outcome of preferences, resources and restrictions arising from people’s life course trajectories. Individuals are active agents who shape their own life course in relation to their preferences and the extent to which these preferences can be put into practice, depending on 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, culture and normative patterns (Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2011).

The findings reported in chapter two revealed that shared residence parents are a typical modern category of separated parents with a specific set of life course characteristics belonging to the residential, educational, occupational and family careers. Being involved in a shared residence arrangement is associated with highly educated, dual-career ex-couples with a high income level, who previously practised a symmetrical task division during their partnerships.

These findings provide a better understanding of the growing popularity of shared residence arrangements. Since the 1960s, in the Netherlands, as in many other
Western countries, there has been a growing group of dual-career couples. The traditional breadwinner earning model has gradually been replaced by the dual-earner model, due to the massive entrance of women on the paid labour market. These dual-career couples prefer a symmetrical task division both in paid work and in unpaid (household) tasks (De Meester, 2010). This dissertation demonstrated that when dual-career couples separate, a shared residence arrangement seems to be the arrangement that best fits their preferences. The interview data presented in chapter two showed that shared residence parents indeed had a high level of symmetry in task division during their marriage. In order to maintain the symmetrical care division that they had during their partnership, and to combine commitments in the work and care domains as they did before, the dual-career ex-couples preferred to be in a shared residence residential arrangement after separation. Another part of the explanation of the high prevalence of shared residence arrangements among dual-career ex-couples might be that these ex-couples are more likely to have the resources to overcome restrictions and constraints imposed by being involved in a shared residence arrangement. For example, two suitable dwellings close to each other might be easier to obtain for couples with a higher income level.

In chapter two of this dissertation, a strong association was also found between the geographical distance between the dwellings of both ex-partners and the likelihood of maintaining a shared residence arrangement. The quantitative analyses showed that parents who lived within a distance of 1.5 kilometres or 10 minutes traveling time from their ex-partner are much more likely to be in a shared residence arrangement than are separated parents living further away. The importance of living in really close geographic proximity to each other, preferably in the same neighborhood, was also often explicitly mentioned by the interviewed shared residence parents as a precondition for maintaining a shared residence arrangement. Twelve of the 15 interviewed shared residence parents actually lived in the same neighborhood (within 1 km distance) as their ex-partner. Most of these parents had made a conscious choice to live in the same neighborhood in order to maintain a shared residence arrangement while providing one social environment for their children.

In the Netherlands, households with a symmetrical division of paid work and household tasks are overrepresented in inner cities and urban contexts. Those residential areas are attractive because of their central location and variety of amenities (Boterman, 2012; De Meester et al., 2007). Therefore, it is surprising that no association between degree of urbanization of the residential environment and shared residence arrangements was found in this study. An explanation might be that in the
Netherlands less urbanized residential areas offer different opportunities than urbanized residential areas, which also enable ex-partners to organize a shared residence arrangement. Less urbanized residential areas, for example, often have a less tight (social) housing market and therefore lower housing prices, which make it easier and also more affordable for parents to obtain two dwellings in the same neighborhood.

Chapter two furthermore demonstrated that maintaining a shared residence arrangement holds different meanings for men and women. Compared with the most common resident mother arrangements, shared residence arrangements are an expression of increased paternal involvement and decreased maternal involvement. This explains the finding that having a new partner is associated with a lower likelihood for men, but a greater likelihood for women, of being involved in a shared residence arrangement. For women, being in a shared residence arrangement instead of in the most common arrangement with a resident mother is associated with less time spent with the children, which makes spending time with a new partner easier. For men, being in a shared residence arrangement increases the time spent with the children compared with being a non-resident father, which makes spending time with a new partner more difficult.

Organizing everyday life after separation

Chapter three of this dissertation aimed to explain the differences between single resident mothers and single shared residence parents in organizing everyday post-separation life. In this chapter, the focus was on single separated parents maintaining a one-parent household. Those parents in particular run the risk of becoming overburdened by the time demands of employment, childrearing and homemaking, because they do not have a residential partner to share the ‘burden’. The research question in chapter three was: *How do separated parents shape and balance post-separation life, with what results in terms of work, care and leisure, and how can we explain the differences between single resident mothers and single shared residence parents?*

In chapter three, organizing everyday life was interpreted as balancing the social roles and corresponding commitments in the work, care and leisure domains in a 24/7 schedule. These domains are differentiated by physical, temporal and psychological boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). In daily life, people make transitions between the different domains by crossing the borders (Clark, 2000). How easily the borders can be crossed depends on one’s commitments, which influence the permeability and flexibility of the demarcations.
The qualitative analyses presented in chapter three revealed that the post-separation residential arrangement has considerable consequences for the organisation of the everyday life of separated single parents. The commuting rhythm of the children not only defines the time demands of the care domain, but also for the scheduling of activities in the work and leisure domains. Compared to the traditional group of single resident mothers who experience many constraints in combining work, care and leisure, single shared residence parents succeed better in balancing their post-separation commitments. The differences between these two categories were explained by the parents’ social roles and commitments in the work and care domains.

Most single shared residence parents value their identity as a primary wage earner as highly as their identity as a parent. After separation, shared residence parents continue to share the commitments in the care domain with their ex-partners. When the children stay with one parent, the other parent is free of commitments related to their social role as parent. This unscheduled time can be dedicated to catching up on paid work, to domestic work or to the leisure domain. As a result, the care domain is clearly temporally and physically demarcated by the presence or absence of the children. The clear demarcation between the work and care domains contributes to a more balanced everyday life (Clark, 2000). Although most shared residence parents do not approve of seeing their children only half the time, the temporal and physical demarcations of the care domain by the presence or absence of the children enables them to succeed better in balancing everyday life than most single resident mothers do.

Most single resident mothers increase their involvement in paid work after separation, while they continue to give priority to commitments in the care domain. Because the work and care domains impose approximately similar time demands on the resident mothers (for instance, being available during daytime), the temporal, physical and psychological borders between the work and care domains must be highly flexible and permeable. As a result they experience the feeling of always being on call. There is seldom any leisure time.

The differences found between both categories of parents are not solely matters of choice. Single resident mothers are on average less highly educated, have lower incomes and work fewer hours than shared residence parents, and therefore have fewer resources with which to arrange or negotiate the balanced daily life they strive for. Some of the interviewed resident mothers made remarks on the structural constraints they were facing in balancing their daily lives. A lack of financial resources, normative ideas on motherhood and the preferences and decisions of the ex-partner were frequently mentioned constraints.
Practising post-separation family life

Getting separated as partners is about breaking up with your partner and making a new start. Getting separated as parents, however, is for a great deal about creating a new post-separation relationship together and finding ways to maintain the continuing obligations of parenting. These obligations keep ex-partners together as parents. Although it is likely that separation will disrupt family life to some degree, part of the former family life is likely to remain. Therefore, in chapter four the research question was: Which family practices of the pre-separation family continue after separation, how are they conducted and with whom?

The focus in chapter four was on two central elements of family life: routines and rituals. Routines are practices that are instrumental to family organization. Rituals are practices that provide a sense of belonging and emotional exchange among family members. A routine can become a ritual once it shifts from being an instrumental family practice to an act imbued with symbolic meaning (Fiese et al., 2002). Whereas in non-separated families, both parents, simultaneously or alternately, are involved in routines and rituals to a certain extent, this is often not the case in separated families.

The results presented in chapter four showed that in post-separation families no routines are practised with all the members of the former family present. Family routines turned out to be highly household-based. The instrumental or functional character of family routines might explain this pattern. Family routines often occur under time pressure and in certain time-space parameters, which do not easily accommodate different schedules, especially after separation.

Based on the way they organize family rituals after separation, in chapter four three types of post-separation families were distinguished: ‘continuing family life’, ‘building a new life’ and ‘only one parent involved’. In the first family type – ‘continuing family life’ – at least some of the pre-separation family rituals take place with both parents present. Sometimes, even new rituals are created. In the second family type – ‘building a new life’ – the pre-separation rituals still occur with both parents, but not in the presence of both parents together. Although the parents involved in this type of post-separation family emphasize the fact that having children together entails certain obligations, building a new life without their ex-partner hinders the continuation of family rituals together. In the third family type – ‘only one parent involved’ – family rituals mainly or only occur with the resident mother. Although the children still visit their non-resident father, they do not share family life together.

Furthermore, chapter four revealed that rituals have an important role in family display after separation. Finch (2007) introduced the concept of ‘family display’. She
argued that families not only need to be ‘done’, but also need to be ‘displayed’. Finch (2007: 67) defines display 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 be even more important for dual-location households, such as shared residence families, because, as Finch described in her study (2007), the distinction between household and family requires an element of display and might even intensify the need for display.

The results presented in chapter four showed that in all three distinguished family types, rituals are used to display the family as a coherent unit. Whereas in the first family type ‘continuing family life’ the message is ‘we are still family’, in the second and third family types the message is ‘this is my new family’. As far as I know, rituals have not been recognized before as a tool for family display. Likely, this applies not only to families after separation, but also to other types of dual-location families, such as commuter partnerships. Although some families follow the standard pathways, contemporary families have become more and more complex and diverse, with separation and remarriage complicating family relationships. Therefore it is likely that family display will become more intense and family rituals more important in everyday family life.

**Residential experiences after separation**

In chapter five of this dissertation, everyday life of post-separation families was studied by looking into the parental perception of their children’s residential experience after parental separation. Most children with separated parents live dual-locally. Although the post-separation residential arrangements, schedules of overnight stays and commuting rhythms of children with separated parents are divers, most of them live to some extent in two alternate parental residences.

Studying the parental perception of their children’s residential experience is relevant because parents are the ones who are primarily responsible for creating a home for their children. Parents arrange the post-separation residential arrangement and it is mostly their decisions that determine whether the child has to commute or not. Therefore, chapter five aimed to gain insight into the perceptions of separated parents on their dual-locally living children’s residential experience.
The first question addressed in chapter five was: 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? Five respondents did explicitly mention that they took into account their children’s residential experiences. They all preferred their children to experience one residence as home. This shared preference however resulted in different residential arrangements. Some parents perceived the resident mother arrangement as best accommodating the one-home option. Others tried the option of a shared resident arrangement with children staying at one address and parents moving in and out.

The second question addressed was: How do separated parents perceive their children’s residential experiences? The findings presented in chapter five revealed that the perceptions of separated parents on their children’s residential experiences vary widely. The post-separation residential arrangements were strongly associated with the parental perceptions of their children’s residential experiences. Residential mothers in particular perceived their children to experience their residence, more than that of their ex-partners, as home. Shared residence parents more often perceived their children to experience both residences as home than resident mothers do. It seems likely that both shared residence parents and their children demonstrate a wider variety of residential experiences.

To gain more insight into the parental perceptions, the third question addressed in chapter five was: What elements parents perceived to affect their children’s residential experiences? Three dimensions were explored: the physical, social and temporal dimensions. The narratives of the separated parents showed that elements of all three dimensions play a role in parental perceptions of their children’s post-separation residential experiences. A shared residence arrangement combines several elements of the physical, temporal and the social dimensions that parents perceived to contribute to their children’s experience of home. Shared residence parents more often live within one kilometre of their ex-partner, their children’s everyday activities and routines are located in one neighbourhood and their children live at both residences on a nearly equal basis in terms of time. These aspects all contribute to the parental perception that their children experience both parental residences as home.

The results presented in chapter five contribute to the post-modern debate on the concept of mobile home. Although it seems possible for children to ‘bring along home’ to other places, the distance between those places is important and has to be limited.
6.2 Diversity, change and continuity

In this dissertation, diversity, change and continuity were recurring themes. Besides the differences between the two types of post-separation residential arrangements studied in this dissertation, a great variety exists among post-separation residential arrangements of one kind. In this dissertation a distinction was made between shared-residence parents and resident mothers based on the number of nights the child(ren) spend with both parents alternately. However, it should be noted that there is not such a thing as ‘one shared resident arrangement’ or ‘one resident-mother arrangement’. The analysis of NKPS survey data revealed that there was a category of parents whose children spent between 30% and 40% of their time in the other parent’s household, but who did not report being involved in a shared residence arrangement. For example, these parents’ children stayed with their father every weekend (Friday evening to Monday morning), but lived solely with their mother throughout the week.

Whereas in most other studies the definitions of shared residence arrangements involve at least 30% of the child’s time spent in each household (Baker and Townsend, 1996; Masardo, 2009), this dissertation took into account this grey area by classifying this particular group of households, in which the children stay with their non-resident parent for nine to eleven nights per four weeks (32–39% of a year), as a shared residence arrangement or a resident mother arrangement based on the respondents’ reports about whether or not they regarded themselves as being involved in a shared residence arrangement. Not only the division of number of nights with both parents can be different within the same type of arrangement, chapter three showed that parents with the same residential arrangement also maintained very different schedules, for example schedules with specific commuting days and lengths of stays with the child(ren). Furthermore, chapter four showed that families with the same type of residential arrangement could practise family life in very different ways.

These findings show that post-separation residential arrangements are not pre-fixed or one size fits all arrangements, but rather design it yourself arrangements. Although there are lots of parents who get separated and all face (at least partly) the same issues, parents experience this transition in family life as an individual one, which needs an individual customized solution. All separated parents have to find out what works for them and their children. In contrast to the nuclear family, who can follow the standard pathways, separated parents (as well as other non-standard families) challenge the often taken-for-granted family arrangements and practices and, in so doing, create their own particular ways of doing family. This dissertation supports the ideas of contemporary family researchers (e.g. Morgan, 1999; Smart, 2000) who claim that ‘being family’ is replaced by ‘doing family’.
The diversity found in this dissertation can be understood in light of life course theory, by which individuals are seen as active agents who shape and reshape their own life course (Giddens, 1991; 1994). Separated parents are making conscious decisions and reflect on these decisions (reflexivity), resulting in different individual arranged residential arrangements. The interviewed separated parents were making morally difficult decisions when they decided and planned how to care for their children after separation. All interviewed parents, irrespective of their post-separation residential arrangement, believed that they searched for the best solution under the circumstances they were in and felt personally responsible for their decisions.

An inevitable consequence of the (above described) process of conscious decision-making and continuous reflection on these decisions is change. This study demonstrated how post-separation families and their residential arrangements are constantly in flux and change over time to meet changing circumstances, needs or preferences of one or more of the family members involved.

The findings presented in this dissertation also showed that along with the diversity and change in the different domains of life, separated parents are in search of continuity in their everyday practices. This might seem a contradiction, but whereas the separation and the post-separation residential arrangement led to a decrease in continuity over the life course, separated parents try to maximize continuity in everyday life. They do this, for example, by continuing their pre-separation division of care or holding on to certain pre-separation family rituals.

6.3 Reflection on theory

The life course approach (Elder, 1978; Hareven, 1978; Willekens, 1991) has a central role in this dissertation. In chapter two a life course approach provided an explanation for the choice of a particular post-separation residential arrangement. The diversity found between different post-separation families can be understood as an outcome of preferences, resources and restrictions arising from people’s life course trajectories. In chapter three, organizing everyday life was interpreted as balancing the social roles and corresponding commitments in different domains of life. A great advantage of life course theory is its focus on the interrelation of the different domains of life. A choice or change in one domain affects other domains of life.

In a life course approach individuals are seen as active agents who define and redefine their own life course by making conscious decisions in the different domains of life. Therefore this approach is a very useful (social) theory to explain the different choices made by post-separation families, resulting in different life course trajectories. While using a life course approach, that emphasizes the active involvement of people
in shaping their own lives and their individual responsibilities in them, one should be aware of the (limited) extent to which separated parents are reflexive agents who actively, consciously and reflexively affect their own lives. Not all individuals are able to change the circumstances in which they find themselves. The separation itself may have been a consequence of a deliberate action to escape from an unsatisfactory marriage for some, but an unpleasant surprise for others. After the separation, in particular residential mothers, who are less highly educated, work fewer hours and have lower incomes than shared residence parents, have fewer resources with which to arrange or negotiate the life course they prefer. Furthermore, opportunities and constraints structured by social institutions, culture and normative patterns should not be neglected while using a life course approach.

Theories on doing family and on displaying family provided a useful framework to understand the organization and the practicing of post-separation family life. First of all, the theory on doing family legitimizes the fact that parents and their children are studied as family-units in this dissertation, although they have been separated and do not live in one residence anymore. Furthermore, the concepts of family display explained the importance of family rituals in practicing post-separation family life. As far as I know, rituals have not been recognized before as a tool for family display. Likely, the importance of family rituals applies not only to families after separation, but also to other types of non-standard families. This might be true in particular for families who live dual-locally and cannot be recognized by common residency, like commuter partnerships.

Although Hägerstrand (1970) was not mentioned explicitly throughout this dissertation, his time-space geography plays an important role in understanding the findings in this study. As one of the first geographical scholars, he focused on the importance of locality and proximity in everyday life by introducing *time-geography*. Hägerstrand conceptualized every individual as on a path through space within time. Each activity takes place on a certain location, at a certain time, and during a certain amount of time. Distances between locations where activities take place need to be bridged, take time and limit the amount of activities.

In this dissertation the importance of place in general, and proximity in particular, in everyday life of parents and their children is being highlighted in several ways. Chapter two showed the importance of living really close to one’s ex-partner, preferably in the same neighborhood, for organizing and maintaining a shared residence arrangement. In chapter four, proximity between both parental residences was identified as a key factor in practising post-separation family life. Not sharing a common residence complicates the functioning of the post-separation family. If one
parent lives far away from the child, not only may asymmetries in the division of care routines arise between the parents, but also the frequency of contact and communication between them may decrease. Furthermore, the findings presented in chapter five revealed that parents who perceived their children to experience both residences as home more often lived within 1 kilometre of the ex-partner than did parents who perceived their children to experience one residence as more of a home than the other.

Although there are scholars (e.g. Castells, 1996) who suggest that in post-modern society people have become footloose and place has lost its importance - intensified by the integration of Internet in everyday life -, the findings presented in the dissertation support the ongoing importance of locality in everyday life of children and their parents. Both adults (Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009a) and children who live dual-locally have difficulties in bridging the gap between two geographically distinct social environments. As Jensen (2009) states, children’s everyday life is located in space usually comprising just one neighbourhood, and one school or kindergarten.

6.4 Social and policy implications
This dissertation provided insight into the growing diversity among post-separation families and contributed to our understanding of how different types of post-separation families arrange and organize their everyday lives. The concept of family is not only interesting and relevant for family and social researchers, but also in policy frameworks or in important social debates on separation.

In the last few years shared residence arrangements got a lot of both positive and negative attention in Dutch society. One the one hand shared residence arrangements are seen as having less negative outcomes for children with separated parents than other arrangements (Westphal, 2015). On the other hand, in 2014 a family-drama in the Netherlands, involving a shared residence father who killed his children, led to a broad discussion about the pros and cons of shared residence arrangements and the consequences of on-going parental conflict for the well-being of children.

The specific life course characteristics of shared residence parents found in this dissertation, raises the question if the impacts of a shared residence arrangement on children’s well-being are due to the arrangement as such or due to the specific characteristics of the parents involved in the arrangement. A recent study from Belgium (Mortelmans et al., 2011) stated that the socio-economic advantage of parents in a shared residence arrangement compared to parents in a resident mother arrangement is becoming less evident since shared residence arrangements are
becoming more widespread. Therefore, the consequences and impacts of different types of post-separation residential arrangements might also become less divergent. In order to answer the question about what residential arrangement is in best interest of children, this question would merit further research.

The Dutch political framework has become more pro shared residence arrangements in recent years. In 2009, a new law on promoting continuing parenting after separation was adopted (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). This law obliges parents with children below the age of 18 to formulate a parenting plan as a precondition for the request to divorce, and mediation or counseling is strongly recommended. The plan must contain a description of the consequences of separation for the children and agreements that have been made between the parents on how to continue parenting after divorce.

The findings of this dissertation made it clear that in particular a short geographical distance between the ex-partners can make a difference in post-separation family life. Living close to each other increases the involvement of the father after separation, increases the likelihood to maintain a shared residence arrangement, makes it easier to organize and balance everyday commitments in the work and care domains, makes it easier for both parents to be involved in daily routines with the children and parents who live close to each other have more often the perception that their children experience both parental residences as home. Although these findings make clear that ex-partners with children living close to each other really can make a difference in post-separation everyday life for both children and their parents, for a lot of separated parents with a wish to live close to each other it is not that easy to obtain two residences close to each other.

The constraints that (might) complicate the realization of the optimal residential arrangement after separation should get more attention in both scientific and social debates. In the cities, but also in most small municipalities, separation no longer guarantees parents priority on the social housing market. Housing policies could be an interesting instrument in promoting continuing parenting after separation. In 2013, a social housing association in Amsterdam (de Key) opened a so called parents house, offering parents (temporarily) a place to live in close proximity of their children during the first year after separation (see www.parents house.nl). The popularity of this initiative showed that there is a need for housing opportunities for separated parents who want to live nearby the former family home.
6.5 Reflection on data and methods

The explanatory mixed methods research design of this study has proved valuable. In chapter two, besides finding associations by quantitative analyses, the qualitative Minipanel data made it possible to gain more insight into the mechanisms underlying these associations and contributing to their explanation.

The possibility to combine survey data and qualitative data gathered among the same respondents was a great opportunity and provided several advantages. The NKPS survey data is a unique and very rich dataset, which 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 and frequency of contact between the child and his/her non-resident parent. 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. Furthermore, information from the survey was used to prepare the interviews and tailor them towards the situation of the respondent. This was a strong aspect of this study.

There were weaknesses as well. Unfortunately, wave one of the NKPS data did not include information about the number of nights the children stay at the residence of the mother and the father. This information is necessary to identify the type of post-separation residential arrangement of the family. Therefore, only respondents who were represented in both wave one and wave two could be included in the analysis of this study. The selection of separated parents contained 295 respondents. Pooling the NKPS dataset with the SIN dataset made it possible to increase the number of respondents and thereby the statistical power of the pooled dataset. A disadvantage was some loss of information owing to differences in measurement of the variables. Furthermore, the data were collected a few years apart, and practices of separated parents might have changed between the surveys. However, I considered the advantage to outweigh the disadvantages of pooling the datasets together. The final pooled dataset contained 675 respondents.

Another weakness was that the survey data did not include information about matched pairs of ex-partners from the same couples. Information on matched pairs would be highly instructive in gaining further insight into which combinations of characteristics of ex-partners lead to specific post-separation residential arrangements and into how pairs of ex-partners reach their decision as to the type of arrangement.
Neither did the agreement concerning the collection of interview data from the NKPS respondents allow the interviewing of respondents’ ex-partners or children. Interviewing both parents and children could provide highly relevant information on the discrepancy or coherence between the perceptions of both parents and those of their children.

6.6 Agenda for further research

Research comparing post-separation families with other (non-traditional) family arrangements

The findings presented in this dissertation underline the need for more research that acknowledges the variations in post-separation families and their residential arrangements. Throughout this dissertation, parents involved in the two most common types of post-separation residential arrangements were studied and compared: parents involved in a shared residence arrangement and mothers involved in a resident mother arrangement. The findings in this dissertation provide several avenues for further comparative research with other (non-traditional) family and residential arrangements.

One line of further research would be to study parents who are involved in a resident father arrangement. In the Netherlands only 7% of children are involved in this type of post-separation arrangement (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014), which is even more in contrast with the normative Dutch culture of maternal care than shared residence arrangements. It is likely that also parents involved in residential father arrangement are characterized by a specific set of life course characteristics. Whereas this group of parents is not frequently observed in survey datasets, qualitative research methods are particularly suited for adding to this type of research.

Another line of comparative research would be to compare working shared residence parents with dual-career couples with children. Compared to the traditional group of single resident mothers who experience many constraints in combining work, care and leisure, single shared residence parents succeed better in balancing their post-separation commitments. This finding, presented in chapter three of this dissertation, raises the question whether the daily life of shared residence parents is also less constrained than the daily life of dual-career parents.

The findings on the practising of everyday family life and the parental perceptions of the residential experience of their children made clear that it would be interesting to further investigate dual-location households. Although there are several types of dual-location households in the Netherland, not much is known yet about
these types of families. With the dissertation of Van der Klis (2009) on commuter partnerships and the current dissertation on shared residence post-separation arrangements a good start was made, but there are yet other types of dual-location households who challenge the traditional ways of being family, for example transnational families. Therefore I would like to emphasise the on-going need to study the practises of doing family, commuting and home-making of dual-location families.

Avenues for further research using the NKPS data
The NKPS dataset is a very rich dataset, which contains a lot of information on families and relationships in the Netherlands. At the time the analysis for this study took place, the NKPS survey data consisted of two waves. In 2012 the third wave became available. The occurrence of this new wave further enriches the possibilities for further research of this large-scale longitudinal dataset. Studying the three waves would make it possible to follow separated families and their residential arrangements through time, which is especially interesting in the light of this dissertation’s finding that post-separation families are continuously in flux and change over time. In this light, it would also be very valuable to conduct follow-up interviews with those respondents from the NKPS Minipanel who are present in the third wave.

The NKPS Minipanel conducted for the research project underlying this dissertation contains a lot of qualitative information. This qualitative information is accessible to other academic researchers (for more information see www.nkps.nl). The available data include the research proposal and design, the interview instructions, background information, correspondence with respondents and the transcripts of the interviews (rendered anonymous). Although a large part of the topics in the interviews has been analysed for this research project, there are still topics left that did not get any or much attention. For example, the interviews contain detailed information on decision-making processes in families, newly formed stepfamilies and the organisation and practises of the children’s travelling from one parent to the other. Such travelling is a regular activity that many children in the Netherlands, as well as in other countries, practise every week after school hours or in the weekends, by car, foot or bicycle, in the company of their parents, siblings, dogs or alone, bringing a lot of stuff or hardly any. There is still a lot of detailed information left in the interview data and therefore I encourage those researchers who are interested in these data to use them in further research. The topic list of the interviews is the appendix of this dissertation.