

## **The impact of different (step)family trajectories on the parent-child relationship.**

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### **Introduction**

Consistent with the trend in Western countries, many Dutch people are these days confronted with the end of their marriage or partner relationship. De Graaf (2005) estimated that every year approximately 100.000 married or unmarried cohabitating couples end their relationship on a total population of approximately 16 million people. The end of a partner relationship often is not only the end of what once was a romantic fairy-tale for the involved adults, also many children are confronted with the divorce of their parents. Every year between 50.000 and 60.000 children are confronted with a parental divorce or separation (De Graaf, 2005). However, this does not mean that all of these children are living in a single-parent household as a consequence of parental break-up. Most of the divorced or separated singles do find a new partner in the first years following divorce, with who they often choose to cohabit rather than to remarry (Netherlands Statistics, 2001). As a consequence, many children who experienced a parental divorce or separation are some years later living together with a stepparent. For example, estimates from the Netherlands Statistics (2001) show that approximately 40% of the children from divorced parents are confronted with a stepparent. The minimum number of stepfamilies in the Netherlands in 2007 was estimated on 149.000 (that is approximately 7% of all two-parent families<sup>1</sup>), involving 282.000 children (Steenhof, 2007).

In earlier days, many stepfamilies were formed after the death of the former partner, while today mainly divorce or separation are preceding the stepfamily formation (Levin & Trost, 2000; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). In this research, we will focus on this 'new' kind of stepfamilies which are the result of the re-partnering of a man or woman with residential children. These families are a specific kind of stepfamilies in the sense that the involved stepparents are in fact *supplementary* parents, rather than replacement parents, as is the case when a widow or widower with residential children remarries. As a consequence, the child often has two families who are not living under the same roof, increasing the complexity of the family configuration during childhood (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). In addition, there has been an evolution towards favouring co-parenting in recent years, based on the idea that the parental couple should survive the conjugal

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<sup>1</sup> In 2007 there were approximately 2,1 million couples with children in the Netherlands (Steenhof, 2007)

couple (Villeneuve-Gokalp, 2000). One of the subsequent consequences is that members of stepfamilies get more and more entangled in a network of complex interpersonal familial relationships, with own dynamics and a lack of a normative framework about how to fulfil their family roles.

In sum, these evolutions leads us to formulate the following two research questions: *(1) What are the (step)family trajectories of children following parental divorce? (2) Have different (step)family trajectories a different impact on the parent-child relationship?*

### **Post-divorce/separation stepfamily formation: pathways and typologies**

Stepfamilies can be formed in a variety of ways, leading to different family configurations. First of all, we can make a distinction between different types of stepfamilies based on the relationship history of both men and women establishing a new union or the partner system. Both partners can have experienced one or more divorce or separation, the death of a former partner, or never have been married or cohabiting with a partner before (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Not only the relationship history of both partners is determining the stepfamily formation, both partners also have a unique fertility history (Stewart, 2002). Therefore, further distinctions can be made according to the fact if one or both partners brings along a child or children from previous unions (or the parental system), possibly creating stepsibling relationships within the stepfamily. Hence, different fertility history combinations lead to different stepfamily formations with different (step)family relationships. In this study, a distinction will be made between simple stepfamilies, referring to families in which only children from one partners' previous relationship are present, and complex stepfamilies, in which siblings vary in biological relatedness to mother and father (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In the latter case, also a biological child of the new partners can be present, creating a stepfamily containing half sibling relationships (the sibling system).

Finally, most family transitions can be repeated through time which gives the classification also a temporal dimension. For example, a child can experience a parental divorce, live some years full-time in a single-parent family, followed by a remarriage of the residential parent, which results in a second divorce of that parent some years later. Before the last divorce, the stepfamily could also be transformed from a single stepfamily in a complex stepfamily after mother and stepfather had a biological child together. Hence, it is important to take into account the complete family history of a child when studying outcomes of different family configurations. This brings us to the first goal of this study, that is the construction of a typology of (step)family trajectories.

### **The complexity of (step)family relationships in stepfamilies following divorce/separation**

Using a system approach of family functioning, the stepfamily can be seen as an interdependent emotional and relational system of family relationships (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). A family systems perspective focuses on the changes in family relationships as a consequence of familial transitions (Brooks-Gunn, 1994), looking at the family as a process, in stead of as a structure (Broderick, 1990 in Van Bavel, 1995). An important characteristic of post-divorce stepfamilies is the parallel existence of two parental households: one of the mother and one of the father. These two households can vary from a single-person household to a complex stepfamily configuration containing children from the previous union(s) of both partners, as well as children born within the new partner relationship. This parallel existence of a household of respectively the mother and father is also referred to as 'binuclear families' (Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1982), and is the foundation of a complex network of (step)family-relationships by residence and (affinal) kinship.

Often the focus of research on stepfamilies is limited to the 'pure' stepfamily relationships, hence neglecting the biological parent-child relationships within a stepfamily (Solomon, 1995). However, research has shown that the biological parent-child relationships in stepfamilies are

weaker than in original two-parent families (Hetherington and Jodl, 1994; Lawton, Silverstein and Bengston, 1994). Seltzer (1994) reports a “small but statistically significant” (p.153) difference in the social support that parents and adult children exchange in stepfamilies compared to parents and children in intact families. One of the most determining factors with regard to the continuation of the parent-child relationship after divorce is of course the physical custody arrangement (Hetherington, 2003). However, also the presence of a stepparent can be an obstacle for the continuity of the parent-child relationship (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson & Zill, 1983).

In sum, the research literature suggests that parental divorce and stepfamily formation can put the parent-child relationship under pressure. This brings us to our second research question, that is how the parent-child relationship is associated with the (step)family trajectory of a child.

## **Data**

To answer our research questions, detailed information is necessary on the timing of all family transitions a child went through. This information is available in the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study or NKPS. The NKPS is a large-scale, multi-actor, multi-method panel study around the theme of solidarity in family relationships. The database from the NKPS comes from two waves of a large-scale survey and contains information on more than 10,000 Dutch families. The first wave was conducted between 2002 and 2004, the second wave was conducted between 2006 and 2007. The wave 1 survey data are based on three separate samples: The main sample (N = 8161) consists of individuals residing in private homes in the Netherlands, and who are at least 18 and at most 79 years old. In addition, there is a migrant sample (N = 1410) that consists only of members of the four largest ethnic groups in the Netherlands, that is Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean people. A third sample, the substitute sample, consists of more than 1600 individuals who refused to participate or who could not have been contacted earlier and that were re-contacted in 2004 as an effort to reduce non-response (Dykstra, Kalmijn, Knijn, Komter, Liefbroer, & Mulder, 2005)..

The information on the sample units or main respondents was collected with both face-to-face interviews and self-completion questionnaires. In addition, also information on the closest relatives was collected, some of which reside in the same household as the main respondent and others which do not: a self-completion questionnaire was mailed to the partner, a maximum of two randomly selected children aged 15 and over, a randomly selected parent, and a randomly selected sibling aged 15 and over. Only in the non-response follow-up study no information was collected on the family members. The members of the third, substitute sample had to fill in an abridged, self-completion version of the CAPI questionnaire (Dykstra, Kalmijn, Knijn, Komter, Liefbroer, & Mulder, 2005).

A final important characteristic of the NKPS for this study is the inclusion of information on different aspects of the parent-child relationship, often questioned in both directions:

- frequency of received help for practical matters from person X to person Y in the last three months: none, once or twice, several times.
- person X received valuable objects or a substantial amount of money from person Y in the last twelve months: yes/no.
- frequency person X showed interest in person's Y personal life the last three months: none, once or twice, several times.
- frequency person X got counsel or good advice from person Y in the last three months; none, once or twice, several times.
- taking everything together, description by person X of relationship with person Y: not great-reasonable-good-very good.
- frequency of conflicts, strains or disagreements in last three months: not at all, once or twice, several times.

- broader measures of the general family climate can be constructed from the scales with items measuring: feelings about family, help from family, reliance on family, closeness to the family, family responsibility expectations, filial responsibility expectations and parental obligations.

### **Research sample**

The family trajectories are studied from the perspective of the child, independent of the age of the child at the time of the survey. All individuals in the original sample for who the detailed parental family history can be reconstructed and information on the quality of the parent-child relationship is available, will be included in the analysis. However, a distinction will be made between children who left the parental home and children who did not. This allows us to look at both short-term and long-term effects of specific family trajectories, as well as to look at both minor and adult child-parent relationships. Finally, also cohort effects will be taken into account.

### **Analysis strategy**

To answer our first research question, a typology of family trajectories has to be constructed. This classification of (step)family trajectories will be based on the parental household composition. As already stressed in the introduction part of this paper, it is important to take into account all family transitions as well as the duration of the period children have spend in the different family types. For example, an interviewed child can be very recently be living in a stepfamily, but have spend 10 years of his childhood in a single-parent household. Hence, it is important to take into account this different family history. Therefore, the technique of sequence analysis will be used. We will first look at the occurrence, ordering, timing and frequency of specific sequences of family configurations in the life course of the children in the study. Next, sequence analysis will be used to construct a typology of specific family trajectories, clustering more similar sequences of family configuration. The duration of each sequence will be expressed in years.

Secondly, the association between the obtained classification from the sequence analysis and the different aspects of the parent-child relationship will be explored. Different multivariate techniques will be used for these analyses, depending on the nature of the dependent variable and if or not a multi-actor model is used. There will also be controlled for different family member characteristics, such as sex, age, cohort and educational level.

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