This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

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Reference:
Full text (Publisher's DOI): https://doi.org/10.1111/FARE.12432
To cite this reference: https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1676070151162165141
Reorganizing the Single-Parent Family System
Exploring the process perspective on divorce

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Abstract

Objective: This study investigated how single parents reorganize their family system after divorce.

Background: Families are dynamic systems that change over time and adapt to crises. Divorce, however, is often approached as a discrete event by family researchers and little is known about how single parents overcome this crisis and carry on with their lives. Therefore, we investigated the process of single parents reorganizing households after divorce, asking the question: How do single parents reorganize their households after the end of cohabitation or marriage?

Method: Qualitative analysis based on Grounded Theory was used on retrospective in-depth interviews. Two sources of interviews and triangulation and confirmation techniques were developed to improve the validity of the study. Sensitizing concepts were derived from Olson’s Circumplex Model and life course theory.

Results: The reorganization process after divorce is described as having six successive stages, each with particular needs and challenges. By overcoming challenges, single parents moved on from one phase to the other to ultimately find a new balance.

Conclusion: Single-parent family systems, like other family systems, strive for homeostasis and search for a new equilibrium in which it is possible to combine all different life spheres. However, this is not a linear process, as it includes the chance of setbacks.
Today, divorce constitutes one of the most significant disruptions to the life course. The increased divorce and separation rates has led to an increase in single parent families (Pailhé et al., 2014). The aftermath of these divorce or separation affects everyday life. However, how the quality of life after divorce can differ to a great extent (Emmers-Sommer, Rhea, Triplett, & Triplett, 2003; Ferraro, Davis, Petren, & Pasley, 2016). Amato (2000) argued that there are three pathways for divorced parents. For some, divorce is a liberator, for others it leads to temporary decrements in wellbeing (which are, however, surmountable) and for others it is the start of a long-term downward spiral. In this regard, the pathway of those people who experience initial problems but eventually get their lives back on track is rarely studied. As a result, various scholars have argued that we should no longer explore the effects of divorce by taking a dichotomous, discrete approach, comparing differences before and after, but to approach separation as a process that occurs over time (Demo & Ganong, 1994; Moore, 2011). A more process-focused approach is used, for example, by Greenwood (2014), who defines divorce, from the perspective of children, as a family transition that entails a number of experiences over a longer period of time. In this study, we will employ a similar approach but from the perspective of divorced and separated single parents.

Research has traditionally reduced divorce to a discrete event in time (Coltrane & Adams, 2003; Demo & Fine, 2010; Hetherington, 2014). The abstraction of the process after divorce can be explained by the comparative and probabilistic nature of quantitative research, which is a dominant analytical approach in the field of family research. Although this research has helped to uncover the challenges single parents face after divorce, it does not explain how they cope with these challenges. Therefore, there is a need to take another perspective: rather than looking at divorce as a discrete event, it should be seen as a crisis for which people develop adaptive strategies. Using this more dynamic perspective, can prove its value as it
helps to overcome the image of single parenthood as an intrinsically negative experience. Instead, single parenthood will be described as a state in which people grow into a new role.

This idea of divorce as a stressful event that people can cope with is supported by Demo and Ganong (1994) and Booth and Amato (1991). Moore (2011) and Greenwood (2014), furthermore, investigated the coping processes of children after divorce. With respect to parents, there has also been research on this process, but because single parents’ lives are versatile, this research can cover many domains. Crosby, Gage, and Raymond (1983), for example, investigated emotional coping after divorce, while Raeymaeckers, Dewilde, Snoeckx, and Mortelmans (2008) studied childcare strategies. Emmers-Sommer et al. (2003) and Arditti and Madden-Derdich (1993), moreover, reflected on the gendered aspects of single parenting itself. In addition, Bohannan (1968) described what he called the six stations of divorce as a process of partners becoming independent from each other.

The reorganization of the single-parent family system following divorce has not, however, received extended examination to date. Parenthood itself was once looked upon as a crisis and was only later studied from a longitudinal life course perspective (LeMasters, 1957; Rossi, 1968). When a person becomes a single parent, they are confronted with practical issues related to the organization of daily life in the household, just as novice parents have to adjust to their new role (Bakker & Karsten, 2013). Creating stability despite these issues is thus a major aim of single parents. Undergoing such a process can be considered as a transition that leads to the successful restoration of balance.

For these reasons, the research question that is addressed in this study is: “How do single parents reorganize their households after the end of cohabitation or marriage?” We focused on this recovery process in relation to the establishment of a post-divorce, single-parent family and the capacity of the single parent to run the newly formed household. The research focuses attention on single parents’ household routines, as well as the combination of work and these
routines. Grounded Theory analysis was used to examine how single parents coped with shifting demands in relation to household organization during the divorce process. The development of a contemporary theoretical framework on the reorganization of everyday life by single parents was needed to alter the perspective of future divorce research. As single parenthood has become a substantial and accepted phenomenon in society today, research on successful transitions to a single-parent family may help fill the theoretical gap in our understanding of many contemporary families. This may also help ease future divorce processes and create a more positive understanding of single parenthood.

**Coping with change and everyday resilience**

In discussing post-divorce processes, it is important to distinguish the divorce process in general from the reorganization of the household of single parents in particular. The former process has been extensively captured in the academic literature, while the latter, as mentioned above, is less visible. The cascade model of marital dissolution, for example, describes the nature of divorce but does not examine events after the divorce or separation (Carrere & Gottman, 1999). This model predicts marital dissolution and describes divorce as the outcome of a continual process that begins with marital distress and moves toward separation, before ultimately ending in divorce. However, it can be argued that a new process that is not contiguous starts at the moment of separation: when single parenthood becomes a reality and people begin to reorganize their lives in function of their new family type. Therefore, new coping strategies are required to deal with the sudden challenges of single parenthood. Nevertheless, how the process of divorce continues after marital dissolution also remains an underdeveloped research domain.

When looking at family transformation after divorce, there is some speculation in the literature on children of divorced parents in particular that single-parent family systems can work. Hetherington (1999), for example, argues that, from the children’s perspective, moving
from a conflictual, stressful and unsatisfying two-parent household to a non-conflictual and more harmonious family system is actually an improvement. This implies that single parents are also able to reduce stress despite the challenges of everyday life, although new custodial arrangements challenge the gendered parenting roles that existed in the two-parent family (Arditti & Madden-Derdich, 1993; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2003). These positive outcomes may be due to successful adaption to a new family system that is different from the two-parent family system. This was also shown by Booth and Amato (1991), who reported an initial increase in stress levels after divorce but a steady decline afterwards.

The idea of people, successfully transforming a dysfunctional two-parent family system into a functional one-parent family system is not surprising. Research on other disruptions (e.g., grief resolution, resilience during health problems) to everyday life has shown the resilience of people in coping with and overcoming crises and or change. This perspective has, for example, been used to study the process of integration undergone by migrants (Berry, 1997; Chen & Wang, 2015), who have to overcome a radical change in circumstances to restore balance to their everyday life. In these cases, people also find themselves in a new situation, in which they have to cope with circumstances that greatly differ from their previous situation. Lenette, Brough, and Cox (2013) captured this notion with the term everyday resilience, recognizing that in a changing context people may struggle with everyday challenges in the short term but are able to overcome and cope with problems in the long term. Moreover, when focusing on the short term, everyday struggles will be most apparent, but in the long term, the recovery process becomes visible.

**Family transition theories and their sensitizing concepts**

Within family transition theories, more attention has been paid to how people cope with changing situations and overcome crises within the family system, considering families as resilient entities (Patterson, 2002). Two theories on family change are discussed: the
Circumplex Model of the family system; and the life course perspective on the family system. Both theoretical models are practical applications derived from family system theory (Munton & Reynolds, 1995). Below, we will briefly discuss the two theories on family change, after which we will discuss the similarities that inspired our analysis.

The Circumplex Model of the family system also focuses on responses to traumatic events in the life course. Olson (2000) originally developed the Circumplex Model to describe how family systems respond to disruptive life events. In the original model, he described the coping processes along the two axes of flexibility and cohesion. He argued that the best functioning families were those with moderate family member cohesion and moderate role flexibility, which are generally seen as reflecting a family system that is in equilibrium. After a disruptive event, he found that families shift in their cohesion and role flexibility but later return to equilibrium, which is an example of homeostasis.

Bengtson and Allen (1993) described the life course perspective on families, which relies on four assumptions. The first is the principle of multiple time clocks, which implies that three time clocks are always intertwined and influence transition: (1) ontogenetic time, (2) the chronological order of events, or historical time, and (3) the historical time we live in and generational time, or the lineage within the family, which influences role systems. The second assumption is the principle of social ecology. This principle consists of: (1) the social structural context, or the position in the social stratification, (2) the meaning of events and (3) the cultural context, which is the shared meaning of events. The third assumption is the principle of diachrony. This implies that families always attempt to return to a point of equilibrium, or homeostasis, through a dialectical proceeding of events. The fourth assumption is diversity, which implies that within the life course of families there is a large degree of heterogeneity, as is the case in other biological systems such as cells and organisms.
From these theories, some general conceptions can inspire our analysis as sensitizing concepts.

Both theoretical models concern timeframes of change directed toward the homeostasis of the family system. This refers to the idea of an *equilibrium*, the balancing act that family systems perform (Day, 2009). Families are thus not static systems, but dynamic open systems that interact with various surrounding stressors, which Demo and Fine (2010) describe as *fluid families*. The two dynamic forces constituting *homeostasis* are *morphostasis* and *morphogenesis*. *Morphostasis* refers to the urge for continuity and sameness through time, while *morphogenesis* refers to the constant genesis of creation and change (Day, 2009; Speer, 1970).

The process of homeostasis takes place within *timeframes of destruction and construction*. This concept of time refers to the interaction and dynamics between family and stressors (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). This is most notable from the life course perspective, in which diachronic time is one of the three timeframes discussed and is described as a progressive and interactive continuum of phases throughout the life course. We can further argue that divorce or separation is a moment of destruction, while the reorganization process signifies the constructive timeframe in which there is movement toward a new equilibrium.

However, to reach this point of equilibrium, changes have to be made. In the Circumplex Model, these changes are only conceived along the axes of family member cohesion and role flexibility, but many other possible axes (or changing aspects) may be considered. In times of change and development, a family system will change along these axes. Olson (2000) describes a crisis situation as a chaotically enmeshed phase, while the equilibrium is structurally connected. The conclusion is that equilibrium is a family configuration for which people strive. Therefore, in the interviews we looked for timeframes in which changes took place, in which there was movement toward adaptation and eventually a new equilibrium.
The Belgian context

Our study took place in Belgium, a country described by Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (2015a) as having rather low rates of single-parent poverty and higher redistribution strategies in comparison to other European countries (Mortelmans & Defever, 2018). However, as dual-earner couples are the norm in Belgium, as in many other countries, families in which one parent has responsibility for both the income and the family duties still have difficulties in attaining the same living standards as other families (Waite & Nielsen, 2001). Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in divorce rates in Belgium due to a reform in the legal system (Mortelmans et al., 2015). This reform implied there was no legal “guilt” question in a legal divorce process. The idea of proving guilt in court had seemed to have discouraged people from divorcing. The removal of the idea of guilt correlated with a significant increase in divorce numbers. Moreover, in court, shared custody is the norm, rather than custody for one parent (Mortelmans et al., 2015). For these reasons, Belgium is an interesting case in this area of research. Redistribution strategies in Belgium are considered to be successful, which allows a shift in the focus from poverty research to research on reorganization in relation to daily life issues (Mortelmans, Snoeckx, & Raeymaeckers, 2009).

METHODS

This study was performed using a novel sampling approach in qualitative research. Two groups of participants were recruited. The first was a population of 30 single parents recruited by snowball sampling, starting via social media. The second population was an elaborative population of 244 single-parent respondents recruited by students’ personal networks. The primary population of 30 parents was interviewed using an unstructured, open and in-depth approach, while the elaborative population was interviewed with semi-structured interview leads (based on the primary population interviews). Thus, each research population was approached differently. The use of structured interview leads by the students allowed
precoding in NVivo in separate data files (Mortelmans, 2011). In this way, the unstructured primary data was kept separate from the data collected in the structured student interviews at all times, as it also served different purposes in the analyses. All interviews were conducted in person by the main researcher (primary research population) or by a student (elaborative population).

All single parents were interviewed in their home or a place of their liking. Both samples included respondents who were the only adult in the household, who worked at least part-time (50%) and who had at least one child younger than 18 (or between 18 and 24, if studying). The child also had to live with the interviewee for at least 50% of the time. These criteria ensured that the single parents had to combine their parental responsibilities with their work routine. We interviewed people about their divorce and its aftermath retrospectively. Divorce or separation had taken place between 1 and 25 years prior to the interview.

The double structure of data gathering took place in two different situations. The primary research population of 30 people (23 male and 7 female) were interviewed by the main researcher. The interviewees in the primary population were found through an announcement on social media and subsequently by snowball follow-up of different respondents.

The elaborative population of 244 single parents were interviewed by students involved in a qualitative methods course at the university. Students were second-year Bachelor level students in an education program. No student interviewed a single parent with whom they had close ties (such as own kin). The students were evaluated on the quality of their contribution. An extracurricular workshop on interviewing was also organized by the first author. Working with student interviews entails quality risks, students may commit fraud, deliver poor quality interviews or fail in some elementary aspects of interviewing and transcriptions. Therefore, the elaborative sample was controlled via sampled respondent calls, video data, closed coding similarity and a respondent check. In total, 244 interviews were completed by the students,
which allowed the triangulation and elaboration of the results. The descriptive statistics of these interview populations can be consulted in table 1 and table 2.

**INSERT TABLE 1 AND 2 HERE**

The main theme of the both the interviews in the primary sample as in the elaborative sample was the daily work-life issues of single parents. General topics of the interviews were *workday routines, the transition to single parenthood, solutions to daily life issues, work-family relationship, employer relationship, parent role, conceptualization of the family system, single-parent challenges* and a *retrospective evaluation* of their time as a single parent. These topics were on a topic list for the initial study population and were reworked, based on the researcher’s experiences in the primary interviews, into interview leads for the student interviews. Considering the privacy of our interviewees, pseudonyms are used when interview data is reported.

The analysis took place using Grounded Theory, which was extended by focused comparisons within the elaborative population (Glaser, 1998; Stern & Porr, 2011). First, a classic structure of Grounded Theory analysis with open and axial coding was completed by the first author to ensure reliability. However, the second author participated in reviewing all coding procedures. In the transcribed interview responses of the 30 single parents in the primary research population. The transcribed interview responses of the 244 single parents in the elaborative group were pre-coded and classified by students (J. Corbin & Strauss, 2014; J. M. Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this way, an initial theory was constructed following the more general rules of coding as described by Mortelmans (2007) by the first author. This means that the initial interviews were structured with open codes. After this open coding, a similar sequence of coding appeared throughout the interviews. Subsequently, these sequences were coded in greater depth using axial coding to delineate these stages.
Following this coding, a first Grounded Theory process model was established to look into the elaborative sample. The elaborative research sample was thematically coded and classified by students after they had been trained in NVivo. This was possible because the students had to follow thematically structured interview guidelines. Furthermore, background data was gathered via a drop-off survey, which was processed using an extensive classification sheet (collecting 41 background characteristics per interviewee). This coding procedure made it possible for the researchers to later process the large number of interviews using coding Queries in NVivo.

Subsequently, the initial theory was tested and expanded via constant comparison in the elaborative research population, which now consisted of all the pre-coded student interviews merged in NVivo (Glaser, 1998). By combining both structuring instruments (pre-coding and classification sheets), we used coding queries to perform focused comparison in the elaborative research population (Mortelmans, 2011). This comparison enabled: (1) a deeper analysis of particular cases that were not, or only poorly represented in the primary sample, (2) the expansion of the analysis of respondents with specific characteristics that were not available in the primary sample, and (3) the triangulation of the results in the search for negative examples or more nuance in the analysis.

The resulting model was first presented to approximately 40 single parents who took part in the study in the context of a confirmation check. This group came to a presentation on an open call to all the respondents. The respondents who were present on the evening of the presentation discussed their experiences concerning the issues and agreed that the theoretical model best fit the general narrative. As every story of divorce is different, there were individual comments and remarks, but none so great as to refute the model.
**RESULTS**

**The process of transition to single parenthood**

In this paragraph, we describe the process of transition to single parenthood with a focus on the reorganization of everyday life. We describe a process broken down into a six-phase model, starting with a troubled relationship and ending with the acceptance of single-parent life. The first two phases we will describe in this process are inherently linked to the phenomenon of divorce or separation. A critical reader might therefore argue that the theory we develop might better start in the third phase. However, experiences during the separation process (the first two phases) may influence people in their future progress to a single-parent family and cannot be ignored. In other words, we consider that the reorganization process starts at the moment the relationship becomes troubled. For this reason, we describe the separation process in these first two phases.

**Phase 1: Initial contentment and decline**

The first phase our interview respondents described involved a disruption to the initial contentment in their relationship. At this stage, there is a decline in marital satisfaction and a rise in tension between partners. None of our respondents described leaving a situation in which they were content. Usually, the tension rises in the period immediately prior to people making the decision to separate. All interviews were recorded in Dutch; participant responses reported here are transcribed from Dutch to English.

> When I thought about being in this situation for another twenty years, I became totally depressed. So, yes, you also become overpowered. On the other hand, ... you don’t decide such things in a hurry. For me, it took 6 years but after that I was totally fed up. It clicks ... that he doesn’t love you any more emotionally. At a certain moment, you start thinking, “Who is that man?,” that you see a man walking down the street
and [feel that] if you took him home, it might be even more pleasant than [dealing]
with the man who actually lives there. (Linda, 40, single for 2 years)\(^1\)

Many people in our sample reported leaving due to a problematic situation. Nevertheless, people also mentioned not leaving immediately, as they struggled with doubts about the future. However, at a certain moment, one of the partners decides to leave, or both make the decision to separate. This involves different perspectives. Some people describe being puzzled by the sudden decision of their partner to leave, others reported that they prepared everything in detail before choosing the moment to leave themselves, while some ended their attempts to save their relationship and came to a mutual decision to separate. Although the context may differ greatly, this phase ends with the move to a period of transition.

\textit{No, I did not see that coming ... it was a thwack for me ... I have to be honest in that, until that day, and sometime after, I still loved her. I did everything, day and night ... It was an uppercut, first I only thought she was unhappy, but then she said there had already been someone else for two years ... I was hoping to deal with it, but the battle was already over at that moment.} (Birger, 48, single for 2 years)

Throughout this first phase, the experience of the interviewees is one of dealing with tensions, acknowledging the discontent in the relationship and determining what is going wrong. Environmental factors, such as a network which acts as a sounding board or changing situations in the neighborhood, can affect the intensity of the struggle, as not everyone decides to end the relationship immediately. However, at a certain point in time, all of our interviewees decided to end their relationship and opt for change. This decision marks the transition to single parenthood, which we analyzed in the next phases.
Phase 2: Drive toward transition

A drive toward transition marks the period in which a person becomes a single parent. Although the situation may have been troubled for some time, the moment people leave or find themselves alone is still a shocking experience.

*I had to run like a thief from my own house. ... All I took with me ... was the children’s stuff, my clothes and that was all ... No more, no less, they came with the van, the van was loaded and I never returned.* (Freya, 36, separated, single for 10 years)

There is substantial variation in the intensity of this phase. Some people stated that they felt that they had to flee, others discussed and agreed on the separation with their former partner, others were left by their partner unexpectedly. This also reflects the way the previous phase was dealt with. The intensity of the phase also depends on the reasons for becoming a single parent, the relation with the former partner and the support people have at the decision-making moment. We distinguished two ways that people make the decision to leave the problematic situation: they keep it hidden, that is, from their partner; or they are open, that is, they make it known and are usually better prepared.

Any time someone leaves the relationship without informing their partner directly can be considered as hidden. This may take place in the presence of the partner, where the individual tensions and motivations for the separation remain “hidden” when they leave, or they may be kept secret to the extent that the person leaves while the other partner is away. With regard to the previous phase, it can be argued that the failure of a couple to communicate to each other about the rising tension will almost certainly lead to one of them keeping their departure secret. In these cases, people leave because the individual tension reaches critical levels.

*It was without me knowing it, and without me being there. So, I came back from work and our three children were really shocked. Our youngest was jumping around and*
our eldest was making jokes. They knew daddy wasn’t coming home anymore. (Rosa, 49, 3 children, single for 4 years)

Being open about leaving, in contrast, implies the recognition of the tension between the couple, as the partner is both present at the moment the other leaves and aware of the motivations that led to the separation. Leaving openly may be paired with mutual preparation and agreements on post-separation parenthood. This manner of leaving is generally less intense than an unexpected break up.

We had cut the knot. Therapy after therapy, in the end we said, “It’s not working anymore.” However, in the week we decided to split, he got meningitis, he went to hospital and everything went fine. In hospital, we decided that I would stay on for a little while as a carer, and in the meantime, I searched for an apartment. When he recovered, I could leave. (Janneke, 42, 3 children, single for 2 years)

Most of the participants’ experience of divorce or splitting up lie somewhere in between absolute secrecy and complete openness. Nevertheless, there is no general experience of separating, as every narrative is complex and diverse. Our interviewees argued that when people separate the emotional tension in the family does not disappear overnight and difficulties may also begin to arise in the workplace, as people have to combine their work life with their new single-parent family life. This leads to what we call a hazy period, as the old routines break down, and memories of this time are also vague. The perception of the problems that arise may be influenced by how people separate. While, preparation may enable and ease the transition, in other cases, a sudden departure increases the shock effect.

It is never easy, anyone who says otherwise simply lies … Sometimes you pick up stuff in tears, other times you act cold and distant, a day later you plead [for them] to come back … Can you tell me what’s best? (Morgan, 38, 2 children, single for 1 year)
Phase 3: The hazy period

Having become single parents, there appears to be an unstructured period that many interviewees identified and which we have labelled the hazy period. Single parents are short on resources, and maintaining daily routines becomes difficult. In this period, people live in a haze, liberated from old routines but also short on money and time and uncertain of how they will survive as single parents. Several people reflecting on this period said they could not recall how they dealt with the situation. Due to the chaos of this emotional period, single parents do not always clearly remember this stage, and they had difficulties recollecting it in the interviews.

There are many parts I don’t remember anymore. ... and I don’t know why this is so.

... I think it is my grief that is to blame. You are like a puppet on a string at that moment, people make the decisions for you. (Veerle, 59, divorced, single for 13 years)

In addition to the emotional turbulence of this period, the now single parents are confronted with the challenges of such a status for the first time. Not only is the hazy period one of emotional turmoil due to the changes associated with being alone, there is also a breakdown in household routines that were suitable in the dual partner family system but not in a single-parent family system. In this regard, single parents have to find new ways of combining parental roles, simple household routines, finances and their work life. Characteristic for this period is a high level of involvement of an individual’s network to cope with the situation.

During work days, my parents stayed here, and on Saturday, so I could work at home, what luck I was not alone. My parents got the children from school, prepared food, I came after work and my father helped with my finances. It was really hectic, but I was not alone. (Liselotte, 40, divorced, single for 5 years)
At first, these changes are overwhelming, and this phase may vary in length. However, the hazy period ends the moment that people take their lives back into their own hands and begin restructuring their daily life to regain control. How long this lasts and how people live through this moment are highly dependent on the intensity of the previous two phases, but at a certain moment, a reorganization phase begins in a move toward a suitable single-parent family system. Ultimately, people create an environment, which can accommodate their new life as a single parent.

**Phase 4: Temporary reorganization of family life**

Some interviewees also referred to a period in which they regained control of their life by rationalizing the challenges with which they were confronted. At the moment they were able to map and acknowledge the problems they were encountering, reorganization starts, and they began to develop household routines that were more suitable to a single-parent family system. The rationalization process may include reflecting on their financial position, such as making lists of income and expenditure or asking others for advice about finances. In summary, there is a shift from an emotionally laden period to a more reasoned reorganization of life in general. Not all of this rationalization happens consciously and intentionally, but single parents do gain control of their life over time. In this reorganization phase, we can distinguish two types of people: those who are independent, who strive for an independent single-parent family system; and the symbionts, who embed their single-parent family system in a broader network that takes on a significant role.

*Being a single parent means doing everything on your own. Being independent. But now and then, in times of need, you have to ask other people for help, for the good of your children. But being independent from anyone else was a key value after my divorce.* (Ann, 48, single for 2 years – striving for independence from the extended family)
I do feel comfortable now, returning to my birthplace was like anchoring my ship in a safe haven. I know family and friends here will always be there for me and they are with me every day of the week. (Cynthia, 34, single for 3 years – symbiont)

For those who valued independence, part of the transition involved a move from a symbiotic relationship with the family to an independent relationship. For these people, the divorce process is truly a pathway to independence.

When the kids were young, my mother was here every day, picking them up from school, doing homework, but now I don’t ask my mother anymore. I started feeling uncomfortable about it and we had a talk. It turned out that we had the same feeling. It had become time for me to regain independence, but it was amazing help and it gave me breathing space to restart my own life. (Patrick, 46, single for 11 years – symbiont to independent)

However, other people describe feeling comfortable about involving family and friends in the family system and move toward a symbiotic family system, in which different people take on various family roles. We call this a symbiotic relationship between single parents and their network. Some single parents are comfortable from the beginning with the high level of involvement from within the family, while others undergo a process of acceptance of the valuable role that their broader network can play in everyday life. Both are examples of symbionts, as they are comfortable with the interplay between themselves and their network.

Balancing work and family responsibilities also concerns having some contentment in both the work and family spheres. Rationalizing, however, does not always immediately lead to a comfortable solution (e.g., Rose, 36, who said that knowing how to make ends meet every week is not the same as being at ease as a single parent). Achieving a comfortable work-life
balance as a single parent is a long-term process. We use the phrase “first reorganization phase” to describe a state immediately after the hazy period, in which people tend to move on but are not yet content with their new routines (which make life more predictable). After the hazy period, single parents rationalize their life, gaining a better understanding of their financial situation and the life costs of the separation. Despite regaining control, they still struggle to combine all their responsibilities. They may have established some new routines, but they have not yet resolved all their work-life problems.

**Phase 5: Sustainable reorganization of work and care**

The temporary reorganization phase ends when people start to reorganize their life in a way that ensures that their work and life responsibilities are adequately adjusted to each other. Some people will change their work settings, while others will rely on friends, family or social services to maintain their household. Nevertheless, during this phase, people set up a new system of daily routines that makes it possible to regain further control over their life. Where control in former phases meant a degree of financial security but little certainty in other daily routines, people now start to adjust their time budget, rebalancing their work and financial needs.

*I am a routine person. When each activity fits into a routine, it all goes smoothly for me. So, the moment that I had my routines, everything was fine. When do things become difficult? If something undermines these routines, then I need to figure everything out again.* (Lieve, 40, single for 3 years)

The implementation of these routines can take a range of forms. Some people focus on an adjustment of work schedules with respect to their needs as a single parent. Others engage external help, such as formal organized household help, or more informal help from friends and family. Usually, life is reorganized using a combination of all three factors.
So, first they are in after school care until 5 or 6; in this way, I can finish work. On Wednesday, my parents pick them up from school because otherwise the day is too long. At home, I only have to cook, as they go to their leisure activities on their own. On Friday, there is a cleaner at home while I am at work, who cleans the house for the weekend. (Bea, 37, single for 6 years)

Of course, such combinations are what make most lives of working parents, divorced or not, bearable. However, that this resembles other, non-divorced families also implies that the single-parent family system is slowly starting to take form. At this time, single parents move on to the next phase, in which they start to accept that their family has taken on this new form.

**Phase 6: New period of contentment: reorganization and acceptance**

Ultimately, some single parents find a new balance in life after a long transition. These people are content with how their lives have turned out, despite facing the challenges of being single and having to combine all life spheres alone.

*Contentment for me is having the experience that I can make ends meet in [terms of] time and money and that we aren’t hungry, that I can make ends meet and don’t overextend myself ... That I notice that the children have landed on their feet, I have balanced children, who may have puberty issues, but they are nice guys who can stand up for themselves and are doing great.* (Patrick, 46, divorced, single for 11 years)

In this final phase, people ultimately reach a new form of work-life satisfaction, combining control over finances with control of their time. During this period, people once more have a sense of what they are capable of achieving. A new level of contentment is attained when people establish new routines that fit their work arrangements, such as involving others in the household, but also when they make the necessary changes to their expectations. Becoming a single parent is about changing things: on the one hand, changes need to be made in the
organization of daily life, as old habits and routines cannot continue in a household that has to be maintained alone; on the other hand, others stated that they also had to change their values and belief system. Either way, they considered that these changes were less problematic than remaining in their former relationship. Both indicate an acceptance of a new lifestyle.

You change your values and beliefs during that period ... the separation. ... I became unbelievably rich in life, and that is human richness, openness, the warmth, the social life with children, family, friends. That is something that is much more valuable for me now. I give less value to how things look: your image and material values are less important. (Hermien, 52, single for 8 years)

After acceptance, and altering their values and their way of life, it seems that single parenthood is a possible end point. However, life can change fast, and most life constellations are temporary. Nevertheless, some respondents were happy with being a single parent.

My image of single parent families has ... A world opened up for me. It is not easy, including in financial matters, but it is possible. And at the moment I thought this, I stopped searching for a new partner, or searching for solutions. I was happy being a single parent. (Samantha, 46, single for 11 years)

After this point, the transition to single parenthood appears complete. However, shocks may occur at any time, creating new challenges that have to be overcome.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This article focused on the reorganization process undertaken by single parents after divorce or separation. Single-parent family systems appear to struggle with a negative image in previous research, which has tended to focus on the negative effects of divorce on various factors, such as work-life balance (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Gilleir, 2013), poverty
(Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015b), mental health issues (Symoens, Van de Velde, Colman, & Bracke, 2014) and loneliness (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). Although these are real challenges, as Coltrane and Adams (2003) argued, over time, the dark side of divorce has come to overshadow a more positive side, with studies on the short-term consequences demonstrating negative outcomes, although research that has looked at divorce over a longer timeframe suggests a more nuanced picture. Furthermore, Hetherington (1999) presented a strong argument supporting the notion that single-parent families have the capacity to function better than a dysfunctional two-parent family. In this paper, we described a model of how single parents move toward this functional single-parent family system.

This study looked beyond divorce as a discrete event and described a dynamic process in which single parents develop an alternative organization of the household. Different crisis theories have been used to study changes in the family system, and this study used the concept of a dialectic of timeframes that moves toward family equilibrium. We described six phases that single parents go through on the way to a state of emergent, comfortable single parenthood: an initial decline in comfort, the moment of transition, a hazy period, a temporary period of reorganization, a period of sustainable reorganization and, ultimately, the acceptance of the single-parent family form.

The six stages we described in our model were based on empirical data and inspired by some of the main components of two theories on family change: the Circumplex Model and the life course perspective (Amato, 2000; Bengtson & Allen, 1993; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Olson, 2000). We argued that both theories make use of an idea of family systems finding a new balance and equilibrium in timeframes of destruction and construction. We can see our model of the reorganization of the single-parent family from the perspective of divorce itself (the first two stages), as the destructive timeframe, and the subsequent
reorganization (the last three stages) as the constructive timeframe. This equilibrium is reached through a process identified as homeostasis, as a sensitizing concept.

Homeostasis and its subcomponents of morphostasis and morphogenesis are major forces within the reorganization process, as single parents attempt to re-establish balance in their life (morphostasis). To fulfil this urge, people develop creative solutions to the challenges with which they are confronted (morphogenesis) (Day, 2009; Speer, 1970). In our model, equilibrium is the moment that single parents feel they have control over their family organization and are content with this situation.

This research also relates to the resilience perspective on divorce. Lenette et al. (2013) coined the term *everyday resilience* to describe the process in which families overcome short-term problems with the aim of creating stability in the long term. If we take a snapshot view, the life of recently divorced parents seems extremely problematic, as they are confronted with the new challenges of a single-parent family. However, as we found, people are able to reorganize their lives in many ways and adapt the structures and networks in their lives to ensure the single-parent family functions well. The process of reorganization entails adapting the family system in a way that facilitates stability in the combination of work and family in the long term (the genesis of a new family system).

**Practical implications**

Amato (2000) described three pathways taken by people going through divorce: some will rush quickly through the process and divorce is liberating, others struggle through, while others struggle from one setback to the next in a downward spiral. Overall, Booth and Amato (1991) found that stress levels rise during the years immediately following divorce, decreasing in subsequent years. According to our study, managing to reorganize the household in a comfortable way can play contribute to decreasing this stress. For family
practitioners, it can be difficult to help people through this process, as every experience appears to be individual and atypical. However, our findings suggest that there are certain stages that can be monitored by practitioners to increase the tempo of the reorganization process. Specific roles that practitioners who assist recent single parents might consider, include providing a sounding board in the early phases, or discussing the core of the challenges faced by the client if they find themselves in the hazy period. Practitioners can help with determining temporary routines in the fourth reorganization phase, while discussing more sustainable solutions in the fifth phase. During the sixth reorganization phase, supporting the acceptance of single parenting at the client’s current stage of life might be an important step.

We believe that interventions focused on the core needs of single parents in the different stages of the reorganization process might improve the tempo of the process, but research is still needed to support this claim. Based on the model constructed with the research here, there are six core needs during the single parenthood reorganization process. In the first phase, people are struggling with their thoughts about the relationship they are in. Therefore, the core need for someone who is evaluated in this stage is bringing structure to their thinking to clear the cloud of doubts they are in. In the second phase, a decision is taken to end the relationship and their core need is advice on how best to do this. In the third phase, single parents are confronted with a chaotic emotional time and the practical need to combine all life roles. At this stage, their core need is structure. Practitioners might focus on how their client can combine all their roles: first on a temporary basis, and later in a more sustainable manner. In the fourth phase, single parents want to transition to a more sustainable lifestyle and practitioners can help by returning the focus to the future. Finally, in the last phase, which is about finding new contentment in their current situation, practitioners should focus on self-worth and self-identity as a single parent.
Limitations

The study we undertook also has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, there was a large span in years since divorce and/or separation across the participants. The longer the span of time between divorce and interview the higher the possibility of bias in their recall of events following the divorce. Although interviewers experienced that interviewees who had a longer time to reflect, i.e., had been divorced for a longer period of time, were able to give a more structured narrative, it was especially important to interview sufficient numbers of recently divorced and separated individuals. After all, memory is also fallible. Second, the use of students for the interviews enabled us to set up an elaborative sample, but it also threatened the quality of the research sample. To address this, the research and education team evaluated the quality of the student interviews and removed those that were not up to standard. Third, there was a selection effect in our research population. We only interviewed parents who were the sole parent in the household at the time of the interview. Many people also tend to repartner, which leads to other narratives. This, however, was not the focus of our study and, therefore, this was not a topic in our interviews. Therefore, this article should be read as a narrow description of the reorganization of the household in the context of work-life issues. Future research on repartnering in the reorganization process would be a valuable contribution to the literature. It also seems that there is no exact speed at which the reorganization process occurred. Some interviewees referred to some phases as if they lasted only a couple of months, while others gave a narrative that covered a year. For this reason, it is impossible to predict experiences from people going through divorce or the length of the coping process. It seems more appropriate to think in terms of timing, which refers to the boundaries people cross as they move to the next stage. This timing of phases may be highly dependent on individual and contextual characteristics. Some interviewees described their life as still a struggle, while people with similar stories referred to life in terms of a renewed sense of
contentment. Therefore, we highly encourage future research to investigate characteristics that influence the timing and tempo of the reorganization process.

REFERENCES


Table 1

Descriptive statistics: Researcher Interviews

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Table 3

Descriptive statistics: Student interviews

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