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Social support in the process of household reorganization after divorce

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Social support in the process of household reorganization after divorce

Abstract

Social support has been shown to be important in the world of single parents. As for divorce, social support is mostly studied in a static way in academic research. Divorcing and/or separating people are in a dynamic state of a changing need for social support. This need changes over time within their process of becoming a single parent. In this article, we propose a more dynamic perspective on social support in the process of household reorganization after divorce. We argue that single parents move on after divorce and work towards a new conciliation of their responsibilities at home and at the labour market, using their social network. This resulted from a Grounded theory analysis, conducted using 30 unstructured interviews that were then compared within an elaborative population of an additional 244 semi-structured interviews in order to develop a 6-phase model of family reorganization after divorce.

Keywords: Single parenthood, network support, divorce, separation, household organization, family sociology

Word count: 8892

Introduction

Social networks have proven to be one of the major sources of resilience in cases of adversity (Black & Lobo, 2008). Extended family members and friends prove to be a reliable safety net when needed (de Bel & Van Gasse, 2020). Whereas other researchers studied the role of the network in coping in several disruptions across the life course, this research focusses on the roles of the network in the process of becoming a single parent after divorce (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, Racine, & Epidemiology, 2003; Munton & Reynolds, 1995). Most research describes single parenthood as problematic, related to poverty, mental health risks and practical and social difficulties. First, poverty is a bigger threat for single parents than for dual earner families as there is only one breadwinner (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis). Second, divorce causes psychological distress. Van de Velde et al. (2014) revealed greater feelings of depression and lower levels of self-esteem and competence for

single parents than their married or cohabiting counterparts. This difference is mediated through various social-relational and socioeconomic contexts (Van de Velde et al., 2014). In general, non-employment, poverty and lower education are more related to single parents' mental health issues and the problems in Anglo-Saxon welfare systems are bigger than in other welfare states. Third, single parents are confronted with practical issues: the combination of running the household and working for the entire family income creates a tense division between both responsibilities. Bakker & Karsten (2013) argued that single parents face more constraints regarding the combination of paid work, care and leisure than their former cohabiting counterparts, or single parents that opted for co-parenting. Fourth, it has been argued that single parents face difficulties maintaining their social network after divorce (Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

It may be asked whether transitions to single parenthood only provoke troubles, or if there are also more positive stories. Amato (2000) and Booth and Amato (1991) already argued that for most single parents, the troubles after divorce are not long lasting and stress levels decrease over time. A strong social network can play a valuable role in overcoming the challenges people face, and can assist in the transition to a comfortable single parent family system (Cook, 2012). This would mean that single parents can be resilient after divorce and overcome the challenges related to single parenthood (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2009). Therefore, social support is important both for combatting the challenges related to single parenthood (Mortelmans & Verheyen, 2011) as well as activating single parents to join the labour market (Raeymaeckers, Dewilde, Snoeckx, & Mortelmans, 2008).

Looking at divorce transitions as processes towards new family models instead of dichotomies opens up a new perspective (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2018). Demo and Ganong (1994) already claimed that the long term problems of single parents are limited. Moreover, many of the negative consequences of divorce can be attributed to the probabilistic nature of

quantitative studies and the selection effects of single parents that experienced the event of divorce or separation (Amato, 2010; McLanahan, Wedemeyer, & Adelberg, 1981). A specific elaboration of such a process perspective that can be applied in this study is the theory of “*the reorganization of single parenthood*”, coined by Van Gasse and Mortelmans (*In-Press*). They described six phases single parents go through after divorce to establish a functioning single parent family.

Within this process, social support can be seen as a dynamic concept as well. Throughout this process of becoming a single parent, the family network takes on a wide variety of functions related to the changing needs of the single parent. This dynamic idea of working networks is where this paper innovates. Whereas the knowledge about single parenting is innovated by describing it in different time frames, the understanding of social support can be improved by studying it in a dynamic way as well.

Therefore, the research question in this article is: ‘What functions do social networks take on within the dynamic process of the reorganizations of single parent families?’ To address this question, we undertook qualitative in-depth interviews to explore how single parents in Belgium and the Netherlands used their social networks to reorganize their work and care responsibilities in a satisfactory way.

Research on social support in single parenthood

Social support has an important impact on the daily life of single parents. Single parents rely on their social network for practical, financial and instrumental help, but also for emotional and social support (Mortelmans & Verheyen, 2011). These support systems help them to recover from a range of divorce and separation-related issues (e.g. maintaining the household, poverty, psycho-social problems and career lags).

Previous research on social support with single parents focused on the question of *who* helps (Colletta, 1979; Freeman & Dodson, 2014), *what types* of help are given (Mortelmans &

Verheyen, 2011), and *how much* help is given (McArthur & Winkworth, 2016). Additionally, the impact of the support has been investigated (Raeymaeckers et al., 2008). In these studies, support is seen as a rather static concept, taking up different forms. We argue, however, that social support can be regarded – in relation to dynamic models of divorce and separation – as a dynamic phenomenon in itself. As single parents' needs vary throughout the process of the reorganization of single parenthood, we will also consider network support from a dynamic perspective. The question is, how these networks should be studied. Recent publications point at the importance of studying changing family systems in a multi-actor approach to improve the understanding of networks better from all different angles (de Bel & Van Gasse, 2020; Van Parys, Provoost, De Sutter, Pennings, & Buysse, 2017). However, in the scope of this study, it was impossible to interview all network actors in depth, so we started from a classic Ego-Network approach. In this study, the focus was on divorced single parents experiences with close others as those are likely the most important and salient relationships and experiences, and the relationships/experiences on which they would likely be the most well-suited to report on retrospectively. This approach is illustrated with figure 1 presented in Appendix A (*Only available online*), so as we did not interview the network agents, we investigated the network roles throughout the viewpoint of the single parent.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Social support from a dynamic perspective

Apparent in the existing research on social support is that both single parenthood and social support are conceived as static concepts. In research on single parenthood, critics have already argued that single parenthood should be studied over time, as people adjust to the problems that arise over time. Van Gasse and Mortelmans (*In-Press*) describe a process of adjustment in daily life, responding to research which approaches divorce as a discrete moment in time. Their process theory is based on arguments by Demo and Ganong (1994) and Coltrane and Adams

(2003) and an empirical analysis of in depth interviews as it approaches single parenthood in a manner that does not assume that it is necessarily a problematic situation in itself. As this theory focuses on the adaptations of single parents in daily life, this is a valuable framework to connect to social support.

Van Gasse and Mortelmans (*In-Press*) describe six phases in the process of a reorganization of families after divorce. The first phase begins with the comfortable situation of a two-parent family system that starts to experience dissatisfaction due to troubles within the relationship. The second phase is the drive to transition that marks the momentum of change. In the third phase, single parents reach a 'hazy period', where they lack the routines and structure of the two parent family system. The fourth phase is a time in which single parents start to reorganize their lives, combining all life spheres. Initially, this concerns finding temporary solutions for everyday problems but, in the end, in phase five, more sustainable solutions are found. Finally, in the sixth phase, single parents accept their new family system, considering it as a well-functioning end-point of the family transition. We will use this idea of household reorganization as the background for the acts that occur in the network of single parents as they set out on the path to reorganizing their family system into a well-functioning single parent family.

We start from this idea of a staged process and investigate how the network throughout this process takes up different functions. Although some research focuses on the types of support given, or the people who offer support, there has not been any research on these changes in support over time (Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Mortelmans & Verheyen, 2011). This is because theories on the reorganisation of families after divorce were scarce up to now. Using the theoretical ideas discussed here, we will develop a new theoretical perspective on network support.

Methods

This study was performed with a novel sampling approach in qualitative research. Two research populations were assembled: a primary research population of 30 single parents and an elaborative population¹ with 244 single parent respondents. The sample included respondents who were the only adult in the household, who had to work at least half time and had at least one child younger than 18 (or between 18 and 24, if studying). These criteria ensured that the single parents had to combine their parental responsibilities with their work routines. We interviewed people about their divorce and its aftermath retrospectively. Divorce or separation had taken place between one and 25 years prior to the interview. This allowed us to gain a broad retrospective view of the process over many years after divorce.

The double structure of data gathering took place in two different situations. The primary research population of 30 people (7 male and 23 female) were interviewed by the main researcher. The interviewees of the primary population were found through an announcement on social media and subsequently by snowball follow-up of different respondents. The elaborative population consisted of single parents that were interviewed by students for a qualitative methods course at the university. In total, 244 interviews were undertaken by the students, which allowed the triangulation and elaboration of the results. The descriptive statistics of these interviews can be consulted in appendix A (*Only available online*). The primary population was interviewed with unstructured, open in depth interviews, while the elaborative population was interviewed with semi-structured interview leads (based on the primary population interviews) (Mortelmans, 2007). The structured interview leads allowed precoding in Nvivo in separate data files (Mortelmans, 2011). This way, the

¹ The elaborative sample consist of interviews of students, that were used to confirm and elaborate the primary analysis that was executed with interviews from the primary researcher.

unstructured primary data was kept separate from the structured student interviews at all time as they also served different purposes in the analyses.

Also the analysis took place in a 2 staged format. As we started from the idea of the reorganization of single parent family systems, it was important to find out whether similar processes were experienced and this theory matched our empirical data. The second part elaborated on network support throughout the interviewees own perspective. Before analysis, the interview structure was evaluated for which parts of the story matched the particular stages. These were then analysed on social support functions of the network. This way, a first empirical grounded theory was constructed based on our researcher interviews.

To improve our empirical model on social support functions, we used grounded theory extended with 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 undertaken with the primary research population (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This way, an initial theory was constructed. Second, this theory was tested and expanded via constant comparison in the elaborative research population, which consisted of all pre-coded student interviews merged in Nvivo (Glaser, 1998). Constant comparison in the elaborative research population was enabled thanks to structured precoding by students (enlisting respondent answers via the semi-structured interview leads) and the use of extensive classification sheets (categorizing respondents based on 41 characteristics). By combining both structuring instruments, we used coding queries to perform focused comparison in the elaborative research population (Mortelmans, 2011). This comparison enabled firstly to deepen the analysis for certain cases, secondly to expand the analysis for respondents with specific characteristics that weren't available in the primary sample and thirdly to triangulate the results in the search for negative examples or more nuance in the analysis. This approach resulted in the full grown model we present in this paper.

Working with student-interviews entails some quality concerns. Therefore, the students were both trained in a curricular course on qualitative research methods as in an extracurricular workshop on interviewing. The elaborative population was controlled via sampled respondent calls, video data and a check to closed coding similarity. The resulting model was first presented to approximately 40 single parents who took part in the study in the context of a confirmation check. A presentation about the model presented in this article was given, with a Q&A session afterwards. The respondents that were present on this evening held a debate about each-others experiences about the issues and agreed together that the theoretical model presented 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 (Figure 2, *Only available online*).

Results

Network functions throughout the process of divorce

In this section, we will discuss the functions that a network can fulfil during the process of household reorganization in single parenthood. Throughout this process, the social network takes on a wide range of functions. While these functions are not necessarily linked to one specific stage in the process, they do become more pronounced in certain phases of the recovery process as was apparent in the narratives of the interviews.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The network functions in Phase 1 – Sounding board

I had a sounding board in my sister, and that would have been the hardest to do without as a single parent. Without her, I wouldn't have made it, I would perhaps have remained in the relationship against my will because I couldn't do it on my own. (Karen, 52, single for 10 years)

As described in the reorganization process of single parent family systems, the first phase entails a decrease in contentment. This is, in itself, not a trigger to end the relationship. While there will often have been problems in the relationship over a longer period, some of our

respondents only decided to end their relationship after a number of years of marital discontent – or were left by their partner. We describe the function of the social network in this phase as that of a sounding board: others mainly listen to the problems that the couple are confronting.

Sounding board function 1: The acknowledgment of discontent. While a single parent's network might only be activated after the decision to separate, some respondents stated that their network had been important from the start, when they first began to experience discontent in their relationship. Family and friends served as a sounding board, listening to their problems and giving them psychological strength. Sometimes the social network was even more involved, initiating the decision to leave, or helping the person accept that there was something wrong in the relationship. The sounding board function of the social network may help to determine the seriousness of the troubles in a relationship. It helps to acknowledge the existence of discontent in the relationship when someone starts experiencing their family situation as problematic.

Sounding board function 2: Ensuring alternatives. Even after people acknowledge the problems in their relationship, they remain confused and uncertain about what to do. Some questions were named that interviewees at the time “*When is it right to separate? Which problems are acceptable?*” One has to decide to separate, it does not just happen. People's first concern is whether problems might be resolved. Couples attempt to work out their problems as a team or alone. The second concern is whether the issue is really problematic or a general aspect of any relationship. When the discontent is seen as insurmountable, people start wondering about the future. Separation brings uncertainty, with future single parents concerned about financial risks, housing problems and the effect of single parenthood on their children. A social network may

offer solutions or alternatives, thus empowering someone in their decision to leave their partner and become a single parent.

The network function in Phase 2 – Transferring interdependencies

I left, which was a dramatic decision, and I went to my parents' house. I lived there until my children were 10 months old and then I left again and moved here. But you know, they live across the street for when I can't do it on my own. (Mary-Ann, 41, single for 7 years)

The function of the social network in indicating alternatives comes into practice during Phase 2. When people make the decision to leave, they use their social network to gain independence from their former partner. Before the separation, the couple could rely on each other, but afterwards, they have to become independent. To do so, they first transfer interdependencies with their network that were earlier from their ex-spouse. We distinguish three domains in which people become independent after separation: *the practical domain* (people want to live separately from each other), *the financial domain* (people no longer want to rely on the income of their former partner) and *the emotional domain* (ex-partners cut their emotional ties).

Transferring function 1: Practical independence. The housing issue is a major concern of people thinking about leaving their partner. People who are left by their partner often remain living in the house that they originally bought or rented as a couple, but people who leave a relationship must find a new place to live. The first act of practical independence thus entails *moving*. People who leave after a quarrel or decide to flee may be helped by their social network, which can assist them to move out without the knowledge of the partner (who might be at work or travelling). People who have a less difficult relationship with their ex-partner will have more time to come and go, and tend to move out gradually.

Transferring function 2: Financial independence. Apart from becoming practically independent, people must also become financially independent. Two forms of assistance can be distinguished. First, social networks can *reduce debt* and, second, they are active in giving *financial advice*. We do not want to generalize and suggest that every divorcee has to learn financial skills from his or her social network. However, some of our respondents had to learn how to deal with their own financial situation, as one of the partners had been more involved in paying the bills, maintaining bank accounts, etc.

For many people, separation is a financial challenge. Becoming a single parent in particular may bring financial troubles. People who remain in the home owned by the former couple may have to buy out their partner. Others must start renting on their own, and lawyers and other costs may also add up. Moreover, one of the partners may have been financially dependent on the other. To become financially independent, people first have to repay any debts to each other. In many cases, friends and family play a crucial role in this process. The first financial facilitating role of social networks is thus spending money, such as *taking over debts* or *offering interest free loans*.

In some cases, the issue of unequal earnings between two partners could lead to one partner having a dominant role in dealing with financial issues. Some respondents did not know how much they earned, how the banking system worked, or how to fill in tax forms. The social network taught them these skills, sometimes even teaching them the basics of finance, as this had previously been controlled by their partner. This *teaching role* can take place in many domains.

My father went with me to the bank. Can you imagine? At the age of 38, taking your father with you to the bank because you don't know a thing about it (Greet, 48, divorced, single for 11 years)

Transferring function 3: Emotional independence. Divorce is not only a practical challenge but also an emotional rollercoaster. Cutting emotional bonds can create many difficulties, and the social network may be helpful.

Last month I took the children to him and he said that he wanted to hug me again, but I didn't want to and he could not understand why. My two sisters responded differently to this, the older one complained that I should understand that it is not easy for him, while the younger one was more supportive. (Ygritte, 30, separated for 1 year)

Several interventions by the social network may ease the situation and facilitate emotional independence by playing an *extended sounding board* role. Here, the social network continues to fulfil the listening role of the previous phase. Seeing and talking to people in the social network can help single parents reflect on possible solutions to their emotional problems. Another way to facilitate emotional independence is by others *taking over communication* with the former partner. Friends and family may also help by taking in the children themselves. Breaking contact with a former partner helps people with the emotional closure of their relationship.

The network functions in Phase 3 – Lifeline

When I had a problem, there is always your family and friends. That is your lifeline in times of need. They know so well what they have to do and what they should do at a certain moment. It is like they are taught how to handle this. (Elke, 40, 2 years alone)

In Phase 3 of the separation process, people cut loose from their former partner. They finally start setting up a household on their own. However, lacking the routines of their former household, they face a new situation, in which they have nothing solid on which to rely. In this situation, the lifeline role of the social network has three tasks: co-parenting, taking over routines and re-parenting. Although these roles remain important in subsequent phases, the network is most involved during this phase, which is often looked back on as a period of black out.

Lifeline function 1: co-parenting

It was mostly one couple ... my children went separately to them. ... mostly Nicolas, when he needed a father figure ... Nicolas even lived there for 4 months, as it was really complicated. ... My brother did everything back then, contact with school, calling teachers, we understood each other perfectly (Greet, 48, divorced for 11 years)

During this hazy period, the network sometimes takes up parental roles to ease the family situation of the single parent, partially taking on the role of the former parent. This may entail childcare to enable single parents to remain in full-time work (*taking on childcare*). The social network might also take children to school, childcare or leisure activities (*taking on child transport*). Some single parents are also assisted by friends and family in their educational role. This may entail advising children during times the single parent is under pressure, or even taking over the parental role in times of family crises (*educating*).

Lifeline function 2: Taking over routines. A second aspect of the lifeline role of the social network is re-establishing routines in the household that have broken down due to the

separation. This can be done explicitly when someone in the social network is involved in daily tasks, thus *becoming a team player in the household*. The co-parenting function only concerns the children, but becoming a team player in the household may also mean cooking, washing or cleaning.

The social network can also take over routines in a more passive way by *giving guidance*. This means that single parents are nudged to focus on practical household tasks that tend to be forgotten. The social network then functions to remind someone about important household tasks.

In addition to becoming a team player in the household and giving guidance, re-establishing and taking over routines may also entail helping with the administrative tasks of the household. Some of our interviewees had been in a situation in which a division of tasks had meant that their former partner performed the administrative role. Paying bills, maintaining finances and other tasks are then looked after by someone in the social network.

Lifeline function 3: Reparenting. The final aspect of the lifeline function of the social network is reparenting. This is not necessarily restricted to the parents of the single person, but may also be undertaken by others. Reparenting concerns educating a single parent about how to maintain a household on their own. This can be done by *teaching them routines* for the practical organization of the household. Tasks that were performed by their ex-partner sometimes have to be taught to the single parent by those in the social network. In addition to teaching routines, the social network can also *bring back structure* and help a single parent gain a better grasp of what needs to occur on a weekly basis and thus survive the black-out period.

The network function in Phase 4 – Consultant

Being the mother and the father at the same time is not always easy. As I said: The grandparents have an important role. His grandfather is an authority figure. He's not really tough, but when he raises his voice, he listens well. My mother also does that a little bit. That's a second educator ... and my sister has a child the same age. I can consult them all when I have problems, and they help when I need them. (Marleen, 42, single for 5 years)

In Phase 4 of the process, people have overcome the hazy period and set up new routines, but they do not yet have a comfortable work-life balance so the function of the social network remains important. It now becomes a network of consultants. In the consultancy role, we distinguish *parenting consultancy* and *taking part in routines*. The consultancy tasks usually cover the same domains as lifeline assistance but also have another function.

Consultant function 1: Parenting consultancy. While the network takes more of a leading role when it functions as a lifeline, in the consultant role, the network moves into the background. Co-parenting or taking an active part in the education of children becomes parenting consultancy and mainly aims to assure the single parent about their performance and advise them on educational issues. This is not a leading role in the household, with the social network slowly withdrawing from family life as new routines arise.

Consultant function 2: Taking part in routines. Nevertheless, the social network still *takes part in routines*, although there is a shift in how family and friends are involved. During the black-out period, the social network took over routines, ensuring that necessary tasks were fulfilled. As people begin to reorganize work and care, family and friends may still be active in the household routines but no longer take a leading role. In this role of household consultant, the network may still take part in transport routines, other household routines and administrative routines.

The network functions in Phase 5 – Life coach

I try to do as much as possible as a single parent family. I do my own thing but when I have doubts, I brainstorm with my friends on how I can do things differently, or what I can do in the future. (An, 47, 6 years alone)

Once people have substantially reorganized their lives, the social network withdraws even more. The main activity of the network in this phase is giving advice regarding this phase of reorganization of life. The social network helps single parents to establish a stable and independent household unit. It has to be noted that this model is idealtypic and not all single parents go through the process described in this paper. It may take different forms and many variations.

Life coach function 1: Rethinking work and care. One aspect of the life coach role of the social network is *helping to rethink work and life*. This can take three forms. First, people in the network may *offer alternatives* that better fit the life demands of single parents than their current work. They may know about a job with flexible hours, flexplace work, or a job closer to home, thus improving the balance of work and care.

Even if they do not know of more suitable jobs, people in the network can help single parents to rethink work and life by *doing research* on potential solutions, such as childcare services that remain open longer or jobs that better suit the new family profile of a single parent. Third, the network may continue to give advice and address the concerns someone might have when making decisions that will change their life. Giving advice can be encouraging, and nudging someone to make changes can also help them take a step back when they are not encouraged by their environment. Once again, this can be seen as an extension of the sounding board role of the social network, which has a genuine interest in the problems that a single parent must face.

Life coach function 2: Withdrawing from routines. A second aspect of the life coach role of the social network entails the slow withdrawal from daily family routines. In the process of divorce, the position of the social network regarding household routines changes a great deal. As suggested above, the network tends to take over routines if the single parent family lacks structure. Later on, the network becomes involved in weekly routines and takes part in them (but no longer takes the lead as in previous phases of the process). In the life coach role, the social network withdraws from the household routines as the single parent regains their independence. Nevertheless, the social network can still offer helpful advice or help children to take on household roles.

Life coach function 3: Brainstorming future life options. Single parents who re-establish structure and stability in their life tend to regain a satisfactory work-life balance. Some people are likely to remain in this contented state. In relation to the role of life coach, we have already suggested that the social network can stimulate a search for new jobs or care services that better fit the work-life context of the single parent. This also relates to the life coach role of *brainstorming future life options*. Alongside options regarding work-life balance, the network can also stimulate other events, such as repartnering. Many respondents mentioned that they had not thought about a new partner and that they were settled in their single parenthood lives until one of their friends brought up the idea. This opened up the potential of finding a new partner.

The network functions in Phase 6 – Helping with acceptance

It is a matter of acceptance. Sometimes, you can't do some things you did in the past. Then you leave them be, there will be time for them in the future. It is a process of acceptance, acceptance of your network, acceptance of yourself, and both go together. Sometimes, it helps when you are struggling with your past and a friend tells you that it is the past, and now is now. (Anne, 52, 10 years alone)

Whether single parents searched for new jobs, partners or solutions for the household or not, the sixth phase is one in which they find a new sense of contentment. This can be attained in a variety of ways, such as changing their work environment, accepting help from their social network, or adjusting their standards. In summary, single parents create new circumstances in which they can reconcile work and care in a satisfactory way, live independently of their ex-partner and network, and have new daily routines that make life easier.

Nevertheless, single parents may still struggle with the decisions they made in the past. The main role of the social network now is to help them accept their new work-life situation. While circumstances may change over time and new ideas might be implemented, the network recedes into the background and single parents establish their household as an independent single parent unit.

When the network does not work

I got to know my sisters better through the process. I always got along best with my oldest sister, but with the divorce I found out I had a better relationship with my youngest sister, she really supports me ... the first time my oldest sister was here, the first thing she said was 'What an ugly wall'. It seems as if she can't accept me doing well. She still has contact with my ex-husband, she thought my decision was too drastic. (Maïté, 30, single for 2 years)

Above we discussed how social networks can help single parents overcome divorce and set up an independent single parent household. However, as in many studies, this is an ideal-typical approach and not all real-life situations follow this pattern. Moreover, we focused on positive stories rather than on problems, thus indicating how good practices may work. Nevertheless, in some divorces the network does not turn out to be helpful.

One reason may be a lack of empathy. People gain support from their network when it recognizes a need, but this does not always happen. Some singles are left to work things out on their own. The recognition of the needs of a single parent by the network is thus an important indicator of whether network support will occur.

Another reason the network might not help is a divergence between needs and support. This article focused on the dynamics of divorce, revealing that single parents have different needs throughout the various phases of divorce and in the transition to an independent single parent family. However, when network members play roles that are not appropriate to the needs of the current phase, this may be perceived as inconvenient by the single parent. If network members continue in these roles, they may also hamper single parents in their transition to an independent household.

Contextual factors can also lead to the withholding of support. Members of the network may live at a distance, crises in different families may occur at the same time, or network members might be struck by illness. Network members could also have limited resources (time, financial, abilities), and not always be able to meet the needs of single parents.

My mother has been a cancer patient and now she belongs to a risk group. She must be careful of people who are sick, so when the children are really ill or have a cold, I don't ask her to come. Then I ask for leave from work if need be. (Mark, 47, divorced for 13 years)

Finally, social capital varies. Some people cannot access the same level of support as those with a strong social network, or the people in their network are less resourceful. Network support is thus also a story of supply and demand.

I had some bad luck. Many people in my network died. So, there was this one person, she was like a big sister to me. She cared a lot for the children when they were young. She moved with

me to this place, but she was ill and then she passed away quite young. And my parents also passed away, so I couldn't ask anyone for help. (Kim, 59, divorced for 16 years)

Discussion

In this article we investigated network support in the process of the reorganization of a single parent family, as described by Van Gasse and Mortelmans (*In-Press*). The process of the reorganization of a single parent family was described in terms of six phases that people go through in their transition to a single parent family system. We used this theoretical lens to investigate how the social support of the close social network can be needs oriented. This suggests that social support should be oriented to suit the changing needs of single parents over time. Many studies have investigated social support in a static way, but when interviewing single parents about their recovery process after divorce, we were able to describe how single parents used their network to grow towards a new equilibrium.

The idea of an empowering social network is strongly linked to the idea of the buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Royal, Eaton, Smith, Cliette, & Livingston, 2017) and the idea of the role of social support in activation for the labour market (Raeymaeckers et al., 2008). The social network proves to be a buffer in cases of disruption, with family and friends able to allay many of the concerns that single parents have in the initial phases of the process of household reorganization in single parenthood. However, in the long term, single parents reorganize their life to establish a more feasible work-life balance, which resonates with the idea of an activating social network.

In terms of McLanahan et al. (1981) idea of network structure we can say that the close knit network of single parents go through a process of intensification in which the direction of the relationships changes first towards the single parent, while the intensification decreases at the moment single parents re-establish their independence.

When considering social support, our research reveals that divorce should be seen from a process perspective (Bohannon, 1970; Demo & Ganong, 1994). Moreover, one of the more important aspects of the process that was described are the dynamics between dependence and independence. After divorce, in the reorganization process of the single parent family, single parents have, at certain moments, a need for the extensive involvement of their network in their household. However, their ultimate aim is to establish their single parent family system as a functional entity, and the social support that is given should be aligned with this need for independence in the long term.

We can also compare this idea of evolving social support over a process of divorce with previous research, which 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, 2015), psychological distress (Symoens, Van de Velde, Colman, & Bracke, 2014) and loneliness (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). It can be argued that the challenges change over the course of time in the process of household reorganization in single parenthood and that social support takes various forms within this process. Therefore, divorce and single parenthood are not approached as inherently problematical circumstances. The findings of this paper suggest that there are other ways to deal with divorce apart from finding another partner and establishing a new family. Specifically, this means using one's social network to help overcome the issues inevitably related to single parenthood (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2013).

Although network support after divorce has been extensively studied (e.g. Cook, 2012), the view of divorce as a process allowed us to investigate how the support needs of single parents change over time. As with divorce itself, support can be seen as a dynamic force operating within single parents' lives. Through *dynamic* network support, single parents are able to overcome the initial challenges of single parenthood. Although divorce or separation is a complex process through which to live, people may be greatly empowered by their network.

While we claim that single parents can grow towards a new level of contentment, we do not underestimate the problems of single parenthood, especially during the first three phases (discontent, decision to leave and black-out). A strong, involved and embedded network is crucial in these phases. However, in the following phases, a movement towards independence takes place. Our study revealed that single parents have an intrinsic power to overcome these situations and often rely on extrinsic help. Similar to the results of Booth and Amato (1991), we found that people's lives do improve over time after divorce, despite initial difficulties. A close social network can help in this process by taking on a variety of roles. This paper added to the literature by considering divorce from this dynamic perspective, in which the needs of single parents change over time.

Limitation of the presented study.

As de Bel and Van Gasse (2020) argue, we cannot understand network dynamics truly when we don't study all agents within the network. Therefore, a first limitation of the study present, is that we used an ego-network approach due to data limitations. The use of multi family member data requires a complex structure of data gathering we were not able to. This means that the functions we described in the results are only true in the perspective of the single parent itself. This also means we cannot discuss these functions from the perspective of the network itself. Literature on network dynamics brings different stories about this perspective. Jappens and Van Bavel (2013) describe for example the positive experience grandparents have when involved with their grandchildren, while Lepore, Evans, and Schneider (1991) also point at the risk of overburdening family members.

Second, we have some gender imbalance in our study population. In both the primary population as the elaborative, the male group consisted of respectively 20 and 25 percent of the population. As men generally have different challenges in their life, these narratives were only limited represented in our study population (Coles, 2015). Also, due to the way we gathered

our interviewees, our study population was rather homogeneous with little interviewees with different ethnic backgrounds.

Third, this study took place in Belgium, a country generally described as a country with a well-developed safety net for single parents (Maldonado, 2015). Therefore, our results should be interpreted as processes in the context of a supportive welfare state. In other welfare state systems, results might differ.

Conclusion

Single parenthood is generally described as a problematic situation. However, in the early interviews of this study, it became clear that the reality for many single parents is nuanced and therefore complex. Ultimately, we can summarise this study with three general conclusion. The first empirical conclusion of this study was the support a network gives to single parents in post-divorce situations. However, as these roles change over time, this article also deals with the dynamic nature of becoming a single parent. Unlike previous studies, we found that these roles change over time, as the needs of single parents also change (Raeymaeckers et al., 2008).

A second conclusion on a deeper level concerns the process of recovery after divorce. This is an ontological story about divorce in its essence. Although much previous research has focused on the challenges faced by single parents (Amato, 2010; Smock, Manning, & Gupta, 1999), we recognized that there is a process of recovery after divorce. Acknowledging the drivers and dynamics of progress towards a single parent family is important to push knowledge about the single parent family system forward. As single parent families are becoming increasingly common, thinking about the process of recovery from divorce is therefore increasingly important (Pailhé et al., 2014). Consequently, we need to approach divorce in a different, dynamic way.

This relates to the third conclusion, which is a theoretical critique. In previous research, divorce and social support have usually been studied as static events. This allowed the wide range of consequences faced by single parents after divorce to be demonstrated (Amato, 2010). However, this approach concealed the two preceding stories. Studying divorce as a discrete event reveals the challenges faced by single parents but fails to address the question of how best to recover. The use of an alternative theoretical lens can help address the issue of recovery, with the study of the empowering aspects of the process – as a dynamic of changing phases – offering positive solutions.

Divorce is an adverse experience faced by many people, and it brings many challenges in its course, with which single parents struggle to cope. This paper has shown that despite this adversity there are many ways in which a person's social network helps them to overcome their problems. After divorce, people must adapt to single parenthood. This is not necessarily the final form each family will take, nor is it the final form of relationship with one's children. Both are stages within a person's life, to which they will adapt and move on.

Declaration of interests

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1.

Network roles throughout the divorce process

Roles	Aim	Methods
<i>Phase 1: Sounding board</i>	Acknowledgement of discontent	Listening
	Ensuring alternatives	Advising
<i>Phase 2: Facilitator</i>	Practical interdependence	Concealed move
		Open move
		Internal intake
	Financial interdependence	External intake
		Reducing debts
	Emotional interdependence	Teaching financial skills
<i>Phase 3: Lifeline</i>	Co-parenting	Extended sounding board
		Taking over communication
		Taking on childcare
	Taking over routines	Taking on child transport
		Educating
		Becoming a team player in the household
		Giving guidance
Reparenting	Helping in administrative tasks	
<i>Phase 4: Consultant</i>	Parenting consultancy	Teaching routines
		Bringing back structure
	Taking part in routines	Assurance about parenting
		Advising on educational points of view
		Transport routines
<i>Phase 5: Life coach</i>	Rethinking work and care	Household routines
		Administrative routines
		Offering alternatives
	Withdrawing from routines	Doing research
		Giving advice
		Advising
<i>Phase 6: Helping with acceptance</i>	Accepting new life organization	Stimulating repartnering
		Stimulating search for other work options
		Advising on external care
		Listening
		Empowering

