The ripple effect in family networks

Bel ,de, Vera

DOI:
10.33612/diss.126812050

1

Introduction - Knotting the Safety Net

A Multi-Actor Family Network Approach (MAFNA) in Divorce Research

This chapter is based on de Bel, V., & Van Gasse, D. (2020). Knotting the Safety Net. A Multi-Actor Family Network Approach in Divorce Research. In D. Mortelmans (Ed.)

Divorce in Europe (pp. 237–249). Springer

The divorce rate in Europe has doubled over the last 50 years (Eurostat, 2019). In 2007, roughly 15% of all children in countries such as the Netherlands and Belgium were growing up in single-parent households (OECD, 2011). This thesis investigates why some families fare better after parental divorce in terms of relationship quality and family well-being. Although previous research has extensively studied the consequences of parental divorce for children (e.g., Amato, 2010, 2014; Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery & Forehand, 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003) and their divorcing parents (e.g., Amato, 2000; Kitson & Morgan, 1990), the consequences of parental divorce for the network of relationships within the nuclear family, i.e., parents and children, and between nuclear and extended family members, i.e., grandparents and aunts/uncles, have not been studied as such. This is an important topic to study because parental divorce affects extended family members, not only affecting their relationships with the nuclear family (e.g., Drew & Silverstein, 2007 reported grandparents' decreased emotional health after loss of contact with a grandchild following divorce), but also because extended family members can be an important source of support for nuclear family members after parental divorce and therefore contribute to family resilience in families that experience divorce (Black & Lobo, 2008; Hess & Camara, 1979).

This first chapter of this thesis introduces the Multi-Actor Family Network Approach (MAFNA). Section 1.1 of this chapter explains Family Systems Theory (FST), which is a well-known theory in studying the structure of relationships and its interdependencies within the nuclear family, and between nuclear and extended family members (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). Next, the configurational approach (CA) is introduced (Widmer, 2019). In addition to interdependence, CA stresses the individual perspective in defining the family network and the – non-static – influence of family configurations on the individual. Third, the theoretical concept of a sharing group (SG) is introduced and applied to families. Sharing groups are characterized by the joint production of a common good by groups of individuals, subject to three types of interdependence: functional, structural, and cognitive (Lindenberg, 1997, 2015). Section 1.2 introduces MAFNA which is a synthesis of the ideas presented in FST, CA, and SG to the family context and its methodological implementation. Next, methods are sketched for the empirical implementation of MAFNA, requiring the collection of information about all family members and their relationships. Section 1.3 discusses what kind of questions in divorce research may be addressed using MAFNA. Section 1.4 provides an overview of the chapters in this thesis and explains how MAFNA is implemented.

1.1 THEORY

1.1.1 Family Systems Theory

A basic assumption in Family Systems Theory (FST) (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974) is that family relationships are interdependent, implying that the consequences of change in

one relationship are not limited to this specific relationship but may also affect other family relationships. A way to understand interdependence is to consider smaller groups, called subsystems, within the larger family system. For example, the subsystem of the nuclear family exists within the larger family system that includes paternal and maternal family members. Since these subsystems consist of people who belong to the larger family system, subsystems interact and often overlap.

Family systems theory was developed in response to psychoanalytical therapy in which "[...] therapists noted that it was more efficient to work to change the entire system than to try to change each constituent member of that system." (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000, p. 10). The principles of FST are difficult to operationalize and therefore not often empirically tested (Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). One of the proposed solutions for this lacuna is to divide the system into "smaller – empirically analysable – relational units" (see Chapter 2 for an example). Dividing the system into smaller units results in the 'parts versus wholes' dilemma (see e.g., Segaric & Hall, 2005): the system cannot be understood completely if one part, which is a system in itself, is studied in isolation. The dyadic approach analyses pairs of relationships; for example, the relationship between the two parents or the parent-child relationship. In a dyadic approach, the dependency on and between the surrounding relationships in the family network is not investigated and therefore such an approach does not offer the ability to analyse the relational interdependence assumed in FST.

Regarding the family as a system deepens our understanding of how shocks, or stressors, affect the system. These shocks can be internal or external (Olson & Craddock, 2000). Internal shocks like divorce are caused by the relational quality and/or strength of (parts of) the family system, while external shocks like death have a cause outside the family system. In the context of divorce, it is reasonable to assume that relational tensions in the parental subsystem preceding the decision to get divorced are likely to continue afterwards. Hence, divorce may have a ripple effect in the family network. This means that chains of changing relationships affect not only the nuclear family but also members of the extended family.

Besides these shocks, there are buffers. Like stressors, buffers can be divided into external and internal buffers. External buffers are exogeneous to the family system and may restrain families from deciding to divorce. For example, dependent on its family policies, some countries are more family-centred (e.g., access to day care, policies regarding maternity as well as paternity leave), and offer a context in which family systems are less likely to fall apart (Saxonberg, 2013). Furthermore, culture affects a couple's decision to divorce and post-divorce behaviours (Afifi, Davis, Denes, & Merril, 2013). Internal buffers are endogenous to the family system and may prevent family members from disconnecting after divorce. The extended family system, for example, helps nuclear families to bounce back after divorce (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). Because these transitions are longitudinal by nature, it is important to

take dynamics, change and time into account in the analysis of changing family systems (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2018).

1.1.2 The Configurational Approach

The Configurational Approach (CA), developed by Widmer (2016), is based on Norbert Elias's notion of a configuration as "a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people" (Elias, 1978, p. 261). When applied to families, CA rests on four pillars. First, the notion of a family is not necessarily limited to kin relatives. Friends and neighbours can also be considered part of the family. Second, CA considers the larger network of family relationships in which dyads are embedded. Third, CA assumes a mutual dependency between the individual level, such as individual choices or identity, and the structural level, i.e., the individual's perception of the network. Finally, family configurations are considered to be non-static and may change in response to time and space (Widmer, 2019).

Widmer, Aeby, and Sapin (2013) implement CA in the family network method (FNM). In this method, one central family member, for example the mother, is interviewed about her relationships to 'significant' family members, referred to as alters, and represented in the ego network approach in Figure 1.1. The significant family members are not pre-defined but determined by ego; hence non-kin, such as friends and neighbours, can be included when mentioned as significant others. In addition, ego reports about the mutual relationships between the significant family members. In social network analysis, this is called an ego network with alter-alter information reported by ego (Robins, 2015). Furthermore, information is also collected about types of relationships such as emotional support or conflict, and family roles fulfilled by the significant others.

Configurations characterize the composition and structure of the family network. By analysing the roles of and relationships between the significant family members, the family configurations that characterize the network can be outlined (Widmer, Favez, Aeby, De Carlo, & Doan, 2012). For example, the network may be focused on friends, family, the partner or siblings (Widmer et al., 2012, 2013). Additionally, it is possible to analyse whether the family network can be characterised by certain compositional configurations and whether these are more prominent in divorced or intact families (Widmer et al., 2012) or to what extent mothers embedded in certain configurations are socially or psychologically vulnerable (Widmer et al., 2013).

The FNM has two limitations. First, information is collected only on significant family members. For example, ego might not mention her ex-parents-in-law as significant family members. Consequently, it remains unknown whether the ex-parents-in-law are deceased, or are alive but insignificant to ego. Second, FNM contains reports by one actor (ego) and does not include perceptions of other family members, and can therefore be considered as personal or ego network data.

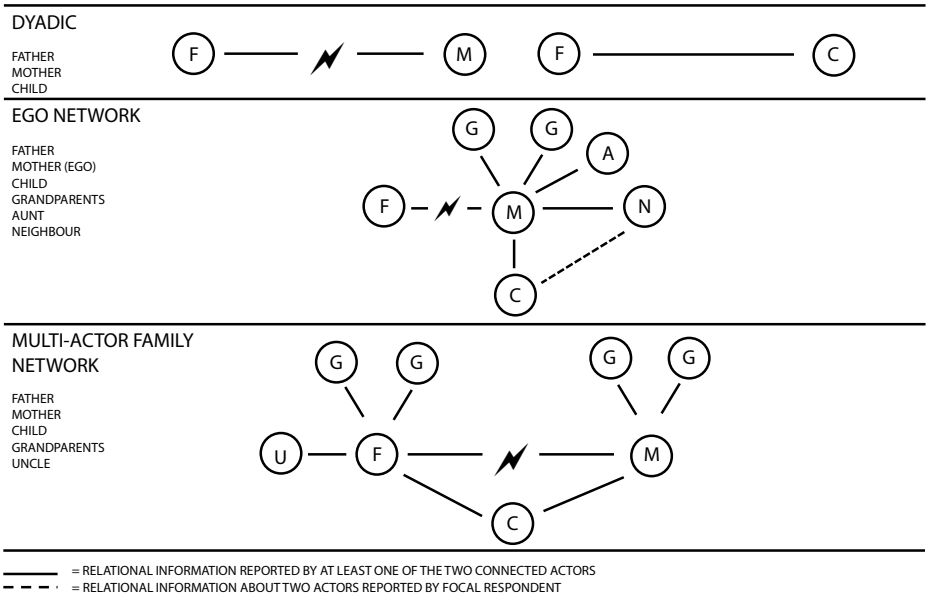

Figure 1.1: Schematic representation of the Multi-Actor Family Network Approach and its methodological alternatives. The lightning bolt represents parental divorce

To summarize: FST offers a natural starting point for explaining interdependence between family members and how the family can be regarded as a dynamic system when processing shocks like divorce. However, FST does not give much guidance for empirical analysis. CA offers an insight in several compositional configurations and it introduces social network analysis methods, the family network method (FNM) (Widmer, 2016; Widmer et al., 2013), for the empirical analysis. In the next section we introduce the concept of sharing groups (SG) and apply SG to families to provide further insight into the nature of interdependence within families. The synthesis of the theory, the theoretical approach and the theoretical concept are implemented in MAFNA, which is introduced after the theory section.

1.1.3 Families as a Sharing Group

The theoretical concept of a sharing group (SG) (Lindenberg, 1982, 1997, 2015) refers to a group of people who together produce a common good. Individuals operating on their own would not be able to produce this good, and hence they are dependent on the other members of the group. The size of a sharing group depends on the number of people needed to produce the common good, and it is important that all members of the sharing group contribute in order to produce it.

Sharing groups are characterized by multiple interdependencies between their members: functional, structural and cognitive (Lindenberg, 1997, 2015). Functional interdependence

means that group members need each other for the production of the common good and also affect each other's outcomes, it implies all group members need to contribute to produce the common good (Lindenberg, 2015, p. 434). Structural interdependence is described as the relational dependencies within groups, in which a key issue is that individuals do not have to be directly connected in order to be affected by other relationships. Finally, sharing groups are characterized by cognitive interdependence, which refers to the interpersonal perceptions of role-related appropriate behaviour. In an organizational setting, this depends on a group member's perception of roles, for instance, managers and staff, and what this person considers to be appropriate behaviour, for instance promoting an employee who performed well.

Some goods require joint production, even in a market society with a high level of welfare, in order to be produced (Becker, 2013; Lindenberg, 1997). For example, as an SG, a sports team strives to produce the common good of winning a match, for which they make the joint contribution of training every week and preparing for the match. Highly specialized work teams may focus on the common good of developing a new product, which requires the joint production of daily discussion, aligning the members' tasks and sharing thoughts about their work (Fetchenhauer, Flache, Lindenberg, & Buunk, 2006).

If we apply the concept of SG to the context of the family, we can identify its common goal as the preservation of family well-being. An individual family member's well-being depends for a large part on the well-being of the other family members. Similarly to the 'parts versus wholes' dilemma (Segaric & Hall, 2005) in FST, family well-being is more than the sum of all family members' individual well-being. Steverink, Lindenberg, and Slaets (2005) argue that (individual) well-being is produced by the multi-functionality of the relationships in the network, which can be interpreted as stating that well-being will be highest if relationships fulfil multiple needs. The joint production of family well-being requires keeping the relationships active and, if necessary, may activate the functioning of the family as a safety net. This may be used to explain why, if parental divorce or other life course adversities occur, family well-being can still be preserved.

Functional interdependence in the context of the family implies that family well-being depends on the contribution of all members. If some family members do not contribute, this will not only affect their own individual well-being, but also the well-being of the family as a whole. Structural interdependence in the context of the family implies that other family members may also be affected by the conflict in the parental relationship, which may endanger everybody's well-being. Structural and functional interdependence are distinguished as separate concepts, but are intrinsically entwined. In families, it means that the family network affects family well-being and that individual family members' well-being affect their family relationships. In network analysis terms, this is referred to as mutual dependency between the structure of the network and individual-level outcomes (Steglich, Snijders, & Pearson, 2010). Individuals who feel well are more likely to 'give' affection, thus strengthening the family relationships. Family members who are having a hard time might turn to their family members for support.

If family relationships are supportive, people who are well embedded in the family network are likely to feel better.

Cognitive interdependence in the context of the family implies that family members have an awareness of their multiple roles. For example, family members normatively expect parents in their parental role to comply with the role-oriented pattern with respect to their children. However, parents are also children and siblings in their original nuclear family, and are expected by their parents and siblings to behave according to those roles as well. During the process of parental divorce, cognitive interdependence may shift because family roles and perceptions change. Divorce may lead to negative perceptions, justified or not, about other family members, which in turn may lead to relational behaviour that could begin a vicious circle of worsening family relationships. Furthermore, divorced parents are no longer partners and have to give meaning to the new roles that they play in each other's lives. Their role as a (former) in-law family member most likely changes or disappears as well. Children and grandparents have to reconsider their roles: children have to position themselves with respect to two separate parents, while grandparents might be inclined to revert to their previous roles as caretakers in order to preserve family well-being.

Although the concept of sharing groups has not previously been applied to family sociology, there is an extensive theoretical overlap between the configurational approach and the theoretical concept of sharing groups. According to Widmer (2019), Elias viewed individuals as dependent on each other, forming configurations in which they fulfil each other's needs and provide each other with resources, a form of cooperation similar to the interdependence of joint production. These interdependencies are in turn a key aspect of FST.

1.2 THE MULTI-ACTOR FAMILY NETWORK APPROACH

MAFNA, the Multi-Actor Family Network Approach, is the synthesis of the ideas presented in FST, CA, and SG and to the family context and its methodological implementation. It embraces the idea of interdependence between family members. The joint production of the common good of family well-being can be used to explain the functioning of the family, taking into account the interdependencies that characterise families as sharing groups. Methodologically, just as CA was implemented in FNM, MAFNA can also be implemented in data collection (Chapter 5).

The bottom part of Figure 1.1 illustrates the multi-actor family network approach. The figure shows that the nuclear family (parents F-M and their child C) constitutes one subsystem in a larger family system. At the same time, both parents are part of their own nuclear family, i.e., the children's grandparents, aunts, and uncles, depicted by (G-G-F-U) on father's side and (G-G-M) on mother's side in Figure 1.1. An example of a question that may be addressed using MAFNA is how compensation mechanisms arise after parental divorce. For example, support offered by the uncle from father's side (U, Figure 1.1) might become inaccessible to family members on

mother's side if both parents maintain a negative relationship with each other. The child (C) can be seen as a natural bridging node between father's kin and mother's kin. In the period after divorce, the bridging function is at risk. The establishment or re-establishment of additional support ties between both sides of the family network (U-M) may compensate for the negative impact on well-being, offering new routes for exchange and maintaining family resilience. This approach results potentially in richer information about exchange in family relationships and, if the data are longitudinal, the consequences of change in the network following parental divorce for family well-being.

1.2.1 The Delineation of Family Networks

Instead of asking one family member about his/her relationships, in the multi-actor family network approach, multiple – preferably all – members of the family are asked to report about their relationships. In order to determine who these multiple informants should be, a meaningful delineation of the family network is needed. When delineating the network, it is important to strike a balance between inclusiveness and relevance. In theory, nuclear family networks could always be extended with first-degree, second-degree and more remote relatives, and hence can never be considered 'complete'. For the purpose of the multi-actor family network approach, individuals should be included only if they have a meaningful family relationship with the nuclear family network. What is considered to be meaningful depends on the research question and may be dependent on the divorce status of the parents.

An important point to consider in the delineation of the family network is the position of the divorcing parents and the roles of the other family members in the network. Although all family members are related by blood or marriage, the – former – couple is most central in the network. The parental divorce makes the delineation of the family network even more important, because it is expected that the members of the family as a sharing group are concerned about the well-being of the children of the divorcing parents. Typically, these are the first-degree relatives of the divorcing parents, i.e. the nuclear families they come from. Acknowledging that other people, like friends and neighbours, may also be important to family members and they might even feel like family (Widmer, 2016, 2019; Widmer et al., 2013), the sharing group argument, emphasizing well-being of the family and its members, leads to a rather strict delineation of the family network consisting of parents, children, grandparents, aunts/uncles, and potential stepfamily.

1.3 OVERVIEW

MAFNA may provide new insights into well-known research questions in the field of family and divorce research. MAFNA may benefit studies investigating how children's well-being is affected by parental divorce by leading to a better understanding of the interdependence of

well-being amongst various family members. Second, by collecting qualitative or quantitative relational data between all family members, MAFNA makes it possible to investigate how an individual's well-being is associated with the relational structure formed by the various ties between family (for example the relational structure of a loyalty conflict when both parents are in conflict and the child has been caught in the middle, see the work of Amato & Afifi, 2006). Third, MAFNA offers the possibility either to focus on the network as a whole, or to specifically focus on one of the various family roles. As an example, we can take into account the cognitive interdependence of well-being when investigating whether well-being is affected by changing family roles such as a child taking on the parent role when the parent is not available, a process referred to as 'parentification' (e.g., Earley & Cushway, 2002).

1.3.1 Outline of the thesis

Chapters 2 and 3 start from an FST approach by studying smaller configurations of the family networks. Chapter 2 studies triads between siblings and their mothers using data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study. In this chapter we test enhancement, compensation and loyalty conflict hypotheses, based on balance theory. Chapter 3 also focuses on triads, but adds mother's self-esteem to the scope of analysis, using the Swiss STEPOUT data. In this chapter we analyse how embeddedness in ambivalent triads affects mother's self-esteem. Ambivalent triads contain dyadic relationships which are not only positive or negative, but also positive and negative simultaneously. Chapter 4 moves from triads to a three-generational MAFNA focus and studies the relationships between children, parents, and grandparents on both sides of the family. Data from the Divorce in Flanders study are analysed to study substitution of low contact with family members on one side of the family by higher contact frequencies with equivalent family members on the other side of the family.

Chapter 5 explains the process of collecting MAFNA data in Lifelines. Chapter 6 analyses these MAFNA data and investigates a related principle of the sharing group approach: based on the Social Production Function theory (Lindenberg, 1996; Ormel, 2002; Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Vonkorff, 1997; Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Verbrugge, 1999) we investigate the positive effect multi-functional relationships, relationships that are characterised by multiple dimensions such as affection and instrumental support, have on family members' well-being. It is furthermore investigated whether it matters if multi-functional ties are received from nuclear and extended family members. The final chapter of this thesis addresses the main findings in light of the theorized ripple effect after parental divorce and the safety net preserving family members well-being. Indications of the ripple effect are obtained from the studies in this thesis, by comparing relational structures and their differences for divorced and non-divorced families.