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### The ripple effect in family networks

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# 5

## Collecting Multi-Actor Family Network Data

The previous chapters divided the larger family system we aim to understand in smaller empirically analysable relational units, which enabled us to take some of the interdependence between family members into account. Chapter 2 and 3 did so by focusing on triadic configurations, whereas chapter 4 extended the triad to a three-generational two-lineal focus. In chapter 1, where we introduced the Multi-Actor Family Network Approach (MAFNA), we also proposed to collect multi-actor family network data. In this chapter we describe the process of collecting MAFNA data.

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

When studying parental divorce and family relationships, a number of large-scale multi-actor family studies are available. The Dutch Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005), the German Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (PAIRFAM) (Huinink et al., 2011), and the Belgium Divorce in Flanders (DiF) data (Mortelmans et al., 2011) are multi-actor family studies in which one focal actor (NKPS and PAIRFAM) or a focal couple (DiF) reports about relationships with a pre-defined selection of family members, such as children, siblings or parents. Family members are included as respondents in the study to report about their perceptions of family relationships. However, these data collection projects are not collected within the MAFNA framework. The data collection described in this chapter, *Lifelines Family Ties*, was designed to collect whole family network data on several types of family relationships and well-being before and after divorce. The aim of the data collection is to investigate empirically whether and how families function as a safety net for preserving individual and family well-being. The data collection is based on the conception of the family as a sharing group (Chapter 1).

The concept of sharing groups helps to determine a meaningful delineation of the family network. Besides the consequences of parental divorce for the nuclear family, we are interested in the consequences of divorce for extended family members, who also play an important role for the common good of family well-being, and their supporting roles. In addition, family roles determine how likely family members are to maintain an affective/supportive relationship with other family members. Parents and children, for example, are more likely to establish such a relationship than an uncle from mother's side with uncle from father's side. In addition, family members may become unreachable to each other after divorce. Therefore, the family networks in this study were delineated as consisting of children, parents, grandparents, and aunts/uncles, i.e., the parents' siblings.

It is reasonable to assume that these family members know each other well enough to have the opportunity to develop a strong and functional relationship. Whereas friendships may offer mainly emotional support and incidental instrumental support, e.g., for moving house and occasional babysitting, we argue that close family members are the designated persons

to take over tasks involving the household or children in case of life course adversities, more so than friends who are therefore not included in the family network.

The next section elaborates on the design of the data collection among divorced and non-divorced families, discussing sample selection in and getting access to a large cohort study, ethical considerations, questionnaire design, and the respondent approach procedure. Section 3 concerns the implementation of *Lifelines Family Ties* and discusses the response rates and experiences in the various steps of the actual data collection. The final section discusses advantages and disadvantages of this data collection.

## 5.2 DESIGN

Three options for the recruitment of families were considered: a snowball sample starting from the researchers' personal network, as was done for the pilot study, a convenience sample through general practitioners or divorce mediators, and a sample of the general population by joining a cohort study. All these options entail a two-step approach: including primary respondents or (former) couples, and their family members as secondary respondents. The pilot study, a convenience sample of 5 divorced families in the personal network of the researcher (de Bel, 2015), showed that it was not easy to recruit families with which the researcher did not have a personal bond, or that went through a recent divorce. The large three-generational cohort study *Lifelines*, carried out by researchers of the University Medical Center Groningen, offered the opportunity to collect data from participants sampled from the general population and used to being approached for research purposes and filling out questionnaires. Moreover, it was possible to select divorced and non-divorced couples. This was the best option, also in view of the limited project budget for data collection<sup>3</sup>.

*Lifelines* is a multi-disciplinary prospective population-based cohort study examining in a unique three-generation design the health and health-related behaviours of 167,729 persons living in the North of The Netherlands (Stolk et al., 2008). It employs a broad range of investigative procedures in assessing the biomedical, socio-demographic, behavioural, physical and psychological factors which contribute to the health and disease of the general population, with a special focus on multi-morbidity and complex genetics. *Lifelines* initially recruited its participants via general practitioners, who invited patients aged between 25 and 50, resulting in 81,500 participants. These participants were asked to also invite their family members, consisting of parents, partner, children and parents-in-law, resulting in another 65,500 participants, covering 20,000 three-generational families. Additionally, individuals registered for participation themselves, often attracted by the individual health information made available to them from the medical examinations, leading to the inclusion of 21,000

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3 A budget of 10,000 euros was available for data collection.

participants. Lifelines contains regularly updated register data including marital status. Therefore, it was possible to draw not only a sample of divorced couples with parents and children also participating in Lifelines, but also a sample of non-divorced families, to serve as a comparison group<sup>4</sup>.

*Lifelines Family Ties* recruited families of couples that divorced 5-10 years ago, and families in which parents did not divorce. The inclusion criteria (see Table 5.1) for participation were that the (former) partners had children who are not too young to participate (at least 12 years old), and old enough (between 6 and 16 years) to remember the divorce or the family situation 5 to 10 years ago. Individual and network data were collected about the current period and the time period before the divorce.

### 5.2.1 Getting access to the Lifelines sample

The biomedical focus of most Lifelines studies requires a full review procedure by a certified Medical Research Ethics Committee (METC). As the proposed network study did not concern medical scientific research and the participants were not to be subjected to a particular treatment or required to behave in a particular way, the METC declared the study not subject to the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) (reference number 2017/161). Hence, the research proposal was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Sociology Department for review<sup>5</sup> and was approved (reference number ECS-171017).

Two aspects of the proposed data collection for the research required special attention in preparing the study: the collection of whole network data and the approach of non-Lifelines participants. Data collection and data storage in Lifelines studies is managed in a protected computer environment. The initial paper-and-pencil respondent questionnaires are gradually being replaced by online surveys. Developing software for the purpose of collecting whole network data was not feasible in view of time and costs, and also not necessary because for the pilot study a questionnaire had been developed using the survey software Qualtrics (Qualtrics XM; Qualtrics, Provo, UT). To get access to Lifelines data, however, an extra step in the procedure was required in order to guarantee the safety and anonymity of data collected outside the system. The data handling by Qualtrics, an external party based in the United States of America, was not in agreement with the new European privacy law (GDPR). In cooperation with the legal department of the University of Groningen, Lifelines' legal advisor managed to make a new data processing agreement (DPA) with the Qualtrics company.

The legal advisor was also important in setting up the procedure for approaching family members who are not Lifelines participants and only reachable through a Lifelines respondent.

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4 When approaching divorced parents, it turned out that in a few cases one of the partners was deceased or that they had re-partnered each other. This may be due to mistakes or a delay in updating 'partner status' in the Lifelines or municipal administration.

5 <http://www.nethics.nl/Gedragcode-Ethical-Code/>

The procedure agreed upon was to involve the selected Lifelines respondents actively by asking them for contact details of family members. Lifelines participants also had to ask their family members for permission to be informed about the study by the researcher. In addition to consenting to study participation, family members had to consent to the use of their names in the questionnaires, also if they did not participate in the study, in the interest of anonymity. At a later stage the letter was adjusted (see section 5.3, step 1) in order to better explain that parents with already participating family members in Lifelines had to ask these family members permission to be informed about the study.

### 5.2.2 Questionnaire<sup>6</sup>

The questionnaire contained measurements of a) multiple dimensions of the network and b) well-being. Directed networks were obtained from questions based on the dimensions outlined in the solidarity-conflict model (Bengtson et al., 2002; Silverstein et al., 2010). Seven dimensions are distinguished: geographical proximity, contact, affection, support, shared attitudes, obligations, and conflict. The network questions were derived from other datasets adopting a solidarity perspective and collecting multi-generational family data (NKPS Dykstra et al., 2005; PAIRFAM Huinink et al., 2011; DiF Mortelmans et al., 2011).

In order to assess given and received support, we echoed a procedure from NKPS (Dykstra et al., 2005) in which respondents were asked to indicate both giving and receiving support to and from family members. Although some respondents in the pilot study perceived the support questions for given and received support as repetitive, we decided to keep them in the questionnaire. From the pilot study we had also learned that measuring network nominations on a five-point scale, representing relational strength, was difficult because respondents had to differentiate between their family members too precisely. Although the quality of measurement may be better when asking these questions on a scale (Ferligoj & Hlebec, 1999), we decided to ask for network nominations dichotomously.

Because of its sensitive nature, especially after parental divorce, not all family members were asked about conflict. Only the parents, who are most central and presumably have a good overview of the network, were asked to report which family members do not get along. In order not to emphasize this negative aspect, they were also asked which family members do get along.

Several dimensions of well-being were measured. Psychological well-being was measured using the 20 items measuring positive and negative affect (PANAS) (Watson & Clark, 1988, 1999). Satisfaction with life was measured with the 5 item satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsem, & Griffin, 1985). Social well-being was measured using the social production function (SPF-IL) scale (Nieboer, Lindenberg, Boomsma, & Van Bruggen, 2005). Health-related

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6 Questionnaires are available in the [online supplementary material](#) (section 5.A and 5.B) and are documented in the research package OV15\_0292.

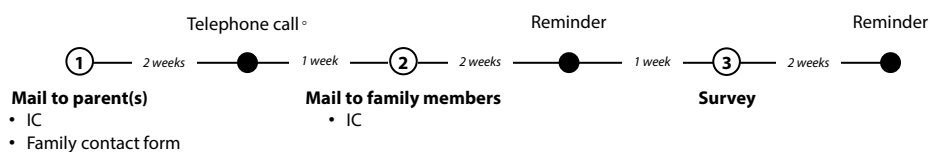
well-being was measured using 10 items about physical functioning of the RAND (Hays & Morales, 2001; Zee & Sanderman, 2012) scale and 2 questions about general health before and after the divorce/in the past.

### 5.2.3 Protocol: approaching parents and their family members

Approaching parents and family members encompassed multiple steps, which are presented in Figure 5.1. In the first step, an information e-mail was sent to the parent(s) with an informed consent form for their participation and a family contact form. Parents were informed that after 2 weeks, they would be called to ask whether they had received and read the e-mail, whether they had questions about the study, and to discuss their participation and the participation of their family members.

The informed consent form explicitly addressed the voluntariness of participation in the study, and asked for consent to participation and for being the contact person for approaching family members. Furthermore, parents were asked for permission for the use of their name in the survey and permission to use their data for scientific research purposes. Parents who did not give permission to use their name in the questionnaire could still participate in the study and were described in the questionnaire with their family role (e.g., the father).

If parents gave their consent, they received the contact form to fill out the contact details of the (ex-)partner, their children, their own parents, (ex-)parents-in-law, siblings and (ex-)siblings in-law. Parents had to declare that they had obtained family members' permission to share these details. Parents also had to give consent for the participation of children under 18, the use of their names in the survey, and the use of their data for the research.



° Of the non-divorced families, only one parent is called.  
Of the divorced families, most parents in group 1 (table 5.1) received a reminder e-mail instead of a call.

**Figure 5.1:** Process

Once parents returned the forms for participation and the correct contact details of their family members, the second step encompassed sending information e-mails with informed consent forms to family members. The information about the study and the informed consent form was similar to those sent to parents, except for family members who did not want to participate. Instead, they were asked for permission to use their name in the questionnaire in order to make it easier for their participating family members to answer questions about family relations.

Moreover, the information email mentioned when to expect the survey, explaining that all family members had to indicate their consent to participation and the use of their name before the survey could be sent to all family members willing to participate. Deceased family members identified by parents in step 1 were excluded from the list of family members. A reminder for family members to fill out the informed consent was sent after 2 weeks.

After yet another week, the family members who had consented to participation received a link to their family survey, which was the third and last step of the protocol. The first question of the survey concerned an identification question (“Who are you from this list of family members?”) which produced a personalized survey. The identification question determined the routing in the questionnaire. The first question for children under 18 – whose parents had given permission for their participation – was whether they were willing to participate, in order to ensure the voluntariness of their participation. Children were addressed less formally than adults. Children of divorced parents and extended family members received additional questions about how they experienced the divorce. Parents received additional questions about their – former – relationship. Stepfamily members did not receive questions about the time period before the parental divorce. A reminder to fill out the survey was sent after two weeks.

### 5.3 IMPLEMENTATION

Although 20,000 three-generational families seemed a promising number to select divorced and non-divorced families from, the available number of families with three generations on father’s and mother’s side within Lifelines turned out to be much lower and even non-existent in case parents were divorced. According to the number of family members participating in Lifelines, the available sample could be stratified in 5 groups (see Table 5.1): the sample of non-divorced families (8620) consisted entirely of three-generational families, whereas the sample of divorced families (495) in most cases (358) consisted of two-generational families. The approach and a description of the response numbers and experiences of the actual data collection process are presented in line with the steps outlined in Figure 5.1.

#### Step 1

Between October 2017 and February 2019, 615 families were approached of the 9115 available families matching the selection criteria, consisting of 495 divorced families and 120 non-divorced families in five groups categorized according to the number and generation of family members available in Lifelines (see Table 5.1). No invitations were sent in December and July-August because of the holiday season. The researcher started inviting parents from group 2 for the divorced families and group 4 for the non-divorced families in Table 5.1, to ensure that start-up-problems were solved before approaching the small group of most complete families. Families were invited in rounds of about 10 families in group 2-3 of the divorced families and



rounds of about 20 families in group 3-5 of the non-divorced families. The number of invitations was lower for divorced families because both parents needed to be called, which was time consuming, whereas for the non-divorced families calling one parent was sufficient. The larger groups, i.e., families in group 1 of the divorced families, were invited in rounds of about 75 families. Due to the large numbers in these groups, it was decided to only call parents who had returned their – almost always incomplete – form.

According to the protocol, parents were called after two weeks. In practice, it was sometimes difficult to reach them. It was decided that if parents did not answer the phone, the researcher left a message on their voicemail after the third attempt and sent them a reminder by e-mail. Most parents said that they had seen the e-mail, but had not yet read it. In that case, parents were asked whether they preferred a reminder e-mail or rather would like the researcher to briefly explain the research by phone. If parents said that they had read the e-mail, the next statement was often that all their family members were Lifelines participants already and that something must have gone wrong in being asked for their family members' details. Based on this reaction, a heading in the information letter stating "What if my family members are already Lifelines participants" was added where it was explained that the researcher did not know whether all family members or a selection participated in Lifelines. In addition, intergenerational descent was documented in the Lifelines system, but sibling relatedness was not<sup>7</sup>. Thus, genealogical information had to be provided by one of the parents even though this seemed superfluous to the participant.

In many telephone interactions, the divorced parent(s) pointed out friendly that the researcher had misunderstood their family situation, and had selected the wrong family to invite for family research. After explaining that their divorced status was exactly the reason for inviting them, which was not explicitly stated in the information letter<sup>8</sup>, they responded more receptively, sometimes agreeing that investigating post-divorce family relationships is important, even if they did not want to participate as a family. The majority of families who participated in the study signed up after the telephone calls.

If the contacted parent(s) decided to participate, it occurred quite frequently that parent(s) did not share (the correct) contact details of their family members – for example phone numbers – or that parent(s) did not indicate that their family members had given permission for sharing these contact details. Upon receiving family members' names and phone numbers,

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7 Initially, selection of families within Lifelines was only possible based on the three generations. After one year of data collection, it turned out that sibling relationships were actually documented in another system which was not available for researchers. Once this was known, it was checked for every family who signed up which family members are known in the system.

8 The communication office of Lifelines advised us to phrase sentences like 'the father/mother of your child' instead of 'ex-partner'. It was expected that this would be a more neutral and therefore less sensitive formulation, but it resulted in miscommunication where parents misunderstood our selection. This phrasing was not adapted in the letter, as this would have required adjusting the agreement with Lifelines.

the researcher checked whether they were Lifelines participants and whether an e-mail address was available. If this was not the case, the researcher sent a reminder to complete the required information.

**Table 5.1:** Selection criterion and approached cases within Lifelines

Family composition known from Lifelines	Group	<b>Divorced families</b> Inclusion criteria: divorced 5-10 years ago, child 6-16 years at time of divorce		<b>Non-divorced families</b> Inclusion criteria: first partners/not married before	
		Available	Approached	Available	Approached
≥ 1 child ≥ 12 years 1 parent	1	358	358		
≥ 1 child ≥ 12 years 1 parent 1 grandparent	2	92	92		
≥ 1 child ≥ 12 years 2 parents 1 grandparent on one side	3	45	45	8540	40*
≥ 1 child ≥ 12 years 2 parents 1 grandparent on both sides	4			60	60
≥ 1 child ≥ 12 years 2 parents 2 grandparents on both sides	5			20	20
<b>Total</b>		<b>495</b>	<b>495</b>	<b>8620</b>	<b>120</b>

\*These 40 families were selected at random

*Changes.* Two changes in the protocol were made. First, the parent of group 1 of the divorced group was called only if he or she wanted to participate but had not given sufficient information, which often was the case. If parent(s) provided the family members' phone number instead of e-mail address, it was first checked – in the system and by re-contacting the parent(s) – whether an e-mail address was available. Only if these family members did not have an e-mail address they were called. In addition, ex-partners frequently did not share the family contact details of their former in-laws.

Second, we decided to design two additional forms for the first approach step. If parent(s) gave the contact details, but did not yet indicate that their family members had given permission for sharing these details, they were sent an additional form in which the remaining permission question for sharing these details was repeated. In this e-mail we thanked them for sharing the details, and explained that their family members could not yet be invited, because they had to give permission for sharing. If the contact details of the ex-partner's family were

missing or incomplete, a form was sent to the ex-partner in step 2 requesting to complement the family contact details of his/her side of the family.

*Result.* Of the 495 available and approached families in the divorced group, 44 contact persons responded positively. However, 20 did not provide the e-mail addresses of their family members or did not ask their family members for permission to share their contact details. This resulted in 24 divorced families of which we could invite the family members. Of the 120 non-divorced families, 25 responded positively. However, six parent(s) did not provide the e-mail addresses of their family members or did not ask their family members for permission to share their contact details, resulting in 19 families of which the family members could be invited.

### **Step 2**

The second step in the approach concerned inviting the family members, as indicated on the forms filled out by the parent(s). Some of these family members were Lifelines participants. In case of non-Lifelines participants it was explained that they would not become part of the cohort study, but only participate in this add-on study. When family members had to be called because e-mail addresses were not known or not available, family member(s) sometimes turned out not to know about the study. This hardly occurred in the divorced group.

Of the 24 divorced families that could be approached, no families dropped out because there was always at least one other family member who agreed to participate. Of the 19 non-divorced, one family continued as an ego-network study because none of the family members agreed to participate.

### **Step 3**

The last step consisted of sending the surveys to all family members who indicated that they wanted to participate. Families in which one family member filled out the survey results in ego-network data.

In non-divorced families, 60 family members covering 19 family networks (13 multi-actor and 6 ego-networks) filled out the questionnaire (see Table 5.2). The average size of these networks is 13 family members ( $SD = 3.303$ ), ranging from 9 to 21 family members. In 5 families, both parents filled out the survey, whereas in 11 families, only 1 parent filled out the survey. In the remaining 3 families none of the parents filled out the survey in the end. Of the 60 family members who started the survey, 55 finished the survey.

In divorced families, 100 family members filled out the survey covering 24 family networks (22 multi-actor and 2 ego-networks) (see Table 5.2). On average, these networks consist of 12 family members ( $SD = 3.773$ ), ranging from 6 to 22 family members. The former couples of families 32 and 35 (see Table 5.2) re-partnered each other again. In 8 families, both parents filled out the survey, whereas in 11 families, only 1 parent filled out the survey. In the remaining 5

families none of the parents filled out the survey. Of the 100 family members who started the survey, 91 finished the survey.

Non-divorced parents have 2.4 children on average. In 12 families, none of the children filled out the survey. Participation of extended family members was equally distributed among paternal (9 families) and maternal kin (8 families). Participation of nuclear as well as extended kin occurred in 5 families, of which 3 families covered both paternal and maternal extended kin.

Divorced parents have 2.2 children on average. In 6 families, none of the children filled out the survey. Participation of extended family members was much higher among maternal kin (15 families) than paternal kin (5 families). Participation of nuclear as well as extended kin occurred in 10 families, of which 2 families covered both paternal and maternal extended kin. Stepfamily participated in 1 family only.

More data of both paternal and maternal extended family members was collected in non-divorced families (6 out of 19, 32%) compared to divorced families (3 out of 24, 13%). In divorced families, maternal extended kin (15 out of 24, 63%) participated more often than paternal extended kin (5 out of 24, 21%). Extended kin were mostly reachable via the participating parent, in most cases the mother.

**Table 5.2:** Descriptive statistics on the response numbers [ = family contains children under 12, \*\* = parents re-partnered each other, Q = filled out questionnaire, S = reported about/mentioned in survey, N = nuclear, E = extended, P = paternal, M = maternal]

		NON-DIVORCED																							
FAM	MAFN /EGO	Family Members		Children		Parents		Paternal GrandParents		Maternal GrandParents		Paternal Aunts/Uncles		Maternal Aunts/Uncles		Step Family		Other Family		Type					
		Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	N	E	P	M
1	EGO	1	21	0	5*	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	4	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0				
2	MAFN	6	14	1	2	2	2	1	1	0	2	0	4	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
3	MAFN	8	13	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	4	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
4	MAFN	3	9	0	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
5	EGO	1	14	0	3*	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	2	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0				
6	MAFN	2	14	0	4	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
7	EGO	1	10	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0				
8	EGO	1	9	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0				
9	MAFN	7	9	1	2*	1	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
10	MAFN	4	11	0	2	1	2	0	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
11	MAFN	6	10	2	2	2	2	0	2	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
12	MAFN	2	14	2	3	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0				
13	MAFN	5	10	0	2*	2	2	2	2	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
14	EGO	1	17	0	3	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	6	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0				
15	EGO	1	9	0	2	1	2	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
16	MAFN	2	16	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
17	MAFN	3	12	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	2	1	1	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
18	MAFN	3	16	0	3	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	2	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
19	MAFN	3	12	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	1	1	3	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	•	•	•	
Sum		60	240	9	46	21	38	9	25	5	29	5	45	11	57										
Mean		3.158	12.632	0.474	2.421	1.105	2.000	0.474	1.316	0.263	1.526	0.263	2.368	0.579	3.000										
S.D.		2.243	3.303	0.697	0.902	0.658	0.000	0.772	0.885	0.562	0.513	0.562	1.571	0.769	2.211										
Min		1	9	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0										
Max		8	21	2	5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	6	2	7										

MAFN /EGO		DIVORCED																				Type			
		Family Members		Children		Parents		Paternal Grandparents		Maternal Grandparents		Paternal Aunts/Uncles		Maternal Aunts/Uncles		Step Family		Other Family							
Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	Q	S	N	E	P	M
20	MAFN	2	14	1	3	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		
21	MAFN	3	9	0	3	2	2	0	0	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
22	MAFN	4	6	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
23	MAFN	8	12	3	3	2	2	0	0	0	2	1	2	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	.	.	.
24	MAFN	4	14	0	2	2	2	0	1	0	2	1	3	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
25	MAFN	10	22	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	7	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
26	MAFN	9	16	1	2	1	2	0	1	1	0	2	6	7	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
27	MAFN	6	12	2	2	1	2	0	2	2	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
28	MAFN	5	12	1	1	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.	.	.
29	MAFN	2	12	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	2	1	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.	.	.
30	MAFN	6	17	3	3	1	2	0	2	0	0	1	6	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.	.	.
31	MAFN	3	9	1	2	0	2	0	1	2	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
32**	MAFN	2	9	0	1	0	2	0	1	2	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
33	MAFN	3	12	0	2	0	2	0	1	2	2	0	2	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
34	EGO	1	9	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
35**	MAFN	7	13	2	4	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	3	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	.	.	.
36	MAFN	3	11	1	2	2	2	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
37	MAFN	5	19	1	3	1	2	0	2	0	2	0	1	3	5	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
38	MAFN	3	9	2	3	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
39	MAFN	2	7	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
40	MAFN	6	15	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
41	EGO	1	9	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
42	MAFN	3	12	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	3	2	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
43	MAFN	2	10	1	3	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.		.
Sum		100	284	27	53	27	48	2	18	10	34	4	47	29	71	1	11	0	2	0	0	.			
Mean		4.167	11.833	1.125	2.208	1.125	2.000	0.083	0.750	0.417	1.417	0.167	1.958	1.208	2.958	0.042	0.458	0.000	0.083	0.000	0.000	.			
S.D.		2.496	3.773	0.900	0.779	0.741	0.000	0.408	0.794	0.776	0.850	0.381	1.367	1.911	3.470	0.204	0.884	0.000	0.282	0.000	0.000	.			
Min		1	6	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	.			
Max		10	22	3	4	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	6	7	17	1	4	0	1	0	0	.			

## 5.4 DISCUSSION

The entire process of preparing the data collection, fielding a pilot study, getting access to Lifelines, approaching parents and their family members, and implementing *Lifelines Family Ties* took 5 years and resulted in data on 43 family networks. Of these 43 networks, 35 family networks are considered to be “multi-actor”, meaning that more than 1 family member in a family reported about his/her family relationships. This discussion reflects upon the process of data collection, evaluates the response rates and discusses future steps.

The expected advantage of joining Lifelines over the – feasible – alternative of a snowball sample was that a group of families could be selected who were familiar with filling out questionnaires. Even though non-Lifelines participants, such as aunts and uncles, had to be additionally sampled, it was indeed helpful that Lifelines provided information, such as contact details and number of children, of its participants. This information enabled us to call the parent(s) and to discuss questions regarding their participation and establish *rapport* between researcher and the potential participants, which increased the chances of participation. Simultaneously, these phone calls were demanding and also made the researcher sometimes feel like a telemarketer, calling parents during dinner time and asking whether the call was convenient. However, the outcome of each call and parents’ possible issues, such as sensitive or no contact with an ex-partner, were registered in a file and discussed case by case within the research team in order to make decisions in accordance with the ethical guidelines in participant recruitment.

It was expected that convincing entire families to participate would be difficult, even more so among divorced families. The topic of the study, parental divorce, makes it difficult to obtain the information about the family networks we aim to collect because divorce may result in more segregated networks. Thus, actors are harder to reach, and are more at risk for drop-out during one of the stages of the process and missing data. Indeed, the overall response rate of 5% in the divorced families (24 out of 495) was lower than the 16% in non-divorced families (19 out of 120). This is in line with the lower response rates found for family members of divorced respondents in NKPS (Kalmijn & Liefbroer, 2011) and DIF (Pasteels et al., 2011).

As these response rates show, the number of participating alters is higher in divorced families. The response rate among children of divorced parents was 27 out of 53 (51%) and thus actually higher than for the non-divorced families, which had a response rate of 9 out of 46 (20%)<sup>9</sup>. A possible explanation for this difference is that the sensitive context of the parental divorce made parents as contact persons more aware of the importance to seriously discuss participation in the study with their children, and perhaps also with other family members.

It is noteworthy that adolescents, especially those in non-divorced families, frequently did not fill out the informed consent. It should be considered whether in future data collection

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9 Some of these children were younger than 12 and too young to participate, (noted with a \* in table 5.2 if one or more children in a family were younger than 12).

the method to approach this target group by e-mail should be changed, such as by phone or using WhatsApp. In both divorced and non-divorced families, mothers were more often the family's contact person than fathers.

In conclusion, the obtained sample size of 43 family networks in *Lifelines Family Ties* points to two important features of this data collection. First, the comparison may be made with the alternative approach of selecting families from the general population via Statistics Netherlands. Comparing our response rate to – much larger – multi-actor datasets that applied such an approach, e.g., NKPS with its team of 160 interviewers, a call center, and giving their respondents a financial incentive, our response rates are not disappointing, certainly not when considering that the data has been collected by just one PhD candidate. Second, convincing multiple respondents in a family to participate is difficult (e.g., Kalmijn & Liefbroer, 2011). This finding was confirmed in *Lifelines Family Ties* where established *rappport* between researcher and family members – through telephone interactions – increased the chances of participation. Parents played a key role as well, they had to act as the contact person and ask their family members for their consent to be contacted about the study.

*Lifelines Family Ties* offers several possibilities for additional research. Permission was obtained to collect data among newly established families in Lifelines, with the aim of carrying out a follow-up. Due to the long preparation time of the study, it was not possible to invite these newly established families yet. In addition, data collection could be continued by contacting the remaining non-divorced families (group 3, Table 5.1), which would require an update of their marital status using the municipal administration.

In this chapter we explained the data collection of *Lifelines Family Ties*, which resulted in information about 43 family networks. In these 43 networks, 160 family members reported about their relationships of 524 family members (number of family members mentioned in the survey). Information about a total of 626 family members (total number of observations in the data) were collected. In the next chapter we will turn back to MAFNA and formulate a research question and make a first step analysing these data.



