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Family routines and rituals following separation: continuity and change

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Separation always changes family life. The aim of this study is to gain insight into the everyday practices of ‘doing family’ after separation. We focus on two central elements of family life: routines and rituals. While in most families both parents are involved in family routines and rituals, this is often not the case in post-separation families. Based on the narratives of 35 separated parents living in the Netherlands, we found three types of post-separation families. For all three types, routines with the children are practised separately with each parent or mainly with the resident parent. However, the three types differ greatly in how they practise family rituals. Rituals play an important role in displaying the post-separation family as a coherent unit. Our study further reveals that the type of post-separation family is not necessarily consistent with the custodial and residential arrangement and may change over time.

key words family display • family practices • post-separation family • rituals • routines

Introduction

Contemporary family researchers recognise and emphasise the continued endurance of family life after separation (eg, Simpson, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999; Thompson and Amato, 1999). Ahrons (1980) was one of the first who emphasised that divorce leads to a redefinition of the nuclear family, whereby the family transforms from a nuclear into a bi-nuclear system, rather than the absolute dissolution of the family. Moxnes (1999) argued that this is not necessarily the case, even though divorce always changes family life dramatically. More recently, Smart (2004) stated that divorce no longer insinuates a clear break between parents, whereby one partner is to be blamed and punished by not being entitled to see the children. Instead, divorce is regarded as a transition in family life, a process by which couples with children continue to have a relationship, although spatially divided. Although the co-resident and romantic relationship between partners has ended, economic, social, emotional and practical bonds between parents are likely to remain, even if the parents re-marry and create new families (Simpson, 1998). In addition to practices of shared responsibilities for
the children, part of the former family life is likely to remain, but separation will inevitably disrupt family life to some degree (Pett et al, 1992).

The consequences of separation for parents and their children have been a popular research objective (Wallerstein et al, 2000; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). However, most studies on post-separation family life focus on custodial and residential arrangements following separation and not so much on the everyday practices of post-separation families. Although the custodial and residential arrangements provide the framework through which family life is conducted, they do not provide much insight into the everyday post-separation family practices on a micro level. Separated families challenge the often taken-for-granted family practices and, in so doing, may create their own particular ways of ‘doing family’. Given the growing diversity and complexity among the post-separation residential arrangements at present, in the Netherlands as well as in other Western countries, it becomes all the more interesting to study post-separation family practices.

Smart and Neale (1999) were among the first scholars who emphasised the importance of family practices in post-separation family research. In their study they distinguished between three patterns of post-divorce parenthood: co-parenting, custodial parenting and solo parenting. This distinction was based on two elements: sharing or not sharing parental care and sharing or not sharing parental authority. Although family routines played an important role in their study, their typology was strongly related to the post-separation custodial and residential arrangements. For example, all parents involved in a shared residence arrangement were classified as having a co-parenting parenting style. As Smart and Neale (1999) admitted themselves, there is far more variety and nuance in everyday family practices of post-separation families with the same residential or custodial arrangement. Furthermore, Smart and Neale (1999) studied two sets of relationships: the parent–child relationship and the relationship between ex-partners. But what happens to the family practices in which both parents and their children used to participate before the split-up? Especially those practices where the family is reunited might play an important role in continuing family life after separation.

In this article, we aim to gain insight into the everyday practices of separated parents in doing family. We focus on which family practices continue after separation, how they are conducted and with whom. Inspired by studies on family life of two-parent families (eg, Fiese et al, 1993), we distinguish between two important elements of family life: routines and rituals. According to Fiese et al (1993), all families practise routines and rituals. They constitute central aspects of family life, especially in families with young children. However, whereas in non-separated families, both parents, simultaneously or alternately, are involved in those routines and rituals to a certain extent, this is often not the case in separated families. It is likely that separation will disrupt family routines and rituals to some degree. Some routines and rituals might continue with both parents together, alternate between parents separately or with only one parent involved. Other routines and rituals will be dismissed, renegotiated or restructured.

Empirical evidence is drawn from in-depth interviews with 35 separated parents with children, living in the Netherlands. Based on the interview data, three types of post-separation families are distinguished. Our empirically based typology is meant to explore and understand diversity and differences among our respondents, rather than to derive generalisations.
Family routines and rituals following separation

Since the middle of the 1960s, ideas about what constitutes a family have changed (Silva and Smart, 1999). In addition to the nuclear family, other types of family arrangements, such as cohabiting unions, single-parent families, stepfamilies and gay and lesbian families, have become more prevalent, thereby becoming more conventional and more visible in society. Furthermore, processes of individualisation, de-traditionalisation and increased self-reflexivity have shifted family membership from being a given to being a choice, depending on the interactions of the members (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Finch, 2007). As a consequence, today’s scholars try to avoid the term ‘the family’ by instead referring to ‘family practices’ (eg, Morgan, 1996, 2011; Smart and Neale, 1999), ‘family life’ (eg, Cheal, 2002) or ‘doing family’ as opposed to ‘being family’ (eg, Morgan, 1999; Smart, 2000). These scholars share the assumption that family members construct their family by practising family life.

‘Practising family life’ has been conceptualised in several ways. Recurring elements include caregiving, solidarity, intimacy, sharing of resources, responsibilities and obligations (Silva and Smart, 1999). Most of these elements are rooted and can be recognised in everyday family routines and rituals. Together, routines and rituals are important to the wellbeing of the family (Fiese et al, 2002). Although the terms ‘routines’ and ‘rituals’ are frequently used interchangeably, there are important differences in function and meaning. Whereas family routines are instrumental to family organisation, rituals provide a sense of belonging and emotional exchange among family members.

Fiese et al (2002) distinguished between routines and rituals along the dimensions of communication, commitment and continuity. Routines are practices accompanied by instrumental or instructional communication (ie, this needs to be done), involve a momentary time commitment and endure as long as it takes (there is no afterthought). Furthermore, routines are repeated over time and recognised by continuity in behaviour, even though there is no continuity in meaning. Rituals are practices accompanied by symbolic and meaning-making communication (ie, this is who we are). They involve an affective commitment and provide a sense of belonging, both during and after the act. People may even memorise the act once it is performed. Rituals are also repeated over time, but besides providing continuity in behaviour, they also provide continuity in meaning (ie, this is who our family will continue to be).

Rituals can play an important role in ‘displaying’ family. Finch (2007) introduced the concept of ‘family display’. She argued that families not only need to be ‘done’, but also need to be ‘displayed’. Display is defined by Finch (2007: 67) as ‘the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant other audiences that certain of their actions do constitute “doing family things” and thereby confirm that these relationships are “family”’ relationships. Today’s diverse, fluid and complex character and structure of family relationships increase the need for family display, because relationships become less recognisable as constituting family relationships. In a recent edited volume of Dermott and Seymour (2011a), several authors applied the concept of ‘display’ to studies on different family settings, but none of them applied the concept to a dual-location family setting. As Finch (2007) described, the distinction between household and family requires an element of display and might even intensify the need for display. Besides being recognised by relevant
others as family (Dermott and Seymour, 2011b), family display is also functional to represent ourselves to ourselves in a way we would like to think we are (Gillis, 1996).

Frequently used examples of family routines are washing the dishes together or escorting the children to school. Examples of family rituals include the celebration of birthdays, Christmas, St. Nicholas evening¹ and holidays. Aside from these momentous occasions, there are also ritual practices that occur on a daily basis, such as bedtime stories and dinnertime rituals. What makes it difficult to distinguish between routines and rituals is that every routine can become a ritual once it shifts from being an instrumental family practice to an act imbued with symbolic meaning (Fiese et al, 2002). Most of the time only the family members involved can interpret whether a practice has symbolic meaning or not.

**Researching post-separation families**

*Context of the Netherlands*

In the Netherlands, 95,000 couples (11% of all couples: Spruijt and Kormos, 2010) experience the dissolution of a marriage (35,000 couples) or a cohabiting union (60,000 couples) annually. As a consequence, 27% of all Dutch children witness the separation of their parents some time in their lives (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010). Since 1998, when Dutch family law changed and joint legal custody became the norm, 90% of the separated parents share joint legal custody in the Netherlands (Spruijt and Duindam, 2009).

Today, in the Netherlands, as well as in other Western countries, social family policies aim at preserving family life and encourage the continuation of some form of family life after separation (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010; see also Roche, 1991, for the United Kingdom [UK]). In 2009, a new Dutch law promoting continued parenting after divorce was enacted (Spruijt and Duindam, 2009). With this law, parents with children younger than 18 years of age are obliged to formulate a parenting plan as a precondition for the request for divorce, and mediation or counselling is strongly recommended. The parenting plan must contain a description of the consequences of separation for the children and the agreements that have been made between the parents on how to continue parenting after divorce.

Despite these law changes, the most common living arrangement, both in the Netherlands and in many other Western countries, is still a resident mother arrangement, in which the children live with their mother and have contact with their father on a regular basis (74% in the Netherlands: Spruijt and Kormos, 2010; see also Kelly, 2007, for the United States; Peacey and Hunt, 2009, for the UK). Although the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) still dominates in the Dutch culture of care, today, being a separated father in the Netherlands no longer automatically implies seeing the children once every two weeks. A relatively small group of parents (20%: Spruijt and Kormos, 2010; 9 to 12% in the UK: Peacey and Hunt, 2009) maintain a shared residence arrangement in which the children live with both parents alternately and in which the care for the children is divided (nearly) equally.
Respondents and methods

The evidence presented here is of an explorative nature and draws on qualitative data from 35 in-depth interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009 with separated parents in the Netherlands. Respondents were selected from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), which contains information on 8,161 inhabitants of the Netherlands aged between 18 and 79 and not living in an institution (Dykstra et al, 2005, 2007). The respondents were selected through purposive sampling (Mason, 1996), from the following criteria:

- they had experienced a divorce or the dissolution of an unmarried, cohabiting union;
- they had at least one child with the ex-partner;
- they had at least one child aged 18 or younger who lived with the respondent for at least half of the time;
- they had an ex-partner who was still alive.

The sample consisted of 20 resident mothers and 15 shared residence parents (seven male, eight female). Within the sample we aimed for variation in terms of the respondents’ place of residence, level of education and the number and the age of their children. The ability to select interviewees from the NKPS made it possible to choose separated parents with an adequate variation of post-separation living arrangements. Unfortunately, the agreement concerning the collection of interview data from NKPS respondents did not permit the interviewing of ex-partners.

All 35 parents participated in individual in-depth interviews conducted by the first author of this article. The interviews were semi-structured and concentrated on separated parents’ experience of daily life, particularly in relation to the family, which included, for example:

- their contact with their ex-partners and their extended family;
- the division of responsibilities and tasks between both parents;
- the way in which they celebrated birthdays and special events.

Beyond raising topics from the topic list, the role of the interviewer was limited, in order to give the respondents ample time to tell their narratives. The interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. The data were coded and analysed thematically. The analytical strategy was twofold: a top-down approach was used, drawing relevant themes from the literature; and a bottom-up approach was used, drawing relevant themes derived from the interview material. In our analysis, exploration, rather than generalisation, was the primary objective.

Three types of post-separation families

Based on the narratives of the respondents about with whom family routines and rituals are practised, we distinguished three types of post-separation families (see Table 1). The first post-separation family type was ‘continuing family life’, whereby the family routines were alternately practised with each parent separately and at least some of the pre-separation family rituals were practised with both parents present.
The second post-separation family type was ‘building a new life’, whereby family routines were alternately practised with each parent separately or mainly with the resident parent and rituals were alternately practised with each parent separately. The third type was ‘only one parent involved’, whereby both family routines and rituals were practised only or mainly with the resident parent. Although the children visited their non-resident fathers, they did not practise family rituals and routines together regularly. An overview of the characteristics of the respondents in each family type is given in Table 2.

We did not find post-separation families in which family routines were still practised together with all of the members of the pre-separation family. For all three types, family routines were alternately practised with each parent separately or mainly with the resident parent.

In relation to the three types of post-divorce parenting introduced by Smart and Neale (1999), it can be said that all parents who fitted in a ‘continuing family life’ family type shared care and parental authority and therefore belonged to the group of parents who were engaged in a co-parenting parenting style. However, not all parents who were engaged in a co-parenting parenting style belonged to the ‘continuing family life’ family type, because this type of family shared more than care and parental authority after divorce. Not all the parents who were involved in a ‘building a new life’ family type shared parental authority, but they did share parental care to some extent, so these parents could have either a co-parenting or a custodial parenting style. Most of the parents in an ‘only one parent involved’ family type had a solo parenting style, but some of them did share parental authority or care.

### Type 1: ‘Continuing family life’

The first type of post-separation family transformed from a single-location pre-separation family into a dual-location post-separation family. The relationship of the former spouses as partners ended but their relationship as parents continued. Twelve of the interviewed parents belonged to this type of post-separation family. Despite the fact that these respondents were separated, they emphasised first and foremost the importance of continuing their pre-separation family life.

‘That is the agreement we made when we got divorced; we change our family as little as possible, for the children’s sake in particular, because there
Table 2: Characteristics of the respondents by family type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Type 1 'Continuing family life' n = 12</th>
<th>Type 2 'Building a new life' n = 16</th>
<th>Type 3 'Only one parent involved' n = 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 50 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work contracted hours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No job</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small part-time (&lt; 25)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large part-time (25–35)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time (&gt; 35)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attained level of education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential arrangement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared residence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident mother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of separation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 5 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child at time of interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 4 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–12 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 12 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of oldest child at time of interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 4 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4–12 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 12 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between respondent and ex-partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ 1 km</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 1 and &lt; 10 km</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 10 km</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-partner only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New children (n = 5; number of respondents with children from new partner)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is already a lot that is going to change with the divorce.’ (Alexander, a shared residence father with a 21-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter)

‘As partners, we are separated because we no longer wanted to live together as partners, but as parents, we are attached and that is how we felt about it, and still do … I can distinguish those roles quite well. Sometimes it is difficult – it was not for nothing that we decided to divorce.’ (Alice, a shared residence mother of 15- and 18-year-old sons)

Most of the respondents in this family type did not blame their ex-partner for the separation. In their role as parents, they felt morally obligated to their children to minimise the impact of their ‘failings’ in their role as partners. This moral reasoning was also described by Smart and Neale (1999) and Smart et al (2001). They emphasised that divorce is about making difficult moral decisions instead of enacting selfishness and egoism.

In these families, family routines alternated between the separate households of each parent. For example, in both households, the children had specific household tasks, their clothes were washed in both households and the children could be at both places when they were feeling ill. Furthermore, both parents took more or less equal responsibility in caregiving, for example by escorting their children to school, to a dentist or to their swimming lessons. Not surprisingly, most of these parents (nine out of 12) were involved in a shared residence arrangement and lived less than one kilometre away from their ex-partner.

Continuity in behaviour and meaning is important in this family type. To maintain the pre-separation family life, all of these families created moments in which the former family was reunited and displayed, as described by Finch (2007). Family rituals played an important role in these gatherings. Frequently mentioned rituals that were celebrated with both parents together included birthdays, St. Nicholas evening, graduation ceremonies and Christmas dinner. Alice emphasised the importance of these family rituals:

‘We go together to parents’ evenings at school, as well as to other events at school, important soccer games of the children, birthdays, etcetera. We celebrate birthdays with the four of us [respondent, ex-partner and their two children] by eating cake, going out or having dinner at a restaurant. Having a moment as a family, because that is what we still are, although we live at different places.’ (Alice)

This quote notes the displaying function (‘this is our family and it works’) of family rituals. Family displaying might become more important after a separation because the structure of the post-separation family is no longer defined by a shared residence. In addition to continuing family rituals, some families create new rituals. Sometimes new partners also obtain a role in these new family rituals:

‘We also arrange a sort of family council once every six weeks, here or at her place and then we all come together – our children, my ex-partner and nowadays also our new partners. We drink coffee and there is room to discuss all the things we want.’ (Alexander)
Family routines and rituals following separation

Having dinner and drinking coffee together on a regular basis were frequently mentioned examples of new rituals. Some examples were less common:

‘Two years ago we [respondent and her son] went on holiday to France. After two weeks my ex-partner arrived. The three of us stayed a few days and then I left, leaving him with our son for two more weeks in France. We did this for two years and it was a good solution.’ (Rose, a shared residence mother with a 10-year-old son)

As is the case with parents involved in a shared residence living arrangement or a co-parenting parenting style (Neale and Smart, 1997; Smart and Neale, 1999; Smart et al, 2001), not all of the separated parents who were involved in this type of post-separation family had a good relationship with their ex-partner. Some of the respondents described how hard it was, especially in the first few years after the separation, to have contact and frequent meetings with their ex-partners:

‘The first years after our separation, having contact with my ex was difficult. There was so much grief, anger, disappointment, you name it … I remember us celebrating St. Nicholas evening together in one of those first years. The situation was tense, but we did not show it. The whole evening I felt a stone in my stomach, but the children were so happy and excited about celebrating St. Nicholas evening with the four of us…. But, especially in the last three, four years – we have been separated for 12 years now – our relationship has become friendlier.’ (Jack, a shared residence father with a 13-year-old son and a 17-year-old daughter)

Other respondents did not have a problem with maintaining a friendly relationship with their former partner after their separation, but some of them described how other family members did have a problem with this:

‘We decided together to separate, but some family members need to say: “It is all her or his fault.” It is the same with some friends. From the moment they decide to choose someone’s side, it is difficult to be in the same room together or to have a nice day when we are both present’. (Alice)

Although this type of post-separation family might give the impression that it is an ideal situation, not all of the children benefited from this family type. A continuing family life and parental relationship can raise children’s hopes that their parents will eventually reunite as a couple or bring about the question as to why their parents got separated in the first place. These dilemmas are described in earlier studies on shared residence arrangements and co-parenting parenting styles (Smart and Neale, 1999; Smart et al, 2001; Haugen, 2010), and might exist even more often in families where the former family unit is reunited on a regular basis: “Our son thinks it is madness; the way I have contact with his mother [drinking coffee together on a regular basis, being friends]. ‘You could as well have stayed together with her!’ he says when he is angry” (Alexander).

The parents involved in this type of post-separation family also described difficulties in combining the goals of continuing family life after separation with building a new
life. New partners seemed to form a big threat to this type of post-separation family. Some of the new partners had a problem with the fact that the respondent was still attached to his or her ex-partner.

‘We would really like to go on holiday with the three of us [respondent, ex-partner and their son], but my new partner does not think that is a good idea. Yes, the biggest problem is my new partner, who has a problem with me having such an intensive relationship with my ex-partner. That’s why we do fewer things together than I actually would like to do. I understand I have to make concessions like this.’ (Rose)

Moreover, new partners might entail the formation of a ‘new’ family. Some respondents started living together with their new partners and even had children together. These new families competed for the respondents’ time and energy with the post-separation family. Earlier studies have also shown that remarriage of one of the parents decreases the contact between the non-resident father and his children (Smyth, 2004; Kelly, 2007). Indeed, for some respondents, the routines and rituals that sustained the existence of the post-separation family were replaced by those of the newly formed family:

‘We used to go to an amusement park together, or things like that, but nowadays we do these things … these things fade away…. See, nowadays we do these things with the three of us [respondent, new partner and child]. That is how it goes.’ (Elizabeth, a resident mother with a nine-year-old son)

It can be expected that this type of family is most common among those parents who have recently separated. Six of the 12 respondents belonging to this type of family separated less than five years prior to interview. Two respondents emphasised that they did not expect their intensive relationship with their ex-partners to endure now that they had found a new partner:

‘There was my daughter’s birthday. We had dinner together with her father, his new partner with her children and me sitting there on my own. My new partner does not want to come. So these moments are no longer as nice as they were before. Afterwards I asked myself: “Why am I still doing this?”’ (Susan, a shared residence mother with an eight-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son)

Most of the respondents in this type of family maintained contact with the extended family of their ex-partners, or at least some of its members. The children played an important role in their sustained contact. For instance, former parents-in-law could provide childcare and children’s birthdays could still be celebrated with the extended family.

**Type 2: ‘Building a new life’**

Seventeen of the interviewed parents belonged to the second type of post-separation family. This type of family seemed to be most common among families involved in a resident mother arrangement, in which the children lived with their mother and
visited their non-resident father on a regular basis. Six parents who were involved in a shared residence living arrangement belonged to this type of family. Instead of being in a dual-location post-separation family, the children in these families alternated their living arrangements between each parent’s new families. Although these parents acknowledged the fact that their children affirmed ongoing relationships with their former partners that involved mutual obligation, all of them emphasised, first and foremost, that they had built a new life after separation (and sometimes even formed a new family) in which the former partner did not play a role. Gradually, the former family faded away:

‘If we had no child together, I no longer wanted to see him [ex-partner]. It is just for our child that we still have contact; otherwise we would not have any contact. I do not have that need. Too much happened between us.’ (Lisa, a resident mother of an eight-year-old daughter)

‘In the beginning you try to keep those family things. Birthdays are important days, so you try to celebrate them together. But it does not work that way. Or at least, that is my experience. It faded away. You cannot mix two separate families. That may be the perfect picture, but at the moment of separation you decide to live our own life.’ (Olivia, a resident mother of 16- and 19-year-old sons)

Seven of the respondents involved in this type of family were living together with a new partner. Among these respondents, two of them also lived with the children of their new partner from previous relationships and two were living with a newborn child. In particular for respondents living together with a new partner, the new family seemed to replace the former family. Sally, a resident mother, who has a 13-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son with her ex-partner and a six-year-old son with her new partner, described her family life as follows:

‘Sometimes I forget that part of the story [the part of the former family life]. My family feels as a normal family. Because my new partner and I make the decisions, it feels like we have three children together [they only have one biological child together and the other two are from her ex-partner].’ (Sally)

To integrate the children into both new families, family rituals, such as birthdays, St. Nicholas evening and Christmas, were often celebrated twice with the children – separately in each family – and the holidays were split up between the new families: “We celebrated birthdays together, until he had a new partner and moved to another city. Now the children celebrate their birthday twice. One time here and one time there. And with St. Nicholas it is the same” (Olivia).

In some of the families that belonged to the ‘building a new life’ type, especially those involved in a shared residence arrangement, routines were also separately practised in both new families. However, there were also some families in which the routines were mainly practised in the family of the resident parent:

‘During the weekends when my youngest daughter is with her father, she does not take a shower or a bath. He does not take responsibility in that.
Last time, she was with him for four days, and she had not taken a shower. Of course that bothers me.’ (Violet, a resident mother of six- and nine-year-old daughters)

To live their own life and to create a new family life, most respondents described how they tried to minimise communication with their ex-partners. Examples of the kinds of strategies used to minimise communication included writing messages in a notebook that the child passed on, using emails instead of telephone calls or face-to-face conversations and, at the most extreme, not engaging in any form of communication at all:

‘He picks her [daughter] up and brings her back home again. There is “good” [sarcastic] communication: he uses the car horn when he arrives and then we know he is there. Sometimes it turns out that it is someone else using a car horn.’ (Emily, a resident mother with five daughters ranging from eight to 23 years old and a 10-year-old son)

‘We communicate by exchanging written messages in a notebook, but since she stopped writing in it a while back, we do not communicate at all at this moment.’ (Bruce, a shared residence father with two 11-year-old daughters and an eight-year-old son)

After the separation, the interviewed parents involved in this type of family no longer had contact with their ex-partner’s extended family. Family members of the ex-partners did not fulfil any kind of role in the new families. Former parents-in-law were an exception because they often continued to provide childcare on a regular basis. As one interviewed parent described:

‘My former mother-in-law had an especially hard time in the beginning. She thought: “I will no longer see my grandchild.” And even now, my new partner is a real threat to her, because she thinks that she will not be welcome once I start living together with him. I do not know why she thinks this since she will always be welcome.’ (Naomi, a resident mother of an 11-year-old daughter)

Although the interviewed parents had minimal contact with the family members of their ex-partner, most of their children maintained contact with relatives in both families:

‘They have contact with both families, but never at the same time. They have only contact with the family of the parent with whom they are staying at that moment. It is not the case that his family visits the children when they stay with me, or the other way around.’ (Fiona, a shared residence mother of nine-, 12- and 14-year-old sons)
Type 3: ‘Only one parent involved’

Seven of the interviewed parents were involved in the third family type – where only one parent was actively involved in family life. All seven respondents were involved in a resident mother arrangement. Most of the interviewed mothers involved in this type of family no longer considered their ex-partner as a member of the post-separation family. Frequently mentioned explanations included the large geographical distance between them and their ex-partner, the low level of contact and the absence of their ex-partner’s involvement in their children’s lives. The geographical distance between the ex-spouses is an important factor in practising family life. Not sharing a common residence complicates the functioning of the post-separation family. If one parent lives far away from the child, not only may asymmetries in the division of care routines arise between the parents, but also the frequency of contact and communication between them may decrease. Expectedly, then, the larger the distance between ex-partners, the more difficult it is to construct social ties by facilitating contact and care exchange and the more complicated it is to retain former family routines and rituals.

In this type of family, both family routines and rituals are practised with the resident parent mainly or only. Even birthdays are sometimes not celebrated with the non-resident parent:

‘When she stays with her father for a week, he does not cut her nails, for example. I mean, he is only involved in the fun part. When she stayed with him, she needed a salve from the doctor, and I said: “You can go to a doctor and buy it for her.” But he did not want to pay for the salve. I am the one who is responsible for her health; he is only there for the fun part.’ (Lucy, a resident mother, who has a seven-year-old daughter with her ex-partner and three- and five-year-old daughters with her new partner)

On the one hand, the interviewed mothers involved in this type of family described how minimising the level of contact with their former partners could minimise the level of conflict. On the other hand, they thought that it was important to keep lines of communication with their former partners open for their children’s sake. For most of the respondents, the contradiction of these goals posed a challenge:

‘The less I talk to him, the easier it is for me. On the other hand, the less you talk to each other, the less you know from each other, if something is going on. When I am aware of something, for example, when the youngest had a nosebleed, I tell him about it and I want to know if he [son] has it again. But even when I told him about it beforehand, I have to remind him to tell me after the visit.’ (Beth, a resident mother with three- and seven-year-old daughters)

Family life over time

The type of post-separation family is not static, but might change over time for a given family. Other scholars (Smart and Neale, 1999; Smart et al, 2001; Smyth, 2004) have also emphasised that post-divorce parenting and post-divorce living arrangements are in a constant state of flux. Our findings reveal two common pathways. First, there
are families who adhere to a ‘continuing family life’ type in the first few years after the separation but become a ‘building a new life’ type after this time. Finding a new partner and creating a new family are often mentioned as an explanation for this transition. Second, there are families who adhere to an ‘only one parent involved’ type or a ‘building a new life’ type immediately after the separation, but former partners gradually begin to share more routines and rituals afterwards. For families who undergo that transition, the negative emotions during the separation might make it difficult to continue sharing family life immediately after the separation. However, over time, changes in the relationship of the ex-partners – notably a decline in the level of conflict – have a huge influence on the type of family maintained after separation.

Discussion and conclusion

Separation always changes family life (Moxnes, 1999). Although aspects of the former family life are likely to remain the same after separation, separation will inevitably disrupt family routines and rituals to some degree. In this article, we have focused on the extent to which family rituals and routines continue after separation, in which way and with whom. Based on the narratives of 35 separated parents, we explored diversity and differences among the respondents and distinguished three types of post-separation families: ‘continuing family life’, ‘building a new life’ and ‘only one parent involved’.

For all three types, family routines with the children are practised separately with each parent or mainly with the resident parent. While in most non-separated families, at least some routines are practised with both parents together, in post-separation families no routines are practised with all the members of the former family present. Family routines seem to be highly household based. The instrumental or functional character of family routines might explain this pattern. Family routines often occur under time pressure and in certain time-space parameters, which do not easily accommodate different schedules, especially after separation. Fiese et al (1993) stated that all families practise routines and rituals. Based on our findings we would like to rephrase this statement into: all families practise rituals and all households practice routines.

When a certain routine becomes so important that separated parents try to engage in that routine at the same moment, the routine becomes a ritual. An example is two parents escorting their son to his first holiday without his parents or to his first day at school. This may seem a functional routine, but might be experienced and interpreted as a ritual when the act is accompanied by symbolic meaning (ie, being together as a family at moments that symbolise growing up and conveying to themselves and relevant others that they are still a family).

The main difference between the three types of post-separation family can be found in the way they organise family rituals after separation. In the first family type – ‘continuing family life’ – at least some of the pre-separation family rituals take place with both parents present. Sometimes, even new rituals are created. In the second family type – ‘building a new life’ – the pre-separation rituals still occur with both parents, but not with the presence of both parents together. Although the parents involved in this type of post-separation family emphasise the fact that having children together entails certain obligations, building a new life without their ex-partner hinders the continuation of family rituals together. In the third family type
– ‘only one parent involved’ – family rituals mainly or only occur with the resident mother. Although the children still visit their non-resident father, they do not share family life together.

Our findings show that rituals have an important role in family displaying after separation. In all three family types, rituals are used to display the family as a coherent unit. Whereas in the first family type the message is ‘we are still family’, in the second and third family types the message is ‘this is my new family’. As far as we know, rituals have not been recognised before as a tool for family display. Likely, this applies not only to families after separation, but also to other types of dual-location families, such as commuter partnerships.

As earlier studies revealed (Smart and Neale, 1999; Smart et al, 2001; Smyth, 2004), the post-separation family is not static but might change over time. Our study also shows that the type of post-separation family might change. We distinguished two common pathways: from a ‘continuing family life’ post-separation family type to a ‘building a new life’ family type after the first few years of separation and from an ‘only one parent involved’ post-separation family type immediately after separation to a ‘building a new life’ or a ‘continuing family life’ family type. Both the level of conflict and the start of a new romantic relationship seem to post a real threat to the continuation of family life after separation.

The fact that the type of post-separation family is not necessarily consistent with the custodial or residential arrangement of the post-separation family, emphasises the importance of looking further than those two aspects in order to gain insight into the growing diversity and complexity among post-separation families. Some children who primarily live with their mothers and occasionally see their fathers, practise family rituals with both parents present, whereas some shared residence parents, who share the living arrangements of their children equally, do not necessarily partake in family rituals together.

This qualitative, explorative study made it possible to study non-standard families and their everyday experiences of family routines and rituals. Although some families follow the standard pathways, contemporary families have become more complex and diverse, with separation and remarriage complicating family relationships. Therefore it is likely that family display will become more intense and family rituals more important in everyday family life.

Our findings show that certain aspects of family life may remain unchanged after separation, but this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, the different kinds of post-separation familial arrangements and practices discussed by our respondents highlight the existence of a variety of post-separation families, rather than just one type. We therefore underline the need for more research that acknowledges the variations in post-separation families. Additional comparative research will help us to explore the factors that influence family life after separation further. Our study identifies at least three factors that influence everyday post-separation family life: the geographical distance between the ex-partners, the level of conflict and the presence of a new partner.

The question arises as to how important it is that family routines and rituals are continued after separation. In some post-separation families, family rituals might create a strong sense of belonging that buffers against the negative consequences of separation for children. At the same time, the level of conflict between ex-parents exacerbates the consequences of separation for children. When there is a lot of conflict
between former partners, not sharing family routines and rituals might be the better strategy for the wellbeing of some or all of the family members.

Notes

1 St. Nicholas evening is a Dutch ritual whereby children receive presents and sweets. It is widely celebrated among families with young children.
2 In general, one should be cautious about taking these two categories together. Recent studies on the Dutch case show, however, that the impact of union dissolution on couples with children does not differ substantially between married and unmarried couples (Spruijt, 2007). We have therefore combined the two groups and use the term ‘separated’ to refer to couples who experienced a non-marital dissolution as well as to couples undergoing a legal divorce.
3 The sample did not contain resident fathers as respondents. In the Netherlands, the number of resident fathers is small (6% of all children of divorce live with their fathers according to Spruijt and Kormos, 2010).
4 The identities of the respondents have been rendered anonymous to protect their privacy.

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