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### Migrant family matters

Rooijackers, Elisabeth Nathanaël

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Rooijackers, E. N. (2017). *Migrant family matters: Comparing patterns of intergenerational solidarity and partner separation in the Netherlands*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.

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# CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

## 6.1. Introduction

Although demographic developments in Northwestern Europe with respect to immigration and family relations have each triggered a great interest in themselves, this dissertation is one of the first to consider their combined importance. The two main overarching questions that I sought to answer were, first: *What patterns of intergenerational relationships and partner separation characterize non-Western migrant and native Dutch families in the Netherlands* and, second: *To what extent can these be explained by processes of migration and settlement?* Focusing on immigrants of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean descent, I have studied these issues from various empirical and methodological angles, using survey material, in-depth interviews and register data to compare immigrant and native families, origin groups, immigrant generations, transnational and uni-national families, individuals with different sociodemographic characteristics, migrants with various levels of acculturation and the perspectives of migrant mothers and children. From a scientific perspective, my dissertation proved the empirical value of an influential cross-cultural theory of family relations for understanding migrant families (the Model of Family Change; Kagitçibasi 1996), demonstrating the impact of migration on affective and practical (solidarity) behaviors vis-à-vis one another. Whereas practical aspects of mother-child relations seem more changeable and conditioned by circumstances, overall, affective ties were central to many families alike: whether immigrant or native Dutch, living in one country or transnationally based and regardless of how strong migrant children were oriented toward the destination country. In contrast to the lasting emotional bonds between mothers and children, partner separation was no rare occurrence among immigrants and at least as prevalent as among native Dutch couples.

All in all, my results show the importance of including migrants in our view of contemporary families or, depending on how you choose to look at it, adding family aspects to the question how migration impacts people's lives. The unmistakable similarities between migrant and native Dutch families indicate that public concerns about elderly care and the increasing number of union dissolutions also apply to migrant families. Moreover, the comparisons between and within migrant families revealed a great variation as well. In this diversity, migrants may actually bear more resemblance to certain native families than other migrant families. The results of this dissertation, therefore, urge us to identify and further explore the differences among

migrants, as well as the common factors that impact family relations among immigrants and non-immigrants alike. At the same time, we should be aware that the implications of changing patterns of intergenerational solidarity and partner separation may be more far-reaching for non-Western migrants, as they originate from societies with different normative beliefs and practices surrounding family relations and are relatively disadvantaged groups in the destination country.

In the next section (6.2), I will recapitulate the main findings of the empirical chapters. In Section 6.3 that follows, I discuss how these results together answer the overarching research questions and elaborate on the scientific implications, deliberating the mechanisms of continuity and change that shape migrant family relations. Finally, in Section 6.4, I will reflect on some methodological limitations and implications, after which I conclude by explicating the societal relevance of this thesis (6.5).

## **6.2. Summary of the findings**

### *6.2.1. Solidarity patterns among mothers and adult children*

In the first study (Chapter 2), I started by examining the topic of intergenerational solidarity, addressing the following research questions: *How are mother-child relationships in non-Western migrant and native Dutch families characterized by patterns of intergenerational solidarity? And how does the prevalence of relationship types differ across origin groups, between younger and older adults and between sons and daughters?* Based on the propositions of the Model of Family Change (MFC), which theorizes how circumstantial changes may impact family relations, I combined information about intergenerational in(ter)dependencies in practical and emotional respect. In addition, I attended to the different directions in which support was given or received, or in other words: who helped whom. This resulted in a typology of five different mother-child relationships that characterized all origin groups, including the native Dutch. The typology encompassed the predicted family systems of the MFC, including three variations of full-interdependence, varying according to the direction in which practical support was provided (reciprocal, upward or downward, viewed from the perspective of the child), emotional-interdependent ties and a relationship characterized by infrequent contact and the absence of support. This last relationship type was a rare occurrence in general, however, and I therefore assumed that it

captured deviant, distant ties rather than (normatively desired) independence.

After having established the relationship types, I compared their prevalence across origin groups. There were two opposing trends, showing that migrant mothers and children, on the one hand, more often provided reciprocal practical support and, on the other, were more often characterized by detachment. There was comparatively more variation in the distribution of relationship types among native Dutch, including a greater prevalence of less “traditional” forms of solidarity: adult children who received but did not give practical support to their mother, or a relationship in which emotional ties took precedence over practical support. These results suggest that the value attached to mutual intergenerational support in non-Western societies tends to linger among most migrant families, but that migration may also distance family ties. Despite the expected differences, there were also notable similarities between migrant and native Dutch. Especially emotional support appeared to be a shared feature of mother-child relations, irrespective of the origin of families. Moreover, the type of relationship that children maintained with their mother was also significantly shaped by their life-phase and whether they were sons or daughters. Reciprocal and downward practical support was especially prevalent among young adult children (aged 18-30), whereas older adult children (aged >45), whose parents were ageing, more often provided practical support. Sons were as well more likely to be involved in a relationship that included upward practical support, whereas daughters were more often recipients of practical help (excluding child-care).

#### *6.2.2. Transnational ties and the impact of acculturation*

The next study (Chapter 3) built on the typology of the previous chapter by extending it to the transnational realm, looking at immigrant adult children in the Netherlands whose mother lived abroad. The first question of interest was: *How do patterns of practical and emotional support characterize transnational mother-child relationships?* After conducting a similar analysis in which flows of practical (including financial) and emotional support in various directions were combined, two types of transnational mother-child relationships emerged. In general, regular practical or financial support was absent in these transnational mother-child relations. Of the two relationship types that remained, one involved reciprocal emotional but no practical support, whereas the other included neither kind of support. The two types were

labelled (transnational) emotional-interdependent and (transnational) detached ties respectively. The vast majority of mothers and children maintained an emotional-interdependent relationship, indicating that reciprocal affective ties also remain of importance in a transnational context and regardless of whether practical or financial help is involved.

Having constructed a typology of both uni-national and transnational mother-child relations, I then devoted attention to the second question of interest: *How does acculturation impact (trans)national mother-child ties?* The results showed that acculturation has diverse effects across families. For migrant families of whom both mother and child lived in the Netherlands, attitudinal and behavioral measures of acculturation had opposed effects on family relations: children who expressed a stronger orientation towards the Netherlands in terms of attitudes (“agreement with the hypothetical situation of one’s child marrying a Dutch”) were more likely to have a distanced relationship with their mother, whereas children with a higher behavioral score (“having celebrated the Dutch national holiday St. Nicolas with household members”) were more likely to have a full-interdependent relationship. Thus, rather than providing evidence that a stronger orientation towards the Netherlands fosters more typical “Western” family relations, the findings suggest two alternatives: that the (perhaps diverging) normative attitudes of migrant parents and children may complicate their relationship, but that the retention of family behaviors from the origin country may very well go together with the adoption of (complementary) family practices from the destination country. Although the findings for transnational families were statistically non-significant, it is still worth mentioning that the direction of effects propose a more straightforward impact of acculturation on transnational ties. My results suggest that the more migrant children are oriented towards the destination country, the higher are the chances that the relationship with their mother abroad is distant.

### 6.2.3. *Giving meaning to intergenerational ties*

Chapter 4 added an important layer to the findings of the previous chapters on mother-child relations by focusing on how migrant mothers and children themselves perceived and made sense of their relationship. Two research questions were addressed: *What meanings do migrant mothers and children attach to practical and*

*emotional aspects of their relationship? And how do mothers understand and evaluate situations in which their norms or expectations conflict with the actual behaviors of children?*

The analyses were based on in-depth interviews with Surinamese and Antillean immigrants above 40 years of age, who discussed their role as mother, child or both. The results revealed that the role of practical support in mother-child relations varies strongly within migrant families, as responsibilities were unevenly distributed across siblings, with usually one child taking the lead. Furthermore, although previous research has tended to exclude parents and adult children who live together, I found that migrant mothers and children talked about co-residence (also over longer and recurring periods of time) as a normal situation. In addition to being a form of practical support in itself, moreover, such a living arrangement seemed to facilitate other practical exchanges. These results suggest that the role of practical support in migrant families could differ more pronouncedly from natives when residential situations are taken into account. Affective ties, in line with the findings of the previous chapters, were markedly present and mentioned by nearly all mothers and children, regardless of whether practical help was provided. The predominant way in which respondents gave meaning to emotional ties was by quantifying these, talking about the amount of time spent together. Similarly but conversely, mothers assessed distanced ties by referring to a lack of contact with children. For children, distanced ties had rather to do with concrete problems in the relationship from which they had deliberately moved away, such as being the main caregiver among siblings.

Despite the more critical view of mothers on the quantity of contact, there were barely any direct accusations towards children in the interviews. The complex evaluations that mothers gave of relationships, however, revealed their struggle to reconcile their children's behaviors with normative beliefs about family obligations. Potentially conflicting situations were explained by a reading of opportunities and needs. The opportunities of children to initiate contact were seen as limited by their busy lives and competing tasks, which were presented as factual circumstances that were typical for Dutch society. These "objective" explanations served to counterbalance potential negative implications of another interpretation that mothers maintained of opportunities, namely as reflecting personal priorities and thus demonstrating a lack of engagement. Whereas the opportunities of children were mostly objectified, needs were treated as a subjective matter and demonstrative of their personal character as being self-reliant, low-maintenance and grateful. In other

words, mothers dealt with tensions in the relationship by making family norms dependent on the individual preferences and possibilities of both their children and themselves, thereby integrating “Western” and “non-Western” family ideals.

#### *6.2.4. Separation and residential relocation*

Whereas intergenerational relationships were the main topic of the previous empirical chapters, *intragenerational* relations between partners were studied in Chapter 5. The aim was to compare and understand trends of partner separation and the resulting residential relocation patterns among immigrant and non-immigrant women in society at large. The availability of yearly register data offered the unique opportunity to examine these life-events among all (legally residing) immigrant women in the Netherlands. The two research questions of Chapter 5 read: *How do union dissolution and residential relocation rates vary across women of different origins and immigrant generations? And to what extent are these variations the result of sociodemographic characteristics?* In order to answer the second question, information was used about the age of women, the type of union they had (married or non-married), whether the union was with a partner of the same origin or not, their family income, the number of children living at home, whether they were tenants or homeowners and whether or not they lived in the 4 largest municipalities. The importance of correcting for these background characteristics became particularly clear when comparing Turkish and Moroccan immigrant women with native Dutch. At first glance, these immigrant women appeared to be less likely to separate from their (married or non-married) partner. However, after including their sociodemographic characteristics, no statistically significant differences remained. In addition, second generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrant women were more likely to separate than the first generation, irrespective of their individual, family and living situation. For Surinamese and Antillean immigrant women, correcting for sociodemographic characteristics did not substantially change the results. Regardless, they had the highest chances of all origin groups to experience a union dissolution and, furthermore, there was no decrease over generations. My results seemed to confirm the conclusions of earlier studies that partnerships are vulnerable to the changes that migration entails (Boyle et al. 2008; Muszynska & Kulu 2007). However, it turned out to be crucial to consider the specific differences between each origin and destination



region in terms of partnership norms and practices, as well as possible longer-term effects of settlement: whereas adaptation to the Dutch context would explain the trends among Mediterranean immigrant women, a continuance of demographic patterns of the origin region may have occurred among women of Caribbean immigrant descent.

In terms of residential relocation, all immigrant women, irrespective of their origin, were found to be less likely to move than native Dutch women after a union dissolution. This relative immobility of immigrant women remained or even augmented over generations, moreover. Given that sociodemographic characteristics offered no explanation, these results suggest that alternative mechanisms underlie the decisions of native Dutch and immigrant couples on moving out after a separation. In a broader sense, the findings attend us to the possibility that even when single demographic events do not differ much across groups, interlinked life-events may nonetheless be characterized by diversity.

### **6.3. Discussion of the findings**

#### *6.3.1. A closer look at the Model of Family Change*

Chapters 2-4 on mother-child relationships not only confirmed the complex ways in which migrant families are characterized by continuity and change, but also gave some illuminating insights into how to grasp the complexity. First of all, the cross-cultural Model of Family Change (MFC; Kagitçibasi 1996) proved to be a valuable theoretical starting point for understanding how migration from a non-Western to a Western region affects family relations. The mother-child relationship typology I empirically constructed in Chapter 2 was based on the MFC's main expectation that the relative importance of practical and emotional solidarity vis-à-vis one another makes up different family systems across societies. Whereas a full-interdependent family system would typically reflect the necessary, mutual reliance of parents and children in less economically advanced, non-Western societies, independence would be characteristic of Western families living in more prosperous welfare states. In addition to distinguishing practical and emotional support behaviors, I differentiated between who helped whom. This resulted in a rich relationship typology that affirmed two central expectations derived from the MFC: that reciprocal practical help would be more central in non-Western immigrant than Western native families, but that

migration nonetheless diminishes the relevance of practical support while leaving close emotional ties of importance (fostering so-called emotional-interdependent relationships).

Apart from affirming the empirical worth of the fundamental expectations of the MFC, this thesis also elaborated the theory in various ways. First, my qualitative study offered insights into how the role of practical support changes in migrant families, namely across siblings and over time. As Chapter 4 showed, the contribution of children in helping their mother with practical matters was asymmetrically distributed, with one child being the principle caregiver. This disparity across siblings interestingly suggested that the process by which practical support loses its prominence in migrant families, as theorized by the MFC, may also take shape in a centralization of responsibilities around one particular child. Due to the qualitative nature of my study, I could not answer the question which child takes on these tasks. The interviews did indicate, however, that such a caregiver role is restricted to neither daughters nor sons, and also not the oldest of the siblings. With respect to time, there were two ways in which the salience of practical ties changed. On the one hand, the amount of practical support that children provided abruptly decreased as the result of determinative life-events or decisions, such as return migration, illness, or the deliberate withdrawal of children from their role as principle caregiver. On the other hand, practical assistance fluctuated over time in correspondence with living arrangements. Alterations in the intensity of practical support, to some degree, ran parallel to the recurring and lengthy periods in which migrant mothers and children co-resided. These findings suggest that the role of practical help is closely linked to people's concrete living situation and thus influenced by (sudden) changes therein, also after migration.

Second, counter to the general expectation of the MFC that migration from a non-Western to a Western society would leave close emotional ties unaffected, my empirical typology included a mother-child relationship that was characterized by little contact and no emotional (nor practical) support. Given the low occurrence of such a relationship, also among native Dutch families, I proposed that it represented a problematic relationship. In contrast to what we would expect based on the proposition that non-Western migrants originate from societies where family solidarity precedes individual independence, moreover, the number of mothers and children who were characterized by such "detached" ties was greater among migrants

than native Dutch. Possibly, the process of migration and related challenges of settling in another country may have put a strain on the intergenerational relationships in these families. Other migration literature that has explicitly focused on the potentially problematic consequences of migration, such as the emergence of mismatching attitudes, misunderstanding and normative conflicts between parents and children (Birman & Poff 2011; Foner & Dreby 2011; Phinney & Vedder 2006), may be helpful for elaborating the MFC and explicating this alternative impact of migration on family relations.

Third, in Chapter 3, I extended the MFC theory to include transnational families. As an increasing number of studies has shown, more often rather than not, migrants continue being engaged with their country of origin (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Levitt & Schiller 2004). Using the MFC as starting point, I explored a still rarely addressed field of transnationalism, namely parent-child relations in adulthood. Transnational family relations, if considered at all, have been treated as a topic of its own and examined separately from migrant families who are established within national borders. Although there are undoubtedly differences that distinguish transnational from non-transnational family dynamics, my thesis showed that there are also interesting correspondences between the two. Again, emotional mother-child ties were sustained among the majority of families. Neither practical nor financial help in any direction, in contrast, played a role of significance. Apparently, the geographical distance coincided with a strongly diminished importance of material support in migrant families, while affective aspects remained salient. Only a small proportion of mothers and children who lived across borders could be characterized as having a detached relationship, measured by infrequent contact and an absence of emotional (and practical or financial) support.

Taken together, Chapters 2-4 suggest that the practical and emotional dimension of mother-child relations are differently affected by migration. Whereas emotional bonds appear to retain their significance for by far most families, practical aspects of intergenerational solidarity seem to be more contingent upon the conditions in which people grow up and live. The presence of practical support in mother-child relationships varied in multiple ways that affective ties did not, including between nationally and transnationally organized families, across siblings, over time and with living arrangements. Emotional support, moreover, was present regardless of the role of practical help. In addition, affective mother-child relations were no less important

in native Dutch families, corresponding with the conclusion of other research on family solidarity in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al. 2006). This interestingly lends support to the idea that an affective mother-child bond is of universal value.

That being said, the results of Chapter 4 add a nuance to this conclusion by demonstrating that close ties need not mean that there is no tension in the relationship at all. The accounts of children but especially mothers revealed their complicated understandings of and sentiments towards the relationship, as (implicit) criticisms were expressed in ways that offset potential negative evaluations. Thus, although the MFC may be right in proposing that affective ties are often sustained in the migration process, the interviews with migrant mothers and children gave an insight into the ambivalence that such enduring emotional bonds can harbor. As a matter of fact, the main effect of migration could be the heightening of ambivalent sentiments. While the different degree to which parents and children are oriented towards the origin and destination country might intensify negative feelings about the relationship, their shared experience of migration, as well as the geographic distance from each other may draw them together in support and commitment to face these challenges. For theories that focus on the challenges that migration involves, in contrast, my findings attenuate the image of problematical migrant families by highlighting that intergenerational frictions need not be detrimental to relationships and actually rarely lead to a breach of affective ties.

With respect to the chapters on mother-child solidarity, there are two important limitations worth mentioning. First, I looked at relationships regardless of the health situation of the mother. In this sense, my findings are not informative about how children behave when their mother is in actual, urgent need of care. A concern for the future, therefore, is to what extent and under which circumstances the affective ties between mothers and adult children translate into practical support. Furthermore, despite the differences between immigrant and native Dutch families, the similarities were noteworthy. What is more, the variations according to the life-phase and sex of children were comparatively clearer than those with respect to origin. This raises an important issue about the main determinants of mother-child relations in general. Unfortunately, even in spite of the immigrant oversample in the NKPS survey, my analyses did not contain enough respondents to be able to account for socio-structural characteristics. If future investigations can tackle this problem, this would obviously be of enormous value for warranting my conclusions and answering additional

questions about the relative impact of structural and cultural influences on family relations.

### *6.3.2. Norms and behaviors*

Previous migration research has mostly focused on family values rather than behaviors. Overall, their results suggest that migrants, even over generations, continue to strongly endorse the family norms of their origin country, leading to a sustained difference with the native population of destination countries (Carnein & Baykara-Krumme 2013; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Schans & De Valk, 2011). A difference in general norms, however, does not necessarily imply that behaviors are different. In my dissertation, I looked at solidarity behaviors and found striking similarities between immigrants and native Dutch. Combining the findings of previous studies with those of my dissertation thus indicates that migrants are maintaining beliefs about family relations from the origin country, while adjusting their behaviors to the typical practices of the destination country. The idea that norms persist while behaviors change is puzzling from commonly employed psychological perspectives. Underlying much research on values is the underlying assumption that established attitudes and beliefs guide people's behaviors and that normative change therefore precedes behavioral change (e.g. Fishbein & Azjen, 1975). There are three possible alternatives, however. First, other factors than beliefs may also influence the ways in which people behave. According to the theoretical reasoning of the MFC, for example, behaviors are not only shaped by norms but also concrete circumstances. Immigrants and natives, by virtue of living in the destination county, to some extent, share the same living environment. The socio-structural and institutional setting of the destination country may therefore limit the degree to which migrants can actually choose to act the way they would ideally like. Societies are often organized in such a way that the structure favors behaviors that are in line with the dominant social norms, which is called institutional bias. In Western countries, for instance, values of self-reliance and individual independence are promoted by prioritizing employment over the care for family members. Although calls for a "participation society" have instigated some changes in the Netherlands in this respect, in general, Dutch employees are still expected to adjust family arrangements to suit their work rather than the other way around. From this perspective, providing support to aging

parents, particularly to the degree that is common in non-Western societies, might actually be quite difficult. Indeed, mothers from the interviews in Chapter 4 talked about the necessity to accept certain behaviors of their children because the demands of Dutch society urged them to act as such. Furthermore, the interviews also indicated how behaviors that are initially motivated by practical considerations may end up instigating renewed views on the matter. Most mothers who complained about the busy lives of their children, simultaneously showed an understanding and even respect of their children's freedom to make their own choices. A change in behaviors could thus also bring about a change in normative beliefs.

Second, in addition to practical circumstances shaping people's behaviors and beliefs, the findings of Chapter 3 propose that (perhaps unexpected) compatibilities between the origin and destination culture may also have motivated migrants to deliberately adopt new behaviors. Both in science and society, the inclination is to think about cultures in oppositional and fixed terms. Such a view, however, may make us overlook the complementary elements that exist between belief systems, as well as the dynamical nature of culture which allows for the adoption and fusion of new elements. In Chapter 3, for instance, I found that mothers and children who maintained a full-interdependent relationship were also more likely to celebrate the Dutch national holiday St. Nicolas. If we take into account that St. Nicolas is a typical family celebration that involves gift-giving, the results are perhaps less surprising. Participating in this holiday may have offered migrants a novel way of expressing their family values.

Third, the combination of continuing norms and changing behaviors may be better understood by reconsidering the mechanism of belief adjustment. Much migrant research has maintained a one-dimensional approach to acculturation, with an orientation to the origin and destination country each at the other extreme. However, as Chapter 4 showed, norms are not necessarily mutually exclusive beliefs. Many mothers subscribed to the ideal of unconditional family obligations, while at the same time respecting their children's personal freedom and even highly estimating their own independence and autonomy. Moreover, these ideas were not treated as inconsistent or incompatible, but actually fused within an overarching normative view in which compliance with family norms was made dependent on individual opportunities and needs. The findings of this chapter thereby demonstrate the creative capacity of people to give meaning to apparently contradictory beliefs. By

making general norms meaningful in the changing circumstances of concrete situations, people may continue to adhere to “old” norms and at the same time pick up “new” ways of thinking.

For the academic field of migration studies, in particular those employing quantitative data, these three deliberations have some concrete implications. They firstly indicate that it is essential to consider the possibility that practical as well as ideological motives may underlie behaviors. Especially if migrants act in ways that correspond with normative ideals of the destination country, we should be aware that there may also be institutional bias at play. The other two explanations are closely related to the question how acculturation should be conceptualized and operationalized. Whereas Chapter 3 showed the value of distinguishing between behavioral and attitudinal (and perhaps other) dimensions of acculturation, Chapter 4 reaffirmed the need for a two-dimensional view on acculturation. Even if the available data might preclude the possibility to measure the adherence to family norms of the origin as well as destination country, we should at least account for the possibility that people are endorsing (or negating) both. Furthermore, the obvious broader underlying question of the norms-behaviors debate is how these are connected. Future research should therefore focus on the question to what extent and under which conditions family norms translate into actual family behaviors. This may also be informative, for instance, about the issue whether strong family values can be viewed as sources of latent support. If this is the case, the durable family norms among immigrant groups could be regarded as a strength and perhaps even protective factor for migrant families.

### *6.3.3. Kin- and partnership relations compared*

Most studies and theories have looked at the (in)stability of mixed couples (Kalmijn, de Graaf & Janssen 2005; Milewski & Kulu 2014; Smith, Maas & van Tubergen 2012), rather than partners sharing the same immigrant background. Research that has been conducted on the impact of migration on union dissolution, moreover, has mainly focused on the direct consequences of moving (e.g. Boyle et al. 2008). In Chapter 5, I used register data to study the prevalence of partner separation among native, immigrant and mixed couples, comparing trends across origin groups and immigrant generations. The union dissolution rates among Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and

Antillean women all equaled or even succeeded the levels among native Dutch. Whereas for Caribbean immigrant women, the relatively high rates of separation over generations were actually in line with typical patterns of their origin country (Emery & Golson 2013; Staker 1992), the higher than expected dissolution rates among Turkish and Moroccan immigrant women, even more so for second generation immigrant women, indicated quite a change from the practices in which they or their parents have been socialized (Morocco: DHS 2005; Turkey: DHS 2009). This chapter thus illustrates that in order to formulate accurate expectations about continuity or change among immigrant families, we should, first, carefully consider the norms and practices surrounding the specific family dimension at hand and, second, not only look at the degree to which origin and destination countries differ but also in which way. More precisely, it is important to reflect on what the combination of origin and destination context means for discouraging or encouraging certain behaviors. In terms of parent-child relations, for instance, the social and institutional context of Western societies such as the Netherlands may motivate non-Western migrant families to rely on external sources of practical support and pursue individual independence, while at the same time not dissuading the continuance of affective parent-child bonds. However, whereas the distinction between Western and non-Western societies is meaningful for capturing cross-cultural differences in parent-child relations, as abundant empirical evidence for the MFC has showed (e.g. Kagitçibasi, Ataca & Diri 2005; Phalet & Güngör 2009; Trommsdorff & Nauck 2005), beliefs and behaviors surrounding partnership vary substantially between the regions from which the four non-Western immigrant groups originated. Whereas the Netherlands may make union dissolutions more feasible and accessible for Turkish and Moroccan migrants, there are no institutional restrictions or social sanctions that make opting for a union dissolution more difficult for Surinamese and Antillean migrants. In Dutch society, the decision to end a partnership, like many other family matters, is considered a matter of individual choice (or in this case, that of the couple). Moving to a country that reinforces or condones different conducts, rather than moving from one (even more) liberal context to another, thus implies a greater potential for change.

It is another question what such potential for change means for the stability of migrant families. Alike to the possibly problematic consequences of acculturation differences in parent-child relations, couples may be affected by the various degrees in



which both partners are oriented towards the destination country. Such diverging acculturation trajectories may particularly complicate partner-relations if origin and destination country differ in terms of gender norms, as is the case for Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in Northwestern Europe. Previous research indeed showed that these immigrant women are endorsing egalitarian gender values at a faster rate than their male counterparts (Idema & Phalet 2007; Röder & Mühlau 2014). Furthermore, many Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands have married someone from their origin country (Huschek, De Valk & Liefbroer 2012). The chances that these partners diverge in attitudes and behaviors are arguably greater for second generation immigrants, who were not born and raised in the origin country. It is plausible, for instance, that disagreements on matters such as gender norms have made the unions between two Turkish or Moroccan partners less stable, particularly for second generation immigrants who married a partner from abroad. Thus, a greater potential for change could also mean a greater challenge for migrant families, as it enlarges the possible “acculturation gap” that exists among family members or partners.

In order to examine whether acculturation discrepancies between migrant partners indeed contribute to higher dissolution rates, more information is needed. One of the methodological strengths of Chapter 5 involved the availability of information about all immigrant and native Dutch women in the Netherlands. I was unable, however, to achieve a more detailed understanding of the process of separation and residential relocation thereafter. The way in which migrant couples decided to split up, who initiated the breakup and why, are nonetheless crucial issues for accurately interpreting the demographic trends I found across origin groups and immigrant generations. Additional recent analyses showed that also the union status of the migrant couple may be important to consider further. This seems particularly the case for those originating from societies where partner separation is less common. Although I still found that union dissolution rates augmented over immigrant generations, taken together, married Turkish and Moroccan women were less likely to experience a union dissolution than the Dutch. In the case of non-married cohabitation, in contrast, women of Turkish and Moroccan origin had actually significantly higher chances for separating from their partner than native Dutch. These additional results attenuate the conclusions of Chapter 5 somewhat by suggesting that high rates of union dissolution characterize a certain subgroup of

non-Western immigrant women. Examining to what degree these family patterns can be explained by acculturation effects would be an interesting way of further advancing our understanding of partner separation among immigrant couples.

Next to getting a clearer insight into the factors that shape union dissolution, future research is needed for reaching a better understanding of the consequences of such a family transition. It would be particularly interesting to combine the two topics of my dissertation in this respect and consider how a union dissolution changes the solidarity between parents and children. Partnership disruption evidently impacts the structure and content of family relations. The different residential locations of parents means that children will somehow have to divide their attention. Furthermore, the event of separating may create tensions or conflicting loyalties in the relationship. For parents, moreover, especially if they do not remarry or get a new partner, a union dissolution means that they lose an important (potential) source of support. As a result, the demands made on children could intensify. Similar to other family events, previous research has extensively studied these matters (e.g. Daatland 2007) but not yet considered migrant families. Examining how obligatory family norms are related to support behaviors in the context of a union dissolution, however, may be of particular relevance for migrant families.

#### **6.4. Methodological limitations and implications**

In order to attain the aim of this thesis to enhance our understanding of how migration impacts family relations, I took advantage of the specific and complementary merits of various data sources and analytical methods. Their strengths do not come without weaknesses, however, and there are a number of important limitations attached to this dissertation, indicating the points where future research can expand, refine and improve on. Although register data, survey material and in-depth interviews complement each other's shortcomings to some extent, there is at least one disadvantage that they all share: the difficulty of capturing the dimension of time. Family and partnership relations are intrinsically dynamic. Intergenerational relationships change substantially over the life-course, accompanied by alterations in family structure, living arrangements, socioeconomic situation, responsibilities and needs for care, to name a few. Similarly, partnership dynamics and the risk that unions are dissolved are closely associated with time-related effects such

as age, timing of union formation and union duration. The changes that take place in migrant families, furthermore, even go beyond these more “regular” life-course developments. During the period of moving and settling, migrants have to negotiate between different normative beliefs and practices surrounding family and partnership relations. Acculturation, which describes the twofold orientation of migrants towards the origin and destination country, is preeminently a process that unfolds over time. As only cross-sectional data were used in this dissertation, I was neither able to capture how family and partnership relations develop in relation to individual changes in acculturation, nor could I directly distinguish between short-term and long-term effects of migration. Moreover, although I attempted to assess how continuity and change characterize migrant family relations, in the end, longitudinal data would obviously be needed to determine these issues. Such data, however, is generally difficult to obtain. As an alternative, more elaborate measurements of migrants’ length of stay, age at migration or language proficiency could be used. For partnership dissolution, it would be helpful to add information about the timing and place of union formation and consider the individual characteristics of partners vis-à-vis one another. Looking at the gender norms that each partner endorses, moreover, could be an interesting way to advance our insights into the stability of immigrant or mixed couples.

In addition to a certain selection of research methods, this dissertation was also formed by some deliberate thematic choices. Apart from being able to account for what these include, it is also important to be aware of what they exclude. By opting to focus on the position of women or mothers, an obvious question arises about family relations among men and fathers. Including the perspectives of fathers could very well yield a different picture of intergenerational solidarity and bring clearer differences across immigrant origin groups to light. Parental obligations and parenting styles, particularly in non-Western countries, prescribe different roles for fathers and mothers (Kagitçibasi 2005). Whereas Turkish and Moroccan migrants originate from societies with strongly gendered norms that prescribe an authoritarian father and an indulgent mother, Surinamese and Antillean societies are characterized by a prevalence of female household heads, who take care of the upbringing of children while fathers are less involved or even absent (Distelbrink 2000). Thus, although emotional ties were found to be prominently present among migrant mothers and children, it should be kept in mind that the situation may be quite different and

perhaps more problematic for fathers.

Finally, in this thesis, I specifically looked at families belonging to the four largest non-Western immigrant groups in the Netherlands. However, as my findings indicate, these groups are not homogeneous. Future research could therefore devote attention to the question which aspects of this diversity within migrant groups affects family relations. An interesting example would be to look into the role of mixed parentage, as intermarriage between native Dutch and immigrant groups is becoming more and more prevalent. Furthermore, in order to learn more about the generalizability and context-bound aspects of the theoretical framework and main findings, cross-country comparisons of the same and different origin groups in various Northwestern European destination countries should be examined. Apart from the immigrant groups that have arrived during the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, European policies guaranteeing free movement between member states has prompted great in- (and out)flows of East-European labor workers. At the same time, political crises in the Middle-East has generated significant streams of refugees over the past few years, adding to an already growing group of asylum seekers in Northwestern Europe. How the arguably different experiences of these migrant groups shape patterns of intergenerational solidarity and partner separation is a question for future research. In addition, it would be valuable to broaden our view and consider the demographic developments that are taking place in origin countries. This dissertation, based on comparisons across migrant origin groups and the native population, has given a comprehensible image as possible of how migration impacts family relations, both those within and across national borders. A next step for understanding migration effects in full-scope would be to widen our focus from destination countries and zoom out to a greater global perspective on how family lives are changing worldwide.

### **6.5. Societal implications**

In the media and societal debates, negative views tend to dominate the discussions about migration and integration. Concerns about unbridgeable differences and the continuing orientation and loyalty of non-Western migrants towards their origin country, for instance, are expressed by the Dutch public and politicians alike. Previous studies on family norms indeed indicate that there is a sustained difference between

the native Dutch and the Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean immigrant population. My dissertation indicates, however, that a difference in values need not coincide with a difference in behaviors. Both in terms of intergenerational solidarity patterns and partner separation, the similarities across origin groups were perhaps more striking than the differences. Adult children of immigrant and native Dutch origin were distributed across the same five types of mother-child relations, for example. At the same time, moreover, I found a noticeable variation between families of the same origin: individual, sociodemographic and life-course characteristics, as well as different responses to the migration experience, all mattered for how family behaviors were shaped. Unlike most studies that have focused on immigrant groups in Northwestern European countries, research from the United States has been more inclined to attend to structural explanations when examining racial differences, for example with respect to divorce risks (Phillips & Sweeney, 2006). Despite the specific historical and societal situation of racial groups in the US, my results suggest that compositional characteristics also play an important role in the Northwestern European context. These findings impel a broader discussion about which groups we ought to compare, if our aim is to understand and aid families in wider society. By fixating too much on the distinction between immigrants and natives, we lose information about the differences between and within families falling within these categories and thereby acquire an incomplete picture that does not do justice to the diversity of contemporary migrant families. Family policies, therefore, should focus on the contribution of concrete circumstances in shaping family relations, whether native or immigrant. Moreover, I showed that non-Western immigrant elderly may strongly adhere to norms of family solidarity and at the same time highly value their own independence. These simultaneous ideals actually closely match the goals of current family policies in the Netherlands: prolonging the self-sufficiency of elderly while stimulating the use of informal care-arrangements (and thereby downsizing the reliance on state-support). I found that both migrant mothers and children described their family values as conditional upon real life opportunities. Facilitating the realization of such family norms should thus be a key focus of policy-making.

In addition, the results of my dissertation raise a discussion on how similarity and difference should be evaluated. The issue of comparing immigrant groups to natives often seems to involve the concern whether migrants are alike to the native population, and if not, when and how fast they will be. It can be debated, however,

whether a stronger belief that families ought to help each other is such a negative value to adhere to. Or whether the growing number of union dissolution among some immigrant groups, converging towards the level among Dutch couples, is such a positive development. These trends across origin groups invite the provoking thought that migrants might not always be better off resembling the native population. In any case, it illustrates that instead of focusing on migration as a demographic process that affects the native population, we should also take into account how contemporary developments in the destination country impact the lives of migrants. The share of elderly non-Western migrants is growing fast. In the Netherlands, forecasts are that in 2060, over 30% of the Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean immigrant groups will be 65 years or older (Garssen 2011). These migrant elderly are generally in poorer health condition, more often suffering from chronic diseases and struggling with psychological problems such as anxiety and depression (Van Wieringen 2014). Meanwhile, language barriers and restricted knowledge or inaccurate ideas about the organization of care in the destination country can hamper their access to care-arrangements. At the same time, there is a vulnerability on the part of the migrant family-caregivers as well. As this dissertation indicated, practical responsibilities tend to be unevenly distributed across siblings. Combined with the preference of migrant elderly to receive help from kin rather than professionals (van Wieringen 2014), that means these children are more susceptible to caregiver stress and burn-out. My finding that affective ties between mothers and children are of lasting importance is relevant in this respect, since a healthy, emotional relationship may contribute to the quality and hence durability of caregiving activities (Van Wieringen 2014). Professionals who are supporting informal caregivers, therefore, could tap in on the already existing emotional involvement between family generations and stimulate activities that nourish these bonds, especially among migrant families.

Similar to the issue of parent-child relations, we should be aware of the precarious position of immigrants with regard to partner separation. As Chapter 5 showed, the dissolution of partnerships was quite prevalent among all immigrant women, whether of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese or Antillean origin. Turkish and Moroccan immigrant women, moreover, originate from countries where divorce is highly socially criticized, especially if initiated by women. In addition to a socioeconomic vulnerability, these immigrant women thus face the risk of social stigmatization and becoming socially isolated after a union dissolution. Finally, by focusing too narrowly

on single life-events, we might fail to understand the full impact of family transitions, as some may involve a double disadvantage for immigrants. The relative immobility of separated immigrant women in terms of residential relocation, for instance, could mean that disparities in quality of neighborhoods and housing are perpetuated. All in all, therefore, if the ultimate goal is to achieve more similarity in terms of equal opportunities for living a healthy life in all its facets, including family and partnership relations, we need more attention for difference in the sense of an awareness of the vulnerability of certain social groups.