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Balancing paid work, care and leisure in post-separation households : A comparison of single parents with co-parents

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Abstract

This article provides insight into the daily lives of separated parents involved in two types of living arrangements: single parents (mainly mothers) living with their children full-time and co-parents living with their children part-time. Earlier studies have stated that the everyday lives of separated mothers are more constrained than those of married mothers. We show that the growing diversity of post-separation living arrangements should no longer be ignored in studies of the consequences of separation, in policy frameworks or in debates on separation. Our findings reveal that single mothers experience more constraints in combining work, care and leisure in daily life than co-parents do. The differences between the groups are explained by different commitments in the work and care domains. These differences are not solely matters of choice. Single mothers who are less highly educated and work fewer hours than co-parents have limited resources with which to arrange or negotiate a more gender-equal outcome. Empirical evidence is drawn from individual in-depth interviews with 18 separated parents living in The Netherlands.

Keywords

co-parents, everyday life, post-separation living arrangements, single mothers, work-family balance

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, balancing paid work, childcare and leisure in everyday life has become more complicated. Major social changes, such as individualization, secularization, economic restructuring and emancipation, have led to an increase in the number of women in employment. Consequently, the traditional nuclear family, in which the father works full-time as primary wage-earner and the mother stays at home to care for the children, is being replaced by the dual-earner family. Today, because both parents work at least part of the time outside the household, childcare responsibilities and domestic work have to be outsourced or addressed after working hours. As a result, an increasing time pressure and complexity in organizing daily life is experienced.

The balancing act of dual-earner families has been described extensively (e.g. Becker and Moen, 1999; Crompton and Lyonette, 2006; De Meester et al., 2007; Forsberg, 2009; Hochschild, 1997; Jarvis, 1999; Karsten, 2003; Spain and Bianchi, 1996; Van der Lippe et al., 2006; Voydanoff, 2005) and as a result of this scholarly attention we have gained considerable knowledge of the daily lives of dual-earner families and how they construct their social roles, resources and relationships to overcome constraints. However, surprisingly little is known about the daily routines of families that have split up.

In Western countries, separation is common (OECD, 2011). Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the consequences of divorce for ex-partners and their children (Amato, 2000; Thompson and Amato, 1999). A particularly large body of research has been published concentrating on the consequences of divorce on the well-being of the children (e.g. Amato, 2001; Bhrolchain et al., 2001), the quality of parent-child relationships (e.g. Seltzer, 1991; Stewart, 2003; Swiss and Le Bourdais, 2009) and on the economic well-being of single mothers and their children (e.g. Holden and Smock, 1991; Poortman, 2000). However, how separated parents shape and coordinate their post-separation daily lives on the micro-level is relatively unknown.

Separated parents must decide whether to live with or without the children and whether to care for them full-time or part-time. The type of living arrangement chosen after separation gives shape to a large part of the day-to-day life of the post-separation family. In Western societies, two main types of arrangement can be distinguished. First, a single-parent arrangement, in which the children stay with one parent and have contact with the non-resident parent on a regular basis or not at all. Second, the relatively new co-parenting arrangement in which the children live with both parents alternately with childcare responsibilities divided equally.

In some studies, the daily lives of single mothers generally seem worse off than those of married mothers (e.g. Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; Sanik and Mauldin, 1986). These studies ignore the growing diversity of living arrangements among separated families. Research in this area is an important addition to the literature because the consequences for the everyday life of a single parent are assumed to differ from those of a co-parent. Single parents, who are most often mothers, run the risk of becoming overburdened by sacrificing time in personal leisure and care activities, including sleep, to meet the time demands of employment, childrearing and homemaking because they have no partners with whom to share responsibilities (Hertz and Ferguson, 1998; Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; Quinn and Allen, 1989; Sanik and Mauldin, 1986). Co-parents might not become two households at the moment of separation but rather a dual-location household (Green et al., 1999; Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009), making day-to-day life more fragmentary and complicated. A more detailed understanding is required of the consequences of separation for daily life and the differences between the different types of post-separation living arrangements.

The central questions addressed in this article are: How do single parents and co-parents shape and balance post-separation life? With what results and how can we explain the differences? We investigate how single parents and co-parents combine and balance their social roles and commitments in the care, work and leisure domains. Empirical evidence is drawn from individual in-depth interviews with 10 single mothers¹ and 8 co-parents with children younger than 18 years of age living in The Netherlands.

Shaping post-separation life

In general, daily life is dedicated to activities in the care, work and leisure domains, and people have multiple social roles in each domain of life. Individuals categorize and identify themselves by these social roles and therefore hold multiple identities (Burke and Reitzes, 1991; Stets and Burke, 2000). For example, a separated woman may identify herself as an employee (work domain), a mother (care domain) and a sportswoman (leisure domain). Burke and Reitzes (1981, 1991) define identities as the shared social meanings that individuals attribute to themselves in a role.

To maintain their identities, people develop commitments that connect them with their identities (Burke and Reitzes, 1991). The term 'commitment' refers to a life choice with long-term consequences (Becker, 1960). One's diverse commitments can be competing and conflicting. Because commitments compete for an individual's time and energy, daily life can be understood to involve trade-offs and sacrifices (Becker, 1960; Willekens, 1991). If competing identities involve equally valued commitments, considerable stress and intra-personal conflict is likely to be generated (Burke, 1991; Burke and Reitzes, 1991).

Studies on the consequences of divorce for single mothers indicate that these women experience more stress and work-family conflict than married mothers, because there is no partner to share responsibilities in the work, care and leisure domains (Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; Quinn and Allen, 1989). The responsibility of providing a household income on their own imposes particularly heavy restrictions on the time and energy available to commitments in other life domains. To manage the multiple and contradictory social roles in daily life, working single mothers spend less time with their children, in domestic work and in leisure than married mothers do (Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; Quinn and Allen, 1989; Sanik and Mauldin, 1986). As far as we know there is as yet no literature comparing the daily lives of single parents and co-parents.

Inherent in identity theory is the assumption that people are reflexive agents who are actively involved in creating their own life courses by making conscious decisions and continuously reflecting on their actions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1991, 1994; Stets and Burke, 2000). Critics of reflexive modernization question the ability of people to reflect on the circumstances of their lives, the extent of reflexivity and to which a person's ability to reflect on their own situation actually affects their action or behaviour (Alexander, 1996; Walters and Whitehouse, 2011). Therefore, Stryker and colleagues (e.g. Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2011) emphasize the structural symbolic interactionist roots of identity theory by focusing on the impact of social structures on social behaviour. Individuals shape their own life courses in relation to their preferences and the resources and restrictions inherent in their life course on the one hand and, on the other, the opportunities and constraints structured by social institutions and cultural and normative ideas.

In the daily lives of single mothers and co-parents, social structures on various levels, e.g. normative institutional arrangements such as family and work, cultural ideas of motherhood and fatherhood or decisions made by other household members, can act as facilitators or constraints in shaping a post-separation living arrangement.

Balancing care, work and leisure

Coordinating everyday life concerns balancing the social roles and corresponding commitments in the work, care and leisure domains in a 24/7 schedule. Several researchers (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2000; Bielby and Bielby, 1989; Clark, 2000; Desrochers et al., 2005; Karsten, 1995; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Schieman and Young, 2010) addressing the practice of combining commitments and activities in everyday life recognize that the different domains of life are interconnected and overlapping, which results in people constantly combining different, contemporaneous commitments.

Recent theories on combining work and care in daily life (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996) share the idea that the domains of life are differentiated by physical, temporal and psychological boundaries. The specific commitments of a given domain occur at a certain location, at a certain moment,

during a certain period of time and are accompanied by a certain behaviour and set of emotions. In daily life, people make transitions between the different domains by crossing the borders (Clark, 2000). How easily the borders can be crossed depends on one's commitments, which influence the permeability and flexibility of the demarcations.

Permeability is defined by Ashforth et al. (2000: 474) as the degree to which a role allows one to be physically located in the role's domain but psychologically and behaviourally involved in another role. Some jobs or employers allow workers to be claimed incidentally by their social roles as parents. When their children telephone them, for instance, temporal and psychological borders are crossed.

Flexibility is defined as the extent to which a border may contract or expand in time and space on a daily basis, depending on the demands of other domains (Clark, 2000). When something unexpected happens to a child, a worker might decide to return home early to fulfil commitments in the care domain. Because of the worker's identity as an employee, part of the caring time at home may be claimed by activities in the work domain, such as checking emails and answering the telephone, although the worker is also occupied by watching over the children.

Depending on the permeability and flexibility of the borders, domains are to some degree integrated or segmented. Which state is desirable cannot readily be defined and depends on a variety of characteristics of the different domains and the persons involved. When borders are highly permeable and flexible, the integration of domains can lead to a well-balanced daily life. However, highly permeable and flexible borders can also lead to blurring of the domains, making negotiating with employers and family members difficult and creating high levels of work-care conflict and stress.

Mothers, in particular, seem to experience stress and role conflict in combining work and care. Although the number of women in employment has increased significantly in recent years (OECD, 2011), a strong cultural ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) still exists. This ideology of intensive mothering is described by Hays (1996) as a set of gendered ideas about good childrearing according to which the mother is still primarily responsible for bringing up the children in a child-centred, highly emotionally committed and dedicated fashion. In addition to their increasing commitment to the work domain, most mothers prefer, are socially expected or feel obliged to give precedence to commitments related to the care domain and experience high levels of work-family conflict.

Context of The Netherlands

In The Netherlands, 35,000 marriages end in divorce annually (2.0 divorces per 1000 inhabitants and 1.0 per cent of all marriages) (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010). In addition to these formal dissolutions, 60,000 couples experience the dissolution of a cohabiting union (10 per cent of all cohabiting unions) (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010). In general, we have to be cautious about taking these two groups together. However, recent studies of the Dutch case show that the impact of union dissolution on couples with children does not differ substantially between married and unmarried couples (Spruijt, 2007). Therefore, we have combined the two groups and use the term *separated* in reference to couples who experienced a non-marital dissolution and to couples undergoing a legal divorce.

Since 1998, when Dutch law changed, 90 per cent of separated parents have had joint legal custody in The Netherlands (Spruijt and Duindam, 2009). However, the most common post-separation living arrangement in The Netherlands and in many other Western countries is still one in which the children live with their mother and have contact with their father on a regular basis (74 per cent in The Netherlands) (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010). This type of post-separation living arrangement strongly supports the ideology of intensive mothering, which still dominates in the Dutch culture of care. Compared with women in other Western countries, Dutch women are employed more often and predominantly in part-time jobs (60 per cent) (Van Wel and Knijn, 2006). It is often assumed that a shortage of affordable² and good-quality childcare facilities prevents many mothers from working longer hours. However, studies on the Dutch case (Van Wel and Knijn, 2006; Portegijs and Keuzenkamp, 2008) show that it is not external obstacles but the Dutch culture of care that motivates most mothers, despite their social-

economic background, to care for their children themselves as much as possible and not to increase their participation in the labour market.

In 2009, a new Dutch law on promoting continuing parenting after divorce was adopted (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010) which obliges parents with children below the age of 18 years to formulate a parenting plan as a precondition of the request to divorce. The plan must contain a description of the consequences of separation for the children and agreements between the parents on how parenting will continue after separation. With a change in legislative norms, societal norms also change slightly. Today, being a separated father in The Netherlands no longer automatically implies seeing the children once every two weeks. Recent studies show that the number of non-resident fathers who have no contact with their children is declining and the visiting frequency of non-resident parents is increasing (Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2000; Seltzer, 1991, 1998). Accordingly, a growing number of co-parents exist (15 per cent in 2005 and 20 per cent in 2010 in The Netherlands) (Spruijt, 2007) who, in contrast to traditional gendered assumptions, share the care of their children equally in terms of residential arrangement, (financial) responsibility, caregiving, support of school-related activities and leisure time budget (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010).

Respondents and methods

The evidence presented here is of an exploratory nature and draws on qualitative data from 18 in-depth interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009 with separated parents in The Netherlands. Respondents were selected from the *Netherlands Kinship Panel Study* (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005, 2007), which contains information on 8161 inhabitants of The Netherlands between 18 and 79 years of age and not living in an institution.

Two groups of respondents were selected through purposive (also known as theoretical) sampling (Mason, 1996): 8 co-parents (3 males and 5 females) and 10 single mothers. In a co-parenting arrangement, the children stay with each parent alternately for at least 12 nights per four weeks. In the arrangement with a single parent, the children stay with their resident parent and visit their non-resident parent 2 to 6 nights per four weeks. We selected the respondents who had experienced divorce or dissolution of an unmarried, cohabiting union; had at least one child aged 18 years or younger with the ex-partner and who lived with the respondent for at least half the time; and whose ex-partner was still alive. Because we focus on the daily lives of separated parents in a one-parent household, we only interviewed respondents who did not live with a new partner at the time of the interview. Within the selection, we aimed for a wide range of variation in place of residence, level of education and the number and age of the children. The ability to select interviewees from the NKPS survey facilitated choosing separated parents with an adequate variation of characteristics. Unfortunately, the agreement concerning the collection of interview data from the NKPS respondents did not allow the interviewing of ex-partners.

Table 1 gives an overview of some of the characteristics of the two groups of respondents. All interviewed parents, except one jobless single mother, have commitments in the work domain for a substantial number of hours. The co-parents interviewed participate more hours per week in paid work than the interviewed single mothers do. However, the employed single mothers participate more hours per week in paid work than working mothers in general do in The Netherlands. The interviewed co-parents were on average older, had a higher level of education and were more often full-time employed than the interviewed single mothers. These characteristics are in accordance with those revealed in an earlier quantitative study indicating that separated parents who have dual careers, a high level of education and a high income are more likely to be involved in a co-parenting arrangement than other parents (Bakker and Mulder, 2009). Parents who have a higher level of education and higher income are expected to have greater resources with which to overcome restrictions and constraints and greater bargaining power to negotiate preferred outcomes in the work and care domains and are therefore better equipped to succeed in balancing everyday life.

On average, the interviewed single mothers had fewer and younger children than the co-parents. Younger, more dependent, children might make balancing daily life more complicated, but fewer children might make it easier. The single mothers were more often separated before 1998 than the

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents (total of 18 individuals).

Characteristics	Category	Co-parents (n = 8)	Single parents (n = 10)
Characteristics of respondents			
Gender	Women	5	10
	Men	3	0
Age	20–29 years	0	1
	30–39 years	0	3
	40–49 years	7	6
	>50 years	1	0
	No job	0	1
Contracted work hours	Small part-time (<25)	1	2
	Large part-time (25–35)	2	6
	Full-time (>35)	5	1
Attained level of education	High	5	2
	Middle	3	5
	Low	0	3
Year of separation	1994–1998	1	3
	1999–2003	3	2
	>2003	4	5
Characteristics of the children			
No. of children involved in arrangement	1	0	2
	2	3	5
	3	4	1
	>3	1	2
Age of youngest child involved in arrangement	under 4 years	0	1
	4–12 years	5	9
	>12 years	3	0
Age of oldest child involved in arrangement	under 4 years	0	0
	4–12 years	1	7
	>12 years	7	3

co-parents. One might expect that, with the change of legislative and societal norms, couples who separated more recently were more likely to be in a co-parenting arrangement than those who separated previously. However, an earlier quantitative study (Bakker and Mulder, 2009) has shown that there is no significant relationship between the year of separation and the type of post-separation living arrangement.

All individual in-depth interviews were conducted by the first-named author of this article. They were semi-structured, with a concentration on the experience of the post-separation living arrangement, the daily activity pattern of the parents and their children, the constraints confronting them and their strategies for resolving these constraints. The interviews, which lasted between 60 and 100 minutes, were recorded and fully transcribed. The interview data were coded, classified and analysed thematically with the help of ATLAS.ti (software for qualitative data analysis). The analyses were conducted taking a top-down approach using relevant themes from the literature combined with a bottom-up approach using relevant themes derived from the interview material.

Results: Balancing post-separation daily life

Scheduling post-separation life

The interviews revealed that talking about activities in one domain without referring to the other domains is almost impossible. For most interviewees, the different domains, particularly those of work

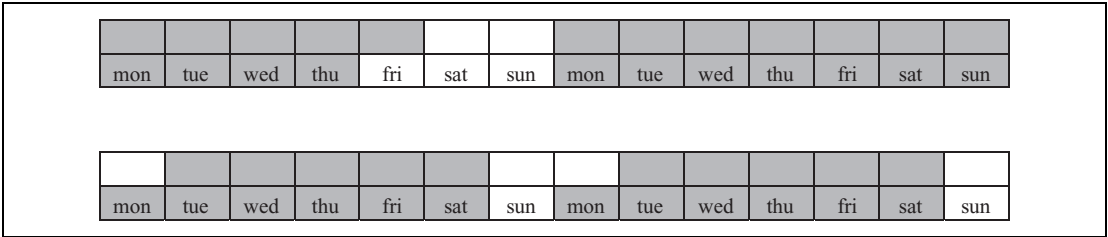


Figure 1. Two most common two-week cycles for single-mothers.

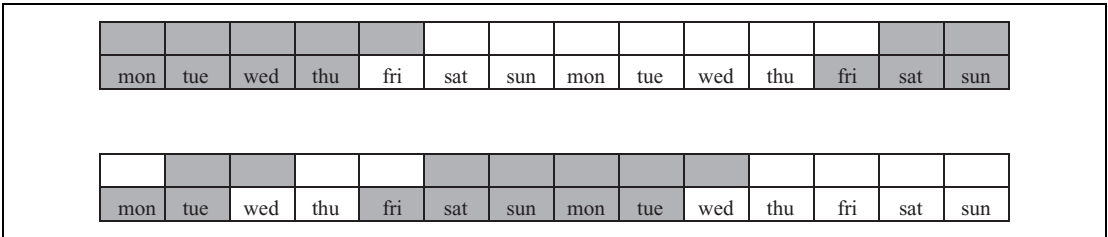


Figure 2. Two most common two-week cycles for co-parents.

and care, feel like two sides of the same coin. This observation confirms that the domains of work, care and leisure are interrelated in everyday life.

The interviewed parents develop different schedules with specific commuting days and lengths of stays with the children. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the two most common two-week cycles for single parents and co-parents. The colour grey marks the days of the week when the children stay with their mothers, white marks the days with their fathers.

The commuting rhythm of the children can be regarded as the main underlying structure of post-separation life. The parents arrange their commitments and related activities in accordance with the commuting schedule of the children. In most single-parent households, the children stay for the weekend (or part of the weekend) at their father’s home every other week, whereas co-parents live approximately half the time with their children and half the time without them. This rhythm has considerable consequences for the time demands of the care domain in particular, but also for the scheduling of activities in the work and leisure domains.

Single-mothers: Balancing paid work, childcare and leisure

All interviewed single mothers emphasized the social role as a mother first and foremost, and because the children stay with the mothers approximately seven days a week, single mothers must almost continuously combine their commitments in the care domain with their work and leisure commitments.

In addition to their first identity as full-time caregivers, most interviewed single mothers emphasized their responsibility of earning sufficient income. Most of the single mothers increased the number of working hours after the separation and had a substantial part-time job (20 to 32 hours a week) to generate household income. The single mothers experience high levels of conflict in combining commitments in the work and care domains. The need to meet financial responsibilities as a primary wage-earner gives them the feeling that commitments in the care domain are being compromised by commitments in the work domain:

Last year I realized that I had to work more hours to improve our financial situation. So I had to work for four days. I said to my daughter: ‘This means that you have to be on your own for a few hours after

school every day.' Of course she didn't like that and neither did I. (Naomi³, single mother of an 11-year-old daughter)

Some interviewed single mothers mentioned explicitly that they preferred to work fewer hours than they actually do. Lisa, a single mother with an 8-year-old daughter, reported the following:

If we were still together, I would prefer to work fewer hours. Not because of the job, but to spend more time with my daughter, helping her with her schoolwork. Now I have no time for that. Yes, working fewer hours would be great, but is financially impossible.

Because the interviewed single mothers are the only care-giving adults present in the household, they feel obliged to be constantly 'on call' for their children. These mothers often do not experience work time as a period during which they are relieved of responsibility in the care domain. Karin, a single mother with three sons, 6, 10 and 11 years old, gives an example:

During work time I make sure I can be there [at school] when it is necessary. One of the children got himself a head injury during his gym lesson at school. At these moments I need to be there quickly. Fortunately I work close by.

The interviewed single mothers experience the borders between the care and work domains as highly permeable. Commitments in the work and care domains impose similar demands on the single mothers; for instance, having to be available during daytime. Consequently, stress and the work-family conflict are often experienced by these mothers.

For single mothers with school-aged children, the intensity of the work-family conflict is less. These mothers minimize the need to outsource childcare by working as much as possible during school hours. A common strategy is to work three or four relatively short days a week – a schedule that makes possible working a substantial number of hours and being at home when the children finish school at 3 p.m.

In particular for single mothers with pre-school-aged children, the support of others is essential to overcoming the work-family conflict. The single mothers interviewed often remarked that they were grateful for the freedom their employer or colleagues gave them when something unexpected happened to their child. Finding a flexible job a short distance from home and colleagues who help out in the case of disruption or emergency is a strategy for avoiding constraints:

I was consciously looking for a job within a short distance, with flexible hours, a flexible boss, because for example when the children are sick or something unexpected happens, I need to be there. (Maria, a single mother with two sons, one 5 and one 6 year old)

In addition to a flexible workplace, flexible care services is an advantage to single mothers balancing daily life. Most interviewed single mothers with pre-school-aged children prefer informal childcare provided by their own mothers, their former mothers-in-law or neighbours to formal childcare. This preference does not arise only from the Dutch culture of care. The single mothers also consider informal, in particular grandparental, childcare a more flexible and low-cost alternative to formal childcare. Daphne, a single mother with a 12-year-old son and a 14-year-old daughter, adds the following:

I don't know how I'd have survived without my parents. It [grandparental childcare] was a perfect solution to my irregular working schedule. Formal childcare was not an option. I couldn't afford it.

The daily combination of work and care minimizes personal leisure time. Conforming to the culture of intensive mothering, single mothers do not prioritize their identity as individuals with a right to personal leisure. Beth, a single mother with two daughters, one 3 and the other 7 years old, describes her leisure time as follows:

Every day I am not working, every holiday, is spent with the children. Sometimes they are sick or we are going out or to the dentist. All my personal free time is about the children.

Most interviewed single mothers reduced their leisure time to the few hours when the children stayed with their father. During this period, single mothers have time for sports, a social life and house-cleaning. Beth describes her weekend without her daughters:

On Friday at seven o'clock the children go to their father, at 7.30 p.m. I am in the gym. When I've finished, I go home and get ready to go out with friends. We go out till six o'clock in the morning. On Saturday I sleep until late, do some grocery shopping and on Sunday I clean the house before the children come home.

Although most interviewed single mothers initially missed their children too much to enjoy the weekends off, after a while they valued these weekends as important for their social lives. Ann, a single mother with two sons, 10 and 16 years old, describes the situation as follows:

In the beginning I had to get used to the weekends on my own. I used to clean the house, since that was the only moment I had time for that. But since I have a new partner, we spent these weekends together, doing fun things only. It feels a little weird, but I really like those weekends!

Most interviewed single mothers only incidentally ask their social network to provide childcare when they need some personal leisure time. They feel guilty not only about the frequency with which they ask for help but also about asking for help to enjoy some leisure time. Daphne explains:

For example, when I wanted to go out with friends, I thought; 'I can't ask my parents again'. They already take care of my children half the time. I don't want to ask them to take care of them so that I can enjoy myself.

For the interviewed single mothers, the border between the leisure and care domains is highly permeable and flexible when demands arise from the care domain. However, the border is not highly permeable and flexible when demands arise from the leisure domain. The result is minimized leisure time concentrated in the days the children stay with their fathers.

In conclusion, being a working single mother and having young children makes balancing daily life very difficult. Although their post-separation status increases the involvement in paid work, single mothers continue to give precedence to commitments in the care domain. The situation forces them to create highly permeable and flexible borders between the work and care domains. As a result they experience the feeling of always being 'on call'.

Co-parents: Balancing paid work, childcare and leisure

Most interviewed co-parents value their identity as a primary wage-earner at least as highly as their identity as a parent. Co-parents arrange their post-separation life taking into consideration their pre-separation commitments in the work domain. Accordingly, most interviewed co-parents have full-time jobs and work the same number of hours after the separation as they worked before it. Maintaining a career is frequently mentioned as a reason for opting for a co-parenting arrangement. Susan, a co-parent with an 8-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son, says the following:

Whether we considered another type of arrangement? No way! It isn't possible to combine another type of arrangement with both our careers. This is the optimal, or rather the least bad, solution.

Most co-parents have a two-week employment cycle consisting of one week (when the children are present) working short days and one week (when the children stay with the ex-partner) working long days to

compensate for the missed hours. Fiona, a co-parent of 9, 12 and 14-year-old sons, gives an example of such an employment cycle:

When the children stay with me I work fewer hours, my employer knows that. They take into account my personal situation. The other week, when the children stay with their dad, I work more hours.

For co-parents whose children switch between their parents' homes more often than once a week, the same type of cycle can be recognized but with a different frequency. Jessica, a co-parent with two daughters, 14 and 12 years old and a 7-year-old son describes her employment cycle as follows:

On Monday and Tuesday I work short days; at 3.00 p.m. I drive to school to get the children. On Wednesday I work at home. On Thursday and Friday I work long days to compensate. On Thursday evening I usually stay overnight in the city where I work [80 km from the place of residence], to be able to work a long day and minimize commuting time.

The care domain of the interviewed co-parents is clearly temporally and physically demarcated by the presence or absence of the children, which creates less work–family conflict and time stress in daily life. The days the children stay with one co-parent, the other co-parent can dedicate him/herself solely to work without interruptions from the care domain. On the days when the children are present, the interviewed co-parents minimize working hours, leisure time and time spent on domestic work and dedicate themselves to the children as much as possible instead of using childcare services. This schedule minimizes the need to outsource childcare. However, for some interviewed co-parents this pattern of staying at home when the children are present comes about because the co-parents feel guilty about being absent half the time, as Jack, a co-father with a 13-year-old son and a 17-year-old daughter describes:

When the children stay with me, I stay home in the evening. I did that from the beginning. When they were younger I could have arranged a babysitter. But one half of the week I can do all the things I want, so the other half I want to be here, exclusively for my children.

Arranging an employment cycle that fits the commuting rhythm of the children requires a flexible employer who facilitates working flexible hours. Fiona emphasizes the importance of a flexible employer to arranging a co-parenting arrangement:

Our jobs are typical flexible jobs; we can arrange our own working hours. There are a lot of inflexible jobs that would make it impossible to maintain a co-parenting arrangement.

The amount of leisure time is greater for co-parents than for single mothers. Most interviewed co-parents plan their leisure activities for the periods during which their children stay with the ex-partner. Some of the interviewed co-parents therefore experience their lives as two different parts.

The week that the children stay with their father I live with my new partner. I work long days, in the weekend we go to the movies or to a party and sometimes we plan a vacation together. These weeks feel like I am kind of a single woman again. (Fiona)

It is a whole different world. Enormously. It is quite schizophrenic; one half of the week I am head of a one-parent family, the other half of the week I am a single man. That is a big difference. Both situations cannot be compared to a normal nuclear family. (Jack)

Although some co-parents feel uneasy about this contrastive lifestyle, most value the situation positively:

Then [when the children stay with their father] I live like I don't have children. Tomorrow evening, for example, I have dinner with friends and it does not matter how late I will be home. [. . .]. It is really nice to have some days without obligations. (Jessica)

In conclusion, although most of the interviewed co-parents do not approve of not seeing their children half the time, the temporal and physical demarcation of the care domain by the presence or absence of the children enables them to succeed better in balancing daily life than most single mothers do.

Limits to reflexive agency

The extent to which the interviewed parents are reflexive agents who actively, consciously and reflexively affect their own lives can be questioned. Although they proved their ability to reflect on their own lives during the interviews, not all were able or had the resources to change their lives or to negotiate the more balanced life they preferred.

Single mothers, in particular, remarked on the structural constraints they were facing in balancing their daily lives. A lack of financial resources, normative ideas on motherhood and the preferences and decisions of the ex-partner were frequently mentioned. Daphne described this complicated set of circumstances as follows:

A few years ago my financial situation was really problematic. I could not work enough hours because of my pre-school-aged children. First I worked 18 hours, then 20 and now I work 22 hours a week. So I said to my ex-partner: 'You will have to give us more alimony or you will have to take care of the children more often, because I don't know how to manage this anymore.' But of course, he didn't listen.

In conclusion, the differences between both groups are not solely matters of choice. Single mothers who are less highly educated have lower incomes and work fewer hours than co-parents and have fewer resources with which to arrange or negotiate the balanced daily life they strive for.

Conclusion and discussion

The post-separation living arrangement shapes a large part of the day-to-day life of parents. Earlier studies (Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; Sanik and Mauldin, 1986) have shown that the daily life of separated mothers is more constrained than that of married mothers. However, this study indicates that in addition to the traditional group of single mothers, who experience many constraints in combining work, care and leisure, there are co-parents who balance their post-separation commitments more successfully.

The differences between the two groups of separated parents can be explained by their social roles and commitments in the work and care domains. The interviewed single mothers support the gendered ideology of intensive mothering, according to which the mother is still primarily responsible for bringing up the children (Hays, 1996) and underline their social role as caregiver and the related commitments in the care domain. After the separation, the involvement of the single mothers in paid work has increased, without commitments in the care domain having become any less. Because the work and care domains impose approximately similar time demands on the single mothers (for instance, being available during daytime), the temporal, physical and psychological borders between the work and care domains must be highly flexible and permeable. As a result, a feeling of always being 'on call' and high levels of stress and work-family conflict are often experienced by single mothers (Clark, 2000). There is seldom any leisure time.

Co-parents challenge the traditional gender roles by combining commitments in the work and care domains as they did before the separation. After the separation, co-parents continue to share the commitments in the care domain with their ex-partners. As a result, the care domain is clearly temporally and physically demarcated by the presence or absence of the children. When the children stay with one co-parent, the other co-parent is free of commitments related to the social role as parent. This

unscheduled time can be dedicated to catching up on paid work, to domestic work or to the leisure domain. The clear demarcation between the work and care domains contributes to a more balanced everyday life (Clark, 2000).

Although the daily life of co-parents is less constrained than the daily life of single mothers, we do not suggest that co-parenting is the best post-separation living arrangement. On paper, the most desirable arrangement seems to be co-parenting, but maintaining it places heavy demands on the relationship between ex-partners and their children.

The differences in commitments found between the groups are not solely matters of choice. Not all parents are able to change the circumstances in which they find themselves. In particular, single mothers who are less highly educated work fewer hours and have lower incomes than co-parents, and have fewer resources with which to arrange or negotiate the balanced daily life they prefer. Therefore, we support the statement of Stryker et al. (e.g. Stryker, 1968; Stryker and Burke, 2011) that identity theory should not be used while ignoring the impact of social structures on social behaviour.

Several further research topics can be derived from the findings of this study. One relevant line of research would be a comparison of single mothers, co-parents and dual-earner couples. Our findings raise the question of whether the daily life of co-parents is also less constrained than the daily life of married parents. We underline the need for more research if this question is to be properly answered. Furthermore, a comparison between single fathers and single mothers would be highly relevant in gaining more insight into gender-related differences.

An important feature of our analysis is the comparison of co-parents with single mothers. The differences between the two types of post-separation living arrangements found in this study show that the growing diversity of post-separation living arrangements should no longer be ignored in studies on the consequences of separation, in policy frameworks or in important political and social debates on separation.

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Notes

1. Our comparison did not contain single fathers. In The Netherlands, the number of single fathers is small (6% of all children of divorce live with their fathers) (Spruijt and Kormos, 2010).
2. In The Netherlands, formal childcare is subsidized by both government and/or employers. The fees vary with income, family status and number of children. On average, a single parent with two young children would have to spend 16 per cent of their available budget on childcare. In Sweden, single parents with two children spend 5 per cent and in the UK 9 per cent of their available budget on childcare (Immervoll and Barber, 2006).
3. The interviews have been rendered anonymous to protect the privacy of the respondents.

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