

DIVORCE-RELATED FAMILY TRANSITIONS:

ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MATTERING IN A MIXED METHOD DESIGN

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Divorce-related family transitions: Adolescents' experiences of mattering in a mixed method design

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CHAPTER **1**

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter starts with a general discussion on the current evolution in research on children with divorced parents and the evolved perspective on parent-child relationships. The focal concept of this doctoral dissertation, perceived mattering, is introduced and the choice for a mixed method research design is justified. Finally, in an overview of the different chapters the research questions are formulated.

THE EVOLVING VIEW ON CHILDREN AND DIVORCE

Increasing numbers of children are confronted with the divorce of their parents. In Belgium, each year more than 30.000 marriages end up in divorce (Corijn, 2011) and over 25.000 adults end a legal cohabitation (Belgian National Register, 2010). Consequently, yearly also more than 75.000 children face their parents' split-up and about 20% of all children have parents who live separately (Lodewijckx, 2005). A considerable amount of research on children's adjustment following parental divorce is now available (e.g. Hetherington, 2005; Kelly, 2000; Lansford, 2009), however, the majority of these studies focus on the negative impact of parental divorce on children and compare the outcomes of these children with those who continued to live in a nuclear family (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). The research findings of these comparative studies are mixed and inconclusive: some have claimed that children who experienced divorce do not fare as well as children in nuclear families (e.g. Amato, 2001), others have discovered little difference between them (e.g. Angarne-Lindberg & Wadsby, 2009; Noack, Krettek, & Walper, 2001).

In addition, the societal context wherein divorce takes place has profoundly changed during the last decade. Early studies were carried out at a time when divorce was relatively rare and when non-nuclear families were stigmatized (Smart, 2003), while a high divorce rate nowadays makes parental divorce a more common experience for families in Western countries (Amato, 2001; Neale & Flowerdew, 2007). Consequently, research on children with divorcing parents has evolved in the way it investigates this family transition. First, although divorce inevitably affects children's lives, the focus is now more on a risk and resiliency perspective rather than a deficits perspective (Hetherington, 2003; Kelly, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003). This risk and resilience perspective points out that the majority of children deal reasonably successfully with parental divorce: they show resilience to cope with this stressful change within their family (Kelly, 2007). However, within the group of children who deal with divorce, there is a big diversity: some benefit from their new life situation and others cope with more problems (Ahrns, 2007; Hetherington, 2003). Therefore, it became more important to investigate how risks can be reduced and resilience can be stimulated.

To examine risks and resilience in families dealing with divorce, a focus on underlying family processes is essential (O'Brien, 2005). It is now argued that not the

divorce itself, but rather its accompanying processes and the number of family transitions post-divorce, are of main importance for the well-being of families. Therefore, in research divorce is now re-conceptualized from a single event in a family to an ongoing family process encompassing multiple transitions (Amato, 2010; Potter, 2010; Sun & Li, 2002). Crucial processes are changes in a family's economic resources, parenting quality, the level of ongoing parental conflict and the quality of the child's relationship with its parents (Potter, 2010). An important transition after divorce is the introduction of stepparents and so the process of forming a stepfamily (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000).

Of the above-mentioned processes, continuing parental conflict is known to be one of the strongest predictors for child maladjustment, even regardless of the family type in which a child is living (Bernardini & Jenkins, 2002). Consequently, it is an important process variable to focus on during and after parental divorce. The link between marital conflict between parents and children's well-being is well established within research (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000). Two process models tried to explain why parental conflict is so devastating for children (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990), however, few studies have examined these process models in the context of divorce conflict. The lack of process research on parental conflict during the divorce transition is a gap in the literature, therefore, we try to fill this gap by researching adolescents' emotional and cognitive responses to parental conflict in the context of divorce.

Focusing on family processes, this dissertation adopts a developmental perspective, stressing transformation and change in parents, adolescents and the parent-adolescent relationship. Especially during the transition of divorce, parent-adolescent relations are likely to transform because now adolescents have contact with each parent separately, depending on their living arrangement. Scholars argued that it is not so much the divorce itself, but rather the way in which the divorce process is handled by parents and the quality of the parent-child relationships that are important to focus on (Smart, 2003). Therefore, in this doctoral dissertation we take a relationship approach and recognize the mutual influence within parent-adolescent relationships (Dunn, 2004).

In sum, rather than focusing on adolescents' different outcomes between families (nuclear versus divorced), a first aim of this dissertation is to investigate more deeply two important process variables within the group of adolescents with divorced parents:

their perceptions of parental divorce conflict and their perceptions of their relationships with parents and stepparents.

Additionally, because divorce may have consequences of various types: economic consequences, psychological and physical consequences (influencing the psycho-physical well-being of adolescents, including adjustment problems) and consequences on relations between parents and their children, the concept of well-being is considered an important compass for the present dissertation. The development of advanced well-being indicators is needed to describe the reality of post-divorce family life, including the views of adolescent family members. Well-being requires security of the family and its members in many aspects of everyday life. This goes beyond material security, including psychological well-being in terms of individual self-fulfillment, relationships and emotional attachments. Self-fulfillment includes the possibility of arranging family relationships in a suitable way. The Quality Of Life (QOL) paradigm is a good candidate to meet all the necessary requirements. The major argument that leads us to this conclusion is that the multidimensional and multi-axial QOL paradigm is appropriate to accommodate multiple outcomes and multiple determinants and has potential in explaining the complex nature of how divorce and post-divorce life is related to outcome measures with vulnerability in some adolescents and resiliency in others. QOL is a sensitizing notion that gives a sense of reference and guidance as to what is valued and desired from the individual's perspective (Schalock & Verdugo, 2002). Although it can be measured in a more objective and in a subjective way, this dissertation focuses solely on adolescents' subjective QOL. The latter is the aggregate of seven domains: material wellbeing, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional well-being (Cummins, 2005; Schalock & Verdugo, 2002). However, many studies operationalized children's outcomes after parental divorce only in terms of their adjustment problems. Well-being, as just described, is more than the absence of problems and measuring adolescents' subjective quality of life adds important information about their well-being beyond that provided by measures that assess only (the absence of) adjustment problems (Jozefiak, Larsson, Wichström, Wallander, & Mattejat, 2010). Therefore, a second aim in this dissertation is to zoom in on adolescents' perceived well-being (their subjective QOL and their adjustment) because this is a more comprehensive construct that also includes positive aspects, rather than a sole focus on adjustment problems.

THE ADOLESCENT AS AN AGENT WITHIN THE FAMILY: PERCEIVED MATTERING

Not only divorce research, also research on parent-child relationships has undergone an important evolution. The era of unidirectional research that considered children as the passive receivers of parenting has been fundamentally criticized (Kuczynski & Lollis, 2004), and the alternative of focusing on bi-directionality within parent-child relationships is put forward (Kuczynski, 2003). The concept of bi-directionality stresses the co-occurrence of both directions of influence, from parent to child and from child to parent, in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003; Pettit & Lollis, 1997) where both parents and children are recognized as full partners within their relationship (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Parents and children are actively contributing to the development of their relationship and each other's personal development, likewise during the transitional process of divorce. Studies adopting a bi-directional perspective stressed the importance of recognizing children's agency within parent-child relationships (Wyness, 1999). However, so far little research has focused on the role of adolescents as active agents in the functioning of families dealing with divorce (Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003). Otherwise put, we know little about the way adolescents are actively contributing to the development of post-divorce family relationships as well as to their own and their parents' development. So, next to our relationship approach and our focus on adolescents' well-being, a third aim of this dissertation is to focus on adolescents as active agents in their changing families.

The concept of children's agency is independently used in the field of psychology and sociology, but both viewpoints are compatible (Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999). Within the sociology of childhood, children are considered as active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them (Morrow, 2003). Within the psychology of childhood, children are seen as having the ability to think, interpret, initiate change and make choices in their own way (Kuczynski, 2003). Agency is therefore a multifaceted construct with a cognitive (meaning construction), motivational (autonomy) and a behavioral (action) dimension (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). Moreover, agency is not an autonomous process, it inevitably occurs in a relational context (Neale & Flowerdew, 2007). In this doctoral dissertation we focus on adolescents' meaning constructions as part of their agency (cognitive dimension) to investigate their side of co-constructing their post-divorce relationships (Pettit & Lollis, 1997). Investigating

adolescents' meaning constructions in parent-adolescent relationships post-divorce is crucially important in understanding adolescents' sense of well-being in their families (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). Therefore, we started our research with a qualitative exploration of young adolescents' meaning constructions on parental divorce in chapter 2.

The multidimensional construct of mattering

Because of their cognitive sophistication and their growing understanding of relationships, this dissertation focuses on adolescents as active meaning-makers in the context of parent-adolescent relationships and stepparent-adolescent relationships. Adolescents construct meaning about their close relationships (including significant others) and a psychological need for every human being, is constructing the belief to be important to ones' significant others. A significant other is someone who matters to us; mattering is considered the reciprocal of significance and refers to our belief that we matter to our significant others. This reciprocity means that we tend to care about those who, we believe, care about us (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In sum, a deeper investigation of adolescents' perceived mattering to parental figures meets smoothly the three proposed aims of this doctoral dissertation because it is a relational concept (1) that is supposed to increase adolescents' well-being (2) and it confirms adolescents' in their agentic position as meaning-makers (3) within family relationships.

According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) mattering to parents encompasses five components that include adolescents assurance that parents view them as important and significant, show interest in them, pay attention to them, depend on them and are concerned with their fate. Elliott, Kao and Grant (2004) describe mattering more generally as the extent to which we make a difference in the world around us. They postulate that people matter because others attend to them (awareness), invest themselves in them (importance) or look to them for resources (reliance). Marshall (2001) speaks about perceived mattering to specific others because mattering tends to imply a characteristic of a specific relationship. She defines perceived mattering as the psychological tendency to evaluate the self as significant to specific other people (e.g. parents). Mattering to specific others (interpersonal mattering) should be differentiated from a feeling of general mattering within the society. However, both constructs are interrelated (Dixon Rayle, 2005). Interpersonal mattering emerges from eye to eye

validation from specific others in intimate relationships (Josselson, 1994; Mak & Marshall, 2004) and can therefore be considered a relational component of identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996). In her validation of the perceived mattering construct, Marshall (2001) found that the construct is positively associated with having a purpose for life and a sense of relatedness. However, mattering is not the same as closeness or intimacy. While the latter terms are associated with qualities of close relationships, mattering is the individual's self-construal of his significance to specific others. Additionally, mattering appears to be distinct from global self-esteem: the latter refers to an evaluation of the self, while mattering is the perception that others notice the self (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In this dissertation, we focus on mattering within the parent-child relationship. However, divorce is a context that potentially alters the parent-child relationship (as it alters residence and care arrangements, and parental responsibilities) and as such, also adolescents' perceived mattering. Therefore, we differentiate between a divorce-specific mattering to parents and a more general mattering to parents. Chapter 2 and chapter 3 handle mainly about divorce-specific mattering to parents. That is, chapter 2 revealed in a qualitative way how important it is to have the feeling of mattering to parents while divorce arrangements are defined. Consequently, we used a quantified construct of divorce-specific mattering to parents in chapter 3. A more general measure of mattering to each parent separately is used in chapter 5.

Extant mattering research

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) were among the first ones to study adolescents' beliefs that they matter to their parents. They investigated the association between mattering to parents and diverse aspects of mental health and adjustment. Their results showed that the adolescent who feels he matters little to his parents has lower self-esteem, is more depressed and unhappy, and is more anxious and more likely to be delinquent. In more recent research, mattering was also found to be negatively associated with participants' levels of depression, anxiety and worry (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009; France & Finney, 2009) and positively with psychological well-being (France & Finney, 2009) and overall wellness (Dixon Rayle, 2005).

Mattering and self-esteem were found to be positively related (Dixon & Kurpius, 2008) and a higher mattering and self-esteem were related to higher well-being, with females feeling as if they mattered more than males (Marshall, 2001). Additionally, levels of self-esteem and mattering were found to be both significant predictors of depression and stress (Dixon & Kurpius, 2008). More specifically, in cross-sectional and longitudinal research variations in mattering have been found to be predictive of depression for females, but not for males (Taylor & Turner, 2001). Examining mattering to mother, father and friends in university students over a three year period, Marshall, Liu, Wu, Berzonsky and Adams (2010) found that only perceived mattering to mother had a significant declining slope and living arrangements were associated with mattering to friends, but not to parents. Also, adolescents who feel they matter are significantly less likely to consider suicide (Elliott, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2005) and perceived mattering to friends added to mattering to parents in explaining the variance in adolescents' psychological well-being (Marshall, 2004).

Furthermore, mattering was found to be a mediator of the link between attachment orientation and mental health (Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan, 2011), of the link between volunteering and well-being (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007), and in romantic relationships a mediation model indicated that perceived mattering to a romantic partner may help perpetuate investment in the relationship (Mak & Marshall, 2004). However, as we mentioned before, perceived mattering to parental figures has not been studied in the context of divorce. Therefore, the major focus of this dissertation is on perceived mattering of adolescents within the parent-adolescent relationship during the transition of parental divorce. Additionally, in this dissertation two different mediation models with mattering included as a mediator are investigated, one of the link between parental divorce conflict (important process variable), adolescents' understanding of the divorce and their well-being (chapter 3) and one of the link between several divorce-related factors and adolescents' well-being (chapter 5). In chapter 4 a more in-depth investigation of what mattering to both parents and stepparents means for adolescent stepfamily-members, is described.

MIXED METHOD RESEARCH WITH ADOLESCENTS

The studies described in this doctoral dissertation complete a mixed method research design. That is, both qualitative (chapter 2 and chapter 4) and quantitative methods (chapter 3 and chapter 5) are used to answer our research questions (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005). When qualitative as well as quantitative data are used to explore a research topic, researchers enrich their results in ways that only one form of data does not allow (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Using both forms of data allows, on the one hand, to gain a deeper and contextual understanding of the phenomenon of interest (i.e. adolescents' perceived mattering) and, on the other hand, it allows researchers to explore the construct's quantitative relations with other variables of interest (Hanson et al., 2005). Consequently, in this dissertation a mixed method design offers a more elaborated insight in adolescents' feeling of mattering in post-divorce families than if we only use one approach. Table 1 gives the reader an overview of the different empirical chapters in this dissertation.

Table 1

Overview of the different empirical chapters

Chapter	Methodology	Method	Age participants	N participants
2	Qualitative	Focus groups	11- & 14-yr-olds	24
3	Quantitative	Questionnaires (cross-sectional)	11-17 year	Study 1: 171 Study 2: 113
4	Qualitative	Focus groups	11-16 year	33
5	Quantitative	Questionnaires (longitudinal)	11-19 year	230

More specifically, our agency approach requires that adolescents are not seen as objects of research or as passive victims of parental divorce (Alanen, 1992), yet that they have a voice in research (Wyness, 1999). Consistent with an agentic perspective on children, adolescents are valuable participants in research and should be viewed as social actors who participate in the process of parental divorce and influence parent-adolescent relationships (Moxnes, 2003). Scholars have encouraged more qualitative

work that examines the meanings of experiences of people going through the transitions of divorce (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Therefore, in this dissertation we focus solely on adolescents' experiences and viewpoints within divorced and blended families. They can help us to understand better how they experience the transitions during and after parental divorce (Smart, 2006). For our qualitative studies (chapter 2 and chapter 4), focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate data-collection method. In qualitative research with adolescents, focus groups can be preferred to one-to-one interviews, which are assumed to be more invasive or more threatening (Barbour, 2008). For our quantitative studies (chapter 3 and chapter 5), we used computerized questionnaires as the most appropriate data-collection method. To maximize adolescents' agentic position in our research, we always offered them their own choice of participation and let them sign their own informed consent (in addition to active parental consent), we provided clear information on our research purposes and made sure the adolescents felt at ease during the research.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS: SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching goal of this doctoral dissertation was to investigate thoroughly adolescents' perceived mattering to their biological parents, and by extension their stepparents, in the post-divorce family transition(s).

Chapter 2 investigated how young adolescents experienced the process of parental divorce. Starting from their ability to actively construct meaning and their psychological need to matter to their parents, this qualitative chapter studied which meanings young adolescents construct concerning their parents' divorce and how they perceive that they matter to their parents within the divorce process.

Chapter 3, a quantitative questionnaire study, aimed at testing whether or not divorce-specific mattering could mediate the relationship between parental conflict and adolescent well-being. As discussed above, parental conflict has been defined as a factor negatively influencing adolescent well-being. In chapter 3 we explored how mattering relates to parental conflict and well-being. Our model was first tested in an explorative sample and then validated in a second sample.

Considering divorce as a series of different family transitions, **chapter 4** focused on family transitions after the divorce. More specifically, it investigated perceived mattering in parent-adolescent relationships and stepparent-adolescent relationships in stepfamilies. Several questions drove this qualitative focus-group study: first, how exactly do adolescents perceive that they matter to parents and stepparents; second, is mattering to biological parents perceived differently from mattering to stepparents; third, what are factors that create the context for the persistence or the development of an adolescent's feeling of mattering to parental figures in a stepfamily.

Chapter 5, a quantitative longitudinal survey, investigated more closely the role of perceived mattering to mother and father and its relation to adolescents' well-being in the first few years after parental divorce. Divorce-specific factors concerning adolescents' living arrangement, the amount of current parental conflict and the relationship with their stepparent(s) were, besides mattering, considered to be important in relation to adolescents' well-being post-divorce. More in particular, we hypothesized that adolescents' perceived mattering would differ between adolescents with nonresident fathers and those with co-fathers. Furthermore, we hypothesized that adolescents' perceived mattering to mother and father would mediate the relation between the divorce-specific factors and their post-divorce well-being.

The final **chapter 6** provides an overview of the main findings obtained from this doctoral research. Furthermore, limitations of the research are discussed, theoretical and clinical implications and directions for future research are described.

The present dissertation is concerned with adolescents. The reader might notice that on several occasions the terms 'children' and 'childhood' are used. There are few reasons why these terms were more appropriate than 'adolescents', including when we referred to literature on children, to known terms such as 'sociology of childhood' or 'children's agency' or when the original authors also use these terms. Chapter 2 speaks consistently about 'children' because this chapter has been accepted in a global journal on child research.

It should be noted that this dissertation consists of several manuscripts, which have been submitted for publication. One is accepted for publication, the others are currently under editorial review. Contents between the several chapters may overlap due to the fact that each manuscript should be able to stand on its own.

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**CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES
AND MEANING CONSTRUCTION ON
PARENTAL DIVORCE:
A FOCUS GROUP STUDY¹****ABSTRACT**

The global aim of this study was to explore children's narratives of parental divorce. A convenience sample, composed of 11 and 14 year old children, was recruited. A total of 22 children (12 male, 10female) participated in this focus group study. The findings show that two components seem to be really important for children during the divorce process: the ability to construct meaning about their parents' decision to divorce and their feeling to count in the process of family transition. Children expressed the need for an explanation about why parents decided to divorce and wanted to matter with regard to the decisions on their post-divorce living arrangements.

¹Based on Maes, S., De Mol, J., & Buysse A. (2011). *Children's experiences and meaning construction on parental divorce: A focus group study*. Manuscript accepted for publication in *Childhood - A Global Journal on Child Research*.

INTRODUCTION

In Flanders, more than 75.000 children face parental divorce each year and about 20% of all children have parents who live separately (Lodewijckx, 2005). The majority of children deal reasonably successfully with the divorce after an initial transition period (Kelly, 2007), showing resilience to cope with this stressful change within their family. There is nevertheless considerable variation in how children cope with family disruption (Hetherington, 2003), the research findings are mixed: while some children benefit from their new life situation, others do not fare as well in later life (Ahrons, 2007). Most child research focuses on the (negative) consequences of divorce for children (Amato & Keith, 1991), it is however argued that for children's well-being post-divorce a focus on the relationships between family members is most crucial (Moxnes, 2003). Therefore, it is not the divorce itself, but the nature of the divorce process, the changes in relationships between parents and children and the post-divorce family transitions that need to be the focus of research (Amato, 2010).

The way how children deal with this family transition is a rather unexplored area (Carobene & Cyr, 2006). So far, research is primarily based on a unidirectional, top-down 'parenting' formulation in which parents are seen as the active agents and children as passive recipients of their parents' decision to divorce. The focus is then on adjustment problems in children, ineffective parenting, parental conflict and limited parental contact (e.g. father's absence). The parent-child relationship can deteriorate for several years after a family transition because the parents are preoccupied with their personal emotions and are dealing with other strains. Diminishment of parenting is then described as a stressor for children (Kelly, 2003). In this line of outcome research the family is typically seen as a collective unit of which children are a part, rather than as individuals (Neale, 2002) who can influence their parents (De Mol & Buysse, 2008a). Such a top-down reasoning has been fundamentally criticized because it does not consider the child as agentic within the family (Kuczynski & Lollis, 2004).

A bidirectional perspective on parent-child relationships is more appropriate in this context. The concept of bi-directionality stresses the co-occurrence of both directions of influence, from parent to child and from child to parent, in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003). For both children and parents it is necessary to recognise the full person and partnership of the child in the parent-child relationship (De Mol & Buysse,

2008b). That is, the study of the parent-child relationship requires a perspective in which both parents and children are actively contributing to the development of the relationship and the personal development of one another. During a transition process, parents and children are shaping and creating themselves and each other, as well as the new family relationships. We consider children as active agents, yet in an asymmetrical power relationship with their parents (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). Children are able to think, interpret and make sense of family change in their own way (Kuczynski, 2003). Within the psychology of childhood, agency is a multifaceted construct with a cognitive (construction), behavioural (action) and motivational (autonomy) dimension (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). Understanding children's meaning constructions as part of their agency (cognitive dimension), is crucial to the study of the child in the post-divorce parent-child relationship. The concept of children's agency is independently used in psychology and sociology, however, the child as agent in sociology is entirely compatible with the child as agent in psychology (Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999). Within the sociology of childhood, children are considered as active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them (Morrow, 2003). Sociology's agency perspective overlaps with psychology's idea of construction: children do not simply internalize what happens around them, they are active producers of meaning (Corsaro, 2005).

Although they do not differ from adults in their ability to make sense of their environment, children are, at least partly, dependent on their parents to give meaning to the process of divorce, resulting from the asymmetrical power relationship children have with their parents and their different level of resources (Kuczynski et al., 1999). A change in the structure of the family can cause transformation and change in parents, children and in the parent-child relationship (Kuczynski, Pitman, & Mitchell, 2009). The relationship context – in which parents and children know each other intimately and have their influences intertwined in an interdependent long-term relationship with a past and a future – makes parents and children receptive as well as vulnerable to each other's influence (Kuczynski, 2003).

Some research provides evidence in favour of a focus on children's meaning construction concerning divorce. Smart (2006) explored the narratives that 60 children between 8 and 15 years old constructed about their post-divorce family. Some children expressed that their parents damaged their lives, not by divorcing, but by failing to divorce in the proper manner. In a study of Dunn et al. (2001), 238 children talked about

their divorce experience. Many of them reported that they were confused during the process because the changes in their family were not clearly explained. They did not understand what was happening so they concluded that the parent that left did not love them. Furthermore children stated that they had more positive feelings when given an active role in decisions about how to divide their time between their parents. Maundeni (2002) examined the extent to which children in Botswana (Africa) expressed their needs for information concerning their parents' divorce. The majority of children were dissatisfied about the informational support from their mothers. The few children who expressed satisfaction about the communication mentioned that their mothers sought their opinions, told them why they had decided to leave their fathers, and discussed the implications of the separation for their lives. These studies exemplify the crucial role of children's meaning construction in the bidirectional parent-child relationship in order to understand the child's perspective concerning divorce. More research is needed, however, because the evidence does not clearly indicate how children experience the process of divorce.

A part of the meaning construction within parent-child relationships is having the feeling to be important to each other, this is what Marshall (2001) terms *mattering*. Children want to matter to specific others, especially their parents. The perception of *mattering* develops through interpersonal interaction and may function to provide individuals with a sense of social meaning and relatedness. It can be considered a relational dimension of identity, emerging from validation by specific others (Josselson, 1994). Moreover, a feeling of *mattering* contributes to psychological well-being (Marshall & Lambert, 2006). Some divorce research indicates that children want to matter. In a qualitative study of children aged 8 to 12, Hogan, Halpenny and Greene (2003) found that children adapted best after divorce when they received reassurances from both parents of their commitment to their relationships with them. Smith, Taylor and Tapp (2003) interviewed 107 children between 7 and 18 years old about the divorce transition. These children wanted parents to listen to them, to ask them what they wanted, to be given information and not to be forced into arrangements that they did not want. Using in-depth interviews, Neale (2002) explored children's discourses on the issue of being listened to during their parents' divorce. Younger children wanted some degree of autonomy, older children attached importance to their autonomy when it came to making decisions about their personal lives. In the research of Dunn et al.

(2001) children reported more positive feelings when being given an active role in decisions about how to spend time in the two households, but they also stated that dealing with decisions that affected other family members (e.g. contact and residence) was more problematic. These studies show that children's agency including their perceived mattering concerning their post-divorce life should be acknowledged and explored more fully (Haugen, 2010).

In sum, considerable evidence suggests that the most important factor in post-divorce adjustment is not the divorce itself, but rather the nature of the divorce process. Yet, the divorce process as experienced by the child remains a fairly unexplored area and research into children's perspectives on family change and how they matter in the post-divorce parent-child relationship is limited. Using the concepts of meaning construction and mattering, this small explorative study wants to investigate which meanings children construct concerning divorce and how children feel to matter in this transition.

METHOD

The global aim of this study was to explore children's meaning constructions about their parents' divorce. Because our research question was mainly explorative and we wanted to collect a variety of views and opinions, focus groups were conducted (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). In qualitative research with children, focus groups are often preferred to one-to-one interviews, which are considered more invasive or threatening (Barbour, 2008). In a focus group four to eight participants discuss a topic thoroughly, the richness of the data and the different opinions originating during the group interactions are of particular significance in this form of investigation (Krueger, 1994).

Participants

A convenience sample composed of 11 and 14 year-old children was recruited. A total of 23 children (10 female, 13 male, $M_{age}= 12$ years) participated in the study. Age was included as a criterion as research reflects that group interactions with children are more interesting when the group members are similar in sex and age (Mauthner, 1997). Given the varied nature of the divorce process, with some parents still arguing 10 years after the actual divorce, we did not restrict the amount of time allowed since the divorce

took place. In this way, we captured the experiences of children who went through parental divorce recently as well as those further in the transition process. One parent of each child filled out a short questionnaire about their child's current living arrangement and whether he/she would consider the divorce currently adversarial.

Four focus groups with each between five to seven participants were conducted. Considering the sex of the children in the focus groups, we had two groups with boys and two groups with girls; considering the age of the children in the focus groups: two groups with 11-year-old children and two groups with 14-year-old children. The time between their parents' divorce and the time of the study ranged between one and 13 years ($M_{time} = 5.15$ years). Ten parents described the divorce as adversarial.

The variation of children's living arrangements was big. Six children were one weekend with their fathers every 14 days and lived with their mothers the rest of the time; one of these six also had dinner at his father's every Wednesday and slept there every Thursday. Two children were one weekend with their mothers every 14 days and lived with their fathers the rest of the time. Six children lived full time with their mothers, the contact with their fathers ranged between meeting once per year and once per month. Seven children alternated living at their mothers' and at their fathers': five changed every week, one changed every three days and one lived one week at father's place and three weeks at mother's place. Two children only saw one parent during holidays because he/she was living abroad, they lived at the other parent's the rest of the time.

Procedure

Children were recruited through public media (e.g. a call on a children's TV channel) and through snowball sampling. They were asked whether they wanted to take part in a discussion group with children of the same sex to discuss the topic 'Children and their parents' divorce'. Participation was only open to children who had been confronted with parental divorce. In each focus group it was assured that all children were strangers to one another.

Since 1995, the standard rule in Belgium allows divorced parents to exercise joint parental authority over their children. Consequently, we assumed that the permission of one parent for the child's participation included the consent of the other and included children in our research with the written informed consent of one parent. By using this

legally defined rule, we avoided any problems with parents. All the participating children signed a personal informed consent that explained the research aims in clear language. The focus groups took place in a university room and they lasted between 90 and 110 minutes. The children of each focus group only gathered for one session. Before the group discussion started the children were once again clearly informed about the aims of the research and their right to quit participation without any justification. Each focus group was audio taped to ensure that participants' comments were recorded verbatim. Talking with children for research purposes in general (Mauthner, 1997), and especially with children who experienced parental divorce has to be done carefully. Attention was given to welcoming the children and making them feel at ease. To meet the criteria for validity and reliability, a standardized topic guide was used.

The interview consisted of three phases: first, the moderator (the third author) introduced herself to the group and explained the aims of the interview as well as the house rules, including confidentiality issues; second, all participants introduced themselves to the group (name, age, hobbies, time since parents divorced). In the third phase a topic guide was used, but without imposing too much structure on the participants. It was important to capture as many spontaneous descriptions as possible, therefore we asked children broad, explorative questions to capture their narratives about the divorce. In the first part of the third phase the children were introduced to three global topics: how did they experience the divorce, how did they deal with it, what could help other children going through the same situation. Open-ended questions were asked, always including, first, a general question followed by more specific probes. An example of a general question is: 'What do you remember about the period when your parents were divorcing?', an example of a specific probe: 'Do you remember the exact moment when your parents told you about the divorce?'. In the second part of the third phase a hypothetical question was asked: 'If tomorrow your best friend's parents announced they were getting a divorce and you could not stop the divorce, what would be the most ideal situation for your friend?'. This question aims to indirectly give us information on how children experience the divorce process. After this, the moderator gave a summary of what was said and the children could give feedback. Finally, the group discussion ended with the opportunity to ask questions and give remarks. Children were told what was going to happen with the data and they received a small present.

Data analysis

It is important to first mention that gathering the data proved to be a very emotional and rewarding process because of the way the children shared many rich and touching stories with the researcher. The children listened to each other carefully, took up on each others' stories or aligned themselves with what was said by others. They were also interested in how others solved divorce-related problems (e.g. dilemma of where to celebrate New Year's eve). Data were triangulated over three researchers, the authors of this paper, to reduce potential bias. The authors analyzed the data using essentialist thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). An essentialist or realist method focuses on the experiences and meanings of the children. Consistent with our agentic perspective on children, the aim of this study was to display children's voices. Therefore we stayed close to the words of the children during the coding process to resist interpretation biased by adultism.

The focus group data were transcribed verbatim and the data analysis process was completed in several steps. The initial stage of the analysis was concept-driven: meaning construction and mattering were used as guiding concepts; the elaboration was, however, fully based on data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2008). In a first step all three authors individually read the most elaborated transcript thoroughly and repeatedly. After a first reading, pieces of text concerning the same topics were marked and short notes about the content were written in the margins. From these notes the first themes were identified, and subsequently written on a separate sheet of paper and given an initial code. Next, the authors discussed the process of analyzing the first group and compared lists of themes, searching for common themes and connections from which to extract super ordinate concepts. The researchers discussed the similarities and differences among their derived categories, including exemplars of the different categories. The themes of the first group were used to help orient the subsequent analyses of the three other focus groups: however, new themes were still discovered using the same methods as in the first group. By the end of each group discussion the moderator gave a summary using the words of the children and asked for their feedback. This was used as a first step to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, recognizing the children as full agentic beings with own experiences and meanings. At the same time special attention was paid to the limiting nature of summaries as many other themes emerge out of the data. Differences in meaning were discussed until consensus was reached. Finally, the

authors took the analyses of all the groups, identified their commonalities, refined the themes and chose exemplars for the final research report. The analyses had the aim of finding the essence of the experiences, getting a view on the unique character of children's meaning construction about their parents' divorce.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed how the three main topics (meaning construction, feeling of mattering and ideal divorce scenario) can be interpreted. These themes with subthemes will be discussed with reference to verbatim quotes from the different focus groups.

Constructing meaning of parental divorce

Our analysis divulged how important it is for children to understand what is happening within their families. Clearly, the divorce of their parents was a significant event in all the children's lives. In each focus group children remembered the specific moment their parents told them about the divorce. For example:

"On a Saturday my mum woke me up and told me we were going to move out, that we were going to leave daddy." (Boy, 11)

"I still remember the day that my dad was taking his stuff and left. It was around Christmas." (Girl, 14)

The children had an understanding of the situation, but to different extents depending on the child. In several cases parental conflicts had served as a signal to children that something was going wrong, in other cases parents explained directly to the child that they were getting a divorce. Besides conflict and explicit conversation as a clear signal, several children talked about less clear signals. They explained they were 'sensing' it, or they were told implicitly (e.g. parent wanted to watch a particular movie with them). One 14-year-old girl said:

"For a long time I had been sensing it and I had already been thinking about what would happen if they divorced."

However, sensing that a divorce might be possible is not the same as understanding why it happens. Children talked extensively about their ideas concerning the reasons for their parents' divorce. The analysis revealed that this is definitely an important issue for children. The children highlighted the importance for them of understanding the divorce and having an understandable story. For example:

"I have been seeing a psychologist for 5 years now. She is trying to arrange a talk with everyone because I don't understand anything about it and I really want to know." (Girl, 14)

"The first thing I asked is why they wanted to divorce and what arrangement they would make. I wanted to know all the facts. If I know what exactly happened and I can picture it, then it feels good." (Boy, 14)

From the accounts of the children it became clear that an understandable story is created in dialogue with parents in the first place. However, speaking about the divorce with a teacher, a stepparent, a grandparent, a psychologist or a friend also helped children to better understand the situation. Moreover, creating an understandable story seems to be an iterative and dialoguing process: some children expressed the need to speak about it several times.

Seeing and understanding that the divorce is the best solution for their parents helps children cope with the situation, as this quote exemplifies:

"I understand it's better for them to be divorced because I know that otherwise they would argue again all the time" (Girl, 14)

Some children named a very clear and for them understandable reason of their parents' divorce: violence or continuous conflict between parents, adultery or parents not being in love anymore. In several groups it was mentioned that an understanding of the situation became deeper after some years.

Some children were not understanding the situation at all, making it more difficult for them to accept it. One 14-year-old girl expressed that she still did not understand why her parents divorced because they both told her completely different reasons for the divorce. Having an understandable story seems to help children to cope with the different emotions they are faced with, sometimes even years after divorce.

The feeling of mattering

There were a number of subthemes related to the concept of mattering. First, the children postulated firmly that the decision to divorce is fundamentally unfair to them. In general they preferred to see their parents together than separated:

"The fact that they divorce means that they only take us into account for the half of it." (Boy, 14)

"I think they are still unhappy both...so for them it wouldn't help to be together, but for the kids it would." (Girl, 14)

Second, the unfairness is related to a massive feeling of 'I did not count'. Many children stated clearly that they did not have the feeling that they counted when it came to their parents' decision to divorce. However, some children noticed their parents' efforts to try to stay together 'for the kids' and interpreted them as a sign of being taken into account. For example:

"My father had a girlfriend, but he didn't want to divorce my mum because he was afraid that she would get the kids and not see us anymore. He didn't want to take the decision to divorce because of that." (Girl, 14)

The more positive side is that to the extent that they do not matter in the decision, children know they are not to blame for the divorce:

"For me it was very important that mum told me that it was not my fault that they were separating." (Girl, 11)

Third, the feeling to count - to matter - in response to the decisions about living arrangements is fundamentally different from the feeling in response to the decision to divorce. Unlike the decision to divorce, youngsters do feel that they are taken into account when their living arrangements are discussed, but to differing extents. Many different living arrangements were sketched in the groups: from children who had no contact at all with their biological father, to all kinds of weekend arrangements, to fully shared custody. There was a clear contrast between children who felt that their parents took them into account in working out a living arrangement and children who did not have this feeling.

The children who have the feeling of being taken into account have the idea that their parents worked out an arrangement that is good for them. Being content with the arrangements had nothing to do with the kind of arrangement (that varied substantially within this group), nor with having an active influence on the decisions. On the contrary, children explicitly stated that it is hard for them when they are asked about their preferences. As an 11-year-old boy stated:

"I love both my parents so I don't want to choose between them, they should decide themselves."

This has to do with the idea that parents make arrangements which reveal that they know what is important for their children, as this quote demonstrates:

"I don't have problems with the fact that they are divorced, they arranged everything nicely and I feel ok with that." (Boy, 14)

The decisions made by parents concerning children's living arrangements show the children that they matter to their parents. Any living arrangements that signals this, is perceived by the children as a good arrangement. Some children got the opportunity to comment on a proposal of their parents. For example:

"My parents discussed an arrangement and asked us whether we liked it. They also told us that this arrangement would not be forever, so it might change." (Girl, 11)

Sometimes children in this group even had positive thoughts about the divorce, for example: there are fewer conflicts, they have more family or a newborn sister. However, they still regretted not doing things together as one family anymore and disliked not always living in the same place and its practical consequences.

Opposite to the latter, several youngsters in different focus groups did not feel they were being taken into account regarding the living arrangements decisions. They felt that the way their parents arranged their post-divorce life had nothing to do with who they were or what they preferred. In other words, they had the feeling that their parents do not know what is important to them:

"They didn't really take me into account. My dad doesn't even know how I like to spend my free time, he never asks about it. He hardly knows me." (Girl, 14)

These children really suffer from the feeling of not mattering to their parents. Some of them came to the focus group with drawings they made, letters they had written to the judge to ask for different arrangements, one child had written a book about the divorce and wanted to get it published. All of these gestures signaled 'please listen to me, take me into account'. The story of these children is fundamentally sad. A few children had professional guidance (e.g. a psychologist). The feelings of the children in this group about making a difference and feeling counted differ greatly from those who are content with their living arrangements. In this group, children report that at least one parent is not listening to them. In addition, sometimes even professionals involved were perceived as 'not listening', adding to the feeling of 'not mattering'. An 11-year-old girl said:

"I have been writing letters to the judge. He answered, but he didn't really listen."

For these children the feeling of being listened to is very important, since they often do not feel that they are being taken into account at all. In some cases children had an explicit preference to live with one parent (mostly the mother). In other cases children did not see the divorce as a solution to the parents' problems. For example:

"They are divorced now, but they still fight and nothing is solved." (Boy, 11)

To sum up, the data revealed that feeling counted does not necessarily mean that children take part in decision-making, but that children feel that they matter when their parents arranged things in a way that feels good for them. For some children this meant that they could continue doing things important to them, like sports or hobbies; others mentioned that they were able to have a good relationship with both of their parents. Additionally, in the focus groups with 14-year old children the idea of being able to decide yourself about your own living arrangements was brought forward: some children stated that at a certain age you should be able to decide yourself, others expressed they already decided themselves when they wanted to visit one of their parents.

The ideal divorce scenario

In the focusgroups children were asked what the ideal divorce scenario would be for their best friend, given that the parents of their friend were separating. The most vital advice they gave to parents was to keep the divorce process as short as possible and not to frustrate each other. Children did not like it when parents argued all the time and thought that both parents had to make concessions. Next, children stressed that parents could do some essential things to make the divorce more bearable. First, parents should give a clear reason for their divorce, this explanation should be understandable and not a lie. A 14-year-old girl was quite firm about this:

“They should be able to do that. In the end they were married, they have loved each other and they made kids together!”

Second, parents should make arrangements in a proper way. Children made a clear distinction between the message of divorce and the arrangements (e.g. financial decisions, arrangements about the children). An 11-year-old girl said:

“The arrangements concerning the children should be best discussed with them the day after, first we need time to recover a bit.”

The children also had some recommendations concerning their living arrangements. They agreed that a child should have a say in where he/she will stay and how many times he/she can visit the other parent. The child should be able to make some decisions, but not too many. Parents should not move too far from each other’s homes. They have to take into account practical issues and should show some flexibility about the child’s arrangement. A 14-year-old girl explained:

“If a child has an argument with one of his parents, it should be possible to contact the other parent, for example by phone.”

Children also agreed that during the process of divorce, parents should be attentive to their children because they are going through a difficult situation. Parents should not tell their children bad things about the other parent. Furthermore it was important for children not to be confronted immediately with a new ‘mother’ or ‘father’, and new partners should get along with the children. Although most of the children’s recommendations were directed to parents, children also thought about their own

contribution to this process, however in a less extensive way. First, they stated that children should never take sides and, second, that they should always treat their parents with respect. The children were aware of the fact that their parents were having a hard time as well.

DISCUSSION

The global aim of this study was to explore children's narratives of parental divorce using focus groups with children. Results showed that two components in this transition process are highly important to children: having an understandable story about the divorce and having a feeling of mattering when it comes to their living arrangements. Children made a clear distinction between their parents' decision to divorce and the arrangements made as a consequence of the divorce. Each child assessed both meaning construction and its feeling to matter differently.

Decision to divorce

Children did not have a feeling of mattering in their parents' decision to divorce. Although this decision is hard to accept for children, from a mental health perspective it is good that children feel that they do not matter in this parental decision to the extent that they feel they are not to blame. From the literature we know that self-blame is an important mediator that explains why children suffer from parental conflicts (see Fosco & Grych, 2007). However, although unfair in their eyes, the children in this study are able to live with the parental decision to divorce, especially if they understand why the decision was made. This result is congruent with Maundeni's (2002) research in which children stressed the importance of knowing why their parents divorced and what the implications were on their lives. Dunn et al. (2001) also stress that children need clear explanations about the changes in their family. If children do not understand why their parents divorced, they make up their own story up with things they know, increasing the danger that children will blame themselves. This can eventually result in emotional distress and even in need for psychological guidance (Healy, Stewart, & Copeland, 1993).

In sum, with respect to the decision to divorce, it is important that parents take full responsibility for their own decisions, that children do not feel any blame and that

parents give their children an understandable story about why they split up and what will change in their family.

Living arrangements

In contrast to the divorce decision, the children expressed a high need to matter with regard to post-divorce living arrangements. This, however, does not mean that parents should give children the power to decide about the arrangements. On the contrary, having this power is confusing for children and potentially puts them in a conflict of loyalty (Dunn et al., 2001). Rather, it means that parents signal to the child that they are taking him/her into account, that he/she matters to them. From a child's perspective, a good living arrangement is one from which they can deduce that parents know what is important to them, and that signals that it is about their interests, not the parents'. Here, parents have a unique opportunity to show their children that they matter to them. For children's well-being it is important to know that they matter to their parents (Marshall, 2001). If they do not sense this, children feel as if they disappear in the whole divorce process, as if they do not count at all. In this case, children are also more likely to assert their right to decide themselves (Neale, 2002).

Limitations, future research and implications

Despite interesting results, this study has some important limitations. Only a small self-selected group of 11- and 14-year old children took part in the focus groups. This makes the results quite specific and not generalizable to children of other ages going through parental divorce. Moreover, the sample consisted merely of white, middle-class children. Children in a different cultural context might experience parental divorce in different ways; however, our results were quite similar to what African children experienced (Maundeni, 2002). Another limitation includes the use of retrospective data, wherein all the children were looking back to the period of the actual divorce. Unfortunately, in some of these cases the divorce process was still not completely finished. We were, however, mainly interested in their current narratives. Although to analyze the experiences of parental divorce more clearly, it could be interesting to question children who are actually going through the transition (Kuczynski et al., 2009).

Future research needs to follow children longitudinally starting from the period of divorce to examine how children cope with multiple family transitions over time (e.g. being part of a stepfamily). The process of divorce includes several transitions and the divorce itself is just the first transition. However, it should be kept in mind that not all the changes that young people face are directly related to parental divorce. Therefore, Flowerdew and Neale (2003) argued to decenter divorce and also investigate children's other life challenges.

Taking these limitations into account, we do believe that the findings of this study provide new insight into how children experience their parents' divorce. Children told us how important it is for them to feel that they matter to their parents. It was clear that children, like adults, are meaning makers. They need to understand what is happening with their family.

These findings suggest two implications to practitioners working with families in divorce. First, professionals (e.g. divorce mediators) can guide parents in their process of meaning construction and help them to create an understandable story to tell to their children. Second, professionals can make parents attentive to the fact that they should not forget their children during the divorce, children need to feel that they matter. Within the divorce process it is therefore important that professionals look through the eyes of both parents and children, and that they teach parents to look through the eyes of their own children.

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**EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE MEDIATORS
OF ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING
TO INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT
FOLLOWING DIVORCE¹****ABSTRACT**

Parental conflict is one of the strongest predictors of adolescents' maladjustment after divorce. The aim of this study was to investigate the putative mediating processes by means of compatible theoretical frameworks (the cognitive-contextual model and the emotional security theory) to gain better understanding of the link between interparental conflict and adolescents' well-being in families that had recently divorced. This study is the first to investigate an integrated model in the context of parental divorce. Because of the changing divorce context, this integrated model was also expanded with divorce-specific and context-specific measures. In a first explorative sample 171 11-17 -year-old adolescents took part, and in a second sample (two years after the initial divorce) 113 11-19-year-old adolescents participated. The results of the updated integrated process model suggest that divorce-specific mattering is a mediator variable and negative internal representations and emotional reactivity are important underlying mechanisms in the association between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being in families who have recently divorced. The results of the second sample suggest that divorce-specific mattering as well as general mattering to parents are important processes.

¹ Based on Maes, S., Brondeel, R., & Buysse, A. (2011). *Emotional and cognitive mediators to adolescent well-being to interparental conflict following divorce*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of children experience parental divorce. Divorce induces a drastic change within the family and causes at least a temporarily crisis in children's lives (Kelly & Emery, 2003). The disruption caused by divorce can cause behavioral problems and lower psychological well-being for children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Potter, 2010), but in the absence of sustained or new stresses most of them recover within two or three years following divorce (Hetherington, 2005). Parental divorce is, however, not a single event, but an evolving family process and we need to investigate the process variables that influence children's post-divorce well-being (O'Brien, 2005). One of the well-known factors that increase the likelihood of sustained disadvantages for children after parental divorce is continuing parental conflict (Coleman & Glenn, 2010). Even regardless of the family type in which a child is living, continuing parental conflict is one of the strongest predictors for child maladjustment (Bernardini & Jenkins, 2002) and consequently one of the most important process variables before, during and after divorce. Moreover, the magnitude of the association between parental conflict and child maladjustment is twice as large as the effect of divorce on children (Buehler et al., 1997). The purpose of this study was therefore to focus on how exactly parental conflict influences children's well-being in the initial period after parental divorce.

The link between parental conflict in nuclear families and children's well-being is well established within research (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Zimet & Jacob, 2001). Two influential conceptual models developed in the 1990s, try to explain why parental conflict is so devastating for children. First, the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990) states that children's understanding and their appraisals of conflict mediate the link between parental conflict and child adjustment. The emphasis in this model is on children's cognitions concerning parental conflict: the degree of perceived threat and their attributions of blame. If children feel very threatened by parental conflict, or they blame themselves for it, they appear to be less well adjusted. The emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994) on the other hand, puts greater emphasis on children's emotionality and suggests that concerns about their emotional security play an organizing and directing role in their reaction to conflict. Children evaluate parental conflict in relation to the implications it has for their emotional security, and difficulties in preserving their

emotional security may then lead to adjustment problems. Children's sense of emotional security is undermined by threats to the harmony and stability of family relationships; in this model putative mediators are difficulties regulating emotions, maladaptive strategies (involvement, avoidance) and negative mental representations (Davies & Cummings, 1998). Both conceptual models are compatible because they recognize similar process components, but the cognitive-contextual framework puts more emphasis on cognitions whereas the emotional security framework puts more emphasis on emotions. Both models try in particular to explain the impact of marital conflict on children's adjustment.

To date, cross-sectional (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Grych et al., 2000) as well as longitudinal research (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003) with intact families supports the mediating role of cognitive and emotional responses in the association between parental conflict and child maladjustment. Some studies tested integrated models (Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007; Davies et al., 2002; Fosco & Grych, 2008; Mann & Gilliom, 2004) and found evidence for the importance of both cognitive and emotional responses in one model.

However, few studies have examined these process models in the context of divorce conflict. To our knowledge, only one study (Gerard, Buehler, Franck, & Anderson, 2005) used a sample that included children of divorced families. These researchers focused on cognitive appraisals and found that the association between children's perceptions of parental conflict and perceived threat was stronger for children in intact families. Immediate threat because of conflict is probably lower in divorced families because parents are no longer living together, but parental disagreements during divorce are more likely to be child-related and therefore children may be more likely to blame themselves for causing conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1993). The lack of process research on parental conflict during divorce is a gap in the conflict literature. The first aim of the present study is to fill this gap by investigating an integrated model (i.e. an integration of the cognitive-contextual model and the emotional security hypothesis) in a sample of adolescents from recently divorced families.

In addition, we complement the existing models with divorce-specific and context-specific measures. The societal context in which people divorce nowadays is quite different from the context in the 1990s, the period in which both conceptual models for marital conflict were developed. Because of the increasing divorce rate in the decades

since then, parental divorce has become a more common experience for adolescents living in Western countries (Amato, 2001). Moreover, several Western societies have taken policy measures to limit conflict or its impact on children during divorce procedures. More specifically, more gender-neutral laws (reflected in acts that favor joint physical custody) and no-fault-legislation are now common in most Western countries. No-fault-legislation allows divorce with or without mutual consent (Beck & Sales, 2000), and former partners no longer need to prove fault during a legal procedure, which, in turn, may result in less conflictual divorces. Additionally, divorce mediation has been internationally recognized and stimulated as an alternative to the more adversarial court system. Mediation is focused on minimizing parental conflict and stimulates cooperation with respect to parenting and decision-making, which should positively influence adolescents' adjustment to divorce (Emery, 1994).

Because the societal context and the context of divorce have both profoundly changed, the second aim of the present paper is to complement the current conceptual models that mainly discuss marital conflict between parents, with divorce- and context-specific constructs. We expect the degree of parental conflict that accompanies divorce today to be somewhat less pronounced compared with one or two decades ago. We also predict that additional factors now predict adolescents' well-being. Arguments in favor of these assumptions are outlined below.

Given adolescents' cognitive sophistication and their growing understanding of relationships, it is important to treat them as active meaning-constructors. Not only is understanding parental conflict (Grych et al., 2000) important, but for adolescents of divorced families understanding the divorce is also of importance. As active agents (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997) they are able to make sense of family change in their own way (Kuczynski, 2003). Owing, however, to their asymmetrical power relationship with their parents and their different level of resources (Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999), they are at least partly dependent on their parents in terms of understanding the divorce. Research shows that adolescents want to understand why their parents divorce (Maes, De Mol, & Buysse, in press; Maundeni, 2002). When family change is not clearly explained, some adolescents even conclude that the parent who leaves does not love them (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001), which could negatively influence their well-being.

Besides understanding why parents divorce, adolescents need to feel that they are still important to their parents. This is what Marshall (2001) described as *mattering*. The fact that one invests time and energy in someone else in order to promote his/her welfare, gives the latter the feeling that he/she matters (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004). A sense of being important to others has been found to be a mediator between attachment orientation and young adults' mental health (Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan, 2011). A feeling of *mattering* to parents contributes to adolescents' psychological well-being (Marshall & Lambert, 2006) and is predicted to be important before, during and after parental divorce. In an interview study by Smith, Taylor, and Tapp (2003) children whose parents had divorced, wanted their parents to listen to them and ask them what they wanted and did not want to be forced into arrangements that they did not agree with. In a focus group study by Maes, De Mol, and Buysse (in press), children expressed the importance of noticing that they matter to their parents when living arrangements are decided. Adolescents' feeling of *mattering* during the divorce has not, however, been explored in relation to their well-being. It can be hypothesized that a feeling of *mattering* to parents during the divorce also mediates the relation between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being in recently divorced families.

In sum, the present paper complements the literature in two ways. First, an integrative test of the two leading conceptual models (the cognitive-contextual and the emotional security framework) linking parental conflict to adolescent well-being is provided in a sample of adolescents from recently divorced families. Second, the conceptual models are complemented with three factors that are potentially important given the rapidly changing societal context in which divorce occurs. First, we include adolescents' understanding of divorce as a predictor of their well-being. Second, adolescents' feeling of *mattering* to parents is added as a mediator. Third, adolescents' subjective quality of life is considered to be an important dependent variable. In most studies on parental conflict and divorce the outcome variable has been operationalized in terms of adjustment problems. Well-being, however, is more than the absence of problems and measuring children's subjective quality of life adds important information about their well-being beyond that provided by measures that focus on problems (Jozefiak, Larsson, Wichström, Wallander, & Mattejat, 2010). Therefore in this study we measured adolescents' quality of life in addition to their adjustment problems. Our

hypothesis is that parental conflict and adolescents' understanding of parental divorce are both associated with adolescents' well-being (in terms of their quality of life and adjustment problems). Additionally, we hypothesize that this association is mediated by the proposed cognitive (threat and self-blame) and emotional (emotional reactivity, regulation of exposure, internal representations) processes and by adolescents' feeling of mattering to parents.

A first test of the model with the putative mediators was provided in an explorative sample and in a second sample we focused on the importance of mattering to parents.

EXPLORATIVE SAMPLE

METHOD

Participants

In the present study 171 adolescents (53.2% females) with a mean age of 14.03 years ($SD = 1.98$, age range: 11-17) took part. Current education level was sixth grade of primary school (19.3%), vocational high school (19.3%), technical high school (25.7%), general high school (35.1%) and college/university (0.6%). Most of the participating adolescents' parents (70.2%) filed their divorce with mutual consent, 29.2% of the adolescents' parents chose a unilateral divorce and 0.6% of the parents were not legally married at the time of separation. The adolescents reported on their current living arrangements: in a two-week period 15.9% lived full-time at their mother's house, 31.2% spent more than 70% of the time at their mother's house, 12.9% spent less than 70%, but more than 50% of the time at their mother's house, 28.2% lived half the time at their mother's house and the other half at their father's house, 2.4% spent more than 50% but less than 70% of the time at their father's house, 1.8% spent more than 70% of the time at their father's house and 7.6% lived full-time at their father's house.

Procedure

In the present study, the adolescent subsample of the Interdisciplinary Project for the Optimization of Divorce Trajectories (the ePod Study) was used. This study is a Flemish research project that investigates the determinants of the quality of life of divorcing adults and their minor children (11-17-years-olds). All adults who divorced

between March 2008 and March 2009 in four major courts in Flanders were asked in court if they were interested in participating in a study on divorce. While people were in the court waiting room, researchers distributed a flyer with information about the study, including a reply card. On the reply card people could fill out their contact information if they were interested in participating in the study. If so, they were also asked to indicate whether they had a child between 11 and 17 years old who could also participate. Participation of the adolescents depended on the permission of at least one participating parent and on the adolescent's own consent. Since 1995, joint parental authority has been a standard condition when parents divorce in Belgium. For some small decisions about their child (like participating in a non-intrusive study) it was assumed that the permission of one parent includes the consent of the other. When, however, one parent explicitly refused child participation on the reply card, but the other parent gave permission, the adolescent was not contacted. In this way problems with parents were avoided.

In total 460 parents with children between 11 and 17 years old indicated on the reply card that their child could participate. Only 437 parents were effectively contacted, however, because of missing or wrong contact data and 52.2% ($n = 228$) of them were still interested in participating when contacted. Non-participation of both parents implied the non-participation of their child. Some participating parents ($n = 51$) changed their mind about the possible participation of their child when contacted, mostly because of a problematic relationship with their ex-partner. Finally, 177 parents gave permission for the participation of their child.

Adolescents were contacted by phone so the research goals could be explained simply and an appointment could be made for filling out the computerized questionnaire at their home. At this stage six adolescents were not interested in taking part in the study. Informed consents were obtained from both participating parents and adolescents. During the adolescent's completion of the computerized questionnaire, a researcher was present in case the adolescent required assistance in comprehending the questions or needed help using the computer. The completion of the questionnaires took between 45 minutes and two hours. All participating adolescents received a cinema ticket as a reward for their participation.

Measures

Demographics. Gender, age of the adolescent, education, parents' divorce procedure, and adolescent's living arrangements were obtained by specific questions in the computerized questionnaire.

Interparental Conflict. Adolescents' reports on the Conflict Properties subscale of the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) were used to assess their exposure to interparental conflict during divorce. This superordinate scale of the CPIC consists of three subscales measuring the frequency, intensity and resolution of interparental conflict (e.g., "My parents are often mean to each other even when I'm around"; "Even after my parents stop arguing they stay mad at each other"). Items are answered on a three-point scale consisting of True, Sort of true, and False; higher scores on the scales indicate conflict that is more frequent, aggressive and poorly resolved. The three subscales demonstrate good reliability as indexed by test-retest reliability (Grych et al., 1992) and by internal consistency and α coefficients for the three subscales ranged from .79 to .86 in the present study. The Conflict Properties subscale showed significant correlation ($r = 0.40, p < .01$) with the conflict items of the Quality of Relationship Inventory (QRI; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991; Verhofstadt, Buysse, Rosseel, & Peene, 2006) assessed from the parents.

Adolescents' Understanding of Parental Divorce. Two self-constructed items assessed adolescents' understanding of their parents' divorce ("I understand why my parents are divorced", "My parents explained to me why they are divorced"). Respondents were asked to score these statements on a five-point Likert scale from completely disagree to completely agree. The correlation between the two items was .52 ($p < .01$).

Cognitive Appraisals. The Threat and Self-Blame scales from the CPIC (Grych et al., 1992) were used to assess adolescents' appraisals. The 12-item Threat scale assesses the extent to which adolescents feel threatened by and unable to cope with parental conflict (e.g., "When my parents argue I worry about what will happen to me"). The nine-item Self-Blame scale assesses the degree to which adolescents blame themselves for parental conflict and perceive conflict as child-related (e.g., "My parents' arguments are usually about me"). Items are answered on a three-point scale consisting of *True, Sort of*

true, and *False*; higher scores on these scales mean stronger appraisals of threat and self-blame. The α coefficients were .79 for Threat and .78 for Self-Blame.

Emotional Security. Adolescents' reports on the Security in the Interparental Subsystem scales (SIS; Davies, Forman, Rasi, & Stevens, 2002) were used to assess adolescents' strategies for preserving emotional security in the context of interparental conflict. This self-report measure consists of 37 statements that are rated on a four-point Likert scale from Not at all true of me to Very true of me (e.g., "After my parents argue, it ruins my whole day"; "When my parents argue, I believe that they can work out their differences"). Items are summed to combine seven subscales (Emotional Reactivity, Behavioral Dysregulation, Avoidance, Involvement, Destructive Family Representations, Conflict Spillover Representations, Constructive Family Representations (reverse coded)) and three superordinate scales (Emotional Reactivity, Regulation of Exposure to Parent Affect, Internal Representations). Evidence for the convergent and discriminant validity of the SIS was provided elsewhere (Davies et al., 2002). For the seven subscales in the current sample α coefficients ranged from .66 to .85.

Divorce-specific Mattering. Four self-constructed items tapped adolescents' feelings of mattering to their parents during the divorce: "My parents take me into account in considering the divorce arrangements", "My parents have devised an arrangement (where I live, who I live with, ...) that is good for me", "If I would want to change something to the arrangement (e.g. where I live, who I live with, ...), I could do so", and "I would have liked that my parents took me more into account considering the divorce arrangements". Respondents were asked to score these statements on a five-point Likert scale from completely disagree to completely agree. The α coefficient for these four items was .71.

Subjective Well-Being. Adolescents' reports on the satisfaction items of the subjective subscale of the Comprehensive Quality of Life scale (ComQOL; Cummins, 1997) were used to assess their subjective well-being. These seven items ask about adolescents' satisfaction with seven life domains (material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, place in community and emotional well-being); two questions about satisfaction with the future were added (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your possibilities for your future?", "How satisfied are you with the possible

future?”). Respondents were asked to score these nine satisfaction items on a 10-point Likert scale from completely dissatisfied to completely satisfied. The ComQOL has been well validated (Cummins, 1996; Gullone & Cummins, 1999); the α coefficient for the nine items was .85.

Adjustment Problems. Adolescents’ reports on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; van Widenfelt, Goedhart, Treffers, & Goodman, 2003) were used to assess their adjustment. The SDQ is a behavioral screening questionnaire with five subscales (Hyperactivity, Conduct Problems, Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Prosocial Behavior): each item is rated as not true, somewhat true or certainly true. The first four subscales are summed to generate a Total Difficulties score. The SDQ has been validated against other measures of behavioral problems, including the Child Behavior Checklist (Goodman & Scott, 1999). The α coefficient for the Total Difficulties score was .70.

Analytical Procedures

Bivariate associations among the study variables were tested with Pearson correlation analyses in SPSS 17. The integrated model was examined with Structural Equation Modeling (*MPlus* 6.11; Muthén & Muthén, 2001). Indirect effects of the proposed mediators were examined with the bootstrap resampling method because of our small sample, the non-normality of the data and our multiple mediator model (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The bootstrap procedure involves repeated sampling from the data set (we used 5000 bootstrap samples) and estimating the indirect effects for each ($n = 171$) resampled data set (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Model fit was evaluated with chi-square and two fit indices. A non-significant chi-square indicated a good model fit. Fit indices such as the comparative fit index (CFI) range from zero to 1.00, with a cutoff of .95 or higher showing a well-fitting model and 0.90 indicating an adequate fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was also computed: a value below .05 indicated a good model fit and a value below .08 indicated an adequate fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Means and standard deviations are provided for each measure (see Table 1). As most of the adolescents' parents in this study divorced with mutual consent and owing to the non-clinical sample, scores for interparental conflict and adolescents' adjustment problems were low to moderate. Adolescents' scores for their understanding of parental divorce were good and scores for adolescents' subjective well-being were within a normal range of 75% to 85% (Laaksonen et al., 2008).

Intercorrelations among study variables are presented in Table 1. Parental conflict demonstrated no correlation with Regulation of Exposure to Affect (REA) and adolescents' adjustment, but showed small to strong correlations with all other variables (r s ranged from $-.16$ ($p < .05$) to $.53$ ($ps < .01$)). Adolescents' understanding of parental divorce showed moderate correlations (r s ranged from $-.23$ to $.28$, $ps < .01$) with divorce-specific Mattering, adolescents' adjustment and adolescents' subjective well-being. The proposed mediator variables were generally interrelated. Threat was moderately correlated with Self-Blame, REA and Mattering (r s ranged from $-.25$ to $.45$, $ps < .01$) and strongly correlated with Emotional Reactivity (ER, $r = .63$, $p < .01$) and Internal Representations (IR, $r = .57$, $p < .01$). Self-Blame was moderately correlated with ER, IR and Mattering (r s ranged from $-.24$ to $.40$, $ps < .01$), but not with REA ($r = .13$, ns). ER was moderately correlated with REA, IR and Mattering (r s ranged from $-.26$ to $.44$, $ps < .01$) and REA was moderately correlated with IR ($r = .40$, $p < .01$), but not with Mattering ($r = -.09$, ns). Mattering was moderately correlated with IR ($r = -.35$, $p < .01$). Finally, the mediating variables were moderately correlated with adolescents' adjustment (r s ranged from $-.30$ to $.35$, $p < .01$), only REA not being correlated ($r = .00$, ns), and with adolescents' subjective well-being (r s ranged from $-.17$ ($p < .05$) to $.32$ ($p < .01$)), only Self-Blame ($r = -.11$, ns) and REA ($r = .09$, ns) not being correlated.

Testing the Fit of the Integrated Mediation Model

The chi-square for the model and the goodness-of-fit indices suggested this model provided an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2(50) = 82.81$, $p < .01$, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.06). The chi-square was significant, but the CFI and RMSEA indicated adequate values.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations among the Study Variables

	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Conflict (cpic)	.95 (.49)	0 - 2	-.02	.53**	.27**	.32**	.08	.52**	-.31**	.14	-.16*
2. Understanding the divorce	3.80 (1.12)	1 - 5	-	-.13	-.05	-.11	.05	-.09	.28**	-.23**	.24**
3. Threat (cpic)	.97 (.42)	0 - 2		-	.29**	.63**	.45**	.57**	-.25**	.27**	-.18*
4. Self-Blame (cpic)	.34 (.35)	0 - 2			-	.25**	.13	.40**	-.24**	.29**	-.11
5. ER (sis)	1.67 (.49)	1 - 4				-	.40**	.44**	-.26**	.35**	-.17*
6. REA (sis)	2.16 (.48)	1 - 4					-	.40**	-.09	.00	.09
7. IR (sis)	2.25 (.44)	1 - 4						-	-.35**	.31**	-.27**
8. Divorce-specific Mattering	3.65 (.99)	1 - 5							-	-.30**	.32**
9. Total Difficulties (sdq)	.62 (.29)	1 - 2								-	-.44**
10. Subjective Qol	8.27 (1.19)	1 - 10									-

Note. cpic = Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale; sis = Security in the Interparental Subsystem Scale; ER = Emotional Reactivity; REA = Regulation of Exposure to Affect; IR = Internal Representations; sdq = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; qol = Quality of Life. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Figure 1 contains the results for the test of the model predicting adolescents' well-being. The model contained three latent constructs (Meaning, Mattering and Well-being), all three being constructs new to this research area. Table 2 contains the correlations between the putative mediating variables in the SEM-model.

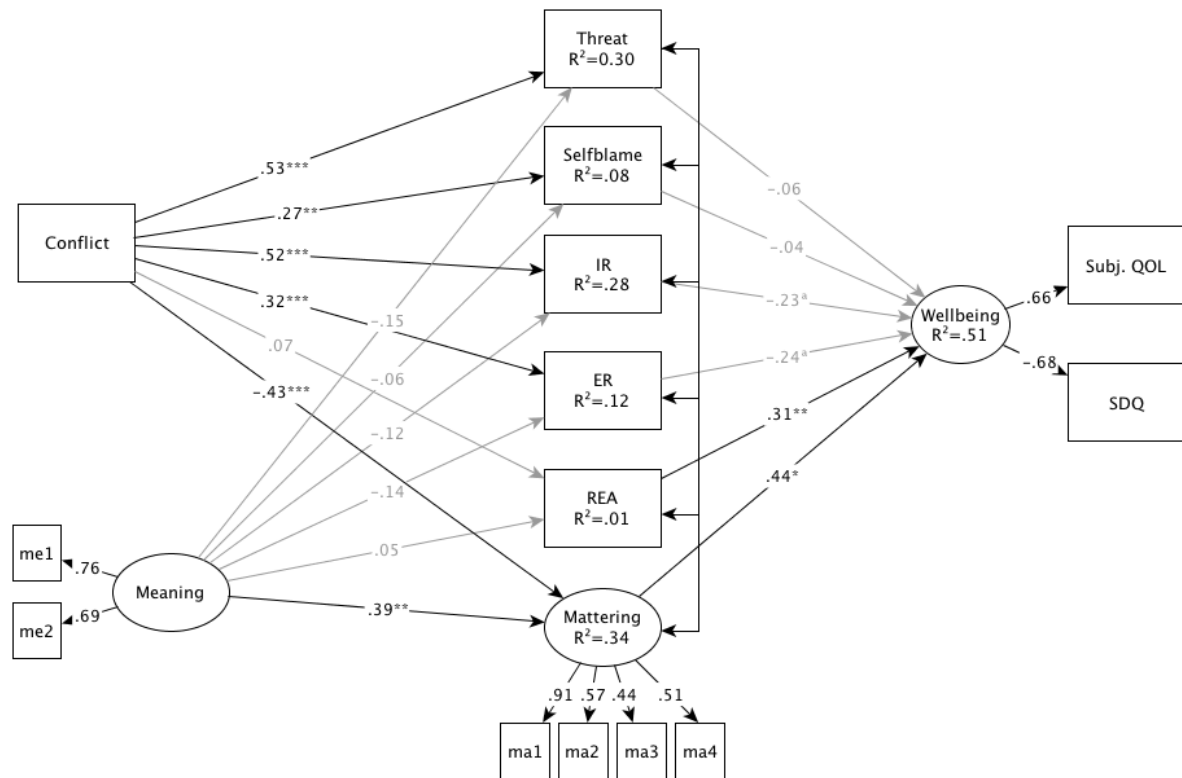


Figure 1. Structural model testing for mediating processes between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being. $\chi^2(50, N = 171) = 82.81$ ($p < .01$), CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.06. ^a $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Correlations between the Mediating Variables in the SEM-model

	2	3	4	5	6
1. Threat	.17*	.41***	.57***	.50***	-.03
2. Selfblame	-	.33**	.19*	.13	-.23*
3. IR		-	.34***	.44***	-.23*
4. ER			-	.42***	-.19*
5. REA				-	.11
6. Divorce-specific mattering					-

Note. IR = Internal Representations; ER = Emotional Reactivity; REA = Regulation of Exposure to Affect. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Examining the model, interparental conflict was significantly associated with cognitive appraisals (Threat and Self-Blame), with two out of three emotional security component processes (Emotional Reactivity and Internal Representations) and with Mattering (β s ranged from $-.43$ to $.53$, $p < .01$). Adolescents' understanding of the divorce (Meaning) was only associated with Mattering ($\beta = .39$, $p < .01$). Mattering ($\beta = .44$, $p < .05$) and Regulations of Exposure to Affect ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) were significantly related to adolescents' well-being. Internal Representations ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .10$) and Emotional Reactivity ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .10$) were marginally significantly related to adolescents' well-being. The coefficients of the indirect effects in the model indicated the mediators. None of the proposed mediators actually mediated the link between adolescents' understanding of the divorce (Meaning) and adolescents' well-being. For the link between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being, divorce-specific mattering ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$) was a mediator, and Internal Representations ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .10$) and Emotional Reactivity ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .10$) could not be considered as mediators, but as underlying mechanisms because the indirect effects were marginally significant.

In sum, these results reveal that the cognitive and emotional variables under study underlie the association between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being in recently divorced families. This largely coincides with prior research in intact families. Mattering, however, appeared to be of specific importance in mediating the link between parental conflict and adolescent well-being. In a second sample, we aimed at validating this particular role of mattering.

SECOND SAMPLE

METHOD

Participants

Two years after the initial divorce, all parents were asked again if their adolescents could take part in a follow-up study, independent of their participation in the first data wave. In total, 113 adolescents between 11 and 19 years old took part (58.4% females): 62 of them had participated in the first data wave and 51 were new to the study. First participation in this second data wave was mainly owed to parental consent now being available or to the fact that adolescents were now eligible (11 years old) whereas they

had not been two years before. Two years after the initial divorce, 64.6% of the adolescents reported that their mother had a new partner and 70.8% of them reported that their father had a new partner. Of those parents who had a new partner, 58.9% of the mothers and 71.3% of the fathers were currently living together with that partner.

Procedure and Additional Measure

The same procedure as in the explorative sample was used. Because these data were collected two years after the divorce, questions about adolescents' perceptions of parental conflict (CPIC) did not have to be answered if adolescents indicated that biological parents had no contact, which was the case for 23 adolescents. Given that validation of the role of mattering was central in this data wave, a second measure of mattering was added in addition to the divorce-specific measures described in the explorative sample. In other words, because we aimed at including divorce- and context-specific measures in the existing conceptual models, we used a divorce-specific operationalization of mattering in both samples. In addition, we used a more elaborated and general operationalization of mattering to parents in this second sample.

Perceived Mattering to Parents. Adolescents completed the Mattering to Others Questionnaire (MTOQ; Marshall, 2001) to assess their perceived mattering to biological parents. This questionnaire was administered in two versions, one with the biological mother as referent and one with the biological father as referent. This self-report measure consists of 12 statements of which ten are rated on a five-point Likert scale from not much to a lot and two statements are rated on a five-point Likert scale from on top of the list to at the bottom of the list. Sample items are "I am missed by my Mother/Father when I am away" and "If your Mother/Father made a list of all the things that she/he cares about, where do you think you'd be on the list?". The MTOQ has been validated in two samples with α 's ranging between .89 and .95 (Marshall, 2001): the α for mattering to mother was .96 and to father .98 in our sample. The scales were summed into one score for general mattering to biological parents (MTOQ = 3.77/5, $SD = .76$). The divorce-specific measure of mattering to parents correlated significantly ($r = .25, p < .01$) with the general measure of mattering to parents.

RESULTS

To validate the mediating role of mattering in the association between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being found in the explorative sample a single mediator model was tested in this second sample. The chi-square for this model and the goodness-of-fit indices suggested an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2(2) = 3.19$ $p > .05$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .08). Figure 2 contains the results for the test of this simple model. The marginally significant coefficient of the indirect effect ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .10$) indicated that divorce-specific mattering was an underlying process, but not a mediator. Table 3 contains the correlations between the variables in this simple model.

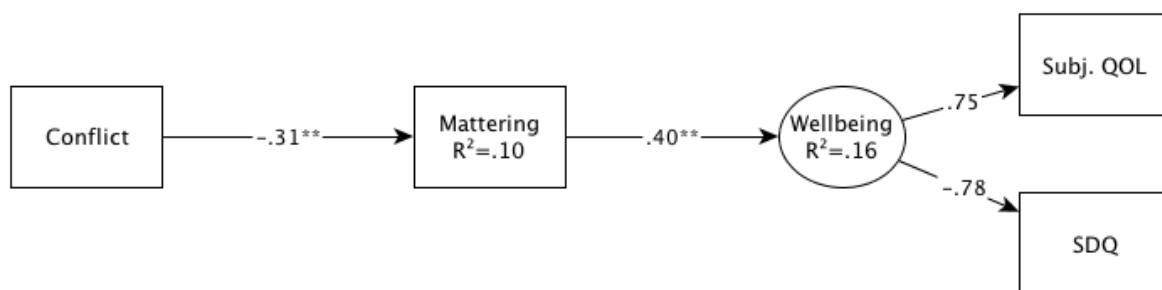


Figure 2. Structural model testing for divorce-specific mattering as mediator between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being. $\chi^2(2, N = 90) = 3.19$ ($p > .05$), CFI = .98; RMSEA = .08. ^a $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Correlations between the Variables in the Simple Model

	2	3	4
1. Conflict	-.38**	.17	-.34*
2. Divorce-specific mattering	-	-.26*	.30*
3. SDQ		-	-.54***
4. Subj. QOL			-

Note. SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; Subj.QOL = Subjective Quality of Life. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 3 contains the results of the model with the general mattering measure (MTOQ) and indicates a good fit to the data ($\chi^2(1) = 0.19$ $p > .05$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00). Table 4 contains the correlations between the variables in the simple model including general mattering to parents. This model indicated that general mattering to

parents was not associated with parental conflict two years after divorce ($\beta = -.13, p > .10$) and therefore cannot be a mediating process. The results indicated, however, that general mattering to parents was associated with adolescents' well-being two years after divorce ($\beta = .56, p < .001$).

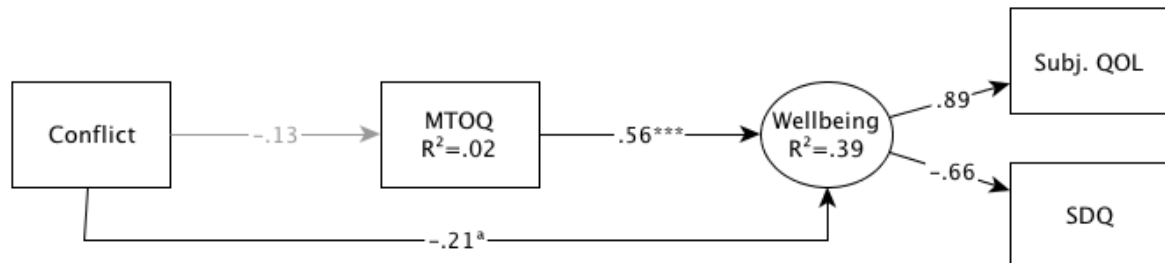


Figure 3. Structural model testing for general mattering to parents as mediator between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being. $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 0.19 (p > .05)$, CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00. ^a $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Correlations between the Variables in the Model with General Mattering to Parents

	2	3	4
1. Conflict	-.12	.16	-.30
2. MTOQ	-	-.27*	.36***
3. SDQ		-	-.54***
4. Subj. QOL			-

Note. MTOQ = Mattering To specific Others Questionnaire; SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; Subj.QOL = Subjective Quality of Life. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the proposed mediating processes from compatible theoretical frameworks, the cognitive-contextual model (Grych & Fincham, 1990) and the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994), in one integrated model for better understanding of the link between interparental conflict and adolescents' well-being in families that had recently divorced. We expanded the existing integrated model tests (e.g. Buehler et al., 2007; Davies et al., 2002; Mann & Gilliom,

2004) in several ways. First, our model used divorce conflict as a predictor variable whereas other studies had examined marital conflict. Second, because of the rapidly changing societal context in which divorce occurs, additional divorce-specific constructs were examined and integrated in the existing frameworks: adolescents' understanding of the divorce and their feeling of mattering to parents (divorce-specific mattering and general mattering to parents). Third, as well-being is more than the absence of problems, we examined adolescents' well-being through a quality of life measure in addition to investigating adolescents' problems (e.g. Grych et al., 2000).

Congruent with our considerations about the changing divorce context, the level of parental conflict was moderate in our sample of adolescents from recently divorced families. Western societies have experienced soaring divorce rates that have elicited policy measures to limit the impact of divorce and divorce-related conflict on the people concerned, especially the children. The majority of our adolescents' parents divorced with mutual consent, which may indeed have influenced positively their level of conflict.

In our explorative sample of adolescents from recently divorced families, we confirmed findings from previous studies with intact families linking parental conflict with cognitive and emotional processes. This suggests that the same mechanisms are at stake, independent of the family structure. More specifically and consistent with research in intact families, parental conflict was associated with cognitive appraisals of threat and self-blame (Grych et al., 2000) and with two (Emotional Reactivity and Internal Representations) of the three component processes of the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1998). Also similarly to prior research (Buehler et al., 2007), the appraisal of threat correlated strongly with the emotional processes of Emotional Reactivity and Internal Representations. As the correlations were not too high (< .65), they were still used as separate constructs. The only difference from prior studies is that the component process of Regulating Exposure to Parental Affect was not associated with divorce conflict. A straightforward explanation is, however, that parents are no longer living together so adolescents' conflict avoidance behavior or involvement in parental conflict is less relevant in this context.

Because all adolescents had recently experienced divorce, and in line with the tradition of seeing adolescents as active interpreters (Kuczynski, 2003) of parental conflict or parental divorce, we included their understanding of the divorce in addition to their reports of parental conflict. The adolescents reported a rather good

understanding of why their parents divorced, but this understanding did not relate to any of the processes suggested by the cognitive-contextual or the emotional security framework. This suggests that parental conflict not only triggers the same appraisals and emotional reactions in adolescents in intact and divorced families, but also that the adolescents' understanding of the divorce does not add to the cognitive and emotional responses triggered by parental conflict. It has been suggested before that not the divorce per se but the parental conflict that accompanies it is of importance (Buehler et al., 1997). Our results largely support this statement, although we would like to expand on it.

We focused on adolescents' well-being and reasoned that well-being is more than the absence of problems. Prior studies have mainly focused on adolescents' adjustment problems in relation to parental conflict. It is not because they do not display problems, however, that they feel well. Our study clearly reveals the added value of using adolescents' subjective quality of life as an outcome variable for well-being (Jozefiak et al., 2010). As expected, parental conflict was negatively associated with adolescents' perceptions of their quality of life. Additionally, their understanding of the divorce was positively associated with their well-being. Adolescents who understood why their parents divorced had a higher subjective quality of life and fewer adjustment problems. This is in line with previous research where children stressed the importance of understanding their parents' divorce (e.g. Maundeni, 2002). Therefore, independent of the level of parental conflict, a good understanding of the divorce is crucial to the mental health of adolescents from recently divorced families.

In support of the emotional security hypothesis (Davies & Cummings, 1998), adolescents' negative internal family representations and their emotional reactivity were recognized as underlying mechanisms that are linked to their well-being after parental divorce. This is in line with previous research (Buehler et al., 2007; Fosco & Grych, 2008) and suggests that adolescents' negative thoughts about their future relationships with family members and their possible fear of losing contact with them are important in the context of divorce conflict. The fact that cognitive appraisals were not found to be mediators does not, however, mean that they are not important processes. As Davies et al. (2002) suggested, it may well be that the SIS provided a more valid assessment than the CPIC, especially in the context of divorce.

Mattering to parents was found to be an important construct in explaining adolescents' post-divorce well-being. First, a divorce-specific operationalization of the feeling that they mattered to their parents mediated the link between parental conflict and adolescent well-being in recently divorced families. Second, two years after the initial parental divorce, divorce-specific mattering was again found to be an underlying process in the link between parental conflict and adolescent well-being. Third, a more elaborated and general operationalization of mattering to parents also predicted adolescents' well-being two years after the divorce. The important role of the feeling of mattering to parents, for both adolescent post-divorce well-being and the diminution of the negative effects of divorce-related conflict on their well-being, is in line with what could be predicted from the extant research on adolescents' feelings of mattering to parents (Marshall & Lambert, 2006). This study was, however, the first to demonstrate the mediating role of mattering to parents in the association between divorce conflict and adolescents' well-being. As divorce induces a serious change in family structure, it is good to know that if parents give their adolescent children the feeling that they do matter to them, they could temper the potential negative impact of divorce and divorce-related conflict and improve their offspring's well-being. When adolescents have a real feeling of mattering to their parents during and after divorce this influences their well-being in a positive way. Divorce-specific mattering specifically refers to taking adolescents' wishes and preferences into account in post-divorce living arrangements. It is not about "hearing children", but about post-divorce living arrangements through which parents show that they know what is important to their children. Whether it is playing football, playing the piano with a grandfather, going to a particular school, or something completely different—only parents know what is important to their own child(ren). Living arrangements may or may not reflect the parents' sensitivity and may or may not give adolescents a feeling of mattering to them. A general feeling of mattering to parents gives adolescents the important feeling of being significant in their parents' lives, even if they are now divorced.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study makes theoretical contributions, some limitations need to be recognized. First, our data provide support for some intervening processes, but given the cross-sectional designs, we cannot conclude anything about the causality between

these variables. The alternative explanation of adolescents' well-being predicting lower levels of perceived conflict should also be tested. A longitudinal test (e.g. Buehler et al., 2007) of the models could be more conclusive about the temporal and causal relations between the constructs. Furthermore, in this study we have only tested for simultaneous mediating processes. Future research should further explore the temporal order of possible mediating processes. It is possible that mediation occurs in several steps. Mattering may be situated as an intervening process between the emotional and cognitive mediators on the one hand and adolescents' well-being on the other hand. In addition, it would be interesting to test for moderating processes, besides testing for mediating processes as was done in the present study. Future research should try to discover whether the impact of parental divorce conflict differs between adolescents with a high score on mattering and adolescents with a low score on mattering.

Second, our sample was based on the divorcing families who had to appear in court. As regards our scores for interparental conflict, we were not able to include families with extremely high levels of conflict in our sample. Prior research in violent families (Grych et al., 2000) showed, however, that some of the processes of the cognitive-contextual framework function similarly in those families. Nevertheless, research in high-conflict divorced families is still necessary; it is likely that adolescents in those families will report higher levels of threat and emotional reactivity than did our sample.

Third, this study focused on adolescents between 11 and 17 years of age to examine the link between parental conflict and their well-being after parental divorce. Therefore, its results are not generalizable to younger children or those of different family situations. Emotional processes may be more dominant in younger children because they are not yet as cognitively sophisticated as adolescents. Consequently, future research with younger children who have experienced parental divorce is important. Fourth, our sample sizes were quite small, and future research should test the models on a larger sample of children from divorced families. Moreover, all the constructs in our model were measured by means of adolescents' reports on questionnaires. The intervening processes (emotions and cognitions) and subjective well-being are intrapersonal and could not be rated by others, but this study could have had more strength if both predictor and outcome variables (adjustment) had been

measured with different sources of information (e.g. mother- and father- reports, observation).

Conclusion and Implications

In sum, the results of the updated integrated process model suggest that divorce-specific mattering is a mediator variable and negative internal representations and emotional reactivity are important underlying mechanisms in the association between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being in families who have recently divorced. The results of the second sample suggest that two years after parental divorce divorce-specific mattering and general mattering to parents are important processes. These findings suggest two valuable implications for practitioners working with families in divorce. First, practitioners (e.g. divorce mediators) should guide parents on how to use constructive conflict strategies, how to explain divorce to their children and how both parents can show that their children still matter to them, during and after the divorce. Second, interventions for adolescents should focus on reinforcing their feeling of mattering to parents and on countering negative internal family representations. Adolescents can learn that divorce does not necessarily mean that family relationships will be broken.

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CHAPTER 4

ADOLESCENTS' PERCEIVED MATTERING TO PARENTS AND STEPPARENTS: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY¹

ABSTRACT

Extant literature showed the importance of perceived mattering for adolescents' well-being. However, the construct of mattering has not been thoroughly investigated in the context of stepfamilies. With this qualitative study, we aimed at exploring adolescents' perceived mattering to biological parents and stepparents. A total of 33 adolescents (15 males, 18 females) participated in this study with eight focus groups (boys and girls in separate groups). Our findings show the concrete ways of how adolescents living in a stepfamily, perceive that they matter to both biological parents and stepparents. They do so in terms of receiving their attention, being cared for and sharing activities. Themes that only came up for biological parents were "proximity", "love", "importance", "takes me into account" and "priority"; themes that seemed more relevant for mattering to stepparents were "count on each other", "ownness" and "implicit mattering". In addition, our analysis carefully suggested some relational context factors that may influence adolescents' feelings of mattering to biological parents and stepparents: the duration of the relationship, the intensity of the contact, the relationship's dynamics, fulfilling a parenting role or not, biological kinship and violence. Implications for clinical practice are suggested.

¹ Based on Maes, S.D.J., De Mol, J., Rober, P., & Buysse, A. (2011). *Adolescents' perceived mattering to parents and stepparents: A focus group study*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce is usually not just a single event in children's lives, but can be considered as a process that contains a series of different family transitions (Amato, 2010). The introduction of stepparents and consequently the formation of a stepfamily is one of the most important post-divorce transitions (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). A high divorce rate has led to a higher prevalence of stepfamilies and this increase in the number of post-divorce stepfamilies asks for a better understanding of this growing family form.

A lot of research compares the adjustment of children living in stepfamilies with the adjustment of children in nuclear families. In comparison with children in nuclear families, stepchildren have slightly more behavioral problems (Magnuson & Berger, 2009) and emotional problems (Brown, 2004), less secure attachment (Love & Murdock, 2004) and a higher risk of a range of psychosocial outcomes (e.g., leaving school without qualifications) (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999). Other studies conclude however that the well-being of youngsters in established (married) stepfamilies is comparable to that of youngsters from stable intact families (e.g., Cavanagh, 2008) or that differences in child well-being within family types are greater than the differences across family types (Demo & Acock, 1996). Depending on the outcomes under study, comparisons between the adjustment of children in nuclear families and stepfamilies are mixed and inconclusive. Therefore, we argue that, rather than focusing on the impact of family structure (nuclear versus step) on children's adjustment, it is more important to investigate stepfamily processes (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001) to find out why some stepfamilies function well and others do not.

It is not so much the family type that is associated with children's well-being, the way a stepfamily functions (Coleman & Glenn, 2010) and the quality of the relationships within the stepfamily (Hakvoort, Bos, Van Balen, & Hermanns, 2011) are more significant. Available research on stepfamily processes teaches us that stepfamilies often have a high sense of uncertainty in their early years of development (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). In these first few years children can still mourn the loss of their old family while adjusting to a new family (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). Within this process of stepfamily formation, everyday talk between stepparents and stepchildren can promote satisfying relationships (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008).

In addition, affirming and supportive communication amongst stepfamily members is one of the factors that make a stepfamily resilient (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009). Research on stepfamily relationships highlights the importance of quality relationships within the family prior to parental divorce (Videon, 2002). Negative effects of divorce can be tempered by positive parent-child relationships (Hines, 1997). Furthermore, the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is strongly associated with how well the stepfamily functions (Bray, 1999). Consequently, for a deeper understanding of children's functioning in stepfamilies, it seems important to focus on the quality of their relationships with each of their parental figures. Yet, little research exists on how exactly parent-child relationships maintain or evolve post-divorce and how stepparent-stepchild relationships develop (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Children's perceptions have a strong influence on post-divorce relational quality and well-being. Thus, it is important to investigate how children living in a stepfamily interpret the relationships with their parental figures and their relational behaviors.

Children's perspectives in stepfamily research

Only in the last decade, scholars have recognized the importance of the views of children on divorce and stepfamilies (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001) and encouraged more qualitative work that investigates their experiences and perceptions (Coleman et al., 2000). Recent research on stepchildren's perspectives and views on stepfamily relationships, however, mostly includes accounts of emerging adults. In the relationship development with stepfathers, they appear to accept and like practical and emotional support from stepfathers, but disapprove of overt control or influence attempts (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). In two other studies with emerging adult stepchildren, they reported that in order to develop step-relationships, spending quality time together is important (Baxter et al., 1999; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011) and their age when relationships begin has an influence (Ganong et al., 2011). In a study with in-depth interviews, young adults from stepfamilies exemplified the parental status dialectics of granting and not granting the stepparent legitimacy in a parent role (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). However, most of these findings are retrospective and adolescents (between 11 and 18 years old) do differ from emerging adults (between 18 and 25 years old) in still being mainly dependent on their parents, still attending secondary school and their ongoing experience of puberty (Arnett, 2000).

Consequently, a focus on how adolescents experience the development of stepfamily relationships is necessary.

Research with adolescents on the quality of relationships with parents and stepparents is rather scarce. From an interview study with adolescents, we know that it is important that stepparents focus on developing friendships with their stepchildren (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). A quantitative study with adolescent stepchildren (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004) indicates that the quality of the relationship with the non-custodial parent predicts adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies. Nevertheless, available research lacks a qualitative focus on how adolescents in stepfamilies construct their relationships with biological parents as well as stepparents.

Bi-directionality, Agency and Mattering

The present study aligns with a bi-directional perspective on (step)parent-adolescent relationships (Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999) in which both adolescents and (step)parents are considered as active participants in the (step)parent-adolescent relationship (Maccoby, 1984). Adolescents are active producers of meaning (Corsaro, 2005) and current interactions between adolescents and parents are influenced by a represented past and future (Lollis, 2003). A change in the structure of the family (e.g., arrival of a stepparent) causes transformation and change in the parent-adolescent relationship (Kuczynski, Pitman, & Mitchell, 2009) and because adolescents are agentic beings, they make sense of this family change in their own way (Kuczynski, 2003).

Adolescents' agency has a cognitive (construction), behavioral (action) and motivational (autonomy) dimension (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). In the present study, we focus on the cognitive dimension of adolescents' agency in (step)parent-adolescent relationships and investigate their perceived mattering to their parents and stepparents. The construct of perceived mattering has been defined as the tendency to evaluate the self as significant to specific other people (e.g., parents) (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Especially because adolescents' growing understanding of relationships and the consolidation of identity in adolescence, receiving recognition from significant others (parental figures) is described as a critical interpersonal process (Erikson, 1968). According to Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) perceived mattering has

five components: adolescents' belief that parents view them as important and significant, show interest in them, pay attention to them, depend on them and are concerned with their faith. Results of extant mattering research indicated that adolescents who perceived that they mattered to their parents suffered less from anxiety and depression and were less likely to be delinquent. Furthermore, a feeling of mattering contributes to one's psychological well-being (Marshall & Lambert, 2006; Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin, & Bryan, 2011) and can be considered as a relational characteristic because it develops through interpersonal interaction with specific others (Marshall, 2001). The emerging adults in Mak and Marshall's (2004) study reported higher perceived mattering to their romantic partners when they received more attention from their partner than from their friends. Additionally, perceived mattering to both parents and friends seems to be additive (Marshall, 2004) and mattering is found to remain invariant across time (Marshall, Liu, Wu, Berzonsky, & Adams, 2010). In the context of divorce, the construct has been investigated in one study (Maes, De Mol, & Buysse, in press) that evidenced the importance of mattering to parents when adolescents' living arrangements after divorce are defined. Adolescents expressed how important it was for them to notice that parents take them into account when making divorce arrangements.

In sum, the construct of mattering within relationships is an interesting concept in the context of (step)parent-adolescent relationships because of the link with adolescents' well-being. However, adolescents' perceived mattering was never explored in the context of stepfamilies. Yet, it is important to know how adolescents interpret the relational behavior of parents and stepparents, to see how this could influence their functioning within their stepfamily. The objective of this study was to explore adolescents' interpretations of the relationships with their biological parents and stepparents and their feeling of mattering to them. We had the following research questions: first, how do adolescents concretely perceive that they matter to parents and stepparents; second, is mattering to biological parents perceived differently from mattering to stepparents; third, can we discover factors that create the context for the persistence or the development of an adolescent's feeling of mattering to parental figures in a stepfamily?

METHOD

Focus groups

A focus group topic guide was developed to encourage participants to speak about their stepfamily and the relationship with their parents and stepparents. For adolescents, focus groups are less invasive or less threatening than one-to-one interviews (Barbour, 2008) and thus appropriate for this study about a potentially sensitive topic. Moreover, a focus group creates a conversational environment where adolescents are able to interact spontaneously with each other (Morgan, 1996). In focus groups gender is likely to play an important role, and therefore single sex groups are recommended because of boys' tendency to overshadow girls in mixed gender groups (Mauthner, 1997). The most effective focus groups have six to eight participants, but smaller groups are more workable when the topic is complex (Krueger, 1995) and fewer participants give more opportunity to discuss a topic more deeply (Morgan, 1995).

Participants

Eight focus groups were run comprising 33 adolescents (15 males, 18 females; age range between 11 and 16 years old): four groups with boys and four groups with girls. The majority of the participants were members of white stepfamilies and our sample included both adolescents from newly formed stepfamilies and adolescents living in established stepfamilies. The time since the initial divorce between biological parents ranged from two years ago to 14 years ago ($M= 7.38$ years), participants' age at parental divorce ranged from nine months old until 11 years old ($M= 5.33$ years). Nine adolescents were currently only living with a stepfather, six only with a stepmother and 17 adolescents had a stepfather and stepmother. The time spent living together with a stepfather (if present) ranged from 0.5 years to 12 years ($M= 5$ years), the time spent living together with a stepmother (if present) ranged from two years to 14 years ($M= 6.32$ years). Only three participants had no siblings at all; the other 30 participants had a variety of combinations of bio-siblings, stepsiblings and half-siblings. Some characteristics of each group are presented in Table 1 (boys) and Table 2 (girls).

Table 1

Focus Groups with Boys

		Group 1	Group 3	Group 5	Group 7
	<i>N</i> participants	3	3	7	2
	<i>M</i> age	13.33 yrs	15.33 yrs	12.71 yrs	14.5 yrs
	<i>M</i> time divorce	8.33 yrs	9.33 yrs	5.71 yrs	9 yrs
	<i>M</i> time living with stepfather	3.5 yrs	7 yrs	5 yrs	12 yrs
	<i>M</i> time living with stepmother	6 yrs	10 yrs	6.88 yrs	2 yrs
Living	<i>T</i> mum > <i>T</i> dad	3	2	2	1
	<i>T</i> mum < <i>T</i> dad	0	1	2	0
	<i>T</i> mum = <i>T</i> dad	0	0	3	1

Table 2

Focus Groups with Girls

		Group 2	Group 4	Group 6	Group 8
	<i>N</i> participants	4	2	6	6
	<i>M</i> age	13.25 yrs	15 yrs	12.17 yrs	14 yrs
	<i>M</i> time divorce	10.75 yrs	8 yrs	5.93 yrs	8.25 yrs
	<i>M</i> time living with stepfather	6.5 yrs	3 yrs	4.7 yrs	4 yrs
	<i>M</i> time living with stepmother	6.33 yrs	8 yrs	6.17 yrs	5.75 yrs
Living	<i>T</i> mum > <i>T</i> dad	3	1	2	3
	<i>T</i> mum < <i>T</i> dad	0	0	0	0
	<i>T</i> mum = <i>T</i> dad	1	1	4	3

Procedure

Purposive and network sampling techniques were used to find participants. First, the first author and two undergraduate students entered classes at two large high schools in the East of Flanders (Belgium) and solicited participation from adolescents from grades seven to ten who were currently living in a stepfamily. Adolescents received an information leaflet about the study and could show this to their parents if they wanted to participate. The adolescents who were interested in participating wrote down

their contact information on a paper strip and returned it to the researchers. Second, the first author and her undergraduate students asked family and friends to search for additional participants meeting the criteria for inclusion.

A participant met the inclusion criteria if his/her parents were divorced, he/she was between 11 and 16 years old and he/she was living together with at least one stepparent. It was not required that the biological parent had been remarried. Eight focus groups were conducted with between two and seven participants in each. Participants were stratified into focus groups by sex and school grade (seventh and eighth graders together, ninth and tenth graders together). Six focus groups took place at the adolescents' schools after school hours and two focus groups took place at the university. Travel expenses were offered to the latter. Ethical approval was gained from the ethical board of the university.

All participating adolescents had their parents' permission to take part in the focus group. Groups organized at school lasted two hours starting with lunch, groups taking place at the university lasted 1.5 hours. All groups were audio-taped to enable verbatim transcription. Before starting a group, all participants received an information letter, signed a written consent form and filled out some background details on their stepfamily (e.g., time since parental divorce, composition of the family,...). Each focus group comprised three sections. In the first section, the moderator (first author) and her assistant (undergraduate student) introduced themselves to the group and explained the aim of the group discussion as well as the house rules (confidentiality, respect). Then each participant presented him/herself shortly to the group (name, hobbies) as a warming-up exercise and to feel at ease in each other's company. As an icebreaker for the discussion, participants were asked to describe their ideal family as this led naturally into the discussion about their current family. In the second and main section, participants were asked to talk freely about their current family, but a topic guide was used to focus the conversation when necessary. Some examples of used probes were: how did they experience the introduction of a new partner, how did they perceive their relationship with their own parents since the divorce; the questions of main interest related to our investigation of the mattering construct were: how did they notice to be significant to their own parents, and to their stepparents; did they notice any change in their feeling of mattering since the formation of the stepfamily? In the third and final section, the assistant gave a summary of the most important things said in the group

and the participants were able to give feedback. The discussion ended with the opportunity to ask questions and make remarks and when the session was finished, adolescents received a cinema ticket as a reward for their participation.

Data analysis

All group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Data were triangulated in two ways. The first author and her two undergraduate students analyzed the data separately and discussed emerging themes during several meetings. Additionally, the first author discussed the developing coding frame with three senior colleagues to check for appropriateness and content. The data collection process occurred in two phases. In a first phase, four focus groups were conducted (two with boys and girls separately, from seventh and eighth grade, two with boys and girls separately, from ninth and tenth grade). After analyzing the first four groups, we decided to recruit four other focus groups matching the first groups (age and grade) to address issues of saturation. A total of eight groups was enough to find recurrent mattering themes between the different groups. Marshall's (2001) perceived mattering construct was used as a sensitizing concept to guide the analysis, rather than the data being approached without any theoretical framework. We were explicitly interested in adolescents' concrete interpretations of mattering in a stepfamily context. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method for focus group data as described by Barbour (2008), this method uses principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but has in the present study not the aim of developing a complete theory as in grounded theory research.

The data analysis process was completed in several steps. In a first step, the first author and her two students individually read the most elaborated transcript thoroughly and repeatedly. After a first reading a provisional coding frame was developed: main themes were noted and comments were grouped under related subcategories. In a second step, the first author and her two students gathered to compare their provisional coding frames and reach agreement about a common provisional coding frame. They discussed the similarities and differences among their derived categories, including exemplars of the different categories. This provisional coding frame was then used to help orient the subsequent analyses of the other focus groups. New themes were still added, however, under the same strategy as in the first group. The summary of the

moderator in every group discussion was used during the analyses as an extra check on validity. Max QDA, a computer package designed for the analysis of qualitative data (Verbi, 2007), was used to facilitate analysis of all eight groups. In a third step, similarities and differences within and between groups were examined in more depth. The first author was searching for recurring patterns, but also for exceptions or contradictions as regards the found patterns. During this iterative process, the refinement of the coding frame was discussed repeatedly with one senior researcher (the fourth author) and in a final stage with two other senior researchers also (the second and the third author). Differences in meaning were discussed until consensus was reached. In a last step, the authors integrated the main categories into higher-level concepts and agreed upon the final coding frame; finally, the first author chose exemplars for the final research report.

The analyses had the aim of finding the essence of adolescents' perceived mattering experiences to parents and stepparents. Hence, if adolescents chose not to address a particular issue in a particular group, we are not able to conclude that they did not consider it as important. It is even possible that they found it too obvious to mention. Therefore, we assume that the issues that came up during the group discussions were the most salient to them at that moment.

RESULTS

Concrete perceptions of mattering to biological parents and stepparents

Answering our first and second research question, our analysis revealed that adolescents perceived in different ways that they mattered or, conversely, that they did not matter. Some ways of mattering were only mentioned referring to either only parents or only stepparents, other concrete mattering perceptions clearly overlapped for parents and stepparents. We asked the adolescents directly about how they noticed to be significant to their parents and stepparents, but also the more indirect accounts of mattering were included in our analysis.

Perceptions of mattering only mentioned in the case of biological parents. The themes that seemed to be unique as regards mattering to biological parents were

“proximity”, “love”, “importance”, “takes me into account”, and “priority”. They are discussed hereafter.

Proximity was about adolescents noticing that their biological parents wanted to have personal contact with them, to enjoy their presence. This theme applied especially with regard to non-residential biological parents. Adolescents noticed that they mattered to them because parents told them they wanted to see them. One girl (13 year) explained that her father wanted a living arrangement that meant he could see her at least one day per week, this gave her the perception that she really mattered to him. The proximity theme is exemplified by the following boy (14 year):

My mum doesn't want me to be away for too long. For her the maximum is just a short while not two or four or five weeks or so. (Focus group (FG) 1)

Proximity also included the fact that adolescents perceived that parents missed them when they were not present and that non-residential parents tried to stay in contact with them (e.g., by e-mail, chat, phone). Conversely, one girl (14 year, FG8) said that her own father had sent her away after an argument and that this gave her a massive feeling of not mattering to him, especially because since then he had not contacted her. Some adolescents perceived that parents did not seem to be interested in seeing them or having them close, and this was interpreted as an indication of not mattering.

The theme of *feeling loved* was about the fact that adolescents perceived that their biological parents genuinely loved them. In several groups adolescents stated literally that they perceived they mattered to their biological parents because their parents loved them, even if this was not always openly expressed, as this girl (14 year) said:

You know, with my dad, we never tell each other that we love each other, but we know. (FG 8)

One girl (14 year, FG8), however, related that her biological father was not able to show his love at all and that gave her a sense of mattering less, even if she was convinced that he loved her. The physical expressions of love (e.g., giving a hug, a kiss) seemed to be something that adolescents noticed more in their biological parents. In addition, some would even have found it strange to be hugged by their stepparents; this came up in a group of 13-14-year old boys:

Boy 1: *Stepfathers do that [= hugging] kind of stuff but stepmothers don't.*

Moderator (Mod): *That's how it is for you. What about the others?*

Boy 2: *Stepmothers don't do that at all I think. [laughter]*

Mod: *Maybe because you're not open to it?*

Boy 2: *She would never hug me voluntarily, I think. But if she would I would not accept I think. It's more a sign of sucking up than of love.*

Mod: *And what would be a sign of love and not of sucking up? How can she show you, in a good way, that you're important to her?*

Boy 2: *First start talking about the problems with us I guess. (FG1)*

Another way in which adolescents felt that they mattered to their biological parents was that they noticed they are *important* to them. Some adolescents knew this because their parent directly told them so, others noticed this in a more indirect way; for example, when a parent made a special effort to be present at school for a parents' evening. When a biological parent was absent on an important occasion, adolescents had a feeling of mattering less to that parent, as this boy (15 year) said:

I actually regret my dad not being there for my proclamation day because yeah, you know, I already failed twice to pass and now I actually did he wasn't there... (FG5)

Two themes concerning mattering to biological parents seemed to be more stepfamily-specific than the others: adolescents perceived that they mattered to their biological parent when he/she *took them into account* concerning post-divorce life and when he/she gave *priority* to them above the stepparent or stepchildren. Adolescents noticed in several ways that they were taken into account, especially when a parent asked them for their personal advice or opinion, as this quote exemplified:

Boy (14 year): *(...) or like when he meets someone eh, sometimes he asks me "what should I do?" and stuff. He asks my opinion about almost everything, especially with me and less with my sisters because they have a different way of thinking. Me and my dad, we think the same about a whole lot of things. He really asks my opinion a lot and is really open about everything. (FG3)*

When adolescents noticed that a parent gave them priority above or defended them in front of their new partner or new children, they felt they really mattered to that parent, as this quote exemplifies:

Girl (14 year): And she [mother] went like “ [to stepfather] don't make me choose between you and my children because you know you'll definitely lose that fight.” He never had an argument with me, the children or with my mum about the children ever since. (FG8)

Some adolescents mentioned they had the feeling that their parent preferred the new partner and his/her children or gave priority to stepsiblings or half-siblings. When they perceived this, they had an overwhelming feeling of not mattering to their own parent.

Perceptions of mattering that overlapped between biological parents and stepparents. Three mattering themes overlapped for biological parents and stepparents and were mentioned with reference to both biological parents and stepparents: “attention”, “care”, and “shared activities”.

In several groups, the importance of receiving *attention* from their biological parent to perceive mattering was mentioned. Adolescents noticed that a biological parent wanted to listen, that he or she stimulated them to tell something, that he or she was interested in the adolescent's life, as this girl's non-resident father exemplified:

Girl (14 year): And when I just got my grades, he gets them send home... but when he knows I got them, he immediately calls and stuff. He really is curious about everything. (FG8)

One girl's (12 year, FG6) biological father was living abroad and called her every day to hear how she was doing. When a parent paid no attention for them, adolescents had the perception of not mattering: for example, the parent paid more attention to his/her new partner or new children (the adolescent's half-siblings or step-siblings), the parent had no interest in how they were doing at school or the parent paid no attention to them when they were staying at his/her place. An example of a decrease in parental attention caused by the arrival of a new partner was given by this girl (14 year):

Girl: yes...he is happy, especially with her

Mod: Happy with her, ok. From you I do hear he's in seventh heaven and...

Girl: Yes, all the time with her... Well, she's always... it's always she, she... “she comes over” and “she stays for dinner” and she... “she comes on Wednesday”, “she comes for the weekend”.. When is she not coming?! (FG8)

Likewise, getting attention from a stepparent was also how adolescents deduced that they mattered to the stepparent, as this girl (14 year) states:

But she meddled, but in a good way. Like "so, school's ok?" and that kinda stuff. And then, sometimes it's annoying and I go like "what do you care?" And sometimes it's like ok, like "yeah, I'm fine, school' s ok." Because you know, my dad never asks about school so it's kinda cool to hear someone besides my mum is interested. (FG8)

Especially at the beginning of the relationship, some stepparents were perceived as being thoughtful by buying presents, and adolescents mentioned this as a sign of mattering.

In all the groups adolescents spoke about how they noticed in several ways that their biological parents cared for them, which reflected that they mattered. Parental care could be considered as one of the most explicit ways in which adolescents perceived they mattered. Common statements included "he/she cooks for me" or "he/she always cares about me."

Several adolescents noted that biological parents could be really worried (e.g., about their traveling alone by train); for one boy they were even worrying too much when it came to the divorce:

Boy (14 year) : *Yeah, that really sucked. I had to go to psychiatrists and I really didn't want to go.*

Mod: *You didn't think it was necessary?*

Boy: *Not at all! But my parents were so worried and all. About us getting depressed or something. (FG7)*

Other adolescents experienced a sense of mattering less when not taken care of by their biological parent, as this girl (14) stated:

So, he never cooks and just sits there and he doesn't even make it cosy in the house. He doesn't really take care of me. Oh you know, all the little stuff. (FG8)

Biological parents were perceived as willing to do a lot for their children, and this was another way in which adolescents noticed that they were cared for and mattered to them, for example:

Boy (15 year) : *Also... my mum does a lot for me. For example, when we need to get something or do something, she's always ready to help me. To drop me or... Two weeks ago I got robbed on the street. They smacked me a couple of times. They took my iPod and other stuff. My mum had planned something for the evening. A party or something. She immediately canceled so we could go to the doctor and the police together. (FG7)*

Another aspect of care was the fact that biological parents took care of their children financially (e.g., buy things). Especially when they did not do so (e.g., parent did not pay alimony or school bills), adolescents had the feeling of not mattering to that parent.

Similarly, adolescents noticed that stepparents also cared for them in several ways: they were worried about them, they bought or paid for things for them (e.g., clothes, call credit) and they cooked for them. For example:

Girl (14 year) : *(...) And if my mum has to work late and he is home, he cooks and makes sure there's some dinner for me. And bread for lunch and stuff. (FG8)*

In particular, girls told us that stepparents were sweet to them, whereas boys said that stepparents told them that they liked or appreciated them. Few adolescents had the experience of clearly not mattering to their stepparent because of their perception that stepparents did not like them, did not take care of them or were never positive about them.

Another common theme that emerged in all the groups was the importance of *shared activities* with the biological parent on the one hand and the stepparent on the other hand. One girl (14 year, FG8) spoke about a very basic activity: the fact that she would just like to have breakfast with her father when staying at his place. Both boys and girls appreciated it when their biological parent wanted to do something together with them. Some adolescents mentioned that it was nice still to do something alone with their biological parent, even if there was now a stepparent in the family, as this girl (13 year) expressed it:

And like, recently I'm off to the city with friends more often. And when he (stepfather), when we leave for the city, my mum and I, he always wants to come. But recently my mum tells him "yes but today I'd like to be alone with my daughter" and all. (FG6)

Adolescents felt they really mattered when a biological parent created unique adolescent-parent-moments to share an activity together.

In several groups, but especially in the groups of boys, doing activities together with a stepparent was how they noticed that they mattered to their stepparent, as this boy (13 year) described it:

I immediately felt it click with my stepfather. He wasn't like "let's watch some TV together or go and use the computer", more like "let's get outside together for a while, let's go inline skating, or shoot some hoops" or something like that. (FG1)

One boy (13 year, FG1) even stated that in doing things together with a stepparent the relationship automatically became better. A stepparent that wanted to do an activity together gave the adolescent the feeling that he/she mattered because the stepparent invested in building a relationship with him/her.

Perceptions of mattering only mentioned in the case of stepparents. “Ownness”, “count on each other”, and “implicit mattering” were three themes that emerged during the analysis and that were only mentioned referring to stepparents. The theme of ownness included the mention by some adolescents that a stepparent considered them “as if I am his/her own child”. One boy’s (12 year, FG5) stepmother literally told him she wished he was her own child; other adolescents deduced this from the stepparent’s behavior. Conversely, some boys and girls also stated that their stepparent clearly had a preference for his/her own children, for another stepchild or for half-siblings, and treated them differently, for example:

Girl: (...) it's like she thinks "yeah ok, I raised you but you're not my own child" and "yeah well, your, well your half-brother is so"...

Mod: So you feel, from your personal experience she does differentiate?

Girl: Yes (FG2)

Some of the adolescents explicitly mentioned as a way of mattering that they could count on their stepparent (e.g., for help with their homework, to take them to school) and that sometimes the stepparent counted on them (e.g., asked for their help).

Another small theme that came up concerning stepparents was “implicit mattering”. Only a few adolescents mentioned that they knew that they mattered to

their stepparent, but that they did not really know how they noticed it. One girl (12 year) expressed it thus:

***Mod:** But could you tell, one way or another, he (stepfather) does find you important?*

***Girl :** yes, yes, yes, yes. But I don't really know how I know. Euhm well, I can tell but couldn't tell you how. (FG2)*

One boy (15 year, FG3) explained that just the fact that his stepmother was present every day gave him a feeling of mattering to her.

Relational context: Factors important to adolescents' feeling of mattering

Our analysis carefully suggests that it makes sense to view the construct of mattering within the framework of bi-directionality in relationships. This bi-directionality was exemplified by the fact that some of the adolescents did not seem to consider a biological parent or a stepparent as an important person to them; their accounts suggested that perceiving that they mattered to them was less significant. From the accounts of our participants several factors emerged which may be important in terms of the question whether a (step)parent is or can become a significant other to whom the adolescent wants to matter. These factors included characteristics of the relationship between the adolescent and the (step)parent and will be described only briefly, given the preliminary results.

The duration of the relationship. Several accounts given by the adolescents indicated that the length of the relationship with the biological parent is important in perceiving the parent as a significant other. Some adolescents did not have memories of their nuclear family, as their parents divorced when they were babies or toddlers. In one case (girl, 14 year, FG8) a biological father literally disappeared when the adolescent was a toddler; the father tried to repair the rift many years later, but the girl said she did not feel a bond with him because they did not have contact for ten years. This could suggest that the complete absence of a biological parent early in a child's live does not fit with the development of a close relationship and the feeling that the parent is a significant other. In most cases, however, the parent-adolescent relationship had been developing since the adolescent's birth. Therefore the majority of the adolescents almost automatically considered their biological parents as significant others because of the

lifelong relationship. For some adolescents the early absence of a biological parent implied that a stepparent was present very soon in their lives; they could not remember their life without their stepparent and therefore considered him/her as a significant other. This suggests that the sooner a stepparent is present in a child's life, the more time and opportunities he/she has to become a significant other to the child.

The intensity of the contact. Some adolescents reported very little or decreased contact with one of their biological parents since the divorce, in most cases their fathers. Irregular contact with a biological parent seemed to contribute to their considering that parent to a lesser extent as a significant other in their life. In those cases adolescents seem to find it difficult to develop or maintain a close relationship with that parent. One girl (14 year, FG2) said that because of the lack of contact with her biological father she did not have the feeling she knew him, and mattering to him therefore seemed less important to her. One boy (15 year, FG3), however, was meeting his biological father irregularly (he had no fixed visiting times), but clearly considered his father as a significant other to whom he wanted to matter, despite the irregular contact. Also, adolescents (boys and girls) who saw their fathers one weekend per month expressed how important he was for them. They really enjoyed the little time they spent together.

The accounts of several adolescents suggested that irregular or casual contact with a stepparent made it difficult for them to develop a close relationship, especially in the beginning. One girl (14 year, FG8) stated that she did not have close contact with her stepfather because of his working hours; a boy (12 year, FG5) stated that the problems between him and his stepfather did not get resolved because he had almost no contact with him. Conversely, some adolescents said that they had a lot of satisfying contact with their (resident) stepparent, these adolescents got to know their stepparents very well and considered them as significant others to whom they wanted to matter.

The relationship's dynamics. In several groups adolescents described a positive evolution in the relationship with their stepparent. Some said they liked the stepparent from the moment they got to know him/her; others gradually got to know the stepparent better and started to appreciate him/her or they noticed that the stepparent started to appreciate them more. Conversely, for other adolescents the relationship with a stepparent remained superficial or deteriorated over time. Sometimes because they did not like the character (e.g., he/she was bossy or self-centered) or the behavior of the stepparent (e.g., he/she smoked continually). In this case the adolescents did not

seem to want to consider that stepparent as a significant other. In other cases the relationship with a biological parent had changed. Some adolescents stated that when they were alone with their parent, they became closer. Girls especially described how periods alone with their mother made them more significant to each other and this seemed to influence their perceived mattering to their mothers. A previously significant relationship with a biological parent could, however, change negatively. One boy (15, FG7) stated that he deliberately chose to change the relationship with his father because he did not like his lifestyle after the divorce. His account suggested that his father was a significant other, but to a lesser extent than his mother. Our analysis suggested that considering a biological parent or stepparent as a significant other or not is a not static sentiment.

Fulfilling a parenting role or not. Some adolescents reported that one of their biological parents was not fulfilling a parenting role. Their accounts seemed to suggest that this influenced their feeling of mattering to that parent. One boy (15, FG7) said that his father was just trying to be a “cool” dad, whereas his mother was being a “real” parent to him. This seemed to define the boy’s idea that he mattered more to his mother than to his father.

When it came to a stepparent fulfilling a parenting role, adolescents’ narratives were very diverse in all focus groups. In each group some adolescents stated that a stepparent should not act as their parent because they already have parents. Some adolescents said that they noticed their stepparent tried to act like a parent, and some approved of this. Another group of adolescents reported that their stepparents deliberately avoided taking the position of a parent, and they appreciated the stepparent for not interfering too much. Our data suggest that some adolescents do not appreciate it when a stepparent “parents” them, whereas others accept their stepparent as a parental figure. Depending on whether they accept how the stepparent is acting, they may consider him/her as a significant other to whom they want to matter. Adolescents expect that biological parents will fulfill their role as parents. If they do not, this seems to be a reason to consider them as a significant other to a lesser extent.

Biological kinship. Some adolescents consider their own biological parents as having a more special position (cf. significant other) than a stepparent, just because their starting position is different: biological parents are real family. One boy (15, FG7) thought that he did not play an important role in his stepparents’ lives because they

were not family. In several groups adolescents mentioned that they had started to notice they resembled one of their parents in appearance or even in character. This seemed to contribute to the perception that that parent is a significant other in their lives to whom they want to matter. Several boys and girls stated that a stepparent can never replace their “real” parent; however, that does not mean that a stepparent cannot be a significant other for the adolescent. One girl (15, FG4) stated that she considered her stepfather as a father figure, but not as her father, even if he acted like a father.

In all the groups the adolescents spontaneously referred to their biological parents as their “real” or their “own” parents, but they also noticed that having a nice stepparent could enrich their life. One boy (15, FG7) appreciated that his stepmother was like a mother, but at the same time she was still an outsider; this made her a good conversation partner and a significant other. The accounts of the adolescents suggested that biological kinship is important, but that irrespective of biological relatedness, a stepparent can be a significant other to whom they want to matter.

Violence. Few adolescents spoke about physical violence between a (step)parent and themselves. This factor influenced whether an adolescent could consider a (step)parent as a significant other. These adolescents were very ambivalent about considering these (step)parents as significant others and wanting to matter to them.

DISCUSSION

This study examined adolescents’ perceived mattering to parental figures in stepfamilies; its qualitative results offer preliminary support for the utility of the mattering construct in stepfamilies, which was, to our knowledge, never explored in this context before.

As an answer to our first and second research questions, the results of this study give us more insight on how adolescents living in stepfamilies concretely perceive that they matter to their biological parents and stepparents, with some more unique, but also overlapping ways of mattering. Getting attention and being cared about have been described as two components of mattering to parents (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) and this is in line with our results. Adolescents described how receiving attention from

their own biological parents as well as from their stepparents showed that they mattered to them. Similarly, Schrodtt et al. (2008) stated that engaging in everyday talk with stepchildren is a way for stepparents to create fruitful relationships with them. Also in our study, being cared about is one way in which adolescents detect that they matter to biological parents as well as stepparents. Only biological parents, however, seem to make it explicit to adolescents that they are important to them. Also, the fact that biological parents love them and miss them (proximity) is interpreted as an expression of mattering. The fact that love and proximity are not mentioned in the case of stepparents does not mean that stepparents do not love or miss their stepchildren. It could be that they do not show it obviously to stepchildren to avoid a loyalty conflict with their own biological parents. Due to the latter, the emergence of the theme of “implicit mattering” to stepparents can be clarified: some adolescents perceive that they matter to their stepparents, but they are not able to describe how they know that.

Another important component of mattering to biological parents as well as stepparents was doing activities together, from very basic activities (eating together) to specially planned activities. The fact that parents and stepparents want to spend time together with them, gives the adolescents a feeling of mattering. Similarly, Baxter et al. (1999) stated that spending quality time together is important for building step-relationships. Our results confirm the importance of sharing time together with biological parents as well as stepparents.

Our findings carefully suggest that mattering should be considered within a context of bi-directionality in (step)parent-adolescent relationships (Kuczynski et al., 1999). Based on personal interactions (Marshall, 2001) with parents and stepparents, adolescents start to consider parents and stepparents as significant others and therefore want to matter to them. As an answer to our third research question, our analysis revealed several relational context factors that influence adolescents’ perception of parents and stepparents as significant others. The emergence of the duration of the relationship and the intensity of the contact as important in considering a stepparent as a significant other are consistent with Ganong et al.’s (2011) context variables for developing step-relationships. Similarly to our findings, they found that stepchildren who met their stepparent at a young age were more likely to accept him/her as a parent (our theme of duration) and that living arrangements were important factors in providing time to bond with stepparents (our theme of intensity of the contact). Our

findings contribute that these factors also seem to count for biological children and their biological parents after divorce. If the contact with a biological parent is broken for some years or if a child almost never sees a biological parent, then it is less likely that the biological parent is considered as a significant other. For some of our participants the arrival of a stepparent included a (temporary) change in the quality of the relationship with their biological parent; this is in line with Kuczynski et al.'s (2009) idea that a change in the family structure can cause transformation and change in the parent-adolescent relationship. The dynamics of relationships with stepparents was also described by Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010).

Baxter et al. (2004) found in their study that stepchildren experienced a dialectic in which the stepparent was and was not granted legitimacy in a parent role. Our findings similarly suggest that adolescents can be very reluctant towards a stepparent acting like a parent. However, some appreciated that a stepparent was caring for them like a parent or considered the stepparent as a parental figure, but not as 'their' parent. Some of our participants stated that a stepparent would never gain the status of a 'real' parent because of the absence of being biologically related. However, our data revealed that adolescents are able to build close relationships with their stepparents and they clearly appreciate the surplus value of a stepparent. This is in line with Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) who state that stepchildren disapprove stepparents' control or influence attempts and with Ganong et al.'s (1999) recommendation to stepparents to focus on developing friendships with stepchildren. The main contribution of the present study is that it gave us a first insight into how adolescents' interpret their parents' and stepparents' concrete relational behavior: what gives them a feeling of mattering or not mattering. The ideal situation may well be that adolescents living in stepfamilies feel they matter to both biological parents and stepparents (Marshall, 2004).

Strengths and limitations

One clear advantage of this study was the participation of young adolescents currently living in a stepfamily, which means that our data have little retrospective bias because the adolescents were reporting on their actual relationships with parents and stepparents. Another advantage is the diversity of adolescents' living arrangements and the configurations of their stepfamilies, which gave us insight into how mattering can appear across a variety of contexts. The fact that we explored mattering to biological

parents and stepparents simultaneously is also an advantage. It allowed us to discover the relational context factors and the similarities and differences between mattering to biological parents and stepparents.

Nevertheless, this study also has some limitations and consequently some recommendations for future research. Our sample consisted of mainly white adolescents who voluntarily participated in our study. This small self-selected sample limits the generalizability of our findings. It is feasible that adolescents with more troubled relationships with parents or stepparents refused to take part in the study or did not get their parent's consent to take part. Future research could try to gather data from adolescents from stepfamilies in residential youth care and explore their perceptions of mattering. In our study, we only explored adolescents' perspectives on mattering. Also, younger children's perceptions of mattering to parents and stepparents are worth exploring further. Additionally, this study solely focused on adolescents' interpretations of mattering to their parental figures in a stepfamily. Future research should also investigate parents' and stepparents' perspectives on mattering within stepfamilies. It could be interesting to see whether adolescents' interpretation is congruent with how parental figures show that their (step)children are significant to them. Given that adolescents mainly described parental behaviors that showed them that they matter to their (step)parents, future research should investigate more in detail how perceived mattering is linked to parental behaviors. Moreover, all our participants were members of different stepfamilies. Future research needs to adopt a multi-informant approach and solicit both parents' and stepparents' perceptions of mattering and stepchildren's perceptions from the same family and could also follow these families longitudinally. It would be interesting to compare resident and non-resident parents' and stepparents' feeling of mattering to children and stepchildren. In the current study we did not ask many questions about siblings, half-siblings and stepsiblings, but their influence on the parent-child and stepparent-child relationship definitely deserves further exploration. Additionally, it would be useful to have more research on the impact of consecutive step-relationships: does this have an influence on adolescents' feelings of wanting to matter to stepparents? Finally, in this study we explored the concept of mattering in stepfamilies, although we are unable to infer anything about the impact of mattering to adolescents' well-being. Quantitative (longitudinal) research could provide a more definite answer to this question.

Conclusion and implication

In sum, this study concretely described different ways of how adolescents perceive that they matter to their parental figures within stepfamilies. In addition, several relational context factors that seem to contribute to adolescents' perceptions of mattering emerged from the data. For practitioners working with stepfamilies, these concrete ways of mattering could be useful to work with. In therapy, stepfamily members can be stimulated to find out how they can show each other that they matter. Furthermore, given the emerged relational factors, practitioners should keep in mind that the context of stepfamily relationships has an influence on how relationships in general and a feeling of mattering in particular can evolve.

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**DIVORCE-SPECIFIC FACTORS AND
ADOLESCENTS' WELL-BEING
TWO YEARS AFTER PARENTAL DIVORCE:
THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED MATTERING¹****ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of adolescents' perceived mattering to their parents and its relation with their well-being post-divorce. More in particular, we investigated whether perceived mattering mediated the link between divorce-specific factors (father-type, satisfaction about the properties of residence at each parent's place and general satisfaction about their living arrangement) and adolescent well-being. A sample of 230 11-19-year-old adolescents took part in this longitudinal study. None of the divorce-specific factors one year post-divorce predicted perceived mattering or adolescent well-being two years post-divorce, perceived mattering was not found as a mediating process. However, both perceived mattering to mother and father were associated with adolescents' well-being two years after parental divorce. Our findings suggest that a feeling of mattering to parents can be considered a protective factor for adolescent well-being post-divorce.

¹ Based on Maes, S., Brondeel, R., & Buysse, A. (2011). *Adolescents' well-being two years after parental divorce: The role of perceived mattering*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

INTRODUCTION

A high divorce rate has led to an increase in the amount of adolescents that do not live together with both of their biological parents. Additionally, given that parental divorce is not a single event (Amato, 2010), parents may repartner and consequently adolescents will most probably deal with living in a stepfamily after their parents' divorce. Researchers argued that for investigating adolescents' well-being post-divorce, a focus on the quality of relationships between family members is most essential (Moxnes, 2003). However, little research exists on how adolescents perceive their relationships with both of their biological parents few years after divorce (Amato, 2010) and how they perceive a starting relationship with the new partner of their parent(s) (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The goal of the current study was to fill this gap in the literature by investigating more closely adolescents' relationships with their parental figures two years post-divorce.

Parents as well as adolescents are both active contributors to the development of their relationship and the personal development of one another (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Because of their cognitive sophistication and their growing understanding of relationships, it is crucial to consider adolescents as active meaning-makers. As active agents (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997), they think, interpret and make sense of changes in their family and in close relationships in their own way (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski, Pitman, & Mitchell, 2009). A part of adolescents' meaning constructions within close (parent-child) relationships and also a psychological need for every human being, is having the belief to be important to ones' significant others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). This is defined as the degree to which we feel we 'matter' to others: the psychological tendency to evaluate the self as significant to specific other people (Marshall, 2001). Especially during the consolidation of identity in adolescence, receiving recognition from significant others (e.g. parents) is described as a critical interpersonal process (Erikson, 1968) and can be considered an important aspect of adolescents' meaning construction on the parent-child relationship. Therefore, the present study focuses on adolescents' perceived mattering to both parents after divorce and its link with their post-divorce well-being.

Mattering can be considered as the direct reciprocal of significance. A significant other matters to us; conversely, mattering refers to how much we believe we matter to

our significant others (e.g. our parents). Mattering encompasses different components that include adolescents' assurance that significant others view them as important, are concerned about them, show interest in them, pay attention to them and depend on them (Dixon Rayle, 2005). It is evident that adolescents want to matter to their parents (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In extant research with adolescents, mattering was found to be distinct from global self-esteem (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), negatively associated with depression, anxiety and delinquency (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) and positively associated with having a purpose for life, a sense of relatedness (Marshall, 2001), psychological well-being and overall wellness (Dixon Rayle, 2005). However, adolescents' beliefs of mattering to mother and father after parental divorce have not been thoroughly explored in relation to their well-being. The present study complements the existing mattering literature by exploring adolescents' perceived mattering to both mother and father and by also taking into account other relevant divorce-specific factors that are likely to be important to adolescents' well-being post-divorce.

Several divorce-specific factors are likely to influence adolescents' perceived mattering to each of their biological parents and their well-being post-divorce. The majority of adolescents do not live full time with each parent anymore after divorce, depending on their living arrangement they have contact with each parent separately (Kelly, 2007). Several Western countries now favor joint physical custody to stimulate the relationship with both biological parents after divorce. Joint physical custody is often defined as children spending at least 30% of overnights with each parent (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009; Kelly, 2007). In this study we focus on co-fathers versus non-resident fathers because non-resident motherhood after divorce is very uncommon. Some studies evidence that both contact frequency with father and adolescents' reports of positive relationships with their father, are highly correlated (King, 2002; King & Sobolewski, 2006). However, frequency of contact by itself has generally not predicted child outcomes because fathers vary in the quality of their parenting, and contact frequency does not capture the length of the contact (Kelly, 2007). Rather than contact frequency with each parent by itself, adolescents expressed the importance of noticing that they matter to both parents when the living arrangement is defined (Maes, De Mol, & Buysse, in press) and in the flexibility with which the living arrangement is

implemented (Parkinson, Cashmore, & Single, 2005). Therefore, we assume that besides the father type (nonresident versus co-father) that defines the adolescents' amount of face-to-face contact with their fathers, also the properties of adolescents' residence at each parents' place (possibilities to contact the other parent, parent's flexibility and compliance with their living arrangement) and their general satisfaction with their living arrangement are associated with their perceived mattering to both of their parents and their well-being post-divorce.

Besides adolescents' perception of their living arrangements, the amount of ongoing parental conflict is another factor that definitely influences adolescents' post-divorce well-being. By two years after the divorce, the majority of parents substantially reduce their conflict, but 8% to 20% of parents continue in chronic high conflict (King & Heard, 1999) and this enduring conflict is one of the strongest predictors of child maladjustment (Bernardini & Jenkins, 2002). However, a recent study showed that adolescents' feeling of mattering mediated the link between parental divorce conflict and adolescents' well-being (Maes, Brondeel, & Buysse, submitted). This shows that adolescents' feeling of mattering to their parents can temper the negative effect of interparental conflict. Additionally, the introduction of a new partner of one or both of the parents is likely to influence adolescents' well-being after divorce. Repartnering and cohabitation (or remarriage) can be quite stressful for adolescents because it involves several changes (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000) and adolescents sometimes receive little preparation or communication about their parent's decision to repartner and live in a stepfamily (Cartwright, 2010). Nevertheless, the adolescents' relationship with the stepparent(s) is strongly associated with stepfamily adjustment (Bray, 1999). Granting or not granting the stepparent legitimacy in a parent role is an important issue for stepchildren (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004), especially in the case of a stepmother (Hart, 2009).

In sum, this study complements the existing mattering literature by investigating adolescents' perceived mattering to each biological parent after divorce in relation to their well-being. Additionally, divorce-specific factors concerning adolescents' living arrangement, the amount of current parental conflict and the relationship with their stepparent(s) are considered to also be important in relation to adolescents' well-being post-divorce. More specifically, we hypothesize that adolescents' perceived mattering will differ between nonresident fathers and co-fathers. We further hypothesize that

adolescents' perceived mattering to mother and father will mediate the relation between the divorce-specific factors (father type, parental conflict and adolescents' satisfaction about the properties of their living arrangement) and their post-divorce well-being; we also assume that the quality of adolescents' relationship with their stepparent(s) will be associated with their post-divorce well-being.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were part of a longitudinal study. To test our model, we used data of 230 adolescents (54% females) between 11 and 19 years old, who took part at Time 3 (T3) (M age = 15.02 years, SD = 2.23), approximately one year after parental divorce and Time 4 (T4), approximately two years after parental divorce. Adolescents' first participation in T4 (N = 51) was mainly owed to parental consent now being available or to the fact that adolescents were now eligible (11 years old) whereas they had not been before.

Adolescents' current education level was 6th grade of primary school (10%), vocational high school (18%), technical high school (24%), general high school (37%), college/university (12%) or working/school-leaver (11%). 48% of them had a non-residential father (less than 30% overnights in a 2-week period) and 52% of them had a co-father (between 30% and 70% of overnights in a 2-week period).

Procedure

In the present study the adolescent subsample of the Interdisciplinary Project for the Optimisation of Divorce trajectories (the ePod Study) was used. This study is a Flemish longitudinal research project that investigates the determinants of the quality of life of divorcing adults and their minor children (11-17 years old). All adults who divorced between March 2008 and March 2009 in four major courts in Flanders were asked in court if they were interested in participating in a study on divorce. Adolescents who participated in the first measurement (T1, few weeks after meeting their parents in court) were invited again to fill out some questionnaires after six months (T2), after one

year (T3) and two years later (T4). This paper considers the third (T3) and the last measurement point (T4) so we deal with the period from approximately one year until two years after the divorce procedure in court. We particularly chose these measurement points because we thought that the chance a stepparent would be living together with the adolescents would be bigger one year after divorce (T3) compared to six months after divorce (T2).

Adolescents were contacted by phone so the research goals could be explained simply and an appointment could be made for filling out the computerized questionnaire at their home. Informed consents were obtained from at least one parent (that also took part in the study) and the adolescents. In case the adolescent required assistance in comprehending the questions or needed help using the computer, a researcher was present during the adolescent's completion of the questionnaire. We gave all the participating adolescents a cinema ticket as a reward for their participation.

Measures

Demographics. Gender, age of the adolescent and adolescent's education were obtained by general questions in the computerized questionnaire.

Perceived mattering to parents. The Mattering to Others Questionnaire (MTOQ; Marshall, 2001) developed for adolescents was used to assess their perceived mattering to their biological parents. This questionnaire was administered in two versions, one with the biological mother as referent and one with the biological father as referent. This self-report measure consists of 12 statements of which ten are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from Not much to A lot and two statements are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from On top of the list to At the bottom of the list. Sample items are "I am missed by my Mother/Father when I am away" and "If your Mother/Father made a list of all the things that she/he cares about, where do you think you'd be on the list?". The MTOQ has been validated in two samples with alpha's ranging between .89 and .95 (Marshall, 2001), Cronbach's alpha for perceived mattering to mother was .96 and to father .98 in our sample.

Relationship with stepparent(s). Information about the presence of a partner of mother and father was asked as follows: "Does your mother/father currently have a partner?", response categories were Yes, No, I don't know. Information about whether mother and father were living together with their partner was asked as follows: "Does

your mother/father live together with her/his partner?”, response categories were Yes, No, I don’t know. We also asked “Do you have the feeling that the partner of your mother/father is like a parental figure for you?”, response categories were Yes, No, Not yet maybe in the future. Only when adolescents answered with yes to the latter question, they filled out the Stepparent Relationship Index (SRI; Schrodts, 2006). This self-report measure assesses the adolescent’s perception of the relationship with the stepparent and consists of 18 items about the stepparent that are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from Completely disagree to Completely agree. The adolescents filled out this questionnaire once with stepfather as a referent (if present) and once with stepmother as a referent (if present). Items are combined into three subscales (Positive Regard, Stepparental Authority, Affective Certainty) and a global score for the quality of the relationship is obtained by summing these scales. Sample items are “My stepparent knows how to be a good parent” (Positive Regard); “My stepparent guides and enforces household rules” (Stepparental Authority) and “My stepparent knows how I feel about him/her” (Affective Certainty). Evidence for the concurrent and discriminant validity of the SRI was provided elsewhere (Schrodts, 2006). In the current sample Cronbach’s alphas of the subscales ranged between .63 and .95.

Interparental Conflict. Adolescents’ reports on the Conflict Properties subscale of the Children’s Perceptions of Interparental Conflict scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) were used to assess their perception of current conflict between their divorced parents. This scale contained 19 items measuring the frequency, intensity and resolution of interparental conflict (e.g. “My parents have broken or thrown things during an argument”). Adolescents answered each item on a 3-point Likert scale consisting of True, Sort of True, and False; a higher score on this scale indicated parental conflict that was more frequent, aggressive and poorly resolved. Because these data were collected one year after parental divorce we also gave the adolescents a fourth answer option stating “My parents don’t have contact with each other”. Reports on the CPIC have been shown to be internally consistent and reliable over time (Grych et al., 1992), Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .93.

Living arrangement’s characteristics. Adolescents’ current living arrangements were questioned by asking them the following question “In a period a 14 days, how many days do you stay at your mother’s home and how many days do you stay at your father’s home”. Adolescents who stayed more than 70% at their mother’s home, were

considered to have a non-residential father (Father type = 1). Adolescents who stayed between 30 and 70% at their father's home, were considered to have a co-residential father (Father type = 2). Eight items asked about adolescents' experience with their living arrangement, we asked about the contact possibilities with each parent, each parent's flexibility concerning the living arrangement, each parent's compliance with the arrangement, the adolescent's satisfaction about the amount of contact with each parent. Adolescents answered each item on a 5-point Likert scale from Completely disagree to Completely agree. Because some adolescents lived 100% at one parent's home, items could also be answered with Not applicable. Sample items are "When I'm staying at mum's/dad's place, I am able to (when I want) keep in touch with my dad/mum"; "At this moment, I am happy about the amount of contact I have with my mum/dad". An exploratory factor analysis (varimax rotation) with these eight items, delivered a 2-factor solution: "Properties of residence at mother's place" and "Properties of residence at father's place". The alpha coefficients of these constructs were respectively .71 and .77. A high score on this variable indicated good contact possibilities with the other parent, high flexibility, high compliance of the parent and high satisfaction with the amount of contact. A single item was used to collect information about adolescent's global satisfaction with their current living arrangement. The item read "Currently I am happy about the living arrangement for me that my parents agreed upon" with response options from Completely disagree to Completely agree.

Subjective well-being. Adolescents' reports on the satisfaction items of the subjective subscale of the Comprehensive Quality of Life scale (ComQOL; Cummins, 1997) were used to assess their subjective well-being two years after parental divorce. These seven items ask about adolescents' satisfaction with seven life domains (material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, place in community and emotional well-being); two questions about satisfaction with the future were added (e.g. How satisfied are you with your possibilities for your future, How satisfied are you with the possible future). Respondents were asked to score these nine satisfaction items on a 10-point Likert scale from "completely dissatisfied" to "completely satisfied". The ComQOL has been well validated (Cummins, 1996; Gullone & Cummins, 1999), Cronbach's alpha for our nine items was .89.

Adjustment problems. Adolescents' reports on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; van Widenfelt, Goedhart, Treffers, & Goodman, 2003) were used to assess their adjustment two years after parental divorce. The SDQ is a behavioral screening questionnaire with five subscales (Hyperactivity, Conduct Problems, Emotional Symptoms, Peer Problems and Prosocial Behavior): each item is rated as not true, somewhat true or certainly true. The first four subscales are summed to generate a Total Difficulties score. The SDQ has been validated against other measures of behavioral problems, including the Child Behavior Checklist (Goodman & Scott, 1999). The alpha coefficient for the Total Difficulties score was .76.

Statistical analysis

Combined across the two used waves (T3 and T4) used for testing the mediation model, a total of 58% of the data was missing, primarily due to missing values on the parental conflict measure (CPIC), and due to drop-out from T3 to T4 and newly added participants in T4. Therefore, preliminary to the analyses, missing data were imputed through multiple imputation by the R-package 'mi' (Gelman, Hill, Su, Masanao, & Pittau, 2011), which resulted in 20 imputed datasets. Multiple imputation has the extra advantage over standard regression procedures that it works under the MAR-assumption (Missing At Random) instead of the MCAR-assumption (Missing Completely At Random). The MAR-assumption implicates that the model estimates will be unbiased if the missingness is independent of any variables other than the independent variables in the model (Shafer & Olsen, 1998).

We analyzed all data using *Mplus* 6.11 and SPSS 19.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the study variables and bivariate associations among the study variables were tested with Pearson correlation analyses. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare the study variables' means of the adolescents with a non-residential father versus a co-father. The mediation model was examined with Structural Equation Modeling (*MPlus*; Muthén & Muthén, 2001) using the bootstrap resampling method because of the relatively small sample, the non-normality of the data, and because the model to be tested includes two mediators (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The bootstrap procedure involves repeated sampling from the dataset (we used 5000 bootstrap samples) and estimating the indirect effects for each resampled dataset (n datasets =

20) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Model fit was evaluated with the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR): a value below .05 indicated a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

RESULTS

T4-adolescents' families two years post-divorce

In T4, two years after the initial parental divorce, 113 adolescents took part: 73 adolescents (64.6 %) reported that their mother had a partner, 36 reported that mother currently had no partner and 4 reported that they did not know whether their mother had a partner. Of those mothers having a partner, 43 (58.9 %) were currently living together with that partner and 32 adolescents indicated that they considered this partner as a parental figure and filled out the SRI. On average, adolescents with a stepfather indicated a good relationship with him (see Table 1). Eighty adolescents (70.8 %) reported that their father had a partner, 23 reported that father currently had no partner and 10 reported that they did not know whether their father had a partner. Of those fathers having a partner, 57 (71.3 %) were currently living together with that partner and 18 adolescents indicated that they considered this partner as a parental figure and filled out the SRI. On average, adolescents with a stepmother indicated a good relationship with her (see Table 1). More adolescents experienced the stepfather as a parental figure in comparison to stepmothers and the relationship with a stepfather was experienced as slightly better than the relationship with a stepmother. However, we did not have enough data on the stepparent-child relationships to make any firm conclusions, for the same reason we unfortunately could not include the stepparent-adolescent quality in our model.

Table 1

Mean scores for the Stepparent Relationship Index (SRI)

	Boys	Girls	Total
SRI Stepfather	3.33/5 ($n=12$) $SD: .89$	3.62/5 ($n=20$) $SD: .61$	3.51/5 ($n=32$) $SD: .72$
SRI Stepmother	3.15/5 ($n=6$) $SD: 1.07$	3.52/5 ($n= 12$) $SD: .82$	3.40/5 ($n=18$) $SD: .90$

Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables

Mean and standard deviations are provided for each measure, except the SRI (because of too little data) (see Table 2). The mean scores for perceived mattering to mother and to father were both high. Two years post-divorce, adolescents indicated a strong feeling of mattering to both parents. Mean scores for interparental conflict and adolescents' adjustment problems were low. On average, adolescents indicated a good satisfaction about the properties (e.g. contact possibilities with the other parent) of their residence at mother's and father's and were satisfied with their living arrangements in general. Mean scores for adolescents' subjective well-being were within a normal range of 75% to 85%, as found in other studies using quality of life measures.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

	M (SD)	Range
1. Mattering Mother (MTOQ), T4	4.06 (.87)	0 - 5
2. Mattering Father (MTOQ), T4	3.47 (1.20)	0 - 5
3. Conflict (CPIC), T3	.90 (.45)	0 - 2
4. Residence Father, T3	4.07 (.91)	0 - 5
5. Residence Mother, T3	4.38 (.69)	0 - 5
6. Satisfaction LA, T3	4.16 (1.22)	0 - 5
7. Subj. QOL, T4	8.28 (1.19)	0 - 10
8. Total Diff. (SDQ), T4	.78 (.20)	0 - 2

Note. These results are pooled results over 20 imputed datasets. MTOQ = Mattering to Others Questionnaire; CPIC = Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale; LA = Living Arrangement; Subj. QOL = Subjective Quality of Life; SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

Perceived mattering to mother (T4) demonstrated no correlation with perceived mattering to father (T4) ($r = .01, p > .05$). Significant correlations were found amongst the living arrangement variables. The properties of residence at father's place (T3)

correlated positively with the properties of residence at mother's place (T3) ($r = .51, p < .01$). Both the properties of residence at father's place ($r = -.38, p < .01$) and residence at mother's place both ($r = -.36, p < .01$) correlated negatively with parental conflict (T3). Adolescents' general satisfaction about their living arrangement (T3) demonstrated positive correlations with the properties of residence at father's place (T3) ($r = .41, p < .01$) and with residence at mother's place (T3) ($r = .26, p < .05$). Adolescents' subjective quality of life (T4) correlated negatively with adolescents' adjustment problems (T4) ($r = -.51, p < .01$).

Non-residential versus co-father comparisons

Of the 230 participating adolescents, 111 indicated that they had a nonresident father (48%) and 119 adolescents had a co-father (52%). Independent samples t-tests were conducted to discover differences between adolescents with a non-residential father and adolescents with a co-father. The tests were only significant for perceived mattering to father, $t(230) = -3.67, p < .001$. Adolescents with a co-father reported a significantly higher level of perceived mattering to father ($M = 3.90$) than did adolescents with a non-residential father ($M = 3.15$).

Testing the fit of the mediation model

The standard root mean square residual (SRMR) suggested this model provided an adequate fit to the data (SRMR = 0.03). Figure 1 contains the results for the model predicting adolescents' well-being. The model contained one latent construct (Adolescents' well-being). Examining the model, none of the presumed predictors of T3 was significantly associated with mattering to mother or to father. The properties of residence at mother's place at T3 ($\beta = -.23, p < .10$) and adolescents' general satisfaction about their living arrangement at T3 ($\beta = .25, p < .10$) only show a trend for association with mattering to mother at T4. Mattering to mother ($\beta = .30, p < .01$) and mattering to father ($\beta = .34, p < .01$) at T4 were both significantly associated with adolescents' well-being at T4. Indirect effects in the model indicated that neither mattering to mother, neither mattering to father were mediating the link between the proposed predictors and adolescents' well-being. Also, none of the direct effects of the proposed predictors to adolescents' well-being were significant.

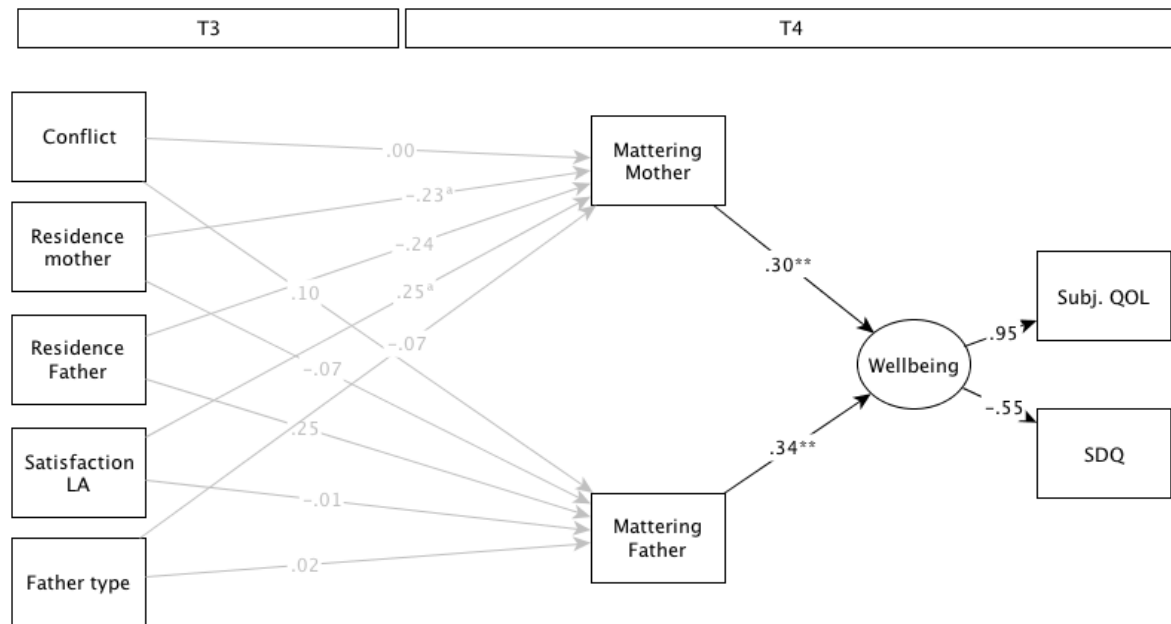


Figure 1. Structural model testing for mediating processes between divorce-specific predictors (T3) and adolescents' well-being (T4). $N = 230$, SRMR = 0.03. ^a $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$.

Note. For clarity reasons, the direct effects (all non-significant) of the predictor variables on well-being are not shown in the figure.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed at investigating the role of adolescents' perceived mattering to parents and its relation with adolescents' well-being. We expanded the existing mattering literature by exploring adolescents' perceived mattering to both parents in recently divorced families and by investigating whether perceived mattering mediated the link between several divorce-specific factors (father type, satisfaction about the properties of residence at each parent's place, general satisfaction about their living arrangement) and adolescents' well-being post-divorce. Because of too little data of the quality of the relationships with their stepparent, the association with adolescents' well-being was unfortunately not tested. However, descriptive data were provided.

Despite our limited results concerning the stepparent-adolescent relationships two years post-divorce, we can still identify a trend congruent with the existing literature. Only half of the adolescents who lived together with the partner of their parent(s) considered this person as a parental figure. This is consistent with the fact that granting the stepparent legitimacy in a parent role can be a complicated issue for adolescents

(Baxter et al., 2004). Consequently, the results with regard to the quality of the relationship with stepparents should be viewed in this light: only the adolescents who indicated that they considered their parent's partner as a parental figure filled out this questionnaire. This probably clarifies the overall positive stepparent-adolescent relationships in this small group. Further, the fact that the relationship with stepfathers is experienced slightly better, is also in line with existing literature that describes the role of stepmothers as more difficult than the role of stepfathers (Hart, 2009).

The results of our study are in accordance with other findings that mattering to significant others (i.e. parents) is associated with adolescents' general well-being (Dixon Rayle, 2005) and add that especially in a context few years after parental divorce, mattering to mother as well as mattering to father are both significantly related with adolescents' post-divorce well-being. Moreover, the belief that one matters to mother post-divorce seems to be completely independent from the belief that one matters to father post-divorce, both constructs showed no correlation. This confirms the importance of focusing on the quality of the different relationships post-divorce (Moxnes, 2003). It might also be indicative of the fact that adolescents consider their two post-divorce families as independent from one another.

In contrast with our expectation, none of our assumed divorce-specific factors one year after divorce (parental conflict, father type and satisfaction with living arrangements) were linked with adolescents' perceived mattering to both parents two years post-divorce, neither with adolescents' well-being two years post-divorce. It needs to be stressed that this is partly a positive finding: the level of parental conflict one year post-divorce had no influence on adolescents' perceived mattering or their well-being two years after parental divorce. However, we want to nuance this finding by pointing out that the level of parental conflict in our sample was low. We clearly were not able to include the small group of adolescents facing enduring parental conflict post-divorce (King & Heard, 1999). Nevertheless, more parental conflict was correlated with less satisfaction about the properties of residence at each parent's place, and less satisfaction with the latter correlated with less general satisfaction about their living arrangement. Furthermore, father type (nonresident versus co-father) did not predict adolescents' perceived mattering to their fathers, neither adolescents' well-being two years post-divorce. However, we found a significant difference between adolescents' feeling of mattering between father types. Adolescents with a co-father reported a

significantly higher level of mattering to their fathers than adolescents with a nonresident father. This probably relates to the fact that a co-father has more face-to-face opportunities to show to the adolescent that he views him/her as important, to show his concern and interest (Dixon Rayle, 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study expands our knowledge on adolescents' perceived mattering to their biological families in divorced families, some limitations need to be addressed. First, none of the assumed divorce-specific factors was able to predict adolescents' perceived mattering. Further research should try to discover what factors are defining for adolescents' belief of mattering to parents post-divorce. Especially since mattering to parents is so clearly connected with their post-divorce well-being. A strength of this study however, is that the model included two separate measurement points. Therefore, we can be more conclusive about the (absence of) temporal relations between the constructs. Second, our sample consisted of adolescents who were not confronted with high interparental conflict post-divorce. However, it is likely that adolescents' perceived mattering to parents is different in families with extreme or enduring interparental conflict. Therefore, future mattering research in high-conflict families is essential. Third, we conducted this study with a small sample of Belgian adolescents, which limits the generalizability of the findings to younger children and children/adolescents of varying nationalities and racial groups. Younger children may perceive mattering to their parents differently and mattering may be differently interpreted across cultures. Fourth, our focus in the present study was to discover whether mattering to each parent mediated between the divorce-specific factors and adolescents' well-being. However, future research should also find out the moderating capacity of mattering to each parent in this context. Moderation analysis could test whether the impact of the divorce-specific factors on adolescents' well-being differs between adolescents with a high score on mattering to each parent and adolescents with a low score on mattering to each parent. Fifth, all the variables in this study were measured using self-report questionnaires. A feeling of mattering is intrapersonal and could not be rated by others, however, future studies could investigate the congruence between the extent to which (step)parents consider their children as significant to them and the way children perceive that they matter to their (step)parents.

Conclusion and Implication

In sum, the results of this study confirm the importance of adolescents' perceived mattering to their mothers as well as their fathers after parental divorce and its relation with their general well-being. These findings suggest that a feeling of mattering to both parents can be considered a protective factor to adolescent well-being post-divorce. Therefore, divorce practitioners could use this construct of mattering in their practice with post-divorce families. When working with adolescents and parents, they could empower their feelings of mattering to each other and search for mutually understood ways to show this to each other, especially in the case of nonresident parents.

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The present doctoral dissertation aimed at investigating the construct of adolescents' perceived mattering in divorcing families. The different chapters with either a qualitative or a quantitative approach demonstrated relevant insights and both approaches enriched our knowledge about how adolescents matter in a context of divorce. This final chapter discusses the main findings and provides some theoretical, methodological and clinical considerations. Finally, limitations and directions for future research are formulated.

INTEGRATION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

Before we summarize the most important results of this dissertation, we shortly repeat the basic assumptions of our research. First, we argued that not the divorce itself, but rather its accompanying processes and the number of family transitions are of main importance for adolescents' well-being during and after parental divorce (Amato, 2010). This is why we did not investigate differences in outcomes between divorced and nuclear families to see the 'impact' of divorce. Crucial divorce processes are the amount of parental conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship and the formation of a stepfamily (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Potter, 2010). To investigate more deeply the underlying mechanisms of these processes, it was important to search for possible mediators for the link between divorce and divorce conflict on the one hand and adolescents' outcomes on the other hand. Second, given a high divorce rate nowadays, divorce became a more common experience for families in Western countries (Amato, 2001) and is considered a social reality. We argued that, although parental divorce affects children's lives, a risk and resilience perspective on divorce is more useful than a deficits perspective (Kelly & Emery, 2003). This is why we did not investigate the determinants of divorce, neither how to prevent parental divorce. Conversely, we focused on resilience within divorcing families and investigated adolescents' well-being post-divorce. Adolescents feel well, not only in the absence of adjustment problems, but also when they perceive a good Quality of Life (QOL). The latter adds important information about their well-being (Jozefiak, Larsson, Wichström, Wallander, & Mattejat, 2010). Therefore, we included adolescents' subjective QOL as an outcome measure in our quantitative studies. Third, research on parent-child relationships has undergone an important evolution: scholars now consider children as active agents in their families and stress the co-occurrence of influence from parent to child and from child to parent in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003). This means that both parents and children are actively contributing to the development of their relationships, also during processes of family change.

In chapter 1 we outlined the three overarching research aims that resulted from the above-mentioned starting points and that consequently guided the research described in this dissertation. In sum, first, we aimed at investigating more deeply important relational processes (parental conflict and (step)parent-adolescent relationships) in a

sample of adolescents with divorced parents. Second, we aimed at studying adolescents' perceived well-being post-divorce (their subjective Quality of Life (QOL) and their adjustment) because this is a more comprehensive construct compared to using only adolescents' adjustment problems as an outcome measure. Third, we aimed at focusing on adolescents as active meaning-makers in their changing families. A deeper investigation of adolescents' perceived mattering meets the three general aims of this dissertation because it is (1) a relational concept that (2) is supposed to positively influence adolescents' well-being and that (3) considers adolescents as active meaning-makers within their changing family relationships.

Understanding the divorce and the importance of divorce-specific mattering

The first research goal (chapter 2) was to investigate adolescents' experiences of the process of parental divorce. Using a qualitative design, we studied young adolescents' meaning constructions on parental divorce and their feeling of mattering within this family process. Two components of the divorce transition were found to be highly important to the participating young adolescents: understanding why their parents took the decision to divorce and feeling that they mattered when parents decided about their living arrangements. In the different groups, a lot of variety existed in the extent to which adolescents were able to construct meaning on their parents' divorce and the extent to which they felt they mattered to their parents. The participants of this study did not experience a feeling of mattering neither did they express that they actively wanted to make a difference when it came to their parents' decision to divorce. Considering the literature on the negative impact of self-blame (Fosco & Grych, 2007), it is positive that adolescents did not have the feeling that they were the cause of their parents' divorce. Nevertheless, being active meaning-makers (Kuczynski, 2003), they clearly expressed their need to understand the parental decision to divorce. This result was congruent with other studies where children also expressed the importance of understanding parental divorce and getting an explanation about the changes in their family (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; Maundeni, 2002). In contrast to the divorce decision, adolescents clearly expressed the psychological need to matter to their parents (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) when it came to their living arrangements: some really felt they mattered and were content with their living arrangement, others felt that at least one of their parents did not take them into account and were less happy

or even unhappy with their living arrangement. This finding shows the necessity of recognizing the adolescent as a full person and partner (De Mol & Buysse, 2008) within the bi-directional parent-child relationship (Kuczynski & Lollis, 2004). It, however, does not mean that parents should children give the power (Kuczynski, 2003) to decide about their own living arrangements because this potentially puts them in a loyalty conflict (Dunn et al., 2001). Rather, it means that parents signal to their child that he/she matters to them so the child can notice that his/her parents are taking him/her into account within the divorce process. If children do not sense this, they are more likely to act upon their agentic position and assert their right to decide for themselves (Neale, 2002).

Divorce-specific mattering linked to adolescents' well-being in recently divorced families

The qualitative findings of chapter 2 were used as input for investigating possible underlying mechanisms of the link between parental conflict and understanding the divorce on the one hand and adolescent well-being post-divorce on the other hand. To discover the mechanisms of processes, one needs to search for mediating variables and this is why we developed a mediation model in chapter 3. Adolescents' expressed need to matter concerning their living arrangement, was named divorce-specific mattering and assessed using specific questions about their feeling of mattering to their parents about their living arrangement. Adolescents' expressed need to understand the divorce, was assessed using specific questions to tap whether they understood why their parents were divorcing. Furthermore, as argued in the above-mentioned starting points of this research, adolescents' subjective Quality of Life (QOL) was measured in addition to their adjustment problems. Our specific hypotheses were that parental conflict and adolescents' understanding of parental divorce would be both associated with adolescents' well-being, and that this association would be mediated by cognitive (threat and self-blame) and emotional (emotional reactivity, regulation of exposure to affect, internal representations) processes and by adolescents' divorce-specific mattering to their parents. These hypotheses could not be entirely validated, however, some interesting associations were found. In a first sample with adolescents from recently divorced families, parental conflict was associated with cognitive appraisals of

threat and self-blame, consistent with previous research in intact families (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000), and with two (emotional reactivity and internal representations) of the three component processes of the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1998). As we considered adolescents as active meaning-makers (Kuczynski, 2003), their understanding of divorce was included in the model. Adolescents reported to have a good understanding of why their parents had divorced, however, this understanding was not related to the proposed cognitive and emotional processes. This is consistent with the statement that it is not the divorce per se, but rather the amount of parental conflict that could bring adolescents out of balance (Buehler et al., 1997). In addition, the study evidenced the surplus value of using adolescents' subjective QOL (Jozefiak, Larsson, Wichström, Wallander, & Mattejat, 2010), next to adolescents' adjustment problems. Parental conflict was negatively associated with adolescents' subjective QOL, their understanding of the divorce was positively associated with their subjective QOL. The latter is in line with previous research where children expressed the need for an explanation about their parents' divorce (Smart, 2003).

Our attempt to find several mediating processes in the model of chapter 3 failed. Only adolescents' divorce-specific feeling of mattering was found to be a clear mediator of the link between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being in recently divorced families. On top, in a second sample two years after parental divorce, this divorce-specific mattering was found to be an underlying mechanism, and a more general measure of mattering to parents was associated with their well-being post-divorce. Additionally, two processes of the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1998) were found to be underlying mechanisms for the link between parental conflict and adolescents' well-being: negative internal family representations and emotional reactivity. Consistent with previous research (Buehler, Lange, & Franck, 2007; Fosco & Grych, 2008), this means that adolescents' negative thoughts about their family relationships post-divorce and their fear of losing contact are processes that should be monitored when it comes to adolescents' well-being in the context of parental divorce conflict. The cognitive appraisals from the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990) were not found to be mediators in our model, however, that could be due to the fact that the used measure of the emotional security processes was a more valid measure in the context of divorce (Davies, Forman, Rasi, & Stevens, 2002).

The most significant finding from chapter 3 is that it evidenced the importance of divorce-specific (concerning adolescents' living arrangements) mattering to parents to diminish the negative effects of parental divorce conflict on adolescents' well-being post-divorce, and the importance of a general feeling of mattering to parents and its association with adolescents' well-being. Although this is the first study to investigate mattering in a divorce context, these findings are consistent with extant mattering research that also showed associations between mattering and well-being (Elliott, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2005; Marshall & Lambert, 2006; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007).

Concrete perceptions of mattering to parental figures in stepfamilies

Since mattering proved to be a useful construct in the context of divorce (chapter 2 and chapter 3) and because divorce is considered just a first step in a series of family transitions, chapter 4 aimed at investigating the different forms of appearance of mattering to parental figures in a post-divorce context, more specifically in stepfamilies. The concrete aim of chapter 4 was to investigate how mattering is perceived in parent-adolescent relationships and stepparent-adolescent relationships in stepfamilies. First, we wanted to know in which particular ways adolescents perceived mattering to parents and stepparents. Second, we were interested to discover whether adolescents' mattering to biological parents was perceived differently than mattering to stepparents. Third, we wondered what factors would create the context for the persistence or the development of an adolescent's feeling of mattering within a stepfamily. The qualitative results of chapter 4 offered in the first place support for the utility of the mattering construct in stepfamilies, which was, to the best of our knowledge, not qualitatively explored in this context before. As an answer to the first and the second research question of chapter 4, adolescents' accounts gave us a concrete view on how exactly they perceive to matter to their biological parents and their stepparents. We found some overlapping themes between mattering to parents and stepparents, but also encountered some themes that seemed to be more unique features of mattering to either parents or stepparents. In line with previous mattering research, attention and care were found to be two components of mattering to biological parents as well as to stepparents (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Furthermore, the fact that parents and stepparents are willing to or take initiatives to share activities with the adolescent, gave the adolescent the feeling to matter. In the case of

stepparents, this is congruent with the results of Schrodt et al. (2008) who found that engaging in everyday talk with their stepchildren is for stepparents a way to bond with them, and with a study that showed the importance of spending quality time to build positive step-relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). Our study adds that sharing activities seems also important to adolescents' perceived mattering to their biological parents. Feeling to be important (Elliott et al., 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) was a component of perceived mattering that adolescents only mentioned in relation to their biological parents. Also, being loved and missed (proximity theme) was not mentioned in relation to stepparents. This could mean that stepparents do not show love and proximity-seeking in such clear ways as biological parents do. In this context the theme of 'implicit' mattering to stepparents can be situated: the adolescent's feeling to matter to the stepparent, but not being able to describe the concrete aspects of it. Further, the study revealed some mattering-components that seemed specifically related to the divorce context: being taken into account considering divorce-related matters, getting priority above stepparent or stepchildren and adolescents who feel that stepparents treat them as if they were biological children.

As an answer to the third research question of chapter 4, our qualitative analysis revealed several relational context factors that seem to influence adolescents' perceptions of mattering in stepfamilies. The main contribution of this finding is that mattering should be considered within the bi-directionality of (step)parent-child relationships (Kuczynski, Harach, & Bernardini, 1999). Furthermore, these relational factors also confirm the reciprocity of mattering and significance, as described by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981): it seems adolescents mostly care about mattering to parental figures that they consider as significant others to them.

Mattering to parents linked to adolescents' well-being two years post-divorce

In chapter 5 we integrated elements of the previous chapters (properties of adolescents' living arrangements, level of interparental conflict, general mattering to parents and the stepparent-adolescent relationship) into one model to be tested in a quantitative longitudinal design. In this study we hypothesized that adolescents' perceived mattering would differ between adolescents with nonresident fathers and those with co-fathers. This hypothesis could be validated: adolescents with a co-father reported a significantly higher level of mattering to their fathers than adolescents with a

nonresident father. In line with the results of chapter 4 that stressed the importance of shared activities, care and attention to perceive mattering, we explain this significant difference in perceived mattering by the fact that a co-father has more opportunities to show the adolescent in person that he is attentive to him/her, cares about him/her and is willing to do activities together.

The second hypothesis of chapter 5 stated that adolescents' perceived mattering to mother and father would mediate the relation between several divorce-specific factors (father type, satisfaction about the properties of residence at each parent's place, general satisfaction about their living arrangement, the quality of the stepparent-adolescent relationship) and adolescents' well-being post-divorce. Unfortunately, this hypothesis could not be validated. Firstly, the quality of the relationship with stepparents could not be included in our model because we had too little data. However, examining the little data we had, we assessed that only half of the adolescents living together with the partner of their parent(s) considered this person as a parental figure. This is in line with existing literature stating that granting the stepparent legitimacy in a parenting role can be a complicated issue for adolescents (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). Moreover, as evidenced in chapter 4, relational context factors (e.g., the duration of the stepparent-adolescent relationship) probably plays a role in whether the adolescent starts to consider the stepparent as a parental figure. Secondly, in contrast with our hypothesis, none of the proposed divorce-specific factors one year post-divorce turned out to be predicting adolescents' perceived mattering or their well-being post-divorce two years post-divorce. In contrast to chapter 3, where divorce-specific mattering turned out to be a mediator, using a more general measure of mattering to parents did not allow us to find a mediating link between the proposed factors and adolescents' well-being. Nevertheless, the finding that perceived mattering to each parent was associated with adolescents' well-being, is consistent with extant mattering research (e.g., Dixon Rayle, 2005). This study adds that some years after divorce, the belief to matter to mother seems to be completely independent from the belief to matter to father. This shows us that a focus on the quality of the different post-divorce relationships is important and necessary (Moxnes, 2003).

In sum, the most important and overarching finding of this dissertation is that the concept of mattering to parental figures turned out to be useful and gave us more insight in the transition process of families confronted with parental divorce. The fact

that mattering is a positive concept and a perception that can positively develop, should be stressed. Additionally, the results show that a sole focus on negative outcomes of divorce provides biased information. Furthermore, our results give clear indications of how adolescents are able to deal with parental divorce in an empowering and constructive way. They also show how adolescents' well-being post-divorce can be stimulated. Our agentic starting point of asking 'how adolescents deal with parental divorce' rather than asking 'how divorce negatively influences adolescents' outcomes', turned out to be fruitful and valuable.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Marital conflict versus divorce conflict?

A first global aim of this doctoral research was to focus on divorce processes, and parental conflict is an important process variable that is even considered more important than the act of divorce (two parents who go and live separately) itself. Our research contributed to the field by studying underlying mechanisms (mediators) of the link between parental divorce conflict and adolescents' well-being, which was a gap in the conflict literature. To investigate possible mechanisms, we tried to transfer two theoretical process models of children's interpretations of marital conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990) to parental conflict in the context of divorce. We confirmed findings from research with nuclear families by evidencing that also divorce conflict is associated with children's cognitive and emotional appraisals. Consequently, this suggests that the same mechanisms are at stake, independent of family structure. However, we were not able to proof that these existing mechanisms were, as in research on marital conflict (Davies et al., 2002; Fosco & Grych, 2008), mediating the link between divorce conflict and children's outcomes. We can assume that divorce conflict is accompanied by other divorce-specific process variables, which are not relevant in the context of marital conflict and were therefore not included in the existing theoretical models. Preliminary evidence for such a divorce-specific appraisal by adolescents was found in chapter 3, where divorce-specific mattering (the adolescent's interpretation that parents take him/her into account concerning his/her living arrangement) proved to be a mediating variable. Future research should try to discover

other divorce-specific factors and mechanisms that explain the impact of divorce conflict on adolescent well-being.

Link divorce-specific and general mattering to parents

As a part of our first research aim, we focused on adolescents' relational processes within families after divorce. The concept of mattering to parental figures (Marshall, 2001) proved to be relevant to adolescents' meaning construction on (step)parent-child relationships post-divorce. Our initial construct of divorce-specific mattering to parents can be considered a contextualization of the more general concept of mattering to parents, that is more independent from the family type. Both constructs significantly correlated with each other ($r = .25, p < .01$). While a part of general mattering to parental figures encompasses getting attention from parents and feeling that they are concerned more generally (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), divorce-specific mattering refers to the fact that children interpret that they matter in the context of divorce by noticing that their parents are concerned with how their children thrive within a specific living arrangement. Nevertheless, both general mattering to parents and divorce-specific mattering were associated with post-divorce well-being. Marshall (2001) describes mattering in relation to specific others (i.e., parents) because it tends to imply a characteristic of a specific relationship. She defines mattering to parents as the child's psychological tendency to evaluate the self as significant to its parents. The construct is distinct from self-esteem because the latter refers to an evaluation of the self, while mattering to parents is the perception that they notice the self (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Furthermore, the construct has been distinguished from perceived social support and self-consciousness (Elliott et al., 2004). A feeling of mattering emerges from eye to eye validation from significant others (i.e., parents) (Josselson, 1994) and is positively associated with a having a purpose for life and a sense of relatedness (Marshall, 2001).

Contribution of Quality of Life (QOL)

A second important aim of this dissertation was a focus on adolescents' perceived well-being, including both negative aspects (adjustment problems) and positive aspects (subjective QOL). Adding the latter was our contribution to the divorce field.

Adolescents' subjective QOL is the aggregate of their satisfaction with seven life domains: material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, place in community and emotional well-being (Cummins, 2005). Our approach was rewarding and contributed to our discovery that the majority of our participants indicated a good subjective QOL, with an overall mean of 83% in our samples. The latter is comparable to the average QOL score for children that tends to be in the range of 70-80% (Cummins, 1995) or, in more recent research, in the range of 75-85% (Jozefiak et al., 2010; Laaksonen et al., 2008). The QOL scores found in our research, can be considered a confirmation of the fact that most adolescents seem to do well after their parents' divorce (Kelly, 2007), however, an alternative explanation might be that adolescents with a lower QOL were not allowed by their parents to take part in our research or did not want to take part themselves. Furthermore, adolescents' subjective QOL was shown to be associated with several study variables (e.g. parental conflict, divorce-specific mattering, general mattering to parents). Therefore, we can conclude that measuring adolescents' subjective QOL in the context of divorce adds important information about their well-being that goes beyond only measuring adjustment problems. This is in line with other scholars' work (Jozefiak et al., 2010). However, in our studies we did not focus on adolescents' objective QOL. It is likely that adolescents' objective QOL might temporarily change after divorce (e.g., decreasing economic resources). So, in our opinion, future studies should also investigate this aspect of QOL in divorcing families.

Researching adolescents' agency in the context of divorce

A third aim of this dissertation was to study adolescents as active agents within their changing families after divorce. Therefore, we focused on adolescents' meaning construction within (step)parent-child relationships by investigating their perceived mattering to (step)parents. Our studies clearly evidence that adolescents give actively meaning to their close relationships (Kuczynski, 2003). However, agency is a multi-faceted construct (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007) and this dissertation only focused on its cognitive dimension (meaning construction). Consequently, our studies lacked to investigate the motivational (autonomy) and behavioral (action) dimension of adolescents' agency in the context of divorce. Additionally, both parents and children are equal agents within a bi-directional relationship (Kuczynski et al., 1999). In this dissertation we only focused on the adolescent's side of this relationship. Future

research should capture all the dimensions of agency within the bi-directional framework.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As described in chapter 1, in this research project we used a mixed methods approach to investigate the different research questions. Investigating adolescents' agency in parent-adolescent relationships and assessing their well-being in post-divorce families requires using different methodological approaches (Amato, 2010; Parke, 2002). The strengths and the limitations of this design is discussed in this section.

The use of focus groups with adolescents in two of our studies (chapter 2 and chapter 4) turned out to be very enriching and rewarding, not only for the researchers, but also for the participants themselves. The adolescents in both studies listened to each other carefully and shared many stories about their personal lives that were relevant to the researchers. Participants discussed their divorce-related problems with each other and aligned themselves or disagreed with what was said by the other group members. In sum, rich data were produced from the interaction between the group members (Kennedy, Kools, & Krueger, 2001).

Using this qualitative approach, we were able to discover adolescents' need to feel that they matter to their parents when it comes to their living arrangement after divorce (chapter 2) and this lead us to investigate more deeply the concept of mattering to parental figures within stepfamilies (chapter 4). Our qualitative approach in chapter 4 then gave us a concrete insight into how adolescents perceive mattering to their biological parents and their stepparents. However, the use of focus groups also has some drawbacks. First, random sampling is not possible (Flick, 2008) when running focus groups about a specific topic because groups are composed based on specific inclusion criteria. For this reason, the results of the qualitative analysis cannot be generalized to the whole population of adolescents living in stepfamilies. Nevertheless, our focus groups provided us with a range of different views on mattering (Sim, 1998). Second, as all participants volunteered to take part in the research, this might have caused bias in the results. Third, the analysis of the results depends on the skills and the interpretation of the researcher (Sim, 1998) and this might also have caused bias in the results.

However, the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis process was enhanced by doing the analysis with several researchers (investigator triangulation), which minimized bias coming from the individual research (Flick, 2008).

The quantitative studies within our mixed methods design also made a significant and relevant contribution to our knowledge on adolescents' perceived mattering in the context of divorce. As a feeling of mattering is an intrapersonal construction, we could not have used other sources (e.g., parents) to assess it. However, our quantitative studies could have benefited from using multiple sources for other study variables. We attempted to include parents' assessment about their children, but due to small samples, we could not complicate the models to be tested. Also due to small samples we were not able to investigate the existence of age differences or sex differences. Nevertheless, our quantitative studies proved clearly that a feeling of mattering to parents is associated with less adjustment problems and more subjective well-being in adolescents.

To conclude, our mixed methods approach clearly showed its surplus value by providing a more deeper understanding of the construct of mattering (qualitative) and by evidencing perceived mattering' s associations with relevant divorce-related variables (quantitative).

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

We would not have undertaken this research project if we did not have the desire that our results would 'matter' in the research field and contribute to the clinical practice of working with families in transition. Therefore, in this section, we discuss how the results of our research can be useful for practitioners.

First, even though the level of parental conflict was low in our research, it still showed to be associated with adolescents' well-being. Therefore, practitioners should help parents to limit their conflict and decrease the chance that children start to feel caught between their parents during and after divorce. Professionals should guide parents how to explain divorce to their children and how to use constructive conflict strategies so children stay out of the conflict. A suitable way of helping parents to do this, is stimulate them to enter divorce mediation (Emery, 1994). Divorce mediation has

become a synonym for securing the welfare of children with divorcing parents (James, 1995) and recent models have been shown their ability to reduce parental conflict in high-conflict divorcing families (Jacobs & Jaffe, 2010).

Second, our results indicate that children need to sense in the divorce arrangements (i.e., their living arrangement) made by their parents that their parents are taking them into account. Divorce professionals can definitely stimulate parents to look through the eyes of their children in this matter. However, as this dissertation shows children should be recognized as agentic beings, also during the transitions of divorce. Reliance on parents' interpretations of their children's needs is only one step. What if arguing parents are not able to define their children's needs, due to their own emotional process? Many divorce professionals are reluctant to involve children in the process of divorce because they fear to burden them with the feeling of having to choose between their parents. Yet, not involving children at all within this transition process that effects their daily lives, is a restriction of their agency (James & James, 1999). Moreover, research showed that including children in divorce mediation clearly benefits the quality of post-divorce relationships and psychological well-being, especially for fathers and children. In addition, agreements reached in child-inclusive mediation have shown to be significantly more durable and workable, and parents were less likely to instigate new litigation in the year after child-inclusive mediation, compared to child-focused mediation (McIntosh, Wells, & Long, 2007). This pleads for a more serious interpretation of children's agency in the context of divorce.

Third, our results indicated that the more adolescents believed that they mattered to their parents, the less adjustment problems and the more subjective quality of life they reported. So, it appears that their sense of mattering to their parents is clearly a protective factor that can be addressed in working with families in transition. A useful tool that can help to empower adolescents' feeling of mattering to their parents, is the website www.tweehuizen.be. This Flemish website was developed for divorcing families and divorce professionals, using the concept of mattering as an important principle. It explains in an attractive and interactive way how children and adolescents can show to their parents how they want to matter within the stressful transition that divorce is. Also, a lot of information for divorcing parents and divorce professionals is provided on this website. In addition, another Dutch website has been developed very recently: www.villapinedo.nl. This website is developed especially for youngsters with divorcing

parents or those who live in a stepfamily. The website empowers youngsters by stimulating them to share their stories and have online discussions on divorce-related topics.

Additionally, even though preliminary, our results showed that a feeling of mattering depends on several factors (cf., relational context factors in chapter 4) that should be taken into account. It means that stepfamily members should also be taught that mattering to each other is not an instant process. Practitioners (e.g., psychologists) should talk with parents and children about their mutual relationships and their feeling of mattering to each other. They can assist (step)parents and children in developing positive relationships where mattering to each other is a feeling that can grow, by teaching them skills, such as open communication about how they can show that family members are significant to them, and problem solving skills.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It does not need to be said that all scientific research has its limitations. We discussed the limitations of our different studies throughout this dissertation in the different chapters, but recapitalize shortly the main points that give rise to directions for future research.

High-conflict families

In previous research and throughout this dissertation, it is argued that high and enduring parental conflict is one of the strongest predictors of child maladjustment during and after divorce. However, in our studies the reported level of parental conflict was quite low, we did not succeed in recruiting high-conflict families in our samples. Furthermore, we only assessed adolescents' perceptions of conflict between parents whereas the level of conflict between parents and children and stepparents and stepchildren are also process variables worth to explore. In addition, concerning parental conflict, we only tapped into adolescents' cognitive and emotional appraisals using self-report measures. Only relying on a single source can bias results. Therefore, future research on divorce conflict should try to include high-conflict families and should assess conflict using different sources and investigate the conflict level of different

relationships within the family. Additionally, in our studies we only encountered families that passed through court for their legal divorce. More research should investigate cohabiting parents that separate.

Multi-informant approach within families

This dissertation assumed bi-directionality as an important theoretical framework to look at parent-child relationships. Yet, it focused mainly on adolescents' side within these relationships. Future research would benefit from including parents', stepparents' and (step)siblings' perceptions of mattering and could investigate the bi-directional levels of mattering within families and how this might change in the transitional process of a newborn stepfamily to an established stepfamily.

Need for research with younger children

This entire dissertation handled about adolescents' feelings of mattering to their parents and stepparents, but the voices of younger children (younger than 11 years old) were not heard. Also young children are agentic beings within their changing families and with a developmentally effective approach, future research should definitely do effort to catch their perceptions on divorce and their feeling of mattering to parental figures.

Longitudinal research with larger samples

The quantitative research in this dissertation was mainly cross-sectional research with rather small samples. In cross-sectional research, a test of mediation (as we did in chapter 3) is ambiguous and not conclusive because the temporal order of the variables cannot be proved. Moreover, we did not compare between different model whereas structural model analysis is at its best when used to determine which of two or more theoretically-derived models most conform to the underlying data. Future research should try to prove mediation using longitudinal data and comparing different alternative models in structural model analysis. Additionally, recruiting larger samples would offer us the possibility to check in detail possible differences in sex and age between children. Additionally, adapting a multiple transitions perspective on divorce, future research should try to follow families for several years starting from the divorce

to investigate how they deal with different family transitions and how this impacts their well-being.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

A growing number of research studies children's viewpoints and experiences of their families in transition. This dissertation focused on the cognitive dimension (meaning construction) of children's agency within their relationships with parental figures after divorce. More specifically, we investigated how children perceive that they matter to their parental figures and how mattering relates to other variables. Results showed that children feel they matter to both biological parents and stepparents in concrete ways (e.g., the care they receive, by doing activities together). Adolescents' perceived mattering proved to be associated with their well-being. Therefore, a feeling of mattering can be considered a protective factor in the sometimes stressful transitions in divorced families.

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NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

Dit doctoraat gaat over adolescenten (11- tot 17-jarigen) en hun gevoel 'ertoe te doen' (Eng: *Mattering*) ten opzichte van hun biologische ouders in het transitieproces van een kerngezin (een gezin met twee biologische ouders) naar een nieuw samengesteld gezin (een gezin waarbij de biologische ouder een nieuwe partner heeft). Daarnaast onderzochten we of jongeren ook het gevoel hebben ertoe te doen ten opzichte van de nieuwe partners van hun ouders in een nieuw samengesteld gezin. We bestudeerden dit op twee manieren: enerzijds met behulp van kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden (focusgroepen met adolescenten) en anderzijds met behulp van kwantitatieve onderzoeksmethoden (vragenlijstonderzoek). Eerst volgt een situering van het onderzoek en vervolgens een overzicht van de belangrijkste onderzoeksresultaten.

BELANGRIJKE EVOLUTIE IN ONZE KIJK OP JONGEREN EN SCHEIDING

In België eindigen elk jaar meer dan 30.000 huwelijken in een scheiding (Corijn, 2011) en meer dan 25.000 volwassenen beëindigen jaarlijks hun wettelijk samenwonen (Belgian National Register, 2010). Dit betekent dat ook ieder jaar meer dan 75.000 kinderen en jongeren te maken krijgen met het uit elkaar gaan van hun biologische ouders. Ongeveer 20% van alle kinderen en jongeren in België hebben ouders die niet meer samenwonen (Lodewijckx, 2005).

Rond het effect van een ouderlijke scheiding op kinderen werd reeds heel wat onderzoek verricht (Lansford, 2009). Het merendeel van deze studies focust echter enkel op de potentieel negatieve impact van scheiding op kinderen en maakt vaak een vergelijking tussen het welzijn van kinderen zonder gescheiden ouders en het welzijn van kinderen met gescheiden ouders (Amato, 2001). De resultaten van dit soort vergelijkend onderzoek zijn echter niet sluitend: sommige onderzoekers vinden dat kinderen die een scheiding meemaakten het op verschillende gebieden slechter doen dan kinderen met twee samenwonende biologische ouders (Amato, 2001), andere onderzoekers vinden weinig verschil tussen beide groepen (Angarne-Lindberg & Wadsby, 2009). Het al dan niet vinden van verschil hangt sterk af van wanneer en wat men precies meet. De maatschappelijke context waarin scheiding plaatsvindt, is

bovendien grondig geëvolueerd. De iets oudere vergelijkende studies werden uitgevoerd in een periode waarin scheiding nog veel zeldzamer was en daardoor meer werd gestigmatiseerd (Smart, 2003). Het hoge scheidingscijfer vandaag, maakt dat meer en meer families eenzelfde proces doormaken en dat jongeren die gescheiden ouders hebben niet zeldzaam meer zijn (Neale & Flowerdew, 2007). Hierdoor is onze kijk op onderzoek rond jongeren die geconfronteerd worden met de scheiding van hun ouders veranderd. Op dit moment is het in scheidingsonderzoek belangrijk te gaan kijken welke risico's een scheiding voor jongeren met zich meebrengt, maar ook en even belangrijk, hoe jongeren veerkrachtig omgaan met deze familiale veranderingen (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Sommige jongeren ondervinden weinig problemen door de scheiding, anderen hebben het er duidelijk veel moeilijker mee (Hetherington, 2003). Het is daarom relevant om te kijken naar de diversiteit binnen de groep van jongeren met gescheiden ouders en te onderzoeken hoe risico's kunnen beperkt worden en hoe veerkracht kan gestimuleerd worden. Recent onderzoek argumenteert dat het niet zozeer de feitelijke scheiding is, maar dat vooral de processen die gepaard gaan met de gezinstransitie belangrijker zijn voor het welzijn van gezinnen na scheiding. Cruciale processen tijdens een gezinstransitie na scheiding zijn onder meer de kwaliteit van het ouderschap, de mate van ouderconflict, de kwaliteit van de ouder-kind-relatie (Potter, 2010) en de vorming van een nieuw samengesteld gezin (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000).

Net als onderzoek rond scheiding, evolueert ook onderzoek naar ouder-kind-relaties. De denkwijze waarbij kinderen beschouwd worden als passieve ontvangers van de opvoeding door hun ouders, werd fel bekritiseerd (Kuczynski & Lollis, 2004) en een focus op het tweerichtingsverkeer binnen ouder-kind-relaties werd naar voor geschoven (Kuczynski, 2003). Hierbij wordt gesteld dat ouders en kinderen elkaar wederzijds beïnvloeden in een complex systeem waarbij zowel ouders als kinderen als volwaardige partners dienen beschouwd te worden binnen de ouder-kind-relatie (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Beiden zijn actieve 'agents', dit wil zeggen dat zowel ouders als kinderen bijdragen tot de ontwikkeling van hun relatie. Beiden geven actief betekenis aan wat rondom hen gebeurt, zijn in staat om verandering te initiëren en keuzes te maken op hun eigen manier (Kuczynski, 2003). Er bestaat echter nog zeer weinig onderzoek naar hoe jongeren actief bijdragen aan de ontwikkeling van relaties met hun ouderfiguren na scheiding en in een nieuw samengesteld gezin. Dit onderzoek wilde daar verandering in brengen.

DOEL VAN DIT DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK

Dit onderzoek had drie overkoepelende onderzoeksdoelen. Allereerst, wilden we relevante relationele processen tijdens en na scheiding onderzoeken. Daarom focusten we op jongeren hun perceptie van ouderconflict tijdens en na scheiding en hun interpretatie van de relaties met hun ouderfiguren na scheiding. Als tweede overkoepelend doel, wilden we het welzijn van jongeren (hun subjectieve levenskwaliteit inbegrepen) na scheiding nagaan. Dit in tegenstelling tot veel studies die enkel aanpassingsproblemen ten gevolge van scheiding bij jongeren willen opsporen. Een derde doel was het bestuderen van jongeren als actieve betekenisverleners in hun veranderend gezin na scheiding. Zeer concreet focusten we op het gevoel van jongeren 'ertoe te doen' in hun gezin na scheiding. Hier dieper op ingaan, kwam tegelijkertijd tegemoet aan onze drie algemene onderzoeksdoelen aangezien jongeren hun perceptie 'ertoe te doen' een relationeel concept is dat uitgaat van hun capaciteit om actief betekenis te verlenen aan relaties en bovendien onderzochten we het verband met het algemeen welzijn van jongeren na de scheiding van hun ouders.

BELANGRIJKSTE ONDERZOEKSRISULTATEN

Een eerste kwalitatieve studie (focusgroepen met jongeren) onderzocht hoe jongeren het scheidingsproces zelf hadden ervaren en hoe zij het gevoel kregen 'ertoe te doen' tijdens deze transitiefase van hun gezin. Twee componenten werden door de jongeren als belangrijk omschreven: enerzijds kunnen begrijpen waarom ouders uit elkaar gaan en dus voldoende uitleg krijgen, anderzijds was voor hen vooral het gevoel ertoe te doen wat betreft hun verblijfsregeling relevant. Bij dit laatste was het voor hen niet zo zeer belangrijk om mee te kunnen beslissen over hun verblijfsregeling, wel was het belangrijk dat ze konden voelen dat hun ouders bij het uitdenken van een regeling rekening hadden gehouden met hen als uniek individu. Deze studie toonde aan dat het belangrijk is dat ouders tijdens de scheiding aan hun kinderen tonen dat ze niet vergeten worden, dat er zo goed mogelijk met hen rekening wordt gehouden. Als jongeren dit niet voelen, hebben ze het gevoel te verdwijnen in het hele scheidingsproces en dit komt hun welzijn niet ten goede.

In een tweede studie (vragenlijstonderzoek) die voortbouwde op de resultaten van de eerste studie, onderzochten we mogelijke onderliggende mechanismen die de link tussen ouderconflict en het begripen van de scheiding enerzijds en het welzijn van jongeren anderzijds zouden kunnen verklaren. In een eerste steekproef met jongeren met recent gescheiden ouders, hing meer ouderconflict samen met een groter gevoel van bedreiging en een grotere neiging om zichzelf de schuld te geven voor het conflict. Meer ouderconflict hing verder ook samen met een grotere emotionele reactiviteit bij de jongeren en met negatieve representaties rond hun gezin. Het gevoel van adolescenten 'ertoe te doen' wat betreft hun verblijfsregeling na scheiding medieerde duidelijk de link tussen ouderconflict en hun welzijn na scheiding. Als jongeren, ondanks het conflict tussen hun ouders, het gevoel krijgen ertoe te doen heeft dit een positief effect op hun welzijn. In een tweede steekproef met jongeren twee jaar na de scheiding werd het belang ertoe te doen wat betreft de verblijfsregeling bevestigd. Zowel ertoe doen wat betreft de verblijfsregeling als een algemeen gevoel ertoe te doen ten opzicht van hun ouders na scheiding, bleek positief samen te hangen met het welzijn van jongeren.

Het apart wonen van ouders, is slechts een eerste stap in een reeks van mogelijke gezinstransities na scheiding. In een derde studie (focusgroepen met jongeren) onderzochten we hoe jongeren in een nieuw samengesteld gezin concreet percipiëren dat ze ertoe doen ten opzichte van hun ouders en hun stiefouders. Uit wat jongeren ons vertelden, kunnen we reeds voorzichtig afleiden dat het gevoel ertoe te doen niet uit het niets ontstaat. Het in stand houden of het ontwikkelen ervan lijkt af te hangen van enkele factoren die wij 'relationele contextfactoren' noemden. De duur van de relatie, de intensiteit van het contact en de dynamiek in de relatie met een ouderfiguur (biologische ouder of stiefouder) hebben een invloed op het gevoel van jongeren ertoe te doen. Of de ouderfiguur (biologische ouder of stiefouder) een echte ouderfunctie vervult, leek ook hun gevoel ertoe te doen mee te bepalen. Verder leek het voor de jongeren logischer om ertoe te doen voor hun biologische ouders wegens de biologische band en heeft fysiek geweld tussen de jongere en een ouderfiguur een nefaste invloed op hun gevoel ertoe te willen doen ten opzichte van die ouderfiguur. De jongeren gaven ons verder heel concrete voorbeelden over hoe zij merken dat ze ertoe doen ten opzichte van hun ouderfiguren. Het zoeken van nabijheid door de ouder, het aanvoelen van liefde, een ouder die duidelijk toont dat de jongere belangrijk is voor hem/haar,

waren concrete vormen van ertoe te doen vooral vermeld in de context van biologische ouders. Het krijgen van aandacht, zorg en het samen activiteiten willen doen werd zowel vermeld in de context van biologische ouders als stiefouders als teken van ertoe te doen. Specifiek gerelateerd aan de scheiding, merkten jongeren dat ze ertoe deden naar biologische ouders wanneer deze om hun mening vroegen (bijvoorbeeld over een nieuwe partner) of wanneer hun ouders duidelijk prioriteit gaven aan hun welzijn in plaats van dat van hun nieuwe partner of diens kinderen. Specifiek rond ertoe doen naar stiefouders toe, beschreven jongeren dat ze wederzijds op elkaar konden rekenen en dat sommige stiefouders hen beschouwden als eigen kinderen. Enkelen stelden dat ze wel voelden dat ze belangrijk waren in de ogen van de stiefouder, maar konden niet concreet benoemen waaraan ze dit merkten. Kortom, jongeren beschreven op verschillende wijze waaraan zij merkten dat ze ertoe deden in hun nieuw samengesteld gezin.

In een vierde studie (vragenlijststudie) integreerden we elementen uit de voorgaande studies (jongeren hun perceptie over hun verblijfsregeling, het hebben van een non-residentiële vader of een co-vader, de mate van ouderconflict na scheiding en het gevoel ertoe te doen ten opzichte van biologische ouders) en onderzochten we in een longitudinaal model de link tussen deze factoren en het welzijn van jongeren twee jaar na de scheiding van hun ouders. Geen van de voornoemde scheidingsspecifieke elementen gemeten één jaar na de scheiding bleek echter in staat om jongeren hun gevoel ertoe doen naar hun biologische moeder of vader te voorspellen twee jaar na de scheiding. Het belangrijkste resultaat van deze studie was dat zowel het gevoel ertoe te doen naar moeder toe als naar vader toe twee jaar na de scheiding positief bleek samen te hangen met het welzijn van jongeren.

KLINISCHE IMPLICATIES

De resultaten van dit onderzoek rond jongeren hun gevoel ertoe te doen, dragen positief bij tot de praktijk van het werken met gezinnen in transitie (na scheiding en bij de vorming van een nieuw samengesteld gezin). Het onderzoek toont duidelijk aan dat het beperken van ouderconflict tijdens en na scheiding belangrijk is voor het welzijn van de betrokken jongeren, maar ook dat hun gevoel ertoe te doen doorslaggevend is. Mensen die professioneel betrokken zijn bij gezinnen in een transitiefase doen er goed

aan om ouders te helpen om hun conflict zoveel mogelijk te kanaliseren en ervoor te zorgen dat jongeren zich niet verloren of gevangen voelen tussen beide ouders. Dat ouders duidelijk uitleggen aan hun kinderen waarom ze uit elkaar gaan, is eveneens belangrijk. Ook hierbij kunnen ouders geholpen worden door professionals. Bovendien dienen ouders met kinderen gestimuleerd te worden tot het uit elkaar gaan met behulp van scheidingsbemiddeling. In bemiddeling wordt namelijk het welzijn van kinderen zeer sterk voor ogen gehouden (James, 1995) en recent is ook bewezen dat bemiddeling hoog conflict tussen ex-partners weldegelijk kan inperken (Jacobs & Jaffe, 2010). Verder is het belangrijk dat professionals jongeren erkennen als actieve betekenisverleners en agents in het gezin en hen als volwaardige partners beschouwen in het transitieproces na scheiding. Dit onderzoek bewijst dat jongeren competent zijn om na te denken over de vormgeving van hun leefwereld en relaties na scheiding. Ik breek dan ook een lans voor het actief betrekken van jongeren in scheidingsbemiddeling. Onderzoek heeft namelijk reeds aangetoond dat scheidingsbemiddeling waarin kinderen een actieve rol krijgen, de kwaliteit van de relaties na scheiding en het psychologisch welzijn van jongeren ten goede komt. Dit onderzoek vond evidentie voor een positieve associatie tussen jongeren hun gevoel ertoe te doen tijdens en na scheiding en hun welzijn na scheiding. Dit betekent dat het gevoel ertoe te doen beschouwd mag worden als een beschermende factor waarmee aan de slag kan worden gegaan in de klinische praktijk met gezinnen na scheiding. Professionals kunnen ouders, stiefouders en de betrokken jongeren helpen bij het ontwikkelen van positieve relaties door te gaan werken rond dit gevoel ertoe te doen. De resultaten van de focusgroepen geven enkele concrete tools rond hoe dit gevoel kan geïnterpreteerd en gestimuleerd worden bij jongeren.

ALGEMENE CONCLUSIE

Dit doctoraatsonderzoek bestudeerde het gevoel ertoe te doen (Eng: *mattering*) bij jongeren in gezinnen na scheiding. De resultaten van de verschillende studies toonden concreet hoe jongeren het gevoel ertoe te doen betekenis geven in hun veranderend gezin na scheiding en bewezen dat dit gevoel positief bijdraagt tot hun algemeen welzijn na de scheiding van hun ouders.

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