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Pasteels, Inge

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Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young adults experiencing dual family life after high-conflict divorce

Inge Pasteels¹

¹ PXL University College of Applied Sciences and Arts

Address correspondence to: Inge Pasteels, PXL University College of Applied Sciences and Arts, Vildersstraat 5, 3500 Hasselt (Belgium). Email: inge.pasteels@pxl.be

Abstract

Objective: This paper describes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the family lives of young adults whose parents had been through a high-conflict divorce and the extent to which these 18-to-30-year-olds believed the COVID-19 measures accommodated for their family situation.

Background: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family lives has been described in recent literature but no attention has been paid to young adults experiencing parental conflict due to a divorce transition impasse.

Method: Data from 24 in-depth interviews were collected in the Belgian province of Limburg using a semi-structured interview guide with open questions and analysed via Nvivo.

Results: Frequency of contact with parents decreased, contact with parents living abroad became nearly impossible. Different interpretations of and approaches to the rules led to frustration and quarrelling in families. The quality of the relationship with parents changed, often in a negative way. Respondents indicated that to their opinion due consideration had not been given to the situation of young adults with divorced parents.

Conclusion: In order to adequately develop COVID-19 rules that are tailored to a wide range of families, with attention to the most vulnerable ones, we recommend that policy makers define a family by using a “feeling family paradigm” rather than defining a family in terms of a household and that they include a multi-actor and multi-disciplinary perspective in the decision-making processes.

Key words: high-conflict divorce, divorce transition impasse, family policy, COVID-19, dual family life



1. Introduction

Since the spring of 2020, Belgium, just as the rest of the whole world, has been in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 23 July 2021, almost 18 months after the COVID-19 outbreak was officially declared a pandemic, the death toll due to COVID-19 worldwide stood at 4,127,963 (World Health Organization 2021). 25,217 people have now died from the coronavirus in Belgium, with deaths peaking twice around what has been called the first and second wave, respectively, which occurred in April 2020 and November 2020 (Sciensano 2021). Since March 2020, the government has been taking measures to combat the pandemic, which have shaken up everyday life for everyone in Flanders. On 17 March 2020, a so-called semi-lockdown was announced, with all schools and non-essential shops being forced to close. People were still allowed to go outside for exercise. From that point on, working from home became standard practice in Belgium. All non-essential travel was prohibited, as was non-essential travel abroad (Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2020a; Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2020b).

People were urged to limit close social interactions to a small, fixed group of people. The size and description of this group varied throughout the pandemic, depending on the degree to which COVID-19 statistics were cause for alarm. Such a group of people who could continue to interact socially without practicing social distancing or taking precautionary measures such as wearing face masks is known as a “social bubble”. Initially, such a social bubble consisted of one’s core family or people living in the same household. Typically, measures were formulated in generalising language and did not distinguish between types of families, which means that they did not provide concrete guidelines for children or young adults with divorced parents who might alternate between two different households. During some periods, households were allowed to meet no one, one person or multiple people from outside the household without any restrictions, who were also known as “hug buddies (knuffelcontact)”. Again, no distinction was made on the basis of family size or composition and, consequently, there were no specific rules for single-parent families or newly blended families. Only for those living alone, more lenient rules were introduced during the second wave in autumn 2020, temporarily allowing two hug buddies instead of one in order to limit social isolation and associated mental effects of the pandemic (Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2020c; Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken 2020d).

After all, there was no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic not only presented physical health risks, while causing mortality rates to rise, but also directly tested the mental health of all members of society through the loss of loved ones or fear of being infected and the dire consequences hereof. Indirectly, however, the pandemic also affected everyone’s mental well-being, as it impacted on many areas of people’s daily lives (Lebow 2020a). This impact, though, was not the same for everyone. In Austria, Pieh et al. (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of all adults, but that the effect tripled for those who rated the quality of their partner relationship negatively as opposed to positively. The effect on the mental wellbeing of single people was somewhere in between. In line with these findings, Donato et al. (2021) showed that couples who were satisfied with their partner relationship were able to successfully deploy coping mechanisms to safeguard their mental well-being and counter the harmful effects

of the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to couples who reported being dissatisfied in their partner relationship.

In addition to adults, children and adolescents were also severely affected by this pandemic, as they were forced to deal with significant changes in their family life and school life, whilst also being at a crucial developmental stage in their lives. In addition, the rules put in place by the government were not well suited to children or young adults with divorced parents, as family life, for them, was rarely confined to a single household, which was the thinking behind the rules. In fact, the majority of children who experience a parental divorce live in two households afterwards, which makes their family life a dual-family-life experience (Pasteels 2020; Pasteels & Bastais 2020). In these new families, different rules may apply with regard to upbringing and different arrangements may be made about the daily functioning of the family. Children are expected to be flexible enough to know these rules and agreements in both families and to observe them as they would in any family. Difficulties may arise if the views on compliance with the government's COVID rules in these two-parent families make different demands on children that may even be incompatible. For example, alternating between both parents' households may be complicated by the ban on non-essential travel, as this rule did not initially include any specific provisions for children or adolescents with divorced parents. Geographical distance could also be an obstacle preventing young adult children to alternate between households, since in Belgium, as in many countries, public transportation systems were also severely impacted by the pandemic (Lebow 2020a; Lebow 2020b).

Children or adolescents who were part of newly blended families faced additional challenges, with 60% of divorced fathers and 50% of divorced mothers living with a new partner within five years (Pasteels 2020). In concrete terms, when their parent enters into a new relationship, children will get to know a step-parent and, possibly, step-siblings and half-siblings who may have different living arrangements. One in ten divorced men and women live in a household with several children who do not have the same biological parents (Pasteels 2020). If all step-siblings also want to keep seeing their other parent, the social bubble quickly balloons, which may again lead to disagreements about following the rules, as such a large, chained social bubble is not in line with the spirit of the rules.

When relationships between divorced parents are neutral or even good, reaching a consensus on compliance with COVID-19 rules, and especially on the definition of the social bubble, is likely to be easier. We can therefore assume that harmonious family systems are also a protective factor for the negative effects of the pandemic on well-being, perhaps especially for children and adolescents with divorced parents. After all, research has frequently shown that a neutral or positive relationship between parents is important for the well-being of children, also and especially after divorce. In contrast, protracted litigation and conflict due to child-related disagreements seem to be the most harmful on children and parent-child relationships after divorce (e.g. Grych 2005; Johnston & Roseby 1997; Stewart 2001).

An additional pitfall was the impact of the rules on the preparedness of psychological and social support services that may have been in place prior to the pandemic to reverse pre-existing and escalating conflict situations or to mitigate the mental impact of such situations. Most support services became less effective - at least temporarily - due to the

COVID-19 rules, thus, further eroding the coping capacity of adults, adolescents and children, and this at a time when the burden on all members of the family system was increasing due to the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This suggests that government action at the time of the pandemic had a cumulative impact. On the one hand, the restrictions aimed at containing the pandemic and all its consequences increased the burden on all members of society; on the other hand, services and assistance, both private and governmental, were forced to scale down at a time when professional support was more necessary than ever. Children and adolescents with parents involved in a high-conflict divorce seem to be especially vulnerable during this pandemic because, firstly, the rules are not tailored to their situation, secondly, they lack the protective factor that a harmonious family system can be, and thirdly, professional help from outside is limited. The latter is in line with the Dominelli et al.'s (2020) assertion that particular attention should be paid to the most vulnerable members of society, as they will suffer more than others from the adverse effects of such a global crisis if the services and guidance they can usually count on are scaled back.

2. Family life and the COVID-19 pandemic

Recent literature on the COVID-19 pandemic highlights its impact on family life. In addition to the direct impact of the loss of loved ones and the accompanying period of mourning that a family goes through, there are also the economic consequences such as increased unemployment and financial vulnerability. On top of that, family life itself also changed immensely and came under pressure. First of all, the COVID-19 restrictions permanently confined many family members at home, as working outside the home had to be avoided as much as possible, schools were closed and leisure activities were interrupted. Many adolescents who would usually have lived in student accommodation on weekdays went back to live with their parents full time. In addition to the permanent presence of all family members, which meant a structural change in everyday life, there were also process changes through the additional tasks that now had to be done at home, amidst the other family members. For example, people now had to do their daily job, assist their children with their schoolwork and take care of infants at home (Lebow 2020a; Lebow 2020b). Because of these additional parenting responsibilities, both internal and external role conflicts were experienced, which increased the risk of parenting disagreements and arguing about household chores in many families. Day-to-day family life had to be reinvented. In addition to the health risk posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was widely reported in the media, the challenge of adapting family life to this new reality brought a lot of additional stress (Levkovic & Shinan-Altman 2021).

These additional parenting responsibilities were especially difficult for single parents, as the family's coping capacity rested squarely on their shoulders during the pandemic. Iztayeva (2021) showed that single fathers experienced many problems in combining their dual role of breadwinner and caregiver, especially in jobs that allowed for less flexibility. The extended family that these fathers normally call on to support their parental role was not there, which exacerbated the work-family conflict. According to this study, dealing

with the other parent presented another risk of conflict escalation due to the pandemic, as the highly specific rules imposed in response to the pandemic proved to be a stumbling block in many co-parenting relationships (Iztayeva 2021).

Reaching consensus on how to deal with the rules requires communication, flexibility and compromise, which is not always evident for couples going through a difficult divorce (Iztayeva 2021). Disagreements regarding the interpretation and/or observance of the rules can thus become a potential source of conflict escalation, putting further pressure on co-parenting relationships (Lebow 2020a).

After all, divorced parents who do not manage to solve their disputes and end up in a high-conflict divorce are, in time, often trapped in what the literature calls a "divorce-transition impasse", which is often caused by an underlying resistance to change. "The parents are unable to make use of the divorce to resolve issues within or between themselves and are frozen in transition. In effect, the form of the custody dispute becomes their new pattern of relationship" (Johnston & Campbell 1988: 7). Some degree of flexibility and the ability to collectively problem-solve and compromise are then often tricky issues in these high-conflict divorces.

In approximately 10% to 15% of families, inter-parental conflict can continue to define the separated couple despite the passage of time (Amato 2001; Grych 2005; Shifflett & Cummings 1999; Stewart 2001). Large-scale research in Flanders confirmed international findings: 13% of all divorces involving children result in a high-conflict divorce, in which the separation is marred by conflict and in which both parents continue to have a poor relationship for years after their divorce. In these high-conflict divorces, reorganising parenthood and the new family life after divorce is very difficult for parents and their children. Such divorces often have a history of gruelling legal proceedings and interventions by the police and public prosecutor, among other things, to ensure compliance with joint custody arrangements or in cases of intra-family violence. High-conflict divorces are often accompanied by long-term individual dysfunction or dysfunctional family systems and are therefore called "failed divorces" (Johnston and Campbell 1988). What is certain is that such high-conflict divorces often severely affect the resilience of families to cope with the rules necessitated by the pandemic. We know from professional support services that people involved in a high-conflict divorce benefit from clear agreements. However, an unambiguous translation of the government's COVID-19 rules to accommodate for the needs of divorced families failed to materialise.

As such, the pandemic offered new and different opportunities for conflict in divorced and remarried families where the frequency of contact between parents and children often already is at issue (Lebow 2020a). After all, children and adolescents with divorced parents were immediately confronted with the fact that the social bubble rules had been tailored to the needs of a traditional nuclear family and did not take other types of families into account. This obliged them to make intentional choices as to who would be in close contact with whom, who is included and who is excluded and therefore to designate who is in and who is out of the family system (Lebow 2020a; Lebow 2020b). It is beyond dispute that such choices are very delicate matters in family systems characterised by high-conflict divorce, with all the consequences that this entails for the quality of all relationships in such precarious family systems. The hypothesis that legislation can fuel high conflict after divorce, of which irregular parent-child contact is an indicator, which

then has an impact on parent-child relationships, is in line with the ecological transactional framework developed by Polak and Saini (2018) to understand the complexity of family systems.

It should also be noted that when the semi-lockdown was announced, the government failed to address the issue of dysfunctional families that were not a safe haven free from conflict and violence. This is not without risk. After all, for families who are already at risk of violence, conflict or other forms of relational difficulty, limiting opportunities to escape into the outside world or limiting social interactions and social support that might mitigate tensions is particularly dangerous. From a theoretical point of view, family violence has been described as a coping strategy or a reaction in the face of structural factors such as poverty, unemployment and isolation (Zhang 2020). High-conflictive divorces in family systems are also such a structural factor to which child maladjustment is explicitly linked (Polak & Saini 2018). This concern and theory seemed to come to fruition in the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, increased levels of family violence worldwide are already found and described as a new crisis (Taub 2020) and as a double pandemic (Bettinger-Lopez & Bro 2020). Detailed pathways between pandemics and family violence have been described and are often precisely the circumstances by which the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of many adults, especially given its duration (Peterman et al. 2020). Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable, since in times of remote digital teaching, schools could hardly, if at all, fulfil their role as a radar for troubled home situations.

3. Research questions

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on adults and children, this study addressed two main research questions. The first research question was: 1) How did young adults who experienced a high-conflict divorce in their childhood and were still living with at least one parent experience the impact of the government-imposed rules regulating social contact? This was further divided into two subquestions: 1a) What issues did they consider when making choices about whether or not to physically stay in touch with both parents and other family members? And 1b) How was the quality of relationships in the family system affected by the impact of the pandemic and the corresponding rules? In a second research question, we asked: 2) To what extent did these young adults believe that the government took account of their often complex family situation? We also examine which improvements they suggested with regard to the rules effected by the government.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

A qualitative research design was chosen in order to map the experiences of the target group. The data was collected between 5 and 21 November 2020 through a series of in-depth interviews in the Belgian province of Limburg, the most heavily affected province in Belgium during the first wave of the pandemic. The data were collected during the second wave of the pandemic. Due to the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic and the measures imposed by the government, the fieldwork was kept as short as possible.

4.2 Sample

Respondents for this qualitative study were recruited from the own network of 13 third-year students of the Social Work bachelor programme of PXL University of Applied Sciences and Arts or their social media network, who acted as interviewers. Respondents were never interviewed by the student who had introduced them, but by another interviewer who they did not know, in order to avoid socially desirable responses as much as possible, given the sensitive nature of the topic.

The target group was defined by three criteria. The respondents were, first of all, young adults whose parents had been through a high-conflict divorce. Divorces were characterized as high-conflict divorce by using a two-step approach. First, only people who perceived their parental divorce as a high-conflict one by self-evaluation, were invited to participate in the interview. Second, we started the interview by asking three questions. (i) 'How much conflict was there between your parents after the decision to break up for good? 'with an answer scale from 0 (no conflict) to 10 (a lot of conflict)?', (ii) 'How often do your parents meet each other or have contact with each other by phone, mail or chat?' measured as never or number of times per week, month, year and (iii) 'How would you describe the current relationship between your parents: 1. Very bad- 2. Bad - 3. Neither bad nor good - 4. Good -5. Very good?'. All respondents included in the analytical sample were classified into three categories. The first group of eight respondents classified the level of conflict at the time of the divorce above 7 and noticed disrupted contact between their parents at the time of the interview. The second group of 12 respondents estimated the level of conflict at the time of divorce also above 7, their parents had still contact with each other at the time of interview but the current relationship between the parents was qualified as bad or even very bad by the respondent. The third and smallest group of 4 respondents considered the level of conflict at the time of divorce below 8 but the current relationship between the parents at the time of interview was qualified as bad or very bad. The assessment regarding the type of divorce stems from a previous study in which a classification of six types of divorces was developed with these three types labelled as "no contact after high conflict", "ongoing conflict" and "new conflict", considered as high conflict divorces as validated by mixed method research (Pasteels 2019).

Selected respondents had to have memories of their parents' divorce if they were very young when it happened, which - unfortunately - is usually the case with high-conflict

divorces, as the conflict is prolonged and thus persists far beyond the actual divorce. During the interview, questions were asked about the conflicting nature of the divorce and about the relationship between the two parents in the period afterwards, in order to gain insight into their regular family life before the pandemic broke out. For all respondents, post-divorce family life had always been turbulent, and markers of high-conflict divorce known from literature (e.g. Gilmour 2004) were frequently present.

A second selection criterion was their living situation. The young people had to have lived with at least one of their parents before the pandemic broke out. If they were students, they were allowed to stay in student accommodation during the week or stay there for a longer period because of the measures imposed as a result of the pandemic.

A third criterion was the age limit, which was set at 18 to 30 years. The age of 18 was taken as the lower limit because this is the age of majority, which means their parents' consent is no longer needed for an interview, which in times of COVID-19 might be more difficult to obtain. The upper limit was set at 30 years to also include respondents who continue to live with their parents for a longer period of time. Having young adults interviewed by interviewers of a similar age proved to be very effective. In the evaluation session after the interviews, the interviewers mentioned how they felt respondents felt at ease and shared their stories without any hesitation, even when broaching delicate topics such as strained relationships with their parents or step-parents or physical violence.

In addition to these three selection criteria, the sample was purposively constructed by incorporating three stratification criteria, namely, gender, age at parental separation, and the re-partner status of their parents. Using these characteristics as stratification criteria ensured sufficient variation in the sample.

A total of 24 interviews were conducted with respondents who met the above criteria. The respondents consisted of 8 men and 16 women and had an average age of just over 21, with 22 respondents being between the ages of 18 and 23. The other two respondents were 26 and 30 years old, respectively. The average age at which the respondents experienced parental divorce was slightly below 8 years, with 16 respondents indicating that they were younger than 10 at the time of their parents' divorce and the remaining 8 being between 10 and 17 years old. For the majority of respondents, their parents' divorce was marked by years of conflict and struggle between their two parents. For 13 respondents, both parents found and moved in with new partners, with only the father finding a new partner in 4 cases, only the mother finding a new partner in 4 cases, and neither the mother nor the father finding a new partner in 3 cases.

4.3 Interview questions

The interview was designed as a semi-structured interview with open questions. Two open questions were asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family life. The first question is as follows: "How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the March and April lockdown in particular, affected your family life?" The second question was directed at the COVID measures in light of the specific family situation in which the respondent lived and was asked as follows: "Do you think that the rules take into account the specific situation of young adults of divorced parents?" Respondents were given the opportunity to give an open answer to both questions, after which the interviewer asked several follow-up

questions to map out the respondents' experiences and perceptions with regard to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their family lives, as well as their opinion on the rules and their suitability to divorced families.

4.4 Analytical strategy

The responses to the questions were transcribed and then analysed via Nvivo controlling for intercoder reliability. The coding scheme was drawn up in a data-driven manner, revolving around the themes of degree of contact and quality of relationships in the family system for the first research question and the appropriateness of the rules and possible suggestions for improvements to government action for the second research question, respectively. All findings described in following section were mentioned by several respondents. Each quote, belonging to a unique respondent, was chosen because it describes in a clear and/or concise manner what multiple people said.

5. Findings

5.1 COVID-19 and its impact on family life

5.1.1 Contact with loved ones

First of all, many respondents mentioned personal contact with their parents, which in most cases had become less frequent. Especially if parents lived abroad, the travel ban and other strict measures such as mandatory quarantine and testing made contact even completely impossible for an extended period of time.

It has had a massive effect on my family life. I can't go to see my Dad anymore because he's not in my bubble. (R20)

Hungary has closed its borders, so we can't get there. I usually go there during the school holidays and I haven't seen Dad since last Christmas. It's been almost a year, so that's quite a difficult situation. (R6)

Some respondents mentioned that one of their parents would sometimes suggest not going to stay with the other parent because they thought, rightly or wrongly, that the other parent would not follow the rules as closely. Respondents indicated that this did not stop them from staying with their other parent and that they would sometimes tell a white lie to avoid alarming the concerned parent too much.

During the lockdown, Mom did not want me to go to Dad because of the risk of infection. Dad is a lot more lax than Mom. So yes, I've noticed that she'd prefer it if I didn't go to Dad and that, if I do, she'd prefer it if I stayed there. I went to Dad anyway and I kept some things from Mom. (R17)

Moreover, when it came to contact with their parents, the majority of respondents highlighted how they strove to meet their parents' expectations with regard to the frequency and nature of contact with them, behaving as they believed their parents wanted them to, which - of course - might differ between both parents.

More like a brief visit. To show them that I'm still here and that I'm thinking of them and that they're important. I think Dad thinks about it a bit differently. He wants me to visit, but only if I do so on my own accord. He'd never tell me to visit, while Mom definitely would. She'll just tell me to come by and ask me about it. (R8)

Furthermore, many respondents often told about decreasing contacts with stepsiblings living in the parental family with which contact had been interrupted due to the pandemic. Also the loss of contact with grandparents who gave practical support to their family, which - in turn - prompted a loss of downward intergenerational solidarity and affected family life, was often mentioned.

I won't be able to have dinner with my stepbrother and stepsister either, which I used to enjoy. (R1)

We used to have dinner with our grandparents almost every day before. Mom would go grocery shopping and Grandma would cook. None of that is possible now. Now, I just see my grandparents from the balcony, and we have food delivered because Mom doesn't want to cook. (R18)

However, respondents mentioned that they still keep in touch with their parents now that meeting face-to-face has become more difficult, using alternative means of communicating such as phone calls and text messages. These alternatives made it easier to cope with the loss of contact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding measures.

I don't see Dad at the moment, but we call and message each other, so I still try to keep in touch with him. It has its disadvantages, because you spend a lot of time on your phone. It does help, though, because you can stay in touch with your parents, and you can call or message other people too. (R16)

Few respondents felt that the pandemic had hardly affected how frequently they were in touch with their parents, either because they were in contact with both parents or because they had only been in touch with one parent before the pandemic too.

We're a bit older and live our own lives. Corona hasn't really changed that. I'm still in touch with both parents. (R7)

I don't see my Dad anymore, but I didn't see him before either, so nothing has really changed for me. (R9)

Regarding contact with loved ones, the answers indicated that frequency of contact with parents but also with stepsiblings and grandparents decreased, that parents even suggested to avoid contact with the other parent and that young adults mostly strove to meet their parents' expectations. Alternative means of communicating were used in order to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contacts.

5.1.2 Quality of the parent-child relationship

Second, the corona pandemic and measures also affected the quality of interaction with parents. On the one hand, respondents reported that living with their parent had become more difficult now that they were forced to spend more time in each other's companies because of the measures to limit the spread of COVID-19.

You're in your parents' hair the whole time, right. You spend each waking moment together, so conflict is pretty much unavoidable. I was living with my Mom. My Dad didn't make much of a fuss, but my Mom did. She was constantly arguing with me about minor things. (R21)

A strained relationship between the respondent and one or both parents often affected the frequency of contact and sometimes even prompted the respondent to make drastic decisions on where to live. Some respondents reported deciding firmly to live with one parent or to stay in student accommodation for an extended period of time.

Yes, COVID led me to completely leave my Mom, because she was too strict with me again and treated me like a child rather than a 20-year-old. (R25)

As already mentioned, due to the travel ban respondents were not allowed to visit their parents living abroad. Especially when the relationship with the parent living in Belgium was strained, restrictions on staying with the other parent could be difficult and even dangerous in case of intrafamily violence.

In March and April, I wasn't allowed to cross the border into the Netherlands to see my Mom. After my Dad became aggressive, I did end up crossing the border, but that's only because I was sobbing when I went to the border police and explained my situation. They ultimately allowed me to cross, but it did mean I was stuck in the Netherlands with Mom and couldn't go back whenever I wanted. (R11)

On the other hand, some respondents indicated that their relationship with a parent had improved as a result of spending a lot of time together at home.

I like it when Mom has to work from home, because it gives us the chance to cook together, which also helps calm her down. (R10)

For some young adults, spending more time in each other's companies led to strained relationships and drastic decisions on where to live. Such changes in family systems in which young adults permanently dealt with parental disputes about their living

arrangement, fuelled conflicts enormously and these escalated conflicts harmed the quality of the parent-child relationships even more. Moreover, safety risks for young adults increased in families characterized by intrafamily violence.

5.1.3 Quality of relationships with step-parents and (step-)siblings

Thirdly, the quality of the relationships with other members of their parents' households, such as siblings or stepparents was changing because of the pandemic and the measures imposed by the government. Again, many respondents reported that spending a lot of time together had led to strained relationships and few respondents even mentioned intrafamily violence.

You spend more time inside, especially during a lockdown, and you're in each other's face the whole time. I get into arguments with my stepfather a lot more often, because he isn't the easiest person to live with. (R10)

I got into a fight with my stepmom because she's - and I'm sorry I have to say it this way - an awful person. The fight started when I laughed out loud because she said something really stupid, and my father got very angry. He pushed me, I fell and I hurt my ankle. When I got back up, he pushed me up against a cupboard, which left me with bruised ribs. It was a very tense situation, but I still think the problem isn't my Dad, but my stepmom. (R11)

Often, the rules, compliance with the rules and the different ways to interpret the rules were a source of discord in newly formed families. Some respondents managed to avoid arguments by coming up with creative solutions, even if they required a little extra effort.

Everyone is allowed one so-called cuddle contact within their family. For us, that would be my Dad. However, I also have a girlfriend and my Mom has a new partner who has his own place but does spend a lot of time here. We've had arguments at times about who is and is not allowed to visit. (R2)

During the first lockdown, my stepfather didn't want us to visit Dad. Mom understood that it was very difficult for me, because Dad is all alone. He couldn't go to work, so he would just sit around at home all day long. If he were to have a fixed contact, it would've been me. My stepfather didn't allow me to see my Dad, though, and I guess I understand because everyone was scared of corona. After talking about it, we found a solution: I could go cycling with my Dad. We would see each other outside and keep our distance, so I could keep on seeing him. It was a solution that also worked for my stepfather. It wasn't as much fun for me, of course, because I don't really like cycling. I'd say: "Yes, I want to see you, but I don't want to go cycling". This was painful for my Dad because it could seem as if I didn't want to spend time with him. (R24)

Negative experiences in the relationships with these other family members could also prompt the respondents to prefer living with one parent over the other or to stay in student accommodation.

At the start of the lockdown, I stayed with Mom, which also made me realise how different the atmosphere was there than with Dad. I was just more at ease and felt more at home, which wasn't what I felt like with Dad. Because his new partner would be there all the time due to the corona measures, I didn't feel very comfortable there, always having my stepmother around. Since then, I've started spending less and less time with Dad because I realised that I just didn't like it as much there. (R8)

Also, the quality of relationships with (step)siblings and stepparents decreased due to tensions that rose from spending a lot of time together and from different ways to interpret the rules. The unusual circumstances experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic required increased flexibility and adaptability of young adults and their family members who lived in newly composed families.

5.1.4 Quality of family relationships between other members of the family

Fourthly, respondents recounted difficulties between other members of the family that arose during and because of the corona pandemic, and which also made it difficult for them to live harmoniously with their parent. In some cases, they even chose to live elsewhere because family life was too unpleasant.

We have problems at home. Dad used to abuse Mom, so the divorce has been a relief in some way. On the other hand, my little brother has autism and can't go to school because of corona, so he's home-schooled. Seeing as his room is a dump, he's living in the living room and he's now banned Mom from the living room because he spends his time playing games there. He really terrorises and threatens her. [...] He's basically become Dad number two. I do want to visit Mom, but only on the condition that my brother isn't there. [...] Whenever I visit Mom, we go to her room. Because Mom has nothing to motivate her, the house has become a complete, smelly mess, so I don't like visiting and don't see Mom that much. I moved in with my boyfriend, which ended up being a good decision given the situation at home. (R12)

Also conflicts between other family members were an obstacle in dealing with the Covid-19 measures and participating in the new family life under these circumstances.

5.2 COVID-19 rules tailored to divorce situations

With the second research question, we strove to investigate whether the measures imposed by the government to contain the COVID-19 pandemic accommodate for the family situation of these young adults who experienced a high-conflict parental divorce when they were younger. In evaluating the rules, many respondents highlighted the special nature of 'young people' as an age group, believing that the rules should be more lenient towards young people, because they need friends with whom they can discuss anything they want, including their feelings. Several respondents even suggested a so-called reverse lockdown, in which restrictions are imposed on the most vulnerable people in society, such as frail elderly people, while young people are given more freedom. In

addition to these general concerns about the rules for young people, four main ideas on the measures imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in relation to family situations of young people with divorced parents.

5.2.1 Ambiguous rules

Firstly, it appeared that there were many different opinions about what the rules actually were. Some of the respondents reported that they did not know the rules because they simply didn't apply to them. Others considered it self-evident that children or young adults would be allowed to alternate between their parents, whereas others believed that this was not allowed. One respondent had not looked into the rules but saw both parents separately anyway, as they were convinced that this should be allowed.

I don't really know, but I'd imagine that you'd still be allowed to go from one parent to the other. I think the rules allow for that, but I'm not sure (R23).

I don't know, but I did visit my Dad during corona. I just saw it as essential travel. I think children should be allowed to do so. (R7)

Some of the respondents believe that they could continue to see both parents and that the rules therefore accommodated for the family situations of young people with divorced parents.

Yes, because you're allowed to go from one of your parents to the other. (R26)

Several other respondents believed that moving between two divorced parents was not allowed, but few resigned themselves to that. Some of them mentioned the alternative solutions they had looked for to see their other parent too, with one respondent indicating that they simply broke the rules.

I know that non-essential travel was banned during the lockdown, but I still went to see Dad a few times and even though I was staying with Mom. I broke the rules, I guess. [...] I understand why they imposed those rules, but I still think that you can't stop children from seeing their parents. (R8)

Overall, the findings indicated that rules were ambiguous what gave room for interpretation. In complex family systems where interactions are characterized by high levels of conflict, every room for interpretation can be considered as a new arena for disputes and escalation of conflicts between all members of the family.

5.2.2 Poorly tailored rules

Secondly, those who thought they knew the rules were of the opinion that they did not accommodate for the family situations with divorced parents in which children or young adults lived with two families. After all, the reasoning behind what we called 'bubbles' no longer held for young adults living in two households.

What we are and aren't allowed to is quite complicated, especially with those bubbles. If I go to one first and to the other next... To be honest, I'm still not entirely sure whether I'm allowed to do it this way. After all, my Dad sees other people every now and again and my Mom spends a lot of time with her boyfriend, so am I still in a real bubble? (R15)

Conversely, strict compliance with the rules forced children or young adults to make difficult decisions or led to unbalanced situations, because single parents were still allowed to have a second 'cuddle contact' in addition to their child, whereas young adults who lived with one of their parents and therefore did not constitute a single-person household could only pick one 'cuddle contact'. This created a major dilemma: should they pick their other parent as their 'cuddle contact'?

None of the options really work. If you still see both of your parents, you'll have one bubble with one and another bubble with the other. Unless you say: I'm only staying with Mom during corona. You effectively force the other one out, so in the end, you're stuck between a rock and a hard place. (R21)

If I wanted to see my Dad, though, he'd be allowed to have me and another person as his 'cuddle contacts' because he's single. However, I'm only allowed to have one, because I live with my mother. In other words, I'd only be allowed to have one 'cuddle contact', and I didn't want it to be my Dad. I opted to make my best friend my 'cuddle contact' and although my Dad didn't really like it, he did understand. Still, though, I think it's very difficult to get everything to fit. (R24)

For this reason, several of the respondents argued that the rules on 'cuddle contacts' should be reviewed and expanded. They believe that children or young adults with divorced parents needed social contact just a little more and that parents should not count towards the total number of 'cuddle contacts'. On top of that, they believed they should also be able to strike a balance between their paternal household and maternal household.

I think you should still be able to see someone besides your parents. (R18)

Other respondents were stricter and believed that everyone should follow the rules for the greater good and that even people living in two households should adapt, even though this was more difficult for them than for young people living with both parents.

I understand that people want to see both their parents and that co-parenting is preferred, but what I'd say is: just accept the situation as it is for now. [...] After all, we all have to look out for the doctors & nurses. Sure, you want to see both your parents, but is it really worth the risk? Instead, you could just say: "I'm going to spend a month in one place now, and we can make up for lost time later." That's how I always approached it. (R16)

These findings indicate that policy makers who created these rules failed to take into account all specificities of new family types with poorly tailored rules as a consequence. Again, these respondents made clear that rules which were not suitable according to

family processes and family structures, were hard to follow and could lead to escalating conflicts.

5.2.3 Ambiguity for adult children

Thirdly, some respondents highlighted specific features of divorce situations that were never given due consideration by the people who set the rules, especially with regard to the differences between minors and children of age. First of all, it was pointed out that whereas minors with co-parenting arrangements were still allowed to see both parents, the rules for children over the age of 18 who might still have co-parenting arrangements were unclear. Did they have to follow the same rules as adult children who had moved out of their parents' home and would not normally be allowed to visit their parents, unless their parents were in their bubble, or were they allowed to continue to visit both parents in the context of co-parenting, just as minors are? In some households, this led to situations in which minor siblings still went to see the other parent, whereas respondents over the age of 18 did not, even though the underlying reasoning did not make much sense.

At first, the situation was very clear for minors. I, however, am a student over the age of 18, which meant that my brother was allowed to go, but I wasn't. Ultimately, though, you still end up mixing the bubbles. (R2)

On top of that, some respondents mentioned living with one parent and going to visit the other, which was fairly common since living arrangements no longer applied after a child reaches the age of majority.

Yes, I know that there was a rule for children under the age of 18 to allow for co parenting during the first lockdown, which permitted week-on, week-off plans. But situations like ours hadn't been taken into account. We only go for visits, but we weren't really allowed to. (R19)

Also the difference between minor children and young adults of age living together with parents led to rather weird situations if families strictly applied the rules about the social bubbles. These findings indicated again that rules were made with rather traditional family types in mind with less attention paid to those families who are characterized by other structures and processes.

5.2.4 Role of Government

Fourthly, some respondents made statements about the role played by the government or the role it should play. On the one hand, several respondents believed that the government did not make the rules as clear as it should have and that it was not prepared for questions that arose in households that did not consist of a traditional nuclear family.

In March and April, the rules were so unclear that I didn't know whether I was allowed to drive to see my Dad. I couldn't find an answer anywhere, and I even sent an e-mail to info@corona.be. They couldn't give me a clear-cut answer either because they'd never considered my situation. (R2)

A number of respondents believed that the government should impose more explicit rules to avoid ignorance, misunderstanding or even abuse of the rules.

During the lockdown, it was said that moving from one parent to another constituted essential travel. At the same time, my Dad, who works for the police, told me that lots of parents stopped bringing their children to the other parent. There are lots of cases of people saying that their ex-spouse is unwilling to do handovers because they're not allowed. It's essentially a way for these people to bully each other, of course, but the children ultimately pay the price. I think that they should say a lot more about this in press conferences or that more attention should be given to social care in general. For many children, corona has made life at home a lot more difficult. (R14)

Others believed that it was impossible for the government to impose a one-size-fits-all rule, because no two situations were the same and rules often made complex situations even more difficult. One respondent indicated that the government had probably not given much thought to the family life of children and young adults of divorced parents, but that it would not be overly strict in enforcing the rules either.

The government could explicitly have the rules cater for the family life of children of divorce, but in the end no two situations are the same. The government can make as many rules as it wants, but do the rules really work if they're too complex? (R22)

Different meanings about the role of Government could be observed. For respondents dealing with high conflict between parents after a parental divorce, it should be on the one hand easier if rules were more detailed and tailored to specific situations but on the other hand the question rose whether rules suitable for everyone could even exist.

6. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, we addressed two research questions. First, we investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to stop the spread of the virus on the family lives of 18-to-30-year-olds from the Belgian province of Limburg whose parents had been through a high-conflict divorce before they were 18 years old and who were still living with at least one of their parents. The findings show that for some respondents, the frequency of contact with their parents decreased, unless they were already living with only one parent before the pandemic and were no longer in touch with the other parent. Contact with a parent living abroad became even more infrequent as a result of COVID-19 and respondents were also more likely to avoid contact in the event that one of the members of their parents' respective households developed symptoms. Respondents indicated that they took their parents' expectations into account with regard to staying in touch, although some of them also made their own plans against their parents' will. Secondly, the quality of the relationship with their parents changed, often in a negative way. Most respondents reported getting into more arguments, which prompted some of them to live with one parent over the other or to stay in student accommodation. Relationships with other

members of their parents' households, such as step-parents, also suffered because of the increased proximity to one another. Different interpretations of and approaches to the rules led to frustration and quarrelling in families. Strained relationships between other family members as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on the respondents' family lives.

On the other hand, we investigated the extent to which these young adults believed the COVID-19 measures imposed by the government accommodated for their family situation. First and foremost, we saw that there are many different opinions about what the rules actually are and how they should be interpreted. Secondly, those who believed they knew the rules mainly indicated that due consideration had not been given to the situation of young adults with divorced parents. Thirdly, the distinction made between children under and over the age of majority were unclear or illogical. Fourthly, there is a variety of views on what the role of the government was or should be. Virtually everyone believes that government regulations offered little support and stability. In addition, the majority of respondents believe that the government should be more explicit about how the rules apply to households that do not consist of traditional nuclear families.

The overall findings make clear that in a contemporary society where three out of ten families with children under 25 who still live at home are not a classic nuclear family and one out of ten adults between 18 and 79 is in a permanent relationship with a non-cohabiting partner, rules should preferably be tailored to accommodate for different family contexts. At the very least, the interpretation of a shared rule should be explained in such a way that everyone can act in accordance with the spirit of the law if their specific family situation is not explicitly defined, which did not happen in Belgium.

Besides that, many findings from the present study might be indicating that restricting or even denying contact with those who act as support during a pandemic, even if they do not live together or live together permanently, is not desirable. Although the COVID-19 rules were intended to benefit everyone, several unintended but harmful consequences rose, such as making typical intergenerational support impossible, which puts parenting under pressure, escalating conflict situations between parents or between parents and children due to the ambiguous nature of the rules on non-essential movement, or keeping social bubbles so small that violence within families becomes invisible to the network or the wider outside world. Moreover, we know from literature that the dynamics of escalating conflicts are hard to reverse, so policy makers should be aware that avoiding conflict escalation in families which frozen in the transition of divorce, should be of major importance. Further research will explore the long-term effects of the measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic for family systems characterized by high conflict between parents (Johnston & Campbell 1988).

From a family sociology perspective, and in line with previous research on adaptive and flexible families in Flanders and beyond, we find that family policies benefit more from a "feeling family paradigm" to describe families rather than defining a family in terms of household, positions, activities or how they display (Ciabattari 2016; Finch 2007; Morgan 1996; Pasteels 2020). Using "a family is a household" as a starting point ignores more current definitions that use roles and positions, interactions and even emotions to define families. The feeling family paradigm, for instance, uses emotions as a measure to

define families and thus keeps relevant third parties who do not live with the family but with whom one has a close affective relationship in focus.

In order to adequately develop COVID-19 rules that are tailored to a wide range of families, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable families, we recommend that policy makers include a multi-actor and multi-disciplinary perspective in the decision-making processes. Taking a multi-actor perspective involves considering rules from the different positions of all actors involved, taking into account the specific characteristics of each position in a specific context. Children of divorced parents, for example, are the only actors in post-divorce family systems who occupy a dual-dynamic and flexible position, and all rules must be interpreted with this position in mind. A multi-disciplinary perspective is required to thoroughly predict the impact of the rules on all family types by combining insights from multiple disciplines. The perspectives of virologists, epidemiologists and doctors on the one hand are essential, but the input of psychologists, pedagogical experts, lawyers and social workers is also necessary to foster the mental wellbeing of all adolescents, especially those from vulnerable families who have gone through a high-conflict divorce and who have or still are in close contact with social workers and/or the judiciary.

More concretely spoken, implementing clear rules that are also tailored to non-traditional families, explaining how, for example, regular joint custody arrangements should be understood in the light of new concepts such as non-essential travel, social bubbles and hug buddies, is the first action a government can take to facilitate the wellbeing of all families. In addition, it is essential to mobilise actors from the social work domain who can pick up signals of troubling situations and intervene in escalating situations in vulnerable families, which are isolated from the outside world due to pandemic restrictions. Only by keeping in mind the situation of the most vulnerable families in society can we ensure everyone's wellbeing amidst the stresses of a pandemic.

This study has several limitations. Recruiting the respondents through higher education students led to a selection of 18 to 23 year olds who were mostly still students themselves and therefore more dependent on their parents than working young people. This means that this study did not cover the experiences of young people who are already working and/or are somewhat older but still live at home. Secondly, we chose to have the data collected by a larger number of interviewers in a shorter fieldwork period, in order to minimise the impact of the rapidly changing reality at the time of the pandemic on the findings obtained. The disadvantage of this strategy is that both the sample and the interview guide remain unchanged and did not evolve during the fieldwork period, which is often the case in qualitative research in order to achieve full data saturation.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, IP. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Auswirkungen der COVID-19 Pandemie auf junge Erwachsene und das Erleben ihres dualen Familienlebens in Folge einer hochkonflikthaften elterlichen Scheidung

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Dieser Beitrag beschreibt die Auswirkungen der COVID-19 Pandemie auf junge Erwachsene, die eine hochkonflikthafte elterliche Scheidung erlebten, sowie den Einfluss auf ihr Familienleben, das die befragten 18- bis 30-Jährigen den COVID-Maßnahmen zuschreiben.

Hintergrund: In der jüngeren Literatur wurden zwar Auswirkungen der COVID-19 Pandemie auf das Familienleben beschrieben, allerdings wurden bislang junge Erwachsene, die elterliche Konfliktsituationen nach einer elterlichen Scheidung erleben, nicht berücksichtigt.

Methode: 24 ausführliche Interviews wurden in der belgischen Provinz Limburg erhoben, unter Verwendung eines teilstrukturierten Leitfadens mit offenen Fragen. Die Analyse erfolgte mittels Nvivo.

Ergebnisse: Die Kontaktfrequenz mit Eltern reduzierte sich, und Kontakte mit im Ausland lebenden Eltern waren nahezu unmöglich. Unterschiedliche Interpretationen von und Zugangsweisen zu den Regelungen führten zu Frustration und Streit in den Familien. Die Beziehungsqualität mit den Eltern veränderte sich häufig negativ. Die Befragten wiesen darauf hin, dass nach ihrer Einschätzung die Situation junger Erwachsener mit geschiedenen Eltern nicht ausreichend berücksichtigt wurde.

Schlussfolgerung: Um angemessene COVID-19 Regelungen zu entwickeln, die ein weites Spektrum von Familien, darunter auch besonders gefährdete, erfassen, wird empfohlen, dass politische Entscheidungsträger*innen Familien basierend auf Gefühlen („feeling family paradigm“) definieren, anstatt haushaltsbasierte Definitionen zu verwenden, und dass multidisziplinäre und Multi-Akteurs-Perspektiven im Entscheidungsprozess berücksichtigt werden.

Schlagwörter: hochkonflikthafte Scheidung, divorce transition impasse, Familienpolitik, COVID-19, duales Familienleben

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Inge Pasteels: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6298-432X>



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