



Parenting in Post-Divorce Estonian Families: A Qualitative Study

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Sociological Research Online 15(1)1

<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/1/1.html>>

doi:10.5153/sro.2074

Received: 8 Oct 2008 Accepted: 12 Dec 2009 Published: 28 Feb 2010

Abstract

Estonia is a society characterised by persistence of traditional gender role attitudes. Accordingly, taking care of children is considered to be mainly mother's task and children's living arrangements following divorce are usually solved in the most traditional way - children stay with their mother.

Based on qualitative interviews with divorced mothers the study focused on the attitudes of mothers towards fathers' involvement in parenting following divorce. It was possible to differentiate between three post-divorce parenting patterns: (1) cooperative parenting with nonresident father involved with his children, (2) distant parenting characterized by loose contacts between children and nonresident father, and (3) sole parenting without any paternal involvement or financial support. The interviewees basically agreed that shared parental responsibilities would be the ideal form of post-divorce parenting but in practice their expectations concerning father's involvement were rather modest. The interviewees mostly approved prevailing in Estonia normative gendered parental role obligations with mother as the primary parent who had to take main responsibility for children both in the marriage as well as in the post-divorce period.

Keywords: *Divorce; Parenting Patterns; Traditional Gender Roles; Qualitative Study; Estonia*

Introduction

1.1 Population surveys carried out in the last decades have revealed that family and children are very highly valued by the Estonian people (Narusk et al., 1999). At the same time both official statistics as well as population surveys demonstrate that the dominance of the traditional marriage based family has decreased in Estonia, whereas the rate of non-marital cohabitation has increased (Hansson, 2000). Furthermore, according to the Eurostat data (Population Statistics, 2006), Estonians seem to have a higher propensity to divorce than do people in the majority of EU countries. In the mid-1990s the crude divorce rate in Estonia (5.2) was the highest in Europe and the number of divorces in relation to the number of marriages for the same year was over 100 per cent (Kutsar & Tiit, 2000). In the next decade the divorce rate decreased slowly but still remained higher than the average in Europe. In 2004, the average crude divorce rate of the 25 EU countries was 2.1 and that of Estonia ? 3.1. Only in two EU countries ? Czech Republic and Lithuania ? the crude divorce rate was a bit higher (3.2) than in Estonia (for more detail, see Population Statistics, 2006). In the Estonian context the decrease in divorce rate does not mean higher union stability as divorce statistics do not account for dissolution of cohabiting unions. In 2004, 25 per cent of Estonian children aged 0-14 living in couple families had unmarried parents, the proportion being the highest among the OECD countries (OECD Family Database, 2006). The frequency of parental separation and divorce means that many children have father, who lives in a different household. According to the OECD family database (ibid.), in 2007, 67 per cent of Estonian children younger than 15 years lived with both their mother and father, 25 per cent lived with single mother and one per cent with single father.

1.2 After restoration of independent statehood in 1991, Estonia had to build a new legislative framework for family policies. Like the majority of new legal acts, Estonian family law followed the principles of the corresponding acts of the European Union. Accordingly, today both parents have equal rights and responsibilities with respect to their children regardless of with whom the children reside (Family Law Act, 1994). The family law act also states that children of divorced parents have the right to close relationships with both parents. Furthermore, the parent with whom the children reside cannot restrict the other parent's contacts with them. The population surveys carried out in Estonia in the last decades have revealed that the situation in separated and divorced families is not that simple, and for many Estonian children parents' divorce results in significant reduction of contacts with their father (Hansson, 2007).

1.3 Under the Soviet regime, the dual earner family became the dominant family model in Estonia (Narusk, 1992). In spite of the fact that the majority of women with pre-school-age children were actively employed,

traditional attitudes towards gender roles were still prevailing both in the public as well as in the private sphere (Narusk, 1997; Kurvinen, 2008). In the family, parental roles were viewed in traditional terms, i.e. taking care of children and domestic tasks were mother's responsibilities, whereas father's role was that of the main economic provider (Narusk & Hansson, 1999).

1.4 Various data sources, e.g. nationally representative surveys "Estonia '98: Work, Family and Leisure" and "Estonia 2003: Work, Family and Leisure" (for more detail, see Hansson 2007) indicate that it is common practice in Estonia for divorced and separated parents to follow traditional parenting patterns. In practical terms it means that after parents' divorce children stay with their mother, and nonresident father's obligation is to pay child support. However, the population survey "Estonia 2003" revealed, that only 40 per cent of divorced mothers were financially supported by nonresident father (Hansson, 2007). Another characteristic feature of post-divorce Estonian families was fathers' reduced involvement in their children's life. The above mentioned population survey revealed that 38 per cent of divorced mothers and 36 per cent of children with divorced parents had no contacts with nonresident fathers, whereas 24 per cent of children met their fathers only once or twice a year (ibid.). Is disengagement of ties with nonresident parents and possible alienation unavoidable, or are there any possibilities to maintain contacts with both biological parents also in the post-divorce period? This is the question often posed by researchers dealing with the issues of children from divorced families.

Theoretical framework

2.1 In the majority of European countries the last decades of the 20th century were marked by significant changes in family models as well as in gender relations. Although there are country specific differences caused mainly by cultural and religious norms as well as by differences in legislation, divorce rates are growing practically everywhere. Family sociologists link changes in the family behaviour and increase in the divorce rates mostly to the processes of individualization and secularization related to post modernism, to growth of female employment and development in gender equality (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006). Increasingly common combination of gainful employment and motherhood has led to women's increasing expectation to more equal share of parental obligations (Narusk & Kandolin, 1997; Greenstein, 2000; Skevik, 2006). On the other hand, gainful employment has made married women economically less dependent on their husband's income and economic independence in turn has made it easier to dissolve an unsatisfactory marriage (Furstenberg, 1990; Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006).

2.2 Empirical studies on the changes in the cultural images of parenthood have presented conflicting results. Several studies have revealed that due to increasing participation of women in the labour force cultural images of women's roles have changed and they are no longer so strictly linked with domestic sphere and motherhood (Edwards et al., 2005). There are also studies that point to a notable cultural shift in the images of fatherhood and to the emergence of so-called "new fathers", who have taken an egalitarian and more involved role in relation to children and family life (Gregory & Milner, 2008; Wall & Arnold, 2007; Toming, 2007; Skevik, 2006). However, a number of studies suggest the opposite ? that due to stereotypical cultural images traditional understandings of motherhood and fatherhood are still largely prevailing actively employed mothers performing a disproportionate share of childcare, and fathers being 'secondary parents' with limited role in child care practices (Hochschild 1989; Narusk, 1992; Wall & Arnold, 2007).

2.3 Marital separation breaks the routine of family life and changes parenting practices. While till the 1970s divorce was mostly dealt with as *family disorganisation* that resulted in broken ties between family members, then in the 1990s rather as *family reorganisation* (Wang & Amato, 2000; Skevik, 2006). In the light of family disorganisation approach fathers, who no longer reside with their children, retreat from parental responsibilities (Furstenberg, 1990). Family reorganisation approach in turn states that divorced parents, who are no longer joined by a shared residence, remain connected through coparental obligations and parent-child relationships (Markham et al., 2007). When it comes to dependent children, there seems to be a shared agreement across cultures that in the family reorganisation process parents should make their choices according to children's best interest. But how are children's best interest defined, is not quite clear. Is it better for a child to stay with one parent, usually the mother, or is it better to commute between "everyday parent", and "weekend parent" (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002)? There are personal preferences, cultural norms and social expectations that not always match the actual situation in the post-divorce families.

2.4 Anne Skevik (2006) has studied the patterns of contacts between nonresident fathers and their children in Norway. Like other Nordic countries, Norway is characterized by high female employment and legislation that facilitates fathers' involvement with their children. However, the study revealed that post-divorce parenting patterns are still quite traditional in Norway ? following divorce women mostly become sole parents and men nonresident fathers. Skevik suggests that traditional arrangements are outcomes of parents' own choices "shaped by strongly held notions of 'normality' and 'good parenting' " (Skevik, 2006, 117). Similar results were obtained also in the studies carried out in Sweden (Eriksson, 2008) and in Finland (May, 2005).

2.5 Several family researchers have given mother a special role in the post-divorce parenting arrangement as mother's attitudes towards the parenting competence of her former husband play significant role in nonresident father's involvement with his children in the post-divorce period (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Markham et al., 2007). Furthermore, the studies have also revealed that in post-divorce families mother may serve as a gatekeeper, i.e. using her position of residential parent mother can control the level of involvement that nonresident father has in his children's life (Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

2.6 The above mentioned studies were based on data gathered in the advanced western countries. Jennifer Utrata (2008) has carried out a qualitative study on nonresident fathers in post-Soviet Russia. Her study revealed that although the old Soviet standards of fatherhood limited to economic provision are no longer as dominant as they were during the Soviet period, and the ideals of involved fatherhood are spreading among younger generation, Russian nonresident fathers are still minimally involved with their children (Utrata, 2008).

2.7 In Estonia the situation under the Soviet regime was at large similar to that in Russia. In her studies on the standards of motherhood and fatherhood in Soviet Estonia Anu Narusk (1992) came to the conclusion that like in Russia, in Estonia parental relationships were built on a traditional family model with work-oriented father and home-oriented (although employed) mother. Narusk (ibid.) concluded that during the Soviet period Estonian mothers were seen as having main responsibility for bringing up children whereas fathers were treated as secondary parents whose role in the family life and childrearing was underestimated.

2.8 Traditional attitudes towards parental roles were rather strong and the situation did not change much after Estonia regained independence in 1991. According to Narusk and Kandolin (1997), traditional gender roles and underestimation of father's role in the family found even stronger support in the mid-1990s. The traditional notion of 'normality' and 'good parenting' were held both by Estonian men as well as by Estonian women. Gender equality issues in parenting and re-evaluation of 'male' and 'female' roles did not befit the time. In the 1990s just the opposite happened ? actively employed women did everything to fit to the traditional 'female' role of a perfect home-maker and good mother (ibid.). Some latest studies (e.g. see Toming 2007; Pajumets, 2007) have revealed that step-by-step the attitudes are changing and in young Estonian families with minor children parents are redefining the 'male' and 'female' parenting roles. Unfortunately we cannot see any major changes in post-divorce families where the division of gender roles has remained traditional. In Estonia it has been common that divorced parents decide between themselves with whom the children should live and how often the nonresident parent should meet his children. As it was mentioned, the existing survey data indicate that it is quite characteristic of Estonian nonresident fathers that they are not involved with their children and many of them do not support their children financially (Hansson, 2007).

The study

3.1 The goal of the study was to shed some light on the post-divorce parenting issues in Estonia, and to understand how cultural norms and traditions affect both divorced mothers expectations concerning nonresident fathers' roles as well as their own decisions and behaviour.

3.2 Data presented in the article was collected in 2000-2001 in the framework of a larger study on post-divorce parenthood in Estonia. Motivated by an interest in understanding how divorced parents had arranged post-divorce parenting, especially how nonresident fathers' involvement in their children's life was perceived by divorced mothers, we interviewed 16 divorcees including two former couples. The general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990) was used, i.e. a set of issues to be explored in the interviews were specified in outline form, and the interviewers could decide the order and exact wording of questions in the course of each particular case.

3.3 Search for participants was carried out in two phases. As our initial aim was to interview divorced parents who had at least one child under the age of twelve, the female interviewees were approached using the assistance of teachers of day-care centres and elementary schools in the capital city Tallinn. Involvement of teachers in finding potential interviewees was justified because the teachers were well informed about the family background of their pupils and marital status of their pupils' parents. Since initially our goal was to interview both divorced parents, in the second phase of the study attempts were made to approach the ex-husbands of the mothers we had interviewed in the first phase of the study. However, for a variety of reasons (interviewed mothers did not have contact information concerning ex-husbands, nonresident fathers refused to be interviewed, etc), only in two cases the post-divorce families were represented by both parents. The remaining male interviewees were found using the already established contacts with the teachers, and the snowball method.

3.4 Thus, there were in total 16 interviews with divorcees carried out ? eight interviews with divorced mothers and eight interviews with divorced fathers. Each interview lasted a maximum of one and a half hour. The interviews with divorced mothers were conducted by the author in the participant's home in the absence of children or other household members, except one interview that was conducted in a coffee bar. The interviews with nonresident fathers were conducted by a male research assistant either in respondent's home or in the office. The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Names and identifying details were changed in the transcripts to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Estonian and the transcripts were translated into English for the present article.

3.5 In the article I am analyzing the transcripts of the interviews with divorced mothers. As one of the mothers we interviewed had been married and divorced twice, and she had two children ? one from her first and the other from her second marriage ? the sample of the present study consists of nine different divorce histories. The age range of the interviewees was from 28 to 41 years, and the interviewees had at least one child under the age of twelve living in the household. Four interviewees had established new permanent partnerships but non of them were formally remarried. All the interviewees lived in the capital city and they were ethnic Estonians. The interviewees had secondary or higher educational level, they were actively employed and worked fulltime. Profile of the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

3.6 In analyzing the interview data, the interviews were first coded and analysed case by case to identify the themes and issues arising from the divorced mothers' accounts about the parenting issues and paternal involvement in the post-divorce period. In the next stage, the transcripts were reviewed to determine possible similarities among the cases. Based on the analysis, the cases were grouped into broader analytical categories. As the sample of the study was rather small ? nine divorce histories ? the results cannot be generalized to the whole population of Estonia.

Findings

Pathways leading to post-divorce parenthood

4.1 The divorced mothers selected for the study were informed that although the interviews touched their former marriage, the main focus of the study was on parenting issues in the post divorce period. The

interviewees were encouraged to tell their stories with a general start-up question, "How long had you been married before you decided to divorce?" Although the idea of the question was not to encourage divorced mothers to comment on their former marriage or problems that had inflicted divorce, the interviewees usually started with accounts describing the circumstances under which they had got married. In most cases the accounts given by the interviewees in response to the start-up question reflected the role that the circumstances had played in the breakup of marriage as well as in parenting practices following divorce.

4.2 Earlier studies have revealed that people who marry very young or after a short period of knowing each other are more likely to divorce (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Amato et al., 2009). Population statistics demonstrate that there is a characteristic feature of family formation in Estonia – transition to parenthood takes place in relatively younger age than it is characteristic of the majority of European countries (Katus et al., 2007). Among the interviewees, there were several women who admitted that they had married too young. The decision to marry had often proceeded from unplanned pregnancy and their parents' negative attitudes towards extramarital childbirths. Several divorced mothers we interviewed presented examples of strong cultural norms and social pressure. For example, one interviewee described her parents' and grandparents' reactions when they had learned about her extramarital pregnancy:

Wedding ? Of course they [relatives] wanted to get a wedding party. I was the one who told them that I was not going to church with my big tummy ? /---/ At first they were very disappointed and all. My godmother, she's ? 81 now, it was a terrible shock for her ? that 'Oh god, how could such a thing happen in our family' ?

4.3 Several interviews revealed that being young parents-to-be the interviewees would have been ready to continue as cohabiting couples. However, they were talked over by their parents and made to convert cohabiting relationship into official marriage. One of the interviewees, who had got married being a second year college student, described the situation she and her partner were put into:

As a matter of fact, we were not so very eager to get married, it was more like ? dictated by our parents. /---/ They [parents] were pushing things on ? that we have to get married for the sake of the baby, and so on ? /---/ If they had given us more time to think it over, the decision might have been different. One is not supposed to get married like that of course, it's quite clear.

4.4 The interviewees who had married very young admitted that they had not been ready for marriage, and totally unprepared for parental obligations. Furthermore, young spouses, who were continuing their studies, had usually no financial resources to obtain a home of their own. Accordingly, they had to stay at their parents' or in-laws' place. The interviewees stressed that their parents and in-laws were nice and understanding people and coresidence had helped them to reduce expenditures on housing and cut child care costs. On the other hand, the interviews also revealed that in such a situation young parents could not take full responsibility of the family and children, or as one of the interviewees put it ? they did not feel like being parents but rather like 'acting' parental roles. The situation can best be illustrated in the following extract:

There was my mother ? we were still living at my parents' place ? and there was my husband's mother, and also my godmother ? You see, I had so many advisors and babysitters that ? Sometimes I even thought that I would be glad if I were allowed to spend a few minutes with my baby.

4.5 The extract gives us a useful clue to understanding traditional gendered nature of parenting practices still characteristic of Estonian families. All the helping hands at babysitting mentioned by the interviewee were female family members ? even the father of the baby was upstaged and not mentioned.

Parenting issues in post-divorce families

4.6 Estonian divorce legislation is quite liberal, and it is not difficult to divorce a marriage. The spouses who have decided to divorce may choose between divorce court or simplified divorce proceedings. Simplified proceedings mean that the spouses have to file a joint written application stating that they want to divorce their marriage, sign a statement that there are no disputes over property, children's living arrangements or support payments, and after a waiting period of a month the marriage can be divorced in a local registry office. Divorce matters are usually brought to court only when there are disputed issues the spouses cannot agree upon.

4.7 The majority of women we interviewed had preferred to use simplified divorce proceedings, i.e. they had applied for divorce in a registry office. In practical terms it meant that the parents had settled beforehand the problems related to children's living arrangements and visiting issues, and there was no disagreement about support payments. In her words, an interviewee described her decision:

It was quite easy [to get a divorce]? we did not go to court ? there was nothing like that. We did not have any property to quarrel about ? the house we were living in, it was not ours ? there was nothing to split. The child's father said that he would pay for his schooling, and that was all. Due to that I did not apply for any alimony or anything.

4.8 As it was mentioned, in Estonia it is a deeply rooted tradition that in case of divorce children should stay with their mother. Accordingly, it was not a surprise that the interviewees considered the traditional post-divorce living arrangements of children fair and normal. In the majority of interviews mother was positioned as the parent primarily responsible for meeting children's needs both during the marriage as well as in the post-divorce period. The interviewees stressed that staying with mother served the best interest of children. Moreover, the interviewees were mostly convinced that divorced fathers were not interested in sharing parental obligations. The interviewer's question about a theoretical possibility of gendered parenting roles being reversed, i.e. child custody being granted to father, was by the interviewees sometimes not even taken seriously. For example, the following response by an interviewee to the interviewer's question concerning role reversal presented a rather stereotypical gendered image of parenting:

Oh no! [laughs] Have you ever seen a man, who would like to voluntarily raise a kid! If, then only because of some special circumstances, when something has happened to the mother or something ... Or to get back at his ex-wife or something like that.

4.9 Thus, the mothers we interviewed mostly supported traditional gendered parenthood images. Role reversal, i.e. father being given custody rights following divorce was not considered acceptable or normal. However, although the interviewees were convinced that in the post-divorce period mother should be the person primarily responsible for the children, father-children contacts were still considered important. For example, a single mother with two children from two divorced marriages described her understanding of nonresident father's involvement with his children:

An ideal case? Theoretically, we all know how things should be? That father should visit his kids regularly and? and be interested in? and take part in raising children in some way. Well, in some way? That he'd be a part both in the financial and other ways.

4.10 In the majority of cases the interviewees visualized the role of father in the post-divorce parenting first of all in terms of father's traditional role, i.e. that of economic provider. Although theoretically understanding the importance of nonresident father's involvement with children, several interviewees stressed that in their particular case the general good ideas of coparenting or father's increased role did not work out. The accounts by the interviewees provided an overview of different problems associated with the post-divorce contacts between children and nonresident father, and allowed us to distinguish between three types of post-divorce parenting practices: cooperative parenting, distant parenting and sole parenting practices.

Post-divorce parenting practices: cooperative parents

4.11 There were three interviews in which the parenting practices following divorce were characterized by several *cooperative parenting* elements. Cooperative parenting was defined here as normal communication between the ex-spouses, shared financial responsibilities and nonresident father's involvement in decision making.

4.12 It was characteristic of a cooperative parenting case that contacts between divorced parents were frequent, and nonresident father not only supported his children financially and spent time with them, but he also took part in the decision making concerning children, their education, hobbies, etc. There were two characteristic features of the interviewees of cooperative post-divorce parenting cases. First, due to unplanned pregnancy the interviewees had married very young, and second, they did not mention any major divorce related quarrels. Furthermore, in these cases both parents seemed to be interested in normal communication and father-child contacts. One of the mothers we interviewed, who represented a cooperative post-divorce parenting case, gave the following account for her communication with her ex-husband, and her ex-husband's contacts with his child:

[We meet]? sometimes more frequently? sometimes? there are weeks when we do not meet each other and there are weeks when we meet every other day? And what are the mobile phones meant for? When we have to discuss something or talk, we can use a phone. /---/ He [ex-husband] is still mostly devoted to his business but? now he can also take a day off. When we were married, then he couldn't. /---/ Now we have spent some holidays together, we have been in Lapland, in the Santa Clause places, and we have visited his mother and? We have been in Legoland and in Cyprus and? We have tried to make her [daughter] understand that she has still got both parents, she has got her Mom and her Dad, they just happen to live in separate places.

4.13 Among the ex-spouses who followed the pattern of cooperative parenting, there were no special visiting arrangements, fixed schedules or disputes over 'dad time'. The interviews revealed that cooperative parents tried to do their best to help their children to adjust to new living arrangements as well as possible. However, the interviews also revealed that although in the cases of cooperative parenting father-children contacts were frequent; the children had still one home? at their mother's place. It was not common for children to sleep over at nonresident father's place, not speaking of staying for a longer period. Father-child contacts took place at a neutral territory, not at father's home. Interviewed mothers of the cooperative parenting group seemed to be satisfied with the situation as it was. They shared the widespread in Estonia understanding that it was better for a child to have stability in his/her life, i.e. firm ground at mother's place. Residing at mother's place and a visiting father were considered a better option for a child than commuting between two homes. In other words, the interviewed mothers' understandings of the best interest of children were compatible with traditional gendered images of parenthood with mother as the primary parent and father as a 'helping hand'.

4.14 Previous studies (e.g. Furstenberg, 1990; Manning & Smock, 1999; Amato & Meyers, 2009) have revealed that if one of the former spouses establishes a new relationship and most certainly if there is a baby born within the new union, nonresident fathers disengage from their nonresident children and invest in their new families and new coresident children at the expense of their children from the former marriage. Particularly noteworthy in the interview cases defined in the present study as cooperative parenting ones was the fact that neither the divorced mothers we interviewed nor their ex-husbands had remarried. A mother we interviewed explained her decision not to remarry:

I haven't even thought of that [re-marriage]. I got married when I was very young and? Now I can enjoy being who I am and what I am, and doing what I like to? And as to my daughter? she needs both me and her father? I don't want her to have another shock? I mean a stranger in the house, someone who is trying to take her father's place or something? one day when she's grown-up may-be I would consider it [remarriage].

4.15 And as put by another interviewee:

When it comes to getting married again, then... that's a complicated issue. It's not only my

decision, after all. Here I'd have to take into account how my child would react to it ...

4.16 Being actively employed, having relatively well paid jobs and being financially supported by the ex-husbands, the female interviewees of the group of cooperative parenting pattern had no significant economic problems.

Distant fathers

4.17 Contrary to a few 'success stories' ? the cases where divorced parents had managed to maintain normal communication and nonresident father was involved with his children, the majority of interviews presented divorce histories, which were characterized by loosened or even missing father-child(ren) contacts. In the analysis, three cases with loosened father-children contacts were defined as *distant parenting* cases. These cases were characterised by a post-divorce situation without much of communication between the ex-spouses. It was characteristic of the interviewees that they had taken full responsibility for raising children whereas the nonresident father's role was defined mainly in terms of financial support. The interviewed mothers of distant parenting group were quite critical about ex-spouses' parenting skills and competence but they stressed that they were well aware of fathers' rights to meet their children. Accordingly, they did not try to impede father-child contacts. For example, one of the representatives of distant parenting cases described her former marriage as hard and difficult. Judging from the interviewee's statements, she could no longer bear to see her former husband who had been abusive and violent. However, she understood that a nonresident father had not only obligations to support his children financially but also every right to meet them:

I've told my kids that when their Dad calls, they have to ask him about where he is and what he is doing and ? The two of us, we don't meet each other. I personally don't want to see him any more. Simply, I don't want ? When the phone rings, and it's him, then I usually put the receiver back without saying a single word. /---/ I might like him or dislike him but the kids have the right to meet him. I cannot do anything about it.

4.18 The interviews revealed that by some of the divorced mothers, who had established a new permanent relationship, the former husband, even when interested in his children, was converted into a distant father. An interviewee who was in a cohabiting relationship with a new partner and who planned to get married represented a case where the nonresident father's rights to meet his son were disregarded, and even financial support from him was not welcome. The following extract reflects mother's self-interest that seems to come first:

We have come to the conclusion that we are strangers now. And as to his support, it's not that much after all. Two or three times a year, then he comes, brings some expensive gifts, and that's all. But my present husband doesn't like it at all. /---/ We are relatively well off now, and there is absolutely no need for such kind of support.

4.19 It is worth to notice that by the above quoted interviewee, the situation when the father did not visit his son was considered as 'quite normal', and as 'very complicated' or abnormal when the father tried to re-establish contacts with his son:

And I'm sorry for the kid. He has got used to my new partner already. They get on quite well together. Everything seemed to be OK. The boy never even mentioned his Dad, as he didn't remember him. The situation was quite normal. And now all of the sudden he is back again! The kid cannot understand any more what is going on, and he doesn't know how to react. And my partner as well ? Can you see, he is the one who is also confused ? The situation is very complicated for everyone, isn't it?

4.20 With the exception of the above quoted case, where the support by the nonresident father was unwelcome, in other cases distant fathers were blamed for not paying regular child support or paying less than expected. Thus, by the interviewed mothers the image of a good nonresident father was mostly constructed in relation to economic support, and not to involvement with children.

4.21 Based on the interview data we could conclude that nonresident fathers often preferred to provide in-kind support rather than cash payments. In the one hand the interviewed mothers seemed to be unsatisfied with irregular or in-kind support. On the other hand, the interviewees seemed to follow the principles that limited support, either cash or in-kind was still better than nothing, and as far as the families could manage, they preferred not to take action against ex-husbans.

Sole parenting

4.22 The third group of the post-divorce parenting cases (three cases) were defined as *sole parenting* characterized by no paternal involvement. One of the sole parenting cases was an exceptional case as the contacts between the spouses were cut because of unexpected circumstances. According to the interviewee her husband was arrested, and when being imprisoned he had preferred to file for divorce and cut all the ties to his ex-wife and children. However, the interviewee, who had established a new partnership, did not take her former husband for a criminal, and she was convinced that when he had served his time, he would have the right to meet his children.

I think that he has every right to meet the kids and in this respect I'm not going to stand on his way. But only in case the kids are interested in seeing him. If they say that they don't want to see him, it's another story. I don't know. But I wouldn't prohibit him seeing his children, not that. After all ? he's not a bad person or anything.

4.23 In the rest of the cases defined as sole parenting cases there was practically no communication left between the ex-spouses and father-child contacts were practically lost. The following extract reflects both the nonresident father's behaviour as well as the interviewee's reaction:

Well ? first, I mean after we had got separated, he supported us financially. But then a couple of years passed and he disappeared. And we had to manage on our own. And we did of course. I didn't run after him or anything. I didn't demand anything. When he doesn't care of us, when he isn't interested in us, I wouldn't insist. He has disappeared, for us he doesn't exist any more!

4.24 It is well documented by previous studies that an important factor in the post-divorce period that often has negative impact on the contacts between nonresident father and his children, is parental conflict and hostility at separation (Lin & McLanahan, 2007; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Based on the interview data we could conclude that the sole parenting cases were characterized by serious conflicts and distrust that had come along from the period of marriage. It was characteristic of the interviewees of sole parenting group to describe the period of marriage as an unpleasant experience full of conflicts and even violence. Father's involvement with his children and his parenting competence were described as poor already during the marriage. In one of the sole parenting cases the embittered interviewee described the attitudes of her former husband towards having children as highly negative. According to her statement, in her value scale children were ranked very high but in her former husband's ? very low:

The divorce was basically my initiative. I may be a foggy but to my mind kids give the meaning to the marriage. But men see things totally differently. At least the men I've met. /--- / He put the blame on me ? that if having a baby was my decision, then it was also my problem to raise the kid.

4.25 The interview data revealed that with the exception of the case where the ex-husband was in prison, the interviewees of the sole parenting group served as 'gatekeepers' to father-child relationships and rather restricted than facilitated nonresident father's opportunities to maintain or re-establish contacts with his children. The interviewed mothers of the sole parenting group had doubts concerning nonresident father's parenting skills and they were afraid that father-child contacts might not benefit children. Furthermore, they were convinced that in general divorced fathers were not interested in contacts with their children. Without any financial support from the nonresident father the post-divorce families headed by a sole mother were often in economic difficulties.

4.26 As it was mentioned, Estonian family law states that a nonresident parent has child support obligations. In case there is no agreement between parents about support payments or the nonresident parent does not meet his/her obligations, the resident parent can sue for child support even when the marriage was divorced in a registry office. In practice, many Estonian mothers do not use their legal rights, or they sue for support only in case of urgent need. Several interviewees made references to the main reasons why they had preferred not to sue for child support. First, bringing the case before the court was considered time consuming and ineffective, as described by one of the interviewees:

To my mind such things have to be agreed upon by the spouses. In case a father has some feelings towards his child he will find a way to support him. And in case he hasn't then ? court cannot help either. Our wage system ? a man can make his official salary very small, and the rest could be given him in the envelope. I know that it's very often done that way. And in such a case through court you get practically nothing.

4.27 There was also another reason mentioned in the interviews explaining why divorced mothers did not use their legal rights to sue for child support. I would call it psychological barrier ? unwillingness to take action against the father of one's children. For example, one of the interviewees explained her decision not to take any legal action or sue for support with the need to protect her child's feelings:

Yes, I could have sued for alimony but ? It wouldn't have been difficult if I had decided to sue. But I didn't know where he [former husband] was and so they would have claimed him a *wanted* man. But I really wouldn't like my son to know that his father is a *wanted* man. What would my child think of it or how would he take it? The money I would have got, if any, wasn't worth it. To my mind there are things which cannot be settled by court.

4.28 A study by Narusk and Kandolin (1997) revealed that for many Estonian women it was important to fit to the traditional female roles ? to be a perfect home maker and a good mother. The interviews with the mothers of the sole parenting group supported the findings of the above mentioned study by Narusk and Kandolin. The interviewees seemed to be proud that without a "useless" ex-husband or an "absent" father, who failed to fulfil his parental obligations, mothers were still able to provide their children with mostly everything the kids needed, i.e. they were good mothers:

I can raise my child alone. And maybe it'll be better than with a father who's hardly ever around.

4.29 And as put by another interviewee:

But in case he wants to support his child, he would come and he would do it voluntarily without any court. And in case he doesn't, mother has to bring the child up alone. And she will do it.

4.30 In one of the sole parenting cases the interviewee told us how the nonresident father had tried to re-establish contacts with his daughter, but instead of facilitating contacts the interviewee had tried to impede father's involvement. The interviewee justified her decision to limit nonresident father's contacts with his daughter by the need to follow mores and norms. Her main argument was that a nonresident father, who did not make sufficient financial contributions, did not deserve any respect and had no right to meet his child. It is best reflected in the following extract:

I think that? someday in the future, when my kids are grown ups, then they will have no worries about a father somewhere ? who could just show up one day and make demands and ? If he has not cared about his kids, then the kids need no future responsibilities either. At least that's how I see things.

4.31 The above cited mother seemed to be afraid that by supporting his children her ex-husband might attempt to get some rights in return in the future. Thus, in a way, the interviewee justified her decisions with the need to protect her child.

Conclusion

5.1 The present study was focused on two main research questions: first, how the parenting issues were arranged in post-divorce families, and second, how prevailing cultural norms and attitudes affected divorced mothers' expectations concerning nonresident fathers' involvement with their children.

5.2 Divorced Estonian mothers, who were interviewed in the course of the study, presented their understandings of nonresident fathers' roles in remarkably similar ways. First, the majority of the interviewees supported normative gendered parental roles and shared traditional understanding of good motherhood. In the interviews, mother was presented as the primary parent, whose task was to take care of her children both in the marriage as well as in the post-divorce period. Divorced mothers we interviewed unanimously approved the wide-spread in Estonia practice that in case of divorce children stayed with their mother, i.e. with the primary parent. Interviewed mothers' expectations concerning nonresident fathers' responsibilities and involvement with their children were rather modest. By the majority of interviewees, the nonresident father's role was limited to that of a complementary parent and related first of all to economic support. Although the interviewees were mostly convinced that following divorce children should maintain contacts with their nonresident father, they stressed that in Estonia the everyday practices differed from the ideal model as in many post divorce families contacts between children and their nonresident father were weak or lost.

5.3 There were three types of parenting practices presented in the interviews: cooperative, distant and sole parenting. The accounts given by the divorced mothers of cooperative parenting cases were characterised by least traditional attitudes towards nonresident father's role. Although in the cooperative parenting cases the living arrangements of children were traditional, i.e. children stayed with their mother, nonresident father's role was not underestimated. Cooperative mothers facilitated father-children contacts and nonresident father's role was seen as more significant than that of a provider of financial support. It is worth mentioning that the fathers of cooperative parenting group had not remarried and accordingly they had no new family responsibilities. Compared to cooperative parents, divorced mothers representing distant parenting cases supported more traditional parenting patterns. By these interviewees mother's role as the primary parent was seen as normal and natural, and so was father's limited role. The interviewees of sole parenting group represented family disorganisation approach, whereas breaking of father-child contacts was justified by the need of serving the interests of children.

5.4 The findings of the present study were consistent with studies carried out in the Western countries (e.g. Fagan & Barnett, 2003) and pointed to both individual factors as well as cultural expectations that influenced the choice of post-divorce parenting practices. First, the findings confirmed that there was distinct linkage between the level of communication between the ex-spouses, and paternal involvement. The study also confirmed that divorced mothers' negative feelings towards their former spouses and unwillingness to communicate were mostly related to conflicts and problems that had preceded divorce. And second, the findings of our study were consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Furstenberg, 1990; Manning & Smock, 1999; Amato et al., 2009) that a new permanent partner and new coresident children reduce frequency and strength of father-child contacts.

5.5 Several researchers (e.g. Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Markham et al., 2007) have pointed to mother's significant impact on the degree of father-child communication and father's involvement with his children. A somewhat surprising finding of the present study was that there were divorced mothers, who preferred to cut all possible father-child contacts, and who refused to accept any kind of support from the nonresident father. In the study, maternal gatekeeping, i.e. mother's efforts to limit father-child contacts was usually related to mother's intentions to establish a new family or a new permanent partnership. Another surprising finding was that nonresident fathers seemed to mostly agree with their limited involvement with their children. At least in the interviews, there was no evidence of divorced fathers' objections to or dissatisfaction with the situation.

5.6 Contrary to the findings of the study by Fagan and Barnett (2003), which revealed no significant relationship between father's financial contribution and maternal gatekeeping, in the majority of interviews of the present study understanding of good fatherhood was related to child-support payments. In case a nonresident father failed to pay child support, whatever the reason, it was not exceptional that mother considered it normal to cut back father-child contacts. On the one hand, the interviewed mothers' emphasis on child support payments and father's provider role can at least partly be explained by the fact that according to official statistics the average salaries of Estonian women are considerably lower than the average salaries of Estonian men. As state child allowances are rather small, for the majority of divorced mothers financial support provided by nonresident father is of vital importance. On the other hand, the interviewees were convinced that Estonian liberal divorce legislation and insufficient control over the implementation of laws made it possible for nonresident fathers to easily avoid regular child support payments.

5.7 Attitudes towards the appropriate roles for men and women and attitudes towards good motherhood and fatherhood can be viewed along a scale ranging from traditional to egalitarian. The findings of several studies carried out in Estonia in the 1990s and in the early 2000s demonstrate that Estonia is characterised by traditional rather than egalitarian gender role attitudes and the majority of Estonians persistently support traditional gendered parental roles (Narusk & Kandolin, 1997; Narusk & Hansson, 1999; Katus et al., 2007). In the present study, the interviewed mothers shared traditional gendered expectations both in parenting practices following divorce as well as in parental roles in general. Thus, by accepting the role of the primary parent and leaving father on the secondary position, divorced mothers seemed to follow culturally approved norms and patterns of behaviour. These findings were consistent with prior research by Narusk and Kandolin (1997) and Narusk and Hansson (1999).

5.8 The limitation of the present study was its small sample size, as a small-scale study cannot be anything than illuminative. Accordingly, based on the present study we cannot make definite conclusions or

speak of national trends. However, despite the sample limitations, in the Estonian context the study was the first one that using qualitative method tried to shed some light on the post-divorce parenting practices as well as on the attitudes towards nonresident fathers' roles in their children's life. Some studies carried out in the recent years (e.g. Toming, 2007; Pajumets; 2007) have revealed that the share of young Estonian fathers, who support the ideas of involved fatherhood and who are ready to share parental obligations with mothers, is slowly increasing. However, these studies were focused on two-parent families with infants. In post-divorce families gendered parenting patterns seem to be still deep-rooted and substantial proportions of divorced mothers have to raise their children alone or with limited involvement by the nonresident father.

5.9 The attitudes towards the roles of mothers and fathers on different phases of family life are based on general cultural norms of good parenthood. Accordingly, some future research is needed to examine the reasons and motivations underlying divorced mothers' decisions that support traditional gendered parental roles rather than facilitate fathers' involvement with their children.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Ingegerd Municio-Larsson from the Södertörn University College for her support and assistance concerning the study, and the anonymous reviewers of the first versions of the paper, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Table 1. Profiles of female interviewees (based on interviewees' self definitions)

Interview	Age	Age and number of children	Education (highest completed level)	Occupation
INT1	32	10	secondary	chief secretary
INT2	28	9 & 6	specialized secondary	nurse
INT3	29	6	higher	shop manager
INT4	38	10 & 4	secondary	purser
INT5	29	6	specialized secondary	optician
INT6	28	6	higher	statistician
INT7	41	15, 13 & 10	higher	company union leader
INT8	32	11	higher	designer

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