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# Divorce and intergenerational family obligations

Past research and current patterns in the Netherlands

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**Divorce and intergenerational family obligations. Past research and current patterns in the Netherlands.**

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*Abstract* - Research has indicated that divorce, either in the parent or the adult child generation, often weakens the ties between adult children and their parents, notably the exchange of support in both directions. Most studies about this issue have focused on actual transfers between generations. Much less work has been done about the relevant values, norms, and attitudes. Yet, studying these can give important insights into the cultural rationale behind behavior and may also help explaining how feelings of mutual responsibility are distributed within families. Using data from the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) we examined how divorce and repartnering affect attitudes towards intergenerational support. Contrary to what might be expected, the results show that divorce is positively associated with feeling of family obligations, even after controlling for the actual transfers of support between the generations and the perceived quality of the relationship.

## **Introduction**

Due to increased longevity a higher number of family members across generations share more *living years* than ever before. At the same time, because of declining fertility rates the number of family members within each generation has dropped (Bengtson, 1996). As research has shown, family members are an important source of informal support to each other (Grundy, 2008). Many parents continue to play a supportive role in the lives of their adult children after they have left the parental home and started families themselves. Conversely, many adult children during their middle or even more advanced ages provide a small or large part of care and assistance to their parents (Grundy & Henretta, 2006).

Only, during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century family relationships have also become increasingly more complex due to rising divorce rates and subsequent (step)family formation, potentially putting intergenerational exchange of family support under pressure. Research has indicated that divorce, either in the parent or the adult child generation, tends to weaken the ties between adult children and their parents and notably the exchange of support in both directions (Pezzin & Steinberg Schone, 1999). As a result, support between generations seems to be increasingly defined by particular individual circumstances in which the relationships between family members are continuously being renegotiated (Coleman et al., 1997; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2007; Lye, 1996; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). When divorce and repartnering imply that the role of kinship as a primary source of support weakens, this may undermine the welfare and well-being of those involved. As a consequence, a greater demand may be put on welfare state provisions for help and assistance (Pezzin & Steinberg Schone, 1999). So, evidently, research on family relationships and intergenerational solidarity has also become increasingly important social policies in ageing societies.

Although attitudes and values are not completely ignored, most research about intergenerational support has addressed actual transfers between generations. Yet, studying attitudes and values about intergenerational support can give important insights into the rationale behind that behaviour and may

also help to explain how feelings of mutual responsibility are distributed within families (Ganong & Coleman, 1999; Ikkink, van Tilburg & Knipscheer, 1999).

In this contribution we examine family obligations after divorce and repartnering, focusing on the viewpoint of adult children rather than their parents. We distinguish between three types of obligations: general family obligations, filial obligations, and parental obligations. We address two main research questions. First, how are divorce and repartnering in either the parent or the adult child generation related to family obligations? And second, how does the association between divorce and repartnering on the one hand and family obligations on the other hand depend on the (potential) need for support, the quality of the relationship and the actual support exchanged between parents and their adult children?

## **Theoretical background and earlier research**

### **Family obligations**

Family obligations are culturally prescribed normative expectations which can be defined in terms of duty and *obliged* altruistic feelings based on kinship or moral grounds, on the societal level, or in terms of reciprocity and affection, on the individual level. On the one hand, general normative expectations exist in society about the duties and responsibilities between family members, independent of individual circumstances. On the other hand, perceived obligations are related to specific relationships and circumstances over the life course. Both personal beliefs and general norms may affect individual conduct, and both are often interrelated (see e.g. Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Ganong & Colman, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2005; Lye, 1996; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Stein et al., 1998). Although empirical results indicate that feelings of obligation remain strong in general, they do not seem to be unconditional. The type of relationship between family members and the context in which these relationships are being evaluated seem to be important indicators in determining the strength of family obligations (Hans et al., 2009; Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

The perceived family obligations between parents and adult children have been most widely examined and according to Rossi & Rossi (1990) they are the strongest, followed by feelings of obligation towards siblings, grandparents and –children, and wider (affinal) kin. Moreover, additional contextual factors play an important part too. Feelings of obligation are found to be stronger when support is reciprocal and legitimate, not too involved and avoiding the creation of a relationship of dependency. Obligations concerning instrumental and financial support therefore seem to be far more conditional than obligations concerning emotional support (Finch & Mason, 1991; Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006; Lye, 1996; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Recently, family scholars have criticized the simplicity of the use of unidimensional models in research on intergenerational support. More attention has been given to the tension between existing norms and personal circumstances. The growing complexity of family structures and the ambivalence, i.e. the simultaneous presence of both positive and negative feelings towards each other, often existing in family relationships have to be taken into account. More recent studies therefore have argued for a multidimensional approach, including both feelings of solidarity and conflict (see e.g. Lüscher, 2002; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006).

### **Divorce and family relationships**

Most research on the effect of divorce and remarriage on family support and obligations draws on exchange theory. Parents are normatively expected to take care of their children and in return the children, when adult, feel obliged to reciprocate this care (i.e. to repay their personal debt) by helping out their elderly parents (Ganong et al., 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Stein et al., 1998; Ribar & Wilhelm, 2006). A divorce might challenge these norms of obligation which is often supported by findings of a reduced contact and exchange of support between parents and their adult children when a divorce has occurred (Amato & Booth, 1991; Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Lye, 1996). Divorce also complicates family relationships, especially when new partners and stepchildren get involved, possibly making the existing

norms less clear-cut and difficult to apply to the changed family structure. Coleman et al. (1997) and Ganong & Coleman (1999, 2006) report that there seem to be stronger feelings of obligation towards genetic kin than to in-laws and step-kin and that the perceived obligations towards former in-laws are significantly weakened after the divorce.

In contrast, some scholars adhering to the *continuity perspective*, argue that families and the norms existing within them are resilient against changes in the family structure or the marital status of its members (Bengtson, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1999; Hans et al., 2009; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Spitze et al., 1994). From this point of view a divorce does not necessarily dissolve existing feelings of obligation. Nevertheless, as Ganong & Coleman (1999) argue, these feelings might become more conditional after a divorce relying on closeness, need, availability of resources, and the previous pattern of reciprocity.

#### *Family obligations following parents' divorce*

Numerous studies about the influence of parental divorce on intergenerational relationships have been conducted. The decline of involvement in the children's lives by the non-residential parent after divorce has been repeatedly documented to be derogative for the parent-child's bond (Amato & Booth, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Furstenberg et al., 1995). Also, often burdened with time and money constraints, divorced parents have been reported to provide less support and attention to their children, even when they are co-resident (Furstenberg et al., 1995; Lin, 2008). Finding a new partner might alleviate some of these constraints but it might also bring new challenges. Research on new partnership formation is very ambiguous. Remarried parents and stepparents generally seem to give and receive less support to and from their adult (step)children than never-divorced parents, although more nuanced results have been found too (Amato et al., 1995; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 2005; Pezzin & Steinberg Schone, 1999). The gender of both the parent and the adult child, and the custody arrangement during childhood may be important factors in determining the support exchanged in later life. Nevertheless, the reduction of parent-child contact and strained relationships in (early) childhood

might lead to a lower tendency to help ageing parents later in life, fathers often being more disadvantaged than mothers (Daatland, 2007; De Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 2006; Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Kalmijn, 2007; Lawton et al. 1994; Tomassini et al., 2007). Even when a parental divorce occurs after the child has reached adulthood the evidence points in the same direction (Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994; Kalmijn, 2007).

Still, not all studies found a relationship between parental divorce and adult children's feelings of obligation to support the older generation (e.g. Gans & Silverstein, 2006), nor do all studies agree on a general decline of support exchanged between parents and children following parental divorce (Amato et al., 1995). Ganong et al. (1998) and Ganong & Coleman (1999) found that people generally agree with fulfilling filial obligations based on kinship, also to divorced parents, but when these obligations are reformulated into specific tasks there is much less consensus on what should be done. Ongoing contact and closeness after the divorce seem to be important preconditions for feelings of filial obligation later in life.

Little is known about how *parental obligations* are affected by the divorce of parents. Some studies examine the continuing responsibilities of parents towards younger children after divorce, including child support (obligations) and custody arrangements (see e.g. Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Other studies focus on the actual transfers of support between divorced parents and their adult offspring (cfr. supra). They often find evidence that divorced parents give less support to their adult children. Yet, no attention is being paid to whether or not and under which circumstances they feel less obligated to help or to what extent adult children expect help from their divorced parents.

#### *Support and obligations following an adult child's divorce*

Research about the consequences of adult children's divorce has focused mainly on the actual support *received* from parents and has yielded mixed results. Parents may be an important source of support in times of crisis. Some studies indeed found that divorced children received similar or even larger amounts

of support from their parents compared to still-married adult children (Dykstra, 1997; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). In contrast, other studies determined that divorced adult children perceived receiving less support from their parents and reported higher levels of strain in the relationship than married children (Umberson, 1992).

The gender of the divorcing child and the presence of (young) children are believed to be important in the post-divorce relationship with parents. For example, Kaufman & Uhlenberg (1998) found that a daughter's divorce has a strong negative effect on the relationship with her parents, while there was no such effect for a divorced son. Yet, other studies came to very different, even opposite conclusions (e.g. Spitze et al., 1994). The presence of young children has been linked to reinforced patterns of reciprocal support (Spitze & Logan, 1991a; Spitze et. al., 1994). Still, when lone custodial mothers and fathers were compared in a study in the US, lone divorced mothers reported the lowest relationship quality with their parents and in-laws and lower overall support levels than lone fathers or married mothers and fathers. It appeared that a divorced mothers' relationship with her parents contained more conflict and ambivalence as a result of the higher levels of contact between them (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2007).

Overall, it seems that the marital status of adult children has little or no effects on the support *provided* to parents or, otherwise that these effects might be very short-lived (Lye, 1997; Stuifbergen et al., 2008). Nevertheless, suggestions have been made that divorced children might be less supportive to their parents. In general, they have less resources to provide support to others, and may actually need support themselves, potentially reducing their awareness of the need of their parents (Connidis, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Hence, an adult child's divorce has been associated with weaker feelings of (filial) obligations. Even so, several studies on the norms and attitudes towards parental care did not find a divorce-effect (Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Killian & Ganong, 2002; Logan & Spitze, 1995).

### **Changing contexts, changing attitudes?**

It has been suggested that attitudes towards intergenerational obligations change according to the circumstances one is confronted with. Hence, if a divorce has the potential to weaken family ties, other traits surrounding the parent-child relationship might moderate the divorce-effect or even strengthen intergenerational family relationships. Different contextual factors have been mentioned by scholars which have also been related to feelings of family obligations. These factors include among others the need for support, the quality of the relationship between parents and their adult children and the existence of a relationship of mutual support (Ganong & Coleman, 1999).

When a family member is suffering from declining health, his or her need for support will consequently rise. This might trigger other family members' feelings of obligation or change people's unwillingness to help each other (Daatland, 2007). Moreover, the expectations other family members might have concerning receiving support from this member might decline as well. Research on the exchanges of support has found that parents with health problems receive more instrumental support from their adult children than healthy parents (Knijn & Liefbroer, 2006). Yet, at the same time a decline in the parents' health status seems to put the parent-child relationship under strain and has a deteriorating effect on the quality of this relationship (Bromley & Blieszner, 1997; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998).

As mentioned before, feelings of obligation might be conditional on the quality of the relationship between the support giver and the receiver (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Liefbroer & Mulder (2006) found that almost a third of the respondents (strongly) disagreed with the statement that family members should support each other, even if they don't like each other. This condition may even grow in importance after a divorce as some relationships become more volatile (Ganong & Coleman, 1998, 1999).

The existence of a relationship of mutual support has been put forward as another condition for the ongoing feelings of obligation after a divorce (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). There's a general consensus that the actual transfers of support and feelings of obligation are positively related. Still, trying to establish the causal relationship between the two is similar to the question of the chicken and the egg. People with a stronger sense of family obligation seem to be more prone to give support (Stuifbergen et

al., 2008), which in turn may help them to obtain or uphold stronger feelings of obligation compared to people who do not exchange support with family members (Gans & Silverstein, 2006). When a divorce leads to less support exchanged between parents and children, it might lower their sense of obligation and by doing so bring their attitudes and behaviour into conformity with each other.

Other variables like gender, age, educational attainment, employment and family size and position have been related to family obligations as well. Again results are inconsistent and often contradictory. For a general overview, see e.g. Liefbroer & Mulder (2006).

### **Hypotheses**

Given the inconsistent findings in earlier research, there is no reason to formulate clear-cut hypotheses on the effect of divorce and repartnering on family obligations. On the one hand, it might be expected that a divorce either from the adult child itself or from the parents leads to weaker feelings of obligation. This might especially be true for filial obligations as these attitudes express what children are obliged to do for their parents, so they are most likely to be influenced by the respondent's specific circumstances. On the other hand, it can be hypothesized that family obligations are not so much determined by the respondent's or the parents' marital history but rather by the (current) relationship quality and the need and/or exchange of support. In other words, in this case we would not find a direct negative effect of divorce history on family obligations but possibly an indirect effect through a bad relationship and/or less support exchanged between parents and children.

Our empirical analyses include detailed measures of the marital history of both the respondent and the parents, taking into account the occurrence of a divorce in either generation but also whether or not they (ever) repartnered. Again, earlier research does not provide a clear image of what is to be expected when a new (step)parent or (step)child-in-law is introduced into the family. A new partner might lead to more tension and ambivalence in the family, resulting in lower feelings of obligation. Reversely, finding a new partner might also ease time and financial constraints, allowing (previous) patterns of mutual support to

persist and leading to stronger feelings of obligation. Nevertheless, given this ambiguity surrounding the possible effects of a new partner, we expect to find stronger and clearer patterns for respondents who do not live in a higher order union and for those whose parents never repartnered after the divorce.

The existing literature does not allow us to predict for the different possible outcomes concerning the other variables included in our analyses. Hence, our main aim is to shed more light on the dynamics behind family obligations by filling in some of the gaps from previous research. Moreover, given the cross-sectional nature of the data, the high level of endogeneity of the variables involved, and the many mechanisms potentially leading to feedback and reverse causality, we cannot estimate the "true causal effect", as it would be conceptualized in a counterfactual perspective (Morgan & Winship, 2007). Yet, we argue that the empirical pattern of association is interesting in itself, both from a social science and from a social policy point of view.

## **Empirical results**

### **Data and methods**

The data used in our analysis come from the first wave of the Netherlands' Kinship Panel Study. The NKPS is a large scale survey among more than 8000 individuals, aged 18 to 79 years (Dykstra et. al. 2005). The focus of this contribution is on the adult child, also called the anchor or simply "the respondent" below. We select a subsample containing respondents whose parents have ever been married and at least one of them is still alive and not living in the respondent's household. Moreover, we excluded respondents with missing values on any of the dependent or independent variables. This amounts to a total of 4.305 cases. Analyses were run separately for each of the types of obligation. We apply sample design weights in all analyses (Dykstra et. al. 2005). Tabel 2 provides an overview of the basic characteristics of the sample and the variables used.

### **Measures**

*Attitudes on intergenerational obligations*

Based on 11 items concerning intergenerational family obligations an exploratory factor analysis was carried out, resulting in three distinguishable correlating factors: general family obligations, filial or upward obligations and parental or downward obligations. Table 1 gives the full list of items and their factor loadings. We use ordinary least squares regression analysis to explain the variance of the standardized factor scores for each of the three types of family obligations.

*Table 1: Factor loadings for items expressing family obligations*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Factors<sup>a, b</sup></b>		
	General family obligations (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,87$ )	Filial obligations (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,75$ )	Parental obligations (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,80$ )
One should always be able to count on family	<b>0,773</b>	0,309	0,390
Family members should be ready to support one another, even if they don't like each other	<b>0,664</b>	0,356	0,424
If one is troubled, family should be there to provide support	<b>0,872</b>	0,368	0,454
Family members must help each other, in good times and bad	<b>0,889</b>	0,346	0,432
Children should look after their sick parents	0,434	<b>0,718</b>	0,366
In old age, parents must be able to live in with their children	0,230	<b>0,703</b>	0,242
Children who live close to their parents should visit them at least once a week	0,411	<b>0,573</b>	0,383
Children should take unpaid leave to look after their sick parents	0,218	<b>0,668</b>	0,232
Parents should support their adult children if they need it	0,473	0,323	<b>0,706</b>
Parents should help their adult children financially if they need it	0,350	0,305	<b>0,812</b>
Parents should provide lodging to their adult children if they need it	0,386	0,308	<b>0,743</b>

<sup>a</sup> Principal axis factoring

<sup>b</sup> Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization

### *Respondent's and parent's relationship history*

Our central explanatory variables consist of the divorce and subsequent repartnering histories of both the respondents and their parents. In contrast to some other studies we only consider legal divorce after formal marriage. For the respondents we distinguish between six categories: (a) still in a first marriage; (b) never married, currently cohabiting; (c) never married, currently living alone; (d) divorced, currently in a higher order union (including both remarriage and unmarried cohabitation); (e) divorced, currently living alone and, (f) never divorced, widowed. The first group is the reference category.

If the parents of a respondent divorce, the partnership history of the mother will often differ from the partnership history of the father. Hence, for the parents we have created two sets of variables distinguishing between the relationship history of the respondent's father and mother separately. We identify three categories: (a) parent still in a first marriage; (b) parent divorced, ever repartnered and, (c) parent divorced, never repartnered. The effects of the relationship history of the father and the relationship history of the mother cannot be estimated simultaneously due to issues of perfect multicollinearity (for example, by definition, if one parent is still in first marriage, or widowed, the other parent can never be divorced, etc.). We therefore run our regressions separately: first with the relationship history of the father as one of the explanatory variables, then with the relationship history of the mother.

Conform the variables measuring the relationship history of the adult children, we have considered breaking down the relationship transitions of the parents even further, adding both their current living situation to their past life course. It is e.g. possible that one or both parents did repartner after the divorce but that they are currently single again. By adding such detail however, the relevant subsamples became too small and the parameters estimates unreliable. Since earlier research has argued that parental divorce and subsequent repartnering loosen family ties we believe that these variables suffice to investigate our main research questions. Nevertheless, we should not suppose that the effects of divorce on family ties need to be permanent and irreversible.

*Relationship quality, support exchanged and parents' health status*

The relationship quality with each parent as perceived by the adult child is measured with a four category variable in the questionnaire. We have created a dummy variable indicating a good or very good relationship as opposed to a bad or reasonable one.

The following measures of exchange of support were used in the analysis: (a) giving and receiving help with household tasks (e.g. cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, etc.); (b) giving and receiving help with odd jobs; (c) showing interest in the other person's life and (d) exchange of advice. We have applied principal component analysis in order to reduce the number of variables and ended up with three components for each parent: (a) exchange of socio-emotional support, i.e. showing interest and exchanging advice; (b) providing instrumental support and (c) receiving instrumental support. The internal consistencies of all these variables were not great but still reasonably good, the Cronbach's alfa's all lying between .541 and .725. The components were only weakly correlated after oblique rotation, indicating that these types of support exchange are very different and unrelated. This is not so surprising as socio-emotional support is more based on or an indication of what's known as *affectual solidarity* (Bengtson, 2001), whereas instrumental support is primarily triggered by need.

Unfortunately, we do not have information about the health status of the respondents' parents. Therefore, we have used age as a proxy. We have created a dummy variable indicating whether the mother and/or father are over 75 years old or not. The chances of a being in good health are expected to be rapidly declining once over 75 (Stuifbergen et al., 2008).

Other background variables we control for are the respondent's age, gender, educational level, the total hours a week spent on paid employment and family size and structure.

*Tabel 2: Basic characteristics of the sample (Frequencies and percentages)*

	N	%	Mean (s.d.)
<b>Respondent characteristics</b>			
Gender: Man	1715	39,80	
Woman	2590	60,20	

Age		
< 30	773	18,00
30-39	1535	35,70
40-49	1218	28,30
50-59	643	14,90
60+	136	3,20
Partnership status:		
Still in first marriage	2226	51,70
Never married, currently cohabiting	598	13,90
Never married, living alone	883	20,50
Divorced, currently in higher order union	230	5,30
Divorced, currently living alone	291	6,80
Never divorced, widowed	77	1,80
Siblings:		
No siblings	203	4,70
Only brothers	1082	25,10
Only sisters	966	22,40
Both (brothers and sisters)	2054	47,70
Children (yes)	2723	63,30
Educational level: Up to lower general secondary	1091	25,30
Up to intermediate vocational	1535	35,70
Higher education	1679	39,00
Number of working hours/week		27,17 (18,14)
<b>Father characteristics</b>		
Marital history: Father still in first marriage	2235	76,70
Father divorced, ever repartnered	278	9,50
Father divorced, never repartnered	124	4,30
Father never divorced, widowed	278	9,50
Father over 75 (yes)	619	21,20
<b>Current father-child relationship</b>		
Relationship quality father: (Very) good	2362	80,90
Not so good or reasonable	558	19,10
Providing socio-emotional support: father (advice, interest) (yes)	2685	93,50
Receiving socio-emotional support: father (yes)	2613	91,00
Providing instrumental support: father (housework, odd jobs) (yes)	1572	55,10
Receiving instrumental support: father (yes)	1419	49,70
<b>Mother characteristics</b>		
Marital history: Mother still in first marriage	2235	51,90
Mother divorced, ever repartnered	231	5,80
Mother divorced, never repartnered	268	6,70
Mother never divorced, widowed	1265	31,60



filial and parental obligations compared to the married. Thus it seems that, apart from the 'divorce-effect', living without a partner is also positively associated with the respondent's attitudes towards family obligations. Further analyses revealed however that this seemed to be only the case for women (not shown). These effects are controlled for by the actual support exchanged between the respondents and their parents, taking into account the fact that respondents, i.e. women, without a partner might be more in need of support or possibly receive more support from their parents compared to respondents with a partner. Nevertheless, the absence of a (new) partner might lead to attaching more importance to kinship and family as a potential source of all kinds of support.

Table 3: Ordinary least squares regression analysis of family obligations

	General family obligations			Filial obligations			Parental obligations											
	Father		Mother	Father		Mother	Father		Mother									
	b	S.E.	Sig.	b	S.E.	Sig.	b	S.E.	Sig.									
Constant	.334	.129	.010	.408	.107	.000	.413	.118	.000	.337	.095	.000	.491	.122	.000	.295	.100	.003
Gender (Woman = 1)	-.102	.041	.014	-.144	.035	.000	-.178	.038	.000	-.240	.031	.000	-.235	.039	.000	-.236	.033	.000
Respondent's age (< 30 = ref.)																		
30-39	-.337	.049	.000	-.344	.048	.000	-.136	.045	.002	-.121	.042	.004	-.379	.046	.000	-.376	.044	.000
40-49	-.559	.062	.000	-.509	.057	.000	-.293	.057	.000	-.241	.050	.000	-.476	.059	.000	-.430	.053	.000
50-59	-.563	.095	.000	-.435	.075	.000	-.413	.086	.000	-.330	.066	.000	-.324	.089	.000	-.219	.070	.002
60+	-.214	.233	.357	-.384	.111	.001	-.510	.212	.016	-.425	.099	.000	-.099	.220	.651	-.064	.104	.538
Educational level (Up to lower general secondary = ref.)																		
Up to intermediate vocational	-.256	.047	.000	-.219	.039	.000	-.169	.043	.000	-.157	.035	.000	-.225	.044	.000	-.178	.036	.000
Higher education	-.422	.049	.000	-.386	.040	.000	-.283	.044	.000	-.235	.035	.000	-.318	.046	.000	-.240	.037	.000
Number of working hours/week	.002	.001	.178	.000	.001	.750	.001	.001	.373	-.001	.001	.485	-.001	.001	.384	-.001	.001	.513
Respondent's partnership status (Still married = ref.)																		
Never married, currently cohabiting	-.027	.055	.620	-.022	.050	.664	-.039	.050	.444	.022	.044	.614	.103	.052	.048	.074	.047	.112
Never married, living alone	.003	.064	.959	-.020	.058	.729	.139	.059	.018	.140	.052	.007	.177	.061	.003	.161	.055	.003
Divorced, currently in higher order union	-.060	.080	.454	.011	.063	.866	.083	.073	.256	.138	.056	.013	.133	.075	.077	.086	.059	.144
Divorced, currently living alone	.174	.099	.079	.202	.075	.007	.205	.090	.023	.283	.066	.000	.177	.093	.058	.207	.070	.003
Never divorced, currently widowed	-.170	.210	.419	-.126	.132	.341	-.159	.192	.407	-.031	.117	.789	-.291	.198	.143	-.199	.123	.107
Father's marital history (Still married = ref.)																		
Father divorced, ever repartnered	-.096	.065	.140				.058	.060	.335				.216	.062	.000			
Father divorced, never repartnered	.037	.097	.699				.037	.088	.672				.127	.091	.165			
Father never divorced, widowed	.059	.060	.331				.030	.055	.584				.189	.057	.001			
Mother's marital history (Still married = ref.)																		
Mother divorced, ever repartnered				-.079	.069	.250				.058	.061	.341				.206	.064	.001
Mother divorced, never repartnered				-.080	.065	.217				.058	.058	.312				.174	.061	.004
Mother never divorced, widowed				.024	.038	.521				-.013	.034	.710				.055	.036	.122
Siblings (No siblings = ref.)																		
Only brothers	.086	.092	.354	-.015	.074	.834	-.120	.084	.153	-.097	.066	.138	-.194	.087	.026	-.197	.069	.004
Only sisters	.070	.094	.453	-.054	.075	.466	-.139	.086	.104	-.147	.066	.027	-.206	.088	.020	-.236	.070	.001
Both (brothers and sisters)	.129	.091	.155	.005	.071	.943	-.002	.083	.985	-.023	.063	.717	-.152	.086	.076	-.196	.066	.003
Respondent has children (Yes = 1)	.117	.051	.022	.034	.045	.447	.088	.047	.061	.027	.040	.500	.203	.048	.000	.181	.042	.000
<b>Current father-child relationship</b>																		
Relationship quality father: (Very good/good = 1)	.104	.052	.046				.081	.048	.090				-.026	.049	.593			
Need: Father over 75 (Yes = 1)	.007	.057	.904				-.097	.052	.061				-.018	.054	.743			
Support: Exchange socio-emotional support: father	.074	.020	.000				.068	.018	.000				.031	.019	.092			
Providing instrumental support: father	.024	.018	.180				.062	.016	.000				.027	.017	.104			
Receiving instrumental support: father	-.012	.019	.525				.043	.018	.014				.005	.018	.771			
<b>Current mother-child relationship</b>																		
Relationship quality mother: (Very good/good = 1)				.245	.046	.000				.209	.041	.000				.155	.043	.000
Need: Mother over 75 (Yes = 1)				-.043	.048	.373				-.059	.043	.172				-.015	.045	.733
Support: Exchange socio-emotional support: mother				.022	.017	.196				.038	.015	.012				-.012	.016	.459
Providing instrumental support: mother				-.002	.015	.914				.016	.014	.237				.007	.014	.645
Receiving instrumental support: mother				.009	.017	.622				.058	.015	.000				.022	.016	.177
R	.272			.262			.275			.283			.291			.274		
F	8.865	.000		11.512	.000		9.057	.000		13.607	.000		10.262	.000		12.698	.000	
df	25			25			25			25			25			25		

Never-married respondents who are living together with their partner do not significantly differ from the married in their feelings of general and filial obligations, but seem to have slightly stronger feelings of parental obligations. As it turned out however, these effects were not very robust and again an interaction-effect with the gender of the respondent could be detected (not shown). Cohabiting without ever being married correlates differently with family obligations for men and women. While it is associated with weaker obligations for men (especially general and filial obligations), it has the opposite effect for women. Widowed respondents overall seem to have weaker feelings of family obligations, although the effects are not statistically significant due to the low numbers in this group.

The parents' marital histories have little or no effect on the respondent's feelings of general and filial obligations, but they seem all the more important for their attitudes towards *parental* obligations. Respondents whose parents ever divorced seem to have higher expectations of parents, especially when their parents ever repartnered, than respondents whose parents are still in their first marriage. Again this is a remarkable finding, not only because the effects are not negative, as might be expected, but also because we expected to find that the relationship between the parents' marital history and feelings of obligations, if any existed, would be more pronounced for filial obligations. The same conclusions can be drawn for respondents with a widowed parent. Especially having a widowed father seems to lead to stronger feelings of parental obligation compared to having still-married parents. These findings seem contradictory to the findings on the actual exchange of support between parents and children after (parental) divorce or widowhood. Moreover, by including the relationship quality and support measures, the model controls for the possibly lower relationship quality and lower exchange of support between respondents and their divorced parents. Yet, a clear and positive relationship between the parents' divorce and the respondent's parental obligations remains. In other words, the observation that respondents with divorced parents seem to have higher expectations from parents than those whose parents are still married cannot be explained as a reaction to a bad relationship or lack of mutual support.

Clear gender and age differences can be distinguished as well. In general, women are estimated to have weaker feelings of obligation than men for all types of obligation. This is in line with some studies

in other, mainly European, countries (e.g. Daatland & Herlofson, 2003) but contrary to many results on the actual exchange of support, where women have been found to be the main providers (and receivers) of support. Nevertheless, based on the estimations for this model it seems that women possibly do not express attitudes in conformity with their behaviour. Different explanations have been put forward. Liefbroer & Mulder (2006) suggest that women might be denying the existence of obligations to move away from their role as main providers. Another explanation might be that, because women are the main providers of support, they have a more realistic view concerning family obligations and the (potential) sacrifices they involve (Gans & Silverstein, 2006). One US study using longitudinal data found that there were strong correlations between women's feelings of filial obligation and the amount of support later provided to their mothers when their health started to deteriorate. This was not the case for sons (Silverstein et al., 2006). These findings suggest that women's expressions concerning family obligations may be less influenced by social desirability than men's.

Although in general respondents in all age categories have a weaker sense of obligation than the 18 to 29 year olds, there are some differences in the overall shape of the effects according to the type of obligation. For both general family obligations and parental obligations there is a U-shaped age-effect, with respondents between 40 and 49 having the weakest feelings of obligation (except for the general family obligations in the father subsample where the 50 to 59 year olds have the weakest feelings). In contrast, for filial obligations we find a steady decline with age: the oldest age category expresses the weakest feelings of obligation towards parents. So overall, the youngest respondents seem to have the strongest sense of obligation. This is sometimes explained as young adults being more 'idealistic' because they are often still far removed from the realities of actually having to care for parents or being in need of support themselves (see e.g. Gans & Silverstein, 2006). It is also important to bear in mind that all respondents in our sample have at least one parent still alive. In other words, the different attitudes might be interpreted with respect to the previous or the next generation, depending on at which stage in the life course one is. For example, adults in their 30's and early 40's are less likely to have adult children themselves than people in their 50's and upwards. Therefore, the same obligations can be interpreted

either as expectations one has to live up to towards others or as certain behaviour one is entitled to expect from others. The decline in filial obligations with age may indicate that the older cohorts are expressing attitudes favouring the younger generation, rather than an unwillingness to care for their own parent(s). This has been interpreted by other researchers as a sign of the altruistic character of norms and attitudes, sometimes also related to a norm of self-reliance or independence and the wish from the older generation not to be a burden to their children (Bromley & Blieszner, 1997; Logan & Spitze, 1995; Lye, 1997; Ward, 2001).

Feelings of family obligations seem to be strongly related to the respondent's educational level. Higher educated children express significantly weaker feelings of family obligation than the lower educated, with respondents who finished tertiary education expressing the weakest feelings. This holds for all types of obligations and is in line with other studies, where it has been suggested that higher educated people put more emphasis on individual autonomy (Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006). Moreover, higher education is often related to a higher income, providing the opportunity to use formal (paid) care.

No correlations are found between working hours and feelings of family obligation. Only, using the total number of working hours might not be the best indicator to examine the effects of employment. For example, Liefbroer & Mulder (2006) found that part-time workers had weaker feelings of (general) family obligations than respondents who were not in paid employment, whereas this was not the case for full-time workers. By including the total working hours in our model, we cannot make this distinction.

The presence of siblings is not correlated with the respondents' feelings of general family obligations but there is a negative correlation with feelings of filial and especially parental obligations. This is in line with earlier research on obligations but also with research on the actual support exchanged between parents and children (Knijn & Liefbroer, 2006; Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006; Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Spitze & Logan, 1990b; Stuifbergen et al., 2008). In short, when the burden can be shared, people feel less obliged to provide support but, on the other hand they also expect less to receive any. The gender composition of the siblings seems to be important too. Respondents who have only sisters have the weakest feelings of filial and parental obligations compared to the ones without siblings. Moreover, respondents who have

only brothers or who have both brothers and sisters do not significantly differ from the ones without siblings in their feelings of obligations towards parents whereas respondents who have only sisters do. This might be a good indication of the unequal and gendered patterns of caring tasks between generations. Separate analyses were run for men and women but we found little or no differences in these effects (not shown).

Having children is positively associated with feelings of parental obligations and, in the respondent-father subsample also with feelings of general and filial obligations. Again, as mentioned before, it is difficult to disentangle the direction, upward or downward, in which these attitudes must be interpreted. On the one hand, respondents who have children themselves might have higher expectations in receiving support from parents compared to respondents without children. On the other hand, as parents they might have stronger feelings of obligations to provide support to children.

#### *The parent-child relationship: relationship quality, parents' health status and support exchanges*

As expected, the results indicate that having a (very) good relationship with the parent is an important variable in predicting feelings of family obligation. Especially respondents who have a good relationship with their mother show significantly stronger feelings on all types of obligations compared to respondents who expressed a lower relationship quality with their mother. Similar interpretations can be made for the relationship with the father with exception of parental obligations where there is no significant difference with respondents who have a reasonable or bad relationship. However, again there seem to be opposing associations for men and women (not shown). Having a (very) good relationship with either parent is positively associated with feelings of family obligations for men but negatively for women. So overall, men's feelings of obligation seem to be more conditioned by, or conditioning for, the current quality of the relationship with their parent(s), than women's feelings of obligation.

Having a parent over 75 years old was included as a proxy for the parent's health status. However, only respondents whose father is over 75 seem to have significantly ( $p < .10$ ) weaker feelings of filial

obligation. On the one hand, the health status of the parents might indeed not be related to the respondent's feelings of family obligation after controlling for the other variables. On the other hand, it is difficult to find the 'exact' threshold when age is used as a proxy. Undoubtedly, the group of respondents with parents over 75 is very heterogeneous, with some of them having parents in (more) need of support because of age and/or health problems and others whose parents can still perfectly manage on their own. Hence, without a direct measure of the parents' health status no clear and firm conclusions can be drawn about this.

The association between the actual support measurements and feelings of obligation differs by type of obligation. With one exception, there is no significant difference in general family obligations between respondents who do or do not exchange support with their parents. Apparently, these items describe more general attitudes, also referring to the wider family outside the parent-child relationship. Existing support patterns are most important for the respondent's sense of filial obligations. Exchanging socio-emotional or instrumental support with the father and/or receiving instrumental support from the mother seems to be positively related to feelings of filial obligations. In other words, respondents who actually exchange support with their parents, feel also more obliged to do so. As to parental obligations, again most effects are not statistically significant. However, there is a significantly positive relationship between exchanging socio-emotional support with the father ( $p < .10$ ) and feelings of parental obligation.

## **Conclusions**

It might be expected that divorce leads to weaker feelings of family obligations. Yet, this paper has shown that this is not the case, at least not in the Netherlands. Rather on the contrary, divorced people in general tend to express stronger feelings of family obligation. Also, having divorced parents seems to correlate positively with family obligations. Furthermore, our analyses revealed that the type of obligation is also tied to the generation in which the divorce occurred: although the respondent's own divorce history is positively related to his or her feelings of both

*filial and parental* obligation, the parents' divorce history seem to be only positively related to the respondent's feelings of *parental* obligation. In other words, the norms to *provide* support to parents seem not to be guided by a parental divorce in itself, but rather by the way the parent-child relationship persists or evolves after the divorce, as shown in the effects of the current relationship characteristics. Reversely, respondents with divorced parents have higher expectations to *receive* support from parents, regardless of the perceived quality of the relationship or the amount of support exchanged with their parents.

Although living in a higher order union is also positively related to the respondents' feelings of family obligation, the effects are less clear and less statistically significant compared to the effects of divorcees who are living alone. As argued before, finding a new partner after divorce may have opposing effects on support norms. On the one hand, it could create tension or conflict in families, weakening feelings of family obligation. On the other hand, by giving the opportunity to pick up again or continue (previous) patterns of support exchange, it might strengthen family obligations. When the marital history of the parents is considered, however, the opposite seems to be true: respondents whose parents ever repartnered have the strongest feelings of parental obligation compared to respondents with still-married parents.

With regards to the contextual variables, we did find evidence that the relationship quality and the support exchanged between respondents and their parents are positively related to family obligations. This is in line with other research. In other words, feelings of obligation are (partly) conditioned by, or conditioning for, the current parent-child relationship characteristics. This seemed to be especially true for men's filial obligations, and actual support exchange is more strongly related to the respondent's relationship with the father than with the mother.

Other important predictors for feelings of family obligation were gender, age and educational level. Overall, women expressed weaker feelings of obligation than men. This appears contradictory to their actual behaviour but it might be an indication of their more realistic view on caring tasks and the sacrifices they entail. The correlations with age seem to indicate that people often express attitudes in an altruistic manner and that the young are more idealistic in their attitudes concerning family obligations. For example, respondents in the oldest age category, who most likely have adult children themselves, express the weakest feelings of filial obligation. In line with other research we have interpreted these results as being favourable towards the next generation (i.e. not wanting to burden them with too many obligations), rather than an unwillingness to care for the previous. Overall, the youngest respondents have the strongest support norms but they are also less likely to actually having to provide support or being in need of support themselves, which might make them underestimate the implications of this responsibility. Finally, support norms are negatively related to the respondents' educational level: the higher one is educated, the weaker the feelings of obligation. This finding can be related to a stronger emphasis on individual autonomy by the highly educated and the extended opportunities to use formal care.

The bottom line is that the positive effects of divorce on family obligations persist after controlling for age and gender as well as for the relationship quality and the actual support exchanged between the respondents and their parent(s). Based on our results one could hypothesize that having experienced loss through divorce, either from a parent or a partner, and having experienced the hardships a divorce might bring with it, may result in stronger feelings of family obligations, regardless of the actual behaviour individuals show. One interpretation is that people cherish blood relationships as relatively "unconditional", especially the relationship

between parents and children, when they experience that one cannot always count on the more "contractual" types of relationships, like marriage. The latter are freely chosen but this may also make them more fragile. In-laws may come and go, but blood relatives always remain family and people might argue that they should be able to count on each other.

## **Discussion**

Clearly, this study has a number of limitations and our results call for further research. One of the difficulties in studying family obligations lies in the general terms in which they are described. Hence, it is impossible to tell whether respondents interpret items about family obligations with respect to some general ideal state of affairs or rather with their own potential course of action in mind. As has been shown by other studies, obligations do not always seem to guide specific behaviour. For example, some types of support may still remain even if feelings of obligation decline (or vice versa), indicating that other motivations besides feeling 'obligated' may be behind the actual support behaviour (Stuifbergen et al., 2008).

With our data we cannot tell to what extent the correlations found can be explained by the causal effect of divorce on obligations or rather by a causal chain or selection effects running the other way around. But whatever the causal mechanism involved, the pattern of association is relevant in its own right. For example, the relationship between attitudes and expectations on the one hand and actual behaviour on the other hand will affect how satisfied people will be with the actual state of affairs, whatever the origin of the attitudes and expectations.

Declining fertility, ageing societies and rising divorce rates have had a major impact on research about intergenerational solidarity over the past decades. In general, researchers as well as policy makers have been, and still are concerned about the (future) role family members (will)

play in the provision of support towards each other. More specifically, many concerns have been expressed about the deteriorating effect of divorce for the parent-child relationship, which might lead to an unwillingness to provide support to one another and eventually result in more people having to rely on social welfare. So far, research on the association between divorce and the actual support exchanges and feelings of family obligations has been very inconclusive, coming up with inconsistent, sometimes even contradictory, findings. The aim of this contribution therefore was, first of all, to get a clearer picture of the existing literature and the different frameworks intergenerational researchers use. Furthermore, trying to fill in some of the gaps from previous research, two main research questions were addressed concerning the association between divorce and family obligations and the possible conditionality of parent-child relationships based on the quality, the (potential) need and the actual support exchanges. The connection between divorce and intergenerational support and intergenerational relationships is not as clear-cut as how it is often portrayed in the public debate. It has been shown, both in research about the actual exchange of support and about feelings of obligation, that divorce does not necessarily loosen ties between family members. Still, some relationships might become more vulnerable and volatile than others. Since divorce has become widespread while parents and their adult children continue to be the primary sources of support to one another, it remains important to determine how these relationships fare after divorce. Also, as divorce is often reproduced through the generations, it is even more important to study the effect of marital dissolution in subsequent generations. For example, one study in the Netherlands found that when the child(ren) as well as the parents had gone through a divorce the actual exchange of support between the generations was lowest (Dykstra, 1997). It is important to gain more insight in the cumulative effect of these family dynamics. And finally, the results presented here are

from the Netherlands. It remains to be seen whether similar patterns can be observed in other countries.

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