



Racial differences in the effects of parental divorce and separation on children: Generalizing the evidence to a European case

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ABSTRACT

Much American research has shown that the effects of parental divorce and single parenthood on children are weaker among African Americans than among whites. So far, this moderator effect has not been studied in other societies. Are there also weaker effects of parental divorce and single parenthood for blacks in other countries? We answer this question by analyzing Caribbeans in the Netherlands. We analyze effects of parental divorce and separation on eight outcome indicators for children in adulthood and we compare these effects between Caribbeans and whites. We show that for Caribbeans there are no effects of parental divorce on own divorce, cohabitation, leaving home, and contact frequency with the father, much in contrast to the effects for whites. For socioeconomic outcomes, however, the effects are similar for Caribbeans and whites.

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1. Introduction

Many studies have shown that children whose parents divorce fare less well than children from intact families. Negative effects are found for a range of outcomes, including well-being, behavior problems, school grades, school dropout, educational attainment, idleness, marital dissolution, and teenage pregnancy (Amato, 2000). Much current research focuses on the conditions which may increase or reduce the effects of parental divorce, i.e., a question of moderator or interaction effects. For example, authors have examined whether effects of parental divorce and family structure depend on the child's age and sex (Amato, 2000; Powell and Downey, 1997), on socioeconomic resources of fathers and mothers (Biblarz and Raftery, 1993; Fischer, 2004; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994), and on the quality of the parents' marriage (Amato and Cheadle, 2008; Dronkers, 1999; Hanson, 1999; Morrison and Coiro, 1999).

An important factor that moderates the effects of parental divorce is race and ethnicity. In their influential book on single parenthood, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) showed that growing up with a single parent has a less detrimental effect on the fate of black (African American) children than on the fate of white children. For example, among whites, the rate of high school dropout was 2.5 times higher for children of single parent families than for children of intact families, but this ratio was only 1.8 among blacks (p. 59). In another study, McLanahan and Bumpass showed that the effect of growing up with a single parent on the risk of marital dissolution was more than twice as strong for whites as it was for blacks (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). A meta-analysis by Amato and Keith concluded that there are weaker effects of family structure on children's educational attainment and psychological adjustment among blacks than among whites (Amato and Keith, 1991). Black–white differences in the effect of family structure on the risk of teenage pregnancy are also present but less pronounced (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Wu and Thomson, 2001). An exception to these results is a recent study by Sun and Li which finds no significant black–white differences in the effects of parental divorce on school-related outcomes and children's behavior problems (Sun and Li, 2007).

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Virtually all the research on racial differences in the effect of parental divorce comes from the United States so that it is unclear how robust and how general these findings are. In other words, does the finding of smaller effects of parental divorce among blacks also apply to other societies? We try to answer this question by focusing on a European case, i.e., Caribbeans in the Netherlands. Although there is little research on racial differences outside the United States, there are two small-scale studies in the Netherlands which find no effect of single parenthood among Caribbeans for two child outcomes, i.e., school success (Hofman, 1993) and problem behavior (Distelbrink, 2000). These two studies suggest that the hypothesis may apply to the Netherlands as well.

The goal of the present paper is to compare the effect of parental divorce on children for (Dutch) Caribbeans on the one hand and for native stock Dutch persons (hereafter called 'whites') on the other hand. The focus is on adult outcomes for children in three domains: (a) socioeconomic outcomes (educational attainment and employment), (b) demographic outcomes (leaving home, marriage and family formation and dissolution), and (c) outcomes in family life (relationships with family members). For all these domains, the research literature has shown significant effects of parental divorce (Amato, 2000). Although the focus on a large number of outcomes makes the analysis complex, it also results in a stronger test of the general hypothesis than one would obtain if just a single outcome was considered.

The central independent variable is the experience of a parental divorce before age 18, the official age of becoming legally independent in the Netherlands. For most children, the experience of a parental divorce also implies living some time in a single mother household, although the duration of this experience can vary, depending on the age at which the child experiences the parents' divorce and the mother's repartnering behavior. Note that there are also children who grew up with a single, never married mother, but the number of these cases is too small for a separate analysis here.

2. Background

The goal of this paper is to compare whites and Caribbeans in the Netherlands. Dutch Caribbeans originate from Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles, both former colonies of the Netherlands. Caribbean immigrants were familiar with Dutch society and virtually all of them spoke Dutch as a second language before they immigrated. Dutch Caribbeans have a significant experience with single parenthood. Research shows that half of the Caribbean households in the Netherlands, is a single parent family (Harmsen and Garssen, 2005), which is much higher than it is for the general population (6%). In addition, Dutch Caribbeans have a higher rate of divorce (De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006), and a higher rate of teenage childbearing than whites (Garssen, 2004).

Although there are similarities between Caribbeans in the Netherlands and blacks in the United States, the ethnic and racial context in the Netherlands is in some senses different from that in the United States. First, the concept of race seems less clearly defined in the Netherlands. For example, the words 'black' and 'white' are not often used in day-to-day language (Essed and Trienekens, 2007) and population surveys do not include questions on race or skin color.¹ There is discrimination on the basis of racial traits in the Netherlands (Bovenkerk, 1978), but discrimination is not more pronounced for the Surinamese than for the two other important minority groups, i.e., the Turks and Moroccans (Verkuyten and Kinket, 2000; Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002).

Another difference with the United States is that one of the two Caribbean groups, i.e., the Surinamese, consists of several different ethnic or racial subgroups. The largest groups are Creole Surinamese, Hindustani, and Javanese. The Creole Surinamese are descendants of slaves. The Hindustani's are descendants of contract workers who came from British India at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. The Javanese are descendants of contract workers from Indonesia (Choenni and Harmsen, 2007). These groups are different with respect to language use, intermarriage with whites, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and attachment to Suriname (Kalmijn and Van Tubergen, 2006; St-Hilaire, 2001; Van Niekerk, 2000). The Creoles are black but the two other groups would be more comparable to Asian Americans. In the Netherlands, these subgroups are often perceived as one single 'immigrant' group. With the data at hand it is not possible to check whether the results are different for the different Surinamese subgroups. As an alternative, we will replicate all the models for the Antilleans only which is a predominantly black group and which is therefore more comparable to African and Caribbean Americans.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether the effects of parental divorce on a range of child outcomes are different for Caribbeans than for whites. Following the research literature, the general expectation is that these effects will be smaller for Caribbeans than for whites. If such differences are found, explanatory questions can be a topic for further study. It is nonetheless useful to review the arguments for or against racial differences in the effects of parental divorce. In the literature, there are essentially two arguments about subgroup differences in the effects of parental divorce: an argument about the normative acceptance of divorce and an argument about parental resources.

2.1. Acceptance of divorce

One of the more common hypotheses about racial differences is based on the notion that single parenthood and divorce are significantly more common in black families than in white families (Distelbrink, 2000, 2006; Sun and Li, 2007). This

¹ This is also true in some other European countries, e.g., France (Model et al., 1999).

applies to the United States (Casper and Bianchi, 2002) as well as to other countries where blacks are a significant minority, such as the UK (Marsh and Vegeris, 2004) and the Netherlands (Harmsen and Garssen, 2005). As a result, single parenthood and divorce would be a more 'institutionalized' living arrangement in the black population which may mean that there is less stigmatization of single parents and more acceptance of the children of divorce. More acceptance could translate in higher levels of well-being of children, fewer behavioral problems, and indirectly also in better school outcomes (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Sun and Li, 2007). Following this line of reasoning, one would expect smaller effects of parental divorce on educational attainment and employment in racial groups where divorce is common.

Greater acceptance of divorce among Caribbeans may not only affect socioeconomic outcomes but also demographic outcomes. Authors have argued that in a climate where divorce is disapproved of, the experience of a parental divorce weakens a person's norms against divorce (Amato, 1996). Children whose parents divorce in such conditions learn that a divorce can be a legitimate solution for a poorly functioning marriage (Diekmann and Engelhardt, 1999; Dronkers, 1994; Wolfinger, 1999). In a context where divorce is common, in contrast, tolerance of divorce will have spread more generally and children from intact families already learn from others—and not necessarily only from their parents—that a divorce can be an acceptable choice in the life course. As a result, one would expect that in a context where divorce is common, the effect of parental divorce on a child's chance of experiencing a divorce or separation will be weaker.

When comparing the effect of parental divorce across countries, authors have indeed found less intergenerational transmission of divorce in countries where divorce is common (Diekmann and Smidheiny, 2004). When time periods or marriage cohorts are compared within countries, however, there is no sign that intergenerational transmission of divorce is weaker in periods or cohorts in which divorce rates are higher (De Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006; Sigle-Rushton et al., 2005; Wolfinger, 1999). In this paper, we study intergenerational transmission of divorce again, now by comparing racial groups rather than time periods or countries. The expectation is that the effect of parental divorce on offspring divorce is weaker in ethnic or racial groups where divorce is more common. Hence, we expect that intergenerational transmission of divorce is lower among Caribbeans than among whites.

2.2. Resources after divorce

The effects of divorce on children's outcomes have also been explained in terms of the decline or loss of parental resources after divorce (McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Ethnic or racial group differences in the effects of parental divorce on these resources would imply different effects on children's outcomes. Several types of resources can be important.

First, we consider economic resources. As is well-known, standardized household income declines considerably after divorce. The income decline is the result of lost economies of scale, the loss of the father's income, the limited alimony payments to compensate this, and the modest increase in mothers' labor force participation after divorce (Jarvis and Jenkins, 1999; Poortman, 2000; Uunk, 2004). Research has shown that declining socioeconomic resources explain a significant part of the effect of parental divorce on children's well-being, behavioral problems, and school outcomes (Thomson et al., 1994). For demographic outcomes of children, socioeconomic resources may also play a role. For example, reduced economic resources may increase the chances that children leave home early (Avery et al., 1992) which may in turn increase the chances of early union formation. Early union formation is also an important mediating factor for the effect of parental divorce on offspring divorce (Kiernan and Cherlin, 1999).

The question is whether differences in resources between family types are different for Caribbeans and whites. It is possible that economic differences according to family structure are smaller among Caribbeans. For example, Caribbean fathers are more likely to be unemployed than white fathers and they more often have jobs with a low socioeconomic status (Dagevos et al., 2003). Hence, the loss of the male breadwinner after divorce may have a weaker impact on the mother's economic situation among Caribbeans. For the United States, Page and Stevens have shown the opposite: Economic resources decline more strongly after divorce for blacks than for whites (Page and Stevens, 2005). Since there are no published papers on such differences in the Netherlands, we briefly present results from a new analysis of tax register data from the Netherlands to motivate the hypothesis.²

Table 1 shows that among whites, the median standardized income of single parent households is 48% of the income of two-parent households.³ Among Caribbeans, this is similar, i.e., 52%. When looking at the percentage living below the official poverty line, the result is different. We see a 17 times higher risk of poverty for single parent families among whites and a six times higher risk for single parent families among Caribbeans. That the effect on median income is not weaker is due to bottom and ceiling effects. The poverty rate is already higher among Caribbeans, regardless of family structure, and this explains why poverty cannot increase so much after divorce. Given that median income differences according to family status are similar in the two groups, we would, on the basis of economic arguments alone, expect similar rather than different effects of parental divorce on children in the two groups.

² Data analyzed in Table 1 are from the Income Panel Survey (IPO) that was collected by Statistics Netherlands. The IPO contains longitudinal information about households and their income. Information on household composition and demographic characteristics stems from both tax information and the population register (GBA), which was matched to the fiscal data. Data from 2000 are used.

³ Standardized household income is household income adjusted for household size and for economies of scale (using the adjustments provided by Statistics Netherlands).

Table 1
Income differences between single parent and two-parent families by race.

		Two-parent	Single parent	Ratio
<i>Standardized household income</i>				
White families	Median	31,372	15,194	.484
	N	(32,123)	(2170)	
Caribbean families	Median	29,425	15,507	.527
	N	(891)	(461)	
<i>Income below poverty line</i>				
White families	%	3.4	58.1	17.1
	N	(32,123)	(2170)	
Caribbean families	%	9.9	58.4	5.9
	N	(891)	(461)	

Source: IPO (own analyses). See text.

Next, we consider social resources. It has been argued that after divorce, children's social resources will decline (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). The father is typically not present anymore in the household which reduces the amount of contact with an important adult figure. Moreover, the mother is often compelled to work for pay which may reduce the amount of contact with the mother as well. The quality of the relationships with parents may also suffer (Booth and Amato, 1994). Children may feel resentful toward their parents and parents may be occupied with their personal problems. Research shows that social resources are an important explanation of why a parental divorce has negative effects on children's outcomes (Fischer, 2004; Hanson, 1999; Thomson et al., 1994).

Is the decline in social resources after divorce different for Caribbeans than for whites? One important argument in the literature is that the decline in resources in black families is compensated by strong kinship networks. Research has shown that kinship networks in (poor) black families are strong and also more strongly linked to the mother than to the father (Distelbrink, 2000; Hunter, 1997; McLoyd et al., 2000; Stack, 1974). American comparative research has shown that black mothers live closer to (and also more often with) their mother than white mothers (Hogan et al., 1990). Moreover, black mothers are more strongly embedded in support networks than white mothers, even after differences in marital status are taken into account (Hogan et al., 1990). As a result, divorced mothers and their children may receive more practical, emotional, and financial assistance from extended kin in black families. Because support works as a buffer for the negative effects of divorce on adults (Eggebeen and Davey, 1998), the presumed advantage in social resources may also benefit the children in single parent black families.

3. Data, variables, and methods

Data are used from the *Netherlands Kinship Panel Study* (Dykstra et al., 2004). The *Netherlands Kinship Panel Study* is based on structured face-to-face interviews with a representative national sample of 8161 respondents (aged 18–79). A unique feature of the survey is that it also includes an oversample of 1402 respondents from ethnic minorities (note that the regular sample also contains persons from ethnic minorities). The ethnic minority sample was obtained using information from the municipal registers which provide information on a person's country of birth and his or her parents' countries of birth. Since, Caribbeans make up about 3% of the population in the Netherlands (Loozen and Van Duin, 2007), regular surveys cannot be used to answer our research questions. The questionnaires for the oversample and the regular sample were identical to a large extent, but the oversample questionnaire was shorter. Two groups were selected from the data: whites and Caribbeans. Whites are operationally defined as persons born in the Netherlands of two Dutch-born parents. Caribbeans are defined as persons with one or two parents who were born in Suriname or the Antilles. Most of these are of the first generation (87%).

3.1. Measure of parental divorce

The central independent variable is parental divorce. We compare respondents whose parents divorced before age 18 to respondents whose parents did not divorce. A parental divorce also includes the informal breakup of a marriage (usually called separation). The interviewer was instructed to also count the breakup of a cohabiting union of the parent as a separation/divorce.⁴ Respondents with parents who divorced after age 18 and respondents with parents who were not together at the time of birth were excluded. This leaves a total sample of 6753 whites and 717 Caribbeans. In the white sample, 528 had divorced parents; in the Caribbean sample, 226 had divorced parents.

There is no complete information on if and when the divorced or separated parent began living with a new partner. American research suggests that among children who do not live with their biological father, black children less often live with a stepfather than white children (Norton and Miller, 1992). Research has also shown a lower remarriage rate among black

⁴ When we speak of parental divorce, we mean to include separations of marriage and breakups of cohabiting unions.

American women than among white American women (Cherlin, 1992; Page and Stevens, 2005). No similar data are available for the Netherlands, but we may expect a similar pattern since Dutch Caribbeans and African Americans are similar on other demographic indicators as well (e.g., divorce, teenage childbearing, and cohabitation). If remarriage has positive effects on child outcomes, the omission of the remarriage variable would lead to a more *positive* effect for whites. Since the hypothesis is that the effect is more negative for whites, our test of the hypothesis is a conservative one.

Adult respondents are the children in the present design and their parents are the persons who may or may not have divorced or separated. This raises the question of where these divorces occurred and where the consequences were experienced. Of the Caribbeans who experienced a parental divorce, 14% were born in the Netherlands, 10% migrated before age 6, and 31% migrated between age 6 and 18. Hence, for more than half of the respondents, most or all of the post-divorce years were experienced in the Netherlands. For the other half, the divorces occurred not in the Netherlands but in the origin country and some of the post-divorce years were experienced in the origin country. It would be an interesting question whether experiencing the post-divorce years in the origin country has a different effect than experiencing the post-divorce years in the destination country. This is also a rather complex issue, however, which would require a separate and more elaborate treatment. For the present paper, it is decided to ignore where the post-divorce years were experienced, although we do briefly explore generational differences.⁵

3.2. Outcome measures

3.2.1. Educational attainment

The highest level of education of the respondent. Six categories were distinguished: elementary, lower vocational, lower secondary general, middle vocational, higher secondary general, higher vocational, and university education. These categories are ordered from low to high.

3.2.2. Idleness

A distinction between respondents who are employed or in school versus those who were not. This variable was only defined for persons under age 65. Note that this variable is typically used for young adults only (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). It can easily be argued that non-employment has disadvantages for older adults as well. We will analyze this variable only for men since one could argue that non-employment is not a disadvantaged position for women.

3.2.3. Age at leaving home

The age at leaving home was reported for those who had left home. Those who are still at home are dealt with as right truncation in the event-history model (see below).

3.2.4. Marriage and cohabitation

For those who were currently living with a spouse, we construct a variable indicating whether or not the person was living together unmarried (1) rather than married (0). No detailed marital histories were available, hence, it is not possible to do an event-history analysis.

3.2.5. Divorce/separation

This variable is also based on the current marital status of the respondent. Four categories were distinguished in the data: married, divorced/separated, widowed, and never married. We contrast those who were married (0) with those who were divorced or separated (1). Some of the married may be remarried which will probably reduce the effects of parental divorce on children's divorce. If remarriage rates are higher for whites, the effects for whites will be reduced more than the effects for Caribbeans. This goes against our hypothesis of stronger effects for whites.

3.2.6. Early childbearing

Detailed information was present on the ages at which all the children were born. This makes it possible to do an event-history analysis of the age at first birth. We focus on births before age 25. Teenage motherhood would be a preferable measure, but this reduces the sample size too much. With an average age at first birth of 29 in the Netherlands, age 25 or younger can be considered early. This analysis is based on women only.

3.2.7. Contact with parents

For those who are not living at home, it was asked how much face-to-face contact the respondent had with the (biological) father and mother in the past 12 months. Seven answering categories were presented, ranging from never to daily. The categories were recoded to approximate annual frequencies. Following earlier research (Waite and Harrison, 1992), the natural log was taken of this variable so that effects can be interpreted in relative terms. Two separate variables were constructed, one for the father and one for the mother.

⁵ Unfortunately, information on the year of immigration was only available in the oversample and not in the regular sample, which also includes substantial numbers of Caribbeans. Since these data are also used here, it was decided not to estimate effects of age at arrival.

3.3. Control variables

To estimate the effect of parental divorce on children's outcomes, it is important to control for characteristics of parents which may be associated with parental divorce and which may affect children's outcomes. Although the retrospective data that we use are more limited than some of the American panel data that exist, there are some important parental characteristics that can be included. More specifically, we include the level of education of the parents (averaged for the father and the mother), the number of siblings, and whether or not the parents were a church member when the respondent was growing up.⁶ The education of parents and the number of siblings are well-known determinant of children's socioeconomic outcomes. Moreover, religiosity is associated with norms and values about marriage and the family and could therefore affect cohabitation and divorce (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). We also include the age (or year of birth) and the sex of the respondent. Migration-specific characteristics were not included in the model as they only pertain to Caribbeans. We examined generational differences but since only few Caribbeans were of the second generation, it was not possible to examine with enough statistical power whether the interaction effect of parental divorce and race applied equally to the first and the second generation.⁷

There were some missing values on the independent variables: year of birth (0.4%), education (0.2%), parental education (3.1%), religion (6.8%), sibsize (0.1%), and parental divorce (0.3%). Missing values were imputed using multiple imputation in Stata (Royston, 2005). To explain how this is done, we note first that we have eight different dependent variables. Each dependent variable applies to a different part of the sample. For example, when analyzing divorce, the never married are not included and when analyzing contact with fathers, only those with living fathers are analyzed. Moreover, the independent variables may differ depending on which dependent variable is considered. Hence, we have in total eight different datasets, each with a different set of cases and a different set of variables (we call these 'subsets' of the data). Because of the way we created the subsets, none of the subsets has missing information on the dependent variable.

Multiple imputation was done for each of the subsets separately. For example, multiple imputation was done for the variables that are used to predict divorce while using only the cases for which divorce is measured; another imputation was done for the variables that are used to predict contact with the father while using only the cases for which contact with the father is measured. All variables with missing cases in a subset were imputed using the information from all the other variables in the subset, including the dependent variable, the central independent variables, and the interaction effects. The imputation was done with an iterative regression technique available in the program *ice* in Stata. The imputation was done ten times for each of the eight subsets. Each regression model was therefore estimated 10 times and these regression results were combined using the program *mim* in Stata, a program which uses Rubin's rules to combine regression results.

3.4. Method

Three models are estimated for each outcome. The first model contains main effects of race, parental divorce, and control variables. The second model includes an interaction of race and parental divorce. Caribbeans are coded 1, which implies that the main effect in the interaction model refers to whites and the interaction tells us how much stronger or weaker the effect is for Caribbeans. It is possible that the interaction effect of race and parental divorce is due to another interaction effect. More specifically, if the effects of parental divorce are weaker for lower educated parents, a weaker effect of parental divorce among Caribbeans may also be the result of the fact that Caribbeans are on average lower educated than whites. If the interaction of divorce and parental education is in the other direction, the racial difference in the effect of parental divorce may be suppressed by omitting the interaction of parental divorce and education. To rule out these possible biases, we estimate a third model in which the interaction between parental divorce and parental education is added. Finally, we replicate the interaction effects using a sample of whites and Antilleans only, leaving out the Surinamese. Since the Surinamese are ethnically heterogeneous whereas the Antilleans are predominantly black, it is important to see if the results also apply when we limit the sample to a stricter black–white comparison.

The type of regression model differs, depending on the outcome. OLS was used for the linear variables (contact with the father, contact with the mother). Logistic regression was used for the dichotomous variables (cohabitation, separation, and idleness). To estimate effects on educational attainment, ordinal logistic regression was used since this variable is ordered but not per se linear. Finally, event-history models were used for the age at leaving home and early child bearing. A discrete time model was estimated using logistic regression on a person-period file (Yamaguchi, 1991). Estimating an event-history model for divorce was not feasible since information on the age at marriage and divorce was incomplete. Results of the models are presented in Table 3 for the socioeconomic outcomes, Tables 4 and 5 for the demographic outcomes, and Table 6 for family relations.

⁶ Using father's and mother's education separately is a less parsimonious solution. I examined whether there were differences in the effects of father's and mother's education but these differences were only significant in the model for the respondent's education (the father's education is significantly more influential than the mother's education). The average level of education was used but when information on the father's education was missing, only the education of the mother was used (and vice versa).

⁷ Several main effects of generation were found. Compared to Caribbean immigrants, second generation immigrants were less likely to be divorced, were less likely to be idle, had more frequent contact with the father and the mother, and were less likely to have children at an early age. No differences were found for the experience of cohabitation, leaving home, and educational attainment. Including a main effect of generation did not change the interaction effects of race and parental divorce.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations of variables by race.

	Caribbeans		Whites	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Education (ordinal scale, 1–6)	3.01	1.78	4.16	1.83
Idleness (if age <65)	.18		.11	
Cohabitation (if living with a partner)	.34		.17	
Separated	.42		.15	
Age at leaving home (if not at home)	21.10	4.09	21.90	4.07
Age at first child (if child)	24.90	5.85	27.50	4.66
Contact with father (logged; if not living with father)	1.72	1.79	3.24	1.34
Contact with mother (logged; if not living with mother)	2.54	2.04	3.42	1.30
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Age	40.92	12.92	46.92	15.20
Female	.59		.58	
Parental education (standardized; average of father and mother)	-.63	.88	.07	.99
Parents were church member	.78		.84	
Number of siblings	4.64	3.01	3.07	2.35
Parental divorce	.32		.08	
Second generation (Caribbeans only)	.13			
Antillean (Caribbeans only)	.48			
N	725		6779	

Source: NKPS (own analyses).

4. Results

Descriptive results are presented in Table 2. We observe that Caribbeans are on average lower educated and more often idle than whites. In demographic terms, the groups differ as well. Caribbeans more often choose cohabitation over marriage than whites, they are divorced or separated more often, and they have their first child at an earlier age. Contact with parents is less frequent for Caribbeans. The racial difference may be due to immigration, which may form a practical limitation to have regular contact with parents if the parents remain in the country of origin. If we limit the comparison to the (small) group of second generation Caribbeans, the Caribbeans have somewhat *more* frequent contact with mothers (3.50 versus 3.42) than whites, although they still have less frequent contact with fathers (2.86 versus 3.24). The age at leaving home is not different for Caribbeans than for whites. This last result has been reported before in the Netherlands (De Valk and Bil-lari, 2007).

In terms of family background, the groups differ considerably as well. Caribbean parents are lower educated on average, are less often a member of the church, and have larger numbers of children. The most striking difference is the experience of parental divorce. Among Caribbeans, parental divorce is experienced by 32% of the children, whereas among whites, it is a minority experience (8%). We now turn to the effects of parental divorce on (adult) children's outcomes.

Table 3 shows the results for educational attainment and idleness. We first see a significant effect of parental divorce. Persons whose parents divorced have a lower level of education than persons from intact families. We also see that Caribbeans have a lower level of education than whites. The interaction effect, however, is not significant, as Model 2 shows. Including an interaction of parental divorce and parental education does not change this result. The results for idleness are more or less the same. First, we observe that persons whose parents divorced are less likely to be employed or to be in school (i.e., a positive effect on idleness). There is no significant effect of race and the interaction between race and parental divorce is not significant. A model of idleness limited to men does not reveal a significant interaction effect either ($p = .42$). Hence, we conclude that for the socioeconomic outcomes, there is no confirmation of the general hypothesis. Caribbeans and whites seem to be affected by a parental divorce to the same degree.

We now turn to the results for the demographic outcomes in Tables 4 and 5. First, we see that children with divorced parents are more likely to choose cohabitation rather than marriage (Table 4). Earlier American and European research on cohabitation has found similar results (Cherlin et al., 1995; Thornton, 1991). Furthermore, Caribbeans are more likely to cohabit than whites. There is also a significant interaction effect of race and parental divorce. The sign is negative, which shows that the effect of parental divorce on cohabitation is weaker among Caribbeans than among whites. More precisely, the implied effect of parental divorce is .75 for whites and $.75 - .66 = .09$ for Caribbeans. In other words, there is virtually no effect of parental divorce on the choice between marriage and cohabitation among Caribbeans. Note that there is no interaction of parental divorce and parental education in Model 3.

Is there less intergenerational transmission of divorce among Caribbeans? Table 4 first shows that a parental divorce almost doubles the odds of being divorced or separated, i.e., $\exp(.656) = 1.9$. We further find that Caribbeans are four times more likely to be divorced than whites. More importantly, we see a significant negative interaction effect. For whites, the implied effect of parental divorce is .90, for Caribbeans it is $.903 - .887 = .013$. Hence, there is no intergenerational transmission

Table 3

Regression of education and idleness on parental divorce and race: regression coefficients and standard errors.

	Education (Ordered logit)						Idleness (Logit)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Age (centered)							-.931	.251*	-.932	.251*	-.935	.251*
Age centered squared							.199	.033*	.199	.033*	.199	.033*
Year of birth	.012	.002*	.012	.002*	.012	.002*						
Woman	-.368	.042*	-.368	.042*	-.368	.042*	.214	.090*	.214	.090*	.213	.090*
Highest education							-.494	.055*	-.494	.055*	-.494	.055*
Parental education	.864	.025	.864	.025	.863	.027	-.037	.055	-.037	.055	-.018	.059
Parents church member	.385	.059*	.386	.059*	.386	.059*	-.054	.119	-.055	.119	-.053	.119
Number of siblings	-.062	.009*	-.062	.009*	-.062	.009*	-.004	.020	-.004	.020	-.003	.020
Caribbean	-.551	.078*	-.529	.090*	-.530	.090*	.227	.141	.212	.163	.225	.164
Parental divorce	-.567	.074*	-.547	.083*	-.550	.086*	.518	.134*	.501	.161*	.522	.163*
Caribbean × parental divorce			-.086	.175	-.080	.181			.051	.279	-.041	.301
Parental education × parental divorce					.009	.068					-.108	.131
Constant							-1.833	.468*	-1.828	.468*	-1.827	.468*
<i>N</i>	7491		7491		7491		5452		5452		5452	

Source: NKPS (own analyses).

Note: Education is in seven ordered categories (threshold estimates not printed). Missing values of independent variables imputed using multiple imputation.

* $p < .05$.

of divorce among Caribbeans. We also see a significant interaction effect of parental education and divorce which shows that the effect of parental divorce is weaker among children of highly educated parents. Including the education–divorce interaction increases the interaction effect of parental divorce and race. In other words, the interaction with parental education works as a suppressor variable.

In Table 5, we present event-history models for leaving home and early childbearing. In line with other studies, we find that children of divorced parents are more likely to leave home early (i.e., a positive effect on the risk of leaving home). Caribbeans appear to leave home somewhat later than whites.⁸ The interaction effect between race and parental divorce is again statistically significant. The implied effects of parental divorce on leaving home are strong and positive for whites (.45) but virtually absent for Caribbeans (.005). The findings for early childbearing are weaker. Note that these findings pertain to women only. On the one hand, we do find that daughters of divorced parents have their first child at an earlier age. On the other hand, the effect of parental divorce is not significantly weaker among Caribbeans. Because the sample size is smaller here, we must be somewhat careful in interpreting the results. We note that the interaction effect, although not statistically significant, is in the expected direction.

How does a parental divorce affect family relationships among Caribbeans? In Table 6 we present models for contact with the father and the mother. Starting with the most frequently studied indicator—contact with the father—we confirm that parental divorce reduces contact between fathers and children later in life. The effect is substantial in magnitude: Children of divorced parents have 71% less frequent contact with their father than children of married parents (i.e., $1 - \exp(-1.253)$).⁹ We also see that Caribbeans have less frequent contact with their father than whites. This is a substantial effect as well, but as we will see, it is also present for mothers. More important is that the interaction effect of parental divorce and race is significant. The effect of parental divorce on contact with the father is weaker among Caribbeans. The implied effect is -1.41 for whites and $-.80$ for Caribbeans. Hence, there still is a negative effect on contact with fathers among Caribbeans, but the effect is 43% weaker than it is for whites. We further see a significant interaction of parental divorce and parental education. In highly educated families, the effect of parental divorce on contact with the father is weaker. Including the interaction with parental education leads to an even stronger interaction effect of race and parental divorce. Since Caribbeans are lower educated, the interaction with parental education serves as a suppressor for the interaction with parental divorce.

The results for contact with the mother are also interesting. We first see a small negative effect of parental divorce on contact frequency with the mother. This finding has been observed in other European countries as well: the mother–child tie is also negatively affected by divorce but not as strong as the father–child tie (Kalmijn, 2008). We again see a significant interaction effect with race. The sign is positive which shows that the effect is less negative for Caribbeans than for whites. Calculations show that the effect of parental divorce is $-.53$ for whites and $.38$ for Caribbeans. Additional analyses show that the effect of parental divorce for Caribbeans is statistically significant. In other words, there even is a positive effect of parental divorce on contact with the mother among Caribbeans. A positive divorce effect confirms the notion that for Caribbeans, maternal kinship ties can be an important buffer in times of crisis such as divorce (Hogan et al., 1990; Stack, 1974).

⁸ This result is after adjusting for control variables and parental divorce and is therefore not comparable to the result in Table 2.⁹ The frequency of contact is logged, hence, $\exp(b)$ is the effect expressed in relative terms.

Table 4

Regression of cohabitation and separation on parental divorce and race: regression coefficients and standard errors.

	Cohabitation (Logit)						Separation (Logit)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Year of birth (centered)	.090	.005 ⁺	.090	.005 ⁺	.090	.005 ⁺	-.018	.003 ⁺	-.019	.003 ⁺	-.019	.003 ⁺
Woman	-.148	.087	-.147	.087	-.148	.087	.392	.085 ⁺	.399	.085 ⁺	.398	.085 ⁺
Highest education	.251	.050 ⁺	.253	.050 ⁺	.253	.050 ⁺	-.090	.048	-.088	.048	-.089	.048
Parental education	.111	.051 ⁺	.110	.051 ⁺	.116	.055 ⁺	.062	.051	.064	.051	.111	.053 ⁺
Parents church member	-.475	.106 ⁺	-.469	.106 ⁺	-.467	.106 ⁺	-.442	.108 ⁺	-.433	.108 ⁺	-.430	.108 ⁺
Number of siblings	-.017	.022	-.016	.022	-.017	.022	.014	.017	.015	.017	.016	.017
Caribbean	.846	.158 ⁺	1.040	.180 ⁺	1.046	.181 ⁺	1.390	.131 ⁺	1.585	.144 ⁺	1.625	.145 ⁺
Parental divorce	.615	.129 ⁺	.749	.143 ⁺	.766	.155 ⁺	.656	.132 ⁺	.903	.149 ⁺	.924	.150 ⁺
Caribbean × parental divorce			-.658	.313 ⁺	-.694	.334 ⁺			-.887	.284 ⁺	-.135	.303 ⁺
Parental education × parental divorce					-.039	.129					-.327	.135 ⁺
Constant	-1.638	.123 ⁺	-1.660	.124 ⁺	-1.662	.124 ⁺	-1.808	.116 ⁺	-1.847	.117 ⁺	-1.849	.117
<i>N</i>	4798		4798		4798		4799		4799		4799	

Source: NKPS (own analyses).

Note: Missing values of independent variables imputed using multiple imputation.

⁺ *p* < .05.

Before turning to the conclusion, we discuss some of the other results in the tables. Since we have several different outcome variables and several control variables, it is undoable to present a full discussion of these results. Nonetheless, we can discuss the three parental control variables. Children of highly educated parents are more highly educated but they are not more likely to be idle (Table 3). Parental education is associated with a reduced chance that children choose marriage, which may be due to more liberal values among higher educated parents (Table 4). Children of highly educated parents leave home earlier but they have their first child later (Table 5). Finally, we see that contact frequencies are lower among highly educated parents, which is also in line with much other research on face-to-face contact (Kalmijn, 2006). Parents' religion has significant effects as well. Children of parents who were church members are more likely to choose marriage over cohabitation, they are less likely to divorce, and less likely to leave home early. These findings support the importance of socialization for children's demographic behavior. The number of siblings, finally, also has clear effects, and not only on socioeconomic outcomes. Sibsize has the expected negative effect on educational attainment (Table 3). In addition, children in larger families leave home earlier, have their first child at an earlier age, and have less frequent contact with their parents (Table 6).

Finally, we examined whether the results were different when the sample was limited to whites and Antilleans, thus excluding the ethnically more diverse Surinamese group. All the interaction effects of race and parental divorce that were significant for the full sample were also significant in the smaller sample and all the non-significant interaction effects remained insignificant. The main effects of race were in some instances stronger for the Antillean-white comparison (idleness and leaving home early) and in one case weaker (early childbearing). For the five other dependent variables, the main effects were quite similar to those found in the full sample. The results are not shown but available on request.

5. Conclusion

Much American research has shown that the effects of parental divorce and single parenthood on children are weaker among African Americans than among whites. So far, this moderator effect has not been studied in other societies which raises the question of how general the patterns are that were found in American research. Are there also weaker effects of parental divorce and single parenthood for blacks in other countries?

We have tried to answer this question by analyzing Caribbeans in the Netherlands. In some respects, Dutch Caribbeans resemble blacks in the United States. A substantial part of Dutch Caribbeans are black, they have very high rates of divorce and single parenthood, and they are disadvantaged in socioeconomic respects. There are of course also differences. The Dutch Caribbean experience is probably more similar to the Caribbean experience in the United States than to the African American experience (Butcher, 1994; Model, 1991). There is also more ethnic diversity within the Dutch Caribbean group than within the Caribbean groups in other countries (Choenni and Harmsen, 2007; Model et al., 1999). Finally, there is more intermarriage with whites among Dutch Caribbeans than among African Americans (Kalmijn and Van Tubergen, 2006). While recognizing these differences, we note that in terms of divorce and single parenthood, Dutch Caribbeans are rather similar to African and Caribbean blacks in the United States. Dutch Caribbeans therefore serve as an important case for generalizing the American findings.

Our findings generally confirm the American evidence but they also lead to several new insights. First of all, we find that the effects of parental divorce on demographic outcomes are significantly weaker among Caribbeans than among whites. Among Caribbeans, the experience of a parental divorce has no effect on children's divorce, no effect on the choice between marriage and cohabitation, and no effect on the age at which children leave home. The results for early childbearing were

Table 5

Event-history model of leaving home and early childbearing: regression coefficients and standard errors.

	Leaving home		Leaving home		Leaving home		First child before age 25		First child before age 25		First child before age 25	
	(Event history)		(Event history)		(Event history)		(Event history)		(Event history)		(Event history)	
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.
Age 15–19 (reference)	0		0		0		0		0		0	
Age 20–22	.989	.033*	.992	.033*	.991	.033*	1.966	.092*	1.966	.092*	1.967	.092*
Age 23–25	1.605	.038*	1.609	.038*	1.609	.038*	2.772	.092*	2.773	.092*	2.774	.092*
Age 26–28	1.654	.054*	1.659	.054*	1.659	.054*						
Age 29–31	1.535	.081*	1.538	.081*	1.538	.081*						
Age 32–34	.575	.149*	.577	.149*	.576	.149*						
Age 35+	.114	.141	.126	.141	.125	.141						
Year of birth (centered)	.009	.001*	.009	.001*	.009	.001*	-.010	.002*	-.010	.002*	-.010	.002*
Woman	.507	.028*	.509	.028*	.509	.028*						
Highest education	.190	.016*	.190	.016*	.189	.016*	-.607	.044*	-.609	.044*	-.609	.044*
Parental education	.140	.017	.140	.017*	.137	.018*	-.244	.044*	-.242	.044*	-.227	.047*
Parents church member	-.162	.036*	-.158	.036*	-.158	.038*	-.127	.095	-.123	.095	-.126	.095
Number of siblings	.028	.006*	.028	.006*	.028	.006*	.053	.012*	.053	.012*	.054	.012*
Caribbean	-.229	.052*	-.115	.059	-.117	.059	.532	.104*	.585	.118*	.597	.118*
Parental divorce	.339	.049*	.448	.055*	.443	.058*	.236	.104*	.308	.128*	.294	.129*
Caribbean × parental divorce			-.444	.113*	-.426	.121*			-.189	.206	-.248	.217
Parental education × parental divorce					.019	.048					-.094	.110
Constant	-2.789	.045*	-2.803	.045*	-2.803	.046*	14.178	4.812*	14.315	4.812*	14.612	4.820*
<i>N</i> person-years	50584		50584		50584		49128		49128		49128	

Source: NKPS (own analyses).

Note: Missing values of independent variables imputed using multiple imputation.

**p* < .05.

weaker, which may be due to the more limited statistical power of this particular analysis. So far, these results are in line with findings for the United States.

Less well-known is the differential effect of parental divorce on the relationship between parents and children. Like other studies, we find that children have less frequent contact with their father when the parents were divorced. However, this effect appears to be significantly weaker for Caribbeans than for whites. Another novelty comes from the analysis of mothers. Although a parental divorce reduces the frequency of contact with the mother for whites, it appears to *increase* the frequency of contact with the mother among Caribbeans. The positive effect of parental divorce supports the notion that there are strong maternal kinship ties among Caribbeans and that these ties may work as a buffer in times of crisis.

Although the results so far are in line with the general hypothesis, we find no evidence for the hypothesis when looking at socioeconomic outcomes. Children of divorced parents have a lower level of education than children of married parents and they are more often not employed and not in school. However, these effects are similar for whites and Caribbeans. In other words, the evidence for the hypothesis seems to be limited to outcomes in the demographic and family domain. A possible explanation for this exception lies in the economic resources of the parents. We found in an auxiliary analysis that the income differences between single parent families and two-parent families in the Netherlands are rather similar for Caribbeans and whites. Parental income is also a determinant of children's educational attainment, which may explain why we do not find differential effects on the socioeconomic outcomes of children.

Because we had no prospective longitudinal data, we have not been able to test interpretations of the differences we found but we have reviewed the most likely interpretations. The basic argument in the literature has been that a parental divorce results in normative disapproval on the one hand, and in lower resources of parents on the other hand. Both these consequences are expected to be more limited among blacks—less disapproval and a more modest loss of social resources—and that is why the children in black families are expected to be affected less strongly by a parental divorce than white children. These interpretations are plausible in the Netherlands as well, with the exception of the role of parental income resources, which does not imply differential effects in the Dutch case.

In closing, we consider some alternative interpretations for the differential effects we found. One alternative explanation lies in the role of parental cohabitation. It is possible that among Caribbeans, there were relatively more breakups of parents who were cohabiting rather than married. If the breakup of a parental union has less negative effects for children if that union was not an official marriage, this may play a role in understanding the differences we found. However, we should add that in the Netherlands, married and cohabiting unions are quite similar when there are children involved. Hence, it is not yet clear if this difference can *explain* the findings. Another possible alternative explanation lies in the role of selectivity. If the threshold to divorce or separate is higher among whites, the parents who break up may have had more serious problems during their marriage and this may have had more severe consequences for their children.

To examine such alternative explanations, panel data are needed which include information on the quality of the marriage before the divorce occurred. Panel data would also be a step forward when outcomes during childhood are examined

Table 6

Regression of contact with parents on parental divorce and race: regression coefficients and standard errors.

	Contact father (OLS)						Contact mother (OLS)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Age (centered)	-.327	.155*	-.345	.155*	-.346	.155*	-.446	.122*	-.458	.121*	-.456	.121*
Age centered squared	.021	.023	.023	.023	.023	.023	.041	.016*	.042	.016*	.041	.016*
Woman	.140	.048*	.136	.048*	.141	.048*	.243	.042*	.238	.042*	.239	.042*
Highest education	-.247	.028*	-.247	.028*	-.245	.028*	-.261	.025*	-.260	.025*	-.260	.024*
Parental education	-.119	.028*	-.114	.028*	-.158	.030*	-.122	.025*	-.117	.025*	-.134	.026*
Parents church member	-.046	.061	-.056	.061	-.062	.060	-.002	.054	-.018	.054	-.019	.054
Number of siblings	-.064	.014*	-.064	.014*	-.063	.014*	-.055	.011*	-.055	.011*	-.055	.011*
Caribbean	-1.388	.080*	-1.586	.095*	-1.616	.095*	-1.054	.072*	-1.331	.084*	-1.342	.084*
Parental divorce	-1.253	.069*	-1.407	.080*	-1.549	.088*	-.287	.065*	-.529	.075*	-.586	.082*
Caribbean × parental divorce			.606	.156*	.850	.170*			.912	.145*	1.028	.159*
Parental education × parental divorce					.246	.066*					.118	.065
Constant	4.405	.262*	4.465	.262*	4.491	.261*	4.555	.221*	4.621	.220*	4.627	.220*
N	3155		3155		3155		4355		4355		4355	

Source: NKPS (own analyses).

Note: Estimated when parent alive and parent not living with respondent. Missing values of independent variables imputed using multiple imputation.

* $p < .05$.

rather than adult outcomes, such as is done here. Such data can be used to examine *when* the effects of a parental divorce occur, *how long* they last, and whether negative child outcomes *preceded* the divorce (Cherlin et al., 1998; Sun and Li, 2002). Examining the dynamics of parental divorce effects for blacks may also yield more insights in the underlying reasons behind the differentials that were found. Perhaps there are still negative immediate effects of parental divorce on black children due to the stress and pain that a divorce creates but there may be a quicker recuperation due to greater acceptance and more kinship support. Although panel data are available in the Netherlands, such data typically have too little statistical power to analyze an ethnic minority group like the Dutch Caribbeans. The lack of panel data for ethnic minorities in the Netherlands (and other European countries) thus remains a handicap for the study of ethnic and racial differences in family life.

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