

OUT OF TOUCH

Understanding Post-divorce Relationships between Children and Fathers in Ethnic Minority Families

Abstract

While ethnic minority children today experience parental separation almost as often as the majority of Danish children, research on how they experience divorce is limited. Hence, this article applies a mixed methods approach to investigate post-divorce father–child contact for ethnic minority children compared to Danish majority peers. Drawing on survey data, the article documents how ethnic minority children are more likely than their Danish majority peers to have either no contact with their fathers or see their fathers for shorter durations. Drawing on qualitative interviews with adult and child members of post-divorce ethnic minority families, we propose that the observed differences in post-divorce father–child contact can result from the lower socio-economic position of the members of such families, be tied to higher thresholds for divorcing, and arise from different understandings of the role of the father in the ethnic minorities' home country cultures as compared to the Danish host society.

Keywords

Ethnic minority children • Father–child contact • Divorce • Dissonant acculturation • Mixed methods

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Anika Liversage^{1*}, Mai Heide Ottosen²

¹SFI - the Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark

²SFI – the Danish National Centre for Social Research, Denmark

Introduction

A substantial share of children in Scandinavian countries experience family dissolution during childhood. When parents separate, the post-divorce¹ organisation of family life becomes an issue, with central topics being with whom the children come to live and how much—if at all—they see the other parent. Over the past two decades, Scandinavian fathers have become increasingly involved as parents. Father–child contact has, on average, become more regular and extensive in cases of parental separation, and many children now spend equal amounts of time with either parent after a divorce. These changes concern majority populations; however, and much less is known about immigrant and refugee families that experience divorce. In Denmark—where this study is set—140,000 children (more than one-tenth of the child population) are either born outside the country or have parents who are classified as immigrants. Of these, 82% have a non-Western family background, predominantly from the Middle East and South-East Asia (Statistics Denmark 2012). In Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe, research on the divorce experiences of such ethnic minority children is limited (Bernardi et al. 2013), and insights into post-divorce father–child contact are particularly sparse (Amato & Dorius 2010; Strier & Roer-Strier 2010).

Departing from this gap in the literature, this article uses a mixed methods approach combining survey data and qualitative interviews

to investigate post-divorce father–child contact in ethnic minority families relative to the situation in the Danish majority. To frame the analysis, we draw on J.J. Arnett's (1995) work on socialisation and the family as well as the concept of 'dissonant acculturation' (Portes & Rumbaut 2001). The article, first, outlines our theoretical approach before providing a schematic overview of family dynamics in (a) majority Danish families, (b) families in the major countries of origin (e.g. in the Middle East and South-East Asia) and (c) ethnic minority families originating from such countries. We then describe our different data sources before documenting quantitative differences in post-divorce father–child contact in ethnic minority families relative to the Danish majority, and use the qualitative data to offer possible explanations of the observed patterns. The article closes with a conclusion.

Migration and practices of socialisation

Socialisation, 'the process by which people acquire the behaviours and beliefs of the social world' (Arnett, 1995, p. 618), is central to shaping individuals' lives. It is through socialisation processes, which may vary both between different regions of the world and between e.g. social classes, that individuals learn about the social world, including what it means to be a mother, a father and a child in given contexts.

* E-mail: ani@sfi.dk

While the family is central for children's socialisation, it is not the only relevant arena. According to Arnett (1995), the six sources—friends, school/work, community, media, the legal system and the general cultural belief system—also centrally contribute to socialisation. In given societies, there is often substantial correspondence between different sources of socialisation, with life within the family preparing children well for life in school and broader society. Differences between domains are also possible, however, as when friends urge individuals towards other goals than does school.

Arnett also distinguishes between cultures with 'narrow' and 'broad' socialisation practices. The former promote high degrees of obedience and conformity, and individuals are expected to follow relatively set tracks in life. In contrast, broad socialisation practices promote individualism and independence, with youngsters' subsequent tracks in life showing greater variation. These two types of socialisation are generally associated with lesser and more complex societies.

Regarding migration, ethnic minorities often live in what has been termed 'transnational social spaces', spanning the boundaries of two (or more) nation-states (Carling 2008). Family life is, therefore, affected by norms, practices and structures of both the countries of origin and destination (Reynolds & Zontini 2014). Arnett writes: 'Immigrant families frequently experience a conflict between the socialisation practices that they bring with them to their new country and the socialisation that they are exposed to in schools, the media, and the legal system' (Arnett 1995: 625). Furthermore, within families, children are more deeply affected by host-country norms than are their parents, not least due to their participation in host-country education systems and peer relations with majority children. Generational differences in socialisation may result in the 'dissonant acculturation' phenomenon (Portes & Rumbaut 2001), where parents and children come to view the world very differently, sometimes engendering substantial family conflict, especially when children become teenagers (Suárez-Orozco 2006). In movements from contexts of narrow, to contexts of broad, socialisation practices, one issue of parent-child tension may be how much autonomy and independence children should have and whether parent-child relations should be hierarchical or democratic.

Family life in different contexts

To better understand children's post-divorce relationships to their fathers in the two populations—majority Danish and ethnic minority families—we begin by attending to the organisation of family life when parents live together. While ethnic minority children in Denmark have diverse origins, most come from non-Western, predominantly Muslim countries, with over half of the non-Western child population originating from Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan—mostly countries placed in what Caldwell (1978) has termed 'the patriarchal belt'. Encompassing Northern Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia, these regions are characterised by principles of gender segregation and restrictive codes of behaviour for women (Kandiyoti 1988). Value surveys show that parents in these countries attribute greater importance to children's obedience and less to their independence as compared to Scandinavian parents (Halman et al. 2008; World Values Survey 2015)—indicating that socialisation patterns are generally narrower in such countries than in Denmark. The next section presents a brief and evidently somewhat ideal-typical comparison between Danish majority families, families in 'patriarchal belt' countries and ethnic minority families from such

countries. We focus on family life, particularly the role of fathers, and on divorce-related practices.

Denmark is a Nordic welfare state with high levels of individual economic independence, a relatively high degree of gender equality and is a country where the state—rather than predominantly the family—supports individuals in need. Education levels are high, and women's employment rate is only a few percentage points lower than men's. The institution of marriage has limited importance and almost half of all children are born outside of wedlock (Björnberg & Ottosen 2013). Regarding gender relations, men and women are both expected to share in breadwinning and childcare. While mothers still, on average, spend more hours on childcare than fathers, the gender gap continues to narrow (Bonke 2009), and Danish fathers today take substantial responsibility for childrearing, including care for infants. Within the family, parent-child relations are relatively democratic rather than hierarchical. Divorce has become widely accepted and commonplace since the 1980s (with almost every other marriage breaking up), and many contemporary parents have themselves experienced parental separation in childhood.

In comparison, family life in the Middle East and South-East Asia, for example, is characterised less by gender equality and more by gender complementarity (Predelli 2004). Relative to Denmark, the family plays a more—and the state a less—central role for individual welfare. Education levels and labour participation figures are much lower for women than for men (ILO 2013). Regarding family practices, marriages are often entered into before spouses know one another intimately, not least due to Muslim norms against pre-marital sex (Eich 2010; Ozyegin 2009). Within families, fathers are generally expected to be breadwinners while mothers hold primary responsibility for childcare. A hierarchical relationship between spouses—where husbands are considered heads of households, have the right to unilateral divorce, or where wives need husbands' permission to be employed outside the home—is integrated into national legislation in countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Jordan (Moghadam 2008). Furthermore, in such countries, norms against divorce are generally stronger and divorce rates lower than in Scandinavia.

Regarding ethnic minority families, research documents home-country influences in family life (Dekovic et al. 2006). Thus, a Dutch study shows that in Turkish, Moroccan and Somali immigrant families, men are more often attributed roles as breadwinners and hold primary responsibility for child discipline as opposed to participating substantially in physical childcare. The situation in such families differs from both the Dutch majority and Chinese and Surinamese immigrant families (Dekovic et al. 2006).

Besides the importance of norms and practices from countries of origin, migration processes also affect ethnic minority family life, including stresses related to migration, poverty, unemployment and the loss of linguistic skills and network support (Chuang and Tamis-LeMonda 2009; Lewig et al. 2010). Some ethnic minority men, therefore, lose the basis for their customary position as household heads, also due to women's better access to work, education and social support in the host country (Kleist 2010). Hence, power structures in ethnic minority families may tilt towards mothers and children having more—and fathers less—say in families as compared to the pre-migration situation (Pels & De Haan 2007). Studies also show that levels of divorce in non-Western ethnic minority populations in Denmark and elsewhere tend to increase over time (Qureshi 2014; Liversage 2012).

Regarding resources in the host country, the majority of parents in ethnic minority families in Denmark have immigrated as adults (mostly as family migrants or as refugees) rather than having been

born and/or raised in Denmark (Bonke & Schultz-Nielsen 2013). With levels of education being lower in the countries of origin as compared to in Denmark, many ethnic minority parents possess only limited educational resources, limiting their options in the Danish labour market.

While this brief overview of family life in different contexts does not do justice to differences due to social and other characteristics, the comparison between the situation in the Danish welfare state, in the immigrants' main countries of origin, and in ethnic minority families nevertheless provides a framework for understanding the differences in post-divorce father–child contact in the investigated populations. Before further investigating such contact, the next section describes the quantitative and qualitative data used in the analysis.

Methods and data

As the 'most insightful studies in the field of transnational families are those that integrate large-scale quantitative methods with in-depth qualitative understandings' (Mazzucato & Schans 2011: 709), the study combines survey and interview data. We utilise three surveys, conducted in 2013–14. The first is Children and Young People in Denmark (CYPD), a nationally representative survey on children in Denmark comprising 7,619 respondents in five age groups (ages 3, 7, 11, 15 and 19). Of these respondents, 7.2% are ethnic minority² youth. The second data source is the sixth round of the Danish Longitudinal Study of Children (DALSC), containing data gathered from 4,296 youth, who are 18-year-old majority Danes. Third, paralleling the sixth round of DALSC interviews, an Ethnic Minority Survey (EMS) was carried out with 877 ethnic minority youth, all 18 or 19 years of age, using the DALSC questionnaire. In the survey, 85% of the youths had non-Western backgrounds, in particular from Middle Eastern and South-East Asian countries.³ Either the first survey (CYPD) on its own or the two latter surveys (DALSC and EMS), in combination, provide comparative insights into the situation of ethnic minority children and youth in relation to their Danish majority peers.

We also use qualitative data. Thus we draw on 62 qualitative interviews, made with 31 children, 26 mothers and 5 fathers from 34 ethnic minority families in which the parents had separated.⁴ Of the children, 28 were minors (aged 9–17) and three were young adults (18–25) who had experienced divorce while children. We are not aware of other European studies that draw on interviews with ethnic minority children to investigate their divorce experiences.

We recruited ethnic minority respondents through different channels, including personal networks, 'gate keepers' in NGOs and public service provisions, and through so-called snow-balling (Browne, 2005). Gaining access to interviewees was challenging, with fathers—despite our concerted efforts—being particularly reluctant to participate. Furthermore, in cases where fathers did grant interviews, we were unable to gain access to our primary group of respondents: the children.

The families represent a range of backgrounds and experiences. Adult informants had different levels of education (high to none) and employment status. Some lived isolated lives whilst others had broad networks. Some were fluent in Danish, whereas others spoke it poorly—two interviews were conducted using professional interpreters. The interviewees represented a number of non-Western countries, with the largest groups—reflecting the composition of immigrant-origin children in Denmark—being from Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq.

In line with the general pattern (Bonke & Schultz-Nielsen 2013), the majority of the parents had come to Denmark as adults—either as family migrants or refugees. Of the respondents, three fathers and seven mothers grew up in Denmark. Two of the 34 families were 'mixed marriages', the mothers having Danish majority backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in 2013–2014, tape-recorded and transcribed. Subsequent analysis was conducted with the support of NVivo software. We found recurring narratives of the relationship between fathers and children being either difficult or having been discontinued provided inspiration for the present analysis. The next section uses survey data to compare post-divorce father–child contact in divorced ethnic minority and majority Danish families.

Post-divorce father–child contact: quantitative comparison

In the CYPD data (children aged 3–19), 24% of the majority Danish children and 21% of the ethnic minority children do not live in a household with both parents.⁵ Hence, the share of majority Danish children with separated parents is merely a few percentage points greater than the share of ethnic minority children with such experiences. Furthermore, register data studies document that the gap between how often the two groups of children experience parental divorce have shrunk in recent years (Ottosen, Liversage & Olsen 2014).

When considering post-divorce living arrangements, the survey data document substantial differences. While 16% of majority children live with fathers (and often also stepmothers), only 9% of ethnic minority children do so (CYPD data). The data also shows that while 69% of majority Danish children in divorced families have parents sharing joint legal custody, the figure for their ethnic minority peers is only 33% (DALSC/EMS data); instead, mothers usually hold legal custody over ethnic minority children.

When it comes to contact with non-residential parents (overwhelmingly fathers), survey data shows the situation for majority Danish and ethnic minority children to be as follows:

As table 1 shows, ethnic minority father–child contact is lower than in the Danish majority throughout: More ethnic minority children lose contact with non-residential parents, predominantly fathers (30% vs. 16%). When contact exists, levels are lower with shared parenting and regular contact with overnight stays being substantially less common for ethnic minority children. Thus, while 68% of majority Danish children regularly spend nights with their non-residential

Table 1. Contact arrangements with non-residential parents among majority Danish and ethnic minority children (source: CYPD)

	Majority Danes	Ethnic minorities
Contact unknown	7%	16%
No contact	16%	30%
Contact without overnight stays	9%	22%
Regular contact with overnight stays	40%	26%
Shared parenting (50/50)	28%	5%

Note: The differences between majority Danish and ethnic minority children are highly significant as $p < .0001$.

parent after parental separation, predominantly fathers, only 31% of ethnic minority children do so. In order to understand the observed pattern of lower post-divorce father–child contact for ethnic minority as compared to Danish majority children, we draw on our qualitative data, focusing on the views of children and fathers.

Variations in father–child contact and socio-economic position

An initial observation in our material is the large variations in father–child contact after divorce. While some had little or no contact with fathers, others had strong, positive relationships. An example of the latter comes from 15-year-old Jaliyah.⁶ Of her last visit to her father's place, she told the following:

I had to send an application for high school [*gymnasiet*] and he helped me ... I was supposed to write something about myself, and when people ask you to do that, you totally forget who you are. So he sat there saying: 'How about mentioning that you speak four languages?' And then I could write that down... [at my next visit] I'm looking forward to cooking with him. I like that a lot. He loves exotic foods with lots of chili and vegetables, and I also like to be creative. We really click there. It's nice.

Jaliyah was one of the child respondents who told of a supportive father who engaged in their relationship. In a majority of the interviews, however, we heard of less positive father–child relationships. Hence the remainder of the article focuses on such experiences.

One reason for lower levels of father–child contact in ethnic minority families is their lower socio-economic position as compared to the majority, as lower class position is generally associated with divorced fathers' more frequent loss of contact with their children (King, Harris & Heard 2004). Within majority Danish families, unemployed fathers have less extensive visitation schemes and more often lose contact with offspring compared to highly skilled, employed fathers (Ottosen, 2014). The lower socio-economic position of ethnic minority men as compared to the Danish majority are due to factors such as lower education and employment levels, non-recognition of home-country qualifications, lower host-county language skills and discrimination.

One example of contact with a father with limited means comes from Tayfun, a 12-year-old boy. Despite family court having ordered that Tayfun should see his father every other weekend (including sleepovers), we learned that the contact was less regular and of shorter duration, in part due to the father living in a single room in a men's rooming house. Tayfun describes how visiting his father is often 'boring', adding that:

Sometimes I spend the night at his place, others I don't. He never uses the kitchen... I have never been in it [the kitchen]—but he says that it's dirty (Tayfun, 12 years old).

The low level of material resources in many ethnic minority families also becomes evident in the shares of children in divorced families living in poverty (with household incomes below half of the country's mean income, see Keeley (2015)). While 15% of majority Danish children whose parents have divorced live in poverty, the figure for ethnic minority children is 52% (Ottosen, Liversage & Olsen 2014). The fact that ethnic minorities are commonly positioned in the lower

echelons of Danish society thus contributes to explaining why levels of post-divorce father–child contact are lower amongst ethnic minorities than in the more affluent Danish majority.

Children seeing fathers for shorter durations

In line with the general situation documented by the survey data, levels of father–child contact in many of the 34 families we interviewed were also low. We thus encountered only two residential fathers. In both cases, mothers were marriage migrants with one mother having moved back to the country of origin. Only one father had an equal share arrangement. Significantly, the fathers in these three families had all been raised in, and had completed tertiary degrees in, Denmark, pointing again to the importance of socio-economic resources for levels of post-divorce father–child contact.

In contrast, Mesut, a family migrant with little education, preferred the contact with his children to be of limited duration and not overnight. Shedding light on the consequences of ethnic minority men's often marginalised labour market positions, Mesut explained that while married, he worked long and irregular hours, which hampered his ability to be close with his children:

I worked in a pizzeria. Over time, I found that I could hardly recognise my children... I left home at 8 a.m. for language school, and the children were sleeping at that time. At noon I went straight to work, and I got home at midnight, after the children were asleep.

The couple had divorced 9 years earlier, and Mesut now saw his children (aged 12 and 14) the following way:

[The children] come here every other Saturday... Just the Saturday. I shouldn't have too much hard work with the children, as I live on my own. And I also work. So I pick them up in the morning, and then we're here until the evening. We have supper and have a good time together—and then I drive them back.

As Mesut was living without female company and working a lot, his children did not spend nights with him. As table 1 shows, after a divorce, only seeing their non-residential parent during the day is much more common for ethnic minority children (22%) than for Danish majority children (9%). While their time spent together was limited by majority Danish standards, Mesut nevertheless experienced having a close and stable relationship with his offspring.

That a divorced (and low-skilled) marriage migrant father could consider childcare difficult without female support also appears in an interview with the man Halil (Liversage 2014). Recently separated, Halil feared that his ex-wife mistreated their toddler son and stated that he would prefer getting custody and becoming a single father. His vision of caring for his son included female assistance, however—either his mother coming to Denmark to care for her grandchild or his son being sent to live with the grandmother for a few years. Another alternative Halil considered was to hire a Russian woman to live in his home and care for the child. None of these solutions seemed particularly realistic due to Halil's insecure post-divorce residency status and Denmark's generally strict immigration rules. The fact that Halil was considering these solutions nevertheless demonstrates his difficulties in envisioning caring for his son without female support (Liversage 2014).

High-conflict divorces lead to limited father–child contact

In divorced ethnic minority families, the relative positions of the mother and father may be strongly influenced by their immigration background and status. When women arrive as family migrants, they may have more restricted access to divorce than both ethnic minority women raised in Denmark and marriage migrant men. The reason is that marriage migrants may have to return to their country of origin if they divorce before the end of a lengthy probationary period (presently six years) with such a return generally being much harder for women as compared to men (Liversage 2013). That some marriage migrant women seem to have a high threshold for divorce can also be tied to their having being socialised in home-country contexts with strong norms against divorce and to high levels of dependency on ethnic minority networks, due to limited Danish skills. Hence, weakly positioned in Denmark, such women may remain in abusive relationships rather than file for divorce.

We heard several stories of immigrant mothers—who left marriages only if they were really troubled—and their children otherwise putting up with men's violence, mental problems and/or substance abuse for years before mothers literally fled the common home (see also Danneskiold-Samsøe et al. 2011). Both children and their mothers often spoke of men having shown little care for children while the parents lived together—a lack of engagement also contributing to such fathers having fragile post-divorce relationships with their children. That divorce in ethnic minority families not uncommonly includes prior experience with domestic violence aligns with studies of Indian families in the UK (Das 2012), Turkish and Iranian families in Sweden (Akpınar 2003; Darvishpour 1999) and other studies (Hyman, Guruge & Mason 2008; Sinha 1998).

Shada, age 25, underwent such experiences. She told of growing up in a 'violent hell' until her mother fled the family home when Shada was eight. Subsequently, her father—applying for visitation rights—met with his children in family court, which led to the following:

[My father] came into the room, and I jumped up and started to scream, because I was afraid that he would hit me. Especially now, where we had run away and sided with the Danes, which was also kind of taboo. My little brother jumped up and hung on to the social worker, and they could see it wasn't so great, so they threw out my father and tried to comfort us. They wanted to know why we reacted like that... I kept repeating that I was afraid and that [my father] beat us. [On a visit to the family home...] my brother had gotten hold of a coil of cables and wires that my father hit us with. It was about a metre long. [My brother] was six years old and he showed it, saying 'this is why I don't want to go back to my father'.... Afterwards, we were just doing well with my mother [and did not see my father].

Whilst amongst the harsher experiences in our material, this experience of prolonged dominance and violence preceding divorce is also documented elsewhere (Das 2012; Guru 2009; Guruge et al. 2010). In fact, according to Danish police statistics, ethnic minority women file more than twice as many complaints of spousal abuse per capita as do majority Danish women (Helweg-Larsen 2012: 47). Shada's comment that leaving their father and 'siding with the Danes' was 'taboo' also brings out the potential conflicts between two frames of reference co-existing in transnational social space: According to home-country norms, a wife should not divorce. In

contrast, her doing so was fully acceptable according to host-country norms, with Shada's mother even receiving both financial and legal support.

As discussed above, the class position of ethnic minorities in Denmark is often lower than their majority counterparts, and studies show that domestic abuse is more common amongst individuals who are unemployed or outside the labour force (Helweg-Larsen 2012: 48). Other factors conditioning domestic abuse in ethnic minority families may be stresses resulting from migration, status loss in the new country and social isolation (Lewig, Arney & Salveron 2010; Szczepanikova 2005), as well as relatively high levels of domestic violence in countries of origin (Douki et al. 2003; Kocacik, Kutlar & Erselcan 2007). Immigrant fathers may also feel their positions undermined by wives receiving state support or entering the labour market (Liversage 2014; Strier & Roer-Strier 2010), leading some to seek to assert their dominance within the private sphere. In refugee families, traumatic experiences may exacerbate the situation (Lewig, Arney & Salveron 2010). Class issues, dysfunctional marriages, poor pre-divorce relations between fathers and children and a high threshold for divorce may thus also contribute to explaining the lower post-divorce levels of father–child contact amongst ethnic minorities.

Contact between fathers and children breaking off

As table 1 shows, 30% of ethnic minority children (compared to 16% of Danish majority children) have no contact with their non-residential parent, predominantly fathers, following the separation of their parents.⁷ This might partly be due to such fathers being barred contact with their children (as in Shada's case). Our interviews indicate, however, that fathers themselves commonly opted out of retaining contact with their children.

With fathers having fewer responsibilities for childcare when parents live together, it seemed as though some had limited understanding of their children's needs in the post-separation situation, including the need for contact with both parents. Hence, we frequently heard of fathers who remarried shortly after divorce (often with marriage migrant wives)—a phenomenon termed 'swapping families' (Kalmijn 2015). Such fathers hereby again became part of two-parent families, sometimes with limited space for children from former marriages. One example hereof concerned a father who had discontinued contact with his three children for a period after the divorce. After he remarried, his children (aged 3–11) began seeing him every other weekend, as there was now a woman in the father's flat. After a few months, however, this arrangement was discontinued: During one weekend visit, the youngest child had gotten up early to watch television. This led to a row with the father and his new, pregnant wife, ending with the father kicking the three children out of the house, leaving them to walk back to their mother in their pyjamas. According to the children's mother, the father had expressed no interest in seeing his children since this incident.

Twelve-year-old Jenna tells a similar story of a father showing limited empathy for the needs of his young child. She told that when she was seven, her mother left her father, taking Jenna and her sister to a woman's shelter for a year. After the mother got a flat to live in, Jenna began sorely missing her father. A contact arrangement was set up for her, with the following incident—while Jenna was on a weekend visit to her father—occurring shortly afterwards.

I wanted to call my mum to say goodnight, and [my father] got really upset about that. Then he said 'call your mum', but she didn't pick up the phone because it was late. Then he said: 'Go down and wait for her, and I'll call her' but he didn't do so. [After waiting on the street in the cold for a while, Jenna walked back up to the father's apartment, and] ...knocked and knocked on the door but he didn't open. And in order not to hear me, he turned on the vacuum cleaner. And I knocked and I just wanted to smash that door. And I cried a lot.

Subsequently, contact between Jenna and her father was suspended for a prolonged period.

Incidents such as this can be linked to some fathers' lack of experience with being primary caregivers and having limited understanding of children. Another reason might be that children do not live up to fathers' expectations regarding obedience. For their part, children may expect a more caring and democratic relationship with their fathers. Such different understandings of how the father-child relationship should be constituted can also contribute to explaining the lower levels of post-divorce father-child contact amongst ethnic minorities, as documented in the survey data.

Dissonant acculturation

Our data also indicates that dissonant acculturation can be accentuated by divorce and deepen the gulf between fathers and children: Fathers have often been socialised according to home country norms and practices, whereas the divorces—usually initiated by the mothers—themselves constitute a break with home-country norms regarding divorce. After parental separation, children mostly came to live in, and thereby became socialised in, female-headed households, which in themselves were emblematic of the higher levels of individual independence found in Denmark. Furthermore, as Arnett (1995) points out, socialisation also occurs in, for example, peer groups and school, resulting in further host-country influence in the lives of the ethnic minority children and contributing to shaping their expectations of father-child relations.

In fact, some children expressed a wish for more engaged parenting from their fathers, observed as being the norm for majority Danish peers with divorced parents. As 14-year-old Ali explains:

I have Danish friends who live with their fathers every other week. Their fathers trust them, spend time with them. Most immigrant fathers only think about work, and nothing else. The children must wait... Most pizza-men leave at ten in the morning like my dad did before my parents separated. He came back at midnight... so I only saw him lying in the bed in the morning, asleep. And on Mondays, which was his day off. Otherwise, I didn't see my father.

Mirroring Mesut's narrative of working long and irregular hours, Ali's father was also often absent from the family—experiences aligning with general findings on the working lives of ethnic minorities (Ochocka & Janzen 2008; Roer-Strier et al. 2005). Hence, linked to the marginal labour market position of many ethnic minorities, such working lives may contribute to explaining the lower levels of post-divorce father-child contact.

While Ali talks about seeing his father, his slightly younger sister had not seen her father for two years. The father-daughter break, which resulted from a family conflict during a holiday, troubled Ali,

and he sought to reunite his father and sister. Hence, Ali had recently told his father that he

... has to start seeing my sister. Because I can see that he wants to and I can see that she wants to.... I've asked my father: 'Can't you do it [i.e. apologise]?' And he says: 'I'll feel like a laughing stock in front of my own daughter if I go to her saying that I'm sorry'. He keeps repeating that.... But why should my sister [apologise] when all the shit is his fault? My sister didn't do anything [wrong].

Ali wanted to end the family conflict by getting his father to apologise to Ali's sister. The father refused to do so, however, due to the context of the hierarchical parent-child relationship into which he had been socialised. Conversely, Ali and his sister had received central socialisation influence from the Danish context. Given the relatively democratic parent-child relationship in Denmark, an apology is not considered something with which a father should struggle. This clash between opposing understandings of father-child relations thus appears to underlie the stalemate regarding the apology in question within Ali's family.

Ali was not the only interviewed child trying in vain to make a father apologise to a sibling. We heard something similar from Jenna (who had been locked out of her father's apartment years earlier, see above) and her sister. The sisters had reconnected with their father some years ago, even though he often told them not to come visit him. 'We go there anyway... that's not his decision alone', as the older sister Gül put it. Mirroring Ali's experiences regarding conflicts over an apology, Jenna shared the following recent events:

- Jenna: [When visiting our father] my older sister suddenly said: 'Remember when you kicked her [= Jenna] out?', and then he replied: 'we shouldn't talk about such things'. And then she said: 'You have to answer me now... you have to apologise to her'. And then my father reacted: 'Don't talk about it all the time', and then he left the room. And I keep telling my sister not to do it anymore... I don't want to talk about it—it makes me upset to talk about it.
- Interviewer: So you prefer to forget it?
- Jenna: No, I don't want to forget it, because then I somehow forget how bad a father he has been.

Exemplifying independent offspring, raised primarily by single mothers in Denmark, children such as Ali and Jenna's older sister Gül sought to get what they wanted from their fathers (including apologies), even though this was not always possible and could lead to both children and fathers becoming frustrated over the relationship and (as in Ali's family's case) be implicated in prolonged periods with no father-child contact at all.

A final example of a daughter's longing for independence as opposed to her father's wish for conformity to his expectations comes from Amal. Amal's young mother had originally been forced to marry Amal's father, who was substantially older than herself. After becoming pregnant, Amal's mother left her husband, fleeing to Denmark with her own parents. Amal was born in Denmark and the socialisation of father and daughter thus indeed occurred in different contexts. When Amal was eight, her father left his country of origin for another Scandinavian country. Subsequently, he contacted the Danish family court, requesting contact with his daughter. Amal recounts her meeting with her father in the Danish family court:

I found out that he just wanted me to go to [X-country], wear a headscarf, go to Quran-school, marry early and all that... He didn't like that I wore shorts. He wanted me to close my jumper, and whatever... And of course I got angry and tried to explain to him that I didn't want that and that it wasn't his life. That I just wanted to be totally normal and—being born in Denmark—I felt a bit Danish... He got upset, obviously [but] I just said that I didn't want to be in contact with him. Incredibly enough, he was okay with that. And that was it—I didn't see him again.

In the home-country context with narrow socialisation (Arnett 1995), a girl should dress in a particular way and her path to adulthood should include early marriage. Amal, raised in Denmark, saw life differently and, being 'a bit Danish', expressed her views equivocally. The quoted encounter can thus be read as a case of dissonant acculturation in which father and daughter have grown far apart. Also lacking emotional ties, Amal rejects her father's wish for contact, which he accepts without further ado. A case like Amal's thus enters into the much larger share of post-divorce ethnic minority children who have no contact with their fathers (about double the share in the Danish majority). In some cases, fathers and children have grown so far apart that forging a meaningful relationship seems unimaginable.

Conclusion

There is a growing body of literature on children of divorce and a general recognition of the potential negative impact parental separation may have on children, for example in terms of prolonged exposure to high levels of parental conflict, and loss of access to resources. However, the literature is overwhelmingly based on data from ethnic majority children, with little being known about the similarities and differences to children with ethnic minority backgrounds. This lacunae in the research is partially due to divorce being a relatively new phenomenon amongst ethnic minority families but can now – as the present study shows – be addressed through analysis drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Hence, regarding post-divorce father–child contact, the quantitative data of the present study shows that ethnic minority children have less contact with their fathers after divorce than do children from the Danish majority. Thus, as compared to their majority peers, larger shares of post-divorce ethnic minority children have no contact with their fathers, fewer of them live with their fathers or enjoy equal share arrangements with both parents, and fewer see their fathers regularly with overnight stays.

Qualitative interviews in non-Western ethnic minority families where parents have separated indicate that a variety of reasons underlie the more fragile father–child relationship in such families. This is partly due to the lower socio-economic position of non-Western ethnic minorities in Denmark, as having fewer resources is associated with less extensive post-divorce father–child contact. Furthermore, the combination of strong norms against divorce, the typically marginal position of ethnic minority women in Danish society, and stresses resulting from migration and marginalisation may lead to some ethnic minority marriages breaking up only after women (and sometimes children) experiencing prolonged violence. Related to this phenomenon, some ethnic minority fathers become cut off from their children after marital break-up.

Other reasons arise from difference in norms and practices regarding family life in the home and host countries. In Denmark,

most ethnic minority families originate from the 'patriarchal belt' countries of the Middle East, South-East Asia and Northern Africa. Such countries generally display patterns of gender complementarity, with women being considered the primary family caretakers and men the breadwinners. While Danish society places high value on independent children, greater emphasis is typically placed on obedience in these countries. Furthermore, divorce may in itself be considered a break with home-country norms and practices, parents often have had little exposure to ways of practicing post-divorce parenthood. Moreover, fathers often have limited experience with the practicalities involved in having primary responsibility for children, which may inhibit their capacity to—and maybe motivation—for having extensive contact with children after separation. In fact, in several cases, children and mothers expressed that they wished for more extensive father-child contact than they were actually experiencing.

Other reasons for the lower levels of father–child contact may be both class issues and the occurrence of dissonant acculturation, with children having been more deeply affected by Danish norms and practices than their fathers. In such families, conflict may result from the two generations holding different expectations regarding the father–child relationship, sometimes leading to contact being discontinued altogether.

In combination, these different and often intertwined reasons—along with the physical separation of family members, which may also be associated with processes of migration—can contribute to explaining the documented pattern of substantially lower levels of post-divorce contact between fathers and children with ethnic minority backgrounds as compared to the situation found in the Danish majority.

Anika Liversage is a senior researcher at SFI – the Danish National Centre for Social Research. Her research interests are immigrant family relations, attending to issues of gender and power. She has particularly worked with issues of marriages and divorces, investigating the interplay between e.g. family networks, residency status, and dependency on religious authorities for ending 'limping marriages'. Recent contributions include "Silenced Husbands: Muslim marriage migration and masculinity" (with Katharine Charsley, *Men and Masculinities*, 2015) and "From Work to Welfare: Institutional Arrangements Shaping Turkish Marriage Migrants' Gendered Trajectories into a New Society" (with Vibeke Jakobsen, *International Migration Review*, 2016).

Mai Heide Ottosen is a senior researcher at SFI – the Danish National Centre for Social Research. She works within the field of sociology of families and sociology of childhood. Among recent contributions are: "Long-term impacts of early paternal involvement in Denmark: What happens after nuclear family dissolution?" (chapter in edited book, *Polity Press*, 2014); "Challenges for future family policies in the Nordic Countries" (book, co-edited with Ulla Björnberg, *SFI*, 2013) and "Patterns of Partnership and Parenthood. Experience, approaches and readiness towards commitment and creating a family" (chapter in edited book, *Routledge*, 2013).

Notes

1. Not all family break-ups involve legal divorce, as not all parents have been married. We use the terms 'break-up' and 'divorce' to cover parents no longer living together regardless of civil status.

2. We define ethnic minority youth as either having been born in Denmark of immigrant parents or having immigrated themselves; see Statistics Denmark (2012).
3. Response rates among ethnic minorities are generally lower than in majority populations (Deding et al. 2008). Thus, in Children and Youth in Denmark, the response rate was 69% in total, but lower amongst ethnic minority children than majority Danish children. In The Danish Longitudinal Study of Children, 72% of the Danish majority children had been part of the investigation throughout all six waves. In the Ethnic Minority Survey, the response rate was 43%.
4. The study was funded by the Egmont Foundation.
5. As compared to the situation for 3-19-year-olds, when looking at youth who are all 18 years old, more have experienced divorce: Amongst the 18-year-olds still living with at least one parent (as opposed to living on their own), 33% of ethnic minorities and 36% of majority Danes have separated parents. Within these subgroups, 19% of majority Danish youth and 11% of ethnic minority youth live with their fathers (DALSC/EMS data).
6. All names are pseudonyms. Details may have been altered to protect respondent anonymity.
7. As shares where contact is unknown are also larger in ethnic minority families, the discrepancy between the two groups may be even greater.

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