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Chapter 5

I'll never forgive you: High conflict divorce, social network, and co-parenting conflicts

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Under review



ABSTRACT

The relation between divorce, co-parenting conflicts, and children's adjustment problems has been well established. An unresolved question for research and clinical interventions, however, is how conflicts between parents are maintained and/or escalate. This cross-sectional study tested the hypothesis that co-parenting conflicts in divorced couples are associated with perceived social network disapproval and that this relation is mediated by parents' tendency to forgive each other. In Study 1, a convenience sample of 136 divorced parents recruited via online forums, we showed that perceived social network disapproval was indeed positively related to co-parenting conflicts and that parents' tendency to forgive the other parent—albeit partly—explained this relationship. Strength of our research is that in Study 2, 110 parents referred to children's mental health care because the wellbeing of the children was severely compromised by the severity of the conflicts between parents, we replicated these results. In both studies perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts were positively related and this link was mediated by forgiveness: perceived social network disapproval was negatively related to forgiveness, which in turn was negatively related to more parental conflicts. Clinical implications and study limitations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Living in divorced families is common and may be harmful. In the Netherlands, approximately 70,000 children experience parental divorce every year (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). The most devastating effect of divorce for children's adjustment and well-being is to be exposed to parental conflict (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Consequently, one of the most challenging tasks for parents' adjustment after divorce is to establish a high quality co-parenting relationship. This is crucial, not only for parental adjustment and wellbeing (Katz & Woodin, 2002), but also because co-parenting quality is essential to ensure children's healthy and smooth adaptation to divorce (Amato, 2005; Bronstein, Clauson, Stoll, & Abrams, 1993; Nunes-Costa, Lamela, & Figueiredo, 2009; Whiteside, 1998) and prevent developmental decrements in the long-run (Cabrera, Scott, Fagan, Steward-Streng, & Chien, 2012; Levine & Painter, 1998; Prevoo & Ter Weel, 2014).

An important question for research is then to explain how conflict between divorced parents is maintained and/or how it escalates. Although research has examined risk factors for co-parenting conflicts (see for an overview, Bonach, 2005), and increased our knowledge about conflict escalation (Coleman, Kugler, Bui-Wrzosinska, Nowak, & Vallacher, 2012), one aspect that has received little attention in empirical research is the role of the social network, including friends, family, and even lawyers (Milardo, Helms, Widmer, & Marks, 2014). This oversight is surprising, given that it is generally recognized that the success and failure of relationships does not only depend on the individual partners but also on their social networks, both in intact relationships (Kennedy, Jackson, Green, Bradbury, & Karney, 2015) and post-divorce relationships (McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013). As an example, it has been found that social network approval is an important protective factor for the quality of romantic relationships (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Also, social network support was found to be an important protective factor for parents' individual adjustment after divorce (Albeck & Kaydar, 2002; Kramrei, Coit, Martin, Fogo, & Mahoney, 2007). In the present research, to our knowledge for the first time, we examine how social network approval or disapproval influences the quality of the co-parenting relationship in divorced couples.

To explain how social network approval or disapproval may influence the level of co-parenting conflicts, we extend findings on the so-called third-party forgiveness effect (Green, Burnette, & Davis, 2008) to divorced families. In these families, social network members, like family and friends, can be regarded as third parties in transgressions made between parents. Research has shown that third parties are generally less forgiving than first parties (Green et al., 2008). Applying these findings to divorced parents, we suggest that perceptions of network disapproval are positively

related to co-parenting conflicts, because they prevent parents from forgiving each other. We conducted two studies to examine the proposed mediational role of forgiveness in the link between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts.

Co-parenting can be conceptualized as the parental relationship in the planning and execution of a joint parental plan for the children. Nunes-Costa et al. (2009) define co-parenting as “the joint and reciprocal involvement of both parents in the education, background and decision-making about their children’s lives. Cooperative parents prioritize their children’s well-being, while creating and maintaining a constructive relationship, with new, more flexible boundaries between one another”. Furthermore, it is important that parents support each other’s educational decisions (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990) and parental efforts (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). In addition, Whiteside and Becker (2000) found that high levels of positive supportive co-parenting are negatively associated with conflicted co-parenting. Because of the detrimental effects of co-parenting conflicts on children’s well-being (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Morrison & Coiro, 1999), in the present research, we will focus on this aspect of co-parenting in particular.

A majority of divorced parents succeeds in remaining supportive of one another and develop a cooperative co-parenting style (Whiteside, 1998; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). They communicate frequently, although they often have different opinions when parental and educational decisions concerning the children need to be taken (e.g., Maccoby et al., 1990). However, approximately one third of divorced parents have high levels of ongoing hostility and tension (Whiteside, 1998). The combination of differing opinions and high levels of ongoing hostility and tension between parents may result in unresolved conflict and contribute to the escalation of co-parenting conflicts (Bonach, 2005; Coleman et al., 2012). We propose that social network disapproval further amplifies this escalation.

Ample evidence shows that social network support is important for individuals’ well-being (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). Furthermore, research has shown that network relationships (being part of a group), more than specific relationships (one-on-one contact), promote positive post-divorce adjustment, including adaptive coping, mental wellbeing, and life satisfaction (Kramrei et al., 2007). This highlights that being part of a supportive social network is particularly important for healthy adjustment after divorce. Social networks provide divorced individuals with a feeling of belongingness and offer emotional support, for example, by approving of the relationship breakup and making negative statements about the ex-partner (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Thereby, social networks may help the individual ex-partners to feel better by increasing their sense of belonging as well as by decreasing feelings of uncertainty about ending the romantic relationship (Eaton & Sanders, 2012).

Despite its beneficial effect for individual post-divorce adjustment, however, such social network support might at the same time have an escalating effect on conflict with the ex-partner. When network members express themselves negatively about the ex-partner as an act of support, they also fuel their divorced friend or family member's negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding the ex-partner (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006). We therefore propose that perceptions of social network approval of the divorce may be perceived as social network *disapproval* of the ongoing co-parenting relationship and should thus be positively related to co-parenting conflict.

Thus, in the present research, we hypothesize that perceived social network disapproval is positively associated with the level of co-parenting conflicts among divorced parents. How and why might social network disapproval contribute to co-parenting conflicts among divorced partners? The literature suggests that forgiveness may play a key role in the answer to this question.

Forgiveness is an interpersonal process (for a review see Karremans & Van Lange, 2008), which serves to maintain the relationship after a transgression has been committed, and to rebuild the quality the relationship had before the transgression. In relationships, including post-divorce relationships, partners intentionally or unintentionally hurt or offend each other. They may lie about extramarital affairs, are emotionally absent, disclose secrets, break promises, or gossip about each other with their friends. To effectively deal with these inevitable transgressions and prevent conflict, relationship partners need to forgive each other. Not surprisingly, empirical research consistently finds that forgiveness has profound consequences for the forgiving individual, such as beneficial effects for psychological and physical health, greater life satisfaction, and lower levels of psychological distress (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Lawler et al., 2005; Michael E. McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Forgiveness also plays a crucial role in relationships. For example, it is associated with less conflict and greater relationship quality in romantic relationships (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005) and more cohesion in families (Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008). Last but not least, forgiveness not only affects individuals and relationships, but also their social network (Green, Davis, & Reid, 2014). People close to the victim of a transgression, so-called third parties (Green et al., 2008), who are not directly involved in the transgression, may feel that they are in a position to grant or withhold forgiveness themselves, and/or influence the forgiveness process of the victim.

Research shows that third parties are generally less forgiving than victims themselves and offers several explanations for this third party forgiveness effect (for a review see Green et al., 2014). For example, family, friends, or other important network members may be afraid to jeopardize their close relationship with the victim by being

forgiving toward the perpetrator. Furthermore, given that they have less information about the perpetrator than the victim does, social network members may blame the perpetrator more for what happened, and make more negative, internal, and stable attributions about the perpetrator. Finally, research indicates that third parties are less likely to believe apologies and see less profit in reconciliation than do victims themselves (Cheung & Olson, 2013; Eaton & Sanders, 2012; Green et al., 2008; Green et al., 2014). Extending these findings to divorced parents, we propose that perceived network disapproval of the co-parenting relationship fuels unforgiving motivations in the divorced parent.

Interpersonal transgressions are important stressors before, during, and after divorce, which may contribute to the maintenance and escalation of co-parenting conflict (Bonach, 2005). Research on clinical interventions for divorcing couples suggests that, in these couples, forgiving the other parent is crucial, not only because forgiveness is negatively related to conflicts, but also because it is positively related to the quality of the co-parenting relationship (Reilly, 2014; Rye et al., 2012). Furthermore, forgiveness is one of the strongest predictors of the quality of co-parenting over time (Bonach, 2005; Bonach & Sales, 2002). Following from our previous reasoning, perceived social network disapproval of the co-parenting relationships should negatively affect the level of co-parenting conflicts by decreasing forgiveness among divorcing parents. Specifically, we hypothesize that the positive relation between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts is mediated by forgiveness among parents in divorced families.

To our knowledge, the current research is the first to examine the indirect relation between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts via forgiveness in the divorce context. Our first hypothesis is that among divorced parents the level of perceived social network disapproval would be positively related to co-parenting conflicts. Our second hypothesis is that parental forgiveness would be negatively related to more co-parenting conflicts. Our third hypothesis is that the association between perceived network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts would be mediated by parental forgiveness of the other parent/ex-partner. To examine these hypotheses, we conducted two studies. In the first study, we tested our predictions using a convenience sample of divorced parents recruited via online forums. To examine the robustness and generalizability of our findings, we conducted a second study among a clinical sample of parents involved in high-conflict divorces who were referred to treatment because of the imminent threat their conflicts posed to the psychosocial wellbeing of their children.

It is possible that parental education, the length of the relationship, and time since separation are linked to the key variables in our research (Yárnoz Yaben, 2009). Also, although both men and women tend to increase mobilization of social network sup-

port in times of greater distress (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007), gender differences may affect the hypothesized processes. Especially, because for forgiveness conflicting results are found on gender differences (Johnson, 2014). To rule out the confounding influence of these variables, we will examine their influence in both studies.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we sought to provide evidence for our theoretical model that perceiving network disapproval of the co-parenting relationship is associated with greater conflict between divorced parents. We also expected that divorced parents' forgiveness toward the ex-partner would mediate the association between network disapproval and co-parenting conflict.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 136 divorced parents (mean age 44.5 years, $SD = 5.8$, range 27-58 years). None of the participants were each other's ex-partner as far as we know. Ninety-six percent was Dutch. On average, they had two children with their ex-partner ($SD = 0.7$, range = 1-4). The oldest child had a mean age of 13.8 years ($SD = 5.0$, range 4-25 years). Forty-nine percent of the parents had a new relationship ($n = 66$), and only 3% had children in their new relationship ($n = 4$). Fifty-two percent sought professional help (e.g., therapy) to adjust to the divorce ($n = 70$).

Procedure

We recruited divorced parents through websites, forums, and the social networks of university students. Parents filled in an online questionnaire about themselves, their children, their ex-partner, and their current relationship with the other parent. Only demographic characteristics and the measures central to our research questions will be described below. To avoid the confounding influence of complex, high-conflict divorce cases, we excluded parents with ongoing legal procedures with the other parent ($n = 26$). All participants gave informed consent before completing the questionnaires. As a reward for participating, they received a gift-voucher of 7.50 Euro for an online web-shop.

Measures

Demographic information, family and divorce measures

To collect socio-demographic information about the participants, they answered questions about their age, and ethnicity. Additionally, several questions assessed information about family and divorce characteristics including number of children, time since divorce, seeking of help to adjust to divorce, and new relationship.

Confounding variables

To assess information about gender, level of education, time since separation, and duration of marriage/legal cohabitation, we added several questions.

Co-parenting conflicts

To assess co-parenting conflicts, we used the 7-item co-parenting subscale of The Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test (PAST; Sweeper & Halford, 2006). The scale was translated into Dutch and showed good psychometric properties (De Smet, 2013). Example items are: “When I speak to my former partner we usually fight over the child/children” “My former partner and I avoid speaking to one another”. Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Mean scores were calculated such that a higher score indicated more co-parenting conflicts (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$).

Perceived network disapproval

To assess parents’ perception of the extent to which their social network disapproved of the co-parenting relationship, we first asked each parent to make a list of people who are involved in and concerned by the divorce (e.g., lawyers, parents(-in-law), friends, new partners). Subsequently, participants completed four questions assessing their perception of network partners’ overall reactions to the divorce, including questions concerning their (dis)approval (e.g., “in general, my network partners approve of my relationship with my ex-partner (reversed)” (cf Lehmler & Agnew, 2007). Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). Mean scores were calculated with a higher score indicating higher levels of perceived social network disapproval (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .65$).

Forgiveness

To assess feelings of forgiveness, we used a twelve-item Dutch translation of the Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (Michael E. McCullough, 2013), rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Parents rated their feelings of forgiveness toward the ex-partner (e.g., “I keep as much dis-

tance as possible from my ex-partner.” (reversed); “I want to see my ex-partner hurt and miserable.” (reversed); “Although my ex-partner hurt me, I am putting the hurts aside so we can resume our contact.”). Mean scale was calculated such that a higher score indicated a higher level of forgiveness (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$).

Statistical Procedure

Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine family and divorce, and social network characteristics, possible gender differences, and zero-order correlations among all study related variables. Second, we used ordinary least squares path analyses to conduct simple mediation analyses, to test whether forgiveness explained—albeit partly—the relation between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts. All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics version 21 (Spss, 2012), in which we used macro PROCESS for mediation analyses, model 4 (Hayes, 2013). We controlled for parental relationship length, gender, and educational level to rule out alternative hypotheses and the influence of confounding variables.

RESULTS

Descriptives

Confounding variables and social network characteristics

Seventy-two percent was female. The educational level was moderate (41%, secondary vocational education) to high (57%, higher vocational education and university). Participants had had a relationship with their ex-partner before divorce for 16.1 years ($SD = 7.2$; range 2-35 years), and had been separated for 4.7 years ($SD = 4.0$; range 0-16 years). Participants reported a mean of five persons ($SD = 3.0$) in their social network (range 0-10), 34% own family, 1% family of the other parent, 44% own friends, 0% friends of the other parent, 6% psychological counselors, 3% legal workers, 6% new partner, 5% other not specified, and 4% reported to have nobody.

Gender differences

Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the study variables for fathers and mothers. Preliminary results indicated that perceived social network disapproval, forgiveness, and co-parenting conflicts did not differ significantly across gender, $t(134) \leq 1.361$, $p \geq .179$, $d \leq .02334$.

Zero-order correlations

Means, standard deviations, for men and women, and bivariate correlations among study related variables, are presented in Table 1. Consistent with the first hypothesis, higher levels of perceived network disapproval were significantly related to more co-parenting conflicts, $r(134) = .611$, $p = .000$, and to lower levels of forgiveness, $r(136) = -.521$, $p = .000$. Also, consistent with our second hypothesis, lower levels of forgiveness were significantly related to more co-parenting conflicts ($r(134) = -.536$, $p = .000$).

Table 1. Descriptives and Zero-order Correlates of all Study Variables Study 1

Variable	Mean		Study 1 <i>n</i> = 136 SD		1.	2.
	male	female	male	female		
1. Network Disapproval	2.95		.91			
	3.07	2.91	.88	.92		
2. Co-parenting conflicts	2.36		1.04		.611**	
	2.58	2.28	1.17	.98		
3. Forgiveness	3.56		.89		-.521**	-.536**
	3.49	3.58	.90	.90		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Forgiveness as a Mediator

Consistent with our mediation hypothesis, simple mediation analyses using ordinary least squares path analysis yielded that perceived social network disapproval indirectly influenced the amount of co-parenting conflicts through its effect on forgiveness. As presented in Table 2, parents who perceived more disapproval in their social network were less likely to forgive the other parent ($b = -.512$, $p = .000$), and when parents were less likely to forgive the other parent, they reported more co-parenting conflicts ($b = -.347$, $p = .000$). We calculated bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals estimated based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples and a 95% confidence interval. The indirect effect (ab) of perceived network disapproval through forgiveness on co-parenting conflicts, did not include zero (for more details see Table 2), which indicates that the effect is significant.

Also, the indirect effect (ab), controlling for the effect of parental educational level ($b = .011$, $se = .043$, $p = .803$), length of parental relationship ($b = -.000$, $se = .001$, $p = .782$), time since separation ($b = -.037$, $se = .018$, $p = .047$), and gender ($b = -.002$, $se = .151$, $p = .989$), of perceived network disapproval through forgiveness on co-parenting conflicts, did not include zero (for more details see Table 2), which indicates that the effect remained significant when controlling for possible confounders. As

can be seen in Table 2, perceived social network disapproval remained a significant direct predictor of co-parenting conflict after controlling for the level of forgiveness, which indicates that other factors, at least partially, mediate the relation between perceived network disapproval and co-parenting conflict.

Table 2. Forgiveness (F) as a Mediator Between Perceived Social Network Disapproval (ND) and Co-parenting Conflicts (CC) in divorced families (n = 131)

Model	ab	95% CI		k ²	c (p)	c'(p)
		LL	UP			
ND → F → CC	.179	0.0671	0.3063	.1684	.700(.000)	.523(.000)
ND → F → CC (with covariates)	.161	0.0530	0.2909	---	.676(.000)	.515(.000)

Note. Unstandardized regression weights are presented. k2 represents kappa, an effect size measure for indirect effects. c represents the direct effect of perceived social network disapproval on co-parenting conflicts. c' represents the direct effect of perceived social network disapproval on co-parenting conflicts, controlling for forgiveness. Covariates are educational level, relation length, and gender.

BRIEF DISCUSSION

Extending previous research on social network disapproval and forgiveness to co-parenting conflicts between divorced parents, we predicted that forgiveness mediates the link between perceptions of network disapproval and conflict. The findings from Study 1 support our hypotheses. They provide the first empirical evidence for the relation between perceptions of network disapproval and co-parenting conflict and document that forgiveness is a critical mechanism of this effect. Specifically, we predicted and found an indirect relation between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts through parents' tendency to forgive the other parent, but the direct effect also remained.

Although these findings are encouraging, Study 1 included a convenience sample of divorced parents recruited via online forums, thereby reducing the generalizability of our findings. This is especially important, given that self-selection may have biased our sample. For example, it is possible that only well-adjusted divorced parents participated. Therefore, it remains unclear whether our findings can be replicated among divorced couples with high conflict levels. Given the devastating effects of co-parenting conflicts on children's post-divorce adjustment and well-being (Amato, 2001; Johnston, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003), and the fact that high conflict parents often underestimate the effects of their conflicts on children (Anderson, Anderson, Palmer, Mutchler, & Baker, 2010), a replication of our findings in a high conflict sample of parents was deemed necessary.

STUDY 2

Our second study was guided by two central goals. First, recognizing the importance of applying the proposed hypotheses to a wider variety of relationships, it aimed to include divorced parents with high conflict levels. Second, we also sought to include more men to examine the robustness of our findings on gender differences in Study 1 (28% fathers). This is especially important because fathers' features and behavior are related with children's normal and abnormal development (Cassano, Adrian, Veits, & Zeman, 2006), but they are underrepresented in pediatric research and in therapeutic treatment of children's mental health (Phares, Lopez, Fields, Kamboukos, & Duhig, 2005).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 110 parents (mean age 42.6, $SD = 5.6$, range 26-60 years) who were referred for intervention at several family treatment centers in the Netherlands, because the wellbeing of their children was threatened by parents' long-lasting conflicts, aggression, and anger surrounding parental decisions. Men had a mean age of 43.3 ($SD = 6.2$, range 27-60), and women had a mean age of 42.0 ($SD = 5.0$, range 26-56). Ninety-six percent of the sample was native Dutch or Belgian. From 32 families only one parent participated, and from 39 families both parents participated. The 110 parents had 127 children, with a mean of 1.79 children ($SD = 0.7$) and the mean age of the oldest child was 10.9 years ($SD = 3.6$). Seventy-four percent of the parents had a new relationship ($n = 72$), and 27% had children in their new relationship ($n = 19$). One hundred percent had sought professional help to adjust to the divorce.

Procedure

Parents were recruited from ten outpatient health care institutions in different urban and rural regions of the Netherlands and Belgium. All parents were referred by judges, Youth Care Agencies (in Dutch: Bureau Jeugdzorg), or a physician, because the wellbeing of the children was severely compromised by the severity of the conflicts between the parents. After the referral, parents enrolled voluntarily in the intervention *No Kids in the Middle* (Van Lawick & Visser, 2015).

Parents were invited for clinical intake as soon as they had both signed up for the intervention separately. Together with the written invitation, parents received information about the research project entitled 'Parenting in the Aftermath of Divorce and *No Kids in the Middle*: an ongoing study among divorced families'. During the

first clinical intake, all questions parents had about the research were answered and the consent form was signed. Subsequently, the clinician informed the researcher and the researcher sent an email to parents with their personal code and a link to the online questionnaire. All questionnaires were programmed in Qualtrics, an online survey software program. Parents were asked to complete the online questionnaire before the second clinical intake or at least before the start of the intervention.

Measures

In Study 2, we used the same measures as in Study 1 to assess demographic information and family and divorce measures, confounding variables, co-parenting conflicts (Sweeper & Halford, 2006) ($\alpha = .75$), perceived network disapproval (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007) ($\alpha = .62$), and forgiveness (Michael E. McCullough, 2013) ($\alpha = .91$).

Statistical Procedure

Like in Study 1, descriptive analyses were conducted to examine family, social network, and divorce characteristics, and possible gender differences. Second, to examine whether we successfully included a high-conflict divorce sample, we conducted an independent t-test to examine whether high conflict divorced parents in Study 2 showed more co-parenting conflicts than the divorced parents in Study 1. Third, we replicated the statistical procedures of Study 1.

RESULTS

Descriptives

Confounding variables and social network characteristics

Forty-six percent was male, so we succeeded to include more men in Study 2 than in Study 1. The educational level was moderate (46%, secondary vocational education) to high (53%, higher vocational education and university), and only 1% had a low level of education (lower vocational education). Parents had had a relationship with their ex-partner for 12.0 years ($SD = 6.3$; range 0-26), and had been separated for 4.6 years ($SD = 2.9$; range 0-12). Participants reported a mean of six persons ($SD = 2.8$) in their social network (range 0-10), 31% own family, 1% family of the other parent, 34% own friends, 0% friends of the other parent, 8% psychological counselors, 7% legal workers, 6% new partner, 12% other not specified, and 3% reported to have nobody.

Gender differences

To explore possible gender differences, we conducted independent-samples t-tests to compare the study variables for fathers and mothers. The results indicated that perceived social network disapproval, forgiveness, and co-parenting conflicts did not differ significantly across gender in the high conflict divorced group, $t(108) \leq 1.691$, $p \geq .094$, $d \leq 0.3252$ (for more information see Table 3).

High conflict divorce sample

Also, an independent-samples t-test examined hypothesized group differences for co-parenting conflicts. As expected, the sample of divorced parents in Study 2 scored significantly higher on co-parenting conflicts ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .72$) than the sample in Study 1 ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(235) = 8.666$, $p = .000$, $d = 1.1297$. So, our recruitment strategy successfully resulted in the inclusion of parents involved in high-conflict divorces.

Zero Order Correlations

The pattern of zero-order correlations in Study 2 (see Table 3 for more details) closely replicated the one observed in Study 1. Again, higher levels of perceived social network disapproval were significantly related to more co-parenting conflicts ($r(110) = .262$, $p = .006$), and to lower levels of forgiveness ($r(110) = -.301$, $p = .001$). Also, lower levels of forgiveness were significantly related to more co-parenting conflicts ($r(110) = -.408$, $p = .000$).

Table 3. Descriptives and Zero-order Correlates of all Study Variables Study 2

Variable	Mean		Study 2 <i>n</i> = 110 SD		1.	2.
	male	female	male	female		
1. Network Disapproval	3.31		.75			
	3.19	3.40	.78	.73		
2. Co-parenting conflicts	3.34		.72		.262**	
	3.46	3.23	.75	.68		
3. Forgiveness	3.23		.79		-.301**	-.408**
	3.28	3.18	.73	.84		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Forgiveness as a Mediator

Importantly, replicating the mediational findings in Study 1, simple mediation analyses using ordinary least squares path analysis yielded that perceived social network disapproval indirectly influenced the amount of co-parenting conflicts through its

effect on forgiveness in Study 2. As presented in Table 4, parents who perceived more disapproval in their social network were less likely to forgive the other parent ($b = -.317, p = .001$), and when parents were less likely to forgive the other parent, they reported more co-parenting conflicts ($b = -.327, p = .000$). We calculated bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals estimated based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples and a 95% confidence interval. The indirect effect (ab) of perceived network disapproval through forgiveness on co-parenting conflicts, did not include zero (for more details see Table 4), which indicates that the effect is significant.

Again, the indirect effect (ab), controlling for the effect of parental educational level ($b = .008, se = .026, p = .773$), length of parental relationship ($b = -.001, se = .001, p = .257$), time since separation ($b = -.057, se = .024, p = .019$), and gender ($b = -.247, se = .132, p = .064$), of perceived social network disapproval through forgiveness on co-parenting conflicts, did not include zero (for more details see Table 4), which indicates that the effect remained significant. In contrast to Study 1, Table 4 shows that perceived social network disapproval was no longer a significant predictor after controlling for the level of forgiveness, indicating full mediation.

Because 78 participants were ex-partners (39 couples), their answers may not have been statistically independent. To examine the robustness of our findings and to rule out possible effects of statistical interdependence, we conducted mixed analyses with a random intercept model. All results remained unchanged.

Table 4. Forgiveness (F) as a Mediator Between Perceived Social Network Disapproval (ND) and Co-parenting Conflicts (CC) in high conflict divorced families (n = 108)

Model	ab	95% CI		k ²	c (p)	c' (p)
		LL	UP			
ND → F → CC	.104	0.0325	0.2172	.1089	.249(.006)	.146(.097)
ND → F → CC (with covariates)	.109	0.0369	0.2239		.258(.004)	.148(.082)

Note. Unstandardized regression weights are presented. k^2 represents kappa, an effect size measure for indirect effects. c represents the direct effect of perceived social network disapproval on co-parenting conflicts. c' represents the direct effect of perceived social network disapproval on co-parenting conflicts, controlling for forgiveness. Covariates are educational level, relation length, and gender.

BRIEF DISCUSSION

Results of Study 1 were consistently replicated in Study 2. Among parents with high levels of co-parenting conflicts, we found a positive relation between perceived social network disapproval and the number of co-parenting conflicts. Furthermore, results confirmed our hypothesis that forgiveness between ex-partners plays a crucial role in explaining this association. So, the results provide empirical support for the indirect

relation between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts through parents' tendency to forgive the other parent in a group of high-conflict parents. In contrast to Study 1, Study 2 revealed full mediation of forgiveness. By adopting a different recruitment procedure, we succeeded not only in including a high-conflict divorce sample, but also in including more fathers than in Study 1. Additionally, all effects remained significant when we ruled out possible statistical interdependence among ex-partners. All three aspects contributed to the robustness of our results.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings of the two studies presented here shed light on one underlying mechanism that can account for why in many divorced couples co-parenting conflicts are maintained or even escalate. Results showed that parents who perceive more disapproval in their social network after a divorce have more co-parenting conflicts. In addition, the willingness of parents to forgive the other parent's transgressions explained, at least in part, the link between perceived network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts. Speaking of the robustness of these results, we found the hypothesized mediation across two studies, involving a convenience sample of divorced parents and a sample of high conflict divorced parents whose children were clinically referred for intervention because their wellbeing was severely compromised by the severity of parental conflicts. These findings are in line with a growing body of research demonstrating the importance of the broader social network on relationship processes between (ex)partners (Agnew, 2014; Crowley & Faw, 2014; Hogerbrugge, Komter, & Scheepers, 2013).

Consistent with our first hypothesis in both studies, we found that divorced parents who perceived more disapproval in their social network had more co-parenting conflicts. Extending existing previous work on the importance of social network influences on relationship quality in ongoing relationships (Lehmiller & Ioerger, 2014), the current research demonstrated that the perception of a negative attitude toward an ex-partner is linked to more parental conflict. Our findings are compatible with our suggestion that ex-partners mobilize social and emotional support to justify the divorce (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000), which may help the individual ex-partners to increase their sense of belonging and decrease feelings of uncertainty (Eaton & Sanders, 2012). Despite its beneficial effect for individuals' post-divorce adjustment (Kramrei et al., 2007), our findings suggest that such perceptions of social network approval of the divorce may be perceived as social network *disapproval* of the continuing co-parenting relationship and are positively related to co-parenting conflict.

Our studies did not allow us to test these processes, because they were correlational and did not include items tapping ex-partners strategies to mobilize support (Crowley & Faw, 2014). In light of the important implications such insights may have for interventions, longitudinal research on these strategies and the interplay of approval of the divorce and disapproval of the co-parenting relationship would be particularly promising. Another future direction for research may be the actual involvement of social network members to answer the question whether parents' *perceived* social network disapproval is the same as parents' *received* disapproval, and second, whether received disapproval is also related to the co-parenting relationship. In a review, Haber, Cohen, Lucas, and Baltes (2007) showed that perceived social support is related to relationship quality, but received social support is not.

In line with previous research, we found support for our second hypothesis, that the level of forgiveness is positively related to the quality of the co-parenting relationship among divorced parents (Bonach, 2005; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Reilly, 2014; Rye et al., 2012). These results suggest that parents who are more likely to forgive each other's transgressions made in the far or recent past, may be more capable to prioritize their children's well-being and share parenting responsibilities in a mutual supportive and cooperative way (Maccoby et al., 1990; Nunes-Costa et al., 2009). Underlining the important implications these findings have for interventions, a preliminary study by Reilly (2014) in a small sample of high-conflict divorce cases ($n = 32$) provided initial evidence that a psycho-educational intervention focusing on forgiveness (Worthington & Scherer, 2004) can promote forgiveness and co-operative co-parenting. More research is needed to examine the role of forgiveness in intervention programs for high-conflict divorces.

Although we confirmed the hypothesized mediation model in both studies, Study 1 yielded a partial mediation, while Study 2 yielded a full mediation model. These findings require replication and explanation. One explanation may be that, although there is a decline in overlap between parents' social networks after divorce (Albeck & Kaydar, 2002; McDermott et al., 2013), an overlap between the social networks remains in less conflictive divorces (e.g., children keep seeing grandparents). In high-conflict divorced families, two villages seem to be at war, and often there is no contact and/or overlap between the social networks (Van Lawick & Visser, 2015). Given the greater overlap in social network, social network partners in less conflictive divorces may have more information about transgressions between both parents, or they blame 'the other' parent less (Green et al., 2014). More research, ideally including network partners, is needed to examine these suggestions.

While our studies shed light on one potential mechanism underlying the link between perceived social network disapproval and co-parenting conflicts, other mechanisms seem possible. For example, parents who perceive more network disap-

proval may interpret this disapproval as emotional support for their feelings regarding old marital conflicts (Cabrera, Shannon, & La Taillade, 2009), or as support for child custody disputes (Sbarra & Emery, 2008).

Research Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

Before closing, it is important to note several strengths and a limitation of the present work. Limitation of the present research is the cross-sectional nature of both studies. Nevertheless, the direction of the proposed associations is consistent with longitudinal studies showing that forgiveness predicts conflict resolution (e.g., Fincham et al. (2007). Although plausible, other directional effects can be proposed. To illustrate, DiDonato, McIlwee, and Carlucci (2015) manipulated relationship partners' forgiveness and found that it predicted how social network partners perceived the relationship of the forgiving individual with the perpetrator. Specifically, more forgiveness was associated with great perceived commitment, satisfaction, and warmth. These results not only emphasize the need for more experimental and prospective studies investigating the proposed links, but also point to the possibility that parental forgiveness, co-parenting conflicts, and perceived social network (dis-)approval may reinforce each other in a cyclic model.

One important strength is the robustness of the results, which replicated across a convenience sample of divorced parents recruited via online forums and a clinical sample of high-conflict divorced parents. A second strength is the broader relational perspective we took in this research. Till now, research mostly focused on the effects of social support and approval of family and friends on individual parental adjustment after divorce (Kramrei et al., 2007), and on social network influence on partners' decision to divorce (Hogerbrugge et al., 2013). Our study showed that social network (dis)approval also affects the post-divorce relationship between ex-partners. This is important as more and more divorced parents maintain a co-parenting relationships and (un)forgiveness is especially impactful when divorced parents have frequent contact (Kluwer, 2015). Second, in the clinical sample, we were able to include 46% fathers, allowing us to examine gender differences and to exclude their confounding influence in the proposed links. Although fathers' characteristics and behavior are associated with children's normal and abnormal development, fathers are underrepresented in child psychopathology research (Cassano et al., 2006), as well as in pediatric research and in therapeutic treatment of children's mental health (Phares et al., 2005).

Clinical Implications

The findings of this research highlight the role of forgiveness for the quality of the co-parenting relationship. Information and psycho-education about the found re-

lation between forgiveness and co-parenting conflicts, and the impact of conflicts on children's well-being and adjustment (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003), may promote forgiveness among divorced parents and decrease parental conflicts (Reilly, 2014). In addition, our findings suggest that it may be helpful to include the social network in interventions and stimulate the networks of both ex-partners to exchange information about parents' perceived stable and internal characteristics, about negative attributions they have of the other parent, about apologies made by one or both parents (Cheung & Olson, 2013; Eaton & Sanders, 2012; Green et al., 2008), and their own role in parental conflicts between ex-partners. Derived from our questionnaire, a clinician could for example ask a social network member: "Do you approve of the relationship your family/friend still has with the other parent?". Or, also derived from our questionnaire, a clinician could for example ask a parent: "Although your ex-partner has hurt you, is it possible to put the pain aside, and to move on in your co-parenting relationship?". The intervention *No Kids in the Middle* (Van Lawick & Visser, 2014) is aimed to decrease co-parenting conflicts by inviting both social networks in the intervention and by promoting mutual parental forgiveness. The effectiveness of this intervention is currently being investigated.

Elaborating on the clinical importance of forgiveness in high conflict divorce, Worthington and Scherer (2004) offer an interesting perspective on forgiveness. There is substantial evidence that divorced adults, relative to married adults, report more psychological distress (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Worthington and Scherer (2004) conceptualize forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy to reduce stress as a reaction to transgression. In this light, forgiveness may be stimulated between high conflict divorced parents by clinical work focused on stress reduction like mindfulness (Webb, Phillips, Bumgarner, & Conway-Williams, 2013). To this end, Van Lawick and Visser (2015) also use mindfulness as a component in their intervention.

Concluding Remarks

Divorce is particularly difficult for parents because they have to continue to be parents together. Especially in light of findings showing that conflictive relationships among divorced parents are associated with important decrements in the psychosocial well-being of children, enhancing our understanding of how and why conflicts among divorced parents escalate is crucial. The current set of studies identified forgiveness as an important mechanism to explain parenting conflicts among divorced parents. Both studies showed that perceived network disapproval of the co-parenting relationship was related to less forgiveness among ex-parents, which, in turn, was associated with more co-parenting conflicts. The present work thereby offers an important contribution to the current knowledge on the role of social networks in relationship

breakup. We have demonstrated the proposed relations across both a convenience sample and a clinical high-conflict sample. Our findings thereby provide important inroads for interventions.

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