DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

'Deviant' or the consequence of social evolution? Discourses of intentional 'multiple parenthood practices' in the Dutch and the Flemish press

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Abstract

Practices of 'intentional multiple parenthood', by which more than two parents agree to conceive and raise children together, have gained increased news coverage in recent years. This paper explores written press articles concerning intentional multiple parenthood in Belgium and the Netherlands. Through a discourse analysis of press articles, the paper challenges the gendered and dyadic concept of parenthood as an understandable given. Newly developed concepts within the 'traditional' framework of parenthood are explicitly presented as 'new' and 'revolutionary' within the public discourse, yet their existence remains dependent on mainstream conceptual usage and the dominant social relations underpinning them. Furthermore, it has been found that press articles on the topic of multiple parenthood frequently use familiar concepts (such as traditional family values of love and commitment) and existing terminology (such as 'father', 'mother', 'donor') to describe the non-mainstream practice of multiple parenthood despite the lack of recognition for this practice in the legal realm.

Introduction

'Intentional multiple parenthood' is a term used to describe situations in which more than two adults decide to conceive and raise children together. In Western societies, certain forms of 'multiple parenthood practices' are widespread as a number of children today are raised by more than two parental figures. Such is the case, for instance, in reconstituted families/step-parent families, following a separation or divorce.[1] A much less frequent parenting form is seen in so-called intentional multiple-parent families or 'plus-two-parent families' (Wallbank & Dietz, 2013), in which more than two individuals voluntarily decide to parent together on the basis of an agreement made between them.[2] The latter form of intentional multiple parenthood will be the subject of this article.

Intentional plus-two-parent families are believed to be the result of societal and cultural as well as medically scientific advancement. Although no exact data are available on the prevalence of such family constellations, it has been theorised that intentional plus-two-parent families will only increase in the future.[3] However, full legal status for plus-two-parent families has not yet been accommodated in either Belgium or the Netherlands. Given the lack of a legal framework for these familial situations as well as the complex interplay between media representation and public opinion, it is necessary to explore how multiple parenthood is portrayed within public discourse. Here, discourse is understood as a range of ideas that form a body of knowledge (Peterson, 2003, p. 95).

Several intentional multiple parenthood practices are uncommon according to Western custom and, therefore, they do not fall within the realm of familiar concepts. What is useful for the purpose of this article is Cooper's (2013) description of concepts as 'devices that draw on the complexities of the empirical world in order to open our theoretical imagination to things as they might be' (p. 26). Indeed, the legal invisibility of multiple parenthood stems from the visibility of dominant social practices which structure what the concept of parenthood means and therefore limit non-omnipresent concepts or alternative ways of doing things. Here, mainstream and non-mainstream practices are apprehended on the grounds of whether they seem 'normal' rather than their prevalence. That is, mainstream concepts equal normative concepts. Cooper (2013) posits that 'even [though] normative (utopian) concepts are explicitly represented as reversals or purer forms of what exists, they remain dependent (for their existence, form and shape) on mainstream conceptual usage and the mainstream social relations underpinning them' (p. 29). Following this, the central hypothesis of this paper is that in the field of family law, newly developed concepts—such as the concept of intentional multiple parenthood—need to be shaped by and build upon familiar concepts for them to achieve a rationale for existence.

One might say that the notions of legal parenthood and parental responsibility for

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[1] Step-parenting practices appear to have entered the realm of everyday life in Belgium and the Netherlands. Estimations from Flanders regarding the numbers of children below the age of 18 who are raised by step-parents range from 4.6 per cent [underestimation] to 27.6 per cent [overestimation] in 2018. With regard to the Netherlands, it is estimated that almost 10 per cent of families with children below the age of 18 are step-parent families. See (Flanders) Kind & Gezin (2018). See (the Netherlands) Nederlands Jeugdinstituut (2014).

[2] In this article, intentional multiple parenthood (practices) refer(s) to the parenting constellations of intentional 'plus-two-parent families', a term coined by Wallbank & Dietz (2013, p. 452). Such families are characterized by 'an intended parenting project, involving three or more adults assuming a "parenting" role in varying degrees, depending on the agreement reached' (Wallbank & Dietz, 2013, p. 452).

[3] Staatscommissie Herijking Ouderschap (2016). *Kind en ouders in de 21ste eeuw: Repport van de Staatscommissie Herijking Ouderschap*. Xerox/OBT.

more than two parents are not recognised in the current state of law because these practices lack accepted or institutionally determined features of parenthood (Cooper, 2013, p. 42).[4] Yet in 2016, the Dutch Government Committee on the Reassessment of Parenthood (GCRP) published an extensive report in which it proposed the legalisation of multiple parenthood and parental responsibility for up to four parents. According to this document, some children could have full legal parental ties with a maximum of four parents instead of the current maximum number of two. The conditions for this proposed legal accommodation were strict with a focus on the child's best interest. The recommendations of the GCRP were controversial and caused some turmoil within the (primarily Dutch) media. Before and after the appearance of the report, several press articles appeared to be in favor of as well as against the proposed law reforms.

This article examines the normalisation strategies used in the mapping of intentional multiple parenthood. First, the theoretical framework is briefly discussed with respect to both parenthood and the media. This is followed by a section on methods. Next, the portrayal of intentional parental projects of plus-two-parent families in written press coverage in Flanders and the Netherlands is discussed. The focus here is on how multiple-parent families are represented in the written press. The analysis and discussion are based on the central hypothesis that non-mainstream, controversial concepts such as intentional multiple parenthood are shaped after familiar concepts. The paper concludes with thoughts on the research findings and the implications they might have for legal consciousness, which is understood as 'an individual awareness of law and legality which has a profound ideological effect on people's outlook on the world' (Gies, 2008, p. 134).

Theoretical framework
Intentional multiple parenthood
In general, the term 'parents' is used to refer to mothers and fathers. As Godelier (2011) explores in his anthropological study of kinship, the origins of nuclear family structures can be traced back to the end of the Roman Empire. They remained in existence in Europe during the rise of feudalism and eventually capitalism in the early nineteenth century. The nuclear family form corresponded to the ideal of the 'real' and 'natural' roles of the biological mother and father within the structure of monogamy and was strongly propagated by the church through the institution of (heterosexual) marriage (Godelier, 2011, p. 507, 201). Consequently, parenthood in its 'natural' form is based on the romantic–sexual affiliation between a man and a woman, apprehended solely within a context of 'horizontal' intimacy (Fineman, 1995, p. 143). Thus, parenthood in these terms is a highly gendered and heteronormative concept (Warner, 1991), characterised by the paradigms of duality and coupledom. In contrast, the practice of intentional multiple parenthood rejects the above-mentioned paradigms. For this reason, parenting by more than two parental figures has been described as 'revolutionary parenting' (Hooks, 1984/2014 p. 133ff., as cited in Bakht & Collins, 2018, p. 141). It is considered 'revolutionary' because it casts aside prevalent notions within Western tradition that favour two biological (heterosexual) parents (Bakht & Collins, 2018, p. 141).

Revolutionary parenting practices where more than two parental figures decide to

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[4] Legal parenthood is the establishment of links of parentage between parent(s) and child, while parental responsibility denotes the body of legal rights and duties that enable parents to make day-to-day decisions with regard to the childrearing process. In principle, both Belgium and the Netherlands limit the number of parents with legal parenthood and parental responsibility to two.

voluntarily create and parent a child together are diverse. A co-parenting project can exist between a male or female same-sex couple who co-parent with another (heterosexual or homosexual) man/woman, in which the latter individual is defined as a parental figure rather than a 'donor' or a 'surrogate mother'. Co-parenting projects can also encompass four parents who are part of a constellation consisting of a same-sex female and a same-sex male couple, or simply between more than two people who may or may not be sexually involved—for instance, in a polygamous family setting.

Although multiple parenthood may appear to be a new concept, this is only true with regard to the term. Bell hooks (1984/2014 p. 145), among other authors, noted that a number of people raised in black communities already experienced a type of community-based childcare with multiple parental figures when growing up. One could say that multiple parenthood is a new notion to describe an old practice: the term is not listed in the dictionary and does not (yet) exist within primary legal sources. In addition, the term has arguably not yet penetrated mainstream knowledge in the same way that, for instance, step-parenting practices have. Researching concepts that are not yet in existence legally speaking pose important methodological challenges. That is, the only method of researching a new concept that is not yet recognised as a legal concept is to look at how this concept is slowly emerging on a practical basis within society. To do so, the present article analyses the print media coverage of intentional plus-two-parent practices. Not much is known (yet) about the way these practices are represented within the media, and, consequently, within the broader public discourse.

Role of the media

The way in which certain phenomena are portrayed in the media is both a mirror of contemporary understandings of these phenomena and a catalyst for such phenomena. In her book on the relationship between law and the media, socio-legal scholar Lieve Gies (2008) explores the complex interplay between the media and public knowledge by illuminating how the impact of media on public perception steers legal change (p. 137). Thus, the representation of plus-two-parent families within media messages is important to the broader (political) debate on multiple parenthood. However, when a new concept (such as multiple parenthood) emerges in the public debate, audiences who encounter such messages typically relate those messages to their own experience for the messages to be relevant (Gies, 2008, p. 34). If a news article mentions the possibility of legal accommodation for plus-two-parent families, the way in which such families or such actions are represented is of importance. In this regard, Gies (2008) refers to the way in which the media often functions as 'a window on the world' (p. 134). That is, the media broadens our horizons and introduces us to new concepts that we have never heard before or ideas that are normally outside our stream of consciousness. Through this process, the media deepens and affirms a common understanding or knowledge of familiar, everyday subjects. This form of 'top-down processing' implies that the reader processes new information on the basis of previous knowledge or understandings (called 'scripts') (Bell, 1991, p. 234). This makes it possible for familiar principles to be linked to new information, such as the practice of intentional multiple parenthood.

So how can the media portrayal of intentional multiple parenthood be presented as something familiar in the first place? First, news that is personality-based as well as psychologically close or otherwise personally relevant to media consumers is better remembered by those consumers (Price & Feldman, 2009, p. 117). In addition, it has been

found that emotion plays an important role in journalistic writing (Van Hout & Burger, 2016, p. 499) and in how media consumers process, encode and retrieve media messages (Nabi, 2009, p. 210). The reason for this, one could argue, is that it might be easier to (immediately) grasp emotion than to understand a more complex and abstract legal–technical concept such as legal discrimination.

Furthermore, the content of ideologically charged news can be presented within the context of agenda setting, meaning that news articles use persuasion to alter the opinions of their audiences. Such media messages often implicitly promote the dominant conceptions of elite groups in society (van Dijk, 1988, p. 83). Therefore, it can be said that news has the power to alter media consumers' perceptions of and beliefs concerning a given topic. However, not everyone will be persuaded by the mainstream media discourse in similar ways. Furthermore, certain media messages on legal issues can be seen as 'disruptive force[s] in everyday life' forming 'a strong "against the law" type of legal consciousness' (Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 45; Gies, 2008, pp. 32–33). This latter view can fuel further disbelief and cynicism, which might result in the rejection of a dominant media portrayal that promotes a certain legal ideology. Shah et al. (2009) have also discussed this issue pointing out that the impact of agenda setting is not uniform, because a host of individual characteristics, personal circumstances and contextual factors all contribute to the extent to which readers internalise a media portrayal (p. 83). Furthermore, the media contributes to a certain form of legal consciousness if and when media representations concur with the beliefs, first-hand experiences and expectations of the audience (Gies, 2008, p. 33). Under such conditions, the media has the power to shape public opinion by focusing on what is already known.

Method

A total of 47 articles on intentional co-parenting projects were analysed.[5] The first article was published in 2005. Several articles followed, published in 2012 (n = 1), 2013 (n = 4), 2014 (n = 6) and 2015 (n = 9). In 2016, 20 articles were published in response to the appearance of an official report by the Dutch GCRP, which contained recommendations for a legal framework for multiple parenthood. This stream of articles was followed by six articles retrieved from 2017. The total data encompassed news articles that appeared in written news press and, to a lesser extent, also in magazines and online (news) sources. The list was non-exhaustive, given the methodology of data gathering up to a point of saturation. Nevertheless, the majority of articles that had appeared on the topic up until 2017 have been identified, selected and analysed.

Articles about multiple parenthood were gathered through the database *GoPress Academic*, which contains full-text versions of the most important newspaper and magazine articles published in Belgium and the Netherlands, and through the databases of the Flemish and Dutch versions of *Google News*. The search for articles on multiple parenthood was conducted through the search terms likely to lead to articles in which multiple parenthood was mentioned (i.e. *meerouderschap/meervoudig ouderschap* [multiple parenthood], *drie ouders* [three parents], *vier ouders* [four parents], *regenbooggezin* [rainbow-family] and *Staatscommissie Herijking Ouderschap* [GCRP]). The data gathering continued until new themes stopped emerging, signifying a point of saturation. The integral corpus of data (encompassing full-text articles) was transferred to NVivo software.

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[5] To enable textual analysis of Dutch kinship terminology, Belgian French-written articles were excluded.

The articles were analysed by means of discourse analysis (Rosalind, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Webley, 2010). First of all, words, sentences and paragraphs in which thematic keywords were tagged on the (parts of) written text were coded using NVivo. Next, these keywords were organised into omnipresent discourses—that is, discourses that dominated the corpus in terms of frequency. Omnipresent discourses often blurred with one another and overlapped. Nevertheless, the classification into themes or discourses was utilised to maintain an overview of the apparent themes that emerged from the data. Next, an in-depth analysis of these discourses was carried out. This encompassed both the perceived friction between multiple parenthood practices and the system of traditional (dyadic) kinship terminology used to describe these practices. Then, the 'information' versus 'ethics' and the 'pro' versus 'contra' discourses that were apparent in the data were discussed. The different 'normalisation strategies', as apparent from the data on the practice of multiple parenthood, are of paramount importance for the aims of this article, and, consequently, were given more attention in the analysis and discussion.

Analysis

Mother, father, parent: use of 'traditional' kinship terminology

As new concepts (e.g. plus-two-parent families) need to be driven by old and familiar concepts (e.g. the nuclear family), the manner in which the news articles represented parental figures was through the use of existing kinship jargon (*Figure 1*).
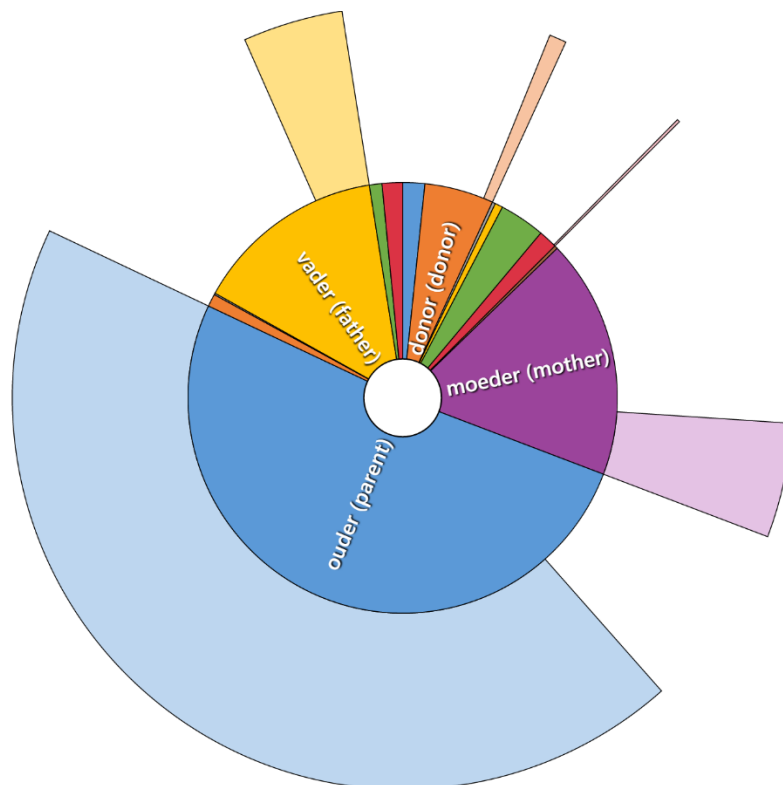

Figure 1. Quantitative mention of kinship terms in news articles in singular form (inner circle) and plural form (outer circle).

Of course, the use of existing kinship terminology is, first, a logical consequence of the

absence of any alternative vocabulary. This means that there are no (or a very limited number of) words available to describe certain non-traditional family forms, which indicates a poverty of language in lexical terms (Diduck, 2007; Swennen & Croce, 2016). Throughout the articles on plus-two-parent families, the terms 'father(s)', 'mother(s)', 'parent(s)' and 'donor(s)' were used most frequently. Other (colloquial) kin terms that appeared were 'mam(m)a' and 'pap(p)a'. The kinship vocabulary of *meeouders* (co-parents), *draagmoeder* (surrogate mother) and *wensouders* (wish parents) were additionally used. This illustrates that there are no specific words available for plus-two-parent families apart from those embedded within the nuclear family framework. Indeed, one could argue that it is easier to speak of two fathers co-parenting with a surrogate mother or of two mothers co-parenting with a donor than to state that a child has three parents. Here, the general knowledge of the absent role and function of the donor and the surrogate mother (who are not to be deemed legal parents by law) enables a more thorough understanding of such practices, while at the same time it limits the broader recognition of these practices. In addition, the word choice of the kinship jargon seemed to be stable throughout the period in which the articles were published, which signifies the rather resistant and crystallised character of kinship terminology. In sum, these new situations are spoken of by using existing and familiar kinship jargon.

In the best interest of whom? Pro stances versus contra stances
The practice of intentional multiple parenthood families was discussed through different journalistic lenses. A clear contradiction was found in the corpus of data between written press articles that provided information on the topic, and articles that raised ethical questions. In terms of informative content, a number of articles focused on giving the reader all kinds of information on the topic of multiple parenthood. This information included social practices (prevalence, style and living arrangements), public perception (stigma, reactions from the environment), scientific and medical breakthroughs and the legal context surrounding multiple parenthood (the lack of a legal framework).

More interesting than informative content was ethical content, or opinion pieces discussing the morality of this practice. Here, the ethical implications of multiple parenthood were explicitly raised by journalists and there was some further discussion and analysis of the practices discussed in informative content. In this regard, the most prevalent tension within the opinion pieces was the notion of best interest of the child ('pro stance') versus best interest of the (plus-two) parents ('contra stance'). Best interest of the child is a legal constitutionally embedded principle rooted in Article 3.1 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Two perspectives were noticeable: the first stated that a legal framework for multiple parenthood is primarily in the best interest of the (plus-two) parents (and thus harmful to the child) whereas the second contended that legal multiple parenthood is actually in the best interest of the child. As a result, it is possible to observe a tension between those who took a negative stance towards the legal accommodation of intentional plus-two-parent families and those who saw no harm in the practice itself and/or its legal recognition.

To further conceptualise this tension, it is necessary to acknowledge that plus-two-parent families (especially when intentional and not the result of a separation or a divorce) are 'deviant' from a Western sociocultural perspective. Given that these families are distinct from the mainstream nuclear family framework, they are at times (albeit implicitly) represented as different, strange or abnormal. The following statements found in Dutch

newspapers illustrate this:

> X [name, red.] expects that both children and parents in multiple parenthood settings will develop their own challenges in terms of identity. 'You do not have to be a fortune teller to see that this will lead to problematic situations' (Wolvers, 2016).[6]

The assumption here is that intentional multiple parenthood will lead to identity issues for both children and parents and, consequently, will create an overall problematic situation. Such a stance implies that people who set up these multiple parenthood constellations are, in fact, responsible for creating future 'abnormal' problematic circumstances:

> It is common sense that four parents for one child will be a burden for the child. Four parents mean eight grandparents, as well as a whole group of cousins, uncles, aunts and so forth… Won't the child be lost and confused at their own birthday party? (Pessers, 2015).

Here, the abnormality of intentional multiple parenthood practices (and extended family links) goes hand in hand with the assumption that four parents will be a burden for the child. The argument is that a child will be 'lost and confused' at their own birthday party (Pessers, 2015), that is, in distress because of the wide array of family members present. Written from the standpoint of the child, the practice is clearly represented as deviant and strange. This implies that multiple parenthood engenders familial chaos, while, nuclear (two-parent) families supposedly allow for structure and stability. The use of the term 'common sense' is also an apparent reminder of what is known and what is generally accepted (Pessers, 2015).

Explaining multiple parenthood: main normalisation strategies

As explained above, intentional plus-two-parent families pose important challenges for the premises of coupledom and duality that have saturated contemporary notions of the family up to now. By implicitly expressing the deviant character of multiple parenthood practices, the news articles often explained these practices in such a way that they appeared less deviant and more understandable to the public. These discourses, which operated as discursive themes to encourage normalisation, function as normalisation strategies. Three omnipresent normalisation strategies were defined. They are centred on (1) societal evolution, (2) the desire to parent, and (3) love and happiness. These three discourses are in stark contrast to the general (often implicit) notion of abnormality surrounding the practice of multiple parenthood. This stems from the idea that the practice is harmful to children and/or derives from a socially deviant character.

The first recurring discourse within the media content is the notion that intentional multiple parenthood is a product of recent times. This remark brings to the readers' attention the need for a legal framework for intentional parenthood, arguing that society has changed the way it looks at dyadic and gendered dynamics surrounding family life and parenting. Often, this type of discourse is found in the opening paragraphs of the news articles in question:

> It used to be straightforward: there was a father, a mother and their children. But now this image has become less sharp. Fathers are not always the 'actual' fathers. The same goes for mothers. Children can be conceived with the help of a surrogate mother, or with donor semen or donated ova. Children can also be raised by two men or two women. It is also possible for a child to have more than two involved parents (Hoksbergen, 2014).

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[6] All excerpts were freely translated from Dutch to English.

Similar perspectives were found in the articles on multiple parenthood. The reasoning here is, first, to educate the public on this practice and, second, to raise the question of legal accommodation and discrimination:

> According to current law, only two people can be legal parents for a child and have parental responsibility. However, more and more children nowadays are raised by three or four parents (Van der Bles, 2015).

Discourses dealing with societal evolution posit that times have changed and that 'new' concepts or forms of family-making have entered the realm of everyday life. Of course, this normalisation strategy omits any broader information on the history of the formation of the nuclear family form. As discussed earlier, from a historical perspective, the nuclear family in its current form is a rather recent phenomenon in Western society. In other words, even older, more familiar scripts of parenthood as nuclear and dyadic are geographically and historically contingent.

The second main discourse that emerged in these news articles was multiple parents' desire to parent. Because the wish to raise a child was frequently mentioned, it was used in order to explain why parents would opt for such a 'complex' and 'difficult' family construction in the first place:

> Franck and I are a loving couple and we have a desire to parent. From that perspective, we are no different from other couples. The only difference is that we needed to find alternative ways to parent ("Beste vriendin vervult", 2013).

The practice of multiple parenting, stemming from a desire to parent, was also often put forward as the only possibility for LGBT individuals to have children because they do not have the biological options that opposite-sex parents have. In this vein, the wish to bring up a child was put forward as a rationale for the social practice of plus-two-parent families and, consequently, can be categorised as a normalisation strategy.

The third normalising discourse was rooted in the belief that the practices of plus-two-parents are fuelled by concepts of love and happiness. By presenting these practices through the lenses of love and happiness, the news articles normalised multi-parenthood by humanising it. The reason for this is that parental love and happiness are generic and powerful emotions that are understood by the majority of people. By framing how LGBT individuals love their children, just like heterosexual couples, and how happy they are to be parents, the indirect message is that LGBT parents and heterosexual parents are, in fact, alike:

> The little Gabriël has one mommy and two daddies. The gay couple Samuel and Franck and their best friend, Marie-Hélène, had a child together. Far from traditional, but the three parents are *ecstatic* [emphasis added]. 'Gabriël is a fruit of love, just like every other child' ("Beste vriendin vervult", 2013).

Several news articles also referred to the fact that members of intentional plus-two-parent families often face more obstacles in becoming parents and, consequently, are even more committed to that role than many heterosexual parents. This is a clear example of how the unconventional practice of multiple parenthood has been normalised through the use of the concepts of love, happiness, and commitment.

Discussion

Newly developed concepts will remain dependent (for their existence, form and shape) on mainstream conceptual usage and the mainstream social relations underpinning them (Cooper, 2013, p. 29). This is illustrated by two main points. First, intentional multiple parenthood is shaped and defined by means of existing kinship terminology, for instance, by

referral to the terms 'donor' and/or 'surrogate mother' to describe the 'third' and/or 'fourth' parent. Second, the practice itself is presented in such a way that readers can relate to it. New concepts transcend the boundaries of 'granted expectancies' (Hall, 1982, p. 71), and, what is new is therefore explained by relating it to older concepts.

The news articles presented stories of plus-two-parent families through emotionally charged portrayals, illustrating how their actions are fuelled by love, care, and a desire to parent. Allegedly, the public can only appreciate these new family settings when they are able to link them with what they already know—i.e. the cultural image of the caring and loving nature of the nuclear, two-parent family unit. Thus, the premise that plus-two-parent families are relatable and recognisable is an important one. However, if the link between the media discourse (that which is presented) and personal experience (that which is already known) is either weak or absent, the ability of media messages to affect one's legal consciousness can be severely hindered (Gies, 2008, p. 35). Moreover, audiences by no means engage in a uniform practice of decoding media messages (Hall, 1973/1980).

It is worth elaborating on these arguments by discussing examples of the news articles' discourses containing a pro stance and a contra stance towards the concept of multiple parenthood or, more specifically, the social practice of plus-two-parent families. Pro and contra stances within these articles appear to be rooted in the above-mentioned 'best interest' discourses which are pervasive throughout the body of data. Although most news articles represented multiple parenthood positively through the previously discussed normalisation strategies, some media messages carried value judgements with a negative connotation attached to them. A first stream of news articles, disseminated by religious media groups, generally focused on the decay of the nuclear family as a result of multiple parenting practices. Articles published by a Christian Dutch news journal took a negative stance on the issue of multiple parenthood because of a fear of the consequences for the institution of marriage and/or because of the belief that multiple parenting practices will lead to the end of monogamy. Here, multiple parenthood was perceived as a slippery slope, leading to further confusion about the maximum number of parental figures a family should have. A second stream of contra articles related to the issue generally centred on the fear of increasing conflict potential between the multiple parties involved.

What these messages have in common is that they are grounded in a sense of resistance because they are the expression of a negative value judgement. In this sense, they may find a connection with those readers who do not approve of situations involving multiple parenthood or those who are worried about the consequences for the child.

Of course, it is also possible for media communication to find a positive connection with its audience, resulting in a pro stance towards this topic. As the previous section made apparent, news articles put forward multiple parenthood situations in light of the relatable concepts of love, happiness and coupledom as well as the provision of care, a nurturing environment and a strong desire to parent. Accordingly, there is a difference in the representation of these practices either as social evolutionary phenomena or as disruptive changes and forms of 'deviance' as embedded in principles of the best interest of the child/parents. The discourses are always (or primarily) used as methods of persuasion and agenda-setting.

Conclusion

Currently, there is no legal framework for the social practice of intentional multiple parenthood in either Belgium or the Netherlands. Although both countries have recently

explored the option of implementing such a legal framework,[7] the discussion to date largely remains situated within public discourse. Indeed, the media is a highly contested space, a form of self-proclaimed battlefield, in which the most powerful groups (often white, middle class) can establish the dominance of a specific discourse (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 333). Yet, at the same time as the media reflect any normative ideologies, they simultaneously shape and reaffirm such ideologies.

In this article, a discourse analysis of news coverage on intentional plus-two-parent families was carried out to analyse discourses regarding a perceived new phenomenon. Arguably, full legal parentage for plus-two-parent families has not yet been accommodated, because such existing practices currently lack the accepted or institutionally determined features of nuclear parenthood (Cooper, 2013, p. 42). Nevertheless, my corpus of data showed that news articles present stories of plus-two-parent families through emotionally charged language: either by illustrating how the actions of these parents are fuelled by love, care and their desire to raise a child or, in contrast, by referring to the alleged harm that would be caused to a child or to society. Additionally, the news articles used existing kinship terminology, such as 'father', 'mother', 'donor' and 'surrogate mother', to describe the plus-two-parent practices. The reasons for this are twofold. The use of kinship jargon already in existence stems from both the lack of an alternative vocabulary and the need to present the multiple-parent practice as a familiar phenomenon. In fact, readers can only appreciate new information (i.e. new family settings) when they are able to combine what they are told with what they already know (i.e. the nuclear, two-parent family unit). Moreover, emotion here clearly functions as a normalisation strategy for multiple parenthood practices.

This article illustrated how newly developed concepts within the traditional framework of parenthood remain dependent on mainstream portrayals. The media operates in distinctive and strategic ways to convey their message of normalisation to the reader. In this way, the media functions to categorise reality and the mundane. Moreover, these media portrayals might alter the readers' apprehension of the concepts themselves. It is reasonable to assume that if the media succeeds in influencing public opinion by enabling the notion of multiple parenthood to become part of a common understanding, it will change the dyadic and gendered concept of parenthood within public discourse. However, it is possible that the media will keep on referring to multiple parenthood by way of existing concepts, regardless of whether it takes a pro or contra stance, and that the concept of parenthood will fail to become more inclusive.

Although the media makes use of normalisation strategies in these news articles to explain intentional multiple parenthood, media messages can of course be used in a different way—e.g. to create distrust and confusion across the audience. Such an agenda-setting strategy is, for instance, present in the context of articles disseminated by religiously affiliated media. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the public does not accept everything uncritically. Future research might consider addressing how the audience reads these kinds of media messages, as this would give us more insight into the triangular interaction of social policy, legal communication, and the written press.

Postscriptum

In 2019, the Dutch government announced that it did not plan to introduce full multi-

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[7] For Belgium, this report was produced under the Commissie Institutionele Aangelegenheden whereas for the Netherlands, it was made possible by the Staatscommissie Herijking Ouderschap.

parenthood and multi-parenting rights, opting instead for a system of 'partial parental responsibility' (*deelgezag* in Dutch) without legal parenthood for a third, and possibly fourth, social parent.[8] Follow-up research could probe the language of (news) media outlets following these recent developments.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of interest
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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