Biological father absence and father-child relationship quality among Curaçaoan and Dutch youth

Mariëlle Osinga¹, Odette J. van Brummen-Girigori², Diana D. van Bergen¹, Tina Kretschmer¹

¹Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands

²University of Curaçao Research Institute (UCRI), University of Curaçao Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez, Willemstad, Curaçao

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Corresponding author: Mariëlle Osinga
Grote Rozenstraat 38
9712 TJ Groningen, the Netherlands
Email: m.osinga@rug.nl

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Abstract

Objective: To examine whether biological father absence is associated with father-child relationship quality among father-absent and father-present Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults. **Background:** Father absence has often been portrayed as problematic for father-child relationship quality but this is not the case universally. Normativity of father absence in a society might affect this link. Unfortunately, cross-cultural studies into father absence are scarce, especially including *normative father-absent societies* such as Curaçao. **Method:** Using identical procedures and materials on Curaçao and in the Netherlands, Curaçaoan ($n = 564$) and Dutch ($n = 652$) participants completed a school-based online questionnaire. Due to measurement variance, we estimated structural equation models testing associations between father absence and father-child attachment, paternal rearing style, and monitoring as indicators of father-child relationship quality separately for both cultural groups. **Results:** Father absence was unrelated to father-child relationship quality among both Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults. **Conclusion:** Though the absence of father-absence effects does not mean that non-residence of a biological father is not a potential risk factor anyway, our data suggest that effects might be more subtle and less systematic than existing literature suggests. **Implications:** By including data from both *normative and contra-normative father-absent societies*, this study adds an important cross-cultural perspective to the current father-absence literature. Further research across demographic characteristics is required to fully understand whether, how, and when father absence may affect offspring outcomes.

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The number of children who, as common consequence of parental divorce or separation, grow up without a biological father present in the household, has increased during the past decades (United Nations, 2017). Studies in predominantly Western societies have portrayed father absence (i.e., non-residence of a biological father) as problematic for offspring well-being and development (McLanahan et al., 2013). Father absence has usually been linked to poorer father-child relationship quality (Bastaitis, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2014), although other work suggests that this is not universally the case (Kalmijn, 2015b, 2015a). Unfortunately, most research is based on the quantitative indicator of “absence versus presence” and hypothesizes that relationships between absent fathers and offspring are of lower quality than relationships between present fathers and offspring. Empirical evidence for such a pattern, however, is largely missing. The implicit assumption that father absence equals poorer father-child relationship quality might be outdated given that many non-residential fathers – at least in Western societies, stay involved in childrearing nowadays.

As rates and normativity of father absence vary cross-culturally (Erman & Härkönen, 2017), it is possible that father-child relationships characterized by non-residence of a biological father are culturally variant as well. In many Caribbean countries, for instance, fathers historically play a marginal role in the upbringing of their offspring due to a past of slavery and labour migration (Allen, 2009). To illustrate, on Curaçao about 40% of children grow up without a biological father present in the household and single mothers are often supported by extended families (Abraham-van der Mark, 2013). The normativity of father absence might imply that presence versus absence does not affect perceptions of and feelings toward one’s father, whereas offspring might feel anger and resentment when father absence is perceived as less normative. At the same time, however, because of the prominent

matrifocal orientation in the Caribbean, offspring with Caribbean origins might have less chance to develop a strong, meaningful bond with their father. In short, comparing the implications of father absence for father-child relationship quality across both normative and contra-normative father-absent societies can offer fascinating insights (Draper & Harpending, 1982). Unfortunately, little cross-cultural research into father absence and father-child relationship quality has so far been conducted (McLanahan et al., 2013).

Therefore, in this study we examined whether father absence is linked to poorer father-child relationship quality and whether cultural context plays a role. We focussed on the Netherlands and Curaçao, two contexts that differ substantially in the prevalence of father absence and in arrangements of care for offspring following divorce or separation. In doing so, we quantitatively compared offspring perceptions of different aspects of father-child relationship quality between father-present and father-absent adolescents and young adults in both countries.

Non-Residential Fathers and Father-Child Relationship Quality

Many children with divorced or separated parents grow up without their biological father present in the household, which has often been linked to reduced father-child relationship quality. For instance, for many non-residential fathers in the US, it is difficult to establish or maintain close relationships with their offspring, to provide emotional support, to monitor their behavior, and to participate in after-school and weekend activities (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004). In addition, non-resident fathers in Flanders and the US were more likely to be permissive and uninvolved with their offspring and often act more like visitors than parents after divorce (Bastaits et al., 2014; Jones & Mosher, 2013). Living in separate homes can mean that fathers and offspring have recreational but often not very close and meaningful relationships. Next to living apart, the amount of time non-residential fathers spend with their offspring after a divorce or separation can influence aspects of father-child relationship

quality, because spending less time with offspring might be linked to less support and control provided by non-resident fathers (Bastaits, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2012).

Although many studies on non-residential fatherhood suggest problems for father-child relationship quality, not all non-resident fathers and their offspring experience a decrease in father-child relationship quality due to divorce or separation (Kalmijn, 2015b, 2015a). As father absence is not linked to poorer father-child relationship quality universally, it is important to find out whether and when father absence affects father-child relationship quality. Culture might play an important role here: On the one hand, increasingly many fathers stay involved with their offspring after divorce or separation at least in Western countries, which might prevent from poorer father-child relationships. At the same time, however, father absence is contra-normative in these contexts and might lead to feelings of resentment and anger and deteriorating father-child relationships. In contexts where father absence is relatively normative (i.e., Curaçao), such feelings might not arise in offspring, but father-child relationships might still be weak due to father's marginal role in childcare (i.e., matrifocality). As such, although there is reason to believe that father absence is associated with poorer father-child relationship quality in both cultures, it is also possible that this is not the case.

Father-Child Relationship Quality on Curaçao and in the Netherlands

Caribbean families have high rates of non-marital births, non-residential fatherhood, and female-headed households and rely heavily on kinship and non-kinship members for assistance with childcare (Roopnarine, 2004). On Curaçao, a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Southern Caribbean Sea, father absence occurs in about 40% of families and single mothers are supported by (mostly female) relatives (Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) Curaçao, 2014). That is, children are cared for, monitored by

other relatives, and have access to many models for positive interactions (Abraham-van der Mark, 2013).

Because of high levels and tolerance of father absence on Curaçao, this family form is less stigmatized (Abraham-van der Mark, 2013), which might imply that father presence versus absence does not influence perceptions of and feelings toward one's father. Yet, in Caribbean families, the role of the father tends to be weaker whereas networks of female friends and kin are more strongly relied upon to provide support in single-mother families (Marcha & Verweel, 2005). Because of the prominent matrifocal orientation in the Caribbean, Curaçaoan offspring might have a weak relationship to their non-resident father anyway. For instance, Curaçaoan father's participation in their offspring's lives could be limited due to work obligations and due to traditional Caribbean beliefs about male dominance in household and mating relationships, early sexual activity to prove manhood, and men as protectors of family members (Roopnarine, 2004). In addition, offspring in Caribbean homes without a father trust their father less and are exposed to less psychological presence and input from their father on decisions about their lives (Ramkissoon, 2002). Greater prevalence of father absence in combination with potentially lower importance of fathers in the Caribbean region adds complexity to the nature of father-child relationships and leaves the assumption of roles and responsibilities by fathers unclear (Roopnarine, 2004).

In the Netherlands, father absence occurs in about one in six (Kalmijn, 2015a) to one in ten Dutch families (CBS, 2015). Even though many Dutch children witness parental divorce or separation, more and more fathers stay closely involved in the upbringing of their offspring (Bakker, 2015). Moreover, increasingly many offspring live with both parents alternately after divorce or separation, in which care is divided nearly equally in terms of residence, responsibility, caregiving, supporting school-related activities, and spending leisure time. Among non-resident fathers in the Netherlands, daytime contact with and overnight

stays of offspring increased during the past decades and fathers have become more involved in child rearing (Westphal, Poortman, & van der Lippe, 2014). Yet, children with divorced parents in the Netherlands generally have less frequent contact with their father and experience poorer relationship quality with their father than children with married parents (Kalmijn, 2015b). As father absence is contra-normative and often stigmatized among the majority of Dutch people in the Netherlands, a normal continuation of the father-child relationship characterized by father absence is possibly more difficult than when the community is used to father absence (Kalmijn, 2015a).

The Current Study

As previous work only provides a limited perspective on father absence and father-child relationship quality, we examined whether father absence indeed affects father-child relationship quality among adolescents and young adults from Curaçao and the Netherlands. In doing so, we quantitatively compared Curaçaoan and Dutch father-absent and father-present offspring perceptions for a set of aspects of relationship quality.

Because differences seem to exist in father-child relationship closeness, emotional support, and monitoring based on non-residential fatherhood, we studied whether biological father absence is linked to father-child attachment, paternal rearing style, and monitoring. On the one hand, due to the normativity and corresponding acceptance of father absence on Curaçao, we tentatively expected that Curaçaoan participants' perceptions of father-child relationship quality would not be impacted by their father's absence. That said, the relatively marginal role of fathers and prominent matrifocal orientation in the Caribbean might result in higher avoidant and anxious attachment, a paternal rearing style characterized by less emotional warmth and more rejection, and lower monitoring among father-absent compared with father-present Curaçaoan adolescents and young adults. As father absence is contra-normative and often stigmatized by the majority of Dutch people in the Netherlands and

therefore father-child contact might decrease, we also tentatively expected higher avoidant and anxious attachment, a paternal rearing style characterized by less emotional warmth and more rejection, and lower monitoring among father-absent compared with father-present Dutch participants. At the same time, however, as increasingly many Dutch fathers stay involved in child rearing after divorce or separation, negative effects of father absence on father-child relationship quality might not actually be prominent.

We included socioeconomic status (SES) and contact frequency between father and offspring as covariates because of their positive relation with father-child relationship quality (Kalmijn, 2015b, 2015a).

Method

This study is part of a larger project on biological father absence among adolescents and young adults carried out on Curaçao and in the Netherlands. The project consists of a quantitative, questionnaire-based part and a qualitative part including in-depth interviews about perceptions and experiences with biological father absence among 50 father-absent Curaçaoan, Curaçaoan-Dutch and Dutch young people and their mothers. The project was approved by the ethics committees of the University of Curaçao Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez and the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences of the University of Groningen. Here, we used data collected in a school-based online questionnaire on Curaçao and the Netherlands. Data collection took place in 2018-2019, with identical procedures and materials in both countries.

Participants

The questionnaire was completed by 2,222 participants between 16 and 23 years old. Here, we included all 564 Curaçaoan (62% female; M age = 18.30, SD = 1.97) and 652 Dutch participants (57% female; M age = 17.42, SD = 1.57), from 17 schools on Curaçao and 20 schools in the Netherlands. To code participants' cultural context, we used information on

their country of birth and residence and their parents' country of birth. Curaçaoan participants were born and lived on Curaçao and their parents were born on Curaçao. Dutch participants were born and lived in the Netherlands and their parents were born in the Netherlands.

We recruited a broader age range than initially planned (16-20 years) to facilitate subgroup sizes and to be in concordance with partial compulsory education regulations in the Netherlands (Education Consumer Organization, 2019); see Figure 1 for details. Fifty-eight percent of participants completed the questionnaire in Dutch (9% on Curaçao, 100% in the Netherlands) and 42% in Papiamentu (91% on Curaçao, 0% in the Netherlands). Most participants were enrolled in (pre)vocational education (62%); educational level did not significantly differ among Curaçaoan and Dutch participants; $t(1,212) = -0.87, p = .384$.

Figure 1. *Details on Participant Inclusion and Exclusion*

Procedures

We recruited schools through active contact and word-of-mouth. We provided school boards with an information letter about the purpose of the study and asked teachers to inform students and their parents one week in advance of the scheduled data collection. After a short introduction, the questionnaire first included an online-informed consent form and continued with the questions. One of the researchers was present to introduce and explain the project and a teacher was present for keeping order. After completion, a voucher worth 30 Antillean guilders or €15 was raffled among the students that participated.

Measures

All instruments were translated to Papiamentu by the bilingual second author and piloted before participants were recruited into the study.

Father absence. We asked participants at what points their biological father had lived with them in the same household during their 1st to 15th year of life using bars for each year. For instance, if their father had lived with them from their 1st to 15th year, they placed a bar from the first to the last box. They could also use multiple bars, for example if their father had lived with them from their 1st to 5th year, then left, and then had lived with them again from their 10th to 15th year. In line with prior work (e.g., Gaydosh et al., 2018), the variable “father absence” contrasted participants who had lived without their biological father present in the household at some point before age eight ($n = 532$, 44%) to participants who had lived with their biological father present ($n = 684$, 56%). Father absence had to be due to parental divorce or separation.

Father-child relationship quality. We assessed father-child relationship quality using three scales: The experiences in close relationships-relationship structures scale (Donbaek & Elklit, 2014; Brenning et al. 2014) consists of nine items, which are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and reflects a two-dimensional attachment construct: Avoidance (six items, $\alpha = .83$; e.g., “It helps to turn to my father in times of need”) and anxiety (three items, $\alpha = .95$; e.g., “I often worry that my father doesn’t really care for me”). The parental rearing behaviors scale (Markus, Lindhout, Boer, Hoogendijk, & Arrindell, 2003; Oldehinkel et al., 2015) consists of eight items, which are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*no, never*) to 4 (*yes, almost always*) and reflects emotional warmth (four items, $\alpha = .92$; e.g., “When you are unhappy, does your father console you and cheer you up?”) and rejection (four items, $\alpha = .71$; e.g., “Do you feel disappointed because your father doesn't give you what you want?”). The parental monitoring

(i.e., knowledge) scale (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Sentse, Dijkstra, Lindenberg, Ormel, & Veenstra, 2010) consists of eight items, which are rated on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*nothing*) to 2 (*a lot*) ($\alpha = .91$; e.g., “How much does your father know about who your friends are?”).

Covariates. Based on the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 context questionnaires (OECD, 2017), we included family SES as a latent variable, assessed using 3 scales: Parents' mean educational level consists of father's and mother's highest educational level, which are rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*primary education*) to 9 (*university*) and correlated moderately; $r(809) = .51, p < .001$. Household possessions consists of the availability of seven items at home (e.g., own room for each child, internet connection) and three country-specific household items that were seen by PISA as appropriate measures of family wealth within the country's context. The number of books at home was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*0-10 books*) to 5 (*201-500 books*) (OECD, 2017). We also controlled for father-child contact frequency, which was rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never or never*) to 6 (*every day*).

Analytic Strategy

To confirm the hypothesized scales against the data, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses for avoidance, anxiety, emotional warmth, rejection, and monitoring separately for both Curaçaoan and Dutch participants, using maximum likelihood with missing values estimation in Stata/SE 17 (Table 1). We evaluated model fit based on the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and considered TLI and CFI values of $\geq .95$ and RMSEA values of $\leq .06$ as acceptable criteria for a good fit (e.g., West et al., 2012). We performed Little's MCAR test to check whether data were Missing Completely At Random (MCAR) (Little, 1988). No missing data were present for father absence, cultural context, sex, and SES. Father-child relationship

quality data were MCAR; $\chi^2(2) = .02, p = .99$. When we added contact frequency to the model, missing data were not MCAR anymore; however, contact frequency had a proportion of only 4% missing. We thus proceeded to handle missing data by using full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML).

To ascertain whether we could statistically compare Curaçaoan and Dutch participants regarding the five aspects of father-child relationship quality, we tested for measurement invariance across culture using multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis (Lee, 2018). This involved three steps corresponding to the conditions of configural, metric, and scalar invariance (Xu & Tracey, 2017). In the configural invariance model (Model 1), we tested whether the basic model structures were invariant across groups and constrained the factorial structures to be the same. In the metric invariance model (Model 2), we tested if the strengths of the relations between scale items and their respective underlying constructs were similar across groups and constrained all factor loadings to be the same. In the scalar invariance model (Model 3), we tested whether observed scores were related to latent scores and constrained intercepts of items to be the same (Milfont & Fischer, 2010). We used a χ^2 -difference test to compare the fit of the sequential models.

Measurement invariance on the scalar level was not supported for any of the five aspects of father-child relationship quality (Table 2); we thus estimated structural equation models for avoidance, anxiety, emotional warmth, rejection, and monitoring separately for both Curaçaoan and Dutch participants. We included SES and contact frequency as covariates, corrected for non-normality and clustered data at class level, and accounted for multiple testing using Bonferroni correction, calculated by dividing the alpha-level by the number of comparisons ($p = .05/5$).

Father absence and relationship quality

Table 1. *Model Fit Indices of Father-Child Relationship Quality Scales*

Model	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% C. I.	SRMR
Avoidance								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 516)								
Baseline model	245.04	9	<.01	.87	.78	0.23	[0.20, 0.25]	.13
Residual correlations (item5*item6)	31.75	8	<.01	.99	.98	0.08	[0.05, 0.11]	.03
Residual correlations (item5*item6 item2*item4)	12.95	7	.07	1.00	.99	0.04	[0.00, 0.08]	.03
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 625)								
Baseline model	167.86	9	<.01	.93	.88	0.17	[0.15, 0.19]	.08
Residual correlations (item5*item6)	54.64	8	<.01	.98	.96	0.10	[0.07, 0.12]	.03
Residual correlations (item5*item6 item2*item4)	24.26	7	<.01	.99	.98	0.06	[0.04, 0.09]	.02
Anxiety								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 516)								
Baseline model	.00	0	<.01	1.00	1.00	0.00	[0.00, 0.00]	-
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 625)								
Baseline model	.00	0	<.01	1.00	1.00	0.00	[0.00, 0.00]	-
Emotional warmth								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 515)								
Baseline model	16.51	2	<.01	.99	.97	0.12	[0.07, 0.18]	.02
Residual correlations (item2*item4)	.62	1	.43	1.00	1.00	0.00	[0.00, 0.11]	.00
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 625)								
Baseline model	12.48	2	<.01	.99	.98	0.09	[0.05, 0.14]	.01
Residual correlations (item2*item4)	1.02	1	.31	1.00	1.00	0.01	[0.00, 0.11]	.00
Rejection								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 515)								
Baseline model	8.98	2	.01	.98	.95	0.08	[0.03, 0.14]	.03
Residual correlations (item5*item6)	.13	1	.72	1.00	1.01	0.00	[0.00, 0.08]	.00
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 625)								
Baseline model	4.81	2	.09	1.00	.98	0.05	[0.00, 0.10]	.02
Monitoring								
Curaçaoan (<i>n</i> = 515)								
Baseline model	1291.31	20	<.01	.63	.48	0.35	[0.34, 0.37]	.17

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Residual correlations (item6*item8)	516.58	19	<.01	.86	.79	0.23	[0.21, 0.24]	.13
Residual correlations (item6*item8 item7*item8)	445.97	18	<.01	.88	.81	0.22	[0.20, 0.23]	.12
Residual correlations (item6*item8 item7*item8 item6*item7)	43.51	17	<.01	.99	.99	0.06	[0.04, 0.08]	.02
Dutch (<i>n</i> = 625)								
Baseline model	453.23	20	<.01	.85	.79	0.19	[0.17, 0.20]	-
Residual correlations (item6*item8)	204.43	19	<.01	.94	.91	0.13	[0.11, 0.14]	-
Residual correlations (item6*item8 item3*item4)	144.55	18	<.01	.96	.93	0.11	[0.09, 0.12]	-
Residual correlations (item6*item8 item3*item4 item6*item7)	119.31	17	<.01	.97	.94	0.10	[0.08, 0.12]	-
Residual correlations (item6*item8 item3*item4 item6*item7 item7*item8)	57.23	16	<.01	.99	.98	0.06	[0.05, 0.08]	-

Note. Residual correlations were included, as suggested by modification indices. SRMR is sometimes not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML. Father-child relationship quality data were MCAR; $\chi^2(2) = .02, p = .99$. The anxiety model was just-identified.

Father absence and relationship quality

Table 2. *Multiple Group Comparisons for Measurement Invariance across Culture*

Model	χ^2	df	p-value	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p-value	ΔCFI	$\Delta RMSEA$
Avoidance ($N = 1,141$; $n = 516$ Curaçaoan, $n = 625$ Dutch)												
Model 1	37.21	14	<.01	.99	.99	0.05	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	89.57	19	<.01	.98	.97	0.08	Model 1 vs. Model 2	52.36	5	<.01	.01	0.03
Model 3	284.55	25	<.01	.94	.92	0.14	Model 2 vs. Model 3	194.98	6	<.01	.05	0.05
Anxiety ($N = 1,141$; $n = 516$ Curaçaoan, $n = 625$ Dutch)												
Model 1	.00	0	<.01	1.00	1.00	0.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	4.733	2	.09	1.00	1.00	0.05	Model 1 vs. Model 2	4.73	2	.09	.00	0.05
Model 3	196.53	5	<.01	.94	.92	0.26	Model 2 vs. Model 3	191.79	3	<.01	.06	0.21
Emotional warmth ($N = 1,140$; $n = 515$ Curaçaoan, $n = 625$ Dutch)												
Model 1	1.65	2	.44	1.00	1.00	0.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	14.90	5	.01	1.00	.99	0.06	Model 1 vs. Model 2	13.25	3	<.01	.00	0.06
Model 3	174.47	9	<.01	.95	.93	0.18	Model 2 vs. Model 3	159.57	4	<.01	.05	0.12
Rejection ($N = 1,140$; $n = 515$ Curaçaoan, $n = 625$ Dutch)												
Model 1	2.78	2	.25	1.00	1.00	0.03	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	7.60	5	.18	1.00	.99	0.03	Model 1 vs. Model 2	4.82	3	.19	.00	0.00
Model 3	86.65	9	<.01	.92	.89	0.12	Model 2 vs. Model 3	79.05	4	<.01	.08	0.09
Monitoring ($N = 1,140$; $n = 515$ Curaçaoan, $n = 625$ Dutch)												
Model 1	96.51	32	<.01	.99	.98	0.06	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model 2	104.79	39	<.01	.99	.99	0.05	Model 1 vs. Model 2	8.28	7	.31	.00	0.01
Model 3	252.43	47	<.01	.97	.96	0.09	Model 2 vs. Model 3	147.65	8	<.01	.02	0.03

Note. Model 1: Configural invariance, Model 2: Metric invariance, Model 3: Scalar invariance. SRMR is not reported because of missing values, which we dealt with by using FIML. Father-child relationship quality data were MCAR; $\chi^2 (2) = .02, p = .99$. The anxiety model (Model 1) was just-identified.

Results

Model Fit for Father-Child Relationship Quality Measures

Results of confirmatory factor analyses showed acceptable fit for rejection among Dutch participants, but a poor fit for rejection among Curaçaoan participants and for avoidance, emotional warmth, and monitoring in both cultural groups (Table 1). The anxiety model was just-identified for both cultural groups. Model fit indices of the baseline models of avoidance, rejection, emotional warmth, and monitoring improved after we included a number of residual correlations as suggested by modification indices. We moved forward with adjusted scales.

Measurement Invariance across Culture

To examine whether Curaçaoan and Dutch participants interpreted the measures of father-child relationship quality in a conceptually similar (invariant) or different (variant) way, we conducted measurement invariance tests (Table 2). Within the first step (Model 1), we tested for configural invariance, which was confirmed by the fit indexes of all measures of father-child relationship quality (i.e., all TLI and CFI values $\geq .95$ and all RMSEA values $\leq .06$), except for anxiety, which was just-identified. Subsequently, we tested for metric invariance (Model 2), which could not be established for avoidance, but for anxiety, emotional warmth, rejection, and monitoring, acceptable fit indices were obtained. Scalar invariance (Model 3) was not supported for any of the measures of father-child relationship quality. We thus could not conduct multiple-group comparisons or include interactions to test moderation and therefore estimated structural equation models for associations between father absence and father-offspring avoidance, anxiety, emotional warmth, rejection, and monitoring for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 3a and 3b summarize descriptive statistics and correlations for all study variables for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately. Father absence before age eight was more common among Curaçaoan ($n = 357$; 63%) compared with Dutch participants ($n = 175$; 27%) in our sample; $\chi^2(1, N = 1,216) = 163.33, p < .01$. On average, Curaçaoan participants lived more years without a father present in their household than Dutch participants did; ($t(1,214) = -14.68, p < .01$). Considering indicators of SES: Parents' mean educational level ($t(807) = 3.92, p < .01$), household possessions ($t(1,214) = 17.54, p < .01$), and number of books ($t(1,210) = 12.79, p < .01$) were higher among Dutch compared with Curaçaoan participants. Contact frequency was significantly higher among Dutch compared with Curaçaoan participants; $\chi^2(5, N = 1,168) = 79.62, p < .01$.

Father absence before age eight and later on were highly correlated among both Curaçaoan and Dutch participants (see Table 3a and 3b). Regardless of its operationalization, father absence correlated moderately to highly with contact frequency, but father absence and SES were only weakly correlated in both groups. SES respectively contact frequency correlated weakly to modestly with father-child relationship quality. Most father-child relationship quality aspects correlated modestly to highly.

Father absence and relationship quality

Table 3a. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables of Curaçaoan Participants*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Father absence before age eight	564	0.63	0.48	-								
2. Father absence continuous	564	9.33	6.85	.98**	-							
3. SES	564	3.61	1.09	-.17**	-.18**	-						
4. Contact frequency	535	4.66	1.93	-.44**	-.47**	.10*	-					
5. Avoidance	516	4.08	1.38	.15**	.13**	-.15**	-.25**	-				
6. Anxiety	516	3.07	2.06	.08	.09*	-.10*	-.00	.02	-			
7. Emotional warmth	515	2.62	0.95	-.14**	-.13**	.21**	.30**	-.69**	.07	-		
8. Rejection	515	1.62	0.63	-.02	-.02	-.00	.05	.30**	.14**	-.21**	-	
9. Monitoring	515	2.07	0.66	-.30**	-.30**	.25**	.39**	-.46**	.06	.49**	-.07	-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3b. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables of Dutch Participants*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Father absence before age eight	652	0.27	0.44	-								
2. Father absence continuous	652	3.83	6.21	.98**	-							
3. SES	652	4.75	1.05	-.24**	-.24**	-						
4. Contact frequency	633	5.36	1.47	-.50**	-.52**	.21**	-					
5. Avoidance	625	3.06	1.42	.18**	.17**	-.12**	-.35**	-				
6. Anxiety	625	1.58	1.16	.21**	.20**	-.11**	-.30**	.42**	-			
7. Emotional warmth	625	3.21	0.86	-.16**	-.16**	.11**	.33**	-.73**	-.52**	-		
8. Rejection	625	1.41	0.50	.03	.01	.01	-.14**	.45**	.46**	-.45**	-	
9. Monitoring	625	2.42	0.57	-.32**	-.32**	.20**	.41**	-.54**	-.42**	.53**	-.31**	-

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Father Absence before Age Eight and Father-Child Relationship Quality

Due to measurement variance, we estimated structural equation models for associations between father absence and father-offspring avoidance, anxiety, emotional warmth, rejection, and monitoring for Curaçaoan and Dutch participants separately (Figure 2). Correlations between covariates (i.e., SES and contact frequency) were included in the model. Father absence before age eight was unrelated to father-offspring avoidance, anxiety, emotional warmth, rejection, and monitoring among Curaçaoan and Dutch participants.

In both cultural groups, contact frequency was negatively associated with father-offspring avoidance, but positively associated with father-offspring emotional warmth and monitoring. Among Dutch participants, contact frequency was also negatively linked to father-offspring anxiety. Only among Curaçaoan participants, SES was negatively associated with avoidance, but positively associated with emotional warmth and monitoring. Yet, only the positive relationships held after Bonferroni correction ($p < .01$).

Sensitivity Checks

As father absence after age eight might also affect father-child relationship quality, we estimated structural equation models with father absence as a continuous variable as well, representing the number of years a father was absent from offspring birth to age 15 (Figure 3). Results did not differ substantially compared to the original models.

Finally, we tested whether father absence, SES, and contact frequency were linked to father-child relationship quality in a model with all outcome variables entered together (Figure 4). Though this model showed convergence problems among Dutch participants, results did not differ substantially compared to the original models among Curaçaoan participants.

Figure 2. *Structural Equation Models with Father Absence before Age Eight, Covariates, and Father-Child Relationship Quality Aspects*

Note. Curaçaoan β 's are in bold, Dutch β 's are in italics. Arrows signify significant paths, dotted lines signify non-significant paths. Indicator loadings of SES (.32 - .86 | .45 - .56), avoidance (-.02 - .96 | .21 - .93), anxiety (.91 - .95 | .88 - .91), emotional warmth (.78 - .90 | .81 - .93), rejection (.31 - .81 | .44 - .77), and monitoring (.43 - .89 | .49 - .84). Coefficient of Determination (CD): .64 - .76 and .53 - .63.

Figure 3. *Structural Equation Models with Father Absence as a Continuous Variable, Covariates, and Father-Child Relationship Quality Aspects*

Note. Curaçaoan β 's are in bold, Dutch β 's are in italics. Arrows signify significant paths, dotted lines signify non-significant paths. Indicator loadings of SES (**.31** - **.89** | .45 - .56), avoidance (**-.02** - **.96** | .21 - .93), anxiety (.91 - .95 | .88 - .91), emotional warmth (.78 - .90 | .81 - .93), rejection (.31 - .81 | .44 - .77), and monitoring (.43 - .89 | .49 - .84). CD: .66 - .81 and .53 - .63.

Figure 4. *Structural Equation Models with Father Absence before Age Eight, Covariates, and all Father-Child Relationship Quality Aspects in One Model among Curaçaoan Participants*

Note. The model was not concave for Dutch participants. Arrows signify significant paths, dotted lines signify non-significant paths. Indicator loadings of SES (.17 - .19), avoidance (-.02 - .95), anxiety (.91 - .95), emotional warmth (.80 - .88), rejection (.33 - .80), and monitoring (.43 - .88). CD = .90.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the association between father absence and father-child relationship quality among Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults. In doing so, we included normative and contra-normative father-absent societies, which differ substantially in the prevalence of father absence and in arrangements of care for offspring following divorce or separation. Moreover, by focusing on matrifocal Curaçao, we included a cultural context on which culturally comparative, systematic, and contemporary research is limited. By focusing on quality of the father-child relationship, we went beyond research that is merely based on the quantitative indicator of “absence versus presence” and tested the implicit assumption that father absence is equivalent to poorer father-child relationships quality. Among the Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults in our sample, father absence was unrelated to father-child attachment, paternal rearing style, and monitoring.

Potential explanations for why father absence did not affect father-child relationship quality among the Curaçaoan participants in our study might come from the already mentioned high incidence and acceptance of this family form on Curaçao, which might imply that father presence versus absence may not influence perceptions of and feelings toward one’s father (Erman and Härkönen, 2017). This is in line with in-depth interviews with father-absent Curaçaoan young people, who did not seem to hold it against their father that he was not around (Osinga, van Bergen, van Brummen-Girigori, Kretschmer, & Timmerman, 2021). That is, many father-absent Curaçaoan young people were positive about their absent father, their bond with him, and his upbringing, reported few difficulties with their father’s absence, and responded that they did not know better, had not missed anything, or that his absence had not influenced them. Father absence and extended family involvement being highly common in Caribbean cultures might have held expectations low for and thereby protected against

negative perceptions of father-child relationship quality among Curaçaoan adolescents and young adults.

Another explanation for why father absence may not affect father-child relationship quality might be that non-residence of a biological father is not an optimal predictor of father-child relationship quality, at least not for Curaçaoan participants. Though Caribbean fathers are generally seen as invisible to their offspring and often portrayed as irresponsible and uninvolved, there's also work reporting that Black fathers' residency status is unrelated to father-child relationship quality (Armstrong, 2019). Not residence but frequency of father-child interactions were important for father-child relationship quality, in the sense that more father-child interactions led offspring to feel closer to their father and share more with him. That is, many Black fathers remain engaged with their offspring, even if they do not share a residence (Coates & Phares, 2014). This is in line with our findings; not the mere "presence" or "absence" of a biological father in the household is important for father-child relationship quality, but instead father-child contact frequency affected father-child relationship quality. Specifically, Curaçaoan participants who reported more contact experienced less avoidant attachment, more emotional warmth, and more paternal knowledge.

Dutch participants who reported more father-child contact also experienced less avoidant attachment, more emotional warmth, and more paternal knowledge, but also less anxious attachment. The importance of contact frequency for evaluations of father-child relationships also emerged from in-depth interviews with father-absent Curaçaoan, Curaçaoan-Dutch, and Dutch young people (Osinga et al., 2021). On the one hand, young people who reported less father-child contact, such as that their father did not make efforts to see them or chose for himself/his new family viewed the relationship with their father negatively. On the other hand, young people who reported more father-child contact, such as through calling – which has become more accessible after technical advancements, helping,

and protecting them and by showing interest viewed the relationship with their father positively. Though some father-child relationships had never been built (i.e., due to a lack of contact), other relationships had been deteriorated because of conflicts and lack of perceived efforts from their father after he left their home.

A potential other explanation for the discrepancy between our study and previous studies, which linked father absence to poorer father-child relationship quality, might come from differences in social, cultural, and economic circumstances. As many studies focused on US samples, it might be that differences in national laws, for instance regarding co-parenting principles and receiving income assistance or alimony, may have contributed to the link between father absence and father-child relationship quality in these samples. In the Netherlands, more and more divorced Dutch parents continue to live close to each other and increasingly many children live with both parents alternately on an equal or nearly equal basis, which is encouraged by Dutch legislation (CBS, 2020). In the US, it might be that physical distance between fathers and their offspring or more traditional arrangements of care for offspring following divorce or separation partly explain why it is difficult to establish or maintain close relationships, to provide emotional support, to monitor offspring behavior, and to participate in after-school and weekend activities (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004). As Curaçao and the Netherlands are relatively small countries, physical distance might not so much be a risk factor for father-child relationship quality among Curaçaoan and Dutch father-absent offspring. Next to that, social security rights such as the child benefit and budget may have served to make the (economic) disadvantages of father absence less severe in Dutch than in US samples, which might affect offspring perceptions of their father-child relationship quality.

Limitations

433 This study adds important knowledge about associations between father absence and
434 father-child relationship quality and responded to the evident need to go beyond the study of
435 the quantitative indicator of “absence versus presence” in father-absence research. Instead, we
436 examined father absence in relation to father-child relationship quality and found no father-
437 absence effects. Nonetheless, some limitations need also be mentioned. First, although we
438 aimed to examine whether culture influenced the relationship between father absence and
439 father-child relationship quality, we could not conduct multiple-group comparisons of
440 regression models or include interactions to test moderation due to measurement variance
441 across culture. Because several studies suggest that culture moderates the link between father
442 absence and offspring outcomes (e.g., Erman & Härkönen, 2017), future research should
443 identify or construct measures that are invariant across groups to be able to examine the
444 influence of such aspects.

445 Second, due to the cross-sectional design of this study, participants’ recollection of
446 father-child relationship quality might be of concern, especially because we included
447 participants between 16 and 23 years old and potential father-absence effects might be more
448 pronounced during earlier stages of the life course (McLanahan et al., 2013). What is more, as
449 we used self-reported data, common method variance might have biased the observed
450 relationships between our measured constructs. Future studies should consider strategies that
451 minimize these potential biases, for instance by using longitudinal study designs or different
452 data sources for predictor and outcome variables (Jordan & Troth, 2020).

453 Third, as we recruited a school sample, we missed adolescents and young adults that
454 were no longer enrolled in school. Because this might be a specific group, it is important for
455 future research to also expand their sample to include participants already out of school.
456 Besides focusing on between group variation, future studies should also consider examining
457 within group variation. For instance, regarding religiousness or reasons of why father left

might have caused variations in the observed relationships between father absence and father-child relationship quality aspects. Moreover, it might be that this study lacked the statistical power to detect true effects. By improving the process – using strategies that have already been mentioned such as minimizing the variability among subjects, or by recruiting a larger sample size, future studies might be able to increase their power (Button et al., 2013).

Finally, despite progress in research on fathering during the past decades (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020), like many other studies into fathering, this study does not include any data provided by fathers themselves. This lack of fathers' perspectives risks the provision of an incomplete view of parenting and offspring family environments. Fathers should not be “absent” parents from the literature on parenting, but instead, future studies should include fathers' perspectives on the relationship with their offspring as well.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the father-absence literature by providing a unique perspective on father absence and father-child relationship quality from both a normative (Curaçao) and contra-normative father-absent society (the Netherlands). Especially with regard to matrifocal Curaçao, culturally comparative, systematic, and contemporary research is limited. Although many studies have linked father absence to poorer father-child relationship quality, father absence was unrelated to father-child attachment, paternal rearing style, and monitoring among the Curaçaoan and Dutch adolescents and young adults in our sample. Not the mere “absence” or “presence” of a biological father in the household, but rather contact frequency between absent fathers and their offspring affected aspects of father-child relationship quality. Though the absence of father-absence effects does not mean that father absence is not a potential risk factor anyway, our data suggest that effects might depend on covariates such as contact frequency and SES, instead of on residence of a biological father. By testing culture-specific links between father absence and offspring outcomes, this

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483 study took an important step towards examining the universality of father-absence effects but
484 further research across demographic characteristics is required to fully understand whether,
485 how, and when father absence might affect offspring outcomes.

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