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Redefining elective co-parenting as PACT: a systematic assessment of published concepts and definitions

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is an increase in the variation of family forms, types of parenthood roles and methods for family formation. One way of family building has most recently been referred to as ‘elective co-parenting’. Yet, many other terms and somewhat diverging concept definitions have been put forward. This paper aims to establish a fundamental conceptual framework.

Methods: We will adhere to a tailored set of guidelines for conceptual ethics organised in four stages: (i) Using a minimal scoping review of published definitions potential attributes are identified, (ii) The potential attributes are organised by theme in order to identify any necessary and sufficient or shared ones, (iii) A conceptual definition of the concept is developed, (iv) The most fitting concept label is determined.

Results: Current terminology lacks comprehensiveness and often contains additional (hidden) meanings, thereby jeopardising its usability for research on contemporary family formation. We suggest a new nomenclature.

Conclusion: We suggest PACT (Pre-conception Agreement-based Co-parenting Together-apart) instead of ‘elective co-parenting’ (or equivalents) as a new concept label for this particular family type, whereby at least two parties of co-parents have agreed before the conception of a child to share parenting of this child. A party can refer either to an individual or a set of romantically involved individuals. Although there may be different types of loving relationships between some (or all) co-parents within this constellation, there is at least some ‘detachment’ that is recognised as being created and present by an absence of romantic love between those parties.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades a gradually increasing variety in family forms has materialised (Macklin, 1980; Segal-Engelchin & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2023). Also, the methods prospective parents might use to enact parenthood, and conceive or rear children have diversified significantly. One such new way of ‘doing family’ (Perlesz et al., 2006) broadly understood

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as the intentional undertaking of a shared parental project by persons who are primarily in a reproductive (and not a 'romantic') relationship with each other – and the main focus of this paper – is increasingly discussed in the literature under the label 'elective co-parenting' (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Harper et al., 2017; Jadva et al., 2015). Other labels are 'intentional co-parenting' (Dempster, 2017), 'platonic co-parenting' (Hunt, 2021), or 'parental/parenting partnerships' (Rodgers & Spedale, 2013). Moreover, said practice is often also discussed under less specific terms such as 'queer parenting' (Averett, 2021), 'rainbow families' (Gato et al., 2021), 'LGBTQ parent families' (Shenkman et al., 2022; Smietana et al., 2018), and 'co-parenting' (Grill, 2020).

These concept labels are frequently accompanied by slightly divergent concept definitions. Despite this, a certain degree of uniformity seems to be shared in the sense that the aforementioned concepts are at the minimum operationalised in order to refer to a particular and new family type rather than being used as pertaining to either the shared activities undertaken by parents, or to a – in some sense universal – collaborative relationship between parents¹ (Eira Nunes et al., 2021), or as new denominators and descriptors for already well-known practices (e.g. stepparenting).

In this respect, for example,² Jadva et al. (2015, p. 1897) define elective co-parenting as 'a relatively new phenomenon, whereby a man and a woman who are not married, co-habiting or involved in a sexual relationship with each other have a child together and typically raise the child in separate households'. While this specific co-parenting practice is often associated with a niche group of gay men and lesbian women, it has recently become more common among other societal groups. This is due in part to a rise of connection websites and 'networking' events dedicated to prospective co-parents (Harper et al., 2017; Ravelingien et al., 2016). Such initiatives have made this path towards parenthood more accessible to a wide variety of people, including *both* LGBTQ+ and heterosexual couples and individuals. This evolution has elicited a first wave of empirical and normative inquiries, as well as an ever-growing media coverage (Cammu, 2020).

The variation in terminology highlighted above shows that a fundamental conceptual framework of the 'elective co-parenting practice' has not been established. As a result, the issuing and implementation of consistent research programs is complicated. This article aims to take a step back from purely content-related questions and develop a shared academic terminology pertaining to what seems to be a new and distinctive family-building type. For this, we will take a stepwise³ approach, working through the stages of a conceptual ethics framework, often also referred to as 'conceptual engineering'. This approach starts from the idea that there is a need for a thorough conceptual (re)evaluation that allows for the articulation of specific complexities, distinguishing the matter at hand from other, seemingly similar concepts and/or practices in the field of study (Burgess et al., 2020), while at the same time keeping a normative agenda in mind (Isaac et al., 2022). For the latter, the reasons for prescribing concepts we *ought* to have and use in the pursuit of high-quality research are underlined (Podsakoff et al., 2016). We deem academic research to be more intellectually and ethically sound when preceded by a rigorous examination of the concepts associated with or typically used in inquiries of the like (Burgess et al., 2020). It will be argued that neither 'elective co-parenting' (and associated definition(s)), nor any of its current alternatives, meet this standard.

The aforementioned proceedings will lead us to propose a new concept definition and concept label ('PACT') for this practice and the people who opt for such a path, while

avoiding to add meaning based on (hidden) assumptions relating to what a family is, or rather should be, and while remaining mindful of the realisation that a society's trajectory, and *a fortiori* the trajectory of individual lives, is shaped by the concepts people live by⁴ (Queloz, 2023).

2. Method

It is impossible to conduct work without using concepts. It is impossible even to conceptualize a topic, without putting a label on it. Concepts are integral to every argument for they address the most basic question of social science research: what are we talking about? (Gerring, 2012, p. 112)

In examining the conceptual repertoire that is at our disposal, we abide – to a certain extent – by the recommendations for creating better concept definitions made by Podsakoff et al. (2016). In their article, Podsakoff and colleagues recognise the need for adequate terminology in the organisational, behavioural, and social sciences. They adhere to the idea that theoretical concepts 'help [us] organise the phenomena in the world around us into meaningful [and discernible] categories', as well as 'serve as the essential building blocks of theory' (p. 165). In this paper, their model will be regarded as a conceptual ethics procedure, meaning a metaphilosophical procedure that is concerned with the assessment as well as the improvement⁵ of concepts (Burgess et al., 2020). As such, to ensure a more systematic approach in articulating conceptual matters and hence achieving more construct validity, Podsakoff et al. (2016) provide a set of guidelines for the assessment of conceptual definitions organised in four stages: (i) Identify potential attributes of the concept by collecting a representative set of definitions, (ii) Organize the potential attributes by theme and identify any necessary and sufficient or shared ones, (iii) Develop a preliminary definition of the concept, and (iv) Refine the conceptual definition

For this article, the last two stages are merged in (iii) Develop a conceptual definition of the concept, and an essential fourth step is added: (iv) Determine the most fitting concept label. Previously, in *The Will To Power* (1901), Nietzsche specified conceptual critique as a process of not merely purifying and polishing concepts, but also *daring to create new labels* where necessary (1968, p. 220, section 409). According to Cappelen (2018), once you have detected a defect in a representational device you care about, you can; (1) do nothing – just live with it, (2) abandon the concept, (3) improve the concept, or (4) replace the concept (p. 3). Against the background of our objective, a choice will have to be made between (3) and (4).

While passing through these four stages, special attention will be paid to ethical considerations. In doing so, it is emphasised that conceptual ethics should be considered primarily as a matter of invention instead of discovery. As is the case in civil engineering, this does not mean that the conceptual choices we make are arbitrary or 'subjective'; 'Which boat, or development of a concept, will work best given our *shared goals, purposes, and situation* may often be an objective matter, once all constraints are in' (Thomasson, 2020, p. 456). Our shared goal here is to neutrally⁶ and correctly represent a particular family type in the (academic) conceptual apparatus, in order to render further inquiry into the topic more sound. In doing so, we resist the idea that analytical pins are always constraining, unilaterally forcing people into inescapable

categories. As such, it is believed that proper concepts are needed to be able to investigate new family formations, and to explore the ways in which parental constellations reproduce as well as challenge the very categorical and heteronormative core of kinship itself (Dahl & Gabb, 2019).

As a first step in our process of conceptual enhancement (stage i) existing knowledge is mapped. More specifically, attributes that are ascribed to the label(s) under discussion are identified. The value of this stage lies in the fact that it can help provide a sense of whether there are already definitions out there that fully and accurately grasp the concept or fail to do so, either because they miss one or more of its key attributes or include attributes that they should not (Podsakoff et al., 2016). For this purpose, several procedures can be useful. In our case, a literature survey (i.e. minimal scoping review) was conducted including English-written academic literature containing one or several explicit definition(s) of 'elective co-parenting' (or equivalents). By 'explicit definition' we mean an overt pursuit of defining and grasping the specificities of a particular parental constellation or family type, rather than of an (universal) interparental relationship, or of the shared activities undertaken by parents.

Furthermore, in accordance with Lederer et al. (2014), the following selection criteria were set a priori and implemented through the ProQuest search engine: papers being (a) a peer-reviewed journal article, book chapter, or conference paper, (b) published in the last ten years, (c) written in English, (d) proposing an explicit concept definition (relevance). Papers cited in the retrieved publications were also included if they satisfied (a), (b), (c) and (d).

The initial search string included various apparent synonyms and variations of the term 'elective co-parenting', which were identified after a preliminary examination of the field of study performed by the first author between October 2023 and December 2023:

'Elective co-parenting' OR 'Elective co-parents' OR 'Elective parenting' OR 'Elective parents' OR 'Intentional co-parenting' OR 'Intentional co-parents' OR 'Intentional parenting' OR 'Intentional parents' OR 'Platonic co-parenting' OR 'Platonic co-parents' OR 'Platonic parenting' OR 'Platonic parents' OR 'Shared parenting' OR 'Shared co-parenting' OR 'Co-parenting' OR 'Co-parents' OR 'Collaborative parenting' OR 'Collaborative parents' OR 'Collective parenting' OR 'Collective parents' OR 'Multi-parent family' OR 'Multi-parent' OR 'Parental partnership' OR 'Parent partnership' OR 'Parenting partnership' OR 'Parental partners' OR 'Parent partners' OR 'Co-parenting partnership' OR 'Co-parental partnership' OR 'Queer family' OR 'Queer parent family' OR 'Queer parents' OR 'Rainbow family' OR 'Rainbow parent family' OR 'Rainbow parents' OR 'LGBTQ+ family' OR 'LGBTQ+ parent family' OR 'LGBTQ+ parents' OR 'Hetero-gay family' OR 'Hetero-gay parent family' OR 'Hetero-gay parents'

For analysis, the definitions were imported into NVivo for first cycle coding. The first cycle coding method adhered to at this stage is 'attribute coding' (Miles et al., 2020).

2.1. Ethical statement

This study did not require formal ethical approval as it did not involve vulnerable human participants, requesting and/or processing sensitive personal data, or other interventions

that fall under the purview of the Ethics Committee of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University.

3. Results

3.1. Identifying potential attributes

After implementing the search string and applying selection criteria (a), (b) and (c), in total 3998 academic articles were obtained (2013–2023). In accordance with criteria (d), all the articles were subsequently assessed based on relevancy (i.e. does the article contain an explicit definition?). After this assessment, we were left with a data pool of 14 academic articles. At last, citations mentioned in these publications were examined based on (a), (b) and (c). This yielded 11 additional scholarly articles. The 25 included articles are mentioned in Table 1, which summarises the attributes found in the analysis of the definitions.

3.2. Identifying necessary and sufficient conditions

A fairly large number of attributes were identified. The next step in the process is, therefore, to group these attributes into categories (Podsakoff et al., 2016). For this, second cycle coding of the codes developed thus far (stage i) was performed (Miles et al., 2020). After careful assessment by the first author, the following attribute categories were found: (a) Subject and timing of the agreement, (b) Number of involved parents, (c) Interparental relationship, (d) Parent profile. In light of our analysis of which core attributes *should* be recognised as necessary and/or jointly sufficient conditions, these categories (represented in the conceptual map in Figure 1) are discussed below.

3.2.1. Subject and timing of the agreement

A large number of the definitions we have obtained, made explicit that this co-parenting type is built on negotiation and subsequent agreement between the involved parties. This seems unnecessary as family relations are said to always (at least in part) be the result of negotiations (Anttila et al., 2023). We can, nonetheless, wonder if there is anything distinctive about the type of negotiation taking place in these situations that should be included in the conceptual definition.

Herbrand (2018a) referred to *the general object* (the ‘what’) of negotiation; ‘These “co-parents” . . . need to determine and negotiate their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the practical arrangements of family organisation’ (p. 312). This line of thinking was echoed by others who allude to the importance of agreements covering parental rights and responsibilities (Elera & Segal-Engelchin, 2014), the ‘degree of parenting’ (Wallbank & Dietz, 2013), the role of each parent in the child’s life and the division of care and financial obligations (Boone, 2018). Again, it remains unclear how this object differs from the object of negotiation between parents in other family types. Finch and Mason (1992), for instance, argue that all kin relationships set the stage for socially mediated negotiations that have responsibility-related commitments as the end product.

Another potential discernible feature brought forward concerns *the form* of the shared agreement. In the definition of Monaco (2022), for example, the aspect of formalisation was explicitly mentioned. The distinctiveness of this agreement might then be found in

Table 1. Summary of attributes.

Author(s)	Concept	Conceptualization	Key Attributes
Bower-Brown et al. (2023)	Elective co-parenting	Elective co-parenting families, meaning two (or more parents) who are not in a romantic relationship having a child together (p. 1).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At least two co-parents Not in a romantic relationship Having a child
Harper et al. (2017)	Elective co-parenting	Elective co-parenting is where a male and female who are not in a sexual relationship decide to have a child together, with the aim of bringing the child up in separate households, but with the involvement of both genetic parents (pp. 13–14)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No sexual relationship Decision for child Aim of separate households Involvement genetic parents (male & female)
Jadva et al. (2015)	Elective co-parenting	Elective co-parenting is a relatively new phenomenon, whereby a man and a woman who are not married, cohabiting or involved in a sexual relationship with each other have a child together and typically raise the child in separate households [...] Elective co-parenting has been more prevalent among gay men and lesbian women. However, there has recently been an increase in co-parenting arrangements among heterosexual men and women. Co-parenting can also include parents of different sexual orientation coming together to raise a child. Often the biological parents have partners, resulting in multiple adults planning the pregnancy and raising the child collectively (p. 1897)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involvement genetic parents (male & female) Not married, co-habiting or in a sexual relationship Having a child Typically raised in separate household Not specific to sexual orientation Often more than two adults involved (partners) Shared planning (of pregnancy) and raising the child
Lingjardi and Carone (2019)	Elective co-parenting	In elective co-parenting arrangements [...] a lesbian woman and a gay man who are not married, cohabiting or involved in a sexual relationship with each other have a child together and typically raise the child in separate households. Often they (i.e. the biological parents) have partners, who may thus be involved in raising the child. In this latter case there are two loving couples who are not the generative couple. As a result, both the loving couples will have a child (p. 231).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific to sexual orientation Not married, co-habiting or in a sexual relationship Typically raised in separate households Often more than two adults involved (partners) Room for intercouple love Child of both couples
Bhatia and Porceddu (2022)	Elective platonic co-parenting	Elective [platonic] co-parenting is a 'relatively new phenomenon'. It is, however, becoming an increasingly attractive option for single people, not in a sexual relationship, or co-habiting, but seeking to have a child together, usually wanting to raise a child in separate households [...] While elective co-parenting has been common for some time amongst LGBTQIA+ communities, it is now being used more generally. This method of family creation often circumvents the need for donor sperm banks, and in some instances the involvement of a regulated fertility clinic in situations where people decide to try to conceive via home insemination (pp. 919–920).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For single people Not in a sexual relationship or co-habiting Having a child as the primary aim Usually the aim of separate households Not specific to sexual orientation Circumventing sperm banks Sometimes circumventing regulated fertility clinics

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author(s)	Concept	Conceptualization	Key Attributes
Herbrand (2018a, 2018b)	Co-parenting (arrangements)	Co-parenting arrangements can vary considerably, including two to four adults or more, of different genders and sexual orientations. While this route to parenthood initially involved mostly gay and lesbian individuals, the rise of specific websites dedicated to such arrangements and the organisation of networking events, such as 'speed-dating' for prospective co-parents, has facilitated its expansion amongst heterosexual women and men in recent years. These 'co-parents' – both the intended biological parents and their possible partners – need to determine and negotiate their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the practical arrangements of family organisation (p. 312). The term "co-parenting" refers here to the parental path, by which a man and a woman who are not a couple have a child that they will raise separately, with or without a partner. Although both biological parents are the child's legal parents, such arrangements often include more than two people who are actively involved even before the child's birth (p. 2). [...] fully equal co-parenting, in which all parties to the contract share the parenthood of the child equally (p. 1640).	At least two adults involved No upper limit of adults Not gender specific Not specific to sexual orientation Negotiative in nature Not a couple Man & woman Separate raising At least the involvement of genetic parents Active involvement before birth
Anttila et al. (2023)	Shared parenting/ fully equal co-parenting		Fully equal co-parenting Contract
Monaco (2022)	Co-parenting	Co-parenting situations involving homosexual people can exist. These situations arise when two or more individuals raise children together even though they are not in a partnered relationship. More specifically, a homosexual person (or a same-sex couple) can make an agreement (not always formalised) with a heterosexual couple or with a single parent to share parental responsibilities (p. 465).	Specific to sexual orientation (always the involvement of at least one homosexual individual or same-sex couple) At least two individuals involved No upper limit of involved co-parents Not in a partnered relationship Agreement, yet not always formalised. Sharing of parental responsibilities

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author(s)	Concept	Conceptualization	Key Attributes
Erera and Segal-Engelchin (2014) & Segal-Engelchin et al. (2019)	Hetero-gay families	Hetero-gay families consist of two birth parents who share parental responsibilities, including financial responsibilities of child rearing, although they do not share a residence. While the mother's home is frequently the children's primary home, both birth parents are actively involved in their children's daily lives and in child-related decisions. Furthermore, in most cases, the birth parents negotiate a shared parenthood agreement before the child's birth, stipulating parental rights and responsibilities (p. 451). [...] hetero-gay families [are formed] for the purpose of conceiving and raising children. These hetero-gay families consist of a heterosexual mother and a gay father who conceive and parent children together while residing in separate households (p. 155).	(Active) involvement genetic parents Sharing of parental responsibilities Not sharing a residence Mother's home is frequently the primary home In most cases a shared agreement is negotiated pre-birth Purpose of conceiving and raising children Specific to sexual orientation (heterosexual mother and gay father) Shared parenting Not sharing a residence
Abraham (2017)	Co-parenting	The term 'co-parenting' describes a situation in which individuals jointly raise children without being in a romantic or legally recognised relationship. Such arrangements occur either after spousal separation, or as a result of a choice to raise children without prior or subsequent romantic involvement. It is important to note in this context that co-parenting is used by members of the LGBTQ community and heterosexuals as individuals, as couples, or in other combinations. In the latter case there are more than two individuals involved (p. 418).	Shared raising No romantic or legally recognised relationship Either after spousal separation, or as a result of choice prior to romantic involvement. Multiple possible combinations There can be more than two individuals involved.
Ravelingjen et al. (2016)	Co-parenting Elective co-parenting	Men and women who are not in a relationship with each other creating and raising a child together (p. 523) [...] an arrangement that best resembles a 'conventional' family, where both biological parents are involved in the child's upbringing. ... not only homosexual, but increasingly also heterosexual men and women, are drawn to these elective co-parenting arrangements (p. 523)	Gender specific (men and women) Not in a relationship Creating and raising a child together. Both biological parents involved Not specific to sexual orientation
Surtees and Bremner (2020)	Collaborative co-parenting	Collaborative co-parenting [...] refers to 'reproductive collaborations' between gay men and lesbians that are characterised by the intention of each of the adults (often more than two) to play some sort of parental role in the child's life (p. 2).	Specific to sexual orientation Characterised by intention to play some sort of parental role by each adult Often more than two involved adults

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author(s)	Concept	Conceptualization	Key Attributes
Bremner (2017; Bremner 2021)	(Gay and lesbian) collaborative co-parenting	The characteristic feature of collaborative co-parenting that sets it apart from other types of parenting following assisted reproduction is the intention that each of the 'parents', often more than two, will remain actively involved in the child's life (p. 2). Gay and lesbian collaborative co-parenting, which challenges existing understandings of parenthood by involving (often) more than two lesbians and gay men in conceiving and raising children together (p. 38).	Following assisted reproduction Intention to remain actively involved by each adults Often more than two involved adults Involving (often) more than two adults Specific to sexual orientation Conceiving and raising the child together
Cammu (2019;2020)	Intentional 'plus-two-parent families'	[...] plus-two-parent families, characterised by an intended parenting project that emerges before the child has been born and in which three or four parents have the intention to parent together, in accordance with the agreements that were made between them (p. 1). Intentional parenthood implies a parent's intention to conceive a child as well as to fulfill a parental role [...]. And we speak of intentional multiple-parent families where more than two parents share parenting tasks from a child's birth (pp. 285–286).	Characterized by the intended parenting project (parenting together) Intended before the birth of the child Three or four parents Agreements made Intention to conceive as well as raise a child More than two parents sharing the parenting tasks
Boone (2018)	Intentional multi-parent families	[...] a new family form involving more than two persons who make the conscious decision to have and raise a child together. Before the conception of the child, co-parenting arrangements are made covering the role of each parent in the child's life and the division of care and financial obligations. These intentional multi-parent families exist in various forms. They may involve a lesbian or a heterosexual couple that conceives a child with the help of a known donor, or a single woman who wishes to co-parent with a male same-sex couple. Some male same-sex couples also co-parent with female same-sex couples. What these persons all have in common is the desire to create a family, which they cannot do on their own, and the wish to involve both biological parents in the upbringing of the child. These families combine a number of phenomena that have become increasingly familiar in recent years: artificial procreation, parenting by single persons or same-sex couples, the separation of parenting from the relationship between parents, and the rearing of children in two households. New in this regard is the involvement of three and sometimes even four intended parents in the parental project (p. 1).	More than two persons involved Conscious decision to have and raise a child together Arrangements made before conception Arrangements cover the role of parents and division of care/obligations Various formations The desire to create a family Cannot create a family on their own Wish to involve both biological parents in upbringing Artificial procreation Single persons or same-sex couples Parenting separated from the relationship between parents Two households Involvement of three and sometimes four intended parents.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author(s)	Concept	Conceptualization	Key Attributes
Smietana et al. (2014)	Co-parenting	As a means of gaining access to parenthood, co-parenting enables a man and a woman who are not a couple to have a child together and to raise the child in separate households. They might do so with their own same-sex partner. One significant feature of such co-parenting arrangements is that the father plays an active parental role unlike most lesbian family projects accomplished by means of insemination with a known donor. They also usually involve more than two people who take care of the child and, unlike step-families, these adults become actively involved in the project even before the child's birth (p. 194).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender specific (man and woman) - No romantic relationship - Have a child together - Separate households - Same-sex partners may be involved - Father plays an active parental role - Usually more than two caretakers involved - Parties are actively involved before the child's birth
Dempsey (2013)	Multi-parent families	Multi-parent families, usually a gay male couple and a lesbian couple raising children together from birth across two households (p. 4).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usually a gay male couple and a lesbian couple - Raising children together - From birth onwards - Two households
Gahan (2017; 2019)	Multi-parent family guild parented families	Families in which there were more than two parents with the plan to permanently coparent their children as part of a multi-parent family. These families began with a same-sex female couple who either joined with a male same-sex couple, or a single gay male, to create their family together (p. 5). Families who are created with more than two parents with the plan to permanently co-parent their children as a family [...] The parents within what has until now been referred to as co-parenting families, also come together to practice their shared craft – parenting, and like guilds they created their groups with the intent to protect and promote their common interest – their child (p. 100).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More than two parents - Plan to permanently co-parent - Always a same-sex female couple involved - Joined by a male same-sex couple or a single gay male. - More than two parents - Plan to permanently co-parent - The creation of groups - Intent to protect and promote the interests of the child
Goldberg and Allen (2013)	Co-parenting	[...] coparenting, whereby the donor occupies the role of another parent (p. 340).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Donor as parent
Wallbank and Dietz (2013)	Plus two parent family	A Plus Two Parent family is defined as an intended parenting project, involving three or more adults assuming a 'parenting' role in varying degrees, depending on the agreement reached. It therefore applies to parties who collectively plan to co-parent a child (p. 452).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intended parenting project - Three or more adults as parents - Varying degrees of parenting possible - Agreement-based

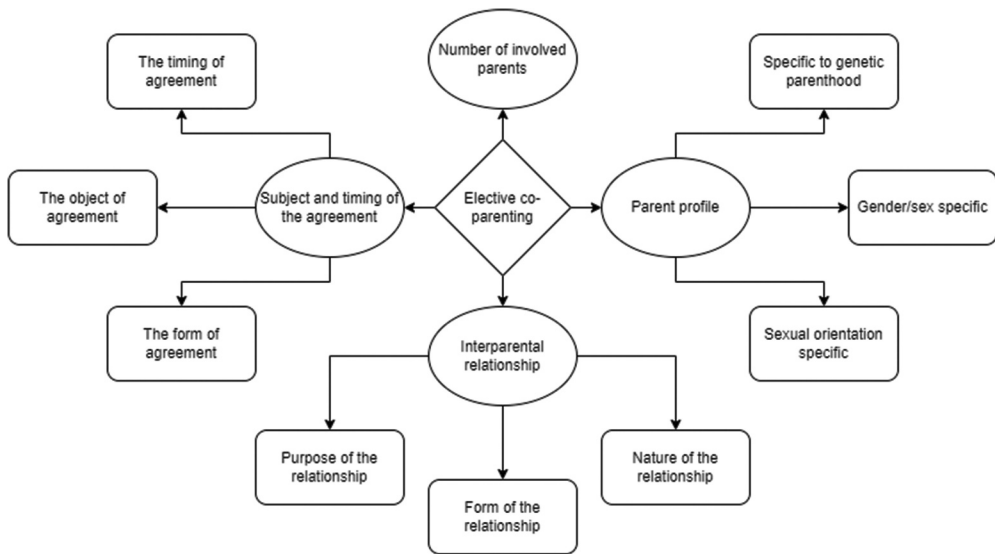


Figure 1. Conceptual map of attribute categories to be considered.

the fact that it is formally established. Proposals that defend the idea that families involving more than two parents should be legally recognised⁷ if they can present an appropriate formalised agreement have already surfaced in the field of family law (Ullrich, 2019). We know, furthermore, that many of these families actually draw up a shared document, although these often remain rather informal (Herbrand, 2018a). The problem with recognising such a document as a core attribute, whether or not it is formalised, is that many families do not take that step (Jadva et al., 2015). Either because they verbally make such agreements, or because they implicitly let the questions of responsibility develop over time. It would be a mistake to categorise these families as a distinct family type based solely on this attribute.

A last specification that seemed to be of interest pertains to the *timing of the agreement*. Most definitions referred to the centrality of intention within these constructions; this specific family type is (in part) characterised by the intention of building such a family. And what is more, the intention has to be shared by agreement *before* conception (e.g. Boone, 2018) or birth (e.g. Smietana et al., 2014) of the child. This point distinguishes the practice at hand from more heteronormative constellations of parenting after separation (for example, in the case of stepparenting). The question then is whether we should be speaking of pre-birth or pre-conception agreements in our conceptual definition.

The timing of the agreement about the allocation of parental responsibilities should be incorporated in our definition because of the role that intentionality plays in these parental projects. The requirement that the intent to parent together be formed before the child's conception is reasonable when one considers that the people who generally choose to form such family type, by and large, have to meticulously plan their reproductive collaboration ('How will we conceive together?') (Bakht & Collins, 2017). This is precisely one of the innovations in the *modus operandi* of family formation that distinguishes this practice from other family forms. It could, however, be argued that, besides

this, there is no good reason to establish the definitional dividing line before conception, instead of before birth. Why not accommodate in the conceptual definition situations in which, for example, an unintended pregnancy leads to a pre-birth – and post-conception – agreement involving the gestational parent and (an)other person(s) to parent this child together (as the definition of, for example, Dempsey seems to allow)?

We believe that such cases are more likely to fall under some kind of ‘co-parenting after separation’-category, since a discontinued ‘romantic’ – at least sexual – relationship precedes the eventual co-parenting. What’s more, since this situation is relatively common, upholding it as an example of ‘elective co-parenting’, ‘platonic co-parenting’, and/or ‘intentional co-parenting’, etc. could undermine the particularity of this new family type. The question might then as well be asked why we should put the limit at pre-birth, and not allow the agreement to form a few weeks or months after birth.

3.2.2. *Number of involved parents*

Most definitions mentioned the number of involved co-parents, albeit often using relative wording (adding ‘often more than two’, ‘usually more than two’, ‘at least two’, ‘three or four’ ...). If we take the ‘elective co-parenting’ situations that, for example, Bower-Brown et al. (2023) discuss, as actually pertaining to cases of this particular type of parenting, there seems to be no reason to limit our definition to family types where there are at least three adults implicated. The collaborative nature (c) of the relationship between co-parents, meanwhile, does necessitate the involvement of at least two adults as co-parents who, in addition, do not form a party, whereby a ‘party’ is defined as an individual or a set of romantically involved individuals, who have been involved in the agreement from the start (pre-conception). Further exploration of this party clause is deferred to the next section.

3.2.3. *Interparental relationship*

Most, if not all, definitions postulated a *particular* relationship between the involved adults (co-parents) that is not to be confused with a more universal interparental relationship, as it is understood to have a specific purpose, as well as specific properties of structure and nature.

3.2.3.1. *Purpose of the relationship*

Some authors mentioned ‘having a child’ as the primary aim of this particular relationship (e.g. Bhatia & Porceddu, 2022; Bower-Brown et al., 2023). The alliance between the co-parents is hence construed primarily as a reproductive one. If we would not consider additional determinants for this relationship, focusing solely on its reproductive aspect risks ‘reducing’ the other in the relationship to the status of a known donor. Segal-Engelchin et al. (2019) added the motive of ‘raising children’, understood as an act of *shared* parenting. They thereby stated that these kinds of families are formed ‘for the purpose of conceiving and raising children’. Not only are these families build upon the goal of having a child, but they also strive for the sharing of parental care and responsibilities. We argue, furthermore, that ‘having a child’ should not literally mean ‘begetting a child’ as there are people who are not biologically – genetically or gestationally – involved,⁸ yet still regarded as co-parents and as part of the family type.

Related to this question of shared parenting, the aim of raising the child in separate households was mentioned more than once (e.g. Harper et al., 2017; Herbrand, 2018b). Although this living arrangement is typically adopted, co-parents also often decide to live under the same roof (Italie, 2023).

3.2.3.2. *Form of the relationship*

Besides the purpose of the relationship, most definitions also delineate the form of the relationship between co-parents. The definition of Anttila et al. (2023), for example, advances the position that this shared parenting takes on the shape of ‘fully equal co-parenting, in which all parties to the contract share the parenthood of the child equally’ (p. 1640). This would, however, render the need for negotiation obsolete, as well as run against the idea that fully equal co-parenting is unrealistic in *any* family situation. It is more accurate to state that the co-parents assume ‘a “parenting” role in varying degrees [of parental responsibilities] depending on the agreement reached’ (Wallbank & Dietz, 2013).

3.2.3.3. *Nature of the relationship*

One property of this relationship seems to be that it is platonic, rather than romantic, in nature. The absence of romance was in turn specified as the absence of a sexual relationship (Harper et al., 2017), co-habitation (Bhatia & Porceddu, 2022), marriage, or one of the above (Lingiardi & Carone, 2019). Reasons have already been given to drop the requirement of not living together as necessary for defining the concept. The imperative that the co-parents should not be married or not be involved in sexual relations can, however, still be debated. Perhaps it is helpful to take a step back and consider where these conditions originate from. We regard these conditions as reflective of what is socially perceived as a proper ‘partnered relationship’ (Monaco, 2022). This reliance on social interpretation, however, complicates the specification of romantic/partnered relationships, prompting the consideration of whether it may be better to presume that individuals generally comprehend the ‘nature’ of romantic connections in contrast to other forms of love (e.g. familial, parent-child).

Adding a no-romance clause, furthermore, seems to be based on the idea that in this type of family, parenting must be done together, in some form of collaboration, while the parents are not involved in such a partnered relationship. We therefore believe this requirement to be, perhaps primarily, about creating a distance, highlighting some kind of detachment *within* a relational context. This distance can be seen as represented by the absence of romantic love, at least between the parties (as defined in b) of co-parents in the family constellation. The absence of romantic love between the parties involved distinguishes this particular family type from forms of consensually non-monogamous (polyamorous) parenting (Lippmann et al., 2024) while recognising the possibility of intraparty romantic love where there are more than two co-parents involved. It should therefore be made explicit in the conceptual definition.

3.2.4. *Parent profile*

According to some definitions, the co-parents taking part in this family type must fit a certain profile that is specified in terms of gender/sex, genetic parenthood, and sexual orientation. It is argued here that all these specifications are unnecessary.

Smietana et al. (2014), to illustrate the first specification, seem to contend that the parent profile is gender specific, by which they presume the involvement of at least a man and a woman. Should this necessarily be the case? Herbrand (2018a) seems to posit a more inclusive perspective, embracing a variety of co-parents 'of different genders'. It remains unclear, however, whether she actually had a continuum of genders and the free intermix of these in mind, or rather alluded again to the 'two opposing sexes/genders', i.e. a man and a woman.

The condition of gender specificity is closely related to, and might stem from, the belief that this family type is chosen over alternatives because the co-parents want to include both genetic parents (e.g. Jadvá et al., 2015). We know, nevertheless, that this need not always be the case. The modest amount of research that has already been done, shows the complexities at play in these arrangements, also regarding motivations. These can, for instance, also concern the desire to not parent on your own or to form a family quickly (e.g. when racing the 'biological clock') (Ibid). Monaco's (2022) interpretation of 'co-parenting' as a situation in which 'a homosexual person (or a same-sex couple) can make an agreement (not always formalised) with a heterosexual couple or with a single parent to share parental responsibilities' (p. 465), allows for co-parenting between two (or more) men or women, thus rendering this arrangement gender non-specific.

A gender non-specific characterisation better represents the current family realities, notwithstanding that Monaco (2022) in turn (and unnecessarily) introduced a specification in sexual orientation. Erera and Segal-Engelchin (2014, p. 2019) did this more explicitly by speaking of 'hetero-gay families'. Similarly, but presuming a different parent profile, Surtees and Bremner (2020) referred to 'collaborative co-parenting' as reproductive collaborations between gay men and lesbian women. In contrast, Bhatia and Porceddu (2022) referred to the fact that 'while elective co-parenting has been common for some time amongst LGBTQIA+ communities, it is now being used more generally' (p. 919). 'Generally' may in this case be understood as Jadvá et al. (2015) see it; including gay-gay and hetero-hetero combinations, as well as 'parents of different sexual orientation coming together' (p. 1897).

3.2.5. *Jointly sufficient conditions*

Identifying and discussing the underlying categories helped to structure the attributes and clarify which ones are to be regarded as necessary (Figure 2). However, none of these necessary attributes appeared to be sufficient, meaning none were unique to and covered the whole practice. Evaluating each attribute individually showed that they were necessary for at least one other family type (e.g. stepparenting, co-parenting after separation, single motherhood by choice, or known donorship).⁹ It is only when these core attributes are taken together, as is done in Table 2, that they can be seen as jointly sufficient, meaning that as a set they form a property that only exemplars of the concept possess (Podsakoff et al., 2016). If you do not include the necessary attribute of 'at least two adults involved' in this set, for example, single mothers by choice (SMC) would mistakenly be

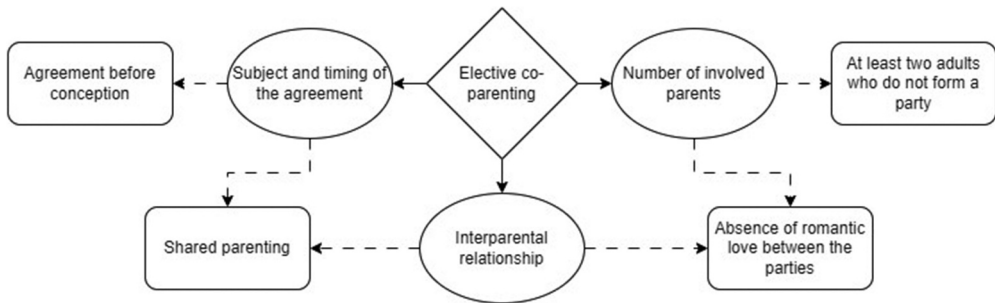


Figure 2. Conceptual map of attributes to be regarded as necessary.

Table 2. Summary of necessary and sufficient attributes.

Attributes	Elective co-parenting	Stepparenting	Co-parenting after separation	Single mother by choice (SMC)	Known donor	Conclusions
A1: Agreement before conception	present	absent	absent	Somewhat present	present	Necessary but not sufficient
A2: Shared parenting	present	present	present	absent	absent	Necessary but not sufficient
A3: Absence of romantic love between the parties	present	present	present	N/A	present	Necessary but not sufficient
A4: At least two adults involved who do not form a party	present	present	present	absent	present	Necessary but not sufficient
A1 and A2 and A3 And A4	present	absent	absent	absent	absent	Necessary and jointly sufficient

covered by the concept. These jointly sufficient core attributes will greatly enhance the precision of the conceptual definition being developed.

3.3. Defining the concept

The main purpose of a definition is to achieve conceptual clarity without needless repetition and without the addition of unnecessary conditions. The previous steps facilitate the formulation of a conceptual definition for the type of co-parenting considered here which fulfils this purpose. Indeed, as noted by Cohen and Nagel (2002):

‘A definition’, according to Aristotle, ‘is a phrase signifying a thing’s essence’. By the essence of a thing he understood the set of fundamental attributes which are the necessary and sufficient conditions for any concrete thing to be a thing of that type. (p. 235)

Taking this into consideration, we propose the following definition:

A family type, whereby at least two parties of co-parents have agreed before the conception of a child to share parenting of this child. A party, in this case, can refer either to an individual or a set of romantically involved individuals. Although there may be different types of loving relationships between some (or all) co-parents within this

constellation, there is at least some ‘detachment’ that is recognised as being created and present by *an absence of romantic love between those parties*.

This definition covers a variety of co-parenting constructions (e.g. these can vary depending on the number of co-parents, per definition two or more). We acknowledge that variations in these characteristics may have distinct implications, for example regarding counselling approaches. It is essential to consider these differences and tailor guiding procedures based on the needs of these varying family forms (McCann, 2001).

However, while acknowledging these differences, this concept definition aims to establish a single framework for examining these diverse co-parenting arrangements through their shared structural characteristics (such as the pre-conceptual negotiations and agreement to share the parenting of the child). To give one example, we hypothesise that the parenting (and counselling) trajectories of PACT families will differ fundamentally from those of single-parent families.¹⁰ However, further research, guided by our conceptual definition, is essential for deepening our understanding of these family forms, mapping and addressing their associated needs, as well as for developing comprehensive approaches to address them.

3.4. Determining the most fitting concept label

As we have stated above, not only the conceptual definition should be object of (re) evaluation. It is essential to also scrutinise the concept label and put a more appropriate label forward if needed. In an attempt to either find a more neutral label or to propose a wholly new alternative, the concept labels used throughout the obtained literature will briefly be assessed based on the hidden meanings contained in them.

In ‘elective co-parenting’, the term ‘elective’ puts choice at the centre stage as the main characteristic for understanding this practice. That being so, the processes and circumstances that inform how individuals and communities perceive and negotiate their families are obscured (Bakhr, 2019). It does not account for the fact that this family type often is a negative choice¹¹ (or ‘choice by elimination’), the only real option or ‘last’ recourse¹² in the pursuit of a family rather than one option among many. The term ‘intentional co-parenting’ faces similar issues. Although a focus on intent seems to make more sense in a procreation context than a focus on choice (as if non-elective co-parenting would necessarily be coercive or pre-determined),¹³ both concept labels do not clearly differentiate this particular family type from practices of stepparenting or *wilful* co-parenting after separation, which both involve intentional or chosen co-parenting.

Above we already touched upon some of the problems other labels face. Labels such as ‘multi-parent families’, ‘plus-two-parent families’, or analogous labels, for example, can be confusing as they seem to imply that this family construction presumes more than two parents, which need not always be the case. Then again, speaking of ‘platonic-’ or ‘no romance co-parenting’ understates the strong emotional ties that (can) exist between individuals who share a parental project, as well as the reality that in multi-parenting constellations there often are romantic relationships within the parties of involved co-parents. Finally, labels such as ‘co-parenting’, the tautological ‘collaborative co-parenting’, or ‘guild parented families’, lack specificity.

To better ensure neutrality, as well as clarity in our concept label, we cannot lose sight of the different attributes that the concept definition puts forward. We, nevertheless, want to avoid a label that is too long and/or convoluted. It may, therefore, be helpful to adopt

an acronym. We suggest referring to this family type as a PACT family, i.e. a Pre-conception Agreement-based Co-parenting Together-apart Family. 'Together-apart' is a concept adopted from Westerling (2016) and emphasises the we-ness of collaborating in a joint parental project, while at the same time recognising a distance between some of the parties involved, a distance we do not find in strictly 'romantic parenting relationships' (one might call these 'together-together' partnerships). In contrast, making the 'no romance' more explicit would indirectly invalidate this we-ness. The PACT-acronym incorporates all the necessary – and jointly sufficient – attributes discussed above, while at the same time keeping a clear connection to practice, in which the role of a pact certainly has its place, thus enhancing its overall usability.

4. Limitations

The main challenge in this study was the construction of a suitable search strategy to find papers on a topic for which a wide range of (often contested) concepts and terminology was used. For this, we explored possible strategies (e.g. scoping review) and data sources (e.g. English-written academic papers) but did not focus on empirical research, definitions in non-academic articles, etc. This being the case, the present article should be understood primarily as agenda-setting.

5. Conclusion

After having passed through our four-stage process of conceptual ethics, we suggest PACT (Pre-conception Agreement-based Co-parenting Together-apart) instead of 'elective co-parenting' (or equivalents) as the most fitting concept label for this particular family type. We, furthermore, take PACT to refer to a family type whereby at least two parties of co-parents have agreed before the conception of a child to share parenting of this child. A party, in this case, can refer either to an individual or a set of romantically involved individuals. Although there may be different types of loving relationships between some (or all) co-parents within this constellation, there is at least some 'detachment' that is recognised as being created and present by an absence of romantic love between those parties.

Further research in these families may bring new insights (attributes) that may need to be reflected in an improved concept definition and/or label. With this, we reject the basic foundationalist idea that there exists one set of concepts that is 'eternal', meaning timelessly and definitively best (Queloz, 2023). The authors are therefore hopeful that the debate on the conceptual issue of PACT families, whatever may follow, has not reached its endpoint here.

Notes

1. As, for example, 'co-parenting' often is.
2. The definition of Jadva et al. serves mainly as an illustration. We will argue below that it has several shortcomings.
3. This article attempts to guide the reader through the research process, instead of focusing solely on the research results.

4. There are indications, for example, that the lack of inclusive language used by medical professionals creates an array of structural barriers to care for LGBTQ+ people (American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 2024).
5. 'Amelioration'.
6. i.e. without (implicitly) attaching unnecessary meanings to this family type.
7. Of course, legal recognition should not be confused with the factual existence or non-existence of certain family types.
8. They do, however, contribute to the conceiving of the child in their own way.
9. These comparative parenting constellations were not selected in advance but resulted from the evaluation process that considered the conceptual necessity and sufficiency of the attributes. The authors regarded them as clear counterexamples to potential claims of individual sufficiency.
10. In single-parent families, the need for social support around the sole parent is often seen as a critical (but also contested) consideration, whereas in other family constellations, this may not always emerge as an immediate concern (Lindell Pettersson et al., 2023).
11. Meaning that it was only seriously considered when other options were ruled out.
12. Assuming that for some, for example, single parenthood is not perceived as an option at all.
13. Whatever this may mean.

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LD is the main author of this paper and did the largest part of the analysis and writing. GP, HB and VP contributed to the design of the study and were all involved in the writing of the paper.

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