The Grief Reaction of Noncustodial Fathers Subsequent to Divorce*
Edward Kruk**
University of Calgary

During the past two decades in particular, fatherhood and divorce have achieved prominence as salient topics for empirical investigation. Fatherhood accounts, however, have been largely confined to analyses of the father role in the two-parent family, and to some extent single fatherhood, while investigations of divorce have mainly focused on single custodial mothers and their children. The non-custodial divorced father population in particular remains largely neglected, and attempts to engage these fathers in the therapeutic endeavor have been problematic (Kruk, 1989). The purpose of this paper is to speculate on the general nature of the impact of divorce on fathers without custody of their children, and to examine some of the implications for mental health practitioners vis-a-vis engaging these men. The author’s clinical and research experience with this group will be drawn upon, and fathers’ self-reports will be presented as valid for their own sake: fathers’ perceptions in and of themselves represent much-needed and important data. In this context, direct quotes from a research sample of non-custodial fathers interviewed by the writer will be interspersed throughout the paper. In particular, non-custodial fathers’ progression along the grief resolution continuum will be charted.

The Bereavement Continuum
Like all divorced family members, fathers face multiple losses upon divorce. Bohannan’s (1970) six “stations” of divorce refer to six distinct types of loss that occur simultaneously for all divorcing parents: the emotional divorce represents the process of mourning the loss of the marital relationship; the co-parental divorce refers to the process of redefining the rights and duties of each parent, including custody and access, altering the dynamics of the parent-child relationship of both parents; the legal divorce involves the process of the legal dissolution of the marriage which establishes the right to remarry; the economic divorce refers to the process of negotiating new financial arrangements, including property division and child support, and each spouse becoming a separate economic unit; the community divorce involves the severance of bonds and sources of support from social systems in the community and the establishment of new ones, recognizing the new identities of the spouses from a couple to two individual units; and the psychic divorce is the process of each spouse developing an autonomous self-identity, differentiating him- or herself from the marital relationship as well as coping with feelings of failure and desertion.

All the above losses apply to non-custodial fathers. Additionally, however, these men face a potential trauma not experienced by custodial parents: the loss of their children and their former parental role. Current accounts of the grief reaction of the divorced, not controlling for the gender or custodial status of the parent, fail to acknowledge the fact that the loss of children in particular, in the midst of the multitude of losses faced upon divorce, may be the most debilitating for those parents without custody of their children. Fathers, who continue to comprise 90% of the noncustodial parent population, despite recent initiatives toward the expansion of custodial alternatives after divorce, may thus be considered as a highly at-risk but less visible population in the context of divorce and its consequences.

One thing that very few people are really able to appreciate is that whoever it is who does not have custody, whoever it is who moves out of the home—that you are out there, you are in your flat or your room or whatever—you are away from your children, and your wife, and they are in a family home, in their familiar surroundings, your wife has the children there (be they crutches, or be they a great joy), but they are people who care about each other, they are a threesome, and you are the isolated one—that can be absolute desolation, and you really can’t (whatever has the children can’t) ever really, really ever start to perceive how isolated one feels in the absence of your family. And that I think is perhaps the greatest tragedy of all. One may say verbally “that’s really difficult,” but if you face that for 3 or 4 years, it’s really a very hard cross to bear. (“Contact” non-custodial father, who has remained in contact with his children on a “visiting” basis.)

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**Edward Kruk, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Social Work. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Edward Kruk, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive, N.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4.
The loss of custody on one's children and the pre-divorce father-child relationship is likely to be particularly problematic if the loss was unanticipated: sudden, unexpected and untimely losses are most likely to be associated with difficult outcomes (Parkes, 1986). A significant proportion of noncustodial fathers experience divorce as a largely unanticipated event; in a majority of instances—about 70% of cases—mothers initiate the separation (Furstenberg et al., 1983), which is typically precipitated by a single crisis. Lack of awareness of the impending separation is common among fathers in wife-initiated divorces, as the mechanism of denial is potent for "non-initiators" during the initial stages of divorce (Jordan, 1985).

The inhibition of emotional expression, largely a product of men's socialization, also complicates the "working through" of custody loss for many fathers, particularly if they felt unprepared for the divorce. Many fathers feel compelled to disguise their symptoms and present a "facade of coping" to the world, and are unlikely to seek or obtain any kind of support, either informal or formal, at the time of divorce. Fathers' grief after divorce may be intense, yet often is not readily recognized and supported by others, either within their immediate family or in the community. Normative and cultural factors discouraging the expression of grief, combined with inadequate or non-existent social supports after bereavement, are also important contributors to poor outcome (Parkes & Weiss, 1983). For many fathers, their former wives had represented a primary source of emotional support in times of crisis; with the dissolution of the marital relationship, feelings of betrayal and distrust are particularly pronounced.

Theories of attachment and loss, particularly those formulations characterizing the bereavement process as comprising a series of phases representing some of the processes of adaptation to loss, provide a compatible framework for an analysis of non-custodial fathers' grief reaction. The classical framework outlined by Kubler-Ross (1953) describes five stages that individuals experience in the resolution of separation and loss caused by death. Translated to the divorce situation, in the initial stage of the grief process, the newly divorced father cannot fully comprehend the reality of the separation; denial functions as a temporary defense against the shock of divorce and the multiple losses associated with it. When denial ceases, confronting the reality of the divorce engenders anger and hostility, much of which becomes projected onto the former spouse, who is often held responsible for the divorce, particularly if she is seen as having initiated the process. The third stage, bargaining, also constitutes a common pattern of behavior as fathers further assimilate the reality of the divorce, in their attempts to effect a reconciliation or passivity in the face of legal action taken by the former spouse toward legal divorce and sole maternal custody. In stage four, depression, a father's denial and anger are replaced by a profound sense of loss, as his emotional investment in his children and family is fully realized and their loss assimilated. With time, a "working through" of the loss leads to some level of acceptance, the final stage of the bereavement process.

As far as what fathers themselves go through, I'd read the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross book on the five stages of dying, and I'd noticed along the way that I was going through the same stages—disbelief, a lot of anger, grief—I've had a lot of that, a lot of crying, and then resignation, acceptance. Now death is a great stress situation, but the break-up of a family can be a type of death, it can be similarly stressful. Some people may be bloody glad, they may feel relief after separation—but it can also be, for others, the most stressful event in their lives. And I think the same five stages apply not just to dying, but to any great stress situation, including the breakdown of a family. If you look around, you can notice it to a greater or lesser degree in all kinds of people going through crisis situations. ("Contact" father)

Wiseman (1975) outlined a grief process of divorce that builds upon the Kubler-Ross framework. First, within the marriage, one or both of the partners deny the existence of problems, and use this denial to maintain the relationship. When at least one of the partners responds to the stress of ongoing difficulties and initiates the divorce, feelings of loss and depression occur. As the reality of the divorce becomes established, depression is replaced by anger, prominent in the stage of custody, access, and financial determination. The fourth stage, "reorientation of lifestyle and identity," involves a changing of habits and redirection of energy toward "the reworking of identity in all areas touched by marriage: personal, vocational, sexual and social" (Wiseman, 1975, p. 209). The final phase of acceptance occurs when "new patterns of interaction without the absent spouse have become firmly established" (p. 211). Kressel (1980) delineated four stages of divorce as part of a "general human adaptive mechanism," namely, denial, mourning, anger and readjustment. He saw this coping process as consisting of four major periods: a pre-divorce decision period, decision period, a period of negotiation, and a period of re-equilibration, noting a lack of recovery of "non-initiators" as compared to the initiators of divorce.

Neither formulation, however, takes into account the unique loss of non-custodial fathers; the satisfactory resolution of the final stage of "acceptance," "reorientation of lifestyle and identity," or "readjustment" may be particularly problematic for those who face the loss of their children and the pre-divorce father-child relationship. In outlining their model, neither Wiseman nor Kressel differ-
entiate between women and men, those with or without children, or those with or without child custody. A rethinking of the impact of divorce on noncustodial fathers is urgently needed; above all, it should be recognized that because of their “non-custodial” status, the majority of fathers experience divorce in a radically different way than do other groups of divorced men and women.

You get into a routine, a certain family way of life which you value deeply. It’s impossible to adjust if this has meant a lot to you and you’ve suddenly lost it. I would have accepted the separation if it was just my wife and I—the fact that there’s a child makes it impossible to accept. It’s a total, complete upheaval—losing my son to me means having lost everything in life. It’s like a life sentence, it’s like prison. (“Non-contact” father, who has lost all contact with his children subsequent to divorce.)

Several years after the divorce, different fathers locate themselves at quite different stages of the bereavement continuum. A significant number of fathers do not reach the point of “acceptance” or “resolution”; many speak of continuing depression and an overwhelming sense of loss, with themes of isolation, loneliness, and a total upheaval of their lives, related first and foremost to the absence of their dependent children.

I can only talk about my own experience, because each case is unique. It’s very, very hard on me. I walk around in a perpetual cloud. It’s ruined everything for me—screwed up my work, screwed up my personal life—it was everything; it was my whole existence. Oh God, it’s left a kind of emptiness, a sadness. It’s left a resignation that’s almost Oriental. It’s left a sort of cloud hanging over me. I think an awful lot of people, when they meet me, think perhaps afterwards, “There’s something about that person but I can’t put my finger on it.” But it’s something tangible—because people have very strong reactions to it. (“Non-contact” father)

I don’t think I’ll ever stop hurting—it’s hurt me ever since the separation, and I think it’ll hurt for the rest of my life. The whole thing has just been such a waste, such a sad waste. (“Non-contact” father)

There’s been a lot of time spent dwelling on the way things might have been, thinking about them and what they might be doing, even what they might be doing together. There’s a lot of sadness. It’s affected me very strongly emotionally. My life has taken a completely different direction—not one which I would have chosen—and given the opportunity I certainly would choose to go back to my old life. I feel that having developed this relationship with the kids that was suddenly cut off—and it’s like losing part of my body. (“Non-contact” father)

Just like a sort of hole in your life, a loss, as if someone’s died. (“Contact” father)

Related to the threatened or actual loss of one’s children after divorce is the loss of a particular role or set of functions that together constitute the “father” role. A clear danger of child absence, according to Greif (1979), is perceived role loss, which may lead to further distancing from the child. Child absence produces a significant change in a father’s perception of his functioning as a parent, and this becomes self-reinforcing: fathers who do not perceive themselves as important in the fathering role are less motivated to maintain that role.

I would say that there has to be a distancing in the relationship. The closeness that previously existed would be eroded. And I think even more basic than that, the children wouldn’t really regard that father as being a father in the sense of that role—certainly not as somebody as important in their lives as their mother—which previously would have been the case. When you’re living as a family, each parent is equally important, maybe in different ways, but equally important, in the lives of the children. Once you’ve left, the only person who’s important in their lives is the mother—the father isn’t there, and is somebody that they go to from time to time. That becomes a relationship they can live without. (“Non-contact” father)

As Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found, fathers experience a variety of constraints in the new post-divorce access or “visiting” relationship, describing the avuncular nature of the relationship and the fact that “visiting” in no way constitutes “real fatherhood.” Many refer to the pain of the visits, and the artificial and strained atmosphere surrounding them; without a day-to-day familiarity, fathers and children often experience an awkwardness at the start of each visit; saying “goodbye” is a particularly painful reminder of the loss of living with each other on a full-time basis.

I think it’s devastating on the father because if the father is a truly loving person he wants to care and be part of the nurturing of the children—and just visiting is not doing that. Fathers need to know that they can provide a home for the children. Just going out and visiting, the father is not performing a fathering role—it’s more like a friend role. And children need more than a friend in a father. (“Non-contact” father)
There's a tremendous feeling of frustration, a great sense of loss in contributing really very little to the lives of the kids. Missing the stages of growing up. All sorts of day-to-day things which are part of normal family life—being familiar with the kids' progress in school, their friends, their interests, even things like what they like to eat. All these little things sort of build up into the blocks which form a relationship—suddenly all those blocks are removed. And it gives you very little on which to really build a relationship. ("Non-contact" father)

I'm crushed when I have to take him home. A weekend isn't enough. I feel like I'm abandoning him when I have to take him back—it's like I feel I'm constantly wounding him each time. But I'm not abandoning him by choice—it's because I have to. ("Non-contact" father)

It had a devastating effect on me. I had to readjust to the fact that I really did have two sons, but who were not close to me any more. When they came we were able to get close, but the heartache would really begin when they had to leave. I mean, that feeling has never ever left me. Everytime I had to say "Cheerio" to those boys, they were in agony, their hearts are in turmoil, and so is mine. I just find it all so sad—it's total agony and turmoil. ("Non-contact" father)

Of all potential adjustments, the most compelling problem for fathers is their pervasive sense of the loss of their children, and it is with the realization of this loss in particular that the classical symptoms of bereavement become manifest. The grief reaction of non-custodial fathers is directly and primarily connected to the actual or threatened loss of their children; such a formulation is a marked departure from the current emphasis in the literature on the loss of the marital relationship as being most salient for divorced men, in studies not controlling for the presence of children in the marriage or for gender/custodial status, which effectively ignores fathers' attachment bonds with their children.

As examinations of the father-child relationship before divorce indicate, fathers' emotional investment in and attachment to their children is strong, despite varying rates of actual participation in child-care and child-rearing tasks; for non-custodial fathers divorce represents a threatened or actual loss of a primary attachment. This combination of attachment and loss necessarily occasions a reaction of mourning. The degree of bereavement is dependent on the strength of the attachment to the lost person: the more intense the pre-existing relationship between father and child, the more complex the mourning and the greater the probability of poor outcome. Initial reactions of intense yearning (characteristic of those with previously intense attachments) are particularly strong predictors of poor outcome (Parkes & Weiss, 1983).

The strength of the pre-divorce father-child attachment bond becomes manifest several months and years after divorce, when the course of "grief work" takes radically different turns for fathers. Noncustodial fathers locate themselves at quite different stages of bereavement continuum: while some continue mourning and become "stuck" along the continuum, others are able to successfully "work through" and resolve their grief, and report positive outcomes of divorce for themselves and their children. Paradoxically, many fathers less attached to their children within the marriage subsequently find that they are able, within the confines of non-custodial fatherhood, to spend time alone with their children in more intense and meaningful ways, and thus are presented with the opportunity to develop stronger bonds with their children than they had before the divorce. For highly attached fathers, however, life after divorce is far from a positive experience; the resolution of the grieving process remains highly problematic, regardless of time elapsed since the divorce. The most vulnerable group of fathers vis-a-vis divorce are those with the most developed attachment bonds with their children.

Implications for Therapeutic Practice

A profile of non-custodial divorced fathers, particularly those who had relatively high pre-divorce involvement with and attachment to their children, may thus be generated: non-custodial divorced fathers of dependent children constitute a group of men who may be highly at-risk, many remaining at a high level of chronic distress several years after divorce. Non-custodial fathers go through a grieving process during divorce, and this grief is directly and primarily connected to the actual or threatened loss of their children. There are, however, significant differences in the course of grief work for fathers. Several months and years after divorce, different fathers locate themselves at quite different stages of the bereavement continuum: continued numbness, shock and denial; anger, outrage, and mistrust; hopelessness and depression; or else acceptance, resolution, and perhaps relief. While some fathers continue mourning and become "stuck" along the continuum, others are able to successfully "work through" and resolve their grief; the prognosis is most favorable for those with less well-developed pre-divorce attachment bonds with their children.

Such a profile highlights the need for closer therapeutic attention to non-custodial fathers by mental health practitioners working with divorced and divorcing populations, and for affirmative programs of outreach to engage these men in the therapeutic endeavor. Such a task, however, remains problematic for those in helping profes-
sions which are historically rooted in traditional practice models based on a variety of formulations characterizing fathers as peripheral to parenting (Marsh, 1987). Despite a more recent rethinking of traditional theories of child development and psychopathology, with new models of family therapy and task-centered therapy pointing to the needed involvement of all family members, stereotypical assumptions remain widespread in relation to the non-custodial divorced father. Further, the opposition of custodial mothers may become a major obstacle, and the assumed resistance of fathers to clinical involvement cause many practitioners to prematurely abandon their attempts to include them. Therapeutic practice with the divorced thus remains largely maternally-based.

To actively engage fathers, it must be recognized that fathers are significantly affected by divorce and the threatened or actual loss of their children: it is this loss in particular which activates a grief reaction containing all the major elements of bereavement. It should also be acknowledged that fathers have a strong desire and need to maintain regular and frequent contact with their children after divorce; for the greater majority of non-custodial fathers, traditional access arrangements are highly inadequate.

Patters of traditional gender-role socialization, directing men toward self-sufficiency, emotional restraint, and independent problem-solving, have mitigated against fathers being able to acknowledge mental health needs and request help (Forster, 1988). A fear of self-disclosure and a feeling of disloyalty to one’s family in exposing family problems, and a need to present an image of control or a “facade of coping” in the form of exterior calm, strength, and rationality, despite a considerable amount of personal turmoil, are common. Mental health practitioners do not always consider such inner obstacles to therapy.

The therapeutic process can be modified to address the mental health needs of divorced fathers in a number of ways. In the initial and latter stages of divorce, noncustodial fathers are looking for a combination of practical advice and emotional support. While they express a preference for a goal-oriented, problem-solving approach, they also have a need to talk about their feelings with someone able to convey, in a genuine and non-judgmental way, an understanding of their experience of divorce and child absence. Fathers often experience a lack of understanding and a general public hostility to their feelings of loss, depression, and victimization. It is crucial that the practitioner take the initiative to combat fathers’ emotional inexpressiveness (Bowl, 1985) by demonstrating an understanding of fathers’ feelings, normalizing the experience of having such intense emotions, and bolstering fathers’ self-esteem and their sense of parental identity.

As the most salient loss of non-custodial fathers is that of their children and the pre-divorce father-child relation-

ship, the therapist’s agenda with divorced fathers should always include a focus on the children of the marriage. The most pressing need for the great majority of non-custodial fathers, particularly those highly involved with and attached to their children before divorce, is their continued meaningful involvement with their children. In those cases where both parents have been capable and nurturant caretakers of their children during the marriage, mental health practitioners have a professional responsibility to support the active involvement of non-custodial fathers in their children’s lives: the clinical picture of fathers is most favorable if they are encouraged and supported in maintaining a satisfying and nonthreatened parent-child relationship.

References