PSYCHOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE DISENGAGEMENT OF NONCUSTODIAL FATHERS AFTER DIVORCE

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The phenomenon of noncustodial fathers' disengagement from their children's lives is critically examined. Based on data obtained from a cross-national (Canada and Scotland) study on the impact of divorce on noncustodial fathers, the argument is developed that these fathers' disengagement from their children’s lives results from a combination of structural constraints and fathers' own psychological response to the threatened or actual loss of their children and the predivorce father-child relationship. While divorce represents a loss which deprives fathers of an attachment figure and a role or identity, it also constitutes a situation where fathers are judicially and legislatively disadvantaged on the basis of gender. Attachment theory constructs relating to situations of loss and bereavement frame the analysis of fathers’ psychological adaptation to divorce and psychological factors contributing to their disengagement from their children, and analyses of gender are used in an examination of the structural consequences of divorce for noncustodial fathers and structural factors contributing to their disengagement. This study also documents the destructive effect of a purely adversarially based approach to divorce.

While noncustodial fathers as a group have been largely underrepresented in research endeavors, virtually absent within the divorce literature is any detailed analysis of disengaged noncustodial fathers, although the disengagement phenomenon itself is well documented and extremely widespread. North American studies have consistently reported a figure of a little over 50% of fathers and children of divorce having no contact with each other in the previous year (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). It is known that fathers’ emotional significance to children does not diminish, despite infrequent or lost contact; children’s intense yearning for their absent fathers continues unabated well after divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). What is less known is the nature of disengaged fathers’ adaptation to the absence of their children, although these fathers are often assumed to have been minimally involved with and attached to their children and their disengagement considered to be the end result of a tenuous

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father-child relationship during the marriage. In the absence of any empirical information derived from systematic research, our conceptualization of the disengagement phenomenon is based almost entirely on commonsense stereotypes, which appear to have infiltrated both public thinking and current divorce literature.

The aim of this article is to present some initial formulations, based on a cross-national research endeavor, about why it is that a large proportion of noncustodial fathers disengage from their children's lives and the nature of the barriers, both internal and external, that prevent these fathers from actively parenting after divorce.

**METHOD**

**SAMPLE**

Interviews were conducted with 80 noncustodial divorced fathers (40 resident in Canada and 40 in Scotland), half of whom had ongoing and regular contact with their children and half of whom were "disengaged" with no contact. The final sample was determined according to a number of eligibility criteria established to control for excessive variation in the sample population and to allow for comparison with preexisting studies of divorce, yet at the same time to reflect the actual heterogeneity of the noncustodial divorced father population. These included (a) final parental separation between 1980 and 1986 inclusive (length of separation ranged from 3 months to 6 years, with a fairly equal distribution for each year elapsed since the separation), (b) no more than two children in the family, (c) children of the marriage under 16 years of age (at interview), and (d) the father having neither physical nor legal custody of the child(ren) (in each case the children lived with their mothers, who retained physical and in most cases legal custody). To distinguish between "contact" and "disengaged" fathers, fathers were asked at the outset about the level of their present contact with their children. Those who had at least one direct physical contact with their children in the month prior to the time of the interview were classified as "contact" fathers; although this group of 40 men spanned the range of frequency of contact, most in fact maintained a weekly or twice-monthly "visiting" contact with their children. Those who had no direct physical contact with their children in the month prior to the interview were considered to be "disengaged"; all 40 of these fathers had in fact not seen their children for at least 3 months prior to interview.
To obtain the most representative cross section of the entire population of such men in Canada and Scotland, an attempt was made to use court records to generate the sample. Despite repeated efforts, however, approval of access to court records in Scotland was not forthcoming; fathers in Scotland were ultimately recruited from a variety of sources, primarily by means of advertising in the local press. Court records were retained to generate the Canadian sample. In the final analysis, the two samples were almost identical demographically, a gratifying result given the different sampling procedures used and the nonrandom nature of sampling in Scotland.

DATA COLLECTION

An eight-part questionnaire was designed and administered by the author to each respondent. The questionnaire proceeded according to the time frame of the father's experience—before, during, and after divorce—with each section examining a distinct and unique set of issues. The interviews lasted, on average, between 2 and 2.5 hours, the shortest being 1 hour, the longest 3 hours. The rich and extensive information obtained was considered to be a major strength of the study; for many fathers, the interview represented the first opportunity to discuss their experiences and feelings about the divorce in a detailed and thoughtful way.

The questionnaire gathered the following data: demographic information about the father and the pre- and postdivorce family; descriptive data about the predivorce father-child relationship, including the father's involvement with and attachment to his children, as well as information concerning the father's perception of the marriage and his previous "father" role; information about the transition period during divorce and the father's feelings and experiences during this time; details regarding the legal aspects of the divorce, including custody, access, and financial determinations, and the father's experiences with the legal system and any other sources of help sought; information about various aspects of the postdivorce experience, with an emphasis on the changing father-child relationship; data about the physical and mental health effects of the divorce on the respondent, as well as repercussions on his employment; information about changes in the "father" role before and after divorce, designed to measure (by means of a Likert-type scale) the father's perception of any change in 10 areas of influence which comprise the "father" role; and further details about the major issues identified by the father with regard to his status as a noncustodial parent, with particular reference to both the positive and negative aspects of his relationship with his children after divorce.
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Although two distinct sampling procedures were used in Scotland and Canada, efforts were made to ensure a representative sample, which in large measure proved to be successful.

The fathers in the study spanned the range of occupational categories. Their mean age (at interview) was 39 years 3 months, ranging from 24 to 56 years. The former marriage was the first for 69 of the men; 11 had been remarried. The mean length of the marriage to separation was 8 years 3 months, ranging from 4 months to 24 years. Of the 80 separated fathers, 39 were legally divorced (20 in Scotland and 19 in Canada). Nine had remarried since the divorce (5 in Scotland and 4 in Canada). The mean length of the separation at the time of the interview was 3 years 4 months, ranging from 3 months to 6 years 11 months. For the 39 fathers who were legally divorced, the mean length of the divorce at the time of the interview was 1 year 10 months, ranging from 1 month to 5 years 7 months. For the 9 fathers who were now remarried, the mean length of the remarriage was 2 years 3 months, ranging from 1 month to 5 years.

In 54 (68%) of the 80 cases, the wife initiated the separation, the husband did so in 18 (23%), and there was a mutual decision in 8 (10%). In 58 of the 64 wife- or mutually initiated separations, the respondent indicated that he had not wanted the separation to occur. In 28 (72%) of the 39 legal divorces, the wife was the petitioner, corresponding to the British and Canadian average of 72% of all divorce decrees being granted to wives (Social Trends, 1988; Bala, 1987). In half of the divorces where the wife was the petitioner, the father indicated that he wanted the divorce, in contrast to the overwhelming number of men who had not wanted the separation to occur when their wives had been the initiators.

The 80 fathers studied had a total of 128 children of the former marriage, ranging in age from 1 to 15 years: 32 of the fathers had one child, and 48 had two children. Of the 80 older or only children, 42 (52%) were female, and 38 (48%) were male; of the 48 younger children, 25 (52%) were female, and 23 (48%) were male.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis focused entirely on the "disengaged" subgroup of fathers—the 40 men in the study who had lost all contact with their children. What was particularly striking was the extent to which the characteristics and experiences of this subsample differed from the "contact" subgroup. A
A surprising pattern emerged from the data: It was the now disengaged fathers who reported the highest levels of involvement with, attachment to, and influence on their children during the marriage. Results indicated a strong inverse relationship between pre- and postdivorce father-child relationship patterns; those fathers describing themselves as having been relatively highly involved with and attached to their children and sharing in family work tasks during the marriage were more likely to lose contact with their children after the divorce, whereas those previously on the periphery of their children's lives were more likely to remain in contact.

Due to the self-report nature of the study (custodial mothers and children were not interviewed to corroborate the information received from fathers), the possibility exists that now disengaged fathers may tend to embellish the former relationship with their children and report inflated levels of predivorce involvement; the importance of one's relationship with one's children may be heightened as a result of diminished or lost contact. However, the total aggregate levels of predivorce father-child involvement of all of the noncustodial fathers in the study—contact and disengaged—fell well within the reported range of paternal participation in two-parent families in existing studies of the father role. The differences that emerged between contact and disengaged fathers regarding various aspects of their predivorce involvement with, attachment to, and influence on their children were striking and consistent, as multiple indicators of each of these variables were used. Finally, the pattern of discontinuity was equally evident in the Scottish and Canadian subsamples.

As the analysis will attempt to demonstrate, the finding of an inverse relationship between pre- and postdivorce father-child relationships is central to any explanation of paternal disengagement after divorce.

FATHERS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR DISENGAGEMENT

Disengaged fathers were asked, "What do you think are the main reasons why you do not visit?" As shown in Table 1, most presented a complex amalgam of reasons for their loss of contact with their children rather than one clear cause.

Most frequently mentioned (by 36 of the 40 disengaged fathers) was obstruction of paternal access by the former spouse (and, in some instances, her family) and her desire to break contact between the father and children. (Many of the contact fathers in our sample, in contrast, stressed the importance of the support and encouragement of their ex-wives in their maintenance of contact and development of a new parental role.) Eleven fathers
Table 1

Reasons for Disengagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage that mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obstruction by ex-wife</td>
<td>90 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's decision to cease contact</td>
<td>33 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical difficulties (distance, finances, work schedule)</td>
<td>28 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child(ren) not wanting contact</td>
<td>18 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal injunction</td>
<td>16 (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early pattern of no contact (prohibiting future contact)</td>
<td>5 (2)</td>
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Note. Numbers in parentheses are the number of fathers responding from the 40-subject disengaged sample.

mentioned practical difficulties in exercising access, including problems of distance, transportation, finances, work schedule, or lack of adequate accommodation, but only as a secondary factor in their loss of contact. Seven referred to a lack of confirmation of the noncustodial father role by their children, or their children increasingly distancing themselves from their father after divorce. Six fathers mentioned the bias of the legal system toward sole maternal custody and the existence of a legal injunction prohibiting the type of contact they had desired. Two indicated that they had been unable to overcome a pattern of diminished or no contact established in the months immediately following divorce.

Reliance on self-report data, however, can be problematic: Fathers' level of "objectivity" may be called in question, as most tended to largely underestimate their own role in their loss of contact with their children. While only 13 fathers made reference to their own decision to cease contact with their children, which they linked to their inability to adapt to the constraints of the new "visiting" relationship, the great majority of all disengaged fathers, in describing the postdivorce father-child relationship, made frequent reference to their prevailing sense of loss and depression, the pain of seeing their children only intermittently, and the fact that an avuncular "visiting" relationship in no sense resembled "real fatherhood."

A closer scrutiny of the dynamics underlying the process of disengagement revealed that while the external factors identified by fathers were indeed operative vis-à-vis their subsequent loss of contact, internal psychological variables were also implicated. Two orders of variables determine the nature and level of postdivorce father-child contact: structural and psychological. Both mediate between divorce and disengagement. On their own, each is usually insufficient to effect disengagement; combined, they are a potent force mitigating against postdivorce paternal contact.
Demographically, there were no observable differences between disengaged fathers and those remaining in contact with their children after divorce; the two groups were similar in relation to occupation and income, age, length of marriage, length of separation, and remarriage. The sex and age of the children involved was not a significant factor vis-à-vis contact/disengagement, nor was initiator of separation. Surprisingly, paternal contact did not seem to be associated with various practical difficulties identified in the literature as potentially inhibiting a divorced father’s subsequent contact with his children: The majority of both contact and disengaged fathers did not consider the type and size of the father’s accommodation, distance, transportation, finances, or work schedule as significant problems in relation to their ongoing contact with their children. It was found, however, that marked differences emerged between the two groups in regard to two external factors in particular— their experience with the legal system and their relationship with their former wives—and to certain internal factors—their experience of loss and bereavement and their reactions to child absence, role loss, and the constraints of the “visiting” relationship. The key to understanding these differences lies in the differential nature of fathers’ relationships with their children before divorce.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DISENGAGEMENT

Fathers’ overall assessment of their lawyers in regard to helping or hindering their subsequent relationships with their children, and of the judicial system in regard to its appropriateness as a forum for determining child custody and access arrangements, differed between contact and disengaged fathers. Those fathers reporting that lawyers had helped, both helped and hindered, or had no effect on the subsequent father-child relationship were more likely to be contact fathers (18 of 23 fathers), whereas a greater proportion of the dis-engaged fathers stated that their lawyers had in some way hindered the relationship (31 of 52; \(p < .05\)).

Although disengaged fathers themselves identified withheld access, resulting from the antagonistic nature of the postdivorce relationship between the former spouses, as the primary external barrier to their postdivorce contact with their children, they felt that the system of individual representation characteristic of the traditional adversarial approach of the legal system significantly contributed to such antagonism. They attributed the provocative behavior of legal practitioners as often creating overt conflict where little
such antagonism had previously been manifest. Direct communication between the parents was usually prohibited by the lawyers of either or both parties, and a more hostile tone was introduced via letters and affidavits drafted by lawyers but ostensibly representing their clients' sentiments, which constituted a new medium of communication between the former spouses.

Research evidence suggests that most lawyers do in fact approach divorce in a traditional adversarial manner (Eekelaar, 1984), believing that in being partisan and assuming a "fighting" posture, they are merely protecting their client's interests (Murch, 1980); the assumption that because two individuals are divorcing they are necessarily in conflict is prevalent among legal practitioners (Murch, 1980). However, a sizable proportion of fathers in the study reported minimal overt conflict between the spouses at the time of the actual separation, before legal involvement, and a number of fathers indicated that the possibility of a shared custody arrangement clearly existed at that time. In one father's words: "we originally had a joint custody agreement, and it was the legal system that tore this apart. It destroyed it. We had agreed beforehand and then this happened— the legal system intervened."

Once legal processes had made their impact, both in the ratification of custody and access arrangements and in escalating or creating overt hostility between the former spouses, feelings of powerlessness in relation to obstruction of access were prevalent, particularly in cases of withheld access. Where legal access arrangements had been made, either fathers did not reapply to the court for access enforcement (believing that such a course would be ultimately unsuccessful in guaranteeing access) or when they did reapply and obtained a renewed access order, fathers claimed that no effective legal sanctions for continued withheld access were applied. Fathers believed that whether or not access arrangements are legally ratified, if a mother is reluctant to allow it, access usually fails.

Clearly, the less supportive a custodial mother is toward paternal access, the greater the likelihood of access difficulties or access denial. The source of postdivorce conflict between the former spouses and mothers' subsequent denial of father-child contact thus becomes an important question. Fathers' responses suggest that interparent hostility after divorce is not necessarily primarily influenced by predivorce patterns; although mistrust and anger are almost universally present in varying degrees on divorce, overt or intensified conflict after divorce may be directly related to intervening legal processes. Many fathers initially made attempts to discuss terms of custody and access directly with their wives but were restrained by their lawyers (as were mothers) from communicating directly and were instructed to negotiate via
the lawyers. Prolonged negotiations involving lawyers as intermediaries typically resulted, according to the fathers in the study, in an atmosphere of competition, intimidation, and mistrust prevailing over what was in some cases a spirit of cooperation at the time of the divorce in regard to postdivorce arrangements for the children. The adversarial nature of such negotiations makes it highly unlikely that a spirit of friendship and cooperation will survive the divorce; severe conflict is the end result of a negotiating environment which effectively forces each party to assume an extreme position.

To test the accuracy of fathers’ reports that the adversarial nature of legal processes was responsible for exacerbating or creating postdivorce parental conflict, resulting in withheld access, the relationship between the spouses at the time of the separation before any major legal involvement was compared with their postdivorce relationship after legal processes had made their major impact. No correlation was found between the level of interparental conflict at the time of the divorce and the nature of ex-spouses’ postdivorce contact; that is, the likelihood of friendly and unfriendly (or nonexistent) postdivorce contact did not depend on the level of conflict between spouses at the time of divorce—suggesting the presence of mediating factors operating in the period during divorce that influence the nature of the subsequent relationship.

There was also no association between the level of conflict between the spouses at the time of separation and subsequent father-child contact: Conflict between the spouses on divorce did not necessarily lead to paternal disengagement. The relationship between paternal contact and the level of conflict between the parents after divorce, however, was highly significant ($p < .001$): Post- but not predivorce parental conflict was associated with noncustodial fathers’ disengagement from their children. This further suggests that mediating factors are at work during divorce to produce a level of parental conflict strong enough to result in access difficulties for noncustodial fathers, followed by eventual loss of contact.

Legal processes thus appear in a significant number of cases to influence parents’ feelings, attitudes, and behaviors toward each other in a negative direction (whether or not overt conflict existed between the spouses at the point of divorce), which in turn affect the quality and quantity of postdivorce father-child contact (see Figure 1).

Those disengaged fathers who perceived themselves as highly involved with their children before divorce considered traditional legal access arrangements to be entirely inadequate. At the time of the divorce, the great majority (88%) of now disengaged fathers wanted at least partial physical custody of their children; after divorce, there existed a widespread yearning for the
Figure 1. Impact of legal processes on withheld access.

children with whom they were no longer in contact: All 40 disengaged fathers indicated a desire for "a lot more" contact with their children. This challenges existing divorce literature which, while containing little empirical data in regard to fathers' desired level of contact with their children after divorce, often contains suggestions that fathers simply do not want custody of their children and explains fathers' disengagement primarily in terms of a lack of interest (Eekelaar & Clive, 1977).

The discrepancy between fathers' initial desires in regard to custody and access and the actual postdivorce arrangements made is striking. Clearly, those fathers who legally disputed custody and forced a court decision (only 6 of the 40 disengaged fathers) did not constitute all of those who wanted custody of their children. Legal practitioners were central in transforming fathers' aspirations regarding what they could achieve through the legal system; lawyers assumed a key role in (a) persuading fathers not to pursue custody and (b) shaping expectations in regard to access. In 55% of all cases in the study, lawyers actively discouraged fathers from pursuing custody; only 12% agreed with or encouraged it. Given that most custody and access arrangements only reach the court as a fait accompli, the way in which lawyers advise their clients is an important determinant of the final arrangements made. The majority of fathers, faced with strong direction from their lawyers toward accepting maternal custody with limited parental access and convinced on the basis of judicial precedent that they have a limited chance
of success for any better arrangement through the courts, do not question their lawyers' advice. One father said,

I got the impression that there would be no problem getting access, getting Andrew to stay with me on weekends and so on—but it didn’t work out that way. He also told me that I should forget about custody, and to just concentrate on access, which I now realize was wrong.

Another concurred:

The lawyer advised me to give the mother interim custody and not to worry about it or fight it. I didn’t know at that time that in fact, when you’re talking about custody, nothing is “interim”—anything that is “interim” means that it is forever. I didn’t know that at that time.

Custody determinations made by the courts, influencing the type of advice offered to fathers by lawyers, often appear to be based on the assumption of fathers’ primary importance as economic providers. In approximately 90% of contested custody cases in Canada and Great Britain, mothers receive sole custody (Bala, 1987; Lowe, 1982), although this proportion is dropping in many jurisdictions, particularly in the United States (Weitzman, 1985). In accordance with such determinations, legal practitioners’ directions rarely differ for divorced fathers; sole maternal custody with limited paternal access was almost universally recommended for the fathers in our sample. There exists, however, a heterogeneity of fathering roles within families. Thus while there were no differences between highly and peripherally involved and attached fathers in the actual advice they received from their lawyers regarding custody and access, the outcome for each group was radically different in terms of satisfaction with the final legal arrangements made and the de facto level of their postdivorce contact with their children. Although the study found no association between paternal contact and the type of advice that fathers received from their lawyers, 12 of the 14 fathers satisfied with the legal custody arrangement were contact fathers, and 33 of the 51 dissatisfied were disengaged ($p < .01$). It may be the very fact of uniformity of approach among legal practitioners, the lack of consideration of the nature of the predivorce father-child relationship, and in many jurisdictions, the largely unvarying nature of judicial resolution of custody and access vis-à-vis fathers with vastly different patterns and experiences of fatherhood that contributes to the poor outcome of those fathers relatively highly involved with and attached to their children during the marriage. Fathers enter the legal process with very different predivorce father-child relationship patterns; such heterogeneity warrants against a homogeneous approach.
The judicial system has a central role to play in limiting child custody and access options, sanctioning and legitimizing traditional structures and relationships, and perpetuating gender-based inequalities in the postdivorce family. The gender-based division of roles with respect to children is clear: The father continues to be responsible for their economic support, the mother for their care; the mother is considered to be the appropriate custodial parent, the father becomes the noncustodial parent. Thus we see a consistent pattern of decisions that both justify and reinforce a maternal presumption; this judicially constructed preference has operated as effectively as a statutory directive (Weitzman, 1985). Further, the judicial system successfully diverts attention from such inequalities by "individualizing" an essentially structural problem, deflecting attention from the wider structural issues of the inferior economic position of women and the need to provide improved state benefits for divorced families. The law deals with the negative consequences of divorce on family members by focusing on the enforcement of financial support payments, legitimizing the call for solutions on an individual level; traditional family structures and sex-role divisions are thus perpetuated, and women's traditional economic ties to and dependence on their former husbands are maintained (Foote, 1988).

The state has a strong interest in the ways in which divorced parents treat their economic relationship (Foote, 1988). Divorce is associated with poverty in families; with the dramatic increase in the numbers of such families, it has become apparent that the state cannot afford to support them by way of public welfare programs. Rather than providing new or improving existing sources of direct financial assistance to divorced families, "the state has chosen instead to shore up private law remedies and to use public law to ensure that private law responsibilities are met. . . . The family's own assets and work-related earnings and benefits are to be the primary source of financial support for needy individuals after marital dissolution" (Foote, 1988, pp. 34-35). New support enforcement laws and programs are essential in this regard; the goal of such legislation is the reduction of social assistance expenditures to divorced families (Foote, 1988, p. 37).

In sum, the impact of structural factors on postdivorce father-child relationships is clear. In ensuring that both the "motherhood" and "fatherhood" mandate remain intact after divorce, "custody" is fully invested in the mother, and fathers' economic responsibilities to their families remain paramount. The law also influences ideology and belief systems. In its appropriation of postdivorce child custody and access determination, it functions to limit postdivorce options for families and provides notions of appropriate work and family role behaviors. Sole maternal custody with limited paternal access
(and paternal responsibility for financial provision) thus comes to be perceived as the only available option for divorcing families.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO LOSS**

Structural forces largely determine the consequences of divorce for fathers: In the great majority of cases, fathers are ascribed noncustodial status. The consequences of divorce for all noncustodial fathers—the loss of the predivorce father-child relationship—are ostensibly similar, yet fathers’ adaptations to these consequences are radically different. The essential difference between contact and disengaged fathers, our data suggest, lies in the differential nature and quality of the predivorce father-child relationship. Divorce results in a more salient loss for previously highly involved and attached fathers: Where the predivorce father-child relationship was intense, a rigid and time-limited “visiting” relationship is experienced as highly inadequate. The effects of divorce on family members are greatly influenced by the quality of the relationships involved: If fathers form strong attachments and are salient individuals in their children’s lives within the two-parent family, severance of such ties will likely occasion significant reactions of loss for both fathers and their children. The loss of the predivorce father-child relationship is more of a reality for those fathers with powerful attachment bonds with their children.

The view of loss from the position of attachment theory, according to Parkes (1986), is such that “grieving” is considered to be the “normal” reaction to a major loss. It is also expected that this grief will gradually decline in intensity and that the affected individual will “recover” in the sense of achieving a new and independent level of functioning. If, for any reason, this “recovery” fails to take place, this reaction is considered “abnormal.”

Parkes identifies two forms of pathological grieving which may be seen to characterize most of the disengaged fathers in the study. **Chronic grief** is distinguished by persistent grieving without diminution in intensity despite the passage of time; it is the most common type of pathological grief and accounts for the poorest outcome in almost all cases. The normal phases of grief become protracted or excessively intense, making resolution and adaptation impossible; the father becomes “stuck” in the grieving process, usually displaying excessive anger, guilt, and self-blame or—most characteristic of our disengaged subsample—prolonged and severe symptoms of depression. Initial reactions of intense yearning associated with an intimate and intense relationship with the lost child, typical of our group of disengaged fathers, predicted chronic grieving. In accordance with Parkes’s formulations, the
preexisting relationship between the bereaved and the loved person was the most significant factor vis-à-vis chronic grieving; the more intense the relationship between father and child during the marriage, the more complex the father’s mourning and the greater the probability of poor outcome after divorce. In unanticipated grief, Parkes found that sudden, unexpected bereavements are a precursor of poor outcome: The magnitude of grief is greater following a loss that is both unexpected and untimely than when the bereaved has had time to anticipate the loss. In this context, fathers frequently reported a lack of preparation or forewarning of the separation/divorce when their wives had initiated it.

Complicating the grieving process of disengaged fathers is the fact that while a salient loss has in fact occurred, the object of their grief is very much alive, and the grieving process persists, as the finality of death is lacking. Further, familial and cultural factors discouraging the expression of grief, combined with inadequate or nonexistent social supports after bereavement, add to the vulnerability of noncustodial fathers. Fathers’ grief over the loss or absence of their children after divorce may be intense, yet it may not be readily recognized and supported by others, either within the immediate family or in society at large. Finally, fathers experience multiple losses and concurrent stresses on divorce: Added to the loss of their children and the predivorce father-child relationship are the loss of the former spouse (often the person most available for support in times of crisis), the loss of the former dwelling place, and often, the loss of one’s former social network.

Above all, however, the intensity of the predivorce father-child relationship was found to be of paramount importance in determining the outcome of the grieving process of noncustodial fathers. A strong inverse relationship between pre- and postdivorce father-child relationships was uncovered; the perspective of attachment theory makes this relationship clear: Those fathers most involved with and attached to their children before divorce are most likely to acutely experience the negative effects of the loss of their children and the predivorce father-child relationship. With a startling intensity, the disengaged fathers in our sample described being emotionally connected to their children in strong and intimate ways, defining their predivorce “fathering” role as a central component of their identity:

Definitions of fathering vary tremendously but I personally would equate it with parenting: a complete commitment to one’s child, the major responsibility in one’s life, a combination of nurturance, encouraging autonomy and initiative within prescribed limits. It’s setting the stage to allow a child to grow and develop his potential to the maximum.
It's a way of living—getting up with your children, eating with them, doing work together, reading with them, hugging them, putting them to sleep, dealing with their fears, and enjoying their pleasures—living with them.

The predominant feature of the ongoing grief of disengaged fathers is a pervasive sense of preoccupation, loss, and sadness; depressive features were most often cited in disengaged fathers’ descriptions of their postdivorce relationship with their children:

The increasing distance between us. I have found no relationship harder to bear than a relationship where you’re forced to be apart, where you have dropped out of each other’s lives. I’ll go on pining forever.

I think of them every day, almost constantly, although I never see them. I feel I am constantly searching for my children, I think I see their faces in other children’s faces. It’s a desperate kind of yearning.

I have a constant, very real pain in my chest; there’s tension, lack of sleep, constant worry. . . . I’m totally preoccupied with my son, and a lot of my time is spent trying not to think about what happened. But mainly it’s a feeling of sadness, an emptiness, a kind of darkness.

It has had a very, very negative effect—like death, mourning—it is bad in every way.

An important psychological barrier to disengaged fathers’ postdivorce contact with their children was their inability to adapt to the constraints of the “visiting” relationship and to construct a new role as a noncustodial parent after divorce. Highly involved and attached fathers face the most abrupt disruption to the routines and events of day-to-day life which had structured their parenting role. Disengaged fathers’ conceptions of what “fatherhood” constituted were diametrically opposed to the structure that had been imposed on them. For these fathers, “real fatherhood” meant living with their children on a full-time basis and sharing daily life with them. They had a particularly strong desire to continue to be influential in all aspects of their children’s growth and development, values, and life-style, which they found difficult or impossible to do within the constraints of “visiting.”

What made the “visiting” relationship particularly difficult for these fathers was the pain of the visits themselves—their brevity, artificiality, and superficiality. For previously involved and attached fathers, “visiting” their children mainly exacerbated already intense feelings of loss and deprivation:

I find that visiting is very hard. The time is very restricted, the constant burden of a limited, restricted time is a very great pressure. There’s a constant feeling that they’re not your own any more—you try to fight off this feeling, you feel very emotional about it.
If a father has a close relationship with the child, it can be devastating. Obviously, 8 hours a month together doesn't constitute any kind of real father-child relationship.

Disengaged fathers' grief was as potent for those fathers who had not seen their children for several years as for those who had lost contact more recently. Time elapsed since the divorce or since the last contact with their children did not appear to diminish the intensity of fathers' grief. Parkes (1986) and others identify the gaining of a new identity as crucial in the resolution of the grieving process; this was particularly problematic in cases where a father's identity was largely defined by his relationship with his child.

CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

The patterns described here were equally manifest in Canada and Scotland. The lack of any substantive differences in the geographical comparison, with parallel data obtained from the two jurisdictions, eliminated plausible alternative hypotheses, contributed to the validity of the data, and allowed a measure of generalizability of the findings not otherwise available.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The disengagement of noncustodial fathers after divorce results from a combination of structural constraints and fathers' own psychological response to the perceived loss of their children. Both psychological and structural factors are inculpated as critical mediating variables between divorce and disengagement: Although divorce represents a loss which deprives fathers of an object of attachment and a role or identity, it also represents a situation where fathers are judicially and legislatively disadvantaged on the basis of gender. This is a radical departure from previous formulations based largely on assumptions about divorced fathers as (a) either incapable or inferior caretakers of their children, (b) not wanting to be involved in their children's lives after divorce, and (c) not particularly distressed in regard to the absence of their children.

The striking discontinuity between pre- and postdivorce father-child relationship patterns suggests a process with two interacting components: the structural consequences of divorce and fathers' psychological adaptation to these consequences. For previously involved and attached fathers, one con-
sequence of divorce was profound: the loss of a relationship which constituted an integral part of their identity. Faced with a dramatic loss of contact with their children within the context of limited access arrangements, these fathers were more likely to acutely experience the effects of child absence, role loss, and the constraints of the “visiting” relationship. For those fathers who were previously less directly involved and attached, the consequences of divorce were less pronounced, and adaptation—the development of a “noncustodial” parental identity within the confines of a “visiting” relationship—was not as problematic an issue.

The key to explaining the dramatic discontinuity between pre- and post-divorce father-child relationships lies in an understanding of important processes occurring in a relatively brief period of time during divorce. There is a critical period during which the nature of postdivorce father-child relationships are determined: the transition period from the time of divorce (separation) to about 6 months after, a time when access patterns become established and consolidated. This is also the time when legal processes have their greatest impact and when multiple adjustments are required on the part of all members of the divorcing family. During this time, the previously less involved and attached father, faced with perhaps weekend or more contact in a “visiting” relationship, may find that with sole responsibility for his children, his fatherhood role can become enhanced. The previously highly involved and attached father, however, faced with diminished contact and what he perceives to be rigid access arrangements, faces a dramatic disruption to the routines of daily life with his children—a drastic reduction of contact and role loss, which, over a period of time, is a factor in his complete disengagement from the lives of his children.

**CHILD CUSTODY**

Our findings complement existing studies detailing the chronic emotional and economic overload of custodial mothers solely responsible for their children after divorce and the negative effects of the consequences of divorce on children’s development and emotional well-being. As fathers suffer the effects of the loss of the predivorce father-child relationship, so children experience these effects; as fathers’ identities are tied to their parenting role, so children’s self-images are firmly linked with their relationships with both of their parents. Fathers’ emotional significance to children does not diminish, despite infrequent or lost contact; the most stressed children have been shown to be the ones whose relationship with their now disengaged father was warm
and intimate before divorce (Hess & Camara, 1979; Heatherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The disengagement of noncustodial fathers from the lives of their children after divorce, particularly those most involved with and attached to their children during the marriage, is largely the result of a custodial arrangement which they perceive as "disqualifying" them as parents. These fathers find that meaningful, regular, and frequent parenting is not possible within the bounds of sole maternal custody and limited paternal access; the very concept of "access" connotes for many fathers a de facto cessation of their parenting role. Fathers want at least partial physical custody of their children; many of the fathers in the study considered shared parenting with their former spouses as the only custodial arrangement that would allow them to maintain a meaningful relationship with their children.

Many of the disengaged fathers in the study suggested that a legal joint custody arrangement would have allowed them to continue their parenting role and responsibilities after divorce. If indeed the most vulnerable fathers vis-à-vis loss of postdivorce contact with their children are those who were previously most actively involved with and attached to their children and if we accept research evidence that the key factor in the positive outcome of most children to divorce is the continued involvement of both parents in child rearing, the appropriateness of sole custody determinations is called into question, and the desirability of joint custody as an alternative arrangement warrants serious consideration. In cases where both parents possess adequate parenting abilities and have been salient individuals in their children's lives and wish to maintain their parenting responsibilities in an active manner following divorce, a joint custody arrangement may potentially have the most positive long-term benefits for all family members.

MEDIATION

The vast majority of fathers in the study described the legal system as exacerbating or creating conflict between the former spouses, setting a tone for the postdivorce relationship which did not bode well for fathers' future contact with their children. They felt that an alternative approach, one which would bring the parents together to negotiate custody and access arrangements, would have produced more beneficial results for all family members.

Their views complement current research on the impact of divorce on children. As a critical variable affecting the adjustment of children after divorce is the extent of continued involvement by both parents in child rearing, so it has been found that divorces having the least detrimental effect on the
development of children are those in which the parents are able to cooperate in their continuing parental roles. If parental cooperation can be freed from the marital tension that may have adversely affected the children within the marriage, then the divorce may present a positive developmental influence. Rarely, however, is this an outcome of a legal mode of custody and access determination.

If indeed the legal system exacerbates or creates conflict between the spouses after divorce, contributing to fathers' disengagement from their children, and if we accept research evidence stressing the importance of parental cooperation after divorce for children's ongoing development and emotional well-being, then the disadvantages of legal determination of child custody and access and the need for alternative mechanisms are clear. In this context, mediation and related counseling services could provide an effective alternative to a legal and judicial means of resolving issues of child custody and access for the majority of divorcing families.

**THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS**

We have identified disengaged noncustodial divorced fathers as a large and vulnerable population which warrants closer therapeutic attention by the helping professions. Despite the recognition that fathers are an integral part of the families with whom therapeutic agents work, fathers in general are largely underrepresented as clientele in clinical settings. This is particularly pronounced in the case of noncustodial divorced fathers, who are very often excluded from therapy.

The primary issue facing family practitioners in work with divorcing and divorced families is the need to determine what constitutes the postdivorce family system. Ahrons's (1980) reconceptualization of the divorced family in terms of a continuing interdependence among family members is particularly relevant in light of the fact that a significant number of fathers previously highly involved with, attached to, and influential in their children's lives disengage after divorce.

The most pressing need for the majority of noncustodial 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, family practitioners have a professional responsibility to support the active involvement of noncustodial fathers in their children's lives; a primary treatment aspect should be the supportive maintenance of the father-child relationship. The clinical picture for fathers is most
favorable if the sharp diminution of contact that many noncustodial fathers currently experience can be prevented, if families are encouraged to allow both parents to maintain satisfying and unthreatened parental relationships with their children.

NOTE

1. It is interesting that while legal practitioners were depicted as highly adversarial in their practices, few encouraged fathers to legally contest the custody of their children. The fact that lawyers transform fathers' aspirations regarding custody (on the basis of what would happen in court if custody were contested) appears to contradict fathers' depiction of lawyers' adversarial practices and the inherently adversarial nature of the judicial system: If lawyers were truly adversarial, they would consistently advise fathers to legally contest the issue of custody. A prolonged legal conflict, however, does not necessarily entail contested custody; in a large number of instances, fathers reported that access increasingly became the main issue of legal contention between the parties. The legal practices of lawyers in their "negotiations" over access (and financial aspects) were described as highly adversarial and as intensifying conflict between the parents.

REFERENCES


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