Discontinuity Between Pre- and Post-Divorce Father-Child Relationships: New Evidence Regarding Paternal Disengagement

Edward Kruk

SUMMARY. Through a systematic analysis of the link between pre- and post-divorce father-child relationships, this paper examines the issue of non-custodial fathers’ loss of contact with their children and families after divorce. A cross-national survey of 80 non-custodial fathers revealed a striking discontinuity between father-child relationships before and after divorce, with those fathers most involved with and attached to their children during the marriage being most likely to lose contact after divorce, and those relatively less involved and attached more likely to remain in contact. Where the pre-divorce father-child relationship was intense, the consequences of divorce and fathers’ adaptation to these consequences are likely to be highly problematic. The case is made that non-custodial fathers’ disengagement from their children’s lives after divorce results from a combination of structural constraints and fathers’ own psychological response to the absence of their children and loss of the pre-divorce father-child relationship.

Current fatherhood research suggests that despite varying levels of actual child care involvement among fathers, generally speaking, fathers’ emotional investment in their children prevails over other

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aspects of their lives (Cohen, 1987), and fathers’ attachment bonds with their children can no longer be regarded as secondary (Lamb, 1976; Rutter, 1972). It is thus likely that fathers experience significant emotional hardship during the time of divorce and after, particularly if they had been previously highly involved with and attached to their children and, as non-custodial parents, are forced to adapt to a “visiting” relationship with their children.

For non-custodial fathers, a particularly ominous consequence of divorce is the possible loss of one’s children. In fact, the stability of continued and frequent contact rarely occurs between these fathers and their children; the disengagement of non-custodial fathers from the lives of their children is a widespread and well documented phenomenon. In a representative sample of children aged 11 to 16, it was found that in 52% of cases, children’s last contact with their fathers had been one or more years prior; only one-third saw their fathers on a monthly basis or more (Furstenberg et al., 1983). The disengagement process typically begins soon after the parental separation and gradually increases, most sharply at about 12 months post-separation (Hetherington et al., 1976); between 25-30% of children lose contact in this first year (Mitchell, 1985).

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the disengagement phenomenon, the present study undertook an examination of the link between pre- and post-divorce father-child relationships, comparing those non-custodial fathers who had lost all contact with their children (“disengaged” fathers) with those who managed to maintain the relationship (“contact” fathers). The following questions comprise our focus:

- What are some of the characteristics of the “now-contact” versus “now-disengaged” subgroups in regard to the father-child relationship before divorce; i.e., fathers’ participation and involvement in child care and child rearing functions, level of emotional attachment between fathers and children, and fathers’ actual influence in various areas of their children’s lives?
- What are some of the characteristics of the “contact” versus “disengaged” subgroups in regard to the father-child relationship during the process of divorce?
- What are the characteristics of the “contact” versus “disen-
gaged” subgroups in regard to the father-child relationship after divorce?

- What factors contribute to non-custodial fathers maintaining contact with their children after divorce?
- What factors contribute to the disengagement of non-custodial fathers after divorce?

To date, the issue of non-custodial fathers’ contact with or disengagement from their children has not been empirically or systematically examined. It is commonly assumed, however, that post-divorce father-child relationships will largely reflect those previously existing within the marriage. That is, those fathers enjoying a comparatively active role with their children before the divorce will want to maintain, and will strive to continue, such a role after divorce—and hence are the group most likely to have ongoing (post-divorce) contact. Such fathers are more likely to form strong attachment bonds which they will actively seek to preserve. Conversely, it is expected that those fathers who locate themselves on the periphery of their children’s lives before the divorce will be the group most likely to lose contact; they will become the “disengaged” fathers.

The assumption that the father-child relationship will, generally speaking, be continuous in the post-divorce period with that which had obtained during the marriage is in accord with prevailing “common-sense” notions as well as with psychological theory. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), however, in looking at the patterns of contact between non-custodial fathers and their children, discovered that the relation between pre- and post-divorce patterns was surprisingly varied: the way in which a non-custodial father managed to define his post-divorce parenting role was not necessarily correlated with the nature of his pre-divorce role. Eighteen months after divorce (separation), there was no correlation between the visiting patterns that had emerged and the pre-divorce father-child relationship (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Contrary to “common-sense” assumptions, the authors found no differences between those non-custodial fathers who remained in contact and those who disengaged from their children’s lives in the level of their involvement with and attachment to their children before the divorce. In a five-year follow-up, they continued to find no correlation between the closeness in fa-
ther-child relationships before and after divorce: 25% of the fathers in their study grew more distant from their children in the space of five years, but another 25% actually grew closer.

Wallerstein and Kelly, however, drew their sample from a clinical population of parents and their children, and provided a counselling service aimed partly at ensuring ongoing contact between fathers and their children. In comparing the two sub-groups of contact and disengaged fathers, one of our objectives was to examine whether pre- and post-divorce father-child relationship patterns are similar to those identified by Wallerstein and Kelly, or whether they tend to conform to the "common-sense" formulation.

**METHOD**

**Sample**

The study utilized a survey research design, employing an eight-part questionnaire administered in the context of a personal interview, with a total sample of 80 non-custodial divorced fathers of 128 children, 40 residing in Scotland and 40 in Canada, half of whom, at the time of the survey, had ongoing and regular contact with their children and half of whom were disengaged from their children's lives. To control for variation within the sample, the following eligibility criteria were established: no more than two children in the family, the elder child being under 16 years of age at interview, and the father having neither physical nor legal custody of the child(ren) of the marriage. In each case the children lived with their mothers, who retained physical and in most cases legal custody.

It was felt that the use of court records to generate a sample would result in the most representative cross-section of such men. Approval of access to court records in Scotland, however, was not forthcoming, and there we were obliged to adopt the second-best strategy of attempting to recruit fathers from a variety of sources, primarily by means of advertising in the local press. In Canada, it was decided to retain court records as the basis for generating the most representative sample possible. The Scottish and Canadian samples, when compared, were almost identical demographically, a
gratifying result given the different sampling procedures used and the reliance on non-random sampling in Scotland.

Data Collection and Measures

The interview proceeded from an initial focus on demographic information and family history to an increasingly open-ended exploration of various psychological and structural aspects of the divorce and post-divorce experience. For many fathers, this represented the first opportunity to discuss their feelings and experiences related to the divorce in a detailed and thoughtful way; on the average, the interviews lasted between two and two and one-half hours, the shortest being one hour, the longest three hours.

Each of the interviews began by obtaining demographic data about the father and the pre- and post-divorce family. Descriptive data about the pre-divorce father-child relationship, including the father’s involvement with and attachment to his children, was then sought, as well as information concerning the father’s perception of the marriage and his previous “father” role, details about the transition period during divorce and the father’s feelings and experiences during this time, information regarding the legal aspects of the divorce, including custody, access and financial determinations, and the father’s experiences with the legal system, as well as with any other sources of help sought, details about various aspects of the post-divorce 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, data 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 ten areas of influence which comprise the “father” role, and further details about both the positive and negative aspects of the father-child relationship after divorce.

Our dependent variable—paternal post-divorce contact with children—was determined according to the level of contact the father currently had with his children: fathers 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; those who had
no direct physical contact with their children in the month prior were considered to be "disengaged." Although the actual levels of father-child contact in the "contact" group of fathers varied from once a month to several visits per week, most of these fathers saw their children on a once-weekly or bi-monthly basis during weekend access periods. None of the disengaged fathers had in fact seen their children for at least three months preceding the interview; most had lost contact over a year prior.

The study was based on the perspective of non-custodial fathers only; their wives or children were not interviewed to corroborate the data obtained. In light of the lacuna in the literature vis-à-vis the non-custodial and disengaged father, however, a case may be made for the validity and value of such "father-centred" research. There is a considerable body of research concerning the impact of divorce on mothers and children, and the findings of this study may be compared to this existing research; further, to study non-custodial fatherhood and disengagement necessitates a beginning focus on non-custodial fathers' self-reports of those phenomena, and a perception of their testimony as valid for its own sake.

**Demographic Characteristics**

The 80 fathers in the study spanned the range of occupational categories. Their mean age at the date of the survey was 39 years 3 months, ranging from 24 to 56. 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; 9 of these had remarried since the divorce. 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 legally divorced fathers, 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%) instances. In 28 (72%) of the 39 legal divorces, the wife was
the petitioner, the husband in 11 (28%). In half of the divorces
where the wife was the petitioner, the respondent indicated that he
wanted the divorce, in contrast to an overwhelming number of men
(89%) who had not wanted the separation to occur when their wives
had been the initiators.

The children of the former marriage ranged in age from one to 15
years (at interview), with a fairly equal distribution for each year of
age. Thirty-two of the fathers had one child and 48 had two chil-
dren: of the 80 older or only children, 42 (52%) were female and 38
(48%) were male; of the 48 younger children, 25 (52%) were fe-
male and 23 (48%) were male.

RESULTS

Pre-Divorce Factors

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found little association between the
closeness of father-child relationships before and after divorce: the
nature and extent of a non-custodial father’s pre-divorce parenting
role did not necessarily translate itself to the post-divorce situation.
Our finding regarding the link between pre- and post-divorce father-
child relationships stands in contrast to that of Wallerstein and
Kelly, yet diverges even further from what “common-sense” no-
tions lead us to assume: rather than there being no correlation be-
tween pre- and post-divorce father-child relationship patterns, there
appears to be a strong inverse relationship; that is, those fathers
describing themselves as having been highly involved with and at-
tached to their children during the marriage were more likely to lose
contact with their children after divorce, whereas those originally
on the periphery of their children’s lives were more likely to remain
in contact. There are thus two major subgroups of non-custodial
fathers and for each the outcome of divorce in terms of their direct
involvement with their children appears to be diametrically opposed
to pre-divorce patterns.

The reliability of this largely unexpected finding warrants exami-
nation, particularly in light of the self-report and retrospective na-
ture of the study. It was suspected that now-disengaged fathers’
high reported levels of pre-divorce involvement with, attachment to, and influence on their children may be largely an artifact of recall: the importance of interaction with one's children may be heightened by separation from and loss of contact with them, and disengaged fathers in particular may tend to embellish the former relationship. Corroborative data from other members of the divorced family was not available, and we had no direct access to information about the former father-child relationship, other than that given to us solely by the fathers themselves and solely by their recollection.

It was noted, however, that the aggregate reported rates of pre-divorce paternal involvement, attachment, and influence (from the entire sample of non-custodial fathers, contact and disengaged) fell well within the range of existing studies of the paternal role in the two-parent family. Kamo (1988) reports that on the average husbands in the U.S. carry 36% of the total domestic workload (domestic tasks plus child care), which increases to 41% when both spouses are employed full-time and to 43% when both earn approximately the same amount of money; in Britain, Martin and Roberts (1984) found that while 44% of married women working full-time said they shared overall family work (domestic tasks plus child care), 67% saw child care as shared. Our overall mean levels of paternal participation in a range of infant care tasks, for example (ranging from 24 to 46%—relative to wives’ involvement), are well within the range of these and other studies (40% in Warner, 1986, and 27% in Berk, 1985). Further, fathers’ involvement with, and attachment to and influence on their children before the divorce were measured by means of a number of discrete indices; multiple measures relevant to the same dimension were used, and on each of these, disengaged fathers consistently reported significantly higher levels than contact fathers. In addition, several questions relating to attitudes and ideologies regarding gender roles in the family were included; these corresponded to reported rates of involvement, attachment and influence.

In regard to their level of involvement in a variety of infant care tasks, significant differences were observed between contact and disengaged fathers in reported rates of playing with the baby, lulling the baby to sleep, and taking the baby for a walk, with disen-
gaged fathers indicating higher rates of participation (all $p < .01$), as well as in taking the baby to the doctor and looking after him or her when he or she was ill ($p < .05$). There were also significant differences in the reported amount of contact with children in the year before the divorce ($p < .05$): while contact fathers spent an average of 12 hours per week with their children alone and 16 hours with others present, disengaged fathers spent 20 hours alone and 20 hours with others.

In addition to fathers' reports of their behaviour vis-à-vis their children within the marriage, their level of emotional attachment was measured. While fathers generally reported high levels of attachment, here too significant differences emerged between the contact and disengaged sub-groups. Disengaged fathers reported “very strong” attachment to their children to a significantly greater degree than did contact fathers, who more frequently reported “strong” and “moderate” attachment ($p < .05$). This pattern was reflected in fathers' self-ratings on a number of attachment indices (thinking about children, wanting to be with children when not with them, comforting children when in distress, and discussing feelings with children); disengaged fathers reported significantly higher levels ($p < .01$). With respect to role attachment, almost all (38 of 40) disengaged fathers found their family role to be the most satisfying during the marriage, whereas only just over half (22 of 40) of contact fathers did so, with 18 of 40 contact fathers indicating a primary attachment to their work or other (non-family) roles ($p < .001$).

Paternal influence in various areas of children's growth and development before the divorce was also measured. In 9 of the 10 areas examined, disengaged fathers reported significantly higher levels of influence than contact fathers; differences between the two groups emerged in the areas of routine daily care and safety of children, personality development, intellectual development, physical development, and moral development (all $p < .01$), in addition to giving children a feeling of being part of a family, teaching behaviour and social skills, emotional development, and religious development (all $p < .05$). There were no significant differences between the two groups in their pre-divorce influence on the financial affairs of their children.
Markedly different perceptions emerged between contact and disengaged fathers in relation to attitudes toward gender role division in the family, fathers' reported strengths and weaknesses as parents during the marriage, and definitions of "fathering," "mothering" and "family life." Whereas contact fathers' responses were divided between "traditional" and "androgynous" orientations to gender roles and division of labour within the family, the great majority of disengaged fathers tended toward an "androgynous" stance, expressing sentiments favouring an egalitarian division of family work. When asked directly about gender role division within the family ("Would you say that there is a fundamental difference in roles between the father and the mother in the family? What would you say are the major differences?"), clear differences emerged between contact and disengaged fathers (Table 1).

The following typifies contact fathers' description of their pre-divorce fathering role:

My marriage was a traditional one in relation to roles. That's changed for me since the separation, and I'm coping. But in the marriage I was the provider and she was looking after the house and the children—it was very clear-cut.

Disengaged fathers marked out a very different scenario. These fathers described being emotionally connected to their children in strong and intimate ways, defining their "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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Division Within the Family</th>
<th>Contact % (N)</th>
<th>Disengaged % (N)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No difference between &quot;father&quot; and &quot;mother&quot; roles (&quot;androgynous&quot; orientation)</td>
<td>50 (20)</td>
<td>82 (33)</td>
<td>66 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No difference between &quot;father&quot; and &quot;mother&quot; roles, although society structured according to gender role division (&quot;qualified&quot; orientation)</td>
<td>8 (3)</td>
<td>8 (3)</td>
<td>8 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear difference between &quot;father&quot; and &quot;mother&quot; roles (&quot;traditional&quot; orientation)</td>
<td>42 (17)</td>
<td>10 (4)</td>
<td>26 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100 (40)</strong></td>
<td><strong>100 (40)</strong></td>
<td><strong>100 (80)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[x^2 = 11.236, \text{df} = 2, p < .01\]
Factors During Divorce

In addition to markedly different patterns between contact and disengaged fathers with respect to the pre-divorce father-child relationship, differences were also evident between the two groups regarding patterns and experiences during the process of divorce. Immediately following the parental separation, involvement with legal practitioners and the legal system was identified as a highly salient component of non-custodial fathers’ experiences, and a number of important differences emerged between contact and disengaged fathers in terms of the legal aspects of the divorce.

There was no significant difference between contact and disengaged fathers in their pattern of contesting child custody in court: of the 15 contesting fathers, 9 remained in contact with their children and 6 became disengaged. There was no relationship between paternal contact and spousal disagreement over the issue of custody at the time of the divorce, nor was there any difference between the two groups in terms of desired legal (paternal or joint) custody of the children. There was a difference, however, in relation to desired physical custody of the children at the time of the divorce (p < .05), with disengaged fathers expressing a desire for at least partial physical custody with greater frequency than contact fathers; a startling 88% of now-disengaged fathers indicated that they had wanted, at the time of the divorce, to have their children live with them at least part of the time. Further, when asked about their desired level of contact with their children after divorce, disengaged fathers expressed a wish for increased levels with much greater frequency than contact fathers (p < .001). Thus from the point of divorce, at which time they report a greater desire for at least partial physical custody, now-disengaged fathers’ requirements for post-divorce contact with their children appear to be greater than those of now-contact fathers.

The discrepancy between disengaged fathers’ initial desires in regard to child custody and access and the actual post-divorce arrangements made is striking. Clearly, those fathers who legally disputed custody did not constitute all of those who wanted custody of their children; there appear to be powerful factors mediating between fathers’ stated desires at the time of divorce and the final
outcome of paternal non-custody, and between these desires and fathers’ subsequent inaction vis-à-vis pursuit of custody. Fathers described the role of legal practitioners as crucial in transforming their aspirations regarding what could be achieved through the legal system; lawyers assumed a key role in persuading fathers not to pursue custody, or lessening their aspirations concerning their level of post-divorce contact with their children. In 55% of cases, lawyers actively discouraged fathers from pursuing custody; only 12% agreed with or encouraged it. In contrast, lawyers encouraged the pursuit of legal access arrangements; in this regard, fathers were often told that a “reasonable” level of access was the “customary” pattern of bi-monthly visitation.

There were significant differences between contact and disengaged fathers in their satisfaction with the legal maternal custody arrangement, with 12 of the 14 fathers satisfied with the legal arrangement being contact fathers, and 33 of the 51 dissatisfied being disengaged (p < .01). There were also differences in relation to fathers’ reasons for dissatisfaction with the legal maternal custody arrangement, with legal maternal custody determinations often cited by disengaged fathers as responsible for their loss of contact with their children (see Table 2).⁴

Not surprisingly, as with legal custody, there were significant differences between contact and disengaged fathers in their reported satisfaction with the legal access arrangement, with all 10 of the fathers satisfied with the arrangement being contact fathers, and 29 of the 47 dissatisfied being disengaged from their children (p < .001).⁵ In contrast, there were no differences between the two groups in regard to their satisfaction with legal post-divorce financial arrangements (property settlement and support payments), or any aspects of the legal financial arrangement.

Interestingly, in relation to custody and access, there was no association between the type of advice fathers received from their lawyers and subsequent paternal contact. There were no differences between contact and disengaged fathers in their lawyers’ encouragement/discouragement of paternal or joint custody or their suggestions as to how to pursue access. Fathers’ overall ratings of lawyers vis-à-vis helping or hindering their subsequent relationship with their children, and of the judicial system in relation to its ap-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Contact % (N)</th>
<th>Disengaged % (N)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wanted paternal or joint custody</td>
<td>28 (5)</td>
<td>27 (9)</td>
<td>28 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole maternal custody perceived to result in no paternal contact with children</td>
<td></td>
<td>27 (9)</td>
<td>18 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole maternal custody perceived to allow ex-wife to cut off contact between father and children</td>
<td></td>
<td>24 (8)</td>
<td>18 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole custody seen as not in children's best interests/welfare of children compromised</td>
<td></td>
<td>12 (4)</td>
<td>16 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole maternal custody perceived to result in not enough paternal contact with children</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
<td>14 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father is left with no legal rights vis-a-vis children</td>
<td>33 (6)</td>
<td>6 (2)</td>
<td>8 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (18)</td>
<td>100 (33)</td>
<td>100 (51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[x^2 = 16.143, \text{ df}=5, p < .01\]
propriateness as a forum for determining child custody and access arrangements, however, differed significantly between the two groups. Those fathers reporting that legal practitioners had helped, both helped and hindered, or had no effect on the ongoing father-child relationship were more likely to be contact fathers (18 of 23 fathers), while a greater proportion of disengaged fathers stated that their lawyers had in some way hindered the relationship (31 of 52; \( p < .05 \)). Although the great majority of both contact and disengaged fathers perceived the judicial system to be an inappropriate forum for determining child custody and access, all 6 of the fathers considering judicial resolution to be appropriate were contact fathers. While a high percentage of contact fathers reported satisfaction with the fairness of the court hearing regarding custody and/or access, almost all disengaged fathers reported strong dissatisfaction \( (p < .05) \).

One of the major repercussions of a judicial mode of determining post-divorce custody and access arrangements, according to both contact and disengaged fathers, is that the prevailing "adversarial" approach of legal practitioners and the legal system serves to enhance or create an atmosphere of distrust and antagonism between the former spouses. Quite revealing in this context was the fact that while no differences emerged between contact and disengaged fathers in the reported level of conflict between the parents at the time of divorce (separation), there was a strong relationship between paternal contact and reported post-divorce conflict between the parents. That is, there were no differences between contact and disengaged fathers as to whether a calm or turbulent atmosphere existed at the time of the divorce (before any major legal involvement of the parties); the differences between the two groups emerged only after legal processes had made their impact. While 39 of 40 disengaged fathers assessed their post-divorce relationship with their former spouses as unfriendly or non-existent, only 14 of the 40 contact fathers did so; 26 of the contact fathers described the post-divorce contact between the ex-spouses concerning their children as friendly or "middling" \( (p < .001) \).

For the majority (34 of 40) of disengaged fathers, contact with their ex-wives was reported as "non-existent." For non-custodial fathers, discontinued contact with the former spouse clearly does
not bode well for ongoing contact with one’s children: only 6 fathers had been able to maintain their relationship with their children while having no contact with their ex-wives. Paternal contact was strongly related to former wives’ encouragement/discouragement of fathers’ contact with their children after divorce, with all 40 disengaged fathers indicating that their ex-wives had actively discouraged contact, compared with only 14 contact fathers (p < .001); for the majority of fathers, some level of encouragement on the part of their former spouses was necessary to facilitate ongoing contact with their children. There were also differences between contact and disengaged fathers in the ways their ex-wives had discouraged post-divorce father-child contact, with outright refusal of access being dominant in the case of disengaged fathers.

In sum, marked differences exist between contact and disengaged fathers not only in regard to their experiences with lawyers and the judicial system, but also in their subsequent relationship patterns with their former spouses. These two related factors are critical in determining the consequences of divorce for fathers; that is, the actual boundaries of the post-divorce father-child relationship or the extent of child absence.

Factors After Divorce

Fathers’ adaptations to the consequences of divorce also influence the nature and extent of post-divorce father-child relationships. While non-custodial fathers’ level of contact with their children is constrained by legal access restrictions and what the custodial mother will allow, the strain of child absence is particularly pronounced for disengaged fathers, a reflection of the intensity of their involvement with and attachment to their children before divorce. Disengaged fathers deeply yearn for the children with whom they are no longer in contact; all 40 disengaged fathers indicated a desire for “a lot more” contact with their children, and the great majority presented as far from having come to any resolution of the grief connected to the absence of their children and loss of the pre-divorce paternal role.

Significant differences emerged between contact and disengaged fathers in the frequency, intensity and duration of physical and
mental health problems resulting from the divorce (p < .01). The majority of disengaged fathers experienced stress severe enough to result in the development of new physical and mental health problems: 28 (of 40) disengaged fathers developed physical symptoms, and 32 experienced mental health difficulties after divorce; the majority of contact fathers reported no new physical or mental health problems. Disengaged fathers also indicated a significantly higher level of negative effects on their work or career (p < .01).

Although the effects of child absence were manifested in a number of ways, the great majority of the disengaged (as opposed to contact) fathers in our sample displayed a number of signs of depression, resignation, and a full grief reaction connected to the loss of their children:

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

It’s a very great loss. It makes me sad, I have periods of intermittent depression, I wake up at 4:00 a.m., I have a lot of sleepless nights. Of course my present wife has helped tremendously, and encouraged me to channel these feelings into positive endeavours. But there’s a tremendous feeling of loss and sadness, and it’s a loss which can never be regained. The period of a child’s life growing, in Elspeth’s case, from 8 to 14, is a vital period for her and a vital period for me, which has been lost forever.

I feel very bad—I feel I am lost with nowhere to go, with no direction. And I feel no one can save me; I don’t know how I can survive like this. I can’t sleep—all the time I think about them.

I feel numb—I don’t feel anything anymore. At first I felt completely terrified—for about 4 years. And then I just started losing all feeling. I don’t know what I feel right now.

Related to child absence is role loss, the loss of a set of functions that together constitute the “father” role. Again, the problems of role loss appeared to be more pronounced for disengaged fathers: for those fathers actively involved with their children before divorce
and who defined their identity largely in relation to their parental role, as the pre-divorce relationship was perceived to be lost, so was the paternal role. Fathers considered themselves to be significantly less influential in all major areas of their children’s growth and development than did contact fathers, and rated their post-divorce parenting abilities significantly lower than contact fathers. Using Greif’s (1979) framework, fathers were asked for their perception of any change (from before to after divorce) in ten functions that fathers perform vis-à-vis their children, which together constitute the “father” role (Table 3). In all ten areas of paternal influence, there were significant differences noted between contact and disengaged fathers; while all 40 disengaged fathers reported a decrease in influence in 8 of the 10 roles listed, the majority of contact fathers indicated either an increase or no change in paternal influence in 8 paternal roles.

Marked differences also emerged between contact and disengaged fathers with respect to their adaptation to the constraints of the new post-divorce “visiting” relationship. For disengaged fathers, “visiting” their children tended to engender persistent feelings of loss and depression, while a number of contact fathers were able to eventually establish a satisfying relationship with their children within these same limitations. Whereas for disengaged fathers, “visiting” their children signified the loss of the former relationship, for contact fathers it often presented an opportunity to develop an enhanced relationship, independent of mothers as mediators in the relationship.

**Observed Differences Between Contact and Disengaged Fathers**

Demographically, there were no observable differences between contact and disengaged fathers; there were no apparent differences between the two groups in relation to age, length of marriage, length of separation, or occupation and income of respondent. The sex and age of the children involved were marginal in determining whether a father continued ongoing contact or became disengaged, and initiator of separation was not a statistically significant factor vis-à-vis contact/disengagement. Whether or not a father was le-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paternal Roles</th>
<th>Increase % (N)</th>
<th>No change % (N)</th>
<th>Decrease % (N)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
<th>Disengaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Routine daily care **</td>
<td>12(5)</td>
<td>10(4)</td>
<td>78(31)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Intellectual development *</td>
<td>15(6)</td>
<td>38(15)</td>
<td>48(19)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Teaching behaviour / social skills *</td>
<td>5(2)</td>
<td>43(17)</td>
<td>53(21)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Personality development *</td>
<td>13(5)</td>
<td>43(17)</td>
<td>45(18)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Emotional development *</td>
<td>20(8)</td>
<td>35(14)</td>
<td>45(18)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Giving children a feeling of being part of a family *</td>
<td>23(9)</td>
<td>33(13)</td>
<td>45(18)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Physical development *</td>
<td>10(4)</td>
<td>53(22)</td>
<td>35(14)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Financial affairs of children *</td>
<td>10(4)</td>
<td>50(20)</td>
<td>40(16)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Moral development *</td>
<td>25(10)</td>
<td>55(22)</td>
<td>20(8)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Religious development *</td>
<td>12(5)</td>
<td>70(28)</td>
<td>18(7)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
<td>100(40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .001
** p < .01
gally divorced was not associated with post-divorce paternal contact in our study, nor was remarriage of the father. 

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. Post-divorce paternal contact was not associated with either the type and size of the father’s accommodation after divorce or the distance between the father’s residence and that of his children: adequate accommodation and close proximity did not ensure paternal contact. The majority of both contact and disengaged fathers did not consider distance, transportation, finances, or work schedule as significant problems in relation to their ongoing contact with their children.

The differences that emerged between contact and disengaged fathers in regard to a number of other factors, however, were consistent and striking (Figure 1); most significant is the marked discontinuity between pre- and post-divorce father-child relationships. The patterns and experiences of 28 of the 40 contact fathers in the sample were diametrically opposed to those of 26 of the disengaged fathers. While 28 contact fathers consistently reported low levels of pre-divorce involvement, attachment and influence, fewer difficulties during the transition phase of divorce, and better adaptation to the consequences of divorce, 26 disengaged fathers had comparatively high scores on all indices relating to the pre-divorce father-child relationship, reported multiple difficulties during divorce, and marked problems in post-divorce adaptation.

In regard to fathers’ differential experiences before, during and after divorce, no differences were found between the British and Canadian sub-samples, suggesting a measure of universality in relation to the disengagement phenomenon.

**DISCUSSION**

There are two distinct and significant sub-groups of non-custodial fathers, with diametrically opposed patterns of pre- and post-divorce contact with their children: previously involved and attached fathers who became disengaged, and initially “peripheral” fathers who managed to remain in contact. The majority of the dis-
engaged fathers in our sample consistently scored high on a variety of measures of pre-divorce involvement, attachment, and influence, whereas most contact fathers had consistently low scores on the same indices.

The striking discontinuity between pre- and post-divorce father-child relationship patterns observed above suggests a process with two interacting components: the consequences of divorce and fathers’ adaptation to these consequences. For previously involved and attached fathers, the negative consequences of divorce were paramount; of the multiple losses encountered, the most salient was the loss of their children and the pre-divorce father-child relationship. For those fathers who were previously less directly involved and attached, these consequences were less pronounced, and adaptation—the development of a “part-time” parental identity within the confines of a “visiting” relationship—was not as problematic an issue. These previously “traditional” or “breadwinner” fathers often came to enjoy an enhanced level of contact with their children; improved relationships were possible within the constraints of “visiting” for these fathers, as assuming sole responsibility for their children on a limited access basis provided an opportunity to establish more meaningful relationships.

The key to explaining this finding 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 post-divorce father-child relationships are largely determined: the transition period from the time of divorce (separation) to about six months after, a time when access patterns become established and consolidated. This is also the stage when legal processes have their greatest impact, and when multiple adjustments are required on the part of all members of the divorcing family.

During divorce, the previously less involved and attached father, faced with perhaps weekly or bi-monthly contact in a “visiting” relationship, may find that with sole responsibility for his children during this time, 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 disentanglement from the routines of daily life with his children—a drastic reduction of contact and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>28 of 40 contact fathers exhibited the following:</th>
<th>26 of 40 disengaged fathers exhibited the following:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paternal involvement in infant care tasks</td>
<td>Scored within the lower half of mean levels</td>
<td>Scored within the upper half of mean levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal involvement in four traditionally “female” domestic tasks</td>
<td>Scored within lower half of mean levels in four traditionally “female” tasks and upper half of mean levels in four traditionally “male” tasks</td>
<td>Scored within upper half of mean levels in four traditionally “female” tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(laundry, cooking family meals, cleaning house, and shopping), and in four traditionally “male” tasks (household repairs, earning money, taking out rubbish, and family money management)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly contact with children in the year before the divorce</td>
<td>Scored lower than mean of 15.8 hours alone with children and 18.2 hours with others</td>
<td>Scored higher than mean both alone with children and with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional attachment to children before divorce</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as less then “very strong”</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as “very strong”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Attachment behaviours (thinking about children when not with them, wanting to be with children when not with them, comforting children when ill and reassuring them when in distress, and talking with children about feelings) | More likely to be reported as less than "very often" | More likely to be reported as "very often"
| --- | --- | --- |
| Role satisfaction during marriage | Less likely to be reported as family- or child-oriented (and more likely to be non-family or child-oriented) | More likely to be reported as family- or child-oriented (and less likely to be non-family or child-oriented)
| Paternal influence in ten areas of children's growth and development before the divorce | Scored within lower half of mean levels | Scored within upper half of mean levels
<p>| Definitions of &quot;fathering&quot; and &quot;mothering&quot; roles | More likely to be &quot;traditional&quot; in orientation/ greater likelihood of differentiation of gender roles in the family | More likely to be &quot;non-traditional&quot; in orientation/ no differentiation of gender roles in the family |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes toward solicitors and/or the judicial system</th>
<th>More likely to be reported as positive</th>
<th>Reported as negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with legal custody and access and children's de facto living arrangement</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as satisfied</td>
<td>Reported as dissatisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired (at least partial) physical custody of children at time of divorce</td>
<td>Less likely to be reported as desired</td>
<td>Reported as desired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired levels of (present) post-divorce contact with children</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as less than &quot;a lot more&quot;</td>
<td>Reported as &quot;a lot more&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Present) post-divorce contact with ex-wife</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as better than &quot;very unfriendly&quot;</td>
<td>Reported as &quot;unfriendly&quot; or &quot;non-existent&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-wife's encouragement of post-divorce paternal contact with children</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as encouraging</td>
<td>Reported as discouraging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of (present) post-divorce parenting abilities</td>
<td>Reported as positive or improvement in parenting abilities after divorce</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal influence in ten areas of children's growth and development after divorce</td>
<td>Scored within upper half of mean levels/minimal or no loss of paternal influence from before to after divorce more likely to be reported</td>
<td>Scored within lower half of mean levels/significant loss of paternal influence from before to after divorce more likely to be reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects of &quot;visiting&quot; on fathers</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as minimal or non-existent</td>
<td>Reported as significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects of &quot;visiting&quot; on children</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as minimal or non-existent</td>
<td>Reported as significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects of child absence</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as minimal or non-existent</td>
<td>Reported as significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects of father absence</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as minimal or non-existent</td>
<td>Reported as significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects of divorce on children</td>
<td>More likely to be reported as minimal or non-existent</td>
<td>Reported as significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

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.

By pre-adjudicating custody disputes on the basis of anticipations of what would happen were the dispute to be carried to court, legal practitioners perpetuate the perceived maternal custody bias of the judiciary: inaction because of an assumption of prejudice becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and reinforces the status quo:

... They don’t give men the benefit of the possibility that they may be good parents. They look at you as if you’re doing something wrong, as if you’re the guilty party. Lawyers and judges are the mainstay of the problems that men and children have, when it comes to men and children not having the right to maintain their relationship. And they support women if they decide to break the relationship—they promote women’s anger and bitterness, and promote destruction of the father-child relationship.

Lawyers’ directions rarely differed for 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 custody and access arrangements that were made and the final outcome in regard to their post-divorce contact with their children. It may be the very fact of uniformity of approach among lawyers and the largely un-
Figure 2  Discontinuity Between Pre- and Post-divorce Father-child Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup 1: Relatively highly involved and attached</th>
<th>Subgroup 2: Peripherally involved and less attached</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BEFORE DIVORCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>DURING DIVORCE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;ANDROGYNOUS&quot; FATHERS</td>
<td>DIMINISHED INVOLVEMENT (either no contact or contact loss/threat of loss)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Relatively highly involved and attached)</td>
<td>ROLE LOSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AFTER DIVORCE</strong></td>
<td><strong>DISENGAGEMENT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUBGROUP 1</strong>: INCREASED INVOLVEMENT (ongoing or increased contact/sole responsibility for children on part-time basis)</td>
<td><strong>SUBGROUP 2</strong>: DEVELOPMENT OF 'PART-TIME OR 'VISITING' FATHERING ROLE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Table listed according to column percentages.
4. Table listed according to column percentages.
5. Legal access determinations were made in 57 cases.
6. Table listed according to row percentages. Categories are pre-coded, listed in order of total amount of decrease of influence.
7. This lack of an association is qualified by the fact that only a small number—9 in total—of the 80 fathers in our study had remarried. Of these, 3 were disengaged fathers.

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COLLECTIVITY IN SOCIAL GROUP WORK
Concept and Practice

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University of Toronto, Canada

Joanne Sulman, MSW
Supervisor, Social Work, Mt. Sinai Hospital,
Toronto, Canada

This book will be of great interest to all social work professionals working with groups, for it presents a concise and comprehensive examination of the theory of collectivity in social group work. Just how collectivity theory can impact on social work practice is fully explored, and descriptions of practice in collectivity are provided. Readers will be able to study the “fit” between practice and this theory and to benefit from the expert insights that are provided.

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