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# The Disengaged Noncustodial Father: Implications for Social Work Practice with the Divorced Family

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*Despite alternatives to adversarial resolution of divorce-related issues and a wider range of postdivorce parenting options, maternal custody with paternal visitation of children continues as the dominant structural arrangement for divorced families in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Furthermore, the reported rates of postdivorce paternal disengagement in each of these countries are identical: Half of noncustodial fathers gradually lose all contact with their children. This article examines the results and practice implications of a Canadian and British study building on earlier U.S. research of the impact of divorce on noncustodial fathers and the phenomenon of noncustodial fathers' disengagement. The results generate two distinct profiles of noncustodial fathers and a marked discontinuity between pre- and postdivorce father-child relationships. Practice implications focus on the lack of fit between divorced fathers' therapeutic needs and social work methods. Methods of modifying the therapeutic process to meet fathers' needs before, during, and after divorce are considered.*

**Key Words:** *disengaged fathers; disengagement; divorce; families; noncustodial fathers*

The dramatic increase in divorce rates during the past 25 years has shifted social work research and clinical practice to a newly emerged population considered to be at risk: parents and children affected by marital divorce. The rapidly expanding divorce literature, an array of social services organizations, and legal and policymaking bodies have clearly identified divorce as a major social phenomenon and family transition during divorce as an important mental health issue. At the same time men's issues, and particularly the father-child relationship, have become a source of considerable public discussion

and have received high priority for methodological inquiry. An emergent trend of fatherhood has been identified and androgynous fathering promoted, generating much speculation and controversy in the literature. Despite varying levels of child care involvement among fathers, who are far from a homogeneous group in this regard, fathers' emotional investment in their children prevails over other aspects of their lives, and fathers' attachment bonds with their children can no longer be regarded as secondary. Thus, in social work, the importance of engaging fathers in the therapeutic endeavor is a priority.

Although divorce and fatherhood research is now flourishing, divorced fathers remain a largely neglected population in the professional literature. Similarly, despite the emergence of therapeutic practice models based on the involvement of all family system members in the therapeutic endeavor, social work practice with divorced families largely continues to exclude fathers. The contribution that social workers can make to families in transition and to the adjustment of family members to the consequences of divorce is considerable. Family mediation and divorce counseling are emerging as important fields of practice for the profession. With the paucity of empirically grounded and systematic information about this one member of the postdivorce family system, particularly in light of data stressing the importance of ongoing meaningful relationships between both parents and their children for the postdivorce adjustment of all family members (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), social work practitioners remain limited in regard to engaging fathers in their work with divorced family systems.

This article reports the results of a research study of the impact of divorce on noncustodial fathers and the phenomenon of noncustodial fathers' disengagement from their children's lives, discusses the implications of the study for social work practice with families in transition, and begins to develop an alternative conceptualization to prevailing stereotypes of divorced fatherhood. The goal of the research was to identify and integrate the missing elements in the divorce literature and to contribute to an empirically based understanding of divorced fatherhood. It is hoped that this in turn will lead to more informed practice with divorced and divorcing populations.

The study gathered data directly from fathers, with a primary emphasis on their perception of changes in their relationships with their children before, during, and after divorce. The point of final parental separation was considered to be the salient event in the divorce process. As Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found, although the legal divorce ratifies child custody and access arrangements, the transition period from the point of separation to about six months to one year afterward is most critical in establishing and consolidating postdivorce patterns and relationships among family members. Thus, "divorce" here refers to the final parental separation, not the legal divorce decree, and the transition period six months to one year after.

The term "divorced father" also requires clarification. In light of the heterogeneity of patterns of fatherhood existing within two-parent families, divorced fathers should not be assumed to constitute a homogeneous group. Increasing numbers of divorced fathers are either sole caretakers or shared caregivers of their children, and noncustodial fathers exhibit a range of caretaking patterns and levels of involvement with children. It is important to distinguish between fathers remaining in contact and those disengaged from their children's lives after divorce. Regardless whether fathers remain in physical contact with their children after divorce, emotionally they remain very much a part of their children's lives (Hetherington et al., 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Although there is a paucity of empirical investigations of the impact of divorce on fathers in general, virtually absent from the literature are any studies focused on disengaged noncustodial fathers. The rate of paternal disengagement after divorce is, however, well documented; there is evidence that more than half of noncustodial divorced fathers gradually lose all contact with their children. In a nationally representative sample of U.S. children ages 11 to 16, it was found that 52 percent of children had no contact with their fathers during the past year or longer; only one-third averaged monthly or more contact (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). More than twice as many children had no contact with their fathers in the preceding five years as had visited them once a week or more (36 percent versus 16 percent) (Furstenberg et al., 1983). Canadian and British studies have replicated these results (Lund, 1987; Palmer, 1983).

The process of a father's disengagement typically begins soon after the marital separation and gradually increases over time, most sharply at about one year after separation (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976). The widespread nature of the disengagement phenomenon stands in stark contrast both to the trend of emergent fatherhood currently the source of much public discussion and to calls from the men's movement toward increased involvement of fathers in their children's lives.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The study surveyed 80 noncustodial divorced fathers from Canada (Toronto) and Great Britain

(Edinburgh) using a combined fixed-choice and open-ended questionnaire administered in the context of a personal interview. Half of the fathers had ongoing and regular contact with their children, and half were disengaged. Divorce outcome research focused specifically on fathers is scarce in both Canada and Great Britain, and observed patterns and trends may be compared to existing U.S. data. I was particularly interested in the degree of similarity among fathers in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States; in each locale the majority of divorcing fathers become noncustodial fathers, and the incidence of paternal disengagement subsequent to divorce is extremely high. In all three countries, more than 80 percent of divorced fathers become noncustodial parents, and more than 50 percent of these men become disengaged fathers, despite the existence of mediation services and joint custody provisions by the courts (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Lund, 1987; Palmer, 1983). Cross-cultural comparison is particularly beneficial when such similarities prevail, adding to the universality of my findings and conclusions. Given that preliminary data relating to U.S. trends were available, I was particularly interested in obtaining comparative data from other locales. Time and financial constraints also influenced my decision to restrict data collection to Canada and Great Britain.

Fathers included in the study met the following four criteria: (1) the final parental separation occurred no more than five years before, (2) there were no more than two children in the family, (3) the eldest child was less than 16 years of age at interview, and (4) the father had neither physical nor legal custody of the children (in each case the children lived with their mothers, who retained physical and in most cases legal custody). I attempted to use court records to generate a representative sample in both locales; although I was successful in negotiating access to court records to generate the Canadian sample, I was denied access to court records for the British sample and therefore had to adopt the second-best strategy of selecting the British sample from a variety of sources. In Canada 288 names were randomly drawn from court records by means of a stratified sampling approach; telephone contact was successful with 132 of these fathers. Of these the first 40 who met eligibility criteria and who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed. For the British sample, a combination of newspaper advertising and referrals from legal and social work

practitioners and divorce-related self-help programs was used. The first 40 fathers who expressed interest and who met eligibility requirements were accepted into the study and interviewed. Before the interview, each father was asked about his level of current contact with his children to ensure equal numbers of contact and disengaged fathers in each locale.

**Instrumentation**

The source of data was a structured interview conducted by the author individually with each father. The interview was pretested with a self-selected sample of six fathers. The questionnaire proceeded from an initial focus on demographic data and family history to a more detailed examination of various legal and psychological aspects of the divorce experience and postdivorce changes in the father-child relationship. The questionnaire proceeded according to the time frame of the father's experience—before, during, and after divorce—with each section examining the following issues:

- demographic data 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 with 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
- data about changes in the father role before and after divorce in relation to 10 areas of parental influence
- details about the major issues identified by the father with regard to his status as a noncustodial parent.

The interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to the respondent, with most

taking place at the father's residence. The interviews lasted on average between two and 2½ hours, the shortest being one hour and the longest being three hours.

In the majority of cases, fathers were willing to share large amounts of intimate and often painfully sensitive information. The rich and extensive data gathered are a major strength of the study; for many fathers, the interview represented the first opportunity to discuss their feelings and experiences related to the divorce in a detailed and thoughtful way. The interview contained many therapeutic elements for the fathers who took part.

The questionnaire comprised 98 items; several questions allowed for multiple responses. Altogether, 266 variables were generated from the questionnaire for data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The factual questionnaire items were precoded, and preparation for data analysis involved postcoding responses to the open-ended questions. The development of these coding categories followed a grounded method of constantly comparing fathers' responses; identifying similar clusters of constructs, themes, and issues related to each item; and labeling categories according to the major themes identified. Coding categories thus emerged directly from the gathered data. SPSS was used in the data analysis, incorporating a mix of statistical tests and measures of association (SPSS, Inc., 1986).

The primary dependent variable in the data analysis was paternal postdivorce contact with children. Fathers who had at least one direct physical contact with their children in the month before the interview were categorized as contact fathers; those who had no direct physical contact with their children in the month before the interview were considered disengaged. Although most of the contact fathers in the sample maintained more frequent contact with their children than once a month, the subgroup spanned a wide range of frequency and duration of contact. All of the disengaged fathers in the sample had in fact not seen their children for at least three months before the interview.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Data were obtained from the perspective of noncustodial fathers only; mothers and children

were not interviewed to corroborate this information. Although uncritical reliance on self-report data can pose serious difficulties, in light of the paucity of empirical studies on the noncustodial and disengaged father, a case may be made for the value and validity of exploratory father-centered research. There is a considerable body of literature concerning the impact of divorce on mothers and children; fathers' views and interpretations of the events surrounding divorce represent a significant lacuna in the research.

The retrospective nature of the study also limits the extent to which interpretations of cause-and-effect relationships can be made, and the degree of representativeness of the data may be questioned in light of the self-selected nature of the British sample. I have no means of knowing about any differences between the fathers who chose to participate in the study and those who did not. However, this problem is largely unavoidable in researching a population such as noncustodial and disengaged fathers, who tend to remain invisible and anonymous.

As an exploratory endeavor, the research was able to generate detailed data from 80 noncustodial fathers; in the majority of cases, the respondents were able to recall their predivorce relationships with their children, significant events during the divorce process, and the postdivorce process with vivid detail and a startling intensity. Some of the fathers took the problem-oriented position, seeking an opportunity to talk about some serious difficulties, whereas others were positive about the postdivorce changes in their lives. Some were looking for a normalization of their experiences, whereas others felt particularly strongly (positively or negatively) about their experiences and vented those feelings. All of these motivations were present in the sample and were fairly evenly distributed, and any biases occurring as a result of the self-selected nature of the sample and self-report and retrospective nature of the study appear to be varied rather than singular.

### **Sample Characteristics**

The 80 fathers studied spanned a wide range of income, occupational, and educational categories and represented a diversity of ethnocultural groups in both locales. The mean age of the respondents was 39 years, ranging from 24 to 56 years. The former marriage was the first for 69 of

the men; for the other 11 it had been their second marriage. The mean length of the marriage to separation was eight years, ranging from four months to 24 years. Of the 80 separated fathers, 39 were legally divorced; nine had remarried since the divorce. The mean length of the separation at the time of the interview was three years, ranging from three months to seven years. For the 39 fathers who were legally divorced, the mean length of the divorce at the time of the interview was two years, ranging from one month to six years. For the nine fathers who were remarried, the mean length of the remarriage was two years, ranging from one month to five years.

In 54 of the 80 cases, the wife initiated the separation; the husband did so in 18 cases; and there was a mutual decision in eight cases. In 58 of the 62 wife- or mutually initiated separations, the respondent indicated that he had not wanted the separation to occur. In 28 of the 39 legal divorces, the wife was the plaintiff; the husband was the plaintiff in the other 11. In half of the divorces where the wife was the plaintiff, the respondent 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 had a total of 128 children from the former marriage ranging in age from one to 15 years (at interview), with a fairly equal distribution for each age. Thirty-two of the fathers had one child, and 48 had two children. Of the 80 older or only children, 42 were female and 38 were male; of the 48 younger children, 25 were female and 23 were male.

## Results

### Grief Reaction

The study generated a profile of noncustodial divorced fathers, particularly those who had relatively high predivorce involvement with and attachment to their children, as a group highly at risk, many remaining at a high level of distress several years after divorce. Regardless of the intensity of the predivorce father-child relationship, the majority of noncustodial fathers appeared to experience a grieving process during divorce, and this grief was directly and primarily connected to the actual or threatened loss of their children. Although noncustodial fathers underwent a number of transitions during divorce, the loss of the predivorce father-child relationship was identi-

fied as the most salient (see Table 1). Asked how their children's absence had affected them, 68 of the fathers primarily indicated some type of negative effect, two were positive, five were both positive and negative, and five were neither positive nor negative (no effect).

This finding represents a strong departure from previous formulations of grieving process of divorced fathers as linked primarily to the loss of their marital identity. Current accounts of the grief reaction of divorced individuals, not controlling for the gender or custodial status of the parent, fail to acknowledge that the loss of children in particular, in the midst of the multitude of losses faced after divorce, is most salient for those parents without custody of their children. Fathers, who continue to comprise the majority of the noncustodial parent population, may thus be considered a highly at risk but less visible population in the context of divorce and its consequences.

The fathers' emotional investment in and attachment to their children was strong before the divorce, despite varying rates of actual participation in child care and childrearing tasks; for non-custodial fathers divorce represented a threatened or actual loss of a primary attachment. This combination of attachment and loss resulted in a reaction of mourning.

Noncustodial fathers located themselves at quite different stages on the bereavement continuum: Although some continued mourning and

Table 1

### Effects of Child Absence on Fathers

Effects on Father	Number of Times Mentioned
Depression or sense of loss	40
Constant worry or yearning for children	27
Reference to loss of paternal influence or loss of daily routine with children	17
Isolation or emptiness	14
Facade of coping	9
Guilt	9
Reference to loss of family life	8
Generally negative	8
Powerlessness, hopelessness of situation	7
Like death or dying	7
Positive effects	4
Neither positive nor negative effects	4

became stuck along the continuum, others were able to successfully work through and resolve their grief and reported positive outcomes of divorce for themselves and their children. Paradoxically, many fathers less attached to their children within the marriage subsequently found that they were able, within the confines of noncustodial fatherhood, to spend time alone with their children in more intense and meaningful ways and thus were presented with the opportunity to develop stronger bonds with their children than they had before the divorce. For highly attached fathers, however, the resolution of the grieving process remained highly problematic, leaving them vulnerable to poor outcomes. No differences were observed between the Canadian and British subgroups in relation to fathers' grief response patterns.

### **Discontinuity between Pre- and Postdivorce Father-Child Relationships**

Although it is commonly assumed that postdivorce relationships are likely to reflect predivorce parent-child relationships, earlier U.S. research findings suggest that this may not always be the case. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), using a clinical sample of divorced parents, found little association between the closeness of father-child relationships before and after divorce. Hetherington et al. (1976) identified a small subgroup of highly involved and attached fathers who, as a result of the pain of seeing their children only intermittently in a visiting relationship after divorce, chose to cease contact altogether. Huntington (1986) reported a similar pattern based on her clinical observations of a limited number of fathers seen in professional practice.

This study's results build on these earlier clinical accounts and research findings. In this study, 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 divorce, whereas those previously on the periphery of their children's lives were more likely to remain in contact. There are thus two major subgroups of noncustodial fathers, and for each an inverse relationship exists between their involvement with their children before and after divorce. What was particularly striking was the strength of the association: Now-disengaged fathers consistently scored highest on

all measures of predivorce involvement, attachment, and influence (see Kruk, 1991).

Although it may be argued that postdivorce disengaged fathers in particular may tend to embellish the former relationship with their children and report inflated levels of predivorce involvement, the aggregate levels of predivorce father-child involvement of all of the noncustodial fathers in the study fell well within the reported range of paternal participation in two-parent families in current time budget research. Specifically, Kamo (1988) found that on average husbands carry 36 percent of the total domestic workload (domestic tasks plus child care), which increases to 41 percent when both spouses are employed full-time and 43 percent when both earn approximately the same amount of money. In this study, overall mean levels of paternal participation in a range of infant care tasks ranging from 24 percent to 46 percent are clearly within the range of Kamo's and other studies (40 percent in Warner, 1986, and 27 percent in Berk, 1985).

Significant differences emerged between contact and disengaged fathers with respect to the following: predivorce involvement in a range of infant care tasks; amount of time spent with their children at different stages of their children's development; reported emotional attachment to children before the divorce; fathers' self-ratings on a number of attachment indices (thinking about and wanting to be with their children when not with them, comforting their children when in distress, and discussing feelings with their children); satisfaction derived from family versus work and other nonfamily roles during the marriage; predivorce influence in the areas of routine daily care and safety, personality development, intellectual development, physical development, and moral development of their children; the provision for their children of the feeling of being part of a family; and the teaching of behavior and social skills, emotional development, and religious development.

Fathers' ideologies regarding gender role division within the family were also examined: Whereas contact fathers were more likely to be traditional in their orientation toward gender roles, with a greater likelihood of differentiating between the mother and father role, disengaged fathers tended to be more androgynous in their orientation, that is, more likely to provide similar definitions of mothering and fathering (see Table 2).

No significant relationships were found between postdivorce father-child contact and remarriage of one or both parents, residential proximity, type and size of the father's housing, the father's income level, and the father's work schedule, reinforcing the salience of the predivorce father-child relationship as a critical factor in postdivorce outcome.

## Discussion

There is a critical period that strongly influences the nature of postdivorce father-child relationships: the transition period from the point of divorce to approximately six months to one year after, a time when multiple stresses and adjustments impinge on all members of the divorcing family, legal processes have their greatest impact, and access patterns are established and consolidated (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The previously less involved and attached father, faced with perhaps weekly or bimonthly contact with his children in a visiting relationship, finds that with sole responsibility for his children during this time, his fatherhood role may well be enhanced. Conversely, the highly attached and involved father, faced with markedly diminished contact and what he perceives to be rigid access arrangements, and perhaps feeling threatened by a total loss of contact, faces a dramatic disruption from the daily routine of his former relationship with his children, an experience of child absence and role loss (Greif, 1979) that, over a period of time, results in complete disengagement from the lives of his children (see Figure 1).

The disengagement of noncustodial fathers appears to be the result of a combination of structural constraints and fathers' own psychological response to the loss of their children and the predivorce father-child relationship (see Kruk,

1992). Consistent with social work's interactionist perspective, both structural and psychological variables are implicated as significant mediating factors between divorce and disengagement: On their own, each is usually insufficient to effect disengagement; combined, they are a potent force working against an ongoing meaningful father-child relationship.

The consequences of divorce for the majority of fathers—the absence of their children, loss of the previous father role, and the limits and constraints of the access relationship—are determined by prevailing structural conditions and sanctioned by the judicial system. Individual fathers' adaptations to these consequences are the other half of the equation in relation to post-divorce contact. The perspective of attachment theory (Parkes, 1986; Parkes & Stevenson-Hinde, 1982) makes the relationship between the consequences of divorce and disengagement clear: Those fathers most attached to their children before divorce are most likely to suffer the negative effects of the loss or absence of their children and their fathering role; reactions of intense grieving, characteristic of these fathers, are strong predictors of poor outcome.

## Implications for Social Work Practice

Although the partisan nature of legal processes has long been associated with the escalation of conflict during divorce, the role of social workers and other mental health professionals has been largely unexamined (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). The majority of the fathers studied had not made use of the variety of social welfare services available to divorcing and divorced individuals in their respective jurisdictions, a pattern also prevalent in the United States (Wylder, 1982). Most fathers indicated a feeling of exclusion in relation to the

Table 2

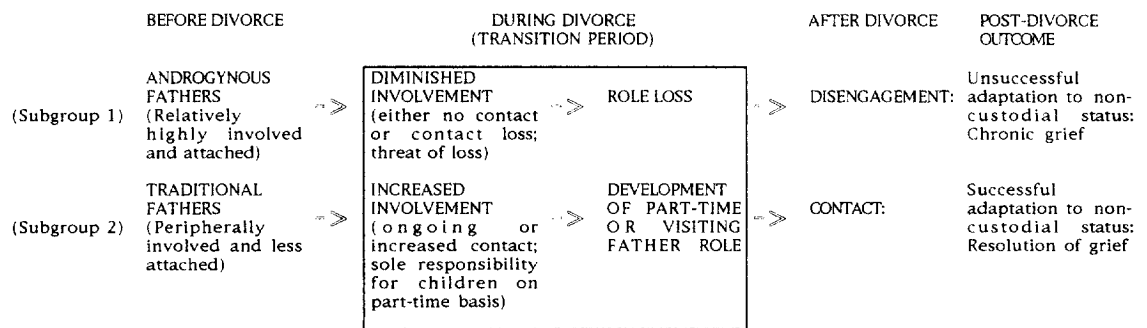
### Paternal Contact, by Father's Ideologies Regarding Gender Roles

Gender Role Ideology	Contact		Disengaged		Total	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
No difference between father and mother roles (androgynous orientation)	5	20	82	33	66	53
Minimal or subtle difference between father and mother roles	8	3	8	3	8	6
Clear difference between father and mother roles	42	17	10	4	26	21
Total	100	40	100	40	100	80

NOTE:  $\chi^2 [2] = 11.236, p < .01$ .

Figure 1

**Discontinuity between Pre- and Postdivorce Father-Child Relationships**



postdivorce family, a feeling that may often be reinforced by both legal and mental health professionals. By not defining the postdivorce family system in terms of a continuing interdependence of mothers, children, and fathers (Ahrns, 1983), social workers and others may well be contributing to the erection of barriers to the postdivorce father-child relationship.

This research suggests that the primary issue facing social workers in their work with divorcing and divorced populations is the need to redefine current conceptualizations of the postdivorce family system. Divorce has been defined as "a crisis of family transition which results in structural changes within the system" (Ahrns, 1983, p. 55). Although divorce necessitates significant changes in family boundaries, it should not necessarily erase one of the parent-child relationships, or even the relationship between the parents.

Divorce outcome research has provided social work practitioners with a growing body of evidence on which to base what is in the "best interests" of children after divorce. The most important factor in children's postdivorce adjustment has been shown to be, for the majority of children, the protection of continuity in their relationships with both parents within a supportive relationship between the parents (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1985; Mitchell, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Thus, the preferred treatment modality in divorce and postdivorce counseling should be the couple or family, with a focus on helping both parents maintain meaningful relationships with their children and

fostering parental cooperation. This modality stands in contrast to the position of practitioners who work with the mother and children as a separate unit on the assumption that conjoint work may reinforce antagonism between the former spouses (Wylder, 1982). The main purpose of intervention with a family during and after divorce should be the redefinition of family roles, relationships, and boundaries to allow the family to continue as a divorced family system. Intervention should focus primarily on the clarification of boundaries so that the spousal role does not contaminate the parental role, that is, on helping parents to separate their previous marital conflicts from their ongoing parental responsibilities (Ahrns, 1980, 1981).

The case for conjoint divorce and postdivorce social work counseling is strong. Communication between the spouses, of particular importance after divorce with respect to child care arrangements, becomes a focus of social work, and triangulation of the social worker in relation to areas of ongoing conflict between the former spouses is less likely. Johnston and Campbell (1988) cautioned that practitioners who undertake individual counseling after divorce are usually privy to only one view of the family problem and that coalitions between parents and therapists are common in these instances. Workers may discourage communication with the former spouse in an effort to support their client's autonomy. They may encourage uncompromising stands; reify distorted views of the other parent; and ally themselves with their client in the face of minimal knowledge or



understanding of the children's needs, the other parent's position, or the couple or family dynamics. Hearing only one version of the divorce situation, the social worker's tendency is to try to right the wrong and help the victimized party; in so doing social workers may well confirm negative, polarized, and distorted views of the other parent, setting the stage for long-term disputes over the children (Johnston & Campbell, 1988).

The task of facilitating a divorced father's involvement in divorce counseling, mediation, and postdivorce counseling represents a continuing challenge for the social work profession. The opposition of custodial mothers has been identified as a major obstacle (Forster, 1988), causing many practitioners to abandon attempts to bring it about (Wylder, 1982). Particularly in the case of the divorced family system, social workers, reluctant to undermine the integrity of the single-parent family system, are often reluctant to challenge mothers' dismissals of fathers' peripheral role in their children's lives or fathers' lack of interest in attending therapeutic sessions. Social work practice with divorced and divorcing populations thus remains largely maternally based.

To actively engage fathers, social workers must recognize that fathers are significantly affected by divorce and the threatened or actual loss of their children. Fathers have a strong desire and need to maintain regular and frequent contact with their children after divorce. For the majority of noncustodial fathers, traditional access arrangements are extremely inadequate. The majority of fathers want and are prepared to assume partial physical care of their children after divorce. Social workers must challenge prevailing assumptions and stereotypes about noncustodial fathers, reconsider traditional methods of intervention, and engage in outreach to bring these fathers into the therapeutic process.

Patterns of traditional gender role socialization, directing men toward self-sufficiency and control, independent problem solving, and emotional restraint, have largely worked against fathers being able to acknowledge personal difficulties and request help (Forster, 1988). A fear of self-disclosure and a feeling of disloyalty to one's family in exposing family problems were described by a large number of fathers in the study; a fear of losing control over one's life and the need to present an image of control or a facade of cop-

ing in the form of exterior calm, strength, and rationality despite considerable inner turmoil were common. Such psychological obstacles are often overlooked.

In an attempt to address divorced fathers' individual therapeutic needs, social workers can modify their interventions in a number of ways. Fathers identified the need, in the initial and latter stages of divorce, for a combination of practical, concrete advice and emotional support. They expressed a preference for structured goal setting and a pragmatic, problem-solving approach, a stance, according to Blackie and Clark (1987), that reflects their orientation to public arenas characterized by the achievement of measurable goals. But fathers were also seeking an opportunity to talk about their feelings within a sympathetic, nonjudgmental atmosphere with someone able to convey a genuine understanding of their experience of divorce. They spoke of others' lack of understanding and a general public hostility to their feelings of loss, depression, and victimization. It is crucial that the social worker encourage examination of the emotional impact of the divorce on the father and take the initiative to combat fathers' emotional inexpressiveness (Bowl, 1985) by demonstrating a genuine understanding of fathers' feelings, normalizing the experience of having such intense emotions, stressing the importance of emotional expressiveness to those who tend to see problems and solutions in more concrete terms, and bolstering fathers' self-esteem and their sense of parental identity.

Bereavement counseling in the traditional sense may not be appropriate for the majority of noncustodial fathers, as the object of their grief is very much alive. Giving permission to grieve is ethically supportable only if termination of the grieving process is foreseeable; the resolution of grief for disengaged fathers, however, is highly problematic and likely resistant to many traditional practice methods. Thus a number of fathers in the study commented on the unhelpful nature of traditional counseling services when they had been sought; few felt that their grief could be resolved without reference to ways of resurrecting their relationship with their children.

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 involvement with and

attachment to their children. In cases where both parents have been capable and nurturant caretakers of their children during the marriage, social workers 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 diminution of contact and disengagement can be prevented and if fathers are encouraged to continue a satisfying and unthreatened parental relationship with their children.

The role of the social worker with divorcing and divorced populations thus should include an educative and advocacy component, with noncustodial status being challenged as an appropriate postdivorce role for either parent. Parents should be fully informed, both about alternatives to litigation in custody and access determination and about alternative postdivorce custodial arrangements; empowered in relation to their continued relationship with their children; and helped to enhance their parenting and coparenting skills during and after divorce.

## Conclusion

The relative neglect of fathers before, during, and after divorce by the social work profession is rooted historically in traditional practice models based on a variety of formulations characterizing fathers as peripheral to parenting (Marsh, 1987). Despite a more recent rethinking of traditional theories of child development, with new formulations emphasizing the salience of both parents (and other "psychological parents") in the lives of children (Lamb, 1986; Rutter, 1972), stereotypical assumptions remain widespread in relation to the noncustodial divorced father. Social work practice with divorced and divorcing populations remains largely maternally based, and workers often collude with mothers' accounts of fathers' peripheral role before and after divorce or lack of interest in attending therapeutic sessions. Fathers are extremely sensitive to such exclusions and, perceiving themselves as being excluded, consider intervention by social workers and other mental health practitioners as largely unhelpful (Ambrose, Harper, & Pemberton, 1983).

The existing lack of fit between fathers, divorced and nondivorced, and social workers may be seen to emanate from two sources: (1) certain characteristics of men and fathers themselves

(self-sufficiency and independent problem solving) and (2) certain aspects of traditional social work counseling processes (which have resulted in a failure to successfully engage men and fathers). Rectifying this lack of fit is of paramount importance if social work is to move beyond maternally based divorce practice and intervene more effectively with the divorced family system. ■

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