

Parenting After Divorce: Nonresidential Parents' Perceptions of Social and Institutional Support

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ABSTRACT. Nonresidential parents are in a precarious position as by definition they are outside of the family residence after divorce and hence often perceived as outside of the family system. Semi-structured qualitative telephone interviews with 36 nonresidential parents living 50 or more miles from their children revealed social and institutional systems provide both assistance and barriers to parents following divorce. The challenge of continuing with their identity and role as a parent and family member was shown through their interactions with schools, religious institutions, and work places, as well as family and friends. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Since the divorce rate began to skyrocket from the mid-1960s to late 1970s (Furstenberg, 1994), researchers have been studying the effects of divorce on family members and their relationships. Less study has been done on factors associated with nonresidential parents who are maintaining contact and involvement in their children's lives following divorce. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research that examines nonresidential parenting from an ecological framework, specifically including the impacts of institutions and social support systems. This void in the research leaves out of the discussion many systems challenges nonresidential parents face in continuing their parenting role and identity, as well as potential models of successful post-divorce nonresidential parenting. This paper seeks to determine, from the nonresidential parent perspective, how social and institutional systems promote and hinder continued parenting following divorce when they live long distances from their children. By examining the experiences of nonresidential parents who do not live close to their children, we can see the role that social and institutional supports play in the process of nonresidential parenting for parents who cannot readily access their children's daily lives.

BACKGROUND

Most previous research examining relationships between nonresidential parents and their children has focused on individual characteristics and relationships with former spouses (Amato, 1994a; Arditti & Keith, 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Seltzer, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), limiting the understanding of how parenting occurs in this setting. However, families live within a larger social and institutional context which needs to be taken into consideration when studying them (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). An examination of nonresidential parents' interactions with systems that interface with families, such as the social support systems of friends and family and institutional systems including schools, religious institutions, and parents' workplace, would offer a more contextual view of the post-divorce family.

Social Support and Institutional Systems

Social support can be defined as emotional and instrumental assistance individuals receive from others in their lives (Belle, 1982) and is important to an individual's overall well being, particularly in assisting the transitions through divorce (Richardson & Pfeiffenberger, 1983; Sansom & Franill, 1997). Research has found however that divorced individuals experience a disruption in social support (Kitson & Morgan, 1990) and social support systems of divorced individuals are smaller than that of their married counterparts (Gerstel, Riessman, & Rosenfield, 1985). Divorced individuals rely on their parents as their primary source of social support (Picard, Lee, & Hunsley, 1997).

In recent years educators have focused on parental involvement in their children's education. Studies have found that parent involvement with their children's school leads to higher academic achievement and school functioning (Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999; Yan, 1999). As the divorce rate has increased, educators have grappled with the issues related to working with both parents after divorce (Keller, 1997); however, most schools still exclude the nonresidential parent from their child's education (Austin, 1993). The model of parent-school involvement tends to be based on the two-parent intact family without considering the variations in family structure today (Standing, 1999).

Changes in the roles and relationships between church and family have occurred in recent years. Although research has examined the change in this relationship, there is a paucity of literature available on nonresidential parenting and religious institutions, perhaps because of organized religion's focus on the traditional family (Wittberg, 1999). Because marriage within the eyes of the church is a life-long commitment, divorce has been conceptualized by some religious leaders as "marital death." In this way it can be understood as the end of a covenant that was to last forever but did not (Gonzalez, 1999). As such, religious institutions may not recognize the binuclear family. Churches often alienate those nontraditional families either because of a reaction to the social change or because they do not know how to best serve these families (Wittberg, 1999).

Virtually absent from the literature is the nonresidential parent in relation to work and family issues. Previous research that examines the work and family interface of post-divorce families generally focuses on the economic conditions (Haas, 1999) and role strain of single residential parents (Heath, 1999). Amato (1994b) found that the workplace offers an opportunity for divorced individuals to make new contacts after separation from their spouse, thus assisting with one's social adjustment. Job

satisfaction and work commitment are impacted by formal and informal family support available at the workplace (Greenberger, Goldberg, Hamill, O'Neil, & Payne, 1989). It would be beneficial to employers to recognize that nonresidential parents experience different family pressures than employees in other family structures.

In summary, little research has focused on social and institutional systems that interact with the nonresidential parent-child family post divorce. Additionally, research to date has not examined how these interactions support families where children and nonresidential parents live long distances from one another. Providing insight into how these broader level systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) affect the parenting role and identity from the perspective of the nonresidential parent would contribute to the literature on post-divorce parenting.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This exploratory study of nonresidential parents was guided through two research questions. The first research question examined how social support systems of friends and family encourage or discourage nonresidential parents' involvement with their children. The second research question sought to understand how the institutions of work, school, and religion promote or impede continued involvement with children by nonresidential parents.

METHODS

Qualitative methods using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1976; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were utilized in this study of nonresidential parents. Qualitative research seeks to understand how and why people think and make meaning of their world, focusing on the depth of understanding the phenomenon (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). We were seeking to examine how nonresidential parents' identity and parenting role were impacted by social and institutional systems.

The population of nonresidential parents is difficult to access and often underreported in national data sets (Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995). Therefore, participants for this study were sought using a purposive sampling technique. Nonresidential divorced parents who have at least one child between the age of 5 and 17, live a minimum of 50 miles from their children, and have contact with their children were invited to participate in the study. Participants were located through several means. Letters were

sent to professionals, agencies, and organizations that had contact with divorced parents. Flyers were posted around the university campus soliciting participants. An email was sent via the Family Science list serve asking professionals to refer potential participants. The majority of participants were found through the list serve.

The age limits on children were set as it was anticipated that children over the age of 17 may be living on their own and therefore the issues of contact and parenting would be different than for those living with a former spouse. The minimum age was set, as the types of contact would potentially be quite different for very young children. The minimum distance of 50 miles was made a criterion, as issues facing nonresidential parents who live in communities other than that of their children would differ from those who reside within the same community due to the distance. The former, without proximity to regularly be involved with their children, would potentially interface with social support and institutional systems to aid with contact.

Letters were sent to prospective participants asking that they sign and return the letter in the self-addressed, stamped envelope indicating their interest. All parents who nominated themselves to participate in the study and met the participant protocol were included in the study. Thirty-six parents, 30 fathers and 6 mothers, were included in the sample.

In-depth telephone interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol were used to explore the research questions. The interview protocol asked parents about the frequency and type of contact they had with their children, in what ways schools, religious institutions, employers, friends and family members assisted them in maintaining contact with their children, and their perceived challenges and successes in parenting after divorce. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 20 minutes to nearly two hours. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained by assigning each respondent with a code number and changing identifying characteristics in quoted material. Data were managed using the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUDIST) (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd., 1997) software package.

Data were first coded using an open-coding method, a process whereby data is broken down and categorized into general themes (Berg, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After immersion in the data, additional codes were incorporated, as new themes emerged. Six interviews were randomly selected and coded by a graduate assistant to check for reliability in coding. Through discussion and consensus between the first author and the graduate assistant, discrepancies in coding were resolved.

SAMPLE

This sample of 36 parents yielded participants located throughout the United States, who were primarily in middle to upper socioeconomic statuses, and living an average of 827 miles from their children. Twenty-seven of the 36 parents had a college or graduate degree. Participants held such occupations as teacher, doctor, professor, salesman, business owner, architect, and manager. Two parents were unemployed at the time of the interview. Six of the 36 participants were female, all were Caucasian, and the average age was 43 years. Thirty-four of the parents were divorced. Of those 20 had remarried and two were cohabiting at the time of the interview. One mother in the sample had never been legally married to the father of her child, and one father was separated but not officially divorced. Parents shared joint custody in 23 cases, former spouses had sole custody in 11 cases, and one family had no formal custody arrangement. In one family the state has formal custody due to an ongoing custody battle but the children reside with the mother. The mean number of children per family was 1.7, and the average age of children was 10 years. Four mothers and two fathers did not pay child support.

Most data available on nonresidential parents pertains to fathers. This is due to the relatively small yet growing number of nonresidential mothers (Herrerias, 1995). Consistent with the general population of nonresidential parents, the vast majority of this sample is fathers. The data presented are based on the aggregate of both mothers and fathers. However, where applicable, differences in the experiences of nonresidential mothers and fathers are shared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the interviews indicate that many nonresidential parents are working very hard to maintain a parenting role in the lives of their children. The challenge of continuing with their role as a parent appears to be related to whether or not the nonresidential parent perceives their parental identity is validated by social support and institutional systems. Researchers have found that the guidelines for the nonresidential parent role are ambiguous (Arendell, 1992; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995). How the parent perceives others see him or her influences the ability to continue in the role.

Social Attitudes and Support

Support from friends and family was found in this study to be important in helping nonresidential parents maintain involvement in the lives of their children. Types of support provided included both instrumental (resource support) and emotional support. The receipt of social support for the parents in this study was impacted by the attitudes about nonresidential parenting held by friends and family.

Social Attitudes and Support from Friends. Consistent with other studies (Gerstel, 1988; Johnson, 1988) nonresidential parents in this sample frequently reported that friends provided emotional support to them. One parent stated:

I've got a lot of good friends that have a lot of good ideas. And so we kind of bounce ideas off each other and if I'm running up against a particularly frustrating situation, I may get some feedback from one of my friends.

Although other studies have found that kin often provide the practical, instrumental support (Gerstel, 1988), this study found friends also contributed this type of support. One father was able to become acquainted with his son's friends' parents and that turned out to be helpful in regard to having a place to store belongings. This father traveled on a tight schedule to see his son and used only a carryon bag rather than checking luggage with the airline. He explained:

Basically I didn't know anybody in [city] and so I got to know the parents of his schoolmates and his hockey teammates and his soccer teammates and whatever and many of them have been helpful in various ways. It turns out the airlines think the hockey stick is a weapon and they won't let you carry it on a plane. So friends who I met as the parents of my son's buddies provide me with the place to leave a hockey stick and some skates so when I am there we can go if it is cold and there is a nice place to skate, we can go pick up the skates and go. It seems like a little thing but it makes a big difference when you're flying with a carry on bag to be there. And they are good at helping me find out about things like school events and stuff or soccer events [so I don't miss them].

Although many parents in this sample received support from friends, changes in friendships were noticed. One parent stated that divorce was a good "friend filter" as some former friends no longer stayed in contact. A

nonresidential mother reported that a friend disappeared from her life when she found out the children would be living with the father. Another father commented that it was difficult to maintain friendships between work and travel to see his children. While friends are a potential important source of support for nonresidential parents, maintaining this type of support system can be difficult.

Social Attitudes and Support from Family Members. Family members, especially parents, were reported as providing support. Kin relationships are important sources of support following divorce (Gerstel, 1988; Johnson, 1988). Gerstel (1988) found that the type of support parents provided their divorced children, socioemotional or practical aid, was related to gender, income, and the presence of grandchildren. Practical aid, while provided to both men and women, is more often provided for women with lower incomes (Gerstel, 1988). In the current study, parents often provided financial support to their adult children in addition to emotional support. One father stated:

From a financial perspective my mother has on several occasions paid for plane tickets for the children to come down and see me. And she has also offered plane tickets for us to see her at her home in [state]. So financially she's done a lot in that respect. But much more importantly than that is the emotional support.

Parents have been found to be important in easing the strains for divorcing children and their grandchildren (Johnson, 1988). A nonresidential mother discusses how her own mother helps her out:

My mom is very supportive. She lives down in [city] where they [the children] are and even though they have their other grandparents down there too, if my ex-husband and his wife want a break they can still take them to my mom's house. And when I'm down there with them I stay with my mom.

Although research today focuses on parents as sources of support for their divorced children, this study found siblings also acted as sources of emotional support. One father stated:

She's [his sister] supportive. She's also a teacher and she had gone through a divorce and gotten custody of her two girls. So she gives me the perspective of a seven-year-old or an eight-year-old or

something along those lines when he [his son] does things and I don't quite understand what it is he is doing.

Current spouses can be a source of emotional support for nonresidential parents. One father explained:

My current wife has been very, very supportive. She has a situation of her own, you know, first hand experiences before we met and got married of being a single parent. And so she has the benefit of understanding what that's like from the other side and so she's been very supportive.

Relationships with former spouses are often cited in the literature in terms of what influences continued contact and involvement in their children's lives following divorce (Kruk, 1992; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980); however, they have not been considered as a source of social support. Because former spouses are still linked to the nonresidential parent through parenting plans or custody agreements for their children, social support provided by them is included in here as a type of family support. Three parents in the current study stated that they still considered their former spouse a member of their immediate family. The type of support former spouses provided varied depending upon the level of animosity between the partners, with those who had amicable relationships reporting more support in terms of their parenting role. The following father explained:

To the extent that there are still difficult feelings between my ex-spouse and myself, she really does an outstanding job of keeping [his son] out of it. And encouraging our relationship.

Another father, who had an adversarial relationship with his former spouse, did not receive support from her. When asked if his former spouse kept him updated on what was happening in his son's life, he stated that she would tell him of decisions related to school and health made about their son after the fact, excluding the father from the decision making process. He commented:

She does it all after the fact. I am not participating in those decisions. In her mind I'm not a parent.

The type of support provided by former spouses was generally limited to providing the nonresidential parent with information such as school or

health needs of the child. A few offered assistance in terms of transportation of the child to see the nonresidential parent.

Although most parents in this sample reported some type of positive support from family members, a few experienced a clear lack of understanding for the situation and support to continue in their parenting role. This father expressed his frustration with his sister-in-law's and his father's understanding of his situation:

Even one of my own sister-in-laws couldn't figure out why I was fighting so hard to, just; I wasn't fighting for custody, I had to fight just to be a father and she thought that was selfish. She doesn't now, because, you know she's [his son's] aunt and she loves him. But at the time she didn't understand why I would bother. My own father didn't initially understand.

The experiences of these nonresidential parents appear to support the findings of Gerstel (1988) and Picard et al. (1997) who found some support from parents of divorced individuals was not beneficial or supportive. Picard et al. (1997) concluded that this may be due to the individuals being sensitive to judgement or intrusive comments made by parents that are meant to be helpful but come across as critical. Experiences of some parents in the current study may also be reflective of general negative stereotypes society has regarding nonresidential parents and post-divorce families. Ideally in our society parents are to reside with their children.

Institutional Attitudes' Impact and Support

In this study parents were asked in what, if any, ways churches, schools, and places of employment were assisting them in maintaining involvement with their children. These three institutions were selected because they are systems that most families interact with on a regular basis (Haas, 1999; Standing, 1999; Wittberg, 1999).

Churches. One half of the participants in the study did not belong to a church or other religious organization. These results support other research findings that religious participation is negatively associated with divorce (Bock & Radelet, 1988; Heaton & Goodman, 1985; Yang & Lester, 1991), although some variation has been found between men and women (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995). Those parents who did belong reported varying experiences and levels of support from their religious organization for their overall situation as a family of divorce or their role as a parent. One father who had been very involved with his

synagogue prior to his divorce explained how he felt the congregation not only did not offer support but also blocked his ability to be a parent during a significant rite of passage for his daughter.

The ex decided she would do the planning [of the bat mitzvah] and would limit me and my side of the family's access to it. We [his former spouse and himself] had been on the board of directors of the synagogue. We were large donators of money and time to the synagogue and the synagogue didn't know exactly what to do, and they ended up, I ended up actually not being allowed to go to my daughter's bat mitzvah.

This father experienced a "hands off" attitude from the church his daughter attended toward his efforts to be involved in her religious education.

I think it's partly because they don't want to get involved. That's really the message I got. I try to call her Sunday school teachers and ask how she's doing. They say, well you know, we don't want to get in the middle of things, don't want to get involved, don't want to create a bad situation here.

The traditional family is central to the Protestant model of religion which may be a defensive response to societal change or because religious institutions do not know how to meet the needs of families with diverse structures (Wittberg, 1999). Changes in family patterns to have both positive and negative impacts on religious congregations (Hart, 1986). The reactions these nonresidential parents had from their religious institutions may be a reflection of the negative impacts as the religious community struggles to deal with the changing family.

Although these parents expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with their places of worship, other parents reported receiving support primarily in the form of emotional support and friendship with others in their congregation indicating that some places of worship are attempting to meet the needs of diverse families. Hart (1986) found the changing family to be associated with a greater need and desire for religion as illustrated in the following quote:

I think what the church does is it keeps me going. I get to the point where I need someone to talk to, I can pick up the phone and talk to the pastor at the church and he'll sit there and listen to me and give me advice and point out different types of things that I can do.

This emotional support helped some parents through the divorce process and the continuing challenges of the post-divorce family structure.

Schools. Results of this study found that many nonresidential parents were involved with their child's education and school activities. Recent research has found that nonresidential parents are involved with their child's school more than what has been previously reported (Stewart, 1999). Even though the parents in this study lived long distances from their children, several volunteered in their children's classrooms. One parent, who lived on the east coast, and had children living on the west coast, volunteered in his children's school on a monthly basis.

As with religious organizations, parents in this study had varying experiences in working with schools to assist them in being involved in their children's lives. Many parents reported that they received school information either directly from the school or through their former spouse. In many but not all cases, the parents with this experience also had a civil relationship with their former spouse.

Some parents reported that they actively worked on developing a relationship with the school and their child's teacher before the information on their child was systematically sent to them. One father who volunteers monthly in his daughter's classroom explained:

Her teacher was clearly very unsure about me, very skeptical when I went in September and spent the day [volunteering] the first time. I gave her a dozen self-addressed, stamped envelopes and asked her to send me copies of grade reports and other relevant material. I got nothing in September, nothing in October. And every month I spent a day in the class. So I got nothing in October, nothing in September, nothing until this January. Two weeks ago I go something and I've gotten a couple of things since. So I think what happened was at first she discovered I wasn't going to go away and second, I think she discovered that I was actually a decent human being that [my daughter] loves very much and that I was a very important part of her life. And now that teacher is I think becoming much more interactive and respectful of my role in [my daughter's] life.

Not all parents however were successful in developing and maintaining a relationship with the schools. Some experienced difficulty in accessing information from their child's school. In several cases these parents suspected that their access was blocked by their former spouse. One parent expressed his frustration at trying to work with the school:

I have actually sent them stamped self-addressed envelopes saying I would like to have copies of their report cards. I've spoken to the principal. I've done everything humanly possible to try to maintain contact through that avenue because I felt like it would be kind of a neutral ground. And so far I have not had any cooperation from the school.

The following example illustrates how the lack of encouragement by school staff can affect the parent's perception of their identity and role.

I was naïve when I went through the divorce. I thought that the only thing that changed is that you just didn't live there anymore. But there is a perception that your power is somewhat diminished in the eyes of the teachers. In fact the same teachers who previously had called me and asked me to come in and be our homeroom parent or to come in and help the kids on various projects, they, after the divorce, they don't call you.

A nonresidential mother had a similar experience. She was told when responding to a request for volunteers that the school already had enough help. Prior to the divorce she had not experienced this response.

The experiences of these parents appear to reflect the current state of school policies regarding non-custodial parents. Austin (1993), in a survey of mid-western schools, found in spite of the 1974 federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), nearly one-half of the school districts non-custodial parents are excluded from their children's education. Austin (1993) points out that the FERPA does not go far enough as it does little to require schools to encourage nonresidential parent participation in their child's education. Furthermore, many of the schools did not collect contact information on the nonresidential parent nor did they have written guidelines on how to handle the exchange of educational information with nonresidential parents. Keller (1997) points out that there is little guidance in policy or law regarding the school's responsibility for divorced families. She claims school administrators have to juggle parental concerns and requests with legal requirements.

When asked what if anything the parent thought the school could do to help them be more involved in their child's life, one father suggested that schools be more aware of timing issues when mailing out announcements of school activities and conferences. He explained:

By the time I get the information lots of times things have expired. The event has happened. So unless I get it from the kids, if it's a big thing, it's gone, it's history.

This parent would like to see the school send him newsletters and calendars so that he could plan for the time with his child. Without the information he found it difficult to make travel arrangements for his children to visit.

The parents in this study wanted to simply receive information that residential parents receive regarding their children's school progress. Many school administrators according to Keller (1997) agree that schools can be of help by obtaining the contact information for the nonresidential parent, mailing out grade reports, school calendars and other notices as well as hold separate parent-teacher conferences if needed. Other ideas included keeping a portfolio of the child's work in the school office and making general school information available via a web site.

Employers. The parents in this study did not readily see their place of employment as a source of support in maintaining involvement in their children's lives. Only one parent could identify a specific workplace benefit that assisted him in this way. This father had a very generous and unusual benefit. He negotiated with his employer a stipend in addition to his salary to pay for airfare to see his children. In talking with the parents, however, they identified aspects of their jobs or informal workplace benefits that assisted them in maintaining involvement with their children and coping with being a nonresidential parent.

Many parents were in management positions, academics, or self-employed. As a result they had jobs where they had more control over their time and the ability in many cases to negotiate with their employers or partners' employment accommodations that would assist them in spending more time with their children. The most frequently mentioned way employers assisted parents in maintaining involvement in their children's lives was control over their time. The parents in the field of education often had vacation schedules that closely matched their children's. Parents in many other occupations reported that they simply had flexibility or compensation time so that when their children came for a visit, they could take time off or work from home. One father shared:

I have to say they've [his employer] been very accommodating to me for my travel schedules when either he [his son] is here or when I go to visit him. First of all I do travel for a living and they've never objected to me stopping in [the city where son lives] on my way to Los Angeles [for business].

A father who was recently hired as a manager of a travel-convenience store explained:

Well the position I am going to be in it will put me in a position to be more involved in their lives. Because I'll be running the show and I pretty much could run my own schedule. So that will put me in position to be able to hopefully make time for a three-day weekend here and there.

Some parents explained that their employers or supervisors were simply understanding of their situation and emotionally supportive. This father said of his supervisor:

The first year and a half when it was most devastating to me, he didn't give me an unfair employee review. He was very honest in his employee review that I wasn't up to my normal stuff, which under my company's review policies had been exceptional reviews up to that time. And raises to match. And at the same time he kept me busy without overloading me. In my management chain, they were understanding.

In general, the types of employer support were modest and informal but helpful. In addition to flexibility or control over time and emotional support, the other primary company resource that was used by parents was access to email to stay in contact with their children.

Two parents reported that their employers were clearly unsupportive of their situation as a divorced nonresidential parent. One father speculated that he was passed over for promotion, and another stated he had lost his job as a clergyman in his church due to the divorce.

Work and family research finds work can be a source of social support for parents (Crouter & Manke, 1994). These data suggest that workplace support may be important for nonresidential parents in two ways: in the form of family friendly workplace policies, and in social support.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND PARENTING ROLE AND IDENTITY

A grounded theory analysis illuminated continuing challenges faced by nonresidential parents. Social as well as institutional systems, although generally providing support, were found to present obstacles to these parents. Additionally, analysis revealed a connection between the

social and institutional systems and parental identity. By analyzing how social and institutional systems supported or undermined nonresidential parents, it became clear that members of these systems often failed to view the nonresidential parent as a “real” parent. In other words, members of social and institutional systems displayed a viewpoint about parental identity that was in conflict with nonresidential parent identity as parents. Ambivalent messages were sent through these systems to the parents. This perception by others impacts how nonresidential parents are able to carry out their role identity as a parent, hindering the process.

Retaining a Parental Identity

Michener and Delamater (1999) define identity as the meaning attached to oneself by the self and others. The source of one’s identity comes from membership in social categories and the multiple roles that individuals occupy in their lives. Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, and Buehler (1993) propose a middle-range theory of father involvement following divorce stating that the change in the post-divorce identity is the key to continued involvement. Nonresidential parents’ sense of parental identity is strengthened or weakened by the perceptions and beliefs of others around him or her. Parental identity can be weakened if the nonresidential parent does not receive encouragement and support from friends, family members, and society. The guidelines for the nonresidential parental role are ambiguous (Arendell, 1992; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995) and it may be difficult for parents to continue with the role in the ambiguous state (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Nonresidential parents may experience a sense of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) as their children are living in another household and their parenting role is not clear. This presents an irony as father involvement is encouraged today; however, nonresidential fathers receive ambiguous messages from society about their responsibility to children with whom they do not live (Seltzer, 1991).

The lack of recognition of their parental identity by social support and institutional systems is illustrated in the following example. This father explained how he felt a lack of recognition as a parent and as a family unit by his church:

Although I’m technically still a member [of the church], it’s like you know, fathers aren’t parents unless they’re married and then they’re secondary. I definitely got the feeling there’s something wrong with me because I was a single parent. And it wasn’t just be-

cause I was male, it was more so because I was a single father with kids, and I actually said I was a single father with kids, I wasn't a divorced father that my kids came and visited. But a couple of single mothers, I think also probably experienced the same thing. Not really overt, but it was just like you know, we're not a real family.

Parenting is guaranteed in two-parent families; however, once a parent leaves the role must be earned (Guttmann, 1989). Other than court rulings outlining visitation and support for children of divorce, our society has not developed guidelines for the nonresidential parenting role. Models are lacking for positive post-divorce nonresidential parenting.

This difficulty in retaining parental identity and role can be more salient among nonresidential mothers because of the stigma attached to nonresidential mothering. Four of the six mothers in this sample expressed concern about the stigma. One mother in the sample shared:

I come from the time when women couldn't even get time off to have babies and pregnancy leave was unheard of. So I guess we've come a long way. I tell you one issue that probably people don't recognize, women who are not with their children, it's the almost universal judgement against you. That's just the standard you know. The children are supposed to be with the parents, that's such an embedded mess with us and we're very unaccepting of that. There are some friends that I did have who when I left, you know, that whole abandonment of your child thing . . .

Another mother who had a good coparenting relationship with her former spouse concurred:

[One thing that would help her as a nonresidential parent is] the perception of the outside world that it's okay for a dad to be a nonresidential parent but it isn't okay for a mom. I mean just people's perceptions that this couldn't possibly be working when it is. Instead of listening to the story, they just judge.

Clearly, some parents in this study, both mothers and fathers, faced challenges related to the lack of support by social and institutional systems to continue their involvement with their children. For these parents, the guidelines to continue functioning as a parent were ambiguous. The ambiguity in role identity and performance is further exacerbated by the terminology that is used related to nonresidential parenting. Several parents in

this study expressed appreciation for use of the term “nonresidential” rather than “noncustodial” as the latter avoided the tone of not being involved or not having any parental responsibilities and rights concerning their children. Some parents commented on how they disliked the term “visitation” as it implies the person is not a family member. One father was very angry about the term “absent fathers.” He was adamant that although he did not live with his children, he was not absent from their lives. His identity as a parent was not supported by the term “absent father.”

Social and Institutional Access

The literature on gate keeping has focused on the mother as the gatekeeper (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Foga, & Zvetina, 1991; Kruk, 1992; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The experiences of the parents in this study demonstrate regulators of access beyond gender, specifically, societal attitudes and institutions. This study found cases of schools not willing to provide parents with information on the progress of their children, and churches distancing themselves from the nonresidential parent because they did not want to get involved.

Seery and Crowley's (2000) recent research suggests that the issues of gate keeping and gate opening might be better understood by examining the social context in which the behaviors occur. Although their sample consisted primarily of married mothers, the implication that a variety of factors and conditions need to be taken into consideration is intriguing and further warranted by the findings in this study. Nonresidential parents experience many different “gates” in relation to their ability to maintain a parenting role when interacting with social support and institutional systems. What is not yet understood is whether or not social and institutional attitudes towards nonresidential parents place the key to these gates in the hands of residential parents. To understand the context by which gate keeping may occur, research on nonresidential parenting from an ecological framework needs to be continued.

LIMITATIONS

The nonresidential parents in this sample represented primarily middle to upper-middle income families. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn to parents with similar available resources to continue their parenting role. At the same time, the data revealed that, even though most

of these parents had financial stability, they still experienced challenges in maintaining their role as a parent due to other institutional and social support systems. We would not have been able to see this with a less advantaged sample.

All parents in this study had and wanted contact and involvement with their children; therefore, the primary challenges for parents who do not have contact with their children after divorce may be very different from this group. This does not represent all nonresidential parents; however, using this sample illuminated the barriers nonresidential parents face. The small number of mothers in the sample makes it difficult to draw conclusions specifically for nonresidential mothers or to distinguish between nonresidential mothers and fathers. The study however does provide new information on how nonresidential parents attempted to maintain their parenting role when they lived long distances from their children, and how their identity was impacted by the support or lack of support they received from others. It adds to the literature the nonresidential parents' perception of how social support systems and institutional assisted and hindered them in the process of continued parenting.

CONCLUSION

The nonresidential parents in this study were aware that, in many ways, their parental identity was not validated by societal or institutional systems. This insight was echoed in the following comment from a nonresidential parent in this study:

I think the biggest challenge is, against considerable odds, given the lack of support from their [the children's] mother and others that surround them our [nonresidential parents] biggest challenge is just to continue to be an important part as a parent, in their lives.

Society today is lacking models and norms to guide nonresidential parents in their roles (Guttmann, 1989; Seltzer, 1991). This research demonstrated how parenting roles and identity are shaped through experiences with social and institutional support systems. From the experiences of these nonresidential parents, it appears that models are also needed for social and institutional support systems that interact with families of divorce.

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