

“I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH MORE I CAN TAKE”: HOW DIVORCED NONRESIDENTIAL FATHERS MANAGE BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT?

This grounded theory study examined how 20 newly divorced, nonresidential fathers believe their physical involvement with their children allows them to maintain an Involved Father identity. Their identities, however, were negatively influenced by five barriers—Rushed Time; The Legal System; Geographic Distance; Negative Perception of Child Support; and Higher Conflict Former Spouse Relationships. Finally, fathers described four ways they were able to reframe their barriers, which negated their negative influence: Reframing Priorities; Reframing Time; Reframing the Relationship with Former Wives; and Reframing Fathers’ Needs. The findings suggest that divorced nonresidential fathers’ physical involvement with their children is maintained by the ability to reframe barriers and not by the number of barriers fathers identify.

Keywords: *divorce, parenthood, qualitative family research, identity*

Current fatherhood expectations assume that fathers will be highly involved with their children—both physically and financially (Lamb, 2000, 2010; Marks & Palkovitz, 2004; Palkovitz, Christiansen, & Dunn, 1998). Many fathers have risen to the challenge and have increased their involvement with their children, attempting to meet these changed expectations. About 90% of fathers are now present in delivery rooms; they change diapers; some take paternity leave; and a small but increasing number of fathers have left the workforce to care for their children full-time (Cockey & Jeon, 1996; Coltrane, 1995). This increase in father involvement, however, appears to apply to married fathers only. Fathers who do not share a residence with their children are far less involved with their children than those who

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do, and the involvement tends to decrease over time (Braver, 1998). The percentage of non-residential fathers who saw their children at least once per week in 2002 was double the 1976 percentage, yet currently 22% of fathers no longer have contact with their children within 2-3 years after divorce. Only 31% of children have contact with their fathers at least once per week (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009).

Although many nonresident fathers disengage, some continue to maintain strong ties with their children following divorce (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004). Yet the characteristics of these ties are not well understood. Scholars have studied the transition from non-parent to father (e.g., Coltrane & Adams, 2001), but few have shown interest in studying how fathers make the transition from residential parent to divorced nonresidential parent (Catlett & McKenry, 2004). We do know, however, that the ways in which men assess and think about themselves as fathers influence how they parent (Fox & Bruce, 2001; Parke, 2002). What remains unclear is why some nonresidential fathers are—or at least attempt to be—emotionally and financially invested while others disengage from their children. Outside of socioeconomic status, we know little about the contexts that influence how divorced nonresidential fathers manage to remain involved with their children in the years following divorce. The current project was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do divorced nonresidential fathers most commonly involve themselves in their children's lives?
2. What barriers influence divorced nonresidential fathers' abilities to remain involved with their children, and how do divorced nonresidential fathers manage them?

THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY

Identity theory has been used to understand and explain the meanings and importance nonresidential fathers attach to fatherhood (e.g., Henley & Pasley, 2005). This theory focuses on role development, role expectations, and the enactment of behaviors consistent with particular identities (Stryker, 1968). An *identity* is an “internalized set of role expectations” (Stryker, 1987, p. 58). The role expectations of one's social network are critical in shaping behavior and sense of self (Stryker, 1968). The pressure social groups exert on the commitment of acceptable identities will lead to the internalizations of identities. For example, many men who experience family stress (e.g., death of a spouse, divorce) feel the need to hide their emotional pain and distance themselves from a feminine identity in order to maintain their masculine identity (Calasanti, 2004).

Stressful Events and Changing Identities

Stressful events, whether positive (e.g., a promotion to a position with greater responsibilities) or negative (e.g., job loss), can initiate changes to identities. Events that involve individuals' identities, particularly high salience ones, can influence individuals to change the role expectations for those identities or, in some cases, can add or eliminate identities (Kiecolt, 1994). For example, a father who divorces will likely eliminate his spousal identity but not his parent identity, although he may modify it. Although Kruk (1994) did not use identity theory in his study of nonresidential father involvement after divorce, his findings suggest that some nonresidential fathers who had distant relationships with their children

prior to divorce realized that they were the sole parent when they had custody of their children for weekend and overnight visits and became highly involved. Men who had been emotionally and physically involved with their children while married had more difficulty adjusting to nonresidential fatherhood than did men who had been more distant (Kruk). When no longer able to meet the expectations of high involvement, they often withdrew from their children, and their father identities became less salient and central.

Negative stressful events can lower individuals' self-esteem (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullen, 1981) and lead to negative self-appraisals (i.e., self-evaluations of not meeting the role expectations set for an identity; Burke, 1991). These negative self-appraisals may encourage individuals to change their behaviors in order to meet the expectations for an identity. If repeated behavioral changes are unsuccessful, however, individuals are likely to forgo behavioral change and instead lower their expectations of that identity (Gecas, 2000). Finally, negative stressful events often lead to a number of negative emotional responses, including feelings of shame, helplessness, and despair (Kiecolt, 1994). Identities may become less salient for people who experience both negative stressful events and negative self-appraisals, even if the individual is highly committed to that role (Kiecolt, 2000).

METHOD

Data were analyzed using the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a systematic set of procedures designed to explain and develop substantive theories about social phenomena (Morse & Richards, 2002; Schwandt, 2001). LaRossa (2006) noted that "family studies has become a field where methodologically based theorizing matters" (p. 837). As such, methods that assist in the development of new ideas, such as grounded theory, are in demand in this discipline. It is important to develop substantive theory because doing so improves our understanding of families, which allows researchers to develop better, more appropriate recommendations for practitioners, policy makers, and educators (Lavee & Dollahite, 1991).

Sample Description

Divorced nonresidential fathers were recruited through a court-mandated parenting class for divorcing parents in a Midwestern state. All individuals who have children under the age of 18 are required to attend this class prior to being granted a divorce decree or having modifications of custody or support approved. Class attendees who agreed to be included in future research were contacted by email and phone. In total, 54 fathers were contacted; 24 responded, and 21 agreed to schedule an interview. One father neither showed up for the interview nor responded to further requests to be interviewed.

The final sample consisted of 20 men who met the following criteria: (a) had only one prior marriage, (b) had been divorced for no more than 3 years (most men have restructured their parental roles by the end of 3 years; Demo & Ganong, 1994), (c) had at least one child under the age of 18, and (d) did not have primary custody of his child(ren). Current relationship status did not exclude participant selection, and as data collection proceeded, we sought participants whose relationship status ranged from dating to remarriage. To further increase the variation in the sample, we also sought men with varied custodial arrangements. The men were not compensated for their participation.

Participating fathers were between the ages of 35 and 51 ($M = 41$; $SD = 5.9$); all were White. Their socioeconomic status ranged from working class to upper-middle class. Two fathers had Associate's or specialized vocational degrees; 15 had Bachelor's degrees; one had a Master's degree; and two had Doctorates. Most (12) fathers identified themselves as single at the time of the interview; five were in relationships; two were engaged; and one was remarried. The two engaged fathers were both remarried at the time of their second interviews. Fathers had a total of 54 children (21 boys) ranging in age from 7 months to 18 years, with a wide range of custody arrangements (see Table 1).

Procedure

Fathers who fit study criteria and agreed to participate were scheduled for interviews that lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Interview questions were open-ended to encourage discussion on a wide variety of topics (e.g., "What do you like doing with your children?" "Can you tell me about a typical day when your kids are in your home?" "What would you like to do with your children, but, for whatever reason, cannot?" "What stands in your way of doing what you want with your children?"). As interviews were conducted, questions became more focused to test hypotheses about the categories and the developing theory. Second interviews were conducted by phone between 3 and 5 months after the first-round interviews. The purpose of second interviews was to clarify points the participants had previously made, to ask further questions, to test preliminary codes and categories, and to reach theoretical saturation- the point at which further data collection and analysis yielded no new insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word files which were uploaded into NVivo Version 8 software. Each transcription was labeled with a 3-digit code instead of the participant's name in order to protect participants' identities. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative approach.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Fathers

	FATHERS
Mean number of days per week with child	4.89 ($SD = 1.9$)
Mean years since separated from spouse	2.49 ($SD = 0.9$)
<i>Relationship status</i>	
Single	60%
Dating	25%
Remarried	15%
Mean number of children per father	1.85 ($SD = 0.6$)
Mean age of children	8.40 ($SD = 4.7$)
Number of contentious co-parenting couples	11 (55%)
Number of remarried former spouses	4 (20%)
Number of fathers living within 25 miles of children	14 (70%)

Constant Comparative Approach to Data Analysis

Creswell (1998) compared data collection and analysis using the constant comparative method to a “zigzag” pattern. We followed this zigzag pattern by gathering data, analyzing it, and gathering more data. Transcriptions were read and interviews were listened to multiple times as categories were developed and refined. Data were collected, analyzed, and compared until incoming data no longer furthered theory development (i.e., *saturation*; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Coding began after the first interview was transcribed. We coded each line of each transcript. As interviews were conducted and codes were developed, we began combining similar codes to form sub-categories. Finally, we identified the core category that was represented in each of the sub-categories. As data collection proceeded, participants were asked questions that would further develop categories as well as test hypotheses about the data. One early hypothesis, for example, was that fathers’ lack of time with their children due to custody arrangements would negatively affect their perception of the quality of their relationship with their children. This hypothesis was not supported by incoming data. The amount of shared time fathers had with their children was not relevant to the theory. Another hypothesis focused on fathers’ beliefs that they had a paternal instinct, which made divorced nonresidential fatherhood easier. This hypothesis also was not supported by incoming data. Rather, some fathers described their ease in overcoming various barriers to the father-child relationship, whereas others described considerable difficulty. This became part of the *perceptions of barriers* category. The incoming data helped clarify the sub-categories, categories, and core category, which resulted in the establishment of the theory.

Verification and Authenticity Procedures

Although qualitative researchers are not concerned with validity and reliability per se, they are concerned with accurately reporting the reality of participants’ lives and experiences, which has been referred to as *verification* or *authenticity* (Creswell, 1998). We engaged in peer review and kept theoretical memos to ensure authenticity. The peer review process is somewhat similar to the quantitative process of inter-rater reliability (Creswell). The coded data, including the approach to data analysis, the coding scheme, and the subsequent theory, were reviewed by two experts in the area of post-divorce families. The experts provided insight into our coding schemes, particularly in the early stages, and helped identify sub-categories that were not thoroughly developed. This resulted in modifications to both codes and subcategories so that the resulting theory was based in the data instead of assumptions made about the data. For example, we originally believed that there were numerous supports to overcome the identified barriers. After peer-review, we realized that there was one support—the ability to reframe—that influenced how fathers viewed their barriers. Theoretical memos were also maintained. We used memos to communicate developing ideas about codes, categories, and the theory, thus creating a paper trail of the developing project.

RESULTS

The primary purpose of this study was to understand how divorced nonresidential fathers most commonly involve themselves in their children’s lives. A secondary purpose was to un-

cover the barriers that influence their abilities to remain involved as well as the strategies used to manage them. All fathers perceived physical involvement as the essential way to maintain relationships with their children, as evidenced in the following statement: “I guess you try to adapt and find ways that you can remain connected (after the divorce). I mean ... you try to maintain that connectivity by doing interests and common things together” (005 [participant’s code]). Fathers described four different kinds of physical involvement: Communicating with the Child; Doing Activities with the Child; Providing Routine Care; and Role Modeling. Although all of the fathers described being involved with their children, they perceived five barriers that negatively influenced their ability to remain physically involved, thus negatively impacting their involved father identity: rushed time, the legal system, amount paid in child support, geographic distance separating them from their children, and higher conflict relationships with former wives. Finally, 14 fathers were successfully able to reframe barriers they believed they faced, which allowed them to manage these barriers. Reframing was a multi-faceted concept that included reframing priorities, time, father’s needs, and the former spouse relationship.

Physical Involvement Communicating With the Child

Fathers discussed communication in two different ways: frequency of contact and conversations. Frequency of contact was defined as how often fathers called, sent text messages, emailed, or instant messaged (IMed) their children while they were with their mothers. The purpose was to check on the child and/or feel like they were not separated by distance. All 20 fathers described keeping in touch with their children in these ways, but not all fathers used these methods often. Five fathers who had contentious relationships with their former wives contacted their children infrequently (once per month, at most) to avoid the risk of speaking to their former wives. Others called after an important event (e.g., the first day of school, major test, doctor’s appointment) or if they were away on business.

Thirteen fathers discussed having in-depth conversations with their children and described talking to them about some difficult, important, and/or meaningful topics such as the divorce, the father-child relationship, how to treat others, questions about relationships, and bullying. One described how he was helping his 12-year-old son deal with being teased by his classmates:

He said some kids were teasing him. I go “You know what? At your age, I had trouble too.” And then I told him, “When I was your age I had this problem, but as I’ve gotten older I did this to deal with it. That helped me, so maybe it’ll help you out.” I tried to give him options, and then we tried to talk through ... what the results would be of each strategy. I tried to give him the options, but I want him to choose so that he learns. (007)

This father wanted his son to become “independent and self-sufficient” and thought these types of conversations would help him mature as well as deal with the teasing. Conversations like this kept fathers up-to-date with what was going on with their children, allowed them to listen and give advice, and encouraged children to trust that fathers were available if they needed them.

Doing Activities With the Child

All 20 fathers engaged in activities with their children that ranged from playing with them to taking them out to eat to attending religious services. One father described how he and his sons—while spending a week together in the summer—took one day to watch science fiction movies while eating pizza and popcorn. He said it was a fun way to relax during summer vacation, calling it their “family time.”

According to these fathers, engaging in activities also served the purpose of creating future memories for their children. One hoped that his children will think, “even though we weren’t together all the time, we always did a lot of things together when we were.” (012). Another described what he thought doing activities with his children would mean to them as they looked back on the time spent with their dad: “I mean, they remember that. They’ll remember these little things (the activities they do while he has them)” (001).

Providing Routine Care

Providing routine care for their children allowed all of the fathers to participate in the everyday, typical activities of child-rearing. The types of routine care fathers provided included setting rules and assigning chores, cooking meals, helping with homework, and planning for when their children would be coming over. The father of a 5-year-old described a ritual he does before taking his daughter to preschool: “Most of the time I make breakfast for her. She likes that, she sits at the counter while I’m cooking and we talk” (003). Other fathers explained that running errands helped maintain the father-child relationship and was a way to prove that fathers “don’t just sit around the house” when they have their children. For example, one father stated, “I have to go shopping. I have to get my groceries. That’s what we do. I’ve got about 1,000 things to do when he’s with me, and he likes that (being on the go)” (010). Although fathers did special activities with their children, routine care allowed children to see how their fathers lived, what their fathers’ routines were, and how they fit into those routines.

Role Modeling

Fourteen fathers explained that they saw themselves as role models and wanted to show their children how to appropriately behave in public. Fathers who had served as role models while they were married did not consider divorce as a reason to stop. In fact, for some, it was now even more important to be role models because of the limited amount of time they had with their children.

Fathers described modeling gender for their children in the most detailed manner and perceived that they were responsible for modeling masculinity for their sons. One father of a teenage son described the bond between fathers and sons: “I think especially for a dad and a son ... they need a father around, they need a male figure, a role model, around as much as possible. So, I try to do that” (004). A very religious father discussed how important it was that he be a positive, masculine, Christian role model for his son because he believed few men modeled these traits: “Men in our society are not the type of men I want my son to be. I want him to be a godly man; most men in this society are not” (009). To counterbalance what he identified as negative masculine role models, this father “lead[s] by ex-

ample as much as I can” and “instill[s] decency and morality in him.” He was certain that if he successfully modeled how a Christian man should behave then his son would grow up to act the same way.

Fathers of girls also believed that they needed to model masculinity, but for different purposes. One father of a teenage girl said:

When a daughter gets to this age (15), it’s important for them to see how they should be treated on dates, and they’re supposed to get that from dads. I don’t mean that in a sick way but I’ll open the door for her and let her order first at a restaurant and that kind of thing. (006)

This father became emotional during the interview when he wondered if his moving out of the family household may have given his daughter a bad impression of men. He was concerned that divorce might have affected how his daughter viewed family life and thought it was especially important that he provide her with a sense of what she should expect from potential suitors.

Barriers to Involvement

All fathers identified at least one barrier to physical involvement, but some fathers identified multiple barriers. These fathers had a much more difficult time being physically involved than did those who mentioned only one barrier. For example, seven of the eight fathers who had higher levels of conflict with their former wives also believed that they were paying too much in child support and that the legal system was biased against them. The five identified barriers often made fathers feel they lacked the ability to change their situations for the better:

I just feel like every time I get ahead, get my life on track, get a decent job with potential, have good friends, then this (a new conflict with his former wife over physical custody of his children) has to get thrown in. (008)

The more barriers fathers perceived, the less access to their children they believed they had.

Rushed Time

All 20 fathers seemed aware of how little time they had to spend with their children, and multiple times throughout their interviews, they explained the number of days they had with their children per two weeks, per month, and per year. Two fathers who shared custody nearly equally with their former spouses were quick to point out that they were “almost there” (i.e., equally shared physical custody) and hoped to have equal time in the future. Regardless of the amount of time fathers spent with their children, all 20 said they wanted more. They preferred weekends, which were not as rushed as overnight visits during the week. For example, one father commented:

I pick them up around 5:30 (on Wednesday evening), then before you know it, it’s almost 8, and I’m telling them “Okay, let’s start getting towards going to bed. Do you know what you’re going to wear tomorrow?” If not, I wash clothes if needed, make sure their teeth are brushed, and see who needs a bath, read stories, and you know 8:30, 9 is gone before you know it. You’re talking 2.5 hours on a weeknight. The mornings are pretty much getting them up and out the door. There’s no quality time there. (002)

Some chose to cook dinner at home on the evenings they had their children because they felt it was more relaxing than rushing to eat out. Although they felt their ability to share quality time was hampered by hurried mid-week visits, none wanted to give up any of the time they had. One father said that “If it’s my week, I take them. If it’s not my week, and they want to come, I take them” (001). Other fathers’ abilities to spend time with their children were not as easy as this father described, however, and were largely dependent upon their relationships with their former spouses. Feeling that their time was rushed was a minor barrier for fathers, and none believed that it deterred them from seeing their children. They did, however, perceive that feeling rushed negatively influenced the quality of the time they spent with their children. Fathers felt they had to pack in a lot of activities during a short time.

The Legal System

Eleven fathers perceived the legal system to be a major barrier to their physical involvement with their children. They believed that the court unfairly favored mothers — “Mothers really have to screw up ... you know, just be total wastes to get less custody” (001)—and none felt that courts fairly determined the amount of parenting time fathers had with their children. Many also believed they were automatically assumed to be the “bad guy” and at fault. One participant stated:

Every time I called over there [to the courthouse] and talked to her [a clerk], she treated me like I’m some kind of asshole. Like somehow I’m not worth her time. I wanted to say, “Hey look, I’m a good guy. I stay in touch with my kids, I love them. I’m not the kind of guy you think I am.” I guess there’s dads who don’t care out there, and I guess she sees all kinds ... but that’s not me. (014)

One father equated his experiences with the court to feeling like a racial minority who has been discriminated against:

I wonder sometimes if how I feel in the court system is anything like what an African American feels as far as discrimination. I don’t know if it’s even in the same ballpark, but it sure doesn’t feel good. I felt like I had to prove I’m not a bad guy. (007)

Because they perceived that the courts were biased against them, these 11 fathers felt like it would have been pointless to seek more physical custody at the time of the divorce or to seek modifications in the future, as one explained:

And Dads may get more of that stuff [time with their children] if they would go into the court and ask for it, but I think that the stigma around divorce and children in the guy’s

mind is like—they're just going to give them to her [the mother] anyway, so why spend a bunch of money and heartache to try and fight for that. It's pointless. And then that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that you get what you ask for, but that's how it is. That's the norm. (013)

Because they believed the court would not give them more time with their children, they did not pursue more time. During one father's first interview, he remarked that he would sue for full physical custody if his former wife continued interfering with his time. When questioned about this in a follow-up interview, he explained "I know I won't go for full custody because I'd never get it...because men don't get it" (016). They wished the court would "make it easier" (012) for fathers and "more heavily weigh the contributions of fathers" in making decisions about the amount of time fathers had with their children. As one father explained, "We may not do everything 100% right, but we should still get a chance" (014).

Amount of Child Support

Although all 20 fathers paid child support, nine felt that they paid too much and that the amount they paid hampered their levels of involvement with their children. One father believed:

If my child support was down to almost nothing, that'd be a big relief. I'd just like to have more financial freedom to do more things with them. I don't have money to spend on an outfit for them or to go to a nice vacation place. I'd like to go buy an outfit for them once a month, or take the little one to Chuck E. Cheese and the older one, whatever she wants to do, clothes probably, really. Buy clothes at the mall. So that's probably one of the most upsetting things. (002)

There was also a belief that time and child support should be inversely related, meaning that the more fathers saw their children, the less they should have to pay regardless of the amount of money either they or their former wives made. One father, during his first interview, was deciding whether or not to petition the courts for a shared (50/50) physical custody modification as well as an elimination of his child support. When asked in his follow-up interview if he pursued the modifications, he responded "Well ... no because I didn't want to risk having to pay more [in child support], so I'm fine with seeing her as much as I do now" (003).

Geographic Location

Most fathers, after moving out of their former homes, stayed within a few miles of their children; six fathers were at least 30 miles away (five moved to be closer to their jobs, and one's former wife and children moved 1,500 miles away to be closer to her family). They expressed difficulty, particularly the father living in a time zone different from his children, in being as physically involved as they would like because of the geographic distance. One who lived about 45 minutes away rarely saw his children during the week because of his commute from work, in addition to the 45 minute drive to his daughters' house. The father who lived 1,500 miles from his children saw them for a week over Christmas, 21 days in

the summer, and a weekend or two every two months. When with his children, he “tried to incorporate [him]self into their daily routines. I don’t want it to be like ‘Oh, dad’s here. We have to forget our plans now.’ I don’t want it to be like I’m visiting” (019). This father informed me that he and his significant other were planning to move to be closer to his children. Although they would still be separated by an almost 14 hour drive, he believed he would see them more often than he does now. All six believed that being separated by distance was the single greatest barrier that affected their relationships with their children.

Higher Conflict With Former Wives

Six fathers had contentious relationships with their former wives that were characterized by a lack of communication, inflexible custody arrangements, and a feeling of being undermined. These men had difficulty gaining access to their children and likened custody conversations with their former wives to battles. They believed they had to fight for each day they saw their children. Only one father, however, actually fought for the time he felt he deserved to have with his son, relying on the court as well as the police to enforce his parenting time. One of the other five felt he could not fight “dirty” (001) enough to win more custody in court; the other four did not have the desire, energy, or money to re-enter the courtroom to fight for custody. Because of the contentious nature of their relationships, discussing custody with their former wives outside of the courtroom without lawyers was not believed to be an option.

According to these six fathers, because their former spousal relationships were characterized by high conflict and a lack of communication, they did not believe they had to provide their former spouses many details, if any at all, regarding the time they shared with their children. A father stated:

No, I don’t tell her [when he takes daughter on trip over a weekend]. I don’t know if I would tell her what hotel...I wouldn’t tell her what hotel I was staying in. If she wanted to call my cell, she could. I probably wouldn’t answer, but she could call. (003)

Another father provided a succinct explanation as to why he withheld details from his former wife: “It’s my time. She can leave me the hell alone” (002). The lack of communication went both ways, as these fathers also believed they were left in the dark about how mothers spent time with their children. They were unaware of their children’s school and extracurricular events that took place while with their mothers and complained that they were the last to know or that they would find out about events, activities, parent-teacher meetings, and vacations after they had happened. Not knowing what their children were doing during the stretch of days they were with their mothers was a concern. Nonetheless, most did not feel comfortable calling their children because of the conflict, and so their involvement was limited to the time they were with their children.

Unlike those with more cooperative relationships with their former wives, the six fathers who reported higher levels of conflict precisely followed the details of their parenting plans. If the parenting plan stated that the father picked up his children at 5:30 on Friday and dropped off his children Sunday at 6:00 every other weekend, that is exactly what he did. One father who wanted to take his children to a community festival that took place on the weeknights he did not see his children said:

I asked her, “You know it would only be for this one night.” We used to all go together, and I wanted to take them last year. Well, she said “no.” Something about how it wouldn’t work out. “It wouldn’t work out? Why not?” She said she didn’t think it was good to confuse the children, that they were just getting used to this situation [the custody arrangement]. Well, I let it go because it was just going to end in a fight. (018)

The benefit to rigidly following custody arrangements was that fathers were guaranteed time with their children. However, the cost was that they could never keep their children a few hours later on the weekend or take them to a special event during their former wives’ time with the children.

These six men also believed they were being undermined by their former wives. Some believed that their former wives purposely interrupted their time with their children (“She’s always calling when I have them—it’s almost like harassment” [016]). This father felt like “[he] never really get[s] alone time with them [his children]. It’s like she’s always there” and believed it to be unfair, especially since he did not see his children as often as he would have liked. Others believed that their former wives were attempting to take away their rights to their children. One father (“John”), whose former wife had remarried, recalled a recent example:

My ex works against me to try to undermine my role as their father. She’s trying to replace me, so... I saw a text message she [his former wife] sent my daughter. It said “tell John,” not “ell your dad or your father,” but “tell John that he needs to come by the house tomorrow before he takes Suzy [daughter] to school. *Dad* [the stepfather] will take you to swim practice.” (002)

This father also explained how, due to a 3 month period of unemployment, he got behind in child support payments, and his former wife told him to “sign away your parental rights so Aaron [stepfather] can adopt them, and you don’t have to worry about doing things like that [paying child support].” Because of their former wives’ behaviors, these six fathers found it difficult to be involved in the ways they felt were necessary. They generally limited their time with their children to what was specifically documented in the custody arrangement because of potential or ongoing conflict. They rarely attended events if they knew their former wife would also attend. But in successfully avoiding their former wives, they also avoided their children.

Reframing Barriers

Fourteen fathers were successfully able to reframe barriers they believed they faced, which allowed them to manage these barriers. Fathers who could reframe were better able to remain physically involved with their children, thus maintaining the Involved Father identity.

Reframing Priorities

Prioritizing children was a choice 14 fathers made, forgoing opportunities that would interfere with time with their children.

Everything else that’s going on—whatever is going on with work, I put aside. It’s just them and me. I just really focus on doing things with them. We plan activities that they like. I get to know them and what they think about things and it’s pretty neat. (017)

Two fathers had the option of moving to different parts of the country but chose not to move. One father was in a serious romantic relationship, but his girlfriend was transferred to a location five hours away: “She and I broke up. Things were going great, but she knew there wasn’t any way I was going to leave my kids. If it wasn’t for my kids, I’d move there with her” (002). Another father had the option of moving hundreds of miles away to serve as an agent for his pro-golfer brother, but he also refused. He and his former wife agreed that “neither one could move out of the county until after he [their son] had graduated from high school” (013).

For many fathers, prioritizing their children meant limiting their housing choices after the divorce. Eight fathers moved within one mile of their former wives’ homes, and six remained within the same county to be geographically close to their children. Fathers wanted their children to be able to go from one house to the other fairly easily and quickly. After the divorce, one moved near his daughter’s elementary school. When his daughter entered junior high, he moved again to be closer to this school. He wanted to live within walking distance in the event that she needed something while at school or she wanted to stop by his apartment before she went home. Fathers’ choices to prioritize their children affected their personal lives but allowed them to stay involved with and accessible to their children.

Reframing Time With Children

Although all fathers wanted more time with their children, 14 referred to the time they had as *quality time* (“undivided attention” [005], “special time for me and my son” [007], “focusing totally on my daughter” [006]). These men believed that the time they spent with their children post-divorce was of higher quality than the time they had spent with them while married. One did not think he “would be able to give [his daughter] as much undivided attention or would have the same kind of relationship with her” (003) if he was still married. Others believed that because the time they had with their children was limited, they focused on making it count, spending as much time as possible engaged in conversation or activities. A few indicated that, when married, their wives negatively affected the time they spent with their children. After the divorce, however, “It is really clear when I have them and when I don’t. I see them without her interfering. I have their undivided attention” (019). Other fathers felt guilty that, in the waning years of their marriages, conflict with their wives had made it difficult for them to focus attention on their children. One described yelling at his son after a stressful argument with his wife. He still felt guilty about it but said this situation would not occur now: “I can focus better on him because I’m in a better situation. I don’t need to take anything out on him—anger, stress, or whatever” (007). Fathers believed that quality time spent with their children created stronger father-child relationships.

Reframing Fathers’ Needs

About half (12) of the fathers reframed their own needs in order to save time and money so that they could be better involved with their children, both physically and financially. For example, one father explained that:

When the kids are with me, I feed them well, but if it's just me, I can live on peanut butter and jelly. I try to scrimp when I'm not with them so that when I'm with them I can spend time doing fun activities with them. (015)

This father also rode his bike as much as possible in order to save gas money. He was proud that he was able to give his sons what they wanted during the time they were with him as well as increase his savings for future necessities. Fathers also sacrificed time, often working more hours or putting in time at second jobs, on the days they did not have their children. By doing this, they could spend more time with their children on the days they had custody of them as well as have more money to spend on them. Three chose to move into apartments after their divorce so that they did not have to pay mortgages or for home upkeep. One father believed that the money he saved by living in an apartment allowed him to buy his son's bedroom furniture and a new computer for his son's room in his apartment. By reframing their own needs, fathers sacrificed for the benefit of their children and believed their relationships with their children benefited as a result.

Reframing Relationship With Former Spouses

Seven fathers reported reframing their relationships with their former spouses. They were able to recognize that they no longer had a marital relationship with their former spouses but that they continued to have a co-parental relationship with them. This was evident in the cooperative language they used to describe their co-parenting experiences:

We [he and his former wife] talked a little about the need to be similar in terms of major rules, to maintain consistency with bedtimes, so it's fairly similar except for the little bit of freedom to be individuals. It's both of our joint responsibilities, and we always want to be consistent just so that the boys never get a really different message at one home versus the other and they know that if there's any issues, we talk. If there's an issue at school, we go together with one voice. (005)

Two primary benefits of reframing the ex-spousal/co-parenting relationships appeared to be flexible custody and high access to children. Fathers who wanted to see their kids outside of the official custody times were generally able to do so, given that mothers did not have special plans. One father suggested, "If we were going for a big festival or something for July 4, then Amy [former wife] might just say 'Well, go ahead and just keep her because you guys have this big plan'" (014). Unlike fathers who were unable to reframe their former spousal relationships, these men maintained flexible holiday schedules. In fact, four of the seven, celebrated holidays and birthdays together with their former spouses. One father of a 5-year-old girl went trick-or-treating with his former spouse, and three fathers spent Christmas Eve or Christmas morning with their former spouses. These fathers felt well-informed about their children, were comfortable contacting them while mothers had custody, and did not feel that their former wives interfered with their time with their children.

DISCUSSION

This study focused on the process of father involvement. Divorced nonresidential fathers believe they can maintain an Involved Father identity by being physically involved with their children; however, they also report experiencing barriers that negatively influence their abilities to remain involved. A key finding is that divorced, nonresidential fathers who can reframe their barriers have an easier time remaining involved with their children, thus maintaining their Involved Father identity, compared to fathers who cannot. Pasley and Braver (2004) argue that divorce constrains fathers’ abilities to be involved with their children. Unlike married fathers, nonresidential fathers no longer have unrestricted access to see their children whenever they would like, and their physical involvement is limited by legal and physical custody arrangements. Shared legal and physical custody is increasingly common, yet we know little about how this legal change affects divorced fathers’ involvement with their children. The men in this study self-identify as involved fathers, yet they report varying degrees of involvement. In an attempt to explain their levels of involvement, the fathers identified five barriers (see Figure 1). All are directly related to being divorced, which suggests that divorce causes or is at least related to a number of potentially negative influences that interfere with nonresidential fathers’ attempts to remain involved with their children. Fathers who cannot reframe those barriers report seeing their children less often and have less access to their children compared to fathers who are able to reframe those barriers.

Reframing barriers serves as a protective factor for fathers. Those who believed they were able to reframe were also likely to be more satisfied with the divorce process and to believe they had more freedom to contact their children as compared to fathers who were less confident about managing their barriers. This suggests that, for these fathers, abilities to reframe barriers are more important in maintaining their relationships with their children post-divorce than the actual number of barriers each father believes he faces. Identity theorists argue that individuals will be more committed to identities that have multiple supports than to identities with multiple barriers (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Researchers who have tested this assumption find that the more supportive relationships divorced nonresidential fathers identify, the higher their commitment is to being involved fathers (Henley & Pasley, 2005). For example, some of the fathers in this study believed they faced each barrier but did not describe the ability to reframe those barriers. These fathers believed it was much more difficult to interact with their children and often reported not contacting them while their children were living with their mothers. These fathers had less interaction with their children as compared to fathers who believed they could reframe their barriers.

Identity theorists report that individuals who are unsuccessful in their repeated attempts at behavioral changes to new identities become likely to forgo behavioral change and instead lower their expectations of that identity (Gecas, 2000). Further, researchers found that individuals who experience repeated negative feedback regarding an identity begin to place less importance on that identity, even if they are highly committed to it (Kiecolt, 2000). This suggests that fathers who are unsuccessful at managing conflict with their former spouses, for example, will eventually stop trying to manage that conflict. Instead, they may alter their Involved Father identity to no longer include discussing parenting issues with their former wives, contacting their children while at their mothers due to fear of having to speak to former spouses, or even attempting to cooperatively co-parent. If fathers’ attempts at managing several barriers to the Involved Father identity are unsuccessful—as some of

the fathers report in this study—then this identity may become less salient. This may help explain why roughly 50% of divorced nonresidential fathers have inconsistent or infrequent contact with their children (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009).

Theoretical Model and Propositions

The goal of this study is to produce a theory explaining men’s experiences with the management of self-identified barriers to involvement which have negative influences on maintaining the Involved Father Identity. The theoretical model (see Figure 1) is based on the central theme that divorced nonresidential fathers believe they enact an Involved Father identity following divorce based on a combination of four aspects of physical involvement. Physical involvement is constrained by a number of barriers, however, that negatively influence their abilities to remain involved unless those barriers are reframed. Based on the findings of this study, several theoretical propositions can be made about the transition to divorced, nonresidential fatherhood:

1. Divorced nonresidential fathers who engaged in at least one type of physical involvement with their children (i.e., communicating, doing activities, providing routine care, and role modeling) considered themselves involved fathers.

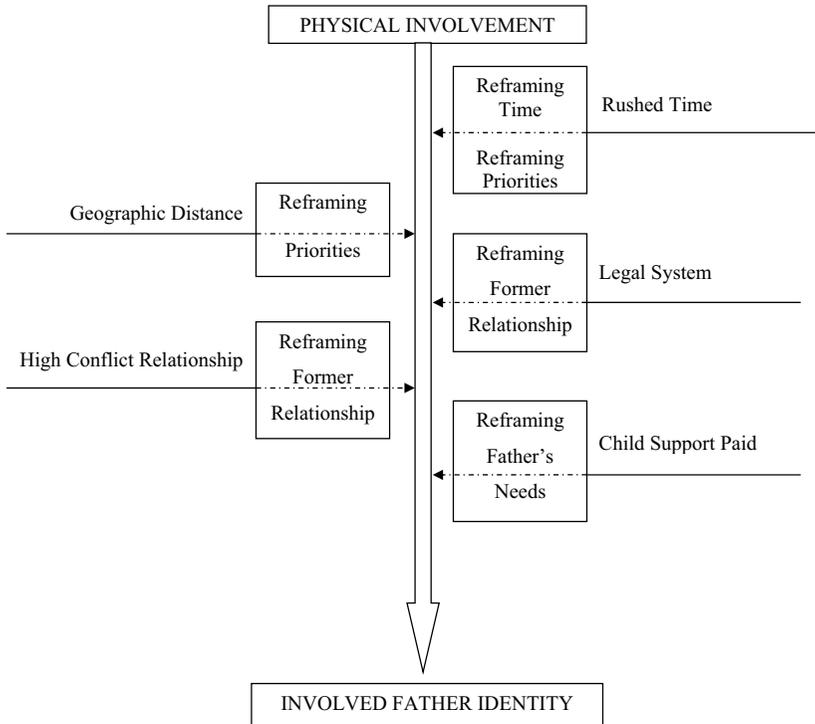


Figure 1. A theoretical model of involved fatherhood.

2. Despite reporting beliefs that they were involved fathers, divorced men experience a range of barriers that weaken their abilities to remain involved with their children.
3. Some divorced nonresidential fathers are able to manage the barriers to involvement by reframing that barrier to have less negative influence.
4. Divorced nonresidential father involvement is not dependent upon the elimination of barriers, but on the reframing of barriers.

Limitations and Implications

As is true of all studies, there are several limitations related to this research. The primary limitation is that the participants self-selected into the study. First, only those fathers who participated in a divorce education program and who agreed to be contacted about opportunities to participate in future research projects were sent a recruitment letter about this study. Second, of the fathers who were contacted, only those who wished to participate in the study were interviewed. It is likely that fathers who were at least somewhat involved with their children would be more interested in participating than those who were minimally involved or uninvolved. Casting a wider net for participants, perhaps by advertising in additional organizations outside of mandatory divorce parent education classes, in future projects would be worthwhile. This may help us better understand men who do not consider themselves as involved fathers.

Dudley (1991) identified four obstacles that negatively influenced divorced fathers who had infrequent contact with their children: tenuous relationships with former spouses; personal problems; having older and/or busier children; and having children live some distance away. Over 20 years later, men who believe they are involved fathers identify some of the same barriers. This suggests that there may be some barriers that are common to fathers regardless of whether they identify as being consistently or inconsistently involved with their children. It also appears that some of the barriers that influence divorced nonresidential fathers have remained consistent over time. This suggests that some interventions designed to increase divorced father involvement are not effective or, at least, are not effective for fathers who believe they are without strategies to reframe barriers.

There are a number of implications of this study. First, some of the men in this study believe relationships with their former spouses are a barrier. Thus, mediators, family counselors, lawyers, and therapists may need to work harder at encouraging their divorcing clients to avoid adversarial divorces, or family courts may need to begin requiring mediation for higher conflict divorcing couples. Second, many fathers believed the legal system was working against them. Professionals who can help fathers cope with negative bias—whether real or imagined—may help them feel more confident in their interactions with the court system. It may also benefit fathers for researchers to present information about the importance of divorced father-child relationships to judges and court administrators as a way to reduce the negative stereotyping of divorced nonresidential fathers that exists in our culture (Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Third, 49 states require divorced parent education courses (Mulroy, Riffe, Brandon, & Faulkner, in press). Including a segment on the ways in which child support is used, how much it costs to raise a child, how child support provides for children’s basic needs, and how child support is calculated may encourage fathers who believe child support negatively influences the time they spend with their children to reframe support as an important aspect of (fiscal) involvement. Finally, the results of this study sug-

gest that successful interventions may need to take a holistic approach by targeting fathers' abilities to learn how to simultaneously reframe multiple barriers.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the men in this study, by their own admission, differ in the types and levels of involvement and perceived barriers and supports, all describe themselves as regularly involved with their children. This suggests that father involvement is a highly subjective concept, one dependent on the expectations each father has for his own involvement as well as on the number of perceived supports and barriers to involvement. This is consistent with scholars who argue that fatherhood is complex (Fox & Bruce, 2001) and who find that fathers assume a variety of roles based on their personal and household characteristics, such as gender roles and parental expectations (Gergen, 2000; Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009). Variations in the described levels and conceptualizations of involvement among the men in this study can help us understand that involvement is a relative term dependent upon the varied experiences of the men making the transition from married residential to divorced non-residential fathers.

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