

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that divorced, non-custodial fathers experience significant stress physically, emotionally, and relationally as a population. Non-custodial, post-divorce fathering demands that men effectively negotiate the influence of cultural, logistical and psychological challenges (Kruk, 1992), and disabling “masculine discourses” (Arendell, 1992, p. 562) if they are to succeed in their efforts to maintain connected, generative relationships with their children. The influence of various issues including the past and present level of collaboration or conflict with ex-spouse (including presence or absence of domestic abuse), ability and willingness to pay child support, experience within the legal system, custody arrangement; and psychological adjustment to post divorce roles and lifestyle, have powerful shaping effects on the quality of the father-child relationship in the post divorce context (Ahrons & Miller, 1992; Bancroft & Silverman, in press; Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Fox & Blanton, 1995; Grief, 1979; Jacobs, 1982).

This exploratory, flexible method qualitative study will begin with a brief introduction to the complex interweaving of issues facing divorced non-custodial fathers in relation to their identity as parents. This will serve as a means of providing context for focusing on a particular sub-group of these fathers: those who experience the dilemmas around post divorce fathering in such a way as to lead them to connect with Fathers Rights Groups as a source of support in their identity as post divorce fathers. (Arendell, 1992; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Coltrane & Hickman, 1992; Pasley & Minton, 1997; Thomson & Lawson, 1999). Within this context, this study will then interview a small

sample of these fathers, for the purposes of extending and increasing the representation of their voices and ideas as a sub-group in the discourse around post divorce fathering.

Further study of these rights-oriented fathers is indicated, both due to limited representation of their voices in the existing social work and psychology literature, and the unique sociological and political issues entwined with their identity claims in a rights-oriented discourse (Bertoia, 1996).

There are several central issues that this study hopes to illuminate in hearing the voices of these particular divorced fathers. First is the degree to which they are either subject to or resist what Arendell (1992, p. 562) refers to as a “masculinist discourse” of post divorce fathering.¹ Secondly, is the degree to which these fathers conceptualize their fathering experience in relation to the decision to become involved in the Father’s Rights Movement, and particularly the degree to which this decision is connected to a painful experience of feeling like they are “losing their children” in the divorce process (Grief 1979, p. 315; Jacobs, 1982, p. 1239). Thirdly, this study hopes to hear from these fathers regarding the degree to which relationships with their ex-spouses are interwoven with their construction and experience of fathering in the post divorce context.

It is proposed that a contribution of these fathers’ voices to the literature and knowledge base will assist providers in better assessing and understanding the needs and dilemmas of this sub-population of fathers, in ways that are not only supportive to their

¹ Arendell describes this discourse as follows:

“The masculinist discourse of divorce is not simply an expression of individual men’s intentions, pointing to ‘men we disapprove of and good guys’.....Rather the shared discourse points to the collective character, force, and stability of gender arrangements and identities: gender is institutionalized in social arrangements, buttressed by a gendered ideology or masculinist ethic....and is internalized, a fundamental aspect of the masculine social self.....Individual men, therefore, are both agents of and participants in the masculinist discourse of divorce. The discourse constitutes a gendered *program*....involving future lines of action as well as past and present ones, aimed at maintaining a particular identity.”

identity as parents, but also to the needs of their children, and (as appropriate) to their children's mothers. This could include but not be limited to delivering more effective services and interventions toward the goals of maximizing generative father involvement (NCOFF, 2000; Pasley & Minton, 1997), and minimizing the generally negative effects of divorce (Braver & Griffin, 2000) within this population of divorced fathers and their changing families.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have reviewed a significant amount of literature that has been written about non-custodial fathers in the post divorce context (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Ferber, 1983; Fox & Blanton, 1995; LeClerc 1983; Nielsen, 1999). Within the framework of these studies, it appears that there are several general themes which emerge. These themes center on issues of custody and visitation, child support, relationship with ex-spouse, psychological effects of divorce, and coping mechanisms. A brief description of each issue and relevant literature follows.

Initial searches in Sociological Abstracts database generated more than 200 citations from the keywords “fathers and divorce.” Of these, approximately 100 citations centered around the theme of non-custodial divorced fathers. Among these citations only one related directly to the experience of African-American divorced fathers, and no other articles specifically focused on the experiences of additional culturally diverse divorced fathers including those of Latino, Asian, and Native American descent. Indeed most of the samples in both qualitative and quantitative studies reviewed focused on white, middle class fathers, and only two of the articles (Arendell, 1992; Hamer, 1998) found in the literature review for this study drew their results from samples which included racially and ethnically diverse membership. This is problematic given the reported significant percentage of divorce rates within communities of color (Mason, 1996).² Clearly this is a limitation that needs to be addressed in further literature searches, and warrants casting a broader net and utilizing more diverse sources in order to obtain a

² For example, according to Mason (1996), African American separation and divorce rates for formerly married men aged 16-39 between 1995-1987 were estimated to be 28.4%. For African American Women meeting the same criteria, divorce rates were estimated to be 49.4%.

more representative description of these diverse populations of fathers in relation to the following issues.

Further limitations to the existing literature on divorced fathers appear when adding the keywords “violence” or “abuse” which may factor in as many as one third of all divorces (Walker & Edwall, 1987), and which clearly have implications across the full range of issues facing divorce fathers. A Sociological Abstracts database search (2002) yields approximately 430 records using keywords “father*” and “divorce.*” When adding the keyword “violence” or “domestic violence” as a search parameters, the number of records returned ranged between 2 and 13. These results appear to indicate that there is far less representation of domestic violence in the literature on divorced fathers than the presence of domestic violence as an issue prior to or concurrent to divorce (Toews, 2001).

Child Custody and Visitation

Perhaps the most logistically defining aspect of the father-child relationship post divorce is represented through the custody order. This element of the post divorce father child relationship is determined through a process which requires (at bare minimum) participation and formalization by the courts. Despite mediation and other more collaborative forms of divorce negotiation and settlement becoming more popular, the predominant method of determining custody and visitation as reflected in the literature sampled for this review, was through legal means, as discussed by Kruk (1992) and Arendell (1992). Kruk made observations of particular interest with respect to the interface between spousal relationships through the divorce process, and the bias of the legal system towards more adversarial practice in divorce settlement. He noted in

particular the relationship between a “creation of conflict” (p. 87) in the legal process and subsequent loss of contact between fathers and their children.

According to many of the studies reviewed (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Arendell, 1992, 1995; Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; King, 1994 and Wallerstien & Blakeslee, 1989) custody generally takes the following forms in many states:

Type of Custody	Description of Custody
Sole legal and physical	One parent has “entire responsibility” for all decisions and care-taking of children.
Joint legal custody, sole physical custody with visitation by non-residential parent	Both parents are responsible for the decisions regarding their children’s well being; the children reside with one parent and have visitation with the non-residential parent.
Joint legal and physical custody	Both parents are responsible for the decisions regarding their children’s well being, and the children “split their time” living in both parents’ houses.

The vast majority of custody decisions in divorcing families appear to be joint legal with sole physical custody awarded to the mother (with visitation by father). This has given rise to reported concerns regarding “gender bias” in the legal system towards assigning physical custody to mothers and away from assigning physical custody to fathers (Hemmens et al., 1998). However, in other studies it is reported that instances where fathers contest custody, they “win 62 to 70 percent of the time” (Erickson & Babcock, 1995).

Reportedly, the trend towards assigning joint legal custody has been growing during the past couple of decades, as the “tender years doctrine” (Erikson & Babcock, 1995, p34) reportedly has been taken to task by paternity advocates. This trend towards assigning joint legal custody appears to be the case even in situations where there are

allegations of domestic abuse prior or concurrent to the divorce proceedings. Such decisions contradict legal statutes which mandate no-custody provisions for perpetrators of domestic abuse (for example, see Chapter 179 of the Acts of 1998, Massachusetts State Law). A growing minority of sole legal and physical custody decisions are being awarded to fathers (Grief, 1985; Kelly, 2001), but the norm appears to be for post divorce children to live primarily with their mothers and either have a visitation schedule or (in the case of joint physical custody) stay up to 50% the time with their fathers. In joint physical custody, it appears that the norm is for children to spend a couple of nights a week with their fathers.

With the bulk of physical custody being awarded to mothers, the norm for fathers following divorce is to experience a dramatic reduction in contact with their children, frequently mediated by a visitation schedule which ranges from daily to (more commonly) two evenings per week and every other weekend. Clearly this shift can have dramatic implications for these fathers' senses of themselves as parents, (Jacobs, 1982), particularly for those who report high involvement with their children prior to the divorce. It can be argued that this issue is the single-most emotionally intense matter affecting fathers across all salient post divorce themes cited in the literature. Child custody, and fathers' emotional and behavioral responses to this issue weaves its way into other issues including degree of compliance with child support schedules (Pearson & Anhalt, 1994; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989), the overall emotional and psychological adjustment of fathers post divorce (Jacobs 1982), feelings and behaviors in relationship with their ex-spouses, and coping mechanisms used by divorced fathers to

manage difficult feelings following their change in identity post divorce (Arendell, 1992; Umberson & Williams, 1993).

Issues of joint custody³ and shared parenting are interwoven with ideas and concerns about the value and importance of the father-child relationship post divorce. Opinions are mixed with respect to this issue. There are studies which argue that joint custody is not only desired, but in the best interests of children and fathers (and by proxy mothers) who benefit not only emotionally but economically and logistically as a result of joint custody (Grief, 1979). A common assertion among these studies is that “joint custody is facilitative of greater involvement by the father with his children” (Arendell, 1995, p. 222; Fox & Blanton, 1995, p. 220; Greif, 1979, p.318) and that this greater involvement contributes to the “assumed gains and benefits” of having an active father in a child’s life (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985, p. 482). Still other studies seem to leave the jury out on the question of whether joint custody means greater involvement by fathers in their children’s lives (Suleman & Meyers, 1999) and even question the trend toward assuming that father involvement is in the best emotional and psychological interests of the children, (King, 1994, p. 78).

Of particular note in with regard to this latter question, is the issue of conflict between the ex-spouses. Johnston et al (1989) conducted a study which concluded that in post divorce arrangements where there was a high degree of conflict between ex-spouses, “more frequent access to both parents was associated with more emotional and behavioral problems in the children” (Johnston et al, 1989, p. 576). One of the questions with regard to this population of post divorce families, is the degree to which conflict management

³ Here joint custody refers to the broadest definition, which includes any combination of legal and physical custody with one or both being shared.

was an issue prior to the divorce, and continues to be an issue following the divorce. An associated concern reported in an earlier study by Johnston & Campbell (1988) was the potential for overlap between expressions of “high conflict divorce” and prior or concurrent expressions of domestic violence (Bancroft & Silverman, in press, p. 195).

Clearly the issues associated with child custody are significant factors in the lives of rights-oriented fathers. Indeed, this appears to be one of the significant and motivating factors for fathers to become involved in Fathers’ Rights groups (Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Coltrane & Hickman, 1992). Regardless of the route to post divorce child custody determinations, there appears to be (more often than not) a significant altering of the degree of contact between divorced fathers and their children. It is assumed that this factor alone has significant implications for fathers’ post divorce adjustments, and interacts dramatically with fathers’ constructions of their identity throughout and following the divorce process.

Child Support

The non-contested, timely payment of child support is viewed almost unanimously across the range of literature sampled. The ideas offered and supported by this literature when taken collectively as a discourse would be as follows: it has undisputed positive effects on the development of the child, and the identity of both fathers and mothers in the post divorce context (King, 1994; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Fox & Blanton, 1995).

This said, it should be noted that timely non-contested payment of child support is in and of itself a significant issue, and often conflict ridden. Perhaps because of the symbolic value of child support in representing a tangible currency of relationship

between father and child, this issue becomes subject to conflicting discourses and intense emotions for fathers, often interwoven with child custody and visitation issues. In two qualitative studies, Arendell (1992) and Mandell (1995) interviewed fathers who refuse to pay child support despite being court ordered to do so in the divorce agreement. In both of these studies, fathers described the reasons for their refusal to pay, in ways that were strongly interwoven with their identities as parents, with their emotions (particularly anger) around the divorce, and around a feeling of being displaced from the center of their children's lives. It is important to note that the fathers in these studies strongly reflect what Arendell refers to as a "masculinist discourse" of post divorce fatherhood (Arendell, 1992, p. 562)

Why should I have to pay for children who[m] I do not live with and who[m] I do not have a part in raising? By paying child support, I simply reinforce my ex for having left the marriage and denied me my children. (Arendell, 1992, p. 573)

Arendell interviewed 75 divorced fathers using a flexible method exploratory research design. She cited that her sample "clearly over-represent[ed] involved fathers...only 15 percent were absent compared with the national figure of 50 percent. Eighty five percent were noncustodial parents compared to a national figure of 90 percent" (p. 564). Child custody arrangements varied within her sample, with 6 fathers having primary physical custody, 5 with shared physical custody, and 64 being non-custodial. Drawing from the thick descriptions of these participants about their identity and behaviors as fathers, she posited the notion of "fathers' rights" (p. 568) as being central to the development of a "masculinist discourse of divorce" (p. 568). It's a discourse which seems connected to themes of retaining power and control in the face of

substantive challenges to these same domains during divorce (particularly in contrast with patriarchal precedents for men to view their partners and children as “property”).

Refusing to pay child support was described as a legitimate response to unfair treatment from both the legal system and the former wife and was an action typically defined in terms of violated rights. (p. 573)

Bertoia and Drakich (1993) echo this sentiment, positing that the fathers they interviewed for their study did not necessarily want “equality in physical custody and everyday care, but the right to exercise the level of parenting that went on prior to the divorce” (p. 602). Money and control are thus themes which merit further exploration in terms of how fathers conceptualize their identity post divorce. Particularly among those fathers who are rights-oriented, there is a need to identify the degree to which themes of child support and custody are interwoven.

Relationship with Ex-Spouse

A number of articles reviewed in this literature search indicated a connection between the degree of conflict and cooperation with the ex-spouses of fathers, and level of involvement in terms of visitation and payment of child support for their children (Ahrons & Miller, 1992; Fox & Blanton, 1995; Hamer, 1998). Among these, Ahrons and Miller cited additional literature (Ahrons, 1983) to place in context the finding that “the quality of the relationship between...former spouses was associated with the amount of involvement that fathers had with their children one year following the divorce” (p. 447). Their study utilized a flexible method semi-structured interview format to gather longitudinal data on the relationship between paternal involvement and quality of relationship between former spouses. While their format was semi-structured, their instruments for measuring these two variables were standardized and thus yielded

statistical results. Their data analysis yielded findings that supported their hypothesis that “the impact on paternal involvement of the quality of the divorced spouses’ relationship would be significant [during the first year]...and then decline after [this same year] following divorce” (p. 447).

In Arendell’s study (1992, 1995), those men who had the most collaborative relationships with their ex-spouses both seemed to live outside of the constraints of the “masculinist discourse of divorce” and to have more generative and fulfilling relationships with their children.

Generally absent from the accounts of these fathers was the language of power and control, whether with regard to their overall situation, the former wife, or their children (Arendell, 1995, p. 223).

Again the themes of custody can weave their way into this issue, in the sense that in high-conflict divorces, one of the primary sites of protracted conflict is the issue of custody (Johnston et al, 1989; Umberson & Williams, 1993). This also has particular relevance to the issues faced by fathers who identify as being rights-oriented (Colrane & Hickman, 1992; Bertoina & Drakich, 1993).

Kruk (1992) conducted semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire with 80 fathers in Canada and Scotland (40 in each country), “half of whom had ongoing and regular contact with their children and half of whom were ‘disengaged’ with no contact” (p. 82). describes those fathers in his study who have higher degrees of interaction and involvement with their children as “contact fathers” (p. 85). He cites that these fathers also “stressed the importance of the support and encouragement of their ex-wives in their maintenance of contact and development of a new parental role” (p. 85). This would appear to underscore the relationship between father-child involvement and cooperation

in the relationship between ex-spouses. An interesting finding of this study was an *inverse* relationship between fathers who were highly engaged with their children during the marriage, and then became subsequently most disengaged following divorce. Similarly, in this study, those fathers who were most distant from their children during the marriage had higher levels of involvement following divorce. Kruk presents this finding in a manner which appears to underscore the hypothesis that grief, associated with loss of prior closeness and proximity play a role in some fathers' disconnection from their children post divorce (Grief, 1979; Jacobs, 1982).

These issues become interwoven, in the sense that in low conflict divorces, ex-spousal cooperation appears to positively affect involvement by fathers with their children, and this involvement in turn affects fathers' degree of commitment to being more than a "Disneyland Dad" (Stewart, 1999, p. 539). Amato & Gilbreth (1999) discuss the value of fathers "doing more than just recreational activities in their involvement with their children" (p. 569), suggesting that the value of involved parenting coincides with an "authoritative" role and style (p. 568). Walker and Edwall (1987) also cite that "[t]he available studies show that when there is parental cooperation during and after divorce, the children continue to develop normally" (p. 134) which indicates positive developmental and psychological outcomes for children of collaborative parent involvement in low conflict divorces. Johnston et al. (1989) further support the idea that cooperation and connection as opposed to hostility and disconnection are in the better interests of the post divorce child, citing that "longitudinal research indicates that frequent visiting is beneficial only in the absence of sustained parental hostility" (p. 577).

These implications for the relationship between ex-spouses include the hypothesis that if cooperation and collaboration are possible, then more possibilities exist for the father's range of self definition.⁴ This in turn would appear to affect his vulnerability to the psychological impact of divorce, and the subsequent coping mechanisms he selects in response to these challenges encountered in the post divorce context.

Psychological Effects of Divorce and Coping Mechanisms Used by Non-Custodial Fathers

A number of authors address the issue of psychological effects and adjustment for fathers following divorce (Grief, 1979; Jacobs, 1982; Liazos, 1997; Thompson & Lawson, 1999; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Those effects most commonly referred to seem to cluster around a reorganization of identity with respect to the parenting role. This topic is particularly salient in terms of the grief responses of fathers toward the loss of full time relationships with their children. Effects of grief in these fathers' lives reportedly include increased isolation, vulnerability to depression, substance abuse, anger problems, and at times physical violence (Jacobs, 1982; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Additionally, at the most extreme end of the spectrum of post divorce effects, Liazos (1997) reports that divorced men are five times more subject to suicide than married men.

As with themes in the above sections of this paper, there is again an interweaving between the ways that fathers experience salient issues around their change in status and identity, and the ways that they cope with new challenges placed before them. The range of responses is wide, and implications of different responses compelling. Arendell (1995) cites that those men who exhibited more flexibility in response to the demands of the post divorce context, seemed to adapt in a more positive fashion to their new

⁴ A potential topic of further study.

circumstances. Alternately, it seems that those men who “went to war” (p. 111) over the circumstances of the divorce (visitation, custody, support, etc) ended up with significantly more misery and suffering than those who didn’t. This would be a significant hypothesis to address in talking with those men for whom association with a rights-orientation becomes an expression of their post divorce fatherhood. There is assumed to be a significant correlation between the degree of hostility and conflict in the divorce, and the gravitation to a rights-orientation for a majority of those fathers who seek support from Fathers’ Rights groups following divorce (Bertoia, 1996; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Colrane & Hickman, 1992).

The emotional pain of divorced non-custodial fathers appears to feature significantly in patterns of visitation and involvement between fathers and their children post divorce. To this degree, those fathers who have less contact with their children built in to the structure of their post divorce life appear to be more subject to falling out of contact with their children over time (i.e. declining frequency of contact). A number of the studies cited in this literature review reiterate this point in numerous ways. Those fathers in Arendell’s (1995) study who were most outspoken about decreasing contact with their children, reported “using the reduction in contact as a strategy to make a statement” (p. 144) about their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs surrounding the settlement or the divorce decree. It was these fathers who seemed to experience most suffering, and for whom the suffering associated with “child absence” (Greif, 1979, p. 316)) became so unbearable as to warrant their decisions to pull back from contact with their children. One can only wonder about the degree to which this becomes a vicious cycle.

Fortunately (for fathers and their children) not all fathers become subject to this cycle. Thompson & Lawson (1999) cite compelling testimony from divorced African American fathers who seem almost resolute in their determination to remain involved with their children, despite (and perhaps even at times in conjunction with) the odds against them.

[T]hese men also recognized their roles as mentors and nurturers of the next generation of African American fathers...fatherhood to these men was a personalized activity of resistance to deter African American male extinction. (p. 43)

Regardless of the strategies employed by divorced fathers to mitigate the ill effects of divorce on their lives, it does appear that themes of fatherhood and parental identity become central to this phase of their identity development. Given this, a couple of authors (Jacobs, 1982; Braver & Griffin, 2000) cite recommendations for early intervention with recently divorced fathers, particularly around themes of helping them to buffer against the tides which might lead them to turn away from their children, not out of neglectful intention, but rather out of the pain of loss (Grief, 1979). As noted, it is possible that out of this grief fathers will become more interested in a rights discourse, and as a result will reach out to gather support for their parenting identity from groups such as Fathers' Rights organizations. McLean (1996) cites that "many men come to the men's movement suffering deeply from the effects of broken relationships. Often they believe they have been unjustly treated by their partners and are grieving for the loss of their children." This would appear to follow the hypothesis put forth above. In turn, this would also appear to generate support for finding out more about how men come to be involved with each other around the themes and issues associated with a rights-orientation to their parenthood.

Conclusion

In conceptualizing a proposal for further study, several key issues come to light. First among these is the need to hear further from fathers who are experiencing some of the changes in their identity that accompany a significant reduction in contact with their children. Additionally, it would be helpful to gain a sense of the degree to which these fathers experience what Arendell would deem as a masculinist discourse of divorce, and the degree to which this affects (and is affected by) their experiences of their relationships with their children and ex-spouses, their experience of the custody and child support settlement processes, and the specters of hostility, conflict, and domestic violence as they pertain to each of these domains. It is also noteworthy that within the existing academic literature on father's rights groups, there are few studies which have been conducted on this population (Bertoia, 1996; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Coltrane and Hickman, 1992), and that none of these studies places the issue of allegations of domestic violence or abuse at the front and center of their analysis of father's rights groups (although it is made mention of, it is not presented as a central feature of the father's rights movement). This study will seek to make this piece more explicit through interviewing fathers about their experiences of these allegations, and the connection between these allegations and their involvement with the fathers rights group.

Of significant interest in interviewing these fathers is the better understanding of how these fathers construct their experience of parenthood in spite (or perhaps because) of various challenges to connection with their children. How do they experience their relationships with their children as changing and shifting through the divorce process?

What are their hopes for the future of their connections with their children, and for the future of their relationships (if any) with their children's mothers?

Another factor taken from this literature review is the degree to which the samples in the literature reviewed for this paper were drawn from primarily white, middle class populations, and as a result do not represent an accurate picture of the experience of divorced non-custodial fathers in the U.S. today. This is particularly the case with respect to matters of racial and ethnic diversity in sample representation. This would further suggest that a study which included the voices of divorced fathers of color would contribute more richly to the existing knowledge base in this topic area. Further enriching would be if those fathers also had more diverse class backgrounds from the primarily middle class samples represented in the literature. This study will therefore undertake to look at these issues within its sample. Are the members of Fathers' Rights groups who will be interviewed for this study (whether from predominantly white geographic areas, or multicultural geographic areas) reflective of the predominately white middle class samples in the literature, or will they reflect greater racial and economic diversity?

The theoretical orientation under-girding many of these question is primarily derived from a combined social constructionist approach to narrative and discourse theories (Freedman, J. & Coombs, G., 1996; Gergen, 1991; Madsen, 1999; Weingarten, 1994, 1995) and Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan, 1997). Implied in this perspective is the assumption that privileging the voices of the men targeted in this study will help further understanding about the ways that these men construct their fatherhood, and the relational dilemmas associated with their fatherhood that they encounter in the larger

socio-cultural context within which they exist. It is assumed that Fathers' Rights groups have some sort of a "say" in shaping the public discourse on post divorce fathering. This study will seek in part to better understand the personal dilemmas which go into the public construction of their position. It is assumed that the findings from this work will construct this as an inductive study, with quite possibly more questions than answers arising from the material generated.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory flexible method study utilized an interview format to gather qualitative data from a small sample (n=10) of members from a father's rights group in the state of Massachusetts. The purpose of the study was to generate "thick depictions" (Anastas, 1999, p. 61) of the lives of this specific sub-group of divorced non-custodial fathers. It was assumed that a semi-structured interview design, using both open and closed-ended questions would yield the best results for this study. An interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed for the project using input from members of the Wellesley Centers for Women Center for Research on Women in order to build in aspects of accountability, relational theory, and refined qualitative research practice. A pilot interview was conducted with one member of the father's rights group prior to interviewing those participants selected for the project, in order to further develop and refine the interview guide.

Definitions of Major Terms

Definitions of the major terms defining sample selection in this study were as follows:

1. "Divorced"
 - a. Fathers who have completed a legal divorce from their ex-spouse at the time of the study.
 - b. Fathers who are separated from their ex-partners, but not yet divorced, provided that they were legally married to their former partner, and that they were the father of one or more children during that marriage.
2. "Child[ren]"

- a. The biological or legally adopted child[ren] of the participant, who resided in the care of the divorced or separated couple prior to the divorce or separation.
3. “Non-Custodial”
- a. The participants will not have full legal and full physical custody of their children at the time of participation in the study.
 - b. Any of the following combinations will otherwise qualify participants for “non-custodial” status in this study:
 - i. Joint legal custody, ex-spouse has sole physical custody.
 - ii. Joint legal, joint physical but ex-spouse has greater amount of physical custody.
 - iii. Ex-spouse has both full legal and physical custody, father has visitation.
 - iv. Ex-spouse has full legal and physical, father has no visitation.

Sample and Sampling Strategies

Fathers for this study were recruited through contacting fathers rights groups throughout the state of Massachusetts. Three separate groups were contacted via email and / or telephone, using a form email letter or a pre-worded message (see Appendix B). Responses were gathered from all three groups and based on interviews with representatives of these groups (leaders / chairpersons, etc) one group was established as being particularly interested in the project. Over the course of approximately 4 weeks, the interviewer attended several meetings of this group, and talked briefly about the project during each meeting, distributing another pre-worded statement (See Appendix C) in order to recruit fathers to be interviewed.

Based on interest generated from these meetings, the interviewer contacted prospective participants via telephone in order to screen them for the project. The screening consisted of participants meeting three criteria:

1. That they had been married to their spouse at one time.
2. That they were currently divorced, or separated with a custody order in place from the courts.
3. That they had been accused of perpetrating domestic violence or child abuse at some point during or after their marriage.

It is noteworthy that in this particular father's rights group (which reports being one of the strongest in the state) based on approximately 4 meetings over a four week period, (consisting of an estimated 60 attendees), only one man of color was visibly present at one of the meetings. The remainder of the attendees appeared to be Caucasian.

Data Collection

Data collection took place through a combination of face to face interviews and field note documentation. Interviews were scheduled at the human service agency used for the father's rights group meetings, in order to make the project easily accessible to the participants. Prior to conducting interviews, participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix D). Interviews took approximately 1.5-2 hours to complete, and with one participant needed to be scheduled over two days to complete the interview. Interviews were recorded on a standard audio cassette tape recorder, for the purposes of transcribing and coding narrative data to obtain findings. Interviews were semi-structured, and employed the use of the interview guide which asked questions along two tiers. The first tier was designed to elicit subjective accounts of fathers' experiences in relationship with their child[ren], and in changes and constructions of their identity as fathers following divorce. The second section was designed to elicit subjective accounts of these fathers' experiences of accusations of domestic violence and / or child abuse prior to or following separation and / or divorce. As noted above, the

development of the questionnaire received input from members of the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, in order to maximize both the accountability of the questionnaire (to the needs of fathers, children, and mothers) and in order to elicit rich descriptions by these fathers of their experiences and identity constructions as fathers. Based on information generated from the first two interviews regarding the child support and economic situations of these fathers, the interview guide was modified (see Appendix E) to include questions regarding these issues, and this modified guide was used in the remaining 8 interviews.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed with the assistance of a professional transcriber, who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to having access to the tapes and transcripts (see Appendix F). All transcribed interviews were then listened to by the interviewer, and in some cases edited in order to insure accuracy between tapes and transcripts. Narrative data generated from the interviews was analyzed using two methods. First, tapes were listened to and transcripts were read in order to elicit broad narrative themes and to cross reference these narrative themes with field data (i.e. emotional tone, connection between interviewer and interviewee, etc.). The information generated from this first tier of analysis was used to begin the second process of coding data. Based on themes generated from this “data up” approach, a list of thematic categories was generated. These categories were then used to create theme “nodes” using QSR N6 software. Raw data was then coded and extracted from each of the transcripts and organized in the software under these “nodes,” according to the respective theme headings. These themes and their respective data were then consolidated into the broader

categories, and cross referenced with existing themes in the literature in order to generate the findings section of this project. Input on the data analysis process was received from members of the Centers for Research on Women at Wellesley College.

Strengths and Limitations

The feasibility of this project was supported given that the sample was small, and the primary emphasis of the study was on gathering rich descriptions from its participants. At the same time, it was difficult to outreach the project to communities in a way that controlled for issues of cultural, racial and economic diversity. The primary limitations here included the following:

1. Not all groups were as receptive as this one to the idea of the project. One other group's facilitator in particular reported a great deal of hesitation at the idea of having his group participate in the project, given the sensitive nature of the interview material.
2. Membership in the group is self selected, and is not controlled for issues of diversity.
3. Attendees varied at different groups, and there was a limited window of time between recruitment and data collection. Therefore, only those members attending the month of recruitment were able to hear about the project and decide if they wanted to participate based on the presentations given at the meetings. It is hoped for in the sample selection. It is projected that the interviewing and coding process will not take more than three months, and that this will be a reachable goal within the time constraints of the project.

Interviews were able to be conducted in a setting with ample privacy for the comfort of the participants, and were conducted in an accessible and familiar (and therefore more comfortable) setting, the same location that weekly meetings were held at.

Bias in this study was reflected in the need to balance the inquiry into these fathers' experiences, and the need to be accountable and aware of the degree of intensity which under-girds much of the Fathers' Rights movement's discourse (which can include sentiments that are anti-feminist and pro-patriarchy). This study did not seek to "take one side or the other" with respect to these themes, but rather was successful in "reaching" its participants because of the "more intimate" focus on ways in which these fathers construct and experience their relationships with their children, and their understanding and experience of themselves as parents within the context of their changing lives and post divorce stressors.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Overall findings from the data indicated numerous issues facing these fathers at this time in their lives. Among these issues, themes of pre and post divorce fathering, relationship with kids, identities as men and fathers following divorce, grief, loss, hopes and fears, anger toward the legal system, and gaining support and advice from the father's rights group are the most salient issues. This chapter will take a look at some of these themes, with the intention of providing some of the salient data generated for further discussion. It is hoped that this data will open further dialogue regarding the issues and discourses facing these men in their lives as post divorce fathers.

Demographic Data

A total of 10 men participated in this study. Self reported racial / ethnic backgrounds of participants was as follows:

Racial / Ethnic Background	Number of Participants
Caucasian:	n=9
French / Italian American	n=1
Anglo American	n=2
Irish / German	n=1
Anglo / French Canadian	n=1
Polish American	n=1
Anglo / Italian	n=1
Anglo / German	n=1
Anglo / French / Spanish	n=1
Bi-Racial (Caucasian / Native American):	n=1

The reported age of participants ranged from 31 to 50, with the mean age being 42. Participants' reported number of children ranged between 1 and 3 with the distribution of children as follows:

Number of Children	Number of Participants
One Child	n=3
Two children	n=5
Three Children	n=2

Age of participants' children ranged between 1yr 7mos and 19 yrs. The mean age of all participants' children was 10 yrs. The distribution of children's ages was as follows:

Age of Child	Number of Participants
1.5 yrs	n=1
3 yrs	n=1
5 yrs	n=3
6 yrs	n=2
7 yrs	n=1
8 yrs	n=1
12 yrs	n=2
13 yrs	n=1
14 yrs	n=1
15 yrs	n=3
16 yrs	n=1
18 yrs	n=1
19 yrs	n=1

The reported racial / ethnic backgrounds of participants' former spouses were as follows:

Racial / Ethnic Background	Number of Ex-Spouses
Caucasian	n=7
Anglo / Polish	n=1
Polish / Portuguese	n=1
Anglo / Swedish	n=1
German	n=1
French / Polish	n=1
French / Irish	n=1
Canadian French	n=1
Biracial Caucasian / Native American	n=2
Unreported	n=1

The reported ages of participants' former spouses ranged between 21 yrs and 45 with the mean age being 34.5 yrs. The distribution of former spouses' ages was as follows:

Age of Ex-Spouse	Number of Participants
21 yrs	n=1
25 yrs	n=1
30 yrs	n=1
33 yrs	n=2
36 yrs	n=1
37 yrs	n=1
41 yrs	n=1
45 yrs	n=2

Accusations of Domestic Violence or Child Abuse

All participants have had accusations of domestic violence or child abuse reported against them by either their ex-spouses or other authorities at some point prior to or following the dissolution of their most recent marriages. The reported breakdown of these accusations was as follows.

Accusations of Domestic Violence or Child Abuse	Number of Participants who Reported Accusations
Single restraining order issued prior to separation	n=0 ⁵
Single restraining order issued concurrent to / following separation	n=4
More than one restraining order issued concurrent to / following separation	n=1
Single restraining orders issued both prior and concurrent to / following separation	n=2

⁵ Those who had restraining orders filed on them prior or concurrent to the separation either had more than one restraining order filed on them prior to separation, or had restraining orders filed both before and after separation. No participant had only one restraining order filed prior to the separation.

Three or more restraining orders issued during or after the marriage	n=4 ⁶
Accusation of child physical or sexual abuse or child neglect prior to separation	n=0
Accusation of child physical or sexual abuse or child neglect concurrent to / following separation.	n=6
Spent time in jail for violation of a restraining order.	n=2
Had children removed by DSS ⁷ at some point for reported child abuse or neglect.	n=3
Total combined number of restraining orders reported by all participants	23
Total combined number allegations of child abuse or neglect reported by all participants	6

Current Custody Arrangements

Current custody arrangements of participants was reported as follows:

Ex Spouse has Sole Legal and Physical	n=4
Father has Unsupervised Visitations	n=3
Father has Supervised Visitations	n=1
Father has No Visitations	n=0
Joint Legal, Ex Spouse has Sole Physical	n=4
Father has Unsupervised Visitations	n=2
Father has Supervised Visitations	n=1
Father has No Visitations	n=1
Joint Legal, Joint Physical	n=0
Joint Legal, Father has Sole Physical	n=2⁸
Of all children	n=0
Of one, but not all children	n=2

⁶ Three participants had two or more restraining orders filed on them as follows:

Three (3) Restraining Orders	n=2
Seven (7) Restraining Orders	n=1

⁷ Includes having had custody or visitation with children reduced concurrent to / following DSS investigations for accusations of child abuse.

⁸ These fathers had sole physical custody of one of their children, and their ex-spouses had physical custody of their other child(ren). This latter fact qualified them for participation in the study.

Pre-Divorce⁹ Fathering

Based on the coding and data analyzing process utilizing the software program N6, data generated from interviews and coded under the categories of “Pre Divorce Fathering” and “Relationship with Kids Pre Divorce” constituted an combined estimate of 3.68% of all the text generated by these fathers in their interviews. This is interesting when compared with the amount of text data generated under the categories of “Post Divorce Fathering” and “Relationships with Kids Post Divorce,” which after coding amounted to an estimated 11% of all textual data generated for the project. These fathers talked much more, and much more in depth about their fathering experiences post divorce than pre divorce. It is assumed that this is partially due to the added complications and overlays of other issues that face parents following divorce.

That said, when asked about their fathering and relationships with their children pre-divorce, these fathers reported that for the most part they had connected relationships with their children and overall positive impressions of their fathering prior to their separations or divorces. Interestingly, this appeared to be the case whether the children were younger or older in age at the time of separation or divorce.¹⁰ Regardless of the amount of time that they had with their children prior to the divorce, these fathers reported that by and large they felt things between themselves and their children during those years, was good.

⁹ For the purposes of this chapter, unless otherwise used, the words “divorce and separation” will be used interchangeably.

¹⁰ There was some departure from this self reported theme of “strong established and secure connections” with their kids before divorce for the two fathers who had infant or toddler children at the time of their separations.

“Very close, very close. We did everything together.....and in the evenings just having quiet time I would have at least one if not two cuddled right with me on the couch including my daughter. So we were very close as a family with my kids. I hardly went anywhere without one of them at least.”

“I mean basically he came to me for just about everything.....when he wanted something, he came to me. He would talk to me about school and everything and what was going on.”

It is interesting to note that most of the fathers gave descriptions of their pre divorce relationships with their children through a more “traditionally masculine” framework. Most of the fathers refer to their fathering and their relationships with their children as being based around the themes of connecting with their children through activities, and in educating their children about values, morals, behavior and conduct.

Activity-Oriented Fathering

Most of the fathers reported that a healthy portion of their relationships with their children and their work as fathers before (and after, as the next section will indicate) the divorce, consisted of “doing” different kinds of activities. These four fathers give descriptions of the types of activities that they focused on with their children.

I was always there with my son with Boy Scouts. And I taught all three of them how to play soccer, coached them all on teams, or assisted coach....but I've taught them all how to play soccer.

Kinda reenact everything my father did with me when I was a kid, piggyback rides, rolling around, scaring them, chasing them, them chasing me, playing games, everything..

I've coached kindergarten, coached them in kindergarten all the way up about fifth grade.....Probably if I missed a game it was 2-3% of the games that I missed and that might have been because I was at the other kid's soccer game....Did camp over with the Boy Scouts....go out on bike rides once in a while.....trips and weekend things and stuff like that....and fishing once in a while...

I was always heavily involved in my kids, their sports, playing catch with them, and always trying to you know be consistent as best I could as my Dad had been

with me.....I enjoyed obviously all the Cub Scouts we did that.....It was about 8 to 9 years of Cub Scouts.....I took my kids....you know they knew how to hunt, they knew camping and things like that a lot of the outdoors stuff, and the Cub Scouts.

Education, Morals, Values, Conduct

These fathers also talked about collaborating with their children in the development of their academic and practical, skills based learning contexts of their lives. These two fathers talked about a couple of the ways that they contributed to their children's academic development:

Helping the kids with their homework. Even though I wasn't very good at some of it....But the homework was one of the best parts.

And I used to give the kids a dollar for an A, fifty cents for B, C was even, D you got to give me fifty cents, E you give me a buck [chuckles]....and if they made Honor Roll I'd give them \$5.00 on top of that.

Other types of fathering in this category include more experiential, hands on, and aesthetic modes of educating children. These four fathers talked about ways that they have contributed to their children's development in non-traditional learning spheres, spheres which are recognized and valued to different degrees in different contexts.

I helped him a lot with things I know about. You know I've brought him in the woodworking shop and we've made things together. I've taught him how to use the machines, most of them.....

I used to sing to them and play music a lot.....they...like to sing, they...play instruments, they want to learn how to play instruments like their Dad. So you know in that aspect....I'm trying to bring them up in a cultural type of world.

He was all proud of his [Army] bunk all made and his boots polished and he was proud to be in the Service and proud of what he was doing, a lot of confidence now and had done very well, had actually thrived in that environment which I didn't know what was going to happen. I realized that a lot of things that I'd done with him had prepared him for that so.

Other ways that these fathers report contributing to their children's development

include moral, religious, conduct and values based education and guidance. These fathers talk about ways that they have contributed to these aspects of their children's development:

But for me my rules and policies were simple in bringing them up....clean your bedroom, put your dishes in the sink, try not to make a mess at the table, keep your room neat, pick up after your mess and basic rules and that was it.....Discipline was timeout on the couches...I would ask them "OK, do you know what you did wrong?....I want you to sit on the couch and think about what you did."

I said "You can go to [local college] they've got a plan.....You can get your degree, you can play football" "Or" I said, "You're going to need to get a job....Or you need to go into the Service."...He finally came around and realized he needed to do one of those three things....So I feel I provided consistency, religious training. To try to get them through to be good citizens and have good careers and become successful adults. And that was my goal.

I think in the five years I had him I had the ability to at least instill some values in him, you know?....I mean there's a good side to him.

"Mr. Mom"

More than one of the fathers referred to their relationships with their children pre divorce in the context of non gender-traditional fathering. Whereas most of the examples given up to this point are simpatico with what we know and assume about traditional male child rearing roles (or at least are not at odds with these cultural images), this category represents moments in the interview where these fathers self proclaimed stepping away from more traditionally gender based parenting roles, and taking on responsibilities which according to their own representations are more in the domain of mothering than fathering. These two fathers speak directly to the "Mr. Mom" idea in their descriptions of their early care-taking of their children.

I love them unconditionally, I want them to know that....I've always been there for my sons, when my sons were little, like when they were toddlers I was like the

uh Mr. Mom, you know I basically stayed home and toilet trained my kids. From [that] time until they went to preschool, I remember putting them in their high chair you know and spoon-feeding them, and you know the Gerber stuff and everything. I remember doing all that shit hey.

We would cook together, we always cooked and baked together, my daughters and I...When my wife was off maternity leave...I did everything, I played Mr. Mom, everything.

These fathers speak to some of the complexity of child rearing that does not often feature in traditionally represented images of men, or of fathering. In doing so, they acknowledge some of the struggles that they encountered in the process of making room for their children's development through these moments in their lives. These three fathers reflected back on some of the challenging issues they faced in their development as parents:

My first marriage, was I as good a dad...? No, I feel bad that...it took me all those years to learn. It's not like it comes with a book of instructions. My parents taught me no coping skills.

I had to call [spouse] a lot at work to ask her questions about my son, like you know how much he needs to be fed, you know, bedtime, crying, what exactly he needs you know. It was like sometimes he'd start crying and I wouldn't know what to do because of the fact that I wasn't around enough to know what he needed.....It was kind of hard at first but after about a couple of months I started getting down a routine that I understood when he needed to be fed, diaper changing, watch him run around in his walker, stuff like that.....

Listening. I mean that was one thing where I have to admit I was really lax at, probably. Looking back over time I can remember my kids coming up to me every once in a while and saying "Dad let's go play ball." Or maybe that falls into listening. Or, "Can you help me do this or that." "Oh, I really didn't want to do that today." But made them do it anyways. I wasn't really listening to them back then, you know?

This father gives a rich description of conversely feeling more relaxed and more confident based on his experience with his prior children:

So in your mid 30's you're like "Oh, wow this is it it's my last most likely my last son, my last child." And you appreciate it. And you're much more experienced

and much more relaxed when they do get fevers and stuff like that. Although he was born with severe colic or something, an under developed stomach and he was on two different meds for six months, constantly throwing up. So everything had to stop for like 6 months. I'd come home every night, that's when I bonded with him actually, I stopped all hobbies, meetings anything I was doing when I came home to relieve my wife and take care of him. It was a half a bottle in, and a half a bottle out, and he was in a lot of pain from the acid reflux, he was on....some other kind of medication that they put adults on. But after 6 months it went away, so I'm very close to my youngest son and his personality is a little different.....he's a very spiritual little kid.

Throughout these descriptions of fathering in the pre-divorce context, these men talked about their connections with their kids, and the ways that they felt they were able to contribute to their children's development. For some of these fathers, the themes they experienced in their pre-divorce relationships with their children carry on in the post divorce context. However, most if not all of the fathers interviewed for this study agree that their relationships with their children have changed following the separation and divorce. Some of these changes are illustrated in the following section.

Post-Divorce Fathering

The fathering that these men describe in the post divorce context in significant ways resembles their accounts of fathering pre-divorce. There are some reports of changes in their approach or parenting style, and concerns due to time constraints with their kids, but in many instances it appears that they are continuing to focus on what they did before, with many of the similar themes noted in the above section. Activity-oriented fathering, education, and instilling morals, values, and conduct continue to be salient themes for these fathers following divorce. However, as we will begin to see, other themes also begin to weave their way into the general experience of these fathers' efforts to parent their kids following divorce.

These fathers report being involved in fathers rights work due to changes in their relationships with their children post divorce. These changes appear to interweave with these fathers' accounts of their relationship with their former spouses in particular. One of the most significant areas that shows up in their accounts of post divorce fathering, is the reported concerns of their growing more distant from their children (either in the present tense, or in the imagined future tense) due specifically to the influence of their ex-spouses, and their ex-spouses' families. We will look at this aspect of their reporting as part of the overall picture of post divorce fathering.

Activity-Oriented Fathering

As mentioned above, many of the fathers continue to report that given the amount of time that they have with their children, they continue to work toward doing activities which can provide a sense of continuity for their relationships with their kids, or a sense of connection with them in their post divorce lives. One father talked about maintaining the continuity of his activities with his children as an important ingredient in attempting to minimize the disruption of the separation and divorce in his relationships with his kids.

People that knew me before we were separated, we were constantly together as a family....We went everywhere together, did everything together, I'm just trying to keep that going now with them on my weekends. We're constantly on the go, constantly. From horseback riding to roller-skating, to bowling to hiking, to camping. You name it, every weekend is planned out pretty much with what we're going to do.....I love to go places with them still and support them for soccer games and stuff.....or basketball games. Whatever sport they're in I've always been supportive of them, so.

Another father talked about the value of doing particular activities and seeing people who the kids are familiar with, as ways of maintaining continuity in his children's lives, and in an effort to support his kids' natural interests.

I take them down to the gymnastic place so they can run around 'cause they love gymnastics, you know, make sure they like seeing their old friends, they really miss them....my daughters like camping in the summer, you know, and I'm not a camper but I learned how 'cause they like it, you know and they just want you I feel to give something of yourself, you know? And I read to them all the time, we do everything together.....they help me clean the house, we do laundry together, we cook, you know, I'm teaching them how to measure and all this stuff, you know what I mean?....I run all over the place with my kids, I take them to [local child activity center], I'm crawling through the tubes with them, I can't get through as fast as them though! [laughs]

A third father talks about his mutual interest and hobby in go-cart racing with his son, which they shared for many years.

When he wasn't visiting his mother every other week, we were racing, you know going to NY or NH or here in this state or down in CT to go go-cart racing, so it was definitely you know it was "guys day."

Education, Values, Morals, Conduct

Educating their kids continues to be a salient theme in these fathers' reports of their post divorce fathering. They describe different ways that they express their interest in and commitment to their children's education. These accounts range from hands-on to pedagogical teaching, and include education in the broadest sense; academics, concrete life skills education, and values, morals and religious education. The following two fathers talked about their emphasis on the importance of reading in their children's lives.

Sitting and reading them a bedtime story. Teaching my youngest son, that's what I'm doing now. He's really learning to read good now. He'll pick up a book and instead of me reading, I used to read it to him all the time, now it's like "Read me the first page." You know, and he'll read. When he gets stuck, he sounds it out. I try to help him sound it out. I'll put my finger over sections of the word to have him sound it out.

I would probably say.....education, because I bring them to book stores you know, [local bookstore] to read and I've got book shelves like this [gestures with hands], full of books you know dictionaries, encyclopedias everything.

Another father reports that his motivation to be involved in his kids' schooling has recently increased, following his attending father's rights group meetings.

In fact it was just recently after going to a meeting here and talking to a few other guys that I finally went over to the principal and felt him out to see what was going on between me and the kids at school.....and now I'm getting paperwork in the mail, they're sending me the report cards and I'm trying to be more involved in their schooling.

Yet another father talks about teaching his toddler son more "general things" in terms of age appropriate developmental tasks.

I try to do the best I can with him as far as teaching him things and showing him what things are, trying to teach him different words to say....because he's still kind of young you know, he's still trying to grasp the concept of everything.

Many of the fathers interviewed talked about their continued investment in teaching their children how to be "good people" and how to have particular sets of values and morals in the world.

I hope that's what they're getting from me is some sense of value and the proper way. I'm concerned about it.

I try to teach him the basics, and to be a good person. Not to make fun of other people just because they're different from you. Not to be racist. You know I mean just to be a good person not to lie, steal. I mean I was brought up with most of that.

Rules, well I was raised old fashioned, but with an open mind. Manners is a big thing, acting appropriately when its.....But mannerism is a very big thing with me. How he treats others, other children and stuff like that, that's another big thing.

One father talked about viewing himself as a role model in helping his children develop a work ethic in their own lives.

They definitely see somebody [in me] that's ambitious, you know I've worked hard, but I do, my whole thing is to keep getting ahead, I mean you can't take a "sit back and let the world give it to me" attitude, because it's not going to happen, you know if you want to obtain things in life you've got to work for it. I

got that from my dad, and I hope to be able to pass that onto my kids. I think it's a good thing, I think a lot of people are failing to pass that onto their kids.

Another father talked about teaching his kids the value of persistence and tenacity in life.

[In real estate] if you knocked on 100 doors, 8 doors would listen to you, 4 would invite you back a second time, 2 of them would invite you in for coffee and 1 would sign. So, if you knock on 1 door, it may take you 99 doors to get to the last one, but if you did 200, then you've got 2 signatures. I try to tell them "Just be persistent" just to "Keep going"....whatever you want you just keep being persistent and go for it.

Most of the fathers mentioned continued efforts to use discipline in their kids' lives, as a component of helping their children develop needed life skills and perspectives. This father talks about using a preferred activity in his son's life (racing) as a contingency for doing well in school.

If he didn't keep his grades up he would lose his racing....racing was something he wanted to do but it was a reward, he would be rewarded for keeping his school grades up, he would not be rewarded for letting them slip, and not being rewarded meant the racing stopped.

These three fathers talk about different forms of consequences, (both negative and positive consequences), in teaching their children different behaviors:

I punish him for mouthing off to me, mouthing off to my wife, different things. I mean if he steals if he takes something I mean he's taken money off my dresser. You know, I've caught him and I've punished him for it. Take away TV for a week, Nintendo game, you know, ground him to the house.

But I'd have to say like OK set up a program....stars or happy face, frown face, blah blah blah, for days he's good. Make it like something he has to work for. And not, don't have him get to where he should expect a reward all the time, but....And timeouts, "OK, alright, that's 1" He'll keep carrying on, "That's 2." And he'll know by the time, if I have to go to 3, "That's 3, take 5." Room – cleaning the room and stuff like that....that would be part of the happy smile face program and all of that.

I've never hit my [kids], they get time outs, they get a minute for each year in age that's how we do it, and after that then it's I'll take something away from them that they like

Another father talked about changing his thinking about his approach to discipline based on his concerns for his connection with his kids.

I find myself lax more than I should be, again because I don't spend that much time with the kids and I don't want to make a prison out of my house when they come over, in fear that they may not want to come back.

While these fathers continue to report engaging with their children as parents in these domains, they also report that post divorce fathering brings changes to their relationships with their kids, and in their thinking about and reflecting on their approach as parents more generally.

Post Divorce Shifts in Fathering Identity and Relationships with Kids

These fathers talked about shifting identities, and changes in their relationships with their kids in the post divorce context in several ways. Some of them became more self-reflective following the divorce. This father talked about becoming more aware of the importance of listening and paying attention to his kids. He also talked about his time with them becoming more sacrosanct, and a willingness to set limits on his work life in order to be able to spend time with his children.

I wasn't really listening to them back then, you know? And I find myself doing that more now. I'm getting better at it, but I'm still not really to where I want to be. So, I have to say listening and being understanding more. I've had to learn that too because before it was they were always around, so if I couldn't be with them on a Saturday because of work...or something, you know it was not a big deal before to not being with them that day. I had the next day or any weeknight with them, and now it's my time with the kids is strictly that, I make sure it's that way and [my work] knows it too, the [supervisor] knows, I won't be responding to calls if the kids are around. So I'm starting to learn, I'm getting better with that....Because before, the time we had together was great but it wasn't 100% you know because of the work and doing things. So when I'm with them, I'm strictly with them now.

Another father talked about his role changing in relationship to his daughter since his divorce.

I think it's somewhat softened me up a little bit because I told my daughter she couldn't get her ears pierced until she was 16. But then when we got divorced, a couple of reasons why I went and got her ears pierced for two reasons, I knew one that once they were done, they were done.....I figured that I would go down with my daughter to get them pierced because I was the one that wouldn't let her get her ears pierced, this way she'd say, "Daddy brought me to get the ears pierced." And I brought her out to get her fingernails done too. I was the first one to bring her to get her nails done.

Elements of this father's account begin to hint at the degree of conflict that these fathers feel in relation to their ex-spouses. Again, it is assumed that these fathers would not be connected with the father's rights movement unless they had experienced high conflict divorces (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Some of the conflict spills over into their relationships with their children following divorce. One father reported concerns about "lack of communication" between he and his ex regarding their daughter's medical situation.

I was never told that she was on Ritalin, so my daughter's coming over and really I think she was on it for two months....and the problem I had was my daughter was going over my house, at the time she was 10, she was taking medicine without my knowledge.....Now I don't know what reacts with Ritalin, if anything reacts with Ritalin. But it's the point that, what if it was a different drug or any drug and she gets hurt and I bring her to the hospital and they ask me if she's on medication and I say "No, she's not," not knowing?

While these fathers continued to report engaging in a variety of fathering activities with their children, they also acknowledged that post divorce fathering has become more complicated in both emotional and logistical ways. A number of them talked about time constraints and how these affected their perspective on fathering with their children. These two fathers talked about constraints on their relationships with their

young children, and spoke to some of the difficulties of having lost regular contact with their children at an early age, in an earlier stage of their development as fathers.

And now I get 2 hours of visitation and it's like at the Visitation Center I have to ask permission to bring my son, my clothes, a camera to take pictures of him, any of my family members....I pretty much have to ask permission for anything to bring my son...basically [I] get to see him 48 hours in a year which doesn't give me much time to really get to know him, other than when I see him....I don't know him. That's the main problem, I don't know him really.

I'm not there much, I'm not allowed to be there much, can't take him and go do things, take him to the zoo or whatever. Also difficult, in the situation that I'm in it's difficult to be a father period. I'm a visitor, with a checkbook. Period. It's hard to get anything down with my son. I mean it's hard to know what he likes and dislikes because I'm not there you know?...I haven't been able to be a father and do anything because I haven't had the chance.

This father talked about constraints in his relationships with his kids, based on lack of time in connection with them....

If I could get a good 50% of time with my kids, yeah I'd find a lot of ways to improve myself with my kids as a father, but again I'm working with 2-4 hours a week and that ain't much time to be a father and to prove yourself to them and show them all the things you learned and all the things you want them to learn, that's just no time....It's slow getting involved, it's very slow especially again with the 2 hours, 4 hours here and there.

...And about some of the ways that changes in his relationships with his kids has affected him personally, and how he copes with these difficult feelings when he spends time with them.

I'm not what I used to be as much, but when I'm with them I bring my old self back just for them because I don't want them to see the sadness...I feel and see. So I kind of play the role again when they're with me and act out my old self how I used to be, very cheerful, playful, openness...um, you know that's how I was, I was a fun person to be with....I think my kids will benefit they will get their Daddy's good side out of him, until things smooth out.

This father illustrated some of the feelings of grief and loss that a number of these men reported experiencing around the change in their relationships with their kids.

Grief and Loss

A significant number of the fathers in this study reported and or expressed feelings of grief and loss, whether it be over their past, current, or imagined future relationships with their children. This would appear to fit with some of the literature reviewed for this study (Kruk, 1992; Liazos, 1997). For fathers whose children were quite young at the time of separation or divorce, there seems to be a particular loss experienced in terms of their sense of themselves as a connected and stable presence in their children's current lives.

But you know, that's really hard, it really is, just not being able to see your child and stuff, that's what hurts most of all I think for most fathers, just trying to be a part of your child's life and not being able to have more time with that child because they grow so fast....It's like my son, he's already almost 2 and it's like I hardly even know him and he's growing up so fast. That time you get it's a one time deal and that's it you know, once it's gone, it's gone.

"When can we sleep over like we used to, when can we live with you?" You know I don't know how to answer those questions....I mean who can give a little kid like that an answer why Daddy's not around anymore?....That they're drifting away from me....They used to always bring me stuff from school, drawn pictures...or gifts...and they never do anymore.

This father also reflected on concerns about how the distance could be affecting his children

When they used to draw, you could tell by their art work. They used to draw things all the time on the driveway or on paper and it would be a house with Mommy, Daddy, [and both kids]. And then it became Mommy over here, Daddy over here, [and both kids] with Daddy and [both kids] with Mommy by themselves. And then that became just [the kids] and now they don't even do things like that anymore. So I'm sure the kids are feeling it. I mean I just was sitting in the living room the other day, I put my arm down like this with my head and my oldest interpreted it as I was sad or something, he came up to me and gave me a hug, you know?

Another father talked about the loss of connection in terms of being involved with his children's schooling, and developmental steps.

My involvement is very nil. I mean I don't know how they're doing in school, I can't go to parent teacher meetings, school plays, you know I missed my daughter's first day of school with her you know....you know I feel [I] wasn't there, her teeth coming out, you know losing her first tooth and stuff like that you know, that's going to hurt. Our relationship suffers, you know, it went from all this time to like none, you know?

And this father who echoed the sadness of missing developmental tasks and milestones in his child's life

What concerns me is that, I mean I've already missed all the major, I should say most of the major stuff that, you know like his first steps and stuff like that....I can't be a proper father that I would like to be. Because you know that means being in his life completely fully, you've lived there with him, you know you played a part in raising him....I mean he's already five. Between baby childhood, you know infant...and if you ask me five or six years old, that's the most important time for bonding. I lost that. It was stolen from me.

“It was stolen from me.” Resonant words which connect to reported feelings by many of these fathers that distance between themselves and their children is due to the influence of their ex-spouses and even their ex-spouses' families.

I know they're manipulating their minds over there, the three women they live with. It's too obvious because they say and do things that make me think so. I want the courts to understand that those kids are being alienated from me from their father you know?

But now what concerns me is, is she saying things to him, is her mother saying things to him about me? I have no clue. What does he think about me?

I started to lose him, you could feel this distance you know, because she kept alienating. Every time I'd come up she'd say “The kids don't want to see you”...The alienation again that's being perpetrated by not only my wife but by her family. I don't see an end in sight and that I'm afraid that eventually that I'll be cut off from my kids and not see them at all eventually, if it's allowed to continue.

This father seems to shift in his narrative from grief over losing contact with his kids, to fear of what the future holds, to anger toward his ex spouse, to a more formal position. The simple statement, “if it's allowed to continue” is very powerful, for it

begins to point toward some of the discourse of the fathers rights movement. It seems that it's not a long jump from grief and the fear of losing connection to a position statement regarding the father child relationship.

I haven't been able to be a dad. She took that God given right to me away.

You know, you're putting a wedge....you're wedging in between something you shouldn't be wedging between.

It is important to note that not all of these fathers reported feeling more distant from their children post divorce. Even those fathers who reported feeling grief over loss of connection with their kids nonetheless also reported feeling connected to them at times, which suggests that it's not an "all or nothing" experience for these fathers.

My relationship though when we're together is good....I think our relationship is good, for the very short time I've got to spend with him.

A few fathers described feeling that their connection with their kids is actually closer following the divorce.

Oh we have a great time. I mean, we get along great you know we do all kinds of things together....Actually right now I think we're closer than ever. Really, I think this whole thing has brought us really close.

I would never admit this to my ex-wife, but I think I've become closer to my daughter because of the split up....and probably somewhat to my son too, because you get to spend more time by yourself together instead of having somebody else there.

Another father described how focusing on his son actually helps him through difficult times in his everyday life.

I think of him and his future and what that's going to....you know how that works, you know if it wasn't for him I mean who knows where I would be or you know it's just every time I start thinking down I think of him and it kind of brings me back up again because I know that I have to do my best to make sure that he is provided for and taken care of.

And another father talked about feeling similarly sustained in his relationship with his children.

What do I enjoy most? Just being with my daughters, it doesn't matter we could be sitting down watching a Scooby Doo video, I could be reading a book to them....It could be going for a walk could be going to the playground.....we'll go dig in the dirt if we have to.....they just want you to I feel to give something of yourself, you know?

Hopes and Fears

Finally, in looking at the issues facing these fathers' experiences of their relationships with their children post divorce, the issue of hopes and fears was raised. Some of these fathers expressed both hope and fear around their children's futures, such as success in school.

I'm concerned about his schoolwork and stuff like that. I just got his reports and he got an F, he's failing Social Studies. He got D's for his homework marks which basically my son never got a D in his life until this whole thing, his grades are going downhill.

I don't want to see him, just like really screw up his life you know?...he's a smart kid, he's good with his hands...So he could really do something positive with his life....you know we talked about him going on, they actually have colleges...I mean there's schools to go to. And this is something we talked about. Right now, academically he's going to be lucky to finish his freshman year at this point....he's stagnant...it's a shame.

A number of fathers in this study reported feelings of hope and fear around their relationships with their children, in terms of amount of time spent and quality of connection.

Our closeness. I just want to get back, you know like I said...I just want to stay tight knit with them and be a friend and a father to them, be their big buddy, you know?

Whether they're going to want to spend more time with me or not is a big concern because of the separation...your quality years with your kids are up until they start getting around the teenage years. I think my concern would be that if I don't get these quality years in quick I'm going to lose a lot.

Considering that...I don't see them as much, [I'm concerned] that I lose them...I think that's the most concern is just that when they get older, don't see them as much, and then missed a lot of years now.

Other fathers expressed concern for the emotional effects of the divorce on their children.

The kids are going to be damaged and scarred from it for life. And that's what eats me up because you know I would have been devastated if my parents had gotten or been divorced, and so I can't imagine what it's doing to my kids. But they're resilient so maybe they'll be alright.

So [my daughter] knows the truth, I think at times is growing up too fast, she needs to be a kid, she need not worry about adult situations, you know what I mean, that's not good, that's going to affect her, I think as she gets older, she's going to end up with some real misconceptions about relationships, you know, that's what I'm afraid of, I really am, that's a concern.

Throughout these fathers' accounts of post divorce fathering, there seems to be rich threads in each of the areas described above. These fathers each gave richly described accounts of their dilemmas and concerns in talking about their relationships with their children in the post divorce context. Clearly there are several important and intersecting themes in these illustrations of their accounts.

Further complicating these particular divorced fathers' experiences is the issue of accusations of domestic violence and child abuse. We now turn to some of their descriptions of these aspects of their lives and experiences in the post divorce fathering context.

Responses to Accusations of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

A number of factors entered into these fathers' accounts of their experiences of accusations of domestic violence and child abuse. As noted above, a criteria for participation in this study was that fathers had to have either accusations of domestic

violence or child abuse filed against them at some point prior to or following their separations or divorces.

“Unjust and Unfair”

All but one of the fathers reported feeling that the allegations lodged against them were false, and that the allegations were “unfair and unjust.”

When I was handed the restraining order and saw what she had claimed against me I was in disbelief....I even asked the police officers that handed me the restraining order. I said, “How can someone accuse someone of this without proof?”....Yeah, when I had the paper sent to me in the mail from the DSS office saying that they found allegations of neglect and physical abuse against me for my..kids. I was like, I couldn’t believe it. Again, like the restraining order, how can somebody accuse this when there is no evidence?

You know when [anyone] can just drop a dime on [their] parents because...parents ground them and [they] make up some story, and the next thing you’re guilty until proven innocent.

I was shocked I mean kind of humiliated you know, that she would do something like that to me after [so many] years. I mean, I had to leave my own home you know, I had to leave my [child, who] was devastated. I mean she really did, she tore [my child’s] heart out you know, I mean me and [my child] were so close that [child] didn’t understand what was going on and [child] knew it was false accusations.

If I physically hit you, or hit a kid, that’s assault and battery. File charges on me, file charges on me. Let’s see the pictures, let’s see the doctor’s reports....Kids are impressionable, you can get a kid to say almost anything if he hears it enough times, anybody actually. I think it was blown out of proportion.

I feel that she should be in jail for perjury and lying, or something....to get hit with that was totally, again a total blind[side].....and the implications of it were pretty horrendous. Yes, I thought it was totally false, bogus, and a bunch of lies...I’ve never been in any kind of trouble. All of a sudden I felt like The Fugitive....the fear of going to jail if I even hiccupped the wrong way.

I’ve had seven of them against me. Seven. And I’ve never done a thing, you know....One person, she’s wrecked my life, now I have a record....I’m made to look like the bad guy [laughs]. There’s nothing I can do about it...I can’t disprove it....Abuse was never an issue. Control, jealousy, stuff like that you know but never, um abuse, never.

The accusations are totally bogus, they were just totally fabricated lies....she knows how to play the game, and like I said this time she even put my kids on it, because she knew my [child] was home at the time and there was nothing that freaking happened, there was nothing that freaking happened

[I was] Extremely ticked off. Number one, I thought it was a ploy to play things out....absolutely unjust and unfair and matter of fact I think she should be getting slammed for making false accusations! People need to be held accountable for it, that damages people!.....[Regarding the accusations of child abuse, I was] Appalled. I felt like I wanted to take her, I never hit a woman in my life, I felt like wanting to pay somebody to beat her ass....Sexual [abuse]. You know I mean....Lies, bullshit lies. I mean, how else are you supposed to feel? That shit's damaging, that's fucking, that can push people over the edge....It can ruin somebody's life.

One father reported that he felt that his ex was "right" in filing the restraining order.

Well my experiences and my thoughts....were that she was right and I was wrong. You know when someone takes a restraining order against someone it's for a purpose, and a reason. And, she had a reason, she had a purpose. I did what I did and I was sorry for it, but I couldn't take it back. And she was afraid and I don't blame any woman or man who is verbally or physically pushed around or abused...If I knew about restraining orders I would have taken one out on my parents but I didn't know about it.

Many of the fathers interviewed reported that they felt the allegations of domestic violence or child abuse were used by their ex's as a way of gaining "the upper hand" in potential custody disputes. A number reported that they believed their ex had fabricated the accusations in order to increase the chances of gaining sole custody of their children following the separation and / or divorce.

I think it was because she was you know just using this as a tool to regain custody and it was part of her...grand scheme of getting him back.

I mean her lawyer, the judge, everybody agreed and when we went back into court for me to go home, she used it against me to say I was stalking her...I mean basically this is all over child custody...I mean [the accusations are] basically a ploy to get custody of my son....she knows...the only way she's going to get custody is to somehow prove that I'm an abuser...the only way she can get custody is to have me thrown in jail

Her lawyer came forward in front of the Judge said that I was abusing my [kids]. That's why she wanted to get sole custody, which was a blatant lie.

She told me with her own mouth afterwards her lawyer told her to put the restraining order, because she knew that the biggest battle was going to be the custody of those kids

Basically she did gain power and control of the situation. That's pretty much how that worked out. Like I said, I pay to see my son....That's just outright trying to gain power of control because you're using the child as a tool to get back at the father or mother.

I felt that the restraining order was used so that I would sign the divorce papers and give my wife you know whatever she wanted, that I was basically being held with this over my head....So it was used as a tool in my mind. I know it was.

Another recurrent theme in these fathers' accounts of the accusations against them, was the idea that "getting a restraining order is quite easy and commonplace for women."

I just couldn't believe that it was so easy for someone to walk in and say, "I feared for my life." That's all you need to say as a woman, "I feared for my life." And boom, the restraining order was placed.

Yeah, all she had to do was walk into court and tell the judge that she was afraid of me. And basically that's all it took. I mean, she doesn't have to prove anything....it seems like they can get a restraining order at the drop of a hat they just go in and say what they want and they issue them.

All these women these days have to do is say, "Boo" and we're thrown in jail, restraining orders are given out like candy.

No proof, I mean, that somebody has no history of violence or anything like that...all the woman has to do, "I'm in fear." You're done.

One father reported that one of the responses he had following the allegations was to obtain a pistol permit.

This time here...I felt far more violated...I felt very violated, they came and took my firearms, you know I didn't threaten anybody....after the guns were confiscated, I was lax that I didn't have a current FID....they changed the laws in '98, I wasn't even aware of it....so to get them back now they would have to get

permitted. And I went and I got permitted, and went and got a pistol permit. Not because I have any intention of doing anything....I guess in my own mind I wanted to prove to myself that, "Hey you know I'm not a bad guy." And I was issued a pistol permit.....one for all lawful purposes which is the toughest one to get.

It is important to note that the large majority of fathers reported feeling or thinking similarly about the issue of accusations. Only an extremely small minority expressed alternate views regarding the restraining orders. One such father reported that in his estimation, more instances of actual abuse are happening than are accounted for by most men who refute these accusations.

I personally believe that every guy that comes forward and denies that he was abusive towards his wife and that's the reason why she pulled out an order or is filing for divorce or whatever...I feel that a good percentage, a high percentage, and I'm taking a ball park figure out of my head, maybe 85-90% are guilty. Clear and simple, because I've seen it so many other times.

"The System."

By and large, these fathers' reports of their experiences of allegations of violence and abuse, in many instances blended seamlessly into their reports of feeling that the "court system is gender biased."

The most difficult thing I seemed to come across is the court systems because I tell you, they're totally anti-man....It seems like everybody in the system, the Judge, everybody is just against you and you got to prove yourself worthy all over again, you know, it's like, especially with my allegations there's no proof there...you don't realize how hard it is to prove to somebody that I'm not abusing my kids when you're not.

This father's description of "the system" and his report of feeling that the system is biased against him resonates with many of the fathers' reports of their experiences around the interface of child custody, the courts (i.e. the amount of contact they are allowed to have with their children post divorce), and the allegations of domestic violence or child abuse. A number of fathers report feeling that they experienced bias

both in the court system and in interactions with other parts of “the system” such as child protective services (DSS).

Well you can parallel the treatment you received from the courts, you know how you’re perceived by the courts, and DOR, DSS. The treatment’s pretty equal, equally crappy.

Ah, see that’s a tough call because if you’re charged with physical abuse, the DSS comes in, and who makes them be judge, jury and executioner? Who lets one person interview everybody, do the investigation, write the charges, write everything up, and find you guilty?

A couple of fathers expressed outright rage regarding their experience in the courts, particularly around the allegations of domestic violence or child abuse.

I’ll tell you a restraining order is the most cruel form of punishment there is. It’s incredible how cruel restraining orders are, I’d like to see the freaking judge who doles them out, I’d like to see that bitch have to freaking live for a week under a fucking restraining order where she couldn’t see her children and she was thrown out of the fucking house on the street and had to live like a freaking peasant, and that would put a whole new fucking realm of reality in those fucking assholes’ eyes and they wouldn’t be doling these things out so easy! It’s just incredible, I mean they don’t understand the restraining order is just part of the scheme....it’s just a fucking part of a conspiracy man, and I’m the one who’s got to be, I’m the fucking victim! I am the fucking victim....I can just picture the misery, and the loneliness, the anxiety that comes from being separated from your children by a freaking, a stupid assed fucking biased judicial system, that says they don’t even take fathers into consideration and they automatically award fucking custody to the fucking slut.....I’ve just lost all faith in the fucking United States government, the fucking state of Massachusetts....Once you get caught up in that restraining order shit man the only thing that you can do short of fucking killing yourself is to leave the fucking state, just get the fuck out.

I kind of knew anyway that our whole legal system needs an overhaul. It’s got too many loopholes, too many.....What changed me also is that I’ve seen how corrupt the system is. I mean ever since I joined the group. And it’s not just hearsay, we can prove everything...I get angry at the system and somehow I get too angry at the system. I see people getting screwed when there’s no reason why they should be...I mean look at all these other cases where people go off the deep end and snap and either they kill themselves or they just kill a bunch of other people, they snap....What brought them to that situation? They don’t correct [the system] before it happens, they correct it afterwards. They wait until something extremely drastic happens

One father reported that he believes that the court system is biased due to its need to continue to provide jobs to its employees.

Nobody asks you, just arrests, and the reason is that they grant money from the Federal Government for every arrest on domestic violence they make, so it's just the statistics....To me it keeps them all employed down there, the whole system, as long as they keep us fighting, they're all employed down there, it's a nice cushy job....

And that the issue of fathers rights is mirrored by "a broader loss of rights within our society."

I see that so many rights that all of us as people are losing, are being controlled. We're under martial law, it's like we've lost everything. George Washington and Jefferson they're going to roll over in their grave. And now you have the fathers coming and just beating them, you know just beating these guys down.

Another father talked about feeling that the court system took away his fatherhood.

I was a father to these kids and...I had a responsibility to them. And then just being ripped out of that against my wishes, against my will, not only by my wife but by the court system. And suddenly being called a "non-custodial" whatever they call it, and not being allowed to be with involved with my kids other than the amount of time that the courts say.

Several fathers spoke directly to the issue of wanting to effect change in the legal system, either through advocating for their own case, or through broader socio-political change.

It's important to defend the Constitution of the United States and you're supporting by exercising your amendments, exercising your rights. That's how you support the Constitution, by defending it. Defending it I do. Politically I think this is a very big key for us, because you've got to fight fire with fire. And the feminist groups – not all women, don't get me wrong, I'm definitely, I'm all for women's rights. I mean everybody should be treated equal, period, OK? But some things are taken too far.

And I will tear this DSS, because I go pro se I've represented myself, I've cross-examined my ex-wife, I've cross examined her husband, I understand the system, depositions, discovery, the motions, how it's all got to be done.

And I plan on devoting the rest of my life to changing [the system]. So that when a father ends up in a divorce, especially against his own wishes that he be allowed to see his children. And that the parent relationship not be destroyed, and that the courts support it. [In my life] that gives me 40 years to change this , and that's my resolve. That's how affected I've been by this and the [fathers' rights movement] needs a war chest, they need a lot of money, they need marketing, they need management....You know because if you had 50,000 divorced fathers, and they're out there, over the last 10 years, that have been you know screwed over by the system the same way I have, and worse....if you had 50,000 people and a [movement] with a five or ten million war chest, politicians are going to start listening. And that's when you're going to see some real change. And it's going to take a few years to do it, but I've got some plans.

The themes of creating change from the personal to the political level run throughout the discourse of the fathers' rights movement (Coltrane & Hickman, 1992), and play a role in the fathers rights groups attended by these participants. These themes featured strongly in meetings of this fathers' rights group, and were interspersed with legal and moral, emotional support offered by the group to its participants.

Fathers' Rights Group As Source of Advice and Support

As noted earlier in this study, part of the sample recruitment for this project entailed attending several fathers rights group meetings over the course of approximately one month in the early spring of 2002. During those meetings, advice was given to fathers regarding how to address their particular situations. The following advice is paraphrased from field notes taken during meetings.

1. Go to the court where the restraining order was filed and look up the docket, to see if the restraining order(s) are still active or not. If they are, then you won't be able to get custody of your child. You need to vacate the restraining order before you have a chance to get custody of your child.
2. Know your local lawyers. Some are sympathetic to the interests of fathers, some are "known" by the group to be either biased against fathers (such as "feminist" lawyers) or are deemed to be incompetent to assist with the rights of fathers.

3. Temporary custody orders are to be regarded as permanent until they are changed. You should request shared parenting from the outset because once the temporary order is in her favor, you will have a harder time turning the tide in your favor later on, the longer it goes, the harder it gets.
4. You need to prove that she is engaging in “abuse of the system.” If she files multiple restraining orders (against you or anyone else) then you can pull this information up and use it against her in the courts to prove abuse of the system.
5. All you have to do is be placed in fear of your life to have a restraining order filed against you.
6. Read copies of the restraining order to see her affidavit and find weak aspects in her story – compare these with the police reports to find discrepancies and weaken her story.
7. Get a Guardian Ad Litem.
8. Get a hold of criminal records of her current boyfriends in order to build a case regarding what influences are in your kids’ lives. Get a copy of the restraining orders on her boyfriends.
9. You must prove that she’s an unfit mom or you will lose the custody fight.
10. Keep a diary or a log of all events especially when you are with your kids.
11. You can file judicial misconduct with the Bar Association with lawyers who show bias against you.
12. Get a mental health professional, a Guardian Ad Litem, or an attorney to document that your child wants to be with his / her father (for older children).
13. Get names of people in the court system, when you are being interviewed by them or come into contact with them.
14. When you have joint physical custody the child support guidelines don’t apply.
15. Keep the property settlement separate from child support settlements because child support settlements can be renegotiated at any time....a 20% or greater change in economic circumstance (for you or your ex) makes it eligible to renegotiate the child support order.
16. Avoid having your wages garnished by the DOR. Pay directly and it won’t appear on your credit report. You don’t have to get wages garnished unless you violate the child support order. Pay with a cashier’s check or money order in order to make a record of the payments. You will pay child support until your child is 23 if s/he is in college through that time.

This “public” advice (given to anyone who attends the weekly group meetings) seemed to correspond largely with advice reported by fathers interviewed for the project.

Make sure you have documentation of what goes on, you know if something happens....write down what you argued about, where you were....where the couch was, where you were standing to the couch, how close were you to her and vice versa....And make sure everything is documented...make sure whatever you do with the kids is written down, get a log whatever you do on that weekend with them write down everything that you’ve done....if the kids say “No” they don’t

want to do something, don't force them to do it cause that can come back and bit you in the butt for neglect that you forced them to do something they didn't really want to do.

Signing a temporary order giving her custody was a mistake, I should have said "No" and done shared parenting...I [didn't] know about all these things, I do now having joined this group, so I would have never agreed to it, I would not have agreed to that....[Regarding the restraining order] you've got to get that 209 vacated...look at what's written in the affidavit....And most of the time the affidavit against a police report has a lot of differences in them....they need to look at the police report you know, what was her statements then? They need to look at the affidavit, what are her statements when she filled that thing out? Are they the same? Did she start to really expand on them, the more she wrote the more of a monster you were?

Get a good lawyer [chuckles], a real good lawyer! Because physical abuse you can dispute, mental abuse you can't and they know it....try to get that no abuse order off before I go for custody. Because they said somehow, she's going to use that against me.

[O]nce you go through something like this, you have to stay on top of the appeals, motions, modifications everything you've got to stay on top of them or you're going to get buried and that's what happened to me. I'm so buried that I don't know whether to go right or left out of my driveway when I pull out in the morning....In my opinion if you can handle your case yourself, if you know what you're talking about, do it yourself pro se because it's the best way to go.

I've learned that you need to dispute [the restraining order] as soon as possible, get back into court and there's a way to dispute it...I didn't know that, I would have tried to clear it....There's a way to beat it. There's a couple of guys in the groups that have went and fought it and won...had it removed....You have to go into court right away with an affidavit to beat it.

Other advice reported by these fathers during interviews included the following:

Jury it up, get to a jury. If it's not true, I mean if the allegations are false, go right to the jury. Get all the way, no matter what it cost, just go all the way to the jury....Because at that point there when the trial comes out, you can bring all the motives out...mine [ex spouse] had serious motive...I mean lies....the amazing part is that I can't believe that the judges don't say anything about the lies.

I would recommend that you file a [restraining order against your ex] if you're going into this right away, if you think that she's going to do it. It's a legal maneuver. To strike, you have to....the attorneys use this term, "Strike first" they're always saying, "Strike first."

Many if not most of the fathers reported that they felt supported in and by the fathers rights group. Many of them reported that being in the group was a normalizing experience in the sense of hearing other men talking about similar experiences, and going through similar difficulties in their lives following divorce, particularly around the relationship between accusations of violence or abuse and constraints in their custody arrangements with their children.

Just that they are going through the same thing I am you know with the kids, having to move, restraining orders, you know it's just a bunch of different men, but it's the same story being told over and over....Every new person that walks in, "Have you got a restraining order?" "Yeah, oh yeah." And then the story just goes in, the kids, child support, you know....they've all been through it. It's a very common thing, you know?

Um, there's an instant understanding of the way they feel. It's a club, a club you don't want to be in, but...You know, I guess you could equate it to combat. You know if you've been in combat with other soldiers then only they understand and that's what this is, this is really war on fathers.

That we generally have a lot in common. We share the same problems, basically the same frustrations with the court system and the judges and lawyers. It all seems to fold into the same categories every time. I've been to 7 or 8 meetings and every single meeting has been the same. Every single story has been pretty much the same as the next guy's with little variation.

Basically knowing that other fathers are going through the same thing, you know. And I'll probably pick up a lot of good information from different people there, because I mean you know, some of the fathers are in different stages of it. Some fathers are already through it, and you get some good advice. You know, that we're basically all in the same boat. You know being accused of something that we haven't done.

I can't say nothing's been not helpful, you know, even just the peace of mind knowing that you're not the only one there going through this 'cause when you're standing in that court room and these accusations are being thrown at you left and right and the judge is looking down at you from his seat and you feel like you're only 2" tall sometimes and you wonder, "Am I the only one to feel this way?"...The first night I came to the meeting it was like, "Damn, there's so many of us that are going through a similar thing" you know...like the allegations against us or even the visitation being slapped around the way it is.....it's just

like knowing I wasn't the only one like that, it seemed as if there was a great weight lifted off me

Again, it is important to note here that not all participants felt the same way regarding the issue of accusations and the connection between these accusations and the fathers rights group. One participant reported the following regarding this matter.

A lot of false allegations. Or true. Again, a lot of these guys that come forward and say "OK I was falsely accused for this, I was falsely accused for that"...a good percentage of guys....they were accused of something they did do, that won't admit it. There's a lot of people who don't admit to false or whatever....a person who's an alcoholic, they don't admit it until they go to AA meetings. Someone that's on drugs, they don't admit it until they go to drug meetings. Someone who's an abuser, they don't admit it. Because they're trying to hide something....there's a lot of similarities [in the group] and I think that for the most part some of those guys ought to just plainly outright admit that they were wrong, get it done with and over with, get on with their life and be a better person after that. And just stop lying to themselves.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In looking at the issues raised in these fathers' accounts of their fathering through and beyond separation and divorce, it is clear that several themes stand out. Among these themes are feelings of grief and loss over the changes in their relationships with their children, most particularly around the loss of contact or connection with their kids. Themes of "needing to focus on the time you have now" stand out for some, whereas "having my kids ripped away from me" is a more salient sentiment for others.

Grief and Anger

More than one father shed tears during the interview section that focused on fatherhood identity and relationships with their kids post divorce. In such moments, it was clear that the interview had crossed over into the more intimate territory of these men's lived experiences. For some, these tears apparently connected to a sense of having lost a vision of themselves as fathers, a hope for what their future connection with their kids might be.¹¹ For other fathers who described their grief over lost connection with their kids, the image seemed to focus more on the idea that they might no longer get credit for all they have done for their sons. This seemed to apply in situations where fathers were more experienced and had older children, a larger storehouse of fathering identity from which to draw in making meaning about their changing relationships with their children.

As the interviews progressed, there were some fathers for whom the reported experience of grief and loss shifted toward expressions of anger, bitterness or resentment.

¹¹ One can only wonder at times like this about the degree to which a father's vision of himself contains the hope of "doing it differently than how my own father did fathering for me."

Most often this was expressed toward their ex-spouses, but then often from there it was only a brief distance to their anger at the court system. For these fathers, the window of vulnerability on their emotional pain would open and close quickly in the interviews....a moment of sitting with the pain of the loss....followed by the shift to seeking accountability in their surrounding environment. For some fathers, the shift from a “not knowing” or almost bewildered location of “how did this happen to me, how did I lose my kids, my former identity as a father?” to a place of beginning to wonder about and even assign blame to the influence of their ex-spouses seemed palpable in the interview.

Relational and Cultural Challenges

Divorce appears for all intensive purposes (reflected both in the literature and in this study) to take a highlighter pen and select out the areas that fathers traditionally already feel most vulnerable with respect to their kids, particularly areas of emotional connection and time spent in connection. The fathers’ rights movement appears to have become a location of protest against the “injustice” disconnection between fathers and children. What does not seem to feature in this protest, is a broader critique (including self critique) of the social policies, social practices, and gender-woven assumptions about men, women, children, privilege, economy and psychology which set the stage for many of these relational disconnections experienced by men in relationships with their children, both pre and post divorce. Instead what we see is a movement protesting against the “rights” of women, and “bias” in the courts. These fathers gather to assert their pain at losing their connections with their children, and yet paradoxically render that assertion in symbolic and linguistic terms which are interwoven with the gender and power assumptions, and with “men’s ways of being” (Carey & White, 1996) that contribute to

the context which sets the very stage for the disconnection they protest. One could argue in a sense that these men are protesting the degree to which father-child disconnection is a taken for granted assumption in the dominant representations of fathering in our society. What the fathers rights discourse does not appear to include in its critique of the system, is the degree to which men and dominant men's ways of being, and in particular white European-descended men's dominant ways of being, set the stage for and continue to perpetrate the conditions under which so many men come to experience themselves as disconnected from others in the first place.

Legal Context

With respect to these fathers' protest specifically around the relationship between custody orders and accusations of domestic violence and child abuse, the following is an excerpt from the State of Massachusetts, Chapter 179 of the Acts of 1998:

Section 31A. In issuing any temporary or permanent custody order, the probate and family court shall consider evidence of past or present abuse toward a parent or child as a factor contrary to the best interest of the child. For the purposes of this section, "abuse" shall mean the occurrence of one or more of the following acts between a parent and the other parent or between a parent and child: (a) attempting to cause or causing bodily injury; or (b) placing another in reasonable fear of imminent bodily injury. "Serious incident of abuse" shall mean the occurrence of one or more of the following acts between a parent and the other parent or between a parent and child: (a) attempting to cause or causing serious bodily injury; (b) placing another in reasonable fear of imminent serious bodily injury; or (c) causing another to engage involuntarily in sexual relations by force, threat or duress. For purposes of this section, "bodily injury" and "serious bodily injury" shall have the same meanings as provided in section 13K of chapter 265.

A probate and family court's finding, by a preponderance of the evidence, that a pattern or serious incident of abuse has occurred shall create a rebuttable presumption that it is not in the best interests of the child to be placed in sole custody, shared legal custody or shared physical custody with the abusive parent. Such presumption may be rebutted by a preponderance of the evidence that such custody award is in the best interests of the child. For the purposes of this section,

"an abusive parent" shall mean a parent who has committed a pattern of abuse or a serious incident of abuse.

For the purposes of this section, the issuance of an order or orders under chapter 209A shall not in and of itself constitute a pattern or serious incident of abuse; nor shall an order or orders entered ex parte under said chapter 209A be admissible to show whether a pattern or serious incident of abuse has in fact occurred; provided, however, that an order or orders entered ex parte under said chapter 209A may be admissible for other purposes as the court may determine, other than showing whether a pattern or serious incident of abuse has in fact occurred; provided further, that the underlying facts upon which an order or orders under said chapter 209A was based may also form the basis for a finding by the probate and family court that a pattern or serious incident of abuse has occurred.

If the court finds that a pattern or serious incident of abuse has occurred and issues a temporary or permanent custody order, the court shall within 90 days enter written findings of fact as to the effects of the abuse on the child, which findings demonstrate that such order is in the furtherance of the child's best interests and provides for the safety and well-being of the child.

If ordering visitation to the abusive parent, the court shall provide for the safety and well-being of the child and the safety of the abused parent. The court may consider:

(a) ordering an exchange of the child to occur in a protected setting or in the presence of an appropriate third party;

(b) ordering visitation supervised by an appropriate third party, visitation center or agency;

(c) ordering the abusive parent to attend and complete, to the satisfaction of the court, a certified batterer's treatment program as a condition of visitation;

(d) ordering the abusive parent to abstain from possession or consumption of alcohol or controlled substances during the visitation and for 24 hours preceding visitation;

(e) ordering the abusive parent to pay the costs of supervised visitation;

(f) prohibiting overnight visitation;

(g) requiring a bond from the abusive parent for the return and safety of the child;

(h) ordering an investigation or appointment of a guardian ad litem or attorney for the child; and

(i) imposing any other condition that is deemed necessary to provide for the safety and well-being of the child and the safety of the abused parent.

Nothing in this section shall be construed to affect the right of the parties to a hearing under the rules of domestic relations procedure or to affect the discretion of the probate and family court in the conduct of such hearings.

This is relevant in the sense that there is a law which is currently in effect that speaks to some of the issues that these men talk about in their interviews. Not many of the men seem to be contesting the fact that this law exists, but rather are contesting the application of the law in their individual and collective situations or circumstances. When they express their anger toward judges, lawyers and “the system” it seems that they are protesting the ways in which this law has been applied to them, and the consequences associated with that application (namely a reduction in their involvement with their kids at this time in their lives, under their current circumstances). As such, they seem to be saying that the restraining orders filed against them are based on poor judgment by those in a position to enforce this law. Whether or not the accusations were true notwithstanding, this is a difficult position from which to argue, and is not unlike the position of a child who is contesting the interpretation of their behavior by a parent, in order to protest receiving a negative consequence for that behavior. The parent often if not always holds the reins and has the final say, with or without taking into account the input of the child.

Group Identity and Support

According to a number of the fathers in this study, the crisis which seemed to impel members of the group to seek support appears to be largely connected to the

allegations of domestic violence or child abuse and the reduction this poses in their child custody orders. It makes sense that so many of the fathers in their situation are faced with the dual crisis of a dramatic shift of identity as a parent, and a loss of social and political esteem in the eyes of the “legal public.” No wonder these fathers find relief in the political discourse and protest of the fathers’ rights movement, a movement that shifts the personal into the political for these men. For these participants, it seems possible that the fathers’ rights movement helps shift them back out of the margins of their own lives and back into the center of a dominant male discourse of parenting. To this degree, these men appear indeed to be subject to what Arendell refers to as a “masculinist discourse of divorce.” But more than that, they appear to be subject to a masculinist discourse of fathering and fatherhood, indeed of manhood in general.

What we don’t know, is the degree to which men who join the movement from a location of grief and loss end up getting “recruited” into the rhetoric of rights because it’s the only place that they’ve found a sense of connection with other men who are experiencing the same things that they are (i.e. “a club that you don’t want to be part of.”) A question to ask here for further research might be, “Are the average participants joining because they started from a position of wanting to overthrow the system? Or, is a willingness to begin expressing interest in that particular discourse the purchase price of a ticket that they’re willing to pay for having their experiences, and capacities as fathers affirmed and acknowledged in a post divorce social context that otherwise is not very validating and affirming of their experiences as men and fathers?” Further along this line of questioning would be “What about men’s dominant ways of being might predispose men who join the fathers’ rights group to experiencing a ‘natural fit’ between the rhetoric

of the movement and their particular life story?” It appears that divorce does place men at significant risk for marginalization in the intimate and connected domains of their lives, in a society where men are asked to make these sacrifices anyway (most often by themselves and other men) as a condition of their gender identity and the privilege that comes with it.¹² Just as it appears that divorce statistically places women at significant risk for marginalization in the economic domains of their lives, in ways that are all too resonant with the ways that women already experience a marginalization of their economic and professional identities.

Accountability and Gender

It is important to note that this study did not seek to determine whether these men did in fact perpetrate domestic violence or abuse. However, regardless of whether they did or didn't, it does seem important to note that people who perpetrate abuse will most often insist that their actions are not abusive, because to do otherwise would contradict the justification for taking these actions in the first place. Hitting is not seen as abuse to a parent who believes hitting is not abuse. Asking a perpetrator of abuse or violence to step outside of the realm of power and control which keeps abusive behavior from being seen and acknowledged in the first place (by themselves, by the social and political context), is a shift that men in the fathers rights discourse are not currently being called to investigate as a possibility, (again, regardless of whether or how many of the accusations reported were true or not.)

¹² It was striking that one father talked about setting limits with his workplace around his time with his kids. One can only wonder, “Why does it take divorce and a custody agreement for men to be willing to set limits on their work lives for the sake of preserving their relational lives?” If only this kind of limit setting were widely supported at the advent of fatherhood....would there be as many divorces?

There is a thin line between father's rights and men's rights. There is in turn a thin line between men's rights and dominant men's ways of being, which include both the use and obfuscation of power and control in personal, social and political contexts. For the fathers rights movement to be successful in reaching and recruiting these men (this group reports it is one of the most successful and largest groups in the state), it is imagined that they have had to intertwine these dominant discourses of power and control with the grief and pain experienced by fathers over the loss of connection in their relational lives; a loss of connection with paradoxically is a "real effect" of these very same dominant discourses of power and control. This equation is not made explicit in these groups (perhaps because it could invite further pain and shame for many participants). So instead of looking at the "man in the mirror" (Jackson, 1987), these men's questioning and protest is turned toward "the system."¹³

That said, it also seems quite important to note that these men reported being able to maintain a sense of their fathering outside of the dilemmas that they report around the divorce and accusations. It is assumed that structuring the questionnaire to focus first on men's experience of fathering and second on their experience of accusations of domestic violence and abuse, was an important sequence in helping these participants to know that their fathering was validated in connection with encouraging them to explore the more "controversial" issues in their lives. It would be therefore a recommendation that future studies which looked at the intersection between fathering and domestic violence allow for both regions to be expressed and richly described. The interviews

¹³ Some women's rights advocates would argue strongly that in fact these men are protesting not because of an attempt to make meaning of their post divorce experience, but rather as a very calculated and conscious attempt to hold on to and regain power and control that they have because of patriarchy (Pollock & Sutton, 1985).

with these men about their fathering produced rich descriptions of how they view fathering across this difficult life cycle transition in their lives. These men are dealing with some of the most challenging post divorce obstacles imaginable in terms of their relationships with their children and their sense of being socially supported in their identities as fathers. Themes of custody, relationship with ex-spouse, psychological adjustment and coping post divorce all appeared to be salient to both their personal narratives and the discourse of the fathers' rights group. Within this study, it seems that they have been able to richly describe their own challenges and joys of fathering, the ways that they have been affected by the divorce and accusations, and the ways that they have both participated in and been helped by the fathers' rights group to which they currently belong.

Next Steps

This study builds on the existing fathers rights movement literature through contributing additional voices of fathers from these groups. According to the literature review done for this study, this is one of the first qualitative studies of fathers rights groups conducted with fathers in the United States.¹⁴ Additionally, this is the first study found that explicitly addressed the relationship between membership in the fathers rights movement and allegations of domestic violence or child abuse. This component is relevant not only to the existing literature on fathers rights groups, but to the broader scope of literature on post divorce fathering in general, which by and large does not appear to include a significant representation of the issues surrounding domestic violence, child abuse, and post divorce fathering. Indeed, it would appear that much further

¹⁴ The only other qualitative study found that was specifically with fathers rights members is Bertoia's work (Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Bertoia, 1996).

research into the issue of domestic violence and child abuse is warranted given that there seems to be so little material regarding these issues built into the current discourses on fathering. It is hoped that the voices of these fathers will assist providers and policy makers to better understand some of the dilemmas associated with fathering in the post divorce context, and some of the issues which interface with the narratives of fathers who are involved in fathers rights work, and have a rights orientation to their fathering.

Conclusion

It is Friday, June 7th, 2002. On the television show “COPS” an emergency dispatcher receives a call from a distraught woman. She reports that her daughter’s husband has their son and has threatened to take the child’s life. The police are dispatched to meet the child’s mother near the house where the father has the child. Upon arrival, the police are shown a restraining order obtained by the child’s mother against her husband. The police inform her that threatening to harm someone is not a crime, and they can only deliver the restraining order and see what’s going on at the house. When they arrive and make contact with the father in question, the child is given back unharmed to his mother, who takes him to her car while the police talk with the child’s father. They serve him with the restraining order and explain its terms. The father begins crying, saying “I’ve been those kids’ primary caretaker ever since they grew up, and now she is threatening to take them away from me because she wants to go to be with another man. All I want is to have contact with my kids!” The police reiterate the terms of the restraining order and inform the man that he will be able to plead his case in a hearing pursuant to the terms of the order. The man agrees to this and agrees to depart the scene at the police’s request.

Aside from the exploitation factor of television shows such as this, we obtain a brief glance into what (presumably) is the unfolding drama of real lives immersed in the same issues that this study has sought to look closer at. Within this brief segment of video footage, we see conflicting images and discourses, and questions are raised including the following:

- What if the man really did make threats to harm his son?
- What if he poses a true danger to his family at times when he's in a state of upset?
- Will some fathers harm co-parents or even their own children when they perceive that their parenthood is threatened?
- Is it possible for a man to both love and pose a threat to those he cares about?
- Is it possible for a man to express anger without harming those he cares about?
- Is it possible for a man to both rage at his partner and children and cry over their potential loss in the same day? Can rage and grief become somehow connected for men in this way?

This in turn leads us to other possible questions, including the following:

- Where do these conflicting images and discourses leave us in terms of understanding how best to work with these same fathers in clinical, legal and social policy contexts?
- How do we join with these fathers in hearing and validating their stories of relationship, connection, care-taking, and parenting while also holding them accountable for the protection and safety of those they care for?
- Do violence and rage erase nurturing and care-taking?¹⁵
- How do we work with these fathers to help them bridge the gap between where the legal system sees them and how they want to and reportedly prefer to see themselves as parents?
- How can these fathers show the legal system, social service providers, and their former partners that they are safe as men and as parents?

¹⁵ The law illustrated earlier in this chapter suggests that legally, violence and threats to harm do in fact remand the rights of fathers to be in a fathering role, at least for a time.

Great passion bears great responsibility. It seems that these fathers have a tremendous passion for what their parenting identities represent to them, hence their involvement in this particular group. And yet their identities are up for grabs, or as they might argue their identities are “under siege” (Bertoia, 1996, p. 1). For a variety of reasons, the issue of fathering has been placed front and center for these men. They have illustrated through their narratives that when this piece is recognized and acknowledged, they seem to feel validated in terms of what they report as images of themselves in connected, caring and engaged fathering roles. As providers we have the option of turning our heads at these narratives, based on the allegations of violence and abuse in their lives, or finding a way to join with them. A former mentor of this author’s once illustrated a clinical practice for talking with people about threatening behavior. She said that in talking with a client who reports a threat to another’s safety, one might say something like, “I can talk with you about this, in order to understand what you mean about it and how you make sense of it, but I need you to know that talking about it doesn’t mean that I agree with it.” In a similar sense perhaps, these men have been invited to talk about their experience as fathers and their experience as accused perpetrators of violence and abuse. They have been invited to engage and connect with their preferred narratives of themselves as fathers. They have been invited to talk about the meanings they make of their experience around the allegations of violence and abuse in their lives. We have been given a brief window into their worlds, and the opportunity to take the stance of “respectful listening” without taking an “agreeing or disagreeing position” with respect to their views of the allegations. In a sense, this study has opened the door to another way of listening to the voices of these men, and hearing what they

have to say. There are parts of what they say that we might agree with, and parts that we might not agree with. But the personal, social, and political unpacking of their narratives will (this author believes) only occur if we make space for both / and. Both the potential that they can be loving caring fathers, and the potential that they can be and have been engaged in behaviors which have threatened or hurt others. Why not simply cast their fathering narratives aside, asserting that in losing their legal privileges as parents they also should forsake their preferred memories, experiences and intentions as men and as fathers? Why not? One reason is because they are men, most of them white, many of them angry, and they carry a great deal of social, political, and financial power as members of these privileged and dominant groups in our society. It is unlikely that they will be marginalized as a social group in this society by virtue of these issues alone. In finding a way to listen to their voices as fathers and as beings with the potential for connection and relationship, we may be inviting them into a dialogue which (as long as it maintains standards of accountability to the women and children involved), could potentially be a fruitful and important discussion. But again, it needs to be “both / and,” in terms of both relational narrative and personal and social and political accountability, and these fathers perhaps would need to know that “both / and” needed to be part of the terms and conditions of such dialogues about their concerns.

This study effectively undertook to use a “both / and” approach to open space and thicken the discourse further around this population of divorced fathers. By paying attention to the social, legal, and political representations and implications of these men’s narratives, it seems that we might better enable ourselves as providers to more fully engage them at the subjective level. What emerges is a rich and conflicting discourse,

which makes it difficult to fully “know the whole story” about these participants. It does not seem possible to simply “put them in a box” or “file them away” or to even fully grasp the big picture of their discourse as a group at this time. There is a tension created between their accounts of connected and engaged fathering, their personal, social and political accounts as men who’ve been accused of harming others, who feel they’ve been wronged, and as representatives of a socially privileged group constituting a political movement.

It seems important to be able to hold these apparent contradictions, and the creative tension amidst these pieces if we are to move forward in continuing our work with this group of men. And it seems equally if not more important that other men in particular become more involved in the work of both listening to these fathers and helping them account for where they are in terms of their narratives, their perspectives, their relationships, actions, and the implications of all of these in their own experiences, and the experiences of past, current and prospective future partners, and children.

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Appendix A

Initial Interview Guide (Did not include questions about child support and economic situations, used for first two interviews)

Demographic Information

1. Year of Birth
2. Race / Ethnicity
3. Ex-Spouse's Year of Birth
4. Ex-Spouse's Race / Ethnicity
5. Sex and Birth Year of Each Child
6. Can you tell me a little about the circumstances around your separation from your ex-wife?
7. Can you tell me what the visitation and custody arrangement is?
 - a. When first went to court for custody
 - b. Initial custody order
 - c. Current custody order

Relationship with Children / Fathering Identity

8. What do you enjoy most about being a father?
9. What is the most difficult thing about being a father?
10. Briefly describe your relationship with your kids before you got divorced
11. Briefly describe your relationship with your kids now
12. What concerns you most about your relationship with your kids (now)?
13. What concerns you most about your relationship with them in the future?
14. What do you hope most for the future of your relationship with them?
15. What matters to you most about your kids?
16. What do you think your kids get from you that they value the most?
17. What are some of the influences on your parenting?
 - i. Your own childhood / relationship with your parents
 - ii. Your hopes and dreams for your kids' futures
 - iii. Your observations or advice from others around you
18. How has the divorce affected your kids' relationships with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc?
19. What kind of support are you getting from family and friends (for being a father)?
20. How has this changed since before the divorce?
21. Tell me about your strengths as a father
22. Tell me about areas you might want to improve yourself in as a father

Bridge to Talking about Relationship with Ex Wife

23. How has the divorce changed your attitude and involvement as a father?
24. Can you describe your approach when it comes to rules and discipline?
25. How is this different from or similar to your ex wife?
26. How do you and your ex wife make decisions about important issues (school, friends, medical, mental health issues, etc) affecting your children?

Accusations of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

27. Has your ex-wife ever *accused* you of spousal abuse?

If Yes,

- a. Were these accusations before or after you and your wife separated?
- b. Can you describe your experience of this? What you thought, felt about it, etc.
- c. Do you feel that these accusations were unjust or unfair?
- d. If these accusations were made after you separated, did they play a role in how custody and visitation were determined in the family courts?
- e. What impact have these accusations had on your relationship with your children? Did you talk about it with your kids, and how did they respond?

28. Did your ex-wife ever take out a restraining order against you?

If Yes,

- a. Can you describe your experience of this? What you thought, felt about it, etc.
- b. Did you ever violate a restraining order? If so, how?
- c. Have you ever been arrested or done jail time for violating the restraining order?

29. Has your ex-wife ever *accused* you of child physical or sexual abuse?

If Yes,

- a. Were the accusations before or after you and your ex separated?
- b. Can you describe your experience of this? What you thought, felt about it, etc.
- c. If these accusations were made after you separated, did they play a role in how custody and visitation were determined in the family courts?
- d. What impact did these accusations have on your relationship with you children? Did you talk about it with them and how did they respond?

30. Did your ex ever file a 51-A against you?

- a. If so, how did that affect your views of yourself as a parent?
- b. If so, have you ever had the kids taken from you by DSS, or been arrested or done jail time for abuse?
- c. If yes to any of these, how has this affected your current relationship with your children?

31. Have you ever accused your ex-wife of spousal abuse?

If Yes,

- a. Have you ever taken out a restraining order against her?
- b. If yes, did she ever violate a restraining order between you?
- c. Did she ever have to do jail time for violating the restraining order?

32. Have you ever accused your ex-wife of child physical or sexual abuse?

- a. If yes, was there ever a 51A or 51B taken out against her due to your report?
- b. If so, did she ever have the kids removed by DSS or did she ever have to do jail time around the reported abuse?

- c. If so, how has this affected your relationship with your kids?
- 33. What advice would you give another father who is accused of partner abuse?
- 34. What advice would you give another father who is accused of child physical or sexual abuse?

Father's Rights Group Questions:

- 35. How did you first find out about the fathers' rights organization?
- 36. In what ways are you currently involved?
- 37. What has been most helpful to you in your involvement with the FRO?
- 38. What has not been helpful, (if anything) in your involvement with the FRO?
- 39. Have things gotten better or worse for you as a father since you got involved in the FRO?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, how?
- 40. What do you identify with most when you hear other fathers in the FRO tell their stories?
- 41. What support, if any, have the fathers' rights groups given you around the accusation(s) of abuse and your case in the family courts?
 - a. What was most helpful about this support?
 - b. What was least helpful (if anything)?

Thank you for your time!

Appendix B

Initial Email / Contact Message to Fathers Rights Groups

Hi, my name is Stephen Bradley and I am a Smith College Social Work student. I am doing a thesis project which involves interviewing divorced fathers who are involved in fathers rights work, and who at some point have been accused by their ex-spouse of domestic violence or child abuse. I am interested in how these fathers maintain connection with their kids despite the challenges they face. I hope that this project will provide an opportunity for divorced fathers to talk about their experiences, and to have their stories heard by a wider audience.

I am currently recruiting participants for this study, and would like to attend your meeting at _____ on _____, in order to present the project and give people my contact information. I would need approximately 10-15 minutes to do a brief presentation on the project, following which I could either stay for the whole meeting, or leave early, depending on the comfort level of your members.

The interview process would consist of meeting with interested participants individually for an hour and a half to two hours and discussing their experiences as fathers both pre and post-divorce. It is my hope that participants will benefit by having an opportunity to talk about their experiences, and to tell their stories in their own voices in a situation where they will be listened to. Additionally, I hope that participants will benefit from knowing that they are furthering knowledge around issues facing divorced fathers.

All identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the project. Interviews will be audio-taped and written up by me without reference to identifying information, in order to maintain confidentiality for all participants. At the end of the interview I will make a list of counseling resources available to participants in the event that they want additional resources for talking about their divorce experiences.

I look forward to hearing further from you about your meeting _____, and to meeting with you then. Please feel free to contact me via email or at (413) 522-0838. Thank you.

Appendix C

Presentation at meeting

Hi, my name is Stephen Bradley and I am a Smith College Social Work student. I am currently doing a thesis project with divorced fathers who are involved in fathers rights groups, and who at some point have been accused by their ex-spouse of domestic violence or child abuse. I am interested in how these fathers maintain connections with their kids despite these obstacles. I hope that this project will provide an opportunity for divorced fathers to talk about their experiences, and to have their stories heard.

I am currently recruiting participants for this study. The interview process would consist of meeting with interested participants individually for an hour and a half to two hours and discussing their experiences as fathers both pre and post-divorce. It is my hope that participants will benefit by having an opportunity to talk about their experiences, and to tell their stories in their own voices in a situation where they will be listened to. Additionally, I hope that participants will benefit from knowing that they are furthering knowledge around issues facing divorced fathers.

All identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the project. Interviews will be audio-taped and written up by me without reference to identifying information, in order to maintain confidentiality for all participants. At the end of the interview I will make a list of counseling resources available to participants in the event that they want additional resources for talking about their divorce experiences.

It is my hope that the results of this project will further extend the voices of divorced fathers in public and academic settings, and that participants will have a positive experience talking about their situations in an atmosphere where they will be listened to respectfully. I look forward to hearing further from those of you who are interested in participating in this study, and can be contacted in the following ways [hand out flyer / card with my contact information on it].

Thank you for your time.

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

I am conducting a study about the experience of separated and divorced fathers who are involved in Father's Rights Organizations, and have been accused of spouse or child abuse. Your perspective as a separated or divorced father is important and valuable to the further development of research in this field. This study is being conducted as a partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work and for future presentation and publication on this topic.

You are being asked to participate as a separated or divorced father who is a participant in Fathers' Rights group(s) in this geographic area, and as a father who has at some time been accused of spouse or child abuse. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to sit for an interview with me, which will take approximately an hour and a half to two hours of your time. The interview will include questions about you as a father since the time of your separation and / or divorce. I will be particularly interested in concerns which are common to fathers involved in Fathers' Rights Groups, and separated and divorced fathers in general. The interview is not meant to invade your privacy, but to gain a better sense of your experience and struggles as a father.

The interview will be audio tape recorded, and then transcribed by me or a professional or volunteer transcriber for the purposes of data analysis (identifying and discussing important themes from the interview). In the event that a transcriber other than myself is used, they will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to having access to tapes or transcripts of the interview. Privacy will be kept protected by assigning a numeric code to each participant's tape and by removing all names and locations from the transcripts. Information will be reported in scientific papers and publications with some quotations that will not be linked to identifying information about you or any participant. Tapes will be transcribed and then destroyed. Transcripts will be kept confidential under lock and key by the researcher for a minimum of three years, consistent with Federal regulations. After three years they will either continue to be kept under lock and key or destroyed.

The only instance where I would have to disclose information from our interview to others is if you inform me of instances of child or elder abuse, in which case I would have to inform DSS as a mandated reporter.

It is my hope that this study will help social workers, counselors, and family advocates understand the unique issues faced by fathers following separation and divorce, particularly those who have been accused of partner or child abuse, and who are involved in Fathers Rights Organizations. There will be no financial benefits from participating in this study. However, it will be an opportunity for you to tell your story in a setting where you will be listened to, and to help people who are interested in understanding your experience as a separated or divorced father. I hope that participation in this study will

help other separated and divorced fathers who are dealing with similar concerns to those you have faced.

During this study, the interview may bring up memories or feelings which are painful or stressful. If this happens, we can take a time out to refocus or consider other questions, skip certain questions or topic areas, or conclude the interview if it becomes too stressful. I will also provide contact information for local counselors and support groups in case you think that would be helpful following talking about some of the challenges of post divorce fathering (please see the back of this form for that information).

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time: before, during, or after the interview. You may choose to not answer any questions, without repercussions of any kind. However, the final date for withdrawal is May 1, 2002 when the report will be written.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION; THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant

Date

**IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS
OR WISH TO WITHDRAW YOUR CONSENT,
PLEASE CONTACT
Stephen Bradley
Box 31 Lilly Hall
Smith College
Northampton, MA 01060
(413) 522-0838**

Please keep this copy for your own records so you can contact me later or use the referral numbers. Thank you!

Appendix E

Modified Interview Guide (Added questions 7, 8 to address child support and economic situation. Used for last 8 interviews).

Demographic Information

42. Year of Birth
43. Race / Ethnicity
44. Ex-Spouse's Year of Birth
45. Ex-Spouse's Race / Ethnicity
46. Sex and Birth Year of Each Child
47. Can you tell me a little about the circumstances around your separation from your ex-wife?
 - a. Year of separation
48. Can you tell me what the current child support arrangement is?
49. Can you tell me a little bit about how your economic situation has changed pre and post divorce?
50. Can you tell me what the visitation and custody arrangement is?
 - a. When first went to court for custody
 - b. Initial custody order
 - c. Current custody order

Relationship with Children / Fathering Identity

51. What do you enjoy most about being a father?
52. What is the most difficult thing about being a father?
53. Briefly describe your relationship with your kids before you got divorced
54. Briefly describe your relationship with your kids now
55. What concerns you most about your relationship with your kids (now)?
56. What concerns you most about your relationship with them in the future?
57. What do you hope most for the future of your relationship with them?
58. What matters to you most about your kids?
59. What do you think your kids get from you that they value the most?
60. What are some of the influences on your parenting?
 - i. Your own childhood / relationship with your parents
 - ii. Your hopes and dreams for your kids' futures
 - iii. Your observations or advice from others around you
61. How has the divorce affected your kids' relationships with their grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc?
62. What kind of support are you getting from family and friends (for being a father)?
63. How has this changed since before the divorce?
64. Tell me about your strengths as a father
65. Tell me about areas you might want to improve yourself in as a father

Bridge to Talking about Relationship with Ex Wife

66. How has the divorce changed your attitude and involvement as a father?
67. Can you describe your approach when it comes to rules and discipline?
68. How is this different from or similar to your ex wife?
69. How do you and your ex wife make decisions about important issues (school, friends, medical, mental health issues, etc) affecting your children?

Accusations of Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

70. Has your ex-wife ever *accused* you of spousal abuse?

If Yes,

- f. Were these accusations before or after you and your wife separated?
- g. Can you describe your experience of this? What you thought, felt about it, etc.
- h. Do you feel that these accusations were unjust or unfair?
- i. If these accusations were made after you separated, did they play a role in how custody and visitation were determined in the family courts?
- j. What impact have these accusations had on your relationship with your children? Did you talk about it with your kids, and how did they respond?

71. Did your ex-wife ever take out a restraining order against you?

If Yes,

- a. Can you describe your experience of this? What you thought, felt about it, etc.
- b. Did you ever violate a restraining order? If so, how?
- c. Have you ever been arrested or done jail time for violating the restraining order?

72. Has your ex-wife ever *accused* you of child physical or sexual abuse?

If Yes,

- a. Were the accusations before or after you and your ex separated?
- b. Can you describe your experience of this? What you thought, felt about it, etc.
- c. If these accusations were made after you separated, did they play a role in how custody and visitation were determined in the family courts?
- d. What impact did these accusations have on your relationship with you children? Did you talk about it with them and how did they respond?

73. Did your ex ever file a 51-A against you?

- a. If so, how did that affect your views of yourself as a parent?
- b. If so, have you ever had the kids taken from you by DSS, or been arrested or done jail time for abuse?
- c. If yes to any of these, how has this affected your current relationship with your children?

74. Have you ever accused your ex-wife of spousal abuse?

If Yes,

- a. Have you ever taken out a restraining order against her?

- b. If yes, did she ever violate a restraining order between you?
 - c. Did she ever have to do jail time for violating the restraining order?
75. Have you ever accused your ex-wife of child physical or sexual abuse?
- a. If yes, was there ever a 51A or 51B taken out against her due to your report?
 - b. If so, did she ever have the kids removed by DSS or did she ever have to do jail time around the reported abuse?
 - c. If so, how has this affected your relationship with your kids?
76. What advice would you give another father who is accused of partner abuse?
77. What advice would you give another father who is accused of child physical or sexual abuse?

Father's Rights Movement Questions:

78. How did you first find out about the fathers' rights organization?
79. In what ways are you currently involved?
80. What has been most helpful to you in your involvement with the FRO?
81. What has not been helpful, (if anything) in your involvement with the FRO?
82. Have things gotten better or worse for you as a father since you got involved in the FRO?
- a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, how?
83. What do you identify with most when you hear other fathers in the FRO tell their stories?
84. What support, if any, have the fathers' rights groups given you around the accusation(s) of abuse and your case in the family courts?
- a. What was most helpful about this support?
 - b. What was least helpful (if anything)?

Thank you for your time!

Appendix F

Transcriber's Assurance Of Research Confidentiality

Father's Rights Group Participants' Narratives of Their Fatherhood **Stephen Bradley MSW Thesis Project for Smith College School for Social Work**

Box 31 Lilly Hall, Smith College Northampton, MA 01060 (413) 522-0838

STATEMENT OF POLICY:

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected. This principal holds whether or not any specific guarantee of confidentiality was given by respondents (i.e. fathers who participate in the project) at the time of the interview. When guarantees have been given, they may impose additional requirements which are to be adhered to strictly.

PROCEDURES FOR MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY:

1. All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
2. A volunteer, or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. Depending on the study, the organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested may also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.

It is incumbent on volunteers and professional transcribers to treat information from and about research as privileged information, to be aware of what is confidential in regard to specific studies on which they work or about which they have knowledge, and to preserve the confidentiality of this information. Types of situations where confidentiality can often be compromised include conversations with friends and relatives, conversations with professional colleagues outside the project team, conversations with reporters and the media, and in the use of consultants for computer programs and data analysis.

3. Unless specifically instructed otherwise, a volunteer or professional transcriber upon encountering a respondent or information pertaining to a respondent that s/he knows personally, shall not disclose any knowledge of the respondent or any information pertaining to the respondent's testimony or his participation in this thesis project. In

other words, volunteer and professional transcribers should not reveal any information or knowledge about or pertaining to a respondent's participation in this project.

4. Data containing personal identifiers shall be kept in a locked container or a locked room when not being used each working day in routine activities. Reasonable caution shall be exercised in limiting access to data to only those persons who are working on this thesis project and who have been instructed in the applicable confidentiality requirements for the project.

5. The researcher for this project, Stephen Bradley shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer and professional transcribers involved in handling data are instructed in these procedures, have signed this pledge, and comply with these procedures throughout the duration of the project. At the end of the project, Stephen Bradley shall arrange for proper storage or disposition of data, in accordance with federal guidelines and Human Subjects Review Committee policies at the Smith College School for Social Work.

7. Stephen Bradley must ensure that procedures are established in this study to inform each respondent of the authority for the study, the purpose and use of the study, the voluntary nature of the study (where applicable), and the effects on the respondents, if any, of not responding.

PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I have carefully read and will cooperate fully with the above procedures. I will maintain the confidentiality of confidential information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Stephen Bradley for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and constitutes a breach of personal and professional ethics, and that the rights of participants in this study will be protected through this pledge. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

Signature

Date

Stephen Bradley

Date

