

Change in non-resident fathers' construction of their role

PS4
International Conference on Children and Divorce
Norwich, July 2006

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Change in non-resident fathers' construction of their role

Non-resident fatherhood, family change
& the interparental relationship

Personal construct psychology and
separated parenting

Qualitative study of Scottish separated
fathers using PCP



Co-parental role after separation

Key protective factors for children following divorce
are:

- the quality of their relationship with their non-resident parent
- the quality of the **interparental** relationship
(Burghes et al 1997; Kelly 2000; Dunn & Deater-Deckard 2001)



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But non-resident fathers describe:

- Coping with an unfamiliar & complex new role
- Feeling disempowered or actively discouraged
- Demands of remaining flexible.
(Simpson et al 1996; Bradshaw et al 1999; Trinder et al 2002)



Co-parental role after separation

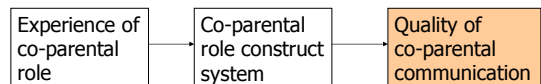
In a separated family:

- Change is experienced more regularly and systematically (Smart & Neale 1999)
- Family beliefs/constructs are less easy for all members to hold in common
- Even where parents have managed to get contact to work, the rate of family change they experience may destabilise arrangements, leading to conflict

How do non-resident fathers who do maintain contact cope with change?



Co-parenting & personal construct theory



The role of co-parent is distinct from the role of a parent within a non-separated family, requiring a unique system of constructs .

Conflict between separated parents may arise when a co-parental role system faces the recurring threat of transition.



Conflict as hostility

Hostility

"the attempt to extort validation evidence in favour of a type of social prediction which has already been recognised as a failure" (Kelly, 1970)

Conflict

Family events precipitate transition, requiring changes to the construct system.

If an construct central to the father's co-parental role system becomes redundant following such change he may still justify its use to himself, generating conflict.



Study

- 3 waves of grid interviews over 1 year with separated, non-resident fathers
- 17 participants from Glasgow area, separated 2.5 -12 years; had seen children in month prior to 1st interview
- Demographic info gathered; interviewed briefly about how things were going (better, same, worse) & any major events or disputes over contact
- Asked to compare situations common to separated families



Elements - common situations

Talking to your child about

- a school or health issue relating to them
- how they have spent the previous week at their mother's house
- how they want to spend their next contact time with you
- something they want that is beyond your resources

Talking to their mother about

- whether a toy, game or activity is suitable
- a temporary change that she has requested to the contact arrangements
- a temporary change that you have requested to the contact arrangements
- a school or health issue relating to your child

Construct types

Participation & control (28.74%)

'beyond my control/able to affect the outcome'

Significance & import (27.32%)

'will make a difference in 20 years/will not make a difference in 20 years'

Feelings (23.99%)

'on guard/relaxed'

Conflict & disagreement (13.78%)

'may cause arguments/don't have a problem'

Other contrasts: *not really a choice, apathy*



Analysis of element ratings on constructs

Participants rated each family situation from 1-7 on each construct they supplied e.g.:

Co-operative (1)

MS	MT	CP	CN	CR	MCS	MCY	CS
3	2	2	1	2	7	5	1

 My hackles rise (7)

50 resulting interview matrices (grids)

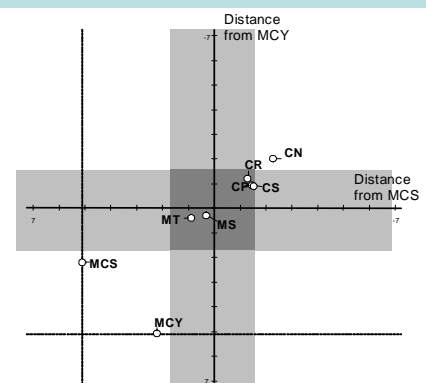
Perceived similarity between situations assessed using inter-element distance measure (Walter *et al* 2002; Hartmann 1992)



Sample plot of distances from MCS & MCY

MCS – mother requests a changed arrangement

MCY – you request a changed arrangement



Perceptions of parity between parents

When overall contact negotiations were ongoing (25 interviews), MCS & MCY were not similar:

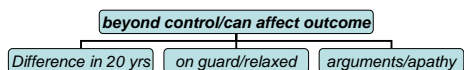
- father's requests were *difficult, antagonistic, a no-no* etc.
- mother's were *automatic, everyday, basic* etc.

Perceptions of parity between parents

Where contact was agreed MCS & MCY were seen as similar:

- where the father was rarely in touch (9 interviews), either request left him *no parental role to play* or *no choice*
- where the father communicated frequently (15 interviews), either request could be *routine, not spoken about*, or *uncomfortable, unsure* or *stressful*

Analysis of element ratings on constructs



Constructs giving a higher value of Somer's D when treated as independent variable are predictive; most important construct predicts most others in a system (Bell, 2004)



Family events & most important constructs

When there had been a significant family event and the important construct **changed**, things went **better** or **the same** (16 interviews)

e.g. New important construct:
Fine, don't get angry/really angry

... there's tension and atmosphere. But because I keep my calm, I can talk to her and then that's the end of the situation



Family events & most important constructs

When there had been a significant family event and an important construct was **retained**, things **got worse** (5 interviews)

e.g. Retained important construct:
I don't like this/would like to know about this

'saw red' ... 'I got dog's abuse'



Family events & most important constructs

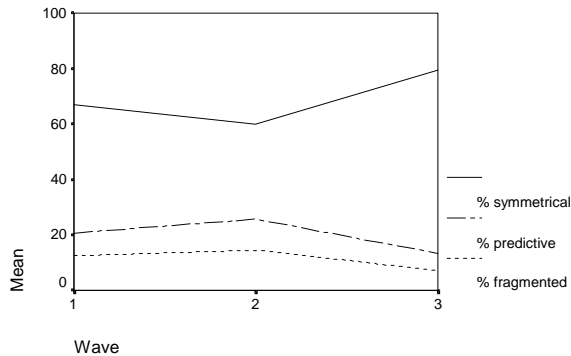
Finally, at some interviews things had got worse, with fathers seeing little or nothing of their family and showing little difference between any of their constructs (6 interviews)

Co-parental role was becoming less central to them.



CONSTRUCT RELATIONSHIP TYPES -

Proportions over 3 waves



Conclusions

Fathers perceived parity in the flexibility of contact arrangements when contact schedule was agreed and they communicated with the mother

Significant family events could be navigated where co-parental constructs were flexible or adaptable; otherwise things got worse

But - one way for NRFs to cope with persistent change may be to construe that role as less central



Implications

Understanding of separated parenthood as a changing role is important; parenting agreements may achieve consensus, but should be seen as contingent

Interventions for separated parents, particularly if non-resident, may be appropriate at any post-separation stage of a child's upbringing

PCP approach offers a useful basis for interventions



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