

Change in non-resident separated fathers' construction of their role

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Concern with the effects of divorce or separation on children has highlighted the role of non-resident parents, usually fathers (Wilson, in press). Key protective factors for children following divorce are the quality of their relationship with their non-resident parent and the quality of the inter-parental relationship, particularly in terms of levels of communication and conflict (e.g. Burghes et al 1997; Dunn & Deater-Deckard 2001). But non-resident fathers in qualitative studies have described coping with an unfamiliar and complex new role; feeling disempowered or actively discouraged, and have pointed to the demands of remaining flexible (Simpson et al 1996; Bradshaw et al 1999; Trinder et al 2002). The quality of any relationship in a separated family is contingent upon the particularly changing and diverse circumstances for separated families (Smart & Neale, 1999). Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) offers a novel and useful approach to understanding such fathers' distinct and changing conceptions of their paternal role; it implies that successful interaction depends on developing ideas of parenthood appropriate to new family situations, and adapting those ideas in response to change.

17 separated Scottish fathers were recruited through family service organisations, municipal nurseries, publicity; each had one or two non-resident children, aged between 3 and 15 years, and had typically been separated for a few years following a long relationship, with weekly contact visits at the start of the study. These participants each completed three repertory grid interviews over a year. For this, they supplied their own constructs (bipolar contrasts in their own words) to distinguish recognisable family situations, and then completed a matrix of ratings for each situation on each construct. Idiographic analysis of each grid included examination of the content of construct labels, Walter et al's (2002) index for similarity of element scores, and values of Somer's D for each pair of constructs as an indicator of relative importance (Bell, 2004).

Non-resident fathers' perceptions of parity in their parental interaction depended on whether the contact schedule was consensual, and whether they saw the other parent frequently. Requests for a temporary change to contact arrangements (e.g. because of a hospital appointment, or a holiday) from the participant or his child's mother were two of the co-parental situations in the interviews. Participants who were actively trying to increase the amount of contact time they had construed themselves as being less able than the mother to request such a change without creating conflict. However, those who assented to the prevailing contact schedule saw their own request in the same way as the mother's. This perceived similarity might be positive or negative, depending how often parents were in touch: with frequent communication the situations might both be routine, while infrequent

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communicators viewed all requests as situations where they would be marginalised. Flexibility in parental co-operation over contact is unlikely unless both co-parents perceive it as reciprocal. Yet at any one time most of these co-parenting fathers were unable to see such reciprocity as available to them.

Personal Construct Theory states that hostility can be generated by someone not relinquishing an important construct (one that predicts many others) when faced with significant change (Kelly, 1970). Data from interviews at which participants reported that a major family event had recently taken place conformed to this model: where participants had retained an important construct they considered that things had got worse for them, while those with a new important construct described things as having stayed the same or got better. For example, one father experiencing conflict continued to view situations primarily in terms of whether or not he had to be 'wary' of his ex-wife seeking to gain advantage; this was despite the recent breakup of her new relationship. In contrast, another father changed from predominantly seeing family situations in terms of whether he was 'in power' or 'groveling', to anticipating whether or not there could be agreement, and felt his situation had improved; this followed the finalisation of his divorce.

Adaptation in co-parental thinking therefore appears to offer a way of avoiding the development of hostility, or conflict. However, constructs of being a co-parent may have become more interchangeable as that role became less accessible or important to participants. Fathers who found themselves seeing less and less of their families tended to supply constructs which were strongly associated without any showing more importance than another, according to the index proposed by Bell (2004). In fact, over the year of the study, mean contact time lowered and the proportion of such symmetrical construct relationships over all interviews increased. This suggests that many fathers became less able to express varied ideas about co-parenting as their family participation dwindled. In the fluid system of a separated family, adhering more strongly to a role other than that of co-parent (e.g. parent with new partner) or attaching less importance to being a co-parent may both represent more accessible ways of coping with the persistent demands of separated family change for some non-resident fathers.

These findings highlight the importance of considering in the long term how non-resident separated fathers enact their relationships with child and mother. Being a co-parent might mean continually learning to act in new ways within the family, with developing ideas of what is important as a parent. If non-resident fathers can find a way to anticipate change in family relationships, and in particular to recognise that their child's agency may bring about change, then their paternal relationships can flourish; if they can view their role as something that may need to be transformed, they may be less likely to distance themselves from that role in the face of successive family crises, and to sustain their fathering through contact in the long term. Finally, the process of self-reflection at the heart of the PCP approach offers a useful resource for services seeking to engage with non-resident fathers, or to facilitate separated families in coping with change.

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