Fathers & DIVORCE

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For Rob

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PART I

Divorce in Contemporary America

1

MEN AND DIVORCE
Unanswered Questions

Men are relatively neglected in divorce research. A dearth of information on men's perceptions and actions persists even though divorce research increased dramatically over the past several decades, as the divorce rate remained strikingly high. This neglect of men, and particularly of divorced fathers, is not unique but is characteristic of fathers and fathering more generally. For example, Furstenberg (1988) observed: "Evidence on fatherhood, though far more abundant now than a few years ago, is still sparse" (p. 194; see also LaRossa 1988; Lewis and Salt 1986; Lamb 1987, 1986).[1] Much of what is known about divorced fathers comes from interviews with custodial mothers (e.g., Arendell 1986; Kurz 1995; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox 1976, 1978, 1982) and survey research, including the National Survey of Children (Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison 1987; Furstenberg and Nord 1985; Furstenberg, Nord, and Zill 1983), the National Survey of the High School Class of 1972 (Teachman 1991a, 1991b), the National Survey of Child Health (Zill 1988), and the National Survey of Families and Households (Seltzer, Schaeffer, and Charng 1989; Seltzer and Bianchi 1988; Seltzer 1991a, 1991b). Neither mothers' reports nor survey findings, however, give expression to fathers' views or experiences.

Men are not mere understudies in the divorce dramas being played out nationally, as might be suggested by the limited research attention given them. Rather, they are key players in postdivorce families, whatever the nature of

their actions and level of parental involvement. The ways in which men draw from the culture, social institutions, and their personal histories and construct and direct their actions in the changed family tell us much about their attitudes, expectations, and relationships. Moreover, men's perceptions on and behaviors in divorce suggest a partial profile of contemporary American family life.

This Study

I previously had interviewed and written about divorced mothers (Arendell 1986, 1987). I also was interested in men's perspectives on and experiences in the family, an interest that was further piqued by the college and university courses I was teaching and by the various sociocultural and political developments regarding the family and relationships between men and women. Therefore, in the early 1990s I set out to study divorced men directly. Wanting to hear from men in their own words about their family and marital dissolution experiences, I interviewed 75 divorced fathers living in various parts of New York state. In my efforts to better situate the men's reports in the current social and legal context, I also spoke with numerous family attorneys, mediators, and mental health workers involved professionally with divorced families. This, then, is an exploratory study of fathers and divorce: It is an investigation of how 75 divorced men viewed and managed their situations and relationships, particularly the former spousal and parental ones, and handled their emotional lives and identities. Focused primarily on the accounts and actions of a small number of divorced fathers, the study is also about the changing American family. So, too, it is about gender—the sociocultural constructs and expectations of masculinity and femininity, assigned to the respective biological identities of male and female—and, more specifically, about the transitions in and challenges to gender roles, definitions, and identities. This book, then, confronts an array of contemporary issues and trends.

THE PARTICIPANTS

All participants in the study were volunteers who responded to notices placed in newsletters, magazines, and newspapers or to referrals from men who were interviewed. The sample, therefore, is one of convenience, recruited through a modified snowball technique (Rubin 1976; Wiseman 1979; Morse 1992). Because the sample is self-selected and, therefore, nonrepresentative, generalizations can be made only sparingly and with caution (Babbee 1992). McCracken (1988) addressed the matter of a lack of generalizability from interview data: "The issue is not one of generalizability. It is that of access.

The purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of, people share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world" (p. 17).[2] I try to exercise caution throughout the text not to generalize from these particular men's experiences to all divorced fathers even though most participants freely extrapolated from their own situations and perspectives, positing their experiences as ones universal to divorced fathers. Although often generalizing, over two thirds of the respondents also said at some point, usually in the initial contact with me when they indicated a willingness to participate in the study, and in varying ways, "Boy, do I have a story to tell you. This is one you haven't heard before." Most saw in their situations, then, both every man's and no other man's divorce, only theirs.

The respondents ranged in age from 23 to 59 years, with the median age being 38. Sixty-four interviewees were white, three were black, four Hispanic, two Asian American, and two Native American. Two respondents were northern European immigrants who had married and divorced in the United States as naturalized citizens. Additionally, five men stressed that their ethnic identity was Italian (Italian American) and another two that theirs was Greek (Greek American).

Nearly half of the respondents had some college education, with over one-third having completed college and approximately one-sixth having earned a graduate or professional degree. The group was largely middle class but included some stably employed working-class men. Occupationally, one-third of the employed participants worked in blue-collar and two-thirds in white-collar positions. Six men were unemployed at the time of the interview, three by choice.

The length of time the respondents had been divorced or legally separated ranged from 2 to 10 years; the median time since divorcing, *postdivorce* time, was 4¾ years. Only men divorced more than 2 years were included in the study. Called selective sampling (Schatzman and Strauss 1973), this strategy was used because persons whose divorces are more recent may have uniquely different perspectives than those divorced for longer periods: The first several years following a marital separation are especially tumultuous, and it takes a year or more for most divorcing persons to regain equilibrium and stability in their lives (Hetherington 1987; Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington 1990).[3]

At the time they were interviewed, 18 men were remarried, 5 were living with a woman in a marital-like relationship, and the others were unmarried. Nationally, the remarriage rate is declining: "Based on 1985 patterns, Norton and Moorman (1987) predicted that only seventy percent of currently divorced men and women will eventually remarry" (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington 1990, p. 109). Nevertheless, the proportion of participants who