Little is known about children’s perceptions of their parents’ divorce or how children construct meaning around the divorce and their subsequent relationships with their parents. The focus of this study was to learn about the experiences and the meanings young adults had constructed about the divorce process and their relationships with their fathers in the years after the divorce. The findings revealed a broad spectrum of experiences and several key issues that gave meaning to both the disengagement and the reengagement with their fathers. Loss, trust, acceptance, availability, and support are a few of the vital issues addressed. Implications for family therapists are discussed.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Processes associated with the divorce experience tend to change parent-child relationships. These changes are also intertwined with other aspects of everyday life, normative stressors, and relationship changes due to children’s continual development. Hence, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how divorce transforms parent-child relationships. The purpose of this study is to provide a description of how young adults see their relationships with their fathers, as well as to explore the connections they make with regard to how divorce might have changed or shaped their feelings about their fathers.

The literature on father-child relationships after divorce presents a rather dismal picture of “fading fathers,” Disneyland dads, and devitalized relationships between
fathers and children (Arditti, 1995). The decreasing quantity and quality of contact between children and noncustodial parents is well documented (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, & Zill, 1983; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976). It should be pointed out, however, that research on father-child relationships after divorce has relied primarily on structural measures such as child support payment or visitation frequency, or global measures of relationship quality. Although information gleaned from quantitative studies of father-child relationships has elucidated certain connections (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Seltzer, Schaeffer, Charng, 1989), little depth is available with regard to understanding qualitative aspects of father-child relationships during the divorce process and beyond. Most research and theory tends to emphasize the problematic nature of father-child relationships after divorce, without really exploring who defines them as problematic and why.

We know little about how children may elicit or discourage their father's involvement after the divorce (Arditti 1995). Furthermore, there is some evidence that children's perspectives and their construction of reality are significant predictors of well-being and may be more important than the actual presence of the parent (Wenk, Hardesty, Morgan, & Blair, 1994). Hence the present study is less concerned with documenting the state of affairs between children and fathers than with examining how young adults construct meaning around their past and current relations with their fathers and perceive their fathers' involvement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Children and the Construction of Meaning

With regard to studying children and divorce, Kurdek (1993) reasons that the appraisal of life events is often more important than their mere occurrence. Social constructionism provides a rich theoretical context from which to study divorce and parent-child relationships, for such inquiry. Gergen is concerned with understanding "the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (1985, p. 266). Applying social constructionism to this study forces us to challenge conventional beliefs about the desirability of divorce, attributes attached to "children of divorce," and definitions of successful father-child relationships.

Social constructionism emphasizes the historical and cultural context and the influences of that context on an individual's interchanges with others. This is extremely relevant to the study of divorce, given societal stigma and our tendency to label children from divorced homes. Concurrent with negative expectations for them are stereotypical, monolithic portrayals of "deadbeat dads." Other arrangements, like noncustodial fathering, lack social guidelines and legitimacy, forcing individuals to construct their own sense of how they should parent and what kind of relationship is to be expected (Arditti, 1995). Viewing young adult children as active implies a need to interpret their experience in relation to the current cultural-historical arena and the negative messages and expectations contained therein.
Loss and Renewal

Loss is an issue of great significance with regard to how adults and children experience divorce and is a pivotal issue within the domain of father-child relationships. Kitson (1992) acknowledges that although divorce is often thought of as an event, in actuality divorce involves a pileup of events, each associated with a variety of difficult losses. Dealing with loss and disappointment, according to Kitson, takes time. Furthermore, from a loss framework, an individual's attributions about the divorce experience and subsequent costs and benefits are seen as important intervening processes regarding how loss and guilt are experienced and one's subsequent well-being (Guttman, 1993). For example, Drill (1987) found that when the noncustodial parent, usually the father, was perceived as lost, the young adult was more depressed. Drill emphasized that children's constructions of meaning around loss rather than mere observable circumstances were crucial for later postdivorce functioning.

It is important to emphasize that loss as it pertains to divorce is experienced in a cultural context that exaggerates the negative aspects of divorce (Stevenson & Black, 1995). Although widespread, divorce is still stigmatized, and lingering societal disapproval of divorce contributes to individuals' incorporating similar attitudes about themselves (Kitson, 1992). Although this may sound overly pessimistic, incorporating notions of loss into the study of divorce is important for several reasons. In rejecting deficit models of inquiry, one does not want to make the mistake of glossing over some of the more painful aspects of children's experiences. Children are often acutely aware of the fact that they are losing something when their parents divorce. Emery and Forehand (1994) refine notions of loss by making a distinction between pathology and painful feelings. Their basic tenet is that although divorce is not inevitably associated with child pathology, children do experience a variety of painful feelings and memories that are connected with the divorce process and subsequent changes. Furthermore, loss can be an element of experience that is not necessarily synonymous with failure. Moore (1994) explores an alternative understanding with regard to the endings of relationships and conceptualizes loss as closely related to renewal. He states, "Endings are painful, and yet at the same time they may offer an indispensable way toward new levels of feeling and new areas of imagination. Renewal does not mean starting over where we were before; it is the discovery of a new beginning" (p. 198).

Batchelder (1995), and more recently Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, and Barenbaum (1997) are rare examples of studies of divorce that incorporate aspects of renewal and employ a nondeficit approach both conceptually and methodologically. Both studies conceptualize divorce as a transformation of family relationships and emphasize changes in individuals and their social contexts rather than pathological effects of parental divorce. The present study explores how constructions of loss and renewal may be part of the experience of children and their fathers. From a renewal framework, painful feelings are possible, but so is healing. Stigma is present, but so is the possibility that one can develop an alternative framework. Endings bring a series of losses but have the potential to transform family relationships.
SUMMARY AND PLAN OF STUDY

Theory advancing notions around individual agency and the construction of meaning and loss and renewal are the sensitizing concepts of the present study. Furthermore, the theoretical perspectives discussed above are well matched for qualitative study in that diversity of experience is valued, as well as complex aspects of relationships. Qualitative methods are designed to explore questions about meaning and process (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995) and yield results that are multilayered (Gilgun, 1992a).

Based on our aim to move beyond deficit models of divorce, this study was designed to carefully examine what they had to say and how the content of the interview data might reflect the theoretical concepts outlined in the previous section. Most important, this study looked for the connections that young adults might make between their parents’ divorce and their current relationships with their fathers. Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the emphasis of this study is not on causality or universality but on generating a fresh and more theoretically comprehensive understanding of parental divorce and father-child relationships. The overall approach of the study is actually a blend of grounded theory (i.e., allowing key issues to emerge) and analytic induction (i.e., matching data to prior constructions). According to Gilgun (1992a), this blend can lead to compelling and thick descriptions.

METHOD

Sample

This study is based on data drawn from interviews conducted with 58 college students from a large mid-Atlantic state university and is a part of a larger project with students whose parents had divorced. Purposive sampling techniques were used, and the research team posted announcements throughout the university and made announcements in specific classes. Participants all were single and most were White. The age reported at the time of parental divorce ranged from 1 to 24 years, averaging 9.5 years (SD, 5.7 years). Thirty-two percent of the sample were male (n = 18) and 67% were female (n = 37). Twenty-nine percent of mothers had remarried; 60% of fathers had remarried. The average length of time respondents reported living in a single-parent household was 7 years (SD, 5.5 years). Demographic data were unavailable for 3 participants. Descriptions of father-child relationships pertaining to change, disengagement, and renewal were contained in 24 of the 58 interviews and are the focus of this article. The demographic profile of the 24 participants who provided data for this study was similar to that of the larger sample and did not significantly differ on the above indicators. These 24 students ranged in age from 18.5 years old to 24 years old.

Interviews

The research team conducted in-depth interviews to provide rich descriptions for understanding the meanings of events from the participants’ perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Snyder, 1992). The questions were open-ended and designed to encourage students to discuss their relationships with their parents, their memories of
their parents’ divorce, and how they believed the divorce had affected their family relationships. Similar to the process detailed by Marshall and Rossman (1995), the primary researcher identified objectives and theoretical concepts from the literature, which then guided the questions asked and content analysis of the study.

Coding

Identification of important themes and subsequent coding and interpretation is historically the essence of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Denzin, 1978; Gilgun, 1992a; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). Our methods followed in this tradition; the data-coding process developed over time and reflected a series of modifications based on repeated readings of the data and discussions with the four-person research team. This approach to coding is consistent with qualitative methodology described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Gilgun (1992a) whereby codes are developed through knowledge of previous theory and research as well as by hypotheses developed during the process of data analysis.

After all interviews were collected, summary concepts were written in the margin of the interview transcripts. A list of codes pertaining to strengths, problems, and changes in father-child relationships was the basis for content analysis. These codes were developed and were attached to interview data using the software package Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD*IST, Richards & Richards, 1994). This package helped maintain clarity, flexibility, and expediency during the coding process.

Interpretation

The primary researcher (Arditti) then reread the coded interviews and identified initial themes from among the codes. Nudist was helpful in this process because it provides a tree diagram from which themes can be developed and relationships can be identified between and on hierarchical levels. The use of these diagrams along with the literature review and on-line definitional and memo data represented the initial step of theory building and allowed for the exploration of interrelationships among various themes (Weitzman & Miles, 1995).

The primary researcher modified the thematic scheme throughout the research process to reflect nuances in the data and meanings that the initial tree diagram might not have reflected. To do this, the researcher extracted text reports from each of the thematic areas and read the reports several times. Notes were made during the examination of the reports. Prior research in father-child relationships and conceptual issues underlying the larger project guided the organization of this study’s results. The researcher reflected upon and linked previous research findings with empirically grounded concepts developed in this study (Gilgun, 1992a). Within these reports, clear themes and relationships among the themes emerged that were supported by the participants’ stories of their experiences with their parents’ divorces and subsequent familial changes as they pertained to fathers.

Methodological Criteria

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose “confirmability” as an important methodological criterion to evaluate qualitative research. Confirmability involves a blend of issues
related to reliability and validity and encompasses whether the findings of a study can be confirmed by another study, as well as the connection between the data and the interpretations of the researcher. Hence the concept of confirmability captures a range of issues relating to the consistency and repeatability of findings (Gilgun, 1992b) and how well the data are linked to the categories of prior theory (Miles & Huberman, 1993). With regard to this study, confirmability is demonstrated in part by the consistency of judgments concerning categorizations and was determined by comparing results of observers working independently on the same materials (Harbert, Vinick, & Ekerdt, 1992). All of the interviews were coded independently by at least two doctoral students. An intercoder reliability of 81.5% was established between Observer 1 and Observer 2, and of 68.4% between Observer 1 and Observer 3. Overall the ratio was 74.7% between two observers on at least one code for each block of text.

In addition, the coding scheme and subsequent themes that emerged demonstrated confirmability in several other ways. First, the coding scheme and thematic interpretations were informed by prior research and theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and then by several readings of the data by the principal researcher. The second author also examined and commented on interpretations of the text made by the principal researcher. Finally, confirmability was reflected by the convergence of major coding categories and themes defined by a separate content analysis conducted on a subsample of 21 interviews (Ruble, 1998).

RESULTS

The goals of the results were similar to objectives put forth by Gilgun (1992a), to present dominant patterns in the data on father-child relationships as well as any exceptions. The overarching concern was to describe the data. Quotes were chosen that reflected guiding concepts of study or were connected with findings of previous research and theory. The results reported in this study pertains to strengths, problems, and changes in father-child relationships. Many similarities were found in the participants' reports that tied into previous research and theory on postdivorce relationships between fathers and their children. However, it is important to note that several issues emerged that reflected strengths, improved relations, and children's perceptions of family changes that have rarely been discussed or explored in any meaningful way in the previous literature.

Change, Disappointment, and Disengagement

Although many young adults' accounts reflected devitalized relationships with fathers, it is important that the data in this study revealed diverse relationships with fathers with differing degrees of closeness, as well as differing perspectives with regard to the reasons for disengagement. Students also differed with respect to how difficult they found the changes brought on by the divorce process. Change seemed to be particularly hard for children who reported close relationships with their fathers prior to divorce. They perceived themselves as helpless to make choices about seeing their fathers, especially if they were young at the time of marital separation. One young woman describes her struggle to deal with the changes in her relationship with her father:
We were very, very close before the divorce. That was the hardest thing when they got divorced. There's some certain age you have to be in order to be able to make a decision who you want to live with. I was too young at first, so since I was a girl, both of them agreed it would be best for me to live with my mom. My father wasn't going to be far away and every other weekend I would be with him so that was not a problem. So I guess I always felt bad that I was leaving him. I would just wake up in the middle of the night and feel terrible that my dad was alone . . . our relationship now, I mean it's good: he's a great man. I love him to death, but it's just not the same.

Of particular interest was her construction of meaning around the divorce. She defines herself as leaving him rather than the other way around. Her appraisal of her father as being alone seemed to be the most salient aspect of the changes brought about by the divorce. On the surface, her guilt and sense of responsibility may seem inappropriate, yet these feelings might also have contributed to her current attachment to and positive regard for her father. It is not uncommon for children to worry about or feel protective toward one or both of their divorcing parents.

Another young man discusses the changes in his relationship with his father brought about by the divorce:

Before the divorce I can't remember a whole lot. I know that he did discipline me some... He'd give me some discipline before their divorce when he lived there. We were close back then and we had fun... After the divorce, when I'd go see him, he'd ask me whatever I'd want to go do and we'd go do it. Like we'd go to the mall and he'd let me run around the mall by myself and go in the arcades and do whatever I wanted. He didn't really offer me much guidance after the divorce. I'm not going to say he didn't care about me, but he just, I don't know, maybe he wanted to let me grow up on my own. When I was with him, he just kind of let me roam free. (management major, age 8 when parents divorced)

This description reflects this young man's view of his father's role transformation from disciplinarian to Disneyland Dad—a stereotypical pattern found commonly for noncustodial fathers as the fun parent with whom discipline is lax or nonexistent (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). However, beyond mothers' reports of father's activities or dissatisfaction with the nature of his visits, virtually nothing is known about how children might perceive this shift. It is interesting to note that this young man, although he enjoyed his time with his father, longed for more structure and guidance. He is careful not to attribute his father's role shift to a lack of caring, and yet he still wants something more from his father.

Indeed, some of the descriptions reflected children's anger and disappointment with their fathers, although it was unclear how much the feelings were aggravated by the divorce experience. Several young adults reported relationships with fathers that were "never good" so they did not attribute their lack of closeness to the divorce:
We don't talk. I don't even associate him as being my father... I don't ask him for anything, like my freshman year here I would say I needed money for different things, like books and stuff, and I would always get a hard time. I said I don't need this man in my life, I can do for myself. (female, family and child development major, three years old when parents' divorced)

This young woman, clearly upset during the interview, stops for a moment, and then reflects: "He has no involvement in my life. And it's hard, it's like I want to sort of correct it but it's hard."

Children also reported a variety of problematic behaviors by fathers that seemed to contribute to their disengagement. One young woman discusses her withdrawal from her father after the divorce as a continuation of earlier difficulties:

Before the divorce he never really took time... he always worked or he was out drinking. He never spent time at home, so I don't really ever remember a relationship with him when he was there. Afterwards [i.e., the divorce]... I saw him maybe four or five times a year, and he only lived about ten minutes down the road... What it's like now... we don't talk at all.

The student goes on to define her view of what the problem really is: "It was just that he wouldn't put forth the effort: It was like he didn't care about me, he didn't love me. It's better for me now not talking to him. I feel like a lot of pain is alleviated by not talking to him" (family and child development major, aged seven at the time of the divorce). For this student, disengagement was a means of coping with painful feelings and loss. The literature tends to address this more often with regard to parents' perspectives on why fathers might disengage. Little is known about how children might participate in or perhaps even initiate the disengagement process. The construction of meaning around why a father might be behaving in a certain way (i.e., not seeing the children or doing things for them) influences a child's behavior toward him. This young woman believed her father's actions reflected a lack of love and consequently pulled away herself:

I always view the divorce as not the divorce between my mom and dad, but the relationship I had with my father. I think that's the key problem. Even if my father was here and in a relationship with my mom, I still don't think we would have a good relationship.

Hence, she does not blame her difficulties on the divorce per se but rather on her poor relationship with her father, which she believes was independent of the divorce. Not surprisingly that she also commented that she believed it was best that her parents did get divorced.

For other young adults, the disengagement process was blamed on their father's withdrawal:
Now my relationship with my father is distant because when I was in the eighth grade, he just kind of stopped coming around and stopped calling. It wasn't until this year that he called me and I finally got to talk to him... I wrote him letters every now and then, but we don't have a relationship now.

Fathers’ problematic behavior, and/or their perceived lack of effort, characterized most stories of disengagement. Children who reported difficulties with fathers during the marriage or who had little memory of their father were particularly vulnerable. Stories varied in terms of how actively the child withdrew, but invariably most who described a pattern of withdrawal believed their fathers initiated the pattern or caused them to withdraw. For some young adults, pulling back was a means of coping with their disappointment with their fathers. This often resulted in the feeling that their fathers did not know them, which further contributed to the disengagement process. For example, one young woman discusses how her disengagement from her father occurred:

When they first got divorced, we used to go over there every weekend and do nothing basically. . . It was boring, especially when I was getting to the age where I wanted to see my friends. . . I don’t know if he didn’t understand that, but he kind of got mad I guess. Then when we’d call him, he would be like, you only call me when you want something. . . so I stopped calling and of course he didn’t call me. . . I don’t really mind because I think it’s too much trouble for what it’s worth. My father doesn’t really know me and really hasn’t. (psychology major, aged 14 when parents divorced)

Even for young adults who were not completely disengaged from their fathers, relationships were described as superficial based on their belief that their fathers did not know them:

He doesn’t know me. He doesn’t know my real personality, he knows the, yeah I’m going to school and I’m getting an education. But he doesn’t know who I really am. I kind of have to hold that back from him. (female family and child development major, 3 years old at the time of parental divorce)

Some young adults reported relationships with fathers that had faded or disengaged, not because of fathers’ problem behavior or lack of effort, but because fathers had moved far away. Mobility has been widely discussed in the literature on noncustodial fathers as influencing visitation patterns and fathers’ involvement postdivorce. The problem of mobility after divorce is rarely fully explored, despite findings that the distance between the noncustodial parent’s residence and the children’s residence is one of the most important predictors of contact (Arditti, 1992; Furstenberg, 1988). The following excerpts confirm the constraints of geographical distance on father-child relationships:
I think my relationship with my father has gotten worse. We were really close when I was little and now that he moved away, he lives eight hours away, it's really difficult for me to maintain a lot of contact with him. Telephone calls and letters are just not the same thing as living with someone day to day. I think it's gotten worse and I really miss him. (19-year-old female family and child development major, aged 7 at the time of divorce)

It's important to point out that moving does not always end close relations with fathers. For example, Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, and Dornbusch (1993) noted that for adolescents, even a fairly small amount of contact (i.e., some visits during the summer) with nonresident fathers seemed to be sufficient to maintain close relationships from the perspectives of the children. However, mobility does pose a challenge for continuing relationships inasmuch as opportunities for contact are limited. Students' stories about their fathers' relocation reflected loss and a longing for more closeness. Emery (1994) comments that changes in the relationship with the nonresident father often involve dramatic shifts in contact (as in the case of moving), which can lead to distress and grief among children.

Triangulation Processes and Loyalty Dilemmas.

Emery (1994) discusses loyalty conflicts as an “unavoidable, triangular dilemma that divorce creates from the child's perspective” (p. 59). Our data were rich with description regarding this issue. For example, not only did children's relationships with their mothers directly influence the nature of father-child relationships, but also mothers influenced children's perceptions of and relationships with their fathers' girlfriends and/or wives. Furthermore, the relationships offspring had with fathers' girlfriends and wives created an additional “triangular dilemma” for several participants and influenced the quality of father-child relations.

Participants described examples of both parents triangulating (n = 6), as well as one example of a father triangulating a child. We do not have space to provide coverage on outcomes related to both parents triangulating (generally resulting in disgust, stress, exasperation with, or attempts to please both parents). When both parents triangulated (i.e., badmouthed each other), it seemed to undermine the quality of relationships children had with both parents. We were interested for the purposes of this article in looking more carefully at what happens when only one parent reportedly blames and undermines the other, and what this might mean for the quality of father-child relationships. These data suggest that children were generally drawn to the parent who did not pull them into this type of dilemma.

Some children seemed to experience difficulty with loyalty issues even in the absence of active, overt triangulation, by trying to be connected to both parents. For example, one young woman talks about how just as a result of seeing her father, she would behave badly toward her mother after returning from the visit with him:

I had a relationship with my father. We saw him maybe four or five times at most a year. I remember when I was younger...it was very hard to go to my father's house. Your frame of mind was, he's the best dad, he's great, he's right, mom's wrong, and then you come home and I was horrible to my mother...after just spending an evening with my father, I was very horrible.
to her. And it was just because they never got along, and it was very confusing
to me where to put my loyalties. (22-year-old family and child development
major, aged 7 when her parents divorced)

It is noteworthy that mothers may not have even actively attempted to undermine
the father and still influenced these relationships. As Emery (1994) pointed out,
children seem to sense loyalty dilemmas inherent in their parents’ parting. Sometimes
this can manifest not only by harsh treatment toward one parent, as described above,
but as a protectiveness toward a parent. For example, one student, who was 6 years
old at the time of her parents’ divorce, recalls: “The first few weeks after they
separated, I wouldn’t go see him because I didn’t want to leave my mom alone” (20-
year-old undergraduate). Another student shares how angry and mistrustful she is with
her father, because he blamed others for his situation:

I haven’t spoken to him since way before I left for school. He and my mother
and I got in a screaming argument in May and that’s the last time I can
remember talking to him. I did have a run-in with him when I was at home
last weekend, and he’s basically playing the good father routine right now
trying to make it look like we’re the ones who have ruined everything. He
sends me these big flowery cards on holidays... I don’t deal very well with
that because I know it’s fake. (psychology major, aged 18 when parents
divorced)

It should be pointed out that although most of these examples deal with mothers’
triangulation attempts, children generally perceived all types of triangulation as
confusing and upsetting, regardless of the source, and seemed to mistrust the integrity
of the parent who most actively created the loyalty dilemma. The data suggest that, at
least for older children, in the absence of identifiable problem behaviors on the part
of fathers, mothers’ attempts to triangulate created loyalty dilemmas for children that
ultimately backfired and may have actually facilitated closeness with fathers. Attempts
to triangulate tend to alienate children from the parent who is undermining the other,
and in turn, in the absence of retaliation from the other parent or efforts to triangulate,
children tend to be drawn to the parent who is berated. This is a significant point to
consider in terms of intervention.

Parents, and sometimes even their partners, gained respect from children by not
participating in the triangulation or retaliating against the other parent. For example,
one participant described a scenario whereby his mother attempted to triangulate him
not only by undermining the father but also by blaming the father’s new wife for the
divorce. He discusses the emerging respect and closeness that he has for his father and
stepmother—largely due to their lack of retaliation. Of particular interest, this young
man connects the quality of his current relationship with his father not to the divorce
per se but to what had happened between him and his mother:

Now, we’re [referring to the relationship with his mother] not that close. I’m
mainly close with my father and my stepmother. Not because of the divorce,
but the relationships formed afterward, and that's based on the fact that she [mother] always used to blame my stepmother for the divorce, and she always kept blaming somebody else. My father and my stepmother never did that; they always let me form my own opinion. Then when I wanted to talk, they would talk to me. Because of that, because my mom tries to force her view on me . . “as I got older, that really got old, someone telling me that this is the way things were, and always putting blame on everyone else and never taking blame for herself. There was a point where I remember I told my mom, I’m tired of you talking about my mom and dad like that, or my stepmother, as I referred to her in front of my mom. They don’t talk about you, and I’ve had enough and I don’t want to hear any more. (marketing major, 20 years old)

Again, the triangulation appears to be unidirectional, coming from the biological mother, and without attempt by the father to retaliate. Indeed, Emery (1994) points out that children’s relationships with their custodial parent, usually the mother, may influence how the stepparent, (or girlfriend) is perceived. If the single parenting by the mother has been troubled, the stepmother is more likely to be viewed positively by the child. When children are close to and involved with their mothers, it might be more difficult to accept a stepparent, and the remarriage could spark new loyalty dilemmas for children (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). In the above case, it is interesting that this young man refers to his stepmother as mom, except in the presence of his biological mother.

Overall, nonretaliation appears to bring respect and draws the child closer to that parent. Mothers gained respect for not attempting to construct obstacles in father-child relationships. For example, this student describes the respect he feels toward his mother for facilitating visitation with his father:

One thing that I really respect her a lot for was that she didn’t try to pull me away from my dad when they divorced. He had visitation rights to me. I’d spend every other weekend with him. She wouldn’t pull sneaky things like saying that we were going on a trip to try to keep me away from him. So she didn’t try to drive a wedge in the relationship between my dad and I. (21-year-old management major, aged 8 at the time of his parents’ divorce)

It was almost as if this young man expected his mother to pose obstacles for him. The absence of this type of behavior on her part was welcomed and allowed him to stay connected with his father without distress. What remains unclear is the origin of his belief that somehow his mother might interfere with his relationship with his father.

Stepmothers and girlfriends created a new triangle for some young adults (there were no examples in the data of fathers having a male partner). Several offspring discussed the pivotal role of their stepmothers or fathers’ girlfriends in their relationship with their father. At times, they were perceived as an obstacle in the father-child relationship because they took up their fathers’ time and made it difficult to communicate with him directly:
I don't tell him anything because my stepmother takes up a lot of his time. She's an only child too, and I think that has a lot to do with it, but we fight for his attention. They're married and that's his wife and I don't get to see him that often, especially now because I'm here, and he sides with her a lot more than he sides with me, so I fell out of place.

The above example illustrates competition between the child and the new spouse for a parent's attention—a dynamic not at all uncommon in stepfamilies (Einstein & Albert, 1986). What is so interesting is the attributions the student makes about why the stepmother is so demanding of the father's attention (i.e., both of them being only children), thus making it harder for her to share him. Another young woman describes a series of shifts in her relationship with her father:

I don't remember being terribly close with him, but I don't remember not being close with him either. That definitely changed after my parents got a divorce. Before my dad got remarried, we were really close. I could tell my dad anything. . . . We still have a good relationship, I just don't think we're as close. He got married right after my younger sister went to school. (24-year-old biology major, aged 8 when her parents divorced)

Divorce created a special context for closeness between father and daughter. Remarriage, however, seemed to lessen their closeness. Another young man describes a similar experience, of competition with his stepmother for his father's attention:

We don't have a close relationship but I know he loves me, and I love him too. There's a lot of stuff there between my stepmother and I. My stepmother's the wedge that kind of prevents dad and I from becoming close and talking about certain things. It's hard to get my dad away from her: They're together all the time and I don't like talking about personal things around her because she's a gossiper. . . Actually, he and I are planning to take a trip this summer, just he and I. I'm looking forward to that. Hopefully, we can break down some of those barriers and get a little closer, but right now we're not extremely close. (21-year-old management major, 8 years old at the time of his parents' divorce)

Although competing with the stepmother does not appear gender specific, two of the three students in the preceding examples reported close relationships with their mothers, providing support for Furstenberg and Spanier's (1984) contention that such may make it more difficult for children to accept the new stepmother. At other times, stepmothers and girlfriends were seen as a facilitator or liaison for the relationships with fathers, particularly if relationships with the mother were strained or difficult. This student, describing the closeness he feels to his stepmother, is the same young man who enjoyed close relations with his father and who described difficulty with his mother's badmouthing:
My dad allowed me to live and learn and form my own opinion, . . . I also like the fact that my stepmother was able to deal with the fact that she took into a marriage two kids that weren't her own and treated them like they were. She never really talked about my mother like my mother talked about her, and I respect her a lot for that. (male marketing major, 20 years old)

Getting Better All the Time

In spite of the evidence reflecting devitalized father-child relationships, the data in this study were varied and rich with descriptions of past and current relations with fathers. We know little about strong father-child relationships, and yet for some young adults, relationships with their fathers were close prior to the divorce and remained close thereafter. Spending time and talking with fathers seemed to facilitate closeness: “Well actually before the divorce, I was his baby too. We watched TV together and went fishing and stuff like that. Pretty much, even though I live with my grandparents, we still have a good relationship together” (male engineering student, aged 5 at the time of parental divorce). Sharing residence with one’s father, although unusual, appeared to provide an important context for closeness:

We're really good friends; we're almost best friends because I live with him. He does everything for me. He's going through a divorce right now, so we're a lot closer and we talk almost every day. And he's there a lot more and he's learned a lot more responsibility to do with the family. (female family and child development major, 10 years old at the time of divorce)

As discussed elsewhere (Furstenberg et al., 1983), residence appears to be especially influential in the level of involvement for fathers. Coresidence provides a context for closeness. Indeed, other studies of single-father families have found unusual closeness between residential fathers and their children (Grief, 1985; Orthner, Brown, & Ferguson, 1976).

Most interesting were young adults who reported improved relationships with their fathers. Divorce was seen as a catalyst for becoming closer with their fathers and allowing them special, uninterrupted time that they did not experience while their parents were still married: “Things have definitely improved. We are on a really good basis right now. We have a really good relationship. We talk over e-mail just about every day. I enjoy his company” (male communications major, 8 years old when parents divorced).

This young woman discusses the changes in her relationship with her father that resulted from her parents’ divorce:

We're getting back to where, just a year ago, I feel like I forgave him for everything. We're getting to a point where we're talking a lot. I talk to him at least once a week now. We're closer probably now than I was with him when I was a kid, as far as friendship kind of close. (female African American management major, 16 at the time of divorce)
During her parents’ marriage, she “hated him” and describes him as uninvolved. After the divorce, the relationship improved, and she felt closer to him, yet believed that her mother resented their growing closeness. Their current closeness may largely be due to her active role in dealing with difficulties that arose with her father:

It’s a lot different. Because of the divorce, I wound up getting a lot closer to my father, because everyone else turned their backs on him. Previously, I pretty much hated him. As I started getting closer to my dad, my mom really resented that and I guess felt really betrayed. Before the divorce, I hated my father, and I usually don’t hate anybody. He was never around. They got divorced officially my sophomore year but told us, my younger sister and I, when I was a freshman . . . the beginning of my freshman year; every time he would come home I’d cry. . . I guess when I was real young, I’ve got some good memories. . . But, especially as I got older, I really just grew to really hate him and not want to be around him and I did not really care for him at all.

She goes on to describe the turning point in her relationship with her father in which she confronts him over his request not to tell their mother that he is dating.

It took all the courage I had to confront him because I always had a lot of respect for my father even though I did not like him very much. Dad was a very powerful person, and you never talked to dad or whatever; he was kind of on that higher plane in the family. So it took a lot of guts, but I confronted him with that. . . . He was trying to protect me. I was like, well I’m not an idiot, and I’m not a little girl. But through that talk and that confrontation, it was really neat because we talked a lot about my growing up, and I wound up forgiving him, even though he didn’t deserve it probably at all. We just talked it through, so I wound up forgiving him for all the past, and just have started our relationship from there. . . I talk to him about once a week. He’s really good about caring for me I guess. But really I think that I was the only person in the family that was there for him during the divorce that said “look it’s not all your fault and I still care about you.” (female family and child development student, 15 at the time of divorce)

This poignant recounting of loss and forgiveness reflects a rare example of how family conflict can give way to healing and renewal. Changes in children’s situations with their fathers after divorce can also give way to improved family relationships. One student discusses the positive consequences of his changing relationship with his father in terms of how it transformed his siblings’ relationships:

Well, one of the strengths (of his relationship with his father) was that it gave myself, my brothers, and sisters a togetherness or unity. You know, you watch the Beaver, the father comes home from work and the mother has the food ready. It wasn’t quite like that, but it (the divorce) just gave us a strong sense of togetherness. We knew that our father, even though he may not have been
able to do certain things for us, he was always there just in case we needed him. (African American housing and interior design major, 14 years old at the time of divorce).

Although only one student mentioned this aspect of divorce’s transformational qualities, the example does provide evidence that divorce has the means to renew sibling relationships. Indeed, siblings have the potential to be important to each other to the extent that they share experiences and take comfort in facing the unfamiliar together (Emery, 1994). Certainly this issue is worthy of more in-depth exploration.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings in this study revealed a range of father-child relationships, with some young adults reporting close relationships with fathers and others reflecting a more devitalized pattern. Our main emphasis in this study was on describing the participants’ experiences. Although it was not the goal to impose specific typologies onto the data, several patterns of relationships did emerge. Some young adults described devitalized relationships with fathers, whereas others described relationships that were more fluid. Fluidity was reflected by shifts in closeness due to situational factors (such as a father moving away or remarriage) or improved relationships after divorce—especially if the children had ample opportunities to spend time with their fathers or live with them. However, despite the possibilities for connection, loss and disappointment were themes in several young adults’ descriptions of their relations with their fathers. Our findings lend support to Emery and Forehand’s (1994) premise that children may have painful memories about their parents’ divorce or their relationships with parents. Disappointments tended to center around fathers’ lack of effort and involvement—especially after divorce. Young adults had a variety of ways of coping with these painful feelings. The most common result of these perceptions was disengagement. Beyond simply documenting a pattern of disengagement between fathers and children, these data offer insight into the process of disengagement and children’s role in either initiating or actively participating in the disengagement process. The data were thick with regard to descriptions of how disengagement occurred for young adults in the study, and revealed the dynamics of a downward spiral.

It seems that without some kind of turning point or confrontation, once the disengagement process begins, it tends to lead to severed or at best superficial relations with fathers. Several participants shared the sentiment that they did not feel known by their fathers. What remains unclear is how the trajectory of their relationships with their fathers might have proceeded in the absence of divorce. It was noteworthy that for one student, confrontation provided a means to stop the disengagement process and move toward her father. Resolution, although uncommon, was sometimes the outcome of active attempts on the part of adult children to handle problems in their relationship with fathers. Hence, children’s response to their fathers’ withdrawal, along with their reactions to fathers’ behavior, some of which is described as very problematic, is crucial in shaping father-child relationships, as well as fathers’ response to their children’s efforts to engage them in problem solving. Although we were unable
to define clearly the link between whether a father cared and the extent to which a child might think he cared, our theoretical framework suggests that the way children construct meaning around divorce-related events and losses appears to be influential (Drill, 1987; Kurdek, 1993). Intuitively, positive attributions (i.e., “I know he still cares”) seemed to help children cope with lessening involvement, role shifts, and problem behavior and may serve to prevent children from withdrawing themselves. In contrast, negative attributions (i.e., “he must not love me since he ignores me”) about the father furthered the disengagement process and could prompt active withdrawal on the part of the child. Indeed, some participants defined their fathers as “lost,” based on their assessment of their fathers’ behavior and lack of involvement in their lives. Certainly, investigations aimed at exploring children’s perceptions of their fathers’ caring, and behavior based on fathers’ reports would shed further light on the role of children’s interpretations in their relationships with their fathers.

The data in this study also provided evidence of close relationships with fathers. Confirming the work of other investigators we found that coresidence facilitated closeness, whereas fathers’ mobility and nonresidence constrained closeness between fathers and children, although these factors were by no means insurmountable. Before jumping to conclusions about the inevitability of devitalized relationships, researchers and practitioners alike should consider the implications of nonresidence and infrequent contact. Relationships that continue to remain close despite these obstacles are worthy of in-depth, follow-up investigation. Fathers’ attempts to maintain contact with children via letters, e-mail, telephone, and other means positively impact relationships and prevent disengagement.

The key issue seems to be children’s perceptions of their fathers’ availability and willingness to demonstrate caring. It is also noteworthy that a child’s gender or age at the time of the divorce did not relate consistently to patterns of coresidence or closeness. Stories about improved relationships with fathers after divorce reflected diverse circumstances and in part exemplified constructions of meaning related to renewal. Like Batchelder (1995), we found that divorce was a means of strengthening sibling relationships for one young adult and improved relationships with fathers for others. Our findings also indirectly provide support for Stevenson and Black’s (1995) view that it is not divorce per se that leads to less closeness between fathers and children but the presence of problem behaviors, lack of contact and financial support, and lack of parental acceptance of the child. Children who perceived their fathers as accepting, supportive, and trustworthy were more likely to report feeling closer to their fathers, regardless of marital status (Villwock, Peckskamp, and Black, 1990, cited in Stevenson & Black, 1995). Young adults in this study who reported close relations with their divorced fathers emphasized fathers’ willingness to communicate with them and recounted times they had spent together, financial provision, and a sense of their fathers being there if needed. Our findings contribute to the scant literature documenting strengths and other qualitative aspects of father-child relationships after divorce. Such information is crucial in constructing an alternative paradigm to counteract the predominant cultural images of the deadbeat dad and the abandoned child of divorce. We cannot tell from our data in what ways dominant negative scripts surrounding divorce specifically impacted offsprings’ negative experiences with their
fathers. It seems reasonable to speculate that a more positive, realistic social climate which normalized marital transitions would enhance the possibilities for and expectations of positive, connected family relationships postdivorce.

**Implications for Family Therapists**

The findings from this study highlight the changing and diverse nature of father-child relationships after divorce, as well as the complexity of family dynamics. Therapy can be sensitive to the dynamic qualities of the divorce process, loyalty dilemmas, loss, renewal, understanding of clients’ divorce-related experiences, and the reengagement of adult children with their fathers. It is also important to note that the following clinical suggestions are made with the assumption that the therapist has determined that the father-child relationship is safe for the child.

Although the therapeutic implications drawn from this study deal largely with older children and ways of preventing disengagement and maintaining relationships with fathers postdivorce, applications can be made to younger children as well. The earlier in the divorce process help is sought, the greater the possibility that disengagement or other types of difficulties might be prevented or altered. When working with young children and their families undergoing the family reconstruction due to divorce, Nichols (1985) and others have suggested family therapy in multiple forms. The aim of most models of family therapy suggested have been to help the family understand what their future family structure will look like, who has control over what decisions, and what the new rules are.

Loyalty conflicts seem to be problematic for many children—especially as they grow older and their awareness of feelings expands (Emery, 1988; Wallerstein, 1985). Perhaps this is one of the most significant points of therapeutic intervention, in that many families probably would benefit from assistance that helped parents work through feelings of anger and emphasized the importance of minimizing loyalty dilemmas for children. Our findings suggest that active attempts to triangulate a child tend to backfire; hence, if for no other reason, it is in a parent’s self-interest not to triangulate or to retaliate against a parent who is on the attack. When working with parents, clinicians can facilitate the separation of the spousal relationship (which may continue to be conflicted) from the parental role after divorce. This separation helps to insure that children are not triangled between the two parents during times of conflict. Emery (1994) notes that the redefinition of boundaries after divorce that is least stressful for children is often not likely to be the least stressful arrangement for the parents. That is, although anger following marital breakups may be healthy for the former partners in terms of their grief experience and the creation of emotional distance, the same anger is maladaptive for children. Therapists can be sensitive to this paradox and can help parents understand their children’s perspective, while exploring acceptable outlets for anger.

During and after divorce, anger and anxiety can often be worked through by normalizing children’s fears and behaviors and using the narrative techniques of “fear busting” and “externalizing the problem” (White & Epston, 1990). Externalization allows the family to incorporate creativity and humor into their relationships to work with and adjust to the emotional and structural changes as a team instead of against each other, thus creating possibilities for new relationships. Ideas related to renewal
and hope are often inherent in the reconstruction of meaning that may evolve as therapy progresses.

Perhaps equally important is the family therapist's ability to help divorcing parents and children prepare for relationship changes and feelings of loss that need to be fully acknowledged before healing is possible. Future stories about changing relationships could be enriched by therapists' sharing stories of renewal as well as specifically outlining for parents what tends to be important to children in their relationships with their fathers. Young adult children in this study reported that it was important for fathers to be available and to provide structure, safety, and predictability in the relationship. Perhaps superficial or devitalized relationships could be avoided or reinvented by helping family members to create future-focused narratives that would meet children's needs for attention, support, and structure.

For young adults who have experienced parental divorce and perhaps difficult changes in their relationships with their fathers, therapists utilizing a narrative approach could assist clients in several ways (White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy's respectful methods could potentially help clients find the courage to create the relational foundation that is necessary for doing activities together, for talking more frequently and with greater depth, for writing to each other, and for otherwise spending meaningful time together reinventing their relationship.

REFERENCES


