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Chat-Room Voices of Divorced Non-Residential Fathers

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This study uses postings by divorced fathers to an unmoderated Internet chat room to sound and analyze their voices. The findings show that the posters expressed an acute sense of powerlessness with respect to their status as non-residential fathers, the imposition of child support, the mothers of their children, the family courts, and lawyers and helping professionals. Although most of their grievances have already been reported in the literature on non-custodial post-divorce parenting, the anonymous postings allow us to hear an intensity of feeling that comes through much more faintly in studies based on interviews or focus groups. Since the posters seem to be a particularly aggrieved and angry group of men who are unlikely to seek professional counseling, the authors suggest professional intervention via the Internet. The challenges that chat room data poses to research are noted.

Key words: chat-room, divorced fathers, non-residential fathers, child support, family court

Despite increases in joint custody, some 80% of divorced fathers do not enjoy "equal parenting" (Bauserman, 2002) because of the simple fact that they no longer live under the

same roof as their children. Over a third of divorced fathers do not visit (Fischer, 2002; King, 1994; Nelson, 2004; Seltzer, 1991; Stephen, 1996) or pay child support (Dubey, 1995; King, 1994; Menning, 2002; Nelson, 2004; Seltzer, 1991), while others do so only sporadically. Growing concern about the deleterious affects of father absence or uninvolved involvement on their children (Jacobs, 1983; Minton & Pasley, 1996) and of non-payment of child support (Bailey & Zvonkovic, 2003; Dubey, 1995; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001) has issued in extensive research into non-residential fathers. Most of this research focuses on identifying factors that contribute to the quality of their involvement with their children (Arditti, 1992; 1999; Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991; Dudley, 1991; Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 1990; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Shapiro & Lambert, 1999; Stephen, 1996), their motives for disengaging from their children (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Greif, 1995; Kruk, 1991, 1992), and their reasons for not paying child support (Arendell, 1992; Mandell, 1995).

As a result of this research, we have gained understanding of the legal and structural disadvantages that make post-divorce parenting a formidable challenge for fathers, such as the lack of practical authority to make day-to-day decisions regarding their children (e.g., Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Buehler & Gerard, 1995; Grall, 2003) and the constraints and artificiality of visitation arrangements (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). We have also gained understanding of some of the interpersonal and emotional impediments to post-divorce fathering, including conflicts with the ex-wife (Maccoby et al., 1990), feelings of inadequacy as parents (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000), and difficulties of separating the role of father from the role of husband (Baum, 2006).

Only a small number of the studies are qualitative. Most of these focus on disengaged fathers or fathers who refuse to pay child support (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Kruk, 1991, 1992; Greif, 1995; Mandell, 1995). The exceptions are Umberson and Williams' (1993) study, of the possible reasons why parenting in the divorced status may contribute to divorced fathers' paternal role strain, psychological distress, and alcohol abuse, in which mostly involved fathers are interviewed, and Lehr

and MacMillan's (2001) study of an atypical research sample of 18 young single fathers who were unemployed or had low paying hourly wage jobs.

Qualitative studies like these have the potential of allowing us to hear the voices of the fathers who, in most cases were interviewed (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Greif, 1995; Kruk, 1991, 1992; Mandell, 1995), and in one, answered several open-ended questions in a mail survey (Dudley, 1991). Hearing the fathers' voices is important because it is only through their voices that we can understand their experience as divorced fathers in all its depth and complexity. The authors who undertook these studies were pioneers in the field who focused attention on the feelings and experiences of divorced fathers. They managed to reach and obtain the cooperation of men who tend to be reluctant to participate in research and, in many cases, find it difficult to speak about the highly personal and charged subject of the inquiry.

With this, there is cause to wonder whether their studies capture and convey the full range of divorced fathers' voices. The studies of absent and non-paying fathers focus on the question of why the fathers are remiss and judiciously select a small number of representative quotations that, in the authors' views, help to explain the phenomenon (Dudley, 1991; Greif, 1995; Kruk, 1991, 1992; Mandell, 1995). The other two studies (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Mandell, 1995) quote more amply. Only Lehr and MacMillan's (2001) study, however, intentionally sets out to make heard the voices of the interviewed fathers; it is also the only study that seeks to learn about the fathers' experiences rather than to answer a set question.

In order to learn more about the feelings and experiences of divorced non-residential fathers, the authors of the present study decided to turn to an Internet chat room. Online chat rooms are a haven for thousands of self-help groups addressing health-related and emotional issues. They are used by victims of rape, victims of domestic violence, alcohol and drug addicts, veterans, minority groups, and a host of persons with special proclivities or needs, such as vegetarians, celibates, religious groups, dating groups (Schofield, 1998), and animal rights groups (Herzog, Dinoff & Page, 2004). Empirical studies show that they have special appeal to persons with

stigmatizing disorders, who find that the anonymity of the Internet makes chat rooms welcome venues in which to discuss sensitive issues (King, 1999; Klemm & Hardie, 2002). There are also chat rooms for divorced fathers.

Open, un-moderated chat groups, such as the one used in this study, are an untapped source of knowledge about non-residential fathers. In the absence of prior study, there is no way of anticipating what concerns those fathers who use chat rooms or what they share. For research purposes, such chat rooms have the advantage of enabling undirected, unsolicited communications of persons who can write when they want, prompted not by an interviewer but only by their need or desire to express themselves. The anonymity of the Internet allows easier self-disclosure (Galinsky, Schopler & Abell, 1997; Klemm & Nolan, 1998; Madara, 1997), while the absence of an interviewer or group facilitator reduces the inhibitions that stem from the desire to maintain "face."

Methodology

Sample

We examined messages posted over a three month period in a non-moderated online discussion group for non-residential fathers titled "alt.dads-rights." During this period, 603 messages were posted. After irrelevant messages (i.e., advertisements, messages posted by women) were eliminated, the sample comprised 450 messages.

Most of the messages were three to four paragraphs long, telling the fathers' own stories and current grievances. As in other online discussion groups, the messages were mostly part of an ongoing discussion. As such, the informal written conventions are in some ways analogous to expressive intonations and fluctuations in speech. For example, when a participant wrote his message, or part of it, in capital letters, it was if he were raising his voice for emphasis. For the sake of authenticity, we quote the messages as they were written, including foul language and errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, syntax and grammar. However, we removed all references to date and time lest they enabled tracing the poster and we assigned each message an anonymous code number.

Ethics

As stated above, participants in on-line discussion groups make their statements in an open forum, which anyone can enter and read, and with as much anonymity as they wish. The subjects were not recruited for the study; the researcher had no contact with them; and they are neither identifiable nor traceable. Hence, there is no risk that their privacy is violated, that sensitive personal information can be disclosed in the study, or that they will be discomforted or inconvenienced. Hence, HSIRB review was not requested.

Data Analysis

The analysis was performed independently by the authors, both social work researchers experienced in qualitative research, applying grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analysis was conducted in three stages. We first performed open coding, identifying the major themes and labeling each message, "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). This phase of the analysis ended with the grouping and labeling of the non-residential fathers' perspectives on their relationships with their children and former spouses; their interactions with attorneys, courts, and judges; their financial and residential situations; and other issues. The next stage in the content analysis was "axial coding," making connections between the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis concluded with inductively-generated categories which reflect the frame of reference of the respondents.

Findings

The non-residential fathers in our sample expressed an acute sense of powerlessness in several areas: with respect to their status as non-residential fathers, the imposition of child support, the mothers of their children, the family courts, and lawyers and helping professionals.

Powerlessness and Despair as Non-residential Fathers

Many fathers in our study conveyed an overwhelming sense of despair, to the point of feeling that they had been

destroyed or annihilated, at their non-residential status. One participant signed his message with the statement: "Welcome to the real world of 'Uncle Sam Screws The NCP [non-custodial parent]' " (#154 0534). Another father's e-mail address includes the words, "nobody nowhere." Another father wrote: "I'm just a non-entity, or more accurately a father" (#174 2259). Another signed his message with the statement: "Dad's Been Beat to Death" (#184 1031).

More than a few wrote of their longing for their non-residential children. They felt that they had lost their children, that their rights to them had been taken away, and that they had no legal recourse: Thus, one father signed his message: "Have you seen my children? I wish I could." (#254 1709). Another ended his e-mail with the statement: "Have a great day, remember our children are ours too, and we also need the laws to support us!" (#154 0931). Yet another wrote: "It seems that I have absolutely no rights when it comes to my daughter" (#274 1526).

Some fathers felt that the very fact that they live in different households from their children set severe limits on their ability to play a meaningful parental role:

The term non-custodial parent is an oxymoron. One cannot be a parent without the day to day physical proximity to the child. [...] Occasional visitation does not provide sufficient time to learn the nuances of each others characters, to properly bond.... (#154 0524)

Let's say [cause it's true right now] that my 4-year-old-daughter is with me for two hours every Wednesday evening, and 6 p.m. Friday to 6 p.m. Sunday every other week. Let's do the math. In a two-week period, she is with her mother 84.5 hours of the time, and with me 15.5 hours of the time. [...] This is not particularly 'sharing' of time, it certainly isn't 'parenting' time....(#245 0731)

Others wrote of their frustration with the rigid visitation arrangements:

I see no reason why a NCP [non-custodial parent] should be kept from announced visits outside of the residential schedule. "Gee there is a good movie playing, I'd like to take the kids to" or "I just got our

daughters report card and would like to take her outto celibrate" type or deal or better yet "I just got back from sea after 6 mo. and would like to just say hi and take the kids out for pizza" or to help with school work or sporting events or whatever. This would be good for the kids... But unshceduled disruptions at anytime... This would be counter productive... (#224 0712)

Fathers who had joint legal custody and paid child support emphasized the lack of parental authority regarding decisions pertaining to the child. These fathers highlighted the difference between their legal status, which supposedly allowed them to participate equally in the decisions concerning their children, and their lack of a substantive role in their children's lives:

Here in Illinois the concept of "joint custody" is still just that, a concept. There is nothing joint about it. Sometimes the actual time with the children awarded to the father in a joint custody situation may be 50%, but because the mother is still the residential parent... It's supposed to mean that both parents have input into medical, educational, and religious issues regarding the children. The extent to which that happens depends largely on the mother... That's the parent who the kids live with. That parent (in Illinois) is spelled, "M-O-M" in 91% of divorces.... (#264 1941)

Joint custody is a sham... At least in my state... Even in joint custody there is a Custodial parent and a Non-custodial parent... I can not make decisions concerning our daughter without the mothers consent... But she can do it without mine... (#224 0712)

Powerlessness with Regard to Child Support Payments

The vast majority of the fathers expressed frustration, anger, and a sense of powerlessness over child support payments:

My ex has just filed to have the support increased and there is nothing that I can do but bend over. (#284 0840)

I cannot afford to pay any more than I am [...] (#294 1556)

When the traditional family [father works, mother raises kids at home] is broken, the man is socked heavy with child support and alimony. (#26 0848)

I have been divorced for just over a year now and have a three year old daughter, who was awarded to my ex. All I got was the bills. (#284 0840)

I am tired of getting the shaft! [...] I pay \$800 a month in child support, which leaves me about \$20.00 a week take home. (#154 1704)

Here in america men, especially fathers, find themselves at an extreme disadvantage. Did you see the president on TV tell fathers and all men in general, "we will find you, we will make you pay". His implication is that all the social ills we face today are the fault of fathers and if you'd just reach a little deeper into your pocket and cough up a little more "child support" money all would be fine. (#244 1824)

The only way to get out of the 'child support' [...] is suicide or murder" (#154 2142).

Powerlessness in Relation to the Mother of the Non-residential Children

Most of the fathers disclosed a sense of extreme powerlessness vis-à-vis their children's mother, whether former wife or cohabiting partner. The mothers were usually depicted as powerful and malicious, the fathers powerless and oppressed.

A recurrent area of conflict with the children's mothers was visitation. The fathers frequently viewed the mothers as spitefully and arbitrarily putting obstacles in the way of their attempts to visit the children. For example: "My ex-bitch has interfered with my court ordered access to my children [...] My ex has not allowed me to have these access rights for the past two years. (#45 1448); "She got a 'no-contact' order and I can't even call my daughter, she has to call me when she feels like it." (#174 2259). Other fathers stated:

I went in on an emergency petition today to see my

son who I haven't seen in several months because his unccoperative mother—actually monster from the deep—refuses to let me see him ever since she moved in with her new cocksman who she wants to care for my kid.... (#224 1822)

I lost my kids when my wife moved 500 miles away while I was at work. I lost at the temporary custody hearing. I know that I have no prayer of winning them back at the final hearing. [...] I also know that there is little more that can be done to me to make my life any worse [...] I have nothing to loose at this point [...] I want my wife punished. (#284 1514)

My son was born 17 days ago, and I have yet to see him. The mother didn't even call me when she went into labor. I went to the hospital the next day and was denied seeing my son by her and the hospital. As of today, she or her family have yet to contact me. I was advised not to call her because she could accuse me of harassment, which would ultimately go against me in any type of custody hearing. (#174 0539)

Another area of recurrent conflict was child support payments. Some non-residential fathers depicted the mothers as exploitative women used their child support money to pay for their personal needs:

the CP [custodial parent] should NOT be allowed to use child support money to pay mortgage on a house.... (#154 2142)

she gets 1/2 my check and now is buying a house and has cellphones.... (#154 0518)

In todays system "child support" is money taken from men and given to women if proof of a sexual encounter is proven. The child is used for proof and then forgotten. Child support IS for the ex.... (#154 2142)

Some accused the mother of using the child support allowance for their own personal needs and neglecting the children's:

I paying 33% of my net income \$1,000/month....+ 30% of my net bonus. My ex-wife doesn't work....she live off of the child support...the kids live in poverty. (#304 0908)

The x has the farm (valued at 380K), two cars, all animals and farm equipment, and won't pay for kids activities like gymnastics or swimming, largely because she refuses to work. [...] Why isn't she accountable for her childrens' financial well-being too? [...] There is no incentive for her to actually do this as it means that she would get less support. (#164 0930)

Some messages conveyed non-residential fathers' sense of being at war with their former wives/partners. They wrote of defending their meager rights and assets against a powerful opponent who was trying to exploit and destroy them by taking their money and depriving them of their parental rights. In doing so, they used terms like "fighting for his rights," being "hostages," and "court battle." One father asked, "If I later decide to file for full custody, what will be my main weapons—income, videotapes of my child's shitty living conditions, a private detective tailgating her, etc?" (#224 1822). Another asked for recommendations for an attorney who "Needs to be a fighter" (#174 0539).

Powerlessness in Relation to the Family Courts

Numerous fathers expressed a sense of powerlessness and victimization vis-à-vis the family courts. Thus, one father signed his message with the statement: "In the next lifetime you get justice. In this lifetime you get a ruling" (#294 0458). Another stated: "My advice: Count your fingers after you shake hands with the judge" (#264 1941), while another wrote: "My ex is constantly taking me to court for more money [...] I guess they just think dads are toys for their entertainment" (#226 0117).

Quite a few fathers felt that they had no chance of presenting their side of the case to the court.

I am out of funds, out of energy to fight it because dad's

don't have rights as you are finding out in the Michigan Family Court System. (#185 0101)

I am currently involved in support and visitation case in Michigan.... Everything I have tried has not accomplished a thing. I haven't even been able to say one word in court on my behalf. (#85 0912)

The courts could give a crap about fathers no matter how much you demonstrate that you love your child more than anything else in the world—I'm living proof. (#304 1322)

Some fathers perceive the judicial system as biased and discriminatory: For example: "I am claiming; Judicial Incompetency, Judicial Improprieties, Discrimination [...]." (#65 0242); "Men have absolutely no rights in court or under the law when it comes to CS [child support]" (#304 2259); "Here in America father's are treated as slaves without rights by the family court system" (#154 1641). Another stated, "When I took her [child's mother] over the contempt, the X Superior Court awarded her small NINETY TWO percent increase in child support based solely upon her word" (#45 1448).

Some fathers accused the legal system of favoring women: "Every law book I have read is worded to be geared for women and against men, when it comes to family matters" (#304 2250). Others stated:

Unfortunately, the states' court systems promote the abuse of power by custodial parents and their attorneys. Visitation, participation in kids education and health decisions, etc are all immediately jeajardized and Fathers lose their kids! (#174 0835)

Those few "men" who do not pay their CS [child support] are the ... target of the govt., however, the laws enacted to enforce the coolection etc. from those few men affect ALL men who are in this situation. I say "few men" because compared on a gender/pay ration, WOMEN far exceed the number of men who do not pay CS [child support] or fall behind.... (#304 2250)

Some fathers contended that the legal system's bias against fathers is contrary to the best interests of the children and is destructive of families and of father-child relationships:

The Family Law courts destroy families and relationships between fathers and their children. (#36 1149)

The notion that family law exists to protect the interests of children is a farce to anyone who has studied the law. The law deliberately denies many protections to children, preferring instead to divide the rights of children between their parents, parcelling them out like objects in a property dispute.... (#304 2250)

Powerlessness in Relation to Lawyers and Helping Professionals

Both lawyers and helping professionals were viewed negatively. Lawyers were repeatedly depicted as unreliable, harmful, or greedy:

I lost custody of Ricky 3rd and Jennifer (I'm crying now please help me Lord) because the lawyer said i did not have to go to the hearing that she [the lawyer] would. Well she didn't and told me it was all my fault. So I lost for nonappearance. Now they take 85% of my income and I can not afford to keep my home for Joseph... (#274 2146)

Even if parents could focus on the well being of their children, lawyers and the system would not allow it. Beating fathers to death has become the national pastime... (#244 1824)

It seems that I have absolutely no rights when it comes to my [non-residential] daughter, unless I want to fork over even more money to my attorney. (#274 1526)

Helping professionals, including child therapists, pediatricians specializing in child abuse, social workers, child protective workers, and psychologists, were generally targeted by fathers who had been accused of child abuse. These fathers felt that once accused, they had no hope of clearing their name, as

the professionals involved were biased to believe the mothers.

If you have been falsely accused of abuse, some of the toughest individuals to deal with are child protection professionals. This includes attorneys that represent children, child custody evaluators, children's therapists, pediatricians specializing in child abuse, child protective service workers and other such so called professionals. What frustrates me about many these so called child protectionists is their inability to show any empathy to the falsely accused dad. Once the mother has made the allegation, the professional immediately treats the accused father as some sort of second class citizen.... (#224 0113)

My daughters were taken away by a social worker based upon completely false charges of abuse. It took me years to clear my name, but by that time my daughters had been moved out of state. Despite the fact that all the charges were dismissed, despite the fact that I currently have legal and physical custody of my two sons, I not only can't get my daughters back, I can't even visit them. The problem is that social workers exist outside the criminal justice system. (#234 1030)

Discussion

Before discussing the findings, the serious methodological limitations that chat room data pose for research must be noted (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1999; Wittel, 2000). Users of chat rooms are a self-selected group who choose this forum of expression for their own reasons, whether its easy access, their lack of access to other sources of help or community, or internal pressures. Thus, it is not only that the fathers in this study, as in other qualitative studies, including those of divorced fathers, are not a representative group. It is also that they are a group whose choice to avail themselves of the chat room may mean that they share distinct features which bear on their responses. All this has implications for the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, chat room entries contain no socio-demographic information; the researcher foregoes the ability

afforded by face-to-face interviews to draw upon visual and auditory cues and body language; and contributors may make multiple submissions using different pseudonyms or might not be who they say they are. Moreover, the data are limited to what the posters choose to reveal, with no way for the researcher to clarify or probe. Although other studies have been carried out using data drawn from chat room entries (e.g., Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Garton et al., 1999; Wittel, 2000), the methodological limitations of this research method must be taken into account in interpreting the findings.

The first finding of note is that the Internet postings convey mainly the angry outpourings of fathers who are highly aggrieved over the losses, constraints, frustrations, and perceived injustices of post-divorce, non-residential parenting. There are few postings directly expressing feelings of sadness—at the loss of the child, the wife, and the home—that are heard more clearly in other qualitative studies of non-residential fathers (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Greif, 1995; Kruk, 1991, 1992; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Mandell, 1995; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Whatever sadness there is behind the postings that refer to the loss of the child is largely buried under anger at the wife and about the violation of the father's rights.

The second is that most of their grievances have already been reported in the literature on non-custodial post-divorce parenting. These include the fathers' difficulties in fathering without physical proximity to the child, their loss of authority and input into their children's lives, the artificiality of visiting only at pre-determined times, resentment at paying child support, and the sense of victimization by the child's mother, a biased legal system, and greedy lawyers (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993). The literature also reports on the pain and emotional difficulties experienced by non-residential fathers (Minton & Pasley, 1996; Nielsen, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), which we hear in these postings.

With this, the postings allow us to hear an intensity of feeling that comes through much more faintly in studies based on interviews or focus groups. The major feeling that runs through the postings in connection with all the grievances is the men's utter sense of powerlessness. We hear these feelings of

powerlessness in regard to their seeing their children and playing a meaningful role in their lives, in regard to their maintenance payments, and with respect to their children's mother, the legal system, and, in a few cases, the child protection workers who barred them access to their children on the basis of what the posters claim were false accusations of abuse.

Posters who had joint legal custody apparently felt no more empowered than those who did not. To these fathers, the fact that the children lived with their mothers turned the joint custody into a hollow abstraction and a sham. Their lack of day-to-day contact with their children and their dependence on the mother as gatekeeper meant that the decisions regarding their children were effectively made by the mother with little input from themselves.

The sense of powerlessness issued in strong expressions of fury and despair. There were posters who wrote of feeling annihilated and destroyed, that they had no more to lose, or that suicide or murder was the only exit they could envision from compulsory child support payments. Few of the postings, including those that steer clear of coarseness, do not convey intense rage.

The rage also seems to have been fed by the sense among some of the men that they were deprived not only of their paternal role, but also of their identity as fathers. This sense comes through most strongly in the postings on the frustrations of non-residential parenting. In these postings, we hear the voices of men who miss their children and long for a meaningful role in their lives. In some cases, we also hear their sense that their non-residential status has taken from them a vital element of their identity. This comes through very strongly, for example, in the statement: "I'm just a non-entity, or more accurately a father." With the father role sapped of its content, the men, too, feel emptied. Even though the formidable difficulties of non-residential fathering have been recognized for several decades now, the immensity of the loss of the paternal identity is not fully appreciated by legal and helping professionals. To some extent, the posters' sense of powerlessness in face of the courts, lawyers, and social workers testify to this.

This expressed rage seems untempered by self-reflection. Many of the postings are in the third person, which allows the fathers to distance from their emotions and to avoid considering their own input into the weakening of their relationship with their children, their conflicts with their wives, or the actions of the courts and professionals.

On the whole, the fathers seem to have experienced themselves as victims. The objective deprivations of non-residential parenting, with its rigid, unnatural, and limiting visiting arrangements and the lack of day-to-day input in the children's lives, are severe and well documented. There can be little doubt of the objective difficulties that lower and even middle income men have in paying child support, which some of the posters expressed.

Along with these objective factors, however, we also hear a note of narcissistic injury in some of the postings. For example, in the posting by the father who states that his ex-wife refused to allow him to see his son after she moved in with "her new cocksman," we hear the jealousy and anger of a man who feels that he has been supplanted. The note of narcissistic injury comes across in several of the postings regarding child support. The father who wrote that he was left with no option but to "bend over" when the court awarded his wife an increase in child support seems to have felt deeply humiliated by the award. The fathers who objected to their ex-wives using their child support money to pay for mortgages or cellphones, both of which can be viewed as expenditures that meet the needs of the children, seemed to have been angered by the possibility that their ex-wives might derive some benefit from the payments. Some of the complaints—for example that the president spoke out against fathers who defaulted on child support payments and that "the court could give a crap about fathers"—convey the posters' feelings of being undervalued, disregarded or targeted.

It is impossible to know from the postings whether this intense, all pervasive sense of powerlessness and the feelings to which it gives rise are episodic or ongoing. It is also impossible to know whether they are common among non-residential fathers or a distinct characteristic of the sub-group who chose to voice their grievances in the forum of an Internet chat

group. As noted above, most of our knowledge of the feelings of non-residential fathers to date has come from interviews and focus groups. It may be that the fathers in these settings were inhibited by the presence of the interviewer or group facilitator and kept their feelings muted. Alternatively, it may be that the sample of chat room posters differs from other research samples, who are generally recruited from social settings like schools, churches, and facilitated support groups (Arendell, 1992, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Greif, 1995; Kruk, 1991, 1992; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993).

Even if the sense of powerlessness and the rage and despair in which it issues are particularly acute in this group of men, it is important to hear their voices. For one thing, their voices may teach us what other non-residential fathers also feel, albeit less strongly. Moreover, the intensity of their feelings of powerlessness and rage suggests that they may be a high risk group that needs professional help. Their writing to an Internet list may be understood as a means of reaching out and calling for help. As suggested above, the posters may be men who have few other sources of social support. Although we cannot know from the postings whether and which of these men have obtained professional help, the literature indicates that little professional help is directed towards helping divorced men cope with their feelings and with the painful psychological processes involved in becoming a non-residential father (e.g., Baum, 2004).

The voices of these men suggest that one possibility of helping them might be to offer professional help using the same medium through which they have chosen to seek help: the Internet chat room. As has been pointed out, online discussion groups can serve as support groups, providing emotional support, encouragement, advice and information (e.g., Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998). Such on-line support is usually provided by peers-who wrestle with similar issues. There is no reason that professionals should not be able to add their assistance as well to divorced fathers who have turned to their peers on the Internet.

Two methods of assistance might be considered. One would be for professionals to enter open chat rooms. The other would be to set up a website of their own offering help to divorced fathers. In both forums, the professional would reply to the

questions asked and offer comments and observations that are not specifically solicited but that pertain to matters that arise in post-divorce parenting. These might include, for example, recognizing and mourning the losses of divorce, separating the parenting from the spousal role, and adapting to the non-residential role and obligations in ways that are both supportive of their children and in keeping with their own strengths and limitations (Bailey & Zvonkovic, 2003). The professionals could also help fathers who are able to get in touch with the feelings of sadness and loss that underlie their anger and to reflect on their feelings and actions.

Since it would probably be counter-productive to ask these men to pay for the professional help, consideration would have to be given to how to finance it. It is important that professionals who offer services on the net be paid for them and be held to all the legal and ethical requirements of their profession. Financing might be provided by a governmental or non-governmental social service agency, as is done for some chat room forums dealing with severe health problems (Shaw, MaTavish, Hawkins, Gustafson & Pingree, 2000; Weis, 2003).

Several avenues of further study are recommended. One would be to study the voices of fathers in other chat rooms and forums, with the aim of ascertaining the generalizability of the findings from the present study sample. Of particular interest is whether other chat rooms for non-residential fathers similarly seem to serve mainly those who are angry and disgruntled. Another avenue would be to try to ascertain what can and cannot be learned from chat room data compared to other sources of data. A third would be to try to learn more about post-divorce paternal identity by listening to the voices of divorced fathers. A fourth would be to examine non-residential fathers' motives for going on-line.

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