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Renegotiating Nonresidential Father–Child Relationships During Emerging Adulthood

Father–child relationships tend to decrease in quality and closeness following parental divorce, yet little is known about how these relationships evolve in response to normative developmental changes in children. We conducted a grounded theory study of how 33 emerging adults maintained or changed their relationships with their nonresidential fathers during the transition to adulthood. In-depth interviews revealed that some father–child relationships were unchanged by divorce, but most became more distant immediately following parental separation. During emerging adulthood these relationships did not necessarily become closer, but communication often increased and stressful interactions decreased for some, especially when compared to childhood. The findings suggest that normative changes that accompany emerging adulthood (e.g., leaving home, gaining new insight about themselves and their families) may facilitate renewed connections between previously distant nonresidential fathers and children.

There is a large body of research examining the processes that either facilitate or hinder healthy

outcomes of children in postdivorce families (e.g., Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Amato, 2010). Although this literature has focused mainly on the well-being of children and adolescents whose parents divorce, there is some evidence suggesting that the transition to adulthood also may be a time when individuals reevaluate their parents' divorce and how they were affected by it (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Nielsen, 2011).

Arnett (2004) described emerging adulthood as a period between 18 and 25 years old that is marked by identity exploration and opportunity as well as by relational and financial instability. Positive contact with parents has been found to increase emerging adults' self-esteem, improve their life satisfaction, and lower their psychological distress as they pursue higher education and other goals (Finley & Schwartz, 2010). Compared to emerging adults with married parents, however, those with divorced parents are less likely to have frequent contact with either parent, and maintaining contact with fathers is especially challenging (Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, & Greenbaum, 2009; Nielsen, 2011). There is also evidence that emerging adults' relationships with their nonresidential fathers are important for their well-being (Amato, 2010; Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011). What remains unclear is how emerging adults' relationships with their nonresidential fathers change (or do not change) when they turn 18 and are no longer subject to the custody arrangements outlined in their parents' legal divorce agreement.

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BACKGROUND

Emerging Adults with Divorced Parents

Each year nearly 1 million children experience parental divorce, and more than 25% of freshman in American colleges report that their parents are no longer married to each other (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2009). Research has focused primarily on the short-term effects of marital dissolution on children and adolescents (Ahrns, 2007). However, widespread social concern about the well-being of children in postdivorce families led researchers to conduct several longitudinal studies addressing divorce-related outcomes over time (most notably Ahrns & Tanner, 2003; Hetherington, 1992; Wallerstein, 1991). Although these longitudinal studies varied widely both in their methods and in their findings, one of the key general findings was that divorce affects children differently depending on their age at the time of divorce. With respect to adulthood, all three studies found that the long-term impact of parental divorce varied depending on family context (e.g., level of conflict, parents' new partnerships). Ahrns and Tanner (2003) also found that adults' outcomes depended on normative developmental changes (e.g., shifting parental roles in adult children's lives). Although the acute stressors of divorce (e.g., adjusting to life in two households) may have long abated, the relationships between young adults and their parents remain important. For emerging adults, this typically takes the form of needing family support as they navigate new responsibilities and freedoms associated with adulthood while retaining some of the needs of adolescence such as parental emotional and financial support (Arnett, 2004).

The literature on emerging adult outcomes following parental divorce includes robust findings from both large quantitative surveys and rich qualitative investigations. Compared to emerging adults with married parents, individuals whose parents divorced during childhood are less likely to form and maintain romantic attachments (Cartwright, 2006; Kilmann, 2006; Weigel, 2007), have poorer mental health (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995), have more difficulty controlling their emotions and calming down in the face of acute stressors (Conway, Christensen, & Herlihy, 2003), have worse relationships with their parents (particularly daughters with fathers; Knox, Zusman,

& DeCuzzi, 2004; Nielsen, 2011), and have lower achievements in both school and work (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). Despite the limitations of the studies on which these findings were based (i.e., the samples were composed primarily of Whites, females, and college students; for exceptions, see Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001), there is strong evidence that emerging adults who experienced a parental divorce during their childhood are more likely to have social and academic problems than those whose parents were continuously married (Amato, 2010).

However, the assumption that divorce causes long-term distress in all families is misguided. The majority (75%–80%) of children whose parents divorce become healthy, well-functioning adults and have healthy relationships with their parents (Ahrns, 2007). Nearly one-third of emerging adults have reported that their parents' divorce had a positive effect on their families, whereas only 26% reported negative effects (Knox et al., 2004). Parental divorce can result in positive experiences despite the presence of divorce-related stressors, especially if the divorce reduces family conflict (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Nonetheless, the varied outcomes of divorce for parent–child relationships and for individual well-being suggest that studies of relational processes are needed to shed light on how family members adapt to divorce transitions.

Parent–Child Contact

Supportive contact between children and both of their parents has been linked to positive outcomes in postdivorce families (see Kelly, 2012). Establishing and maintaining parent–child contact after divorce, however, is influenced by many environmental and developmental factors (Kelly, 2012). Although parent–child contacts are legally established through family courts via physical custody arrangements (Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012; Kelly, 2004), these arrangements tend to shift both formally and informally over time (Kelly, 2004). As children age, they may begin to exercise control over the amount of time they spend with parents. Children's control intensifies when they reach adulthood and no longer are bound by guidelines set forth in the divorce agreement (Lux, 2010). This shift from legal guidelines to interpersonal methods for maintaining parental contact is an

important process because it has implications for whether emerging adults maintain contact with both parents, only one parent, or neither parent (Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009).

Nearly three-quarters of college students with divorced parents report that their mothers were their primary caretakers (Ferrante, Stolberg, Macie, & Williams, 2008). Fewer than 7% of children spend more than 25% of their time with their fathers after divorce (Kelly, 2012), and 23% of college students reported spending no time with their fathers after their parents divorced (Ferrante et al., 2008). Although the amount of nonresidential father–child contact has increased in the past three decades (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009), the overall percentage of American children living primarily with their mothers has remained relatively stable (Kelly, 2007).

Despite legal, geographic, and interpersonal barriers, many nonresidential fathers maintain regular contact with their children (Kelly, 2012). Consistent father–child contact has been found to be important for younger children and for emerging adults (Leite & McKenry, 2002), yet nonresidential fathers often reduce the time and resources they provide to children following divorce (Furstenburg & Cherlin, 1991; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Although some nonresident fathers fit the negative stereotype (see Grall, 2006), there are many who want to financially support and maintain contact with their children, and most have positive attitudes about sharing care for their children (Smyth & Weston, 2004).

Children of all ages (including emerging adults) generally desire greater contact with their nonresidential fathers (Fabricius, 2003; Finley & Schwartz, 2007), want to have more conversations with them (Nielsen, 2006), and wish for greater contact flexibility than they had when they were younger (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). These desires are often offset, however, by the actions and opinions of their residential mothers. Most college students (70%–80%) whose parents divorced believed that their fathers wanted more time with them, but they also were cautious about fostering more contact because of their mothers' opposition (Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius & Hall, 2000). Adjusting parent–child relationships from parent superiority and influence to those in which mothers respect children's independence is a slow and gradual process (Arnett, 2004). Thus, a better understanding of nonresidential

father–child relationships requires investigation of the factors that contribute to contact during the transition to adulthood.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationships between emerging adults and their nonresidential fathers during the transition to adulthood. Supportive contact from fathers may protect emerging adults from common developmental stressors (Fabricius, 2003). For example, supportive contact predicts success in college (Fabricius, Braver, & Deneau, 2003; Menning, 2006). However, little is known about whether and how emerging adults gain agency in shaping the postdivorce father–child relationship from childhood through the transition to adulthood. Thus, we used grounded theory methods to answer the central question: How (if at all) do emerging adults perceive that their relationships with their nonresidential fathers have changed during the transition from childhood to adulthood?

METHOD

Grounded theory methods (GTMs) are a systematic, qualitative approach to understanding social processes. They are particularly appropriate when processes have seldom been investigated. GTMs are flexible approaches to collecting and analyzing under-investigated phenomena, such as the perspectives of emerging adults on postdivorce family life and the specific processes associated with parent–child relationship maintenance. GTMs provide a set of tools for investigating the intra- and interpersonal processes that shape father–child relationships following divorce.

Sample

Study participants were recruited from a large Midwestern university through e-mail advertisements, listservs, announcements in classes, and by word of mouth. Respondents to these ads completed a screening interview via e-mail, which was used to establish eligibility for the study and to identify subsets of the sample for more focused analysis. The screening form included demographics, questions about roughly how much time the respondent had lived with each parent following divorce (<25%, 50%,

Table 1. Key Characteristics of Participants (N = 33)

Name	Type of Relationship	Gender	Age	Age at Divorce	Percentage of Time Lived with Father	Relationship with father	Remarriage
David	Stable (-)	M	21	3	25% or less	Good	Both
Veronica	Stable (-)	W	18	17	25% or less	Poor	Neither
Ann	Stable (+)	W	20	18	25% or less	Excellent	Neither
Brooke	Stable (+)	W	21	4	25% or less	Good	Both
Eva	Stable (+)	W	19	5	25% or less	Excellent	Both
Ingram	Stable (+)	W	21	2	25% or less	Good	Both
James	Stable (+)	M	20	1	25% or less	Excellent	Mother
Kristen	Stable (+)	W	20	7	25% or less	Good	Both
Rebecca	Stable (+)	W	20	18	Nearly 100%	Good	Neither
Yvonne	Stable (+)	W	19	9	About 50%	Good	Neither
Jen	Changed (W)	W	21	4	25% or less	Good	Both
Sam	Changed (W)	M	22	16	About 75%	Good	Mother
Abby	Changed (W,I)	W	21	2	25% or less	Fair	Father
Amy	Changed (W,I)	W	20	9	25% or less	Good	Both
Cynthia	Changed (W,I)	W	18	12	25% or less	Poor	Neither
Dianne	Changed (W,I)	W	23	9	—	—	Both
Fiona	Changed (W,I)	W	19	2	25% or less	Excellent	Both
Gloria	Changed (W,I)	W	23	10	25% or less	Good	Neither
Gwen	Changed (W,I)	W	21	12	25% or less	Excellent	Father
Hilary	Changed (W,I)	W	21	3	25% or less	Good	Mother
Julia	Changed (W,I)	W	18	5	25% or less	Good	Both
Liam	Changed (W,I)	M	22	13	about 50%	Excellent	Father
Lucy	Changed (W,I)	W	19	5	25% or less	Excellent	Mother
Louis	Changed (W,I)	M	19	17	25% or less	Good	Neither
Marie	Changed (W,I)	W	20	2	25% or less	Fair	Both
Natalie	Changed (W,I)	W	21	5	25% or less	Fair	Both
Penny	Changed (W,I)	W	21	17	25% or less	Good	Neither
Robert	Changed (W,I)	M	19	17	About 50%	Good	Father
Susan	Changed (W,I)	W	20	8	25% or less	Good	Neither
Sylvester	Changed (W,I)	M	20	14	About 50%	Excellent	Both
Thomas	Changed (W,I)	M	20	1	25% or less	Fair	Father
Valerie	Changed (W,I)	W	19	6	25% or less	Excellent	Neither
Zack	Changed (W,I)	M	19	17	25% or less	Excellent	Mother

Note. Stable (+) = always positive, stable (-) = always negative, changed (W) = worsened, changed (W,I) = worsened, then improved; M = man, W = woman. "Remarriage" refers to remarriage status of parents.

75%, and nearly 100%), and the quality of his or her current relationships with each parent (response options were *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, and *poor*).

A total of 9 men and 24 women met eligibility criteria; they were emerging adults between 18 and 25 years of age whose parents divorced before they were 18 and who indicated that they spent 50% or less of their time living with their nonresidential father from the time of the divorce to the age 18. At the time of participation in the present study, they ranged from 18 to 23 years of age ($M = 20.2$), and nearly all ($n = 31$)

were White and had completed at least some college. Thirteen had two parents who had remarried, five had a remarried father but unmarried mother, and five had a remarried mother but unmarried father; neither parent of the remaining 10 participants had remarried. Following the divorce, most participants reported spending the rest of the childhood living at least 75% of the time with their mothers; only six reported seeing their fathers more than 25% of the time after divorce (see Table 1 for a detailed description of each participant). Pseudonyms were used to protect identities.

Table 2. Complete Themes, Categories, and In Vivo Codes

Themes and Categories	In Vivo Codes
Consistent Relationships	
Always close to fathers	Always had a good relationship with [Dad] (Yvonne)
Close proximity to fathers	We only lived 8 minutes apart (Yvonne)
Open access to father's home	We pretty much [could] go right back and forth (Ann)
Fathers continuously engaged	He called a lot of times (Brooke); [Dad] will text me (Eva)
Lack of enmity between parents	[Mom] didn't bash [Dad], and he didn't bash her (Rebecca)
Never close to fathers	We never connected on a basic level (Veronica)
Long gaps in contact	I haven't seen him in a couple of years (David)
Stressed by parents	[My parents] have always been very volatile (Veronica)
Open to improvement	It could get better in the future (David)
Relationship with Father Changed	
Worsened following divorce	Getting distant (Gwen); Periods of no contact (Marie)
Sense of loss	I was reminded that he wasn't there (Natalie)
Awkwardness and discomfort around fathers	We had to sleep on blow up mattresses (Liam)
Ongoing conflict between parents	Big blow outs (Lucy); I felt really torn (Dianne)
Mothers had tarnished their fathers' image	A lot of things being put in my head (Dianne)
Improved relationships during emerging adulthood	[Our relationship] has gotten better as time goes on (Gwen)
Dad changed	[Dad] is definitely trying harder (Gloria)
Calls more	I have a lot of missed calls from [Dad] and messages (Gloria)
Financially supportive	Lately when I need something, I can call him (Cynthia)
Treats me as an adult	It seems like we're the same age now (Marie)
Participant changed	Time, maturity, getting over myself (Abby)
Perceived changes in their own maturity	[Now] I understand where he's coming from more (Gwen)
Lowered their expectations of fathers	Learned not to expect things of him (Hilary)
Developing a sense of obligation	I still need to [visit him], he's my father (Thomas)
Taking charge of communication	You guys can figure that out. Don't ask me about it (Lucy)

Procedure

Digitally recorded interviews were conducted in a university office. Interviews began with a genogram that identified all members of the emerging adult's family including parents, present and past partners of parents, siblings, stepsiblings, and anyone else participants wanted to include. Interviews followed a standard protocol, but questions were open ended and participants were prompted to expand on their responses throughout the interview. This flexible interviewing technique is common in grounded theory methods to elicit rich responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interviews progressed chronologically, beginning with the parents' divorce and asking about nonresidential father–child contact over time. Participants were also asked questions about relationships with their mothers to better understand the context of nonresidential father–child relationships. After conducting several interviews, we conducted follow-up interviews with eight participants to

clarify their responses or expand on emerging themes. Saturation was reached when new interviews no longer resulted in the creation of new codes and did not change the emerging themes from the study (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). The 60–90 minute interviews were transcribed verbatim. A \$10 gift card was given to participants.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory uses an inductive approach in which meanings and understandings come directly from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We used constant comparison techniques to derive codes and concepts from the data and compare them to previously developed themes and ideas. Using constant comparison techniques allowed us to move beyond description and toward building a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon of interest (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

We used open coding (i.e., analyzing each line of text) to yield a set of categories that represented how emerging adults defined and explained their relationships with their nonresidential fathers. Some of these categories became the basis for the results (e.g., always close; improved relationships during emerging adulthood), but others were trimmed for the sake of parsimony or subsumed under broader themes (e.g., financially supportive).

After deconstructing the data during open coding, we looked for relations among codes to generate broader themes (e.g., changed relationships). We created detailed tables (available on request) that helped organize the codes, participant quotes, and broader themes. These tables were used as analytical and organizational tools, which helped us to identify patterns and groupings of participants. Throughout the coding process, we wrote theoretical memos (i.e., a written record of analysis; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to formulate and refine themes and theoretical insights. All memos and codes were shared during weekly meetings with members of the research team—which comprised two professors and two doctoral students—to triangulate the data and confirm the validity of the themes as they developed (see Table 2 for codes).

The final stage of data analysis, theory elaboration, was completed through additional memo writing and using the table to compare subgroups in the sample. Data elaboration involves systematically working through the emerging findings to identify gaps or inconsistencies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). When problems arose, we returned to the raw data, memos, and analytical tables to adjust and reorganize the ideas.

RESULTS

We found that most father–child relationships were strained immediately after the divorce, but increased independence and the development of greater empathy during emerging adulthood provided an opportunity for continued or, in some cases, renewed (e.g., greater support, less conflict) connection between nonresidential fathers and their children. These changes unfolded depending on (a) parent–child interactions during the transition to adulthood and (b) emerging adults' perceptions of themselves and their fathers. In our sample, 10 participants

perceived that their relationships with their fathers were relatively consistent following parental divorce; the remaining 23 perceived that a notable change occurred during emerging adulthood.

Consistent Relationships

For a minority of emerging adults ($n = 10$), parental divorce did not change the father–child relationships in any perceptible way; we labeled these “consistent relationships.” Most consistent relationships were positive ($n = 8$); children had strong bonds with their fathers that were not strained by parental separation. For example, Rebecca stated, “The divorce hasn’t made ... me and my dad closer. Things have changed, but for the most part our relationship hasn’t changed.” About the divorce experience, she explained: “Didn’t really affect me that much. I wasn’t sad, crying, depressed, and all of that.” Yvonne thought that she might be an exception, not believing that others would have such positive relationships with parents who are no longer married to each other: “I’ve always had a good relationship with [my dad]... We just get along really well... I know most people wouldn’t be like that, but I felt that [our relationship] was the same [after the divorce].” However, her experiences were not as unique as she thought, given that nearly one-quarter of participants reported always having good relationships with their fathers.

Consistently positive relationships seemed to occur when participants had (a) close proximity to fathers and open access to his home, (b) fathers who were consistently engaged with them, and (c) a lack of enmity between parents. Having both parents’ houses in close proximity allowed for frequent contact; four felt they could see their fathers whenever they wished given the close proximity, and all eight with consistently positive relationships commented that they enjoyed spending time at their fathers’ homes. The fathers of these participants made efforts to remain in frequent contact by calling their children often and routinely following through on opportunities to spend time with their children. Although in-person contact ranged from occasional outings to weekly overnight visits, a common theme among this group was the belief that their fathers cared about them and that they could trust their fathers to be around in the future.

The eight who always had good relationships with their fathers said their parents rarely, if ever, fought in front of them or criticized each other. For example, Rebecca said, “[Mom] didn’t bash [Dad], and he didn’t bash her. [They] just went their separate ways.” These individuals also perceived that their parents were working together as coparents: “They didn’t talk about each other negatively to us, and they communicated with each other about what was going on with us” (Kristen). When parents made decisions across households and kept children out of their conflict, the divorce experience was less traumatic and relationships with both parents were positive.

Two individuals reported that their relationships with their fathers had been consistently bad. Both had predivorce family histories involving their paternal substance abuse. Veronica was blunt in describing the negative perception she held of her father: “I hated him, he never understood [me], never was there for me. . . . We never connected on a basic level.” In contrast, rather than antipathy, David described an emotionally distant relationship with his father in which they did not “talk about a lot of personal things.” David also reported that he had not seen his father in years, despite having opportunities to do so. “It just seems like whenever I am gonna take a trip [to his dad’s house], I always end up going somewhere with my friends.” Both David and Veronica reported long gaps in contact with their fathers. They indicated that when their fathers were in their lives, interacting with them was often stressful. Veronica also reported feeling stressed by her parents’ interactions before the divorce, largely because they had “always been very volatile” and would “blow up” and be “angry with each other.”

Despite their negative comments, both David and Veronica were open to future improvements in their relationships with their fathers. Neither saw this as likely to happen soon, but David said, “It could get better in the future . . . [but my dad and I have] both kind of accepted where [the relationship] is right now.” Veronica expressed similar sentiment when she stated, “He’s my dad, and I hope one day that we could have a relationship. I know that today is not that day, but maybe one day.”

Changed Relationships

Twenty-three participants perceived that their relationships with their fathers had changed

since their parents divorced. In most cases, they experienced a period of disengagement with their fathers following the divorce. They described this as “getting distant” (Gwen), “not talking” (Cynthia, Natalie, and Abby), or “periods of no contact” (Marie). For these young people, living away from their fathers meant feeling less connected and experiencing more stressful interactions with them. Several things contributed to disengagement, including reduced contact, feelings of discomfort during visitation, and coparental conflict.

Feelings of Loss and Discomfort. Two-thirds ($n=22$) of our sample reported feelings of loss and discomfort immediately following the divorce. Liam said, “[Dad moving out] looked like ‘I’m leaving you, I’m abandoning you.’” Natalie felt this loss more acutely when she was around other families: “I was happy until something as silly as seeing a dad and his daughter playing catch; [the divorce] didn’t bother me until I was reminded that he wasn’t there.” Most fathers lived close by, but for those farther away, distance reinforced the sense of loss. For example, Amy said, “My dad moved [400 miles away] when I was in sixth grade. That was hard. I think my brother and I felt a little bit abandoned. I was just frustrated . . . that he wasn’t around when I wanted him to be.”

Although they missed their fathers, early visits with them were often unpleasant or awkward in that those visits often were imbued with feelings of discomfort rather than alleviating feelings of loss. Several felt that their fathers’ new homes were not inviting because they lacked space or comfortable accommodations for them. Liam said, “We had to sleep on blow-up mattresses.” Natalie felt out of place at her father’s house because “it wasn’t a kid-friendly house; they had fancy furniture that you couldn’t sit on and fancy bedspreads. No toys or anything.” Valarie also had negative memories of her father’s new residence, in part because she did not have her own bedroom, but more generally she said, “It was annoying packing to go to my dad’s every weekend. . . . I definitely called my mom’s house ‘home,’ and I called my dad’s house ‘my dad’s house.’”

Overall, most considered their mothers’ households as home and their fathers’ homes as places they visited. Abby stopped visiting her dad as a teenager because, as she put it, “I lived with my mom, all my stuff was there, [and my

mom] took care of us.” Similarly, Zack summed up his preference for his mother’s house as a matter of comfort: “My mom’s house, I liked being there more. . . . It’s just because I had all the things I consider mine, this is my space, it was my home.”

Fathers’ new partners also created discomfort for about half of the sample. Julia was annoyed that she had to interact with a new girlfriend each time she visited her father: “[Dad’s girlfriends were] weird and annoying, especially when I was younger. I’d go over there, and I’d be used to one girl for a weekend, and then the next weekend it was somebody different.” Fiona remembered not wanting to share her father with his girlfriend and thinking, “He’s ours. Back off!” Abby reported, “I just felt he was selfish and always worrying about girls and not his kids, so I didn’t talk to him that much [and consequently], over the years, I grew apart from him.” These tensions continued when fathers remarried. Opinions of stepmothers ranged from being “apprehensive” (Amy) to thinking that they “didn’t want me [at their house]” (Jen). Stepmothers were not always viewed negatively, but these emerging adults commonly reported that their stepmothers (or their father’s girlfriends) contributed to feelings of discomfort when around their fathers, especially in the years immediately following the divorce.

Coparental Conflict. Ongoing parental conflict, especially parents “bad-mouthing” (Zack) each other, having “big blowouts” (Lucy), and “yelling and hanging up on each other” (Julia) made interactions with both parents unpleasant. Just under half of participants who said their relationships with their fathers changed after the divorce ($n = 10$) mentioned contentious relationships between parents as a contributing factor to problems with their dads. Dianne remembered being confused and distressed by these conflicts:

[After the divorce] was awful. . . . You have Dad telling you something about Mom. Mom’s telling you something about Dad. Grandma’s telling you something about Dad. Who do I believe? I’m here with this [parent] and so I don’t want to think poorly of them, and then with [the other parent] you don’t want to think poorly of them. So I felt really torn the whole time. I remember crying a lot about it because I didn’t know what to do.

Being put in the middle of parental conflicts was particularly problematic. Participants

reported that they “had to be the communicators” (Gloria) and the one “mediating between Mom and Dad” (Gwen). They described it as “annoying” (Julia) and “hated it” (Robert) when it happened. Gwen concluded, “I think they could definitely do a better job with keeping their fights to themselves and not lash them out onto the kids. They could have done a better job with that.”

Reflecting on their childhood experiences, several emerging adults felt that their mothers had undermined their relationships with their fathers. Dianne explained:

[My relationship with my dad] was tested because when I lived at home with just my mother, especially right after she left my dad, there was a time that brainwashing [was] occurring. I lived with my grandmother too, and she didn’t like my dad until the day she died. So there was a lot of things being put in my head that weren’t necessarily true.

For three women who perceived that their relationships with fathers changed, their mothers labeled their fathers as alcoholics. Being kept away from their fathers was presented as a matter of safety, and it was not until they were older that their mothers allowed them to visit their fathers. Although Abby did not think her mom actively restricted her relationship with her father, she recognized that she did not facilitate it either: “I don’t think she helped [my relationship with my dad]. Maybe she hindered it in a way. [Mom] would be like, ‘Oh my God, your dad . . .’”

Feelings of loss and discomfort often lasted for years during childhood. Fathers’ remarriages and ongoing parental conflict exacerbated the problems between nonresidential fathers and their children. Only when participants reached late adolescence or left for college did they perceive that their relationships changed again, offering new opportunities for connection.

Improved Relationships. Nearly all participants ($n = 21$) perceived that their relationships with their fathers had improved in the few years before the interview. Although they did not necessarily describe the relationships as closer, communication increased and stressful interactions with fathers decreased, especially when compared to childhood. Sometimes they reported that their fathers had changed—specifically, that they talked to them more frequently ($n = 10$), provided more financial assistance ($n = 9$), or started treating them as adults (e.g., supporting their school or career

decisions; $n = 10$). However, they also reported changes in themselves that they felt improved their relationships. In particular, they (a) perceived changes in their own maturity ($n = 4$), (b) lowered their expectations of their fathers ($n = 12$), (c) took more responsibility for the relationship ($n = 7$), and (d) actively controlled interactions with parents (e.g., refusing to mediate their conversations; $n = 10$). Perceived changes in fathers were viewed as positively influencing the relationship, and participants' perceived changes within themselves during emerging adulthood helped them to have greater empathy toward their fathers.

With respect to perceived changes in fathers, many participants reported that their fathers initiated more contact with them after they left their mothers' homes. Abby's parents divorced when she was 2 years old and contact with her father became less frequent during her adolescence. Once she entered college, however, her father started calling her more often and inviting her to dinner. "It's mainly [Dad] that makes more of an effort than I do because he invites me, and so I go. . . . That's why we're still in contact, probably because of him mostly, rather than me" (Abby).

Cynthia was 12 years old when her parents divorced, and she reported little contact with her father in the years immediately following. Like Abby, her father had recently started calling more. His increased communication started with an apology for how hard the divorce had been for the family. "[My parents] did a lot of things that were wrong," she explained, but he was "the only one that apologized," and since that apology her father had continued to call and reiterate to her how much he cared about her. "[Dad] left a message on my phone saying that if I ever need to talk or anything [he'll] be there, and [he wanted me] to know that no matter what, he always loved me, and he'll always be proud [of me]." Gloria's father also started calling more often with messages concerning how much he cared about her. She said that she "had a lot of missed calls from [her dad] and a lot of 'I love you' messages, which [her siblings and her] did not hear that often from him" during their childhoods. She continued, "That's a new thing; he's definitely trying harder."

The increased frequency of phone calls often occurred during the transition from high school to college. These calls were used as an opportunity for fathers to learn about their

maturing children. Susan felt her father "got to know [her] more" during this time and perceived that he now "realized who [she] was, which he probably didn't know before." Dianne reported how simple conversations with her father about daily life during her freshman year at college were a time of reconnection. "Our conversations [freshman year] would be for an hour sometimes, just telling [my dad] everything I did that day. So I'd consider that a turning point because that was definitely a reconnection time. I needed that support" (Dianne).

Along with several others, Dianne also appreciated her newfound financial support from her father. She reported that her father had never paid the full amount of his child support during her childhood, but he was now helping "pay for half of my housing," as well as providing additional money she could use to have a social life. Cynthia similarly reported that, unlike when she was younger, her father had become financially available: "Lately when I need something, I can call him." Marie believed that her father's recent financial support was intended to help rebuild their relationship:

It seems like he's trying to reach out and build a relationship. [Dad] said, "I couldn't be there for you when you were little, but I'll financially support you now." If I call him and say I need money, [then] it's no questions asked; [the money is] given to me. [He gives] little extras all the time, and he's giving me his car now. He was never like that when I was little. He was thousands upon thousands of dollars behind in child support for a while. . . . [Now] he's offering [to pay for] next semester's [tuition].

Amy was one of the exceptions who reported having a father who had consistently been financially supportive: "My dad is a huge financial support for my family. . . . He pays for my college and my rent and all of that, so I talk to him a lot about that." Consistent financial support was rare, so many in our sample viewed their fathers' financial contributions as a positive change from what they experienced during childhood.

Although more subtle than the other changes, participants mentioned that their fathers treated them more like adults. For example, Marie felt that her father now saw her more as a peer than a child, and offered this example: "He couldn't talk about going to parties or drinking with me [when I was younger], and now he can." She continued, "We're a lot closer now than we used

to be because it seems like we're the same age now." Zack also perceived that his father had begun treating him "as an adult." Abby preferred this supportive but autonomous relationship as well, stating that her dad was "more [a] friend than a parent; ... Mom is always lecturing me, [but Dad] doesn't really tell me what to do, ... [we're] like friend-acquaintances."

A component of being treated as an adult was the feeling that fathers supported school and career decisions; respondents expressed appreciation for their fathers "backing them up." For example, Cynthia said that her father had respected her college plans: "He's been the only one that supported my decision to go to school." Similarly, Sylvester appreciated that his dad supported his choice of college and indicated that applying to college had "helped [him] get closer to [his] dad." Others reported that their fathers had backed them on important academic choices once they were in college. Penny said that her dad had been "the only one" who had supported her decision to switch majors. The perceived increase in support from fathers was a positive change reported in many father-child relationships because it provided the emerging adults with a foundation for a new type of parent-child relationship that in some ways mimicked what they knew as friends or peer relationship but more importantly signaled a transition to a parent and adult child relationship.

With respect to perceived changes in self, most participants believed that they also had changed during emerging adulthood in ways that made their relationships with their fathers less contentious. Personal maturity was credited as a reason some relationships improved, even when fathers' behaviors were not perceived as any different from what they had been during childhood. Abby attributed improvements in the relationship with her father to "time, maturity, [and] getting over [herself]." Unlike those who felt their fathers had changed, she said it was "more me changing. I feel [my dad] was more constant. I think it was just my perspective changing ... [as I] I grew up and realized it's not all about me." Similarly, Louis concluded that his maturity had allowed him to "just appreciate more what [my dad] did. Just recogniz[ing] what he had been doing. [He] had the best intentions." Gwen also reported that she believed her dad had always acted in the same manner toward her, but she did not see it positively until recently: "When I was younger I had an OK relationship with [my

father], ... [but our relationship] has gotten better because [now] I understand where he's coming from [and] I appreciate his friendship more than I did when I was younger."

For others, improved relationships involved learning to ignore the negative aspects of the relationship. Even with time and greater maturity, only seven participants with improved relationships reported that their current relationships were excellent. Nearly half ($n = 12$) of those with improved relationships attributed the positive changes to lowering their expectations of their fathers. For example, Hilary was still disappointed that her father was unreliable, but "learned not to expect things of him," and when asked about her current relationship with her father, she referred to it as "better" and "good." Those who lowered their expectations recognized that it was "pointless" to wait for fathers to change (Marie) and learned to "put up" with the things they did not like about their fathers (Lucy). They "accepted that's how he was going to be" (Susan).

High expectations of their fathers during childhood had resulted in tension, stress, and eventually distance for many in the sample. Although relationships with fathers did not necessarily become closer during emerging adulthood, lowered expectations eliminated some of the frustration and allowed for less stressful relationships. Zack, for example, recognized that he would not get to see his dad much because of his dad's job, and he had reached a point of acceptance of the current state of the relationship: "I don't see him as often ... [but] when I get the chance to [see him] I get excited ... [and] I don't feel there needs to be any more closeness between us."

Out of a sense of obligation, several participants ($n = 7$) decided they wanted their fathers to be part of their lives and therefore took responsibility for continuing what were generally distant relationships with their fathers by changing their own expectations of themselves. None in this situation particularly wanted to visit their fathers, but they felt they should. Susan said, "Regardless of what he's done, he's still my dad; that's what it comes down to." Thomas conveyed similar sentiment: "Throughout my entire life I didn't like hanging out with him, [but] I'm his son, he's my dad, and as much as I sometimes resent him, I still need to [visit him]." Abby said, "As I got older, I realized that family is important to me, and so I'm trying to fit my dad somewhere...."

[H]e is my dad. I feel with family it's implied that you're supposed to have contact with your mom and dad."

Those in this group also started to actively control their interactions with fathers in efforts to eliminate conflict. This was particularly true for those who in childhood had been stuck in the middle of coparental conflict or in situations where parents spoke negatively about each other. To promote more neutral conversations, participants described (sometimes mutual) efforts to actively avoid contentious topics when talking with their fathers. For example, Gloria stated that she had learned "to stop talking [with her father when] something's going on that's frustrating on either end; I think we both know when to talk and when to just keep our mouth shut." Marie also described a shift in the relationship tension with her father: "[Our conflict] is just hidden better than it used to be [in part because] I don't have to deal with the bad side effects directly anymore [so] I don't care as much about it.

Several participants ($n = 7$) asserted themselves in interactions with their fathers by directly telling their parent(s) what they needed (or didn't need) from the relationship. Cynthia told her father to "stay stable in [her] life [or] stay out of it." Several participants described telling their fathers (or both parents) that they were not going to be an intermediary for the arguments and issues their parents had with one another. Robert, for example, told them: "You guys have to be adults and deal with [your issues] yourself." Penny took control over the timing and duration of conversations between her and her father by calling on her way home from work, when she knew she would only have 15 or so minutes to talk. These assertive moves helped the emerging adults set boundaries and broker new types of relationships with fathers.

Conclusions

A minority of participants in the study ($n = 8$) were never particularly stressed by their parents' divorce and felt they retained their connection to their fathers despite not living with them. They saw their fathers regularly and felt close to them throughout childhood and into emerging adulthood. However, most participants ($n = 23$) reported that parental divorce had strained their relationships with their fathers and created emotional distance, which they attributed to a variety of divorce-related stressors (e.g.,

coparental conflict). Emerging adulthood provided these individuals with opportunities to change their relationships with their fathers, often by finding ways to bridge the gap they felt between them. Most reworked their relationships with their fathers by thinking differently about themselves or their fathers.

DISCUSSION

Arnett (2004) suggested that emerging adulthood presents an opportunity to renegotiate parent–child relationships. During their late teens and early 20s, many children move out of their parent's home, seek higher education, and take steps toward financial independence. Thus, they must balance their need for support with their growing independence as new boundaries are established in the parent–child relationship (Tanner & Arnett, 2009). For those with divorced parents, this transition may be particularly important for rebuilding or repairing relationships that were strained following the divorce. Our findings suggest that normative changes that accompany emerging adulthood (e.g., leaving the mother's home, gaining new insight into oneself and one's family) may enable the renewal of connections between previously distant nonresidential fathers and children.

Development and Postdivorce Parent–Child Relationships

A primary contribution of this study is its expansion of emerging adult theory to explain family processes. Our findings bring together contemporary research on brain development in emerging adults with changes in family relationships. This not only helps to move the divorce literature forward but also provides additional evidence that the developmental context of the individual has implications for the family. The emerging adult literature has focused primarily on individual development, yet there are avenues for rich inquiry into the relationship between emerging adulthood and the broader family system. This study represents one such effort to move the theory forward.

Our findings suggest that there are latent opportunities for parent–child reconnection after divorce that emerge as children transition to adulthood. Some children remain close to both parents following divorce (Ahrns, 2007),

but for those who struggle with postdivorce family relationships, our findings indicate that continued investments by fathers may yield positive outcomes as children transition toward adulthood.

Even emerging adults who are conflicted about their fathers often perceive positive changes in the father–child relationship as they get older. One explanation is that cognitive changes accompanying emerging adulthood increase the capacity to think in different ways about past events and present interactions. Previous research suggests that emerging adults continue to develop more sophisticated cognitive abilities into their 20s (Tanner & Arnett, 2009). Specifically, they develop a greater capacity for empathy, form higher-level reasoning skills, and achieve a greater ability to accept contradictory ideas than do adolescents (Tanner, 2006). These skills may explain how emerging adults reinterpret postdivorce events and negotiate new ways of interacting with their fathers that result in greater communication and contact.

Empathy may be particularly important for renewing connections between fathers and children during the transition to adulthood. Participants in this study talked about how their fathers changed (e.g., trying harder to be a dad), but it may be that they were simply noticing his efforts for the first time or that his efforts were no longer filtered through residential mothers. If emerging adults develop the ability to think about the divorce from their father’s perspective, they can reinterpret actions or situations that caused them stress during childhood in light of the difficulties he may have been facing at the time. For example, they may come to understand that a home without a bed for them did not indicate that he did not want them there or care about their comfort; rather, they may realize that their fathers lacked the resources to accommodate them more comfortably or that he did not know what they needed to feel at home. By engaging in perspective taking, emerging adults may better understand their fathers’ earlier behavior and motives, encouraging them to respond in positive, or at least neutral, ways when their fathers make attempts to connect with them as emerging adults.

Higher-level cognitive abilities may also provide a foundation for changing expectations of the father–child relationship. Without exception, those in our sample wanted a father figure in

their lives, yet many continued to struggle with lingering negative feelings about their fathers. Emerging adulthood seems to provide an opportunity to accept both the good and bad in fathers, which allows reconnection and the establishment of an adult relationship. For example, some participants lowered their expectations of fathers because they recognized his limitations. Research suggests that children’s perceptions of their parents change as they form an independent identity during adolescence (Koepeke & Denissen, 2012). As they reach emerging adulthood they are more likely to see their fathers as flawed individuals rather than failed fathers—a view more amenable to maintaining connections. Although emerging adulthood is largely a time of self-focus and self-discovery (Arnett, 2004), many in our study seemed able to shift focus from their own needs and expectations to relationships built on mutual responsibility.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Because the goal of grounded theory is not to generalize results to the broader population, our relatively small sample size is not inherently problematic. However, similar to many other studies about postdivorce family relationships, our sample was mostly White and female. Homogeneous sample limitations aside, the present study provides some important evidence about *how* postdivorce relationships develop with children in emerging adulthood and, therefore, which processes might lead to positive or negative relationship outcomes for daughters (as well as sons). Although gender differences were not evident in the analysis, there were too few men in the sample to make definitive statements about gender similarities and differences.

The high level of education in the sample may also bias the results. The experience of leaving home for college and the immersion in a new environment may have been responsible for some of the perceived changes in family relationships. However, it may also be the case that any separation from family (e.g., military, independent living) might stimulate the development of greater empathy in emerging adults. Collecting data from a more diverse sample in terms of gender, race, education, and separation context would help to parse out the influence of individual or contextual variables from those associated with emerging adulthood.

Arnett (2004) suggested that most parent–child relationships become more peerlike during emerging adulthood. Because our sample included only emerging adults who experienced a parental divorce, it is not clear how changes in postdivorce families are similar or different from those in continuously married or never-married families. Some of the processes may be universal or arise from family situations that involve stress or separation (e.g., abuse, periods of separation due to military deployment) other than parental divorce. Looking at other stressful family events would broaden our conclusions beyond postdivorce families.

Without data on participant outcomes, it remains unclear whether the relational changes identified here affect emerging adults' well-being. For example, is lowering expectations of fathers an adaptive strategy that leads to greater support, or does it lead to further disappointment? Similarly, will participants who feel obligated to maintain relationships with their fathers later resent the responsibility? It is also unclear whether contact with fathers helps one to achieve some of the concrete tasks of emerging adulthood (e.g., graduating from college, becoming employed, finding a healthy romantic relationship). Thus, future research needs to address postdivorce father–child relationships over time with attention to their implications for the health and well-being of emerging adults.

Implications for Practice

This study provides evidence that strained postdivorce relationships with fathers can improve as children transition to adulthood. Clinicians, counselors, and advisers who wish to support divorced nonresidential fathers in maintaining or reestablishing their relationships with their children might encourage fathers to have developmentally appropriate expectations. For example, fathers may need to recognize that children commonly become distant following divorce. New homes, partnerships, and routines are seldom viewed positively by children, at least initially. Children entering adolescence may prefer to mostly stay in their primary home (which is usually their mother's) because of access to peers and school, even when parents share physical and legal custody (Kelly, 2007). Findings from our study suggest that fathers should continue to call their children, invite them to their home, show up at their activities,

and frequently “check in” via communication technologies. These investments may pay off when children get older and wish to reconnect.

As children transition to adulthood, the urge to “parent” and discipline should be tempered, especially if relationships were distant during childhood. Emerging adults appreciate their fathers treating them as adults, supporting their educational and career decisions, and making themselves available to talk about the future. Those with particularly stressful father–child relationships may be slow to overcome their anger and forge closer relationships with their fathers, but even those with the worst memories remain hopeful for better relationships in the future. Therefore, nonresidential fathers who want to be connected with their children may need to patiently wait to establish a functional and satisfying relationship.

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