

Post-Divorced Transitions: Mental Health and Suicide Ideation Among Canadian Fathers

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Abstract. Do fathers matter after separation or divorce? The data based on this Canadian study of 208 fathers, mothers, grandparents, and adult children indicates that children, mothers, and especially fathers seem unimportant after separation and divorce. The initial purpose of this study was to examine the connection between the family law system and the impact this system and the court have on separated and divorced parents as well as their reasons for activism. One of the unexpected findings that emerged was how frequently separated and divorced fathers reported personal mental health issues and suicide ideation. These issues were often associated with being dismissed by the courts as disposable “social” post-separation/divorced parents. The main problem is that these parents and activists are disregarded due to the negative perceptions by the family law courts of both the shared parenting movement and fathers. This perceived negation has impacted fathers’ mental health issues and suicide ideation as well as their activism in the shared parenting movement.

The Fathers’ Rights Movement has become more organized over the past 20 years, and is now part of a global trend that includes close networking, both virtually and during conferences in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Europe. The most well-known and popularly recognized global Fathers’ Rights organization is “Fathers 4 Justice”. Using Internet sites, listservs, and other media, this movement has promoted shared parenting issues, gaining global media coverage through their “superhero” displays. These were first seen in the United Kingdom and Canada, and have since been seen globally in other Western countries (Dominus, 2005). There seems to be a shift in the collective identity of this movement, which promotes the idea of fathers being essential in the parenting partnership. While this emphasis is not a new aspect of the Fathers’ Rights Movement’s collective identity (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006), it is a strategic shift in terms of presenting social movement activism that is more globally coordinated.

This research is part of a larger project focusing on the overall global shift in the collective identity of the Fathers’ Rights Movement as a “new social movement”. Through my preliminary analysis of interview data with 208 Canadian Fathers’ Rights Activists and others, I have found that many of these advocates have emphasized the notion of shared and equal parenting, as well as a desire to be identified as part of the Canadian “Shared Parenting Movement”. These activists have noted that all capable parents should be recognized, irrespective of gender, as equal parents and not denied shared parenting or equal access time with their children.

One of the main goals of this research is to investigate the theoretical connection between identity and activism. I have been developing the notion of situational identity (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006) and its relation to activism in the Fathers’ Rights Movement in Canada, and, more specifically, investigating how situational identity is a conduit that

bridges the link between personal identity, collective identity, and activism. Another goal of this project is to examine how personal identities become transformed into political ones in terms of what motivates parents to join the Fathers' Rights Movement, as opposed to those parents who do not join this movement.

This research is based on qualitative semi-structured individual interviews, couples interviews, and focus groups with 208 activists and others across Canada. Based on past research and preliminary findings from this research project, this work began with the hypothesis that situational identity is linked to both personal identity and collective identity in terms of activism related to shared parenting. Parents involved in problematic separations and/or divorces form a situational identity that bridges public and political issues, which leads to the construction of a collective identity that focuses primarily around shared parenting issues (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). In short, situational identity is a transitional link connecting a person's identity as a parent to social movement activism.

Literature Review

The Fathers' Rights Movement is often viewed as a right-wing "backlash" against feminism, in terms of an attempt to re-affirm patriarchal rights in post-separation/divorced families (Bertoia, 1998; Boyd, 1989; Crean, 1988; Crowley, 2008; Faludi, 1991; Flood, 1998, 2001, 2013; French, 1992; Smart, 2004) and issues related to family violence (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Mann, 2008). Fathers' Rights Activists in North America are criticized for creating a "fathers' rights discourse" based on the "rhetoric of equality" (Arendell, 1992a, 1992b; Bertoia, 1998; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Coltrane & Hickman, 1992; Drakich, 1989; Flood, 2013). Recent literature about the Fathers' Rights Movement and the Men's Rights Movement offers a similar analysis, suggesting that the movement is a "backlash" against feminism to differing extents (Crowley, 2008; Dragiewicz, 2008). Other research on Fathers' Rights Activists varies, offering interesting perspectives on fragmented fatherhood (Collier & Sheldon, 2006, 2008).

The literature on the Fathers' Rights Movement focuses on rhetoric and discourse, thus portraying activists as having a self-serving bias that favours fathers over mothers and challenges aspects of the feminist movement (Arendell, 1992a, 1992b; Bertoia, 1998; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Coltrane & Hickman, 1992; Crowley, 2008; Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Drakich, 1989). They discount these fathers as being angry and seemingly do not thoroughly consider their reasons for activism (Boyd, 1989; Crean, 1988). They also view fathers' rights and men's rights activists as being similar and present these activists' concerns about custodial issues and violence against fathers as rhetoric and baseless discourse (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Mann, 2008). Many of those who have researched the movement focus more on the backlash against feminism without considering the underlying reasons concerning why these fathers are active or if they suffered as a result of custodial issues, such as having little or no access to their children after separation or divorce. These researchers also discount domestic violence against fathers and view it as more mythical, as well as being part of the backlash against feminism (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Mann, 2008).

My research suggests that the Fathers' Rights Movement is neither a countermovement (Mottl, 1980; Pichardo, 1997; Zald & Unseem, 1987) nor a right-wing

social movement (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). My past research indicates that Fathers For Justice (FFJ) activists present a very specific view of shared parenting that includes both a mother and father being involved in their children's lives after separation and divorce (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). Focusing more on the name of "Fathers For Justice", critics such as Crean (1988) argue that FFJ Activists excluded ex-spouses of various male members. Primarily, it was this implication of (fathers') "rights" that suggested a conservative movement which seemed to be about re-asserting the dominant position of fathers in the family. My early research suggested that FFJ members focused more on the failing family law system as promoting an adversarial legal system that often did not encourage both parents having equal contact with their children after separation and divorce. Overall, FFJ members' grievance was not with feminism, but the family law system as it relates to custodial and parenting issues.

The literature about Fathers' Rights Activists also suggests that these Activists focus primarily on rights and not enough on responsibilities (Boyd, 1989; Smart, 2004). The claim of a self-serving bias also needs to be considered during research on the Fathers' Rights Movements. In order to assess the claims made in the above literature, Melucci's (1989, 1995, 1996) and Touraine's (1981, 1988) understandings of collective identity were used as the basis for analyzing how Fathers' Rights Activists define their collective perspectives on issues central to them as Activists. The literature on the Fathers' Rights Movement provides a guideline for exploring Activists' collective perceptions regarding the notions of equality, a fathers' rights discourse, and claims about the political and social backlash of this movement.

Theoretical Framework

This research focuses mainly on the process of how collective identity formation is negotiated among Activists. Touraine's (1981, 1988) work was also used in this analysis of collective identity, as he focuses on the symbolic challenges in the cultural realm relating to the struggles pertinent to the "production of culture". He points out that the central struggle over who controls the production of culture often includes collective actors rejecting, challenging, and creating new meanings and practices within dominant cultures. These challenges and constructions become associated with the collective identity of (collective) actors or social movements (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). This research concentrates on Activists' shared "meanings" and "practices". Escobar (1992) loosely defines meanings as a set of beliefs. These beliefs are embedded in practices, and practices are linked to behaviours in everyday life. These behaviours may be present in symbolic creativity involving language, the body, performative rituals, work, and both individual and collective identities. Meanings are articulated through practices. Shibutani (1987:98) concurs with Escobar's work, stating, "...we learn meanings through actions, but also *meanings are primarily a property of behaviour and only secondarily a property of objects* [his emphasis in original]". Both Escobar and Shibutani emphasize that meanings can be articulated through behaviours. These theorists believe that collectivities are constantly expounding meanings and practices. For the purpose of this analysis, meanings can be understood as emerging through peoples' interpretations of perceptions, attitudes and ideas about the world. Practices are behaviours, modes of conduct, procedures, and actions.

In the context of this research, situational identity is applied to Fathers' Rights

Activists based on its role of mediating between personal identity and collective identity. I have investigated how situational identity actually fosters a shared collective predicament or commonality; a shared circumstance, condition, or position/status that a person occupies in a society (e.g., being stigmatized). I hypothesize that situational identity is based on the Goffmanian notion of multiple identities that are socially created (Goffman, 1963) and “situationally” based – for example, being Fathers’ Rights Activists who are non-custodial parents with limited or no access to their children and paying support that they cannot afford. In short, I investigate the possibility that these Activists feel as though they are “secondary parents” (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). These “situational identities” are based on contestation, or creating social change through challenging a specific identity. One goal was to find out if situational identity is about controlling or managing an identity that is “situationally” based, such as being post-separation/divorced fathers who may or may not have access to their children, and are often not the custodial parent (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006).

Finally, I am exploring the possibility of situational identity being based on a shared understanding of similar social concerns. Through this research, I am examining how Mills’ (1959) notions of personal “troubles” and public “issues” fit into situational identity. I have reexamined Bertoia’s (1998) application of Mills, and hypothesized that the personal troubles relating to post-separation/divorced fatherhood may be connected to public issues through situational identity. In short, situational identity may also be useful for understanding public displays of activism. The preliminary findings from my research on the Canadian and the UK Fathers’ Rights Movements suggest that situational identity is transitional or liminal, in terms of being a stage in between personal life crisis and activism (Turner, 1979; van Gennep, 1909). In the context of a support group, which both the Canadian and UK Fathers’ Rights Movements provide, situational identity may also be seen as providing a “safe place” to work through the identity of being a separated or divorced parent. My preliminary Canadian findings also suggest that situational identity is connected to having this in-between “safe place” that may also provide the impetus to become an Activist. Further analysis is still necessary in order to fully conceptualize situational identity and understand how it is related to the transformation of personal identities into political ones in terms of motivating parents to join the Fathers’ Rights Movement.

Furthermore, using Gonos’ (1977) ideas about the theoretical connection between the Symbolic Interactionist construct of the “situation” and the Goffmanian construct of the “frame”, I am trying to theoretically connect social structure and action (Bertoia, 1998; Mills, 1959). I additionally want to investigate how a situational identity may be connected to Fathers’ Rights Activists who have a shared or common predicament (i.e., being separated/divorced parents) and how this may help “frame” their issues as Activists. Most importantly, I want to explore how these frames are associated with creating organizational structures that lead to taking collective action.

Shared Parenting Movement

There has been a trend toward a shared parenting movement that is moving away

from solely focusing on fathers' rights to highlighting children having continued relationships after separation and divorce with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family members. The shared parenting movement emphasizes a non-zero sum game of children getting what they need from parents and family members. There is a movement away from sole custody to a more symmetrical understanding of the "children's best interests", away from adversarial approaches. This movement advocates a more family-oriented approach that emphasizes parents and family members not separating or divorcing their children, but instead recognizing that it is spouses who are separating or divorcing. This movement also advocates resolving issues outside the family law system (e.g., mediation and discussions between parents), as the legal system is viewed by many of these activists as being inequitable and causing further grief for separating and divorcing parents. They often comment that court battles create distress and grief for children and parents, without emphasizing parenting plans or agreements, mediation, and other balanced approaches that maintain safe and stable child-oriented arrangements (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006).

Research Purpose and Hypotheses

The overall purpose of the larger research project was to better understand the collective identity and situational identity of Fathers' Rights Activists as they relate to social movement activism, fatherhood/parenting, and related issues. The initial hypothesis guiding the research was that situational identity will influence the collective identity of these activists. More particularly, that individuals' situational identity of parents not having contact with their children will influence their collective identity as activists wanting to change custody laws after separation and divorce to include shared parenting. However, once unexpected data began to emerge throughout the interviews, one of the main hypotheses that became a focal point for this chapter was that the increased negation of divorced fathers in family law court has increased the likelihood of mental health issues and suicide ideation amongst them. This hypothesis stems from the main research question: Do fathers matter after separation and divorce? This chapter will focus primarily on the unexpected findings regarding self-reported of mental illness and suicide ideation, and if these issues are linked to fathers feeling as though they do not matter after separation and divorce.

Methodology

This research is based on the preliminary findings from a larger, exploratory, qualitative research project. The data that was gathered and analyzed examines the claims made in literature and explores theories related to collective identity, situational identity, and social movements. This chapter focuses on interview data from 164 custodial and non-custodial fathers that were part of a larger study of 208 participants across Canada from April 2006 to October 2011. In future work, data from custodial and non-custodial mothers, grandparents, adult children, and second spouses will be examined (see table 1).

The research design has been guided by an ethnographic approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Esterberg, 2002) that stresses the subjective understanding of the participant's experiences using Weber's notion of *Verstehen* (Freund, 1968). The data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews, couples interviews, and focus

groups. While the individual interviews were based on a more structured interview schedule, a less structured focus group interview schedule was employed in order to facilitate more dynamic focus groups. Before starting the interviews and focus groups, all participants were informed that their names and personal data would be kept confidential. Morgan's (1996) recommendations for focus groups were applied; that is, focus groups were often done with members from the same group to promote higher levels of comfort and encourage participants to openly discuss the issues regarding parents, as well as their situation. The individual interviews lasted about 30 to 75 minutes, while focus groups, which included 4 to 8 participants, were from 70 to 120 minutes. The individual interviews were conducted in offices, university rooms, restaurants, and respondents' homes. Focus groups were held in church basements, community centres, library meeting rooms, and classrooms at universities, as well as other locations.

Purposive sampling techniques were used concurrently to select participants. A combination of such non-random sampling techniques aided with interviewing a diverse sample of activists in various Canadian provinces. I also used snowball sampling, judgmental-purposive sampling, availability sampling, and quota sampling (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2002). Participants were identified based on contacts through organizations and activists. Snowball sampling was especially helpful following interview and focus groups, when asking recent participants in order to recruit other participants. Convenience sampling was also used in cases where additional subjects, who were readily available and willing to participate in the study, were sometimes unexpectedly brought by participants to focus groups.

Overall Study Sample

Parental / Family Status	Number
Non-Custodial Father	155
Custodial Father	9
Non-Custodial Mother	9
Custodial Mother	19
Non-Custodial Grandmother	9
Adult Child (AC)	5
Second Spouse (SS)	2
Total	208
Sex	Number
Male	164
Female	44

All interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed and the transcripts of the interviews were coded utilizing a thematic analysis and a two-rater process (Seidman, 1991). Common themes were agreed upon and then coded separately by two independent raters (myself and my research assistants). Themes common to both raters were validated and accepted using a grounded theory approach loosely based on the work of Corbin and Strauss (1990), as well as a qualitative methodological analysis used by me for an earlier study (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). This was done to identify participants' perceptions and to reveal possible themes and sub-themes using Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) techniques. This process involved sifting out important ideas, concepts, and themes pertaining to shared parenting, health, suicide, and related concepts. An open and axial coding form was used with conceptual labels to create categories and subcategories regarding identity and activism (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These conceptual categories and the related quotes from the transcriptions were then transferred into a table and organized under various headings and subheadings, such as collective identity, situational identity, activism, custody, support, access, courts, and other issues. Other unexpected categories that emerged included mental and physical health, suicide and suicide ideation, and the role of the legal system. This technique of using a table to sift out (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991) themes allowed for a clear and visually distinct schema that helped organize categories and the connections between them (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006).

Analysis

A Microsoft Excel[®] spreadsheet was used in assisting with the process of analysis. This software was chosen for reasons similarly outlined in Swallow, Newton, and Van Lottum (2003): usability and how well it displayed the data. Excel[®] provided a means to chart identity in relation to how various members articulated meanings and practices, along with an overall identity. On the whole, there were three apparent benefits of utilizing a spreadsheet:

- 1) It visually displayed and clearly organized variables related to an overall Fathers' Rights Movement collective identity.
- 2) It enabled the examination of Fathers' Rights Movement members' re-articulation of dominant meanings and practices.
- 3) Finally, variations of the re-articulated meanings and practices among the membership could be compared.

The construction of a Fathers' Rights Movement collective identity came about as a result of selecting themes that pertained to the Fathers' Rights Movement members' collective reality, and how they viewed themselves. Results from the participant observation work and relevant Fathers' Rights Movement documents were also considered as an independent source (from the interview data) in selecting what issues were important to Fathers' Rights Movement members. Themes from the interview data, based both on the quantity and quality of Fathers' Rights Movement members' responses during the interview, were also selected. Quantity was measured in terms of frequency (i.e., what issues arose most often during the interviews) and volume (i.e., how much time members spent discussing an issue and the thoroughness of their answers). Indicators of frequency included how often issues were brought up by the respondent as major or minor points; for example, if issues were discussed as major points frequently or only occasionally. Volume was measured in terms of respondents making specific or general statements about an issue; for example, if a lot was said about an issue and specifics were mentioned, or alternatively if only general statements were made.

To assess quality of the members' responses, I used more subjective indicators such as insightfulness and depth, in terms of the thought and emotion evident in the interview responses. Insightfulness was measured relative to how much contemplation, reflection, and articulation was evident in the interviewees' responses. Indicators of depth included the level of emotion, such as the respondent's voice cracking (with feeling), whether they cried, if they sounded upset, or if they gave answers with passion.

Findings

The initial focus of this research was to examine issues related to collective identity, situational identity, and parenting. However, throughout the interviews, many of the fathers began to discuss mental health issues and issues related to suicide and suicide ideation. This often occurred when they were asked about their personal situation, related to situational identity, at which point they began to discuss the problems of coping with the separation and divorce process. It was also related to going through the family law system and their experiences with various judges and lawyers. Many of the fathers recounted how their court proceedings and related aspects resulted in mental health problems and other repercussions. The findings discussed below are based on the data

analysis and include specific quotes from the interview data of 164 custodial and non-custodial fathers that highlight self-reported mental health issues, suicide ideation, and other issues related to suicide of separated and divorced fathers and their experiences in the family law system. The findings also point to fathers self-reporting that not feeling as though they matter is linked to mental health issues and suicide ideation.

One of the most unexpected findings in the study was the self-reported mental health issues and suicide ideation amongst non-custodial fathers. This emerged throughout many of the interviews, especially when fathers were asked about the general history of their relationship with their spouse as well as their separation and divorce. Since a semi-structured interview schedule was used, follow-up questions were asked and the results were alarming, especially amongst non-custodial fathers; these ranged from self-described long-term depression to other mental health issues as well as suicide ideation, which were usually connected to the loss of contact with their children and their being mired in the legal system. Furthermore, health issues and suicide ideation were often exacerbated by having to contend with drawn-out court proceedings related to legal access, access enforcement, and other custodial issues. Most of the fathers who reported mental health issues and suicide ideation had custodial issues ranging from limited access to not seeing their children. Generally, some mothers, grandmothers, second spouses, and others did discuss their mental health issues, but none of them discussed their own issues related to suicide. These women talked mainly about fathers they knew who had mental health issues, experienced suicide ideation, attempted suicide, or committed suicide.

During many of the interviews with fathers who discussed mental health issues and suicide ideation, these issues were linked with the stress related to going to court, custodial issues, and difficulties coping with the legal system. Many of the fathers felt that there was a bias against them as fathers in court cases pertaining to custodial and related issues. There was also the theme of the overall accumulative effect of going through the separation, divorce, or family law courts, along with their despondency, which manifested itself in terms of mental health issues and suicide ideation. First, the self-reported mental health issues will be discussed and then the related suicide ideation will be considered.

Mental Health Issues

Throughout the interviews, many fathers discussed mental health issues that were linked to custodial issues and the legal system. Some fathers discussed their self-reported bouts with depression, anxiety and other related mental health issues openly, regardless if they were being interviewed individually or in focus groups. However, there were other fathers who told me after the interviews or focus groups that they experienced various mental health issues. They sometimes would ask me to turn off the recorder, especially if they were in tears while describing their anxieties or if they were being treated for depression. They usually began by discussing their own personal situation with separation, divorce, access, custody or related issues. These were the main topics mentioned when they contextualized mental health concerns and how they were connected to custodial issues.

This father from Alberta describes what he went through after going in and out of family court regarding his custody issues. He recounts his experience of emerging from a depression and the “downward spiral,” noting:

... I mean I was just going nowhere and then finally when I came out of my depression I started trying to make changes and that was probably the one that sparked the whole downward spiral into the legal system. (CM4SAB)

He found that this “downward spiral” was not only related to the legal system but also the negative effect it had on his mental health and continuing depression. This father noted that he was already struggling with depression and found that that family law system not only did not help his situation, but actually made it worse. So, there was a dual effect of the family law system not helping him and his mental health deteriorating further.

Similarly, another father reported a “spiral of depression” related to the legal system and what he had been coping with during family court trials and related custodial outcomes. Many fathers note how they often do not get awarded custody and focus on how this influences their mental health. A father from Québec states:

... I went into a spiral of depression, and a lot of people I hated, or when I had people come up to me... [who said] ... “But you won Jim [pseudonym], you don’t have to pay these people”... I lost a girl that I was protecting for years, I was protecting her against an abusive mother and grandmother, and now she’s living with them... (CM43QC)

It is often the loss of custody as well as having limited or no access to their children that was linked to self-reports of depression from the fathers interviewed. In the above case, this father did have custody and the loss of custody coupled with limited access created numerous problems for him in terms of feeling as though he was failing to help his daughter, as well as not being able to help her. The theme of not only losing custody but having limited to no access to their children was an issue for many fathers and was reported as increasing mental health issues. A father from Nova Scotia describes his how he felt when he saw children with their parents and how it reminded him of not seeing his children, explaining:

I had to go to work, go home, not bother going out to a restaurant, to a store to get what I need. If I went to the store and as soon as I went and I heard the words daddy, for most people it cause[d] warmth and joy in their hearts, for me it caused an icicle going right up my spine and I had to get up and leave. (CM21NS)

Losing his children left this father with emotional issues that he said later in the interview persisted for at least a year or more.

Throughout the interviews, it was very common for fathers to discuss reduced access to their children or having no contact with them as having a very negative emotional impact on both them and their children. Another father from British Columbia noted that he went from a very involved parent to seeing his children on a weekly basis, lamenting:

... I was a dad that was home every night, involved, heavily involved in their sports, ... all of sudden I’m told that I’m going to see them, ya know, 4 times a

month...I couldn't live with that, right, I just couldn't live with that, right, so I kind of got off the canvas. (CM9BC)

This father had a very difficult time coping and, when asked about getting “off the canvas”, he talked about how he coped with depression. There was a description provided by this father of feeling helpless and finding it so difficult to accept this that he “got off the canvas” and slipped into a depression.

Many fathers reported similar issues, such as a father from Ontario, who says: “I’m concerned that I might be slipping into depression at times and not keeping as focused as what I should be on, on whatever the priorities are” (CM33ON). This father expressed what many interviewed said with regard to keeping focused on their children and other matters so they do not become depressed. It was the lack of contact with their children and usually not having any success when going to court over custodial issues that was reported as one of the main reason for mental health issues, such as “slipping into a depression” or related problems.

It was not uncommon during interviews for fathers to cry when discussing their children and related custodial issues. While some fathers held back and did not want to cry during interviews, others would ask me to take a break and then return after crying. Others, like this father from Québec, were very open about coping with the loss of their children through custody issues and described how they coped, saying: “I was crying, I was crying, I had nothing else, it was a drug, you know, I couldn't think of nothing else, just get in the truck and go, and my mind went...” (CM50QC).

The link to the legal system and mental health is evident for many fathers. Some fathers discussed how they felt about the legal system, commenting on how they were treated and the outcome of frustration and anger. Many fathers discussed how to cope with anger and the related emotions. A father from Alberta states:

I’m just saying that when you’d been pushed into a corner, okay, you’re treated like dirt and you want to fight back but you can’t fight back with the legal system because the legal system is so unfair, that you’re frustrated, you’re angry, what are you supposed to do with that anger? (CM4SAB)

Many fathers, mothers, and grandparents commented on the lack of fairness, especially concerning fathers, in the legal system. Taking action was important to some fathers, as they found it therapeutic in order to cope with their situation. Fathers reported a sense of agency, as they found that becoming active, supporting other fathers, and protesting seemed to help them manage emotionally. A father from the Northwest Territories explains:

It’s helped my mental health situation tenfold knowing that I’m taking action against not only what happened to me...the biggest thing is my own mental health. Without this vehicle, I don’t know if I could survive the pain of not seeing my children. I don’t know if I could go decades of hardship without, ya know, something going wrong for sure. So that’s it, it builds my confidence, it builds my confidence... (CM06NWT)

There were fathers who felt that taking action was helpful. This father discussed how he coped with mental health issues partially through activism. While this was not uncommon, many fathers who were interviewed, and were coping with ongoing mental health issues, did not mention activism. Based on conversations after interviews or focus groups when fathers were not being recorded, they were often more forthcoming in terms of quietly discussing their mental health issues. There were many fathers who did not want others to know they were suffering and would not discuss their depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues.

These quotes were only a few examples of fathers trying to cope with mental health issues. Some fathers suffered silently, turning inward, self-isolating, and often not reaching out for help. They said to me after the interviews that they worried that if they discussed their issues with a mental health professional, they would be viewed as “crazy” or an unfit parent. Some fathers also commented on how seeking help may be associated with being “weak” or incapable of being self-reliant. Unfortunately, they often were reticent to share this information while being taped and sometimes during focus groups. Other times they would discuss their depression and other mental health issues with me after the interviews and focus group, while with a spouse, supportive friend, or others. Sometimes there would be angry moments, tears, and wanting to turn off the recorder to resume the interview at a later time or leaving focus groups. Often the grief was focused on loss of custody, contact, or a basic relationship with their children. Anger was expressed regarding spouses, judges, lawyers, and the general family law system.

Many of the fathers discussed issues with depression and anger. Most said that they did self-isolate and tried to cope with not being with their children. Sometimes after interviews, fathers would say they coped through substance use (i.e., mainly alcohol and drugs). This was discussed more privately. Some fathers felt embarrassed or said that they did not want others to feel sorry for them or to look “weak” or unable to cope. Other fathers decided to become more active in order to cope.

Much of what came out after the interviews were fathers who cried, were upset and angry, or were simply frustrated with the family law system and the self-reported biases, many of them saying that they were overlooked as custodial parents and viewed as, at best, visiting parents.

Suicide, Suicide Attempts, and Suicide Ideation

Throughout the interviews, there were instances when fathers recounted the times when they or others were overwhelmed and considered suicide. Fathers would tear up or cry when discussing their own suicide ideation, that of other fathers they knew who discussed their ideations, and those they knew who committed suicide. Some fathers who reported mental health issues also described instances of suicide ideation. Others discussed how often they talked to fathers who contemplated or actually committed suicide.

Emotional and social support is very important, as many fathers are coping with limited or no visitation with their children. This was especially difficult for fathers during holidays, birthdays, or other important occasions. Sometimes the pain was so overwhelming that some fathers were afraid to be alone. Most fathers did not openly discuss suicide ideation, but a few did. A father from Nova Scotia recounts the memories associated with his daughter and describes how he tried to cope with isolation so he

would not think of the pain and hurt himself by committing suicide:

... you could be driving along, you hear a song [that] reminds you of your daughter, reminds you of your child, you know, reminds you of a certain time, you could be driving by someplace, [it] reminds you of a certain time, you can't be alone, if you're alone you think, and if you start thinking it hurts. (CM21NS)

While some fathers were indirect, others were more direct about their pain. Most fathers would feel more comfortable saying they were depressed and used cues such as not being alone or other terms. This father from Québec is more explicit and attests to his own suicide ideation, saying:

I was suicidal, and then every time I picked up a gun to blow my own brains out, I said why should I leave my girlfriend to pick up this mess ... I didn't want to take pills, I was suicidal, I was homicidal, and I wasn't sleeping, and a couple of people pushed me in the direction of this group called Pères Séparés [Separated Fathers], which was an emotional support group... (CM43QC)

This father was quite open about his suicide ideation. His interviews clearly highlighted the connection between self-reported depression and suicide ideation amongst separated and divorced fathers. Most fathers were not as explicit as this father about depression and suicide. This and other interviews helped to highlight when fathers were being implicit about their suicide ideation, such as the aforementioned father who was worried about being alone and "thinking" or contemplating suicide. When we talked about what he meant after the interview was completed, he confirmed that it was suicide ideation. In short, most of the fathers interviewed were at times cryptic about issues regarding mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. Another father from Québec recounts how he wrote a suicide note to his son in order to explain why he contemplated suicide, saying:

I've gone through two burn outs [and] three depressions. I was at a point where I even wrote my son a letter at one point, explaining everything, that, I'm sorry, but Daddy just couldn't do it anymore. (CM67QC)

While some fathers discussed their own thoughts about suicide, others discussed the suicide of other fathers they knew who were going through difficult divorces. One of those interviewed in the Northwest Territories talked about two friends he knew who committed suicide as a result of going through separation and divorce. He notes:

I was drawn into it largely through the suicides of both people I knew of, but some personal friends as well. ...Cliff Ives [pseudonym] of Toronto ... he was the first person to post [his] suicide note on the internet. Then I lost one of my closest friends, he had been assaulted by his wife, her brother, faced false allegations, with no relief from the courts or the police and then one day he drowned himself ... (CM7NWT)

It was mainly fathers who discussed suicide and suicide ideation. A few grandparents

also mentioned it, one relative to a son who committed suicide and another who discussed suicide ideation with his mother. There was also a father who was part of a support group in Québec who recounted hearing about another father going through a difficult divorce and wanting to commit suicide. In the excerpt below, this father provides details of what he heard from a “Mountie” (Royal Canadian Mounted Police Officer) who attends the support group meeting and had told the group about one of his fellow Mounties who almost committed suicide, saying:

He’s a Mountie and his colleague working...at commercial crimes...called him up one day, and he had no money for an apartment or anything. He was sleeping in his car. Undercover car and he called Jack [pseudonym], to say bye, he had his revolver in his mouth...He just called Jack [pseudonym] to say bye, and Jack [pseudonym] talked him down and saved this guy’s life. (CM66QC)

As in the above quote, supporting fellow fathers experiencing mental health issues and suicide ideation was mentioned in some interviews. Many of the fathers discussed not seeing their children as an ongoing issue related to suicide ideation. They often suffered in silence, not reaching out; this usually resulted in them internalizing their pain. Fathers met in self-help groups in places like church basements. As a father from Québec notes, both fathers and mothers attended these groups for emotional support:

...we’re not psychologists, you know, the majority of men who came in and women, we had a lot of women came [sic] in to help us as well, about 20% were women, but the vast majority of men who came in to ask for help, needed serious psychological help...The problem is, is, because they’re depressed, they’re suicidal... (CM43QC)

Some fathers who already worked through most of their own issues related to mental health and suicide ideation talked about their work of supporting fathers on who were on a suicide watch. This father from British Columbia discusses the work he did to support a father on “suicide watch”, noting:

So we spoke for about an hour and I was trying to help him, counsel him to take a positive rather than a destructive approach, he was then on suicide watch living at his friend’s place, I made some recommendations, among which was to meet with me the next day, I was just volunteering my time here trying to help out. (CM41BC)

This father was also very forthcoming about his mental health issues and suicide ideation. There were various fathers who also connected their experiences through the family law system and the effect it has on them. Another father from Québec shares his observations about the problems he sees other parents coping with during a separation or divorce, stating:

... when they realized what the reality is, well, they can understand that men, that go through this system. Suffering great deals [sic], and some people are pushed so

far off the edge, that they're willing to do pretty much anything because they've exhausted all of their resources. (CM64QC)

Fathers being "pushed off the edge", in this interview, refers to how fathers feel as though there are limited options left, and, unfortunately, suicide or other drastic action is considered. This theme of fathers being pushed to the edge is also echoed in what this father notes regarding the family legal system and the possibility of being "picked off" or eliminated. A father from Nova Scotia pointed out the hopelessness of his situation in the family law system and how it makes him feel. "You're left with a sense of hopelessness and you feel like a pen of livestock waiting to see, you know, which one's gonna get picked off, is it gonna be me today?" (CM21NS). Some fathers were clear about their dissonance and feeling as though they may be the next person to be "picked off", or as this person later clarified in the interview, succumb to their depression and suicide ideation. His main issue, like many fathers, was being seen as a disposable social parent after divorce and not seeing his children. Another father from British Columbia highlights the point of remaining an involved parent after divorce related issues, noting that it is "...the lack of equality in the [family law] system that prevents children from getting the best of both parents, that's just what it is..." (CM10BC). This was a consistent theme throughout most interviews with fathers who often feel the family law system, specifically the courts, are neither balanced nor inclusive in terms of promoting both parents in their children's lives.

As noted, there were fathers who reported mental health issues as well as describing instances of suicide ideation. Others discussed other fathers who contemplated or actually committed suicide. Overall, the interview schedule did not include questions about suicide ideation and mental health issues. These were unexpected findings that reveal how these fathers feel about their precarious current situations, their lack of importance as parents after separation and divorce, and their vulnerability as a result of mental health issues or suicide ideation.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was initially to investigate if situational identity influences collective identity related to activism in the Fathers' Rights and Shared Parenting social movements. The results of the interviews suggest a situational identity of "social" fathers not mattering after separation and divorce. Many of these fathers reported having mental health and suicide ideation issues usually as a result of their post-separation or divorced parental role as social fathers being diminished, often as an outcome of going through the family law system. This has added an unexpected dimension to understanding how their situational identity as separated or divorced fathers who have been demeaned, demoralized, and disenfranchised (Nielsen, 1999). Fathers' Rights and Shared Parenting activists primarily focus on changing divorce laws and advocating for shared parenting, as well as fair custodial arrangements, support, and access laws so that they can remain in their children's lives (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). In terms of their situational identity, they often see themselves as being viewed as disposable parents after separation and divorce; they are seen as not mattering as social parents, even though they are committed to their children.

Many of the fathers interviewed in this study noted that they were seen as secondary in their children's lives and that, after divorce, court-mandated custody decisions left them at the periphery of their children's lives. One of the main themes in many of the interviews is that the decisions made in family courts regarding divorce and custodial issues often left these fathers out of their children's lives socially. Nielsen (1999) points out that "divorce laws still tend to reinforce the idea that what children need from their divorced father is his money, not his involvement in their daily lives" (p. 150). It seems that one of the main questions this research seeks to address is if fathers matter, which is, in many ways, a core issue related to these activists' collective identity and, on a personal level, their situational identity – that post-divorce social fathers do not matter.

Interestingly, the unexpected findings pertaining to mental health and suicide did, however, highlight the initial research question of asking if fathers matter in the family law system. There does seem to be awareness, especially amongst the fathers, that they are expendable as social fathers and are not really necessary in terms of spending time with their children and nurturing them. Generally, after separation or divorce, social fathers do not seem to matter as parents substantially contributing to their children's lives emotionally and psychologically. This seems to have a very negative effect on fathers. Parke and Brott (1999) discuss the notion of "throwaway dads" and point out the various myths connected to fatherhood. They note how society sees fathers as disposable, lazy, useless, and deadbeats, especially after separation and divorce. They also ask the question: "Do fathers really matter?" Parke and Brott (1999) further point out the importance of fathers and the need for fathers before and after separation or divorce.

The situational identity, for many of those interviewed, was that of a "secondary parent", a father who does not matter (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). This was connected to their personal identity as fathers, who, they believe, are not seen as necessary. Their "situational identities" challenge this notion of not mattering, and contest this negative perception of fathers after separation and divorce in order to rethink this stigmatized identity and put forth the idea that fathers are vital social and emotional parents who are necessary in their children's lives (Goffman, 1963). They want to manage their identity "situationally" as post-separation/divorced fathers who may or may not have access to their children and are often not the custodial parent (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006). In this case, their situational identity is based on being an activist who is a non-custodial parent with limited or no access to their children and wants some sort of shared parenting arrangement.

The data highlighted the issues mental health, suicide ideation, and suicide among fathers. There were cases of fathers who reported being both depressed as well as coping with suicide ideation. Kposowa (2000:259) notes that clinical depression is often a prelude to suicide and accounts for the high rate of suicide amongst those who are divorced. Others studies have also linked depression, suicide ideation and suicide (Braswell & Kushner, 2012; Oliffe, Ogrodniczuk, Bottorff, Johnson, & Hoyak, 2012; Sareen, Cox, Afifi, De Graaf, Asmundson, Have, Stein, 2005; Wasserman, 1984). In some literature, fathers' rights activists are viewed as angry and their rhetoric is discounted as anti-feminist backlash, dismissing them and the reasons for their activism (Arendell, 1992a, 1992b; Bertoia, 1998; Bertoia & Drakich, 1993; Coltrane & Hickman, 1992; Crowley, 2008; Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011; Drakich, 1989) without considering their

personal reasons, which may focus more on their children and problems they have encountered regarding mental health issues or other problems as a result of family law system (Kenedy, 2004/5, 2006).

Interestingly, almost all fathers interviewed highlighted missing or being away from their children (Hughes, 1989). Umberson and Williams (1993) pointed out that men's grieving process is less direct. Studies found that the loss of contact with their children is often far more significant for fathers than the loss of the marital role (Baum, 2003; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; Hughes, 1989; Kendler, Thornton, & Prescott, 2001). Umberson and Williams (1993) note that the effects of mortality and mental health related to divorce are often associated with fathers' loss of "...their parental role" (p. 379). Many fathers in the current study did experience notable mental health issues as a result of the distress of being away from their children, as well as their experiences in family court. The fathers also reported similar mental health issues as Liazos (1997) found in his study on divorced fathers who felt lonely, rootless, and depressed.

Few fathers directly reported mental health or suicide ideation issues. As noted, sometimes they were very direct about reporting depression or contemplating suicide, but for some fathers, they would only discuss these issues after the interview. Some did say that they did not want to appear weak when in focus group interviews or if they were being recorded during individual interviews. Some also said after focus groups or interviews that they did not want to visit doctors or mental health professionals. These fathers also noted that they worried about anyone publicly knowing about their mental health issues and this negatively impacting their custodial cases before the courts. Many of these fathers were like other "Men [who] tend not to seek out care because social norms promote the idea that it is more masculine to not been seen as weak and 'tough it out'" (Health Canada, 2012: 42). Similarly, Spector (2006) notes that fathers experiencing marital conflicts and divorce often masked or denied suffering from depression. As a result, they often did not seek treatment. Other literature confirmed the finding in the current study of many non-custodial fathers who had limited contact with their children reporting incidences of depression and feeling "...demeaned, demoralized, lost, and unsupported" (Nielsen, 1999; Spector, 2006). Conversely, the presence of children in the lives of post-divorced fathers was noted as being facilitative and stabilizing (Stewart, Schwebel, & Fine, 2008). Many of the fathers interviewed who had limited or no contact after separation and divorce were more likely to report incidences of depression and suicide ideation.

The literature suggests that separated and divorced fathers suffer from more mental health issues and have a higher risk of suicide than married fathers. Various studies have suggested an association between divorce and suicide (Bartlett, 2004; Health Canada, 2012; Kposowa, 2000; Trovato, 1987). In his analysis of the literature on fathers' health, Bartlett (2004) discusses how divorced fathers who have lost custody of their children had notable chronic health problems, psychological issues, and a greater risk of suicide. Bartlett (2004) also cites many divorced fathers' lack of social integration and cohesion as a possible reason for suicide. Sbarra and Emery (2005) also note that men who divorce have increased rates of poor health and suicide, as well as not faring well socially and struggling more than women. Kposowa (2000) found that "divorced men were 2.5 times more likely die to from suicide than married men" (p. 258). Moreover, divorced men are ten times more likely to commit suicide than divorced

women (Kposowa, 2000). In the case of suicide, men account for 4 out of 5 deaths by suicides in Canada. “Most individuals who attempt or complete suicide, have some form of mental illness – most often depression” (Health Canada, 43). Bartlett (2004) notes that Kposowa (2000) could not directly link fathers’ loss of child custody to the risk of suicide, but did suggest that there was an association. This seems evident in the case of the fathers interviewed for the current study, regarding depression and suicide ideation being linked to not seeing children due to custodial problems, in terms of fathers usually being the non-custodial parent with access or visitation and having limited or no contact with their children.

The interview questions for this study highlighted personal situations, legal and custodial issues, general involvement in fathers’ rights and shared parenting issues, as well as other issues as part of a larger project. Asking about mental health, suicide, and related issues such as personal well-being was not part of the overall study. It is interesting to note that, even though the fathers interviewed were not asked about their emotional health, mental health, or related reasons, fathers either openly self-reported or hinted at mental health issues and suicide ideation as it related to being removed from their children’s lives after separation or divorce. Even more significant is that they often went into detail about mental health issues such as depression and how they begun to think about suicide as a result of not having contact with their children, usually as a result of a challenging separation or divorce.

Throughout the various interviews, it was when many of the parents, grandparents, and others responded to questions about their personal legal situation, the family law system, and their children that mental health and suicide-related issues emerged. It was often in this context that many participants either discussed their own struggles with these issues or secondary accounts based on what other fathers, mothers, and grandparents observed of fathers they knew who experienced mental health issues, suicide ideation or committing suicide. While both mothers and fathers who were interviewed discussed mental health issues, very few mothers talked about any personal thoughts of suicide. Mothers and grandmothers sometimes discussed the suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and suicides of those they knew. It was primarily fathers who discussed their own cases of mental health issues such as depression, as well as suicide and suicide ideation. The essential point is that all fathers contextualized their mental health issues and suicide ideation as being related to custodial issues, the family law system, and associated issues. There were times when I did ask follow-up questions during or after interviews regarding mental health and suicide issues; fathers often said that if they did have pre-existing mental health issues, the issues were often exacerbated by their own legal and personal issues related to separation and divorce. In terms of suicide, of those fathers who discussed their own situation about suicide ideation, when I asked them if they thought about it before getting separated or divorced, most of them said that they never considered suicide (there were no mothers who explicitly talked about it). Generally, the connection to mental health and suicide ideation was connected to their separation, divorce, custodial, or legal issues in the family law system.

Summary and Conclusions

This research began by asking the question: “Do fathers matter after separation and divorce?” The findings suggest that fathers do not seem to matter to the point where, according to those interviewed, they are seen as unnecessary, disposable parents. One of

the possible outcomes of being viewed as expendable parents after separation and divorce is having limited or no contact with their children. These fathers pointed out that the consequence of losing contact with their children resulted in various mental health issues as well as suicide ideation. They also noted that their mental health issues and suicide ideation were related to both their custodial issues as well as their experiences of going through the family law system. Many fathers believed that their concerns were usually dismissed, and they were referred to in the literature as being “angry” and participating in their own demise. The literature portrays these fathers as being anti-feminist and misguided. The problem is that while dismissing their concerns about the family law system, the problematic aspects of the legal system are ignored. The overall findings also suggest that fathers interviewed may be the “canary in the coal mine” and are voicing their concerns about a legal system that is not helping them stay in contact with their children after separation and divorce.

Furthermore, do separated and divorced fathers have enough support from social services? Do they have particular services that are geared toward their particular needs, such as counselling services, legal services, and family shelter space specifically available to them? Having specialized support services for fathers who need shelter space and support seem to be of clear concern across Canada. Usually, these men reported not reaching out for help and, in some cases, contemplating suicide or some type of self-harm. Outreach for this was limited, and many of them reported wanting to seek help for their emotional problems. It was often as a result of contending with their legal issues that they would visit fathers’ groups and self-help groups to discuss their mental health issues. They also noted the lack of general resources beyond family doctors and other traditional sources. It would be helpful for healthcare providers or professionals to reach out to separated and divorced fathers, encouraging them to feel comfortable about seeking help or referring them to fathers’ support groups when appropriate. Also, having outreach providers or professionals working with various fathers’ groups on a regular basis may be helpful for fathers to feel more comfortable asking for support with mental health issues and suicide ideation. This could begin with outreach healthcare providers or professionals giving presentations at fathers’ groups and informing fathers of the services they offer in terms of support and counselling. This would be especially helpful for fathers coping with mental health or suicide ideation issues who reported that they were worried about feeling stigmatized or appearing weak. Having an established working relationship between fathers’ groups and healthcare providers and professionals may make this group of fathers feel more comfortable seeking the services.

Recommendations for Further Research and Policy Implications

A focus on fathers is especially necessary for further research, since they are often seen as disposable social parents. There also needs to be more focus on the family and non-adversarial services that support children and parents going through separation and divorce. Further research on suicide rates and suicide ideation amongst divorced fathers, mothers, and children of divorce in Canada is also necessary (Fuller-Thomson & Dalton, 2011). This is particularly an issue for fathers and children of divorce.

Though the literature on children of divorce and their mental health as well as suicide issues is robust, more longitudinal research on the outcomes of high-conflict

divorce on (adult) children is necessary, as is more research on non-custodial mothers and the issues of mothers who are paying support. Far more research is necessary regarding the social, mental health and legal challenges that non-custodial and custodial parents encounter, especially for non-custodial mothers and fathers. There needs to be a better understanding of shared parenting and the implications for non-adversarial services that promote it.

Researchers need to examine why this issue exists and why these fathers suffer as a result of separation and divorce, as well as the custodial issues. Too many researchers focus on the outcome of the Fathers' Rights Movement without examining reasons why it exists or why the activists are interested in shared parenting and related issues. They often ignore why fathers are protesting and suffering from the outcomes of rancorous separation and divorces, as well as a family law system that does not believe that fathers, mothers, or children matter. There seems to be a noteworthy ideological slant against fathers and the movement without focusing on reasons why the movement exists. Even worse, when fathers are facing mental health issues and contemplating suicide, they seem to be ignored as not mattering. The existing literature focuses more on the movement as being an anti-feminist backlash, rather than examining why fathers and others are interested in being viewed as equal parents instead of being perceived as expendable and disposable non-custodial parents. In short, the literature seems to be ignoring the obvious reason the shared parenting movement exists: that fathers feel that they do not matter in their children's lives as social parents and often feel as though they are superfluous, especially after experiencing the family law system.

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