The problem addressed in the article is why so many fathers remove themselves from their children's lives after divorce. The authors develop a theory that offers a partial explanation of this phenomena based on the potential for change in the salience of a man's identity as a father postdivorce. Propositions are developed and hypotheses are derived from symbolic interaction and identity theory. The authors define and interrelate the concepts of identity, saliency, commitment, and significant others to explain father presence or absence postdivorce across time. The theory further isolates a number of variables that are expected to moderate (strengthen or weaken) the relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement. Identifying modifiers enables the authors to stipulate why some fathers are more involved with their children following separation by explaining the conditions under which father identity becomes translated into a patterned set of behaviors.

Developing a Middle-Range Theory of Father Involvement Postdivorce*

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A nation with an eye on its future values, nurtures, and cares for its children. At the end of the 20th century in America there are an increasing number of children who do not receive this necessary valuing and care from their fathers. Some of these children are born to unmarried mothers and have no father in their lives from the start (Mott, 1990). Others lose the financial and emotional support of their father after divorce. We are not arguing here that father-absent families are inherently deficient. Rather, we suggest that children whose fathers are functionally absent are at greater risk for developing problems. We propose that children's well-being is placed in jeopardy for two reasons. First, children benefit

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from the love, caring, and economic support a father can provide. Second, a father’s involvement in the life of his child is important to a child’s development.

For children who are born to married (or stably cohabiting) parents, divorce does not automatically jeopardize children; some fathers continue to fulfill all their parental roles postdivorce. However, many do not. Recent longitudinal research shows that a significant number of fathers cease to nurture and provide for their children after divorce (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). Although several recent studies with small, nonrepresentative samples have attempted to shed light on why this happens (see as examples Arendell, 1992; Kruk, 1991), we do not as yet have an answer. In this article, a theoretical conceptualization is presented that is intended to help explain this phenomenon. Using the principles of identity theory we develop a middle-range theory that accounts for the degree of father involvement with children postseparation, postdivorce, and in some cases, postremarriage.

The theory presented here proposes that the key element in father involvement postdivorce is the degree of a father’s identification with the status and roles associated with being a parent. Father’s parenting-role identity is defined as the self-meanings attached to the status and associated roles of parenthood (Burke & Tully, 1977). We hypothesize that this parent identity is a major determinant of father involvement with children following marital separation. Father involvement is defined as behaviors that promote interaction with and reflect a commitment to a child, including, among other activities, face-to-face contact, phoning or writing, physical caretaking, and providing financial support. The consequence of father involvement is child well-being, which is defined as the degree to which children are able to engage successfully and appropriately in interpersonal relationships and in work or play activities with relative freedom from noxious social behavior, burdensome emotions, and poor physical health (Trotter, 1989, p. 16). Figure 1 illustrates these relationships.

Our task here is to develop the rationale for using identity theory to explain father behavior and to show how identity principles help explain father involvement postdivorce. Therefore, in this article we focus on the first half of the model depicted in the figure—the concepts and propositions responsible for the relationship between father identity and father involvement—rather than on those that make up the second half of the model.

Our interest in using identity theory as an explanation of fathering behavior is not unique. In a forthcoming article, Marsiglio (in press)
proposes the utility of this theory to explain parenting involvement/noninvolvement of young fathers who live apart from their children. Using the concept of commitment, he suggests that this framework is a fruitful tool to understanding the dimensions of meaning that young fathers and their significant others associate with father roles. He also suggests that identity theory could guide research that explores "the subculture and developmental aspects of the relevant identity processes" as well as "identify young men's characteristics and the situational factors that affect young fathers' level of commitment to a role identity that emphasizes the emotional, psychological, and financial responsibilities often associated with fathering."

Marsiglio (1992) also used identity theory to guide a discussion of the stepfather parenting role. In a study of 195 stepfathers, he found that stepfathers who hold fatherlike perceptions (indicating that role identity and role performance are fatherlike in nature) had more positive relations with their stepchildren. Several other variables that were entered into a simultaneous multiple regression model also were significant (socialization values that emphasized conformity, a wife/partner who had a positive relationship with the target child), but stepfathering perceptions were the strongest predictors.

The theory offered here attempts to link key variables associated with father parenting-role identity and show how they affect father involvement. Because the real world (as contrasted to the scholar's theoretical world) is extremely complex, it is not always easy to distinguish cause from effect when observing behavior over time. For example, L. White (personal communication, October 1991) raised the question whether, in our theory, identity salience causes involvement or involvement causes salience. Acknowledging this point, we suggest that father parenting-role identity directly influences father involvement, but involvement in turn affects a future level of father parenting-role identity. This nonrecursive relationship is reflected in the full theoretical model presented later in the article. Also, when delineating change over time, an "entry point" in the process must be chosen. We accept as given all experiences and events
that shaped, maintained, and/or changed father parenting-role identity up to the point of residential separation from a child. Thus the theory presented predicts change or stability in father parenting-role identity beginning at the time when father's co-residence with a child ends.

POSTDIVORCE FATHERING

Most studies investigating postdivorce fathering find that the majority of fathers disengage from their parenting roles over time. Data from the National Survey of Children document the limited contact that children have with their fathers postdivorce (Furstenberg et al., 1987; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Furstenberg et al., 1983). In one report based on these data, 23% of fathers had no contact with their children aged 11 to 16 during the previous 5 years (Furstenberg et al., 1987). Only 26% of children averaged at least bimonthly contact with their fathers (Furstenberg et al., 1983). However, in spite of limited contact, the conclusion drawn from these data was that the children who were surveyed showed no negative effects from paternal absence. Because of the quality of the research design and the fact that it is based on a national probability sample, considerable weight is given to these findings by scholars interested in the effects of divorce on children.

Studies using multimethod and/or qualitative techniques also document the limited involvement of fathers after divorce but produce different findings regarding the effects of lack of contact on children’s well-being postdivorce (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). These studies conclude that fathers are important to children’s postdivorce adjustment because father contact is associated with fewer behavioral problems, higher self-esteem, and other positive indexes of children’s development.

Thus the extent of the problem of limited father involvement postdivorce is well documented, even though the consequences of father absence as reported in the literature are inconsistent. More important, what the extant studies do not explain is why so many fathers remove themselves from active participation in their children’s lives after divorce. We argue that at least part of the explanation is because of the potential for change in the salience of a man’s identity as a father. Role ambiguity in fathering identity is introduced when the husband position and roles are relinquished after marital separation and divorce. A change occurs in the meaning of parenthood and self-conception as a parent of the child(ren) from the dissolved marriage. This identity change may be represented by
an increase or a decrease in the importance of fathering. We emphasize that the focus of the model is on process, change, and degree, not merely presence or absence of participation.

THE ROLE OF IDENTITY

KEY CONCEPTS

Identity. At a time when scholars were less aware of sexist language, Manford Kuhn (1960) emphasized Mead’s contributions to what we now call identity theory. He wrote: “George Herbert Mead suggested that a person’s behavior is a function of his conception of his identity, and further, that his conception of his identity derives from the positions he occupies in society” (pp. 53-54). According to this conceptualization, identity has a cognitive dimension and is linked to social structure through status and associated roles. For Stryker and Serpe (1982), identities are defined as “reflexively applied cognitions in the form of answers to the question ‘Who am I?’ These answers are phrased in terms of the position in organized structures of social relationships to which one belongs and the social roles that attach to these positions” (p. 206). In this same tradition, Burke and Tully (1977) conceptualize identity as

a major component of the self. Indeed the self as a whole is a collection of identities, each of which is experienced indirectly through interactions with others (Stryker, 1981). These identities are the meanings one attributes to oneself as an object. Each identity is associated with particular interactional settings or roles. (p. 883)

The origin of these definitions of identity is the symbolic interaction perspective. Each conceives of identity as composed of meanings and cognitions associated with a specific status that is formed and maintained through interaction with others. According to this perspective, the social situation is the context in which identities are established, and they are maintained through the process of negotiation (Becker, 1964; Stone, 1962). The idea of negotiation brings to identity theory the importance of significant others in identity formation, maintenance, and change. For the specific theoretical model we develop here, parent identity is defined as the self-meanings and cognitions attached to the status and roles of parent.

Saliency. Identity theorists contend that identities are organized into salience hierarchies. As Stryker and Serpe (1982) explain,
This hierarchical organization of identities is defined by the probabilities of each of the various identities within it being brought into play in a given situation. Alternatively, it is defined by the probabilities each of the identities have of being invoked across a variety of situations. The location of an identity in this hierarchy is, by definition, its salience. Implied in this conceptualization and definition is the general proposition that an identity's location in a salience hierarchy will affect its threshold for being invoked in situations and thus the likelihood that behavior called for by the identity will ensure. Whether or not that behavior will, in fact, occur will clearly depend on the way that salience of an identity interacts with (1) defining characteristics of situations (such as the degree to which the situation permits alternative identities to be expressed behaviorally), and (2) other self characteristics (such as self-esteem or satisfaction). It is worth emphasizing that, from the viewpoint of identity theory, the organization of identities in a salience hierarchy is a specification of the sociological conceptualization of personality as a structure reflecting the roles persons play. (p. 207)

From this definition and discussion we expect to find that when the parent identity is more salient vis-à-vis other identities, fathers will value the status and roles associated with fatherhood above other statuses and roles. Fathers also will choose to enact parenting behaviors in specific situations appropriate to those behaviors or across situations, taking into account the characteristics of the situation. This might be exemplified with the decision by a father to attend a child's musical recital instead of taking the opportunity to go out with friends when the characteristics of the situation are an evening free of other obligations and both child and friends are equally persuasive in their appeal.

One further point concerns the relative salience of the various roles attached to a specific status. That is, just as statuses are compared and ranked in importance, the roles associated with a single status also are compared and ranked. For example, the status of father competes with other statuses a man may hold (e.g., employee, husband, son, brother). Each of these statuses has a set of roles associated with it; fathers take on the role of provider, nurturer, companion, disciplinarian, and so on with reference to their children. Furthermore, just as a man may rank the status of father more salient than that of brother, he also may rank provider more salient than nurturer or disciplinarian more important than companion. The way a man enacts the father roles provides insight into the meaning that he attaches to that role.

Commitment. The term commitment is an important concept in identity theory, but its use is confounded by multiple meanings. Writers apply different definitions to the concept, and it is not always clear to what they
are applying that meaning. For example, Stryker and Serpe (1982) define commitment as

the degree to which the person’s relationships to specified sets of others depend on his or her being a particular kind of person, i.e., occupying a particular position in an organized structure of relationships and playing a particular role . . . [the concept of commitment] provides a useful way of conceiving “society’s” relevance for social behavior, doing so by pointing to social networks—the number of others to whom one relates by occupancy of a given position, the importance to one of those others, the multiplicity of linkages, and so on—as the relevant considerations. (p. 207)

This conceptualization views commitment as linked to a network of relationships, not to an identity per se. The theory developed here assesses a father’s commitment in terms of two factors: (a) the number of, and extent to which, persons expect or require him to hold the status of father and enact father roles, and (b) the importance of these relationships to him.

Burke and Reitzes (1991) define commitment as “the sum of the forces that maintain congruity between one’s identity and the implications for one’s identity of the interactions and behaviors in the interactive setting” (p. 244). This means that when a father’s perceptions of others’ responses to his parental behaviors, attitudes, and enactment of parent roles are not aligned with his own perceptions of himself in those roles, the strength of his response to the misalignment is the degree of his commitment to that role. For example, if a father shrugs off negative comments about his failure to provide child support for his children, it can be interpreted that his conception of father-as-provider role is not important to his identity as father or that his status as father is low in salience. This definition indicates the commitment concept refers to a commitment to an identity.

However, commitment also has been defined as (a) “the willingness of social actors to give their energy and resources to a particular course of action” (Gecas, 1980, p. 1); (b) a promise—that is, “an obligation to remain in and maintain a relationship over time” (Tallman, Gray, & Leik, in press, p. 17); and (c) as “consistent lines of behavior resulting from an actor’s assessment of the balance of costs over rewards” (Becker, 1960, cited in Gecas, 1980, p. 2). According to these ideas the concept of commitment refers to a commitment to people, objects, goals, or groups and not to an identity.

Herein lies a source of confusion. It is evident that an individual makes commitments to his or her self via adherence to a particular identity as well as commitments to others via promises and consistent lines of behavior. Because our theory defines father involvement as behaviors that promote interaction and reflect a commitment to a child, we are concerned
with both types of commitment. Thus we are concerned with a man’s commitment to (a) establishing, maintaining, or changing his identity and role-related behaviors as father, and (b) actions taken to maintain a relationship with his child over time. To keep these two aspects of commitment distinct, in the following pages we differentiate between commitment to self and commitment to others when appropriate.

Although commitment has been defined and applied differently, the consequences of commitment are clear. “The greater the commitment to an identity, the more consequential it is for the individual’s conduct” (Stryker, 1980, cited in Gecas, 1982, p. 14). Burke and Reitzes (1991) suggest that a consequence of commitment is the moderation of the relationship between an identity and role performance commitment (p. 244). This means that individuals use “their behavior to increase rewards and values received for having a particular identity” (p. 244). “High levels of commitment . . . result in involvement in activities, in organizations, and with role partners, all of which support the person’s identity” (p. 245).

Commitment implies decision-making and choice behavior. Stryker and Serpe (1982) emphasized that role-related behavior involves making choices. Based on the work of these authors, we formulated the following proposition pertaining to father identity: The extent to which a father is embedded in a social structure that provides options and he has the opportunity to choose behaviors from those options, then the degree to which he chooses to enact specific roles associated with father status indicates its saliency vis-à-vis other statuses and roles. The way choices are manifested is illustrated with the earlier example concerning the decision to attend a child’s music recital. Choices and decisions are expected to be based on salience of roles and the actions and reactions of significant others.

An identity theory principle states that people seek to create and maintain stable, coherent identities and that they prefer to evaluate their identities positively (Schwartz & Stryker, 1970). Also, people establish their aspiration levels (including identity aspirations) in a way that is designed to maximize self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1986). This propensity for both a positive evaluation of identities and an alignment between what people aspire to and their sense of self-worth means that the decisions and choices people make are likely to be based on an assessment of rewards and costs associated with choice alternatives (Becker, 1960). Regarding fatherhood, we propose that all else being equal, fathers are more likely to make role choices perceived as relatively pleasant and entailing few barriers than to make role choices perceived as aversive and difficult to enact (Tallman & Gray, 1990). However, when all else is not equal, the
degree of commitment to self and others is expected to affect behavioral choices. Therefore, when level of commitment to father identity (self) is high and level of commitment to the child (other) is high, father identity saliency also is expected to be high. A high degree of salience is expected to modify difficulties or unpleasant situations, and fathers are expected to pursue involvement with their children in spite of such difficulties.

**Significant others.** Identity theory is an outgrowth of symbolic interaction theory (Burke & Tully, 1977; Gecas, 1981; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Therein lies the importance of significant others to identify formation, to the salience hierarchy of identities, and to the behavioral choices that a person makes that reinforce or change identities. The importance of significant others follows from Mead’s and Cooley’s conceptualization of the development of the self. Stryker and Serpe (1982) summarize this idea:

> We come to know who and what we are through interaction with others. We become objects to ourselves by attaching to ourselves symbols that emerge from our interaction with others, symbols having meanings growing out of that interaction. As any other symbols, self symbols have action implications: they tell us (as well as others) how we can be expected to behave in our ongoing activity. (p. 202)

Burke and Tully (1977) tie this notion of self to identity by stating that “the self as a whole is a collection of identities, each of which is experienced indirectly through interactions with others” (p. 883).

Finally, we emphasize that individuals enact specific role behaviors that are relatively congruent with their identity in a specific position (Burke & Tully, 1977; Burke & Reitzes, 1981 Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Significant others are important to the formation, maintenance, or change in father identity insofar as they respond to a man’s behavior and attitudes related to fatherhood. In addition, a father’s perceptions of others’ (re)actions define the degree and strength of his commitment to father identity.

**Time.** A theory that attempts to predict change in behavior must include a temporal element. To examine change in father identity, it is necessary to know the initial state of father identity before the predicted change takes place (i.e., the marital separation). Only then can we assess what, if any, change occurs in identity. Over time, fathers experience life events, such as their divorce or their own or their former spouses’ remarriage. These events also will affect father identity and father role behavior over time. This view reflects Wells and Stryker’s (1988) interpretation: “What is
important to recognize is that neither stability nor change in self is a given, and that life-course processes help to account for both” (p. 209).

The time dimension necessitates a longitudinal examination of father identity and father involvement behaviors. The reciprocal effects of father-child interaction on father's subsequent identity and involvement behavior need to be considered because behavior has consequences that influence future behavior. (Re)actions of significant others, including the child, have an impact on the maintenance and change of father identity and role behavior. Thus we predict that father identity will change as relevant life events occur, as the set of father's significant others change, and as children adapt to the divorce and mature. The proposed theory of father involvement incorporates a longitudinal dimension to delineate the conditions under which men continue or discontinue parenting postdivorce and after remarriage.

A THEORY OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT POSTDIVORCE

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

With the central concepts of the theory specified, our next step is to set forth the basic theoretical assumptions. Space limitations prohibit a complete explication of all the principles associated with identity theory that stem from the symbolic interaction framework. However, because the theory of father involvement proposed here is premised on these principles, the following statements are offered as general assumptions.

1. Most behavior is associated with the performance of some role or roles.
2. Roles are shared expectations or meanings attached to behavior.
3. The meaning of roles is understood through interaction.
4. Identity is the meaning a person attributes to the self as an object in a social situation (status) or social role.
5. Shared meanings are the essence of social identity.
6. Because an individual has many statuses and roles, an individual has many identities.
7. Therefore, identity is self-meaning relative to various statuses held and roles performed and is developed, maintained, and changed through experience, interaction, and negotiation with others.

Our theory of father involvement conceptualizes fatherhood as a status with a variety of roles (e.g., provider, disciplinarian, companion) attached to that status. After divorce, fathers retain the status of father, but the roles
associated with fatherhood are difficult to maintain if the father and child no longer live in the same household. Fathers become the nonresidential parent in about 90% of divorce cases (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986).

Holding the status of father and enacting the roles associated with fatherhood is a potentially salient identity for a man. As stated earlier, people are expected to enact specific role behaviors that are relatively congruent with their identity in a specific status (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Burke & Tully, 1977; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Therefore, fathers are expected to behave toward their children in ways that reflect (a) the value they place on fatherhood and (b) their interpretation of what a good father does and/or is. However, there is variation among men in what it means to be a father and what constitutes “good” fathering. For example, two men who give equal salience to their parent identity may enact the roles associated with fatherhood quite differently because of differences in the way they interpret what it means to be a good father. One father may work 14 hours a day, 6 days a week to provide the material good he thinks his child should have. He believes he is a wonderful parent. In this case, there is congruency between identity and role behavior. Another man may consistently skip work to go watch his son play soccer, and he also believes he is a wonderful parent. Here there is also congruency between identity and role behavior. Thus, when determining the salience of father status and roles, careful consideration must be given to an assessment of the perceived content by individual fathers.

When a father loses the daily, routinized, familiar opportunities to parent after divorce, his identity as a father is expected to be affected. Only in cases where father identity salience is extremely high or extremely low is no change in role behavior expected. This expectation stems from the earlier discussion of commitment. Fathers at the extreme ends of the identity salience hierarchy (those who are extremely committed or extremely uncommitted to their parent identity) are less likely to perceive alternatives to that identity. They will have made more (or fewer) investments (side bets) in that identity (Becker, 1960). They will be more (or less) anchored in that identity through significant others’ expectations for them to enact fathering roles effectively. Thus the extremes are expected to be stable overtime. In most other instances, we hypothesize that father parenting–role identity will gain or lose salience depending on events, specific circumstances, and the influence of significant others.

In summary, as a family reorganizes after marital separation, a man must choose (or is forced to choose) new patterns of involvement with his children. The level of this involvement will depend on several things: (a) the saliency of his father identity vis-à-vis other identities, such as a lover,
worker, friend, new husband; (b) the salience hierarchy of the variety of father roles that might be enacted; (c) a commitment to his view of himself as a parent and the degree to which this view is aligned with his perceptions of significant others' responses to his parenting; and this, in turn, depends on (d) the expectations significant others have for his behavior. We suggest that fathers reinforce, reconfirm, or change their father identity by choosing from various alternative behaviors based on feedback from significant others (Burke & Tully, 1977). The most likely significant others who are potential sources of influence on father identity and postdivorce involvement with children are the former spouse, parents, former in-laws, co-workers and/or colleagues, friends, lovers, a new spouse, stepchildren, and the children themselves.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CONCEPTS

The concepts that are considered relevant to the development of father parenting-role identity have been identified and discussed. We summarize the interrelationships among these concepts with the following theoretical propositions:

1. To the extent that father identity is enmeshed with other identities, father identity will have high salience, and father roles are likely to be enacted.
2. The more a father is embedded in a network of relationships that are premised on his being a father and those relationships are important to him, the more he will be committed to the status and roles of fatherhood.
3. The greater the salience of father status, the greater the commitment to that status (commitment to self).
4. The greater the salience of father status, the greater the commitment to one's child (commitment to other).

FATHER IDENTITY AND ROLE CHOICES

We identified factors that establish, maintain, or change father parenting-role identity for the purpose of explaining the rationale for using identity theory as the underlying framework for the theory. We now discuss father parenting-role choices and show how these choices affect father involvement.

It was stated earlier that just as statuses are compared and ranked in importance, so, too, the roles associated with a single status are compared and ranked. How a particular father ranks the many roles associated with his father status is the basis on which he invests his resources in children, other things being equal. The roles chosen to be enacted are closely tied...
to the interpretation a man makes concerning what it means to be a father. Choices associated with the expenditure of time, money, and energy are an indicator of the salience of roles associated with father identity. These ideas are summarized in the following propositions:

5. A father will make choices favoring enactment of father role behavior (as opposed to role behavior associated with a nonfather identity) when father status is more salient than other statuses.
6. A father will make choices favoring enactment of father role behavior (as opposed to role behavior associated with a nonfather identity) when the actions and reactions of significant others favor father involvement.
7. A father will enact parenting-role behavior that is relatively congruent with his father identity.
8. All else being equal, a father will be more likely to make role choices that he perceives as relatively pleasant and entailing few barriers than to make role choices he perceives as aversive and difficult to enact.
9. The salience of father roles will affect the ways a father chooses to be involved with his child.

TEST OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FATHER PARENTING-ROLE IDENTITY AND FATHER INVOLVEMENT

A test of the initial relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement was conducted to determine if further work on the theory was warranted. A mail survey was completed by nonresidential fathers with children ages 18 and younger, most of whom lived in central North Carolina. This was a convenience sample of 76 respondents solicited from church groups in the area. Father parenting-role identity was measured using McPhee, Benson, and Bullock's (1986) Self-Perceptions of the Parental Role Scale. This instrument measures parental role satisfaction, perceived competence, investment, and role salience. Father involvement was operationalized as father contact with child, measured as frequency of visits, writing letters, and paying child support. The correlation between father parenting-role identity and father involvement was .34 ($p < .01$).

Further analysis provided evidence of a positive relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement. This test measured father involvement by examining the degree to which fathers engaged in 11 activities with their children (responses asking for the degree of involvement ranged from not at all [1] to very much [5]). These activities included helping with schoolwork, celebrating holidays, and attending
school- or church-related functions. The correlation was .39 (p < .01) between these summed items and father parenting-role identity.

Although the causal direction of these relationships is unknown, we have some confidence that the two principle variables are associated positively. Thus, although these data are preliminary, they provide the impetus to continue the process of theory construction.

**FATHER PARENTING-ROLE IDENTITY AND FATHER INVOLVEMENT: VARIABLES THAT MODERATE THE RELATIONSHIP**

In this section, we address the question, Which factors moderate (strengthen or weaken) the hypothesized relationship between father's parenting-role identity and involvement with children? The identification of valid moderators enables us to understand more clearly why some fathers are more involved with their children following separation by explaining the mechanisms by which a specific component of identity becomes translated into a patterned set of behaviors. The moderators were selected because of their importance in the life of a divorced father.

*Mother's preferences and beliefs.* Research conducted by Ahrons (1983) has indicated that mothers serve as gatekeepers to the father-child relationship. More recent research supports these early findings (Arendell, 1992; Dudley, 1991). The residential mother’s preferences for father-child contact and her regard for his parenting abilities moderate the relationship between father parenting-role behavior and father involvement. Her preferences for frequent contact and positive regard for father’s parenting will strengthen the relationship, whereas contrary preferences and beliefs will weaken it.

*Father’s perceptions of mother’s parenting skills.* We hypothesize that a father’s belief that the mother is a good parent will weaken the relationship between the father’s parenting identity and his involvement. This belief has received little attention in the extant literature but was identified as a potential moderator by Babcock (1989). Some fathers report feeling less needed postseparation when their former wife is a “good mother.”

*Father’s emotional stability.* Past research indicates that a father’s emotional stability affects how he reorganizes his parenting relationship postseparation. Fathers who are depressed, anxious, and suffering see
their children less often than do fathers who are not in these emotional states (Grief, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1976; Kruk, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Based on their findings that nonresidential fathers were more depressed and anxious than residential ones, Stewart, Schwebel, and Fine (1986) concluded that contact with children has a stabilizing effect on men postdivorce. Thus there is some evidence to suggest that a father’s emotional stability will strengthen the relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement.

**Mother’s emotional stability.** Although no empirical evidence could be found to serve as a basis for formulating specific hypotheses regarding the moderating effects of a mother’s emotional stability, identity theory suggests that a father’s parenting identity will be heightened (increase in saliency) if he perceives that his children are poorly parented by their mother postseparation. This is particularly true if other significant persons in his life (parents, friends, lover) express expectations regarding what constitutes adequate parenting and if these expectations are at variance with the children’s current situation. There is some evidence suggesting that women experience depression and anxiety postdivorce that is associated with less effective parenting (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Thus we expect that a mother’s emotional instability will strengthen the relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement as a father tries to compensate for a mother’s poor parenting.

**Sex of child.** Although some evidence suggests that sons see their fathers more often postseparation than do daughters (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Furstenberg, 1988; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977), findings from the National Health Interview Survey showed no gender differences (Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Given these conflicting findings, we hypothesize that the relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement is stronger for boys than girls because fathers and sons typically have more shared interests and activities (Barnett & Baruch, 1986; Radin & Goldsmith, 1985) and because mothers may press for more father involvement with sons than with daughters. These two factors may make the translation process from identity into behavior easier with sons than with daughters.

**Coproductive relationship—competition and cooperation.** There is substantial evidence that certain dimensions of the quality of former spouse relations are related to the level of father involvement following separation both in terms of contact and financial support (Ahrons, 1983;
Hetherington et al., 1982; Issacs, 1988; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977; Kurdek, 1986; Peterson, 1987; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989. The most important dimensions are coparental competition and cooperation. Using social conflict theory to conceptualize the former spouse relationship, coparental conflict, competition, and cooperation are defined as distinct components (Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, & Trotter, 1992; Trotter, 1989). Conflict is defined as disagreements about goals, issues, and scarce resources, whereas cooperation and competition are patterns of behaviors that people choose when faced with disagreements (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Deutsch, 1973; Sprey, 1979). Cooperation is defined as behaviors that allow for continued interaction in spite of differences and even fundamental disagreements (Horowitz, 1967). When parents cooperate, it implies that they are willing to place their children’s needs above their own individual interests and negative emotions (e.g., revenge, dominance, jealousy). According to conflict theory, without cooperation the management of conflict remains primarily competitive. Competition is defined as a state of negative interdependence between family members such that gains for one member mean losses for others (Sprey, 1979). Two major types of coparental competition are possible: direct and indirect. Direct competition is represented by overt behaviors (e.g., yelling, screaming, attacking) that are expressions of a negative interdependence between spouses. Indirect competition is represented by passive-aggressive attempts to triangulate children in parental conflict (e.g., using them as spies, allies, or by denigrating the other parent in front of the children). An analysis of existing research using this conceptualization indicated that father involvement is related more to coparental competition than to conflict (Trotter, 1989). Thus we hypothesize that coparental competition (both direct and indirect) weakens the relationship between father parenting-role behavior and father involvement by creating a negative and aversive environment in which important child-related issues are processed. Similarly, we hypothesize that cooperation between former spouses strengthens the relationship between these variables. We also hypothesize that coparental conflict in itself does not moderate this relationship, because it is how the conflict is handled that is important rather than the level of conflict per se.

Father economic well-being and employment stability. The literature on father involvement postseparation points to two important economic factors: economic well-being and employment stability. Both factors are related positively to the payment of child support and to the amount of support paid (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; U.S. Bureau of the Census,
1986; Weiss, 1984). Fathers define their parenting role postseparation primarily in terms of economic support (Babcock, 1989). Thus we hypothesize that higher levels of economic well-being and a stable employment history will strengthen the translation of father’s identity into involvement.

Encouragement from others. Because behavior is not selected and enacted in a social vacuum, and based on our earlier proposition about relationship networks, we hypothesize that father’s translation of identity into involvement behavior will be influenced by the opinions of relevant others. Thus encouragement from important persons to continue paternal involvement will likely strengthen the translation process, whereas discouragement will weaken it.

Figure 2 presents the complete theoretical model, including life events that are inside and outside the control of the individual, variables hypothesized to have direct effects on father parenting-role identity and father involvement, and those that moderate the relationship between these variables. Moderating effects differ from direct effects. Variables exhibiting direct effects influence the level of a dependent variable, whereas a moderating variable changes either the strength or direction of a relationship between variables (James & Brett, 1984). For example, the question of whether or not boys are more aggressive than girls postdivorce involves testing the direct effect of sex of child on aggressive behavior. The question of whether or not the relationship between father involvement and child aggression is stronger for boys than girls, however, involves testing the moderating effect of sex of child on the relationship between father involvement and child aggression. With few exceptions, we hypothesize that the moderators identified in Figure 2 change the strength of coefficients (strengthen or weaken them) rather than the direction of the relationship. Thus this component of the model represents our efforts to predict the effects of specific variables that strengthen or weaken the relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement soon after separation.

CONCLUSION

This article developed a theory to explain why fathers absent themselves from their children’s lives after separation and divorce. Because separation and divorce are emotionally difficult life events, role identity salience will likely change after father-child coresidence ends. We hy-
Figure 2: Theoretical Model of Father Involvement Postdivorce

FPR1 = Father Parenting Role Identity
FI = Father Involvement

① Relationship between FPR1 and FI is strengthened
② Relationship between FPR1 and FI is weakened

* The following aspects are included in this variable: child temperament, child's behavior in the father-child relationship, child's reactions to father's involvement behavior, child's evaluation of father as a person (father's personality attributes, child's respect and regard for father).

pothesize that the change in identity that accompanies the loss of daily interaction with a child is responsible for the extent to which an absent father stays involved (or becomes more or less involved) with his child. For some, the status of father may increase in salience, and these fathers will become more involved with children postdivorce. For others, even though father status may initially rank high in their identity hierarchy, new circumstances, situations, and significant others may discourage fathering behavior, and parenting-role identity salience will decrease. As commitment to a given identity changes and commitment to others changes, father parenting-role identity is expected to change. Furthermore, given any position that father identity holds in an identity hierarchy, the perceptions and beliefs of both parents, parents’ emotional state, sex of the child, the coparental relationship, economic factors, and the degree of encouragement of friends and family members are expected to strengthen or weaken (moderate) the relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement behavior. An initial test of the basic relationship between father parenting-role identity and father involvement behavior provided support for the theory. Further efforts to validate this relationship and delineate the conditions under which the moderating variables operate will continue.

NOTES

1. Because the concepts of status, position, and roles are differentially defined in the social-psychological and sociological literatures we want to offer the reader an explanation of how we use these concepts. Position and status are meant to be used interchangeably. Status is defined as an individual’s place or position in a social structure, or network of social relationships. Role is defined as a set of expected behavior patterns, obligations, and privileges attached to a particular social status (Robertson, 1987).

2. Father involvement in this theory is defined as behavioral and economic involvement with the child. Involvement ranges from no involvement to high involvement (e.g., daily contact and adequate financial support). As conceptualized, involvement does not imply high-quality father-child interaction (e.g., warmth, authoritative discipline). Rather, we conceptualize quality of fathering as a variable that moderates the relationship between father involvement and child well-being. Specifically, based on research by Hetherington (1989), we hypothesize that the relationship between father involvement and child well-being is stronger for children who have fathers who exhibit good parenting skills (i.e., warm, noncoercive, inductive, consistent).

3. A point that Cast (personal communication, August, 1991) and White (personal communication, October, 1991) called attention to is that one reason for this role ambiguity is that the identities of husband and father may be more intertwined for men than the identities of wife and mother are for women.
4. The distinction between choice and decision is offered by Tallman and Gray (1990). In their view, the term choice is best used when referring to the selection between routine options, such as which route to take to work. Decisions, on the other hand, is best used when referring to "nonroutine situations under conditions of risk or uncertainty" (p. 423).

5. Because of the very high proportion of individuals who belong to churches in the South, the method of using church membership as a selection factor was viewed as less biased than it might be in other regions of the country.

REFERENCES


