

RESEARCH

Nonresident fathers' seeking continuity in relationships with their children: Commitment, personal change, and reliance on others

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Abstract

Objective: To explore intrinsic and extrinsic factors that help nonresident fathers' continuing relationships with their children.

Background: Research on nonresident fathers tends to focus on rates or trajectories of contact and the perspectives or experiences of children or others and highlights significant barriers to development and maintenance of relationships between nonresident fathers and their children. What helps the growth and development of nonresident fathers' relationships with their children are less well understood and less frequently researched. This research sought to fill the gap in the literature of what is known that helps nonresident fathers maintain meaningful relationships with their children.

Method: A qualitative research approach was chosen using thematic analysis of semistructured, in-depth interviews. Recruitment was via social media and community sites targeting nonresident fathers after divorce.

Results: Participants highlighted deep commitment to ongoing fathering and a deep desire for meaningful relationships with children. The experience of divorce had a highly negative impact, but some positives emerged that enhanced their relationship. Significant others played contingent roles helping participants improve their relationships with their children.

Conclusion: Continuity of relationships with children was the direct result of participants' actions to remain involved and their ongoing commitment to their children through strong and unwavering fatherhood role salience. These

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factors, together with actions for self-improvement, managing change, and fostering cooperative relationships with relevant others, helped fathers maintain positive engagement and relationships with their children.

Implications: The nonresident fathers in this study relied on their own initiatives, resilience, and resources to remain engaged with their children. Policies and programs should respond to and encourage the development of policies and programs that help nonresident fathers' relationships with children in practical and meaningful ways.

KEYWORDS

divorce, fatherhood, fatherhood role salience, nonresident fathers, relationships

Separation and divorce are consistently high in most Western democracies. The incidence of separation is not calculated in Australia, but the number of divorces has remained steady since no fault divorce was enacted in Australia in 1975. The processes of separation and divorce are complicated when the partnership has produced children and can result in protracted negotiations on an interpersonal—and in many cases, legal—level. Negotiations can hinge on custody of the children, including their ongoing living arrangements. Most often, children reside with the mother at a separate location from their father, and the actual number of nonresident fathers is largely unknown. This is because “data on fathers are not systematically collected resulting in an acknowledged evidence gap relating to fathers in general and non-resident fathers specifically” (Poole et al., 2016, p. 224), which in turn means that there are gaps in our knowledge as inaccurate proxies (i.e., lone mothers) have to be used to estimate the number of fathers in different relationships with their children, so that the actual number of nonresident fathers is not known. In this way, “The evidence gap is exacerbated for nonresident fathers who are a hard-to-reach group; unlike lone mothers they cannot be identified through government records. Representative primary research with nonresident fathers is limited leading to the use of proxies to quantify and investigate the population” (Poole et al., 2016, p. 225). Although these data can provide important factors in nonresident father and child relationships, they “cannot comprehensively capture paternal perspectives” (Poole et al., 2016, p. 225). This has important implications for new research, how the phenomenon of nonresident fatherhood is understood, the experiences of nonresident fathers, and their ongoing relationships with their children from fathers' own perspectives.

Fatherhood in general, and nonresident fatherhood in particular, are roles that are currently underrepresented in research literature. The terms *mother* and *parent* are frequently used interchangeably, which has a twofold effect. First, mothers are generally seen as children's primary caregivers and thereby representative of parenthood in general (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Second, this tends to conceptualize parenthood as being nongendered—that is, fathers and mothers are treated interchangeably (Kim et al., 2021) despite the dominant focus on the mother-child dyad (Cabrera et al., 2018). This can lead to a valorization of the mother's role over the father's (Smoliak et al., 2022) and a superficial engagement with more complex gendered realities (Henz, 2019). In this way, “parenting” can become conflated with “mothering” in policy and practice (Meah & Jackson, 2016).

A growing body of evidence indicates that fathers' engagement with children has been increasing in Western countries for several decades and the role of “father” in men's lives and the lives of their children has evolved. Research suggests a significant positive correlation between a father's identity status and his involvement with his children (Fagan, 2021). *Fatherhood role salience* refers to how strongly a man identifies as a father and lives out that role (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016):

As an “identity,” fatherhood is psychologically constructed to reflect a man’s beliefs and values; as a “role,” fatherhood is socially constructed in the relationships among men, women, and their children. Despite the known influence of role salience and involvement with children, research of the topic tends to focus on rates of contact with children (Haux & Platt, 2020) or the trajectories and changing patterns of contact over time (Poole et al., 2016). Although standing in as helpful proxies for fatherhood role salience, these cannot capture the psychosocial and emotional commitment to their fatherhood role. That is, exploring issues of contact based on sociodemographic status, finances, and proximity to children does not take into account intrinsic or subjective factors such as commitment to children, commitment to their fatherhood role, and emotions. This leaves a gap in the research by not exploring the links between nonresident fathers’ attachment to their children, the quality of their relationships with children, and how these relationships are determined by salient intrinsic (e.g., psychological, emotional, mental health, and resilience) or broader extrinsic (e.g., homelessness, employment, legal, and financial) factors.

Research from several decades ago found that nonresident fathers were less satisfied with their role than married fathers but reported high fatherhood role salience (Minton & Pasley, 1996). The often-diminishing contact with children over time despite high fatherhood role salience for nonresident fathers was found to be “attributed to such factors as ongoing conflict with the child’s mother, competing demands of new relationships (such as a new marital partner), pragmatic difficulties such as geographic distance” (Bruce & Fox, 1999, p. 460). These older studies consider some extrinsic social aspects that affect a nonresident father’s relationship with his children but seem not to attend to intrinsic aspects or to consider what helped the nonresident father remain involved with his children. Moreover, they lack insights into what helps maintain fatherhood role salience and relationships with children from fathers’ own perspective and based on their experiences.

A considerable volume of literature exists highlighting how nonresident fathers can negatively impact their children (Culpin et al., 2022) and the issue of noncompliance with agreed, or mandated, child support payments (Cook, 2022). Little research exists that investigates what helps nonresident fathers maintain positive ongoing relationships with their children. The ongoing nature of the mother–father relationship after separation or divorce is important and needs to be highlighted because positive coparenting predicts nonresident fathers’ greater involvement with their children (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Research suggests that nonresident fathers’ contact with children decreases over time (Poole et al., 2016). At the same time, nonresident fathers’ continued involvement is positively associated with ongoing contact, so it is suggested that if mothers were more involved in facilitating children’s access to their fathers, “we would not expect contact to decline” (Haux & Platt, 2020, p. 172). As such, relationships between nonresident fathers’ and their children cannot be realized by the fathers acting alone. To realize their desired relationship with their children, they need the support of others (Walper et al., 2020), especially the mothers (Haux & Platt, 2020).

The key aspects of more involved fathering include engagement, physical accessibility, responsibility, and emotional availability (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Despite calls for increased father involvement in children’s lives (Cabrera et al., 2018), the nature of the post-separation relationship and contact with children is less understood, endorsed, or promoted (Steinbach, 2019), requiring more research. As little attention has been given to nonresident fathers’ ongoing fathering role and engagement with their children from their own perspective, understanding what helps and promotes engagement with children will offer significant insight for future research, policy, and practice.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to explore factors that help the continuity and quality of nonresident fathers’ ongoing relationship and engagement with their children after divorce.

METHODS

Research design

This study used a qualitative approach for data collection and thematic analysis for data analysis.

Approach and recruitment

A purposive sample of 19 nonresident fathers was recruited from across Australia through men's health forums and networks, social media, and dissemination of recruitment information within the wider community. Criteria for inclusion in this study were nonresident fathers who did not have equal shared custody of their children. Fathers who never lived with their children were excluded. Participants contacted the first author through official email to discuss the project, addressing any questions or concerns. Informed consent to participate was provided. No predetermined sample size was sought, in keeping with thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Recruitment ceased when sufficient interviews were conducted to provide a solid base of knowledge through repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness (Lawless & Chen, 2019) and to ensure a broad and deep data set that reflected the complexity and lived reality of the participants' experiences and hopes.

Data collection

Semistructured, in-depth interviews were used for data collection because this enabled the researcher to grasp daily life experiences, challenges, and motivations, which helped in understanding the flow of actions that occurred, rather than focusing on cause-and-effect possibilities (Bosoni & Mazzucchelli, 2018).

The interviews were conducted from May to September 2022 and had a 55 minute to 3-hour duration (median 1.15 hours). All interviews were conducted by the principal researcher using previous experience in the undertaking of research interviews. The interview schedule posed questions on the nonresident fathers' perceptions of their relationship with their children before and after divorce, their desired relationship with their children after divorce, their desired rate of contact, and what helped achieve their desired relationship with their children. All interviews were video- and audio-recorded using Zoom, with the participants knowledge and consent at the time. Interviews were professionally transcribed and anonymized for confidentiality.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis attends to repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness (Lawless & Chen, 2019) for validity; this approach enabled the participant's voices to be heard and their stories to be explored and documented (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We achieved this by taking the following steps:

Step 1. All transcripts were read through at least twice for clear understanding and overall appreciation of the scope of the data.

Step 2. New data/topics (codes) were noted and recorded as they emerged from the transcripts, revealing 40 codes guided by repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness.

Step 3. Reflecting on the codes, they were seen to fall into five organizing groups: relationships, legal aspects, community, mental health/psychological effects, and responsibility, which, although interrelated, are distinct and reflect the comprehensiveness of the data.

Step 4. Data in each group were scrutinized for factors that were seen to have helped the nonresident fathers maintain relationships with their children from their own perspective.

Step 5. Emerging themes that explained the meaning, significance, and interactions shown in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022) were identified. From the five groups of data that gave a comprehensive overview of the participants experience, three themes emerged from across the groups. The themes were identified by giving particular attention to what was revealed, indicated, or identified by participants in the interviews, such as patterns of what they deemed as important, salient, or meaningful.

Ethical considerations

This study had ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. H14824). No adverse outcomes resulted from the conduct of the study, and no participants withdrew from the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to ensure confidentiality.

FINDINGS

A total of 19 interviews were conducted. Participants in this study had a mean age of 42.8 years and had been divorced a mean of 4.5 years. The majority ($n = 11$) were single and living in a house ($n = 14$), with the remainder living in an apartment or townhouse, except for one who had returned to the parental home. Employment status varied from unemployment ($n = 5$), part-time work ($n = 2$), full time work ($n = 9$), to self-employment ($n = 3$). Education levels ranged from not finishing high school to completion of a bachelor's degree, with income ranging from AUD\$16,500 to >\$500,000 per annum. The majority of participants were of Anglo-Saxon heritage, and some claimed Scandinavian, Western European, and Australian backgrounds.

Data analysis revealed three themes:

Theme 1: Commitment and continuity of fatherhood role

Theme 2: Personal growth and education enhanced relationships with children

Theme 3: Relationships with children can be contingent on the actions of others

These themes constitute and provide valuable insights into what helps nonresident fathers in both continuity and quality in their relationships, with their children enabling the opportunity to consider all aspects that the nonresident fathers reported that have had a positive effect within those relationships. Words in brackets and ellipses are added to some quotes either to enable clearer understanding or to increase confidentiality. All quotes are attributed to participants using pseudonyms.

Theme 1. Commitment and continuity of fatherhood role

All participants' sense of being fathers remained high with no diminishment of their commitment to or continuation of their fatherhood identity or fathering role after divorce. This provides evidence for high fatherhood role salience. Nevertheless, not all reported high-quality relationships with their children, predominantly because of limited contact with them, resulting in or due to conflict with the mother.

For some participants, fatherhood constituted a fundamental part of self-identity: "having the kids ... has always ... been fairly strong and ... an important part of me as a person" (Marcus). Becoming and being a father did not simply occur but was a guiding principle early in life:

At uni, I made the conscious decision to ... I made the observation that so many men ... wake up in their midlife ... and panic, ... then walk out on their obligation, ... as a provider and a father, ... I wanted to try and avoid that. (Oliver)

Another said, "it was always the hope to have the partner, and the kids to either come home to or spend time with ... and see them grow up into proper young adults. ... That was sort of the dream" (Marcus). Becoming a father was a choice that formed and underpinned part of these participants' identity and future selves. In this way, becoming a father was an act of personal agency, highlighting the degree to which the men had thought about, envisioned, and deliberated on the kind of father they intended to be.

Several participants reported taking on the primary care of the children while they were still living with the child's mother. For some, this was a deliberate choice; for others, it was circumstantial. In one instance, the participant reported that "until our marriage split up, I was the one who was rearing the children. ... I was a very, very active father. ... I was a real intimate part of my child's growing" (Cameron). Others said, "I was with [son] every single day. I was his primary caregiver" (Oliver); and "I was ... basically a stay-at-home dad. ... I was very involved" (Larry); and "I was the stay-at-home parent. The former partner was [a public figure], so she was always out doing meetings and traveling around ... whereas I stayed at home and looked after the kids, so it was really good" (Eduardo). In this circumstance, domestic roles were negotiated in a way that Eduardo found satisfying, growing more comfortable in and committed to the fathering role.

Theme 2. Personal growth and education enhanced relationships with children

The ending of the relationship with the partner resulted in physical, emotional and psychological dislocation, and change. However, this change often had some unexpected positive effects on the nonresident fathers, their lives, and their relationship with their children.

Personal change meant relating better to the children

All participants reported a desire for increased time and greater presence with their children. Some participants reported improved relationships with their children after a few months or over several years, prioritizing the children over their own preferences; they also noted how the experience of separation provided opportunities for personal growth, a change of attitude, improved mental health, and educational opportunities.

Some participants reported no significant changes in the relationship with their children: "I've tried to keep that same level of love and care" (Larry). For others, the changes after

separation or divorce helped the relationship because of increased time and availability: "I had time to do things with them" (Neville). Increased time resulted in improved engagement: "We've actually been closer. After the divorce, I wasn't exhausted anymore. So, I actually had more time to spend with them" (Sylvain); and "we are able to spend more time together" (Kaarle). Time itself was an important element reported by some participants; time spent together with children affected participants' attitudes, practice, and activities undertaken during contact: "My time with them was more focused on having a good time rather than being a parent in regards of teaching things or parenting or disciplining" (Kaarle).

Successful relationships were helped by "open communication" (Cameron). Open communication gave the nonresident fathers a sense of involvement: "My relationship is good. He comes to me with issues and talks to me about things that are on his mind" (Barry). Another shared, "No laws about what we can or cannot talk about. We talk about anything" (Cameron). Sometimes such communication included challenging topics: "I answered every question they had. And I think that was good, because you could see they were really struggling themselves to make sense of what was going on" (Colin). By focusing on the benefit to children of open and honest communication, more engaged relationships were realized based on consistency and continuity.

Some participants experienced discontinuity in their relationships with their children, but these were successfully reestablished with time, communication, and giving the child space to mature:

The first couple of years were quite difficult with her [daughter], ... I was probably seeing her as regularly as she wanted to see me ... she matured, she herself understood human relationships are somewhat vulnerable and different, that we're not just in a straight path, straight line. (Brad)

With discontinuity comes the challenge of rebuilding relationships. Reengaging in activities that were enjoyed together before separation or divorce proved an important foundation:

I used to take them swimming and I had to teach them how to swim again. I took them kayaking. I took them up into the snow, doing activities, playing board games. Arts and craft, Nerf gun fights, water fights, just that hands on one-on-one, sort of quality time sort of thing. We go out into my backyard and have barbecues and I got a fire pit and we'd have a fire and put the hot plate over and cook sausages. And just sitting outside at night, watching stars and just talk about anything. We could go out when it's raining and just splash in puddles. It didn't matter. That's how we got our relationship back to what it was. (Craig)

Prioritizing the needs of the child

Many participants reported a newfound prioritization of the child over other matters. This prioritization was a deliberate choice and actively pursued: "What I've tried to do is let my son direct where ... [the relationship] should be ... he's in control" (Barry). Personal reflection and adaptation underpinned the prioritization, focusing away from self:

My mindset [is] away from me being a parent, to what he needs, and how I can fulfill that ... [by] opening up and being completely available to him at any time is necessary ... each time he's with me, I'm 100% focused on him, and present with him. (Oliver)

Barry shared, “By recognizing when I’m holding back and trying to not do that. To be more open with him and patient with him and explaining things more.” Prioritization of the child was based on availability: “As long as you’ve got the time and you’ve got their dedicated attention; they will just continue to take up as much of your time as they can ... which is really nice” (Marcus). Prioritizing the child meant focusing on the quality of relationship: “My time with them was more focused on having a good time ... when you only got four hours with your kids, you only want to focus about the good bit [sic]” (Kaarle).

Improved personal attitudes led to change and positive outcomes

Separation or divorce changed participants’ life circumstances, lifestyle, and personal attitudes. For some, these changes resulted in a greater sense of self, improved attitudes toward their lived situation, increased strength and personal resilience, less stress, and increased calmness. In turn, these changes helped participants in their approach to and relationships with their children.

One participant reported having “a greater sense of who I am. ... A better perspective on myself” (Steve). Reflecting on the past was significant for many participants to go forward: “I think I’ve got a better understanding of me and what I bring to a relationship by having to look back at where the relationship didn’t work previously” (Barry). Others experienced better personal qualities: “I’m much calmer, more time to think” (Bruce). Some participants described increased strength “I’ve learned how to be very, very strong and independent” (Craig) and “I’ve become less aggressive, more focused, I’ve found an inner strength that I didn’t think I had” (Eduardo). Others described resilience: “It’s also a strength and a resilience in me” (Oliver) and independence “Independent, resilient” (Craig).

Resilience came from an improved sense of agency, which enabled a better sense of self and self-management: “probably a positive out of this really stressful and sad situation ... is that I’ve improved, ... my way to handle emotion and my resilience towards stress and negative ... outcome of my personal life [sic]” (Kaarle).

Changing attitudes meant taking greater responsibility and exercising greater agency in the future: “The next chapter in life’s going to be a hell of a lot better than the last one” (Eduardo) and “If I see a red flag, I know what a red flag is and I get away from it” (Craig). In exercising agency by leaving a negative relationship, one participant observed that “my life’s taken off. I’m in a fantastic place now” (Sylvain).

Improved mental health

Some nonresident fathers reported that the experience of separation or divorce in some ways proved beneficial to them, improving their mental health, which then helped them focus on maintaining optimal relationships with their children.

Perhaps one basis for this is a sense of a new start: “I get a second chance. I get another, a clean slate to remold my life, how I want it to be, as opposed to feeling obligated” (Oliver). Others noted a dramatic change in their mental health status: “I’m no longer on antidepressants. Haven’t been for quite a number of years. I’m in a much better place mentally, physically, financially, everything” (Sylvain) and “psychologically and mentally, I feel like a stronger, richer person since coming out the other side” (Steve).

The adoption of specific strategies and consciously identifying actions that fostered and developed the continuity and ongoing engagement with his children was reported: “I spent time on my mental health and reading books about psychology and parenting, physical disciplining” (Kaarle). This participant reported adopting a long-term strategy to help his mental health and underpinned his efforts to gain greater access to his children:

I think probably the main thing is to actually keep your calm and acknowledge that it's going to be a long administrative process. ... when you've digested that, ... then you put your mental health plan in place to accept that. (Kaarle)

Identifying desired outcomes, the means to achieve them, and the power to realize them helped maintain a positive focus on the future.

Parenting plans, self-education, and learning

To remain involved and engaged in the lives of their children, some participants undertook education, which included a university course and informal approaches: "I did a [lot] of research. ... I could literally be a family law practitioner. I dived headlong into it, I probably spent 300 hours ... doing all this" (Neville); "I've learned so much. I've learned so much" (Nick). While the university course in itself did not directly help in being more involved or engaged with children, it did enable a better navigation of the legal process, the successful management of which helped in their relationship with children.

Two participants undertook parenting courses, which helped in their relationships with their children. After completing an mandated parenting course, one participant found it so beneficial that "I just went on a roll" (Eduardo) and continued with them: "I think I've done 17 parenting courses" (Eduardo), with the result that

it just gave me a better understanding on the way I was raised isn't the way to raise children in this day and age. A lot of the stuff overlapped, but it also reinforced that what I was learning was the right way to go about it. (Eduardo)

In other words, the parenting courses increased his fatherhood role salience, which enabled him to establish better relationships with his children.

Another participant undertook research into the areas of family law and parenting:

What helped me [as I was] on my own most of the time [with] no children [during Covid], ... was [to] ... reach out to external resources and reading on parenting and how to cope with separation with your children during divorce or all those things [sic]. (Kaarle)

He was then able to

take advice from ... academic references to how to manage my mental health and then see how I can take the approach of improving my patience to get to where I want to, which is what I've done now, and being able to restore the time with the children [sic]. (Kaarle)

This is another example of further education increasing fatherhood role salience and thus benefitting the relationship with children after separation or divorce.

Theme 3. Relationships with children can be contingent on the actions of others

Participants reported that contingent relationships played an important role in maintaining relationships with their children. The majority of participants in this study found themselves socially isolated and distanced in the lives of their children with little or no active support from

the ex-partner, relatives, or friends. By contrast, a small number reported that the mother of the children, the wider family including new partners, and friends helped their relationship with their children after divorce.

The role of the mother

For some participants in this study, the mother played a positive role in assisting and enabling the nonresident father's relationship with his children. This arrangement succeeded based on collaboration and cooperation, emphasizing the needs of the child over parental rights or needs. Barry described how "we could maintain a degree of friendship that would help us look after our son and coparent him." He noted that cooperative coparenting was achieved through discussion: "We talked about how we were going to parent [name], my son. How we were going to make that function for him and for us," with discussion and planning not being a one-off event but an ongoing conversation: "We support each other. We help plan if there's things that we need to change or work with or for, family events or something like that, we work together on that and make it happen." This included the physical homes of both parents viewed as the child's homes: "This is his house here and it's his house down there. ... So we always talk about him having a home up here and a home down there." In this way, the needs of all persons involved were considered and validated.

Coparenting extended beyond discussion and ideas, incorporating practices and actions that enabled achieving the goal of maintaining a relationship between father and child: "she facilitates it, like getting him to me and meeting me halfway. So she facilitates that. She supports his decisions. ... So she's that supportive role for him and he uses that ability to get to see me too" (Barry). In supporting the child to visit his father, the mother was simultaneously able to interact positively with the nonresident father, further benefiting everyone involved.

As Brad reiterated, "I think my ex-wife did help a lot," again by being present and supportive in practical terms and establishing positive family practices: "When I went to see my daughter, my ex-wife was always there, as were my sons. We were meeting twice a week initially and then once a week after that, which we still do as a family unit." This participant's relationship with his daughter was not always easy, but when difficulties occurred, "my ex-wife allowed us to navigate the trickiness of that relationship," highlighting the importance of the mother's not intervening but remaining supportive in the communication process.

One participant noted that the mother's involvement and help in his relationship with the children changed with time due to a change in attitude: "Their mum's attitude. It's fine. After three years, it's started to change. We actually talk and communicate more. It's more amicable" (Larry). Through cooperation, coparenting, changing attitudes and stances, and adapting to the changing needs of all, the mother can play a pivotal role in helping the nonresident father continue to have and maintain a meaningful relationship with his children.

Family, friends, and workplaces

Some participants found their birth and wider families to provide significant help in continuing and maintaining their relationships with their children: "My family; mum, dad, my three siblings ... They've just been such a great emotional support and just kept me going" (Larry). The family encompassed parents and siblings also played a role: "My brothers and sisters and my mother when she was alive" (Nick), as well as the more extended family: "What we realized as a broader family was that everybody's a part of my son's life. ... so we all have to maintain a healthy relationship to give him the best relationship with everybody" (Bruce). Finally, friends and work clients could also be supportive resources: "Friends, good friends. And even work

clients ... were amazing. We're all connected in the community. ... The community really, really stuck with me" (Nick). The sense of community and support received confirmed Nick's fatherhood role identity, which helped his relationship with his children and kept him engaged with increased fatherhood role salience.

The complex nature of the contemporary family was reflected with the inclusion of new partners and stepchildren within the nonresident fathers' relationship and their children. These often proved to be important helps: "my partner, and my stepchildren. ... Everybody gets along fairly well, and it's a happy time when they [his children] come and visit" (Neville).

The workplace, especially administration, proved to be a major help for one nonresident father in maintaining his relationship with his children:

My boss at work was a fantastic guy who really did everything he could to make sure that work was a really supportive and flexible place, and understood I think the complexity I was going through and was really quite a strength in that process.
(Craig)

Organizations

A few participants had taken part in Internet-based support groups: "I started looking around on [social media] ... groups and stuff like that" (Corey), but no major impact or significant help was reported.

Of the 19 participants, only three mentioned groups that helped them in their fathering role and practice and thereby helped the relationship with their children. One participant, through a parenting plan came into contact with a family therapy group: "I was the only single father in the organization, so it benefited me and my girls immensely" (Eduardo). This group targeted families in crisis (rather than separated or divorced families in particular) yet proved a valuable tool and experience for this participant to improve and maintain his relationship with his children.

Several participants came out as gay while in heterosexual marriages. Two of these men were assisted by a community association whose function is to assist gay and married men. One participant said, "I found [association] incredibly helpful" (Craig) and "It was a huge support to be able to mix with other gay fathers. And the kids would come along to events and things, and it was very supportive" (Victor).

DISCUSSION

This study explored and documented what helps nonresident fathers maintain their relationship with their children after separation or divorce. The findings describe the experiences of a cohort of nonresident fathers who largely reported enhanced, rather than diminished, relationships with their children. Central to this finding was the strength of their fatherhood role salience, a clear and unwavering continuing commitment to their children, and the presence and development of personal resilience. This stands in contrast to some of the research literature on nonresident fathers that highlights stereotypical portrayals of the deadbeat dad or feckless father (Mandell, 2016) or research that tends to reduce relationships between nonresident fathers, their children, and the mother to a set of transactions (Cook, 2022; Poole et al., 2016). Equally important is the consideration of the rich, multidimensional experiences that they more often are. Rather, it builds on the research about nonresident fathers that do not abandon or give up on their children or their fatherhood and parenting roles (Harknett et al., 2022; Kulu, 2021; Mortelmans, 2020).

The enhanced relationships between the majority of nonresident fathers and their children reported in this study were attributable to a combination of intrinsic factors, consistent with those outlined by Robb (2020) and Ives (2018) and extrinsic factors, which have been highlighted by Meah and Jackson (2016). These relationships were underpinned by an unwavering commitment to their children based on a strong sense of fatherhood role salience, which is the correlation between a father's identity status and his involvement with his children (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016), as well as the desire and action for self-improvement, which was evidenced by the participants undertaking further education, private study, or parenting courses. In addition to this commitment, our findings echoed the studies by Cabrera et al. (2018) and Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan (2020), which found that the quality of a father's relationship with his children rests partly on others, such as cooperative relationships with the mother and support from family and friends.

Contrary to stereotypically negative depictions of disengaged nonresident fathers, participants in this study exhibited a strong desire to be involved in the lives of their children, often reflecting on and premeditating on the kind of father they wished to be. This finding is consistent with those previously reported by Henz (2019) and Tarrant (2022). The findings from this study also clearly confirm other studies' findings on nonresident fathers' strong identification with and commitment to fatherhood, their fatherhood role (Gatrell & Dermott, 2018), the salience of this role for the father, and ongoing fathering practices before and after divorce (Haux & Platt, 2020; Whitley, 2022).

Consistent with the findings of Raley and Sweeney (2020), participant's commitment to their ongoing fathering role was also demonstrated by the continuation in the struggle to remain engaged and involved in the lives of their children despite the emotional, psychological, legal, housing, social, and financial costs that they encountered, as well as the possible compromise of their mental health. It has been highlighted that fatherhood role salience may underpin fathers' involvement and engagement with their children before divorce (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016). Our findings suggest that fatherhood role salience continues to be strong after divorce, supporting other researchers' suggestion that it is possible (Yuan, 2016). This knowledge is a new addition to the field of understanding nonresident fathers and therefore presents an important basis for understanding the myriad identity and role questions for nonresident fathers, such as those confronted by the participants in this study.

Early writers on identity theory saw identity as a hierarchical structure in which differing role identities take differing positions of salience, with salience defined as "the probability of evoking a given identity across or within situations of interaction" (Stryker, 1991, p. 23). In other words, a person's commitment to a given role determines the salience of that role identity in their identity hierarchy. The higher a person's commitment to a given role, the more they will live out that role in a way that is consistent with the expectations of significant others, society, and themselves (Bruce & Fox, 1999). This is important because fatherhood research seems not to address whether fatherhood role salience is a factor in the often-complex situations and contexts related to their children after divorce.

This study revealed strong support for the continuance of fatherhood role salience after divorce, thereby extending what we now know about nonresident fathers. It can further be argued that the strength of their fatherhood role salience underpinned the impulse toward and achievement of personal change opportunities, encompassing educational, parental, and psychological/mental health spheres—not for their own sakes but to ensure and improve ongoing contact, engagement, and involvement with their children. The broader consideration could be how fatherhood role salience may be enhanced to help nonresident fathers in their relationships with their children and to promote greater involvement, engagement, and continuity with them in meaningful ways.

There seems to be little if any recent and direct research on fatherhood role salience and its impact on fathers, families, and children. If the differences that high or low fatherhood role

salience has on a father's familial relationships were understood, we could begin not only to appreciate the dynamics of these two factors, but also to investigate whether fostering further education, parenting programs, and better psychological/mental health outcomes for fathers increases fatherhood role salience and thereby has a positive impact on these men and their families. Future research might also explore the lives of so-called disengaged fathers (including disengaged nonresident fathers) with a view to understanding the broader bases of their disengagement and how enhanced fatherhood role salience through further education, parenting programs, and better psychological/mental health outcomes might differ for these individuals in contrast to engaged fathers and nonresident fathers within their new and previous relationship contexts.

The majority of both long- and short-term nonresident fathers in our study found it challenging and difficult to maintain contact with their children for several reasons, including negative relationships with the mother, homelessness, financial stress, and legal barriers (Mincy et al., 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2019; Whitley, 2021), but demonstrated a strong and ongoing commitment to being involved and engaged with their children (Shadik & O'Connor, 2016). Before divorce, the majority of participants were very involved fathers and fought hard to remain similarly involved after divorce. This supports Haux and Platt's (2021) proposed link between predivorce fathering practices aiding postdivorce engagement and involvement with the nonresident father's children. Consistent with Shoppe-Sullivan and Fagan (2020), our findings highlighted the important role of the mother as facilitator and gatekeeper of the fathers' relationship with his children. It could be argued that the significant role of the mother not only continues but more likely increases after separation or divorce, especially in circumstances in which there is not cooperative coparenting. In addition, this study underlines that parenthood should not be conflated with mothering because fathers are also parents in their own unique ways, and their parenting should be equally valorized, especially if they are parenting in difficult circumstances such as the conditions in which participants in this research reportedly found themselves after divorce.

IMPLICATIONS

This study discovered a lack of support for nonresident fathers in all life areas, including political, social, housing, and welfare organizations. The forms of help that were identified lay entirely within the individual—his self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and resilience, with limited assistance from friends and family. The nonresident fathers in this study desired better and more engaged relationships with their children, which included more time and more personal agency in how they lived out those relationships. Redefining and expanding the nonresident father's role in the lives of their children can lead to better understanding of how to provide support in this endeavor without creating further conflict. Many of the nonresident fathers voiced their desire for more time with and better access to their children without hindrances as well as accessible support, such as educational programs and relevant information, that might assist them in navigating the transition from resident father to nonresident father. This should include the nonresident father's ensuing dislocation, which may be physical, emotional, or psychological, as well as strategies on practical ways of improving their relationships with their children.

At the same time, such programs and initiatives should incorporate the nonresident father's understanding of their role and any gender biases and personal sexism that may negatively impact relationships with their children. The need for increased nonresident father involvement in the lives of their children and the lack of acknowledgment of their current parental roles implicitly perpetuates the myth that nonresident fathers do not care for their children. However, this study and others have shown that this is false (Lobaka, 2022). Despite this reality, not having decision-making power, together with a lack of choice as a male caregiver, were barriers to

accessing the full range of caregiving they desired to provide their children. Therefore, further research should expand on these findings by exploring the barriers for nonresident fathers as caregivers to engage with their children.

Future research and theory

More work needs to be done in refining the conception and measurement of fatherhood role salience, particularly in relation to nonresident fathers. This could provide a basis for planning more targeted supports for nonresident fathers who might be struggling at different points in the postdivorce period. The results of our study highlighted how relationships with children were contingent on the actions of others, especially the mother, wider family, friends, the workplace, and specific organizations. This helps to explain why some nonresident fathers cannot achieve their desired outcomes after divorce on their own, highlighting that research conducted with nonresident fathers and other stakeholders is needed to develop more relevant postdivorce policies and supportive programs. Future research could also focus on documenting the experience of nonresident fathers who were never married to the mothers, giving valuable insights into the dynamics and legalities faced by this group and highlighting similarities and differences in experience.

Given that this study focused solely on what helped the nonresident fathers in their relationship with their children, further research exploring what hinders these relationships would deepen and enhance our understanding of their experiences and provide a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics underpinning and/or limiting their relationships with their children. An enhanced understanding of nonresident fathers' experiences of barriers to ongoing relationship with their children after divorce could inform the development of support services, policies, and programs that center on the needs and experiences of nonresident fathers.

Strengths and limitations

Contemporary understanding of nonresident fatherhood is often heavily influenced by the perceptions and interventions of social workers, women, the courts, and children (Lobaka, 2022). Lobaka (2022) suggested two possible explanations for this: First, it is often difficult to find male participants for research studies; second, women and children are affected by the absence of the father, and research tends to focus on this demographic.

This study sought the views of nonresident fathers themselves, standing in contrast to most other research, and reflects their voices in their own words, which is often missing from research. The main limitation is that the men who took part in this study self-identified as nonresident fathers after divorce and wished to tell their story; hence the findings might not represent the views of nonresident fathers who are less heavily invested in, or are distanced from, their children. We only interviewed men who had, during one period of the child's life, been married or in a de facto relationship with the child's mother *and* resident in the family home. We do not know the extent to which the findings from this study are transferable to fathers who never resided with the child or the mother.

The use of social media as one means of recruitment could have led to a selection bias by recruiting respondents who were technology adept, active on the Internet, and who sought self-enhancement or had self-presentation motives, which may affect generalizability of this study. On the other hand, the study has strong transferability because the sample was broad in terms of the fathers' demographics, geographic location, and time since divorce.

Conclusion

This study revealed a group of nonresident fathers who did not show any indication of the often-stereotypical abandonment of or giving up on their children or the fatherhood role after separation/divorce. This study unpacks, for the first time, how strong fatherhood role salience acts to bring fathers closer to and remain engaged with their children, supporting the perception of nonresident fathers' strong identification with and commitment to fatherhood, before and after divorce. The uniqueness of this work is that it identifies and endorses the continuation of fatherhood role salience but also highlights that there are few if any real supports for nonresident fathers—that the real “help” comes from within the individual's own emotional/psychological resources of resilience, self-reliance, and ongoing commitment to being a father and to his children. At the same time, the continuity, quantity, and quality of relationships with children are shown to often be dependent on and a direct result of fathers seeking ways that help maintain their commitment to their children, as well as the ongoing and meaningful involvement in their lives.

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