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# Australian Nonresident Fathers' Tattoos That Relate to Their Children: An Exploration of Motivation and Meaning

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Research on nonresident fathers after divorce is generally conducted from the perspective of others and rarely from their own perspectives. Becoming a nonresident father may mean major dislocation often presenting challenges to meaningful relationships with children. Some nonresident fathers may have tattoos that relate specifically to their children, which were acquired either before or after the divorce. Understanding the links between changing family configurations, fatherhood role identity, desired relationships with children, and how these are enacted and embodied through tattoos represents an important step toward understanding the experiences of nonresident fathers from their own perspectives. This article aimed to investigate the motivators and significance of nonresident fathers' tattoos that specifically relate to their children and how they link to personal and mental well-being. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven nonresident fathers who had tattoos that related specifically to their children, had a mean age of 42 years, had been divorced for a mean of 6 years, and self-identified as Australian. The data were analyzed using a seven-step thematic analysis process. As a result, nonresident fathers' tattoos that relate to their children could be used by them as a means of maintaining an emotional and psychological connection to their fatherhood role, and in doing this, their mental well-being may be positively affected.

## **Public Significance Statement**


This research has identified how fatherhood role salience continues after divorce, being highlighted by the choice to make their fatherhood identity permanently visible through tattoos and how these in turn may have beneficial effects on the individual's mental well-being. Deepening our understanding of the value nonresident fathers' place on their attachment to their children, their fatherhood identity, and how tattoos may have beneficial psychological effects on themselves for some individuals is important. Having tattoos may also be seen as an important entry point for counseling, psychological, or therapeutic interventions. This could be linked with the development of positive approaches to existing tattoos by therapists and, in this way, be one part of a wider solution to helping nonresident fathers realize their desired relationships with their children.


*Keywords:* fatherhood, nonresident fathers, tattoos, children, mental well-being


For the purposes of this article, a nonresident father is one who does not live with his children through separation or divorce. Despite increased interest in fathers (T. Miller, 2018) and fatherhood from a masculinities perspective (Gallais, 2023), there is "an acknowledged evidence gap" (Poole et al., 2016, p. 224) in regard to fathers and nonresident fathers specifically. Nonresident fathers are seen as a hard-to-reach group because, unlike single mothers, they are not identifiable in government records (Henz, 2014). Research about nonresident fathers can be problematic. Sometimes researchers of nonresident fathers rely on proxies to

obtain data, often the mother (Sumo et al., 2022). Furthermore, research focuses on nonresident fathers' relationships with their children (De Wit et al., 2014), the effects of separation or divorce on children (Maslauskaitė & Tereškinas, 2020), gendered perspectives of family relationships (Cannito & Mercuri, 2022) or family domestic violence, and the lack of child support payments (Douglas & Nagesh, 2021). This evidence gap means that the extent of nonresident fathers' involvement with and emotional attachment to their children and how this is expressed is under investigated and not well-understood (Altenburger, 2022).

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What is known is that fathering for nonresident fathers can be a complex undertaking raising concerns about the nonresident fathers' ongoing role in their children's lives (Lizarazu & Cracco, 2021). Factors in this complexity include the ongoing relationship with the mother (Kessler, 2018), legal regulations (Seymour, 2016), sociocultural norms (Cook, 2022), employment (Coles et al., 2018), (in)adequate housing (Clarke & Muir, 2017), and loss of personal networks (Dudley, 2021) among others. Early father involvement in a child's life is seen to result in ongoing engagement with them (Norman et al., 2023), and the involvement before separation may make their relationship more likely to survive divorce (Barnes, 2018).

The hard-to-reach and underresearched status of nonresident fathers equates to them also being underrepresented statistically (Poole et al., 2016). Even when research is based on large-scale surveys such as the longitudinal panel survey "Understanding Society (Wave 1, 2009–2011)" (Poole et al., 2016, p. 224), there is a knowledge gap in their regard. Poole et al. (2016) noted that "data on fathers are not systematically collected resulting in an acknowledged evidence gap relating to fathers in general and non-resident fathers specifically" (p. 224). In Australia, this gap is highlighted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which noted that in 2003, 87% of children with one nonresident parent had a father living elsewhere (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), and, in 2009, 82% of nonresident parents were fathers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). It appears that these figures have not been updated since, further cementing this lack of knowledge and confirming Poole et al.'s (2016) assertion that identifying an accurate number of nonresident fathers is currently nigh on impossible. Davies and Wyatt (2020) noted that having no statistics is one invisible feature of institutional power over particular groups.

The importance of having a meaningful voice has emerged as a significant factor in contemporary research from an emancipatory perspective (Kidron, 2023), as a search for authenticity (Bezzina, 2022), and as part of feminist research (Lokot, 2021). Nonresident fathers have been identified as having a lack of voice (Violi et al., 2022), and it would appear valuable to document nonresident fathers' voices from their own perspective as one of many other diverse voices (Chadwick, 2021). Enabling the nonresident father's voice can be seen as a transindividual process in which their voice is not just located in the individuals and their bodies but is fundamentally relational, embodied, and within the complexity of their social material world (Chadwick, 2021). By enabling nonresident fathers to voice what they experience, from their own perspective, research into this topic could provide wider and deeper knowledge of nonresident fathers themselves, their desired relationships with their children, and what helps them remain engaged, and this should include the motivations for getting tattoos that relate to their children, their significance and their effect on themselves, and their self-understanding.

Body modification and tattoos have received significant research (Crompton et al., 2021; Dann & Callaghan, 2017; Dickson et al., 2014; Hill, 2020; McCandlish & Pearson, 2023), and some attention has been given to how acquiring tattoos may be understood as a means of coping with trauma (Ward, 2022). As nonresident fathers' relationships with their children are not well-understood, even less well-understood are the motivators for getting tattoos that relate to their children. The experience of divorce can be traumatic

(Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020), and some individuals use tattoos to deal with trauma (Crompton et al., 2021) as it is thought that the emotional pain of trauma is purged through the pain of the tattoo process (Ward, 2022). Given the "increased cultural popularity" (Rees, 2021, p. 26) of tattoos especially in Western society, it is important to explore how nonresident fathers, being part of this milieu, might use tattoos documenting what the tattoos might indicate about themselves and their attachment to their children from their own perspective. Such information would increase our understanding of nonresident fathers' psychological/emotional insights, challenges, and traumas and how they deal with these. These insights may enable the development of therapeutic and counseling policies, practices, and process discussion starters that help psychologists, therapists, and counselors to interact with nonresident fathers from an approach that helps them maintain a connection to their fatherhood role based on what they themselves have indicated and in turn may result in better relationships with their children.

Fathering for nonresident fathers can be a complex undertaking, and this raises concerns about the nonresident father's ongoing role in their children's lives (Lizarazu & Cracco, 2021). Factors that contribute to this complexity include the ongoing relationship with the mother (Kessler, 2018), legal regulations (Seymour, 2016), sociocultural norms (Cook, 2022), employment (Coles et al., 2018), (in)adequate housing (Clarke & Muir, 2017), and loss of personal networks (Dudley, 2021). By contrast, a continuing and involved role for nonresident fathers with their children is seen to have a psychologically protective effect on them (Maslauskaitė & Steinbach, 2020). It has been suggested that early father involvement in a child's life results in continued and ongoing engagement (Norman et al., 2023) and that this involvement before separation may generate a bond and commitment from both the father and child, making their relationship more likely to survive divorce (Barnes, 2018).

It is valuable then to explore and document the meaning and significance of nonresident fathers' tattoos that relate to their children, and if they also enhance this sense of mental well-being, especially for those who experience conflict, and when they may not have contact with children that they desire. In this context, "well-being is seen to be more than the absence of 'ill-being' or disease" (Stewart-Brown, 2013, p. 33), and it is "taken to be synonymous with happiness or satisfaction with life" (Stewart-Brown, 2013, p. 33).

While body modification and tattoos have received significant research (Crompton et al., 2021; Dann & Callaghan, 2017; Dickson et al., 2014; Hill, 2020; McCandlish & Pearson, 2023), some attention has been given to how acquiring tattoos may be understood as a means of coping with trauma (Ward, 2022), but no attention appears to be given to nonresident fathers experience of trauma and their tattoos. Moreover, it is valuable to investigate what part tattoos that relate to their children play in their quest for identity, involvement, and well-being.

Nonresident fathers' construction of new identities after separation/divorce is crucial and often involves emotional and psychological stress, distress (Violi et al., 2023), and altered relationships with their children (Dudley, 2021) and may lead to mental health issues (Whitley, 2021). For many nonresident fathers, this comprehensive loss is experienced as trauma (Dudley, 2021). The nature of trauma makes it not just an event that took place sometime in the past but

rather an imprint left by the traumatic experience on the mind, brain, and body (Kearney, 2024).

Self-identity or individualization can be seen as a dominant motive for getting tattooed (Kıvanç Altunay et al., 2021). A significant amount of literature including the work of Kıvanç Altunay et al. (2021) described and discussed several social groups, men, and women to identify the motives for getting tattooed. This body of work, however, most often does not include factors such as emotions, trauma, divorce, loss, and grief as motivators; all of which are crucial factors in the nonresident father's reconstruction of his self-identity, fatherhood role, and ongoing relationships with his children.

### The Medium and Function of Tattoos

Historically, tattooing was limited to specific groups: members of tribes, criminals, and/or slaves forcibly tattooed; early Christians voluntarily tattooed themselves to honor Christ (Rees, 2021). Tattoos in these cases signified membership of specific groups, enabling their identification. The premodern use of tattooing bore little resemblance to today's practice (Rees, 2021) particularly the tattooing process and the diversity of contemporary consumers. Their use and purposes have expanded dramatically in the 21st century (Rees, 2021). While tattoos may hold no inherent meaning, many are currently used as records of important life events providing reminders of loved ones (Buckle & Corbin Dwyer, 2023), pets (Hill, 2020), personal goals (McCarty & Popejoy, 2021), and personal convictions (Dickson et al., 2015). Tattoos provide a sense of uniqueness (Tiggemann & Hopkins, 2011), can function therapeutically (Alter-Muri, 2020), and are used to create and demonstrate meaning to self and others (McCarty et al., 2023). Tattoos have a self-reflexive function, where individuals present to themselves their own conflicts, achievements, morals, and beliefs and reinforce a sense of self-worth (Huang, 2016). While there is research on how motherhood is embedded into the body through tattoos (Dann & Callaghan, 2017; Tonkiss, 2023), there appears to be no systematic research on fathers and tattoos. In our search, one source mentions fathers and tattoos but only in passing and as descriptors: "he is bald, with tattoos, and wears glasses and a checkered shirt" (Gallais, 2023). Another source noted: "Matias's first tattoo memorializes his passage to fatherhood: the name of his first-born. ... The tattoos help Matias to keep his son's childhood present" (Morello, 2021, p. 72) but did not elaborate on the wider applications of tattoos by fathers. Identifying the motivators for becoming tattooed may reveal the purpose of the tattoos, which appears to have a psychological basis for self-expression, gaining attention, social interactions, artistic freedom, and therapy (Roggenkamp et al., 2017).

### Tattoos, Motivators, and Personal Identity

Tattooing has also been described as a kind of secular and spiritual writing on the body where the skin is the prime material for self-expression (Crompton et al., 2021). Rees's (2021) investigations into the relationship between the body and identity emphasized the use of tattoos to construct and portray one's self-identity and authenticity. Understanding the reasons for getting tattooed is a complex undertaking. Research has focused on exploring diverse groups to identify the meaning and effect of their tattoos. This research has included how trauma may be a motivator for getting

tattooed and how, at the same time, getting tattooed may be part of the healing process (Ward, 2022). This body of work highlights that mapping the motivators for getting tattoos are complex, socially imbedded, and yet deeply personal. The weakness of this research is that, because they have a particular group or research focus, they do not offer a wider, more generalized understanding or theorizing of the motivators for getting tattooed.

Another research on tattoos and their symbolism has attempted to identify a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to motivations for getting tattooed, and this may have broad applicability. One research study identified three motivators for getting tattooed: tattoos as an expression of the relationship with self, tattoos as an expression of relationships with others, and tattoos as symbols of change (McCandlish & Pearson, 2023). Buss and Hodges (2017) proposed a broader range of motivators, identifying five themes for becoming tattooed, which were identified from the individual's accounts of their motivations, feelings, and experiences. These are self-empowerment, identification with a group, memorialization, message to oneself, and transformation of pain into beauty. While there are implicit overlaps in both proposals and neither model encapsulates all possibilities, they are still especially useful in approaching a broad understanding of the motivators underlying the decision to get tattooed and are particularly useful in relation to nonresident fathers' tattoos that relate to their children.

Much of the writing on motivation for getting tattooed focuses on psychological or conceptual meanings. However, in trying to understand nonresident father's motivations for getting tattooed, it may be equally important to include the divorce experience, relationship with children, emotions, loss and grief, and a sense of disempowerment as equally crucial factors for nonresident fathers. Therefore, it seems timely and valuable to investigate and document why nonresident fathers get these tattoos, what they mean, and what their effects are on themselves.

### Aims of the Study

This study aimed to explore the motivators and significance of nonresident fathers' tattoos that relate to their children and how they link to personal and mental well-being.

### Method

#### Study Design

A descriptive qualitative design was used for this study as it was an appropriate means to explore the experiences and understandings of the nonresident fathers themselves (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015).

#### Participants

A total of seven men who self-identified as nonresident fathers due to separation/divorce and who had tattoos that specifically related to their children participated in this study. All seven participants were male, heterosexual, and born in Australia. Three participants indicated non-English-speaking ancestry but identified as Australian. Ages ranged from 32 to 52 years ( $Mdn = 42$ ), and time since divorce ranged from 3 to 9 years ( $Mdn = 6$ ). The majority were single ( $n = 4$ ), and three were in new relationships after the divorce. Participants had been divorced from 3 to 9 years ( $M = 4$  years). Participants were recruited by purposive sampling using social and

print media and a flyer. Nonresident fathers who had never resided with the mother of their children were not included as they were seen to have always been nonresident and not because of divorce and therefore did not fall into the focus group of this research. Prospective participants contacted the first author through official email. The project and their eligibility were discussed with participants before they provided consent to participate.

Recruitment ceased when the sample size provided sufficient information power for analysis, and saturation was not adopted as a guiding principle. Saturation or information redundancy (Braun & Clarke, 2021) is seen to be the point at which no new information, themes, or codes can be identified from the data (Low, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2022) saw data saturation as not a useful concept for all thematic analysis applications, and it is argued that saturation is “not as objective and indisputable as it might appear” (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1759). Determining sample size can rely on a mix of interpretative, situated, and pragmatic judgments (Sim et al., 2018). Boddy (2016) suggested that recruitment ceases when developing a depth and breadth of understanding was possible through “information power.” Information power is seen “as an aspect of internal validity, influencing the potential of the available empirical data to provide access to new knowledge by means of analysis and theoretical interpretations” (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1759). The adequacy of the data quality and the variability of relevant events are seen to be more important than the number of participants. In this way, information power indicates that the more information the sample holds relevant for the actual study, the lower the number of participants is needed. An initial approximation of sample size is necessary for planning, while the adequacy of the final sample size must be evaluated continuously during the research process (Malterud et al., 2016), and “the results presented in the final publication will demonstrate whether the actual sample held adequate information power to develop new knowledge, referring to the aim of the study at hand” (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1759).

### Researcher Positionality

This research was undertaken by a team of four researchers, one female and three males, two are Caucasian, one is Asian, and the other is Southern European, with suitable qualifications to undertake the study. The researchers have all been married: two in intact relationships, one having an agreeable divorce, and another experiencing some conflict in the divorce process. None have tattoos. The setting for this research was Australia wide and, in contrast to other researchers, reflected the researcher’s desire not to just record things *about* nonresident fathers but rather to *hear* what they had to say from their own perspective, in their own words, to value this contribution as their own authentic voice and to reflect this in the writing.

### Procedure

In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted for data collection. This allowed the identification of shared experiences but remained sufficiently flexible to address individual narratives (Scanlan, 2020). Interviews took place between May 2022 and November 2023. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with a duration between 45 min and 1 hr and 10 min, digitally audio recorded with permission, and later professionally transcribed. For interview questions, see the Appendix. Participants supplied their

own photographs of their tattoos, which were stored in the university cloud and were accessible only to the authors electronically.

### Ethics

This study had university ethics approval from the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: H14824). All participants provided written consent and consented verbally for the interview to be recorded. Participants provided photographic images of their tattoos and were alerted to the possibility of the images being published in some form. Participants were assured that in this event, the images would be altered to maintain confidentiality. All participants agreed to this voluntarily. In any event, no images have been reproduced. No adverse outcomes occurred, and no participants withdrew from the study. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. As Braun and Clarke (2022) pointed out: “TA is a method for developing, analyzing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes. ... Themes are [the] ultimate analytic purpose” (p. 4). Several steps were taken to enable the themes to be identified. First, all transcripts were read in their entirety at least twice by the principal researcher, to ensure understanding and appreciation of the scope of the data. Second, new data/topics (codes) were identified and recorded as they were identified from the transcripts. This revealed 27 codes that were identified by the authors through repetition within individual reports, recurrence across participant’s reports, and forcefulness in the tone, words, and emotionality (distress, crying, breaks) as evidenced in the data analysis. No fixed number of repetitions or recurrence were stipulated, but two or more mentions were required for inclusion in the next step. Third, codes and themes were checked, clarified, and finally ratified by the remainder of the team. Fourth, all codes were scrutinized for a unifying idea, and two themes were identified: (a) Nonresident fathers used tattoos to maintain an emotional connection with children and (b) tattoos and nonresident father’s mental well-being. Fifth, these shared areas were scrutinized, identifying themes that contributed to the explanation of the meaning and significance of the data. Sixth, the themes identified were rechecked against the data collected and written up. Seventh, the final themes and conclusions were checked, interrogated, and agreed upon by the whole team. In the process of identifying themes, particular attention was given to what participants revealed, indicated, or identified within the interviews that enabled the identification of patterns of what was important, relevant, or meaningful for them.

## Results

### Timing and Physical Aspects of Tattoos

The time of acquiring tattoos in relation to separation/divorce was not a factor in the inclusion criteria. All participants acquired their tattoos after separation/divorce, and the tattoos’ visual forms ranged from simple unadorned names of children to elaborate and symbolic tattoos. Participants reported that their tattoos reflect their commitment and attachment to their children; they also shared how the tattoos affect their mental well-being. In their imagery, many of the tattoos were highly

symbolic; using the Tree of Life (motif that at times represents the source of life, a force that connects all lives or the cycle of life and death) or animals to represent their children and/or their personalities. Two participants modified existing tattoos. Larry adapted a Celtic cross to become the Tree of Life with his children's names and birth details included, and Chris modified a tattoo that related to his daughter into a shrine to reflect the changed relationship. The timing of getting tattooed is significant as most of the participants acknowledged that they were acquired at a time of and in response to stress, distress, and fear but also reflected and projected positive aspects of and to themselves and their self-understanding.

From Table 1 and an analysis of the interview data, two themes were identified: "how nonresident fathers used tattoos to maintain relationships with their children" and "tattoos and nonresident father's mental well-being." Words in brackets are added to quotes to either enable clearer understanding or to increase confidentiality.

### ***Theme 1: Nonresident Fathers Used Tattoos to Maintain Emotional Connection With Children***

For all participants, the motivation for being tattooed was highly personal. The three motivators were to act as an embodied reminder of fatherhood, as an acknowledgment of their relationship with and commitment to their children, and to reflect their sense of continuing family. In this way, the motivations for getting tattooed are complex and nuanced and reflect the nonresident father's values in relation to their children and their sense of fatherhood.

#### ***The Tattoo as an Embodied Reminder of Fatherhood***

Participants used tattoos as a reminder of their fatherhood status and a sense of family: "[the tattoos are] Permanent reminders of

being a dad" (Kelvin), while another stated "they're [the tattoos] evidence that I am a father, ... Physical proof, documentation of my fatherhood" (Steve). Another goes further linking his identity with a sense of purpose.

This sense of purpose and identity is reinforced by another participant saying: "I'm always trying to be the best role model for my son that I can be, and I want to see him progress, that [the tattoo] is reminding me of what I've got to do" (Barry).

Tattoos can be seen to be "embodied," and it can also be perceived that the motivation for getting a tattoo is its physical embodiment, so it becomes an integral part of the individual:

It really becomes that they're [the tattoos] another part of me, ... it's [the tattoos] now something that is of me for someone else ... [the tattoo is] a way that I've given up a little bit of myself from within my belief. I'm going to deliver myself to that thought, that person. (Barry)

Another participant said: "They're [the children through the tattoos] a part of me now, that they're never ever far" (Chris). In this way, desire, memory, emotional attachment, and embodiment are interrelated: the tattoo is there: "To remind me. They're [children] still there. And so, it feels like they're a part of me wherever I go. ... So, I've always got my family there on me" (Chris).

#### ***Tattoos as Symbols of Current Relationships With Children***

A major motivating factor for nonresident fathers to get tattooed was to capture and represent in an image the perceived reciprocal emotional attachment with their children. All participants reported wanting to increase contact with their children and with many indicating they would have them 100% of the time if they could. For some, the tattoos were testaments to this:

**Table 1**

*Table of Participants, Tattoos, and Description*

Participant	Number of tattoos	Image	Location on the body	Description
Barry	1	Dragon and tiger surrounding yin-yang symbol	Left shoulder	The dragon and the tiger are the father and son playing or chasing each other. The yin-yang is representative of the times of year that we were born.
Eduardo	1	Tree of Life with names of children and the self	Back	The Tree of Life with the names of children stepping down the branches from the oldest to youngest and own surname name in the root system of the tree
Larry	1	Celtic cross modified to show animals personifying children, plus clocks	Full back	A Celtic interlaced cross with zodiac sign. The cross was turned into the Celtic tree of life. Children are represented by an animal each. Two clocks show the date and time of birth for each child.
Neville	2	Names of sons	Either side of the chest close to the neck	Names in decorative font
Steve	2	Horizontal bar with date repeated 10 years apart	On the back	Tattoos show the daughter's height on her fifth and 10th birthdays
Chris	4	Three names of children. Jesters hat, crown cap, and date of birth Name of daughter: changed to shrine	Left hand, right hand, right side of neck On back	Name of the son with a jester's hat Name of the other son with a crown cap Name of the son with date of birth Modified to look like a shrine
Kelvin	2	Dog tags (one for each child) with their names and the Mad Hatter	On the right forearm	Three dog tags with the name of each child and entwined ropes. Image of the Mad Hatter

One [tattoo is a] dragon and tiger surrounding a Ying Yang symbol ... the dragon and the tiger are the two of us playing or chasing each other. And the Yin Yang [symbol] is representative of the times of year that we're born. My son was born on the winter solstice and I was born at the end of the summer solstice. ... I thought with the significance it [the tattoo] had of the two different symbols chasing each other ... not chasing for bad reasons but chasing for good reasons ... the tiger and dragon [are] entwined playfully, or wrestling is deliberately unclear and [it is] also deliberately unclear who is who. (Barry)

In this way, personal characteristics, personal history, and the dynamic interplay within the relationship were seen to be encapsulated in one image because "we each play a role in directing each other's lives. So, there's that following and chase or chasing but in a real positive way" (Barry).

Symbolism is used in tattoos to represent the nonresident father's relationship with his child(ren). One participant said: "the names [of children] just step down [through the branches of the tree] from the oldest to youngest, and essentially, I wanted my last name put in the root system of the tree" (Eduardo). In this way the continuing relationship and link between the nonresident father and the children is encapsulated by the children being shown as growing out of his own self-identity. Relationships with children are not always reported as being positive, and one participant reported having a tattoo that related to his daughter but due to the participant's perception of ongoing negativity from the daughter had it modified: "One [tattoo] on the back for daughter now modified to a 'shrine'" (Chris).

The enduring nature of nonresident father's relationships with their children was reflected in some of the children's actual or intended collaboration in the nature, design, and application of the tattoos:

I asked the two younger boys ... on what to get. ... They wanted to see their name on me. They got excited because obviously, Dad's going to get a tattoo of us on him, so they got super excited. ... So, they got to input on how I was going to do them and what I was going to get. (Kelvin)

Another participant reported how he had been diagnosed with autism in recent years and that his son also had autism. As a result, he plans to have a tattoo that acknowledges and embraces their autism:

There's a few symbols that are around for autism. Some of them I like and don't like, and it'd be something that I would talk to him about because that tattoo is very much about involving him. (Barry)

The significant factor is not the acquisition of a tattoo referring to autism but rather the intention to involve the child in the design and process of getting this new tattoo and how this evidences the nonresident father's ongoing relationship and positive engagement with his son.

### ***Nonresident Father's Commitment to Fulfilling a Role of an "Ideal Father" as a Motivator***

The participants in this study expressed their commitment to their children through the acquisition of tattoos. This was a clear choice with the placement of the tattoos being described as significant: "the symbology was that I actually wanted it on my shoulders ... you either carry them [children] on your shoulders or carry them on your chest" (Neville). The idea of "carrying" the children was reported by

another participant: "The commitment goes both ways. Like the kids, they've had their input on both... , and I'm the one that carries them" (Kelvin), indicating the possibility of a high degree of fatherhood role identity and a sense of responsibility that might underpin the acquisition of tattoos by nonresident fathers.

One participant had:

Two [tattoos] on the back to mark my daughter's 5th and 10th birthdays. The first one, the V with the dragon wings, that's to mark my daughter's fifth birthday. ... And the horizontal bar is to mark her height on her fifth birthday. To mark her 10th birthday. ... there's a horizontal bar ... to mark her height on her 10th birthday on my back ... each one represented my daughter at the time. (Steve)

In this way, the participant described that his ongoing commitment to his child is evidenced over a time of more than 10 years.

One participant expressed his self-identity through a Celtic cross on his back; this was later modified to reflect his commitment to his children because "it was only fitting that my first tattoo then branched out to become the one [in which] I incorporated my kids" (Larry). The ongoing commitment to and presence of children despite distance and diminished contact were reported by one participant:

Knowing that although the kids might not be physically with me every day, every second of every day, I've got something, a permanent reminder of those kids on me every second of every day. So, no matter how far in life I go, no matter how far in life the kids go, no matter what distance separates them, I've always got them with me. (Kelvin)

A sense of constancy through a tattoo was reflected by another participant:

"I just wanted to have a constant reminder [the tattoo] that I'd done what I could do to stay a part of their life. And even if they're removed from my life physically, they're always going to be a part of my family tree" (Eduardo). While another observed: "the idea of parents, ... getting a tattoo to commemorate their children, ... I think that's a positive thing. It always makes me feel [good] when I see other people with a similar tattoo". (Steve)

## **Theme 2: Tattoos and Nonresident Father's Mental Well-Being**

The effect of tattoos on participants' mental well-being was evidenced in three ways: they enabled regaining feelings and gave a sense of children's presence and as a way to remember to stay positive in the face of difficulties.

### ***Promoting Mental Well-Being Through Feeling, Physical Presence, Signposting, and Positivity***

Separation/divorce may result in stress and distress, which may be evidenced by the inability to feel emotions:

"That's why I got into skin art, because I couldn't feel" (Neville). The ongoing sense and effect of a tattoo promoting mental well-being was reported by one participant who expressed that: "the result of [the tattoo] is a positive impact because it's that reminder of my son and [our] relationship. ... So that's a very positive one." (Barry)

Another reported that:

"It [tattoo] can take me to my happy place. It's a reminder of what I've endured to be dad, and I'll do it again in a heartbeat and it gives me a sense of gratification" (Eduardo). This participant continued: "It's [the

tattoo] just a reminder to understand that it doesn't matter how bad things get, they will always be my girls." (Eduardo)

Being able to physically look at the tattoos was described as having a positive impact on the nonresident father and his mental well-being:

Every time I look down at my hands, I see my boys. And every time I look in the mirror, I see my other boy. Even though they [children] may not be ... they're with me ... [the tattoos are] Healing. [the tattoos make me] Proud. (Chris)

The acquisition of tattoos was reported as a step toward mental well-being by addressing internal stress and distress:

[After the separation/divorce] I was that numb and I couldn't feel anything. ... At that stage, things were still just pretty new and raw and everything, high emotion. I was suffering from chronic ... anxiety ... just everything hit home there right at that stage. (Neville)

Similarly, the acquisition of tattoos reportedly assisted in maintaining mental well-being simply by their physical presence: "[I am] just proud of them [tattoos]. Just comforted that it feels like they're [the children] just there, when they haven't been" (Chris). So the effect of the tattoos on mental well-being was reported by some participants: "All positive. Definitely positive" (Chris). Another reported that they [tattoos] gave him "a sense of pride. ... I'm glad that I got them [tattoos]. When I do think about them [tattoos], it is in a positive way" (Steve).

Some participants reported that the tattoos had significance as signposts to positivity from a mental well-being perspective but also in relation to their relationships with their children:

The [tattoo] on my right leg I got a couple of months after the separation. ... it's a black wolf or. ... The Black Dog of Depression, and ... out of that is the Rising Phoenix. So, it's a permanent reminder to myself that whatever gets me down ... you can always come back better and stronger, ... because that black dog, he does always sit at the back of your mind. (Larry)

In this way, the tattoo had a grounding function:

From a grounding point of view, they're [the tattoos] reminding me that there's adversities there, there's challenges there, there's aspects of our life that can be challenging and you sometimes need that just to remind you to keep your feet on the ground. (Barry)

Tattoos were also seen as reminders of and signs for positivity:

With the separation, I knew the signs of depression, having depression, having gone through it as a teen. I knew the signs so it [the tattoo] became a permanent reminder to myself that I could look down and go, 'hey, pull your head up, chin up, you can do it. (Larry)

### ***Pride, Achievement, and Reminders of Children***

Having a sense of mental well-being can result in a sense of pride. Pride here refers to and is indicative of the nonresident father's resilience, durability, and achievements. Pride in having the tattoos and pride in the effect of the tattoos have an important impact for the individual's self-identity and self-understanding, as reported by a participant:

There's a certain amount of pride that I have in having those two markings on me. ... I've already been through three years of ... hell and I've got another couple of years of financial ... suffering to get through. ... It's going to be a long, hard road. (Neville)

The tattoos are there:

Just to remind myself that sometimes it does pay to be positive, not the opposite all the time. ... Sometimes, you just got to be positive ... the therapeutic value... far exceeded the monetary costs. And I wear them [tattoos] ... with pride. (Neville)

Participants expressed a sense of achievement or purpose behind their tattoos: "I still look at it [the tattoo] as a symbol of 'I know what I've overcome'" (Larry), and another reported:

It [the tattoo] was just meant to be something that was a badge of honour. I had to make sure that, regardless if my kids didn't come home or not, I needed them to know that they were my purpose. (Eduardo)

Tattoos were reportedly used as emotional and psychological supports: "They're [the tattoos] up there with my family as emotional support" (Larry) and as conversation starters:

With the days I didn't have them [children], it felt like I still had them. ... I get to talk about them [children], I get to mention them. It [the tattoo] was always a conversation starter for other people about, 'Oh, what's this one about? What's that one about?' And it was always a great thing, and I'd get to then talk about my children, and how proud I was of them. (Chris)

Another reported: "no matter how much I miss the boys, ... I can just look at it [tattoo] and see them. I look at the tattoo and I can picture their faces so clear as day" (Kelvin). Kelvin continued to speak of the connection he feels between the tattoo and his children: "Just they're [the tattoos] always with me if they're on my body and being on the right forearm, I fold my arms, I'm always holding them close to my chest" (Kelvin).

## **Discussion**

This is the first study that we, the authors, are aware that explores how nonresident fathers' commitment to their children and fatherhood identity was displayed through the permanence of their tattoos that related to their children. Moreover, this research included how the tattoos were linked to the nonresident fathers' sense of mental well-being. This was despite significant dissonance between their desired relationships with their children and the actual frequency and durations of contact. These findings highlight that, once achieved, the fatherhood role endures in both social and mental environments for the men who participated in this study. That is, the tattoos provided a constant sense of closeness to their children and their role as a father, even during periods of time when the father was not *with* his children. Crucially, this study is one of the few that has sought to reflect nonresident fathers' own perceptions and self-understandings and to highlight their own voice from their own perspective. Two key points stand out because of this study. The first key point is that the nonresident fathers in this study acquired the tattoos after separation/divorce for two main reasons: as permanent reminders of their self-identity as fathers and to highlight continuity in their commitment to their children. The outcomes of these choices were to symbolize the actual or desired ongoing relationships with their children, which were to have more contact and more time with them. The second key point is how getting tattooed was both a process and an outcome, which supported nonresident fathers' mental well-being at a time of emotional stress and distress.



**Figure 1**  
*Nonresident Fathers and Tattoos: Identity, Commitment, and Well-Being*

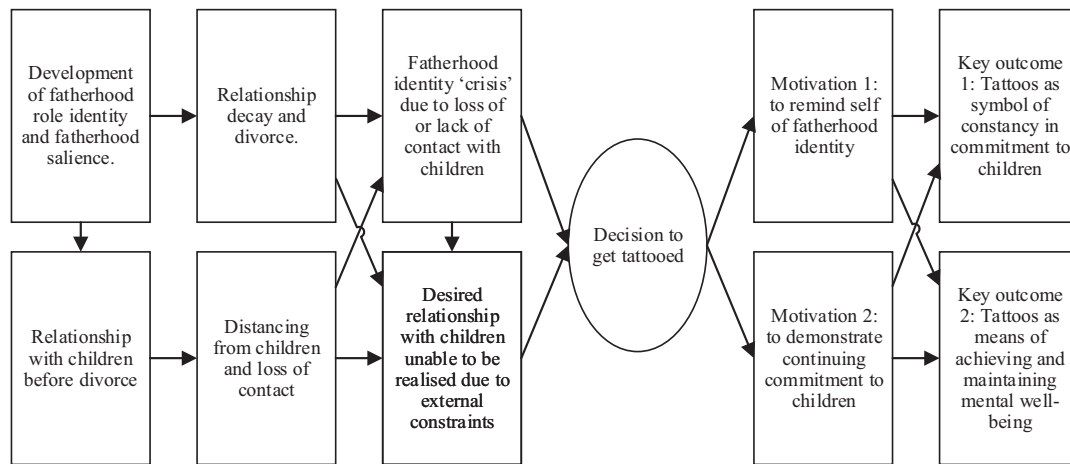


Figure 1 outlines the journey from developing fatherhood role identity to relationship breakdown, the decision to get tattooed to demonstrate their enduring fatherhood identity and their commitment to their children, and how the tattoos are linked to the nonresident father's mental well-being.

### Motivation and Tattoos

Recent research conducted on diverse populations as outlined above attempts to identify the motivations for getting tattooed. This body of research highlights that tattoos are highly personal, have a psychological function, are social signifiers of some knowledge or aspect of self, and are often undertaken at times of positivity, change, stress, or distress (McCarty & Popejoy, 2021). Of Wohlrab et al.'s (2007) list of motivators, *personal narration*, *commitment*, and *resistance* are applicable to nonresident fathers who may need to tell their stories, highlight their commitment to their children, and resist their marginalization and disempowerment. Carmen et al. (2012) focused on a past event, or love may be relevant if this is reinterpreted from the broader perspective of "relationships" and to include children. Buss and Hodges (2017) offered more substantial possibilities applicable to nonresident fathers, such as *self-empowerment* (at a time of disempowerment), *memorialization* (linked to nonfinite loss or ambiguous grief), *message* (and reminder) *to self*, and the *transformation of* (psychological) *pain into beauty*. Last, McCandlish and Pearson (2023) in a qualitative study presented motivators that more closely align with nonresident fathers' reports in our study, which are tattoos as *signifiers of relationship with self*, *relationship with others*, and *symbol of change*.

While identifying those theoretical aspects of tattooing that may apply to nonresident fathers, it is equally important to identify aspects that do not apply to nonresident fathers. For example, it is often noted that tattoos are used to signify membership within particular groups. While the participants in our research strongly identified as both fathers and nonresident fathers, there was no indication at all that their tattoos in any way were linked to a wider awareness of "nonresident

fatherhood" as a social grouping. On the other hand, given the homogeneity of their reported experiences and understandings, it is possible to view them as constituting a social grouping within contemporary social and political life. The nonresident fathers in this study indicated that while attention to the aesthetics of their tattoos was important, they gave no indication that "beauty," physical self-enhancement, or "style" was part of the motivation for getting tattoos (Buss & Hodges, 2017). Similarly, no connection with spirituality or cultural identity was specifically reported.

The experience of divorce for the nonresident father may be a kind of "rite of passage" where he moves from one lived reality to another largely unknown one and one in which he has little control (Violi et al., 2023). As such, the control of his own appearance (through tattoos) may reflect the (re)creation of his self-identity. The lack of agency and the desire to assert something of themselves seem to underpin nonresident fathers who participated in this study getting tattoos that relate to their children, as a reminder of their fatherhood identity.

It has been noted that the getting of tattoos can be linked to or be part of a therapeutic process as well as a means for self-reconstruction (Ward, 2022). Alter-Muri (2020) noted that tattoos can function as a vehicle for promoting healing and exploring self-identity because "Tattooing, . . . , may have therapeutic benefits as it is a form of expression and identity" (p. 139). This highlights the importance for therapists to understand the part a tattoo plays in a client's sense of self and personal expression by understanding what the tattoo images and symbols mean for the individual themselves (Bos & Huss, 2022). In practice, this might mean that, for a therapist, the tattoos may be a physical "entry point" into understanding the individual, their history, life changes, loss and grief, and their therapeutic needs and not necessarily a sign of maladjustment or pathology.

In our study change was reported as an aspect of both getting and having tattoos and their significance over time, though change itself was not a motivator for getting tattoos. Research has shown that tattoos related to kin (children for nonresident fathers, in this study) often reveal anxiety regarding proximity to their loved one spatially

and relationally and the tattoo becomes a reference to the constancy of the core elements of the relationship (Ostojic & Taylor, 2023). This is true for the nonresident fathers in this study who have been removed from the family home and who, as a result, experience emotional, psychological, and physical distancing from their children. This is a new finding that helps us understand not only why nonresident fathers get tattoos that relate to their children but also their purpose and significance.

### Key Outcomes

Two key outcomes of getting tattooed were identified. First, the tattoos were symbols of the constancy of nonresident father's fatherhood role and identity together with their commitment to their children. Second, tattoos offered a means of achieving and maintaining mental well-being even though this was not an intended outcome. From our study, we now know that some nonresident fathers might use tattoos to focus on their fatherhood role identity and relationships with their children. This could provide a valuable platform for future research, which could investigate other areas of nonresident father's lives, such as conflict, trauma, mental health consequences, social negativity, stigma, and how these elements coalesce and may also be given a visual form and expression as tattoos by nonresident fathers.

### Limitations

There are some limitations to this study: Seven men who self-identified as nonresident fathers were included; all except one participant experienced conflict and negativity with the ex-partner, with the Family Court and other agencies giving rise to experiencing conflict. While these experiences were not part of the selection criteria, they may have had an impact on both the motivators identified and the findings. Only nonresident fathers who had tattoos that related specifically to their children and who independently volunteered to participate were included, so it is not possible to generalize to all nonresident fathers with tattoos. Three of the seven participants identified with a non-English-speaking heritage, but they did not indicate that this played a significant role in their daily lives or the choices they made in relation to the tattoos. Some participants had other tattoos that did not relate to their children, and the motivators and signifiers of these were not considered in the findings.

### Future Research

The foregoing has some important implications for future research. First, research could be undertaken with a broader sample that may confirm the results or extend the findings of this study. Second, research could be undertaken that specifically targets nonresident fathers who have tattoos that relate to their children, but who may regret getting the tattoos or for whom the tattoos were have resulted in a negative impact on their mental well-being. Third, further investigation could be undertaken focusing on the collaboration of children in the design and acquisition of tattoos to document if and how this collaboration might result in increased affect and attachment with children. Fourth, research could be undertaken to document and explore how the getting of tattoos that relate to their children may help counselors, psychologists, and mental health professionals in addressing significant issues that nonresident fathers' experience and which may help in the successful

reframing of their negative and conflictual experiences. Fifth, a wider quantitative or mixed methods approach utilizing the model as outlined in this article to a new research with nonresident fathers and their tattoos may provide further useful insights.

### The Importance of the Study's Results and Their Use in Practice

As noted earlier, the body is often seen as a socially constructed phenomenon (Tabea Jerrentrup, 2022). The reasons for getting a tattoo can vary from beauty, art and fashion, personal narratives, group affiliations, resistance, spirituality, and cultural tradition (Wohlrab et al., 2007). These aspects are important for self-identity and have one feature in common: People want to take control of their bodies in a meaningful way, indicating the importance of agency, though "agency" must be distinguished from just "being active" (Tabea Jerrentrup, 2022, p. 4). Tabea Jerrentrup (2022) noted that people who anticipate having control (agency) over situations are seen to be less pessimistic, resigned, and more confident and view being in control as desirable.

Getting tattoos can be seen as a means to escape, deny, transcend, or embrace one's human spatial and social condition (Roux & Belk, 2019), and this has important implications for therapy practice and perhaps welfare policies. Some implications are linked to what may be seen as traditional approaches to therapy with men (with or without tattoos), which tend to adopt a deficit or pathological approach to therapy being applied to violent male offenders (Harry, 1987), homosexual men (Karacaoglan, 2012), or men and suicidal ideation (Frey et al., 2023). Other studies that focus on tattoos link tattoos with gender construction (J. Miller, 2020), focus on both males and females (Strübel & Jones, 2017), or focus more on the effects of tattoos on women (Molloy & Wagstaff, 2021) with no research appearing to focus on men, fathers, and nonresident fathers in their own right. One text that does focus exclusively on men in therapy (but does not include tattoos) is *Working with Men in the Human Services* (Pease, 2020) where it is noted that most human service workers and welfare clients are women and, to address the potential for any real or latent sexism, an understanding of men as well as women is necessary.

Because one major function of a tattoo is its power to reflect one's inner reality and relational self through narrative (Csekő et al., 2024), it could be advantageous for therapy with men with tattoos to be approached as a narrative exercise. This is because narrative enquiry reveals the lived stories of the individual and is at the basis of the individual's self-understanding (Naude & Naude, 2024).

The findings of this research indicate a possible use of tattoos and visual images in therapy including art therapy because tattoos can function as a means to preserve memory and promote healing and exploring self-identity, and these can facilitate clients to share the narratives of their tattoos and their meaning as part of a therapeutic process. This means that social scientists, psychologists, therapists, researchers, and theorists could incorporate and consider both positive and negative impacts of tattoos and their link to wider consequences for nonresident fathers. The important aspect would be the approach that is adopted in working with nonresident fathers wherein they are not so much asked *about* their tattoos but to speak *from* their tattoos much as they did within this research. This would help to better ground, understand, and appreciate nonresident fathers'

lived situations and experiences and as a result identify interventions for more positive outcomes for them.

## Conclusions

Participants in this study indicated a dissonance between their desired relationship with children and their actual relationships, care, and contact arrangements. As a result, the nonresident fathers used tattoos related to their children to maintain an emotional and psychological connection to their fatherhood role. Our study offers a new contribution to and extends what we know of nonresident fathers after divorce, their attachments, and their behaviors. We know that becoming a nonresident father is complex, time-consuming, and an all-encompassing and overwhelming experience. In this context, some nonresident fathers seek to signify their commitment and attachment to their children when they feel it is under threat. This signifier may be a tattoo that relates specifically to their children. The main motivators for getting tattoos are multifaceted and include acts of agency to underpin a sense of self-empowerment, giving visual form to their sense of self-identity, to foster and nurture their relationship with their children, as well as acting as a therapeutic means for regaining or maintaining mental well-being. This offers a deeper understanding of some nonresident father's experience of fatherhood role salience after separation and divorce and highlights the desire for a continuing emotional and relational connection to their children while continuing to enact their fatherhood role.

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## Appendix

### The Interview Guide

#### Interview Question Guideline for Tattoos

##### Interviewer

##### *Introductions and so Forth*

Do you consent to have this interview recorded?  
 Can you tell me your name and postcode, please?  
 (icebreaker) If you were stuck on a desert island with only one food available to you, what food would you have?

##### *Becoming a Nonresident Father*

Can you tell me how you became a nonresident father?  
 Do you still see yourself as a father?  
 What does it mean to you to be a father?

##### *Impact of Becoming a Nonresident Father*

How has being a nonresident father impacted you?  
 What has been the ongoing impact of becoming a nonresident father?  
 What has helped you in being a nonresident father?  
 What has hindered you in being the nonresident father you would like to be?

##### Focus on Children

Thinking about the relationship you have with your nonresident children (or had till they were 18), what is (was) your relationship with them like?

Thinking about the relationship you have with your nonresident children (or had till they were 18), what would you like (or would have liked) your relationship with them to be like?

##### Tattoos

How many tattoos do you have that relate specifically to your nonresident children?  
 Can you show them to me and talk me through them?

When was each one done?

To whom does each relate to?

Do you have photos of your tattoos and are you willing to make them available for inclusion in the research discussion? (Please note that any identifying material will be altered to maintain confidentiality.)

Are you willing to email these photos for the research records?

When did you get the tattoos done?

For what purpose did you get them done?

When you see the tattoos that relate specifically to your children, how do they make you feel?

Have you always felt like this?

Has the way they make you feel changed over time? In a negative way? In a positive way?

Do you ever feel depressed or experience negative feelings when you see the tattoos?

In your opinion, what is the impact of the tattoos on you psychologically? Has this changed over time?

In your opinion, what is their impact on you emotionally? Has this changed over time?

Do they have any effect on you on a day-to-day basis?

Do they impact negatively in any way?

Do they help you positively in any way?

Have you ever felt the need to hide them?

What made you try to hide them?

At what times did you hide them?

How did you try to hide them?

From whom did you try to hide them?

Have you ever wished you could remove any of them?

Would you remove any now if you could?

Which ones specifically?

What would be the reason you would like them removed?

(Appendix continues)

***Focus on Mental Health***

Do any of your tattoos have any specific meaning or purpose?

Which tattoos are they?

What is their purpose or meaning for you?

When were these done?

What were the circumstances for them being done?

Are they motivational in any way?

Do they keep you positive or remind you to stay positive?

Do they depress you or make you feel sad at any time?

Do they make you feel happy or satisfied at any time?

What has been the importance of having a physical image like a tattoo?

In general, what has been the overall impact or effect of having these tattoos on you?

Is there anything further you would like to say about your tattoos that relate to your children or any other tattoos that we have not covered or that you would like to add information about?

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