


Nonresident Fathers' Voice: Marginalized, Disempowered, and Silenced

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Abstract

Nonresident fathers, following separation/divorce, are more likely to experience multiple forms of family types simultaneously than any other sociodemographic group. Although there is considerable writing on the factors and issues surrounding nonresident fathers from academics, the Family court, the Child Support Agency, and women's and welfare groups, the voice of nonresident fathers themselves is rarely heard. This is due to nonresident fathers being marginalized, disempowered, and silenced by these same entities. The voice of nonresident fathers is routinely minimized, dismissed, and labeled as anti-feminist or a backlash to feminism. This opinion piece argues that there is a need for qualitative research to be undertaken to investigate, document, and explore nonresident fathers' voices from their own perspective to hear what they have to say of themselves so that a better understanding of the dynamics that impact and influence them can be achieved. This would mean that actions can be identified and undertaken to better understand nonresident fathers' situation while providing insights for the development of social policies by Government and Welfare agencies together with support care for nonresident fathers highlighting their desires and needs.

Keywords

nonresident fathers, fathers, divorce, grief, marginalization, disempowerment, silencing, gender, intimate partner violence, maternal gatekeeping, children, Fathers' Rights Groups

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Introduction

Nonresident fathers' numbers are rising due to increasing separation/divorce rates across the Western world, but little is known about their lives. While nonresident fatherhood can have negative impacts on their health and well-being, there is a lack of research from their perspective and the outcomes they experience. This has the effect of silencing and marginalizing them, being potentially dangerous for their physical, mental, and social health. Nonresident fathers' problems are compounded by social stigma and, in Australia, ongoing interaction with the legal system, policing, and social policies that arguably put them at a disadvantage. In addition, contemporary family constructs and the prevalent ideologically based discourse within academic literature and

popular writing can serve to marginalize, disempower, and silence nonresident fathers. This experience may apply to nonresident fathers worldwide; nevertheless, for the purposes of this opinion paper, the focus is on Australian heterosexual nonresident fathers.

This opinion paper has three aims: first, to argue that nonresident fathers can be marginalized, disempowered,

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and silenced at all levels of Australian society; second, to describe the ramifications for nonresident fathers; and, third, to propose a research schedule that will embody their voice, resulting in exploring, documenting, and addressing their issues.

Who Are Nonresident Fathers?

Nonresident fathers are fathers who do not live with some, or all, of their biological children following separation/divorce, with a steady rise in this category of fathers (Poole et al., 2016). Poole et al. noted that despite this social change and the increased contemporary interest in fathers and fatherhood, data on fathers and nonresident fathers are not systematically collected. This results in an evidence gap relating to fathers generally and nonresident fathers specifically. Nonresident fathers are seen as a hard-to-reach group (Henz, 2014) because unlike single mothers, they cannot be identified through government records. As little research data are collected on nonresident fathers as a demographic, writers often use proxies to determine the number of nonresident fathers and the quality of their relationship with their children. This means that what we know about nonresident fathers and their family configurations and relationships are often obtained from others, usually the mother. Nonresident fathers' perspectives, and particularly the nature of their relationships with their children, remain unknown.

Understanding nonresident fathers themselves and the characteristics and quality of their relationship with their children is further challenged because the majority of models that underpin relevant literature are grounded in normative constructions of the resident father as being involved, engaged, accessible, and responsible, emphasizing their roles in caretaking and shared activities with children. If this normative construction of fatherhood is regarded as being sufficient, then constructions of nonresident fathers who fail to conform to this set of norms must inevitably be constructed as deficient. Consequently, any non-normative relational desire on the part of the nonresident father cannot be accommodated within a normative model of fatherhood.

Although there is a general perception that nonresident fathers diminish or cease to have contact with their children after separation/divorce, Poole et al. (2016) maintained that there has actually been a reduction in the number of nonresident fathers who cease to do so. They also identified the emergence of "a notable pattern of diversity in the quantity and quality of contact and care that non-resident fathers have with their children" (Poole et al., 2016, p. 226), noting that the factors that determine the extent and rate of contact extend beyond the nonresidents fathers' characteristics, to those of the

resident mother, children, practical matters, and relationship dynamics.

How Many Nonresident Fathers Are There?

The actual number of nonresident fathers is not known. A United Nations (UN) Report (2011) noted that "National rates of lone-mother households have been used as a demographic proxy for father absence through divorce and separation" (p. 89). This is problematic as not only is imputing figures in this way unreliable; it also ignores the re-partnering of many men and women overlooking the range of family types that nonresident fathers may find themselves in concurrently. As the UN Report noted, this can result in the marginalization of nonresident fathers, which warrants a research focus on nonresident fathers.

Impact of Becoming a Nonresident Father

While becoming a father is a significant event and heralds positive changes for new fathers, becoming a nonresident father is often the opposite and a highly traumatic experience with long- and short-term negative effects (Flood, 2012). Separation and divorce are enormous upheavals typically resulting in a total disestablishment of their previous life that necessitates the re-establishment of an entirely new life under often very difficult circumstances. Within this challenging and potentially traumatic process, nonresident fathers may lose much of what has underpinned their identity. This loss includes their home, their children, their social circle, friends, extended family, a partner they may not have wanted to leave, as well as possessions and may be accompanied by increased mental health issues and greater financial insecurity. For instance, Kessler (2018) claimed that "fathers suffer more emotionally (than mothers) due to deteriorations of the relationships with their children" (p. 2). The negative effects of separation/divorce for nonresident fathers "are exacerbated by poverty, social isolation, conflict, violence and physical and mental ill-health" (Flood, 2012, p. 4). Brüggmann (2020), in reference specifically to nonresident fathers, noted that "getting divorced more than doubles mortality for men (133%) . . . in the first 2 years after the divorce" (p. 292), arguing that this places nonresident fathers at greater risk of suicide.

For nonresident fathers, the deteriorating relationships and ensuing marginalization from their children, social groups, and their wider family after separation/divorce often result in nonfinite loss or disenfranchised grief. This experience of grief relating to the loss of daily contact with their children, loss of status, loss of the familiar household, loss of self-identity, and loss of family is so all

encompassing that it can be experienced as a trauma that is similar to the effects of major social upheavals, natural disasters, or trauma for which there are social supports provided by Government and Welfare Agencies. No similar supports are provided to nonresident fathers despite there being a surfeit of supports by these agencies for separated/divorced women.

Nonfinite loss or disenfranchised grief occurs because “the ensuing grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned” (Doka, 2008, p. 78). Separation/divorce is often unexpected so that “a pattern of expectation is disrupted. ‘Me’ as I have come to picture myself, be comfortable with over time, suddenly becomes destined to be someone different” (Doka, 2008, p. 216). Generally, nonresident fathers have to construct a new “me” within an uncertain context while at the same time deal with and manage a range of factors and entities that are seen to be ranged against them. Not only is the voice on nonresident fathers not sought; when it is expressed, it is not heard and this omission serves to diminish, marginalize, and disempower them.

Perceptions and Portrayals of Nonresident Fathers in Current Academic Literature

Compared with other father “types,” the nonresident father is usually reduced to playing a small, ambiguous part in the family and, despite their overlapping roles within families, their voices are reportedly rarely heard within academic literature (Cohen-Israeli & Remennick, 2015). Some socially current literature has reflected nonresident fathers’ voices. Bradford’s (2020) paper focussed on the mental well-being and social/emotional isolation of nonresident fathers who sought assistance from a Welsh charity predominantly due to child arrangement problems after separation/divorce. Bradford (2020) concluded that “Well-being was found to be strongly degraded—and loneliness severely increased—in this cohort compared to general populations” (p. 42). As men’s social circles revolve strongly around work and family, the loss of family identity will, unsurprisingly, have an effect on loneliness. Regression analyses revealed that the nonresident fathers’ risk of domestic abuse and low income, mostly from unemployment, were the strongest predictors of both loneliness and poorer well-being. This is because a nonresident fathers’ well-being is strongly affected by their reduced contact and interactive opportunities with their children.

Nonresident Fathers and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Nonresident fathers, as noted above, are at significant risk of domestic abuse, more commonly defined as IPV.

Citing the Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project (PASK, 2013), Bradford (2020) explained that “Large, international meta-analyses have indicated that partner abuse is closer to gender parity, or even that men are the majority of victims” (p. 43). A detailed description of what mechanisms are used so that the high level of male victimization is diminished to very low levels is then elucidated. In this way, “the prevalence of male victims is vanished away via a sequence of filters at different stages of the process” (Bradford, 2020, p. 43). In the United Kingdom and Wales, the crime surveys of 2019 have “reported that 33% of adult abuse or partner abuse is against male victims” (Bradford, 2020, p. 43). In an Australian paper, Walker et al. (2019) maintained that “Despite evidence indicating that within some contexts IPV is perpetrated equally by men and women . . . societal narratives typically portray male perpetrators and female victims and regard female-perpetrated IPV as less serious and occurring less frequently” (p. 213). This is underlined by Machado et al. (2020) stating that “. . . studies have revealed that male PV (Partner Violence) victims reported losing custody of their children and being a target of false accusations of child abuse” (p. 613). The above papers also document a dismissive and minimizing attitude to male experience of IPV by Police, the Courts, and the legal profession. If this is the experience of the majority of nonresident fathers, it is a particularly dire series of possible outcomes for themselves and their children.

Child Support, Nonresident Fathers, and Maternal Gatekeeping

In reality, and despite the many obstacles they face, many nonresident fathers do continue to play an active role in their children’s lives, within the boundaries set by Courts or ex-partners, after divorce, and provide not only financial support but also “in kind” support, often despite numerous personal emotional and practical obstacles (Kane et al., 2015). By contrast, the growing number of nonresident fathers are often stigmatized as “deadbeat dads” or “feckless fathers” (Whyte, 2017), by popular media, academics, and women’s groups, reifying a pathological and negative discourse. The Australian Child Support Agency lends weight to this perception through media releases that predominantly focus on nonresident fathers who have not met their financial responsibilities (with no regard or reference to the circumstances that may have prevented the payment).

What the female partner (or ex-partner) allows or does not allow has become known as “maternal gatekeeping.” For example, Schoppe-Sullivan and Altenburger (2019) stated that the current understanding of gatekeeping centers mostly on maternal gatekeeping. This involves the ways in which mothers encourage, discourage, or control

the nonresident fathers' parenting. This maternal gate-keeping often affects negatively the nonresident fathers' parental role and the kind and quality of relationship he is able to have with his child/ren.

Nonresident Fathers in the Pandemic

Within the current Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a profound silence surrounding nonresident fathers. Literature has appeared specifically on Covid-19 and single mothers (Fortier, 2020) and other women's issues generally, but little on Covid-19 and nonresident fathers. According to Bradford (2020), a survey in the United Kingdom indicated that 61.5% of fathers who responded had no contact or only indirect contact with their children during lockdowns. This is an increase from 14% before the pandemic. Nonresident fathers are severely affected by government-mandated restrictions such as widespread travel restrictions, curfews, social distancing regulations, and lockdowns that, in turn, severely affect contact, visits, communications, disruption to routines, and the amount and quality of time nonresident fathers spend with their child/ren. Bradford (2020) claimed a potential for a simultaneous increase in domestic abuse and unemployment, which "presents a worrying prognosis for increasing levels of isolation and suicidality among the demographic of separated fathers" (p. 53).

A Backlash to Feminism?

There is some literature coming from the nonresident fathers' perspective, often through what are generally termed Fathers' Rights Groups (FRGs). These groups are usually active on social media and often undertake symbolic actions or events to draw attention to their experiences, challenges, and voices. While the actions and language of these groups are not necessarily endorsed here, nevertheless there has been what appears to be a dismissal, or a silencing, of many of the issues raised, by prominent academics. For example, these issues are often portrayed or documented as a "backlash" against feminism (Rosen et al., 2009) and shift the focus from nonresident fathers to women, reasoning that "when threatened by real or imagined losses of power, resources and authority, some men have sought out peer subcultures that shore up their opposition to women's empowerment" (pp. 515–516). Flood (2012) has framed these nonresident voices as a sexist overreaction due to the shifts in gender relations and family lives, reiterating from an earlier paper that the concerns expressed within a father's rights context "represents an effort to re-establish masculine and paternal authority over women and

children" (p. 6). Rather than being listened to as an authentic voice to be heard, respected, and their experiences being validated, such a portrayal of nonresident fathers' voices serves to further minimize, silence, demean, and disempower them.

Jordan (2020) takes this further, fearing that care of children postdivorce is being "masculinised." She claims to attempt to "bridge the gap" between theoretical ethics of care and empirical discussions of caring masculinities by "exploring gender and care through masculinities lenses as articulated in the context of fathers' rights narratives" (p. 21) and this is "in the context of anti-/postfeminist FRGs" (p. 35). This language betrays a prejudicial and biased view of what these groups are saying without engaging with them at face value. Furthermore, Jordan claims that her research illustrates "some of the difficulties with disentangling 'positive' forms of caring masculinity given that caring masculinity is currently frequently expressed in ways that are far from ideal in feminist terms and may incorporate, rather than reject, domination" (p. 36). Again, the shift is away from the concerns of nonresident fathers to solely valorize what may be valuable for women.

In 2004, Boyd attacked FRGs, and in 2010 valorized mothers over nonresident fathers, arguing against shared parenting and for a mother's autonomy to choose where she lives or takes the children (even interstate) without recourse to and regardless of the impact and consequences this may have on the nonresident father and his relationship to his child/ren. Boyd (2010) discounted shared parenting as simply social engineering that "has at best been overly simplistic and at worst has generated problematic consequences for children and caregivers" (p. 147). In this way, by shifting focus away from what nonresident fathers are saying, these writers not only silence, marginalize, and disempower nonresident fathers; they make them completely dispensable.

The Effects on Policy and Practice

Hunt and MacLeod (2008) show that there is a significant social perception among nonresident fathers, some writers and relatives who have lost contact with children, that some Family Courts can treat nonresident fathers unfairly. In this regard, while not supporting this perception, Hunt and MacLeod noted that the resident parent starts off from a position of strength simply by having the children reside with her, and that it is too easy for them to manipulate the Family Court and legal system and spin things out by using mediation as a delaying tactic and delaying property settlement proceedings. As a result, the whole process takes too long and some nonresident fathers (or parents) simply give up as a result of these difficulties. Finally, some resident parents remain

strongly opposed to contact and the Court is limited in its abilities to deal with this.

Academic Frameworks and Constructs

Many academics have attempted to come to terms with nonresident fathers and any number of factors that affect and influence them. Two of these papers are of special interest for our purposes as they display an approach that in many ways is not helpful in understanding what nonresident fathers intend or desire.

The first paper uses data from the “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study” (no country of origin or reference for these data is provided). Sariscsany et al. (2019) note and explore nonresident fathers’ diverse and changing family constructs as noted above. In their paper, Sariscsany et al. (2019) plot what they call the *trajectory* of child support over time. In this study, three groups of nonresident fathers are identified (previously married, previously cohabiting, and never cohabiting) noting that child support (both in-kind and formal support) change over time for each of the three groups.

While a nonresident fathers’ changing circumstances and ability to pay are noted (but not explored) in this study, it is claimed that a “Fathers’ willingness to pay for all three groups (fathers married, cohabiting, or not cohabiting at the time of their child’s birth) declines as time away from the child increases” (Sariscsany et al., 2019, p. 173). However, no justification or basis for this assertion on the *willingness* to pay is provided, nor is it explained how this quantitative data set could reflect the *willingness* of the nonresident fathers to pay child support.

In an earlier paper, Poole et al. (2016) sought to answer the question, “Who are non-resident fathers?” undertaking a secondary analysis from a British national survey. Their sociodemographic framework is one attempt to conceptualize who nonresident fathers are by using a latent class analysis that offers a starting point by categorizing nonresident fathers by the level of engagement—as measured by frequency of contact—that they have with their children: “Engaged” fathers, “Less Engaged” fathers, “Disengaged” fathers, and “Distance” fathers. The authors refer to their insights as highlighting the heterogeneity of nonresident fatherhood. However, Poole et al.’s (2016) framework is unhelpful unless an assumption is made that the amount of contact time these nonresident fathers reported equals the time the nonresident father actually *desired* to have with their children. This method is not helpful in understanding nonresident fathers’ attitudes, experiences, and challenges, as it has the effect of, perhaps inadvertently, taking away their voices and

further dismisses them into silence. At base, Poole et al. (2016) fail to answer the question posed in the title of their paper: “Who are non-resident fathers?”

Both of the above papers make assertions based on interpretation of their data in a way that does not lead to a better understanding of nonresident fathers or their voice.

Toward an In-Depth Exploration of Nonresident Fathers’ Voices

Notably, Cohen-Israeli and Remennick (2015) asserted that “the difficulties experienced by divorced men as parents and individuals having received relatively little scholarly attention” (p. 538). This attention should be forthcoming in realistic ways. Roulston and Choi (2018) champion the benefits of qualitative research to understand particular social groups under investigation. Such designs would provide a voice for nonresident fathers enabling the expression of their own views, in their own language, identifying their own salient factors and variables that affect their relationship with their child/ren, be they legal, political, ideological, patterns of relationships, distance, or other social or demographic factors.

It is timely then that research is undertaken to investigate and document these opportunities, difficulties, and the factors that may result in nonresident fathers’ marginalization and disempowerment. As discussed, there is a large gap in the research and knowledge on nonresident fathers, particularly from their own perspective. Future research must investigate and document what relationship nonresident fathers actually *desire* to have with their child/ren and what factors (social, legal, welfare, etc.) help or hinder the realization of this relationship.

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