AUSTRALIAN NONRESIDENT FATHERS
ATTRIBUTES INFLUENCING THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN

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Abstract

Studies of nonresident fathers have largely neglected the influence of their personality on their contact and involvement with children. The present two-stage study, using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, undertook to investigate the extent to which selected personality characteristics influenced nonresident fathers’ continued engagement with children.

The study initially collected demographic and personal data from two hundred and sixty nonresident fathers throughout Australia. This first stage of data collection focussed on fathers’ experience of the separation and their subsequent frequency and level of contact and their level of involvement with children. It included several multi-item variables, which measured nonresident fathers’ relationships with former partners and children, their adjustment to their new parental role, their role satisfaction and role strain. It also included measures of fatherhood salience, nonresident fathers’ parental authority within the separated family, their satisfaction with that authority, their attitude to child support and their perception of resident mothers’ attitude to contact. It also administered abridged Sensitivity and Impulsivity scales devised by Eysenck (1969).

At the second stage of the study, one hundred and thirty-five of these fathers participated in an interview. One hundred and twenty of them completed a personality questionnaire, which measured scores on the four folk scales of Responsibility, Socialization, Self-control and Good Impression, taken from the California Psychological Inventory.

The study found Socialization was the only selected personality characteristic to be significantly associated with nonresident fathers’ engagement with children. All four folk scales were positively correlated with nonresident fathers’ role adjustment, which was significantly associated with nonresident fathers’ contact and was part of the model best predicting their involvement with children. Results showed that nonresident fathers’ scores on the Sensitivity measure were negatively associated with role adjustment.

Most nonresident fathers in the study had frequent contact with children but limited involvement with them. They reported having little scope to share in parental decision making or to be involved in children’s schooling. The study found fatherhood salience, role adjustment, parental authority and attitude to child support to be positively associated with
engagement. It showed interparental hostility, interparental conflict and nonresident fathers’ role strain to be negatively correlated with engagement. The study also found that dissatisfaction with parental authority within the separated family, role strain and a negative attitude to child support were associated with ongoing interparental hostility.

Qualitative data confirmed nonresident fathers’ common experience of being marginalised within the family. They also revealed that many participants went to great lengths to maintain some parental relevancy for their children, despite social and legal systems tending to impede them from meeting parental responsibilities and caring for their children.
Certificate of originality

This thesis describes original research undertaken in the Department of Behavioural and Community Health Sciences at Sydney University.

No part of this work has been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or tertiary institution.

To the best of my knowledge, any theories or research that are not my own have been acknowledged in the text.
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