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Non-resident fathers: A literature review of factors influencing their world

Dave Whyte

It has been acknowledged (McCashin, 1996; Hogan & Gilbertson, 2007) that services designed to support families tend to focus on the mother and children and little contact is generally made with fathers, even when they are resident in the family home.

Considering the changes in family structure in contemporary society and the often complex range of needs held by families who avail of social care services, this paper provides some insights in the factors that impact on non-resident fathers. The paper presents a literature review on the topic of non-resident fathers covering areas such as fathers' role in the family and in children's development; factors that have been found to impact on non-resident fathers' contact with their children and the impact of non-residency on the fathers themselves.

Introduction

There has been significant changes in family life structure in western society particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Divorce, separations and children born outside wedlock have grown and as a consequence there is an increasing number of fathers who live their lives outside the family realm (Martin, 2005). There are varying definitions of the term 'non-resident father' in relation to family matters but for the purposes of this paper a non-resident father shall mean a father who does not live with his child or children. According to Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams (1999) a man can be described as a non-resident father regardless of whether he ever lived with the child or children.

'Invisible' fathers

The area of social policy has focused, in the main, on initiatives and research to support mothers and their children with fathers not receiving as much attention (McCashin, 1996; Hogan & Gilbertson, 2007). According to McKeown (2001) "other researchers have also observed that family support is characterised by "the predominant focus on mothers and the apparent invisibility of fathers" (p. 12) while an evaluation by Working with Men (2006, p.50) of The Da Project (2005) observed that "family support services have had little contact or engagement with fathers", that fathers were marginalised "in the assessment of families'

needs” and this leads “to their exclusion from the provision of support”. Recommendations were made for family support services to be more proactive in engaging with fathers, assessing their needs and promoting a more father friendly approach among staff (Forrest, 2005).

Non-resident fathers’ involvement

Research by Dienhart (1998) and Pleck and Pleck (1997) has pointed to the importance of the father as an influential factor in a child’s development. No longer are fathers regarded as being on the periphery but are seen as playing a central role. Lamb (2010, p.3) described the new father as “companions, care providers, spouses, protectors, models, moral guides, teachers and bread winners”. Flouri and Buchanan (2003) point out the importance of fathers being engaged in their children’s lives from an early age as this increases their long term involvement. Indeed in childcare services the benefits of having male carers have been suggested to be to expose children to different styles of caring and a wider variety of play activities (Jensen, 1996).

While research on non-resident fathers (e.g. Bradshaw et al., 1999; Marsiglio, 1995; Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010; Poole, Speight, O’ Brien, Connolly & Aldrich, 2013; Simpson, Jessop & McCarthy, 2003) has focused on the involvement of non-resident fathers and their children, it has been mainly quantitative in nature. Seltzer’s (1991) model, for example, is often used as a basic measure which examines details of “economic support, measured by formal and informal child support paid, social involvement, measured by the frequency of contact between the parent and child; and authority, defined as the influence the non-resident parent has on the child’s life” (Walter, 2000, p. 38) rather than exploring the experiences of fathers and factors which help or inhibit their involvement with their children. For example Corcoran (2005, p.134) notes that non-resident fathers’ “capacity to adopt a positive fathering role is affected by a range of institutional, economic and social barriers”.

Non-resident fathers have often been described “as callus and fickle, who are far too quick to assume emotional and economic ‘absence’ from their children’s lives” (Simpson, Jessop & McCarthy, 2003, p. 202) and that after separation from the mother men are no longer viewed as a co-parent who is involved with his children “to a detached visitor in their child’s life to the more negative ‘deadbeat dad’, ‘feckless father’”, (Corcoran, 2005, p. 148). Such stigmatising labels are likely to have an impact on the non-resident father’s identity as a father.

Another consequence of being a non-resident father is the loss of daily time with the child which results in missing aspects of the child's development and losing the opportunity to have an influence in the child's life as well as having a voice in children's upbringing (Jenkins, 2006). Data obtained by Nixon, Greene and Hogan's (2012) study of twenty seven Irish children of non-resident fathers suggests the "majority of the children did not feel connected to their fathers and a sense of familiarity with each other was missing" (p. 385) and "identified connection and commitment as key relationship processes that facilitate feelings of closeness to non-resident fathers" (p. 387). This can impact on parenting. For example Fahey, Keilthy and Polek (2012) surmise that "children are more likely to experience non-optimal parenting from non-resident than resident fathers" (p. ix). A lack of contact can also be exacerbated by the current and past relationship with the resident caregiver, usually the mother. Walter (2000, p.38), for instance, found that "unwed fathers have significantly less ongoing influence in their child's life than previously married non-resident fathers". On the other hand Hogan, Halpenney and Greene (2002, p.xii) gathered the views of 60 children from separated homes and found that for 30% of the children "their relationship with their non-resident parents had mainly improved since the separation in terms of the quality of the time they spent together".

Factors influencing fathers' contact with children

Excluding those who do not wish to see their children there are several factors which can impact on when and how non-resident fathers have contact with their children. Many have to journey down the judicial route. For instance, in 2012 and 2013 there were 11,347 outcomes in relation to access only in the District Court (Courts Service, 2013). A quantitative study by Bradshaw et al (1999) in the United Kingdom in which 619 non-resident fathers were surveyed revealed that 47% of non-resident fathers had contact at least once per week. A more recent study by Poole et al. (2013) using data from the U.K. wide survey Understanding Society (2009-11) however suggests that this figure has risen to 59%. A United States study estimates that only between a quarter to one third of children of non-resident fathers remain in regular, weekly contact with them" (O'Brien, 2005, p. 6).

Using the U.K. figures as a base, as Irish figures could not be sourced, it is possible to roughly gauge the number of children who enjoy weekly contact with their non-resident fathers in this country using the State of the Nation's Children figures on households with only a single parent. In 2011 according to these figures there were 202,444 children living in

single parent households or 18.3% of the child population in this country (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012). Accordingly, a little over 95,000 see their non-resident father on a weekly basis, over 28,000 on a fortnightly basis and over 6000 never see their father at all. However, to generalize the findings of any studies would be wrong as it is a snapshot of that time and confined to the area/country in which it is conducted (Bryman, 2008). For instance, the Bradshaw et al. (1999) study as well as only being relevant to the year it was conducted, can only be indicative of non-resident fathers' experiences in the United Kingdom.

For non-resident fathers who used the judicial route it has been identified by Ferguson and Hogan (2004), in their Irish study featuring 10 non-resident fathers, that the courts were very restrictive in the extent of access allowed resulting in the men feeling that they were being prevented from being active fathers. In the words of one participant:

I can only see my children [...] two hours once a week on school days, four hours once a week at weekends [...] d'ya know how long two hours lasts? It'll take me a half hour to get the kids back and half hour to take them [...] so basically I've got an hour with the children.

(Ferguson & Hogan, 2004, p. 68).

This feeling of helplessness is echoed by Wilson (2006, p.287) who suggests that “for many non-resident fathers locked in disputes over contact with their children, the idea that they themselves do not have a legal right to time with their children per se is difficult to grasp”. While Ferguson and Hogan’s (2004, p.14) participants reported feeling excluded in the family law system and described it as being “cruelly sexist and anti-men/fathers”. Coulter (2007) found no evidence of bias against fathers in her analysis of one hundred hours of court time. The financial costs of the judicial route also need to be considered. Interviews with 18 non-resident fathers in Australia found that “several fathers were engaged in lengthy and expensive legal battles over contact arrangements” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 188). Woods (1999) survey of 252 non-resident parents in Australia however uncovered that nearly sixty percent of fathers were satisfied with their contact time.

Jenkins’s (2006, p.189) study also found that non-resident fathers felt powerless in the organisation of contact and “obstruction by the mother when either partner had re-partnered” Sometimes though a child may not wish to go with the father at the agreed access time. There may be a perfectly innocent reason for this but it can also be caused by what is referred to as parental alienation. Parental alienation can be caused by actions, either covert or overt, “by

the custodial parent designed to turn the child against the absent parent” (Shannon, 2005, p. 57).

Research has also revealed the additional financial cost to the father of access visits with his children, on top of paying financial support. Woods (1999) survey of 252 non-resident fathers found that 94% of respondents provided recreation and entertainment activities involving a 'significant cost' during contact visits. Of those who provided recreational and entertainment activities, 35% said that “it helped to build the relationship with the children” (p. 28). Jenkins’s (2006) research reports similar. This study also found that some fathers in order to see their children had to make alternate work arrangements and incurred what he called re-establishment costs, such as, a new place to live after moving out of the family home.

Impact on fathers

Jenkins (2006) showed, in his Australian study of 18 non-resident fathers that participants “frequently expressed their love and affection for their children” and wanted to be active in the lives of their children. Also as a consequence of separation many fathers felt guilty about the possible impact of the separation on the children and they felt estranged from family and community resulting in a sense of loss and helplessness (Jenkins, 2006). Other findings of Jenkin's study included the lack of supports emotionally and financially available to non-resident fathers, that the fathers experienced great loss, sadness, stress and pressure. The “members of fathers advocacy groups argued that socialisation processes work against the interests of men in that men are discouraged from expressing their feelings” and that “there is a presumption of guilt on the part of the man if and when the relationship breaks down and he leaves the family home”, (Corcoran, 2005, p. 148). Ferguson and Hogan (2004) noted that fathers felt alone with nobody willing to listen to their experiences as well as being fearful that the anger they felt about their position would alienate people.

New relationships

Furstenberg (1995) suggests that new relationships and especially new children, may decrease the father's connection to his children and his willingness to pay child support (as cited in Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010, p. 343). Bradshaw et al. (1999) also report absent children may lose out for time and attention with the introduction of new children and

stepchildren and Wilson (2006) suggest that cohabitation with a new partner reduces the likelihood of direct or indirect contact with children. However Hogan et al. (2002, p.xi) found that while “some children were concerned about parents developing relationships with new partners” they mainly expected the non-resident parent to “continue to play the role of parent”.

Support Services

Due to the lack of institutional support services available to non-resident fathers many “find solace in sharing their experiences with each other in the context of men’s networks or support groups” while others found the support of friends and family invaluable (Corcoran, 2005, p. 148). Ferguson and Hogan (2004, p.68), in their study, revealed that non-resident fathers joined fathers groups “where they learned that they are not alone and that “the system is stacked against them”. Many of these fathers groups are run by volunteers who are themselves non-resident fathers with differing degrees of involvement with their children, different experiences and little professional training which can cause more problems than solutions. Flood (2012) maintains that separated fathers’ groups can have a negative effect on non-resident fathers by way of suppressing healing processes, damaging relationships with the child's mother and ruining fathers’ ties with their children

Conclusion

This review of some of the existing literature on non-resident fathers has discussed factors that influence non-resident fathers’ involvement with their children. Irish and international research indicates that fathers’ may be affected by the terms used to label non-resident fathers as well as difficulties in maintaining desired contact with their children and being an ‘active’ parent. The stress due to feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness in guaranteeing time with their children has been reported. Also found has been the additional expenses incurred through legal costs to ensure access and spending time with their children. That fathers appear not only to be marginalised within family support services but also do not have access to support groups provided by trained professionals to help them cope with the emotional issues that arise due to their non-resident status is of concern when the important role that fathers have been demonstrated to play in their children’s lives and development.

While children have been reported to remain positive about the role of their non-resident father in their lives other research suggests that new relationships can negatively impact on contact and involvement.

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