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DAUGHTERS’ RELATIONSHIPS WITH NONRESIDENTIAL FATHERS:
AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology,
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative thesis study investigates daughters’ experiences of relationships with nonresidential fathers following parental separation, the supportive and difficult aspects of these relationships, and daughters’ perceptions of the impact of the relationship on themselves and their sense of wellbeing. The study also investigates experiences external to relationships with fathers that impact on this relationship, including other relationships within the separated family. The study includes two projects, a questionnaire study and an interview study. The questionnaire study was designed to collect information about daughters’ experiences of relationships post-separation. Fifty-five young adult women, who had parents that had separated during their childhood or adolescence, completed the questionnaire. Sixteen of these participants also took part in the second project, the interview study. The interviews gathered in-depth data about the participants’ relationships with their fathers pre- and post-separation, including current relationships. Thematic analyses were conducted on the data from the two projects. Most participants described both supportive and unsupportive aspects of relationships with nonresidential fathers in the years following parental separation. A common experience that emerged across both studies was a sense of loss that occurred within the father-daughter relationship. This included a loss of contact and for some, a perceived loss of fathers’ interest and involvement in their lives. Some experienced difficulties in communicating with fathers, or superficiality in the relationship. Some daughters attributed distance in relationships with fathers to the father’s personal problems, while others attributed the distance to changes in the fathers’ lifestyle and loss of interest in daughters. Subsequently, some participants described feelings of rejection and resentment towards fathers. On the other hand, some participants were positive about fathers who were perceived to remain actively involved in their lives, demonstrating interest and affection to them.

Participants also identified contextual factors that supported or created barriers to relationships with nonresidential fathers. These concerned practical considerations, including geographical proximity, fathers’ work commitments, and living arrangements. For some participants, the quality of relationships between separated parents also appeared to impact relationships with fathers. This included ongoing inter-parental conflict and the impact of visitation arrangements. Fathers’ repartnering also appeared to impact some participants’ relationships with fathers, either positively or negatively. Finally, some participants perceived
that mothers had affected their relationships with fathers, such that mothers’ support could enhance the nonresidential father-daughter relationship, and mothers’ difficulties with the nonresidential father could impact negatively on the daughters’ feelings towards fathers or feelings about spending time with them. The implications of the results for separating families are discussed along with future research directions.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I entered this research with my own experience of parental separation. My parents separated when I was 14 years old. I have always been interested in the impact of the father-daughter relationship on daughters’ wellbeing. So when I was offered the opportunity to carry out research in the area of post-separation families, it seemed a natural fit.

Completing the doctorate programme would not have been possible without the invaluable support I have received from my supervisor, family and friends in the programme.

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