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The role of social support systems in reducing loneliness and social isolation for parents whose partner work fly-in/fly-out

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Edith Cowan University

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The Role of Social Support Systems in Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation for Parents Whose Partner Work Fly-in/Fly-out

Nicole Fresle

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Edith Cowan University.

Submitted October 2010

I declare that this written assignment is my own work and does not include:

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Date 3rd December 2010
Fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) practices in the mining and contracting industries are currently prominent and expanding throughout Western Australia. There is a strong need for effective social support systems for families during the worker’s deployment due to long periods of time apart, reappraisal of family roles and social isolation. This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of parents whose partners are employed on a fly-in/fly-out basis and their views of social support systems in addressing the issues of loneliness and isolation. Family resilience was also utilised to investigate how female home-based partners deal with the stress involved with the FIFO lifestyle. Triangulation was used to build interpretive rigour and to access two relevant samples in order to reach the widest audience range. Twelve online interviews were conducted from the research forum of a pregnancy and parenting website. Twelve participants took part in semi-structured face-to-face interviews which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Following analysis of the data using thematic content analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), four major themes were identified. These were; emotional support, instrumental support, social interactions and family resilience through positive reappraisal. The online sample reported more enduring experiences of loneliness and social isolation and was more likely to have younger children, less experience with the FIFO lifestyle and less time in their current partner relationship. Thus, supporting current literature that has identified family life stage and experience with partner absence as modifying factors in family stress and coping (Gallegos, 2006; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). Support needs were found to be related to both the issues of critical timing as found by Gallegos (2006), and to the high levels of parental responsibility, demands and time restraints experienced during their partner’s absence. Emotional support was provided primarily by partners, while the participant’s parents were their main source of instrumental support. Many participants reported strong, supportive social networks and an ability to elicit support if required. However, further research is needed on families new to the FIFO lifestyle and those in early family life stages. In addition, longitudinal studies are required to examine the longer term impact of this lifestyle on families.
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Date 12th December, 2010
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Social Support for Parents with FIFO Partners

Introduction

Western Australia’s resources industry is one of the most economically productive in the world with a value of over $70 billion (Department of Mines and Petroleum, 2010). As many of these resource development projects are located in remote locations, long distance commuting (LDC) now more commonly known as fly-in/fly-out (FIFO), has become the preferred system of work practices (Storey, 2001). FIFO mining operations involve provision of food and accommodation at the work site, with employees returning home on a set schedule (Gallegos, 2006). Generally, these rotation rosters vary between 4 days on and 3 days off (4/3), to 4 weeks on and 1 week off (28/7) (Beach & Cliff, 2003). Labour demands are predicted to peak in 2012, resulting in an additional 38,000 planned employees with the majority expected to be met through FIFO sourcing (CMEWA, 2010).

The major advantage of FIFO operations is that workers’ families are no longer required to relocate to isolated communities. This is significant because relocation of young families to rural or remote areas has been found to disrupt family and informal support networks, increasing social isolation and parental mental health problems (Rawsthorne, Hillman & Healy, 2009; Stanley, 2007). Consequently, many workers and families have reported a strong preference for a FIFO lifestyle (Storey, 2001). This lifestyle has been reported to offer the advantages of financial security, extended periods of recreational family time together and potential for independence and personal freedom, especially for the female home-based partner (Gallegos, 2006). However, there are also a number of challenges or stressors reported including reappraisal of family roles, long periods of time spent apart and social isolation (Gallegos; Watts, 2004). In addition, research on working non-standard and inflexible hours has indicated increased marital dissatisfaction and instability (Heiler, Pickersgill & Briggs, 2000; Presser, 2000).
Consistent with family resilience literature, researchers have also reported healthy levels of psychological functioning and positive outcomes for these women. They include increased confidence and coping abilities, a sense of achievement, space to develop individual pursuits and interests, and stronger relationships between couples and family members (Gallegos, 2006; Watts, 2004). Therefore, this study will utilise family resilience to investigate how female home-based partners deal with the stress involved with the FIFO lifestyle. It is proposed that women with strong, supportive social support networks will be more likely to experience positive outcomes such as emerging stronger and more resourceful.

At present there is a lack of research that focuses specifically on home-based partner’s needs for social support within the FIFO lifestyle. To address this gap, the purpose of the study is to explore the role of social support for parents whose partners are fly-in/fly-out workers. Due to the paucity of FIFO literature this review will begin by analysing research on other groups who experience partner absences such as British offshore families and U.S. military families. The focus then turns to recent research on Australian FIFO mining families and families of oil and gas offshore workers. Following this, the role of social support during critical times will be addressed. The limited research on social support in relation to the FIFO lifestyle will then be reviewed and the functional aspects of social support discussed, in addition to its association with work-related partner absence. Lastly, this review will examine how adaptation to the FIFO lifestyle can be related to the process of family resilience.

**British offshore families and the 'intermittent husband syndrome'**

Early studies into the effects of British offshore work on wives and families revealed family problems of social isolation, inconsistencies with child discipline and high levels of alcohol consumed by offshore workers on their return home (Clark & Taylor, 1988;
Collinson, 1998). The term ‘intermittent husband syndrome’ was generated by Morrice and Taylor (1978), to describe a clinical population of spouses of off-shore workers who experienced anxiety, depression and sexual difficulties. However, following interviews conducted on 17 offshore workers and 20 spouses and analysis of 200 questionnaires relating to various psychosocial and health measures, Clark, McCann, Morrice and Taylor (1985) concluded this term was not valid with only a 10% prevalence found. Instead, the majority of wives appeared to have successfully adapted to the commute lifestyle and held positive attitudes towards their husband’s absence. They also reported high levels of community involvement, self-esteem and personal coping resources. Positive outcomes experienced included a sense of independence and personal freedom, enhanced relationships and partner appreciation (Clark et al., 1985). In contrast, those who struggled to adjust were often younger, married within the last five years and with children under school age. A lack of previous experience of husband absence and irregular and longer shift patterns were also associated with difficulties in adjustment and increased symptoms of anxiety and depression (Clark et al.)

More recently, researchers have continued to report the adaptation and satisfaction of offshore families and cite positive advantages which are beneficial to many (Parkes, Carnell & Farmer, 2005; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). Nonetheless, Parkes et al., (2005) also showed how specific factors of loneliness, social isolation and communication difficulties were consistently problematic for British offshore families, thus suggesting a need for social support. They examined the perceptions, attitudes and concerns of female spouses of North Sea offshore workers in a qualitative study using 245 survey responses and 39 telephone interviews. Loneliness was reported by two-thirds of spouses and linked to difficulties with fully participating in a social life during their partner’s absence. Another major factor was
telecommunication, with 73% of spouses who could not initiate calls reporting difficulties in adjusting to partner absences, compared to 48% for those who could initiate calls (Parkes et al).

American military families and the ‘military family syndrome’

Similar to early research findings on British offshore families, the term ‘military family syndrome’ described a clinical population of military families with depressed mothers, children with emotional and behavioural problems and authoritarian fathers (La Grone, 1978). While evidence of this syndrome has since been disputed, partner separations have been reported by military spouses as their greatest source of emotional strain due to issues related to the care of children, relationship maintenance and role negotiation (Drummet, Coleman & Cable, 2003). Experiences of negative affect include loneliness, role overload and increased parenting demands which often increase with separation time (Drummet et al.; Kelly et al., 2001; McNulty, 2003; Rossetto, 2009).

In a recent study of military wives, Rossetto (2009) explored how they made meaning of their experience of spousal deployment. Twenty six military wives were interviewed with many reporting constant uncertainty over their husbands’ safety, an inability to initiate contact and the sense that the military controlled their life decisions. With their husbands often absent for months at a time, communication was highlighted as their only connection. Open, honest communication was considered vital to staying involved in each other’s lives and maintaining relational closeness, through the expression of feelings, expectations and needs. Yet, as wives reported this style of communication could also increase feelings of vulnerability or sadness for their partners, restricted communication was sometimes used for its protective functions. Communication was a central tenet in this study through helping women deal with the relational loss and role change by relating to their subjective
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experiences, making meaning, adapting to new communication and behavioural needs and eliciting support (Rossetto). Women reported developing increased appreciation for their partners, sought new personal and social activities and were found to make positive reinterpretations of their experiences.

As noted by Kaczmarek and Sibbel (2008), while military and FIFO mining families share issues of regular parental absence, family disruption and the need for social support, there are differences in respect to profiles of absence, perceptions of danger associated and types of social support available. For example, those in the military were generally absent for longer periods and their families experienced more regular informal contact due to military housing, as well as professional support from military community organisations (Kaczmarek & Sibbel). Therefore, these differences must be acknowledged in comparing the impact of partner separations on both FIFO and military families.

In summary, while early research into British offshore families and American military families emphasised the adverse psychological effects and negative impacts of these lifestyles, more recent research has found that the majority of spouses tend to adapt to the lifestyle despite the challenges involved. These studies are significant in revealing factors and strategies that moderate coping. They included shorter shift patterns, previous experience with the lifestyle, access to telecommunication, open communication styles, positive attitudes towards their husband’s absence, high levels of community involvement, self-esteem and personal coping resources.

Australian research on FIFO mining and offshore oil and gas families

There is a gap in the literature as much of the understanding of the impact of the FIFO lifestyle on families to date, has come from studies on American military families (e.g., Kelly et al., 2001; McNulty, 2003; Rossetto, 2009), and British offshore workers (e.g., Mauthner,
MacLean & McKee, 2000; Parkes et al., 2005). Consequently, there is currently an increase of Australian FIFO research (e.g. Carter & Kaczmarek, 2009; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Pirotta, 2009; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). Of these studies, two are based on a family perspective and will be reviewed here, followed by research involving the decision to adopt this lifestyle. Both the recent studies highlight the importance of emotional support and positive communication skills in increasing levels of family cohesion and flexibility to respond effectively with the change and stress related to the FIFO lifestyle. More specifically, this stress has been found to be associated with the regular partings and reunions, reappraisal of family roles and partner absence (Sibbel, 2001).

Firstly, in an exploratory quantitative study that aimed to examine qualities that enable FIFO families to function and experience satisfaction, Taylor and Simmonds (2009) proposed that this lifestyle required better than average communication skills due to the many role adjustments necessary. Self-administered inventories (FACES IV Scales, Family Communication Scale and Family Satisfaction Scale) and a family information questionnaire were completed by a sample of 63 predominantly male FIFO workers and their female partners. The results indicated the profile of the average FIFO family was relatively healthy with high levels of family cohesion, enabling the exchange of social and emotional support between family members. In addition, they were found to successfully balance stability and change through the adjustment of family roles (Taylor & Simmonds). This study, consistent with others (e.g. Gallegos, 2006; Watts, 2004) also emphasised the value of access to private and timely methods of communication, including internet-based communication. The authors suggested further research was needed on factors that moderate coping for FIFO families. However, limitations included the use of self-report data, lack of control group and level of difficulty of the questionnaire which may have excluded sections of FIFO families.
Secondly, Kaczmarek and Sibbel (2008) examined the effects of employment related absences on children’s depressive symptomology and anxiety levels, and mothers’ perceptions of family functioning using a number of standardised inventories. Comparing military, FIFO and community samples (30 from each), no significant differences between patterns of child psychological well-being were found, with all groups functioning at healthy levels. In addition, mothers’ perceived their families were not greatly distressed by the lifestyle, with the researchers suggesting that protective mechanisms were used by mothers to compensate for the effects of paternal absence on their children. However, the mothers from both the FIFO and military groups reported more difficulties with communication of feelings and emotions, child behaviour control and affective involvement. Thus, the authors speculated that the effects of limited opportunities for communication and disruption to family routine increased maternal stress, warranting further research into FIFO maternal and child health relationships (Kaczmarek & Sibbel). Therefore, these findings suggested a need for emotional support to lower the perceived severity of the stressors involved.

Researchers have also found the perceived severity of stressors to be moderated by the initial decision to adopt a FIFO lifestyle. For example, Watts (2004) found a trade-off between benefits and sacrifices such as long periods of time spent apart and the risk of social isolation for both partners. Financial rewards have been consistently cited as the largest incentive to working FIFO, with emphasis on long term goals such as purchasing property and the establishment of financial security (Carter and Kaczmarek, 2009; Gallegos, 2006; Watts). Another incentive was spending large periods of family time together during the worker’s return home, with many families viewing the lifestyle as a short term project as a way of coping (Gallegos; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001).
Following this initial decision, positive adaptation for women was also found to be contingent on roster length. For example, asymmetrical rosters (where workers are away more days than at home) made both initial and sustained adaptation more difficult (Beach & Cliff, 2003). In addition, Watts (2004) found rotation patterns longer than three weeks away increased relationship strain and overall family stress. Interestingly, in early research shorter roster patterns have also been associated with higher stress levels for wives due to the more frequent role readjustments required (La Forte, 1991).

The process of adaptation has also been identified by Watts (2004) who found FIFO workers and their families experienced stages of adaptation involving re-appraisal of self-identity and relationships resulting in a decision to accept or reject the lifestyle. This research aimed to develop understanding about issues and attitudes in the Pilbara region in Western Australia in relation to the FIFO workforce in order to identify strategies to maximise benefits and minimise impacts. Using a mixed methods approach with a quantitative survey, grounded theory and action research, participants were selected from stakeholder groups identified in the initial stages of the project. Five options were identified in relation to the acceptance or rejection of the FIFO lifestyle, which were believed to become more evident following six months of involvement. These were balancing the positive and negative aspects, accepting the situation, accepting but passively rejecting the situation, setting a time limit, and lastly, enjoying the lifestyle.

In summary, recent research indicates that despite the many challenges involved with the lifestyle, FIFO families are experiencing healthy levels of psychological functioning. While these results suggest positive adaptation, researchers propose the need for longitudinal studies in order to assess family psychological functioning over longer periods, as the effects of these stressors may not yet be apparent (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). There is also a need
to examine the role of social support in moderating maternal stress due to the cyclic nature of the FIFO lifestyle, thus emphasising increased needs for support at times of acute stress.

**Social support at critical times**

Through efforts to clarify the concept, researchers have defined social support as a context specific, multifaceted phenomenon that can be reduced to two interactive dimensions; socioemotional and instrumental aid (Fergus, Gray, Fitch, Labrecque & Phillips, 2002; Finfgeld-Connett, 2005). Firstly, emotional support involves having someone available to listen, reassure and sympathise (Helgeson, 2003). Importantly, the perception that someone will be available if needed has been found to be more strongly related to quality of life than actual received support (Helgeson). For example, in a study of 380 rural West Australians, Day, Kane & Roberts (2000) found a lack of perceived social support as the most salient risk factor for depressive symptoms. Secondly, instrumental aid refers to practical, tangible assistance such as financial help, child care or doing household chores (Helgeson). In addition, informational support provides guidance or instruction to the recipient (Helgeson).

Social support is understood to be beneficial when the recipient feels valued, cared for and like a member of a mutually supportive network (Fergus et al., 2002). Types include both informal such as family, friends and neighbours and formal such as mother’s groups or playgroups and community organisations. According to many theorists, the function of support is influenced by the nature of the stressor, types and sources available and personality characteristics and other attributes of the recipient (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch & Ungar, 2005). The relationship between social support and psychological well-being has been discussed further in terms of the main effect and the stress-buffering effect hypotheses (Armstrong et al; Helgeson, 2003). The main effect relates to the existence of social relationships and states that quality of life improves with the amount of social support,
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regardless of an individual’s stress levels (Helgeson). Whereas, the stress-buffering effect relates to the resources provided by these social relationships and depends upon levels of stress experienced (Helgeson). Therefore, social support acts as a buffer under conditions of high stress but is unrelated to quality of life in the absence of stress (Helgeson). During times of high stress resources are needed from social relationships to facilitate coping (Helgeson).

This is important to acknowledge due to the many stressors associated with the cyclic nature of the FIFO lifestyle which suggest a strong need for social support for home-based partners. This was demonstrated in a study by Gallegos (2006) where women reported the transition of their partners’ departure for work was followed by feelings of nervousness, loneliness and tiredness. They missed the support, intimacy and companionship of their partner and longed for relief from all the parenting responsibilities, thus indicating a need for both emotional and instrumental support during such times (Gallegos). Reported challenges involved coping with the increased responsibility of managing the home, child care and making important decisions in their partner’s absence (Gallegos).

Other FIFO studies have reported conflict over authority, inconsistencies with child discipline, emotional withdrawal and loneliness (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Watts, 2004). Social isolation was another issue identified, with limited social interactions for the home-based partner during their partner’s absence, especially at weekends (Gallegos, 2006; Shrimpton & Storey; Watts). The misunderstandings between partners associated with restraints on communication such as limited time to talk, lack of privacy and inability to initiate contact with the worker have also been prominent issues in the literature on the FIFO lifestyle (Watts). Thus, the key stress-buffering effects of social support are believed to play a strong role in facilitating coping for these women.
FIFO and social support

There is a distinct lack of research addressing the relationship between the moderating effects of social support and the time specific stressors involved in the FIFO lifestyle. Whilst not focusing solely on social support, Gallegos' (2006) study aimed to identify strategies for dealing with parenting transitions involved with this lifestyle by emphasising the balance and interactions between the stressors and supports in the family environment. Through semi-structured interviews with 32 couples, Gallegos found access to social support reduced instability during the transition periods. A combination of other factors were also influential such as a positive attitude, regular and open communication, maintaining a consistent routine, keeping the worker involved in family life and shorter rosters.

The female home-based partners interviewed mentioned the importance of seeking and accepting help in times of crises and not viewing this as a sign of failure. They discussed a range of supports they found helpful with parenting issues which provided instrumental and emotional support. These included informal supports such as families, friends and neighbours in addition to formal supports such as mother’s groups, playgroups, child health nurses and early parenting centres. Immediate families were found to be the primary source of both emotional and instrumental support, followed by friends (especially for those with no family close by). However, women were conscious of not over-extending the boundaries of these friendships by requesting too many favours. Social support networks were developed mainly through mothers’ groups, playgroups and other child-centred activities, which often resulted in close, long-term relationships. Participants also reported a desire to build social support networks with other fly-in/fly-out families due to shared issues such as reappraisal of family roles and transitional parenting (Gallegos, 2006).
This study identified the women’s support needs were predominantly related to the issues of critical timing and highly stressful situations, as it was considered most valuable in the event of a crisis such as the home based partner becoming ill (Gallegos, 2006). Thus emphasising emotional support, as research on factors that influence which type of support best buffers stress has found this type of support to be most often associated with uncontrollable stressors (Helgeson, 2003).

Other factors include the timing and nature of the stressor and the source of support (Helgeson, 2003). Firstly, in relation to the timing of the stressor, emotional support has been found to be most beneficial during the initial crisis phase as the knowledge that help is available is considered important (Helgeson). This is considered particularly pertinent for those new to the FIFO lifestyle. Instrumental support is most needed during the deficit phase where the demands of the stressor may exceed coping ability (Helgeson). Secondly, in relation to the nature of the stressor, instrumental support is considered vital for home-based partners involved in the FIFO lifestyle due to the many associated parenting and domestic demands, (Helgeson). Lastly, all sources of emotional support are perceived as helpful, while the relationship between instrumental support and source of support is as yet unclear (Helgeson).

**Family social support networks**

Access to family and social supports for parents has been found to be a protective factor against social isolation and parental mental health problems such as depression (Stanley, 2007). According to Belsky’s (1984) model of parenting, depression has a direct impact on social networks as it can lead to withdrawal and avoidance from family and friends, thus resulting in fewer close relationships, smaller social networks and a decreased perception of support (Lee, Anderson, Horowitz & August, 2009). Conversely, those
considered more psychologically healthy may perceive high levels of support or may have the necessary social skills to elicit support (Helgeson, 2003). A history of receiving support in the past has also been found to influence support perceptions (Helgeson). Although the association between social support, maternal stress and parenting is as yet unclear, it has been found to be a mediating factor between low family income and parental depression (Lee et al.).

Research on low income families has emphasised the value of existing informal support networks such as extended family and friends, above formal supports such as community agencies (Lee et al., 2009; Miller & Darlington, 2002). Whilst it is acknowledged the nature of the stressors affecting FIFO families may differ to those for low income families, the patterns of seeking support share similarities. An examination of patterns of support revealed individuals often received support from a variety of sources which provided different types of support (Lee et al.). In a study of 53 low income Australian families, Miller & Darlington (2002) found parents were the most important sources of support through provision of material, instrumental, emotional and to a lesser extent, informational support. Also, the role of friends in providing both emotional and informational support increased with opportunities to interact with their children’s friend’s parents (Miller & Darlington). Studies show children can play an active role in generating social networks for their families by using their own social relationships to connect their parents with other parents in the community (Offer & Schneider, 2007).

Studies have also identified the partner’s role in providing support. In an Australian study on maternal experiences of seeking support for family issues, women primarily turned to their partners for emotional and instrumental support (Jackson, Mannix, Faga & Gillies, 2005). The nature of the stressor determined who participants approached for support with
some expressing concerns about confiding in extended family or friends due to the possibility of overt or implied criticism (Jackson et al). Although support was also sought from community based programmes, self-help groups and health professionals, women experienced difficulties in locating a supportive network that adequately met their needs. Notably, women reported enjoying the companionship and emotional support experienced through playgroups while their children were young and identified a need for similar social supports during their children’s teen years (Jackson et al.).

**Social support and work related partner absence**

Research involving social support and work related partner absence has highlighted the stress buffering effects of partner relationships in increasing psychological well-being (Davis, Goodman, Pirretti & Almeida, 2008; Orthner & Rose, 2003; Orthner & Rose, 2009; Zvonkovic, Solomon, Humble & Manoogian, 2005). Orthner and Rose (2009) examined the role of military-provided supports and informal supports, including marital satisfaction, in increasing psychological well-being for military spouses. In a probability sample survey of 8,056 female spouses of U.S. Army personnel, support from both formal and informal support networks was found to influence personal well-being. However, a strong marital relationship was the strongest contributor. Living in a close community and having meaningful relationships with friends were also positively associated with spouse psychological well-being. In another study on separation adjustment among military families, Orthner and Rose (2003) found time spent together as a family was highly associated with positive adjustment.

Beyond social support, a sense of community and social capital can provide a buffer against negative physical and mental health outcomes of populations and subgroups (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Browning & Cagey, 2003; Pretty, Bishop, Fisher & Sonn, 2007).
Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware and Nelson (2003) examined sense of community as a potential mediator between informal social support and family adaptation in a sample of 17,161 military families. Sense of community was defined as feelings of positive attachment to the military and viewing the base community as a source of support and connection to others, reflecting both work and personal relationships (Bowen et al.). The indirect effects of formal support (unit support) and informal community support on family adaptation were found to be positive and significant through a positive influence on sense of community ($B = .698$ and .223, respectively). Therefore, the direct effects of both formal and informal supports upon psychological well-being and adjustment may be less significant than indirect effects such as a sense of community, strong marital relationships and time spent together as a family.

Family Resilience

As the studies reviewed indicate family is the central point for support, there is a need to focus on family resilience. Family resilience refers to key processes that enable families to cope more effectively, to emerge stronger and to avoid the negative consequences typically associated with high risk situations (Lietz, 2007; Van Breda, 2008). The resilience perspective allows researchers to consider strengths among groups usually approached in terms of risks and problems, and directs attention to positive outcomes (Mohaupt, 2008). In defining resilience two dimensions are vital; the exposure to risk and adverse circumstances, and an outcome perspective where families emerge from the situation feeling strengthened, more resourceful and more confident (Mohaupt). As identified from the literature review on FIFO families there are many stressors associated with the cyclic nature of the FIFO lifestyle, indicating they are at risk of experiencing high stress levels. These were found to be social isolation, loneliness, communication difficulties, relationship issues and increased parental
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demands (Gallegos, 2006; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Watts, 2004). Research shows related risks include disruption to family relationships, parental mental health problems and poor child behavioural, educational and health outcomes (Early Years Strategic Framework, 2004). As the FIFO literature also reports stronger relationships, increased confidence and independence (e.g. Gallegos; Watts), it appears both the dimensions of resilience can be applied to families who have successfully adapted to the FIFO lifestyle.

Family resilience is a dynamic process which is best understood through an interrelational framework (Mohaupt, 2008). The key components of family resilience will now be applied to FIFO families. Firstly, in relation to the length of the adverse situation, short-term situations are classified as challenges while crises are considered long-term (Simon, Murphy & Smith, 2005). Secondly, the life stage influences the type of adverse circumstance encountered and also affects their ability to cope (i.e. young wives in commute and FIFO research). Thirdly, sources of internal and external social support influence family resilience as they alter how a stressor is appraised (Helgeson, 2003; Simon et al). For example, reassurance through emotional support and knowledge gained from informational support can lower the perceived severity of the stressor. Instrumental support can then provide the resources to effectively cope with the stressor and enhance quality of life (Helgeson). This suggests the ability to reframe obstacles and to elicit social support are key factors in family resilience (Edward, 2005).

Family resilience recognises family dynamics, parental strengths and the broader social network (Black & Lobo, 2008). Through in-depth interviews with six families Lietz (2007) identified ten family strengths that were helpful to families as they faced difficult experiences and high stress levels. These were internal and external social support, insight, boundary setting, taking charge, flexibility, humour, morality, appraisal and communication.
These family strengths were important in different ways through the stages identified as survival, adaptation, acceptance, growing stronger and helping others. During the survival stage the family strengths found to be most effective were social support, taking charge and morality (Lietz). Critically, the families identified extended family support and support from groups as important. Yet the primary source was from within their own family, thus contradicting the assumption that external support is sought due to families feeling too overwhelmed to support one another during a crisis (Lietz). Turning to each other for support has also been found by many researchers of low income families as one of the most important factors in resilience (Conger & Elder, 1994; Lietz, 2007; McCreary & Dancy, 2004; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei & Williamson, 2004).

During the adaptation to stress stage where significant changes to family functioning are needed, the family strengths found to be most effective were flexibility, boundary setting and communication (Lietz, 2007). This supports in part the findings of the literature on FIFO families where communication plays a significant role in adaptation to a new lifestyle (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). Family strengths considered important in reaching the acceptance stage were insight, humour, morality and communication (Lietz). During this stage families used alternate methods of communication such as writing journals and poems. This can be seen in FIFO families through the use of inventive forms of communication such as webcams, electronic greeting cards and digital photos and also through the sending of journals to their partner to increase feelings of connection (Watts, 2004). The family strength of appraisal, or the meaning given to experiences, was found to be most significant during the growing stronger stage (Lietz). As families gained mastery over challenges they recognised ways they had grown stronger and closer as a result of these struggles, as confirmed by the findings on
FIFO families (e.g. Gallegos, 2006; Watts). When families felt strong and able to cope they felt the need to then help others through the provision of social support (Lietz).

In summary, reviewing the process of adaptation to the FIFO lifestyle in terms of resilience acknowledges the importance of family based support, which appears to be a key factor in literature on commute families. It also serves to highlight the family strengths utilised at different stages of the adaptation process. The family strength of appraisal is considered particularly critical in this context due to its links with social support, open communication and positive family outcomes.

An overview of the research has shown that despite the increasing popularity of FIFO practices in the mining industry, there is still a paucity of Australian research on the impact on families. As reviewed, several recent quantitative studies conducted on FIFO families indicated a need for further research into maternal well-being and factors that moderate coping (e.g., Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). In addition, recent qualitative studies have found evidence of maternal stress experienced due to the cyclic nature of the FIFO lifestyle, loneliness and forced independence (Gallegos, 2006; Watts, 2004). Interestingly, these researchers have also reported healthy levels of psychological functioning and positive outcomes for women. Therefore, there is a strong need to focus on resilience through access to social support as this has been found to reduce instability during transitional periods and crises, with family based support being particularly critical (Gallegos).

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of the meaning of everyday lived experiences in relation to female
Social Support for Parents with FIFO Partners

home-based partners of FIFO workers (Hawley & Jensen, 2007). This involved qualitative interviewing penetrating the participants' internal worlds to find how they perceive events and experiences of the FIFO lifestyle through immersion in the subject matter (O'Shaughnessy, 2009). Within the hermeneutic approach the researcher's previous understanding and knowledge of the FIFO lifestyle is seen as a valuable guide, rather than as a personal bias which needs to be accounted for (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This approach also acknowledges the dynamic nature of the process and the reciprocal interaction between participant and researcher, where depth of understanding on FIFO resilience and support comes from an integration of meanings (O'Shaughnessy).

Participants

Participants were mothers of primary school aged children or younger, whose partners were currently employed on a FIFO basis in mining or construction and resided in the Perth metropolitan area in Western Australia. The age restriction of the children was selected due to the factor of children's increased dependence upon parents which literature suggests may increase parental need for social support. However, many participants also had older children in addition, thus explaining the extended age range for children (see Table 1). The female home-based partners in the mining and construction industries were selected due to the extended periods of time away from home, with shorter roster schedules not included in this study.

The process of triangulation was used to build interpretive rigour and to access two relevant samples to reach the widest possible audience range. Twelve female participants were selected for face-to-face semi-structured interviews and 12 responded to the online interviews. The online method was chosen due to the ability to reach a wide range of target participants. Parents may also find it preferable to respond online and be more likely to
Social Support for Parents with FIFO Partners

openly express their opinions on sensitive issues. Other advantages of this method were the speed of data turnaround and elimination of transcription errors (Rhodes, Bowie & Hergenrather, 2003). As shown in Table 1, a comparison of the two samples identified the face-to-face sample had more experience with the FIFO lifestyle and had spent more time in their current partner relationship. There were also contrasts between the children’s ages, with the online sample more likely to have younger children (see Table 1). Roster patterns varied across participants in both samples, ranging from 2 weeks on/1 week off to 4 weeks on/1 week off.

Table 1

Participant Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-to-face sample</th>
<th>Online sample</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age range of children</td>
<td>4 months – 17 years</td>
<td>7 months – 8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>8.48</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of time in FIFO</td>
<td>4 months – 17 years</td>
<td>2 months – 20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in partner relationship</td>
<td>5 years - 23 years</td>
<td>3 years – 20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>15.17</td>
<td>9.58</td>
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</table>

The Researcher

As I am also a parent whose partner works FIFO on a 4 weeks away/1 week home roster I am aware of many of the issues involved with the lifestyle. This insight into the experiences of others allowed me to compare how this differed with my own experience, in addition to having a deeper understanding of areas to probe further in interviews. This lived experience of the research topic was needed to help build rigour and provided participants
Social Support for Parents with FIFO Partners

with the opportunity to tell their stories and interact with someone who understood the issues they faced and thus gain access to their full meaning.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix D) comprising of four open-ended questions and probes was used as a guide for discussion. It aimed to generate broad discussion and included questions such as “Can you tell me about your experiences of social support?” and “If you were talking to a family just starting FIFO, what would you suggest from your own experience about social support needs?” The use of open-ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to use their own words and the researcher to probe into areas of specific interest, which fitted with the hermeneutic approach (Woodgate, Ateah & Secco, 2008). An information letter (Appendix E), a consent form (Appendix F) and a list of counselling services (Appendix G) were used to develop an ethically sound procedure. A digital tape recorder, notepad and pen were used for accurate data collection. A reflective journal (Appendix I) was also maintained, comprising of notes and observations made during data collection and analysis. It served to highlight interesting observations, issues and discrepancies between samples and how experiences differed or reflected my own.

Recruitment Procedures

Following approval from the ECU Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Research Ethics Committee, participants were recruited and screened according to the abovementioned criteria. The research sample was recruited through two stages. In stage one, the Bub Hub Pregnancy and Parenting Forum Website (www.bubhub.com.au) was employed to recruit online participants. Prior permission had been granted from the website administrator to conduct online interviews with website members, following approval of the proposed research. A specific research forum on the website was used for this purpose. An
invitation for study participants was posted on the Research Help section of the Bub Hub Pregnancy and Parenting Forum (see Appendix C). A message regarding the study was also posted on the discussion board for ‘Parents with Partners Working Away’ so that members with eligible criteria were directed to the Research Help Forum.

In stage two, letters (Appendix B) were sent via email to two mining companies and two contractors to the mining industry advising them of the study and requesting their assistance in recruitment through an attached flyer (Appendix A) and information letter (Appendix E). However, due to a lack of response, a ‘snowballing’ technique was successfully employed through the primary researcher’s family members, friends and contacts through the local primary school. In addition, several of the interview participants referred their friends to the study. An information letter (Appendix E) was emailed to each participant along with a consent form (Appendix F) to be read, completed and then returned at the interview. Following this, a mutually convenient time and place to undertake the interview was arranged with each participant.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected in two stages. In stage one, the interview questions were posted directly onto the Research Help section, as approved by the website administrator (Appendix C) and were accessed by online participants who were members of the Bub Hub Pregnancy and Parenting Forum Website (www.bubhub.com.au). This procedure emphasised the need for clear, understandable and relevant questions to avoid the collection of poor quality or surface data (Stewart, Eckerman & Zhou, 1998). Alternatively, participants could respond to the questions on the primary researcher’s email address, thus ensuring privacy and confidentiality. A consent form was devised for this purpose (Appendix H), to be returned via
email. While no participants took this option, a face-to-face interview could have been requested if preferred.

In stage two, semi-structured face-to-face interviews provided additional information through visual and non-verbal cues. It also enabled the researcher to respond to participants’ feedback with questions and additional probes, in addition to clarifying issues raised in the online data (Strickland et al., 2003). Ten of the participants chose to be interviewed in their own home, with two preferring to attend the primary researcher’s home. Prior to each interview, the researcher thanked the participant for their agreement to participate and attempted to build rapport, thus allowing both parties to feel more at ease. The general aims of the study were then explained, followed by issues of confidentiality. Participants were advised that involvement was voluntary, they could withdraw from the study at any time and could ask questions for clarification. Informed consent to take part in the study and to be audio-recorded was obtained from each participant (Appendix F).

Each individual interview took approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete and began with the collection of demographic information. Self-disclosure of the primary researcher’s own experiences was also involved due to the personal nature of some topics discussed. The interview sessions were audio-recorded and the primary researcher took handwritten notes in order to capture non-verbal cues. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked if they held any queries or concerns regarding the study, which were then addressed by the researcher. All participants were provided with contact details of counselling services (Appendix G) in case of distress. They were thanked for their participation and advised of the end date of the research should they wish to obtain a copy for their records.
Data Analysis

Following each interview, the audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim, with names omitted from transcripts and data erased subsequent to analysis. Thematic content analysis was used to identify central patterns and themes from the transcripts and online semi-structured interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Firstly, transcripts and postings were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data and to acquire a sense of the whole data set (Bennett, 1998). Preliminary ideas and interesting aspects about participants’ experiences of social support and resilience were noted during these repeated readings. Secondly, significant statements were coded into meaningful groups that appeared to be revealing about the participants’ experiences of loneliness, isolation and social support needs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thirdly, these codes were organised into broader potential themes, with participants’ language used to code themes where possible. As suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006) a thematic mind-map was used to clarify the relationship between the codes and themes. The fourth phase of analysis involved reviewing the themes for internal consistency and distinct differences between themes, or internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke). In this phase inconsistent themes were reworked into a new theme or discarded. When the data set and the thematic map appeared to provide a good fit the final phase began. This involved arranging themes and significant statements (exemplars) into a table to be compared and contrasted between each participant group and later evaluated against findings in the literature, thus developing interpretive rigour via triangulation (Mendelson, 2003).

Methodological and theoretical rigour were maintained by thorough record keeping of notes from the interviews and online data, which were compiled into a reflective journal (Liampittong & Ezzy, 2005). Member checking was used to confirm the extracted themes.
These themes were shown to two of the participants who had shown particular interest in the study, who then verified they accurately reflected their views on the FIFO lifestyle.

Findings and Interpretations

The data confirmed the current research indicating that loneliness and social isolation for parents whose partners work FIFO was a significant issue (Gallegos, 2006; Watts, 2004). While the women from both samples indicated experiencing them as transient emotions, they were reported to be more enduring by the online participants. These women were more likely to have younger children, less experience with the FIFO lifestyle and spent less time in their current partner relationship. This finding is consistent with the literature that has identified family life stage and experience with partner absence as modifying factors in family stress and coping (Gallegos; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). The four themes related to these findings were emotional support, instrument support, social interactions and family resilience through positive reappraisal, with some interconnections between them (see Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Issues that Contributed to a Perception of Family Resilience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Instrumental Support</td>
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<td>Social Interactions</td>
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<td>Family Resilience through Positive Reappraisal</td>
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Emotional support

Many of the women in this study acknowledged that the FIFO lifestyle was definitely not for everyone as it could be tough, challenging and could lead to trust and resentment issues for both partners. Confirming the literature, support needs were found to be dependent upon context, suggesting social support acts as a buffer under high stress levels (Helgeson, 2003). For example, women reported situations when they felt more vulnerable during their partners' absence such as the first week of separation, when the children were ill, night time, weekends and on special occasions. For those with infants or young children who were new to the lifestyle, feelings of loneliness and isolation proved to be particularly challenging. In such cases the need for emotional support was intensified, as shown by one young mother who described her sense of loss and abandonment:

“For the first week it’s always lonely and I suppose I feel a little bit deserted every time he goes away. I suppose having him here for nine days, day in and day out is so nice and then all of a sudden he’s just gone. It makes you a little bit miserable.”

In support of previous research (e.g. Jackson et al., 2005; Rossetto, 2009) the partner’s role in providing emotional support during critical times was found to be most vital. Women reported missing the companionship and affection that no one else could provide:

“If something’s gone wrong and you do need that bit of affection and no one else can fill that void.”

As the ability to touch or experience activities together was denied them, communication was the only means of maintaining a connection to their partners. This finding supports recent research conducted by Taylor and Simmonds (2009) linking positive communication skills to optimum levels of cohesion or emotional bonding. In the current study, communication styles and access were found to influence how emotional support from their partners was experienced. One woman summed up her thoughts on communication as acting as the ‘proxy’ to their relationship:
"He says a lot of the guys don't speak to their families for a couple of days. I said 'I don't care what the phone bills are, we've got to have some sort of relationship.'"

**Communication styles**

Due to the time spent apart, participants felt they needed to be clear with their partners about whether to openly express information and emotions or to be more selective. The majority believed that because of the limited time for interactions being honest was the best approach, enabling involvement in each other's lives and serving as a full emotional outlet:

"I tell him everything about how I'm feeling, on the bad days I have a good cry over the phone. I do feel bad that I put that extra pressure on him but he doesn't mind and talking to him and getting everything out makes me feel better."

In contrast, when more restricted communication styles were employed women felt less emotionally supported. Women reported using this approach in the belief that it was pointless telling their partner as there was nothing they could do, or as a protective barrier against increasing their partners' concerns:

"I used to, I would say things but you wouldn't want to whinge too much. Because they're the ones away from home so you felt a bit guilty if you complained."

As highlighted by Rossetto (2009) each style of communication has both advantages and disadvantages. Open communication benefitted the women by increased feelings of attachment to their partner:

"When I do have the odd day where I am emotional Chris and I talk through my concerns and he is very understanding and we put things in perspective. These days tend to occur if the kids have been sick and I've had to take them to hospital."

Yet, some said this approach could distract or frustrate their partner due to their inability to be able to provide instrumental support:

"It frustrates him. He didn't want to hear it because he couldn't fix it and then it frustrates him heaps but I figure 'I've got to let you know what I'm going through.'"
Restrictive communication may have protected their partners from the knowledge that they were struggling with negative emotions, at the same time it served to increase their feelings of loneliness and isolation due to decreased emotional attachment.

**Access to telecommunication**

Recent studies highlight the value of access to private and timely methods of communication in maintaining family connectedness (Gallegos, 2006; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009; Watts, 2004). Women in this study reported the support role of daily phone calls with their partners, with some speaking up to four times per day. They also used several other methods of telecommunication including email, instant messaging, Skype and video calls. These last two options were found to be especially effective for whole of family communication due to the added benefits of vision. Those who were easily able to contact their partner enjoyed the emotional support of knowing they were available when needed:

“I could ring him anytime. I know what times he has meetings and runs workshops so I know what time I shouldn’t ring. So sometimes I’ll wake up in the middle of the night knowing he’s on night shift. If I can’t get back to sleep I’ll just ring him and he’ll go ‘What’s wrong?’ and I’ll go ‘Nothing, just having a cup of tea or couldn’t sleep or whatever.’ It makes a big difference when I can contact him whenever.”

For some women calls could only be initiated by their partner while on site, therefore communication was on their terms and a missed call could result in no contact until the following day. Parkes et al., (2005) found women who were unable to initiate calls to their partners were more likely to report difficulties to adjusting to their absence than those who could initiate calls. Often the most convenient time to ring the family coincided with busy periods such as bed time routines for the children, potentially straining family relations.

Women reported stress and feeling rushed when the only communication with their partner occurred at such times. These calls could feel like an intrusion:

“Well usually he rings in but it’s always at a bad time when I’m trying to put the kids to bed and then I get a bit poopy...so that’s never good.”
Time limitations were found to be especially restrictive to the quality of communication:

“The hardest part for the kids and I is that he is only able to talk on the phone for 10 minutes a day and this is often after the kids are in bed. It’s hard to do much sharing in that time!”

**Instrumental support**

Instrumental support involves taking direct action to reduce demands (Rossetto, 2009). Many women had expressed a strong need for practical, constructive support due to the high levels of parental responsibility, demands and time restraint experienced during their partner’s absence. This instrumental support was supplied by families, friends and other FIFO families. Child care assistance was reported as the form of instrumental support most needed, with a preference for immediate families as a means of support before recruiting assistance from other options such as friends or mothers-in-law:

“Oh I’d prefer my mum but you just do. No I’m happy, she’s very helpful. She always wants to help. So I don’t mind and try not to ask too much, I really only ask when I have to work. I don’t ask for pleasure, just going out to get my nails done [laughs]. Sometimes, if I’m going out somewhere special I’ll ask her.”

These findings were consistent with those of Gallegos (2006) who found the family of the home based partner to be their principal form of instrumental support. Friends were established as the most valuable form of instrumental support for those with no family close-by. The intensity of the responsibilities involved is summed up by one of these women:

“It probably depends on how much sleep I’ve had because I still get up probably most nights. If I get really tired I just want him to come home and share the load I suppose. The 24/7 of being their sole entertainment, cook, cleaner, you sometimes think ‘Oh!’”

**Families, friends and reciprocal relationships**

Family support in the event of stress due to an emergency was found to be imperative, as women took comfort in knowing that someone would be readily available if needed. This
finding is consistent with Gallegos (2006) who found support was most valued in the event of a crisis. As found by Miller & Darlington (2002), the women’s mothers were reported by many as their most dependable source of instrumental support:

“I do know if things get tough my mum is always there for me, no matter what time of the day or night.”

In addition, they provided much needed sources of emotional support, through provision of companionship for the women:

“With the kids being so young and demanding, I couldn’t do it without having someone to offload onto. But no I guess you feel a little bit lonely. I couldn’t do it I don’t think, without Mum. That would be extremely hard.”

Primarily, the women’s parents were reported to be their main source of instrumental support, helping to reduce parental demands by providing child care and companionship for their children. This support was found to be invaluable, with some parents willing to adjust their own plans to coincide with the women’s needs, as mentioned by an online participant:

“My mum came over after a desperate call a couple of times when I couldn’t cope with bath time or whatever. My parents only go away for the weekend while my partner is home because Mum takes care of the kids on Monday morning. My dad comes over to hang out with the kids once or twice per week.”

In-laws were another major form of instrumental support, with the availability of this support in addition to their own family making women feel valued and cared for:

“And then I’ve got Matt’s parents in Mindarie so I’ve got a very good support network. Whether it’s financially, or just making me a meal maybe. I mean Jan comes over sometimes and just watches her for a couple of hours while I clean the house.”

In addition to family support, many women expressed feelings of gratitude towards their friends for their understanding and intuition through extending both instrumental and emotional support. Faced with a multitude of parental demands, this woman reported how she was able to regain control of a stressful situation by having some of those demands reduced through the help of her friends:
“I had a lot of good friends at the time. If I was trying to feed the baby and the toddler’s having a big tantrum and they’re wetting on the floor with toilet training, you’ve got to pick the other two up from school, I’d always have a friend. I’d go ‘Can you pick up those two for me?’ I think I was really lucky that my friends were surrogate support during that time and not now. Now I hardly see a lot of them. But it just seems that when he was 4/1 and I had a newborn, my friends sort of stepped in where he wasn’t and now it’s back to normal.”

Even if the instrumental support was not needed at the time, the perception that it would be available if necessary was valued, thus supporting literature emphasising perceived support above received support (e.g. Day et al., 2000; Helgeson, 2003). For example:

“I’m very lucky with my friends. I’m very self-reliant but everybody’s offering to help all the time. Even with little things and I’m like ‘No, I can do that, I can do that.’ I have managed. I have to do it by myself so I can do it by myself.”

Support through reciprocal relationships with other FIFO families was another prominent theme in the interviews, enabling women to feel comfortable in asking for help. Interestingly, these interactions supported feelings of self-reliance as they were both providers and receivers of assistance:

“And I’ve got people I can rely on which is good and you know there’s other people in the area whose husbands are FIFO and they understand what you’re going through. So they know if you ring them up ‘Can you help me?’ they’re like ‘Of course!’ Because they’re going to ring you one time and say the same.”

**Support needed and coping suggestions**

Even though most of the women interviewed felt confident in gaining access to instrumental support due to their past experiences in receiving it, there were also areas where support was lacking. Several mentioned a strong need for occasional care in order to enjoy a day alone for rest and recuperation. For some, the added commitments involved with employment left them with no time to themselves:

“I crave time on my own as I am always with the kids or at work or running between the two.”
Women reported that the stress of dealing with the children alone and not having 'help walk in at 6pm' was sometimes found to be immense. Another issue related to critical timing were the complications involved when the home based partner fell ill. For those without social support networks the only option was for their partner to return home to care for them. One woman described being desperate for support in a time of crisis:

“It has happened once that my daughter was vomiting and so was I. My son was newborn. I called the neighbour but she wasn’t impressed, she thought she was going to get it. So I had a horrible night and my husband flew in the following night, earlier than usual. But after that I have always said I would like to set up something for mums like me with NO support, but I am not in the position to do this now.”

Others emphasised their partner's role in providing instrumental support on their return home, allowing them to recover from the effects of the sleep deprivation associated with constant parenting responsibilities:

“It's VITAL to have someone who can help you when you get tired or stressed. I haven’t been blessed with good sleepers and often get exhausted. It’s also important that your partner is ready and willing to step up when they get home so you can have a rest.”

As found by Gallegos (2006) women also expressed a desire to meet other FIFO families in their area in order to chat with those in the same situation and share experiences:

“I would love to have some kind of meet and greet with other FIFO families like a barbeque or something. Sometimes when I’m at the airport picking Chris up I see a lot of other women there with children and it’d be nice to be able to say hello to them and have a chat.”

The women were keen to make suggestions in order to help others adapt to the lifestyle. A prominent suggestion in relation to child care was making regular arrangements with others in the same situation to share 'swap' time in order to plan for things that can 'take twice as long if the kids are around' such as shopping or running errands. This also gave them the chance to have some much needed time alone, something to look forward to and the reciprocal nature of the relationship saved them from having to ask others for favours.

Organising weekend activities or joining sporting groups were considered other important
ways of dealing with loneliness and social isolation. Women emphasised the value of maintaining social contact and keeping busy:

“Spend time with other adults by being involved with something you enjoy or are interested in – volunteer at school, join a club or work part time.”

Accepting the limitations of the situation and learning to make the most of them was another suggestion:

“When my girls were young Steve was home every second weekend which was dedicated as family time. On the alternate weekends I spent time with my own family (which he was happy to miss) or had the girls’ friends over.”

Consistent with Gallegos’ (2006) findings the women in this study acknowledged their need for social support, both in times of crises and in order to cope with all the demands and responsibilities. As one woman advised:

“Don’t try to be Superwoman and do everything yourself.”

**Social interactions**

Seeking social interaction involves taking action to acquire protective resources, maintaining existing resources or managing the stress resulting from demands (Rossetto, 2009). Rather than putting their lives ‘on hold’ until their partners’ return, many of the women interviewed were found to engage in and enjoy active social lives. Those with younger children reported socialising on a regular basis during the day by taking their children along to activities and events. While most indicated they did not mind socialising without their children, several online participants stated they would prefer a night out but were not comfortable hiring babysitters due to a reluctance to leave their children with someone whom they did not know well. In addition, many women had different social networks during their partner’s absence as they tended to socialise with mothers they had met through child-centred activities and unmarried friends, as opposed to couples on their partner’s return.
Social connectedness and emotional support

Women discussed their experiences of establishing and maintaining a social network and acknowledged this in regulating feelings of resentment towards their partners. These feelings were due to their partner’s lack of domestic responsibilities and access to adult contact. When partners were perceived to be enjoying social interactions that women felt were denied them, feelings of resentment ensued. One woman described these feelings as ‘an acid that erodes everything so you’ve got to have that balance right.’ This was also found to be a significant issue by other researchers (e.g. Watts, 2004). Another woman described how she had experienced strong feelings of resentment towards her partner prior to the establishment of her own social network:

“That was a big issue at one point. It’s like ‘It’s fine for you, you’ve got all these lovely barbeques and you get to talk to people every day. There was actually a period in my life when I went through that. Where I was thinking ‘It’s alright for you, you don’t have to deal with kids 24/7, when you get to sleep you actually get to sleep. You get your food cooked for you, you don’t have to worry about that. All you have to worry about is your laundry!’ [laughs]. Like I’ve got these two screaming at me...and I did resent him for that. The fact that he could do the sports and he had all these barbeques and social things...and then I guess as soon as I joined the gym and as soon as I got out I got a lot more social and didn’t resent him anymore.”

For many women social support networks were developed through children’s sporting groups and activities which, in addition to providing pleasure and emotional support, also served as a distraction to deter them from dwelling on their partner’s absence. These child-centred activities proved to be a valuable source of support on weekends. As they were considered by many to be one of the major times when loneliness and social isolation was experienced, this further emphasises the need for support at critical times. The following example also demonstrates the importance of the quality of support, with women enjoying companionship and meaningful social contact with other mothers:
“Yeah the footy mums are really good, so that’s another outlet two days a week. We take our coffee flasks and sit there and gas bag for an hour on a Sunday morning. Whinge about how we hate getting up every morning and then go scream and yell and cheer [laughs]. So it’s good.”

Consistent with Gallegos’ (2006) findings on types of support networks utilised by FIFO families, mothers’ groups and playgroups were instrumental in developing social networks for many of the participants with young children. Jackson et al., (2005) also identified the role of playgroups in providing an important form of emotional support and companionship for women. In the current study, some women were in the process of establishing these friendships and attending the groups was viewed as a social event to look forward to. For others who also have older children, the friendships made through attending such groups were maintained over many years and continued to be their main form of social support. For example, prior to joining a playgroup this woman was at risk of suffering from social isolation due to having relocated to a new area, with her husband absent and the responsibilities of parenthood impending:

“When Richard first started I was a bit like that (lonely) because I was pregnant with Robbie and I really didn’t know anybody because we’d only been here a few years. And when I had Robbie I actually joined a playgroup. And they’re the group of friends that I’ve still got today. So all our kids have grown up together.”

Employment

Many participants found working outside the home served as way of coping with their partners’ absences, especially those in part-time employment. Rather than purely serving financial or career purposes, it kept them busy and was a valuable form of social contact and interaction:

“I love working myself, it’s my outlet. If you don’t have someone to have adult conversation with at night, you have it at work.”

For some, the extent of interactions with others during working hours removed the desire to socialise after hours:
“Yeah everyone says to me ‘How do you do it, how do you come home to no one?’ I say ‘I’m with people all day long, and it’s so high end corporate where I work and I just don’t want to talk to anyone, don’t want to be with anyone. So I think it really depends on your situation, but certainly I think that’s how I cope is by keeping busy and doing stuff.”

**Online socialising**

For the online sample this form of support helped them feel connected to friends and family and significantly improved their social network. Nonetheless, while it could contribute to feelings of belonging and support, online socialising was not considered a substitute for interpersonal interactions. Online participants were more likely to describe feeling socially isolated, possibly due to having younger children and less time involved with the FIFO lifestyle. The lack of opportunities for social contact could lead to personal vulnerability and decreased self-confidence. For example, one online participant wondered whether she would be able to ‘hold her own’ at a party due to extended periods away from adult company.

Without access to positive, caring relationships with friends and family women felt isolated and susceptible to feelings of loneliness and depression. For one young mother whose friends were either single or childless and lived on the opposite side of the city, the act of socialising was described as an ‘effort’ and ‘stressful:’

“I quite often will be ready to go out, be sitting in the car and then it all gets too much so we go back inside.”

This woman’s honesty was revealing in emphasising the role of social support as a protective factor against social isolation and depression, demonstrating how feeling ‘lonely, sometimes sad and depressed’ could lead to social withdrawal, thus impacting social networks as found by Lee et al., (2009). Acknowledging this relationship, she advised:

“Seek out support as soon as possible, don’t leave it until you’re all stressed out and depressed as it will make it harder to socialise and make new friends.”
Family resilience through positive reappraisal

According to Lietz (2007) as families gain mastery over challenges they recognise ways they have grown stronger and more resourceful. The findings from the present study accentuate this. Strong, supportive social networks were found to help women reinterpret the challenges and concentrate on the benefits and personal strengths they had experienced through the FIFO lifestyle. They recognised and accepted the limitations and sacrifices involved such as loneliness at night, attending special occasions on their own and feeling socially isolated on weekends. Yet, most viewed the lifestyle as a choice over which they had control:

“He is always telling me that all I have to do is say the word and he will go back to his old workplace. But I am happy with the setup we have right now.”

The prominent issues observed in the interviews were partner appreciation, freedom and independence and FIFO versus alternative employment arrangements.

Partner Appreciation

Large periods of time apart appeared to build family resilience as women expressed strong appreciation towards their partners and respect for their sacrifices in order to provide for the family, with some believing FIFO was actually more difficult for them. This was due to the long shifts, lack of comforts and leisure options, and separation from their family and friends:

“I remember thinking one time how fed up I was and I just thought ‘I am sick to the back teeth of this’ and then I was speaking to this friend on the phone and she just said to me ‘Look, God love him, he’s out there doing what he’s got to do and he can’t speak to you, he can’t see the kids.’ She said ‘He’s got it worse’ and you know what? That’s true and I’ve always stuck that in my mind and I’ve always thought ‘They do have it harder than us.’ We’re still in our familiar terrain and we have the money to do a luxurious thing now and again. But they’re stuck out there in the middle of nowhere.”
Interestingly, this view was held particularly by those involved with longer roster schedules such as four weeks away and one week home and is inconsistent with Watts (2004) who found longer rotation patterns increased relationship strain. Instead, for one young woman the extended separation highlighted the importance of their marital bond and the simple pleasures of companionship:

“Oh absolutely, just the appreciation that we have for everything ... our whole marriage... having them here. I mean we used to take each other so much for granted until they’re gone and you’re like ‘I miss my best friend, just having you sit there, talking to you.’”

*Freedom and Independence*

Women reported enjoying greater freedom and independence due to the FIFO lifestyle, particularly those involved in shorter roster schedules as reported in previous studies (e.g. Watts, 2004). Rather than seeing this as ‘forced independence,’ they eagerly anticipated their own ‘personal space’ and reported improved marital relationships, thus increasing family resilience:

“I like my space and actually struggled more to be in a marriage where they were there all the time... It actually suits my personality to have my freedom and then I’m a better wife and more loving to him and more affectionate.”

Some women seemed particularly suited to the lifestyle:

“I’ve always liked my own company because I like me [laughs]. I very, very rarely get lonely... This (FIFO lifestyle) suits me down to the ground.”

As reported by Watts (2004) the separation from their partner also gave women the opportunities to develop their own personal interests and social pursuits:

“Well as soon as he goes out I’m arranging play dates and coffee and I’ve already arranged coffee for tomorrow [both laugh]. Wednesday we’re all meeting at the park and so yeah...it makes a difference.”
FIFO versus alternative employment

The FIFO lifestyle was rated exceedingly favourably by the women compared to the alternative of their partners' employment in Perth. Thus, suggesting their support needs were perceived to be controllable rather than acute (Helgeson, 2003). Many women viewed FIFO as necessary in order to improve their family's future and endeavoured to maintain a positive outlook to achieve their goals by sharing support with their partner:

"We just keep looking forward to everything. Whether it's the next pay cheque in the bank account or when he's coming home next or anything. It's just keep positive because we know what we're doing is making our lives better. We just keep reminding ourselves of that because he gets days when he's homesick and it just brings me down. And there's days when all I want is for him to be home and he's like 'It's ok we're almost there.'"

This finding supports the literature where turning to each other for support is one of the most important factors in family resilience (e.g. Conger & Elder, 1994; Lietz, 2007; McCreary & Dancy, 2004; Orthner et al., 2004; White et al., 2004). The opportunity to spend large periods of time together as a family, generated by FIFO employment, also contributed to the process of family resilience. Women reported a preference for spending quality time with their partner during their return home, as opposed to seeing them for a few hours each night:

"I was speaking to our broker the other day and he works seven days a week and he gets to see his family a couple of hours a night. I said 'But I get to see Matt nine days straight. Like all day, all night. And I get that whole time instead of just crawling into bed at the end of the night and saying 'Hey honey, how're you going?' Yeah, I get nine full days and I still get to speak to him every night. I just don't get to lie next to him.'"

Time spent together as a family was also highly associated with positive adjustment in studies among military families (e.g. Bowen et al., 2003; Orthner & Rose, 2003).

Financial rewards were the other strong incentive to retain a positive outlook and reframe negative thoughts and experiences, by serving to alleviate financial anxiety. The women
acknowledged that in order to earn similar wages in Perth their partners would need to work two or more jobs, placing increased strain on family relationships and potentially impacting their family resilience. For some, FIFO employment enabled them to be full time carers to their children:

“Even on the bad days you just go ‘I’m not working, I’m home with my boys. I appreciate that.”

Another option was living a regional residential lifestyle by relocating to the mine site. However, research indicates relocation to rural areas can disrupt existing social support networks resulting in social isolation and parental mental health problems (Rawsthorne et al., 2009; Stanley, 2007). In support of literature showing many workers and families preferred FIFO over a regional residential lifestyle (e.g. Storey, 2001; Watts, 2006), women in this study were reluctant to move due to the lack of facilities involved in living in small, remote areas:

“They were trying to talk people into moving down so they gave everyone a free holiday to Esperance. So we were like ‘Great.’ So we went down and we drove past his mine but not actually right in where it was. So we did get to see the local town and there was nothing there and we thought ‘No, we’re not moving down here.”

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the role of social support for parents whose partners are fly-in/fly-out workers in order to provide individual perspectives on support needs. Essentially, the findings from this study indicate there is a strong need for social support for parents whose partners work FIFO due to the many stressors involved with the cyclic lifestyle. The women’s support needs were found to be related to both the issues of critical timing as found by Gallegos (2006), and to the high levels of parental responsibility, demands and time restraints experienced during their partner’s absence.
Experiences of loneliness and social isolation were transient and linked to particular situations such as the first week of partner separation, night time, weekends and on special occasions. Thus, suggesting a need for social support at such times to act as a buffer under high stress levels (Helgeson). Interestingly, only those in the online sample reported enduring experiences of loneliness and social isolation. These women were more likely to have younger children, less experience with the FIFO lifestyle and less time in their current partner relationship. Therefore, supporting current literature that has identified family life stage and experience with partner absence as modifying factors in family stress and coping (Gallegos, 2006; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). Still, the vast majority of women in this study appeared to have developed the coping strategies and resources necessary to deal with the challenges involved with the FIFO lifestyle.

Overwhelmingly, the most significant findings from this study involve the meanings women made of these experiences of social support, which can be seen clearly through their subjective positive reappraisals of the challenges faced. As proposed, those with strong, supportive social support networks were more likely to experience positive outcomes such as emerging stronger and more resourceful through choosing to focus on the benefits of the FIFO lifestyle. These included focusing on goals, situation controllability, large periods of quality time spent with their partner, financial rewards, partner appreciation, stronger family relationships and freedom and independence. Interestingly, longer rosters were found to be associated with partner appreciation, while women whose partners worked shorter rosters were more likely to appreciate their freedom and independence. This suggests there can be positive outcomes related to each, dependent upon women’s perceptions that support will be available if needed and consistent with family resilience theory.
Family resilience was evident through the partner’s primary role in providing emotional support, particularly for those in earlier family life stages. This role was found to be influenced by communication style and access to telecommunication facilities. Open, honest communication styles and unrestricted access to telecommunication facilitated feeling understood and valued. This increased emotional bonding and the women’s ability to cope. As open communication is most often associated with experiencing emotional support, it is the recommended style for the FIFO lifestyle which places enormous emphasis on maintaining connections through communication. This finding supports research emphasising the importance of internal family support in relation to family resilience (e.g. Conger & Elder, 1994; Lietz, 2007; McCreary & Dancy, 2004; Orthner et al., 2004).

Overall, however the women reported a stronger need for instrumental support over emotional support. According to Helgeson (2003) this suggests the stressors are considered controllable as emotional support is more likely to be used to buffer the effects of uncontrollable stressors and high stress levels. It may also indicate that these women perceive less stress due to the emotional support received, with instrumental support then serving to increase their ability to cope effectively, as proposed by Helgeson (2003). This theory is supported by the author due to a strong perception of family resilience which is connected to the women’s confidence and ability in eliciting social support if needed. For the majority of the women instrumental support was provided primarily by their parents, with child care assistance reported to be the most valued form of social support. Reciprocal relationships with friends, and especially other FIFO families, were also found to be significant as they enabled the women to feel comfortable in asking for assistance.
Women reported experiencing well developed social networks, with child-centred activities such as children’s sporting groups providing opportunities to socialise. These activities were found to provide a significant form of support on weekends, identified as a time when women were particularly susceptible to feelings of loneliness and social isolation due to their partner’s absence. The women also acknowledged the development of strong, supportive social networks in helping to alleviate feelings of resentment towards their partners. These feelings resulted from their partner’s ready access to adult contact and lack of parenting and household responsibilities. Employment was found to be another valuable form of adult contact, which sometimes had the adverse effect of reducing women’s inclination to socialise.

This research adds to the recent literature investigating various aspects of the FIFO lifestyle including family stress and resilience, the psychosocial well-being of children, the importance of communication for relationship survival and the process of adaptation through the transitional phases of the work roster. It also provided participants with opportunities to share success stories, coping strategies and positive aspects of the FIFO lifestyle. This is considered particularly important as many of the past studies have focused on the maternal stress experienced rather than coping resources. However, while the triangulation process built interpretive rigour and increased access to participants, a limitation of the study was the decreased level of interaction involved with the online interviewing method. Yet importantly, this method also accounted for response bias as anonymity ensured both ‘survivors’ and those still adapting to the FIFO lifestyle were equally likely to respond to the study.
In conclusion, the study achieved its aim by exploring the lived meaning behind home-based partners’ experiences of social support within the FIFO lifestyle. These findings may assist future research that examines family stress and resilience within the FIFO population. It may also serve to inform families considering the lifestyle, as well as their extended families and friends, counsellors and employers. At present there are a number of resources available to FIFO families such as Employee Assistance Programmes which provide a limited number of counselling sessions and a seminar held by Relationships Australia exploring the impacts of FIFO on relationships and the importance of effective communication. In addition, a Perth-based website has recently been developed by one of the study participants to connect FIFO families through social gatherings and to inform them of current information on the FIFO lifestyle (www.fifofamilies.com). It is believed that through such initiatives, parents whose partners FIFO are less likely to experience feelings of social isolation and loneliness and more likely to feel adequately supported.

Directions for future research include focusing on families who are new to the FIFO lifestyle and conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with participants recruited online, as the findings indicate a higher need for social support within this sample. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how these experiences and coping resources and strategies change over time, due to their dynamic nature.
References


PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR PARTNERS OF FIFO WORKERS

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study on the role of social support systems in reducing loneliness and social isolation for parents whose partners work fly-in/fly-out.

I am planning to conduct a number of interviews in Perth throughout July and August and am seeking parents who:

- Have a partner who works in mining or construction on a roster where long periods are spent away from home such as a 2/1, 3/1 or 4/1 roster
- Have young children (aged newborn to 12 years) and live in the Perth metropolitan area

As a participant in this study, your wife or partner would be asked a series of questions relating to their experiences of the fly-in/fly-out lifestyle and their views on social support. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and will be completely confidential.

As a parent with 3 young children whose partner works on a 4/1 roster I am interested to know how others cope. For more information or to volunteer for this study please contact:

Nicole Fresle

Ph. [redacted]

Mobile: [redacted]

Email: nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au

This study has received approval from Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee and is being conducted as part of a Psychology (Honours) degree.

Thank you for your interest in this project.
Appendix B
Sample letter to Mining Companies and Contractors

Dear Human Resource Manager,

I am currently conducting research looking into the experiences of parents whose partners are employed on a fly-in/fly-out basis and their views of social support systems in addressing the issues of loneliness and social isolation. This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements of a Psychology (Honours) degree at Edith Cowan University and has been approved by the Faculty Subcommittee.

I am planning to conduct a number of interviews in Perth throughout July and August and am seeking parents who fill the following criteria:

a) Have primary school aged children or younger whose partner is currently employed on a FIFO basis
b) Whose partner works in the mining or construction industry on an asymmetrical roster schedule such as 2, 3 or 4 weeks away and 1 week home

The research aims to identify the types of social support found to be most effective along with the factors that affect access to this support. As a parent whose partner works fly-in/fly-out rosters on a 4 week on 1 week off basis I am aware of some of the issues involved. I believe that maternal stress can be well controlled through the use of social support such as family, friends, sporting groups, support groups, community organisations and counselling services.

As much of the recent research on the fly-in/fly-out lifestyle has emphasised the negative aspects of family separation I would like to provide an opportunity to share success stories and coping strategies in order to improve family functioning. I believe this will also have positive affects for the workers through knowledge that their partner feels adequately supported and aware of ways to build their own social support systems or access help if necessary.

Interviews will take approximately 1 hour and will be arranged at the convenience of the participants. It will involve a number of questions regarding the types of social support used. An example of an interview question is “Can you tell me about your experiences of social support?”

I will contact you shortly via email with the information letter for your employees. Alternatively, I can be contacted on or nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au.

Your help in this matter is greatly appreciated.

Kind regards,

Nicole Fresle
Appendix C

Posted on Bub Hub Pregnancy & Parenting Forum
Under Research Help Needed Thread

**Invitation to Participate in Online Research**

a) Are you a parent with primary school aged children or younger whose partner is currently employed on a FIFO basis?
b) Does your partner work in the mining or construction industry on an asymmetrical roster schedule such as 2, 3 or 4 weeks away and 1 week home?
c) Do you live in the Perth metropolitan area?

I am looking into the experiences of parents whose partners are employed on a fly-in/fly-out basis and your views of social support systems. As a parent with 3 young children whose partner works on a 4 week on/1 week off roster I am interested to know how others cope.

I have posted some questions on this research site (see below) and if you are able to help you can either post your responses here or email me on nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au. If you would prefer a face-to-face interview please email me and we can arrange a time and place that suits you.

If you are happy to respond the following conditions apply:

- Confidentiality is guaranteed – at no time will your identity be disclosed
- Participation is voluntary – you do not have to answer any question you are not comfortable with, you can withdraw at any time and remove any data contributed without explanation or penalty
- By posting your responses on this forum you are consenting to participate in the study

With your help we can identify the types of social support found to be most effective in reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation for parents whose partners FIFO. This study has received approval from the Edith Cowan Faculty Subcommittee and is being conducted as part of a Psychology (Honours) degree at Edith Cowan University.

Thank you for your help and please feel free to contact me or my Research Supervisor, Dr Andrew Guilfoyle if you have any queries about this study.

Kind regards,

Nicole Fresle
Primary Researcher
Ph.: [redacted]
Mobile: [redacted]
e-mail: nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au

Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle
Research Supervisor
Ph.: Ph. 6304 5192
e-mail: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

* This thread has received Moderator approval
Firstly, I would like to ask you some questions about yourself.

1. How many children do you have? How old are they?
2. How long have you and your partner been together?
3. How long have you been involved in FIFO?
4. Are you working outside the home?
5. Have you always lived in Perth?

You and fly-in/fly-out

1. How do you feel during your partner’s absence?
   a) Is your partner aware of how you feel? If so, how did they respond?
   b) Do you ever go out (socially) when your partner is away? (with or without the children) How do you feel about this?

2. Can you tell me about your experiences of social support? (e.g. family, friends, neighbours, sporting groups, Mum’s group or playgroup, online parenting forum, connecting with other FIFO families or any other forms you would like to discuss)

3. Are there any forms of support you wish were available to you?
   a) Have you experienced any problems accessing social support? Can you describe these situations?

4. If you were talking to a family just starting fly-in fly-out what would you suggest from your own experience about social support needs?
Hi, my name is Nicole and I am very interested in hearing about your experiences with the FIFO lifestyle. My husband also works away and I have three young children so I may be able to relate to some of the issues we will discuss.

Firstly, I would like to ask you some questions about yourself.

1. How many children do you have? How old are they?
2. How long have you and your partner been together?
3. How long have you been involved in FIFO?
4. Are you working outside the home?
5. Have you always lived in Perth?

You and fly-in/fly-out

1. How do you feel during your partner’s absence?
   a) Is your partner aware of how you feel? If so, how did they respond?
   b) Do you ever go out (socially) when your partner is away? (with or without the children) How do you feel about this?

2. Can you tell me about your experiences of social support? (e.g. family, friends, neighbours, sporting groups, Mum’s group or playgroup, online parenting forum, connecting with other FIFO families or any other forms you would like to discuss)

3. Are there any forms of support you wish were available to you?
   a) Have you experienced any problems accessing social support? Can you describe these situations?

4. If you were talking to a family just starting fly-in fly-out what would you suggest from your own experience about social support needs?
Appendix E

Information Letter

a) Are you a parent with primary school aged children or younger whose partner is currently employed on a FIFO basis?
b) Does your partner work in the mining or construction industry on an asymmetrical roster schedule such as 2, 3 or 4 weeks away and 1 week home?
c) Do you live in the Perth metropolitan area?

I am looking into the experiences of parents whose partners are employed on a fly-in/fly-out basis and your views of social support systems.

My name is Nicole Fresle and I am undertaking this research project as part of the requirements of a Psychology (Honours) degree at Edith Cowan University. As a parent with 3 young children whose partner works on a 4 week on/1 week off roster I am interested to know how others cope. With your help we can identify the types of social support found to be most effective in reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation for parents whose partners FIFO.

If you would like to participate in this study please contact Nicole at nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au or on [redacted]. It will involve an interview of approximately 60 minutes duration. The interview will be arranged to take place at a time and location mutually agreed upon. You will be asked a series of questions relating to your experiences of the fly-in/fly-out lifestyle and your views on social support. Please find attached an informed consent form to be completed and returned at the interview, as confirmation of your participation. To accurately analyse the interview I also seek your consent to use audio recordings, which will be destroyed following transcription.

This study meets strict ethical guidelines of the Edith Cowan Faculty Subcommittee. Confidentiality will be guaranteed and at no time will your identity be disclosed. All data collected in relation to this study will be stored in a secured filing cabinet at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup. The de-identified information will be analysed and used to produce a research thesis. The results of the study may also be published in reports, conference papers and journal articles. You will be advised at the completion of the research should you wish to receive a copy for your records.

Participation is voluntary. You are under no obligation to answer any question with which you are not comfortable, you can withdraw from the study at any time and remove any data contributed without explanation or penalty. A list of counselling services will be made available to you should you become distressed in any way by your participation.

If you have any questions about the research or would like further information please contact myself or my supervisor, Dr Andrew Guilfoyle on 6304 5192 or a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au. Alternatively, if you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact: Dr Justine Dandy, Edith Cowan University, and 270 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup WA 6027, Ph.6304 5105, jdandy@ecu.edu.au. Thank you for your interest in this project.

Nicole Fresle
Ph. [redacted]
nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au
Title of the Research Project

The Role of Social Support Systems in Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation for Parents Whose Partners Work Fly-in/Fly-out

Contact Details

Primary Researcher:
Nicole Fresle
Ph. ..............................................................
nfresle@our.ecu.edu.au

Supervisor:
Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle
Ph. 6304 5192
a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

I have been provided with a copy of the Information Letter explaining the research project. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team.

I have read and understood the information provided and understand that participation in the research project will involve an interview which will last approximately 60 minutes and will be audio recorded.

I understand that the information I provide will be kept confidential, will only be used for the purposes of this study and I will not be identified in any way. I am aware that the results of the research project may be published in reports, conference papers and journals but that confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

I understand that I am under no obligation to answer any question I am not comfortable with and am free to withdraw from further participation at any time, without explanation or penalty. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and confirm that I am over 18 years of age.

I consent to my participation in an interview □ YES □ NO
I also consent to the interview being audio recorded □ YES □ NO

Name: ...........................................  Researcher: .....................

Signature: .................................  Signature: ..............................

Date: .................................  Date: .................................
Appendix G

List of Counselling Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Lifeline:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Health Direct:</td>
<td>1800 220 400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Health Emergency Response Line:</td>
<td>1300 555 788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Red Cross Counselling Service</td>
<td>1800 052 222</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Samaritans</td>
<td>9381 5555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU Psychological Services Centre</td>
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</table>
Appendix H

Online Consent Form

Statement of Consent: (Please select one of the following options)

I consent to participate in the study

I am at least 18 years of age. I have read the information in the Invitation to Participate Online and understand what I will be asked to do in the study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team. I am aware I can print a copy of the consent form for my records.

I would like to ask the researcher a question

I have read the information in the Invitation to Participate Online but have more questions about the research before I consent to participate in the study. I would like to e-mail the researcher now to get more information.

I do not wish to participate in the study
Appendix I
Reflective journal

In the recruitment stage I was very surprised at the lack of support from the mining companies and contractors. Especially as the company my husband works for were not prepared to help, advising they were not interested in getting involved with research conducted by a university. However, the generosity and willingness to help of the women who participated was overwhelming. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed the interviewing process. Although I felt nervous at the beginning of each, it was easy to build a rapport due to shared circumstances. At times it felt as though I was talking to friends, rather than women I had recently met for interviewing purposes.

Interestingly, only one of the women I interviewed in the face-to-face sample mentioned neighbours as a source of social support. This woman had established a close supportive network of neighbours with whom she regularly socialised and said “...in this area we’ve got a great network of friends. If anything goes wrong here I can pick up the phone and have someone here in five minutes.” As I was analysing the data I remember thinking how different things are now compared to when I was growing up and everyone knew their neighbours. It seems we have lost an important and easily accessible form of social support here. I wondered if this could be due to our busy lifestyles, tendency to keep to ourselves or the transient nature of neighbourhoods. Another issue that was only mentioned by one woman was the perception of danger involved with her husband’s work. I wondered if this could increase an individual’s need for social support.

In many cases the women seemed to adjust to FIFO while their partner’s continued to struggle. One woman reported “He’s finding it a little bit harder this time” and “And I’m
probably managing better than the first time when he did it for 10yrs, so it’s crazy really.”

The interviews also revealed the difficulties their partners faced on returning home, such as feeling like an outsider due to the set routines of family life. Another surprising issue was how well the women rated FIFO compared to their husband’s returning to Perth. The women really seemed used to having their own space and this appeared to be more of an incentive to continue with the lifestyle than those reported in the literature such as time off and financial rewards. Women often mentioned it sheepishly as they did not want to appear selfish or unappreciative. This is something I could relate to as I find you do become accustomed to pleasing yourself and making the decisions, so when your partner returns you have to take his wants and needs into consideration. As one woman mentioned everyone seemed to be so organised during their partner’s absence, “We have everything planned and then they come home and it’s chaos. By the time they’re going back you’re nearly ready for them to go!”

Another interesting aspect of the interviews was how incredibly busy the women were, both from choice and necessity. Many of the women had active social lives and often mentioned the need to balance these in order to respect their partners’ feelings, both during their absence and on their return. They spoke about being ‘careful and selective’ about socialising, particularly at night and were conscious of not appearing to enjoy themselves too much during their absence.

Overall, the women appeared extremely positive and well adjusted. Even though there were more accounts of loneliness and social isolation from the women in the online sample, they were still surprisingly few. On a personal note, I remember sometimes feeling a desperate need to escape all the parenting responsibilities and found weekends especially isolating as I did not know any other FIFO mums. It was also difficult for me to show
affection to my partner on his return home as I felt if I became too emotionally attached our separation would be more difficult. However, once I became more socially active and joined sporting groups the adjustments became easier. Hopefully this research will serve to develop understanding of the FIFO lifestyle for female home-based partners by highlighting situations where they may be more likely to need support.