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Exploring the experience of separation in Australia: Perspectives from formerly married and cohabiting parents

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**Exploring the experience of separation in Australia:
Perspectives from formerly married and cohabiting parents**

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Sarah M. Barbas

Edith Cowan University
School of Arts and Humanities

2017

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Statement of Confidentiality

Ethical clearance for the current study was granted by Edith Cowan University in December 2011. Confidentiality and privacy of participants was protected at all times including correspondence between myself, supervisors other colleagues. Pseudonyms were used for all participants involved in the current study and all verbatim quotes contained in this thesis were analysed for any identifiable information.

Abstract

The increase in separation and divorce rates during the 20th century brought with it many far-reaching social implications for all involved, sparking a high level of interest among researchers. Most research in this area has been approached from stress frameworks that have conceptualised separation and divorce as a stressful life transition that individuals must adjust to. Yet, attempts to understand separation and divorce to date have been dominated by quantitative methods that have resulted in a relatively static and objective understanding of this experience; particularly in Australia. Furthermore, although international rates of divorce are declining, rates of separation following cohabiting unions are increasing. However, research continues to neglect the voices of formerly cohabiting individuals. Using a qualitative methodology, the current study sought to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married *and* cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. The term 'separated' was used to denote relationship dissolution to ensure adequate representation of both formerly married and cohabiting parents.

This study was embedded within an interpretivist paradigm and was guided by a phenomenological qualitative methodology. Using Moustakas' (1994) systematic phenomenological research method, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 55 separated parents ranging in age from 23 to 56 years. Thirty-four parents were formerly married and the remaining 21 were part of cohabiting unions. Of the 25 mothers who participated in the current study, 11 were residential, 5 were non-residential and 9 were shared care parents. Of the 30 fathers involved in the current study, 9 were residential, 11 were non-residential and 10 were shared care parents. Exploration of experiences of the six groups of parents allowed for more robust and rich data. Phenomenological data analysis guided by Moustakas (1994) was used to understand and interpret interview transcripts.

Data analyses identified five major themes and related sub-themes that captured the experience of separation and the factors associated with adjustment: *uncoupling* (including sub-themes of psychological health, family stress, infidelity, and drifting apart);

uncoupled (including sub-themes of co-parenting, the economic struggle, loss and loneliness, identity: assumed and assigned, and psychological, emotional, and physical health problems); *searching within the self* (including sub-themes of personal control, self-regulation, optimism, and healthy living); *reaching beyond the self* (including sub-themes of connectedness, social support and reaching out, positive employment, constructive co-parenting, the parent – child relationship, and loving again); and *patterns of adjustment* (including sub-themes of the rollercoaster, the ‘time’ factor, and the protective nature of separation).

Collectively, findings revealed that the Australian experience of separation began prior to separation and was constantly changing over time. Formerly married and cohabiting parents’ experiences were imbued with stressors frequently identified in research that has adopted dominant stress frameworks, along with numerous personal and environmental resources that lessened the impact of stressors and assisted adjustment following separation. A framework that represents the experience of separation and the factors associated with adjustment was developed based on these five themes. Findings support an understanding of adjustment following separation and divorce that advocates for a paradigm shift away from objective conceptualisations of this experience, towards an understanding of this experience as it is perceived by those who have been through it. Therefore, to only attend to static and objective conceptualisations of separation and divorce as they are experienced by formerly married individuals would be to overlook significant psychological and social elements of the separation and divorce experience. Further research is encouraged with a specific focus on gender, residential status and marital status.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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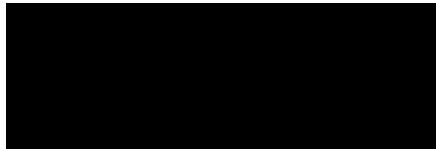
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A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Sarah M. Barbas.

Date 20/07/2017

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Yaiyia, Papou and Nanna – my No.1 fans

Acknowledgements

I consider myself extremely lucky to have access to a wonderful support network which I am grateful for everyday. I would like to formally acknowledge this network of people who helped make this research possible.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my participants. The courage and kindness you showed me in sharing your difficult experiences was incredibly humbling and invaluable above all else throughout the preparation of this thesis. The strength you all possessed was the fuel that kept the engine of my research journey going. I hope that by retelling your stories, I will be able to offer what all of you selflessly wished for most – to help other families going through the difficult experience of separation.

Next I would like to express my deepest appreciation and thanks to my supervisors, Dr Deirdre Drake, Associate Professor Julie Ann Pooley, Associate Professor Pamela Henry and Professor Lynne Cohen for their patience, reassurance, and support throughout my PhD journey. The knowledge you shared with me as my mentors was invaluable. I would like to thank you for encouraging my research and facilitating my growth as a researcher over the last six years.

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To my soul sisters who have stood by my side for the last 17 years through good and bad and still love me anyway – Nikki, Ashleigh, Breanna, Vanessa, Julia, and Kelly. Words cannot express just how much your friendship means to me and just how instrumental your support has been in the completion of my PhD. You offered me a shoulder to lean on, kept me sane in my moments of madness, showered me with wine when I could take it no more, and when all else failed you made fun of yourselves just to make me smile and laugh. The older I grow, the more I come to realise just how rare our friendship is, which makes me appreciate it more and more each and every day.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Chapter overview

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to separation and divorce. The purpose of the current study is then presented. The terms separation and residential status are then defined which provide the foundation for the research context. This chapter concludes with the research aim and questions, followed by the thesis structure.

Separation and divorce

One of the biggest international changes in family composition during the 20th century was the increase in rates of divorce. Australia was no exception. By the turn of the century it was estimated that around 33% of all Australian marriages would end in divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). This increase in rates of divorce brought with it many far-reaching psychosocial implications for adults and children, sparking a high level of interest among researchers. Such research was instrumental in highlighting divorce as a stressful life event that leads to lower levels of wellbeing for all individuals involved (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978; Booth & Amato, 1991; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Lorenz, Simons, Rand, Elder, Johnson, & Chao, 1997; Thoits, 1986; Tschann, Johnson, & Wallerstein, 1989).

Although international rates of divorce have begun to decline over the last decade, this decline has been counterbalanced by increasing rates of separation following cohabiting relationships. In 2012, it was estimated that around 16% of all couple households in Australia were cohabiting relationships, compared to 10% in 1996 (Weston & Qu, 2013). Research examining the social elements of cohabiting relationships remains at a preliminary level; however, there is prevailing evidence that rates of separation are higher for these couples when compared to married couples (Olsen, DeFrain & Skogrand, 2008). Collectively, it is evident that more adults are separating and that an increasing number of separations are from cohabiting relationships.

Despite increases in separation and divorce, Australian enquiry in this area is limited. This is concerning given separation and divorce continues to be an ever-present focus of government policy. Most Australian studies have focused on demographic trends of divorce (Qu & Weston, 2008; de Vaus, 1997), isolated consequences of divorce (i.e., economic decline; de Vaus, Gray, Qu & Stanton, 2014; Smock, 1994) and child maladjustment following parental divorce (Ridge, 2005; Guilfoyle, Banham, Cavizzi & Napolitano-Lincoln, 2011). What has emerged from such studies is increasing evidence of the consequences of separation and divorce; especially for children. In particular, recent Australian studies have pointed to parental adjustment as a potential protective factor for children affected by separation and divorce (Guilfoyle et al., 2011). However, Australian research fails to move beyond such findings to offer insight into how parents adjust following separation and divorce. Instead, most of what is known has been the product of international research that has focused on understanding family systems and child adjustment. Yet, such research findings do not necessarily translate seamlessly to an Australian context. Furthermore, international studies in this area continue to neglect the voices of formerly cohabiting parents, despite the increasing prevalence of cohabiting relationships in today's social climate. As such, there is a need to explore the experience of separation for formerly married *and* cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event.

The purpose of the current study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the Australian experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married *and* cohabiting (heterosexual) parents to learn more about the factors associated with adjustment following this stressful life event. The focus was restricted to parents' experiences in response to research pointing to parental adjustment as a substantial protective factor for children affected by parental separation and an absence of Australian enquiry focusing on parent's perspectives of adjustment (Guilfoyle et al., 2011; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

The research context for the current study was Australia. The terminology with respect to separated and divorced families in Australia differs from other international research contexts. The next section defines the term separation and the three residential statuses as they were applied to the current study.

Terminology

To address the under-representation of formerly cohabiting voices in separation and divorce research, the current study included samples of Australian parents who identified as both formerly married and formerly cohabiting (i.e., never married). The decision was made to use the term *separated* or *separation* when referring to both formerly married and cohabiting parents experiences (unless otherwise stated). The use of this term as it applies to the current study is defined next.

Separation. In Australia, formerly married individuals are required to wait 12 months before applying for legal divorce. Most legal literature refers to this 12 month period as ‘separation’. For example, the Australian Family Law (1975) Act (Section 49) currently governing separation and divorce in Australia lists the meaning of separation as:

- 1) The parties to a marriage may be held to have separated notwithstanding that the cohabitation was brought to an end by the action or conduct of one only of the parties, and
- 2) The parties to a marriage may be held to have separated and to have lived separately and apart notwithstanding that they have continued to reside in the same residence or that either party has rendered some household services to the other

This definition suggests that separated individuals were formerly married and refers to cohabitation as the physical act of living in the same household. Likewise, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2014, Glossary section) defines the date of separation as:

The date given on application for divorce from which the period of living apart is calculated for the purpose of establishing grounds for a divorce – in determining the date of separation, a single period of resumed cohabitation of less than 3 months may be ignored, provided the periods living apart before and after resumed cohabitation amount to a total of 12 months or more

Here, the date of separation relates to applying for divorce which denotes a previous term of marriage, where again, cohabitation refers to the physical act of living in the same household. The interchangeable use of the word ‘cohabitation’ across legal and social literature can be problematic when attempting to define separation. For example, within family law literature ‘cohabiting’ commonly refers to the physical act of living in the same household, and the term ‘de facto’ is used to refer to ex-nuptial relationships. However, in social research, the term ‘cohabiting’ refers to ex-nuptial relationships (Olsen et al., 2008; Weston & Qu, 2013). So a problem exists in adequately delineating the meaning of separation based on whether a definition refers to married or ex-nuptial (i.e., cohabiting; de facto) individuals and whether the use of the word ‘cohabiting’ refers to a relationship or a living arrangement.

In consideration of this issue, and because the term was used to refer to the experiences of both formerly cohabiting and formerly married individuals in the current study, the following definition of ‘separated’ or ‘separation’ was developed: 1) the parties to a former relationship, either bonded by marriage or cohabitation, no longer define themselves as a couple and/or are no longer physically living in the same household, 2) legal separation or divorce.

In the event of separation, as defined above, parents in Australia may become 1) a residential parent, 2) a non-residential parent, or 3) a parent who shares the care of their children equally with the other parent. Because the focus of the current study was restricted to parents’ experiences of separation, samples of mothers and fathers who identified with each of these disparate residential statuses were included. They are defined next.

Residential status. The terms ‘residential’ and ‘non-residential’ were developed in 1995 in preference to previous terms ‘custodial’ and ‘non-custodial’ in an attempt to focus attitudes away from the ownership of children following separation in Australia (Family Law Reform Act 1995 [Cth]). In general, residential parents are those who have physical care of their biological or adopted children following separation for most of the time as opposed to non-residential parents who have physical care of their biological or adopted children for the least amount of time. The amount of time children spend with the non-residential parent may vary from no time at all to 49% of the time. On the other hand, children may spend 51% of their time to all of their time with the residential parent. Definitions of shared care arrangements (discussed in the next paragraph) differ in terms of mathematising parenting time. As such, a parent who may have 40% care of their children may actually be deemed a parent who shares the care of his or her children. Relative to this issue, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013, Glossary section) defines residential parents as:

Those people aged 18 or above whose children (aged 0 to 17) reside with them the majority of the time, at least 5 nights during the week, where most of the child care and nurturing responsibilities usually reside with them.

In comparison, the ABS (2013, Glossary section) defines non-residential parents as:

Those people aged 18 or above whose children (aged 0 to 17) reside with the other parent the majority of the time, at least 5 nights during the week, where most of the child care and nurturing responsibilities usually reside with the other natural parent.

These definitions of residential and non-residential parenting were fitting for the current study.

Sharing the care of children equally means that children move between each parent’s residences equally throughout the year. The definition of shared care parenting varies widely in relevant research and literature, as well as across different countries. For example, the United Kingdom refers to shared care parenting in relation to equal division of time with children between each parent (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011). In Australia, legal definitions of shared care parenting differentiate between ‘equal time’ and

‘substantial and significant time’ where the former term does not necessitate equality to mean shared physical care (Fehlberg et al., 2011).

Defining shared care arrangements is important due to the effect it may have on prevalence estimates when defining residential and non-residential care arrangements. For example, the occurrence of shared care arrangements will be greater if adopting a definition encompassed by each parent having care of their children at least 35% of the time, as opposed to 50% of the time (i.e., 50/50 split; Fehlberg et al., 2011). In some instances, where parents have an exact 50/50 split care time arrangement for their children, they are referred to as equal care parents and any other variants of percentage splits between 35% and 65% are subsequently referred to as shared care arrangements (Kaspiew, Gray, Weston, Moloney, Hand, Qu, & the Family Law Evaluation Team, 2009). In consideration of the difficulties inherent in defining and estimating the prevalence of this type of arrangement, the current study defined shared care parenting as an arrangement where children spent anywhere between 40% to 60% of their time with each biological or adoptive parent.

The definitions of separation and each of the three residential statuses were used to assist recruitment in the current study and provide preliminary understanding of the research context. To conclude this chapter, the specific aim and research questions that guided the current study will be presented, followed by an outline of the thesis structure.

Aim and research questions

The main aim of the current study was to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married *and* cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. Using a qualitative research method, the following research questions were framed:

1. What is the experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia?
2. What factors are associated with adjustment following separation?

Thesis structure

In Chapter 1, the research area of separation and divorce was presented, followed by the purpose of the current study. The terms separation and residential status as they apply to the Australian context were then described. This chapter concluded with presentation of the research aim and questions.

Chapter 2 paints a picture of the Australian context in which the current study was situated. An overview of Australian Family Law is presented, followed by a description of Australia's separated and divorced community. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the services currently available to assist separated and divorced families in Australia.

Chapter 3 reviews literature with respect to what is currently known about separation and divorce and subsequent adjustment. This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical perspectives that have been posited to understand separation and divorce. Amato's (2000, 2010, 2014) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective is then used to guide a review of literature regarding the psychosocial factors associated with separation and divorce.

Chapter 4 outlines the research design and method of the current study, beginning with identification of the philosophical framework. The phenomenological method of the current study is then presented including information regarding the participants, materials, procedure, and data analysis. This chapter concludes with a description of ethical considerations and processes of research rigour.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and interpretations of the current study and is divided into five parts. Part 1: *Uncoupling* presents the factors that led to separation for Australian parents in the current study. Part 2: *Uncoupled* presents the difficulties that impacted Australian separated parents in the current study. Part 3: *Searching Within the Self* presents the helpful personal factors that assisted Australian separated parents. Part 4: *Reaching Beyond the Self* presents the helpful environmental factors that assisted Australian separated parents. Part 5: *Patterns of Adjustment* presents fluid patterns of adjustment shared by Australian separated parents.

Chapter 6 discusses and summarises the findings and interpretations of the current study in response to the aim and research questions. Recommendations are offered for separation and divorce policy and service provision in Australia, followed by the strengths and limitations of the current study. This chapter concludes with directions for future research and a final conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Chapter overview

Chapter 2 sets the scene for understanding the Australian context in which the current study was situated. First, a brief overview of Australian family law is presented. Australia's separated and divorced community is then described, including prevalence estimates, demographic information and service usage information. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the services currently available to assist separated and divorced parents and their families.

Australian Family Law

Current family law procedures in Australia are governed by the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth). There have been many amendments to this legislation since 1975 as a result of social, political and legal influence (see Nicholson & Harrison, 2000 for a detailed review). On the whole, the Family Law Act considers parents and their children and the requirements for dissolution of marriage and de facto relationships (i.e., the legal term for cohabiting relationships), as well as the principles and enforcement of rights, powers, duties and liabilities between spouses and ex-partners. This legislation currently allows a marriage to end (i.e., legal divorce) following proof of separation for at least 12 months, where the marriage is irreparable by one party. Parties to a de facto relationship have been recognised by the Family Law Act since 1988 and may apply for legal separation at the time of relationship dissolution (Family Court of Australia [Additional Jurisdiction and Exercise of Powers] Act 1988 [Cth]). The Family Law Act additionally recognises the parental rights and responsibilities towards children following separation, unless a court orders otherwise (McIntosh, Bryant, & Murray, 2008).

Recent research suggests that only one in five separating parents in Australia currently come into contact with Family Courts following separation and, in most cases, this

is to assist with property settlements (De Maio, Kaspiw, Smart, Dunstan & Moore, 2012). The reason for such low rates of court involvement is due to legislation enacted in 2006 in the form of the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act. This amendment was designed to provide separating parents in Australia with the means to organise parenting arrangements in a less adversarial manner in response to research that has associated legal involvement with dissatisfaction of outcomes, lengthy deliberations, and financial and emotional hardship (McIntosh, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2008). As a result of this amendment, all separated parents are currently mandated to access some form of community based dispute resolution through Australia's Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) when difficulty is experienced organising post-separation parenting arrangements (McIntosh, 2009). These centres offer community based assistance as a first port of call for parents following separation and an application may only be filed to obtain orders through the Family Courts if attempts to mediate through the FRCs are unsuccessful (Weston, Qu, Gray, Kaspiw, Moloney & Hand, 2011). Exceptions are made where risk of family violence and abuse is present and where breach of orders, urgent circumstances or an inability to participate in family dispute resolution (i.e., incapacitation, physical remoteness) is encountered (Parkinson, 2010; see Chisholm [2007] for a detailed review of the Shared Parental Responsibility Act 2006). The Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006 was also enacted to facilitate greater involvement of both parents by encouraging a default starting position of cooperative and shared parenting, and shared parental responsibility, following separation and divorce (Smyth, Weston, Moloney, Richardson, & Temple, 2008).

An overview of Australian family law offers the basis for understanding the legal context of parents' experiences of separation in the current study. The incidence of separation governed by such laws will be presented next to paint a picture of Australia's separated and divorced community.

Prevalence estimates in Australia

According to the most current estimates provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 46,498 divorces were granted under the Family Law Act (Cth) in Australia in 2014 (ABS, 2014). The median age at separation for men was 41.7 years and 39 years for women. The median age at divorce for men was 45.2 years and 42.5 years for females. Of these divorces, 21,840 involved children aged 18 or younger (47%). However, divorce trends do not provide an accurate snapshot of the incidence of separation in Australia given that many couples cohabit. Estimates of separation following cohabiting relationships are difficult to come by because separation in these circumstances may not necessarily result in a legal process and is not as commonly documented in comparison to divorce. One of the only studies providing insight into this area was conducted by De Maio et al. (2012). They found that 30.2% of mothers and 26.4% of fathers were cohabiting at the time of separation.

Australian data found that 73% of all children with a natural parent living elsewhere lived in single parent families in 2011 (more recent ABS data in this area is currently not available; ABS, 2011). With respect to parenting arrangements following separation, statistics continue to find that the majority of children in Australia reside with their mother for the majority of care time (i.e., residential mother household). For example, 85% of all single parent families with children aged 0 to 17 were lone mother families and 15% were lone father families in 2011 (ABS, 2011). Similarly, De Maio et al. (2012) found that the majority of children in their study spent all or most of their nights with their mother (72.5%). With respect to the Family Law amendments made in 2006 (i.e., Family Law Amendment [Shared Parental Responsibility] Act 2006), De Maio et al. (2012) found that shared care time arrangements were reported in 22% of cases which suggested a 6% increase in this type of arrangement when compared with previous findings (Kaspiew et al., 2009). However, De Maio et al. (2012) cautioned that children in shared care arrangements had an average age that was older than previous studies in this area (Kaspiew et al., 2009); therefore this increase in reported shared care time may suggest this arrangement is more common in families with older children. In terms of longevity of care time arrangements,

the traditional arrangement where children spent most of their nights with their mother has been documented as the most stable followed by equal time (i.e., 48% – 52% of time spent with each parent) and shared care time (i.e., 35% – 65% of time spent with each parent; De Maio et al., 2012).

Research conducted by De Maio et al. (2012) and Kaspiw et al. (2009) also provided estimates of pathways used in determining parenting arrangements following separation in Australia. Kaspiw et al. (2009) found that most parents were able to sort out care time arrangements for their children following discussions with the other parent (65.8%). Parenting arrangements as a result of no specific pathway (i.e., 'just happened') were the next most common pathway reported in this study (15.6%) and the more unequal the care time arrangement was, the more likely parents were to report that their arrangements had 'just happened' (Kaspiw et al., 2009). In terms of service usage, around 6.9% of fathers and 7.7% of mothers reported using counselling, dispute resolution or some form of mediation as a means of assisting the implementation of care time arrangements. Around 6% of mothers and fathers subsequently reported using a lawyer, and 2.4% of fathers and 3.3% of mothers reported mainly using the family courts to arrange care time for their children. In general, Kaspiw et al. (2009) concluded that the people most likely to use family law system processes (i.e., counsellors; mediators or dispute resolution services; lawyers; courts) were mothers with shared care arrangements and fathers whose child saw the mother during the day time only. De Maio et al. (2012) found that around 69% of parents reported discussions between themselves as the pathway to organising post-separation parenting arrangements. The remainder of the parents in this study reported counselling, mediation or dispute resolutions services (9.5%), that it 'just happened' (9.3%), using a lawyer (6.5%), using the courts (3.4%) and some other way (2.3%) as the pathway used in organising parenting arrangements following separation.

The Australian separated and divorced community have access to a number of government and local community based services to assist them following separation. A brief overview of these services will be presented next to provide the context for understanding the services that were available to parents in the current study.

Australian separation and divorce services

Parenting and legal services. Australian Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) were established following implementation of the 2006 Australian Family Law amendments. The first FRC opened in Australia in 2006 and since this time another 64 centres have opened across the nation. FRCs provide a gateway to services which include pre-marriage information; education and services provided for strengthening family relationships; services and referrals for prevention of separation; resolution of parenting arrangement disagreements outside of court through child-focused information, advice, mediation and referrals to other services; family dispute resolution, referrals, information and advice for separated parents whose parenting arrangements have broken down or court orders breached; services for individuals outside of families who also deal with children and their families (i.e., teachers and doctors); family dispute resolution, referrals, information and advice for grandparents and other extended family affected by family separation; and services and opportunities for referrals in the case of family abuse and violence (Parkinson, 2010). De Maio et al. (2012) found that, of parents who attempted Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) via the FRCs, 35.6% of parents reached an agreement on parenting matters, 24.9% of parents reported not reaching an agreement where a certificate to attend court was issued, and 24.2% of parents reported not reaching an agreement where no certificate to attend court was issued. For a detailed review of the value of FRCs in Australia see Moloney (2013), Moloney, Qu, Weston, and Hand (2013), and Parkinson (2006).

Parents may also enlist legal assistance provided privately or through legal aid/telephone advice lines (i.e., mostly for property/financial settlements; De Maio et al., 2012). Private lawyers are sought via personal pathways; however, legal aid services may be accessed via state and territory systems. Legal aid services in Australia provide assistance in the resolution of legal problems, offer free legal advice to those who are disadvantaged, and provide alternatives to court involvement.

Health and welfare services. The Department of Human Services (DHS) is the Australian government welfare agency provided to assist in meeting the needs of the Australian community (DHS, 2015). The main service provider of the DHS is Centrelink. There are currently 598 Centrelink offices located in Australia which provide individuals with support, information about health and welfare, assessments, benefit payments, and referral to specific services. In an attempt to address economic difficulties faced by separated parents, Centrelink offers a number of government benefits to Australian single families with dependent children.

The most relevant service provided by the DHS in terms of separating parents in Australia is the Child Support Agency (CSA). This agency helps parents to provide their children with a similar standard of living that they were accustomed to pre-separation (DHS, 2015). The CSA is involved in child support evaluations, registration, collection and child support payments following separation (DHS, 2015). This agency uses a formula to assess the sum of money to be paid from a non-residential parent to the residential parent (Gray & Chapman, 2007). The formula is calculated based on a number of factors including number of children to be supported, the income estimates of the residential parent, and the non-residential parent's capacity to pay (Gray & Chapman, 2007).

Relative to health problems often experienced by separated parents following separation, a universal health care system known as Medicare is offered by the Australian government providing Australian residents with low cost or free hospital and health care (DHS, 2015). The most significant scheme implemented by the Australian government to assist with access to mental health care providers is the Better Access (formerly known as the Better Outcomes) initiative introduced in 2006 (DHS, 2015). This initiative provides patients with improved access to mental health care providers including general practitioners (GPs), psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

Other related services. Australian separating or separated parents may also access a number of community and not-for-profit organisations for support, assistance, information

and guidance. Services include helplines (e.g., 1800Respect, Lifeline, MensLine Australia, Child Abuse Prevention Service, Family Relationship Advice Line, Crisis Care, Family Help Line); peer support groups (e.g., Fatherhood Foundation, Dads in Distress, Mums in Distress); and internet forums (e.g., singlemum.com.au, lonefathers.com.au).

Summary

The process of separation and divorce in Australia is governed by The Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) which states that married individuals are eligible to apply for legal divorce following proof of separation for at least 12 months, and that cohabiting individuals may apply for legal separation at the time of relationship dissolution. Current trends in Australia suggest that the separated and divorced community is aged between 39 and 45 years of age and around half of separated and divorced individuals have children (ABS, 2014). With respect to families with children, the single mother household (i.e., residential mother) continues to prevail as the most common parenting arrangement following separation (ABS, 2011). Yet, research indicates a slow but steady increase in shared care parenting arrangements, and most parents in Australia are able sort out parenting arrangements between themselves (i.e., without legal or community assistance).

The Australian separation and divorce community differs slightly from other international contexts that form the basis for the majority of separation and divorce scholarship to date. As such, delineation of the Australian context lays the foundation for further understanding separation and divorce as it is experienced by Australian separated parents; which was the aim of the current study. The focus of the next chapter will turn to a review of international and Australian (to a lesser extent) literature to lay the foundations for what is currently known about separation and divorce and subsequent adjustment.

CHAPTER 3

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Chapter overview

Chapter 3 sets the scene for what is currently known about separation and divorce, and subsequent adjustment. First, early theoretical perspectives posited to understand separation and divorce are presented. In this section, the experience of separation and divorce is described as a stressful life transition, making reference to the social selection and social causation theories. The focus then shifts to a more recent and holistic understanding of separation and divorce as a process, beginning with an outline of the theoretical foundations of Amato's (2000, 2010, 2014) divorce-stress-adjustment framework. The divorce-stress-adjustment framework is then used as a guide to organise, summarise and integrate a review of literature regarding the psychosocial factors associated with separation and divorce. In this section, particular attention is paid to understanding stressors, protective factors and factors associated with adjustment in the lives of separated and divorced individuals.

Theoretical considerations

Studies seeking to better understand separation and divorce have implemented a number of theories, conceptual perspectives and approaches (Booth & Amato, 1991; Emery, 1994, 2011; Grych & Fincham, 1992; Sakraida, 2005; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). For example, research in this area has incorporated feminist approaches (Carbone, 1994; Sakraida, 2005), attribution approaches (Grych & Fincham, 1992), symbolic interactionism (Orbuch, 1992), systems approaches (Emery, 1994), social capital perspectives (Teachman et al., 1996) and life course perspectives (Booth & Amato, 1991). In addition, research has been grounded within a number of theoretical perspectives such as the risk and resiliency perspective (Hetherington, 1999) and the family stress and coping theory (Plunkett, Sanchez, Henry, & Robinson, 1997). Despite varied approaches, stress perspectives continue to dominate separation and divorce scholarship (Amato, 2010; Bloom

et al., 1978; Booth & Amato, 1991; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Krumrei, Mahony, & Pargament, 2011; Lorenz et al., 1997; Plummer & Koch-Hattem, 1986; Tschann et al., 1989; Thoits, 1986). Studies approached from this theoretical perspective assume that the experience of many changes within a short period of time can have harmful effects on psychological health and wellbeing (Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005). Therefore, research guided by this theoretical perspective conceptualises separation and divorce as a stressful life transition associated with many psychosocial stressors that have the potential to cause adverse effects on psychological health and wellbeing.

Sakraida (2005) describes the divorce transition as “an event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 226). Specifically, research in this area finds that the loss of a partner and the family unit is associated with numerous stressors that result in lowered psychological wellbeing (Amato & Previti, 2003; Evans & Kelley, 2004; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Gähler, 2006; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; Ide, Wyder, Kolves, & De Leo, 2010; Kessler, Walters & Forthofer, 1998; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Nelson, 1995; Stewart, 2005; Williams & Umberson, 2004). Marks and Lambert (1998) offer an explanation for such findings, stating that transitions viewed as ‘socially non-normative’, such as the experience of divorce, are unanticipated and go against social ideals of family life, resulting in decreased wellbeing; particularly psychological functioning (Marks & Lambert, 1998). Much of the early research examining the transition through separation and divorce utilised cross-sectional data or longitudinal data with a small number of observations for each individual (Blekesaune, 2008). Subsequently, studies shifted to a focus on observing individuals at multiple time points to investigate separation and divorce transitions more effectively (Blekesaune, 2008; Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Mastekaasa, 1994b; Pevalin & Ermisch, 2004; Simon, 2002; Wade & Pevalin, 2004). Research investigating multiple time points of the transition through separation and divorce found that difficulties may begin prior to the physical event of separation and divorce, and continue on for years following that (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014; Blekesaune, 2008; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Sakraida, 2005; Strohschein et al., 2005; Wade & Pevalin, 2004). However, studies have presented

inconsistent findings regarding whether the most significant psychological impacts of stressors may be experienced prior to the point of separation and divorce, at the point of separation and divorce, or in the years following separation and divorce. The social selection and social causation theories emerged to explain such findings.

Social selection. According to the social selection theory of divorce, individuals possess certain problematic characteristics (i.e., depression; antisocial personality traits; a general history of psychological problems) that predispose them to relationship dissolution (Amato, 2000; Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Kelly & Conley, 1987; Kessler et al., 1998; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Merikangas, 1984; Simon, 2002). Consequently, the social selection theory argues that individuals in poor psychological health are less likely to marry, are more likely to have unsuccessful relationships, or both (Blekesaune, 2008). Mastekaasa (1994b) distinguished between two types of social selection. Firstly, he suggested that less stable personality characteristics may not only lower mental health, but may also increase the risk of divorce. Secondly, he reported that the probability of maintaining a successful relationship is affected by mental health and psychological wellbeing (Mastekaasa, (1994b).

Research in support of the social selection theory has found that individuals who divorce may have a higher prevalence of permanent psychological problems (Mastekaasa, 1994b). For example, Merikangas (1984) found that divorce rates were nine times more likely in a group of depressed in-patients who were followed up two years post-release when compared with those in the community. Likewise, in a community study, Kessler et al. (1998) found that 48.7% of individuals who experienced at least one psychological disorder before or during marriage experienced marital dissolution, compared with only 35.9% of individuals who experienced no disorder during this time. More recent research has also found support for the social selection theory. For example, Sbarra, Emery, Beam, and Ocker (2014) compared rates of depression for continuously married individuals with separated/divorced individuals over two assessment periods. They found that individuals who were depressed prior to separation and divorce were at increased risk for later major depressive disorder following separation and divorce. Despite research supporting the

social selection theory, one important shortcoming is that it does not offer an explanation for the finding that many individuals with an absence of pre-existing psychological problems are similarly affected by the stressors associated with divorce. As such the social causation theory was posited to provide further insight into this area.

Social causation. The social causation theory argues that it is the divorce itself that causes psychosocial stressors, and proposes that divorced individuals are at a higher risk of developing psychological difficulties following a relationship breakdown (Amato, 2000; Mastekaasa, 1994a). Central to the social causation theory is the idea that marriage, or being in a relationship, is protective for individuals, whereas other relationship statuses (i.e., separated; divorced; single; widowed) may be associated with more persistent and specific hardships (Mastekaasa, 1994a). Therefore, partnerships (both cohabitation and marriage) protect individuals in a way that is beneficial to psychological health, while non-normative partnership transitions affect psychological health negatively (Blekesaune, 2008).

Early support for the social causation perspective was reported by Doherty, Su and Needle (1989), as well as Nelson (1989). Both studies found that divorced individuals reported significantly more psychological distress following marital breakdown when compared with individuals who remained married (Doherty et al., 1989; Nelson, 1989). However, these and other longitudinal studies examining the social causation theory (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1985; Wade & Pevalin, 2004; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) tended to use a small number of observations for each individual. Blekesaune (2008) suggested that to identify the relative importance of social causation and social selection theories, the health status of a large cohort of individuals must be investigated several times before and after each type of partnership transition over many years. Blekesaune (2008) stated that more recent findings in support of the social causation perspective suggest that psychological difficulties may rise and peak during the time of separation and divorce, and may remain for some time following divorce. However research is inconsistent regarding how long problems tend to persevere. For example, Booth and Amato (1991) used three waves of data between 1980 and 1988 and found evidence of increased psychological

distress for up to two years following divorce. Yet, after this period, distress had decreased to levels similar to their stably married counterparts. On the other hand, Mastekaasa (1995) found the effects of divorce on mental health to be similar and constant across both short (0 to 4 year) and long term (4 to 8 year) periods following marital dissolution.

In general, support for the social selection theory is mostly dated and studies that have found evidence of this effect have simultaneously found evidence to support the social causation theory (Amato, 2000; Blekesaune, 2008; Booth & Amato, 1991; Doherty et al., 1989; Gähler, 2006; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Mastekaasa, 1994b; Menaghan, 1985; Nelson, 1989; Wade & Pevalin, 2004). For example, in addition to finding support for the social selection theory, Sbarra et al. (2014) also found that continuously married participants with a history of depression showed no difference in rates of depression when compared with individuals without a history depression. Therefore, those individuals who did separate/divorce in their study, and who had a history of depression, may have been at increased risk for major depression due to the chronic difficulties that often follow marital dissolution. Thus they additionally found support for the social causation theory.

As research has evolved, a number of theoretical shortcomings have been identified with the ideas inherent in both the social causation and social selection perspectives of divorce. Firstly, research seeking support for both theories remains ambiguous where findings suggest the selection perspective, the causation perspective or a combination of both may apply to some groups of individuals more than others. Secondly, neither the social causation nor social selection theories provide any insight into why psychosocial stressors may be experienced only temporarily and why some may persist long after divorce. Thirdly, both theories fail to provide an explanation for research findings that suggest divorce may actually result in better outcomes for a handful of individuals (Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Sakranda, 2005). For example, some individuals may be leaving situations of great conflict and adversity and these individuals subsequently feel empowered, free and renewed following separation and divorce (Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Sakranda, 2005). Furthermore, for some individuals, divorce may present opportunities for self-growth, optimism, and the development of new social networks. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these two

theories both fail to recognise the interaction between protective factors and stressors contributing to experiences of adjustment following divorce. In response, Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) summarised and integrated qualitative and quantitative research conducted in the 1990's to arrive at a conceptual model of the process of divorce that provided a remedy for each of these shortcomings.

Divorce-stress-adjustment

Grounded within a stress framework, the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014) (see Figure 1) posits that the adverse effects of divorce may begin years before physical separation where feelings of estrangement may be experienced, and may then be followed by attempts to renegotiate the relationship. It may also be that one individual wants the relationship to end more than the other; therefore, the mourning of the relationship may be experienced at different times in the divorce process for each individual.

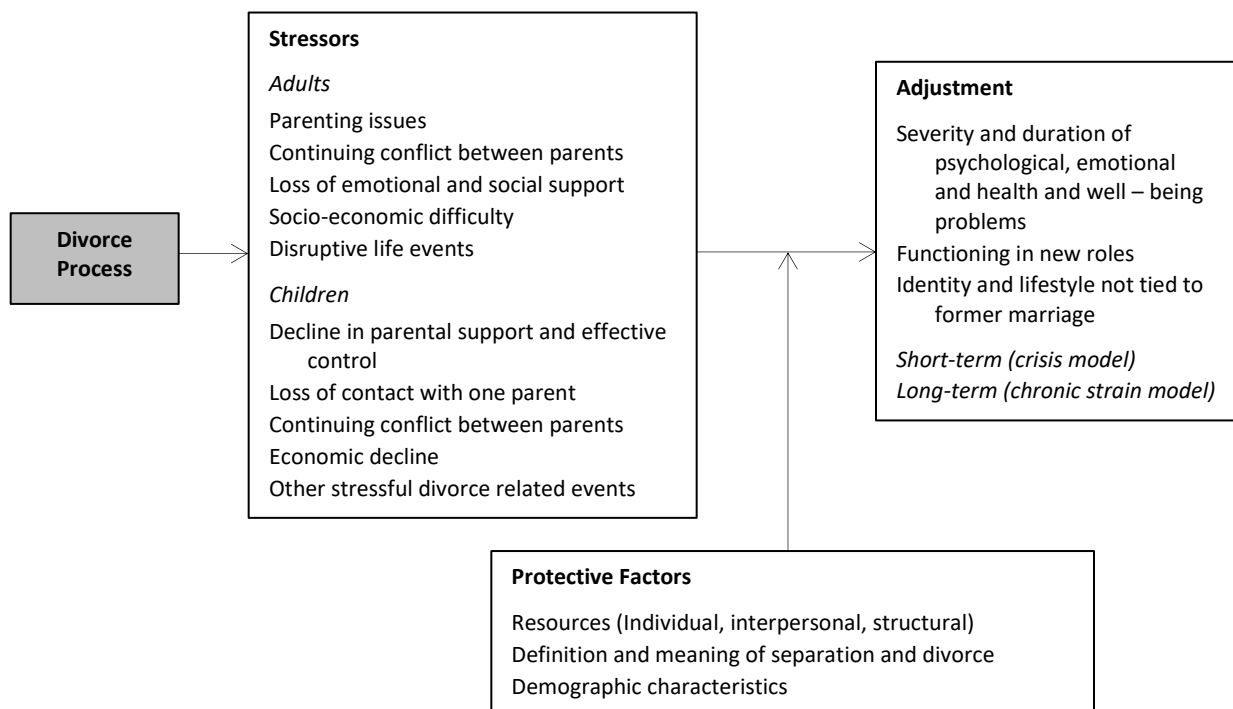


Figure 1. The divorce-stress-adjustment framework (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014)

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014) argues that divorce does not necessarily bring an end to the stress associated with an unhappy relationship. Rather, it paves the way for numerous new psychosocial stressors which often lead to adverse outcomes relative to physical and psychological health. Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) argued that viewing marital dissolution as a process beginning prior to the event of separation and lasting long after legal divorce allows for consideration of lowered psychological functioning prior to separation (i.e. social selection), as well as considering divorce as paving the way for numerous new psychosocial stressors that lead to lowered psychological functioning (i.e., social causation).

Amato suggests stressors that adults often face following divorce include parenting issues (e.g., gaining sole residential status of children or losing contact with one's children and associated difficulties), socio-economic difficulties, conflict with the ex-partner, weakening of emotional support following loss of social networks and other disruptive life events (e.g., moving house). In response to stressors, the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective theorises that individuals may experience a number of negative psychological, emotional and physical outcomes that exacerbate the ability to adjust to divorce, both short and long-term. Some adults may experience particular stressors as more debilitating than others, or may experience some stressors but not others. Viewed in this way, the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective supports ideas inherent in the social causation theory. However, this framework goes further by offering an explanation for why some stressors may be experienced temporarily, while others persist long after divorce

Specifically, the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective incorporates the crisis and chronic strain models to delineate the severity and duration of stressors associated with divorce. According to the crisis model, psychological distress is greatest at the time of divorce where the most difficulties are experienced. Over the next few years, effects on psychological functioning slowly dissipate as the individual adjusts to transition-related changes and comes to terms with the loss of their ex-partner (Strohschein et al., 2005). The chronic strain model suggests that the loss of a partner and the family unit creates strains (i.e., economic hardship; conflict) that maintain, or even exacerbate, psychological distress

following divorce, and these strains may persist indefinitely (Amato, 2000; Strohschein et al., 2005). Research lending support to the crisis model shows a decline in psychological distress 1 to 3 years following divorce where psychological functioning becomes comparable to stably married individuals (Booth & Amato, 1991; Lorenz, Wickrama, Longer, & Elder, 2006; Waite et al., 2009). Initial difficulties include (but are not limited to) grief associated with the loss of spouse, children, family roles and support networks, adversarial processes, and financial difficulty (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014). These difficulties have been shown to contribute to crises following separation and divorce (Strohschein et al., 2005). Findings in support of the chronic strain model show no evidence of improvement in psychological functioning during the time following divorce, unless individuals remarry (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Mastekaasa, 1995). In addition, Umberson and Williams (1993) found that strain among divorced fathers actually increased over time. Chronic strain models are associated with (but are not limited to) persistent stressors such as economic hardship, social isolation and sole parenting responsibilities (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014; Booth & Amato, 1991).

According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, protective factors interact with stressors to weaken the adverse effects of divorce. Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) described protective factors including individual factors (e.g., coping; self-esteem; self-efficacy), interpersonal factors (e.g., social support; family support), and structural factors (e.g., employment; community services; government assistance). Amato further posited that the ability to reconstruct support networks, the manner in which divorce is regarded by the individual (e.g., an opportunity for personal growth vs personal tragedy) and a number of demographic factors (e.g., age; gender; ethnicity; race; and culture) may also act as protective factors following divorce. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective a degree of variability exists with respect to outcomes experienced where individuals' ability to overcome stressors will depend on their access to, and configuration of, protective factors. Amato theorises that adjustment to stressors faced by individuals following divorce depends on the availability of protective factors, where successful adjustment leads to a return in adaptive functioning across most domains (e.g., family; work; lifestyle; identity). In

addition, adjustment is often the result of redevelopment of identities and lifestyles that are not tied to adults' previous unions.

Following the development of his framework, Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) argued that the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective considers individual and contextual differences in the way stressors and protective factors are experienced, and the factors related to subsequent adjustment. Specifically, he argued that despite approaches, models, perspectives, and theories that attempt to understand this experience, individuals continue to display either improved functioning following divorce, temporary declines in wellbeing, or exhibit persistent and longstanding psychological problems in response to stressors experienced. As such, Amato concluded that there is a continual need to understand and monitor adjustment factors following separation and divorce at an individual level (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014).

Many studies seeking to understand various constituents of the divorce experience over the last decade have benefitted from application of Amato's (2000, 2010, 2014) divorce-stress-adjustment framework (e.g., Forste & Heaton, 2004; Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2000; Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison, & Morselli, 2014). In the current study, this framework provided a suitable platform to organise, review and summarise the wealth of literature that offers preliminary understanding of the specific psychosocial factors associated with adjustment following separation and divorce. However, the divorce-stress-adjustment framework (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014) was developed in 2000 following a review of qualitative and quantitative research conducted in the 1990's. Therefore, the current review followed a slightly modified framework to ensure adequate representation of psychosocial factors identified since this time. In particular, information pertaining to children affected by parental separation was excluded from this review as such information was beyond the scope of this study. To learn more about children's experiences following parental separation and divorce, please see Amato (2000), Baxter, Weston and Qu (2011), Kelly and Emery (2003), and Strohschein (2012). 'Other stressful divorce-related events' were also excluded because this stressor is relatively ambiguous due to its idiosyncratic nature. Instead, literature with respect to 'legal issues' was added as this particular stressor

is frequently highlighted in separation and divorce scholarship. Literature regarding 'sole parenting responsibility or loss of custody of children' was imbued within the four categories of stressors, along with information pertaining to residential status differences, as research has begun to focus on differences in this area. Loss of emotional support was termed 'social problems' as an in-depth review revealed a plethora of issues in this area in addition to losing emotional support. Finally, the following review does not explicitly outline issues experienced during the estrangement process as these are often imbued within stressors, protective factors and factors associated with adjustment as part of the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. Therefore research in this area will be reviewed throughout the following three sections of this chapter.

Most of the literature reviewed in the following section is the product of international enquiry; however the small body of Australian studies in this area are also discussed. Similarly, there is a considerable lack of research examining the separation experience of parents who were formerly cohabiting. As such, literature reviewed maintains a strong focus on psychosocial factors associated with the *divorce* experience. Therefore, the term 'separation' in the current review refers to the time following physical separation, but prior to legal divorce, unless otherwise stated.

Stressors in the lives of separated and divorced individuals. Stressors, as part of the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, are factors that have the potential to decrease psychological health and wellbeing following separation and divorce (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014). With respect to stressors following separation and divorce, difficulty is often experienced when attempting to adequately describe what constitutes a stressor as opposed to a negative consequence or outcome. For example, conflict between ex-spouses is a well-known stressor associated with separation and divorce, and often leads to negative outcomes such as psychological distress. On the other hand, psychological distress may be the main contributing factor that leads to conflict between ex-spouses following separation and divorce. Therefore, the issue arises as to which is the stressor and which is the negative outcome. To remedy this problem, identified stressors in the current review will be

discussed as decreasing psychological health and wellbeing, and the specific negative consequences or outcomes will be discussed as they apply to each individual stressor. Similarly, gender and residential status differences in the experiences of stressors will be discussed in accordance with each specific stressor where applicable.

Economic and financial hardship. Economic and financial hardship has been internationally identified as a stressor following separation and divorce. Research has found that separated and divorced individuals have lowered standards of living, are subject to more poverty and encounter greater economic adversity than their married counterparts (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Bloom et al., 1978; Burkhauser, Duncan, Hauser & Berntsen, 1991; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Hao, 1996; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; King, 2008; Loxton, Mooney, & Young, 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Tein, Sandler & Zuatra, 2000; Zagorsky, 2005). Economic and financial hardship following separation and divorce is largely the result of the loss of a second income, legal costs, division of assets, changes in employment, changing residences, increasing child care responsibilities and welfare payments (de Vaus et al., 2014; Espenshade, 1979; Finnie, 1993; Hao, 1996; McManus & DiPrete, 2001; Smock, 1994; Teachman & Paasch, 1994; Weitzman, 1981). Experiences of all or any of these economic and financial difficulties leads to lowered psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing and mothers have been found to fare worse (Burkhauser et al., 1991; Gray & Chapman, 2007; Loxton et al., 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Nelson, 1994; Tein et al., 2000).

Economic and financial consequences for mothers have mostly been attributed to gaining the majority care time for children following separation and divorce. Mothers are faced with not only the loss of their husbands' income, legal costs and increased costs of daily living, but also with having to provide financially for their children (Espenshade, 1979; Gray & Chapman, 2007; Smock, 1994). The only exception is where mothers are better educated and part of the work force prior to separation and divorce (Bianchi, Subaiya & Kahn, 1999). Such findings have been evident in more recent examinations of the separation and divorce experience and may reflect social change over time (McManus & DiPrete, 2001). For example, early quantitative studies in this area reflected significant economic and financial declines for mothers as a result of residential status, and lowered

socio-economic status, educational attainment and employment opportunities (Bloom et al., 1978; Burkhauser et al., 1991; Nelson, 1994). However, as more and more women are becoming better educated and joining the workforce, the economic and financial consequences of separation and divorce appear to be changing (Gadalla, 2008; McManus & DiPrete, 2001).

One result of such changes is the finding that fathers may be impacted by the loss of their wives' income in a similar manner to the economic and financial hardship women experience following the loss of their husband's income (McManus & DiPrete, 2001). For example, McManus and DiPrete's (2001) analysed quantitative data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics in America and found that the most significant decline in men's standard of living following separation and divorce was attributed to an inability to compensate for the loss of their ex-partners income. They also found that voluntary and compulsory support payments (i.e., child support payments), and increased costs of living associated with maintaining involvement with children, were additional sources of strain for men following separation and divorce. Similarly, the idea that men are becoming more involved in child-care responsibilities has also been examined in recent literature (Gadalla, 2008; Greif, 1995; Hilton & Desrochers, 2000; Hook & Chalasani, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Research suggests that as care time of children increases for fathers, so too does economic and financial strain (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000; Hook & Chalasani, 2008; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Therefore, difficulties experienced by residential fathers with respect to economic and financial strain may be similar to those experienced by residential mothers.

Current estimates in Australia suggest that more than half of single parents experience poverty at one point or another following separation (AIHW, 2015; Butterworth, 2003; de Vaus et al., 2014; Phillips & Griffiths, 2004). Similarly, quantitative data from the Survey of Recently Separated Parents (De Maio et al., 2012) found that around 69% of parents reported experiencing financial difficulty. In terms of labour force participation following separation, data from the same study indicated around 85% of fathers and 59% of mothers were in paid employment (De Maio et al., 2012). Differences between the economic welfare of mothers and fathers following separation have been documented in

relevant Australian research (e.g., de Vaus et al., 2014; Sheehan, 2002). For example, recent quantitative longitudinal research conducted by de Vaus et al. (2014) found that in Australia's current economy, both mothers and fathers experience a significant economic decline following separation and divorce. However, fathers' recover faster than mothers; furthermore, fathers tend to rely more on income as a result of labour force participation (de Vaus et al., 2014). Although mothers' participation in the labour force has increased, they tend to rely more heavily on government benefits and maintain a higher percentage of pre-divorce assets compared to fathers.

Although sparse, Australian research reflects international studies finding that both mothers and fathers experience economic and financial declines following separation and divorce; however, mothers are impacted upon more significantly (De Maio et al., 2012). Reason for this finding may be that mothers in Australia continue to maintain the majority care time of children post-divorce. Therefore, participation in the work force is more difficult and everyday living and child care expenses are higher, despite government assistance and child support payments. Australian research findings do not support McManus and DiPrete's (2001) study which suggested that fathers may be experiencing more significant financial and economic declines following separation and divorce in response to the loss of second income provided by their ex-partner. However, it could be argued that where international research has, at times, identified increases in the financial and economic wellbeing of separated and divorced fathers (Bianchi et al., 1999), findings in Australia document economic and financial declines for both mothers and fathers (de Vaus et al., 2014). Therefore, perhaps the decline in economic and financial wellbeing for fathers reflects the loss of second income, among other determinants.

Continuing conflict with ex-spouse. Conflict between ex-partners has been internationally identified as a stressor for all individuals involved following separation and divorce and is associated with high levels of psychological distress (Cookston, Braver & Griffin, 2007; DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Symoens, Colman & Bracke, 2014). This stressor is most significant for parents due to issues associated with negotiating ongoing co-parenting relationships (Amato, 2000; Bonach, 2005; Hutson, 2007;

Masheter, 1997; Symoens, Bastaits, Mortelmans & Bracke, 2013). Conflict following separation and divorce may be characterised by distrust, anger, hostility, verbal or physical abuse, litigation over custody, and difficulties associated with communication and co-parenting (Levite & Cohen, 2012). Ongoing conflict between mothers and fathers following separation and divorce is most commonly related to child support, visitation, property division, remarriage and the rearing of children (Amato, 2000; Bonach, 2005; Hallman, Dienhart & Beaton, 2007; Hutson, 2007). Where the relationship between ex-partners is highly conflictual, research has found that these individuals experience more difficulty adjusting to separation and divorce, and such difficulties have been reported to continue for up to three years post-divorce or more (Cookston et al., 2007; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Symoens et al., 2014).

The majority of research examining conflict between ex-partners following separation and divorce refers to attachment theory and separation anxiety (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Masheter, 1991, 1997). For example, Levite and Cohen (2012) stated that conflict is often a result of intense emotional relationships where hostility serves as protection from dealing with difficult and complex emotions that are part of the separation and divorce process. Ex-partners may become immobilised in the separation and divorce transition where the post-separation relationship remains defined by conflict (Levite & Cohen, 2012). Problems are heightened for parents who must negotiate constructive co-parenting relationships whilst dealing with the loss of attachment from their ex-partner and subsequent separation anxiety.

Gender role theory research finds that inter-parental conflict following separation and divorce may affect women more than men due to differences in men and women's values (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Symoens et al., 2014). For example, men tend to value autonomy and power, whereas women tend to value involvement and commitment as part of their relationship identities (Symoens et al., 2014). Therefore, it is expected that women may experience more strain associated with conflict in interpersonal relationships when compared with men (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Symoens et al., 2014). Yet, other research has found that both men and women report relatively similar experiences of conflict in post-

separation and divorce relationships; however, women tend to report significantly higher experiences of extreme emotional abuse, physical abuse and fear (Forste & Heaton, 2004). Other studies have found that fathers are more affected by conflict that arises as a result of parenting and visitation issues following separation and divorce (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Research finding support for this idea has incorporated samples of non-residential fathers in order to examine the consequences of this post-separation and divorce parenting arrangement (Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993). Such studies find that that non-residential fathers experience significant distress as a result of conflict with ex-partners over attempts to maintain contact with their children (Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Troilo & Coleman, 2012; Umberson & Williams, 1993). These studies further suggest that conflict arises as a result of strained relationships between ex-spouses, where fathers feel consistently thwarted by their ex-partners (Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993). As such, conflict has been reported by fathers as the result of ex-partners erecting barriers to contact with children; ex-partners turning their children against them; parenting differences; lack of respect and trust from ex-partners; and significant difficulties with ex-partners' families (Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993).

There are a handful of studies that provide some insight into the incidence of conflict in post-separation and divorce in Australian families (de Maio et al., 2012; Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Kaspiew et al., 2009; Natalier, 2012). De Maio et al. (2012) noted that around 12.3% of fathers and 12.6% of mothers reported high conflict in their post-separation relationships. This was a slight decline in parent reports of conflict in post-separation relationships compared to data collected in 2008 (14% fathers, 13.1% mothers; Kaspiew et al., 2009).

A study conducted by Halford and Sweeper (2013) provides more insight into conflict in post-separation relationships in Australia. They examined trajectories of adjustment to separation and divorce with a sample of separated (i.e., previously cohabiting) and divorced (i.e., previously married) Australian parents. Their quantitative

research suggested that co-parenting conflict was a significant problem following separation and divorce and did not abate over a two year trajectory. Interestingly, they found that co-parenting conflict was experienced as more severe for couples who were previously cohabiting compared to those who were previously married. Halford and Sweeper's (2013) study mirrors international findings that continuing conflict is a significant issue that may persist for many years following separation and divorce (Cookston et al., 2007; DeGarmo et al., 2008).

Legal involvement. Legal involvement has been internationally identified as a stressor that impacts on psychological health and wellbeing following separation and divorce (Dillon & Emery, 1996; Kelly, 2003; Kourlis, Taylor, Schepard, & Pruett, 2013; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Pruett & Jackson, 1999; Rodgers, Smyth & Robinson, 2004). Following separation and divorce, parents commonly come in to contact with the legal system as a result of parenting arrangement disputes, property and financial settlement disputes, or in more extreme cases, violence, abuse and safety concerns. Most of the research in this area finds that individuals involved in high conflict relationships following separation and divorce will access legal services (Dillon & Emery, 1996; Kelly, 2003; Rodgers et al., 2004). However, legal involvement may also occur despite relatively amicable separation and divorce transitions (Kelly, 2003).

Kelly (2003) argues that pre-separation and divorce conflict, the way in which separation occurs and mental illness contribute to persisting legal disputes in the context of separation and divorce. In addition, individuals may be more likely to be involved in adverse legal disputes if the manner in which separation occurred was particularly traumatic, where recovery may be prolonged and characterised by attempts to seek revenge on the ex-partner. Kelly (2003) suggests that it is not uncommon for one party (usually the high-conflict parent) to continuously pull the other party through child-focused legal conflict, where the latter tends to become emotionally disengaged following repeated emotional abuse and financial depletion. Whatever the reason for involvement in adversarial processes, research suggests that experiences with the legal system are stressful, time consuming, costly and emotionally draining for both parents (Dillon & Emery, 1996; Kelly,

2003; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Pruett & Jackson, 1999; Rodgers et al., 2004). Most of the literature in this area has examined legal involvement with respect to parenting disputes where less attention has been paid to property or financial disputes.

One qualitative study that examined parental perceptions of lawyers and litigation during the divorce process (both financial and parenting disputes) was conducted by Pruett and Jackson (1999). Parents from 21 families were included in the study where divorce had occurred in the last 6 months and families had been involved in some form of litigation or court involvement. Most parents (88%) felt that no aspect of the legal process was positive, reporting that litigation increased anger and conflict and that parents felt left out of the overall decision-making process. As a result, parents felt the legal system was ineffective and corrupt. The most common complaints centred on the costs of litigation, the quality of representation, increases in parental conflict and communication problems. For example, many parents in the study felt that the fees were 'outrageous' and that the outcome of their dispute was inferior to the lawyer's interest in their money (Pruett & Jackson, 1999). Parents also reported feeling that their lawyers were unorganised, inefficient, and focused on minor details in favour of more important details which resulted in time-consuming negotiations. Parents also felt that communication with their lawyer was ineffective; reporting feelings of uncertainty about how the legal process may affect them, that plans were changed at the last minute, that lawyers failed to communicate important information and that lawyers failed to argue for what parents wanted. Finally, most parents (71%) reported that the litigation process exacerbated high conflict relationships between parents that existed prior to involvement in legal processes. As a result parents felt that lawyers actually encouraged increasing conflict as opposed to bringing about amicable deliberations.

The research conducted by Pruett and Jackson (1999) involved perceptions of both mothers and fathers following litigation experiences of the divorce process. However, the majority of research in this area finds that legal involvement causes the most distress for fathers (Kruk, 2010; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Parkinson, 2010). The reason for this finding has been attributed to dissatisfaction of outcomes relating to perceptions of gender biases

of the legal system. For example, Lehr and MacMillan (2001) found that fathers had a general sense of frustration, anger, and helplessness relating to experiences with the legal system. Frustration with the law centred upon a lack of confidence that the court would rule in their favour, that as a father they possessed fewer rights than the mother of their children, and that their involvement in the judicial system came at an emotional and financial cost they felt they could not afford (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). Similarly, Kruk (2010) found that fathers consistently reported feeling un-supported and disregarded by court systems and other social institutions, and felt that the paternal role was undervalued by the legal system. Fathers saw the legal system as the most significant emotional hardship following separation and divorce in Kruk's (2010) study. Until recently, outcomes of litigation following separation and divorce have mostly resulted in the majority of care time being awarded to mothers (Parkinson, 2010). As such, fathers are more often than not the instigators of legal involvement and tend to have the most to lose from the adversarial process. Adverse experiences of fathers' attempts to spend more time with their children, coupled with research highlighting the importance of father involvement, has led to international movements towards gender neutrality within legal systems (Parkinson, 2010). Therefore, recent research suggests that more fathers are gaining at least shared care time with their children following legal involvement as a result of residency disputes (Bemiller, 2008; Kaspiw et al., 2009; Parkinson, 2010). As such, recent research has begun to show that mothers are not as satisfied with increased father involvement in comparison with fathers (see Bauserman, 2012, DeMaio et al., 2012, Kaspiw et al., 2009 and Trinder, 2010).

Available research examining the effects of legal involvement for parents following separation and divorce in Australia is surprisingly sparse. Although one could examine Australian commonwealth government reports (i.e., Graycar, 2012; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, & Hull, 2003) that provide insight into legislative changes in response to problems associated with Family Law and court involvement, most of these reports centre upon considerations of the best interests of children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Findings from the Survey of Recently Separated Parents (De Maio et al., 2012) provide some indication of satisfaction

with court-related involvement following separation and divorce. This study examined parent perceptions of how well the family law system met their needs, as well as the efficacy of specific pathways used. Results indicated that 61.8% of fathers and 39.8% of mothers felt the family law system met the needs of mothers. Results further indicated 20.8% of fathers and 37.3% of mothers felt the family law system met the needs of fathers. These results are interesting and appear to reflect international studies that find fathers are generally less satisfied with legal involvement following separation and divorce (Kruk, 2010; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). However, caution should be taken when considering these findings as the Survey of Recently Separated Parents examined families who reported family violence alongside families who did not in response to recent legislative changes (Family Law Amendment [Family Violence and other Measures Act] 2011[Cth]).

Social problems. Another significant stressor referred to in international separation and divorce scholarship is the loss of important social relationships and subsequent social difficulties (Amato, 1994; Booth & Amato, 1991; Greif, 1997; Nelson, 1995; Propst, Pardington, Ostrum & Watkins, 1986; Stewart, 2005). Research indicates that social support and social networks decrease most significantly in the early stages of separation and divorce (Nelson, 1995). Initial declines in support networks are due to the loss of a significant other and the social networks that were gained from the pre-divorce relationship (i.e., family; mutual friends; neighbours) (Amato, 1994). The initial stages of separation and divorce are also characterised by residential change. Residential change involves a loss of community social networks, community services, formal support and neighbourly social networks (Booth & Amato, 1991; Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, moving to another neighbourhood may affect already vulnerable social networks and activate a number of other issues in relation to arrangements for children (e.g., distance from school, friends and the other parent) (Symoens et al., 2013).

Although, research finds that men similarly lose important social supports provided within the pre-divorce relationship, women have been noted to experience higher levels of depression and lower levels of emotional and physical health in response to social loss when compared to men. For example, in Stewart's (2005) quantitative study on the

adjustment of 245 lone-parenting women following marital separation, women's satisfaction with their wider social support network was a significant predictor of life satisfaction and had a substantial influence on levels of depression. This finding was attributed to the idea that women value important social relationships more, access social supports more, and gain more emotional satisfaction from social relationships (Milardo, 1987; Stewart, 2005). In addition, women have been found to experience more social difficulties in relation to responsibilities associated with single-parenthood (Amato, Rezac, & Booth, 1995; Nelson, 1995).

On the other hand, although fathers tend to mourn the loss of their ex-partner and associated support networks in a similar capacity to mothers, they are often less likely to seek emotional support and help. Dominant constructions of masculinity have been found to impact heavily upon men's and fathers' willingness and ability to seek emotional help and support (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010). For example, research has found that men are much more likely to deal with social losses by replacing their ex-partner quickly with other sexual partners and engaging in frantic social activity, and that such behaviours suggest that fathers are coping relatively well with separation and divorce (Baum, 2003; Campbell & Pike, 1998). More recently however, Fletcher and StGeorge (2010) challenged this notion suggesting that such ideas are outdated and have little evidentiary basis. They argued that research viewing men's help-seeking behaviours as insufficient fails to consider socially determined explanations such as lack of services available, job insecurity, rigid work conditions, a lack of male care providers, and practitioner gender biases and disinterest. Despite gender differences, both men and women experience significant social difficulties following separation and divorce; however, the way in which such difficulties present to men and women may differ.

Another social issue often referred to in the relevant literature is the stigma attached to the experience of separation and divorce. Stigmas associated with separation and divorce relate to either residential status or social perceptions of separation and divorce. For example, research suggests that parents often experience rejection from social networks in response to the idea that separation and divorce goes against conventional

social norms (Greif, 1997; Gubernskaya, 2010; Kielty, 2005, 2006; Stavrova, Fetchenhauer & Schlosser, 2008). Although increases in the social institution of cohabitation in favour of marriage suggest that the way in which society views marriage may be changing, recent research suggests otherwise (Gubernskaya, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2002). For example, Kim and Kim (2002) examined the stigma associated with divorce in Asia and found that divorce is still considered a social problem; however, results differed between first divorce and consecutive divorces. Similarly, multi-national research conducted by Stavrova et al. (2008) examined perceptions of cohabitation and marriage in terms of social and gender norms across 30 countries. Although this research does not provide an understanding of the way in which society currently views separation and divorce, it does provide insight into the way in which societal norms may be changing. They found that cohabiting women were viewed as not conforming to gender role standards and reason for cohabiting was attributed to their partner's lack of desire to marry them. They also found that cohabiting women were more unhappy than married women due to their own self-beliefs and expectations of gender role norms. This research found no comparable effect on male gender roles across cohabitation and marriage. These two studies appear to suggest that societal norms may not necessarily be reflecting current trends in family and relationship composition, especially for women. As such, it appears that stigmas associated with deviation from more conservative ideals of family life (i.e., cohabitation, divorce, separation) may still be present in today's society. Stavrova et al. (2008) did caution that there may be differences in the experience of stigma associated with societal norms in more conservative versus more contemporary countries. This argument may contribute to findings of prevailing stigmatisation associated with divorce in Kim and Kim's (2002) study which was based in Asia. It is possible that their findings may reflect the more conservative nature of social norms present in Asia when compared to other countries (i.e., America, Australia, England).

Research has more consistently identified social difficulty as a result of stigmas associated with unconventional parenting arrangements (Greif, 1997; Kielty, 2005, 2006). For example, stigmas have been found to impact on non-residential mothers significantly (Greif, 1997; Kielty, 2005, 2006). Greif (1997) suggests that courts are becoming more

gender neutral when deliberating on care time outcomes for children, therefore rates of non-residential mothers are increasing (Greif, 1997). In addition, Greif (1997) states that the labour force is becoming increasingly 'female friendly' where more women are pursuing careers and are more willing to relinquish care time. Despite such changes, women have first and foremost been defined as mothers and any variation from this continues to lead to perceptions of unfitness, deviance, mental illness, and engenders guilt and social disapproval (Herrerias, 1994). For example, King (2008) points out that one major difference regarding the role reversal of non-residential mothers compared with fathers is the stigma they are often subjected to. She reports that social stigmas may lead to rejection from family, friends and social networks. As a result, non-residential mothers often experience an internal struggle characterised by shame, loss and grief. In addition, they believe that they are not fulfilling their natural role as a mother which may contribute to an increase in mental health problems and suicidal behaviours (Greif, 1997; King, 2008).

In Australia there have been a few studies that have examined social difficulties following separation and divorce (Gray, de Vaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2011; Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Patulny, 2012). For example, Patulny (2012) compared reports of social contact (i.e., frequency of contact with social networks), social support (i.e., ability to receive assistance in times of need and crises and ability to confide in social networks) and social efficacy (i.e., ability to discuss important issues with social networks) among a sample of men and women (parents and childless individuals) who were either in a relationship (married and de facto) or separated. Patulny (2012) found that separated fathers and mothers reported less social support from social networks and less social efficacy; this effect was greater for separated fathers. Patulny's (2012) research found that although contact with social networks increased, these networks did not necessarily offer emotional support, and fathers were less likely to actively seek such support. Halford and Sweeper (2013) also investigated the issue of social support and found that formerly cohabiting individuals reported more loneliness following separation; however, the effects dissipated over time. In addition, they found that low levels of social support were related to loneliness and psychological distress in the initial stages following separation; however, psychological

distress did not lessen over time (2-year period). Results from these Australian studies support international studies that have identified social problems as a stressor following separation and divorce.

Protective factors in the lives of separated and divorced individuals. Protective factors, as part of the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective are those factors that buffer against stressors and reduce the potential for decreased psychological health and wellbeing (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014). There are a number of ways protective factors have been found to increase the likelihood of adjustment following separation and divorce including reducing the impact of stressors or groups of stressors, interrupting a series of negative events associated with stressors, and providing opportunities for growth, access to resources or new positive directions in life (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008).

Individual factors. Individual factors are unique characteristics that serve to lessen the negative effects of stressors associated with separation and divorce (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; Park, Sanchez & Brynildsen, 2011; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Stewart, 2005; Tein et al., 2000; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). Research has identified factors such as high self-esteem and self-worth (Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008), high self-efficacy and personal mastery (McKelvey & McKenry, 2000), high levels of locus of control (Stewart, 2005), adaptive coping skills (Tein et al., 2000), and social skills (Patulny, 2012).

With respect to self-perceptions (i.e., self-esteem; self-worth; self-efficacy; personal mastery; locus of control), Vukalovich and Caltabiano (2008) found that individuals with feelings of high self-esteem and self-worth, who felt good about themselves, their emotional self, their path in life and who felt in control of their life, had a better chance of successful adjustment following divorce in their study. Similarly, Park et al. (2011) examined individual self-worth in a sample of divorced participants and found that individuals scoring higher on measures of self-worth were more likely to report better adjustment. With respect to self-efficacy, Hilton and Kopera-Frye (2006) state that parents who are confident in their skills, resources and ability to overcome adversity are less likely to experience

negative outcomes following separation and divorce and adjust better than those who lack self-efficacy and personal mastery. Furthermore, Stewart (2005) suggested that locus of control was an important factor relating to successful adjustment. She found that divorced mothers with a high internal locus of control experienced the least amount of post-divorce stress and social maladjustment, and reported greater life satisfaction. Marks and Lambert (1998) examined self-esteem in participants undergoing divorce transitions and found that women experienced greater declines in self-esteem following divorce when compared with men. Similarly, research conducted by Vukalovich and Caltabiano (2008) found that women benefitted more from a self-esteem building intervention when compared with men. Together these findings suggest that women may experience greater declines in self-perceptions, but may have more to gain from interventions aimed at increasing self-perceptions following separation and divorce.

Research consistently points to positive and adaptive coping as another individual factor that assists adjustment following separation and divorce (Kulik & Heine-Cohen, 2011; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Tein et al., 2000). The majority of the literature in this area suggests that more positive styles of coping such as problem-focused coping and approach coping (i.e., coping strategies aimed at addressing problems actively to reduce negative effects caused by events or stress) tend to increase the likelihood of better adjustment for individuals following stressful life events, as opposed to emotion-focused coping or avoidant coping (i.e., coping strategies aimed at reducing emotional responses caused by stressful life events such as avoidance, distraction or catastrophising) (Ben-Zur, 2009; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). For example, Richmond and Christensen (2001) investigated coping styles and adjustment following separation and divorce. They found that individuals who relied more on approach coping (i.e., actively seeking support and guidance) were better adjusted as opposed to those who relied more upon avoidance coping (i.e., passive appraisal). Interestingly however, they reported a curvilinear relationship between adjustment following divorce and passive appraisal (i.e., a measure of avoidance coping), where participants were found to benefit from passive appraisal in the early stage of coping with this stressful event.

Research has also found that individuals who have good social skills are often better able to adjust to separation and divorce (Tein et al., 2000; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). Social skills are not to be confused with social support which will be discussed in the next section. Social skills are the particular set of skills that individuals possess that assist them to maintain existing social networks as well as create new social networks. Both Australian and international studies have found that these skills are important tools for separated and divorced individuals in consideration of the significant impact this stressful life event has on pre-divorce social and emotional support networks (Nelson, 1995; Patulny, 2012). Therefore, an individual's ability to hold on to existing social networks, as well as organise and secure adequate social networks, is an important factor following separation and divorce (Patulny, 2012). Individuals who have good social skills tend to have better access to emotional, instrumental, and informational support needed for successful adjustment to separation and divorce (Patulny, 2012; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). Research finds that mothers often have better social skills than fathers, and men are less likely to actively seek social support (Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). In addition, research has found that men generally acquire social networks through intimate partners, where skills necessary for creating and maintaining social networks are often not a primary consideration (Patulny, 2012).

Interpersonal factors. There are a number of interpersonal factors identified as protective following separation and divorce. First and foremost, research consistently identifies availability and use of social support as a significant predictor of positive divorce adjustment (Choi & Marks, 2013; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Gähler, 2006; Hewitt, Turrell, & Giskes, 2012; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Sakraida, 2005; Wang & Amato, 2000). Studies find that social support may be accessed via social networks that include friends, family, co-workers, new partners, support group members and from children's social networks (i.e., children's friends and their parents) (Buehler & Legg, 1993; Choi & Marks, 2013; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Gähler, 2006; Hewitt et al., 2012; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Sakraida, 2005; Wang & Amato, 2000). In their study on receipt of social support and psychological wellbeing following separation and divorce, Buehler and Legg (1993) reported that an

important influence on psychological wellbeing following separation and divorce was the availability and use of social support.

Literature is inconsistent with respect to which form of social support may be the most beneficial following separation and divorce. For example, emotional support that assists in reducing distress following separation and divorce has been identified as a beneficial form of support following separation and divorce (Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet, & Kitson, 1998). Early quantitative research conducted by Milardo (1987) found that family members were more likely to be critical of separated and divorced individuals, whereas friends provided more impartial emotional support as well as less judgement and interference which was more beneficial for divorced participants (Milardo, 1987). Similarly, Miller et al. (1998) found that support in the form of having someone to confide in was significantly related to lowered distress following separation and divorce. However, support that came in the form of material assistance (i.e., economic assistance) was associated with increased distress as a result of feelings of indebtedness. More recent research has found that, dependent on residential status, material support in the form of assistance with difficulties such as child care and parenting is more beneficial for parents than emotional support (DeGarmo et al., 2008).

Research examining gender differences in the availability and use of social support following separation and divorce is conflicting (Diedrick, 1991; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). Richmond and Christensen (2001) found that acquiring social support, mobilising formal support and seeking spiritual support significantly predicted the physical and psychological health of women, but not men in their study. Yet, other studies have found that men rely more on socio-emotional support provided by friends and family when compared with women (Duran-Aydintung, 1998; Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010; Milardo, 1987). For example, one Australian study found that men were not less likely, or less well-equipped, to access appropriate support following separation and divorce (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010). Instead, the men in this study reported benefitting immensely from social support, but felt they came up against a number of obstacles that delayed or impeded help-seeking behaviours (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010).

These findings suggest that men and women may benefit similarly from social and emotional support; however, men may be deterred from help seeking due to difficulties experienced with formal support as opposed to a reluctance or inability to actively seek help.

Support from peers has been found to facilitate a sense of belonging, a safe environment for expressing emotional difficulties, and reduced feelings of stigmatisation from external sources (Bell, Charping, & Strecker, 1990; Lee & Hett, 1990; Øygard, Thuen, & Solvang, 2000; Vera, 1993; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). Øygard et al. (2000) examined the benefits of a divorce support group. They found that participants benefitted immensely from validation and empathy from other group members who had had similar experiences, which led to catharsis and normalising experiences for these individuals. Øygard et al. (2000) further found that group cohesiveness was associated with lowered anxiety, fear and loneliness for participants. In addition, they further found that participants who did not feel that they could access support from external sources were able to do so within a peer group environment. Similarly, Vukalovich and Caltabiano (2008) reported that their group intervention, aimed at assisting adjustment to separation and divorce, facilitated greater social involvement and an increase in social resources which assisted adjustment, as well as allowing group members to begin to detach and redefine themselves as distinct from ex-partners.

Most importantly, research suggests that new intimate relationships may be particularly beneficial in assisting adjustment following separation and divorce. Studies have repeatedly found positive associations between post-separation and divorce adjustment and remarriage or new intimate relationships (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Symoens et al., 2014). Wang and Amato (2000) suggest that of all forms of social support, new romantic relationships may be the most useful in facilitating post-separation and divorce adjustment. One argument relating to this finding is that remarriage not only provides companionship, protecting against loneliness following separation and divorce, but also signifies economic advantage providing a buffer against risks associated with economic and financial difficulties (Shapiro, 1996). In addition, new relationships have been shown to

reduce health and psychological problems as well as weaken preoccupation with ex-spouses (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Symoens et al., 2014). For example, Symoens et al. (2014) quantitatively examined intimate relationships in the context of post-divorce conflict. They found that both men and women who had formed new intimate relationships following divorce were significantly more satisfied with their life, felt less depressed and reported higher levels of self-esteem and mastery.

Structural factors. Education, employment and income have been reported as structural factors that buffer against the adverse effects of separation and divorce (Amato & James, 2010; Wang & Amato, 2000). For example, results of Wang and Amato's (2000) quantitative study found that well-educated individuals had better problem-solving skills and a higher locus of control, and therefore possessed better resources to assist them to cope following separation and divorce. They similarly found that employment acted as a buffer against the negative effects of separation and divorce by not only providing income but also by providing a sense of self-worth and independence (Wang & Amato, 2000). In addition, they found that psychological distress was higher among single mothers on public benefits compared with mothers who were part of the workforce. Other Australian research found that the more support single fathers received from their place of employment and work colleagues, the fewer changes they needed to make to their routines and the better their relationship was with their children (Turner, Monk, & Mudaly, 1998).

Community services and supportive government policies that work to assist parents through the difficult time of separation and divorce may also be protective. Studies have found that community resources such as counselling, group interventions, community education, and community programs and strategies are beneficial for separating and divorcing parents (Amato, 2010; Douglas, 2006; Emery, 1994; Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001; Humphreys, Fernandes, Gano-Phillips, Bhana, & Fincham, 1993; Parkinson, 2010; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Rodgers et al., 2004; Taylor, 2004; Vera, 1993; Zimpfer, 1990). For example, Pollet and Lombreglia (2008) examined parent education programs and parental adjustment following separation and divorce in America. They found that parents who were mandated to engage in these programs (aimed at

teaching parents about the needs of children post-separation and divorce, co-operative co-parenting, and minimising conflict) reported better inter-parental communication and cooperation, and less conflict. Mediation has also been associated with higher rates of child contact with the non-residential parent, more involvement of the non-residential parent, better compliance with child support payments, better communication between parents, and greater parental satisfaction (Emery et al., 2001; Emery, 2011; Robert et al., 1994).

Definition and meaning of separation and divorce. Research suggests that the definition and meaning individuals attribute to separation and divorce can be protective. There are two main facets to this idea. The first is how individuals define their experience with respect to factors that contributed to the separation and divorce experience. Research finds that the reasons for separation and divorce, as well as the way separation and divorce eventuated, may contribute to better adjustment (Sakraida, 2008; Steiner, Suarez, Sells, & Wykes, 2011; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001). Experiences may differ depending upon who initiated the separation and whether the separation was the result of a particular event such as infidelity, conflict, abuse or external processes (i.e., cultural differences, relocation) (Gray & Silver, 1990; Hewitt & Turrell, 2011; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Wallerstein, 1986).

For example, in most cases, one individual will want the divorce more than the other (Emery, 1994). The unhappily married spouse who initiated the separation may therefore experience more relief and improvements in wellbeing compared with the happily married spouse. Findings in this area are mixed, however, research generally finds that initiators are more in control during the separation and divorce process, adapt better emotionally and psychologically, and generally experience relief following the end of the relationship (Baum, 2007). Although, post-separation difficulties are not completely absent among initiators (Buehler, 1987). Other research finds that both initiators and non-initiators may experience emotional and psychological difficulty following the decision to divorce, however differences may be evident in the time taken to adjust to such an event (Sweeney, 2002). Research in this area finds that the relationship between initiation and non-initiation of separation and divorce points to longer adjustment time for non-initiators, yet differences tended to be brief in longitudinal studies (Sweeney, 2002). For example, Hewitt and Turrell

(2011) quantitatively examined the health consequences of Australian separated and divorced individuals, focusing specifically on initiator status. They incorporated scales of functional health and wellbeing including the SF-36 which measured physical functioning, role-physical functioning, bodily pain, general health, vitality, social functioning, role-emotional functioning and mental health. Results indicated that non-initiators scored lower on measures of mental health, physical health and wellbeing. They ascribed reason for this finding to manifestations of feelings of helplessness and lack of control that led to poorer wellbeing following separation and divorce.

On the other hand, there is a body of research finding that separation and divorce itself is protective in the context of highly conflictual and problematic marriages (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006; Wang & Amato, 2000; Wheaton, 1990). Research in this area finds that separation and divorce can be a relief from the negative effects of a problematic marriage on health and wellbeing. However, Kalmijn and Monden (2006) caution that such relief may still be experienced within the context of the stressful and turbulent nature of separation and divorce. Specifically, studies have found that individuals who were in relatively conflict free and satisfying marriages are more likely to experience separation as unwelcome or unexpected, whereas those involved in marriages that were characterised by high conflict and distress are likely to experience relief and increased psychological functioning following separation and divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Symoens et al., 2014; Wheaton, 1990).

The second facet of the definition and meaning of separation and divorce as protective refers to the meaning individuals attribute to the event itself. Most research finds that individuals who have more positive attitudes towards divorce, or are perhaps less committed to the values and ideals inherent in the bond of marriage, are likely to adjust better to separation and divorce than individuals who hold negative attitudes towards this event and are likely to view their divorce as a moral failure (Booth & Amato, 1991; DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Wang & Amato, 2000). For example, Simon and Marcussen (1999) examined two waves of quantitative data (N = 10, 005) from

the National Survey of Families and Households in America in order to assess the effect of individual beliefs relating to the permanence, desirability and importance of marriage on experiences of depression post-divorce. They found that individuals who held more liberal beliefs about the permanence, desirability and importance of marriage were better adjusted following divorce.

Recently the issue of the meaning of separation and divorce has been investigated relating to spirituality and religiosity (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009, 2011; Steiner et al., 2011; Webb, Ellison, McFarland, Lee, Morton, & Walters, 2010). For example, Krumrei et al. (2009) found that individuals who experienced divorce as a non-spiritual loss reported less disillusionment and despair as opposed to individuals who viewed it as a sacred loss. They also found that greater use of adaptive spiritual coping methods (coping strategies characterised by working together with God to manage the divorce) were linked to higher levels of post-traumatic growth. This finding was similar to that of Steiner et al. (2011) who found that women who attributed spiritual meaning and purpose to their divorce in a positive manner reported better adjustment on measures of self-worth, disentanglement, anger, grief, social trust, and social self-worth. These findings suggest that individuals who appraise their divorce as a desecration of spiritual and religious beliefs may fare worse than those who either do not have such values or those who are able to positively reframe the spiritual or religious purpose and meaning of their divorce.

Demographic factors. Factors such as gender, age, race and ethnicity and the presence of the children have been suggested as buffers against risks associated with separation and divorce (Kalmijn, 2010; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Simon, 2002; Wang & Amato, 2000). Research examining whether gender may be protective following separation and divorce is inconsistent. However, the finding that men and women often experience this stressful life event differently appears consistent. For example, Simon (2002) posited that differences in the experience of separation and divorce across gender are best understood via an examination of emotional processes unique to males and females, as opposed to discerning gender differences in experiences through application of arbitrary measurement. To demonstrate, early examinations of the influence of gender on the

experience of separation and divorce found that men experienced this event as less distressing than women as they were less likely to experience economic and financial difficulties and were less likely to have to deal with strains associated with full time care of children (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Doherty et al., 1989; Marks & Lambert, 1998). Other studies have found that women were better off following separation and divorce because they were more likely to have initiated the divorce and had better social networks and social skills (Masheter, 1991; Wallerstein, 1986). Such inconsistency across studies may reflect problematic measurement and consideration of gender role theories that dictate the need to consider how coping mechanisms differ across gender.

Gender differences in the experience of separation and divorce acknowledged above may be changing (Raley, Bianchi, & Wang, 2012). For example, earlier research finding that men were better off following separation and divorce because they were less likely to experience economic and financial difficulty and were less likely to have care of the children may not necessarily be as relevant in the current social climate where statistics suggest rates of shared care and residential post-separation arrangements are becoming more common for fathers (Kelly, 2007; Smyth, Rodgers, Allen, & Son, 2012). Similarly, some research finds that men are becoming increasingly more efficient at accessing appropriate and beneficial supports following separation and divorce (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010). On the other hand, women experiencing separation and divorce in the current social climate may be better educated, more involved in the labour force, and may have parental roles that are more equally distributed between themselves and their ex-spouses (Smyth et al., 2012; Doherty et al., 1989).

With regard to age as a protective factor, Frode (2000) found that younger individuals tended to adjust better to marital dissolution. However, he reports that this finding is generally confounded by length of marriage where individuals who were married for a shorter period of time tend to cope better with separation than those married for longer periods of time. Other explanations of this finding include the fact that divorce is more uncommon in older adults; older adults tend to hold more conservative attitudes towards divorce; older adults are less competent in their ability to effectively and

appropriately implement coping skills; psychological problems are more prevalent in older adults; and forming new support networks and relationships is more difficult for older adults (Wang & Amato, 2000). Alternatively, research has found that adjustment to separation and divorce may be more difficult for younger individuals in terms of psychological wellbeing, where younger individuals are less able to actively regulate emotions compared with older individuals (Marks & Lambert, 1998). Yet, more recent research finds that older adults who remain strong in their ideals regarding the sanctity of marriage concomitant to social norms at the time they were married may experience significant adjustment difficulties when compared with younger individuals who have more liberal attitudes about separation and divorce in line with redefined and evolving social norms (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

Some studies examining race and ethnicity following separation and divorce find that Blacks adjust better than Whites (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000). However, other studies have found that experiences of separation and divorce are similar across race and ethnicity (Aldous & Ganey, 1999; Amato, 2000; Neff & Schluter, 1994; Umberson & Williams, 1993; Wang & Amato, 2000). Therefore, available research suggests weak (if any) differences across experiences of separation and divorce for race and ethnicity; however, this area of research is still at a preliminary stage. In response to the lack of consistency across studies, most literature suggests that marital dissolution causes distress and adversity irrespective of race, ethnicity or culture (Amato, 1994, 2000; Mastekaasa, 1994a; Parra, Arkowitz, Hannah, & Vasquez, 1995; Stack & Eshleman, 1998). One exception to this idea is the finding that cultures bound by stronger religiosity and social norms experience greater distress following separation and divorce when compared with cultures characterised by more liberal and relativistic social norms (Kalmijn, 2010). For example, Kalmijn (2010) recently used multilevel models for 38 developed countries to examine cultural differences in the experience of divorce. He found weak support for greater effects of divorce in countries that have more conventional norms, but only for religious persons.

Research also finds a number of beneficial factors associated with the presence of children following separation and divorce (Amato et al., 1995; Amato, Kane & James, 2011; Plummer & Koch-Hattem, 1986). For example, older children have been found to provide support both socially and materially (Amato et al., 1995). Most consistent within research in this area, however, is the finding that parents with majority care of their children experience less change in their living situation, are better emotionally regulated, and report less feelings of loneliness, insecurity and helplessness (Kruk, 2010).

Adjustment to separation and divorce. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, successful adaptation to separation and divorce depends upon individual experiences of stressors and access to protective factors that serve to lessen the effects of stressors described to this point (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014). In addition, a number of other factors have been associated with adjustment following separation and divorce including the severity and duration of psychological and physical health problems, the degree to which individuals function successfully in new post-separation and divorce roles, and the degree to which post-separation and divorce identities and lifestyles are tied to the former marriage. The chronic strain and crises models form the foundation for understanding adjustment following separation and divorce. However, as these models were explicitly described earlier, the current review is restricted to delineation of the additional factors described above.

Severity and duration of psychological and physical health problems. Physical and psychological problems are perhaps the most widely researched and recognised consequences of separation and divorce (Amato, 2000; Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Davies, Avison & McAlpine, 1997; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Liu & Umberson, 2008; Marks, 1996; Richards, Hardy & Wadsworth, 1997; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Shapiro, 1996; Simon, 2002; White, 1992). Specifically, research suggests that separated and divorced individuals are at a higher risk for experiencing psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, dysthymia, panic disorders, self-harm and suicidal behaviours, post-traumatic stress, personality disorders and externalising disorders (Afifi, Cox & Enns, 2006; Breslau et al.,

2011; Corcoran & Nagar, 2010; Frode, 2000; Gibb, Fergusson & Horwood, 2011; Ide et al., 2010; Kemp, Vollebergh, Engels, de Graaf, Overbeek & Scholte, 2006; Kolves, Ide & De Leo, 2011; Kolves, Varnik, Schneider, Fritz & Allik, 2011; Masocco, Pompili, Vichi, Vanacore, Lester & Tatarelli, 2008; Overbeek, Vollebergh, de Graaf, Scholte, Kemp & Engels, 2006; Ringbäck Weitoft, Burström & Rosén, 2004; Yip et al., 2012). Similarly, research has identified that separated and divorced individuals are at a higher risk of developing emotional problems associated with feelings of grief, guilt, anger, resentment, rejection, lowered self-esteem, insecurity, irritability, lowered self-efficacy, pity, sorrow, lack of self-worth, loneliness, helplessness and an inability to cope (Amato, 1994, 2000; Baum, 2004, 2007; Frisby, Booth-Butterfield, Dillow, Martin, & Weber, 2012; Gee, 2001; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Määtä, 2011; Martin, 2001; Park et al., 2011; Parra et al., 1995; Sweeney & Horwitz, 2001). Furthermore, research has found that separated and divorced individuals are at a higher risk of developing physical health problems such as illness, disability, injury associated with risky behaviours, drug and alcohol use, suicide related behaviours, specific diseases, weight loss, nerve-related eye and dental problems, high blood pressure, reduced energy, excessive tiredness, tight muscles, headaches, and sleeping and eating difficulties (Aldous & Ganey, 1999; Amato, 2000; Bloom et al., 1978; Choi & Marks, 2013; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Hemström, 1996; Joung, Stronks, van de Mheen, van Poppel, van der Meer & Mackenbach, 1997; Lillard & Panis, 1996; Lillard & Waite, 1995; Murphy, Glaser & Grundy, 1997; Rogers, 1996; Umberson, 1992; Williams & Umberson, 2004).

The degree to which psychological and physical health problems occur and persist following separation and divorce differs substantially according to individual variability. However, research drawing on the crises and chronic stress theories of adjustment provide some insight in this area (Hetherington, 2003; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Lorenz et al., 2006; Määtä, 2011; Waite et al., 2009). For example, Jonson and Wu (2002) conducted longitudinal research over 12 years using four waves of data obtained from both married and divorced individuals. They found that the psychological wellbeing of divorced participants declined significantly immediately following divorce and did not improve until participants re-partnered. Similarly, Hetherington (2003) conducted longitudinal research

that followed the relationship pathways of divorced and non-divorced families ($N = 144$) over a 20 year period. Findings revealed that the first 2 years following separation and divorce presented the most psychologically, socially and physically unstable period for parents. After 6 years post-divorce, Hetherington (2003) found that adjustment had improved and remained relatively stable over the following 14 years; with quantitative trends suggesting further positive adjustment for parents during this time. However, she cautioned that a minority of parents remained persistently troubled by psychological, social and physical problems. Subsequently, she concluded that individuals may take a number of different pathways following separation and divorce that differentiate the severity and duration of psychological and physical health problems experienced.

In contrast, Lorenz et al. (2006) found an interesting distinction between psychological and physical health trajectories on their study. They longitudinally investigated the short and long-term effects of divorce on psychological and physical health using quantitative data obtained from 416 divorced and married mothers. They found that divorced mothers reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress and wellbeing in the years immediately following divorce when compared with married mothers; however, no differences were evident in physical health. Ten years later however, divorced mothers reported significantly higher levels of illness compared with married mothers. Their findings indicated that negative psychological outcomes, such as depression, were more reactive to imminent stressors than physical illness; where physical illness appeared to accumulate over time in response to persistent strains.

Australian research in this area has generally resulted in similar findings to international studies. For example, Gray et al. (2011) provided insight into the long-term physical health of divorced individuals. Their study examined health in later life following earlier divorce and therefore does not provide an understanding of health problems in the initial stages of divorce. They measured physical health using the SF-36 scale which assessed general health and vitality where scores closer to 100 on a scale of 0 to 100 indicated better health. Results suggested no impact on physical health for men who divorced earlier in life however women who had not remarried or re-partnered reported lower health and

wellbeing compared to those who had re-partnered or were still married. In addition, Hewitt et al. (2012) examined mental health and marital loss in a sample of Australian men and women and found marital loss decreased short-term psychological wellbeing for participants in their study and this effect appeared most significant at the point of separation.

In general, most studies suggest that the impact of psychological and physical health problems following separation and divorce may persist for up to 3 years, although there is evidence that physical health declines may accumulate over time. In addition, research in this area continually points to individual differences in adjustment to psychological and physical health problems over time with respect to experiences of stressors, and access to and configuration of protective factors that serve to enable adjustment following separation (Hetherington, 2003; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Liu & Umberson, 2008; Lorenz et al., 2006; Määttä, 2011; Waite et al., 2009).

Identity and lifestyle not tied to former marriage. Redefinition and re-establishment of new identities has often been associated with adjustment following separation and divorce (Amato, 2000; Baum, 2004; Hardesty, Raffaelli, Khaw, Thomann Mitchell, Haselschwendt, & Crossman, 2012; Park et al., 2011). Identity is defined as a shared social meaning that an individual may classify themselves; for example, as a partner, friend, employee or a parent (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Gähler, 2006; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002). Identities are socially constructed and provide individuals with purpose, meaning, and guidance, reducing feelings of despair and anxiety (Thoits, 1986). During marriage, spousal and parental identities form much of an individual's own self-identity as a whole. However, following separation and divorce, parents' identity as a spouse is severed but their identity as a parent remains but changes from a co-parent, where identities are shared within the family system, to a single parent where new identities must be adopted.

Research finds that adjustment following separation and divorce is largely dependent upon whether an individual is able to successfully sever emotional ties to their former spouse and redefine their identity (Amato, 2000; Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Baum, 2004; Gähler, 2006; Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Hardesty et al., 2012; Madden-Derdich &

Leonard, 2002; Park et al., 2011). In particular, many individuals have been found to have difficulty coping with what Baum (2004) terms 'absence – presence'. This refers to the absence of the spousal identity and the presence of the parental identity after divorce (Baum, 2004). Specifically, Baum (2004) states that individuals may continue to associate themselves with features of their pre-separation identity and the degree to which they hold on to such features has the potential to determine adjustment where residuals of the former identity can prevent full closure (Baum, 2004).

Research examining the difficulty associated with redefining and adjusting to new identities following separation and divorce has referred to attachment theories (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Krumrei et al., 2009, 2011; Masheter, 1991, 1997; Park et al., 2011; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Thoits, 1986). For example, research has found that anxiously attached or avoidant individuals report more difficulties redefining and adjusting to new identities because attachments define how individuals deal with loss and separation in interpersonal relationships (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012). Therefore, research has found that individuals who have anxious attachment styles within relationships struggle more when attempting to redefine their own identities. For example, Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2012) quantitatively examined the mental health of 56 Israeli couples post-divorce and found that those individuals who reported anxious or avoidant attachment styles were more likely to experience stress and diminished mental health when attempting to redefine post-divorce identities.

Similarly, an Australian study conducted by Halford and Sweeper (2013) examined the effects of the emotional attachment and adjustment following separation and divorce. They found that participants who reported anxious attachment styles were significantly more likely to report enduring attachments to their ex-partners in the initial stages of separation and divorce. Furthermore, these participants were also more likely to report increased feelings of loneliness and psychological distress; however, such difficulties appeared to lessen over time (Halford & Sweeper, 2013). Halford and Sweeper (2013) further found that attachment problems were more pronounced in men and fathers, as well as women without children. Participants who did not initiate the separation also reported

increased difficulty letting go of attachments to former partners. Halford and Sweeper's (2013) findings support international research which finds that individuals who are anxiously or avoidantly attached may experience increased psychological distress following separation and divorce (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Masheter, 1991; Simon & Marcussen, 1999).

Functioning in new roles. An individual's ability to function successfully in new post-separation roles has consistently been associated with adjustment following separation and divorce (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Hardesty et al., 2012; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000, 2002; Troilo & Coleman, 2012; Vannoy, 2000). Similar to research examining the redefinition of post-separation and divorce identities, many parents experience difficulties with respect to continually associating themselves with features of pre-separation and divorce roles they fulfilled while upholding associated pre-separation and divorce identities (Baum, 2004). For example, when traditional roles are not successfully redefined within a post-separation and divorce context, individuals experience difficulty adjusting which can prevent full closure (Baum, 2004).

Although Australian enquiry is lacking in this area, international research examining difficulties adjusting to new separated and divorced roles has often referred to role-overload or role strain theories (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Hardesty et al., 2012; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000, 2002; Troilo & Coleman, 2012; Vannoy, 2000). These two terms are used interchangeably within relevant literature, however the central argument of role strain or role-overload theories is that individuals, particularly residential parents, are often faced with adopting roles previously held by ex-spouses within the family system as well as continuing to perform in their pre-divorce roles. These individuals must similarly deal with changes associated with the loss of support provided by the ex-spouse and providing for their children externally (i.e., child support payments). For example, mothers experience strains associated with taking on the roles as the disciplinarian, breadwinner and entertainer; while simultaneously continuing to hold pre-divorce roles such as child rearing and domestic roles. At the same time, mothers also have to deal with the loss of support and practical assistance offered by their ex-spouse. Yet, other individuals (mostly non-

residential parents) often have to deal with strains as a result of changes relating to the loss of day-to-day parenting, decision making, disciplining and care-giving roles.

When experiencing role over-load and difficulty coping with changes in roles following separation, studies suggest that women may experience associated strains as more distressing (Simon, 1992). Bakker and Karsten's (2013) qualitative study supports this idea. They examined role-overload in both single and married mothers. Both single and married mothers in their study reported significant emotional investment in their role as caregiver. Single mothers in their study reported stress and family-work conflict as a result of role over-load where leisure time was limited (Bakker & Karsten, 2013).

In general, however, whether men or women experience role strain and role-overload as more distressing cannot be ascertained with any certainty. This is because research indicates that social norms associated with the establishment of new rules for co-parenting following separation and divorce are unclear and ambiguous (Hardesty et al., 2012; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000, 2002; Umberson & Williams, 1993). According to family systems theory, interpersonal and individual roles within the family system are defined by unspoken and spoken rules of familial interaction. These rules serve as regulators associated with interactions between family members and are well-established, clear, functional and satisfactory (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). In the event of separation and divorce, rules that served to regulate familial interactions must be redefined. Hardesty et al. (2012) labelled this process 'boundary renegotiation'. In order to reduce the potential for psychological distress and conflict as a result of difficulty renegotiating spousal roles, parenting roles must be redefined so that parents can keep their spousal and parenting roles separate (Hardesty et al., 2012). Unfortunately, however, new roles and rules within separated and divorced families are often ambiguous and impede the redefinition of post-separation and divorce roles. Hardesty et al. (2012) defined this as 'boundary ambiguity'. Madden-Derdich and Leonard (2000) suggest boundary ambiguity is attributed to the significant lack of normative guidelines to assist parents to redefine rules and roles following separation and divorce. In many cases, boundary

ambiguity increases stress and psychological difficulty when attempting to adjust to new post-separation and divorce roles (Hardesty et al., 2012; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000).

Summary

Research approached from dominant stress frameworks conceptualises separation and divorce as a stressful life transition. As such, it is widely recognised that separation and divorce is associated with numerous psychosocial stressors that reduce psychological wellbeing. The social selection and social causation theories have been posited to attribute meaning to the experience of psychosocial stressors associated with separation and divorce. However these theories present a relatively static understanding of separation and divorce and shed little light on individual experiences of psychosocial factors or factors associated with adjustment. Instead, Amato's (2000, 2010, 2014) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective provided a more holistic understanding of separation and divorce, viewing this experience as a process beginning when the couple is still living together and lasting long after the finalisation of divorce. Subsequently, Amato's divorce-stress-adjustment framework was used to guide a review of the large body of literature that provides an understanding of the psychosocial factors associated with the experience of separation and divorce. This review highlighted an over-reliance on quantitative methodologies resulting in a relatively static and objective understanding of the experience of separation and divorce, where most studies have considered only one or a few isolated psychosocial factors associated with this experience. In particular, stressors in the lives of separated and divorced parents were discussed as having the potential to impact on psychological health and wellbeing. Protective factors were presented as factors that interact with stressors to enable adjustment following separation and divorce. Adjustment following separation and divorce was discussed in conjunction with the severity and duration of psychological and physical health problems, identity and lifestyles that are not tied to the former marriage and successful functioning in new roles.

Rationale for the current study

The psychosocial implications of divorce have been widely recognised since the turn of the 20th Century. Although rates of divorce are declining internationally, current social trends suggest this decline is counterbalanced by increasing rates of separation following cohabiting unions. Australia is no exception. Tens of thousands of Australian parents separate each year and around one-quarter were never married. Despite evidence of social change, research in this area continues to explore either one or a few isolated psychosocial factors associated with separation and divorce as they are experienced by formerly married parents, where most research is dominated by quantitative methodologies. The result of such research has been a relatively static and objective understanding of separation and divorce that offers little insight into the process of adjustment for both formerly married and cohabiting parents. This is particularly the case in Australia. Although Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) integrated findings from international separation and divorce scholarship to provide a holistic understanding of the process of adjustment following divorce, such knowledge does not translate seamlessly to an Australian context.

Aim and research questions

The main aim of the current study was to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married *and* cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. Using a qualitative research method, the following research questions were framed:

1. What is the experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia?
2. What factors are associated with adjustment following separation?

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

Chapter overview

Chapter 4 outlines the research design and method of the current study. The philosophical framework that guided the research design is described first. In this section, the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative methodology and phenomenological method are introduced. Next, the phenomenological method that guided the current study is outlined. This section discusses the research aim and questions, participants, instruments, use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, and the procedure followed. A discussion of the phenomenological data analysis procedure is then presented. This chapter concludes with a description of ethical considerations and processes of research rigour adhered to during the data collection and analysis phases of this study.

Research design

My study was grounded within a philosophical framework that guided the research approach taken to address the aim and research questions. A philosophical framework (or a research paradigm) is a set of basic beliefs about how the world should be understood and studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). More specifically, a research paradigm informs the researcher of the nature of knowledge, how that knowledge is explored and generated (i.e., methodology), and what the researcher must do to acquire that knowledge (i.e., methods) (Creswell, 2013, 2012; Crotty, 1998). Essentially, delineation of the research paradigm provided a frame of reference for where I was coming from, the validity of the conclusions I reached, the flow of my research process, and the homogeneity of my search for knowledge (i.e., truth). See Figure 2 for a visual representation of the philosophical framework of my study.

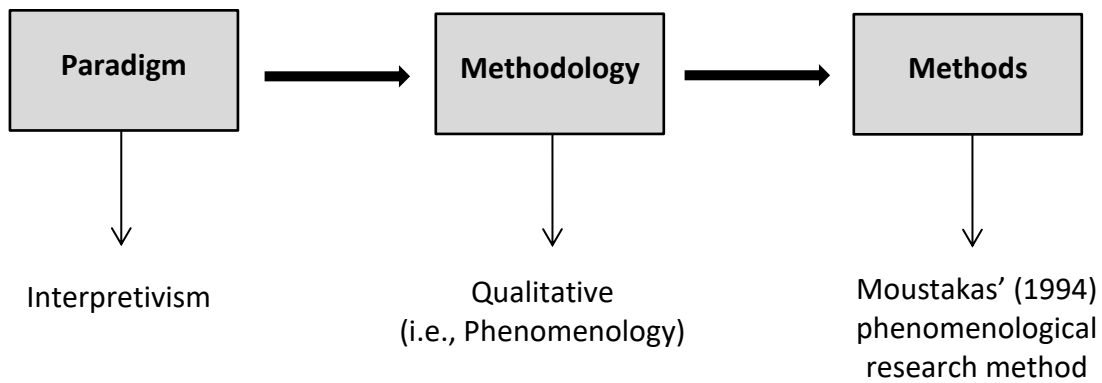


Figure 2. Visual representation of the philosophical framework of my study.

My study was guided by interpretivism and implemented a phenomenological methodology. The methods used were guided by Moustakas' (1994) systematic procedure for conducting phenomenological research. The paradigm, methodology and method are outlined in the following sections.

The interpretivist paradigm. I aimed to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. In doing so, I grounded my study in an interpretivist paradigm because it aligned well with this aim. The interpretivist paradigm advocates for *interpretation* and *understanding* of social phenomenon, rather than an *explanation*, by viewing it through the lens of those who have experienced it (Crotty, 1998). Specifically, this paradigm is based on the idea that truths cannot be understood without interpretation and that humans cannot separate themselves from what they know (Angen, 2000). Although individual knowledge of the world may be gathered at a distance, individuals learn about and understand the world through attempts to meaningfully interpret it within the boundaries of culture and context (Angen, 2000). Therefore, failure to consider subjective knowledge is inappropriate to the goals of understanding and interpreting human experience.

Adopting an interpretivist paradigm provided the basis for exploring the Australian experience of separation, not from a distance, but from an intimate and inductive position where separated parents perspectives of the everyday worldview were at the forefront of the discovery and generation of knowledge (Angen, 2000; Crotty, 1998). This was not possible from a positivist stance which advocates for all-knowing, objective, rational and neutral researcher positioning (Creswell, 2013). To date, separation and divorce scholarship has been dominated by such approaches and the result has been a static and objective understanding of separation and divorce that offers little insight into individual experiences of separation and the process of adjustment following this stressful life event. Instead, I sought to ground my research within a paradigm that would allow me to consider individual and contextual differences in the way psychosocial factors and subsequent adjustment to separation is experienced. This was important because previous studies have found that despite approaches, models, perspectives, and theories that attempt to understand the separation and divorce experience, individuals continue to display either improved functioning following divorce, temporary declines in wellbeing, or exhibit persistent and longstanding psychological problems in response to stressors experienced (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014). Therefore, what has emerged is a continual need to understand and monitor adjustment factors following separation and divorce at an individual level that can only be uncovered by adopting an interpretivist theoretical perspective (Amato, 2000, 2010, 2014).

Assumptions inherent in interpretivist research differ considerably from positivist research. Interpretivist researchers operate from an intimate and inductive position where the participant and researcher discover the essence of phenomenon together (Crotty, 1998). This positioning of the researcher is a far cry from positivist assumptions that advocate for all-knowing, objective, rational and neutral researcher positioning (Creswell, 2013). Interpretivist research also addresses many criticisms inherent in positivist approaches. For example, interpretivism highlights the context and meaning of human experience that positivism circumvents. Interpretivist approaches to research also allow for an understanding of phenomenon at the individual level as opposed to the group level which is where positivist research is limited. Accordingly, my research journey began with

the assumption that knowledge of the Australian experience of separation lies within the subjective perspectives of formerly cohabiting and married parents who reside in Australia.

Interpretivist methodology is directed at exploring how meanings are expressed by those expressing them to arrive at a 'rich' understanding of the reality of phenomena (Crotty, 1998). Specifically, interpretivism aims to understand the meaning of contemporary life through interpretation of the everyday dialogue people use to create social meaning. This is accomplished by focusing on small populations of people and collecting rich and detailed descriptions, often referred to as 'thick' descriptions (Crotty, 1998). The goal of gathering thick descriptions is to better understand phenomena as it is situated within its own culture and context, rather than to explain, control or predict phenomena, as is the case with positivist research. The aims of interpretivist research are best accomplished through qualitative methodologies, which will be described next.

Qualitative methodology. Qualitative research methodologies recognise that reality is socially constructed where individual experiences occur within numerous contexts (i.e., personal, cultural, social, historical contexts) (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Therefore, qualitative methodologies acknowledge that there may be multiple perspectives of reality instead of one single truth and subsequently seek to understand the subjective lived experience; consistent with the interpretivist paradigm (Hennink et al., 2011). For example, qualitative methodologies allow for the identification of issues from individual perspectives aimed at understanding subjective meaning and interpretations relative to behaviour, objects or events. As such, qualitative research is typically used for exploring new or unexplored phenomena in order to understand meaning as it is experienced subjectively. In addition, qualitative research approaches are often chosen to explore and address sensitive and complex topics as this approach offers researchers the opportunity to build rapport and ensure a comfortable environment for participant disclosure (Hennink et al., 2011). Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of my qualitative research methodology.

Table 1

The characteristics of my qualitative methodology (Creswell [2012] p. 38 – 39)

Characteristic	Description
Natural setting	○ I collected data in the field where parents experienced separation (i.e., in participant's home or over the phone)
Researcher as key instrument	○ I collected data through interviewing separated parents (i.e., I developed interview schedules and collected data myself)
Inductive analysis	○ Patterns, categories and themes were built from the "bottom-up" (i.e., I worked back and forth between themes until a comprehensive set of themes was established)
Participants meanings	○ I kept a focus on learning the meaning parents attributed to separation, not the meaning that I or the literature brought to the study
Emergent design	○ My research design was not certain and all phases of my research process were subject to change after I entered the field and began data collection
Philosophical foundation	○ I used a philosophical foundation to view my research (i.e. interpretivism and phenomenology)
Interpretive inquiry	○ I interpreted what I saw, heard, and understood. It was important that my interpretations were not separate from my own background, history, context and prior understanding.
Holistic account	○ I developed a complex picture of separation in Australia which involved reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved, and sketching the bigger picture that emerged

Qualitative methodologies allow the researcher to examine individual experiences through use of interviews, focus groups, content analysis, visual methods, observation, and life histories or biographies (Hennink et al., 2011). Some examples of qualitative methodologies include narrative approaches (i.e., reports on the life of a single individual), phenomenology (i.e., lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon), grounded theory (i.e., generation and discovery of theory), ethnography (i.e., behaviour, language and interaction among members of a culture) and case studies (i.e., issue explored through one

or more cases within a bounded system). Phenomenology was the chosen qualitative methodology for my study and is described next.

Phenomenology. I chose to ground my study within a phenomenological methodology because it was best suited to my perception of the way subjective knowledge is discovered and generated (i.e., interpretivism). Phenomenology seeks to describe and interpret socially constructed realities by gaining an understanding of how individuals experience certain phenomena (Creswell, 2012; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This is done by exploring thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of individuals directly involved in the phenomenon, to arrive at the essence, or true nature, of the phenomenon. Phenomenology recognises that knowledge comes from within individuals and is based on their own interaction with the world.

I applied traditional philosophical ideas of phenomenology to aid in developing a pathway for conducting research that would enable a more sympathetic understanding of the experience of separation, consistent with Schutz's methodological stance of phenomenology (Green & Thorogood, 2009; Liamputtong, 2012). His approach focused on the ways in which everyday life experiences taken for granted were actively constituted by social members within that world (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Accordingly, I used phenomenology as a research methodology to understand the experience of separation as it related to separated parents who were directly involved in this phenomenon.

This view of phenomenology as a methodology, rather than a philosophy, has been criticised by some writers as a misinterpretation of traditional phenomenology (Crotty, 1996). For example, it has been suggested that viewing phenomenology as a methodology removes the idea of phenomenological reduction (i.e. experience before we have thought about it), in favour of a subjectivist epistemological foundation that is distinct from the constructionist position inherent in traditional phenomenological perspectives (Crotty, 1998). However, phenomenological methodologies depart from traditional European philosophy due to a slight change in interpretation as opposed to a move towards an entirely subjectivist epistemology. For example, phenomenological methodologies simply offer *researchers* such as myself a practical way to understand and interpret phenomenon

as opposed to traditional perspectives of phenomenology that are better suited for *philosophical reflection*. This is because phenomenological methodologies allow for a fuller exploration of the lived experience by uncovering the meaning of phenomena from the situated perspectives of those who actively participate in the phenomena, rather than using the lived experience simply as a tool to access phenomena objectively (Caelli, 2000). Viewed in this way, the application of phenomenology as a methodology considers how individual interactions within the world influence the lived experience (Caelli, 2000).

Specifically, the phenomenological methodology in my study was guided by a number of assumptions that are common across both methodological and philosophical perceptions. Firstly, I sought to explore the lived experiences of formerly cohabiting and formerly married parents. Secondly, I considered their experiences as part of consciousness. Thirdly, I aimed to develop a description of the essence of their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Flood, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990 as cited in Creswell, 2012). The specific phenomenological method I used was guided by Moustakas' (1995) systematic procedure for conducting phenomenological research and assembling textural and structural descriptions and is described next. Other studies have demonstrated the efficacy of this procedure when conducting phenomenological research (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000; Iwamoto, Creswell & Caldwell, 2007; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

Phenomenological method. Employing a qualitative approach guided by Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research method allowed me to immerse myself within the life-worlds of parents so that I could better understand and interpret the experience of separation from the perspectives of those who have experienced it. Use of this method also enabled opportunities for rapport building and ensuring a comfortable environment for participant disclosure in the context of the delicate nature of separation. I was then able to interpret individual differences to arrive at connections and interrelations between parents' stories that uncovered a collective understanding, while also maintaining cultural and

contextual sensitivity. Figure 3 represents Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research method and information regarding how I applied this method in my study.

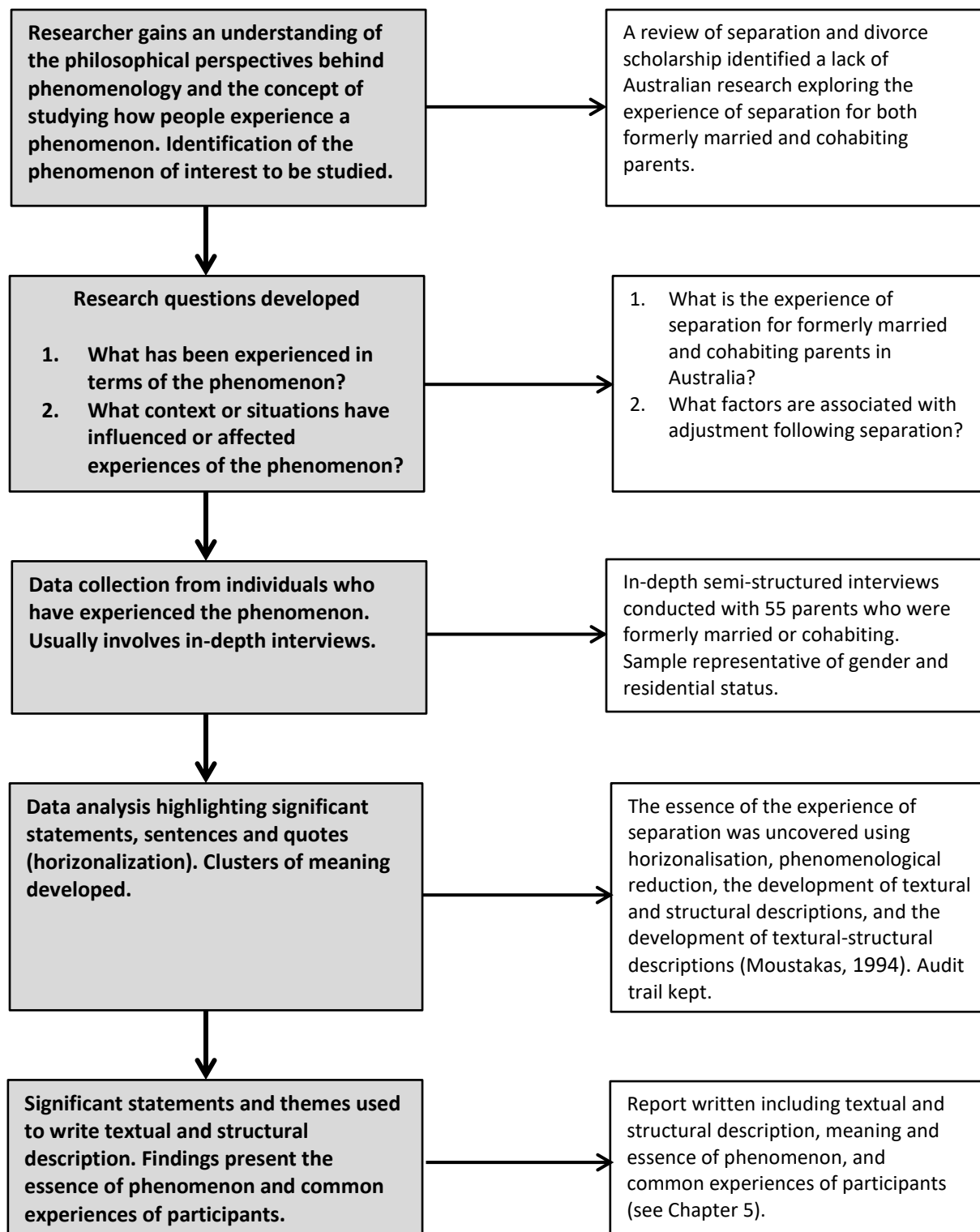


Figure 3. Application of Moustakas' (1994) systematic phenomenological research method

Method

Guided by Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research method (see Figure 3), this section explicitly outlines the methods used in my study to address the aim and research questions.

Aim and research questions. The main aim of my study was to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. The following research questions were framed:

1. What is the experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia?
2. What factors are associated with adjustment following separation?

Data collection. In line with Moustakas' (19954) phenomenological research method, data was collected from formerly cohabiting and married parents via in-depth semi-structured interviews. A description of the data collection process is detailed next.

Recruitment of participants. I used purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). My research was advertised by placing flyers in venues, organisations, service areas and websites targeted at assisting separated and divorced parents (e.g., Centrecare, Anglicare, Family Relationship Centres; see Appendix A). Flyers included my contact details so participants could contact me directly if they were willing to participate. Letters were sent to CEOs of major family relationship services and organisations requesting their assistance to advertise my research within family service venues throughout Australia and online websites (see Appendix B). I then contacted the CEO approximately one week later to follow up their participation in the study.

Interested participants were included in my study if they were a separated parent. The following definition of separation was used to guide recruitment: 1) the parties to a

former relationship, either bonded by marriage or cohabitation, no longer define themselves as a couple and/or are no longer physically living in the same household, 2) legal separation or divorce; participants were included if they had a child or children under the age of 17 (i.e., still dependent) born to the pre-separation union. Once identified as a separated parent, participants were asked to state their post-separation parenting arrangement based on the following definitions:

Residential parent: Those people aged 18 or above whose children (aged 0 to 17) reside with them the majority of the time, at least 5 nights during the week, where most of the child-care and nurturing responsibilities usually reside with them.

Non-residential parent: Those people aged 18 or above whose children (aged 0 to 17) reside with the other parent the majority of the time, at least 5 nights during the week, where most of the child-care and nurturing responsibilities usually reside with the other natural parent.

Shared care parent: Shared care parents were defined as having an arrangement where children spent anywhere from 40% to 60% of their time with each natural parent.

Participants were also required to speak English and had to be over the age of 18. Participants under the age of 18, and childless individuals were excluded. Individuals from the same pre-separation union were also excluded. Care was taken to select relatively equal samples of mothers and fathers who fit into each parenting status category, and recruitment was undertaken nationally. No specific criteria were determined based on length of former relationship or time since separation. However, individuals who had separated within the previous three years were given preference in an attempt to reduce the potential for retrospective responding.

Participant sample. The final participant sample consisted of 55 heterosexual parents. Thirty-four parents were formerly married and the remaining 21 were formerly part of cohabiting unions. Parents' ages ranged from 23 years to 56 ($M = 42.76$). Of the 25 mothers who participated, 11 were residential, 5 were non-residential and 9 were parents who shared care. Of the 30 fathers involved, 9 were residential, 11 were non-residential, and 10 were parents who shared care. Relative to ethnicity, mothers and fathers reported

being mostly Australian ($N = 29$), Anglo-Saxon ($N = 7$) or Caucasian ($N = 4$). Other ethnicities included New Zealand ($N = 2$), British ($N = 2$), Polish/Israeli ($N = 1$), Estonian ($N = 1$), Chilean ($N = 1$), South African ($N = 1$), and Canadian ($N = 1$). One parent reported being of mixed ethnicity and five did not give this information. Mothers and fathers also reported a diverse range of religions including Christian (reported as either Christian, Anglican or Church of England; $N = 15$), Catholic ($N = 10$), Atheist ($N = 7$), Jewish ($N = 2$), Agnostic ($N = 2$) and Orthodox ($N = 1$). The remainder of parents reported that they did not follow any particular religion ($N = 18$). Length of time since separation ranged from 2 months to 14 years ($M = 3.08$ years, $SD = 2.70$). Parents had no more than 3 children born to the pre-separation union, with ages ranging from 5 months to 25 years ($M = 9.42$ years, $SD = 5.55$). Nineteen parents reported being in a new relationship. Please see Appendix C for detailed information relative to participant demographics. Participants were engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews based on their experience of separation. Information pertaining to the collection of data is described next, including the materials used and the interview procedure.

Interview materials. An information letter was provided to all parents prior to the commencement of their interview (see Appendix D). A consent form was also signed prior to the interview (see Appendix E). In cases of geographical disparity between me and my participants, the consent form was read verbatim over the phone and verbal consent was obtained. A list of counselling services was provided to parents if requested or required following the interview, or if the interview was stopped due to participant distress (see Appendix F). A semi-structured schedule of open-ended questions was used to assist in conducting the interviews (see Appendix G). I developed this schedule in line with a phenomenological research method and attempted to gain a contextually relevant understanding of parents' experiences of separation. Examples of questions included, "What was your experience of separation like?" and "What helped the most following your separation?".

Interview procedure. Interviews were conducted at a convenient time and place for the participant or over the telephone at a convenient time. Face-to-face interviews were

generally held on the Edith Cowan University campus to ensure my safety. If interviews were held at a parent's residence, I informed at least one other person of my whereabouts during the interview and when the interview was expected to finish. An Mp3 player was used to record interviews.

In-depth interviews have been identified as the most suitable data collection method for research guided by phenomenological ontologies as they facilitate rapport and empathy, and offer greater flexibility of coverage allowing the interviewer to explore richer data (Caelli, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Willig, 2008). For example, Hennink et al. (2011) states that in-depth semi-structured interviews aid in identifying constituents of phenomenological studies including "how people make decisions; people's own beliefs and perceptions; the motivation for certain behaviour; the meaning people attach to experiences; people's feelings and emotions; the personal story or biography of a participant; in-depth information on sensitive issues; and the context surrounding people's lives" (p. 110).

In-depth semi-structured interviewing uses a schedule of questions as a guide; however, the order in which the questions are presented is not fixed (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Questions asked during the interview procedure of my study were guided by the topic of separation; however, the flow of questions was unstructured. Conducting the interview in this manner allowed me to gain a more valid view of participants' experiences of separation because this form of interviewing offers greater opportunity to understand behaviour, and therefore phenomenon, by simply asking individuals what they think (Minichiello, 1995).

Due the geographical distance of a number of my participants, I conducted some in-depth semi-structured interviews over the telephone. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) found that telephone interviews produced a similar quality of data when compared to face-to-face interviews. They concluded that telephone interviews can successfully be used in qualitative studies. Other studies have noted benefits in the use of telephone interview methods such as decreased costs, increased access to rural, remote and geographically distinct participants, interviewer safety, increased privacy and anonymity of participants, an

increased ability to build rapport, and lowered social pressure (Carr & Worth, 2001; Chapple, 1999; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Sweet, 2002; Tausig & Freeman, 1988).

The 55 in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 to 150 minutes. Interviews were conducted until saturation was met. Participation was completely voluntary and parents had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interview became too distressing for one parent (discussed in more detail in the Ethical Considerations section of this chapter) and in this instance the interview was stopped and the parent was provided with a list of counselling services (see Appendix F). Interviews were recorded using an Mp3 player and transcribed verbatim.

Due to the large number of interviews conducted, and the length of each interview, transcribers were used and were required to sign confidentiality agreements (see Appendix H). They were also given a transcribing template (see Appendix I). The transcribing template included a detailed list of instructions to abide by during transcription including the use of pseudonyms, file name changes, and general transcribing instructions. The method used to analyse data is described next.

Phenomenological data analysis. I used Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's (1959, 1966) method to analyse data obtained using in-depth semi-structured interviews. This transcendental phenomenological method of data analysis provides a systematic approach to phenomenological analysis that fits well with the philosophical assumptions of my study. This method of data analysis also served to increase rigour because it provided systematic steps that guided the process of data analysis not necessarily offered by other methods. Although Moustakas (1994) provides a second method of phenomenological analysis based on a modification of methods suggested by Stevick (1971), Keen (1975), and Colaizzi (1978), this method of data analysis differs from my chosen approach by acknowledging both researcher and participant experiences of the

phenomenon and appears better suited to the hermeneutical type of phenomenology. The steps taken to analyse my data are described next.

Horizontalisation. The process of horizontalisation is based on the idea that “horizons are unlimited” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). Therefore, all ‘horizons’ (i.e., quotes) that relate to an experience must be considered as equally important. During horizontalisation, lists are formed that include every horizon relevant to each individual participant’s experience. I completed the horizontalisation process both manually and also through the use of NVivo software to assist qualitative analysis. I manually read and then re-read each parent’s account of their experience and listed *all* horizons that were apparent. I then entered transcripts into the NVivo program and repeated this process electronically. Combining both electronic and manual methods of horizontalisation allowed for efficient, systematic and comprehensive organisation of the horizons of each parent’s experience of separation. During this stage I was careful to attempt to withhold all biases, prior knowledge and subjective perspectives in order to remain as close to participant data as possible and stay true to the participant perception and experience of separation (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction involves reducing identified horizons by illuminating the essential nature of each participant’s experience. During phenomenological reduction horizons are tested for two requirements. Firstly, horizons are preserved if they reflect a moment of the experience that serves to describe and understand it (Moustakas, 1994). Secondly, horizons are preserved if they can be isolated and labelled. The central purpose of phenomenological reduction is that the researcher reflects on identified horizons from different angles to ensure all possible representations are considered. In doing so, the horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience (i.e., the meaning units of horizons of the experience). I conducted phenomenological reduction manually. I looked at horizons again and again until the essential qualities of each parent’s experience of separation were illuminated to the point that a description and understanding of the experience was evident (i.e., the emergence of invariant constituents).

Developing clusters of meaning. In this stage of analysis invariant constituents are grouped into themes of related meaning for each participant. Themes represent the core meanings of each participant's experience. Themes are then validated against each participant's complete transcript. I completed theme development manually for each parent by grouping together invariant constituents that reflected similar meaning. For example, the following invariant constituents were grouped into a theme labelled 'loneliness' for one parent in my study: "being on your own was really tough", "being on your own and missing your family, not having your kids around you", "I don't like silence, I don't like quiet, you know... sitting at home on your own". Developed themes were then validated by considering whether they were expressed explicitly within the parent's complete transcript. If themes were not explicit, they were then assessed for compatibility with the complete transcript. If themes were neither explicit nor compatible, they were eliminated.

Developing textural descriptions. Textural descriptions are written descriptions of each of the themes identified in the previous stage. Quotes were used to assist the development of textural descriptions. I developed textural descriptions for each parent manually by examining themes to arrive at a description of each parent's experience of separation.

Developing structural descriptions. Structural descriptions focus on the settings that influenced the participants' experiences. The task of imaginative variation urges the researcher to consider *how* the experience came to be what it was. Moustakas (1994, p. 99) suggests four steps of imaginative variation: 1) systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings; 2) recognising the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the experience; 3) considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the experience (i.e., time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, relation to others); and 4) searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the experience. I followed this process to arrive at structural descriptions of each parent's experience of separation.

Moustakas (1994) also suggests that researchers record their own textural and structural experiences during this stage and the previous stage of data analysis. I did this as part of a confirmability and reflexivity process of research rigour.

Developing textural-structural descriptions. This stage of data analysis involves constructing textural-structural descriptions of the meaning and essence of themes of each participant's experience. Textural-structural descriptions of themes provide an understanding of *what* the experience was and *how* it was experienced as a whole. I combined textural and structural descriptions of themes manually to arrive at the overall meaning and essence of each parent's experience of separation.

Developing the essence of phenomenon. This stage of data analysis involves synthesising all participants' textural-structural descriptions of themes to arrive at a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience as a whole. I synthesised each individual parent's textural-structural description of his or her experience manually to arrive at an overarching description of the meaning and essence of the experience of separation. In my study, synthesis of parents' textural-structural descriptions resulted in delineation of five themes and related sub-themes that depicted the experience of separation and the factors associated with adjustment (see Chapter 5). To ensure interpretive rigour in my study, themes and interpretations were inspected by a clinical psychology colleague of mine who is experienced in working with separated and divorced individuals (discussed in more detail in the following section). Please see Appendix J for a detailed example of Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's (1956, 1966) method of phenomenological data analysis conducted in the current study.

During the course of this research, my own moral integrity was of utmost importance (Creswell, 2012). As such, the ethical considerations and research rigour adhered to during completion of my study are described next.

The role of the researcher

My research approach required me to remain close to my participants and to establish rapport and trust between them and me. I aimed to work collaboratively with my participants to explore the experience of separation and the factors associated with adjustment. In doing so, I aimed to provide a comfortable and informal environment to facilitate equality between myself and my participants. This relationship was developed to ensure sensitive and accurate representation of the phenomena. The ethical considerations and processes of research rigour used during the research process are discussed next.

Ethical considerations. A number of ethical considerations were relevant in this research. Hennink et al. (2011) suggest that ethical principles are more pronounced in qualitative research. In establishing rapport, researchers often engage in close and intimate relationships with their participants and therefore ethical principles such as ‘do no harm’, ‘confidentiality’, and ‘anonymity’ must be more carefully considered (Creswell, 2012; Hennink et al., 2011). If these ethical principles are not upheld then the privacy and security of participants may be compromised.

The concept of informed consent posits that participants have a right to be informed of the research and that they are aware they are being researched. Berg and Lune (2012) suggest two reasons behind ethical consideration of informed consent. Firstly, obtaining informed consent ensures potential participants are agreeing to take part in research voluntarily and knowingly (Berg & Lune, 2012). Secondly, informed consent forms allow institutional ethical review boards to monitor the voluntary nature of participation in research by participants. During the recruitment phase of my study, potential participants were emailed participant information letters and research flyers detailing the nature of the research and what was to be expected following participation. All participants involved in the current study, provided informed consent. Participants completed informed consent forms in person or over the phone (read verbatim and recorded) to ensure they understood the nature of the research and boundaries of the interview.

In this research it was important for me to provide my participants with a high degree of confidentiality and privacy. Confidentiality refers to an active attempt over the course of the research process to remove any elements that identify participants in any way, as well as non-disclosure of important and personal information discussed between the researcher and participant (Berg & Lune, 2012; Hennink et al., 2011). In doing so, I made participants aware that the interview was to be recorded and ensured the participants understood that the recording devices were kept in a secure, locked filing cabinet for the duration of the study. Following interviews, voice recordings were transferred to my personal computer where access was password-restricted, and then deleted from recording devices. During transcription pseudonyms were provided to ensure confidentiality of information. During data analysis and presentation of research findings and interpretations, other identifiable information such as places, events, and individual characteristics were changed or redacted as necessary. Once transcribing was completed, transcribers were required to copy final documents to my personal password-restricted computer and delete both voice recordings and completed transcripts from their computers and computer trash/recycle bins. De-identified excerpts of transcriptions were printed during data analysis and were stored in a locked filing cabinet along with participant consent forms and voice recording devices.

Given the sensitive nature of the current study, interviews had the potential to become distressing for participants invoking the ethical principle of 'do no harm'. To ensure participant wellbeing was preserved, participants were informed that they could choose not to answer any questions and could withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, participants were informed of a list of counselling services available Australia-wide if they felt the need to access assistance following the interview. Some participants became emotional during certain parts of the interview. Indeed, most participants reported that some memories and issues were difficult to discuss. During these periods, I responded in an empathic manner and participants were offered a break or the option of terminating the interview.

One participant requested termination of the interview due to the emotional difficulty encountered while describing their experience. I terminated the interview and debriefed the participant to ensure they had access to services to assist them should they need it. The participant was also emailed the list of counselling services as the interview was conducted over the phone. Following termination of the phone interview, I debriefed with my supervisors to ensure all ethical considerations were adhered to and the correct procedures followed. I also followed up with the participant two days following the interview and two weeks later via email to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

All participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the formal interview and offered the opportunity to ask any questions about the research. Participants were also asked to offer feedback on their experience of the interview process and were informed of their right to receive a summary of the manuscript when completed. An email address and phone number was recorded on the consent form and kept separate from transcripts to ensure interview information was not associated with identifiable details.

Finally, qualitative research is most often applied to sensitive issues which means participants may have to revisit painful memories or events that cause emotional or physical distress, implying even more careful consideration of the aforementioned ethical principles (Hennink et al., 2011). In considering these issues, I upheld the psychological ethical principles of respect (i.e., respecting the rights of the participants), beneficence (i.e., ensuring the benefits of the research outweighed any possible risks), non-maleficence (i.e., do no physical, emotional or mental harm to participants) and justice (i.e., ensuring the research does not exploit the study population or involve deception) to the best of my ability at all stages of the research process.

Research rigour. Rigour refers to the reliability and validity of qualitative inquiry and is used as a means of evaluating qualitative research. Despite valuable interpretivist ideas that led to an increase in qualitative approaches to studying human phenomenon at the turn of the century, qualitative research continues to be criticised as lacking reliability and

validity (Angen, 2000; Creswell 2012, 2013; Liangputtong, 2012). This criticism is clear at face value when considering the difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches to human science described above. Quantitative approaches purposefully maintain an objective distance from the world and are regulated by strict, rigorous methodological procedures that serve to increase the validity and purity of results (Angen, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Liangputtong, 2012). Due to the interpretivist nature of qualitative approaches, applying objective methodological procedures of rigour undermines the very essence of qualitative research. As a result, qualitative research approaches have been criticised for lacking reliability (i.e., ability to replicate observations) and validity (i.e., ability to obtain correct information and analyses) contributing to interpretations and analyses that are not legitimate (Liangputtong, 2012).

To resolve this problem, some researchers have adopted a positivist approach to methods of rigour in qualitative research, while others have disregarded validity altogether, releasing the human sciences from the restrictions of validity as truth (Angen, 2000; Silverman, 2011). The latter argument is largely a result of the idea that no research, no matter how rigorous the methodology, can ever be completely free from subjectivity (Angen, 2000; Silverman, 2011). These two solutions represent two ends of the continuum addressing the issue of validity in qualitative research. In order to mediate between the two extremes, I followed a set of criteria often used to judge the merits of qualitative research including credibility and authenticity, transferability, dependability and confirmability and reflexivity (Angen, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Liangputtong, 2012; Silverman, 2011).

Credibility and authenticity. In achieving credibility and authenticity, prolonged engagement and fieldwork in the research area has been suggested to allow for the development of trusting relationships between participants and researchers, where the longer researchers spend in the field the more accurate their data will be (Liangputtong, 2012). I followed this procedure while conducting my study, where participant recruitment and data collection occurred over a 12 month period. I spent time meeting with Australian family relationship organisations in order to build trusting relationships with service providers to assist recruitment. Services offering assistance to families following separation

provided me with access to participants who met criteria for the unique characteristics required for my study. Potential participants were provided with information letters and research flyers in order to familiarise them with my research. My email address and phone number was also provided so participants could communicate with me and get to know me prior to the interview process.

Triangulation was also used in my study to meet the criteria of credibility and authenticity. Triangulation involves using multiple methods, sources, analyses and theories to ensure research findings are robust, comprehensive, well-developed and rich (Creswell, 2012; Liamputtong, 2012). I recruited male and female as well as residential, non-residential, and shared care parents to participate in my study (Liamputtong, 2012). I did this to ensure that findings represented a variety of parents' voices. Parents were recruited nationally for similar reasons.

Transferability. Transferability refers to how generalisable qualitative research is to other individuals, groups, contexts or settings. In ensuring this criterion of rigour, I aimed to present findings in a detailed, rich and thick manner to allow the reader to obtain an understanding of the reliability and the generalisability of data (Creswell, 2012; Liamputtong, 2012). In doing so, I included evidence to support my interpretations in the way of verbatim quotations that reflected the essence of participant experiences (see Chapter 5).

Dependability. Dependability refers to the fit between data and the population from which it was drawn. Dependability is most commonly associated with an auditing process that ensures that the research is logical and clearly documented. An audit trail is achieved through detailing choices made relative to methodology and data collection, and establishing links between reported findings and data (Creswell, 2012; Liamputtong, 2012). During the course of data collection and analysis, I kept a journal that was used to document my thoughts throughout the research process. Recorded information included conceptual, procedural and analytic questions and decisions made (Fassinger, 2005). The journal also documented evolving ideas, assumptions, uncertainties, insights, feelings and choices I had made during the research process as a means of recording interpretive

processes. I aimed to ensure throughout this chapter that my study may be replicated by other researchers.

Confirmability and reflexivity. Confirmability refers to the degree to which findings and conclusions of qualitative research are determined by the participants of the research and conditions of inquiry instead of by the biases, interests, perspectives and motivations of the researcher. Reflexivity is a procedure considered integral to confirmability and acknowledges the important role researchers play in how their data is shaped and analysed (Creswell, 2012; Liamputtong, 2012). Reflexivity involves the researcher being aware of their position and effect on the research process; acknowledging that researcher presence will have some effect on interpretation. When I considered the issue of reflexivity during the interpretation phase of my study it resulted in discourse between participant experiences and perspectives of the researcher, making research more meaningful.

Additionally, peer review by a colleague who is not directly involved in the research but may have a general understanding of the research topic and qualitative research processes is also important in verifying the adequacy of emerging themes (Fassinger, 2005; Liamputtong, 2012). To ensure interpretive rigour in my study, themes and interpretations were inspected by a clinical psychology colleague of mine who is experienced in working with separated and divorced individuals. Peer review of audit trails is also crucial to establishing the confirmability of findings in qualitative research (Fassinger, 2005). Therefore, my audit trail including coding information, theme development, and my own notes recorded in my journal was also reviewed by my colleague, adding to procedural and methodological rigour.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the research design and method of the current study. The interpretivist paradigm was outlined as the overarching philosophical framework guiding this study. Phenomenology was presented as the qualitative methodology, followed by a detailed overview of the phenomenological method which was used to address the aim and

research questions. The following chapter presents the key findings and interpretations of parent's experiences of separation derived from phenomenological data analysis.

CHAPTER 5

KEY FINDINGS

Chapter overview

Chapter 5 presents the key findings of the current study. The aim was to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. Five major themes and related sub-themes emerged following phenomenological analysis and are introduced first. This chapter is then broken into five parts to present textural-structural descriptions and interpretations of each theme. Descriptions and interpretations are aided by the use of participant quotes, along with integration of relevant literature. Unique differences across gender, residential status and marital status that emerged from the findings are also highlighted.

The experience of separation in Australia

The experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia was fluid (i.e., amorphous) and constantly changing. I identified five major themes and sub-themes using phenomenological analysis which reflected this experience (see Table 2). I did not view subjective representations of identified themes and sub-themes as absolute. Previous research and participant excerpts assisted in the interpretation of findings. Excerpts are referenced with pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity. Pseudonyms reflected parents' residential status and gender and are represented as: 5050 = shared care parent, R = residential parent, NR = non-residential parent, F = father, or M = mother. For example, 5050M1 was a mother with a shared care residential arrangement, NRF3 was a non-residential father, and RM6 was a residential mother. Numbers were arbitrarily assigned in order to differentiate between participants (see Table 3 for participant demographics). The following five parts of this chapter present a description and interpretation of the five major themes and related sub-themes.

Table 2

Major themes and related sub-themes identified following the analysis of interviews

Major Themes	Sub-themes
Uncoupling	Psychological health Family stress Infidelity Drifting apart
Uncoupled	Co-parenting The economic struggle Loss and loneliness Identity: Assumed and assigned Psychological, emotional and physical health problems
Searching within the self	Personal control Self-regulation Optimism Healthy living
Reaching beyond the self	Connectedness, social support, and reaching out Positive employment Constructive co-parenting The parent – child relationship Loving again
Patterns of adjustment	The rollercoaster The “time” factor The protective nature of separation

Table 3

Participant demographics

Participant group (Code)	N	Age M (SD)	Years since separation M (SD) ¹	Formerly married	Re- partnered
Residential mothers (RM)	11	42.2 (9.25)	3.3 (2.85)	9	5
Residential fathers (RF)	9	47.8 (5.61)	3.7 (2.55)	5	2
Mothers with shared care (5050M)	9	38.6 (6.02)	3.3 (2.76)	5	2
Fathers with shared care (5050F)	10	44.9 (8.65)	2.7 (1.91)	7	5
Non-residential mothers (NRM)	5	43.2 (9.98)	4.6 (5.45)	3	1
Non-residential fathers (NRF)	11	36.9 (12.57)	1.7 (0.81)	5	4
		(Average)	(Average)		
Total	55	42.76 (8.14)	3.07 (2.69)	34	19

Note: 1. Decimal places denote months calculated by: months separated/12

PART ONE: UNCOUPLING

Parents described their experience of separation as beginning prior to the actual event itself. I termed this phase of the separation experience '*uncoupling*' because consciously or unconsciously, all parents' reflections of their experience included issues that they felt led to their separation. This was an important consideration in my study because these experiences and the way parents understood them actively contributed to their perceptions of experiences *following* separation. Core descriptions of parents' experiences during the uncoupling process reflected particular sets of conditions, circumstances, settings, environments and backgrounds (i.e., context) that shaped their decision to separate. Identifying the context and the core of sub-textual meanings of parents' descriptions of the uncoupling process was integral in providing the foundation for understanding the experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia.

Psychological health

Prior to separation, parents were dealing with numerous psychological issues and many of these parents believed that associated difficulties provided the basis for feelings of estrangement; ultimately leading to separation. The parents in my study spoke of their own intrinsic psychological concerns as contributing to their separation: *"I had really bad post-natal depression with my little girl, which ended in a suicide attempt, and then he kicked me out and I lost access to the kids basically"* (NRM3), and *"I found out I had depression and had to go on medication, see a psychiatrist and what not. So I suppose this was coming for why we separated, because I realised that he didn't want to support me through that"* (5050M6).

Parents also spoke of their ex-partner's psychological concerns as contributors to their separation:

My wife ended up getting very sick, with very bad depression... And so that depression led into schizoaffective disorder... it was very hard because we still loved each other... my wife had a mental illness and I feel as though I was at the point in life where I still had a lot of love to give someone and I still wanted to be intimate with someone else and I had to make that decision – a totally selfish one which was – “Do I be a carer for the rest of my life or do I go off and find someone I can be with and give my life to?” – I had to make that decision. I had to tell my wife at the time that I can’t keep going on like this, I need to find somebody else (5050F2)

Specifically, parents described a range of mental illnesses and substance abuse which affected either themselves or their ex-partners including depression, anxiety, alcohol and other drug use, schizo-affective disorder, bi-polar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, post-natal depression, borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, and suicide-related behaviours. As an extension of their own and their partners’ mental health concerns, parents also experienced numerous forms of domestic abuse. For example, parents described violence, aggression, physical abuse, psychological abuse, manipulation, police involvement, and violence towards the children when discussing experiences of domestic abuse:

[when asked what led to her separation] Violence, mental and physical abuse... about halfway through our marriage he started to get more violent and I’d get bruises on me and stuff like that. He would never touch my face. Well he did, like my earrings got pulled out and he’d pull my hair, he’d drag me around the house by my hair, but he would never do something that would leave a physical... you know... evidence, physical evidence so people could see it. So each night I’d get into bed at night time and my heart would be racing thinking – “Am I going to have a good night tonight?” or “Am I going to have a bad night?” “Will I be awake until three or four o’clock in the morning listening to horrible words, getting pushed around and stuff?” or “Am I going to be able to get some sleep?” (RM2)

Most often, parents described non-physical abuse (i.e., emotional; psychological; verbal) during the uncoupling process:

Probably there was a lot of verbal abuse going on, or degrading... From her to me. Yeah I was quite passive. I'd just basically ride it. I've got a thick skin now. I could take a lot of verbal abuse. It was mainly verbal. But, yeah, over time, you don't realise, it wears you down. Basically that went on. I lost my true identity. I didn't get out. I didn't look after myself... she was constantly nagging and abusing me and telling me I'm basically worthless, and, yeah no one would have me and all that sort of shit (NRF5)

Interestingly, it appeared common for non-residential parents to describe experiences of domestic violence and abuse in their pre-separation relationship. Kaspiw et al. (2009) described similar findings in their review of the 2006 Australian family law reforms. They found that fathers who never saw their children, and mothers who spent between 1% and 34% of nights with their children (i.e., non-residential mothers), reported the highest proportions of pre-separation physical and emotional abuse. In general, psychological health concerns as precursors for separation and divorce have been well established in relevant literature supporting social selection theory (Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Sbarra et al., 2014; Simon, 2002).

Family Stress

In addition to psychological difficulties experienced prior to separation, numerous insurmountable stressful family circumstances were apparent among parents' experiences of the uncoupling process. Parents described stressful family circumstances such as moving house, deaths in the family, cultural issues, difficulty with employment, problems with children, financial difficulty, and physical health problems:

Well one of the reasons that my ex left me also, she said was, I was involved in a fairly serious work injury and as a result of that I had really bad injuries to both my knees and back. And over time I just put on a lot of weight I guess at that stage, and couldn't do a hell of a lot and that's what she made lots of reference to. She couldn't live with a person who had a disability any longer (RF5)

Stressful life circumstances were not isolated to one issue, but rather a combination of issues over a period of time that eventuated in an increase in distress:

The first issue we dealt with was IVF, because my wife had trouble conceiving. So we went for four years on the IVF program, which proved to be a source of friction in the marriage and tension... at the same time as that, my mother then contracted cancer and then passed away from cancer... shortly after that my best friend passed away of a sudden heart attack... shortly after that, after my mum passing away from cancer, my dad contracted dementia... so these were all sources of stress placed on the marriage... we went overseas together to try and rekindle the romance, so to speak. Unfortunately our child was sick and my ex needed to fly back to Australia. And once she flew back to Australia, she then rang me back several days later and told me that the marriage is over, and when I come home I need to find a new house (5050F10)

5050F10's experience of stress leading up to separation encompassed issues associated with conceiving, deaths in the family, illness in the family, and problems with the children which led to separation. NRF11 similarly described a series of stressful life events that led to his separation including moving house, difficulty with employment, and health problems:

... we moved – we were living outside of the coast – about an hour and a half from the coast... and that put a lot of stress on the relationship because my partner was quite far away from home and her sort of support network. I then had a car accident and broke my sternum, and was quite incapacitated for probably three months and then took another three months to recover. So sort of that five month period, [I was] quite hurt physically and [it was] putting an extra lot of strain on our relationship and we broke up (NRF11)

Parents described family stressors as external to the relationship itself and felt that they were outside of their control. Subsequently, stressors were appraised as contributing to separation when they were not able to be dealt with within the parameters of the relationship, as described by 5050M8:

We just couldn't keep doing what we were doing [arguing over the children's disability]. There weren't enough resources to keep doing what needed to be done and we spent a lot of time trying to fix things but I guess my idea and his idea of what needed to happen weren't similar enough for things to be fixed... Unhappiness wouldn't have been enough for me to divorce, um, definitely seeing my children yelling at their father in conflict in a way where they weren't going to be supported to work through that, and that I was going to need to be the person to try to deal with stuff, wasn't something that was sustainable...

Findings provide some support for social selection theory (Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Sbarra et al., 2014; Simon, 2002). In line with this theory, parents who appraised life stressors as insurmountable during their relationships may have been more likely to appraise issues experienced following separation as similarly insurmountable. On the other hand, parents' difficulties dealing with family stressors in their pre-separation relationships may also reflect an unsatisfactory match between personalities, where parents may very well experience relief from stress following separation. Thus, experiences of stressful family circumstances provide the basis for understanding the foundation of parents' experiences following separation. In general, these findings appear to have moved beyond pre-existing understandings in this area (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Amato & Previti, 2003; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006) to highlight the specific stressors that Australian separated parents were dealing with prior to separation.

Infidelity

Problems associated with infidelity were also apparent among many parents' experiences of uncoupling and contributed to separation in many cases. Some parents described either initiating infidelity themselves or spoke of their ex-partner's infidelity as the reason for separation: *"My ex-husband had an affair and decided he wanted to be with the other woman and then so I offered a second chance but he refused"* (5050M2), *"She had loads of boyfriends. Look I have to be honest with you. I love my wife very much but there was nothing I could do about the fact that she was terribly promiscuous and she wanted to do what she wanted to do"* (RF6), and [when describing the reason for his separation] *"I had an affair. There's no excuses for that"* (NRF4).

Other parents described infidelity earlier in their relationship that ultimately led to separation later down the track. Specifically, parents described giving their partners a second or third chance following infidelity in the relationship:

... she told me she'd slept with somebody else and she wanted a divorce. That bloody hit home like you imagine it would of course. Anyway, back then, I didn't want her to leave and the boys were only very young and all the rest of it. So I convinced her to stay and you know, we sort of, we stayed together for the next 10 to 12 years I guess, and in hindsight I think the fact she did that, I should have let her go right then. Because I don't think life between us was ever the same after that. I think we lost the connection we had, or I did, I lost the connection we had, and all the passion in the relationship and that kind of thing (RF4)

Experiences of infidelity appeared to have implications for the way in which parents appraised their separation. For example, some parents who initiated infidelity felt a sense of shame and guilt:

I took a route I'm not proud of, of meeting up with someone else...it took me a long time to get over what I'd done there, because that... I was really ashamed of myself... I come from a very traditional farming background and to get... or to leave a marriage was a big decision on my part, and it wasn't that I didn't expect to be judged for that by certain parts of family and friends and things like that, but I guess it was... yeah, I felt like I'd let myself and everyone else down, and let the kids down. So yeah, I felt like a failure, to be honest. Yeah, that's probably the... I just felt like I'd let so many people down (NRF6)

Other parents who initiated infidelity described a sense of hurt and injustice related to the way in which the infidelity was dealt with:

Unfortunately I didn't get a second chance with my ex-wife...I didn't think I deserved to be treated in that manner [being taken to court for residency of children] even though I'd done the wrong thing, admitted to doing the wrong thing. I was still a human being and we were still married for 18 years. I considered the 17 years and 10 months prior to my infidelity as being a successful marriage and it seemed that everything was wiped away. I mean I know you can say it's your own fault but we're all human beings, we all make mistakes. I just didn't think I deserved – not that I didn't deserve it, I didn't think it was justified what was happening. I didn't think the punishment fitted the crime (NRF4)

On the other hand, some parents who were the non-initiators of infidelity described feelings of betrayal and rejection when reflecting on the time leading up to their separation:

I just can't believe he's just thrown it all away... like 23 years is a long time... The infidelity and the fact that he basically threw our life away. We really grew up together because we were only young when we got married and he didn't try... he just didn't try (NRM2)

Other parents described conflict in the context of their ex-partner's infidelity:

He was quite horrible to me... like – "You fucking move out, I want you out, I'm seeing someone else!" It was quite volatile. So I did take the initiative to move out; it took me a long time to gain the courage (NRM4)

These findings are similar to previous studies finding that non-initiators of separation and divorce tend to feel betrayed, rejected, and helpless as a result of their partner's decision to leave the relationship (Sakraida, 2005). Formerly married parents described infidelity during uncoupling as a particularly salient issue. The socially constructed moral climate of infidelity suggests that marital separation involving violation of the adultery norm is especially difficult to cope with (Sweeney & Horowitz, 2001). In other words, the social institution of marriage involves commitment and loyalty to each other and a pledge of fidelity. Adultery violates these particular social values of marriage. Despite social change suggesting a weakening of social proscriptions governing sexual behaviour and family life, research continues to identify adultery as socially unacceptable (Allen & Atkins, 2012; Previti & Amato, 2004; Sweeney & Horowitz, 2001). Descriptions of infidelity were largely absent from formerly cohabiting parents dialogues. This finding may suggest that formerly cohabiting parents did not experience infidelity or that they may not necessarily appraise infidelity in a similar vein to formerly married parents. The latter argument may further indicate that social constructions of the sanctity of marriage continue to prevail.

The current findings indicate that parents who initiated their separation following their own infidelity, and parents who experienced separation as the non-initiator due to their ex-partner's infidelity, may progress through separation with differing levels of emotional difficulties that centre upon their perception of control.

Drifting apart

Almost all the parents in my study described a sense of “drifting apart” during the uncoupling process. There were two inter-related components to this sub-theme. Firstly parents felt that they drifted apart from their partner: *“I began to drift away and she began to drift away, and we started to live separate lives”* (5050F10), and *“I think we just grew apart”* (5050M9). Parents’ experiences of drifting apart from their partner were the result of issues associated with the previous three sub-themes or isolated experiences such as diminished communication and intimacy, having different interests, feeling the relationship was not right from the beginning, and marrying too young or too quickly:

We weren’t talking and listening to each other. We weren’t communicating at all. We were arguing a lot, and... We just kind of grew apart. We weren’t giving each other the attention that we probably needed and deserved – both of us (NRF6)

Our interests were going separate ways, you know. For me, the greatest pleasure was doing the landscaping and the gardening, cooking, and these sort of things were my pleasures. And she wanted to drink and party and carry on, and it’s not my interest. So we had different interests (5050F4)

[we] got married when we were 24 so – I think it was just too young. We were high school sweethearts sort of thing, so I think it was just a bit young, not a very good match sort of thing. But you just, when it’s your first relationship you just keep going (RM5)

Lack of intimacy I would probably say. There was no other reason [for the separation]. The longer you don’t make love, the harder it is to make love. I guess towards the end there, neither of us wanted to make love to each other (5050F2)

Secondly, parents felt that they drifted apart from themselves or “lost themselves” as an individual. Parents’ expressions of losing themselves tended to centre upon perceptions of their own identity over time as enmeshed within their parenting role and their role as a partner, rather than as an individual who was a parent and a partner. Feeling a loss of independence also tended to underpin parents’ descriptions of losing themselves:

I guess I didn’t – in my case I’d become [ex-partners’] wife because I was only young when I got married and... I lost myself... I didn’t have any personality of my own. I was [ex-partners’] wife, I was [first child’s] mother, I was [second child’s] mother and that was who I was (NRM2)

I lost my true identity. I didn't get out. I didn't look after myself. I was basically doing what I was told and not what I should be doing for myself (NRF5)

In general I had kind of realised that I had stopped loving myself and I was putting someone else first and it wasn't really all that good and I really needed to start looking after myself and I couldn't really do that while I was with this other person so... Yeah that's it I guess. I kind of lost myself (5050M4)

Parents' experiences of drifting apart from themselves reflect a struggle with their own identity during uncoupling. Although identity struggles have been identified in previous literature associated with post-separation adjustment (Amato, 2000; Baum, 2004; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Hardesty et al., 2012; Park et al., 2011), my findings add to these findings in the following ways.

Firstly, parents began to redefine and re-establish their identities during the uncoupling process, contrary to previous research findings suggesting this issue is more prominent after separation (Baum, 2004; DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996; Hardesty et al., 2012; Park et al., 2011). Secondly, redefinition and re-establishment of identity during the uncoupling process does not appear to reflect previous research (Baum, 2004; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002; Simon, 1992) that suggests difficulties in this area are the result of the loss of identity associated with being a parent and a partner as part of the separation experience. Rather, my findings indicate that parents began to mourn the loss of their own personal identities prior to separation; ultimately leading to separation. In other words, my findings appear to reflect a psychosocial drifting prior to a physical drifting. Thirdly, my findings suggest that the nature of parents' identity battles differed pre and post-separation. Specifically, parents mourned the loss of their own personal identity when fulfilling roles associated with parental and spousal identities (i.e., when part of a family system) *prior* to separation.

Whether parents felt they drifted apart from their partners or from themselves, most experiences of drifting apart were associated with time. Parents began to drift apart from their partners or themselves long before physical separation. Further, parents alluded to attempts to renegotiate relationships or keep going despite feelings of drifting apart.

These findings taken together indicate that uncoupling for parents in the current study was a process that evolved over time where parents began to feel estranged from their partners, and attempted to “keep going” unsuccessfully.

Experiences of drifting apart appeared to be different across gender. Mothers often described feeling as though they drifted away from their own unique identities. This finding suggests that women may be more likely to initiate separation as a result of increasing feelings of estrangement from themselves, rather than their ex-partners. Accordingly, many mothers in my study felt confident in their ability to separate from their ex-partners following feelings of estrangement due to appraisal of their own economic independence as a contributor to personal control. Findings also indicate that fathers felt that they were rarely intimate with their ex-partners during the time preceding separation; both emotionally and physically.

Shared care parents in my study commonly felt separation was the result of drifting apart from their ex-partner during uncoupling. Yet their separation was often appraised as unexpected. Due to feelings of estrangement rather than issues associated with infidelity, conflict, violence and abuse, shared care parents appeared more likely to agree to a shared parenting arrangement. However, such findings do not suggest that shared care parents were protected from conflict or difficulties associated with co-parenting following separation.

PART TWO: UNCOUPLED

This theme is the first of four themes capturing parents' experiences *following* their separation, and flows directly on from the contextual experiences described as part of the uncoupling process. Following separation, parents were thrown into a new world that was distinct from the life they had previously known. They were now *uncoupled*. Even if the parents in my study felt they were prepared for their separation or not, they collectively described having to contend with a number of expected and unexpected stressors associated with the new phase of being *uncoupled*. For the most part, the elements of being uncoupled in the current study appeared to align with those stressors identified in previous research.

Co-parenting

Projection into the uncoupled phase first and foremost meant becoming a *co-parent* for the parents in my study. A co-parent in my study was defined as a parent who is separated or divorced and shares the responsibility of their children with their ex-partner or ex-spouse across disparate households. Therefore, all participants were co-parents. Experiences of becoming a co-parent were complex and perplexing because this new relationship was characterised by continuing parenting responsibilities, but a discontinuation of partnership (or spousal) responsibilities. Parents' experiences of co-parenting following separation were thwarted by difficult social interactions with a new environment geared to assist separated and divorced parents, disruptive social interactions with ex-partners, and increasing worry and concern for their children who were now part of a separated family. These three difficulties were described by the parents as the hardest issues to contend with as a co-parent.

The first difficulty associated with co-parenting was that becoming a co-parent necessitated interactions with an environment geared towards fostering a positive transition to single parenthood. This environment included Australian legal and government appointed services such as welfare and mediation services that aim to assist the

development of post-separation parenting arrangements. Parents' experiences of organising care arrangements for children were mixed. Some parents agreed to care arrangements mutually and amicably. However, most parents described this process as a significant source of stress. Despite the intended purposes of legislative changes in Australia, government-appointed community-based services were reported to be unhelpful: *"I felt mediation was a mammoth waste of time... I found it terrible for me, for my kids, it was a terrible move"* (5050M1).

Specifically, problems were seen to involve an ineligibility to engage with services, a lack of service access, long waitlists, administrative problems, a lack of community awareness and negative experiences:

In that first year, I did nothing but phone call every association, everywhere seeking help. Oh my god, I knocked on every single door that was there to knock on. And basically what I found is that the government had set up these welfare agencies that are totally incapable of helping. They're basically there to put Band-Aids on a burdened system (NRM1)

Parents experienced similar difficulties when attempting to access such services for financial and practical assistance associated with the sole care of their children:

... it wasn't like anyone in [welfare service] or [child support service] said "Hey, you can get help here"... because when I went in there and said, you know, "I want to apply for the sole parent pension, what do I have to do?" Apart from the fact that they lost my forms three times and then I had to make three appointments and I'm still fighting for back-pay because they refuse to acknowledge that I even lodged the forms that they lost. The last time I was like "What else is available? What else can they do?" and the guy gave me a form for childcare and said "You can put your kid in childcare" and I was like "Great, thanks!"... You know, like... and the stupid thing was that I'm eligible for it and I didn't really need to do the form, you know what I mean? You can either do the form or you can just get them to give you a letter and you can give the letter to the childcare provider, but he didn't even tell me that. I mean I know they're not deliberately unhelpful, but they're not that good (5050M4)

Parents' social interactions with government-appointed community-based services exacerbated difficulties associated with arranging care for their children and the acquisition of financial and practical support. Parents felt misunderstood, misled, frustrated, hopeless,

and unimportant when engaging with these services. Such findings appear to contradict some Australian and international research indicating positive results when evaluating parliamentary and governmental policies and strategies that have led to the implementation of various service provisions for separated families (Emery, 2011; Emery et al., 2001; Kaspiew et al., 2009; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). Instead, my findings reflect other research finding that information, advice and assistance from community services may increase difficulties associated with adjustment to separation and divorce when compared to emotional support (Douglas, 2006; Kitson & Holmes, 1992). Such findings suggest inefficiency of mandatory mediation provided by FRCs and welfare agencies.

In addition to appraisals of such services as unhelpful, parents were further disappointed with outcomes: “... *there was nowhere really to go unless I issued family law court proceedings, you know, which costs money and things like that and so we ended up at mediation and it wasn’t a great – I don’t think it was a great outcome*” (RM10).

On the other hand, parents were happy to access these services in the context of a general desire to avoid involving the legal system. For parents, the thought of involving the legal system brought with it expected financial and emotional costs. These concerns were justified when considering the experiences of those parents who did involve the legal system:

The court process is so long and drawn out and you get nothing. It shouldn’t be in the court system, it shouldn’t be a court matter – children’s matters. It’s actually an industry made for lawyers and judges that should not be – it shouldn’t happen because no one actually wins. The kids’ rights don’t actually get, in my opinion, honoured... So I probably wouldn’t have went [sic] to Family Court because like I said, it’s so financially draining and emotionally draining – terrible. It’s almost like emotional abuse. I think a friend of mine likened it to that. Family Court is emotional abuse. So you may as well beat yourself up before you go to the Family Court because it’s just terrible. Financially and emotionally draining, it’s almost worth not seeing your kids, because, my ex she didn’t want me to see the kids, and I know it’s hard to say that but it’s almost worth not doing it... It’s never over. So it’s been in court for at least a year and it’s just terrible (NRF2)

Parents described the legal system as unsupportive, inconsiderate, emotionally draining, time-consuming, and costly. Legal involvement for parents in my study mostly involved battles for care of the children and, to a lesser extent, financial settlements. The effects of legal involvement following separation were often experienced long after court proceedings had concluded and outcomes were generally undesirable.

Parents further felt that community awareness and resources were significantly lacking to assist them to arrange care for their children and prepare for legal proceedings: *"... it would have helped me to know what to expect but there was nothing out there, I didn't know where to turn to or who to go to for help"* (NRM4). Parents' experiences of legal involvement following separation mirror previous findings (Kelly, 2003; Kourlis et al., 2013; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Pruett & Jackson, 1999; Rodgers et al., 2004).

The second difficulty associated with co-parenting was negotiating a new relationship with ex-partners. This relationship was characterised by continuing parental responsibilities within the boundaries and parameters of a new, platonic relationship. Negotiating such a relationship was fraught with conflict as a result of having to arrange care time for children, experiences during uncoupling and the adverse nature of separation itself. Distinct from parents' experiences with government-appointed community-based services and the legal system, conflict and violence in the co-parenting relationship extended beyond finalisation of care arrangements, where some parents were still engaged in conflict with their ex-partners at the time of their interview:

...the hardest thing about all of this is dealing with my ex-partner through it all... So constant accusations of me manipulating – I think often really trying to provoke a reaction from me and I just try not to – and I stopped handing over our daughter to him when he visits her... [because there was] some shouting and sort of – nothing violent but I've had my shirt yanked or haven't been able to leave the house with my daughter in my arms because he's blocking the front door and things like that so... the difficulties of dealing with my daughter's father have continued throughout her first year of life and even today (RM6)

The necessity for an ongoing relationship with ex-partners was a substantial contributor to discord in the co-parenting relationship:

... probably one of the hardest things is knowing that when you have a little one with someone, you can probably never get rid of them... you just can never separate... when someone dies it's like you can grieve and get over it and that sort of thing, but in this situation you can never, it's like the grief is ongoing, like the dramas and the arguments (RM5)

Conflict was not only confined to the immediate co-parenting relationship, but also involved extended family members and ex-partners' new partners : *"Both my ex-husband and his mother tried to formulate... a case of me being mentally unstable and an unfit mother, turned the whole community against me"* (5050M3), *"The guy [ex-partner is] with now... he bashed me up in front of the house <laughs>... you can't imagine how horrible that was"* (5050F4), and:

Just personally, it's just I start getting a lot better, and then my [ex] wife does something that's very cruel, or her father, her whole family does something really cruel and that does set me back. And that is the intention, and I know that, and sometimes I know that they're trying to get under my skin and to bully and to coerce and do the things that they do. That does set me back, it does. It's better now, with much less contact, because they're totally... you know [they think] I'm a waste of space and waste of skin and shouldn't be breathing. So, as far as they're concerned, I'm dead to them. They don't want me involved with my kids at all and that adds to the fight, you know. That sets me back, when they do things and they say things... (NRF3)

When describing discord within the co-parenting relationship, I use the word *conflict* loosely because, although some parents' expressions of conflict were explicit, others were implicit. Specifically, discord between some parents in my study and their ex-partners was expressed outwardly through aggressive communication and behaviour, similar to those experiences described above. Yet, others preferred to remain passive about issues they perceived as problematic. For example, parents had inconsistent ideas of appropriate parenting across households and some parents felt as though their ex-partners were unreliable parents: *"... he won't put the same importance on things as what I will or what [child] will, so she's trying to make her own way and have her own values but he doesn't allow her to have that"* (5050M1), and *"... when it comes to looking after the little one and it gets a bit difficult; she'll call out for me to come and give her a hand... you know, and so... and she couldn't*

handle any of his outbursts and that sort of stuff, she'd just have to walk away" (RF3). These types of thoughts were not necessarily articulated to ex-partners. Rather, experiences were discussed with me in the context of co-parenting issues that were causing concern for the parents in my study. Remaining passive meant that parents had to work harder to counteract their perceptions of maladaptive practices across households when children were in their care. This led them to feel as though they lacked control of the co-parenting environment: *"Also the biggest, one of the biggest issues is the lack of control... You have no control over what goes on in the other house. And if you try to it's only going to light the fire again"* (5050F10). Therefore, parents felt it best to remain passive and withhold issues they had within the co-parenting relationship, simply to avoid conflict.

When explored in more depth, communication was indeed a substantial contributor to conflict in co-parenting relationships: *"You need to try and establish some sort of co-parenting arrangement, so that's really, really difficult when the two parents don't communicate"* (NRF4). Parents struggled to isolate discussions to child issues only, where emotional or uncoupling issues would cause conflict: *"I started putting my foot down and saying.... If it's about the children ring me, if not I don't need to talk to you... and the more I did that, the more nasty emails, the nasty text messages, the vicious phone calls were coming through"* (5050F8).

Parents' experiences point to two issues associated with interactions in the context of co-parenting. The first is the specific issues parents experience when attempting to adapt to co-parenting. For the parents in my study these issues encompassed the prevailing relationship with their ex-partner, inconsistency in parenting practices across households, a lack of confidence in the other parent, and a lack of control. The second issue relates to the way parents cope with these difficulties through the use of communication. Parents in my study who had more difficulty adapting to the co-parenting relationship tended to remain passive regarding the issues they were experiencing, or were exposed to consequences associated with the aggressive communication of ex-partners. Parents' experiences of continuing conflict in co-parenting relationships following separation and divorce reflect

other studies that have documented similar difficulties (Cookston et al., 2008; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Symoens et al., 2014).

These findings lead directly into concern for children's wellbeing following separation, which was the third and final co-parenting difficulty described by parents in my study. For example, feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem and low self-efficacy described by parents were exacerbated by anxiety, guilt and worry about how their children were coping: *"I worry about all the different negative impacts of this on my daughter. Yeah it can be quite upsetting"* (NRF8). Concerns were heightened when children were at the other parent's house:

...when you suddenly have to let your child go and you have no impact on that at all, so whether you... you know, is she warm enough, is she happy, what is she eating, you know is she cared for, you know, is she happy... all of that... that's really hard and even now it's still... it's hard to adjust to... they have a whole other life that you know nothing about (5050M1)

The difficulty associated with this transition was largely a result of the presence of dependent children. Parents would not have been termed 'co-parents' if children were not present. Therefore, the necessity for an ongoing co-parenting relationship, distinct from co-parenting within an intact family system, obstructed parents' abilities to grieve for the loss of the relationship completely and move on. These findings reflect other studies that have found that parents with dependent children struggle more following separation and divorce compared with parents with older and more independent children (Amato et al., 2011; Gardner & Oswald, 2006).

Among representations of the co-parenting sub-theme was the substantial variability in experiences of becoming a co-parent across gender and residential status. Mothers described particular difficulties following separation as a result of conflict within the co-parenting relationship. Such findings have been described in previous literature (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Symoens et al., 2014). For the mothers in my study, difficulties associated with conflict in co-parenting relationships were specifically related to the controlling behaviours of ex-partners, difficulty negotiating with

ex-partners which involved countless disagreements, and a subsequent tendency to attempt to avoid ex-partners as a result: *"I never expected the things that happened after we were separated... he was a passive aggressive and controlling person – he wasn't a violently aggressive person – and he became all of those things after the separation"* (5050M4). A further consideration that emerged as particularly salient for mothers in my study was the substantial emphasis placed on their children's wellbeing following separation. Mothers in my study frequently spoke of how they felt their children were faring and their associated worry and concern: *"The kids suffered greatly, so of course I suffered by watching them suffer"* (5050M3). Mothers appeared more focused on their children following their separation rather than on themselves or their ex-partners. As such, they frequently described feeling unhappy about care arrangements, grieving for their children, and consequently reported feeling scared and afraid of being uncoupled. Furthermore, mothers often described engaging lawyers to assist them to arrange more suitable parenting arrangements.

For the fathers in my study, entrance into the uncoupled phase meant unease when organising care arrangements for children. The fathers in my study frequently spoke of feeling as though their ex-partners were actively attempting to deny access and communication with their children: *"The hardest part is the fact that I'm being dictated to when I can and can't see [my children]... there's this controlling body that says even though these are your kids, they're not your kids... it's very hard"* (NRF5). When involved in legal disputes, fathers felt that they were discriminated against and that the legal system was heavily geared towards the mother's best interests. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Hawthorne, 2005; Kruk, 2010; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Parkinson, 2010; Umberson & Williams, 1993). However, the majority of research in this area has included samples of non-residential fathers. Therefore, representations (i.e., residential, non-residential and shared care fathers) of unease with organising care arrangements, and fathers' perceptions of the mother as thwarting contact with children, adds another layer of understanding regarding their experiences.

Residential parents in my study also described conflict, violence and police involvement as particularly salient issues in the co-parenting relationship following separation: *"He became more and more aggressive when he was dropping the kids off... we had a couple of altercations.... one that I had to get the Police involved in"* (RM8). Perhaps as a related matter, residential parents often described their ex-partner as an unreliable parent: *"...she is quite competent... but when it comes to looking after the little one and it gets a bit difficult she'll call out for me to give her a hand"* (RF3). Attempts to cope with such difficulties often led to alcohol use. Findings point to possible pre-separation issues as a contributor to the development of care time arrangements for the children post-separation. For example, conflict, violence and police involvement associated with difficulties with ex-partners in the pre-separation relationship was described often as a contributor to separation for residential parents in my study, and subsequently led to residential care of the children. It is possible that ex-partners' attempts to renegotiate care time of children may have led to increased conflict, violence and police involvement in the post-separation relationship for residential parents.

On the other hand, further consideration of perceptions of ex-partners as unreliable may suggest that the residential parents in my study experienced difficulties associated with maintenance of care time arrangements when uncoupled. For example, issues such as pick-up and drop-off times, the nature of time spent with children (i.e., inappropriate activities; leaving children with grandparents), parenting practices when children were with the other parent (i.e., bad foods given to children; inappropriate rules and boundaries enforced), and communication between parents (i.e., difficulty getting hold of ex-partner when children are in their care) were often described by the residential parents in my study. Similar issues have been described in previous literature (Amato, 2000; Bonach, 2005; Hallman et al., 2007; Hutson, 2007). It is therefore possible that such issues further exacerbated conflict within co-parenting relationships for the residential parents in my study.

It was also common for shared care parents to describe co-parenting problems associated with differing opinions about best parenting practices: *"we have the odd sort of disagreement about what we think should be done about something"* (5050M7). A further

unique issue highlighted for shared care parents was concern associated with moving their children between two homes and frequent worry about the two lives their children were living: *"The constant to-ing and fro-ing – [child] didn't have any stability when she started high school – she hated that changeover day"* (5050M3). A handful of studies have identified similar concerns associated with shared care parenting (Cashmore et al., 2010; Haugen, 2010; Nielsen, 2011; Trinder, 2010; Tucker, 2006). However, most of these studies have pointed to similar concerns described by children in shared care arrangements, whereas my findings suggest that parents share their children's associated concerns. Similarly, I found that shared care parents felt that there was a general lack of community support for them: *"There was very little community support"* (5050F10). Such findings have not been documented in previous literature. At face value, this lack of support is understandable given the relative rarity of this post-separation parenting arrangement. In other words, because shared care parenting has been less common until the last decade where a spike in prevalence is evident, community assistance and information available for parents attempting to negotiate this parenting arrangement will have been scarce.

Non-residential parents' experiences of co-parenting were interpreted as the most adverse of all typologies following separation. Perhaps as a related issue to experiences of violence and abuse prior to separation (described as part of *uncoupling*), non-residential parents frequently described feeling emotionally hurt by their ex-partners following separation and repeatedly described feeling as though their ex-partners were denying them access and communication with their children: *"You feel the usual rejection... and depression and loss... losing your kids, it's very, I guess, depressing... it's quite difficult"* (NRF2), *"He's hurt my child and me so badly, and all my family and friends – to alienate my child from all of us..."* (NRM5). Most importantly, however, non-residential parents consistently described the adversity associated with separation from their children. Their dialogues reflected the loss of regular contact with their children. Lack of involvement with children translated into concern that children were not adjusting to the separation. Such thoughts were often experienced by non-residential parents in the context of having little or no contact with their children where adequate assessment of child adjustment and

adaptation was difficult. Likewise, they believed that their involvement with their children was integral to their child's development: *"It was a lack of contact with my kids which really hurt... basically I was just flatly refused access... not seeing the kids every night... that's the hardest part"* (NRF5). Similar findings have been identified in previous literature (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Troilo & Coleman, 2012; Umberson & Williams, 1993). However, most other studies examining the experiences of non-residential parents explicitly outline difficulties for fathers due to social trends associated with a high proportion of men becoming non-residential carers following separation and divorce. My findings present an additional understanding of previous research results given that my study also included non-residential mothers. Therefore, findings indicate that issues that have often been identified for non-residential fathers following separation may also be present for non-residential mothers.

Non-residential parents also frequently spoke of their lack of confidence in the family law system: *"I think the whole system is failing. I think the whole society is falling apart... and I think both parties are not heard and I think the legal system is so harmful – it's really harmful"* (NRM1). It is important to note here that non-residential parents did not necessarily report engaging legal involvement more than parents with other arrangements. Rather, they simply appeared more dissatisfied and lacked confidence in the policies, strategies and processes associated with the family law system. Taken together, these issues described as particularly salient by the non-residential parents in my study contributed to personal perceptions of their separation as "traumatic". Similar experiences were described in other studies that have examined legal involvement following separation (Kruk, 2010; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Parkinson, 2010).

The economic struggle

For the parents in my study, descriptions of economic hardship were associated with finances, housing and employment. While parents were adjusting to co-parenting, most found themselves in a position where a double income was reduced to a single income, and

their family home was now a single parent residence. Meanwhile, they were attempting to maintain employment that suited their new unique circumstances. These economic changes paved the way for substantial difficulties for the parents in my study:

Financially it's been difficult. That's why I've ended up living with my parents. My choice to go to Uni has meant that, hopefully, I can live with my parents for the three years that I'll be there. Because it's just impossible if I had to work as well. I would have to study part time. It doubles the length of the course. Yeah, rent and stuff is basically impossible... the budget is significantly tighter (RM9)

Financially, parents struggled with the loss of a second income, having to start over again, the loss of assets, having to make organisational payments (i.e., child support), legal fees and the maintenance of everyday living expenses:

I had to buy everything again, refrigerators, washing machine, you know... lounge suites... everything you know. It's just like starting out again when you're nineteen and you've left your parents' home, but I had to do it as a [age] year old man and also care for three children while I was doing it. So that was physically really, really hard and there were times, you know, I found it really hard to cope with it all. Psychologically I think the hardest thing was the coming to terms with losing everything as far as your home and your finances are concerned. And that was hard because you think, why have I worked all my life for? (5050F1)

Financial struggles had the potential to decrease parents' ability to cope because such difficulty was often experienced in the context of physical and emotional strain, concern about their ability to provide for their children, and feelings of hopelessness when finances were low or depleted. For parents, difficulty coping with finances was reflected through descriptions of lifestyle change:

I guess back then it was just really hard because I hate being in debt and I didn't have the money to do a lot of things I wanted to do. So that really upset me and really put a strain on everything, and just put a lot more pressure on me (RM4)

Financial strain was exacerbated not only due to an economic split between two previously coupled people, but also due to numerous changes associated with being uncoupled. The parents in my study had to consider how they would maintain employment in the context

of caring for their children on their own. For some parents this meant resigning or losing employment as a result of increased emotional and practical difficulties: *"I basically resigned from my position. I decided I can't do this divorce and work in [job title], which is highly stressful, and long hours at the same time. So I resigned from my position"* (5050F10).

Other parents found they had to increase working hours to increase their income, while some had to decrease working hours to have more time to care for their children. Yet, other parents had to find new jobs that were more suitable and accommodating to their new lifestyle. Despite variation in parents' experiences, all dialogue regarding employment reflected ongoing difficulty juggling work and home life. This was especially so in the context of employment environments that were neither flexible nor accommodating:

So now my position was how to start to pull this out. How do I work full time, but also try and be around my children as much as possible? So I was lucky enough to find a job which was two weeks on, two weeks off, working as a [job title] in [City]. And my lifestyle – my life sort of became a lot better because I'd be away for two weeks, and it was hard being away for two weeks, but then I'd be back for two weeks and I'd literally have my children for you know anywhere up to 10 days in that two week off period. Money was comfortable, I was quite comfortable; however, I was still working away, I was still away from my children which is pretty difficult (NRF11)

Parents who had to increase their working hours to increase income described feelings of guilt at not being able to spend more time with their children. In contrast, those parents who decreased their working hours in order to spend more time with their children described financial insecurity. Therefore, parents' descriptions in my study reflect employment as negatively impacting on either their emotional situation or financial situation or both following separation dependent upon increases or decreases in workforce involvement.

Complicating matters further were parents' experiences with housing. A prevailing issue was the experience of living under the same roof while separated: *"I think for about the first ten months we were separated in the same home... sharing the communal areas and then having, you know, separate rooms to sleep in... and, I found that very, very difficult"* (5050M1). For many parents, living under the same roof while separated was

described as a substantial barrier to adjustment. In particular, parents spoke of issues associated with implementing boundaries under these unique circumstances:

I was like, you know, do you cook dinner... do you cook enough for him, do you not, you know, if you don't, how does it look to your daughter that you're not feeding... you know, her Dad. Yeah, but you don't want to cook for him because you're bitter about what he's done. Very difficult... Do you do his washing, don't you do his washing because you're sort of trying to say, well, you've... you know, you've left the marriage and so you're still living here then... but we can't play happy families (5050M2)

I started seeing other people and one day she confronted me about this and... because I kind of discussed it with her because we were basically separated under one roof really, and she was trying to alienate me from the kids. And one day she confronted me about an e-mail that she'd found that I'd written to someone and she got pretty aggressive and you know... she punched me in the face (5050F6)

In addition, continual contact as a result of living in the same home following separation had the potential to prolong redefinitions of identities and roles due to an inability to sever physical attachments as well as emotional attachments to ex-partners:

I don't quite know the full extent of – or the falling back of living in the same house as [ex-partner], that sort of probably did make it a bit more difficult because there was a continual reminder of her presence, so that meant I couldn't really emotionally move on as quickly if I could have if I was living in an additional place (5050F7)

Such arrangements were necessary due to financial difficulty, the inability to find suitable housing (i.e., for children; distance to travel between post-separation households; stability) or disagreements over property settlements and childcare arrangements. Interestingly, living under the same roof while separated was a common experience for shared care parents.

Parents also felt that renting was difficult due to availability and suitability issues; however, buying a new property was often not an option due to economic strain. Specifically, when considering moving, parents had to consider finding a property that was close to their children's school, in a similar area as the pre-separation household to

maintain consistency, and not too far from their ex-partners property so travel time between households was minimised:

Just getting a place. It's just near nigh impossible. There's so many people applying and as a single mother with not a huge income because I'm mostly relying on [welfare payments] now because I've got my daughter for half of the year, it makes it pretty hard to cover fulltime or to have a job. And so I don't have the income that some other people have and I've also got a child which goes against me, and I've also got a cat. A lot of people are put off by having pets as well. So yeah, it's been really, really hard to try and find somewhere to live (5050M4)

At the same time, parents struggles to cope with the loss of their family home. Relocating to a new property meant settling in to new surroundings which was not only emotionally stressful, but also physically stressful:

The thing that was really difficult was setting up a new home, and not just for myself but for my three children... physically speaking it was really hard... so for me it was really hard to move into a house like that [run down property out of town] and set it up for my children to live in... it was really hard also to set the children up... it was hard, it was setting up a new home buying all the stuff and going and picking it up on trailers and loading it up and bringing it back and all that sort of stuff. The physical stuff was hard (5050F1)

For the most part, findings reflect literature that has consistently identified economic adversity as a significant stressor following separation and divorce (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; de Vaus et al., 2014; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Loxton et al., 2006; Zagorsky, 2005).

Findings relative to housing issues are where my study departs slightly from previous research. For example, research examining residential relocation has acknowledged countless difficulties inherent in changing residences (Symoens et al., 2013; Winstanley, Thorns & Perkins, 2002). However, studies exploring the challenge of living under the same roof while separated are lacking. Therefore, findings point to this post-separation housing issue as an additional difficulty that separated parents must contend with.

Loss and loneliness

Loss and loneliness were experienced collectively among the parents in my study. Loss was multifaceted; encompassing a variety of different elements. Loneliness was the resulting state of consciousness that parents found themselves in as a result of both physical and emotional loss. The simple nature of separation denotes a loss of partner or spouse. For parents, feelings of loss were not isolated to mourning previous relationships. Loss was also felt in the context of losing the family system, time with children, friendships, social opportunities, possessions, roles and extended family. Experiences of loss were intertwined with feelings of sadness and grief:

....losing my partner was obviously a massive issue because I lost my best friend, I lost my accomplice, I'd lost everything in that sense. But the actual loss, you know it took me a little while to get over the relationship loss, I can't ever get over not having the kids, you know what I mean? So from full-time dad to part-time dad, that's the catch 22 because I won't ever be able make up for that time, and I probably won't ever have the opportunity to have my babies living with me full time (NRF11)

...we had to completely break off all ties with him and all of his family in order to keep the children safe. So it's been like there has been a train wreck and everybody we knew, all of our Australian family were all killed in the one go. So the kids lost... They lost all their grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, everybody that they'd had in this part of the world. They were gone all at the same time so it's been really terrible (RM8)

We as a pair had more social world and more of the social contacts than we do as separated for some reason, and we lost a lot... I'm probably not good at keeping those social, those things. So it's impacted us. So there's a bit less of a kind of network. I think more about the kids than myself. Before we had a bigger network of friends and social engagements, and they had more context. So that's drifted aside (5050F5)

Loss was often felt in the context of a sense of longing for something was never going to be experienced again. Appraisal of loss in this sense reflected a degree of finality; of never again having what once was. Such feelings transpired into emotional and physical loneliness. Emotional loneliness for the parents in my study was experienced as a result of being projected into a new world that was unknown and was characterised by a state of consciousness resulting from thoughts about loss. Parents reflected on prior feelings of

completeness within the family unit that turned into projections of the future that embodied emptiness. Parents reported emptiness in terms of the lost family that would never again be whole; time spent with children that would never be complete; relationships that would never be the same; social opportunities that would never be as available; assets that would never again be tangible; and roles that may never again be performed:

I just love being their father and being with them and changing nappies and cleaning and washing them and washing their clothes. I love fussing them and fussing around them and you're isolated from that. That's the best therapy for me and that wasn't allowed for me (NRF6)

In many cases, thoughts and feelings of emptiness did not necessarily reflect parents' experiences of reality. Rather, this sub-theme reflects a conscious state that parents found themselves in following separation that disrupted opportunities for adjustment. Emotional loneliness experienced following separation was exacerbated by physical loneliness.

Physical loneliness relates to the physical loss of having persons and things in close proximity at all times. When parents were physically alone, they were also cognitively alone with their thoughts of loss and loneliness. They found themselves ruminating on lost experiences that previously provided them with a sense of joy and purpose. Parents felt physically lonely when their children were in the care of their ex-partners, where recurrent feelings of "missing out" on children's lives were rife: *"I wasn't seeing the girls on a daily basis as I had been. I wasn't being a part of their lives which I was accustomed to ... that's the hardest part. That still is the recurring issue"* (NRF7). It is in this context that feelings of emotional loneliness were exacerbated:

Being lonely. Not having anybody, not having a partner... not having anybody to talk to, you know... even my best mate I rarely, sometimes, we probably only talk now once every couple of months; that's the worst part. It's just the loneliness and, you know... I don't like it when the children aren't with me, it's just lonely, you know... (RF7)

Feelings of loneliness were felt more by parents who had little or no social networks, or who were geographically isolated. Therefore, social isolation was an important

consideration when interpreting parents' experiences of loss and loneliness. Loneliness in the context of social isolation was experienced by parents not only as a result of losing important relationships following separation, but also as a result of role change. Parents felt that the simple nature of parenting on their own reduced the time available to engage with others socially, where increased childcare commitments and difficulty juggling home and social activities contributed substantially to feelings of physical loneliness: "... *when you're a single with kids, you don't get out, you don't get the opportunity to meet up with people. So yeah it's much, much harder to meet someone or to connect with someone*" (RM8), and:

... it is quite an isolating experience, particularly if you're the primary carer or the non-primary carer of the child or children, it's quite an isolating experience. So – because despite what the statistics are out there – I don't know, I haven't – I know a couple of single mothers but I don't know that many, and even the couple I know, we really struggle to see each other because it's hard when you've got a child, especially a young child, and then times don't match up, you can't see each other, or if you're working different days of the week you can't see each other. You're so busy, it's hard to see people in the same boat, let alone your friends or whatever (RM9)

I don't have any support and I just don't get a break... I did have a few friends, but when you become a full time parent you can't go out doing what you used to do. They all seem to, pretty quickly I might add, fall by the wayside and, as I say, you end up with no one (RF9)

There was some notable variability in experiences of loss and loneliness across gender and residential status. Mothers in my study tended to experience the loss of support from friendships and ex-partners' family as a salient issue. Research examining gender differences following separation has documented similar findings (Amato et al., 1995; Nelson, 1995; Stewart, 2005). As a related issue, the mothers in my study felt that there was a substantial lack of community support to aid their adjustment to their separation. Specifically, they felt that there was little awareness and communication provided by their community in terms of service access and support.

Fathers, on the other hand, referred to loss and loneliness as a result of feeling as though they *lacked* support. This finding reflects ideas presented by Fletcher and St George (2010). They suggested that contrary to popular beliefs, fathers do not necessarily lack the

ability to seek help and support following separation. Rather, such experiences may be the result of lack of service availability and job insecurity as described by the fathers in my study. Therefore, although the fathers in my study described a lack of social support following separation, the reason for this was not due to deficits in their ability to seek support, but rather that such supports were perceived as unavailable or inaccessible.

Residential parents often described loss of friendship networks, substantial changes in parenting roles, and difficulty finding a work/life balance as salient issues when uncoupled. Such findings have been described in previous literature (Amato et al., 1995; Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Specifically, for the residential parents in my study, an increase in parenting roles contributed to a reduction in friendship networks as a result of having little time to engage socially, and difficulty finding a work/life balance in the context of increasing parenting roles. Given that most mothers continue to gain residential status following separation and divorce (De Maio et al., 2012), the majority of research in this area has focused on mothers' experiences of role-overload. However, my findings in this area move beyond such findings by also considering the residential father following separation concomitant with sampling characteristics (i.e., nine residential fathers were included in my study). In particular, findings suggest that fathers may experience similar issues associated with role-overload and loss of social networks, which have previously been considered as an isolated issue for residential mothers.

In contrast, non-residential parents frequently described loneliness in the context of a lack of social support. However, my findings further revealed social withdrawal was a common behaviour for non-residential parents. Social difficulties have been documented for residential parents as a result of role-overload and a lack of time to engage socially (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Similar research exploring social experiences of non-residential parents is scarce. Some literature suggests that non-residential fathers tend to cope with distress by engaging in frantic social activity (Baum, 2003; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006). Other research suggests that non-residential fathers are less likely to seek social support and place less value on social relationships (Patulny, 2012). However, such studies appear to relate to father's experiences (i.e., gender sensitive),

rather than providing further understanding of the social difficulties associated with non-residential parenting status.

Experiences of loss and loneliness following separation and divorce have been repeatedly identified in previous literature (Amato, 2000; Halford & Sweeper, 2013; Nelson, 1995; Stewart, 2005). Separation in itself is characterised by the loss of a primary relationship; however, feelings of loss are exacerbated when children are involved due to the secondary loss of full-time relationships with children. Experiences of loss for the parents in my study were therefore consistent with previous findings; however, they built on such findings by highlighting the distinction between emotional and physical loneliness that resulted from experiences of loss, and the variable experiences across gender and residential status.

Identity: Assumed and assigned

Following separation, the parents in my study battled with developing a new sense of self. As evidenced by the title of this sub-theme, parents spoke of difficulties associated with redefining their own identities, as well as identities they felt were assigned to them by others. These two issues contributed substantially to parents' struggles with identity formation post-separation and reflected contextual changes that parents initially appraised as unsafe or unwanted.

Parents' identity struggles reflected difficulty accepting the loss of the family unit and desecration of the sanctity of marriage: "... it wasn't the loss of the love of my ex as I had grown out of love for her some time ago as she had for me, but the destruction of the family unit which was a foreign concept to me" (5050F10), and:

Probably just my ideals of family. I came from a very... my parents are still together and all my friends' parents are still together and so I always had that image of that was what it is. So just coming to terms with the fact that that's not how my family is going to be. That was probably the hardest (5050M6)

... nearly all my adult life I was a dad and a partner and that's who I identified with and suddenly when that changed and I was a single dad... you have to come to terms with the fact that you're not who you wanted to be or you're not who you used to be, especially when you've been in that pattern for such a long period of time. To suddenly be a single bloke, doing the things that single guys do or whatever, you still feel guilty about that. You feel like you shouldn't be doing that; you feel like this is not what you want to do and to come to terms with that new identity was very difficult for me... It wasn't until ages later when I realised what I was struggling with the most. The letting go of that and being comfortable with having been now in a different stage of my life and that meant I was a different person (RF5)

For the parents in my study, this struggle meant letting go of previous conceptualisations of the self and adopting a new separated or single status. This involved negotiating with personal feelings regarding deviation from conservative ideals of family life. Parents were thrown into a new culture that was significantly distinct from the previous culture they identified with. They struggled to come to terms with not being a partner or spouse and co-parent within an intact family unit. Initially, this new culture was appraised as unwelcome. Many parents rejected their new separated or single status based on their own entrenched ideals of family life which led to feelings of defectiveness. This internal struggle was intertwined with lowered self-esteem and self-worth, as many parents searched for a way to attribute meaning to their self-perceptions of defectiveness and become accustomed to being separated. Constructed expectations of the family life they once knew had to be deconstructed. However, many parents did not know where to start or whether they even wanted to build new identities. As a result, parents found themselves in a world that was not necessarily progressing according to their expectations. Such expectations were a product of social norms ingrained over time which were contrary to the new world parents found themselves in following separation. Expectations were also a product of difficulty letting go of the life parents once knew.

Although parents may have experienced attachment difficulties as suggested by previous studies, descriptions of their identity struggles better reflect their investment in their marital identity (Baum, 2004; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Wang & Amato, 2000). Identity struggles described by the

parents in my study were repeatedly discussed in the context of personal values and constructed ideals of marriage that were tarnished by separation and divorce, rather than difficulty letting go of pre-separation relationships as attachment theories might suggest.

Parents who initiated the separation described having time to begin to reframe their perceptions of themselves whilst still functioning within the confines of the pre-separation relationship. Their expectations differed slightly from the expectations of parents who were shocked by decisions to separate (i.e., non-initiators). However, being an initiator opened up other issues associated with ending the relationship. While they began to redefine their identity, and worked towards making the decision to leave the relationship, initiators struggled with a guilty conscience which impacted on perceptions of themselves as a person and often manifested in psychological distress: “[There was] *a lot of guilt there obviously. I felt bad for the ex because I basically up and left*” (NRF5), and:

His whole goal was about me returning to the family home and him and I getting back together, and you know it was just like kicking a puppy constantly, you know. It was a hard decision to leave in the first place and there was no way I was going back and he, no matter how I said it or put it across, he just kept clinging to hope so... living with the knowledge of what I knew was coming... it was tough and I ended up suffering with anxiety and panic attacks and things, so it was all... pretty hard... as much as it was my decision it was still hard, it was still tough on me to get through as well, you know being the one, I felt like I was the one the responsible for all their unhappiness and so I feel quite selfish and I have a lot of guilt, you know, for that (5050M9)

The guilt that initiators of separation experienced was interwoven into redefinitions of post-separation identities. They felt guilty for leaving their partners and for putting their children through parental separation. This guilt was unrelenting until they began to note adaptation and adjustment in both their ex-partners and their children.

On the other hand, for parents who were non-initiators, redevelopment of identities was prolonged. Many parents in my study who were the victims of infidelity had to contend with feelings of betrayal and rejection in addition to the initial shock of a decision to end the relationship that was not theirs. Despite whether non-initiators were the victims of infidelity or not, their initial reaction to their partner’s decision to separate paved the way for

negative self-appraisals. Non-initiators automatically looked within themselves to determine the reasons for separation, which ultimately impacted on redefinitions of post-separation identity. These parents described feelings of worthlessness, lowered self-esteem, failure and self-blame and reported more difficulty accepting the end of their relationship:

... during that time when she decided that she had feelings and then... the affair developed and all that type of stuff... that was... that was a really difficult time. My self-esteem, self-respect, self-worth was really thrown out the window. Yeah, so I sort of went from being quite a confident, capable person... I wasn't incapable, I was still capable but my confidence and, you know, all that sort of... got ripped away I suppose... that was a pretty difficult time. You sort of start thinking, "Wow, what did I do wrong?" I suppose being the dumpee you really question... and say, "What did I do wrong?", "What did I do wrong in that relationship?" You know, you start to wonder, "Am I a good person?" and all that type of stuff (5050F8)

I think it's different for the people that are left as opposed to being the one who wanted to go. I think they can get going again a lot easier because it was their choice.... You're in a time warp but they've moved on (RM1)

For non-initiators, separation was appraised as unwanted. These parents found themselves in a situation they had not expected and were not prepared for. Because their new separated status was not something they wanted, they resisted redevelopment of their identities, preferring to remain attached to their pre-separated world. Initial negative self-appraisals slowly turned to feelings of despair, where parents found themselves wondering how their ex-partners could have ended the relationship. In this context, being separated was considered foreign and insurmountable, as were initial attempts to adjust to post-separation identities, which in turn reinforced refusal to relinquish pre-separation attachments.

Difficulties with initiator status for the parents in my study were included as part of their struggle to redefine identity because such issues impacted on their perceptions of themselves following separation. However, findings support prior research that has examined initiator status as a stand-alone issue. Specifically, parents who were initiators of

the separation described immense feelings of guilt consistent with Sakraida (2005) and Baum's (2007) findings.

From an attachment perspective, the parents in my study who were non-initiators experienced exacerbated difficulties as a result of failure to let go of pre-existing attachments to both their partners and their marital values. Parents found themselves in a stagnant position; unable to move forward but unable to move back to the pre-separation relationship. Therefore, these parents appeared to have difficulty letting go of pre-separation attachments as they were not yet able to process how they were severed. Experiences of attempts to reconcile former relationships support this position: *"I've toyed with the idea of going back many times and that's created a lot of confusion"* (NRF6), and *"Even up to February this year I still tried to go back"* (RM3).

Interestingly, when considering parents' experiences of infidelity in past research, together with the current findings, it appears that initiators in my study experienced more difficulties prior to separation, whereas non-initiators experienced more difficulty following separation, therefore prolonging their post-separation identity adjustment (Amato & Previti, 2003; Sweeney, 2002; Wang & Amato, 2000).

Complicating efforts to redevelop post-separation identities further were parents' descriptions of having to learn to become both a mother and father when their children were in their care: *"I've had to learn to be a mother and a father when I've got the children, and that's been very difficult"* (NRF4), and:

I'm the mum and dad for them. I do everything for them but I have to do everything as well around the house, and I have to do all the cooking, all the cleaning, all the shopping, all the gardening, all the mowing of the lawns. Everything is my responsibility, all the bills, everything is totally wholly and fully my responsibility for myself and for the two children, and that's a huge burden (RM8)

Adopting new roles and losing others blurred the parameters of identity redevelopment, resulting in an insecure sense of self. Such findings reflect role strain during the process of post-separation identity redevelopment (Hardesty et al., 2012; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000, 2002). For the parents in my study, role strain was experienced as part of

renegotiating their place within the uncoupled culture which was characterised by parenting on their own. Parents struggled to become both the mother and the father, where difficulties arose in the context of having to adopt previous roles that were unknown to them because they were originally their ex-partners' roles.

Such difficulties also reflect what Baum (2004) described as 'absence – presence', where parents experience difficulty letting go of spousal roles and identities and redefining parental roles and identities. The parents in my study described struggles as a result of difficulty letting go of their marital or coupled identity, their identity as part of a family unit, their identity as the initiator or non-initiator of the separation, and their identity as a mother *or* father within an intact family system. The residual features of these identities that were left behind, and held onto following separation, provided the basis for problematic re-establishment of post-separation identities.

In addition to adapting to personal assumptions and expectations of themselves as separated or single, parents struggled with identities that were assigned to them by others and subsequently felt stigmatised following separation. Perceived stigmas were related to breaking the sanctity of marriage and conservative ideals of family life: "... *people judge – they do judge – and marriage is a big societal value and it's still held in that vein, and to break up is not necessarily a good thing...*" (NRF6). Parents were rejected socially as a result of concern from others that they would interfere intimately or socially with intact relationships (i.e., steal their husbands/wives, steer husbands/wives down an unfaithful/risk-taking path):

One thing that happens, in separated woman [sic], I've started going out... I was invited out to a school function and I never got invited out again. And I was told "It's because you are a single woman and therefore dangerous to other married couples." And that is so true, that is a big problem for a separated woman. It's not easy to be separated. It definitely isn't... (RM11)

Parents were also stigmatised as a single parent: "*I just found sometimes that, just because my marriage has broken down, doesn't mean that I'm a bad parent*" (5050M1). Descriptions of stigmas shaped parents' experiences of separation as non-normative and contributed to

negative perceptions of themselves and their new separated identity. Viewing themselves as non-normative in response to identities assigned to them by others exacerbated parents' difficulties interacting socially, as well as their opportunities to meet new people:

It's like I'm... you know, a single man, you know. We can't have a single man coming to our party, you know. It's okay if you've got your kids, but if you haven't... it's just like... like... you're this... this... person with a hideous disease or something... You know, we can't have that person associating with us... (RF7)

Other men who were happily married couldn't understand it or found it too confronting because they thought about their own marriage situation. And then their wives worried that their men, their husbands were mixing with me and it might cause them, you know, to flirt on the side. So basically I had to find new friends, and fairly quickly (5050F10)

This was particularly so in the context of attempting to develop new intimate relationships: *"I don't think anyone is interested in a [age] year old man and generally speaking they're not interested in looking after another woman's children" (RF6), and:*

Well I guess when you're a single mum it definitely makes things a lot harder. There will always be a certain proportion of guys that wouldn't date a single mum for example. So I guess in terms of that side of things that would make it hard... So I guess there's a bit of that. There's still a bit of prejudice about single mums and that sort of thing (RM5)

I was chatting to one lady once for a while and I said to her, you know, "I'm a single dad" and she says, "Oh, so you're like the mum?", and I said, "Well, not quite!" Never heard from her again after that... it's different when you're in your twenties, you know, you don't have so many concerns and, you know, you just start talking to a girl and you know whatever... but I just don't feel confident now... my heads telling me, "Don't even bother", because this, you know, you're just going to be rejected (RF7)

Experiences of stigma in this context led parents to feel socially isolated which contributed to difficulties redefining their separated identities. Feelings of defectiveness increased which led to a sense of hopelessness for the future. Parents lacked confidence in themselves which in turn exacerbated the redevelopment of who they were, who they wanted to be, what their purpose was, and what being a separated parent meant to them. For most parents in my study, perceived stigmas were related to the idea that separation is

a socially non-normative event and, therefore, parents who fit into this category were similarly non-normative. Other studies have reported similar findings (Kielty, 2005, 2006; Stavrova et al., 2008).

The findings of my research reflect a multitude of social issues associated with perceived stigmas that revealed how others see 'separated' parents and how separated parents construct their own identities based upon others' perceptions of them. These findings mirror a social transaction between those who have been labelled as non-normative and how those who fit within 'normative' restraints of family life see them. Specifically, parents felt automatically labelled as "bad parents", "contaminated", "husband/wife stealers", "abnormal", and "not worthy of new love".

Of most interest were the difficulties that parents experienced in the context of meeting new people and looking for new relationships. Being labelled as 'separated' for the parents in my study was taken to mean that there was something wrong with them and that they had no hope of meeting new people, which contributed to personal rejection of their new separated status. There is a large body of evidence that has documented the protective nature of new intimate relationships following separation and divorce (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Symoens et al., 2014; Wang & Amato, 2000). New intimate relationships have been found to buffer against loneliness, provide economic and financial security, assist identity and role re-definition, and weaken pre-occupations with ex-partners (Symoens et al., 2014). Therefore, parents who had difficulties forming new intimate relationships, or harboured an aversion to doing so, may have experienced prolonged periods of distress while attempting to renegotiate their identities.

Some variability in experiences of identity redefinition was noted across gender, residential status and marital status in my study. For fathers, underlying concern for their children was exacerbated by a preoccupation with the pre-separation relationship. They often described fixating on their ex-partner's new relationship and their children's relationship with their ex-partner's new partner: *"I honestly think the biggest hurdle was just getting past the fact that it was over and moving on"* (5050F3). As such, their dialogues often reflected anger, hurt and feelings of failure associated with their pre-separation life

and the loss of their pre-separation assets which translated into difficulties adjusting and adapting to changing roles associated with being a single father: *"I've always been taken a very active role in the household. Not waking up with the absolute chaos of children running around and being pains in the necks was the hardest part... I miss that a lot and I feel like a failure"* (NRF6). Fathers subsequently described declines in self-esteem following separation and employment disruption. These findings support previous research that has found that fathers experience significant distress associated with loss of contact and loss of control over their families in the context of their struggle to adapt to changes in their role as a father following separation (Umberson & Williams, 1993). Gender role research sheds more light on such findings, suggesting that fathers value power in relationships; therefore, when power over the family unit is taken away following separation, they tend to experience significant difficulty adjusting to their new role (Symoens et al., 2014). As such, fathers tend to base their own self-esteem on their ability to exert power over the post-separation family which is often unsuccessful and results in aggression and lowered self-esteem.

Residential parents described unique difficulties associated with attempting to develop new relationships and concern about what others thought of them. In particular, residential parents were very cautious when considering developing new relationships (Bakker & Karsten, 2013). For example, due to consistently considering how their children were adjusting to their separation in the context of the majority care time spent with them, residential parents placed particular emphasis on ensuring that their children would be able to cope with their new relationship. Although these parents believed that they had the means to develop new relationships, they were worried about doing so because of fear of experiencing more conflict in new relationships, new relationships ending in separation again, and because of concern for how their children would cope with their new relationships: *"I wasn't thinking about moving on at all... it was just about spending time with [the children], getting them used to the separation... have some quiet time to ourselves..."* (RM4). Residential parents also described particular stress associated with others' opinions; specifically, family members' opinions that appeared more prevalent post-separation in the context of single parenting: *"I sometimes wondered what other people*

thought... because it's not a situation I was happy with – I never thought I was going to be a single parent" (RM6). For example, residential parents often felt that although support from family members increased, so too did family members' suggestions and judgements associated with their parenting practices as a single parent. These related issues all point to social difficulties described by the residential parents in my study. As residential parents, increased strain is placed on them to adequately care for their children on their own (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Increased strain and responsibility may, therefore, contribute to worry and concern about others' perceptions of them as a single parent which may be fed back to others by their children's adjustment and healthy development. Support for both arguments is further provided when consideration of residential parents' protectiveness over their children is highlighted. For example, the word "protect" came up repeatedly in residential parents' dialogues.

Most importantly, however, identity struggles were found to be most problematic for formerly married parents in my study. Perhaps as a result of experiences of infidelity (described as part of *uncoupling*), formerly married parents had a lot of difficulty accepting the end of their marriage: *"People don't understand that it's not just you, it's your whole family and the concept of your family and everything... there is no replacement for it"* (RM1). In particular, their experiences of social stigmas, assumed and assigned, were appraised by them as particularly adverse: *"...people do judge – they do judge – and marriage is a big societal value and it's still held in that vein, and to break up is not necessarily a good thing"* (NRF6). Formerly married parents in my study described the loss of family life, the loss of their ex-partner's family, and the loss of their family home as contributors to difficulty adjusting to their new separated status. Such difficulties were exacerbated by their own personal perceptions of themselves as defective in the context of a failed marriage, as well as their appraisal of others' perceptions of them as defective. Together, these issues led to increased feelings of loneliness for the formerly married parents in my study. Formerly married parents were hypervigilant in social settings and were more aware of the possibilities of stigma as a product of their own appraisal of themselves as defective. Research has consistently documented similar experiences for formerly married individuals

associated with social stigma; both assumed and assigned (Kielty, 2005, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2002; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Stavrova et al., 2008; Wang & Amato, 2000). Most importantly, my findings appear to suggest that social stigmas associated with separation and divorce continue to prevail, despite research that has suggested otherwise (Gubernskaya, 2010).

On the other hand, it is possible that findings reflect other studies that have examined how individuals appraise the social institution of divorce themselves (DeGarmo & Kitson; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Wang & Amato, 2000). There is a body of literature that suggests that individuals who are more invested in their marital identity, and more conservative in their ideals of marriage, demonstrate increased difficulty associated with accepting their new divorced identity (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996; Simon & Marcussen, 1999). It is possible that the formerly married parents in my study may have similarly appraised their separation as unwanted due to their strong ideals associated with the social convention of marriage. Furthermore, the relative importance formerly cohabiting parents placed on such stigma and its associated effects was not reported in my study as being a particularly prominent experience for them due to the absence of the marital identity.

Psychological, emotional and physical health problems

Having to contend with issues experienced during uncoupling and being uncoupled related to a decline in physical and mental health for many parents in my study. During attempts to adapt to separation, parents experienced physical health problems including sleep difficulties, stress, tiredness, weight fluctuations, and a lack of appetite: “... *sleeping is really, really difficult. I’ve stopped cooking and eating*” (NRM3). For some parents, difficulties coping with being uncoupled pre-empted unhealthy lifestyle choices such as alcohol and drug use, partying, risky behaviour and promiscuity. For example, when giving advice to other separated parents, 5050F9 suggested: “... *don’t fall into a self-destructive pattern. Been there, done that. Don’t go into an alcoholic binge or a drug binge or something like that. Yeah, I learnt that one...*”. Similarly, parents began self-medicating with

prescription medication including benzodiazepines, anti-depressants, sedatives and pain killers: *"... it all depends on how your body is handling what you put it through mentally and physically and that's why I self-medicate because there's only so much you can take before different parts of your body let go"* (RF8).

Some parents turned to unhealthy lifestyle choices, such as increased alcohol intake and unhealthy diets, as a way to cope with the overwhelming strain that was placed on them following separation. They described such behaviours as detrimental to their adjustment to separation: *"On your own it's just very difficult. I just run out of energy. I think I just lose it and then I just sit there and do nothing for a while and I'm even more stressed because I haven't done enough"* (RM1).

Declines in physical health following separation and divorce have been well established in previous literature (Aldous & Ganey, 1999; Amato, 2000; Choi & Marks, 2013; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Liu & Umberson, 2008; Schoenborn, 2004). The adoption of additional roles and routines is overwhelming for parents following separation and subsequently places increased stress and strain on the body. As such, parents experience a sense of hopelessness at not being able to carry out the necessary daily activities that are now required of them. In some cases physical health problems were exacerbated by mental health difficulties. In other cases, pre-existing mental health problems were exacerbated by physical health problems.

The impact of mental health problems, as well as increases in mental health problems in post-separation and divorce populations, has similarly been well documented in relevant literature (Afifi et al., 2006; Breslau et al., 2011; Corcoran & Nagar, 2010; Gibb et al., 2011; Kemp et al., 2006; Overbeek et al., 2006; Ringbäck Weitoft et al., 2004; Yip et al., 2012). While attempting to cope with the physical strain placed on them following separation, the parents in my study were concurrently struggling with mental health concerns, consistent with previous research findings.

In the context of adverse experiences, parents began to notice increased difficulty coping with their emotions which manifested in mental health problems such as depression,

anxiety, and suicide-related ideation and behaviours: *“I had periods of depression, and constantly, it was a very, very difficult time. All my issues were psychological, nothing else... I actually felt horrible things, horrible things, if I can just say, suicide and even violence sometimes...”* (5050F4), *“I think depression and anxiety and exhaustion have been a big biological element. I think those things have been challenging within me...”* (5050M5).

Parents often compared experiences of emotional dysregulation with practical difficulties, concluding that mastery of emotional turmoil following separation was much harder: *“For me it was all the emotional stuff [that was the hardest]... I have no problems with the physical stuff, but it was just the emotional stuff”* (5050M7). Specifically, parents had to contend with immense feelings of guilt related to the failure of their relationship as well as having to put their children through separation:

I get quite guilty about – just feeling like I didn’t try hard enough to keep the relationship together, that I should have tried to keep it together rather than sort of feeling like I just accepted that it wasn’t right, and I walked away from it. And I feel guilty about how that’s going to impact my daughter (NRF8)

Other parents were dealing with feelings of rejection: *“I felt like she had just rejected me, I sort of, you know I’d been married for a number of years then she had rejected and I didn’t really understand why”* (5050F1). Meanwhile, other parents were experiencing uncertainty and despair: *“... from my experience I really didn’t know where to go, what to do, what I was entitled to do, what I should be doing to look after myself, what I should be doing to try and have access to my children...”* (RF8). For many parents, the result of emotional dysregulation and uncertainty transpired into feeling scared or afraid: *“... there were obviously times when things would happen and I felt quite kicked emotionally and really alone and scared”* (5050M9). For other parents, emotional difficulties transpired into immense anger: *“at the start I was angry”* (5050F3); *“my frustration and anger [has] come out on people, verbally”* (RF9).

On top of having to contend with their own mental health concerns, parents also reported having to deal with their children’s emotional wellbeing following separation: *“... you are seeing the kids all the time and they are telling you how they feel, and you’ve gotta*

sort of handle that and at the same time you're trying to make them feel better, but [the separation] it's ripping your own heart out". For the parents in my study, dealing with both their own, and their children's, mental health concerns often meant placing the children's needs over their own, which prolonged personal adjustment to separation.

Although some parents' descriptions of self-medicating following separation appeared reckless, other parents described use of such medication to help them cope with emotional dysregulation and psychological distress as directed by health care professionals: *"I saw my GP and he put me on some antidepressants because I was finding it really hard to focus at work"* (5050M3). For many of the parents in my study, experiences of emotional dysregulation and psychological distress were the result of adversity experienced as a result of all difficulties described to this point. Therefore, this sub-theme embodies the overarching consequences of parents' adverse interactions with the separated world, which is why it is presented last.

Such findings provide support for the social causation perspective (Blekesaune, 2008; Booth & Amato, 1991; Mastekaasa, 1994a; Wade & Pevalin, 2004). Declines in physical health following separation provide further evidence that stress and strain was a result of being uncoupled. Therefore, any decline in psychological functioning that followed the separation event may be interpreted as the result of being uncoupled itself, consistent with social causation theory. These findings should be interpreted with caution, however, given that the parents in my study also described psychological health issues during uncoupling that may additionally explain these findings. For example, parents' own difficulties with psychological health prior to separation may be reflected in their experiences following separation, where it is possible that psychological health problems following separation were actually a product of pre-existing issues. Therefore, although the findings inherent in this sub-theme provide support for the social causation argument, findings described earlier similarly provide support for the social selection argument. Rather than lending support for one argument or the other, it seems that findings reflect Amato's (2000) suggestion that, in most cases, a degree of both social selection and social causation may be operating.

Notable variations in experiences of physical and mental health problems across gender also emerged in my study. Emotional difficulties associated with concern for their children often manifested in declines in health, and increased tiredness, depression and anxiety for the mothers in my study. It appears that these mothers may have expressed psychological distress internally via emotional difficulties associated with feelings of grief, insecurity, helplessness and bitterness. According to these mothers, however, the overarching issue associated with psychological distress was concern for their children and ongoing consideration of their wellbeing. It is here that findings add another layer of understanding associated with the basis for internalising psychological distress often described by mothers following separation.

Fathers' experiences of being uncoupled commonly led to increases in alcohol and drug use initially which translated to suicidal ideation and related behaviours in extreme cases. Findings such as these further support Simons' (2000) argument that males and females experience psychological and emotional distress following separation differently. My findings further support previous studies that found an increase in the incidence of suicide, suicide-related behaviours and self-harm among fathers following separation (Kposowa, 2000; Kruk, 2010; Ringbäck Weitoft et al., 2004).

PART THREE: SEARCHING WITHIN THE SELF

Many parents experienced adverse effects of being uncoupled at one point or another. However, following separation, parents found personal resources that served to reduce the adversity associated with being uncoupled. Consciously or unconsciously, consistently or inconsistently, the parents in my study searched within themselves for personal resources to assist their adjustment to separation. This theme, labelled *searching within the self*, presents an understanding of the helpful personal resources that were described as most beneficial for parents following separation, and how they utilised these resources to assist successful adjustment.

Personal control

In the context of an unknown and unpredictable new world, parents' abilities to exercise personal control were integral in influencing positive outcomes. The way in which parents perceived their ability to adjust to being uncoupled, and their expectancies of what would happen in the future, was an essential part of their experience of separation. Through exercising personal control and making desirable outcomes more likely, parents attempted to improve their personal circumstances following separation. This desire was dependent on parents' individual beliefs of their capabilities to increase favourable outcomes following separation. Specifically, parents' dialogue reflected personal control beliefs associated with self-efficacy, mastery, and autonomy.

Following separation, parents' appraisals of themselves as having the ability to access and adequately implement personal resources and skills aided their ability to adjust to the difficulties they faced as part of being uncoupled. Self-appraisal in this manner is known as self-efficacy. For the most part, parents' experiences of self-efficacy reflected their ability to implement personal resources and skills centred upon adapting to single parenting identities and roles. In particular, participants who reported high self-efficacy felt that they were better able to leave their pre-separation identities and associated roles behind in favour of development of new personal resources and skills: "*I guess it really*

came down to myself and having faith in myself and being confident knowing that I could do it and I could get through it” (5050M3), and:

...definitely some of my strengths were being able to do everything. There was nothing where I thought “Gosh I need a man to do that”... so I did feel most of the time, I felt that I could cope on my own, so I felt strong in that area (5050M7)

I’m very capable; there is nothing that I won’t try to do and most of the time I will succeed one way or another... So that helps you to say I’m going to do it... The more confident you are the stronger you’re going to be because you’re more likely to stick at something and try to make it work because you think you’re capable. If you really know you can’t do it, you know, you’re not going to put so much effort into it... (5050F1)

The confidence that parents had in their abilities provided them with the motivation to persevere through the difficulties that they experienced as a separated parent. Previous research has similarly identified high self-efficacy as a beneficial tool that aids successful adjustment following separation and divorce (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000). Self-efficacy in my study was taken to mean an individual’s judgement of how well (or poorly) they will cope with a situation based on the skills they possess and the circumstances they face (Bandura, 1993). In consideration of this definition, parents’ descriptions of self-efficacy reflected positive judgements of themselves as having the personal resources and skills to cope with the stress associated with being uncoupled and the ability to use them in the context of separation.

Although similar to self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-worth were not included in isolation as part of this sub-theme because interpretation of parents’ dialogue reflected an overarching focus on perceptions of ability in the context of adapting to new separated identities and associated parenting roles. What appeared to be most important for parents following separation was their belief in their personal abilities to carry out the necessary tasks and roles associated with becoming an uncoupled parent. The simple nature of becoming a separated parent meant an increase in a wide range of responsibilities (in most cases); therefore, parents found that they needed to focus more on their perceptions of what they could do for themselves and their children.

To further demonstrate this finding, it may be beneficial to consider the fact that my study focused on parents (i.e., not childless couples). The parents in my study had grown accustomed to selflessness in the context of becoming a parent prior to separation. As such, they tended to focus less on the self and more on their ability to fulfil their roles as a partner and a parent. Despite changes to the nature of their relationship status, they remained parents following separation. Therefore high self-efficacy was discussed much more frequently, and was appraised as more important, by the parents in my study because their main concerns centred upon their ability to continue pre-separation roles while simultaneously accessing and developing the personal resources and skills required to fulfil new roles following separation. However, self-esteem and self-worth were intertwined within parents' reflections of self-efficacy following separation. Specifically, it was evident that those parents who were more confident in their ability to access and use personal resources and skills to cope following separation, similarly felt more confident in themselves. As such, the three concepts (i.e., self-efficacy; self-worth; self-esteem) appeared to go hand-in-hand in my study, but primarily represented experiences of increased self-efficacy. When explored in more depth, experiences of high self-efficacy were instrumental in facilitating mastery of the difficulties associated with being uncoupled.

Mastery of feelings of helplessness associated with moving from a known context to an unknown context brought with it a sense of accomplishment that was integral in exercising personal control over the new uncoupled culture:

...it was such an adventure for me to be living on my own having never done it before. I felt like a proper grown-up for the first time ever. Just the satisfaction of that I guess, and doing that, and actually showing myself that I was managing to pay my bills and you know life didn't come to a halt. I was doing it, it was my new reality. That was I guess encouragement rather than a strategy. Yeah just, the more I learned to cope with different things – the pilot light going out for the gas, you know... no husband there for me to say "What do I do?" you know, so I had to ring around and google and sort things out for myself. I guess they were strategies because I was learning all the time (5050M9)

For the parents in my study, skills that were not previously well developed had to be improved. Through a process of believing in their ability to do so, parents subsequently

found themselves resisting failure and demonstrating hardiness when faced with tasks that were foreign to them. This reflects other research that finds that parents with a strong sense of self-efficacy and personal mastery have the ability to take control of environmental stressors and solve personal and behavioural problems through hard work and development of skills (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006). Although mastery and self-efficacy have been argued to be similar constructs within relevant literature, mastery in my study related to parents' development of skills that assisted in dealing with increased responsibilities relative to practical, emotional and logistical difficulties.

Further interpretation of personal control reflected experiences of autonomy that empowered parents during their separation. In the context of an increase in single parenting responsibilities, and the loss of the pre-separation partnership, parents negotiated with their environment to arrive at a newfound sense of independence. Some parents felt autonomous as a result of feeling forced into independence, whereas others embraced their new found sense of independence as their long lost self:

I think getting back to... like, I'm enjoying... because I bought my own home and I'm now making my own life now. So I'm making decisions for myself, whereas, I don't have a partner now to – except my daughter say – to bounce ideas off so if, you know... if I want to eat or not eat, or garden or not garden. I'm my own self now and I'm enjoying that... So I think that's very therapeutic to me, to get me back on to who I am and I think making decisions and then seeing that you've made... oh yeah, I've made a good decision (5050M1)

The construct of autonomy is not one that has been described in previous literature. Autonomy embodies the need to experience choice in the initiation and regulation of behaviour (Edward & Richard, 1987). Autonomy also reflects the desire of an individual to make his or her own decisions as opposed to decisions made as a result of environmental or interpersonal events that determine one's actions (Edward & Richard, 1987). As reflected during uncoupling, parents in my study consistently discussed feeling that ex-partnerships did not allow for independence and autonomy simply due to the nature of being in a relationship (i.e., sharing one's life with another). The adverse event of separation, coupled

with negotiations for personal resources and skills to assist in desired positive outcomes, resulted in increased feelings of independence and autonomy.

A lack of understanding in this area reflects an over-representation of studies adopting stress frameworks. The simple nature of separating from a partner or spouse necessitates independence. However, literature often describes such independence in conjunction with feelings of loss and loneliness (Wade & Pevalin, 2004). My findings extend upon findings relying on a stress approach by highlighting the alternate strengths that may be gained from experiences of loss and loneliness following separation. For the parents in my study, loss and loneliness were reframed over time to represent empowerment derived from independence and autonomy. Consistent with the nature of this sub-theme, autonomy was desired by the parents and was gained in conjunction with experiences of both self-efficacy and mastery. Autonomy was also the product of a desire for independence and rediscovery of the self in the context of experiences of drifting apart from the self during uncoupling.

There were notable differences in the experiences of personal control across gender, residential status and marital status in my study. Perhaps as a flow-on effect following feelings of estrangement from the self and ex-partners during uncoupling, mothers in my study placed substantial value on faith in themselves, empowerment, autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-awareness following separation. These findings partially support previous research. For example, studies have found that women tend to experience greater declines in self-esteem following separation and divorce, and subsequently stand to benefit more from increases in this area (Marks & Lambert, 1998; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). My findings extend this understanding by indicating that positive perceptions of the self were integral for mothers following separation; particularly in the context of a need for autonomy following loss of identity within the pre-separation relationship.

Similarly, residential parents appeared to value personal control as a salient personal resource following separation, but from a different point of view. Residential parents described valuing independence because their post-separation lifestyle was characterised by solidarity most of the time. Residential parents often referred to dealing

with difficulties associated with being uncoupled independently. Specifically, residential parents valued self-awareness, trust and faith in the self, and their ability to “get on with it”. Perseverance despite difficulties was important for residential parents; perhaps because they had no choice due to having the majority care time of their children. As a result, residential parents tended to report increased experiences of personal growth following separation.

Having faith in the self was also important for formerly married parents. Perhaps in the context of their prominent identity struggle, formerly married parents further valued self-exploration and finding themselves following separation. I interpret this finding in the context of identity difficulties associated with marital loss. For example, self-exploration and finding the self reflects a need to redevelop identity, which may not have been present if loss of the marital identity was not an issue. Similarly, having faith in the self may not have been particularly important for the formerly cohabiting parent following separation because they never identified with the married culture. Therefore, their faith in themselves may not have been as compromised. Further, perseverance may have been particularly important for the formerly married parent simply in the context of experiencing increased difficulty adjusting to their new separated status, which was one less issue that the formerly cohabiting parent had to contend with.

Self-regulation

Following on from experiences of personal control were parents’ descriptions of self-regulatory behaviours. Having the ability to exercise personal control led to implementation or redevelopment of personal resources and skills that were integral parts of the separation experience. Based on their beliefs about their ability to do so, their experiences of mastery, and their new found sense of independence, parents searched within themselves and began to implement goals for their future, organise themselves, and use positive problem-solving strategies to assist them to cope with being uncoupled.

The ability to set personal goals following separation provided the parents in my study with an opportunity to work towards successful adaptation in a self-regulated manner. In order to buffer against emotional and physical difficulties experienced as part of being uncoupled, parents implemented goals associated with working towards a positive future and regulated self-perceptions of what they wanted and who they wanted to be. Specific goals set by parents were multifaceted and dependent on individual situations. Collectively, however, parents described goals associated with their children (i.e., providing the best life possible for children; spending more time with children; winning court battles over time with their children) and achieving inner happiness. Parents regulated goal-setting behaviours by planning, implementing routines, increasing their focus, studying, de-cluttering, developing positive self-affirmations, journaling and meditating. Over the course of their journey towards achieving their personal goals, parents highlighted personal attributes such as determination, persistence, and perseverance as essential. Together, personal attributes and strategies contributed towards making informed decisions, learning from mistakes, and being proactive about difficulties and unexpected problems along the road to goal achievement:

I've done a lot of work on thinking [about] what I want in my life and how I'd like my life to be, and I have seven massive calendars and things. So like seven o'clock I'll get a reminder at the top of my calendar like, "I'm a saver", because that's one of my goals is to become better with saving, and all the things that I want in my life [I've] sort of made affirmations about them... [in response to being asked what strategies she implemented to assist goal attainment following separation] ...the only strategy that I can think of is just basically the planning and the affirmations and that sort of thing because I've just spent a lot of time figuring out exactly what I want and how I'm going to get it... the positive visualisation, affirmations and that sort of thing for me, that's just been really, really helpful... just like when you've decided that this is a goal that you want or something that you want, actually picturing it in your mind and seeing how that might look, how that might feel. As well as having an affirmation I guess you can sort of have a visual picture with that or it can have a smell associated with it (5050M4)

The emergence of parents' abilities to set goals and actively make the necessary arrangements to obtain them has not been identified in previous research. This extends my previous findings and other research that suggests that personal resources such as self-

efficacy, mastery and locus of control are protective following separation (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Stewart, 2005). Specifically, these findings embody the overarching idea of commitments made by parents in achieving a self-constructed ideal state of being, and the strategies they reported as helpful during this process. In other words, the parents in my study actively set goals and implemented a number of measures to reach them that helped in counteracting adverse experiences associated with being uncoupled.

Of particular importance for the parents in my study was their ability to regulate their finances. Those parents who reported economic and financial wellbeing following separation described financial organisation and awareness of their financial position as an important part of the separation experience:

I think my ability to be organised financially instead of falling in a heap. I immediately worked out what my bank accounts were, whether they were closed bank accounts, open bank accounts, budgeted, started setting aside particular amounts of money, worked out quite specifically in spreadsheets what my estimate was, um so I armed myself I guess with knowledge so that I wouldn't feel like I didn't know what I was doing (5050M8)

For parents who initiated the separation, financial planning was often part of the uncoupling process. For other parents, having the ability to plan and budget following separation was an important skill in ensuring economic and financial wellbeing.

Although this finding has not explicitly been represented in previous literature, stress approaches have identified stressors associated with economic decline following separation that provide the context for further understanding of parents' experiences (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Loxton et al., 2006; Zagorsky, 2005). Given economic decline has been found to contribute to significant adversity following separation, it appears fitting that the parents in my study who described financial organisation and feeling "on top" of things financially felt better equipped to deal with economic difficulties. Similar findings have identified higher income earners (i.e., better educated) as having the potential to adjust better to separation and divorce when compared to their lower income

earning counterparts (Wang & Amato, 2000). My findings differ slightly from ideas presented in such studies where the benefits of financial planning and organisation do not necessarily reflect income amounts or education as significant contributors to financial adjustment. Rather, they specifically relate to the idea that despite income or education, if a parent is able to organise their finances appropriately, and consider their financial position realistically, they may be better able to cope with financial difficulties encountered as part of being uncoupled.

Amidst difficult experiences of being uncoupled, a final self-regulatory construct described by the parents in my study was the implementation of problem-focused coping strategies. Parents adopted such coping strategies to effectively deal with numerous problems encountered following separation. Problem-focused coping strategies were often implemented alongside other self-regulatory efforts and were the product of personal control beliefs. Such strategies have been associated with more positive outcomes when compared to emotion-focused coping strategies in previous research (i.e., coping strategies aimed at reducing emotional responses caused by stressful life events such as avoidance, distraction or catastrophising; Ben-Zur, 2009). Specifically, parents used numerous problem-solving skills, found ways to positively reframe negative situations, implemented active coping skills, focused on each day at a time, sought acceptance, and implemented support-seeking strategies. These problem-focused coping skills were described as beneficial following separation: *"I suppose I turned the hurt and anger into focus, even more focus on pushing forward... so I turned to action rather than drinking myself into a stupor or self-pity type thing"* (5050F3), and:

I remember the day that I found out about, you know, we're definitely separating, I cried... and then I got up and got on with it... I'd already made the decision like, you know, I could sit here and let myself go into a hole [or] I can just get up and get on with it and either way the outcome is that my marriage is over so I just got up and got on with it... I didn't kind of dwell on it. I just addressed it and moved on (5050M2)

These findings support other studies that have found a positive relationship between problem-focused coping and adjustment to separation and divorce (Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Tein et al., 2000).

One particularly salient problem-focused coping strategy described by the parents in my study was the ability to recognise when they needed to seek help and use personal resourcefulness skills. Resourcefulness and help-seeking abilities were included as part of this sub-theme, as opposed to part of next theme – *reaching beyond the self* – because parents appraised this type of coping as a personal resource that increased their ability to cope with being uncoupled. In particular, critical analysis skills such as having the ability to distinguish between reliable/unreliable and relevant/irrelevant resources was instrumental for parents following separation: “...it really helped me to research my particular circumstances... the other thing is – know the law – like know your rights and responsibilities” (5050M5), and “... what I got out of my law degree was this train of thought – How do you approach a problem? And you research it and you approach it. So you know, I had the skill to research the area” (5050F10).

Being situated in an environment that offered countless avenues and opportunities for support was overwhelming for parents. Therefore, the ability to acquire their own resources and knowledge to assist them following separation, as well as access correct and useful information, was an important skill:

I learned quite quickly that solicitors very rarely really do the job, and you actually have to do a lot of researching or basically offer them suggestions for different rulings and acts that they might have forgotten about or weren't aware of. You know, my kids are at stake, so I'm going to do everything possible (NRM1)

Being able to get out to a third party, get on the internet and get onto websites that were there to assist you. Not speak to them, but read resources and things like that that help you. And they make it easier to understand things from not only my side, but a female side as well. It does make it better for me to be able to do that (5050F9)

Recognising the need to access external assistance was also an important part of problem-focused coping for parents and reflected a sense of self-awareness of the difficulties that were within parents' personal control, and those that were outside the boundaries of what

they felt they could cope with alone. In other words, parents who felt they were adjusting to being uncoupled acknowledged their own personal strengths, but were also modest when faced with difficulties they knew could not be handled by them alone, and were subsequently confident in accessing assistance from others. This finding highlights parents' abilities to differentiate cognitive appraisals of their own strengths from acceptance of the limits of their abilities. Together, these abilities were an important part of the separation experience:

I guess just probably firstly, just an awareness of how I could be affected by it. So straight away I went to the doctor and got a referral to a psychologist and that kind of thing. So not trying to just pretend that it would all be okay... I'm not all the way there, but to be able to recognise the negative thoughts and things that may have sort of spiralled me down. In being able to recognise them, I could deal with them more effectively, not feeling bad for feeling down about life, I guess. That's just a natural response to circumstances I was facing and that could definitely be helped... (RM9)

Several studies find that availability and use of social and emotional support assists adjustment following separation and divorce (Choi & Marks, 2013; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Gähler, 2006; Hewitt et al., 2012; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Sakrinda, 2005; Wang & Amato, 2000). Studies also find that individuals may have difficulty accessing social and emotional support if they do not possess the skills necessary to acquire such supports (Patulny, 2012). Although such findings reflect social and emotional support, rather than abilities to access and acquire resources and technical help, they do offer some insight into why parents may have identified resourcefulness and help-seeking abilities as beneficial following separation. For example, Patulny (2012) found that individuals who had better social skills reported higher levels of social support needed for adjustment to separation and divorce. Similarly, the parents in my study felt that they adjusted better to their separation when they were able to successfully seek beneficial help and resources as part of problem-focused coping. Yet, my findings also extended beyond such studies where resourcefulness and help-seeking skills emerged as resources that assisted parents to cope with a plethora of challenges related to parenting following separation (e.g., economic and

financial problems; social problems; emotional problems) as opposed to the simple ability to seek social support as suggested by Patulny (2012).

In contrast to the finding that problem-focused coping skills were beneficial following separation, many parents also felt that temporary distractions and avoidance were effective coping strategies following separation:

Look I tried to find diversions to keep me going. As I said, work, playing indoor cricket every Monday night, you know, having a weekly dinner with the parents. Things like that to keep me busy and occupied. I think that was a strength. It was an effective measure of keeping coping through the first few months... Because your mind wasn't wandering. It was fixed on doing what you had to do and I think while you didn't have time to wander you didn't have time to get upset... about reality... not coming home to the girls (NRF7)

This finding suggests that my participants felt that they benefited from more emotion-focused or avoidant styles of coping in the earlier stages of separation. Although this finding would appear to contradict the use of problem-focused coping described earlier, the possible benefits of emotion-focused coping when used immediately following stressful life events to gather more effective coping resources, and when stressful life events are experienced as significantly overwhelming, have been noted in other research (Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Such research has identified the potential benefits of emotion-focused coping when relied upon temporarily following stressful life events, where over-use and over-reliance embodies a decline in adjustment (Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Therefore, the parents in my study appear to have experienced a similar curvilinear relationship in the use of emotion-focused coping.

Some self-regulating strategies were noted as particularly beneficial for mothers in my study. These included problem-solving skills, planning, goal development, and meditation. These strategies were considered salient factors for mothers that aided in achieving a state of problem-focused coping in conjunction with issues experienced following separation. However, as part of valuing self-awareness, the mothers in my study were also open to withdrawing when issues became too difficult to handle: *"...I was just hibernating... I sort of withdrew and found it was better to just be on my own... I found solace*

in being on my own" (5050M1). Withdrawing assisted mothers to re-group and gather their own personal resources to cope effectively.

On the other hand, fathers felt that getting educated was a particularly beneficial strategy following separation. Fathers were likely to access all sorts of services and supports in an attempt to adjust to being uncoupled. These findings extend on previous discussions of fathers' help-seeking abilities following separation. Namely, despite what previous studies have suggested, fathers' help-seeking abilities may not pale in comparison to mothers. Rather, accessibility, employment factors (i.e., rigid employment), lack of male care providers, and gender biases may better explain discrepancies (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010). Fletcher and StGeorge (2010) go further to suggest that differences in coping styles may reflect misguided beliefs about men's help-seeking abilities following separation. For example, the tendency for men to withdraw and reflect when attempting to cope may explain their apparent lack of help-seeking skills, rather than hegemonic perceptions of masculinity. Indeed, this was another salient protective resource described by the fathers in my study. Fathers withdrew and used distractions including focusing on their children and work in order to cope in the early stages following their separation. In addition, fathers felt it was particularly important to stay level headed and calm following separation. Although achievement of such a state was not always possible, the concepts of acceptance and perseverance (i.e., pushing through) assisted fathers along their road to staying calm and level headed.

Activating help-seeking skills and studying were also important self-regulatory practices for residential parents. Such findings may reflect previous studies that have pointed to increased workforce involvement for the residential parent following separation and divorce (Bakker & Karsten, 2013). For example, the residential parents in my study discussed studying again as a form of increasing their earning potential to find work that may offer more flexibility. In addition, "getting away" was also particularly important for residential parents. Again, getting away reflects the temporary use of emotion-focused coping to gather the resources necessary to cope with difficulties associated with being uncoupled. On the other hand, getting away also meant simply going on vacation in order

to facilitate some enjoyment, relaxation, and stress relief for residential parents and their children.

Optimism

Optimism was a state of consciousness that parents reverted back to repeatedly while attempting to cope with being uncoupled. Optimistic thoughts were a valuable personal tool that was an integral part of the separation experience: *“The ability to remain optimistic regardless of how pessimistic everything was – is why I was able to be so strong”* (NRF11). Optimistic thoughts had a stabilising effect on difficulties associated with being uncoupled for the parents in my study: *“I guess it’s that optimistic outlook again, that you sort of say well, yeah things have gone as bad as they possibly could and they can’t possibility get worse so you know, it’s just that ability to deal with that”* (RM8).

Parents reverted to thoughts of optimism during times of extreme difficulty. Adopting an optimistic outlook facilitated an experience that allowed parents to focus on the positive aspects of the world:

Look it would be so easy right now to just be negative and sad all the time and think you know – “Poor me, what have I got, I’ve got nothing”. But instead you can choose how you look at the world every day when you get up and I choose to look at it in the way that “I’m lucky, I’m healthy, I’m alive, I’ve got my daughter” – well you know, one week on I’ve got my daughter – and my health and everything else (5050M4)

Placing their world in perspective through optimistic thought created a new conscious state characterised by the acceptance of current circumstances and projections into the future that embodied positivity and growth: *“Just knowing that one day things will get better, finally. It took two and a half years, but finally it has”* (RM4), and *“I think that optimism is hope, you know, yeah, probably hope and being optimistic for your future”* (5050M1). Optimistic parents let go of pessimistic thought processes that were creating a vicious cycle of psychological distress and actively chose to place their consciousness in the hands of optimistic faith and hope for their future. Subsequently, parents’ descriptions of the

separation experience were characterised by optimistic thought that facilitated meaning, perseverance, hope, strength, courage and motivation:

I looked at it as an opportunity and as a positive thing for my kids and for me, yeah. So I didn't look at it negatively. I looked at it positively – that anything that was coming out of this was really good so... yeah (RF1)

In my study, optimism was interpreted as an isolated construct rather than part of problem-focused coping because it emerged repeatedly as an integral personal resource over the course of parents' experiences of separation. Similarly, descriptions of optimism were not included as part of personal control or self-regulation because parents' descriptions of adopting this conscious state centred upon placing their faith in positivity as opposed to actively using personal resources and abilities to influence positive outcomes. In doing so, parents were able to arrive at a conscious state of optimism in the context of personal control beliefs and self-regulatory behaviours.

Although optimism has been identified as a contributor towards positive adjustment following separation and divorce in previous literature, this conscious state has only been explored in the context of problem-focused coping (Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Tein et al., 2000). Yet, other literature targeted at understanding the construct of optimism itself sheds further light on the benefits of adopting this state of consciousness. For example, Peterson (2000) stated that although optimism is not a well-understood topic, both empirically and socially, this individual characteristic can be exceptionally beneficial to mental and physical health, achievement, perseverance and mood. Peterson's findings, coupled with my findings, suggest that the conscious state of optimism adopted by the parents in my study assisted them to not only deal with imminent difficulties experienced as part of being uncoupled, but also allowed them to look forward to their future in a positive, growth-oriented manner.

Healthy lifestyle

In the context of being uncoupled, parents quickly recognised the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Parents' initial response to their separation encompassed declines in health as a result of projection into an unknown world characterised by a new single parenting status. Experiences of ill physical health extended for varying periods of time and to varying degrees of severity. Yet, they subsequently paved the way for acknowledging the value of adopting a healthy lifestyle to combat the adversity of being uncoupled. Parents searched within themselves for the motivation to engage in regular exercise, eat healthier food, get regular sleep, and reduce their alcohol intake: *"Just doing the practical things of sleeping regularly and eating well and getting physical exercise, because I think that makes a real big difference to your ability to cope"* (5050F7), and:

...deciding that a positive healthy lifestyle is better for you... so choosing to not hit the bottle... go and join a gym, go and dance, start work at six in the morning instead of eight like you're always used to, you know. Make some changes to actually snap yourself out of it (RF3)

Healthy lifestyles were appraised by parents as protective because they increased self-esteem, mental health and strength both physically and emotionally: *"[when asked what advice he would give to other separated parents] ...look after yourself and try to be healthy, and feel good in yourself, because I guess if you go and look after yourself you're going to feel good in yourself"* (NRF2). Healthy lifestyles further provided the parents in my study with a way to cope with difficult emotions, stress, and tension by contributing to a clear mind that was instrumental in tackling issues associated with being uncoupled:

I go to the gym quite a lot. [It] just takes the weight or the focus off how upset or angry I am for the couple of hours that I'm at the gym – and I get into the music at the gym – and then when I come back I feel a lot calmer and able to tackle the next problem if I've got one to solve the next night or the next day. So it just clears the mind and it makes me physically exhausted too, which is a good thing. So by the time I go to bed I'm physically ready to go to sleep. So it slows down my mind thinking about things. If I don't go to the gym I kind of might wake up at 2am in the morning and think about my problems and really, really have a cry about [son] and if I go to the gym, I'm a lot better (NRM4)

For parents, maintaining a healthy lifestyle meant actively working towards physical and emotional wellbeing in an attempt to undo the damage experienced as part of being uncoupled. Parents fought with adverse physical and emotional consequences to arrive at a state of health that they perceived as integral to their ability to successfully participate in their new uncoupled world. This state was instrumental in buffering against physical and mental health problems that served to inhibit adjustment.

The findings suggest that attempts to adopt a healthy lifestyle simply buffer against well-known stressors associated with declines in physical health leading to adverse outcomes and subsequent perceptions of wellbeing following separation. In general, the overwhelming benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle are well known (Crone, 2005) and further contribute to the plausibility of this finding.

For the most part, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, particularly exercising, was integral for fathers following their separation. Gender-specific discrepancies have not been identified in this area in the context of a general lack of research. Therefore, this finding adds a further layer to the current body of knowledge by suggesting that exercise is particularly helpful for fathers following separation.

PART FOUR: REACHING BEYOND THE SELF

In addition to finding personal strength within the self, parents simultaneously reached beyond the self to find ways to adjust to being uncoupled. Specifically, the parents in my study described interactions with other individuals and organisations external to the self as providing the support, security and safety that they needed. This theme presents an understanding of *reaching beyond the self* to access environmental resources that assisted adjustment following separation, as well as how parents utilised these resources.

Connectedness, social support, and reaching out

As part of reaching beyond the self, parents made active and successful attempts to connect with others in their same position, find solace in the support of others in their personal networks, and reach out for private health care support within their community. Parents did this in a number of different ways, dependent on personal context.

For many of the parents in my study, moving from a known context to an unknown context was frightening. Parents did not know who turn to, or where to go for help when attempting to adjust to being uncoupled. The first port of call for many parents was connecting with others in their same position. Parents sought out friends or family members who had experienced separation. If there were no peers in their social network, then parents accessed local community support in the form of peer support groups and organisations. Either way, connecting with others who could normalise and validate their own personal experiences was extremely cathartic for the parents in my study: *“I’ve had somebody who’s going through a divorce and we talk about it, and we talk it through which has really helped”* (5050M8), and:

...men ring you and they know what you're going through and they've been through it themselves and they tell you where they go to, and they say "Don't worry, you'll get through it. But if you ever... don't do anything, don't do anything to yourself and if you ever get desperate, give me a call. I'm here". So that really helped a lot. There were times when I could just go and see these people and I didn't need to say much. They just knew that I needed encouragement or just to be with somebody, and they would know exactly what to say, which wasn't much – just "Keep going". Look I've met plenty of men, plenty of men have spoken to me and told me that they've experienced the same thing, so even that makes me feel like I'm not too abnormal, because it can affect both [men and women] differently... and they say to you "Look, I got to a point during that that I nearly did this, this and this... don't worry, it's tough, it's really, really difficult what you're going through". When you think – well other men found it hard emotionally and psychologically, so it's okay for me to feel this way about it. It's okay for me to be doing it tough – That really helped to know that the things that you're feeling have been felt before and are normal (NRF4)

Connecting with others in their position provided parents with hope, support, strength and encouragement. Through interactions with peers, their new identity did not seem so strange, or foreign, or unique. They were comforted by those in their position and felt understood. They were safe from judgements of themselves and judgements of others external to the uncoupled culture that had the potential to derail their adjustment to separation. They learnt beneficial skills and gained valuable information that aided their adjustment to being uncoupled. Parents perceived this process as even more valuable based on their peers' successes. Throughout interactions with their peers, the parents in my study realised that they could overcome adversity and triumph too. They had the power to overcome their hurdles and adjust to being uncoupled because they had tangible evidence in the form of peer success.

The nature of this social interaction was unique. Connectedness with peers provided a validating and normalising experience for the parents in my study that was not found in any other corner of their social network. Furthermore, this particular form of support was appraised as especially salient for those parents who lacked support from family and friends. Recent research has also identified the benefits of peer support (Øygard et al., 2000; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008). However, the majority of this research has been

conducted in the context of group therapy environments, whereas the parents in my study additionally described accessing peers within their own personal social networks.

In addition to the benefits gained from connecting with peers, the parents in my study also described support from friends, family and local communities as instrumental to adjustment and adaptation. Parents' supportive relationships with family members increased substantially following separation, and this newfound closeness was described as an important protective factor: *"Definitely family... because without their support I can so easily see how people would actually just be pushed over the edge and become depressed and/or suicidal"* (5050M4), *"I can tell you what, if you don't have family and you're going through a separation, then you're in a bit of strife I think"* (NRF7), and *"...family, I really feel sorry for anybody who doesn't have their family with them"* (NRM2).

Parents reached out to their families for emotional support, an opportunity to talk, financial and economic support, practical and childcare assistance, and housing assistance. The benefits gained from supportive family members were multidimensional:

...she [mum] lives 700 metres or something down the road. If she hadn't been there when I moved in, those first couple of months, getting the house set up, just helping around the house those first few weeks, just having someone to talk to and a shoulder to cry on and someone to listen to is very important, just to get the emotions out (NRF7)

Initially it was my family, they were extremely supportive and were already quite aware of what was happening so I didn't have to tell them too much. They were just supportive without me having to explain too much. They were there financially, emotionally, yeah family absolutely would be the first (RM3)

They were always there for me. If I needed help and it was too much for me; if I wasn't coping my parents, especially my mother, she would be there at the drop of a hat and that helped so much... Without a doubt, the support of extended family networks. I could not have done it without the support of an extended network (RF5)

Literature has long recognised the family as a substantial source of support following separation and divorce (Buehler & Legg, 1993; Choi & Marks, 2013; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Fletcher & StGeorge, 2010; Gähler, 2006), as well as the strengthening of family of origin relationships (Nelson, 1995).

Friendships were similarly described by parents as a substantial source of support over the course of adjusting and adapting to being uncoupled: *“That’s probably the most important thing, having my friends around me”* (NRM5) and *“I had really good friends and family as well around me who, yeah, it was a great source of support. So that’s another thing that strengthened me I suppose”* (RM6). This was especially the case for those parents whose family were geographically disparate from them or for those who did not have access to family support.

Friendships provided the parents in my study with unfaltering emotional support and an environment that facilitated the opportunity to talk through the difficulties associated with being uncoupled. Parents drew strength from their friends’ support and described increases in self-esteem and self-worth gained from the positive feedback provided by them: *“[what benefited her most from her friends] still feeling loved, still feeling I’m an ok person”* (NRM5). Parents were able to socialise with their friends, meet new people through them, and engage in enjoyable activities with them that would otherwise not have been possible in the absence of such supportive relationships.

Interestingly, support gained from family and support gained from friends differed slightly in the eyes of the parents in my study. Parents’ dialogues reflected more reliance on friends for emotional support because they felt friends were more honest and non-judgmental than family members:

I cried a lot, and I had one friend, a couple, who were incredibly good to me. They basically put me up for three months and allowed me to complain and to do what I needed to do during that three months. They let me cry, they let me talk, they talked to me when asked, they were incredible. So that helped a lot. My close friends helped a lot. I didn’t talk to many people about it, but certainly talking to those that I knew and trusted that I knew were going to give me a serve when needed, but also in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way they were just helping me through the strings, and that helped a lot. Helped an enormous amount (NRF3)

I mean you know who your real friends are and you know that you can draw on them if you need to and they were very not one-sided. They were – what's the word – they weren't biased just because we were friends. They gave it to me straight and said well you know this is this... So yeah they definitely did help. Again it was one of those things where you can seek all the information you want, and they were unbiased. But family I guess is a bit more biased. But my friends have been very, very good friends – were unbiased in a situation (RM3)

Friendships were described as assisting identity redevelopment more than family members. Spending time with close friends assisted parents to feel good about themselves and about the circumstances they found themselves in; especially when these circumstances involved something that they were afraid or ashamed of. Although interesting, this particular finding is not new. For example, Milardo (1987) found that family members are more likely to be critical of separated and divorced individuals, whereas friends often provide more impartial emotional support and less judgement and interference. According to the parents in my study, family members were relied upon more for assistance with economic and practical support related to childcare issues. Alternatively, friends offered more impartial and validating emotional support. A large body of literature has demonstrated the protective benefits of support from friends following separation and divorce, consistent with these findings (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Hewitt et al., 2012; Miller et al., 1998; Sakraida, 2005; Wang & Amato, 2000).

In addition to both support from family and friends, the parents in my study further described local community support involving children's schools, neighbours, children's extra-curricular activities, employment, internet/forum access, telephone helplines and community activities (i.e., sporting clubs). These types of community supports were distinct from supports provided by government-appointed community-based services because they were accessed within parents' local communities by choice. Parents felt humbled by their local community and felt their community provided emotional support, the ability to talk about difficulties, information, advice, and physical support:

I think I was the luckiest person with the group I was with because my friends helped me so much. They... there's nothing more they could have done than what they did so I was extremely lucky... the girls went to a Catholic school and so it's a bit more closeknit than the public schools and I just happen to be with a group of parents... my daughter, my eldest daughter's year are very close so, so when I say community I mean specifically the parents of that one class, cos even my other daughter's class wouldn't be as close as that so I was just in the right place at the right time with those friends. They really, really carried me for a while there (5050M2)

I've got good friends that have got a local day-care centre and they treat me like family. I go up there once or twice a year if I feel like going over there. They'd have me around all the time if I wanted. Yeah, but I've got them. I've also got one of the local police officers who every now and then she takes me out to breakfast or lunch or something. Our kids, they used to go to school together... So I've got support, like pretty good supports now that gives me confidence that I never had when I first went through all the stuff... That's an incidental one, the police officer. That's not my, that's not me bumping into her or her bumping into me. That's through the kids. It happens to be that she's a local police officer. I had maybe one other mother at the school [child's school] took a shining [sic] to me, married woman, she took a shining [sic] to me and went up there a few times for dinner and they were really good to me. That really helps a lot when you've got other people that take you in (RF8)

Engaging with their community, and receiving community support, further contributed to successful identity redevelopment for the parents in my study. Following supportive community interactions, parents felt less ashamed of being separated, and that their pre-separation identities and the roles that they felt they held within their community remained despite separation. Parents felt as though they were still an important part of their community and through the feedback and support provided by community members, they were better able to navigate their way through the difficulties associated with being uncoupled. Furthermore, parents felt that local community support was easier to access when compared to government-appointed community-based support and provided them with a more personal and authentic experience of support. These particular findings support previous research finding that parents who widen their support networks to include the local community following separation and divorce report increased wellbeing and adjustment (Amato, 2010; Emery, 1994, 2011; Emery et al., 2001; Parkinson, 2010; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Rodgers et al., 2004; Taylor, 2004).

A final source of external support described as immensely beneficial for the parents in my study was reaching out to relevant health care professionals including general practitioners (GPs), psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors and social workers. In the context of coping with physical and mental health problems, identity struggles, loss and loneliness, parents sought assistance from health care professionals privately or were referred by other professionals and organisations. Through interactions with health care professionals, parents were provided with a safe and secure environment that offered opportunities for management of mental health concerns, crisis situations, and self-awareness. Health care professionals were additionally appraised by the parents in my study as independent of social networks, which is where this particular finding departs slightly from other findings associated with this sub-theme. Health care professionals offered parents impartial support that was not found in other social or community contexts. Parents were able to discuss difficulties associated with being uncoupled in an open and non-judgmental environment. Such support increased experiences of self-efficacy, problem-focused coping and self-esteem following separation. This support further provided the context for personal growth and development: “*I wouldn’t be alive without my psychologist*” (NRF4), and:

I don’t think I would have gotten through it if I didn’t seek regular counselling. Just to understand why it happened and things that I could do to make sure it never happened again to myself or the kids and yeah how I could aim to just become more positive about everything and not have so much anger, yeah... and we really focused on not changing to be with anybody. So yeah – not being, like don’t be snobby about yourself, but be very grounded and know what you want from life... If I didn’t have my family and friends I would have got through with counselling, but if I only had my family and no counselling I don’t think that would have been enough. Definitely – and through my counselling – I went in and she just pumped me full of pamphlets and brochures and printouts that she’d done (RM3)

... my psychologist was wonderful... There were times where – a couple of times, things – I just – things took a turn for the worse circumstantially, and I just couldn't cope. I could ring her and say "Is there any appointments, can I have one?" That was really helpful because I think, I could talk to my friends about it and I did. That was definitely helpful in helping me cope as well, but just having that person who's removed from all that and obviously has the training to help you think about things in a helpful way. Yeah, so that was always a strategy, I guess, as well. That she was available (RM9)

Health care professionals were described by parents as assisting with a vast range of difficulties associated with declines in emotional, psychological and physical health. Therefore, descriptions of health care professionals as beneficial following separation are strengthened when one considers that the most significant stressors parents tend to face are physical and psychological health problems (Afifi et al., 2006; Choi & Marks, 2013; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Liu & Umberson, 2008; Lorenz et al., 1997; Richards et al., 1997; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Shapiro, 1996; Simon, 2002; White, 1992; Yip et al., 2012).

Contextually, these findings reflect positive outcomes relative to Australia's health care system. Australia's health care system provides residents with opportunities for low cost or free health care as well as private health care. In particular, findings reflect benefits associated with the Better Access initiative put in place by the Australian government in 2006 (DHS, 2015). This initiative provides individuals with improved access to health care providers including general practitioners, psychiatrists, specialist psychologists, registered psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists.

Some notable demographic considerations were identified through parents' descriptions of connectedness, social support and reaching out. A particularly salient environmental buffer for mothers in my study was support from close friends and the loyalty family members showed them following separation. Interestingly, mothers frequently spoke of the overwhelmingly beneficial support they received from their friends as instrumental following separation, as opposed to support received from family members. This finding reflects previous research suggesting social relationships are valued more by women (Nelson, 1995; Stewart, 2005). Specifically, mothers reported that they valued the

loyalty of their family of origin in the context of losing the support from their ex-partners' family, but valued support from friends more following separation because they were less critical and judgmental, and more impartial in their support.

Fathers were particularly explicit about the benefits of support received from families and from their peers. The finding that fathers in my study felt they benefitted immensely from community and family support extends upon common misconceptions of the nature of fathers' support and help-seeking behaviours following separation. Studies examining gender in this area have not pointed to gender discrepancies associated with family support or support from peers. However, findings associated with the benefits of peer support may be interpreted in conjunction with research finding that men tend to engage in increased social activity following separation and divorce as a way of coping with the loss of pre-separation attachments (Baum, 2003; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006). Indeed, socialising and developing new intimate relationships were particularly salient protective resources described by the fathers in my study. It is interesting to note, however, that previous studies have often identified frantic social activity as a stressor for fathers following separation. Conversely, the fathers in my study felt engaging with their environment socially was particularly beneficial.

Interestingly, shared care parents in my study described support from friendships developed within their children's school community as a unique contributor to adjustment and adaptation following separation. This finding suggests that environments associated with the children, specifically the school environment, can be very beneficial in facilitating support and assistance following separation for the shared care parent. In particular, it was the families of children's friends who provided meaningful support for the shared care parents in my study.

In the context of findings that formerly married parents experienced substantial difficulty with marital status and family loss, support from their own family of origin was a salient contributor to positive and adaptive adjustment following separation. Although a significant body of literature points to support from family as protective following separation (Choi & Marks, 2013; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Gähler, 2006; Hewitt, Turrell, &

Giskes, 2012; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Sakraida, 2005; Wang & Amato, 2000), research has not delineated between marital status and the benefits of family support. My findings suggest that the dissolution of parents' own immediate family may have contributed to an appreciation of the value of family life in the context of desecration of their own values and ideals. Their family, therefore, provided them with the benefit of feeling as though they still belonged within a family system, despite the loss of their own immediate family system.

Positive employment

Being uncoupled meant a substantial economic struggle for the parents in my study. Despite economic changes, parents described employment as a buffer against many difficulties encountered following separation. The benefits and support parents gained from positive employment were multifaceted. For many of the parents in my study, positive employment represented stability in personal identity. Those parents who enjoyed their job, and who identified strongly with the roles associated with their work, described increased self-efficacy and self-esteem in the context of separation. The ability to maintain a good work ethic despite the difficulties associated with being uncoupled provided parents with a source of personal strength and consistency. Such feelings transpired into mastery in balancing work/home lives and economic stability:

[when asked what helped the most following separation] Good employment. I have always had good bosses. I am not sure if it's good bosses, but I have always had a good work ethic so I have always felt good at my work. So this part of me has always been stable – my work has always been so helpful. I guess having these wife and kid problems, and if I wasn't good at my job, then I may have been overwhelmed... I love my job, that's why I have been here for 20 plus years now (5050F2)

I enjoy my work. I've done the same sort of work for 30 years... I love going to work... going to work gives you a reason to get up every day and when you haven't got your child it just, you know, gives you a purpose in life and I guess my job is in a caring profession so you know you feel like you're making a difference for someone, um, as hard as it is and as frustrating and as difficult as it is... (NRM5)

For many parents, employment was particularly beneficial because it provided a means of distraction consistent with self-regulatory behaviours described previously as part of theme three (*searching within the self*). When parents were at work, they were less likely to constantly reflect on emotional difficulties associated with their separation which provided a sense of psychological relief:

...work at that time was something that I found very important. It keeps me on the right track. It keeps life in perspective. But I don't know if that was a strength or not; it was quite ironic that, for the January or February after I separated, I was acting national manager which got my mind off the separation. So I suppose one of the strengths was to continue working at an effective level at the time of separation. I guess that was a saviour and an avenue to forget things for me... functioning well at work at that time of separation, using work as an avenue of a saviour... utilising my work as a diversionary avenue... (NRF7)

Despite identifying with roles associated with employment and the distraction work provided, parents felt that flexibility and support within the workplace was paramount. Interactions between parents and their post-separation work environment were protective when workplaces acknowledged the increased responsibilities of separated parents and offered support, assistance, and understanding:

... oh yeah, one other thing I think I had a really, really supportive boss – I had a really supportive boss and bosses actually because while I was pregnant I worked for a few different people and they were incredibly supportive. So my work environment – I should have mentioned this – were fantastic... just adapted what my work was, my work situation to suit everything and I was told the door was open to work as soon as I wanted to. So that was really great as well. That was a really important source of support and feeling – and not feeling – yeah, people just thought it was a good – a really good thing. I didn't feel all the negative aspects [of being a separated mother], it was really good (RM6)

I suppose for me I was lucky that I did have a job which also provides for flexible hours and I approached them and I now work a lot more hours than I did before but I still have the flexibility for the girls to be home with them. When they have days that they don't go to school, school development days and so on... I can work from home and that... (RM10)

This sub-theme goes hand-in-hand with parents' attempts to regulate their finances described as part of the previous theme (*self-regulation*) in order to facilitate economic wellbeing. However, positive employment extends upon these findings by reflecting how parents' interactions with their working environment aided attempts to contend with the economic struggle they faced post-separation. Furthermore, these findings provide insight into the mechanics behind how parents were able to negotiate with economic struggles and what was instrumental in assisting adjustment in this area.

Findings associated with positive employment partially support previous literature. Studies have found that employment may act as a protective factor following separation by providing a sense of self-worth, independence, opportunities to widen social networks, and by providing social and practical support (Turner et al., 1998; Wang & Amato, 2000). However, the parents in my study reported flexible and supportive environments as substantially beneficial for them in addition to the more personal benefits of employment identified by previous studies.

Another consideration associated with these findings is that positive employment may have emerged as increasingly more important in the current social climate when compared with previous studies. For example, current social trends suggest that women are becoming more involved in the workforce and may also be engaging in further education to improve career and employment opportunities (Broderick, 2012). Therefore, the women in my study were likely to have been less financially and economically disadvantaged as research once found, and flexible and supportive work environments may have emerged as even more important for them. Similarly, as fathers are becoming increasingly involved in childcare responsibilities and commitments following separation, flexible and supportive work environments may have been considered increasingly more important for fathers in my study (Raley et al., 2012). Therefore, the emergence of positive employment as a protective resource may reflect social changes relative to mothers increasing involvement in the workplace and fathers increasing involvement in child-rearing practices following separation and divorce. Interestingly, however, positive employment appeared to be most beneficial for fathers.

Constructive co-parenting

In the context of the difficulty experienced adapting to the co-parenting relationship, the parents in my study described a number of characteristics that contributed to constructive co-parenting relationships. Experiences were mixed regarding the time it took for parents to achieve constructive co-parenting relationships. However, some consistencies in the nature of such relationships were evident. This was an important finding of my research given the stress and strain that difficulties associated with becoming a co-parent represented for the parents in my study.

Parents attempted to isolate post-separation relationships between themselves and their ex-partners to a focus on the children. In addition, co-parenting relationships that were respectful, stable, flexible, and characterised by mutual confidence in each other's abilities as a parent were appraised as constructive by parents:

We're both deeply hurt, but we're not in great conflict with each other, we have a high regard for each other, a strong amount of mutual respect and... generosity and graciousness, but still, deeply hurt and so our relationship is a little bit... 'tense' is maybe too strong a word, but there's a strong sense of dis-ease when we're together, but no animosity or conflict. So we're still working together in terms of the childcare and we talk quite a bit about how the kids are going and practical, logistical planning and thinking about the kids' future and what we need to be doing for them. And apart from that, our communication's fairly limited... So I think for all the sense of failure about the marriage that didn't work, we at least bowed out graciously and at least, giving it an example, not that anybody's really looking, but at least showing our kids that broken relationships can still treat each other with respect (5050F7)

We're very flexible around the kids and... I mean, we're okay... it's a reasonably peaceful relationship. We do what needs to be done and try to support each other through that, and we're just kind of getting on with things I guess... I'm really proud of how both of us have actually done the kids and worked with the kids and helped them understand the separation... I think we've done them very well [sic] (NRF6)

Parents were able to navigate their way towards constructive co-parenting relationships by reframing the nature of their relationship with their ex-partner. Specifically, parents alluded to a process of cognitive restructuring that facilitated more adaptive thoughts associated with the ongoing nature of the co-parenting relationship:

Oh look, I suppose the biggest thing which again I haven't mentioned is not to think of your ex as a negative thing. Try to be positive when you're talking to your kids about the ex, because once – as soon as you start being negative towards your ex-partner or ex-wife, then that starts to flow out and becomes a negative thing with the kids as well. So what I try to do is be positive all the time about everything that she was doing and whenever I spoke to the kids I was always trying to be positive about her as well... trying to look at that person as – in a positive way rather than a negative way, which is bloody hard, I tell you what. But, yeah, that to me was the most important thing – not to paint who is the kids' mother, half of them, in a negative view point, yeah... (RF1)

... [our co-parenting relationship] it's probably as amicable as it can be without being friends um [so you need to] let go of whatever conflict there was in the past and try – given that you're going to have to co-parent – try and have the best co-parenting relationship you can with the children's father. As soon as possible start thinking of the other person as the children's father rather than your ex (5050M8)

Facilitating a constructive co-parenting relationship following separation provided parents with increased self-efficacy and mastery of their post-separation parenting abilities. Parents who felt that their co-parenting relationships were constructive described experiencing a smoother transition and an increased sense of adjustment. Parents felt better about being separated and therefore felt better able to assist their children through their separation with the support of their ex-partner.

Findings support previous studies that suggest that individuals with lower levels of conflict report better outcomes following separation and divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; DeGarmo et al., 2008; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Symoens et al., 2014). Yet, they extend on such research by further uncovering the nature of constructive co-parenting relationships, as well as ways in which parents were able to navigate their way to a conscious state of amicable co-parenting. Furthermore, these findings provide support for other research that suggests conflict in co-parenting relationships is often the result of anxious or insecure attachments to the ex-spouse (Baum, 2003; Masheter, 1991, 1997). Specifically, parents' abilities to reframe their thoughts about their ex-partner suggested redevelopment of new post-separation identities that were not tied to their ex-partner, but rather reflected what Baum (2003) termed 'absence – presence' following separation. In other words, working towards an amicable and constructive co-parenting relationship

following separation aided parents' attempts to redefine post-separation roles and identities.

Constructive co-parenting was particularly important for the shared care parents in my study. In particular, being amicable and attempting to leave emotions out of the co-parenting relationship was important, along with remaining child focused and flexible. These findings reflect previous studies in this area (Fehlberg et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2011; Smyth, 2009; Smyth, Caruana, et al., 2004; Smyth, Qu, et al., 2004; Trinder, 2010). For example, Nielsen (2011) reviewed 20 studies examining shared care parenting after divorce and stated that common parenting characteristics included a co-parenting relationship that was unemotional, 'business-like', focused on the children, and flexible.

The parent – child relationship

Parents described their children as a protective factor following their separation. There is an overwhelming body of literature that has identified characteristics that contribute to positive adaptation and adjustment to parental separation for children (Guilfoyle, Banham, Cavazzi, & Napolitano-Lincoln, 2011; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Similarly, literature has repeatedly pointed to the adverse effects of parental absence (particularly father absence) following separation and divorce for children (Hetherington, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Findings associated with this sub-theme move beyond such studies by providing insight into the reverse dynamic. That is, how children contribute to their parents' wellbeing following separation.

A question that was repeatedly asked of all parents in my study in one way or another was "What were your strengths during separation?". Responses to this question almost always led back to "*my children*". The role of the children following separation was multifaceted for the parents in my study. First and foremost, children provided parents with a source of strength: "[when asked what her strengths were during separation] *I guess the kids. Having to just focus on the kids all the time, knowing that I had to be strong for them*" (RM4), "*My biggest strength I gained from my children*" (5050F10), and:

My strength was my children because... sorry, just a bit emotional now. I had to work very, very hard to keep my children alive... yet you stuck it out and you lived with them and you could live your life as long as you can, but them wanting to be with me and enjoying their time with me, that's what gave me strength. My strength as a person I guess, my determination to keep them in my life and to be there for them no matter what happened, that was my greatest strength... the main strategy really was just focus on the kids and do what you can for them and be there for them and that's you know... and that way you know that you are doing everything you can, you know (5050F1)

The other strength was the relationship with my daughter... My daughter just helped me by being my daughter. Just by the fact that I had this wonderful child. You know she's a joy to have for as long as she wants to stay close to me (RM11)

Knowing that their children were safe and happy, and knowing that they were doing everything they could to ensure their children would adapt positively to their separation, provided the parents in my study with strength. For them, a separation involving children meant considering that their sons and daughters were more important than themselves. Therefore, their separation was not just about them; it was about their children too. Crumbling into an emotional mess was not an option for parents because they had children who were dependent and reliant on them. They were responsible for someone other than themselves: *"Honestly, I think that's what kept me going through everything, is just knowing that first of all, these children need me, and second of all they deserve to have their father around"* (NRF3), and:

... the fact that the children needed me. Responsibility. Being responsible for the child. Responsible for assuming that they need more than what you do. So, call that whatever you want, but that's what kept me going. If it was up to me and I had no kids I would have said goodbye to everyone a long time ago. I would have gone that way, but I had kids and I had to make sure I was there for them (RF8)

...and the only thing that got me through was the children. I just kept saying I had to get better for the children. And that got me through from day to day – knowing that I had to come up healthy to look after them. And they were young, so I knew I had a long way to go (5050F4)

In this sense, the presence of the children was protective for the parents in my study. For some parents, the protective role of the children was automatically assumed. For others, a universal focus on the children was a strategy:

...the main strategy [to cope] really was just focus on the kids and do what you can for them and be there for them and that's you know... and that way you know that you are doing everything you can, you know. So basically I got in a situation where, as a parent, you've got to put your kids first and say "I might be doing it tough, but it's tough for them too and they still need you", you know... Like for me I buried myself into my children's needs and that's my way of coping with the fact that my wife had rejected me I guess to some extent (5050F1)

Focusing on the children as a strategy reflects findings described earlier regarding use of distraction as a coping style. Parents hid their own emotional turmoil and focused on the needs of their children in order to cope. Feedback from perceptions of their children as happy, healthy and well-adjusted provided parents with increased feelings of self-efficacy, self-esteem and mastery. If their children were doing well, then that was proof that they were doing well as a separated parent:

I have been everywhere I can to make everything right for my children and I've only after all this time in the last few months, well probably this year, been able to sit here and say "I'm okay with everything that's happened", "I've done everything I could possibly do in relation to my children" and that's all that counted to me was that they survive it... I suppose I don't think of myself, I thought of [child] all the way along... I guess I did everything as I thought would be best and in hindsight I would probably do it all the same (NRM2)

The meaning behind this sub-theme centred on parents' awareness of the need to act in the children's best interests at all times. Interestingly, this is the paramount consideration of Australian Family Law. Therefore, on the one hand, my findings appear to reflect social awareness of the political aims of Australia's Family Law system. On the other hand, findings associated with this sub-theme further reflect the specific focus of my study which was isolated to parents' experiences of separation. Although the presence of children was associated with more life strains relative to economic difficulties, re-partnering, and conflict between ex-partners following separation, the children of parents in my study also

moderated against such adversity by being a source of strength and distraction. Findings, therefore, suggest that the adversity associated with the presence of children following separation may have been counteracted by the simple presence of children, as articulated well by 5050F4:

...the funny thing is – the paradox there is – if there weren't any children, the break-up probably wouldn't have been as traumatic <laughs> so on the one hand they got me through, but on the other hand it was because of, that we had children that it was so devastating

Other research in this area has further pointed to the presence of older children as a practical, social and material resource for parents following separation (Amato et al., 1995). Absence of such findings in my study may reflect the mean age of target children in my study, which was around nine years. Because children of the parents in my study tended to be of middle-childhood age, they may not have been of an age to assist in providing practical, social and material support.

In any case, my findings are more consistent with other studies finding that the presence of children provide separated parents with purpose and meaning following separation, distraction from their own emotional turmoil, and a buffer against feelings of loneliness and helplessness (Kruk, 2010). My findings go even further by providing insight into *how* parents benefit from the presence of their children following separation.

It was interesting to note that a salient protective resource described by the fathers in my study was their relationship with their children. Mothers tended to report more focus, concern, worry and psychological distress in conjunction with their children following separation, whereas the role children played for fathers appeared to be protective. This finding does not appear to be reflected in previous literature and suggests that the role of the children following separation may be appraised differently across gender. Mothers seem to be more protective *of* their children, whereas fathers seem to be more protected *by* the relationship with their children. This finding may reflect previous studies suggesting that fathers experience increased distress as a result of the loss of contact or access to their children following separation, and therefore appraise their relationships with their children

as protective when they have opportunities to spend time with them (Hawthorne, 2005; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Umberson & Williams, 1993). However, this interpretation appears to be directly related to residential status rather than gender. Therefore, it seems that this finding may reflect hegemonic gender stereotypes associated with the roles of mothers and fathers. For example, mothers tend to adopt maternal child-rearing and domestic roles within the family unit, whereas it is the father's role to be a provider. Subsequently, my findings may suggest that a mother's childrearing role may be perceived as even more important in the absence of the father's roles, causing substantial worry and concern for mothers. Yet, fathers may view contact with their children, which was generally sparse prior to separation due to fulfilment of the provider role (i.e. full-time work), as even more important in the context of a further reduction in time spent with children following separation.

The presence of their children and their relationship with them was also a particularly salient protective resource for residential parents in my study. This finding reflects other studies that have documented the benefits of the presence of children following separation (Amato et al., 1995; Kruk, 2010). In particular research suggests that having the majority care time of children following separation provides parents with meaning in their life, something to live for, a distraction from personal issues, less change in living situations, better emotional regulation, and reduced feelings of loneliness, insecurity and helplessness (Kruk, 2010).

This protective resource differs from those described by non-residential parents who felt that the presence and relationship with their children was particularly beneficial. The discrepancy here relates to the assumptions associated with the nature of the relationship with children. Non-residential parents felt that when they were involved with their children, in the context of minimal contact, distress following separation was substantially reduced. On the other hand, residential parents benefitted from the ongoing relationship that was able to be facilitated with their children as a result of maintaining the majority of care time.

Loving again

Of those parents who had re-partnered following their separation, their new intimate relationships were appraised as a substantial buffer against loneliness and isolation. Separation was an event associated with feelings of defectiveness for many of the parents in my study. Such feelings were experienced in the context of the loss of partner or spousal identities and loneliness as a result of intimate and social isolation. When parents developed new relationships, feelings of defectiveness reduced because they felt the simple nature of being in a new relationship suggested that they were lovable once again. Feeling loved gave them more confidence in themselves and provided them with a sense of companionship that only an intimate relationship could offer. Similarly, loving another provided parents with a cathartic experience that increased wellbeing:

I think certainly when [new partner] came into my life that was a big turning point for me. It was what, nearly two years ago. It was the turning point for me, and I realised that I could love again, which was nice. To feel loved again was a really, really nice feeling. Yeah, that certainly helped a lot... there's absolutely no doubt, meeting [new partner] has certainly helped a lot. As I said, to feel wanted again and to feel loved again was an amazing feeling. It was something I never expected. I never went out looking for it, and that helped a lot, it helped an enormous amount. So yeah, I guess having that feeling of a partnership there again was nice, and that helped a lot (NRF6)

Experiences of companionship and new partnerships offered parents a new opportunity to share their life with another. As such, new intimate relationships further provided parents with emotional and practical support that they appraised as integral to their ability to adjust and adapt to being uncoupled:

I went and did a parenting class with my girlfriend in the early days, we went and did one together. It was her idea and it was just fantastic and I've got back to the calm parenting and reasoning and emotional coaching sort of thing and all that sort of stuff so, which is wonderful... it took me a long time, with luckily the understanding and love from my girlfriend as well, to really bear through it with the kids to get them to the stage I've got them to now... Look I was lucky in the way that I met [new partner] about six or seven months after the breakup... She helped me with the government side, the help side, like she got me the number of a lawyer that was free to talk to and he was fantastic... It's just, I was just lucky that I met [new partner] when I did. That she was the type of person she was cos she's the one that's helped me through most of it... So I was one of the lucky ones (5050F3)

In addition to new intimate relationships, parents felt that when their ex-partners developed new relationships, difficulties in the post-separation relationship reduced significantly:

... but he has somebody else now, they're not living together but there is somebody in his life so that has eased these things... because prior to him meeting her he was driven, his whole goal was about me returning to the family home (5050M9)

This particular finding reflects previous research finding that new intimate relationships weaken preoccupation with ex-spouses (Symoens et al., 2014). In general, however, my findings reflect research finding that new intimate relationships buffer against loneliness, mental health difficulties and life strains (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Shapiro, 1996; Symoens et al., 2014).

On the other hand, research in this area has identified a strong relationship between re-partnering and economic wellbeing (Shapiro, 1996; Symoens et al., 2014). The experiences of parents in my study did not reflect similar benefits associated with new intimate relationships. Instead, findings better reflect Symoens et al.'s (2014) research finding that re-married divorcees were more likely to report increased life satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, self-esteem and mastery when compared with single divorcees, even after controlling for financial situation. For the parents in my study, new intimate relationships represented another chance at love, companionship and intimacy which

contributed to increased perceptions of personal wellbeing, emotional support and practical support associated with being uncoupled.

New intimate relationships appeared particularly beneficial for shared care parents in my study. This finding appears in contrast to previous studies that have documented being single as a characteristic of positive shared care parenting (Smyth, Caruana, et al., 2004; Smyth, Qu, et al., 2004). Single status was specifically related to fathers in these studies, whereas my sample was inclusive of both mothers and fathers. Likewise, formerly married parents described new intimate relationships as particularly protective following separation; a finding that I interpret to represent an increased sense of belonging in the context of substantial identity difficulties following separation. These findings have been demonstrated in previous literature (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Symoens et al., 2014; Wang & Amato, 2000).

PART FIVE: PATTERNS OF ADJUSTMENT

The experiences presented as part of themes one, two, three and four represent descriptions of the difficulties the parents in my study had to contend with and the resources that helped them adjust following separation. Representations of difficulties (i.e., *uncoupled*) and the resources that helped (i.e., *searching within the self* and *reaching beyond the self*) reflect parts of the adjustment process described by parents. In reality, parents' experiences did not fit into perfect categories of difficulties and helpful resources following separation. Rather, experiences described as part of the themes presented to this point were in effect at different times and to differing levels of severity. The purpose of this fifth and final theme – *patterns of adjustment* – is to present a more fluid and temporal understanding of the experience of separation.

The rollercoaster

For the parents in my study, the experience of separation did not follow a smooth transition from difficulties associated with the uncoupled culture to acts of reaching within the self and beyond the self for the resources to assist them to successfully adjust. Rather, parents experienced countless ups-and-downs that reflected negative experiences with the uncoupled culture and attempts to reduce the impact of associated difficulties. It was the interaction between the uncoupled culture, and access to the helpful resources separated parents found within themselves and beyond that provided the context for understanding adjustment following the experience of separation. As such, parents' perceptions of the separation experience were fluid and constantly changing, where understanding one overarching process of adjustment was impossible.

Throughout experiences of separation, parents would be faced with a difficulty, negotiate between themselves and their environment to find a way to deal with the difficulty, and then begin to feel a sense of adjustment. Their adjustment may have then been compromised again by another difficulty that had to be dealt with later down the track. This process continued for some time. Yet, each up-and-down was an instrumental

part of the separation experience. This pattern of experiences was appraised as a rollercoaster ride:

I mean it's a harrowing time in your life and its ongoing too. Like, it's not something that just happens quickly, you know. It takes a long time and I find you – even after you know – I'm considerably a few years on now, but as your child... as your child changes and your life changes – you know – it's sort of that shock time. And then you have the time when you're trying to... you go through the battle... of the separation – you know – going through the battle which can be ongoing, you know, with all that. And even that is a monster in itself that you need to – you know – you can be all quiet while you're trying to wait for things to occur, and then it blows up again. And then after a while, you know, dust settles and then it blows up again. And then I find it keeps going like that even after you're divorced it still... dust settles, or so you thought – but there's still ongoing issues... that continue. It's like a... a bit of a rollercoaster (5050M1)

... you know there was times when I thought – you know – it's too hard, was it all worth it, but it is, it definitely is. And it's been a crappy year in the fact that, naively, I resigned from a job that – I mean – it was coming to an end anyway, and the house was being sold so I had to pack up and find somewhere else to live. So I resigned because there was nothing else for me within that company, and the plan was to move houses and unpack and have a bit of a break while I job hunted. Um, [it] didn't occur to me that I wouldn't find anything when I needed it, so sort of 3 months later here I am, sort of really skint, and panicking about money. But yeah it just seems to be since December – I guess – one thing after another. There's been a couple of deaths and funerals that I've had to go to. Um the kids are struggling now with their dad. Dropping my phone in the water in the toilet. You know it just seems to be one thing after another at the moment. But I still manage to get through it you know. I might have a couple of quiet days and withdraw and sort of sulk for a bit. But a couple of days and it sort of passes you know, and ill carry on, and I'm joking with my friends, and I sort of carry on (5050M6)

These passages represent the ups-and-downs parents experienced following separation that mirrored a rollercoaster ride. However, each parent's rollercoaster ride was different. Some parents got off the rollercoaster earlier than others. Other parents' rollercoasters were scarier than others. Some went at higher speeds than others. Yet others were characterised by longer ups than downs, and vice versa. Some parents even felt as though they were on two or more rollercoasters at a time. For the most part, rollercoaster rides were experienced in the context of emotions, relationships or health. Collectively, however, all parents described experiencing interactions between difficulties associated with being

uncoupled and the search for helpful resources within themselves and beyond to adjust to separation. This pattern represented a journey that was constantly changing; just like a rollercoaster.

For the parents in my study, this finding suggests that the experience of adjustment following separation was constructed as a result of the interaction between difficulties associated with being uncoupled and searching within the self and beyond for helpful resources. Therefore, experiences of adjustment were based on parents' own perceptions of their abilities to cope with the ups-and-downs that they experienced following separation. This finding was interpreted in the context of my participant sample which included parents who had been separated for a wide ranging amount of time (from 2 months to 14 years). Therefore, each parent was at a different stage following separation and may or may not have experienced self-defined positive health outcomes. Indeed, some of the parents I spoke to felt that they were experiencing a difficult period at the time of our interview. For these parents, the experience of separation was more like a bank, where each difficulty they overcame added more and more credit to their account. Through their ups-and-downs they began to grow, learn, adapt, and move from strength to strength. This pattern of adjustment was the first identified throughout parents' dialogues that represented *how* they constructed their experience of separation. Namely, separation meant contending with the rollercoaster of exchanges between difficulties and helpful resources described as part of themes two, three and four.

Instead of identifying causal or predictable relationships between stressors and protective factors, findings associated with this sub-theme reflected the way the parents in my study began to make sense of their separation experience. Specifically, this pattern highlights adjustment following separation as a journey characterised by a rollercoaster of experiences. The changeable nature of separation is not one that has been identified in previous literature. This is because most literature in this area has been conducted using quantitative methodologies that do not allow for exploration of non-systematic, non-hierarchical relationships between factors following separation (Blekesaune, 2008; Booth & Amato, 1991; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Lorenz et al., 1997; Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Johnson

& Wu, 2002; Pevalin & Ermisch, 2004; Simon, 2002; Wade & Pevalin, 2004). Rather, most studies have identified a plethora of specific stressors and protective factors in isolation instead of the way in which the two interact and contribute towards an understanding of the social reality of separation.

Although findings may contribute to further understanding of the crisis or chronic strain models of adjustment following separation (Hetherington, 2003; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Lorenz et al., 2006; Strohschein et al., 2005; Waite et al., 2009), delineating between the two based on my findings is difficult. For example, one may argue that perhaps the rollercoaster of experiences described by the parents in my study reflects numerous chronic strains that repeatedly appeared over time causing many ups-and-downs. However, consideration of sampling characteristics suggests that such difficulties may have also been experienced as crises for those parents in my study who had only been separated a short period of time when interviewed. In any case, findings associated with this sub-theme may better reflect the way in which parents cope with temporary or long-standing difficulties following separation. Namely, they grow, learn, adapt and draw strength from overcoming each hurdle along the road that ultimately contributes to feelings of adjustment following separation.

The “time” factor

Parents’ dialogues repeatedly reflected thoughts associated with “time”. The “time” factor further contributed to representations of separation as a journey. The concept of time differed for the parents in my study because each one had been separated for a different period of time. However, adjustment following separation and time went hand-in-hand. There could not be one without the other. For many parents, journeying through separation was not something that was easily achieved. It took a lot of hard work, perseverance, and ultimately time. As time passed, and parents got on and off their rollercoasters, their perceptions of their experience began to change: *“Time definitely does make a difference, but to realise that to begin with is really hard because as I said, you live*

in the moment, so you live day by day” (RF5), “You just have to do a lot of adjusting over time” (RM3), and:

We're just starting to move on. That first year after the separation I didn't see anyone, it was just I needed that whole year to just be with just me and the girls, so I wasn't dating anyone or even thinking about moving on at all. So that first year it was all just about spending time with them, getting them used to the separation and routine and that sort of thing. I think it was good for them in that first year just to have some sort of quiet time I guess to ourselves... Just knowing that one day things will get better, finally. It took two and a half years but finally it has. Everything took time; it took a year to even want to date anyone again. I was just so hung up on him, not because I wanted to get back with him but he was just such a big part of my life for so long that I just didn't feel like I could move on for that first year. So it took a year to want to move on in that way, and it's taken, what is it now, nearly two years to find someone else to move on with and to feel that I can let him into my family, with my girls, and we can move on as a family now (RM4)

... you know everyone says, “it’s just going to take time” and I didn’t understand that until now. But there’s a healing process and much has happened. But there’s a lot of things that I didn’t understand – that I probably still don’t understand – that I have more acceptance of... I’m a lot stronger now... it’s just time unfortunately. As hard as that is to accept, just the healing process does take a while (NRF3)

Represented within these excerpts are examples of a number of issues that changed over time for the parents in my study. I use the word “changed” instead of “improved” because time did not necessarily embody improvements for all parents. Consistent with the previous sub-theme, parents’ experiences over time were fraught with many ups-and-downs, where progress or setbacks were interchangeable. As such, parents could not necessarily pinpoint the months or years it had taken for them to adjust to their separation. Rather, dialogue reflecting the concept of time was based on thoughts about the past, the present, and the future. Specifically, these thoughts represented the rollercoaster of experiences they had undergone, which in turn reflected how they perceived themselves in the present, and subsequently where they felt their road might lead them in the future: *“We’ve been talking about how I felt in the past and everything but one of my strong feelings right now is – I have an equally uncertain future” (5050M2), “... what's going on today isn't necessarily going to be going on in two years' time” (NRF5), and:*

I think for the first couple of months I thought a lot about how to try to save it and how to fix the situation. Once I was able to realise it wasn't going to be saved, I started moving on and I started thinking more about the future in a different light – and I'm still working on that now six months later (5050F5)

So – you know – right now, meeting a new partner was just a fantastic thing that happened... and that there now would be the backbone of just moving on in life... I'm a very positive person and I look now and [I think] – everything will be sorted out. Whether it's next week, next month, next year – but it will be sorted out. And you know, we'll have our own house, the kids will be living with us, whenever and whatever the courts decide and whatever we decide with our ex's. There will be a point where we'll sit down and have a glass of wine on the deck and think – this is life, we're back to normal now – so I think six, twelve months ago it was those earlier things. Right now it's the new partner... in the short to medium term future [that will be when] you get back to a normal family unit (NRF7)

Parents thoughts associated with the past, present and future embodied judgments of themselves in the context of where they have been, where they are now and where they hope to be in the future. Parents looked at how far they had come, the difficulties they had overcome, the strengths they had gained, and the changes they had made. Such reflections highlighted the interaction between difficulties and helpful resources found within and beyond. Although some parents still felt that they had a difficult road ahead of them, and others felt that they were presently experiencing difficulty, thoughts associated with the past, present and future shaped the way they viewed the separation experience. When thinking about time, parents were comforted by the knowledge that their difficulties were only temporary in the context of the time they had lived, and the time they had yet to live: *"It's a moment in time, it does go away"* (RF5).

Time itself was defined on a continuum of the past, present and future rather than through the assignment of days, months and years. All parents felt that "time healed" and that time was made up of experiences in the past, perceptions of the present and projections into the future. However, the length of time needed and the salient aspects of the past, present and future that contributed to feeling healed were unique to each individual.

The construct of time has been identified in previous studies that have examined adjustment periods following divorce from a chronic strain or crisis perspective (Johnson & Wu, 2002; Lorenz et al., 2006; Määttä, 2011; Wade & Pevalin, 2004; Waite et al., 2009). Although both perspectives provide some insight into time and adjustment following separation and divorce, neither contributes towards an understanding of the meaning of time following separation. Therefore, findings extend beyond what research has already identified in conjunction with time and adjustment by providing an understanding of the meaning of time in the context of the experience of separation.

The protective nature of separation

Some parents described experiencing a sense of relief following separation. Therefore, for some parents, separation in itself was considered protective. This particular finding goes hand-in-hand with difficulties experienced during uncoupling. It was included here as part of the fifth and final theme, rather than integrated into the main analysis, because it indicated a unique pattern of adjustment for those parents who viewed their separation as protective. Specifically, the parents in my study who were exposed to significant distress as a result of problematic relationships reported a sense of liberation at the point of separation: *"Yeah, I'm definitely healthier emotionally and physically [following separation], definitely"* (NRF2), *"My life got a lot easier when I separated"* (5050M2), *"As soon as I got out of there, I bounced back to where I normally should be"* (5050M5), *"I think it's been a good separation, certainly a relief for everyone concerned"* (NRF9), and:

To me, seriously, it was easier. I had a lot to deal with when he was around. And it was – you know... I just – it was like sometimes I just wish he never came home from work. Because it was – I had to deal with him and – yeah, it was a lot easier [following separation] (RM7)

... psychologically, from the minute I actually got the words out of my mouth to say that "I'm leaving", my emotional and mental wellbeing just improved you know – hour by hour – just getting those words out and actually doing it (5050M9)

For some parents, separation was a relief. In the context of difficulties experienced during uncoupling, and numerous attempts to renegotiate the relationships, parents were exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally. Separation released them from the bonds of distress associated with difficult pre-separation relationships and provided them with an opportunity for a new beginning distinct from their problematic coupled life. For these parents, the simple act of leaving their difficult relationships was the point at which they began to feel better. However, the parents in my study who reported immediate relief from difficult marriages and partnerships were not necessarily protected from the difficulties associated with the process of being uncoupled. For many of the parents in my study who described relief from problematic relationships, adaptation to the uncoupled culture was still fraught with numerous issues that had to be dealt with:

I actually found the separation quite easy, but it was more me stressing out knowing too much about child attachment and stuff and how we were going to do that. That was the hardest thing for me, but the actual relationship was – that grieving was quite easy (RM5)

Therefore, although some parents perceived their new uncoupled culture as protective based on experiencing the pre-separation relationship as distressing, they continued to experience difficulties associated with being uncoupled. However, liberation from a difficult relationship meant that these parents did not necessarily experience problems associated with loss of the pre-separation relationships. Similarly, the increase in mental, physical and emotional health described by parents that resulted from liberation of problematic relationships may have actually facilitated positive experiences of separation.

Summary

The five parts of this chapter have presented a description and interpretation of each theme and associated sub-themes identified following phenomenological analysis. Findings revealed that parents' experience of separation was fluid and constantly changing. This experience began with the process of '*uncoupling*'; here, a description of the context of parents' experiences prior to separation was offered. Once separated, parents were situated within a new phase that I termed '*uncoupled*'. Findings as part of this theme reflected the difficulties that parents faced following separation. Novel findings as part of this theme were mostly the result of social change. The theme '*searching within the self*' embodied the personal resources described by parents as helpful. Findings associated with this theme went beyond previous research by providing further understanding of the strengths that parents felt they possessed within themselves following separation. The theme '*reaching beyond the self*' represented the resources that parents found most beneficial within their environment to assist them. Findings associated with this theme added a new layer of understanding of the environmental resources that were most helpful for parents following separation. The nature of separation was culminated in the theme titled '*patterns of adjustment*'. Although a number of differing patterns were identified, all reflected difficulties associated with being *uncoupled* that were mediated by *searching within themselves* and *beyond themselves* for the means to cope with the separated culture. Therefore, this theme pulled together findings represented as part of themes one, two, three and four to present a more temporal understanding of *how* parents adjusted following separation. The findings and implications of the current study will be discussed and summarised in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Chapter overview

Chapter 6 discusses and summarises the findings and interpretations relative to the aim and research questions of the current study. Next, recommendations are offered for separation and divorce policy and service provision in Australia. The strengths and limitations of the current study are then discussed. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and a final conclusion.

Response to the study aim and research questions

The majority of knowledge in the area of separation and divorce has understood this experience as a stressful life transition that results in numerous consequences for all individuals involved. Although studies to date have been instrumental in highlighting a number of isolated psychosocial factors associated with separation and divorce, research in this area has yet to move beyond static and objective conceptualisations of adjustment; particularly in Australia. Furthermore, knowledge in this area largely relates to formerly married individuals, where the voices of formerly cohabiting individuals are absent. To address what was lacking, the main aim of the current study was to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married *and* cohabiting parents residing in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. Two research questions were framed in response to the main aim of the current study:

1. What is the experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia?
2. What factors are associated with adjustment following separation?

The aim and research questions were addressed using data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that explored the experiences of 55 separated parents from Australia (11 residential mothers, 5 non-residential mothers, 9 shared care mothers, 9 residential fathers,

11 non-residential fathers, and 10 shared care fathers). The findings are summarised and reviewed in the context of the two research questions below.

The experience of separation in Australia. In this study, participants' own dialogue and experiences informed and extended current knowledge in the area of separation and divorce. A salient finding was that parents' experiences of separation were constantly changing. The findings as they related to the research questions of the current study were presented through the identification of five overarching and central themes. These five themes formed a picture of the experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia and the factors associated with adjustment.

A key finding of the current study was that parents placed substantial importance on the '*uncoupling*' process prior to separation, where they began to feel estranged from their partners. Although Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) referred to the estrangement process when presenting his divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, the particular elements of this process were not explicitly outlined in his model. In the current study however, findings in this area were central to parents' perceptions of adjustment following separation. Collective experiences of uncoupling in the current study reflected difficulties associated with mental health, family stress, infidelity and a sense of drifting apart.

Findings revealed that psychological concerns experienced during uncoupling were appraised as either intrinsic or secondary (or both) and had implications *following* separation. Specifically, intrinsic psychological difficulties continued following separation for some parents, while other parents were relieved of secondary psychological difficulties following separation. Descriptions of psychological difficulties experienced both prior to and following separation tended to reflect both social causation and social selection theories of psychological, emotional and physical health declines identified in international research. These findings support Amato's suggestion (2000, 2010, 2014) that in most cases, a degree of both will be in effect at any one time. Findings further revealed that Australian mothers tended to express psychological difficulty intrinsically, while Australian fathers were found

to express psychological difficulty extrinsically following separation, in line with Simon's (2000) findings.

Findings similarly suggested that those parents who considered their family circumstances as stressful, insurmountable or outside of their control prior to separation were likely to initially appraise being uncoupled in the same way. Although these findings supported prior literature for the most part (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Baum, 2007; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006), acknowledging parents' voices throughout the uncoupling process extended current knowledge by identifying *how* experiences during this time set the scene for parents' experiences of adjustment *following* separation.

Findings associated with the experience of infidelity during the uncoupling process also supported other studies (Steiner et al., 2011; Sweeney & Horowitz, 2001). Yet a particularly prominent finding was that residential parents and formerly married parents viewed infidelity during uncoupling as a particularly salient issue. For residential parents, common descriptions of estrangement and conflict during uncoupling were associated with more frequent reports of infidelity. For formerly married parents, infidelity was a violation of the sanctity of marriage by adultery which impacted heavily upon the socially constructed moral view of marriage.

Also unique to the current study was the finding that drifting apart and subsequent identity battles were a salient issue *during* uncoupling, despite previous research that has identified redevelopment and redefinition of identity *post*-separation as a significant risk for psychological, emotional and physical distress (Baum, 2004; DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996; Hardesty et al., 2012; Park et al., 2011). This finding is important because it points to variability in the way identity struggles may be experienced pre and post-separation. For example, prior to separation, parents appeared to mourn the loss of their own independence and autonomy. However, following separation, parents appeared to mourn the loss of spousal roles and identities. Therefore, a psychological drifting was evident prior to a physical drifting. Interestingly, drifting apart from each other appeared to be a common contributor to separation for shared care parents. This finding may shed further light on

circumstances that lead parents to opt amicably for shared care arrangements following separation.

Descriptions of drifting apart from the self suggest that the protective nature of marriage and relationships may have changed in Australia. For example, findings suggested that redefinition and re-establishment of personal identities began prior to separation where the context for separation impinged upon a drive for autonomy and independence that could not be negotiated within the pre-separation relationship. Mothers struggled more with the loss of their own unique identity when coupled. This finding suggests that women may be more likely to initiate separation as a result of increasing feelings of estrangement. It is possible that the experience of drifting apart from the self in an Australian context may reflect social change, particularly associated with women's movement towards independence. Indeed, international research has begun to consider women's economic independence as a factor that may explain the increased frequency in which women are applying for divorce (Brinig & Allen, 2000). When considered in association with the finding that mothers in the current study valued autonomy and self-efficacy following their separation, this possibility may be well applied to the Australian and international context.

On the other hand, fathers were found to struggle more with a lack of intimacy when coupled, which they noted as a common contributor to their separation. Although intimacy problems between couples have been emphasised repeatedly, there is a significant lack of in-depth research in this area (Allen & Brinig, 1998; Lodge & Umberson, 2012). However, this particular finding appears to reflect research that has found a relationship between sex drive and divorce between husbands and wives (Allen & Brinig, 1998; Lodge & Umberson, 2012). Specifically, research has found that an imbalance between men and women's sex drives over the life cycle increases bargaining power and subsequently influences the likelihood of divorce (Allen & Brinig, 1998; Lodge & Umberson, 2012).

Findings related to the difficulties of entering the separated culture were referred to as part of being '*uncoupled*'. Factors that emerged for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia included difficulties associated with co-parenting, economic struggles,

loss and loneliness, difficulties associated with identity (both assumed and assigned) and psychological, emotional, and physical health problems. Findings in this area reinforced results from prior studies that have examined stressors associated with separation and divorce (Baca – Garcia et al., 2007; Corcoran & Nagar, 2010; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Gahler, 2006; Hilton & Kopera – Frye, 2006; Stewart, 2005). Yet, notable differences were also identified.

With respect to difficulties associated with becoming a co-parent following separation, government-appointed community-based services (i.e., FRCs) were appraised by parents in the current study as unhelpful when attempting to organise post-separation parenting arrangements. Specifically, parents viewed such services as inhibiting their adjustment to separation. Similarly, legal involvement was described as inhibiting adjustment following separation; especially for non-residential parents. Although the latter finding has been documented in previous literature, most studies have incorporated samples of non-residential fathers. Inclusion of non-residential mothers in the current study suggests that such issues are just as salient for mothers. However, the substantial number of parents who described adversarial legal involvement to assist with making care arrangements for their children following separation was surprising. Although international research continues to document difficulties associated with legal involvement, recent amendments to Australian Family Law (i.e., Share Parental Responsibility [2006] act; De Maio et al., 2012; Kaspiew et al., 2009) were intended to reduce the number of separated families coming into contact with the legal system. It is possible that some parents in the current study separated prior to the amendments or that the current sample was over-represented by high-conflict families (in which case they would have been fast-tracked to the Family Court).

However, findings suggest that government-appointed community-based services aimed at assisting separated parents and their families following the 2006 Family Law reforms are not necessarily reaching their intended goals. The simple fact that parents reported both increased legal involvement and dissatisfaction with government-provided welfare services in the current study suggests a need for further evaluation of Australian

relationship dissolution services following the 2006 reforms. Despite pathways towards making care arrangements for children, the nature of having to divide the care time of children between two previously unified parents was found to be challenging.

Similar to previous studies, representations of continuing conflict between ex-partners when uncoupled left parents feeling immobilised, hopeless, and anxious (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000; Symoens et al., 2014). Furthermore, parents described conflict as a result of changing roles and boundary ambiguity which subsequently impeded adjustment following separation; this supports previous research (e.g., Hardesty et al., 2012). However, important variations across gender and residential status were highlighted. Specifically, mothers reported substantial difficulty with conflict within the co-parenting relationship associated with the controlling behaviours of ex-partners, difficulty negotiating with ex-partners, and a desire to avoid them. Mothers were also particularly concerned about how their children were faring following separation and focused solely on their children, as opposed to fathers who appeared more focused on themselves or their ex-partners. Fathers believed their ex-partners were actively attempting to deny access and communication with children and felt that the system was heavily geared towards mothers. This particular finding is one that has been identified in previous research (Kruk, 2010; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). Therefore it appears that, despite increased gender neutrality within the adversarial system (Parkinson, 2010), fathers continue to feel thwarted by their ex-partners and the adversarial system.

On the other hand, residential parents described particular difficulty associated with conflict, violence and police involvement within their co-parenting relationships. This finding was better understood within the context of other studies that have found non-residential parents often deal with role-strain associated with loss of contact with children by turning to aggression and violence (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). Differing opinions about best parenting practices was a particularly salient co-parenting issue described by shared care parents, along with concern about moving their children between two homes. For non-residential parents, the lack of contact with their children was reported as the most difficult aspect of their separation and they felt the least amount of confidence in the legal system.

Such findings have important implications for understanding demographic variability in experiences of becoming a co-parent following separation.

Financial difficulties were described by both mothers and fathers in the current study, and were particularly problematic for non-residential parents who had engaged legal involvement. This finding differs from international representations of financial adversity following separation and divorce (Burkhauser et al., 1991; Loxton et al., 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Nelson, 1994; Tein et al., 2000). Similarly, employment difficulties following separation in Australia emerged as a substantial difficulty for both mothers and fathers and was associated with subsequent difficulties with balancing work and life. It is possible that employment difficulties have become just as difficult for mothers as they have been for fathers given increasing rates of labour force involvement (Broderick, 2012). Similarly, mothers' financial difficulties may have reduced to mirror fathers in Australia's current economic climate for the same reason. Difficulty with housing similarly emerged as a substantial economic difficulty. Housing difficulties have been described in international literature, but only in relation to social difficulties associated with residential relocation (Booth & Amato, 1992). In this study, many parents reported living in the same residence following separation, particularly shared care parents, which led to increased emotional and psychological difficulties. This finding suggests that housing is an additional problem that Australian parents must contend with following separation when compared with international representations of economic stress.

Findings of the current study also highlighted an important distinction between emotional loneliness and physical loneliness when uncoupled. Emotional loneliness embodied perceptions of the separated culture as foreign and therefore lonely. Physical loneliness reflected the loss of physical presences. The emergence of these two layers of loneliness in the current study provided further insight into how loneliness may be intrinsically experienced following separation, extending previous studies that have explored social problems using quantitative measures (Amato et al., 1995; Booth & Amato, 1991; Nelson, 1995; Stewart, 2005). With respect to demographic differences, fathers felt they lacked support following separation and spoke often about a need for more support.

Non-residential parents also believed they lacked support after separation; however, this finding was found in conjunction with a tendency to withdraw socially.

Another important contribution of the current study was the finding that parents in Australia continue to feel stigmatised following separation (Buchler et al., 2009; Gubernskaya, 2010; Weston & Qu, 2013). This finding suggests that despite Australia's changing social climate, the sanctity of marriage continues to be held in the same conservative vein that it has always been held, or that individuals have begun to consider marriage as even more sacred in the context of decreasing rates of marriage and increasing rates of divorce (DeGarmo et al., 2008; MacKay, 2002; Symoens et al., 2014). In particular, Australian parents who were formerly cohabiting appeared to be somewhat protected from the effects of stigmas that were both assumed and assigned following separation. Fathers were also found to have particular difficulties associated with the loss of the family unit and tended to fixate on their ex-partners' new relationships and how they might impact on their children. Subsequently, they had particular difficulty redefining pre-separation identities and roles.

Theme three represented the helpful personal resources that were accessed by parents as part of '*searching within the self*'. A prominent finding associated with searching within the self was the importance of personal control beliefs that led to perceptions of the self as having the ability to overcome difficulties associated with being uncoupled. Findings in this area extended upon previous literature by further articulating *how* these constructs were appraised as beneficial by parents (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000). For example, self-efficacy was important in the context of coping with increased roles and responsibilities associated with being a single parent. Similarly, personal control beliefs reflecting a sense of autonomy aided in positively reframing experiences of loss and loneliness over time to represent empowerment and independence. For some parents, autonomy was important following estrangement from partners during uncoupling. For others, autonomy was developed following a process of increasing self-efficacy and subsequent mastery of the difficulties associated with being uncoupled. Personal control beliefs centred upon faith in the self, empowerment, autonomy, self-efficacy and self-

awareness; these constructs were particularly important for mothers and residential parents. This finding was interpreted in the context of increased roles associated with having the majority care time of children, which often resulted in a solitary lifestyle.

Personal control beliefs were found to precede important self-regulatory behaviours as part of the process of searching within the self. Specifically, setting goals for the future represented commitments made by parents that assisted in achieving self-constructed ideal states of being following separation, especially for mothers. Although goal setting reflected elements of international findings, such as self-efficacy, mastery and high internal locus of control (Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Stewart, 2005), parents described this resource as an overarching strategy used to assist them following separation. Parents in Australia felt that working towards a self-constructed ideal state of being in a self-regulated manner was immensely beneficial following separation.

In addition, findings revealed that parents' abilities to organise finances, plan and budget acted as a buffer against the well-known risks associated with economic adversity following separation, adding to research in this area (Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2006; King, 2008; Loxton et al., 2006; Zagorsky, 2005). Residential parents appeared to benefit most from organising their finances in the context of increased economic demands associated with having the children the majority of time. This finding goes hand-in-hand with the finding that employment difficulties have emerged as increasingly adverse for Australian separated parents, where a rise in mothers' and women's work force participation dictates the need to be more financially aware and financially organised. Residential parents also believed that good help-seeking skills and studying again were essential self-regulatory behaviours.

Findings further revealed that parents believed that emotion-focused coping was helpful during the early stages of separation. Specifically, the findings highlighted the benefits of withdrawing temporarily in order to facilitate self-awareness and build the personal resources required to solve problems associated with being uncoupled. Evidence of problem-focused styles of coping following temporary use of emotion-focused styles in

the current study reinforced prior literature (Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Tein et al., 2000).

Optimism was one particular problem-focused coping construct identified as a stand-alone factor central to searching within the self in the current study. This particular construct has previously been identified under the umbrella of problem-focused styles of coping in previous literature (Nelson, 1994; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Tein et al., 2000). Similarly, living a healthy lifestyle was an essential part of searching within the self, especially for fathers, and represented an extension of previous research by highlighting the benefits of this resource as a buffer against psychological, emotional and physical health declines following separation (Amato, 2000; Liu & Umberson, 2008; Lorenz et al., 1997; Marks, 1996; Richards et al., 1997; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Simon, 2002).

Theme four represented the helpful resources that assisted parents following separation as a result of '*reaching beyond the self*' following separation. In particular, connectedness, social support, and reaching out were described by parents as a fundamental part of reaching beyond the self. Specifically, peer support, support from friends and family members, support from the community, and support from healthcare professionals were predominantly beneficial. Although findings mirror previous studies (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Emery, 2011; Emery et al., 2001; Hewitt et al., 2012; Nelson, 1995; Øygard et al., 2000; Parkinson, 2010; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008), some experiences emerged as unique. For example, parents described validating and normalising experiences derived from engaging with their peers through support groups as an important part of the separation experience. It could be argued that this finding was reflective of sample characteristics (i.e., many parents were recruited from community support groups); however, this finding was consistently reported by most parents – particularly fathers. Similar benefits were noted following support from members of the local community, such as support from children's school environments, particularly for shared care parents. Although these findings support recent studies examining the benefits of interaction with such environments (Øygard et al., 2000; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008; Vukalovich & Caltabiano, 2008), further consideration revealed a discrepancy between

government-appointed community-based services and local community-based services and support. Specifically, parents reported greater benefits from support services they actively choose to engage with, rather than services that they were mandated to engage with. Parents also described benefitting more from community support that was personal and authentic as opposed to community support that was institutionalised, judgmental and impersonal. These findings suggest that services supporting autonomy in decision making following separation were appraised as most beneficial.

Similarly, with the exception of formerly married parents, most parents also described benefitting most from non-judgmental support from friends as opposed to family members. However, this finding was also interpreted in conjunction with the idea that friends and family members offered forms of support that were beneficial in different ways. Namely, friends were appraised by parents as offering normalising and validating emotional support, whereas family members were better at providing practical and material support. Interestingly, fathers were found to report substantial benefits associated with peer, social and community support. This finding appeared in contrast to previous studies finding that mothers benefit most from social interaction following separation (Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Stewart, 2005). This finding further appeared in contrast to hegemonic masculine beliefs that suggest that men are less likely to benefit from emotional support when compared to women. The collective finding from this study that healthcare professionals' input was immensely beneficial was also important, and added another layer of understanding to previous studies that have identified psychological, emotional and physical distress as a significant stressor following separation. This resource is particularly specific to the Australian context of separation and may reflect the efficacy of the Better Access initiative that offers improved access to private healthcare providers including GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and occupational therapists.

Parents' experiences further highlighted the protective nature of employment. This finding built on other studies that identified employment as a protective factor (Turner et al., 1998; Wang & Amato, 2000) by highlighting flexible work environments as a protective buffer against balancing work and home lives with economic stability. Many women in the

current study identified as being part of the labour force. This finding goes hand-in-hand with the suggestion made earlier that employment difficulties may reflect increasing rates of women and mothers' work force participation, and that financial organisation has emerged as more important. Collectively, the current findings may reflect increasing gender equality in work force participation where supportive and flexible employment environments are considered even more important for parents in Australia's current social climate (Broderick, 2012). Yet, this particular resource continued to be described by fathers as substantially beneficial. This finding suggested that employment may continue to be appraised by fathers as an important part of their post-separation identity when compared to mothers.

Findings revealed that another important part of the process of reaching beyond the self was constructing co-parenting relationships that were respectful, stable, flexible and characterised by mutual confidence in each other's abilities. Such co-parenting relationships were particularly beneficial for shared care parents. Similarly, findings extended previous literature identifying a number of protective benefits associated with the presence of children following separation and divorce (Amato et al., 1995; Kruk, 2010). Specifically, the presence of children provided parents with opportunities for increased self-efficacy, self-esteem and mastery inadvertently through use of their children's wellbeing as a marker of their own psychological health. Importantly, the parent – child relationship appeared to differ among fathers and mothers; fathers appeared to be protected *by* their children, whereas protectiveness *of* their children was reported more by mothers.

Findings also highlighted the benefits of re-partnering and re-marriage following separation and divorce, reinforcing previous literature in this area (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Shapiro, 1996; Symoens et al., 2014). Interestingly, re-partnering was appraised as particularly beneficial for shared care parents, which appears in contrast to previous studies finding that shared care parents are less likely to benefit from re-partnering following separation (Gray et al., 2011).

Theme five '*patterns of the experience*' represented the elements associated with the process of adjustment following separation. Separation was first and foremost

experienced as a rollercoaster of ups-and-downs. Describing separation in this way highlighted the changeable nature of parents' experiences. Specifically, the interaction between difficulties experienced as part of being uncoupled, and the search within and beyond the self for help, was constantly changing where one difficulty was overcome only to be replaced with another and so on. It took time for the rollercoaster to stabilise. Therefore, time was another important part of understanding the experience of separation. However, time was also a complex factor. The "time factor" described by parents in this study represented not only days, months, and years, but also representations of the past, present and future. Therefore, adjustment following separation was associated with looking back in time at how far parents felt they had come, acknowledging the 'gifts' they had in the present, and their hopes for their future. Furthermore, there were some parents who felt that their separation was inherently protective. However, viewing separation as protective did not necessarily shelter parents from the complex difficulties experienced following relationship dissolution. This finding supported previous studies which found that separation and divorce may represent relief from distressing relationships (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006; Wang & Amato, 2000).

Factors associated with adjustment following separation. Using the five themes and related sub-themes detailed above, a visual framework was developed that presents the experience of separation and explicitly outlines the factors associated with adjustment for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia (see Figure 4).

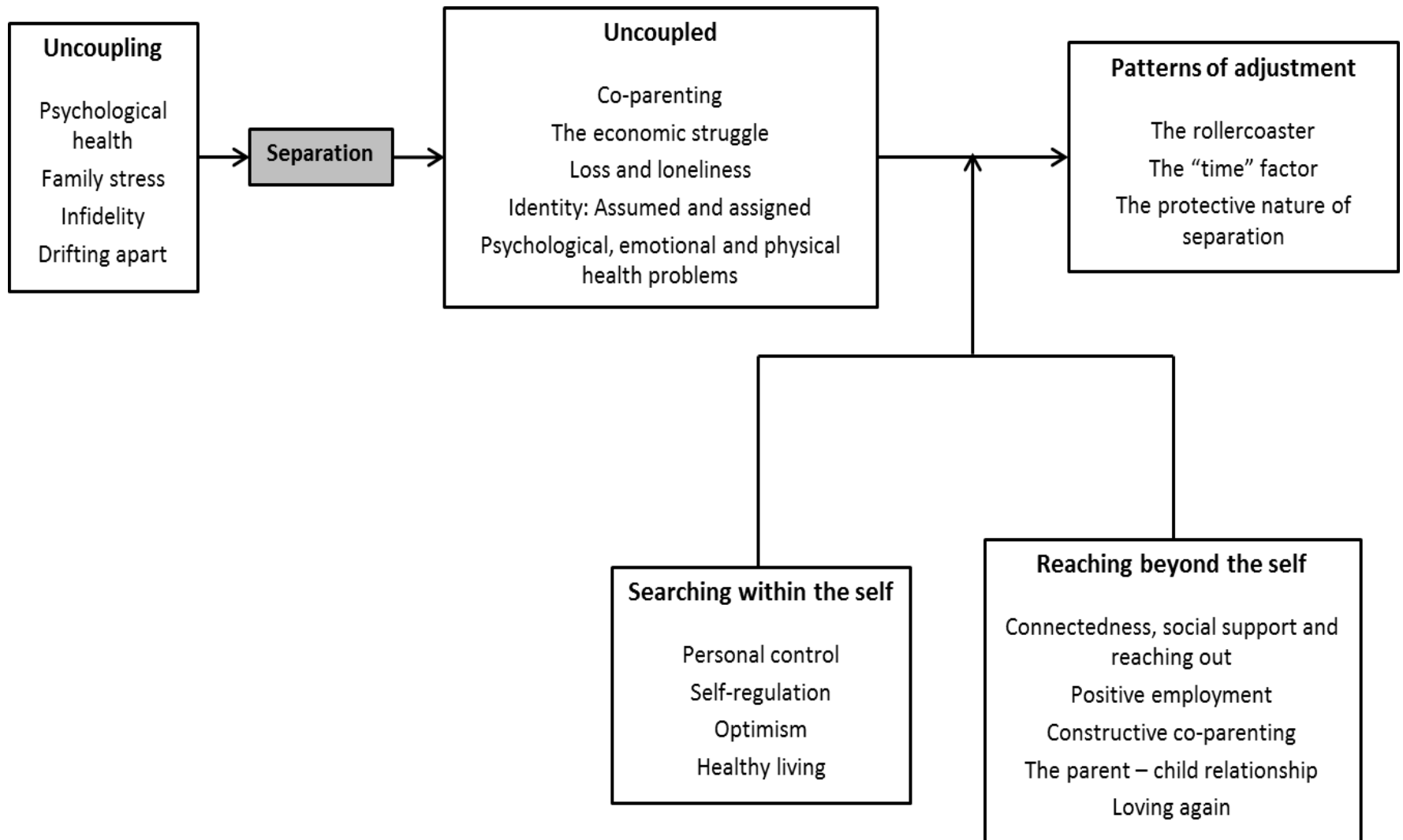


Figure 4. A framework for understanding the factors associated with adjustment following separation.

The experience of separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia was one that began prior to the event of separation itself during *uncoupling*. Understanding the nature of the estrangement process via representations of uncoupling provided the context for further understanding of experiences following separation. As such, experiences associated with uncoupling represent the first component of the factors associated with adjustment following separation.

The next part of the framework highlights the experience of being *uncoupled* which was met with factors associated with co-parenting issues, economic struggles, loss and loneliness, identity problems, and psychological, emotional and physical health problems. These factors were similar to the stressors highlighted by Amato (2000, 2010, 2014) as part of his divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. Social change provided the basis for understanding the most novel findings associated with being uncoupled in current study.

Parents' descriptions of their experiences further revealed two important processes that served to enable successful adjustment following separation including *searching within the self* and *reaching beyond the self* for helpful resources. The factors associated with these two processes reflected elements of Amato's (2000, 2010, 2014) protective factors presented as part of his divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. However, Australian separated parents' experiences pointed to two separate overarching categories – personal and environmental resources. Helpful personal resources included factors associated with personal control beliefs, self-regulatory strategies, optimism, and healthy living. Environmental resources included factors associated with connectedness, social support and reaching out, positive employment, constructive co-parenting, the parent – child relationship, and loving again.

The interaction between difficulties faced as part of being uncoupled and the processes of reaching within and beyond the self was complex, variable and multifaceted. Subsequently, *patterns of adjustment* following separation embodied a rollercoaster ride of ups-and-downs that stabilised over time. Yet for some parents, the separation itself signified protection from a problematic relationship.

This framework provides the basis for understanding the factors associated with adjustment following separation for formerly married and cohabiting parents. This framework may be used as a guide for future research in an Australian context and may contribute to improved service provision for separated and divorced families.

Recommendations

The findings of the current study provide information that may assist in informing separation and divorce policy and service providers working with separated and divorced parents. Recommendations based on the findings of the current study are presented next.

Directions for separation and divorce policy in Australia.

Legal support. Findings of the current study suggest that parents in Australia continue to report legal involvement following separation; mostly in the context of high-conflict post-separation relationships. Legal involvement in Australia was described by parents as unreliable, unsupportive, inconsiderate, emotionally draining, time consuming, and costly. Therefore, it appears that although Australian parents are now mandated to access government-provided mediation within their community which decreases the number of families accessing legal involvement following separation and divorce, parents who did involve family law processes continue to be met with significant stress associated with the adversarial environment. In addition, parents who came into contact with the legal system felt that they were unprepared for legal processes which led to negative outcomes. Therefore, the findings of the current study suggest the need for legal practitioners to better prepare their clients for legal action following separation. In line with the results, this may be done by ensuring that parents have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities following separation, the possible outcomes of legal involvement following separation, the rights of the children following separation, and relevant services that may be provided to assist parents following separation.

It may also be beneficial to develop a legal mentor system for parents which would allow people who are currently involved in the legal system to engage with other parents who have experienced legal involvement following separation previously. Mentoring in this respect may provide separating parents with further information regarding legal processes and services available, along with a validating and normalising experience. In addition, it may also be necessary for FRCs (Family Relationship Centres) to provide parents who experienced unsuccessful mediation with similar information as a means of additionally preparing parents for legal action following separation. Parents' reports in the current study suggest that community awareness is lacking with respect to avenues for assistance following separation, especially in cases where legal involvement may eventuate. Therefore, increased community awareness of relevant legal services available appears especially necessary.

Community support. At a community level, support groups and community-based services that provide separated parents with validating and normalising experiences and an opportunity to discuss their experiences with other individuals who have also experienced separation may be very beneficial. Support groups may also be instrumental in providing parents with the necessary skills to seek appropriate and relevant help when needed. In addition, individuals who may have progressed further in the separation process than others in group environments may be able to offer added informational support and access to important resources. Communities that provide encouragement and opportunities for separated parents to engage with other individuals who have been through separation may also assist parents to gain the necessary emotional support and information required to successfully adjust following separation. Programs that promote healthy co-parenting relationships based on principles of flexibility, respect, positive communication and confidence in mothers' and fathers' parenting abilities would also assist in promoting successful adjustment following separation. Further, communities that provide opportunities for parents to socialise and engage in enjoyable activities may assist with the development of new social networks and opportunities for new intimate relationships.

The finding that many parents felt that information provided by the community was lacking suggests the need to increase public and community awareness of separation and the relevant institutions that may provide assistance following such an event. This includes information centred upon relevant legal processes, separated parents' rights and responsibilities, making parenting arrangements, mental health, financial wellbeing, and the services that are currently offered to assist parents following separation.

Re-evaluating the efficacy of Australia's Family Relationship Centres. Findings of the current study suggest that the recently implemented FRCs as part of the enactment of the Shared Parental Responsibility (2006) Act and Australian welfare services may not be meeting the needs of parents following separation. Access to such centres is often the result of family breakdown which is a negative experience in itself. Therefore, parents may present to FRCs in the context of adversity. As such, it may be that irrespective of service provision, no parent accessing such centres would be happy about having to engage these services. Therefore, FRCs and welfare services represent a negative experience before service provision has even begun. In any case, parents in the current study reported a number of administrative problems and negative experiences associated with mediation and welfare services. Findings therefore suggest the need for further evaluation of the efficacy of FRCs. Perhaps evaluations would benefit from interviews with parents currently attending centres to research the specific issues experienced and the ways parents feel such issues may be remedied in a more meaningful manner.

Improving service provision for separated parents.

Educating service providers. The findings and implications of the current study have the potential to inform a number of service provider settings that aim to assist separating parents. Findings indicate a need to adequately assess separated parents presenting for clinical assistance based on the unique and most pressing difficulties they are experiencing. The current findings are further important for service providers to understand when working with separated parents because they suggest a need to explore the process of

uncoupling with parents and how this process may have the potential to impact on experiences following separation. Findings further suggest a need to examine experiences of being *uncoupled* that may be unique to each client, where each individual parent may be at risk of experiencing some or all of the difficulties associated with being uncoupled. Furthermore, it would be of the utmost importance to explore whether or not separating parents have access to any of the resources identified as integral parts of *searching within the self* and *reaching beyond the self*. Being able to explain *patterns of adjustment* will also assist service providers to help parents understand what may be expected when attempting to successfully adjust following separation. In particular, referring to Figure 4 (a framework for understanding the factors associated with adjustment following separation) will assist healthcare practitioners and family relationship service providers to better understand the unique experiences of separated parents. The current findings may further offer service providers the potential to connect with separated parents in a manner that will reflect understanding and empathy, whilst simultaneously taking residential status, gender and marital status factors into consideration.

Suggestions for therapeutic interventions. There are a number of ways in which the findings of the current study may inform healthcare practitioners and family relationship service professionals aiming to assist parents following separation. The findings suggest a number of ways that parents may be assisted via individual therapy following separation. Indeed, one important finding was that many parents felt they benefited from healthcare practitioner assistance. For example, personal control, self-regulation, optimism, and leading a healthy lifestyle are issues that healthcare professionals are skilled in assessing and promoting. Therefore, individual therapy is an appropriate platform to assist in reducing the impact of difficulties associated with separation as well as promoting and fostering access to helpful resources.

Specifically, based on the finding that many parents felt self-regulation was helpful, Solution-Focused Therapy is an example of a therapeutic intervention that may assist parents. This therapeutic approach focuses on solutions rather than problems in a goal-directed manner and posits that all individuals have some knowledge about how they may

be able to make their current circumstances better (O'Connell, 2005). This therapeutic approach further promotes the idea that most individuals have previously experienced problems and were able to find solutions in the past. Therefore, previous life experiences are used to provide evidence, as well as therapeutic tools, for promoting confidence in finding solutions to current difficulties. Further, Solution-Focused Therapy assists individuals to find solutions to current problems and offers individuals the opportunity to develop more adaptive or problem-focused coping styles.

In line with the findings of the current study, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is another therapeutic intervention that may assist parents following separation (Harris, 2009). This therapeutic approach is based on assisting individuals to distance themselves from, and let go of, unhelpful thoughts, memories, and beliefs, accept painful feelings and allow them to come and go freely, and become more aware of the 'here and now' in an open and curious manner. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy advocates for identification of personal strengths on the journey towards leading a more rich and meaningful life. This therapeutic approach may assist separated parents to let go of their pre-separation roles and identities and foster a positive environment in which new post-separation roles and identities can be defined. In addition, this therapeutic approach may assist separated parents to become more aware of coping styles that are ineffective and replace these with more effective strategies.

Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (Beck, 2011) may also assist parents in learning to implement more effective coping strategies that will contribute towards successful adjustment following separation. This therapeutic approach focuses on problems and assists individuals to actively implement strategies to address such problems. It further assists identification of unhelpful thinking styles and behaviours that may be leading to psychological distress and helps individuals to challenge patterns and beliefs in order to bring about positive change. In addition, this therapeutic approach promotes the importance of a healthy lifestyle in conjunction with a healthy consciousness, which was important for parents in the current study. Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy has long been considered an effective, evidence-based approach to assist individuals with a variety of

mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, health/lifestyle related issues and suicide-related behaviours. Therefore, the simple nature of this approach, coupled with the specific physical and mental health problems experienced by parents in the current study suggests that this approach would be well suited to assisting parents following separation.

In accordance with the finding that optimistic thoughts were helpful for parents in the current study, it is further suggested that positive psychotherapy and therapeutic approaches guided by positive psychology will also benefit separated parents. This area of psychology emphasises optimistic emotions, strengths, and the identification of positive influences on happiness (Seligman, 2004). Positive psychology assists individuals to identify what influences their happiness and optimism during exciting and pleasurable experiences and allows individuals to begin to focus on positive emotions more regularly in order to bring about a greater sense of joy and liberation in their lives. This therapeutic approach also aligns well with successful adjustment as it focuses on strengths and positive outcomes rather than problems or stressors, and allows individuals to become more aware of positive experiences and emotions rather than negative ones. Therapeutic approaches guided by positive psychology coupled with implementation of any of the above interventions may assist separated parents.

Strengths of the current study

The current study aimed to address gaps in the separation and divorce body of knowledge and contribute to further understanding in this area. To date, separation and divorce scholarship has been dominated by quantitative methodologies that have been integral in identifying isolated psychosocial factors associated with separation and divorce. However, the result of such research has been a relatively static and objective understanding of separation and divorce. By applying a phenomenological methodology, the current study moved beyond such representations of separation and divorce to offer a rich and thick description of the experience of separation and provided the basis for the discovery of unknown experiences that have otherwise been neglected in previous

research. Specifically, the very large sample size ($N = 55$) and the in-depth phenomenological analysis conducted over an extended period of time allowed for the emergence of multiple truths and realities imbued within subjective experiences and contextualised interpretations of separation from the perspectives of those who have experienced this stressful life event themselves. In doing so, novel findings emerged with respect to the experiences of formerly married and cohabiting parents in an Australian context and the factors that are associated with adjustment following separation. Processes of procedural and methodological rigour (i.e., peer review of themes and audit trail) increased the confirmability and reflexivity of novel research findings.

In particular, the current study highlighted the voices of formerly cohabiting parent's experiences of separation amidst a body of knowledge that has been dominated by research incorporating samples of previously married individuals. In this sense, most research to date examining the 'separation' experience refers to the time immediately following physical separation and prior to legal divorce for individuals who were previously married. Current Australian and international snapshots of family composition suggest increasing rates of cohabitation where couples are prolonging marriage or simply choosing not to marry (Weston & Qu, 2013). The emergence of the cohabiting family form therefore suggests a need for research to similarly evolve to include accurate representations of current social climates; particularly in Australia. As such, an important strength of the current study was the inclusion of Australian parents who were cohabiting prior to separation, as well as those who were formerly married.

Another strength of the current study was the inclusion of all possible heterosexual post-separation family formations. Specifically, Australian non-residential parents, residential parents and shared care parents were recruited. The reason for inclusion of these post-separation family forms was in response to research finding that separation and divorce may be experienced differently for parents across different residential statuses. Similarly, this study included a sample of participants that varied across age, gender, time since separation, and number and age of dependent children. Furthermore, participants were recruited nationally across both rural and urban domains, as opposed to simply

recruiting parents from one location alone. Collectively, participant recruitment in the current study aimed to ensure adequate representation of the separation experience as it presented to a wide range of parents across each of these sampling characteristics and to increase the external validity of findings.

Theoretically, this study has led to the development of a framework for understanding factors associated with adjustment following separation. This framework has extended upon Amato's (2000, 2010, 2014) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective to provide a contextually relevant understanding of the experience of separation in Australia for both formerly married *and* cohabiting parents. In particular, this framework is based on novel findings from the current study including information regarding the experience of separation for cohabiting parents, factors associated with adjustment that are specific to an Australian context, and further insight into pre-separation issues that have the potential to impact on adjustment following separation. It is expected that this framework will assist in guiding service provision for separated and divorced families as well as future studies situated within an Australian context.

Limitations of the current study

There are some limitations that should be acknowledged when considering the findings of the current study. The current study recruited only five non-residential mothers, where each of the other five categories of separated parents (i.e., non-residential fathers, residential mothers, residential fathers, shared care mothers, shared care fathers) included at least nine participants. Research finds that non-residential mothers are at significant risk of experiencing social stigma that lead to feelings of shame, grief, worthlessness and increased mental health problems (Grief, 1997; King, 2008). Therefore, although it was not necessarily surprising that non-residential mothers were difficult to recruit, findings may not be as generalisable to these mothers as they may be to parents recruited as part of the other five categories.

Many of the parents were recruited from local community-support groups such as Dads in Distress and from single-parent support websites such as singlemum.com.au which may be considered another limitation of the current study. Parents recruited from such avenues may have experienced significant difficulties following separation which may have influenced their perceptions of additional support in the form of community support and support groups. For example, negative perceptions of government-provided community-based services described by parents in the current study may have been the result of an over-representation of parents who had negative experiences with such support services leading them to access alternative support services such as support groups. Findings relative to conflict in post-separation relationships may also reflect this dynamic. Similarly, the finding that support groups and support from peers was a substantial protective resource may have been biased by an over-representation of parents recruited from such environments.

The use of phone interviews with around half of the participants in the current study may be also be a limitation. Studies have scrutinised the use of phone interviews in qualitative research due to the potential for lack of reception, an inability to pick up on visual cues and body language, and increased opportunities for distraction (Carr, 1999; Chapple, 1999). Although other studies have documented benefits of the use of phone interviews (Carr, 1999; Chapple, 1999; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004), it is possible that the validity of the phone interviews conducted in the current study were impacted by such processes.

Most parents in the current study reported being of Western ethnicities ($n = 45$; i.e., Australian, British, New Zealand, Canadian). This limitation contributes to difficulties associated with the generalisability of findings across ethno-racially diverse populations of parents experiencing separation. This issue is an important one to consider due to Western peoples position of privilege. For example, ethnic minorities may experience various stressors that may differ from Western populations following separation, where helpful resources may also be different. If this is the case, then this issue becomes less about generalisability and more about exploring and understanding such factors so that

individuals who identify with ethnic minorities can receive similar levels of assistance offered to those who identify as part of the Western population. The lack of focus on minority groups such as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transsexual and queer) populations presents a similar limitation of the current study.

Directions for future research

Although the current study has provided an understanding of experiences of separation across disparate demographic categories, closer examination of such experiences is necessary to understand the unique experiences of parents who identify with different demographic typologies in more depth. In particular, further quantitative examination of the differences between separation experiences for formerly married and cohabiting parents is needed. Furthermore, systems research exploring the experiences of children following parental separation in Australia is warranted; as is research exploring the experiences of parents from the same union. Such research should similarly include populations of children and parents who come from both formerly married and cohabiting family compositions. The separation and divorce body of research may also benefit from exploration of the experience of separation as it applies to varying cultural and racial populations and other minority groups such as LGBTQ populations. More diverse exploration of experiences following separation will allow for the discovery of factors that may be culturally and contextually specific and therefore more generalisable to populations distinct from a Eurocentric epistemology. Findings of the current study suggest a need for further re-evaluation of Australia's Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) following parent reports that such services are not meeting their post-separation needs. Finally, the findings of the current study suggest a basis for the exploration of risk and protective associated with resilience following separation. Therefore, it is suggested that future research adopt a resilience framework targeted at further understanding the social ecological constituents of resilience following separation for parents.

Final conclusion

The main aim of the current study was to explore the experience of separation from the perspectives of both formerly married *and* cohabiting parents residing in Australia to learn more about how they adjust following this stressful life event. Using a phenomenological methodology, five overarching themes that reflected a fluid and constantly changing picture of the experience of separation were identified. The first theme – *uncoupling* – represented the context for understanding parents' experiences of separation based on the estrangement process. The second theme – *uncoupled* – represented the numerous difficulties that separated parents had to contend with once separated. Themes three – *searching within the self* – and four – *reaching beyond the self* – represented the resources that parents deemed helpful in lessening the impact of difficulties experienced following separation. The fifth and final theme – *patterns of adjustment* – provided a holistic understanding of *how* parents' experiences of adjustment following separation were shaped. Together, these five themes were synthesised to develop a framework for understanding the factors associated with adjustment following separation in Australia.

Findings of the current study have highlighted important considerations associated with the experience of separation for both formerly married and cohabiting parents in Australia. In particular, the phenomenological methodology allowed for the discovery of the experiences of formerly cohabiting parents whose voices have been marginalised, the factors associated with adjustment following separation within an Australian context, and unique pre-separation issues that may form the basis for understanding adjustment following separation. Therefore, to only attend to static and objective conceptualisations of separation and divorce as experienced by formerly married individuals in international contexts would be to overlook significant psychological and social elements of this stressful life event. Furthermore, providing parents with opportunities for successful adjustment following separation has the potential to lead to positive outcomes not only for themselves but also for their children. If parents are able to adjust more successfully following the

difficult and emotional experience of separation, they will be better able to offer their children and themselves a more positive post-separation experience.

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Appendix A
Research Flyer

Are you a separated mother or father?

My name is Sarah Barbas and I am currently completing my PhD in Clinical Psychology at Edith Cowan University.

As part of my research I am interested in talking to separated mothers and fathers (residential, non – residential and 50/50 parents) over the age of 18 years who have children aged 0 to 17 years. I hope that by talking to mothers and fathers post – separation, I will be able to gain a better understanding of this experience.

If you are interested in participating in this research you will be asked to attend a 60 to 90 minute interview via telephone or at a place that is convenient for you.

This study has been approved by the Edith Cowan Human Research Ethics Committee. All interview information will be treated as strictly confidential. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in participating in this research or require any more information please contact Sarah Barbas via email on s.barbas@ecu.edu.au or via telephone on 0439 936 277.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix B

Permission to Advertise Letter to Chief Executive Officer



Dear Chief Executive Officer,

My name is Sarah Barbas and I am currently completing a PhD in Clinical Psychology at Edith Cowan University. As part of my degree, I am required to complete a research study. I am interested in understanding the experiences of separated mothers and fathers.

I am writing to ask your permission to place recruitment flyers for this research within your service areas.

Participants required for this project must be over the age of 18 years and must have at least one child under the age of 17 years. Participants will be asked to engage in an interview which may last between 45 and 60 minutes.

The proposed research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. All information collected during the interview will be strictly confidential. The completed project will contain no identifying information. During the interview no names will be recorded and only pseudonyms will be used. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants will be able to withdraw at any time with no adverse consequences. In the event that this research is published, no identifiable personal information will be released. A list of counselling services will be available should participants become distressed during the interview and the interview will be stopped.

If you have any questions about the research you may contact me on 6304 5468 or via email s.barbas@ecu.edu.au. Alternatively, you may also discuss any queries with the supervisors of this research, Associate Professor Julie Ann Pooley on 6304 5591, Dr Deidre Drake on 6304 5020, or Dr Pamela Henry on 6304 5415. If you have any concerns and wish to speak to an independent person please contact the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee Officer, Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170 or via email research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Your assistance with this research is greatly appreciated

Sarah Barbas

Appendix C

Participant Information Letter



Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Sarah Barbas and I am currently completing a PhD in Clinical and Forensic Psychology at Edith Cowan University. I am researching the experiences of separated mothers and fathers. I am interested in understanding what helped you during and following your separation.

Participants must be over the age of 18 years and must have at least one child under the age of 17 years. If you are interested in participating in this research you will be asked to attend an interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview may last 45 to 60 minutes.

The proposed research has been approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. All information collected during the interview will be strictly confidential. The completed project will contain no identifying information. During the interview only pseudonyms will be used. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any time with no adverse consequences. In the event that this research is published, no identifiable personal information will be released. A list of counselling services is also available should you become distressed at any time and the interview will be stopped.

If you are interested in participating in the research or have any questions about the research you may contact me on 0439 936 277 or via email s.barbas@ecu.edu.au. Alternatively, you may also discuss any queries with the supervisors of this research, Associate Professor Julie Ann Pooley on 6304 5591, Dr Deirdre Drake on 6304 5020, or Associate Professor Pamela Henry on 6304 5415. If you have any concerns and wish to speak to an independent person please contact the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee Officer, Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170 or via email research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information letter.

Your assistance in this research is greatly appreciated

Sarah Barbas

Appendix D
Participant Consent Form



I, _____, have read the information
(Participant's full name)
provided with this consent form and any questions I have asked have been answered.

I would like to participate in the research conducted by Sarah Barbas and understand that my contact details will be kept until I am called upon to participate.

I understand that I can choose to not answer any questions and can withdraw from the study at any time.

I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded as I understand the Mp3 player will be kept in a secure location for the duration of the study, and recordings will be destroyed at the end of the project.

I agree that the research data gathered in this study may be published providing I am not identified in any way.

I understand that all information will be kept strictly confidential. Supervisors will have access to data, however, no identifiable information will be available.

I understand that participation in this project refers to an interview about my experience of separation. I understand that the interview **WILL NOT take any form of a counselling session**. If the interview becomes too distressing, I acknowledge that the interview will be stopped and a list of counselling agencies will be provided.

Your Signature: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Other: _____

Date ____/____/____

Appendix E

List of Counselling Services

List of Australia-wide and Western Australian Helpline and Counselling Services			
Helpline/Counselling Service	Description	24 Hour service?	Contact
1800 RESPECT	A national sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for anyone who has experienced—or are at risk of—physical or sexual violence. This service is designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities, Indigenous Australians, young people, and callers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.	Yes	1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
1800 MYLINE	A national relationships helpline for young Australians to talk to someone about the relationship issues they may be experiencing, or if they are unclear about where to draw the line between what is, or is not, a respectful relationship.	Yes	1800 MYLINE (1800 695 463) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
Lifeline	A generalist and crisis telephone counselling, information and referral service, provided by trained volunteers who are supported by professional staff.	Yes	Ph: 13 11 14
MensLine Australia	An Australian Government initiative providing telephone counselling and a referral service for men. It is operated by Care Ring (Personal Emergency Services Inc), and is a resource for men who need advice on a large range of issues (e.g., relationship support, parenting skills) and for those at risk of committing suicide.	Yes	Ph: 1300 78 99 78
Child Abuse Prevention Service	Workers offer information, referral and ongoing support to those affected by child abuse, concerned about the welfare of a child, or needing family or parenting support.	Yes	Freecall: 1800 688 009
Domestic Violence Helpline	Telephone counselling for victims of domestic violence and their concerned friends. Also provides information about services for those affected by domestic violence or who are troubled by their own behaviour.	Yes	Freecall: 1800 800 098
Family Relationship Advice Line	Assists families affected by relationship or separation issues. The Advice Line provides information on family relationship issues and advice on parenting arrangements after separation. It can also refer callers to local services that can provide assistance.	No	Freecall: 1800 050 321 Mon–Fri: 8:00 am – 8:00 pm (local time) Sat: 10:00 am – 4:00 pm (excluding national public holidays). Instructions for deaf or

			speech-impaired callers can be accessed on the website.
Child Wise—National Child Abuse Prevention Help Line	Support service for individuals, organisations, professionals and parents requiring assistance on child protection. A compassionate and professional team of trained counsellors can assist with any enquiry or report relating to child sexual abuse.	No	Freecall: 1800 99 10 99 Mon–Fri: 9am – 5pm
Crisis Care	Provides a telephone information and counselling service for people in crisis needing urgent help from the Department for Child Protection.	Yes	Freecall: 1800 199 008 (country areas) Ph: (08) 9223 1111
Family Helpline	Offers a telephone counselling and information service for families with relationship difficulties.	Yes	Freecall: 1800 643 000 Ph: (08) 9223 1111 TTY: (08) 9325 1232 Interpreter services are available.
Women's Domestic Violence Helpline	Offers information, referral and telephone counselling to victim/survivors of domestic violence.	Yes	Freecall: 1800 007 339 Ph: (08) 9223 1188
Men's Domestic Violence Helpline	Offers information, referral and telephone counselling from people who are specially trained in talking to men about domestic violence.	Yes	Freecall: 1800 000 599 Ph: (08) 9223 1199
Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)	An emergency service that offers assistance and support to any person, female or male, aged 13 years and over who has experienced any form of unwanted sexual contact or behaviour in the last 2 weeks. A free counselling service is also available (during business hours) to people who have experienced sexual assault or sexual abuse in the past (more than 2 weeks ago).	Yes	Freecall: 1800 199 888 Ph: (08) 9340 1828
The Patricia Giles Centre	Counselling services for both women and children affected by family violence. Parenting information also provided.	No	Ph: (08) 9300 0340 Mon–Fri: 9:00 am – 4:00 pm Children: Ph: (08) 9328 1888 Mon–Fri: 9:00 am – 5:00 pm

Appendix F**In-Depth Semi-Structured Interview Schedule****Demographic Information**

Age?

Ethnicity?

Religion?

Occupation?

How long have you been separated?

How many children do you have and what are their genders and ages?

Residential, non – residential parent, or shared care parent?

Re-partnered?

Interview Schedule

1. What was your experience of separation like?
2. What helped the most following your separation?
3. What did you find hardest following your separation?
5. What advice would you give other separated mothers and fathers in order to adjust following separation?
6. Would you like to add anything else?

Appendix G**Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement****CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

Between :

(you)

and

Sarah M. Barbas

Chief Investigator

PhD Research Candidate

Project Number: 7106 BARBAS

1. BACKGROUND

ECU Ethics Committee requires that Confidential Information must be kept strictly and absolutely confidential and always handled as required in accordance with ethical considerations. All persons authorised to have access to Confidential Information must acknowledge their obligations to uphold confidentiality. Obligations under this agreement are in addition to and do not restrict any other obligations you may have under law.

2. INTERPRETATION

“Confidential information” means information that is made available to you for use in the project detailed above, whether orally or in writing, or by any other means that is:

- health and personal information about an individual whose identity is reasonably apparent,
- any other information that is by its nature confidential

3. OBLIGATIONS

3.1. You agree to protect Confidential Information provided for the project in your possession or control against loss, unauthorised use, access, modification or disclosure

3.2 You agree to use or disclose the Confidential Information only for the purpose of the project and only in accordance with the Chief Investigator

3.3. You agree to deal with the Confidential Information only in accordance with conditions specified by the Chief Investigator

3.4. You agree not to use the Confidential Information to attempt to identify or make unauthorised contact with any individual or to provide the Confidential Information to another person for those purposes

3.5. You agree not to disclose any Confidential Information to any person other than another person authorised for the project

3.6. You agree that you will not publish any information about the project or information from which the identity of an individual is apparent or can be reasonably ascertained unless the individual has given their written consent to be identified in the publication

3.7. If you are required by law to disclose any Confidential Information you agree to immediately notify the Chief Investigator on this project before making such disclosure and you agree to co-operate with the Chief Investigator to use all efforts to minimise the extent of such disclosure

3.8. You agree to ensure that the Chief Investigator of the project is notified of any breach of Confidential Information

DECLARATION

I have read and understood my obligations under the Confidentiality Agreement and I agree to comply with its provisions.

Signed

Name

Date

WITNESSED BY CHIEF INVESTIGATOR SARAH M. BARBAS

Signed

Sarah M. Barbás

Date

Appendix H

Transcribing Template



TRANSCRIBING TEMPLATE

Project Number: 7106 BARBAS

Name of Transcriber: (Your name should appear here)

Audio/Participant Code: (The file name you have been given to transcribe should appear here. This may include an RM, RF, NRM, NRF, 5050M, or 5050F code followed by a number).

Date:

Before you begin transcribing it is imperative that you sign a **confidentiality agreement**. Please contact me on 0439 936 277 or at s.barbas@ecu.edu.au if this has not already been completed. In accordance with ECU anonymity and confidentiality policies you must **change the name and any identifiable information of the participant/respondent** during transcription. You may keep my name the same, however, if for example the respondent answers to Sam you must change her name to Holly (this is just an example). The same must be done for **any individuals that the respondent names** during the interview. Interviews need to be transcribed verbatim which means **word for word**. All I need is exactly what I said and exactly what the respondent says.

All you need to do during transcription is to write what I say in bold font and what the participant/respondent says in normal font.

For example:

Can you tell me about your experience during separation

Sure, well my husband and I had been together for a long time and we just began to grow apart

Ok, how long were you married

Appendix I

An Example of Phenomenological Analysis

This transcript, used to provide an example of the phenomenological analysis implemented in the current study, describes one mother's experience of her separation. This particular transcript was chosen as it was the shortest in the current study (32 minutes). The interview was conducted over the telephone as this mother lived in one of the Eastern states of Australia. During our interview, this mother had her children in her care therefore our time together was strained slightly. This mothers' name was changed to Rita and all identifiable information was redacted or changed.

Due to the nature of the phenomenological analysis used in the current study, it is not appropriate to provide an example of the process involved in stage 7 of this analysis (i.e., development of the essence of phenomenon). The result of this stage, however, is presented in the Findings chapter of this thesis (Chapter 6). The current example provides the reader with stages 1 to 6 of the phenomenological analysis method implemented in the current study for one participant (5050M6). The reader is reminded that this process was undertaken for all participants, where the result of stage 6 of the analysis (development of textural-structural descriptions) for each participant was combined to represent the group as a whole during stage 7. What follows is a step by step account of how 5050M6's experience of separation was analysed to arrive at a textural-structural description of her experience of separation.

5050M6

Stage 1: Horizontalisation

During this stage, significant statements, quotes and sentences are highlighted (in yellow highlighter).

A Hello.

Q **Hello, is that Rita?**

A Yes, this is Rita, how are you?

Q **Good thanks Rita, it's Sarah, how are you going?**

A Yeah, good thank you.

Q **We spoke yesterday about having a chat tonight, is that still OK?**

A Yes, yes, yeah, that's fine, yeah, that's fine...

Q **I would normally, if I was doing this face-to-face, just give you a consent form to read through and fill out, but because we are doing it over the phone, would you mind if I just read the consent form to you Rita?**

A Yeah that's fine.

Q Okay. So the first point is, I would like to participate in the research conducted by Sarah Barbas and understand that my contact details will be kept until I am called upon to participate, which is today.

A Yep.

Q I understand that I can choose not to answer any questions and can withdraw from the study at any time.

A Yep.

Q I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded as I understand the MP3 player will be kept in a secure location for the duration of the study and recordings will be destroyed at the end of the project.

A Ah, yes.

Q What happens there is following the interview, the audio is transcribed, and during transcription all names, places any identifiable information really, is changed, and then the audios are deleted, so there's no way of tracking information back to the individual.

A Okay, fine.

Q I agree that the research data gathered in this study may be published providing I am not identified in any way.

A Yes, that's fine.

Q So, only changed names will be used in any publication.

A Yep.

Q I understand that all information will be kept strictly confidential, supervisors will have access to data, however no identifiable information will be available.

A Yep.

Q And finally, I understand that participation in this project refers to an interview about my experience of separation. I understand that the interview will not take any form of a counselling session and if the interview becomes too distressing, I acknowledge that the interview will be stopped and a list of counselling agencies provided.

A Yep.

Q Okay. So are there any questions about any of the points on the consent form there at all, Rita.

A Ah, no, no, they're fine.

Q **Okay. And what was your last name Rita?**

A [Surname].

Q **And, your email address?**

A It's all lowercase, [email address]

Q **Yep. Okay. So, the reason why I'm just recording your email address, is because when I finish the final manuscript, I would just send out an email to all the participants asking whether they would like a copy, for their own information. So that will probably happen in about a year. And I'll use either your phone number or your email address and I'm hoping that one of them will still be available then.**

A Yep. The email should definitely be. Hold on a sec. <child talking in background> Okay, sorry about that.

Q **That's okay. <laughing>**

A Ah, yeah, no you're right now.

Q **So, the way the interview will work Rita, is I will start off with a few quick and easy demographic questions, and then I'll move into the interview itself, which is really just me asking some general, broad questions, and I'm really happy for you to answer however you feel appropriate.**

A Yep, okay.

Q **So, I will start off with the interview itself, with just a bit of an understanding about the separation.**

A Yep.

Q **So firstly what was your age, if you don't mind me asking.**

A [redacted]

Q **And your ethnicity?**

A [redacted]

Q **And your religion?**

A [redacted]

Q **And your occupation?**

A [redacted]

Q **Yep. And how long have you been separated?**

A [redacted]

Q **Six months, okay. And how many children do you have, and what are their genders and their ages?**

A [redacted]

Q **And the care arrangement that you have is 50-50, is that right?**

A Yes that's right.

Q **So how does that work for you?**

A You mean in a general sense or?

Q **In general, yeah.**

A Yeah, it works pretty well now. It's been a slow adjustment. But now we're getting quite used to it, so it works well.

Q **And is that a week on week off, or half week half week or?**

A We do every second weekend, from Friday to Monday, that's alternating weekends. And then I'll have them Monday through to Tuesday afternoon, and then [ex-partner] will have them Tuesday afternoon through to Thursday morning then I'll have them again on Thursday morning through to Friday afternoon.

Q **Yep, okay. And are you re-partnered at all Rita?**

A No.

Q **No. Okay. All right, so that's the end of those quick and easy questions. So I'll get into the interview now, and like I said that was start with just a little bit of an understanding of the separation. So, in general, what were the circumstances of the separation?**

A I don't really know, it just didn't work out. We got into having children really quickly, so just didn't think it all through properly I suppose and we tried for a year but, my problems were he wasn't being part of a family at the time. Yeah just wasn't, he was very misogynistic minded, that he bought home the money and that was all he had to do. And then we just changed too much and we just fell out of love and didn't really work.

Q **Okay. So would you say that you were the initiator, or you're ex-partner was the initiator of the separation?**

A it was kind of a year in the running, and then it just became a mutual thing. Like we both came to the realisation at the same time. I think I asked for it, but it was in one of those conversations but it was very obvious what we both wanted.

Q **Yeah. And so what is the relationship with your ex-partner like now?**

A It's pretty up-and-down. We get along quite well for the children, but then there are some things that will happen, like for example, a fortnight ago, I wasn't happy where he was living, because I couldn't leave the car there, so we had massive fight over that and only just gotten over that, so it's still very up-and-down. But for the most of it, we keep it together, for the children, yeah.

Q **Okay. And so, other than things not working too well in the family context, were there any other issues you were dealing with at the time of separation, Rita?**

A Yeah, there was a couple actually, actually I suppose one of the reasons as well, I found out I had depression and had to go on medication, see a psychiatrist and what not. So I suppose this was coming for why we separated as well because I realised that he didn't want to support me through that, so I didn't want to be with someone who didn't want to support me. There was that around the time. Also, I've just got the kids with me for a second, can we come back to that half of the question later?

Q **Yeah, yeah, that's fine. No worries.**

A Yeah, a bit difficult.

Q **What was the...**

A Hang on a sec, just give me two seconds... [Mum talking to children for 30 seconds]

Q **Yeah, sure. I could call you back if you wanted me to Rita.**

A Oh, no it's alright, they just... I was playing with them when you called, so they were wanting to hang around for a bit. But they're okay now, I can see they're inside playing with Grandad. They knew I was doing this, so, oh hang on, yeah, they're fine now.

Q **Okay, no worries.**

A They're playing happily.

Q **Well you just let me know.**

A Yeah, no that's fine. Yeah, that last question. We also found out that I was pregnant, with our third child, and he decided he didn't want it at all. I was kind of excited about it, but it came to the point that he effectively forced me into

having an abortion, so that was the deal breaker for me. So there was a couple of other things that happened around when we broke up that reinforced it.

Q And what specific parts of the separation have you found the most difficult?

A Probably just my ideals of family. I came from a very... My parents are still together and all my friends' parents are still together and so I always had that image of that was what it is. So, just coming to terms with the fact that that's not how my family is going to be. That was probably the hardest. And then probably, just missing the kids, when we did that separating and realising that they weren't with me, and I had no control over who they were seeing all what they were doing, and them being so young, that was also pretty hard.

Q And other parents have said things like economic difficulties, personal problems, custody issues, issues with the ex-partner and the ex-partners family, occupational issues, psychological issues, social issues. Were any of those sorts of things difficult for you at all Rita?

A Yeah, I suppose probably dealing with [ex-partner's] mum, so the in-law issue. At the time of separation, [ex-partner] was starting up his own business, so financially I was doing my in-home business [redacted], so financially I was okay, I was already used to doing our whole finances just off my wage, so that was really easy to adapt to. But, yeah, I suppose just... it meant splitting up with a couple of friends. We had some mutual friends that kind-of chose sides, so I lost those connections, which is probably a bit hard and I suppose just don't go out, I know now, but I didn't know any single mums, so that was... having someone to talk to who actually understood what I was going through. That was really difficult, not having that.

Q Do you feel that the separation has impacted on the children in any way at all?

A I think it had originally, but they seem quite fine now. They had all the classic symptoms of distress in young children, so the sleepless nights, and when I first moved for a little bit, my four-year-old was showing some aggressive behaviour, but that's all settled down now.

Q And how about extended family, like your parents, your ex-partners parents, I know you said you had a bit of difficulty with your ex partner's mum. Do you feel that the separation has impacted on them?

A Yeah, I know my parents were really quite angry, so, they don't really want have any contact with [ex-partner] obviously. And then, [ex-partner's] mum, [name], she lives in [State], and we used to talk weekly on the phone, and I haven't heard from her since about a month after the breakup. And she used to be a really strong support for me, because she could see what [ex-partner] was doing, and what not. But yeah, just completely dropped off about a month after we split up. Yeah, so I suppose it has impacted a little bit.

Q How about friends, I know you said that you lost a few friends. Do you feel that it impacted on your relationships with friends in any way, or on your friends?

A Yeah, some grew a bit stronger. Like the friends I had before I met [ex-partner], they came and helped me and then a couple, the couple of mutual friends, or close friends I'd become, that were originally [ex-partner's] friends, and I haven't spoken to them since, or seen them ever since, it was just a straight cut off. And that was hard because one of them actually was a single mum, she was the only one I knew, so I thought she might understand and support a bit, but that didn't happen. That was probably the hardest out of all the friendships.

Q Yeah. And so what you say your strengths were during the separation and following the separation, Rita?

A My strengths were probably still being able to care for the children, like keeping it together, when they were around. Being able to keep a hold financially, so I didn't get into too much trouble. I don't know, it's probably being able to ask other people for help, like being able to ask for help, ask my family and, yeah, just telling them when I wasn't okay, and needed someone to talk to. Yeah, I suppose that come down to communication, probably the most.

Q And, do you feel you were strong during the separation and after the separation Rita?

A Ohhhhhh, yes and no. On my good days I was but the depression played in a bit with that because it knocked me around quite a bit, but on the days when I was having a good day, I felt really strong and it was fine, I could see this coming, I'm ready for it, it's fine, but, those days with the depression, was really bad, it was, yeah, no hope of being strong.

Q And on those good days I guess, what things really assisted you?

A Probably just the same things I said before, like having the support from the family and my close friends. Just knowing that I had a bit of money that I'd put aside in the bank, so that... I couldn't work for that week, I could still pay the bills. Just knowing I'd kinda build up those support networks, that definitely helped.

Q And did you find that there were any, I know you said, social support and family time were big ones for you, did you find that there were any, access to services or resources or community assistance that really helped?

A I suppose, I have to go into Centrelink to get on the single parenting payment, to help with some things, and the lady there was the most helpful person I've ever met. She wasn't a counsellor or anything, but she was really lovely. And then, I suppose, on the Internet I just joined a couple of single mums forums, and I didn't really get into them that much, but it was nice to know that there's

other people out there you could talk to. So, yeah, they're probably the only two that I really had to interact with.

Q Do you feel that there were any personal characteristics, within you, that really assisted you Rita?

A I suppose I've always just been one of those, like I'm a chilled out person, that nothing really gets to me that much, so, just having that attitude I think helps. And, I don't know, I've always been told I'm a really unemotional person, so I suppose just not getting overly upset about things probably helps.

Q What would you say if you had to choose was the most helpful characteristic for you, during and after the separation?

A Maybe just, I don't know, maybe just my strength, maybe just that mindset of, everything's going to be okay, you just have to get through this.

Q So optimism?

A Yeah, optimism, yep.

Q I know you said you had your bad days – do you feel that there was anything that really got in your way?

A Probably, actually, yeah, when [ex-partner] moved out, he was starting up a [redacted] business, so downstairs was a big, under the house there, he had all his tools and stuff, so he was coming in two or three times a day, just to downstairs, to get his tools and what not. Having that constant, his car, and you're constantly knowing he was downstairs, and on the property, that really affected me, having to see him all the time. Yeah, that was probably the worst thing, because you'd stop thinking about it for half an hour, and then you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right, so yeah...

Q Is there anything you would have liked to have done differently or done better to assist you during and after the separation Rita?

A I'd probably, would have been a lot more forceful in the sense that, because he had a place that he could have taken all his tools and what not, so I would have been more forceful in that, he's left, he has to take all his belongings so I couldn't see him. Yeah, I suppose that would be it, not being so forgiving I suppose and I wasn't trying to get back together with him, but I was really pushing having a friendship, so that we could maintain that family feel for the children, but it just wasn't the right time. So I suppose maybe, just enforcing no contact for a while.

Q Have you noticed that you implemented any strategies to really help you cope and to help you overcome the adversity during and after the separation Rita?

A Sorry, what was the start of that question?

Q **Do you feel like you implemented any strategies to help you cope?**

A Oh, yep. Yeah, I suppose, I've started looking at more lifetime plans. So, I've done things like goals, and financial goals, so I've got them on my wall. Just doing a lot of lists, I know it sounds kinda silly, but yeah, lists of the way I used to be and who I want to be, and just so I know that I can get through, who I am know. And just making a tighter routine with the children and just to help with their behaviour, that helped a lot. And then also, I do a few things from counselling to try and beat the depression, practicing mindfulness and doing a bit of meditation, really helped as well. And, yeah, other little things like exercising, I'd go for a walk everyday now, and that really seems to help.

Q **Did you say something about counselling?**

A Yeah, so, I did it for my depression and so we talked a bit about the break up, but, he wanted to help me, rather than help the whole relationship side of it. So, but yeah, it helped a lot, like I said, he gave me all those tools for the mindfulness and, through medication and all those goal setting things, he really pushed them, which helped.

Q **So the main tools were mindfulness and relaxation did you say?**

A Yeah, that's right.

Q **Yeah, yeah, ok. And I guess the final question that I have, Rita, is what advice would you give to other separated mothers and fathers going through separation?**

A I suppose it would just be to build up those networks so that you know that you're not alone. So whether that's getting your family or your friends around to help you, or going through services if you can't, if you don't have close contact with some close people. Yeah, just really, just making that little community around you to help you through each day.

Q **Uh-huh yep, and is there anything else that you wanted to add, or anything else that maybe we haven't discussed that you wanted to discuss at all Rita?**

A Um... No, I suppose that's it.

Q **And, do you have any questions for me at all, I know I've been asking you lots?**

A No, no, I think that's, it was pretty clear at the start.

Q **Yep, okay, great. Alright Rita, well, I'd like to really thank you for your time and your interest in supporting my research, it's really appreciated.**

A That's alright. I'm glad I could help out.

Q **Yeah, yeah, you've been a great help and I will contact you, like I said, around about a year, and send you through the manuscript if you like, which will have all the results in it, which I know you were interested in, so.**

A Yep, no problem.

Q **Yeah, I'm sorry it's going to take a little bit of a while. I've got a bit of a road ahead of me.**

A That's why I didn't study, it is a bit of a lengthy one, isn't it?

Q **Yeah, it is, yeah, absolutely. You've been wonderful, so thank you so very much, I really do appreciate it.**

A No problem, all the best for it, I hope you find what you are looking for with it.

Q **Yeah, thank you so much. Thanks, Rita.**

A Bye.

Q **And you take care.**

A Yeah, I will, you too.

Q **Thank you, bye.**

A Thanks, bye.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Stage 2: Phenomenological Reduction

In this stage all horizons are examined and those that cannot be abstracted and labelled are eliminated. This stage of analysis was assisted by the use of NVivo software, however, for the purposes of this example, the manual process will be presented in order to adequately describe this stage of analysis.

Horizon	Abstracted and Labelled	Eliminate
Yeah, it works pretty well now. It's been a slow adjustment. But now we're getting quite used to it, so it works well	Adjusting to change, up and down	N
it just didn't work out		Y
we tried for a year but	Reconciliation?	N
he wasn't being part of a family at the time		Y
we just changed too much	Growing apart	N
we just fell out of love	Growing apart	N
it was kind of a year in the running	Reconciliation?	N
then it just became a mutual thing. Like we both came to the realisation at the same time	Realisation	N

I think I asked for it	Initiator	N
It's pretty up-and-down	Up and down	N
We get along quite well for the children	Considering children, relationship with ex-partner	N
there are some things that will happen, like for example, a fortnight ago, I wasn't happy where he was living, because I couldn't leave the car there, so we had massive fight over that and only just gotten over that, so it's still very up-and-down	Relationship with ex-partner, up and down	N
we keep it together, for the children, yeah	Considering children, relationship with ex-partner	N
I found out I had depression and had to go on medication, see a psychiatrist and what not. So I suppose this was coming for why we separated as well because I realised that he didn't want to support me through that, so I didn't want to be with someone who didn't want to support me	Mental health, relationship with ex-partner,	N
We also found out that I was pregnant, with our third child, and he decided he didn't want it at all. I was kind of excited about it, but it came to the point that he effectively forced me into having an abortion, so that was the deal breaker for me	Realisation, relationship with ex-partner	N
there was a couple of other things that happened around when we broke up that reinforced it		Y
Probably just my ideals of family	Sanctity of marriage and family	N
My parents are still together and all my friends' parents are still together and so I always had that image of that was what it is. So, just coming to terms with the fact that that's not how my family is going to be. That was probably the hardest	Sanctity of marriage and family, identity	N
just missing the kids, when we did that separating and realising that they weren't with me, and I had no control over who they were seeing all what they were doing, and them being so young, that was also pretty hard	Considering children, missing children, lack of control, worry	N
Yeah, I suppose probably dealing with [ex-partner's] mum, so the in-law issue	Ex-partners family	N
financially I was doing my in-home business with family day-care, so financially I was okay, I was already used to doing our whole finances just off my wage, that was really easy to adapt to	Financial	N
it meant splitting up with a couple of friends. We had some mutual friends that kind-of chose sides, so I lost those connections, which is probably a bit hard	Loss of social support, mutual friends,	N

and I suppose just don't go out, I know now, but I didn't know any single mums, so that was... having someone to talk to who actually understood what I was going through. That was really difficult, not having that	normalisation, loneliness, lack of peer support	
I think it had originally		Y
They had all the classic symptoms of distress in young children, so the sleepless nights, and when I first moved for a little bit, my four-year-old was showing some aggressive behaviour, but that's all settled down now	Considering children, children's experience	N
Yeah, I know my parents were really quite angry, so, they don't really want have any contact with [ex-partner] obviously	Family system impact	N
she lives in Tasmania, and we used to talk weekly on the phone, and I haven't heard from her since about a month after the breakup. And she used to be a really strong support for me, because she could see what [ex-partner] was doing, and what not. But yeah, just completely dropped off about a month after we split up. Yeah, so I suppose it has impacted a little bit	Ex-partners family, loss of social support	N
Yeah, some grew a bit stronger. Like the friends I had before I met [ex-partner], they came and helped me	Social support	N
then a couple, the couple of mutual friends, or close friends I'd become, that were originally [ex-partner's] friends, and I haven't spoken to them since, or seen them ever since, it was just a straight cut off	Loss of social support, mutual friends	N
that was hard because one of them actually was a single mum, she was the only one I knew, so I thought she might understand and support a bit, but that didn't happen. That was probably the hardest out of all the friendships	Loss of social support, lack of peer support	N
My strengths were probably still being able to care for the children, like keeping it together, when they were around	Considering children, keeping it together	N
Being able to keep a hold financially, so I didn't get into too much trouble	Financial	N
I don't know, it's probably being able to ask other people for help, like being able to ask for help, ask my family and, yeah, just telling them when I wasn't okay, and needed someone to talk to	Social support, help seeking, talking to others	N
I suppose that come down to communication, probably the most	Communication	N
the depression played in a bit with that because it knocked me around quite a bit	Mental health	N

on the days when I was having a good day, I felt really strong and it was fine, I could see this coming, I'm ready for it, it's fine	Feeling strong on good days	N
those days with the depression, was really bad, it was, yeah, no hope of being strong	Mental health	N
like having the support from the family and my close friends.	Social support	N
Just knowing that I had a bit of money that I'd put aside in the bank, so that... I couldn't work for that week, I could still pay the bills	Financial	N
Just knowing I'd kinda build up those support networks, that definitely helped	Social support	N
I have to go into Centrelink to get on the single parenting payment, to help with some things, and the lady there was the most helpful person I've ever met. She wasn't a counsellor or anything, but she was really lovely	Community services, support	N
on the Internet I just joined a couple of single mums forums, and I didn't really get into them that much, but it was nice to know that there's other people out there you could talk to	Peer support, normalisation, talking to others	N
I've always just been one of those, like I'm chilled out person, that nothing really gets to me that much, so, just having that attitude I think helps	Being 'chilled out' helps, personality factors?	N
I've always been told I'm a really unemotional person, so I suppose just not getting overly upset about things probably helps	Emotional stability	N
Maybe just, I don't know, maybe just my strength, maybe just that mindset of, everything's going to be okay, you just have to get through this	Optimism	N
optimism		Y
when [ex-partner] moved out, he was starting up a landscaping business, so downstairs was a big, under the house there, he had all his tools and stuff, so he was coming in two or three times a day, just to downstairs, to get his tools and what not. Having that constant, his car, and you're constantly knowing he was downstairs, and on the property, that really affected me, having to see him all the time. Yeah, that was probably the worst thing, because you'd stop thinking about it for half an hour, and then you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right, so yeah	Can't get rid of ex-partner, relationship with ex-partner, re-experiencing, difficulty moving on	N
I'd probably, would have been a lot more forceful in the sense that, because he had a place that he could have taken all his tools and what not, so I would have been more forceful in that, he's left, he has to take	Boundaries, relationship with ex-partner	N

all his belongings so I couldn't see him		
not being so forgiving I suppose	Relationship with ex-partner, forgiveness	N
I wasn't trying to get back together with him		Y
but I was really pushing having a friendship	Relationship with ex-partner, identity	N
so that we could maintain that family feel for the children	Considering children, relationship with ex-partner	N
but it just wasn't the right time		Y
just enforcing no contact for a while	Boundaries	N
I've started looking at more lifetime plans	Planning	N
I've done things like goals, and financial goals	Goal setting, financial	N
Just doing a lot of lists, I know it sounds kinda silly, but yeah, lists of the way I used to be and who I want to be, and just so I know that I can get through, who I am know	Organisation, identity, roles	N
making a tighter routine with the children and just to help with their behaviour, that helped a lot	Considering children, routines, children's' experience	N
I do a few things from counselling to try and beat the depression, practicing mindfulness and doing a bit of meditation, really helped as well	Counselling, mental health, mindfulness, meditation, personal tools	N
other little things like exercising, I'd go for a walk everyday now, and that really seems to help	Exercise	N
counselling		Y
Yeah, so, I did it for my depression and so we talked a bit about the break up, but, he wanted to help me, rather than help the whole relationship side of it. So, but yeah, it helped a lot, like I said, he gave me all those tools for the mindfulness and, through meditation and all those goal setting things, he really pushed them, which helped	Counselling, mental health, tools, mindfulness, meditation, goal setting	N
I suppose it would just be to build up those networks so that you know that you're not alone. So whether that's getting your family or your friends around to help you, or going through services if you can't, if you don't have close contact with some close people. Yeah, just really, just making that little community around you to help you through each day	Social support, help seeking, community services, support	N

Stage 3: Developing clusters of meaning

During this stage, significant statements identified during phenomenological reduction are grouped into clusters of meaning.

Identity Changes

- It's been a slow adjustment
- we're getting quite used to it
- it's pretty up and down
- it's still very up and down
- when [ex-partner] moved out, he was starting up a landscaping business, so downstairs was a big, under the house there, he had all his tools and stuff, so he was coming in two or three times a day, just to downstairs, to get his tools and what not. Having that constant, his car, and you're constantly knowing he was downstairs, and on the property, that really affected me, having to see him all the time. Yeah, that was probably the worst thing, because you'd stop thinking about it for half an hour, and then you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right, so yeah
- Probably just my ideals of marriage
- My parents are still together and all my friends' parents are still together and so I always had that image of that was what it is. So, just coming to terms with the fact that that's not how my family is going to be. That was probably the hardest
- that really affected me, having to see him all the time. Yeah, that was probably the worst thing, because you'd stop thinking about it for half an hour, and then you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right, so yeah
- So that we could maintain that family feel for the children

Considering children

- we get along quite well for the children
- we keep it together for the children
- just missing the kids, when we did that separating and realising that they weren't with me, and I had no control over who they were seeing all what they were doing, and them being so young, that was also pretty hard
- They had all the classic symptoms of distress in young children, so the sleepless nights, and when I first moved for a little bit, my four-year-old was showing some aggressive behaviour, but that's all settled down now
- My strengths were probably still being able to care for the children, like keeping it together, when they were around
- So that we could maintain that family feel for the children
- making a tighter routine with the children and just to help with their behaviour, that helped a lot

Relationship with ex-partner

- We just changed too much
- We just feel out of love
- We get along quite well for the children
- there are some things that will happen, like for example, a fortnight ago, I wasn't happy where he was living, because I couldn't leave the car there, so we had massive fight over that and only just gotten over that, so it's still very up-and-down
- we keep it together for the children

- I didn't want to be with someone who didn't want to support me
- We also found out that I was pregnant, with our third child, and he decided he didn't want it at all. I was kind of excited about it, but it came to the point that he effectively forced me into having an abortion, so that was the deal breaker for me
- when [ex-partner] moved out, he was starting up a landscaping business, so downstairs was a big, under the house there, he had all his tools and stuff, so he was coming in two or three times a day, just to downstairs, to get his tools and what not. Having that constant, his car, and you're constantly knowing he was downstairs, and on the property, that really affected me, having to see him all the time. Yeah, that was probably the worst thing, because you'd stop thinking about it for half an hour, and then you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right, so yeah
- I was really pushing having a friendship
- I'd probably, would have been a lot more forceful in the sense that, because he had a place that he could have taken all his tools and what not, so I would have been more forceful in that, he's left, he has to take all his belongings so I couldn't see him
- Just enforcing no contact for a while

Mental health

- I found out I had depression and had to go on medication, see a psychiatrist and what not. So I suppose this was coming for why we separated as well because I realised that he didn't want to support me through that
- Yeah, so, I did it for my depression and so we talked a bit about the break up, but, he wanted to help me, rather than help the whole relationship side of it. So, but yeah, it helped a lot, like I said, he gave me all those tools for the mindfulness and, through meditation and all those goal setting things, he really pushed them, which helped

Interpersonal Changes

- it meant splitting up with a couple of friends. We had some mutual friends that kind-of chose sides, so I lost those connections, which is probably a bit hard
- Yeah, I know my parents were really quite angry, so, they don't really want have any contact with [ex-partner] obviously
- she lives in Tasmania, and we used to talk weekly on the phone, and I haven't heard from her since about a month after the breakup. And she used to be a really strong support for me, because she could see what [ex-partner] was doing, and what not. But yeah, just completely dropped off about a month after we split up. Yeah, so I suppose it has impacted a little bit
- then a couple, the couple of mutual friends, or close friends I'd become, that were originally [ex-partner's] friends, and I haven't spoken to them since, or seen them ever since, it was just a straight cut off
- that was hard because one of them actually was a single mum, she was the only one I knew, so I thought she might understand and support a bit, but that didn't happen. That was probably the hardest out of all the friendships

- Yeah, some grew a bit stronger. Like the friends I had before I met [ex-partner], they came and helped me
- Yeah, I suppose probably dealing with [ex-partner's] mum, so the in-law issue
- and I suppose just don't go out, I know now, but I didn't know any single mums, so that was... having someone to talk to who actually understood what I was going through. That was really difficult, not having that

Financial

- financially I was doing my in-home business with family day-care, so financially I was okay, I was already used to doing our whole finances just off my wage, that was really easy to adapt to
- Being able to keep a hold financially, so I didn't get into too much trouble
- Just knowing that I had a bit of money that I'd put aside in the bank, so that... I couldn't work for that week, I could still pay the bills

Resources (Environmental)

- Like having support from the family and my close friends
- Just knowing I'd kinda build up those support networks, that definitely helped
- Yeah, so, I did it for my depression and so we talked a bit about the break up, but, he wanted to help me, rather than help the whole relationship side of it. So, but yeah, it helped a lot, like I said, he gave me all those tools for the mindfulness and, through meditation and all those goal setting things, he really pushed them, which helped
- I suppose it would just be to build up those networks so that you know that you're not alone. So whether that's getting your family or your friends around to help you, or going through services if you can't, if you don't have close contact with some close people. Yeah, just really, just making that little community around you to help you through each day
- on the Internet I just joined a couple of single mums forums, and I didn't really get into them that much, but it was nice to know that there's other people out there you could talk to
- I don't know, it's probably being able to ask other people for help, like being able to ask for help, ask my family and, yeah, just telling them when I wasn't okay, and needed someone to talk to
- I have to go into Centrelink to get on the single parenting payment, to help with some things, and the lady there was the most helpful person I've ever met. She wasn't a counsellor or anything, but she was really lovely

Resources (Personal)

- I do a few things from counselling to try and beat the depression, practicing mindfulness and doing a bit of meditation, really helped as well
- I've always just been one of those, like I'm chilled out person, that nothing really gets to me that much, so, just having that attitude I think helps
- I've always been told I'm a really unemotional person, so I suppose just not getting overly upset about things probably helps

- Maybe just, I don't know, maybe just my strength, maybe just that mindset of, everything's going to be okay, you just have to get through this
- Not being so forgiving I suppose
- I've started looking at more lifetime plans
- I've done things like goals, and financial goals
- Just doing a lot of lists, I know it sounds kinda silly, but yeah, lists of the way I used to be and who I want to be, and just so I know that I can get through, who I am now
- other little things like exercising, I'd go for a walk everyday now, and that really seems to help

Stage 4: Developing Textural Descriptions

During this stage themes and statements are used to describe 5050M6's experience of separation

Identity changes

For 5050M6, separation meant a change to her identity. She described this process as slow and tumultuous: "it's been a slow adjustment", "it's pretty up and down". In particular, 5050M6 had difficulty adjusting to the loss of her identity as a couple: "he was coming in two or three times a day... that really affected me, having to see him all the time... because you'd stop thinking about it [the separation] for half an hour, and you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right...". 5050M6 also reported difficulty adjusting to the loss of her identity as a married person: "just my ideals of marriage... my parents are still together and all my friends' parents are still together and so I always had that image of that was what it is. So, just coming to terms with the fact that that's not how my family is going to be. That was probably the hardest".

Considering children

5050M6 described continual considerations of her children during her separation. Considerations related to how her and her ex-partner's relationship was focused on the children: "we keep it together for the children", "so we could maintain that family feel for the children". She described implications of having children following separation, both for herself: "missing the kids... I had no control over who they were seeing or what they were doing... that was pretty hard" and for her children: "they had classic symptoms of distress in young children, so the sleepless nights... aggressive behaviour". On the other hand, 5050M6 also described having to care for her children as a strength: "my strengths were probably still being able to care for the children", "making a tighter routine with the children and just to help with their behaviour, that helped a lot".

Relationship with ex-partner

5050M6's description of her relationship with her ex-partner took a number of different forms. She first described why her relationship broke down which was the result of an overarching feeling of growing apart: "we just changed too much... we just fell out of love... I didn't want to be with someone who didn't want to support me". Then 5050M6 described her relationship with her ex-partner since separation as up and down and focused on the children: "a fortnight ago I wasn't happy where he was living because I

couldn't leave the car there so we had a massive fight over that and only just gotten over that, so it's still very up and down", "we get along quite well for the children". 5050M6 also described the difficulty she experienced when she saw her ex-partner and a lack of boundaries within their relationship: "downstairs was a big, under the house there, he had all his tools and stuff, so he was coming in two or three times a day, just to go downstairs, to get his tools and what not. Having that constant, his car, and you're constantly knowing he was downstairs, and on the property, that really affected me, having to see him all the time. Yeah, that was probably the worst thing, because you'd stop thinking about it for half an hour, and then you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right", [when asked what she would have differently] "I probably would have been a lot more forceful in the sense that, because he had a place that he could have taken all his tools and what not, so I would have been more forceful in that, he's left, he has to take all his belongings so I couldn't see him... but I was really pushing having a friendship".

Mental health

5050M6 described depression as a contributor to her separation as well as an issue she had to deal with following separation: "I found out I had depression and had to go on medication, see a psychiatrist and what not. So I suppose this was coming for why we separated as well because I realised that he didn't want to support me through that", "the depression played in a bit with that because it knocked me around quite a bit".

Interpersonal changes

Following separation, 5050M6 described a number of interpersonal changes. First she described the social losses: "it meant splitting up with a couple of friends. We had some mutual friends that kind of chose sides, so I lost those connections, which is probably a bit hard", "I haven't heard from her since about a month after the breakup [ex-partners mother] and she used to be a really strong support for me". Then she described some social gains: "some grew a bit stronger [friendships]. Like the friends I had before I met [ex-partner], they came and helped me". She also described feeling alone as a single mother: "I just don't go out. I know now, but I didn't know any single mums, so that was... having someone to talk to who actually understood what I was going through. That was really difficult not having that".

Financial

In general, 5050M6 described feeling on top of her finances: "financially I was ok, I was already used to doing our whole finances off just my wage, that was really easy to adapt to". She also described preparing herself financially: "being able to keep a hold financially... just knowing that I had a bit of money that I'd put aside in the bank so that if I couldn't work for that week I could still pay the bills".

Reaching beyond

5050M6 described a number of environmental resources that assisted her to adjust to her separation. She described support from family, friends, welfare agencies, peers and mental health care professionals as beneficial following separation: "having support from the family and my close friends", "I have to go to Centrelink... the lady there was the most helpful person I've ever met", "I did [counselling] for my depression... it helped

a lot", "I joined a couple of single mums forums... it was really nice to know that there's other people out there you could talk to".

Searching within

5050M6 described a number of her own personal resources that she felt helped her following separation. She described using a number of self-regulation strategies such as mindfulness, meditation, planning, goal setting and exercising: "I do a few things from counselling to try and beat the depression, practising mindfulness and doing a bit of meditation, really helped as well", "I've done things like goals, and financial goals... just doing a lot of lists... lists of the way I used to be and who I want to be, and just so I know that I can get through, who I am now", "I'd go for a walk every day now and that really seems to help". 5050M6 also described a number of personality factors that she felt assisted her following her separation including being chilled out, unemotional and optimistic: "I'm a chilled out person, nothing really gets to me that much, so just having that attitude I think helps", "I'm a really unemotional person, so suppose not getting overly upset about things helps", "my strength is maybe just that mindset of, everything's going to be okay, you just have to get through this". Help seeking was a final personal resource that 5050M6 felt was beneficial for her following separation: [when asked what her strengths were] "probably being able to ask other people for help, like being able to ask for help, ask my family, and just telling them when I wasn't okay, and needed someone to talk to".

Stage 5: Develop Structural Descriptions

In this stage, statements and themes are also used to describe contexts and settings in which each participant experiences the phenomenon. Imaginative variation assists the process of structural description development. Moustakas (1994, p. 99) suggests four steps of imaginative variation that were followed during this stage of analysis: 1) systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings, 2) recognising the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon, 3) considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon (i.e., time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, relation to others), and, 4) searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon.

Identity changes

5050M6 experienced difficulty with identity change in the context of having to see her husband often due to his work equipment being left in the family home. For 5050M6, repeatedly seeing her ex-husband hindered her ability to move on or forget about her separation. Moving from a couple identity to a single identity was hard for her due to her husband repeatedly reminding her of the position she was in (i.e., separated) simply by being present more than might be expected due to having to pick up work tools from her house. In this sense, her post-separation space was being invaded by repeated memories of her pre-separation self (i.e., the presence of her ex-partner). 5050M6 struggled with her identity change further in the context of feeling alone in her separation journey. It is possible that 5050M6 compared herself to others in her social network who were 'happily married'. In 5050M6's social world, there were no others

who were separated therefore this experience was new and lonely for her and may have contributed to lowered self-esteem and feelings of failure. As such she described adjusting to her new separated identity as 'the hardest'. For 5050M6, separation went against her own ideals and beliefs of what family and marriage would be like. Therefore becoming a single mum was hard for her because she didn't expect her marriage to breakdown and did not have anyone within her social network to compare or validate her experience with. She may also feel different to others in her social network due to being the only one who has experienced separation. Time was also a contextual factor in 5050M6's experience. She had been separated for 6 months therefore she had not had very long to become accustomed to identity changes, especially in the context of not knowing what to expect due to a lack of separation culture within her social networks. She described her adjustment as 'up and down' which suggests that over time, her adjustment has been both positive and negative. This may also mean that she has not yet reached a point where she feels she has adjusted fully. She refers to her adjustment specifically as 'slow' which suggests that six months following separation she has gradually worked her way through redevelopment of her new identity without her partner, however she may still have a long road ahead of her.

Considering children

5050M6 described a culture of decision making and experiences following separation that was dictated by continual consideration of her children. This was especially so when describing her relationship with her ex-partner. She felt that her relationship with her ex-partner was one that was characterised by a focus on the children. Contrary to an individual who doesn't have children following separation, 5050M6 further described the loss of not only her partner but also her children. She described feeling lonely and missing her children when they were with their father. She also described being attuned to her children's health as well as her own. In this sense, she had to take care of not only her own health but also the health of her children. For 5050M6, however, the presence of her children was described by her as a strength, where she alluded to the idea that, had children not been present following her separation, she may not have adjusted so well. Perhaps she felt that the presence of her children was a distraction where she displaced thoughts of her own difficulties, focusing instead on helping her children through the separation. Taking care of them provided her with strength, therefore she may also have looked for indications of positive adjustment within herself by acknowledging how well her children were adjusting following the care she provided them with. When considering that she felt being able to take care of her children was a strength, she was certainly deriving strengths from the idea that, because she could care for her children, she must be strong.

Relationship with ex-partner

5050M6 described a gradual process of falling out of love and growing apart from her partner which led to her separation. This process occurred over a period of one year as reported by her. Therefore, prior to the actual separation, 5050M6 had already had a one year period of time where she may have begun to feel separated from her partner. She also experienced such feelings in the context of an unsupportive environment provided by her ex-partner. Therefore, prior to the separation 5050M6 was feeling unsupported and such feelings may have spilled over into her post-separation

relationship with her ex-partner. She described what may be interpreted as developing a barrier between herself and her ex-partner following separation where their relationship was purely focused on their children. Describing their relationship in such a way meant that their relationship was no longer an intimate one but more of a business related relationship where the children were the agenda. She also described getting along with her ex-partner 'for the children' which suggests a superficial relationship based on presenting the façade of having a good relationship for the sake of the children when realistically, one did not exist. The fact that this relationship was described as up and down also suggests that adjusting to new post-separation roles may have been difficult. Specifically, arguments appear to have resulted from difficulties associated with adjusting to the separation, but continuing to be parents to the children. Mediating between the roles that each parents now has and adjusting to changing dynamics appears to be coming through from descriptions of 5050M6's relationship with her ex-partner. This was especially so when 5050M6 alluded to her post-separation relationship with her partner as one that lacked boundaries (i.e., tools left at house where partner was continually present). She described struggling to know whether she should have maintained boundaries due to considerations of her children (i.e., the other partner was a parent too) and the fact that her difficulty in placing boundaries within this relationship hindered her adjustment to separation. She also described regret at not placing boundaries within the post-separation relationship retrospectively. Therefore she may feel that her current circumstances are a result of her inability to know what to do at the time and whether or not she needed to place boundaries within her post-separation relationship. She described feeling that she put her children's needs and wants over her own in this context where she failed to place boundaries within her post-separation relationship in order to maintain a friendship with her ex-partner for the sake of her children.

Mental health

Mental health concerns were described as both a contributor to 5050M6's separation and a roadblock to adjustment following separation. When asked if she felt she was strong following her separation, 5050M6 reported that her depression got in the way some days. On the other hand, when she wasn't feeling depressed she felt she was adjusting better to her separation. In this sense, 5050M6's depression was experienced as a constant negative presence in her life that not only served to derail her relationship but also served to derail adjustment following relationship breakdown. She also alluded to depression and mental illness as a health problem that her partner did not want to help her with which suggests a stigmatic connotation. It also provides an impression of her ex-partner as someone who had no interest in helping another through a mental health difficulty. Therefore 5050M6 may have felt lonely in her struggle with her depression prior to her separation and this feeling may have lingered some time following or may possibly still be present.

Interpersonal changes

For 5050M6, separation meant a reduction in her social networks. 5050M6 experienced this reduction in the context of the result of the loss of her ex-partner and his social networks or social networks that were part of her pre-separation relationship (i.e., mutual social relationships) for the most part. She felt that mutual friends shared

between herself and her ex-partner in the pre-separation relationship chose her ex-partner and not her and therefore she lost those friendships. This connotes a culture of awkwardness following separation where friends are torn between the two separating individuals (in the context of mutual relationships). In 5050M6's case she appears to feel that mutual friends chose her ex-partner and not her. This could lead to lowered self-esteem. In particular, 5050M6 described substantial difficulty losing a mutual friend who had the potential to provide her with a normalising and validating experience of separation given this particular friend was also a single mother. 5050M6 experienced this difficulty and feeling of loss in the context of not knowing anyone else in her own social network who was separated. She also described losing a particularly supportive member of her social network who was her ex-partners mother. In this instance, 5050M6 described the loss of someone who knew what her ex-partner was like and could therefore empathise with her situation and reasons for the separation. In this sense 5050M6 felt more alone because lost social networks appeared to mainly be connected to her pre-separation self and therefore may have been better able to understand and provide empathy to her following her separation. Therefore she felt completely cut off from her pre-separation social environment which appeared to impact greatly on her adjustment. She may have felt that she was thrown into a whole new world without any connection to the life she had known pre-separation which was quite daunting for her. On the other hand, 5050M6 also described interpersonal gains and support provided by friends she had known prior to her relationship. She reported feeling that they helped her in the absence of lost social supports. She also alluded to the fact that they were friends prior to her relationship with her ex-partner which suggests that friendships and social networks gained during her relationship were not her own but were her ex-partners or social networks gained together during their relationship. In this sense 5050M6 current social relationship may reflect a social time before she met her ex-partner.

Financial

The general feeling from 5050M6's descriptions was that she felt on top of things financially. She alluded to having a lot of knowledge in finances and financial planning as she had taken care of the finances in her pre-separation relationship. In this sense, 5050M6 appears to feel confident in her ability to take care of her finances as a result of the person she was in the pre-separation relationship. She further described having to live off her own personal wage within the pre-separation relationship, therefore adapting to separation financially was not too difficult for her post-separation (i.e., based on her own wages) because she was already used to doing this. 5050M6 appeared to allude to the idea that change was difficult to adapt for her, however in the context of her financial situation, because there was not change, she was able to adapt easily. In addition, 5050M6 described feeling confident in her ability to save emergency money in order to support herself post-separation. This may have been a flow on effect from feeling confident in her financial planning abilities as a result of her financial experiences pre-separation. She felt that this was a strength of hers. Therefore a culture of money and financial considerations was evident in her post-separation experience. In addition, 5050M6 alluded to the fact that some weeks she was unable to work as a single mother. The reasons for this were not addressed, however, not being able to work may be

directly related to post-separation experiences for 5050M6 (i.e., perhaps she couldn't work due to child care commitments, depression, stress ect...).

Reaching beyond

In the context of her separation, 5050M6 found that there were a number of factors that assisted her. In particular, she felt she was supported within her own personal environment. She felt her family were very supportive, especially when she needed someone to talk to. She did allude to family and close friends as the most supportive which suggested that she relied upon individuals within her immediate social network for support. She also described community services as supportive. She felt that in terms of services she may have accessed, the Centrelink lady was the most helpful. She appeared to suggest this as a surprise which may mean that she had experienced some unhelpful people within the family relationship community service environment. She stated that she 'had' to go to centrelink which also suggests that she wasn't necessarily happy about having to access such a service but when she did she was pleasantly surprised with the support she received there. She further reported counselling as a substantial support. In the context of the way she described her depression and the negative connotations attached to her mental health disorder, it appears counselling may have been particularly beneficial for her as it assisted her to cope effectively with her disorder therefore increasing feelings of positive adjustment and adaptation. She described her depression as directly related to an inability to maintain her strength therefore counselling served as a buffer. 5050M6 also described peer relationships as important to her. The way she described these relationships, however, was somewhat distant. For example, she stated that it was nice to 'know' there were others out there that she could talk to but also reported that she didn't really access such support. Therefore the simple feeling of not being alone appeared to assist 5050M6 the most, rather than actually reaching out to others in her same position. Again, this may reflect the fact that she did not have any peers in her own social networks but knowing that she wasn't alone on a distant level assisted her following separation.

Searching within

In addition to environmental resources, 5050M6 also described personal resources that she felt assisted her following her separation. She pointed to mindfulness, meditation, goal setting and planning as helpful. 5050M6 learned these techniques during counselling, therefore they were initially related to assisting her depression, however she reported using these strategies to assist her to work her way through her separation. This further increased the benefits she felt from counselling. Having these new skills allowed her to feel more on top of who she was and who she wanted to be and also increased feelings of personal mastery and adjustment to her separation. Again, these techniques were mostly described in terms of assisting her depression which further reinforces the significant impact her depression had on her as a person. She also described exercise as beneficial stating that she goes for a walk 'now'. This may mean that she didn't exercise in her pre-separation relationship however her new separated self enjoys exercise and finds benefits from it. In particular, 5050M6 referred to planning and goal setting as beneficial for her personally. She felt using these strategies assisted her to know that she could get through the separation and assisted her to learn about herself and adjust to her new identity post-separation. She also

described feeling that planning and goal setting allowed her to provide a structure for adjustment that she could work towards in a self-regulated manner. Therefore perhaps she felt that having goals and plans ensured that she had something to work towards in terms of a light at the end of the tunnel. 5050M6 also felt that she was an unemotional person who didn't get too upset about things. This description of herself suggests that she feels emotions get in the way of adjustment, where her ability to remain emotionally stable assisted her following separation. Perhaps she feels that had she been more emotional, she may not have been able to overcome her difficulties as well as she had. She described her lack of emotion as a sort of personality trait that assisted her following separation. She further described herself as optimistic, where she felt that maintaining a positive persona assisted her following separation. She described optimism as a mindset where she felt that she had conditioned herself to believe that everything was going to be and pushed herself to believe that she could get through her separation. Therefore, she alluded to the idea that she had a difficult road ahead of her but that she would be ok because she believed she would be. In addition, 5050M6 also alluded to the idea that she was able to recognise when she needed additional help and was able to reach out for such help. Describing herself in such a way suggested three things. First that she was confident in her ability to recognise and react to her own emotions, second that she was confident in her ability to seek help during such times, and third that she knew she had a support network available to her should she feel the need to access it. She also alluded to the idea that talking was a beneficial way to buffer against feeling 'not okay'.

Stage 6: Developing a Textural-Structural Description

During this stage of analysis textural and structural descriptions are combined to arrive at the meanings and essence of the experience for each participant.

For 5050M6, separation meant being thrown into an unknown world characterised by redevelopment of her pre-separation self. She had to contend with being a mother to her children on her own, adjust to a different relationship with her ex-partner, manage her depression on her own and cope with a number of personal losses including friendships and daily interaction with her children. 5050M6's experience was imbedded within the notion of turbulence over time where she described redevelopment of herself as "a slow adjustment" and "up and down". She described having to maintain a relationship with her ex-partner as her children's father as impeding on her ability to redevelop her separated identity "that really affected me, having to see him all the time". His continued presence in her life invaded her post-separation space causing difficulty in her ability to move on "you'd stop thinking about it [the separation] for half an hour, and you'd hear his car and he'd be there again, and it's like, oh that's right...[I'm separated]". On top of external reminders of the fact that she was separated by the continued presence of her ex-partner, 5050M6 also described an internal struggle of adjusting to her new separated status due to her own personal ideals of the sanctity of marriage. These ideals were the result of the way relationships and marriage were modelled for her within her own social networks and her world as she knew it. 5050M6 reported that others in her world continued to be married, where the event of separation was not a known phenomenon for her. Therefore, when she separated, she described the need to "come to terms" with this new experience in the context of

having no one around her to assist her through it and to provide her with a normalising and validating experience: “just my ideals of marriage... my parents are still together and all my friends’ parents are still together and so I always had that image of that was what it is. So, just coming to terms with the fact that that’s not how my family is going to be. That was probably the hardest”. In this sense, 5050M6 described a feeling of loneliness when attempting to redevelop her post-separation identity. This experience was also described as unexpected for 5050M6 which added to adjustment difficulties.

When 5050M6 described her journey through her separation, there was an undercurrent of continual consideration of her children. In this sense, having children following separation added another layer to the complex experience of separation for 5050M6. Specifically, 5050M6 described the presence of her children as dictating the nature of her relationship with her ex-partner: “we keep it together for the children”. 5050M6 alludes to the idea that, had children not been present, perhaps her relationship with her ex-partner may have been different. In other words, her post-separation relationship with her ex-partner extended as far as a focus on the children. In this sense, 5050M6 describes considering the needs of her children and what would be in their best interests following separation where she alludes to the idea that “keeping it together” was beneficial for the children, therefore that was the way she felt she had to interact with her ex-partner. The presence of children following separation for 5050M6 added another layer of worry or anxiety specifically related to how the children were coping with their parents’ separation. 5050M6 reported a continual consideration of how her children were faring making reference to their health following the separation: “they had classic symptoms of distress in young children, so the sleepless nights... aggressive behaviour...”. The reason this adds another layer to the complexity of her experience of separation was due to already having to consider her own health following separation (described a bit later). This experience was bittersweet for 5050M6 where she described being attuned to her children’s health, however at the same time described the act of having to be attuned to how her children were faring as a strength: “my strengths were probably still being able to care for the children”. In this sense 5050M6 suggests that had her children not been present following her separation, she may not have adjusted as well as she has. Therefore, although a focus on her children meant increasing worry and concern, the feedback she received relative to the positive adjustment she observed in her children subsequently provided her with reflections of her own adjustment. In other words, because she could care for her children, she must be strong. When describing issues related to her children following separation, 5050M6 also reported losses in her relationships with her children and added concern when they weren’t with her (i.e., when they were with her ex-partner): “missing the kids... I had no control over who they were seeing or what they were doing... that was pretty hard...”. Here 5050M6 describes a loss of control relative to her children’s wellbeing and sadness at a result of loss of time spent with her children. Therefore, for 5050M6 separation meant not only the loss of her pre-separation relationship with her ex-partner but also the loss of her pre-separation relationship with her children and the safety and security of that those relationships provided her with. Specifically, changes to her relationships with children meant an increase in concern and worry and a loss of feeling of control related to her children’s wellbeing. In addition, 5050M6 described feeling that she had to place trust in her ex-partner and his ability to maintain her children’s wellbeing when

they were in his care. It appears, however that she may lack trust within her post-separation relationship with her ex-partner in terms of when he has care of the children and also perhaps that there is a lack of communication between herself and her ex-partner which has led to feelings of a lack of control, worry and concern about her children.

Difficulty redeveloping her post-separation identity and continual concern for her children were described by 5050M6 as the result of adjusting to development of a new relationship with her ex-partner. 5050M6 described difficulty moving from a cohesive relationship with her ex-partner within the pre-separation environment to a new complex relationship with her ex-partner post-separation which was characterised by the presence of a co-parenting relationship for the children but the absence of an intimate relationship as husband and wife. For 5050M6 this adjustment was a difficult one. Although 5050M6 described having had a year to adjust to the idea of separation prior to the physical separation "it was kind of a year in the running [the separation]", it seems that she struggled most with redefining her post-separation relationship particularly in terms of setting boundaries. On top of a post-separation relationship with her ex-partner dictated by a focus on the children and difficulty adjusting to her new separated status in the context of a lack of social experience with the event of separation, 5050M6 described difficulty wetting particular rules and boundaries within her post-separation relationship with her ex-partner: [when asked what she would have done differently following separation] "I would have been more forceful in that, he's left, he has to take all his belongings so I couldn't see him... but I was really pushing having a friendship". Here, 5050M6 described a conflict between pushing a friendship with her ex-partner following separation (for the children) and setting boundaries within her post-separation relationship with her ex-partner in order to foster more positive adjustment or herself. In other words, 5050M6 appears to suggest that in order for her to adjust better to her separation, she must minimise the amount of time spent with her ex-partner, however she must also consider her relationship partner and how that may impact on her children. This conflict and lack of knowledge about what to do in this situation was described by 5050M6 as contributing to some difficulty adjusting to separation. As a result of contending with conflicting ideas of how to redevelop her post-separation relationship with her ex-partner, 5050M6 further described her relationship with her ex-partner as "still very up and down" referring to arguments relative to the nature of the post-separation environment.

Whilst adjusting to a new post-separation identity, continually considering her children and contending with ongoing personal conflict centred upon how best to maintain a relationship with her ex-partner as her children's father, 5050M6 also had to find a way to manage her health, and in particular, her depression. For 5050M6, depression was a both a contributor to her separation as well as roadblock to adjustment following her separation. Therefore, depression was experienced as a constant negative presence in her life that served to not only derail her relationship but also served to derail adjustment following relationship breakdown. Specifically, 5050M6 felt that her depression got in the way following separation, however when she had days where she felt less depressed, 5050M6 felt she was adjusting better to her separation: "the depression played in a bit with that because it knocked me around quite a bit". Another layer was added to the complexity of dealing with depression following separation

where she alluded to her mental health disorder as an issue her ex-partner did not want to help her with: "I found out I had depression... so I suppose this was coming for why we separated as well because I realised that he didn't want to support me through that". This description of her depression as such adds a stigmatic connotation to her experience of depression. This description suggests that 5050M6 feels lonely in her struggle with depression and, due to the feedback she received from her ex-partner, she may feel stigmatised for her mental health concerns. Therefore feelings of loneliness may be exacerbated by feeling that she will not receive consideration or the help she needs from others in her social network based on the way her ex-partner responded to her diagnosis.

Separation also meant a number of interpersonal changes for 5050M6. She described losses not only in the relationships with her children and her ex-partner, but also within her social network. Specifically, losses included friendships developed within her pre-separation environment as well as family relationships associated with her pre-separation environment. For 5050M6 these losses represent lost support in a number of different ways. Firstly, 5050M6 described the loss of her relationship with her ex-partners mother: "I haven't heard from her since about a month after the breakup [ex-partners' mother] and she used to be a really strong support for me because she could see what [ex-partner] was doing and what not". The essence of loss associated with this relationship was feeling that she lost an ally and someone who knew her ex-partner and could empathise with her and the reasons for the separation. 5050M6 also had to adjust to this lack of support and redevelop a new world in which her ex-partner's mother wasn't present. Similarly, 5050M6 described lost relationships of mutual friendships she had developed within the pre-separation environment. 5050M6 felt that these friends felt they had to make a choice following her separation and they chose her ex-partner over her: "it meant splitting up with a couple of friends. We had some mutual friends that kinda chose sides, so I lost those connections, which is probably a bit hard". This experience describes a few difficulties inherent in interpersonal relationships following separation. Firstly, the loss of friendships is a difficult one to contend with because it suggests a loss of support and a changing social world. Secondly, there appears to be a culture of awkwardness for friends following separation where they feel they may have to choose sides. Thirdly, as 5050M6 reported, her mutual friends chose her ex-partners side which suggests that for whatever reason, her mutual friends chose to maintain their relationship with her ex-partner and not her, which 5050M6 described as "hard". 5050M6 didn't described why she felt her friends chose her over her ex-partner, however she may have had to deal with feelings of rejection and lowered self-esteem as a result of this experience. Losses of mutual friendships and loss of her relationship with her ex-partners' mother suggests a culture of social loss, loss of support and rejection for 5050M6. In particular, 5050M6 described feeling increasingly lonely as a result of the loss of a mutual friend who was also separated. In the context of living in a world where the event of separation was unknown to her, 5050M6 described the loss of another who had the potential to provide her with a normalising and validating social experience as particularly difficult. This experience left her feeling alone and unsure of what to expect following her separation: "I didn't know any single mums, so that was... having someone to talk to who actually understood what I was going through, That was really difficult not having that". For 5050M6 it appeared that validation from a peer was particularly

important. As a result of social losses 5050M6 felt cut off from her pre-separation world with no connection to the life she had known, which was daunting for her. On the other hand, 5050M6's interpersonal changes following separation also meant reconnecting with friends she had prior to her relationship: "the friends I had before I met [ex-partner], they came and helped me". 5050M6 reported that these friends assisted her in the context of lost support from pre-separation friendships. Interestingly, 5050M6 alluded to the fact that these friends were friends she she'd had prior to her relationship with her ex-partner which suggests that friendships and social networks gained during her relationship were not her own, but her explainers or social networks gained together during their relationship. In this sense 5050M6 current social relationship may reflect a social time before she met her ex-partner.

5050M6 also described financial changes that she had to contend with following separation. For 5050M6 such changes did not necessarily represent difficulty for her. The general feeling from 5050M6's reports was that she felt on top of things financially: "financially, I was ok. I was already used to doing our whole finances just off my wage, that was really easy to adapt to". In this sense, it appeared that 5050M6 had a lot of knowledge, or at least felt knowledgeable in finances and financial planning as she had taken care of the finances in her pre-separation relationship. In other words, 5050M6 appeared to have mastered financial planning within the pre-separation relationship therefore, adjusting to financial wellbeing within the single parent household was not an issue. When discussing financial change, 5050M6 alluded to the idea that change was hard for her to adapt to, however, in the context of her financial situation, because there was no change, she was able to adapt relatively easily. The flow on effect of this stability for 5050M6 was that she also felt confident in her ability to set aside emergency money and financial safety nets to support herself and her children post-separation. 5050M6 felt this was a strength of hers: [when asked what she felt her strengths were] "being able to keep a hold financially... just knowing that I had a bit of money that I'd put aside in the bank so that if I couldn't work for that week I could still pay the bills". In addition, 5050M6 alluded to the fact that some weeks she was unable to work as a single mother. The reasons for this were not addressed, however, not being able to work may be directly related to post-separation experiences for 5050M6 (i.e., perhaps she couldn't work due to child care commitments, depression, stress ect...). In the context of the difficulties 5050M6 experienced adjusting to her separation she reported a number of resources that she enlisted to assist her through this difficult time. Resources were both personal and environmental. 5050M6 felt she was supported within her own personal environment: "having support from the family and my close friends". She felt her family were very supportive, especially when she needed someone to talk to. She did allude to family and close friends as the most supportive which suggested that she relied upon individuals within her immediate social network for support. She also described community services as supportive: "I have to go to Centrelink... the lady there was the most helpful person I've ever met". She felt that in terms of services she may have accessed, the Centrelink lady was the most helpful. She appeared to suggest this as a surprise which may mean that she had experienced some unhelpful people within the family relationship community service environment. She stated that she 'had' to go to centrelink which also suggests that she wasn't necessarily happy about having to access such a service but when she did she was pleasantly

surprised with the support she received there. She further reported counselling as a substantial support: "I did [counselling] for my depression... it helped a lot". In the context of the way she described her depression and the negative connotations attached to her mental health disorder, it appears counselling may have been particularly beneficial for her as it assisted her to cope effectively with her disorder therefore increasing feelings of positive adjustment and adaptation. She described her depression as directly related to an inability to maintain her strength therefore counselling served as a buffer. 5050M6 also described peer relationships as important to her: "I joined a couple of single mums forums... it was really nice to know that there's other people out there that you could talk to". The way she described these relationships, however, was somewhat distant. For example, she stated that it was nice to 'know' there were others out there that she could talk but also reported that she didn't really access such support. Therefore the simple feeling of not being alone appeared to assist 5050M6 the most, rather than actually reaching out to others in her same position. Again, this may reflect the fact that she did not have any peers in her own social networks but knowing that she wasn't alone on a distant level assisted her following separation.

In addition to environmental resources, 5050M6 also described personal resources that she felt assisted her following her separation. She pointed to mindfulness, meditation, goal setting and planning as helpful: "I do a few things from counselling to try and beat the depression, practising mindfulness and doing a bit of meditation, really helped as well", "I've done things like goals, and financial goals... just doing a lot of lists... lists of how I used to be and who I want to be, and just so you know that I can get through, who I am now". 5050M6 learned these techniques during counselling, therefore they were initially related to assisting her depression, however she reported using these strategies to assist her to work her way through her separation. This further increased the benefits she felt from counselling. Having these new skills allowed her to feel more on top of who she was and who she wanted to be and also increased feelings of personal mastery and adjustment to her separation. Again, these techniques were mostly described in terms of assisting her depression which further reinforces the significant impact her depression had on her as a person. She also described exercise as beneficial stating that: "I'd go for a walk every day now and that really seems to help". Use of the word 'now' may mean that she didn't exercise in her pre-separation relationship however her new separated self enjoys exercise and finds benefits from it. In particular, 5050M6 referred to planning and goal setting as beneficial for her personally. She felt using these strategies assisted her to know that she could get through the separation and assisted her to learn about herself and adjust to her new identity post-separation. She also described feeling that planning and goal setting allowed her to provide a structure for adjustment that she could work towards in a self-regulated manner. Therefore perhaps she felt that having goals and plans ensured that she had something to work towards in terms of a light at the end of the tunnel. 5050M6 also felt that she was an unemotional person who didn't get too upset about things: "I'm a really unemotional person, so I suppose not getting overly upset about things helps", "I'm a really chilled out person, nothing really gets to me that much, so just having that attitude I think helps". This description of herself suggests that she feels emotions get in the way of adjustment, where her ability to remain emotionally stable assisted her following separation. Perhaps she feels that had

she been more emotional, she may not have been able to overcome her difficulties as well as she had. She described her lack of emotion as a sort of personality trait that assisted her following separation. She further described herself as optimistic, where she felt that maintaining a positive persona assisted her following separation: "my strength is maybe just that mindset of, everything's going to be ok, you just have to ;get through this". She described optimism as a mindset where she felt that she had conditioned herself to believe that everything was going to be and pushed herself to believe that she could get through her separation. Therefore, she alluded to the idea that she had a difficult road ahead of her but that she would be ok because she believed she would be. In addition, 5050M6 also alluded to the idea that she was able to recognise when she needed additional help and was able to reach out for such help: [when asked what her strengths were] "probably being able to ask other people for help, like being able to ask for help, ask my family, and just telling them when I wasn't okay, and need someone to talk to". . Describing herself in such a way suggested three things. First that she was confident in her ability to recognise and react to her own emotions, second that she was confident in her ability to seek help during such times, and third that she knew she had a support network available to her should she feel the need to access it. She also alluded to the idea that talking was a beneficial way to buffer against feeling 'not okay'.