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An exploration of non-residential fathers' relationship with their children: Working towards a positive psychology approach

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An Exploration of Non-Residential Fathers' Relationship With Their Children:
Working Towards A Positive Psychology Approach

Suzanne Ray

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirement for the Award of
Bachelor or Arts (Psychology) Honours
Faculty of Community Studies,
Education and Social Sciences
Edith Cowan University

October, 2005

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

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Declaration

I certify that this literature review and research project does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in text.

Candidate's signature: _

Date: 31-10-05

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The Importance of Non-Residential Fathers in Their Children's Lives:

What the Research Says

Suzanne Ray

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August 22, 2005

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Abstract

In western culture, the majority of fathers become the non-residential parent after separation and it is reported many disengage from their children as time goes on. This review will elucidate the effects of separation on the father role. Within this body of literature there are two dominant ideologies pertaining to fathers – father absence and father importance. The findings from research support that the quality of contact rather than quantity of contact is important for close bonds between non-residential fathers and their children. There are a number of factors that can help or hinder this relationship which are intrinsically linked to their level of parental satisfaction and their ability to engage in authoritative parenting. The father construct is shaped by world events, social and political movements. Contemporary fatherhood, pertinent to non-residential fathers, is still in a period of transition. Although this area of study is gaining momentum the diversity and complexity of modern family structures necessitates ongoing research to uncover subtle changes in behaviour and attitudes.

The Importance of Non-Residential Fathers in Their Children's Lives:

What the Research Says

Over the past four decades the rate of divorce has increased in western cultures. In today's relationship climate, nearly one in every three first marriages and half of second marriages will also end in divorce (Lamb, 1999). While the majority of residential parents are mothers, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report that 82% of non-residential parents are fathers and approximately 80% of separated parents re-partner within five years (ABS, 2003; Murphy, 1998a). This phenomenal rate of marriage, divorce and remarriage has had implications for the structure and roles performed within traditional nuclear families, re-partnered families and legislation (Australian Government 2003; Amato & Keith, 1991; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 1999; McLanahan, 1999; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

The roles of fatherhood have transitioned through broad contexts such as moral guide, breadwinner, sex role development, and responsible father provider (Lamb, 1999). Social scientists purport fatherhood is a multi-faceted, socially constructed reflection of the social and political attitudes of the time (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Lamb, 1997; Lamb, 2000; Garbarino, 2000; Greenberger & Goldberg, 1989; Hewitt, 2000; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin & Dornbusch, 1993; Marsiglio, 1991; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Parke, 2000). Undoubtedly the biggest influences on contemporary fatherhood were the end of World War II (WWII) and the birth of the 1960s feminist movement (Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 2000). As outlined below, these two significant events contributed to the emancipation of women and the increase in divorce (Baker, 2001).

The onset of WWII provided different experiences for men, who went away to war, which broadened their life experiences and the women left behind were

required to undertake different roles within the community and enter paid employment (Baker, 2001). These vastly different experiences, along with the feminist movement, challenged the traditional stereotypical gendered roles and values of patriarchal domination and demanded fathers involve themselves more in parental responsibilities and obligations within the family (Baker, 2001; Garbarino, 2000). For some fathers the change in social attitudes that required them to perform tasks contrary to their socialisation where confusing, but for others it enabled them to nurture close bonds with their children without the stigma of being labelled feminine (Lamb, 2000; Lamb, Sternberg & Thompson, 1999; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Parke, 2000; Vawser, 2001).

These changes also had implications for social policy pertaining to separation and divorce¹, child residency and child support issues along with interventions designed to support separated families in reaching acceptable outcomes (Baker, 2001; Emery, Kitzmann & Waldron, 1999; McLanahan, 1999). This necessitated the Family Law Act (1975) in Australia to be amended to reflect that mothers and fathers were equally legally responsible for their children until they were 18 years and children's best interests needed parental co-operation² (Australian Government, 2003, 2004; FLPAG, 2001).

The end of WWII not only had implications for social attitudes and behaviours but also created two dominant research foci associated with parental separation. The first was maternal deprivation which espoused the importance of the mother-child attachment (Baker, 2001; Bowlby, 1974; Lamb 1999). This underpinned the 'tender years' presumption in family law that considered mothers to

¹ Separation will be used to refer to both legal divorce and the demise of a co-habital relationship.

² The Family Law Act (1975), particularly Part VII was amended under the Family Law Reform 1995 to reflect that children had the right to have access to both parents. The terms custody and access were replaced with residency and contact respectively.

be the best carers for children³ (Emery & Wyer, 1987a). The second was father absence. This drew attention to the negative psychological outcomes for children attributed to absent fathers' withdrawal of financial and emotional resources from the family (Baker, 2001; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 1997; Lamb, 1999; Phares, 1992; Silverstein, 1993).

Both the maternal deprivation and father absence studies were predominantly empirical studies which were conducted on lone mother families and their children ranging from preschool to adult children (Costigan & Cox, 2001; Phares, 1992). Most of these studies relied on mothers' perspectives of themselves, of their ex-partner, children and children's perceptions while fathers' direct participation was negligible. For example, Greenberger and Goldberg (1989) had mothers and fathers in their sample but they did not collect fathers' information on authoritative parenting as they had done for mothers. This over-representation of mother and child focused research portrayed a negative picture of emotional instability and financial deprivation due to the departure of the father (Costigan & Cox, 2001; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001; Phares, 1992).

What early research failed to recognise was that many fathers also suffered from poor psychological functioning through perceived loss of their family status, extended relationships, and financial distress of having to support their children as well as establish new homes themselves (Campbell & Pike, 2002; Nicholls & Pike, 1998; Smyth & Weston, 2005). In response, men's advocacy groups were established to support angry, depressed and suicidal fathers in their transition from being married to single fathers (FLPAG, 2001, www.lonefathers.com.au; www.menslineaus.org.au; unifamcounselling.org). The interest in the importance of

³ Prior to this time, children were automatically awarded to fathers. This ideology of ownership remains customary in some non-western cultures (Hewitt, 2000).

fathers in children's development had gained momentum by the 1990s. Findings from these studies highlighted the need for egalitarian parental rights and legislative reform at a Commonwealth level.

Later research paints a more positive picture. When good supportive bonds are established between non-residential fathers and their children, soon after separation, it is more likely there will be positive psychological outcomes for both children and fathers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Garbarino, 2000; Maccoby et al., 1993). There is some evidence to suggest that the majority of separated children, who have an involved non-residential father, appear to function at levels similar to children from intact families (Barber, 2005; Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; Lamb, 1999).

Aim

The purpose of this review is to elucidate the two predominant research foci associated with paternal involvement post-separation – father absence and father importance. Thus, the review will explore what helps and what hinders fathers' level of involvement with their children and how this impacts on their capacity to parent effectively. The extent of non-residential father involvement may be influenced by their recollection of their own fathers' parenting skills which impact on their current behaviour and the commitment to their children. In addition this review aims to highlight the need for ongoing research into the nuances of non-residential fathers' relationships with their children.

Father Absence

In most instances of parental separation it is fathers who leave the family home and have to re-establish themselves elsewhere (Australian Institute of Family

Studies, 2005 [AIFS]; Baker, 2001; Campbell & Pike, 2002; Murphy, 1998a). This phenomenon has been labelled 'father absence' and is associated with the negative psychological outcomes and delinquent behaviour in children and the increased psychopathologies in lone-mothers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Barber, 2004; Barber, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999; Phares, 1992; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). These negative outcomes were attributed to the withdrawal of financial and emotional resources of the absent fathers, his reduced parental buffering and inter-parental conflict (Hetherington et al., 1998; Kelly, 2000).

The bulk of 'father absence' research was predominantly conducted in North America during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. However, a recent Australian meta-analysis suggested Australian children are similarly affected by the separation and parents' emotional distance after separation (Rodgers, 1996). The following section outlines the research conducted on the effects of father absence on children, mothers and the contact father.

The effects on children. The research on the effects of father absence on children's outcomes indicates the impact of divorce remains internalised by children throughout childhood and their adult lives (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Barber, 2005; Hetherington et al., 1998; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). However, it is recognised that children's adjustment is facilitated by their own personal attributes, propensity for vulnerability, development stage, pre-separation environment and their social context (Bauserman, 2002; Hetherington et al., 1998; McIntosh, 2003; Parke, 2004). There have been opposing arguments about the impact of divorce on children's age. For instance, some social scientists consider separation to be disruptive on the early cognitive and emotional development of younger children who respond to parents'

emotional turbulence with increased aggressive behaviours but these behaviours are not as significant as those of adolescents' externalised aggression (McLanahan & Teitler, 1999).

The evidence from North American longitudinal studies indicate children from separated families were at increased risk of dropping out of high school, experienced earlier sexual activity, increased instances of teen-pregnancy and higher rates of maladaptive behaviours in boys when compared to children from intact families (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; AIFS, 2005; Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Barber, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lamb, 1999; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Children in stepfamilies are also at greater risk of negative psychological outcomes, increased instances of high school dropout and teen pregnancies (McLanahan, 1999).

These differences between children from separated and intact families are also evidenced in the intergenerational transmission of family behaviours and marital instability (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cowan, Cohn, Cowan & Pearson, 1996; Feng, Giarrusso, Bengston, Bradbury & Fry, 1999; Lamb, 1999; Story, Karney, Lawrence & Bradbury, 2004). In the meta-analysis by Amato and Keith (1991) correlation co-efficients were calculated using no controls, controlled for pre-divorce variables and controlled for post-divorce variables, (-.158, -.154, -.172 respectively), although weak, they showed young adult children from separated families had lower levels of wellbeing when compared to young adults from intact families. In other longitudinal studies that tracked separated parents and their children, female adult children were more likely to be sexually active, cohabit and become pregnant much earlier than female adult children from intact parents (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 2001). Similarly male

adult children are more prone to addictive, contemptuous and aggressive behaviour than those from intact parents, thus these separated adult children are more likely to choose partners who respond to these behaviours than adult male children from intact parents (Amato, 1996; Feng et al., 1999; Story et al., 2004).

The effects on mothers. A major contributing factor to maternal dysfunction is the withdrawal of financial and parental resources, particularly if the mother was financially dependent on the father (Story et al., 2004). This impacts on the capacity of all family members to engage in extra social activities and services necessary for normal development (Hetherington et al., 1998). It contributes to some families' relocation to poorer neighbourhoods where children are exposed to more negative behaviours (McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999).

In addition mothers, particularly if they are employed, have less time to supervise and monitor children creating more opportunities for delinquent or maladaptive behaviour (Hetherington et al., 1998). Without the buffer of another adult, the increased demand on mothers' personal resources impacts on their parenting ability (Hetherington et al., 1998) which often becomes authoritarian in contrast to the authoritative parenting reported in most intact families (Avenevoli, Sessa, Steinberg, 1999). Separated mothers also tend to report increased instances of depression and anxiety and it is apparent some mothers' conflict, resentment and physical strain contribute to them controlling the fathers' contact with children (Bauserman, 2002; Kelly & Lamb, 2003). This gate-keeping behaviour can have a detrimental effect on the non-residential father-child relationship.

The effect on fathers. In the early literature, the negative effects of separation on non-residential fathers' experience were not considered in relation to child development but instead were focused on their addictions and domestic

violence (Phares, 1992; Silverstein, 1993). However, more recently men have reported increased instances of depression, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and suicide are consequences of their changed roles (Campbell & Pike, 2002; Flood, 2005). There is sufficient evidence to support the finding that many fathers disengaged from their children as length of separation time increased and as children grew older (ABS, 2003; Kitzmann & Emery, 1994; Maccoby et al., 1993; Qu, 2004). At one point in time it was believed that it was important for children to have a strong attachment to one parent, namely the mother, and at a later time children could seek out the other parent. In addition, some fathers found it difficult to establish a relationship with their angry children after their separation (Green, 1998).

In summary the evidence pertaining to the 'absent father' portrays a very negative picture for mothers, children and fathers. What this research failed to convey was that absent fathers have been denied the joys and pain of their parental responsibility. With the growing public profile and stridency from men's advocacy groups it became apparent fathers were under-represented in both family law matters which were perceived to be biased towards mothers and under represented in research (Costigan & Cox, 2001; FLPAG, 2001). These combined factors gave birth to a new research paradigm – the importance of fathers in children's lives.

The Importance of Fathers

Prior to the 1970s there was a de-emphasis on the importance of fathers in children's development (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 1999). Current social attitudes support the unique, multi-dimensional contributions fathers make to their children's lives (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Lamb, 1997; Thompson & Liable, 1999). In fact, some researchers report that fathers have the power to hinder

or promote healthy development in children (Lamb, 1997; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001; Phares, 1992; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Vawser, 2001).

There are many factors that support the important role fathers have in the psychological development of children. Many social scientists now agree that (a) Infants can be equally attached to both mothers and fathers; (b) fathers are capable of nurturing; (c) it is important for children to be allowed to have good relationships with both parents; (d) non-residential fathers can still play a vital role in children's development even when they have reduced contact; and (e) that some non-residential fathers become closer to their children after separation when they engage in authoritative parenting (Amato, 1993; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Biddulph, Garbarino, 2000; Green, 1998; Greene & Moore, 2000; Lamb et al., 1999; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Marsiglio, 1991; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

Authoritative parenting. It can be said parenting is a dynamic experience marked by shifts in children's development and life events (Thompson & Liable, 1999) and two major difficulties separated fathers have to contend with is their diminished parental role and their perceived lack of control over children's lives (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Bruce & Curtis, 1993). A number of studies have explored the effectiveness of parental style on children's behaviour and found authoritative parenting shapes children to be independent, self-assertive with good self-concepts (Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Conrade & Ho, 2001; Green, 1998). The tenets of authoritative parenting are clear communications to support children's autonomous behaviour within well defined boundaries, emotional warmth, support and appropriate physical contact (Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Conrade & Ho, 2001; Thompson & Liable, 1999).

The traditional father has been perceived to be more authoritarian - characterised by high control, no autonomy, coerciveness, and value laden, rather than authoritative (Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Conrade & Ho, 2001). However a study by Greenberger and Goldberg (1988) has shown fathers' parental style is moderated by their commitment to work in that when they show increased commitment to work they became less authoritarian. Parke (2004) adds that the level of autonomy in parents' employment will also impact on their parenting practices. The relevance of this finding relates to the plausibility that fathers' parenting style may change and become more aligned with maternal parenting when fathers spend more time in active parental roles (Phares, 1993; Risman, 1987). Garbarino (2000) purports that this change in parenting is not about feminising fathers' involvement but recognising that mothers and fathers are equally capable of effective parenting; they just bring different experiences to parenting (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Father involvement. According to Minton and Pasley, (1996) fathers' involvement with their children is intrinsically linked to their perception of fatherhood. These perceptions are shaped by their own parents' parenting practices, reflective of the social and political attitudes of their time, regulating behaviours to comply with social norms within given contexts (Furstenberg, & Weiss, 2000; Garbarino, 2000; Le Gresley, 2001; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Parke, 2000). For example, in a survey of 300 fathers, Parke (2000) found older fathers had different patterns of involvement than younger fathers and age was negatively correlated to physical activity. A number of researchers suggest fathers' identities are sensitive to the recognition of their roles by significant others such as partners and ex-partners (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Parke, 2000, 2004).

Minton and Pasley (1996) found no difference in the perceived level of parental investment between married and separated fathers. However, Minton and Pasley found statistically significant differences in feelings of competence and satisfaction; separated fathers felt less competent and less satisfied than intact fathers. It is plausible that the more satisfied non-residential fathers feel towards their parental role the more involved they tend to be.

It is apparent there are vast differences amongst fathers' commitment to parental responsibilities. In a study on the social construction of fatherhood, Le Gresley (2001) found that fathers varied in their parental role and this was attributed to both conscious and unconscious priming. For instance some fathers choose to retain their traditional role of provider with peripheral interest in children's development, while other fathers adopted the "new" discourse associated with satisfaction from engaging both in children's development from pregnancy and in the non-traditional roles such as caring, yet other fathers blended the traditional and new discourses (Le Gresley, 2001; Marsiglio, 1991; Phares, 1993; Pruett, Williams, Insabella & Little, 2003).

The socio-biological theory is another perspective for exploring paternal involvement and underpins Silverstein's (1993) "cads and dads" dichotomy. The tenets for this theory pertain to the procreation patterns of primate behaviour. According to Silverstein cads are fathers who invest little energy or emotional resources in the children sired from serial relationships. Conversely, dads produce offspring with only one partner and invest a significant amount of emotional and energy resources (Silverstein, 1993). Based on these definitions, along with the increased numbers of non-married mothers, fathers who are non-compliant with child support and diminished contact post-separation, Silverstein argues most fathers

are cads. However, it is plausible that paternal involvement falls on a cad-dad continuum (Phares, 1993).

Paternal involvement has also been studied using an object relations perspective which focuses on the importance of significant attachments in early childhood. The quality of these attachments are internalised by children which have an impact on their perception and experiences of relationships throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1974). In a study by Ehrenberg, Hunter and Elterman (1996) they found that non-residential fathers who shared custody were more 'other' focused and invested highly in their children and had co-operative co-parental relationships. In contrast non-residential fathers who did not share custody were more 'self' focused and had comparatively increased levels of conflict and had non-cooperative ex-partners (Ehrenberg et al., 1996).

It is evident that there are many philosophical perspectives for viewing paternal involvement. It is common practice that paternal involvement is invariably contrasted to maternal involvement which will be explored in the next section.

Parental involvement in intact families. From research conducted on intact families, it is well documented that there is a difference between mothers and fathers in terms of the time spent with children and the types of interaction they have with children. For example mothers spend more time engaged, accessible and responsible for children's activities and fathers' interaction is more playful and competitive (Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, 1991; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Despite the growing social attitudes towards fathers' involvement there has been little change to the above pattern in the past decade (Lamb, 1997).

In an attempt to quantify intact parental involvement, studies typically use measurements such as engagement – one on one participation i.e. playing and

homework; accessibility – close proximity but less interactive i.e. cooking and cleaning whilst child is near-by; and responsibility – the extent to which a parent takes responsibility for health, education and finances (Lamb, 1997). In intact families the level of interaction is mediated or moderated by the employment status of the mother. For instance in families with unemployed mothers, fathers spend about a quarter of the time in engagement, about 30% accessible time but had negligible responsibility when compared to mothers (Lamb, 1997). Whereas in dual employed families, mothers still took responsibility but paternal engagement and accessibility was higher (Costigan & Cox, 2001; Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio, 1991; Phares, 1993). One of the major difficulties in measuring the multi-dimensionality of parental involvement is that boundaries between the three categories get blurred. For instance, what one researcher may define as engaged another may defined as accessible.

Non-residential father involvement. The frequency of contact and levels of compliance with child support payments are two of the most widely used measures of non-residential father involvement (Seltzer, 1988; Smyth & Weston, 2005). However, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) have argued contact provides a very narrow view of father involvement and they include the capacity to have close emotional bonds and practice authoritative parenting as additional measures for assessing father involvement. These latter areas of non-residential father involvement have received comparatively little research attention.

It is consistently reported in research findings that factors such as socio-economic status and education are predictors of non-residential father involvement. In a study conducted by Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) on young African American fathers it was found that paternal participation in this cohort was

characterised by two distinct patterns of paternal involvement. One group of fathers were either highly involved, caring from birth to the three-year follow-up and the other group of fathers were disengaged, non-compliant with child support and emotionally removed from their children.

In this sample, paternal involvement was linked to education and employment status, which may be correlated with personal characteristics of responsibility and stability (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). Therefore the more fathers feel they can adequately provide for their children, the more likely it is they will engage as a father (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Seltzer, 1988). These conclusions are consistent with Smyth, Caruana and Ferro's (2004) findings that Australian fathers who had day only, little or no contact tended to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds and felt less satisfied as fathers. It was also found that residential status was less important than the quality of paternal involvement in mediating non-residential fathers relationships with their children (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Parke 2000).

An optimistic view of changes in non-residential fathers' parenting behaviour is that their commitment to work will not undermine their ability to parent effectively if they wanted to negotiate shared residency. Support for this statement is found in a multi-method qualitative and quantitative study by Nicholls and Pike (1998) who found fathers to be capable of effective parenting, nurturing and discipline. Costigan and Cox (2001) also found that employment was not a predictor of non-residential fathers' involvement.

Factors that Help or Hinder Non-Residential Fathers Involvement

It is well known that fathers spend less time with their children than do mothers in most family structures. For most non-residential fathers who do not share residency this time is even more compromised (Lamb, 1999). The investment that non-residential fathers have in their children can be both mediated or moderated by factors such as children's age, fathers' demographics, the inter-parental relationships and the level of conflict, relocation and re-partnering (Amato & Keith, 1991; Campbell & Pike, 2002; Hetherington, et al., 1998; Marsiglio, 2001; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; McLanahan, McLanahan & Teitler, 1999; Nicholls & Pike, 1998; Parke, 2000; Thompson & Laible, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). It is important for the reader to be made aware how the key factors discussed below affect the non-residential father-child relationship.

Child support. There is clear evidence to support the payment of child support by non-residential fathers makes a significant contribution to the wellbeing of children (AIFS, 2005; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Green, 1998; Greene & Moore, 2000; Hetherington et al., 1998; Pedro-Carroll, 2001; Smyth & Weston, 2005). This notion was one of the guiding principles behind the establishment of the Child Support Agency (CSA) in Australia (Smyth & Weston, 2005). However, the payment of child support remains one of the most contentious issues facing non-residential fathers (Parkinson, 2003). Not only does this create increased levels of anxiety and depression in separated fathers when re-establishing their own lives, particularly if they have re-partnered and have step-children, it may also hinder their ability to engage in close parental bonds with their children (Campbell & Pike, 2002; Murphy, 1998a; Thompson & Laible, 1999).

In a discussion paper by Smyth and Weston (2005), there was a consensus from both the general population and the Caring for Children After Parental Separation Survey (CFCAPS) that the purpose of the CSA was to support children. However, there are discrepant views about whether: (a) non-residential fathers should always have to pay child support; (b) if age of children should be considered and (c) if the system was informal would non-residential fathers comply with child support (Smyth & Weston, 2005). Whilst this paper acknowledges the 'income minimisation' strategy used by high-income earners to reduce their child support payments, this behaviour is not included in any of the critiqued literature (Smyth & Weston, 2005).

Many fathers report mothers use child support as the 'gate' between them and their children (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Pruett et al., 2003). However, differences in mothers' and fathers' perspectives on child support compliance are difficult to measure because not all payments are processed through collection agencies (Braver et al., 1993). In fact, a study by Greene and Moore (2000) found that informal child support arrangements were correlated with more compliance. Similarly, non-residential fathers with joint custody, higher earnings and informal child support negotiations were more compliant with child support (Phares, 1993).

The literature suggests that separated parents have different priorities towards post-separation concerns. For instance, residential mothers are primarily concerned with establishing child support payments from fathers, whereas fathers are primarily concerned about establishing post-separation relationships with their children (Thompson & Laible, 1999).

Contact. There have been changes in the patterns of contact frequency from the 1970s to now. The statistics reported in studies show that these contact patterns

have generally increased which may be attributed to the growing acceptance of the important contributions fathers make to their children's lives (ABS, 2003; AIFS, 2005B; Maccoby et al., 1993; Thompson & Laible, 1999). Although there are contradictory findings pertaining to the payment of child support and the frequency of contact, it is acknowledged that a certain amount of contact is essential for the maintenance of emotional bonds and for engaging in authoritative parenting practices (AIFS, 2005a; Hetherington et al., 1998; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Pedro-Caroll, 2001).

The majority of children wish to remain in contact with their fathers and a sign of the non-residential fathers' commitment to them is their ongoing frequent contact which needs to be established as soon as possible (Garbarino, 2000; Nicholls & Pike, 1998). In establishing contact schedules, it has been found that mothers generally favour sole residency, particularly if they are financially dependent on ex-partner or the children are very young (Smith & Weston, 2004). Conversely many fathers prefer more contact, some preferring shared residency but do not pursue this issue because of costs and stress associated with litigation (Maccoby et al., 1993; Smyth & Weston, 2004).

In Australia, the most predominant contact schedule is for contact at least once per month or more and that involves overnight stays; but is less than shared care which is considered to be greater than 30% of the time (AIFS, 2005b; Australian Government 2004; Smyth, 2004; Smyth et al., 2004 [see Smyth, 2004 and Smyth et al., 2004 for comprehensive discussions). This is consistent with other western cultures (Amato 2001; Bauserman, 2002). There are two principal reasons for this – first traditional gender roles have fostered the maternal bond between

mother and child and second that other options have not been considered (Bowlby, 1974; Smyth, 2004; Smyth et al., 2004).

Fathers who have shared care (>30%). There are certain factors that contribute to successful shared care such as parents' close proximity to enable children to attend the same school and extra curricula activities, financial independence of both parents and flexible working arrangements (Maccoby et al., 1993; Smyth, 2004). It has been found that shared care was associated with positive outcomes for children and allowed both parents maximal involvement in parental roles (Australian Government, 2003; Bauserman, 2004; Smyth 2004, Smyth et al, 2004). It has also been found that joint residency is linked to increased levels of parental satisfaction in non-residential fathers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). However, it is logistically complex and requires business like communication and negotiation between parents who can separate their marital issues from their parental responsibilities (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Parkinson, 2003; Phares, 1993; Smyth et al., 2004). It has been found that inter-parental communication and the co-ordinating of rules do diminish over time (Maccoby et al., 1993).

In a meta-analytic study by Bauserman (2002), the non-significant effect sizes across several domains i.e., education, emotional, family and behaviour were attributed to the children in joint custody being better adjusted than those in sole custody. When parental conflict was controlled for, those parents who shared custody tended to have minimal conflict and were able to negotiate with the children's best interest in mind. Interestingly, in this analysis conflict was lowest when father contact was very high and highest when middle contact levels (Bauserman, 2002; Parkinson, 2003) which is contrary to findings by Barber (2005). However low conflict could also arise when there was no contact because co-

parental relationships were very poor or the father had completely disengaged. Similarly the results from the meta-analysis conducted by Amato and Gilbreth (1999) supported joint residency because fathers had more time and were more able to be authoritative parents, which is intrinsically linked to increased parental satisfaction and better emotional, behavioural, and academic achievement in children.

Fathers who have little or no contact. It appears that there are many complex issues that surround the little or no contact group and these fathers may only see their children once every three months or only once per year (AIFS, 2005b; Smyth et al, 2004). In a study by Smyth et al. it was found that the little or no contact group was characterised by increased conflict, relocation, lower socio-economic status, inflexible working hours, and more paternal disengagement (Smyth et al., 2004). In a review by Kelly and Lamb (2003) it was reported that 17% of custodial parents moved within two years of separation and that custodial mothers moved more frequently than custodial fathers. Relocation of either parent has been attributed to non-compliant child support and non-residential father disengagement because the financial and emotional costs of maintaining contact are too great for some fathers (Braver et al., 1993; Phares, 1993; Thompson & Laible, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

It has been found that mothers have reported fathers opt out of their parental duties, fathers reported mothers are gatekeepers and prevent additional contact, either physical or electronic (Smyth et al., 2004). The disadvantage of this schedule is that the long intervals in between visits may hinder close connections from forming if there is no form of contact (Smyth, 2004). The holiday only and day only contact was associated with even less parental satisfaction and perceived to be

shallow, laced with the stigma of being 'fun' dads who entertained their children in order for them to return next time (Smyth et al.).

Although not customary practice, it is plausible that contact schedules may need to be reviewed periodically to reflect children's different needs at critical developmental stages (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Although most Australian children reside with their mother, the CFCAPS showed there was some flexibility in residential arrangements with 10% of children less than 10 years and 21% of children between the ages of 15-17 years changing residences at least once (Qu, 2004). There have been inconsistent findings about the influence of age on contact schedules. Pruett et al. (2003) found that non-residential fathers are more involved with older children than younger children but there was no differential contact between boys and girls.

For some fathers establishing relationships in their post-separation home is difficult, particularly if they were uninvolved in their marital relationships. However, separation can be a liberating experience and an opportunity to establish emotional connections with children (Green, 1998). The ongoing relationships between non-residential fathers' and their children may also be influenced by the reciprocal nature of their personality dynamics (Hetherington, et al., 1998; Maccoby, 2000).

Conflict. It has been consistently documented that parental conflict is detrimental to the establishment and maintenance of non-residential father – child relationships (Ahrons & Miller, 1993; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Maccoby et al., 1993; Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Christopher, 1999; McIntosh, 2003; McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003; Pruett et al., 2003; Wymard, 1994). When inter-parental conflict is high it seeks to undermine the non-

residential father relationship, decrease their parental satisfaction and increase the likelihood they will disengage (McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003). Some of this parental conflict may be attributed to the fact that, in approximately 80% of cases, only one parent wants to dissolve the relationship (AIFS, 2005; Pedro-Carroll, 2001). This is linked with unexpected findings by Emery, Laumbann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra and Dillon (2001) who found that parents who mediated were less accepting of the marital demise than were those who litigated.

The first few years after separation are characterised by emotional vulnerability and for some this extends much longer (Campbell & Pike, 2002; Hetherington et al., 1998; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). It has been documented that fathers suffer greater emotional vulnerability than women after separation (Australian Government 2004). Therefore, it is imperative that interventions are accessible by vulnerable parents to resolve issues and work towards a low conflict co-parental relationship (FLPAG, 2001; see McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003 for a comprehensive account of normative and enduring conflict).

Under the family systems perspective clear boundaries between each dyad in the system is necessary for healthy relationship functioning. In the case of highly conflicted families, these boundaries can become blurred and children can be drawn into the conflict to buffer parental conflict (Cox & Paley, 1997). In a random sample, Madden-Derdich et al. (1999) tested the hypothesis of separated parents' high level of conflict was correlated with ambiguous boundaries. They found no difference between mothers' and fathers' level of emotional intensity, financial strain, and parenting satisfaction. However, for women the emotional intensity and the power and control variables were significant predictors of boundary ambiguity

whereas only emotional intensity was a significant predictor of boundary ambiguity for men (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999).

The findings from research provide support for the considerable differences in non-residential fathers' personalities, values and motivation. This is demonstrated by the fact that not all fathers disengage because of poor inter-parental relationships. For example in a study by Maccoby et al. (1993) parental conflict was only minimally predictive of contact. Conversely, sometimes the conflict resulting from contact can erode any benefit from the contact (Maccoby et al., 1993). Cox and Paley (1997) add that exposure to a certain amount of conflict is healthy for developing conflict resolution skills in children.

Re-partnering/stepfamilies. The rate of subsequent re-marriage dissolution is even more prominent than that of first marriages (Bray, 1999; Murphy, 1998a, 1998b). In the majority of stepfamilies, it is a non-residential father who enters a lone mother family (Murphy, 1998a). For some lone mother families this can be a further financial and emotional drain on their resources (Murphy, 1998a). There is some evidence that the adjustment period for establishing homeostatic relationships within stepfamilies is longer than that of separation, particularly if separation and repartnering are concurrent (Cox & Paley, 1997; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The length of adjustment is also attributed to the complexities of multiple family relationships within the remarried family and the unconscious priming of mythical labels such as "wicked step-mother" that create anxieties and fears in children (Bray, 1999; Murphy, 1998b).

In addition to the risk factors that influence non-residential fathers involvement with their own children, there are additional factors that complicate stepfamilies. For instance, the remarriage brings two parents that may have

different parenting values; the step-parent-step-child relationship may be strained through personality differences or readjustment issues; conflict can be exacerbated with former partners and child support paid to former spouse may strain loyalties to both families (Murphy, 1998a, 1998b). In addition the biological mother may react in a negative manner, if she perceives the children's father has become distant and his focus is on the new family (Bray, 1999; Hetherington et al., 1998).

Litigation or mediation. It is not unusual for contact schedules to be negotiated and 'carved in stone' in court orders when parental conflict is high and this inflexibility may prevent contact schedules with the best interests of children in mind from being negotiated and (Amato, 2001; Australian Government, 2004a, 2004b; Maccoby et al., 1993; Qu, 2004). It has been reported that separated fathers are adversely affected by litigation, for example, the Lonefathers Association reports: (a) 70% of fathers are not granted residency; (b) 80% are advised not to proceed; and (c) 75% of fathers loose in property disputes.

In an attempt to minimise the ongoing and often escalated conflict associated with litigation, mediation has become a widely used resolution instrument to minimise conflict between parents (Australian Government, 2003; Kitzzmann & Emery, 1994). It has been found that mothers and fathers have different mediation experiences. For example, fathers who mediated reported increased satisfaction and more child support compliance, more joint residency was negotiated and better co-parental relationships were established (Emery, Matthews, Kitzzmann, 1994; Emery, Matthews & Wyer, 1991; Emery & Wyer, 1987a, 1987b). In addition, mediation has been found to resolve cases faster and prevent other cases from entering the adversarial process (Emery et al., 2001; Emery et al., 1991).

The findings from studies relating to the effects of non-residential fathers contact with children's wellbeing have produced differential results (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). These different findings have lead to the assumption that the quality of non-residential father contact and the closeness of the relationship with children is more important than the quantity of time spent with children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb et al., 1999). Garbarino (2000) says "the issue is not the physical presence or absence of the man, but how well he lives his spiritual calling so that his life story can inspire his child who will then make sense of the father's life" (pp.14).

When children feel close to parents they are more likely to adhere to imposed boundaries and imitate the socially desired behaviour modelled by parents which facilitates the internalisation of social norms (Bandura, 1977). When children feel loved and supported their sense of security is enhanced and increases their coping mechanisms (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). To date there still is a void of research on non-residential fathers parenting practices and the impact it has on their relationships with their children. Rohner and Veneziano (2001) intimate that existing research is still tainted with a female perspective.

Methodological Issues Raised in Non-Residential Father Research

The studies critiqued in this review have a diverse range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies underpinned by various philosophical epistemologies such as psychological, sociological, socio-economic, socio-biological and family process (Parke 2000, 2004; Lamb 1997, 1999, Braver et al., 1993; Silverstein, 1993, Cox & Paley, 1997 respectively). The reliability and validity of the quantitative

measures may be questionable because many were designed specifically or adapted to meet the each study's requirements. The sample sizes in the 1980s were small in comparison to other periods (Amato, 2001). The sample sizes in other studies varied from: (a) Small clinical samples with participants who had increased psychopathologies; (b) small non-representative samples, of white middle class participants who were well educated or low socio-economic status; (c) unemployed and uneducated African Americans; to (d) large nationally representative samples, which makes generalisations beyond the particular samples difficult. Overall it is difficult to make direct comparisons of the studies critiqued because there are subtle differences in the underlying philosophies, measurements and sample sizes that invariably impact on interpretation.

One of the biggest problems in the separation literature is the cross-cultural comparisons can be confusing due to the different political and economic structures and the terminology used to describe similar events. Although there are differences in the family law terminology and their connotations between Australia and North America, the findings from these North American studies are generally applicable to the Australian context. Despite the strengths and weaknesses of these studies, they all in some way have contributed to the extensive body of literature.

Conclusion

In concluding this review, it is apparent that movements in social and political structures play a pivotal role on fathers' involvement with their children through the attitudes communicated by the current social climate. There is evidence to support that fathers' active engagement in authoritative parenting practices is associated with better psychological outcomes for children and also have a positive

effect on their level of parental satisfaction. Although we know a considerable amount about what helps and hinders relationships there is no definitive answer to why some fathers completely disengage and others remain committed to their children.

It is recognised that separation affects not only the family structure and the individual and peripheral family members (Ackerman 1984; Bowen, 1978; Broderick, 1993; Cox & Paisley, 1997), but also has implications for community and political structures (Baker, 2001). In Australia, both state and federal governments have instigated comprehensive studies to address these issues (Australian Government, 2003; FLPAG, 2001). Although it is impossible to address the separation experience, with a blanket response or injunction to capture the unique dynamics of each scenario, the Australian Government has committed to establish Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) across the country. These FRCs will provide support services i.e., education, information, advisory bodies with various paths and entry points dependent upon the unique requirements of each user (Australian Government, 2003, 2005; FLPAG, 2001).

Whilst all fathers have their own unique experience, there are similarities which have enabled research to provide a global view of the separation experience. It is envisaged that ongoing research will contribute to the construction of a positive non-residential father model. Evolution moves slowly and for traditional fathers, as opposed to the new breed fathers, the marital demise might well be an opportunity to learn new skills and establish emotional connections with their children (Green, 1998).

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Guidelines for Contributions by Author – Literature Review

An Exploration of Non-Residential Fathers' Relationship With Their Children:
Working Towards A Positive Psychology Approach

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

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- (ii) material copied from the work of other students".

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Abstract

This research used a positive psychology approach to explore the subjective experiences of nine non-residential fathers (NRFs) who maintain a committed relationship with their children. The NRFs' mean age was 42.1 years, with a mean of 2.2 children per family and a mean separation time of three years. Although some NRFs become dislocated from their children post-separation other NRFs actively pursue more contact and develop stronger bonds with their children. This study explored the NRFs' perceptions of their father role and what makes them different from NRFs who disengage from their children post-separation. These NRFs are authoritative parents and provide further evidence that fathers are equally capable of nurturing children. The post-separation parenting of these NRFs' challenges traditional gender roles that espouse the importance of the maternal bond.

Fatherhood as a social construct impacts on the way fathers' perceive their role and how they interact with their children. This construct has been sensitive to significant world events such as World War II and the feminist movement (Baker, 2001; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 1999). These events have contributed to changes in gender role expectations, relationship instability and social policy (Amato & Keith, 1991; Baker, 2001; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 1999; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin & Dornbusch, 1993; Marsiglio, 1991; Marsiglio & Cohn, 2000; McLanahan, 1999; Parke, 2000; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). The increased rate of divorce in the western world has also been attributed to these changes.

It is reported that one in every three first marriages and half of second marriages end in divorce (Lamb, 1999; Murphy, 1998). Whilst attitudes towards divorce have become more liberal, the social attitudes towards child residency and post-separation parenting are slow to reflect equality in child residency arrangements. This attitude may be reflected in the low number of lone father families in Australia (1.7% in 1997 to 2.3% in 2003) and 82% of non-residential parents being fathers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003 [ABS]).

Despite the Australian Family Law Act (1975) being amended to reflect that both mothers and fathers are equally responsible for their children until they turn 18 years, this does not mean they have equal residency (Australian Government, 2003, 2004; Family Law Pathways Advisory Group, 2001 [FLPAG]). Many fathers claim that the family law system is still biased towards mothers. Australian research indicates that many NRFs favour more contact than the standard every second fortnight (Smyth, 2004). Conversely many mothers are not in favour of NRFs having more contact, particularly if the children were younger than five years (Smyth, 2004; Smyth, Caruana, Ferro, 2004; Smyth & Weston, 2004).

The separation literature associated with non-residential fathers (NRFs) involvement follows two prominent research foci: (1) the decreased involvement of NRFs post-separation and (2) the importance of close emotional bonds between NRFs and their children (NRF-C). These two foci also parallel the different social constructs of fatherhood with respect to the emphasis of father involvement being peripheral or central to children's lives.

The first focus stems from research conducted in the 1950s-1970s. This period reflects the notion that fathers were the providers and that they only had peripheral engagement in children's lives (Lamb, 1997; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Fathers were considered to be largely irrelevant to child development. However, when fathers left the family home, as a result of separation, the removal of financial and parental resources was attributed to the increased psychological dysfunction and delinquent behaviour in children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Barber, 2004, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999; Phares, 1992; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

The second focus is associated with research from the 1980s. This focus argues that fathers contribute extensively to the development of healthy self-concepts in children (Lamb, 1971; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999). Socially there is the expectation that fathers adopt an egalitarian role both towards domestic and family issues. This research highlights that many fathers are equally capable as mothers of nurturing and developing strong bonds with their children (Biddulph, 2002; Cox & Paley, 1997; Lamb, 1997; Le Gresley, 2001; Nichols & Pike, 1998). Despite research acknowledging that fathers are equally capable of nurturing, NRFs are still awarded comparatively less time with their children.

In the early research NRFs' involvement was usually defined in terms of compliant child support payments and the frequency of contact between NRFs and their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Bruce & Curtis, 1993). In more recent research the NRFs' ability to establish close bonds with their children after separation was considered to be a more comprehensive measure of NRFs' involvement (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Although the frequency of contact was considered to be an important facet in the NRF-C relationship, the consensus is that the quality of the contact is more important than the quantity of contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, Sternberg & Thompson, 1999). It has been found that the amount of contact NRFs have impacts both on their level of parental satisfaction and their ability to be authoritative parents (Amato & Keith, 1991; Minton & Pasley, 1996). Authoritative parenting is characterised by clear communication, close physical contact, autonomous and responsible behaviour and high monitoring but is not coercive or punitive (Baumrind, 1967, 1971).

There are several other factors that help or hinder the NRF-C relationship. These are: (a) the level of conflict between parents is extensively reported to impact on fathers' relationship with their children; (b) the personality characteristics of both fathers and children will affect the dynamics in the ongoing relationship; (c) geographical proximity, and (d) re-partnering of either parent is affected by the time of re-partnering in relationship to the demise of the marriage and introduces complex dyads (Amato & Keith, 1991; Campbell & Pike, 2002; Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; Marsiglio, 2001; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999; Nicholls & Pike, 1998; Parke, 2000; Thompson & Laible, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

This Study

The issue of separation has been widely studied through various theoretical frameworks. Prior to the 1990s, these studies were largely North American, quantitative and focused on the psychopathologies of lone mothers and children. The emergence of data on men's increased psychopathologies such as depression and suicide after separation have necessitated a greater need for research into the issues affecting NRFs. However much of this research is underpinned by a pathological deficit model. The critical focus of this model is that people are lacking or deficient in some way and that they need expert help and external solutions to get better (Brickman, Rabinowitz, Karuza, Coates, Cohen, & Kidder, 1982; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi so aptly wrote:

psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best (2000, p 6).

In this sense there is comparatively little research that focuses on the positive models offered by the growing, albeit small, number of NRFs who share care of their children and those who remain committed to their children despite the challenges discussed in the literature.

Therefore this study uses a positive psychology framework as the impetus for exploring the subjective experiences of NRFs who remain committed to their children. This study focuses on three broad research questions.

1. How do NRFs perceive the father role?
2. How has separation impacted on NRFs' ability to be an involved father?
3. What makes these NRFs different from other NRFs?

Method

Participants

The data for this project was collected from 9 NRFs who consented to voluntarily participate (Appendix A). The NRFs were recruited from a men's support group in Bunbury, Western Australia and by a snowball technique. The NRFs were included according to the following criteria: (a) they were biological fathers; (b) they had been separated for longer than two years (as studies show that heightened emotions have generally stabilised near the end of the second year post-separation (Campbell & Pike, 2002)); (c) they had experienced low to medium conflict with their ex-partner (FLPAG, 2001) and thus have had minimal contact with the judicial system; (d) they maintain contact with their children. Initially non-repartnered fathers were sought however this criteria was too restrictive and therefore removed from the inclusion criteria. Participants were not selected according to level of education, occupation or income level as a broad spectrum of participant demographics was intended.

A summary of the individual participants' demographics is presented in Table 1 and includes: age, length of relationship, length of separation, the number of children, residency/contact schedule, current relationship status and geographical location. The mean age of NRFs was 42.11 years, mean relationship length was 9.5 years with a mean separation of 3.44 years and the mean number of children/NRF was 2.2. The mean age of NRFs' own fathers was 70.35 (range 62 – 79). Two fathers were currently studying part-time at university level, only one father had completed a tertiary degree. Their occupations comprised: farmer, potato picker, mentor, social-worker, finance broker, prison officer, research assistant, and loader driver.

Table 1

Non-Residential Fathers' (NRFs) Demographic Details

NRF	Age	Rel'ship (in yrs)	Separ'n (in yrs)	No of Child'n	Residency/Contact Schedule	Re- partnered	Location
1	49	10	2.5	1	Week about	3 mths ^{`^}	Bunbury City
2	43	9	2.5	3	Every 2 nd weekend, ½ school holidays	No	Bunbury Region
3	43	12	4	3	1x70%, 2x40%; every Tues o/n for tea and every 2 nd w'end	Multiple	Perth Metro
4	42	15	6	3	50% of time, flexible to suit shiftwork	4 yrs [^]	Perth Metro
5	36	10	3.5*	2	Every Wed night for tea and every 2 nd weekend	Multiple	Bunbury City
6	45	16	3	3	2x100%, 1x15% plus takes to school and dinner on Tues	6 mths	Bunbury City
7	37	4**	3	1	Nightly 5.30-6.30 when mother works or at mothers whim	No	Bunbury Region
8	43	5	3	3	Two days / fortnight but sacrifices one to meet CSA	14 mths	Bunbury City
9	42	3.5**	4	1	Every Thurs o/n plus every 2 nd weekend, will increase in 2006	2 mths	Bunbury Region
Mean	42.11	9.5 [#]	3.06	2.22 ⁺			

[`] Married previously[^] Post marriage relationship ended

* Separated, not legally divorced

** Cohabiting before relationship ended

Separating marriage from cohabitation - Mean marriage 11 years, mean cohabitation 3.44 years

+ Mean age of children = 9.95 years (range 5-17)

o/n = overnight

Instrument

This research engaged an interpretative phenomenological philosophy in order to construct a collective story from NRFs (Bannister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 2001). A semi-structured conversation style interview was used to collect data. The duration of these interviews was between 40-70 mins. The interviews were conducted in offices at either Edith Cowan University, Bunbury or town libraries and two interviews were conducted by telephone due to geographical restrictions. These interviews were all tape recorded to ensure accuracy of data collected. The interview schedule or sample questions (Appendix B) centred around central themes such as family of origin (FoO), traditional gender roles, authoritative parenting, father's own perception of fatherhood, and social or community support. These themes guided the interview but did not dictate the interview flow.

Procedure

As a rapport building exercise, a genogram was constructed to gather basic demographic, intergenerational data and record observational notes on changes in participants' behaviour, mannerisms and voice inflections. The genogram lead into the body of the interview with a beginning statement such as *"tell me about your dad"*. The interview schedule was used as a prompt to guide the interview schedule. At the conclusion of the interview participants were asked if they wished to contribute anything further *"is there anything else you would like to add about your experience of being a non-residential father"* and asked *"if there were any questions pertaining to the research"*. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were cross-checked to an uninterrupted flow of the tape. Following the accuracy check, the tapes were erased.

Analysis

The transcripts were interpreted using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) thematic analysis. Initially 15 themes emerged. These were condensed into four major themes and eight sub-themes which are presented in Table 2. The consistency of the themes was cross-checked with the themes derived by a professional colleague who is a social science practitioner.

Table 2
The Major Themes and Sub-Themes

Major Themes	Sub Themes
The Father Role	What they value in being a father Family of origin Social/Institutional influence
Contact With Children	Formal contact Authoritative parenting
Attitudes Towards the Former Partner	Conflict Child Support Re-partnering
What Makes These NRFs Different?	

Findings and Interpretations

The purpose of this study was to construct a positive model of NRFs who maintain a consistent relationship with their children. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 9 NRFs and four major themes were identified: (1) The Father Role, (2) NRF-Child interaction (3) NRFs attitudes towards the former partner (the ‘Ex’) and (4) What makes these NRFs different from disengaged NRFs. Themes 1-3 reflect NRFs’ experiences, attitudes and behaviours and theme 4 is what they perceive makes them different from NRFs who disengage from their children.

The following discussion highlights the interwoven nature of these themes and the sub-themes.

Theme 1 – The Father Role

It has been argued by many social scientists that fatherhood is socially constructed through the interaction of both the cultural and institutional ideologies of the time (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Garbarino, 2000; Hewitt, 2000; Lamb, 1997, 2000; Maccoby et al., 1993; Marsiglio, 1991; Marsiglio & Cohn, 2000; Parke, 2000). That is changes in global, government policy and the community all interact to influence the behaviour of families and individuals. Along with this, fathers' have their own innate ideas of how they want to father. The literature acknowledges that NRFs' attitudes towards post-separation parenting have changed over time. For example forty years ago fathers had a peripheral role in child development (Garbarino, 2000; Lamb, 1997). The current social attitudes support the unique, multidimensional contributions fathers make to their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Lamb, 1997; Thompson & Liable, 1999).

What they value in being a father

When NRFs were asked 'what they valued in being a father', the typical response was that they enjoyed watching their children grow and mature. Only two NRFs talked about being present at the birth of their children and that this was a "life changing experience". However all NRFs "wanted to be a part of their life in every aspect". There was a sense that this was an important time in both the NRFs' lives and their children's. As a group, these NRFs were more selfless than selfish. For example one NRF said that "life is not just about doing things for myself" and

another said that *"I felt my life between 30-40 or a bit more was stability for the kids"*.

The literature suggests that NRFs' involvement with their children decreases as the time from separation increases and the age of children increases (ABS, 2003; Kitzmann & Emery, 1994; Maccoby et al., 1993; Qu, 2004). However, this pattern is also evident in married households because as children socially mature they engage in more social activities and employment beyond the family setting. These NRFs were aware that their children would undergo significant developmental and social changes that would impact on the amount and style of their interaction. In a sense every day they have with them is a *"bonus"*. This response typifies the interpretation of the collective experience:

so what I value most is when we're all together and having fun and its just yeh its that feeling of actually being a family.

When asked 'what had influenced their father role', the consensus was that:

in a backward sense, my father, he was never there, he was always at work, he worked and he worked and then he had his own interests.

Although the NRFs' attributed their increased involvement with their children to the lack of involvement by their own fathers, they all said that this was not a conscious choice but an innate sense of *"wanting to be there"*.

Family of Origin

In addition to the cultural norms operating, the familial environments and more specifically the family's dynamics and behaviour patterns impact on both the conscious and unconscious behaviours of NRFs (Ackerman, 1984; Bowen, 1978; Broderick, 1993; Cox & Paley, 1997; Le Gresley, 2001). Some of these patterns were evident in the NRFs (a) choice of partner, (b) marriage dynamics and (c)

behaviour. The literature suggests that relationship dynamics are sensitive to intergenerational transmission (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cowan, Cohn, Cowan & Pearson, 1996; Feng, Giarrusso, Bengston, Bradbury & Fry, 1999; Lamb, 1999; Simon, Whitbeck, Conger & Chyi-In, 1991; Story, Karney, Lawrence & Bradbury, 2004). In this sample, approximately 45% of NRFs experienced either their parents' separation or the effects of their grand parents' separation. For example one father said:

my father's dad left when he was about 7 and I think he sort of didn't have a model of how to be a dad so he never felt comfortable in that role.

Another NRF told of how his parent's fighting impacted on his health:

I'm the oldest, and I sort of bore all the arguments, I was protecting them (siblings) looking after them coz they'd get upset with all the screaming and crying when mum and dad were shouting and screaming at each other...I got siriasis when I was 6 or 7 and I've had this all my life it's a rash you get through like nervousness and like worry and stuff.

Yet another NRF could see he had repeated the same domestic violence (DV) pattern of his parents. He said:

I realise there was a DV (domestic violence) relationship between mum and dad even though there was no actual physical violence that I knew of, but the emotional stuff and the silence and all that sort of thing that was all...yeh... just repeating the pattern.

When prompted to think about other influences on their father role one man reported

My aunties and uncles were awful role models you know like they were really bad parents to my cousins and I didn't want to be like that, I guess that highlighted the stuff that my dad did.

Social/Institutional Influences

The majority of NRFs initially did not see the media, religion or political agendas as being influential on their role. However, after prompting about the effects of television programs or parenting propaganda there was some

acknowledgement that *“the media influences us in such subtle ways”*. One NRF added that the media could put fathers

under pressure when they have a lot of commitments and here is the media saying you've got to have more time with your kids, then he can start to become resentful.

Religion was not reported to be influential. However one NRF had participated in parenting programs run by his church and had a father who was a Salvation Army Minister. After contemplation he thought that religion had played a part in his commitment to his children.

The Australian Government has introduced initiatives such as paternity leave to enable fathers to participate in caring roles. However, social policies were not acknowledged at all as being influential on their father role either pre or post-separation. Social policies were only discussed in the context of NRFs accessing the legal system to gain knowledge about their post-separation parental rights and financial settlements.

Interpretation

This theme ‘The Father Role’ looked at how NRFs developed their concept of fatherhood and what it meant to be a father. These NRFs were reportedly committed, responsible parents who derived considerable value from being a father. Despite NRFs’ perceived increased involvement in active parenting, when compared to their own fathers, 78% of them were in traditional provider roles before their separation. However, half of the sample reported being very active in parenting and domestic duties prior to separation. Two fathers who were the primary care-givers pre-separation became NRFs post-separation.

Collectively, these fathers talked about caring, influencing and modelling rather than about 'providing' in the traditional sense of the 'breadwinner'. However the notion of providing was an underlying component but not the 'main' focus. The question this raises is – does post-separation parenting become neutral and facilitate in NRFs separating from the 'gender' role?

In answering this question, it could be that we purportedly live in an egalitarian society. However when many of these NRFs were in the relationship, the mothers were more influential and performed a greater proportion of the parenting. Whilst fathers were still involved in some aspects of parenting they were more likely to be engaged in activity. This is not to say that these NRFs were not capable of competent parenting but that NRF-C involvement was influenced by (a) another adult being present and mediating or moderating the NRFs' behaviour and (b) cultural norms for intact family behaviour.

Many NRFs claimed that they had closer and stronger relationships with their own mothers which remained unchanged until the mothers' deaths. This poses the question of whether their own mothers were subconsciously influential on their ongoing commitment to their children. The literature on intergenerational transmission of marital function and dysfunction suggests that these patterns are more likely to be transmitted through the mother than the father (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 2001). Conversely, research suggests fathers are more influential in the transmission of addictive and violent behaviour patterns (Amato, 1996; Feng et al., 1999; Phares, 1992; Story et al., 2004).

Theme 2 – Contact With Their Children

Central to this theme was NRFs' direct engagement and accessibility to their children, both in terms of their residency schedule and their parenting. This research is consistent with other research that indicates that many NRFs have increased the time that they are directly engaged in children's activities when compared to their level of involvement by their own fathers three decades ago (ABS, 2003). It is evident that the more access NRFs have, the more able they are to engage in authoritative parenting practices. Authoritative parenting has been associated with increased parental satisfaction in NRFs and positive psychological outcomes in children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Although the quality of the contact has been deemed to be more important, it is recognised that a certain amount of contact is required for parenting.

Residency Schedule

The residency/contact schedules listed in Table 1 are consistent with other research findings that support various non-standard schedules do operate in Australia (Smyth, 2004; Smyth et al., 2004; Smyth & Weston, 2004). Also consistent with these findings is the fact that fathers are open to more contact to their children than the standard every second weekend (Smyth, 2004). No father talked about having more contact in an attempt to reduce his child support payments. One NRF was adamant that he was not going to be a "*visiting dad and he wanted week about*". Similarly, some NRFs perceived that the mothers were resistant or not willing to forego their primary caregiving role with comments such as "*over my dead body*" and threatening to "*decrease access if he didn't back off*".

NRFs saw shared residency as an opportunity to *“still be involved in everything that she (the child) does on a weekly basis”*. There was also the added benefit of having *“some child free time to do their own thing”*. Eight NRFs lived in close proximity to their children i.e., the same suburb or town. Four fathers had children older than 10 years and this close proximity allowed for extra non-scheduled contact. This also enabled NRFs to have additional interaction time such as picking children up from the former partners’ house and taking them to school and/or picking them up from after school activities and dropping them home. This was seen as a way of keeping in touch with day to day happenings, particularly when the children were teenagers.

Collectively these NRFs felt it was very important to give their children the choice of coming to stay with them rather than demanding them to come to stay.

The following quote typifies their responses:

The most powerful thing is that um that you give them a choice and they choose to come over then that’s where they want to be.

However, the NRFs also expressed the importance of having some structure to contact to ensure that their time with the children was not totally compromised when children were engaged in other social activities. Most of these NRFs said they did not *“want to get to the end of the week and find I’ve had no time with my children”*.

Consistent with other research that suggests that inter-parental conflict will be a predictor of access, this was evident for one NRF who had no formal access schedule and was at the mercy of the mother. When asked whether he felt like the ‘babysitter’ he replied:

It is my job as a parent, so every chance I do get to look after him, I should take regardless of whether to not it’s given freely.

Formalising mutually agreeable contact schedules was not always an harmonious affair. For three NRFs, mothers were “*threatening*” and made accusations about domestic violence and allegations of sexual abuse. Whilst one father still had no formal residency schedule, two NRFs proceeded with litigation to formalise contact. Both fathers reported the court process was “*unfair and one-sided*”. One NRF said “*she could say what she liked and I had to prove my innocence even though I feared the same behaviour in her*” despite “*the fact that she came from a DV background too*”. Whilst both fathers achieved acceptable outcomes, one NRF’s success was attributed to the mediation process. He said:

I could see this person as the mother of my daughter and not as an adversary and someone who was trying to hurt me... until something real changes in the dynamic then the adversarial nature of things continues.

Authoritative Parenting

Many NRFs in this sample were aware of the need to spend special time engaged with their children in different types of activities. These same NRFs recognised the need to spend some “*special time*” with their daughters and said that “*it was a day she looks forward to*”. They felt comfortable in the ‘father role’ being openly demonstrative i.e., holding hands, hugging, smooching. However, demonstrating too much affection was a challenge for one NRF who thought it might be taken in the “*wrong way*”. The planning of the contact weekend was a family ritual for one NRF and his sons which usually involved “*doing things in the shed, going four wheel driving or fishing*”.

The NRFs in this sample clearly demonstrated a capacity to be authoritative parents. For example, the following quote typifies these NRFs’ responses:

I try to give a clear boundary, definite clear boundaries and we stick to them but also...I use the words responsibility and respect with her...letting her know about actions and consequences and if you spill something then you

clean it up...I try and show her that ah something simple like spilling a drink or something like that, if I do it then I clean it up, if she does it then she cleans it up.

These NRFs monitored their children keeping “*a good eye on them but not over the top*” and encouraged them to be autonomous and responsible for their own learning and behaviours. There was considerable variation in NRFs level of direct engagement with some just being accessible. Collectively these NRFs felt that if children were happily playing there was no need to “*interfere, unless they ask for help*”. One NRF encouraged his children to find their own answers saying “*I’ll point out a couple of things...so they find it themselves*”.

The literature suggests that many fathers are authoritarian and are coercive and punitive (Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Conrade & Ho, 2001). However, these NRFs consistently reported authoritative parenting and had ambivalent feelings towards smacking. Although most of these NRFs acknowledged they had smacked their children, they said they had not smacked their children for a long time. When asked whether it was a conscious choice to stop smacking their children they reported making no “*conscious decision*” to stop smacking. One NRF said that “*they don’t do anything that I consider really smackable offences*”.

This begs the question of whether these NRFs’ post-separation parenting practices have changed because they can parent in their own manner without the mothers’ influence. Another consideration is that cultural ideologies towards punitive parenting have changed and non-punitive practices have become automated in NRFs.

Fathers were asked if there were any differences in their ability to be an effective parent after separation. Changes in parenting were linked to children’s developmental stages rather than as a consequence of separation. One NRF said: “*I*

was parenting for an infant and now I'm parenting for a small child". However what became obvious was the reported differences between the two parents parenting styles. For example one NRF said:

I'm always explaining why he should be eating his vegies before he eats his chips and all that sort of stuff whereas his mother is kind of the opposite, if he asked for chips he gets chips and lollies.

Another NRF said:

they'll have white boards up and notes to kids on whiteboards and...and chores you have to do your chores or you don't get your pocket money ...whereas mine is a bit more laid back...you get your basic pocket money and there's an expectation to pull your weight.

Despite the fact that some NRFs had reduced capacity to be an authoritative parent as a function of their reduced contact time, their sense of father identity was not lost "they know I'm dad"; they still set behaviour boundaries and disciplined as needed.

NRFs can be perceived to be 'fun' dads in an attempt to buy their children's affection with the hope that they will return. One NRF said "my dad used to come with arms full of presents and stuff like that". However these NRFs did not "feel the need to compensate" for their diminished contact nor did they "think the kids really expect that". These NRFs were open to their children residing with them in the future and they wanted their children:

to realise that if they ever do make the decision to live with Dad part-time full-time whatever, they've got to pull their weight.

However another NRF saw his 'fun' dad label differently:

they played a lot down the park and the 'fun' dad didn't involve spending lots of money.

The NRFs who had less contact acknowledged that it was "very difficult to maintain that authoritative role" and influence the other parent or be overly influential on the day to day happenings of the children. For instance:

when it's obvious that your children haven't had a shower for a couple of days and um how much can you say about that um...because you're trying to keep the peace and be civil at a certain level.

Interpretation

There was considerable variation in the types of activities these NRFs directly engaged in with their children. It is evident that these NRFs were competent in their parenting abilities in every aspect i.e., their domestic capacity for cooking, cleaning, through to their capacity to care and influence behaviour. For some NRFs this was an opportunity for learning new skills and relatedness. Separation had highlighted that some NRFs were not as actively involved as they had thought i.e., they were physically accessible but not engaged in activity.

These fathers appeared to have a strong identification with the father role, regardless of how much contact they had. The NRFs in this sample were prepared to do the 'hard yard' but this was balanced with tenderness and compassion. These NRFs recounted their capacity for self-control and patience when controlling their children's behaviour. This was attributed to recalling their own childhood experiences when relating to their children. However these NRFs did not talk about their parental role in terms of masculinity. This has been interpreted that they see their parental role as important but distinct from their masculinity.

Theme 3 – Attitudes Towards the Former Partner

This theme was reflective of the extent to which NRFs have accepted the demise of the relationship, their ability to accept their role in the demise and their positive or negative attitudes towards their former partner in terms of respect and trust. Their positive or negative attitudes towards their former partner were seen to be associated with their positive or negative attitudes towards paying child support.

In most instances, the positive or negative attitudes towards the mothers were not indicative of the residency/contact schedules (Table 1). However, the positive or negative attitudes towards the mother were reflected in the amount of inter-parental communication. Those NRFs who had positive regard for the mother had increased levels of communication and boundaries around topics discussed and vice versa. The differences here may be attributed to the fact that 66% of relationships were long term marriages ($6 > 9$ years) in contrast to the 33% of short term relationships ($3 < 5$ years). These short term cohabitating relationships, as reported by the NRFs, had higher levels of conflict.

Child support

Child support is reportedly one of the most contentious issues associated with separation (Parkinson, 2003). To support the notion that NRFs' attitudes towards child support was linked to the perception of their former partner. One father said:

I have no problem and that's because I trust Monica[name substituted] is putting it towards the kids and her lifestyle hasn't changed and she's not wearing really great clothes so I know she's doing the right thing by the kids...I had a hand in bringing them into the world and so I have no problems with the maintenance.

Another father said:

I've just sort of let go and accept that whatever child support that I pay is going into the home budget and its been spent where it should be and things are progressing in the child's best interest.

Whereas for the other NRFs with increased levels of conflict, and embroiled negative feelings associated with the separation, their attitude towards paying child support was also more negative. One father said he had to:

sacrifice seeing the kids or get so far behind whereas Centrelink or CSA start screaming at me to pay the money.

Two fathers said in order to survive and live the life that they wanted to, they “*made their own agreement*”. Some NRFs told of “*playing a game*” by using maintenance as a tool not only to get access to their children but also to “*get at*” their former partner.

The attitudes towards paying child support can also stem from the FoO. One NRF talked about how his father worked two jobs to get money and the following quote suggests he too relates to others through money:

Realistically money is nothing...realistically...but it also makes your life very comfortable...if I had the choice between money and the kids...you'd take the kids or if you had the choice between money and going back to when Tahlia and I first met or when Kalab and Brent were born then you'd take that over money...yeh money's the nice stuff but the money also allows the relationship between Kalab, Brent and myself to do that much more.

Although there are commonalities between these NRFs, their differences in attitudes and behaviours can be exemplified by the following two fathers who are equally committed and responsible towards their children. The first father lived in a caravan, put his boys in his bed so they could sleep-over and he slept in a swag in the annex but he made his own maintenance arrangement because he couldn't survive under CSA agreement. The second father had a two-bedroom unit, but rarely had his children for a sleep-over but accepted paying child support as per CSA agreement.

Re-partnering

The extent to which NRFs accepted the relationship demise, was reflected in their attitude towards the post-separation activities of the other partner. For instance some NRFs found mothers' who had re-partnered were more argumentative. When fathers were still embroiled in bitterness or anger they were more likely to make snide comments about former partners such as “*she's loose*”. Some NRFs also perceived that the mothers' re-partnering contributed to increased residency of their

children because their mother was “*more focused*” on the new partner or that children “*did not get on with him*”. One father said:

I'm glad to have him but it would have been nice to have him come to stay because he wanted to and not because he wasn't getting on with his mum.

There were also differences between these NRFs attitudes towards introducing their own new partners into their children's lives too. Some NRFs freely introduced women whilst others were “*reluctant*” to introduce a new partner because they did not want their children to “*feel like they had to compete for dad's attention*”. The NRFs who freely introduced new partners had more unresolved negative affect associated with the separation. It was evident that both the emotional pain and the financial loss of separation was a contributing factor in their non-commitment to another person because “*they never want to be in that financial situation again*”. There appeared to be no relationship between introducing new people to children and child residency schedules.

Interpretation

This theme highlighted the vast differences between NRFs attitudes and behaviours towards their former partner and paying child support. It would be reasonable to interpret that the NRFs' individual personalities influenced their post-separation behaviour. It is also apparent that FoO plays a crucial role in the behaviour patterns of family members and NRFs in this instance (Bowen, 1978; Cox & Paley, 1997). It is also acknowledged that vast differences occur in the perception of conflict – what might be high conflict for one is not for another, and when viewed in the big picture of conflict in separation, this sample falls within the ‘low-medium’ range (FLPAG, 2001).

This theme is interwoven with the other themes and poses a challenge to the dominance of the maternal bond. It has been purported that the importance of the maternal bond has underpinned post-separation child residency arrangements (Emery & Wyer, 1987). Most of these NRFs have moved outside the confines of this maternal bond and gender role ideology to exercise their own paternal needs. They acknowledge the reciprocity of 'value' in the NRF-C relationship. This can be attributed to either positive learning from FoO influences or a direct attempt to change negative FoO behaviours.

In building a positive model of NRFs who maintain a consistent relationship with their children, these NRFs provide an example of men who are able to acknowledge and take responsibility for their positive and negative behaviours. For some NRFs this necessitated learning new skills. Their separation 'journey' is testament to a strength based model that accounts for the positive individual traits such as resilience and capacity to love as outlined by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) positive psychology approach at an individual level.

Theme 4 - What Makes These NRFs Different?

The literature suggests that many NRFs disengage from their children when factors such as inter-parental conflict is high, re-partnering, geographical distance, low socio-economic status, etc. (Amato & Keith, 1991; Campbell & Pike, 2002; Hetherington, et al., 1998; Marsiglio, 2001; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999; Nicholls & Pike, 1998; Parke, 2000; Thompson & Laible, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Conversely, when they can maintain close bonds, NRFs are more likely to remain engaged with their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2005, [AIFS]; Conrade & Ho;

2001; Lamb, 1997; Phares, 1992; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Thompson & Liable, 1999). Therefore this theme incorporates (a) what these NRFs perceive makes them different from the disengaged NRFs and (b) what were the positive aspects of separation.

NRFs were asked ‘what made them different from the NRFs who disengaged from their children’. There was no unanimous response that typified the collective experience. Some fathers said they “*took it seriously from the beginning*”; others had a “*deep sense of responsibility*”; others recognised “*children needed stability*”; and having children was “*the best thing that ever happened to me*”. One father claimed having children was the “*impetus for his change*” and many fathers said “*in hindsight*” things would be different. Some of the NRFs recognised that “*children need two parents even if they are not living together*” and that “*its not about more or less its about the different experiences mothers and fathers bring*”.

Separation can be a liberating experience and an opportunity to establish emotional connections with children (Green, 1998). Some fathers talked about the “*strong bonds*” they had with their children before the separation. However for other fathers the separation has enabled them “*to strengthen their relationship with their children*” now that the “*tension*” in the pre-separation environment was gone.

Although the literature suggests that more women than men initiate the end of a relationship, this sample comprised 45% of NRFs who initiated the separation. Most of these NRFs talked about “*accepting*” responsibility for their part in the separation. Many of these NRFs have experienced a great deal of negative affect in terms of their own personal grief and increased conflict associated with separation. One father said he “*never loved his wife, he wanted to end it but she was going to*

neck herself so he didn't". Three NRFs in this sample spoke of their diagnosed depression prior to the relationship ending.

When NRFs were asked 'how did you rise above the conflict and be able to remain engaged with your children' they responded with comments such as "*because I love them*", "*I want to be there for them*" and "*they didn't ask for it*".

Most (78%) of these NRFs accessed "*counselling*" services to assist their transition and to "*put things in perspective*". Most fathers acknowledged that the experience had allowed them to grow emotionally and the opportunity to "*heal*" old tribal wounds (Murphy, 1998). In terms of establishing post-separation parental relationships with their former partners, this was reportedly "*an up and down journey*". The only positive one NRF could find was "*that I could sit in my jocks drinking beer in the middle of the day*".

Interpretation

Although western culture portrays masculinity being contingent on a man being strong and emotionally self-contained (Lee & Owens, 2002), this study found that these NRFs reportedly display considerable emotionality. In a sense these NRFs operated outside the stereotypical male role by openly displaying their vulnerabilities and for seeking help. This needs to be viewed as a strength in these NRFs. After a period of time, separation was seen as just one chapter in the book of life, an opportunity to learn and grow in different directions - their own self-care, relating, parenting and communicatively. They reportedly encouraged other NRFs to access counselling or attend programs to address self-care needs. Some NRFs acknowledged that when their self-care needs were met they were better fathers to their children.

In using a positive psychology approach, these NRFs are testimony to the resilience required to re-build emotionally and financially after separation. Within this, their commitment to their children was never in jeopardy; although they acknowledged that at various times enduring the conflict with their former partner was enough to make them consider disengaging. However, their sense of responsibility would not allow them to disengage. These NRFs were able to contain their marital issues and be able to focus on the needs of the children.

Taking a positive psychology approach towards NRFs, it could be said that these fathers undertake their post-separation parenting with 'flow' (Csikszentimihalyi, 1997). According to Csikszentimihalyi (1997) 'flow' stems from being totally immersed or involved in any given context with a definite set of priorities. The priority for these NRFs is to provide a stable environment for their children to ensure that they are not adversely affected by the separation. In addition, they acknowledged the importance of modelling desired behaviours and that they were committed to providing environments that were conducive to building health self-concepts in their children.

Implications

This exploratory study of NRFs, using a positive psychology framework, has provided some valuable insights into the positive contributions through modelling and supporting behaviours that underpin the development of healthy concepts in their children. Exploring positive concepts in NRFs at an individual level is necessary for building a positive model of NRFs' involvement at the community level. This study has implications for formal residency arrangements by

challenging gender roles: it appears post-separation parenting for these NRFs transcend any gender role.

These NRFs reportedly demonstrate authoritative parenting and their capacity to provide nurturing environments for themselves and their children. They are advocates of establishing close bonds and having increased contact with their children. In addition, they provide a positive model to other men! These NRFs are advocates for taking personal responsibility for their own behaviours and accessing support services to develop their own personal strengths without fear of social ridicule (Lee & Owens, 2002).

In addition, these NRFs are a valuable source of experiential information that if harnessed, through ongoing research, can positively influence other fathers and men in general to develop optimal relational skills on multiple levels. For instance one NRF suggested that the health education programs, albeit parenting programs or school-based programs need to acknowledge the different experiences that mothers and fathers bring to their children. Even if mothers and fathers parent from two different homes they are both still equally important in the development of healthy self-concepts in children. These NRFs also talked of the need for early intervention to avoid the 'bitter men's club' mentality. This environment can potentially erode vulnerable NRFs attempts at establishing business like relationships with their former partner to support the best interests of children.

There is a myriad of benefits of constructing a positive model of NRFs who remain engaged with their children. For example, positive models can counter-balance the challenges presented from the family law system. In fact some of these NRFs could also serve as mentors to vulnerable NRFs by sharing their 'separation journey' emphasising the rewards of maintaining close bonds with their children.

If there was any doubt about a self-selection bias in this sample of NRFs (Costigan & Cox, 2001), it can be alleviated by the balanced recounts of both their negative and positive post-separation attitudes and behaviours. In this sense, the strength of these NRFs is evident in their learned self-awareness and self control whilst being confronted by challenging situations.

However it is acknowledged that there are some methodological issues associated with this research. Whilst this study purposely sought a diverse sample of NRFs, the fact that the sample was predominantly comprised of regionally based NRFs may have implications for the transferability of findings to metropolitan NRFs. In addition, the interviews exploring NRFs' perceptions of their separation experience were conducted by a female interviewer who had also experienced separation. Although every attempt was taken to prevent researcher bias, it is acknowledged that the interview dynamics may have had subtle effects on data quality. It is also acknowledged that the interview schedule guiding the research may also have had an influence on NRFs' disclosures.

Overall Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the NRFs' perceptions of their parental role, how separation had impacted on their parental role and what they perceived made them different from NRFs who disengage from their children post-separation. The notion that fatherhood is socially constructed has meant that fathering has not been enmeshed into men's identities in the same manner as motherhood has been to women (Lee & Owens, 2002). Lee and Owens (2002) suggest that although many men desire to be more active fathers, it is difficult to move beyond the traditional parental roles. This was evident in reports that many

NRFs had traditional provider roles pre-separation and some mothers would not allow egalitarian residency splits because it was their role to be the mother.

Whilst biological aspects of parenting cannot change, the roles that the parents fulfil can be constrained by the norms communicated by traditional gender roles. Many of the NRFs in this sample have embraced the opportunity to contribute to their children's lives. To confine a person to a gender role in order to guide and therefore explain some aspect of themselves is to deny or remove their freedom of being a unique person, who is male or female, a father or a mother. This has consequences for the choices that they make, either consciously or subconsciously.

The amount of attention we focus on an issue influences the control we have over the situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). These fathers shared their grief and guilt openly but were able to encapsulate their responses and address separation issues to ensure a stable environment for their children. They were adamant that they were going to maintain a consistent relationship with their children despite any angst with the former partner.

One of the current foci of psychology and the family law system is to build a society that enables children to flourish. To be able to build such an environment, psychology needs to build models of competency based on positive human strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology is about making normal people stronger and helping them achieve higher levels of self-actualisation (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore it is important to shine the spotlight on the positive outcomes that these NRFs have achieved with their children as a consequence of separation. These fathers have been active agents rather than passive recipients of their separation experience.

Although current research on separation attempts to provide balanced perspectives on all individuals affected by parental separation, there is still relatively little research that focuses on the NRFs post-separation parenting practices and the relationship it has with his personal identity. These NRFs have revealed that they are parents 'every minute of every day'! This research challenges traditional gender based notions of parenting despite the cultural and social rhetoric of egalitarianism.

If our intention is to build a strength-based model of NRFs to counter-balance the negative model of disengaged NRFs or NRFs still embroiled in negative affect, we need to change what we focus on:

When we can focus consciousness on the tasks of everyday life in the knowledge that when we act in the fullness of the flow experience, we are also building a bridge to the future of the universe (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p71).

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Appendix A

Information and Consent Form

Hi

I am a 4th year Psychology (Honours) student at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup and a component of this course is a research project approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences. This research intends to explore the father-child relationships of non-residential fathers and their attitudes towards parenting. Although many non-residential fathers actively participate in their child's life they still have remarkably less time with their children than the mother.

A conversation style interview of approximately one hour, will explore your experience of maintaining a relationship with your children and how this has impacted on your ability to remain an authoritative parent. Your intention to participate on a voluntary basis will be indicated through signed consent (see attached form) and returning the form to myself. Your participation will make a valuable contribution to existing knowledge; has potential for social policy reform and program development.

Your information will be strictly confidential and where information forms part of the final report, the content will not identify you in anyway. Your right not to answer a question or terminate the interview without penalty will be honoured by the researcher. If this interview causes you distress, contact numbers of two reputable counselling agencies will be provided for your support. A summary of the main findings will be available to all participants at the conclusion of research.

If you have questions relating to this project you can contact the researcher Suzanne Ray on 0408 242 355 or alternatively my supervisor Associate Professor, Lisbeth Pike, School of Psychology on (08) 6304 5535 or an independent person Dr Craig Speelman, Head of School of Psychology on (08) 6304 5724.

Regards

Suzanne Ray

June, 2005

CONSENT FORM

An Exploration of the Non-Residential Father-Child Relationship:
What Helps and What Hinders

I have read the above information outlining the research being conducted by Suzanne Ray as a component of an ECU Psychology (Honours) project and any questions I have asked have been satisfactorily answered.

I agree to be a voluntary participant in this research, knowing I may at any time terminate the interview or withdraw any comments made by myself during the interview without penalty.

I understand that this interview will be taped recorded to enable content analysis. I also understand any information I provide will be strictly confidential and where the contents of my interview are used in the final report I will not be identified.

I agree that research findings containing information I have imparted can be published so long as I am not identified.

Participant

Date

Investigator

Date

Appendix B

Sample Interview Questions

- When you think about a 'father' what does this person do?
- What or who has influenced your thoughts about the role of fathers?
- What do you value most/least about being a father?
- How did you parent when you were a couple? For example did you talk with the children's mother on issues of discipline, boundaries for behaviour, family activities, and the roles you both performed?
- Now that you are a contact father has there been any change to the way you communicate or relate with your children? Can you give me some examples
- How happy are you with the amount of involvement you have in your child's life? Does this involve a sense of ownership?
- Separation is a painful time for everybody. Can you tell me where you went to get support?
- Have you been able to maintain a low conflict relationship with the children's mother?
- What would be helpful to you now?