Mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenting in the fly-in fly-out mode of employment

Patricia Joan Rhodes
Edith Cowan University

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Mothers' and Fathers' Experiences of Parenting in the Fly-in Fly-out Mode of Employment

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Bachelor of Criminology and Justice (Honours)

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Abstract

A qualitative study of mothers’ and fathers’ experiences of parenting in a fly-in fly-out employment arrangement was undertaken. Eight mothers were interviewed individually to investigate their experiences of parenting. Five fathers also participated in individual interviews to examine their experiences of parenting and to substantiate those of mothers. The findings indicated that mothers were subjected to a range of conditions that would not, in the normal course of events, be experienced by mothers with partners in home-based occupations. These circumstances imposed additional stresses on families, but more particularly on mothers. In family systems theory parental stress inevitably resonates throughout the entire family. Coping strategies may seriously deplete parental resources that could ultimately lead to a breakdown in the marital relationship. Although it was generally perceived that there were no detrimental effects on children’s wellbeing overall, some children did manifest negative reactions directly attributed by a parent to father absences. As the scope of this research did not include an examination of differences in maternal coping strategies or specific parenting practices, future research could examine how these factors might account for differences in both mothers’ and children’s ability to cope.
I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed ....

Dated .................
Acknowledgements

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Parenting in FIFO

Mothers’ and Fathers’ Experiences of Parenting in the Fly-in Fly-out Mode of Employment

Parenting is one of the most significant roles that adults assume and the fundamental drive is to achieve the best possible outcomes for children. Parental involvement impacts upon child development in the dimensions of parental engagement (the amount of time directly engaged with a child), and parental accessibility (the amount of time directly accessible to a child) (Wise, 2003). Providing financially is a necessary and significant component of parenting to meet the needs of children. However, parents’ employment can have a strong impact on their children, both positive and negative (Pocock & Clarke, 2004).

In all families the presence of children substantially increases the demands of the home environment (Alexander & Baxter, 2005). Child rearing and care giving demands can be very challenging within any family and children’s behavior can at times be extremely frustrating and annoying. Coupled with minor daily hassles, the cumulative effect over a day, several days, or longer, might culminate in a meaningful stressor for a parent. Daily hassles are defined as the irritating, frustrating, annoying and distressing demands that typify everyday interactions with the environment (Hobfoll & Spielberger, 1992). Hobfoll and Spielberger contend that stress is not an event or an internal state, but an ongoing process. Greater stress is significantly associated with less optimal parent and family functioning (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). Although parents derive satisfaction from their children’s wellbeing, their own health and wellbeing is impacted by the stress induced by additional time commitments in achieving this end (Kalenoski, Ribar & Stratton, 2006; Schmidt, 2000; Williford, Calkins & Keane, 2007).

Deater-Deckard (2005) proposes that stressful conditions can lead to distress in the parenting role and consequentially, detrimental short- and long-term effects for parents and children alike. The majority of children present parents with a variety of challenging behaviours during the early years of development and may include externalising behaviours such as tantrums and noncompliance, and internalising behaviours such as social withdrawal, fears and sadness. As children mature, those early difficulties may increase in severity (Burbach, Fox & Nicholson, 2004). As significant components of children’s environments, parents may unwittingly contribute to the development and maintenance of challenging behaviours (Eizirik & Bergmann, 2004). Synder (1991) proposes that parental irritability induces child aversive behaviour and the use of parental strategies that reinforce
the use of aversive means of relating to other family members. In other words, parental distress disrupts effective child management, which is consistent with the notion of reciprocal feedback loops as posited by family systems theory.

Family systems theorists conceptualise the marital subsystem as the foundation of family functioning (Davies & Chicchetti, 2004). Family systems theory proposes that because family members are interconnected and operate as a group, everything that happens to one family member has a consequent impact upon everyone else in the family (Hetherington, et al., 1992; Olsen & DeFrain, 1996) and hence, the whole family unit is the central object of study in the family systems approach (Davies & Chicchetti). The primary goal is to achieve a rich depiction of the interplay among relationships and individuals in the family unit. The specific focus is on identifying relationship structures, interpersonal boundaries, power distributions, and communication patterns (Davies & Chicchetti; Minuchin, 1985). All systems are made up of subsystems and in families include the spousal subsystem, parent-child subsystems, and sibling subsystems. From an ecological perspective, human development is viewed from a person-in-environment context and emphasises the notion that all growth and development takes place within the context of relationships (Connard & Novick, 1996; Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996).

Westen, Burton and Kowalski (2006) describe families as intensely emotionally connected individuals who form a group with interdependent parts. The intense emotional connectedness and reactivity are what make the functioning of family members mutually dependent. A change in one person's functioning is inevitably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of other family members (Boss, 1986; Minuchin, 1985). Patterns in a system are circular as opposed to linear, and interaction involves a spiral of habitual loops. For example, stress experienced by a parent triggers a reciprocal reaction in a child, which in turn triggers concern by the parent. In turn, a parent's increased concern exacerbates the child's reaction and increases the parent's concern, and so forth. This is indicative of how tension can spread infectiously among other members of a family, heightening the potential for conflict.

The spheres of work and family are both potentially stressful environments and the strains experienced in one may also have an impact upon the other sphere (Hobfoll & Spielberger, 1992). Parents' work can 'spill over' into the family environment. For example, analysis of qualitative empirical data collected in Australia in late 2003 from 93
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males and females in Year 6 and Year 11 found that for many children, their parents’ work had positive spillover effects such as the money and security that their work brings (Pocock & Clarke, 2004). Negative spillover was also evident in children’s reports of parental moods, tiredness, and emotional spillover related to their work. Negative spillover is defined as a process in which stress in one domain accumulates within an individual and is experienced in another domain (Leiter & Durup, 1996). For example, an individual who is subjected to stressors at work may come home short-tempered and fatigued and may be prone to enter into an argument with another member of the family (Appel & Kim-Appel, 2008). Parents’ moods are obvious to children and have a noticeable effect on the entire household (Alexander & Baxter, 2005; Collinson, 1998; Kitzmann, 2000; Margolin, Gordis & John, 2001; Pocock & Clarke). This is consistent with family systems theory whereby it is inevitable that stress will impact reciprocally among other family members.

Coping successfully with stressors is the norm in many families (Deater-Deckard, 2005). Coping strategies are defined as reactions to stressors that involve the use of emotional, cognitive and social resources. Coping is entrenched in family processes and embodies the entire family process as it develops each day. In other words, coping is a series of strategies used by members of the entire family system to respond to events within or from the environment (Deater-Deckard). However, repeated coping efforts, albeit successful ones, may seriously deplete parental resources (Eizirik & Bergmann, 2004). Therefore, it is not inconceivable that this could ultimately lead to a breakdown in the marital relationship with resultant negative consequences for children.

During 2007, 47,963 divorces were granted throughout Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). Although this reflected a decrease in comparison to 2006 (51,375), 49.3 per cent (23,646) of the divorces granted in 2007 involved an average of 1.88 children per divorce. In numerical terms this equates to a staggering number of 44,454 children in just one year exposed to the negative consequences associated with divorce. It must also be noted that these figures do not include unmarried parents, or parents who have separated. The number of divorces annually places an enormous burden on Family Law systems.

In pre-industrial societies, men and women typically worked alongside each other and child rearing was an activity that was integrated into their daily lives (Talbot, 2005). Home and work were intimately connected. The growth of industrial capitalism has often
been attributed to the development of separate domains of home and work (Talbot). The
globalisation process and its attendant 24-hour market place have motivated an expansion
of atypical working hours. Less favourable outcomes for families have been associated with
working non-standard and longer hours. As people are required to work longer and harder,
correspondingly there is less time for families, friends and other interests (Alexander &

Both parents are important for the emotional and intellectual development of
children and the absence of one weakens family functioning (Anderson, 2002). Research
has shown that many children protect themselves emotionally by physically withdrawing
from a parent, or turning to the other parent and distancing themselves from the parent who
has been absent. Pocock and Clarke's (2004) study further shows that young people desired
more time with their parents as opposed to the positive spillover of monetary gains. Many
children perceived that parents who worked long hours or spent extended periods of time
from home were afflicted by feelings of guilt that were quelled by spending extra time and
money on them. Young people particularly wanted parents present for special events at
school, sporting achievements, celebrations, and when problems arose. Having the mother
at home did not sufficiently compensate for an absent father.

The role of father is multifaceted in that they predominantly undertake the
breadwinner role in families, spend time with children, and provide support and assistance
to the mother (Baxter, 2007). Although the role of breadwinner may represent a culturally
valued role for fathers, Christiansen and Palkovitz (2001) suggest that the provision of
income has largely been ignored as a form of paternal involvement, as evidenced by limited
contemporary research assessing its relationship to fathers, their children, or families.
Proposed explanations why the provision of income has been overlooked as a form of
paternal involvement include an assumption that the role of a father is to provide financial
resources, and that the act of providing is invisible to the family. While economic
contributions are a necessary and important resource for children, emotional resources are
equally important for children's psychological wellbeing (Videon, 2005). Nevertheless, as
stated by Christiansen and Palkovitz, a father's economic responsibility to his children
cannot exist without an ongoing connection, and involvement with his children.

The underlying premise in the work/family literature is that work and home
environments place numerous demands upon parental time and resources (Sarder, 2006).
Parenting in FIFO

Paid employment can hinder fathers in having sufficient time to spend with their families and in Western Australia, the size of the resource sector and increasing use of the Fly-in Fly-out mode of employment means that more fathers may be absent for longer periods of time. Therefore, it is important to examine how mothers and fathers share in the parenting of children in this employment arrangement.

Fly-in Fly-out Employment

Australia's resources sector comprises minerals and petroleum and is the country's largest single export sector. In 2006-07, over 80 per cent of its output was exported, accounting for approximately 49 per cent of total goods and services exports. This represented over eight per cent of Australia's Gross Domestic Product and accounted for 63 per cent of Australia's merchandise export earnings (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). The 2006 Australian Census reflected that the number of individuals whose foremost place of employment was in the mining industry almost doubled between 1961 (54,501) and 2006 (106,895) (ABS, 2008). Perth was shown to be the largest mining centre in Australia with 11,543 employed in the mining industry in 2001 and 19,160 in 2006 (ABS). Those residing in Perth and working in the Pilbara comprised 1,972 (10%) of the Statistical Divisions of Western Australia, the South Eastern 1,613 (8%), and the Central 1,068 (6%) (ABS).

Over the past few decades, Australian mining operations have adopted the strategy of employee long distance commuting (LDC) to mine sites. LDC was originally devised to meet the needs of the offshore oil industry because of the absence of 'local' workforces and permanent accommodation, and daily commuting was not feasible (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). LDC originated in the offshore oil sector in the Gulf of Mexico during the late 1940s and was introduced into Australia in the 1960s by the oil and gas industries for both onshore and offshore production (Hogan & Berry, 2000). The upsurge of gold mining activities in Western Australia was largely responsible for the escalation of LDC in Australia (Houghton, 1993).

The practice of LDC in Australia is known colloquially as fly-in fly-out (FIFO) because air travel has become the most viable form of transport to and from remote mine sites (Hogan & Berry, 2000). FIFO also includes ship-in ship-out (SISO), drive-in drive-out (DIDO) by private vehicle or company transport, and commute mining (Chamber of Minerals and Energy Western Australia [CMEWA], 2005). FIFO mining operations may be
more accurately described as those where meals and accommodation are provided for employees who work at the mine site for a period of time, then return to their respective domiciles in between rosters (CMEWA). Work shifts are typically 12 hours and might be all days, all nights, or a combination of days and nights (Hogan & Berry). Work rotation patterns may vary, but the most common are two weeks on and one week off, three weeks on and one week off, and six weeks on and one week off (Watts, 2004). A range of factors can be attributed to the use of the FIFO strategy to acquire a workforce.

The majority of communities having an industrial economic base are single-industry resource-based, which means that the communities depend upon the economic activity generated by one industry, such as a mine. These remote, widely dispersed, and scantily populated communities are confronted with challenges in climate and transportation, which represent major obstacles to the provision of services. Resource-based communities are subject to the boom and bust cycles intrinsic to the global economy. To solve some of the problems related to industry shutdown or downsizing, some companies use the FIFO strategy for resource extraction (Schmidt, 2000). From the standpoint of other mining companies, FIFO offers considerable cost savings over the customary alternative of building permanent accommodation for workers and their families in outback regions of Australia (Houghton, 1993). Another factor contributing to the move away from the establishment of traditional towns to the FIFO approach has been a change in the economic viability of various new mining projects in smaller mining operations (Houghton). In addition, the short lifespan of some mines does not justify the costs of building a town (Gillies, Wu & Jones, 1997).

In a follow-up study on the impact of FIFO mining operations in the Australian mining industry, the majority of companies reported that the main factor in the decision to adopt a FIFO strategy of employment was the reduced capital requirements. Other companies reported that the ore reserve being mined was not economically viable if a town had to be constructed near the mine site (Gillies, Wu & Jones, 1997). Other factors contributing to the decision to adopt the FIFO approach was the potential to attract a high quality work force, the ability to control the shift start-times of employees, and a reduction in absenteeism. There was general agreement amongst operators that FIFO was a positive influence on employee motivation, but was very difficult for those with young children. FIFO has generally replaced the construction of residential towns throughout the world as a
means of accommodating workers for remote mining operations (CMEWA, 2005) as it has become a more cost effective approach (Hogan & Berry, 2000). Increased visitor presence recorded in 12 high-growth mining towns between 2001 and 2006 reflected the popularity of organisations attracting workers to regional and remote mining towns on a FIFO and/or DIDO arrangement, (ABS, 2008).

The resources sector is integral to the economy and this is expected to continue. In turn, FIFO workers are directly related to a work practice necessary for the wellbeing of the Australian economy (Sarder, 2006). It is anticipated that many Western Australian industries will continue to face skills shortages (State Training Board, 2007). This is likely to result in an increased availability of employment opportunities that will expose more families to work schedules that separate them. Indeed, it is anticipated that the soon to be commenced Gorgon gas project on Barrow Island will play a pivotal role in the Australian economy for the next 40 years (Chevron, Australia). This project is Australia’s largest resource development and at the peak of construction will provide direct and indirect employment to 10,000 people. Due to the remoteness of the location this will of necessity involve FIFO arrangements. At a recent ‘Fly-in Fly-out’ Seminar Ms Greer Bradbury reported that approximately 70 per cent of mine workers were married with children (Department of Consumer and Employment Protection, 2008). However, little research has been conducted on parenting experiences in the FIFO lifestyle. Parents’ provision of care serves to advance children’s safety, good health, and emotional and intellectual development. It is important, therefore, to understand the characteristics that facilitate and encumber parental care giving (Kalenoski, Ribar & Stratton, 2006).

In home/away occupations the family becomes the sole responsibility of the spouse during partner absences (Collinson, 1998; Hiew, 1992). Although somewhat dated, there is a small body of research that has examined the experiences of wives in other home/away occupations. Familiar examples of occupations that entail a partner’s absence from home, regularly or irregularly for periods of time are the armed forces, merchant navy, deep-sea fishing, offshore oil rigs, long distance truck driving, construction, sales and business executives (Hubinger, Parker & Clavarino, 2002; Morrice, Taylor, Clark & McCann, 1985; Thomas, 2003). The focus of research on the impact of home and away occupations has predominantly addressed personal and organisational factors relating to risk and safety. Because parallels can be drawn amongst those in other occupations that call for intermittent
absences away from home and the family (Thomas, 2003) a review of this literature provides a foundation for the current study.

Adaptation

In clinical contact with North Sea wives of offshore workers Morrice, et al. (1985) identified three main types of coping responses to the cyclical partings and reunions with their offshore husbands. Firstly there were wives who found it impossible to accustom themselves to the partings and reunions. Secondly, some wives adopted lifestyles that were much the same irrespective of partner presence or absence, and finally, there were wives who resented both their partners' absence and their partners' return. Spousal adjustment to the return of a partner has been shown to follow a characteristic pattern (Gallegos, 2005; Hubinger, et al., 2002; Morrice, et al.; Parkes, Carnell & Farmer, 2005). Initial happiness was experienced upon reunion, followed by a period of annoyance. The irritation experienced during the first days of reunion reflects the potential difficulty of partners in managing two different transitions. During the middle of the leave cycle there was a period of 'normality' as the partners adapted to the transition of the return of the absent parent, followed by a build-up of tension in the days prior to a partner’s return to work (Parkes, et al.).

Fatigue has been reported to be a major source of adjustment for returning husbands/partners (Collinson, 1998; Hubinger, et al., 2002; Parkes, et al., 2005; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). Fatigue is characterised by a range of signs and symptoms such as tiredness and an increasing need for sleep. The effect of work schedules on fathers ultimately impact upon the family, as evidenced by a number of women who reported that the levels of stress and exhaustion experienced by their partners related to increased stress within the family (Shrimpton & Storey).

In terms of family systems theory the adjustment cycle of spouses would be mirrored in other members of the family unit. When a father is intermittently absent from the family as in FIFO employment, the system continually has to readjust (Boss, 1986). The characteristic adaptation pattern may render FIFO families vulnerable to conflict during the period of annoyance upon the initial return of a partner and the build-up of tension in the days prior to the partner’s return to work. However, Boss further suggests that the predictability of father entrances and exits from the family system results in less
disequilibrium than if there were no predictability. The reasons for this are unclear but could be the result of consistent management, or adaptive coping strategies.

**Parenting**

A prominent study of the strategies used by Western Australian families with young children for dealing with transitions in the family as a consequence of the FIFO lifestyle was undertaken in 2005 by Ngala in partnership with Meerilinga (Gallegos, 2005). Ngala is a leading resource for families with infants and young children in Australia; Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity that promotes the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in working to raise the status of children in Western Australia. The study sought to identify strengths of couples managing parenting transitions with children under the age of six years because of the importance of the early years in children’s social and cognitive development. Thirty-two couples participated in individual semi-structured interviews.

The findings showed that parenting, defined by what particular child care and household tasks each undertook, fell along a continuum between there being no change at all because of the father’s absence much of the time, to no change because of the maintenance of a household presence by daily telephone conversations in his absence. This could also be explained by an emphasis by both parents on the male breadwinning role as a central function of the family system and that the patterns of responsibility that follow in a partner’s return reflect the homeostatic nature of family roles (Zvonkovic, Solomon, Humble & Manoogian, 2005). The majority of participants in this study were both involved in providing care and nurturance of the children and the home partners generally felt they had partner support for decision making and parenting. However, one parent would usually take on the role of ‘disciplinarian’. Upon their return, the division of household tasks occurred on a continuum from fathers not assuming any household duties, to fathers who took over particular duties (Gallegos, 2005).

Whereas it appears that parents in this study generally managed the lifestyle well, they acknowledged that working a concentrated schedule increased the level of fatigue for both. As this study was designed to identify the strengths of FIFO families, potential challenges were not identified. Other research has demonstrated mothers’ concern regarding the maintenance of discipline (Hubinger, et al., 2002) and that conflict sometimes arose as a result of inconsistencies in discipline, with one parent perceiving the other to be
too lenient (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). Some spouses reported that they bore the sole responsibility for managing children’s discipline because there was little their partners could do while they were away (Parkes, et al., 2005). Other spouses reported that their partners were disinclined to become involved in discipline problems when they were home as they were reluctant to damage relationships with their children (Parkes, et al.; Shrimpton & Storey). Schmidt (2000) argues that families subjected to commuting separation may develop a system whereby as a result of physical absence, fathers withdraw from the role of parent, leaving the mother with increased responsibility.

Research on two-parent families suggests that parental care giving remains to be a highly gendered set of tasks where mothers specialise in the expressive role, whereas fathers specialise in the instrumental role (Videon, 2005). Women are generally assumed to have unique capabilities for nurturance and caring for children, whereas men are task oriented, and promote competence and productivity for success in the external society (Videon). Gender theory proposes that an individual’s gender is the primary predictor of behaviour in families and the power that men have over women in society is reflected in the home (Hall, Walker & Acock, 1995). The power of men in society was put forward as an explanation for why women do more “feminine” family work and menial tasks and men more “masculine” tasks. Feminine tasks were described as those that are done repeatedly and at specific times, such as cooking and laundry. Masculine tasks were described as those usually done at convenience, and that needed to be done infrequently, such as car washing and fixing things. Men’s involvement in child care was predominantly in the form of play activities (Hall, et al.; Stewart, 1999; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

While domestic tasks can be very time consuming, arduous and tedious, and caring for young children a 24-hour-a-day job, the health and wellbeing of children is founded to a large extent on these everyday tasks (Windebank, 2001). For women, family work is intermingled with love and many enjoy ministering to the needs of their loved ones (Thompson & Walker, 1989). However, family work is repetitive, isolating, inescapable, and often unappreciated because it is mostly invisible to partners at work. Thompson and Walker showed that men’s involvement in family work was predominantly undertaken on weekends, whereas for women it was every day of the week. Furthermore, men were more inclined to become involved in those activities most enjoyable and fulfilling for women such as cooking and playing with children.
This traditional, gendered view was reflected in the 2001 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, which indicated that women continued to do more of the high stress, and less rewarding aspects of domestic duties, especially those involving child care. This was true even when wives themselves performed a similar number of hours in paid work (Goward, 2005). Hence, it would appear that despite the more egalitarian view of women in the workforce, the role of mother remains strongly culturally prescribed (Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter & Small, 2001).

To explore shared parenting, 58 dual-earner couples (116) parents with young children (nine years or younger) completed interviews and self-report measures (Ehrenberg, et al., 2001). A Parenting Together Questionnaire (PTQ) was developed specifically for this study to measure shared parenting by assessing parenting goals, flexibility in parenting approaches and feelings of support and competency in parenting. A modified version of Baruch and Barnett’s Checklist of Child Care Tasks (CCCT) was used to measure what percentages of time 12 specific child-care tasks were completed by mother alone, father alone, and parents together. After individual interviews were conducted, each parent received copies of the questionnaire measures to complete independently. The findings demonstrated that the average percentage of time that couples estimated mothers spent on the 12 child-care tasks were between 40 to 60% compared to fathers’ average percentages of time of 20 to 40%, and parents worked together approximately 20 to 40% in completing the tasks.

Overall the results demonstrated that mothers spent a significantly greater proportion of their time completing 9 of the 12 child care tasks alone, indicating that a traditional division of labour predominates, where the mother does more than the father irrespective of other responsibilities (Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Goward, 2005; Hall, Walker & Acock; Steward, 1999; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983; Windebank, 2001). While mothers spent significantly more time on the majority of child care tasks than fathers, both parents typically completed the planning of family-oriented activities together, which may indicate that these activities promote a sense of shared parenting (Anderson & Spruill).

In Western societies fathers are encouraged to engage in a responsible relationship with their children yet for more than a century, the debate about what it means to be a responsible father has focused on what role fathers should play in the everyday lives of
their children outside of their role as financial provider, or breadwinner (Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998). The rationale for encouraging responsible fathering from a developmental perspective reflects children’s needs for predictability, nurturance and appropriate limit setting from both mothers and fathers (Doherty, et al.). Research has indicated the evolution of a new model of fatherhood as evidenced by a steady increase in fathers’ involvement over the past three decades (Fleming, Eerie & Tobin, 2005; Ranson, 2001). Particularly when children are young there is an expectation and an aspiration by fathers to be involved in their children’s lives and to share parenting tasks. However, an examination of popular child-rearing books focusing on the principles and techniques of raising children in Western societies does not reflect the proposed new image of fatherhood. Rather, a father’s role is depicted as peripheral, and limited; perpetuating outdated cultural expectations (Fleming, et al.). Christiansen & Palkovitz (2001) contend that providing financially for families via the breadwinner role has become a form of competition with being an ‘involved father’, as opposed to a manifestation of good fathering.

Pocock and Clarke (2004) proposed the existence of a ‘hyper breadwinner’ phenomenon whereby in couple households, a single earner (typically the father) has a demanding job and works long hours to provide the family income. Research has demonstrated that when fathers work longer hours they are less involved with children, and are less likely to provide support to partners and share in child care tasks (Baxter 2007). Another perspective was proffered by Barnett (1998) who suggested that some fathers ‘buy out’ of housework tasks that are particularly stressful by choosing to spend long hours at work.

Using data derived from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Baxter (2007) examined the relationship between fathers’ hours of paid employment (n = 3,268) and the extent to which they spend time with children, and provide support and assistance to mothers in families with children aged four to five years. To analyse the effects of long working hours, usual work hours were categorised as 1 to 34 hours, 35 to 44 hours, 45 to 54 hours, and 55 hours or more. Of these fathers, 24 per cent worked 35 hours or more per week. The LSAC did not amass details of father involvement in specific child care tasks such as helping the child to get dressed or taking children to school. Therefore, this analysis focuses mainly on fathers’ involvement in children’s recreational activities.
such as reading to a child, playing with toys or indoor games such as board and card games, and playing outdoor games or exercising together, such as walking, swimming, or cycling. To assess the extent to which mother and father supported each other both were asked how often their partners were a resource or support in raising the children, and how often they were a resource or support to their partner in raising children.

Overall the findings demonstrated that working longer hours reduced fathers' involvement with their children (except for reading) and reduced the provision of support to their partner and the sharing of child care tasks. However, despite the significant effects, the differences were small. Among those working fairly standard hours some fathers were found to be less involved in activities with their children and less supportive as a co-parent. On the other hand, among those fathers with more employment-related time constraints, there were fathers who were closely involved in their children’s activities and supportive as a co-parent (Baxter, 2007). It must be noted, however, that the self-reported responses to questions are subjective and mothers and fathers may have different perceptions of what constitutes parenting and supportiveness to a partner. A valuable aspect of this study was the longitudinal characteristic of the data because the nature of fathering changes with children’s age and changes in family circumstances.

To facilitate positive father-child involvement, research has shown that mothers in Western societies use a number of strategies (McBride, et al., 2005; Seery & Crowley, 2000). In a sample of 23 women, 78% ($n = 18$) indicated, and/or were observed to deliberately take steps to promote and build father-child relationships (Seery & Crowley). The participants included families where fathers were residential/biological ($n = 15$), residential/stepfathers ($n = 2$) and non-residential/biological ($n = 1$). Strategies identified to facilitate positive father-child involvement were identified: offering suggestions for joint father-child activities, relaying information about positive feelings, praising fathers for their involvement with children, organising the family schedule/environment, and creating or maintaining positive images of fathers. Although 18 women did perform activities to encourage and strengthen father-child relations, there was a considerable difference in terms of their efforts. McBride, et al. (2005) argue that maternal perceptions of fathers' investment in the parenting role are related to father involvement.

Belsky (1984) argues that the provision of advice and assistance by a partner with the tasks and responsibilities of parenting can directly affect the quality of parenting
because marital support serves as a coping resource that moderates the association between psychological distress and the quality of parenting. When marital support is absent, the social network becomes the principal parental support system. However, this is secondary to that of the marital relationship. As a result of father absences from the home, spouses are required to assume tasks that put them at increased risk for distress. Increased daily stresses, more chaotic home life, task overload and reduced social supports may influence maternal adjustment, parenting behaviour and child development (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). On the other hand, however, the disproportionate responsibility of women for family work serves to keep the family system functioning (Zvonkovic, et al., 2005).

Children

The FIFO mode of employment impacts upon families because when a parent is intermittently absent, the family as a system is required to manage the departure, absence and return of the parent (Zvonkovic, et al., 2005). As a basis for a cross-cultural study on the impact of work-related father absences, Hiew (1992) derived data from 66 children aged between 8 – 11 years ($M = 9.95$) of Canadian military families and their mothers aged between 26 – 45 years ($M = 33$). Mothers completed the Supportive Functions Questionnaire (SFQ) that measures the perceived social support received in separated families in the functions of parenting, emotional/social, tangible, and directive guidance support during father absence. The Parent Evaluation Form (PEF) was utilised to assess children’s behavior at home concerning their emotional and separation adjustment. Children’s homeroom teachers were required to complete the Classroom Adjustment Rating Scale consisting of 41 items measuring three factors: acting-out behaviours, shy/anxious behaviours, and learning/academic problems. In addition, children took part in individual interviews to examine their coping behaviours related to father absence. The stressor was conceived as having three stages: anticipation of parental departure, actual parental absence, and the return or reunion with a parent. These stages are comparable to the three stages of adjustment identified by Hubinger, et al., (2002), and Parkes, et al., (2005). Stressfulness relating to each stage of father absence was appraised on a 4-point scale from $1 = \text{not upsetting}$ to $4 = \text{really upsetting}$. The coping strategies children used were classified into problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and social support seeking (Hiew).
The results indicated that for high SFQ mothers, teachers reported significantly less classroom acting-out behaviours, and less learning problems and academic underachievement. Teachers also rated children of parents who reported that their children were well-adjusted at home as less shy/anxious in class and having fewer learning/academic problems. Overall, children’s coping responses were significant across the three stages of anticipation of parental departure, actual parental absence and reunion. Actual father absence was the most stressful for children, followed by anticipation of parental departure. While it was not clear what particular factors evoked feelings of stress, it was suggested that they were due to these events being beyond a child’s control (Hiew, 1992).

Within each stage of separation, emotion-focused coping predominated. Examples of the strategy to control negative emotions were “I try to forget about it”, and “I wish he didn’t have to leave”. Overall, it would appear that children are subjected to the same characteristic adjustment pattern as mothers to intermittent father absences. Nelson, et al. (2009) contend that coping with negative emotions is a more developmentally difficult task for children than coping with negative emotions and that it is important for parents to assist children in handling these experiences because they provide valuable information about appropriate emotional displays and successful coping strategies. The literature discussing parental separation in military families has demonstrated shared common risk factors to children of regular parental absence (Sibbel, 2001).

Risk is a statistical concept used to predict the probability of negative outcomes. These risk factors relate to negative outcomes for children in the areas of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and social relationships (Amato & Keith, 1991; Farrington, 2005). Attachment theorists argue that a range of psychiatric disturbances can be ascribed to divergence in attachment development or alternatively, failure of its development (Bowlby, 1977). Attachment is considered to be any form of behaviour that as a consequence, results in the attainment and retention of an emotional bond with a preferred individual. For children, the maintenance of an emotional bond is experienced as a source of security whereas the threat of loss arouses anxiety, actual loss evokes sorrow, and both of these situations are likely to stimulate anger. However, anxiety over an unwilling separation can be a perfectly normal and healthy reaction. Irrespective of representational models of attachment an individual builds during
Parenting in FIFO childhood and adolescence, they tend to endure into and throughout adult life (Bowlby). Nevertheless, much research is still required to identify factors that place children at risk, the causal linkages between these factors, and the realised outcomes.

Kaczmarek and Sibbel (2008) investigated the impact of work-related father absences on three groups of primary school-aged children and their mothers in Western Australia. Thirty with fathers in the military, 30 with fathers employed in FIFO mining and 30 with fathers whose employment did not require extended periods of absence from home. The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects on children’s psychological wellbeing and their home-based mothers’ perceptions of family functioning. To measure children’s psychosocial wellbeing the Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI) and Revised Children’s Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS) were utilised, and to measure children’s and mothers’ perceptions of family functioning, the Family Assessment Device (FAD). No significant differences were found between groups on all measures of child wellbeing.

A strength of this study was the inclusion of a control group for comparative purposes. However, criticisms have been raised about the CDI and RCMAS. A contested property of the CDI has been its construct validity as assessed by factor analysis (Cole, Hoffman, Tram & Maxwell, 2000). Insofar as factors reveal underlying symptom patterns, Steele, et al. (2006) contend that differences in factor structures could indicate differences in the experience or expression of depressive symptoms across samples. Possible explanations offered by Cole, et al. are that parents and children may be sensitive to different manifestations of the target construct and that some questions asked of children may not have the same meaning when reworded and asked of parents about their children. Although still widely used, the RCMAS is being supplanted by newer scales because it has been shown to not perform as well as newer scales. In particular, there is concern that the factor structure of the RCMAS may not cover a sufficient range of youths’ anxieties and that the construct it measures is unclear. Similar to other older scales, Myers and Winters (2002) suggest that its discriminative abilities appear poor and the dichotomous yes/no format may result in a decrease in power and sensitivity. Overall, however, mothers from these FIFO families reported significantly more stress than the other two groups in the areas of communication, support and behaviour control within the family, consistent with the findings of Parkes, Carnell and Farmer (2005).
Although FIFO families are theoretically intact, it is important to acknowledge that during the periods of father absences, mothers essentially function as single-parents. To more fully understand the development of children, it is important to appreciate the functioning of the family as an entire unit in the context of whole-family interaction (Wise, 2003). Research examining the developmental trajectories of children growing up in various family structures has validated concerns about the wellbeing of children in single-parent families. In single-parent families the absence of one parent is often advanced to explain difficulties in child adjustment and functioning, often making reference to the lack of paternal authority. When a parent is absent the notion is that a child is exposed to lower levels of supervision (Anderson, 2002).

Animosity between separated/divorced parents has also been found to impact upon parenting practices. As an example, Bailey and Zvonkovic (2003) explain that when a decision is made by a residential parent alone relating to children and only telling the nonresidential partner after the fact, effectively excludes that parent from the decision-making process. This undermines and impedes that parent’s role and identity in their children’s lives (Bailey & Zvonkovic). Furstenberg and Nord’s study (as cited in Stewart, 1999) refers to a phenomenon known as ‘Disneyland Dads’ and ‘Disneyland Moms’ whereby the nonresidential parent is satisfied to merely be engaged primarily in recreational activities rather than the day-to-day lives of their children. However, it must be acknowledged that the specific needs of children vary by developmental stage, requiring higher levels of physical care giving when infants, but as adolescents, greater levels of conflict management (Doherty, et al., 1998).

*Advantages*

The FIFO lifestyle is not without advantages. It provides employees with the financial resources to meet basic, and not-so-basic financial needs, while at the same time maintaining existing family arrangements in an urban environment (Sarder, 2006). Another considerable advantage was the separation of work and family life (Hubinger, et al., 2002; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). The opportunity to spend extended periods at home to partake in shared recreational and other interests, and the ability to spend long periods of time with their children was of significant value to many FIFO employees (Collinson, 1998). However, this did not necessarily take the form of involvement in day-to-day child care activities (Shrimpton & Storey). Children of offshore workers reported that they saw more
of their fathers than children of fathers working onshore (Mauthner, Maclean & McKee, 2000).

For home-based spouses, apart from the obvious financial benefits, independence was a valued feature of the lifestyle. This included the establishment and maintenance of daily routines such as mealtimes, children’s bedtimes, children’s and their own recreation times, and social activities (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). Another characteristic of independence related to the development of new skills to more effectively manage the household in a partner’s absence. The development of independence translated into an increase in personal confidence and coping ability as a result of partner absences (Parkes, et al., 2005).

Overall, research has indicated a number of advantages to families afforded by the FIFO lifestyle. However, the nature of the FIFO mode of employment separates families for intermittent periods on a rotational basis. This means that during fathers’ absences for work, families may essentially be likened to single-parent families during those periods. This may place families under stressful conditions that could ultimately lead to a breakdown in the marital relationship. Negative consequences for children of divorced/separated parents have been well documented. Therefore, there is a need to consider parenting experiences of mothers and fathers in the FIFO lifestyle. This research sought to address the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of a partner’s FIFO lifestyle on mothers’ parenting practices?
2. What are the experiences of the FIFO lifestyle on fathers’ parenting practices?
3. What are the differences between mothers’ and fathers’ experiences of parenting practices in the FIFO lifestyle?

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research was exploratory and a phenomenological research paradigm informed the study’s design. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2008) describes phenomenology as the study of phenomena as they are experienced and the
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meanings individuals attribute to those experiences. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view and emphasises an individual’s construction of the ‘life-world’ of everyday life experiences. The benefit of a phenomenological approach is that it can lead to insights into particular processes and practices that exist within a specific setting (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). It is important to capture individuals’ perceptions of their world and the sense they make of their experiences. Qualitative data centre on the lived experiences of individuals that allow researchers to study phenomena and strive to interpret the meanings brought to them (Gilgun, 2005; Leech & Onwuegbuzie). This study adopts the family systems framework because family members are interconnected and operate as a group. Everything that happens to one family member has a reciprocal effect upon everyone else in the family since interaction involves a spiral of habitual loops (Hetherington, et al., 1992; Olsen & DeFrain, 1996).

Participants

The snowball (chain sampling) (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2006) method of recruitment was utilised with the point of origin being friends and acquaintances whose partners were employed, or who knew of someone employed in FIFO occupations. The participants consisted of eight mothers whose partners work in a FIFO employment arrangement with ages ranging from 25 to 53 years ($M = 39.62$). These participants were unknown to each other and therefore, not part of a network of friends. Five fathers employed in a FIFO working arrangement ranging in age from 32 to 56 years ($M = 41.80$) also participated in this study for the purpose of examining their perceptions, as well as substantiating those of mothers. Four of the five participants were work colleagues. Children ranged in age from 9 months to 26 years ($M = 14.46$). Participation was voluntary, with no incentives offered.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. In addition, all participants were advised of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event of the interview causing distress or discomfort to a participant, a list of free counseling services was available. The interview process concluded with questions relating to positive experiences for the purpose of debriefing participants. Confidentiality of participants was maintained by allocating an identifier as to their gender, namely F (female) and M (male),
followed by a number (1 – 13). Add data was secured in a locked filing cabinet, accessible only to the researcher. The Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee granted approval for this research.

**Materials**

A semi-structured interview schedule comprising three single central open-ended questions with six prompts was utilised (Appendix B) to elicit participants’ experiences of parenting in the FIFO lifestyle. The semi-structured interview process was chosen because this format lends itself to providing a depth of information. Semi-structured interviews also facilitate clarification of meaning by following up with probes to get more in-depth information, and enable participants to respond freely. The interviews were audio recorded as taking notes detracts from the development of rapport and dialogue, which are essential in the interviewing process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

**Procedure**

Participants were interviewed individually at designated locations of their choice. Prior to conducting the interview participants were thanked for their participation in the study and were given a Participant Information Letter (Appendix A) to read. Participants were then required to acknowledge their consent by signing a Participant Consent Form (Appendix C). Demographic details obtained prior to the interviews were number, sex and ages of children, age of parents, length of time in FIFO, and fathers’ work roster. All participants were informed that responses to questions were entirely voluntary and that they could decline to answer any question. As there was a slight possibility of distressing emotions, participants were advised that details of appropriate counselling facilities would be provided upon request. Care was also taken by the researcher to assure all participants of confidentiality and that they would not be identifiable in the final research report. Once these formalities were completed the researcher indicated to participants that the interview and audio recording would commence. Although the focus of the current study was upon perceptions of parenting in the FIFO lifestyle, participants were not discouraged from discussing other issues surrounding the lifestyle as this information facilitated an understanding of the context of their everyday experiences.
Data Analysis

The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim after each completed interview and participants were allocated pseudonyms. Lowenberg (1993) suggests that in qualitative research meanings are construed and negotiated during the interaction between the researcher and the informant. During data processing the narrative text was examined, allowing for the identification of content and subsequent chunking of data into smaller, meaningful parts that exposed the thoughts, ideas, and meanings conveyed (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thereafter a question ordered matrix was developed to ascertain frequent themes and sub-themes. By comparing participant responses to similar questions, differences or similarities in their experiences were explored. Prior to final analysis, the assistance of a second researcher was enlisted to assess consistency in the coding of data.

Findings and Discussion

Mothers' narratives of parenting experiences in the FIFO lifestyle were dominated by two themes. These were parenting alone in a father's absence, and parenting together upon his return, with sub-themes of day-to-day child care and household responsibilities, interaction with children, social/recreational activities, and advantages of the lifestyle. Fathers' narratives of parenting experiences were similarly dominated by two themes. For fathers these were parenting away, with the sub-themes of communication with families and missing significant events; and parenting together, with the sub-themes of day-to-day child care and household responsibilities, interaction with children, social/recreational activities, and advantages of the lifestyle.

Mothers Parenting Alone

Day-to-Day Child Care and Household Responsibilities

When parenting alone, mothers depicted the management of day-to-day child care and household responsibilities without support and assistance by fathers as extremely demanding and stressful, with attendant feelings of never getting a break from these duties. As one participant explained:
"... it used to really annoy me because I feel like I’ve got the kids for seven days straight whereas he gets full days by himself after work to rest ..."

The burden of caring for children and households alone resulted in feelings of tiredness and/or exhaustion that ultimately exacerbated feelings of strain and distress. In turn, this impacted upon mothers’ sleeping patterns in different ways. For example, one participant stated:

"... I’m so tired and exhausted ... I just zonk ...

However, a more frequent response was difficulty in sleeping:

"... I don’t sleep very well when he’s not home ... I’ve always got my ear out for the kids ...

One mother reported that she was frequently ill upon her partner’s return from work and offered the following explanation:

"... I think it’s because psychologically I don’t let myself get sick when I’m by myself because who else is there to look after the kids? It’s like your body knows that there is no one ... you have to do it ... but it’s tiring ...

While parents derive satisfaction from sustaining their children’s wellbeing, research has shown that their own health and wellbeing are impacted by the stress induced by the commitments in achieving this end (Kalenoski, et al., 2006; Schmidt, 2000; Williford, et al., 2007).
As previously stated, mothers were generally frustrated by feelings of never having a break from their responsibilities in the absence of fathers. To avail themselves of a means of relief from work overload some mothers actually joined the workforce as a coping strategy. One mother declared:

"... I chose to go back to work ... it gives me two days to get out of the house and not have the kids with me ..."

While it is acknowledged that coping with stressors is the norm in many families (Deater-Deckard, 2005), coupled with minor daily hassles, the cumulative effect of coping alone over several days or longer might culminate in a significant stressor for a mother (Hobfoll & Spielberger, 1992).

Mothers generally availed themselves of the support of family and/or friends during times of crises or emergencies, but these individuals were obviously not available to assist on a day-to-day basis due to their own family commitments and responsibilities. However, they were grateful for the availability of alternative support. As one mother explained:

"...it's not the same as support from your husband. Sometimes it would be good to have them to help take the pressure off ..."

As previously mentioned, in family systems theory, a change in one person's functioning is inevitably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of other family members (Boss, 1986; Minuchin, 1985). Research has also shown that stressful conditions can lead to distress in the parenting role (Deater-Deckard, 2005). The following narrative provides an example of how feelings of stress and fatigue can impact upon parenting practices:
“... they do try things out when I’m really tired because sometimes they know that I’m not listening ... just go ahead and do it because I just haven’t got the energy to deal with it ...”

In family systems theory, the intense emotional connectedness and reactivity are what makes the functioning of families mutually dependent (Westen, et al., 2006). Eizirik and Bergmann (2004) propose that parents may unwittingly contribute to the development and maintenance of challenging behaviours. Parental irritability induces child aversive behaviour and parental strategies that reinforce aversive means of relating to other family members. In essence, parental distress disrupts effective child management (Snyder, 1991).

It would appear that attending to day-to-day child care and household activities alone present mothers with challenges unique to the FIFO lifestyle. Schmidt (2000) suggests that the costs of the commuting lifestyle manifest in emotional stress and repeated coping efforts seriously deplete mothers’ resources (Eizirik & Bergmann, 2004). Furthermore, research has shown that greater stress is significantly associated with less optimal parent and family functioning (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990) with consequent detrimental short- and long-term effects for parents and children alike (Deater-Deckard, 2005). Paradoxically, however, the disproportionate responsibility of women for family work serves to keep the family system functioning (Zvonkovic, et al., 2005).

Interaction with Children

Mothers described their perception of parenting as being that of a single parent during father absences. However, the majority of mothers perceived that their children adapted well to the FIFO lifestyle and that there were no detrimental effects to their children’s wellbeing. This was ascribed to children having become accustomed to the lifestyle or because it was all they had ever known. However, for some mothers the increased responsibility of making decisions alone relating to children promoted increased feelings of anxiety. As indicated by one participant:
"...there's a fear that I make a decision ... and something goes terribly wrong ... I don't know if he would ever be able to forgive me ..."

Although communication was maintained daily with partners by telephone, consistent with prior research, mothers perceived that they bore the sole responsibility for managing children because there was little that fathers could do while they were away (Parkes, et al., 2005). Being predominantly responsible for maintaining family values, roles, boundaries and how children were managed imposed a certain degree of distress for some mothers relating to the role of sole disciplinarian, as illustrated by the following narratives:

"... you've got to make more decisions and the kids hate you ... I put it down to the fact that he doesn't do any of the parenting ..."

"... I'm the bad guy and he's the good guy ... if he was here I wouldn't come across as the ogre all the time ... I would get that instant support ..."

These perceptions give substance to Belsky’s (1984) contention that the provision of advice and assistance by a spouse serves as a coping resource for mothers. Some mothers, however, perceived parenting to be easier during father absences:

"... because you don't have the other person to interfere ..."

"... also harder because you don't have that person to lean on ... back you up ..."

Consistent with the literature, the perception of parenting being easier during father absences could be explained by the independence afforded to FIFO mothers in the
establishment and maintenance of daily family routines (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). Independence was a characteristic ascribed by mothers to be a valued advantage of the lifestyle. However, albeit contrary to the perceived ease of parenting alone, in accordance with Belsky (1984), the absence of spousal advice and assistance still posed a source of maternal difficulty. Doherty, Kouneski and Erickson (1998) propose that predictability and appropriate limit setting from both parents is essential for the wellbeing of children.

Although the majority of mothers reported that their children adapted well to the lifestyle it was concerning to note that some mothers were required to cope with the negative responses of some children that were attributed directly to the FIFO lifestyle. The following narrative describes the experience of a mother with a five-year-old whose father became engaged in FIFO employment two years ago:

"... she loves her dad so much she finds it hard when dad is not here ... her behaviour at school is a bit worse when he's not home. They've got a 'listening' system at school and they get a green face if they've had a great day, orange face not so great, red face a really bad day. Didn't listen! And she gets quite a few orange and red faces when dad's not home ...”

From these comments it is evident that this child’s behaviour at school is negatively impacted during periods of father absence. Another mother described her experience with a teenager whose father initially entered the FIFO mode of employment when her daughter was eight years old:

"When he first started she absolutely hated it ... felt like she was being abandoned."

This participant then went on to explain her daughter, who is now a teenager.
"The week after he’s flown back she just goes out and binge drinks, big time ... I said, ‘why do you do that? The lifestyle you’re used to is because of what your dad does’. And she goes, ‘I don’t care, I always had nice stuff when I was little and he didn’t have to be away’ ...”

It is important to point out that accounts of negative responses were of children whose fathers had previously been in home-based occupations as this may be a significant factor in relation to their adaptation and coping abilities. Research has shown the periods of father absence to be the most stressful for children (Hiew, 1992) and that coping with negative emotions is a more developmentally difficult task (Nelson, et al., 2009). Attachment theory suggests that anxiety over an unwilling separation from a parent can be conceived as a normal and healthy reaction, but for some children, anxiety can stimulate anger (Bowlby, 1977) that can manifest in a variety of ways. Literature discussing parental separation in military families has demonstrated shared common risk factors to children of regular parental absence (Sibbel, 2001). It has further been substantiated that the wellbeing of children in single-parent families is a matter of concern because the absence of one parent can result in diminished supervision (Anderson, 2002). Therefore, it is possible that the intermittent absence of fathers required by the FIFO lifestyle may place children at similar risk of negative outcomes in the areas of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem and social relationships (Amato & Keith, 1991; Farrington, 2005).

Some mothers gave accounts of an emotional distancing between children and their fathers as illustrated by the following narratives:

“...she doesn’t like it when he comes home ... her little world is disrupted ... she’s just had me full on and then he comes into the scene ... he gets a bit annoyed with it ...”
"... they were getting a bit distant ... it was like they had no common ground and they didn't know each other really well ... they sort of drifted apart ... I didn't like that happening..."

This finding is consistent with research showing that many children protect themselves emotionally by physically withdrawing from a parent who has been absent (Pocock & Clarke, 2004). Because of the tendency for models of attachment built during childhood and adolescence to endure throughout adult life, this might have the propensity to impact negatively upon future relationships (Bowlby, 1977). The withdrawal of children from their fathers was a source of distress for mothers and hence, consistent with the literature, these mothers devised strategies to attempt to facilitate positive father-child involvement such as offering suggestions for joint activities, organising the family schedule, creating positive images of fathers, anticipating, preventing, and/or mediating unhappy feelings (McBride, et al., 2005; Seery & Crowley, 2000).

There was evidence to suggest that parenting alone presented a range of challenges for mothers, and for some children. However, when comparing groups of children whose fathers' work required periods of absence from home and fathers in home-based occupations, no significant differences in children's psychosocial wellbeing were found (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008). The inconsistency in findings could be attributed to the measures used in Kaczmarek and Sibbel's study which have been subjected to criticism regarding their construct validity (Cole, et al., 2000; Myers & Winters, 2002; Steele, et al., 2006).

**Social/Recreational Activities**

Mothers reported a number of hindrances to participation in recreational or social activities as indicated by the following narratives:

"... you have to be careful how you socialise ... you are sometimes considered to be single because you're out on your own ... so I decided to choose outings that did not put me into the position of too much male company ..."
"... I want to go back to the gym but I have to juggle ... I used to spend 6 days a week at the gym. I want to get back to that place, but ..."

It would not be unreasonable to assume that this lack of access to recreational and social activities as imposed by the FIFO lifestyle deprived mothers of the opportunities for stress reduction and rather, served to increase feelings of stress and isolation. Task overload and reduced social supports may influence maternal adjustment, parenting behaviour, and consequently child development (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983).

**Parenting Together**

The second theme related to mothers' experiences of parenting upon their partners' return from a period of work. Although a father's return was eagerly anticipated and met with happiness, various stages were identified that promoted stressfulness and tension. The following narrative demonstrates how tensions might arise upon a partner's return:

"... he'd come home and make changes around the house. It was sort of like a dog pissing on a tree. And I was like, why are you doing that?"

The period prior to a father's departure was similarly a potential source of heightened tensions:

"... the last day he paces like anything and so that gets everyone else on edge so I hate those days ... we all just get out of each other's way ..."

In this sample the adjustment pattern was consistent with the characteristic cycle identified in the literature researching other home/away occupations (Gallegos, 2005; Hubinger, et al.,
This is indicative of how work strains can spill over into the family environment (Hobfoll & Spielberger, 1992), inducing a risk of heightened tensions and a potential for conflict.

Because the marital subsystem is conceptualised as the foundation of family functioning (Davies & Chicchetti, 2004), heightened tensions may render parents more vulnerable to irritability and short-temperedness, thereby creating a potential for family conflict. In terms of family systems theory, because family members are interconnected and operate as a group, everything that happens to one family member has a consequent impact upon other members of the family (Hetherington, et al., 1992; Olsen & DeFrain, 1996). Inevitably then, tensions experienced by parents would be mirrored in their children (Boss, 1986). This view is substantiated by Hiew’s (1992) study of children’s coping strategies related to intermittent father absences, where it was found that children were subjected to the same adjustment pattern of mothers.

Upon their initial return, mothers reported that fathers needed time and space to reintegrate into the family because of work-related fatigue, as illustrated by the following comment:

"... he’s tired, very tired, they’ve [the children] actually learned to wait ..."

This finding is consistent with research on other home/away occupations that showed fatigue to be a major source of adjustment for fathers (Collinson, 1998; Hubinger, et al., 2002; Parkes, et al., 2005). Shrimpton and Storey (2001) suggest that father fatigue ultimately related to increased stress within the family. The literature shows that children are highly susceptible to parents’ moods (Alexander & Baxter, 2005; Collinson, 1998; Kitzmann, 2000; Margolis, Gordis & John, 2001; Mauthner, et al., 2000). Furthermore, individuals subjected to stressors at work may become short-tempered (Appel & Kim-Appel, 2008) and coupled with mothers’ fatigue; this may put couples at heightened risk of conflict.
Day-to-Day Child Care and Household Responsibilities

Although mothers eagerly anticipated assistance with day-to-day child care and household responsibilities upon a partner’s return, for the majority this did not necessarily diminish their tasks. For some mothers this was a source of frustration and resentment. The following comments demonstrate fathers’ participation:

"... he didn’t take over the 'mother' tasks ... but he would if I asked him to ..."

"... I have to prompt him actually to help out at bath and bedtimes ... he does it ... but just those two things ..."

Fathers were generally more inclined to fix things around the house during the period at home. This finding reflects a gendered, traditional division of tasks that is consistent with the literature showing that irrespective of other responsibilities, women continue to do more of the less rewarding aspects of domestic chores and especially those related to child care (Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Ehrenberg, et al., 2001; Goward, 2005; Hall, et al., 1995; Stewart, 1999; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983).

Interaction with Children

Although it was generally perceived that fathers saw more of their children than those whose fathers’ work did not require extended periods of absence from home, a predominant form of involvement by the majority of fathers was in recreational activities, as illustrated by the following narrative:

"... he’ll play and play and play with them. I doubt that he’d do that if he was here all the time ..."
Another form of involvement entailed spending money on them:

"... we're out to buy her a car next month when he gets home ...

This finding is consistent with the 'Disneyland Dads' phenomenon experienced by separated/divorced parents whereby the nonresidential parent compensates for their absence by spending money on them and engaging primarily in recreational activities with them (Stewart, 1999). Interestingly, children's perceptions of parents who worked long, unsocial hours, or spent extended period of time from the home were that parents spent extra time and money on them to assuage their feelings of guilt (Goward, 2005).

With regard to child management, mothers reported that fathers generally followed or maintained practices put in place by them. As reported by one participant:

"... I've had to show him a lot about what works with them ... this works with her, and this is what works with him ...

This may be indicative of Schmidt's (2000) contention that families subjected to commuting separation may develop a system whereby fathers withdraw from the role of parent. Alternatively, other research has demonstrated reluctance of fathers to become involved in discipline because of a perception that they might damage relationships with their children (Parkes, et al., 2005, Shrimpton & Storey, 2001).

Some mothers reported that their children demonstrated a preference for them when fathers were home, as indicated by the following:

"... the kids come to me first before they'll go to him if I'm here. If I'm not here, then they'll go to him ..."
This was a source of distress for both parents. As mentioned earlier, models of attachment shaped during childhood and adolescence endure throughout life and failure, or divergence in its development can lead to a range of psychiatric disturbances (Bowlby, 1977).

To facilitate and maintain positive father-child interaction some mothers elucidated how they adopted a range of decisive strategies. As one participant explained:

"... I generally step out of the situation ... I'm quite happy to remove myself ... because if the four of us are there, the kids will prefer me ... I feel like he needs that time with them ... and that they can trust their dad with things ..."

This finding is consistent with the literature demonstrating that mothers in Western societies perform activities to varying degrees, to strengthen father-child relationships (McBride et al., 2005; Seery & Crowley, 2000).

**Social/Recreational Activities**

When fathers were home participants generally partook in activities as a family. For mothers in paid employment, however, the constant flurry of family activities added to feelings of stress and exhaustion. As stated by one mother:

"... we go out here and there and then when I say like, can I sit this one out he gets all offended and I'm like, I don't ever get that chance to switch off ... I don't get that week off work ..."

Another mother expressed her frustration at a partner who pursued his own social activities on his return home:
“... he still has his golf time, go-to-the-pub time, and play footy as well ... I'm doing a lot of it all and I feel like I'm nagging all the time ... you're home now and you should be helping me ...”

The majority of mothers in this sample reported that recreational activities were restricted to the family as a unit and little, or no social interaction with friends. Research has evidenced less favourable outcomes for families working non-standard hours because of the lack of time spent not only with their own families, but also with friends and in the pursuit of other interests (Alexander & Baxter, 2007).

Advantages

Apart from the financial rewards of the FIFO lifestyle and recognition of the role of father as a good provider, mothers enjoyed a range of advantages that the lifestyle afforded them. The most commonly reported advantage was the independence to develop and maintain family routines. This was followed by the development of skills and/or the ability to access and manage resources to deal with tasks normally undertaken by men. For some mothers the time apart to pursue their own interests such as reading, watching their favourite television programmes or merely continuing on with their daily activities without the interference of, or having to consult partners, was a source of enjoyment. These very advantages, however, could serve to undermine the fundamental core of marital relationships, as illustrated by the following:

“... thinking that if anything ever happened between us, I'd actually be alright on my own because I'm doing it now ... knowing that you don't need them as much and the fact that I can do everything on my own ... he hated it ...”

“... what worries me and annoys me now is that I'm getting to the point where I'm actually getting used to being alone and doing things myself ... that sort of scares me because I don't want to end up where you can't be one and you're these two
people, separate people ... that's the bit that scares me, that we're not going to stay connected because it's so hard ... it's hard to keep putting in the hard yards ..."

Fathers Parenting Away

Fathers' experiences of parenting were captured in two themes. Firstly, parenting away with the sub-themes of communication with families, and missing significant events. The second theme was parenting together with the sub-themes of day-to-day child care and household responsibilities, interaction with children, social/recreational activities, and advantages of the lifestyle.

Communication with Families

Fathers reported missing their children and that daily communication with families by telephone or video conferencing was essential to keep abreast of events in their children’s lives and of the family’s wellbeing in their absence. Although it was acknowledged that children also missed them, this was generally not perceived to be of particular concern to fathers, as demonstrated by the following narratives:

"... I think they're fine while I'm away but I think they do miss me ... when you do leave them for a week they notice it more than we do ... but it's not that bad actually..."

"... because they've never known any different ... it's not that bad ..."
In discussing how family problems or difficulties were managed during his absence, one father described his frustration and sadness at attempts to help resolve problems by telephone:

"... it is very difficult. It makes you feel crap ... inadequate not being able to help resolve the problem by not being there ..."

**Missing Significant Events**

Most fathers in this sample perceived that missing significant events in children’s lives was not problematic, as illustrated by the following narratives:

"... it'll probably be the small things you miss out on ... if you're not here for a birthday or whatever ... we celebrate those things when I get home ..."

"... when I'm away I hear the things you miss. Sports, or something at school. When I'm at home I go to all of those ... I spend as much time with them as possible ...

Contrary to the perceptions of the majority of fathers in this sample, Pocock and Clarke’s (2004) study showed that young people desired both parents to be present for special events, celebrations and when problems arose. Furthermore, the availability of mothers did not sufficiently compensate for the absence of fathers. One father described his experience of parenting in the FIFO lifestyle as:

"... a lack of one! Not being here when you need to be here. Birthdays, Christmas ... when you're needed ..."
Parenting Together

Day-to-Day Child Care and Household Responsibilities

The following narrative demonstrates that although some fathers acknowledged the family work undertaken by mothers in their absence, this did not translate into equal participation in day-to-day child care and household tasks. As stated by one father:

"... every day she's got to prepare the kids, make their lunch, make their own lunch, do the dishes, go to work... over the day it's probably a lot more than the 12 hours I do ... and then the house and cleaning ... I try and do a lot of the cooking when I'm home ..."

Another father described his participation in child care and household responsibilities during periods at home:

"... I bath and feed them most nights. Because my partner works ... they were sick so I had them for a whole day ... it's probably not my speciality but it was alright ... when I get home we have a list of stuff that needs to be fixed ..."

Fathers' participation in daily child care and household activities predominantly consisted of taking children to school, bathing, and cooking. The majority of gendered child care and household duties undertaken by mothers in their absence continued upon their return, consistent with the literature (Gallegos, 2005; Hall, et al., 1995; Stewart, 1999; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Windebank, 2001). Zvonkovic, et al. (2005) propose that the patterns of responsibility that follow upon a father's return reflect the homeostatic nature of family roles as posited by family systems theory.
For some participants, readjustment into the family unit was met with difficulty as illustrated by the following examples:

"... the wife and children create their own lives ... when you come home you’re upsetting everyone else’s routine ... and you don’t know what their routine is ..."

"... she’s used to organising the house, the kids and things... you can feel like you’re a visitor ... I’ve got to reign back and think ... because I’m home doesn’t mean I’m going to control the way we go because I’m the man of the house so to speak ..."

This is indicative of how the interpersonal boundaries, power distributions and communications proposed by family systems theory may become disordered (Davies & Chiccetti, 2004), putting couples at risk of heightened tension and conflict. In terms of family systems this would resonate throughout other family members.

Interaction with Children

Fathers in this sample considered that the FIFO lifestyle afforded them the opportunity to spend longer periods, and more quality time with their children. However, one participant described reunion with his children:

"...it’d take a couple of days for them to settle back in ... they wouldn’t be cuddling up to you ... it was quite frustrating ... wanted mum to dress them ... it was quite hurtful ..."

Research has evidenced an increased aspiration by fathers to be involved in their children’s lives and to share parenting tasks (Fleming, et al., 2005; Ranson, 2001). From these
experiences it would appear that the effect of intermittent absences upon some children might hinder fathers in fulfilling this aspiration.

For the majority of fathers, however, interaction with children during periods at home was predominantly in ‘fun’ activities of playing with them, going on family outings and holidays, or generally spending money on them. For example:

"... we've been to Europe with the kids ... we've just done lots of things ..."

"... the girls like their horses ... this one's costing me ... that's been her main passion ... it's worth it, she's happy ..."

Research has shown that many children enjoy the positive spillover effects of a parent’s work such as the money and security that it provides. However, working longer hours has been shown to reduce fathers’ involvement with children (Pocock & Clarke, 2004).

Management of children’s behaviour was generally prescribed by mothers and upheld by fathers when they were home in order to maintain consistency, or because they believed mothers to be more adept and knowledgeable about child management. This finding is consistent with the literature showing that women are generally assumed to have unique capabilities for nurturance and caring (Goward, 2005; Videon, 2005). Alternatively, however, it could reflect a disinclination of fathers to become involved in discipline problems due to a perception that they would damage relationships with their children (Parkes, et al., 2005; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001).

**Advantages**

Consistent with Sarder (2006), fathers expressed that a significant advantage of the FIFO lifestyle was the ability not only to provide families with basic needs, but with more luxuries. Fathers also perceived that the lifestyle allowed for more time to be spent with their partners and children. Another significant advantage for fathers was the separation of home and work.
Differences in Parenting Experiences

The most obvious and notable difference between mothers' and fathers' parenting experiences was that in the normal course of events in the FIFO lifestyle, only mothers undertook day-to-day child care activities and household duties single-handedly on a regular basis. This placed mothers at significant risk of task overload, increased stress and levels of fatigue. In those families where children responded negatively to father absences, mothers were required to deal with these alone, thereby placing additional emotional burdens upon them. While it is acknowledged that being away from families for extended periods of time was also an isolating experience for fathers, their workplaces afforded them the opportunity to socialise with other adults, relax after a day's work, and to participate in sporting/recreational activities. Mothers' opportunities were severely restricted as a result of their responsibilities.

Mothers and fathers were both fatigued at the end of a period of his work away, yet the burden of day-to-day child care activities and household duties was not necessarily diminished by his return. It could, in fact, be implied that looking after another person increased the workload for mothers. Fathers' interaction with children was predominantly in the more enjoyable 'fun' activities, whereas for mothers, irrespective of father absence or presence, interaction with children was predominantly in the repetitive, arduous, everyday tasks upon which the health and wellbeing of children are principally founded. In some families, however, fathers' frequent absences perpetuated emotional distancing by their children. Although distressing for fathers, this placed yet another burden upon mothers to devise and implement strategies to facilitate and/or maintain positive father-child interaction.

While it is acknowledged that all families are subjected to stress as a norm, it would appear that the unique challenges faced by the FIFO lifestyle poses a range of challenges that place parents at increased risk of stress, but more particularly for mothers. Stress results in heightened tensions and a potential for conflict. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that this could ultimately lead to a breakdown in the marital relationship with resultant negative consequences for children.
Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation of this study was the small sample size. While recruitment of participants was by the snowball sampling method, they did not comprise a network of friends. The families in this study comprised intact parents with biological children only. Additionally, the majority of participants had been parenting in the FIFO mode of employment since the birth of children and accordingly, accustomed to the lifestyle. This study was of an exploratory nature and because of the small sample size and complexity of the nature of families, its purpose was not to generalise across all FIFO families.

Nevertheless, these findings offer constructive insights into parenting practices in the FIFO lifestyle and the potential impact upon family relationships. This information is important for families, considering the potential risks and/or benefits of participation in the FIFO mode of employment. It is also important for professionals working with FIFO families in designing and implementing appropriate interventions, as awareness and understanding of the unique experiences of FIFO families would result in more adaptive strategies. FIFO employers would also benefit from an understanding and awareness of the experiences of employees and their families when designing policies and strategies aimed at employee health and wellbeing, as well as reduction in staff turnover.

Albeit a small sample size, while men generally expressed fulfillment in their role as breadwinner in the FIFO mode of employment as facilitated by the family work of home-based spouses, diversity in women’s attitudes towards the lifestyle was evident. Half of the participants expressed a predilection for the FIFO lifestyle overall, whereas the remaining half were equally divided between actively hating it, and feelings ambivalent. These coping responses are consistent with the literature (Gallegos, 2005; Hubinger, et al., 2002; Morrice, et al., 1985; Parkes, et al., 2005).

Overall the findings of this research indicate that FIFO mothers are subjected to a degree of emotional stress and work overload in fathers’ absences due to the lack of day-to-day support and assistance by fathers with child care and household tasks. This was exacerbated by restricted access to social/recreational activities that could serve to alleviate feelings of stress and isolation. Upon a father’s return both parents were fatigued and subjected to an adaptation cycle with its own potential for heightened tensions and risk of
conflict. Although parents generally perceived that there were no detrimental effects to children’s overall wellbeing, contrary to previous research (Gallegos, 2005; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008) some children did manifest negative reactions that were directly attributed by mothers to father absences. In accordance with family systems theory parental stress inevitably resonates throughout the entire family and affects their wellbeing, and the literature has shown that stress has been associated with less optimal parenting and family functioning.

In light of these findings, it is not inconceivable that the additional strain placed on FIFO families could place some at risk of breakdown of the marital relationship with the attendant negative consequences for children. As the scope of this research did not include an examination of differences in maternal coping strategies or specific parenting practices, future research could examine how these factors might account for differences in both mothers’ and children’s ability to cope.
Parenting in FIFO

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Appendix A

Participant Information Letter

Mothers' and Fathers' Experiences of Parenting in the Fly-in Fly-out Mode of Employment

My name is Patricia Rhodes. This study is being undertaken as part of the requirements for a Bachelor of Criminology and Justice degree (Honours). Approval has been granted by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee for this project.

The aim of the proposed research is to examine mothers' experiences of parenting where fathers are employed in a fly-in fly-out (FIFO) employment arrangement. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Mothers and fathers in FIFO families are being invited to participate in this research and your involvement would be to participate in a semi-structured interview regarding your experience. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped. Once the data has been transcribed the tape will be destroyed and your confidentiality and privacy will be maintained by the use of a pseudonym. Once the research project is completed, the data will be stored in a secured filing cabinet at Edith Cowan University. It is expected that the duration of the interview range between 45 minutes and one hour. You may decline to answer any questions put to you, and are free to withdraw from involvement in the research project at any time.

There is a small possibility that some distress or discomfort may be experienced for some participants. Assistance is available to you through a number of counselling services, a list of which would be provided to you at your request. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer, Edith Cowan University, 100 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, WA 6027; phone (08) 6304 2170 or email research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

Should you wish to participate in this study, kindly complete the attached consent document. The results will be published in report form and if you are interested in the outcome, I would be pleased to provide you with a copy upon completion. If you would
like to make an appointment for a participatory interview I can be contacted by phone at [REDACTED] mobile [REDACTED], or by email prhodes@ecu.edu.au

Yours truly,

PATRICIA RHODES
Before we begin I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. (Then general questions about number and ages of children, and the mother’s employment status, for the dual purpose of eliciting this information for the study, to establish rapport, and to put the participant at ease).

1. Tell me about your experiences of parenting in the FIFO lifestyle.
   The following probes will be used to elicit more detailed responses.
   - Tell me what your/your partner’s position and roster are.
   - Tell me how long your children have been involved in this lifestyle.
   - Tell me about the parenting agreements you have in place.
   - Tell me how parenting is managed.
   - Tell me about your experiences of parenting when father is absent.
   - Tell me about your experiences of parenting when father is present.
   - Tell me about any additional skills you have acquired, and/or other positive aspects of the lifestyle (the purpose of the latter is to debrief participants).
Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

Mothers’ and Fathers’ Parenting Experiences in the Fly-in Fly-out Mode of Employment

I have been provided with a copy of the Participant Information letter explaining the research study and acknowledge that I have read and understood the contents. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and they have been answered to my satisfaction. Should any additional questions arise then I can contact the research team. I consent to the interview being audio recorded and that it will be erased after it has been transcribed. I have been assured that the information provided will remain confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research project. I understand that I am free to withdraw from participation including withdrawal of information, at any time without explanation or penalty.

NAME: ___________________________ DATE _________________

SIGNATURE: ______________________

RESEARCHER: _____________________ DATE _________________