

CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

HOW DID WE GO ABOUT THE RESEARCH?

The five objectives and collaboration framework set out in Chapter 1 positioned us to design and operationalise the Project.

2.1 Research Design

The research design preceded the selection of collaborating agencies in that each agency specialises in working with men and / or women with different parenting situations. Ngala works primarily with parents who live and parent together, AnglicareWA with parents who are separated, and Lifeline WA with men who are separated or alone. Working together enabled us to design a project across these three parenting structures.

We chose to investigate the topic with agency-selected groups of similarly situated parents. Each collaborating agency also provided a co-facilitator. Table 1 displays the investigation structure and staffing.

Table 1: Six Study Groups in Three Parenting Structures by Recruitment Source and Facilitators

Parenting Structure	Source	Dads	Facilitators	Mums	Facilitators
Parenting Together	Ngala Hey Dad WA	Grp 1	Denis Ladbrook Eryn Webster		
	Contact list Snowball			Grp 2	Denis Ladbrook Anne Beach
Parenting Separated	AnglicareWA Mums and Dads Forever	Grp 3	Denis Ladbrook Paul Murphy	Grp 4	Denis Ladbrook Janice Dickinson
Parenting Alone	Lifeline WA Dads@Lifeline	Grp 5	Denis Ladbrook Noel Giblett		
	Ngala Invitations from contacts			Grp 6a	Denis Ladbrook, Anne Beach
					Grp 6b

2.2 Research Method

We chose an Action Research process from the qualitative tradition to collect biographical, experience, and visionary narratives from the participants, in invited groups that were homogeneous in terms of sex, parenting structure and having a child under two¹.

The group data collection format appealed to us as it has distinct advantages over individual methods. Group members were stimulated by each other's stories and this led to lively dialogue, a sharpening of perceptions, and the recall of more memories.

Feedback form responses indicated that men found it rare to hear others' situations and views on families, relationships, and different ways of being a dad, and that receiving mutual encouragement and modelling had been valuable. Mothers reported that they rarely shared their early expectations of and current visions for the fathers of their children.

The groups were task-focussed groups, not therapeutic groups. One of the commitments of the agency facilitator was to identify and follow-up people who surfaced clinical issues within the group. This was an important part of the collaboration contract, as the discussions stirred memories and dilemmas at the most fundamental level. Many comments were received of the order:

'I haven't thought about this before'.

Hence we count a personal stirring in some participants as a beneficial outcome of the research group experience. We have a number of evaluative statements to this effect, but none than reflected a perception of damage.

Only two sole mothers came to the first meeting of Group 6, so we decided that a biographical approach would be more appropriate. We asked the women to tell their stories, and within the story to speak to the three questions. On a subsequent occasion we followed a similar procedure with two more sole mums. We call these Groups 6a and 6b.

Selection Criteria for Group Participants

We purposefully designed the project for the three agencies in accordance with the parenting structure in which each specialised. Having divided the population theoretically, we then established quite strict criteria for admission to each group. The criteria were:

¹ We relaxed the 'child under two' selection criterion in the case of Group 5 fathers in order to secure a larger group.

All Groups

- Parenting is of the genetic child(ren) of both partners
- Participants' first experience of parenting must be in this relationship
- The focal child is less than three years old, preferably less than two
- No adopted, fostered or stepchildren live in the home

Groups 1 and 2

- Participants live with the child's other parent, and parent together

Groups 3 – 6

- Participants do not have another live-in relationship

Groups 3 - 4

- Participant are separated from the child's other parent
- The other parent is also parenting the child, separately

Groups 5 & 6

- Participants have residency, preferably without the other parent having any significant involvement.

Beyond these criteria, each group is best balanced if it contains a spread of ages, education and income levels, and ideally has a 50-50 split between boys and girls as the focal child.

The desired size for each Group was ten participants. Table 2 reveals the actual number recruited into each of the six groups.

Group Membership

The composition of the six groups, presented by sex, marital status, age, parenting structure and educational, occupational and income ratings, is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Group Composition by Parenting Structure, Sex, Marital Status, Age, Education, Occupation and Income

	Parenting Together			Parenting in Separation			Parenting Alone			Totals			
	Fathers Grp 1	Mothers Grp 2	All Gp 1,2	Dads Grp 3	Mums Grp 4	All Gp 3,4	Dads Grp 5	Mums Grp 6	All Gp 5,6	Sep + Sole Gps 3-6	Dads Gps 1,3,5	Mums Gps 2,4,6	All Gps 1-6
No. in Group	11	10	21	4	5	9	7	4	11	20	22	19	41
No. Married	11	9	20	3	2	5	5	1	6	11	19	12	31
Age at Group													
Self : Range	30-48	32-43	30 - 48	26 - 42	22 – 40	22 - 42	27 - 46	25 - 39	25 - 46	22-46	30-48	22-43	22-48
Mean	36.4	38.0	37.2	32.5	31.8	32.1	37.1	31.5	35.1	33.8	35.9	35.0	35.5
Median	35	38	37	31	34	33	37	31	36	33.5	35	35	35.5
Partner/Mean	35.4	40.5	37.8	30.1	34.8	33.8	34.0	34.8	34.4	34.1	34.4	36.1	35.2
Age @ 1st Birth													
Self: Range	28-44	29-39	28-44	23-37	19-32	19–37	23-37	21-36	21–37	19–37	23–44	19–39	19-44
Mean	34.3	34.6	34.5	29.0	26.4	27.9	31.1	28.5	30.2	29.1	31.6	30.1	30.8
Median	33.5	35.5	34.5	28	26	27	33	28	30.5	29	32	31	31.5
Partner/Mean	33.5	37.1	35.2	27.3	26.4	27.0	27.4	31.8	29.0	28.2	30.5	31.8	31.1
Education %	45	60	52	25	40	33	57	50	55	45	45	53	49
Education	2.1	2.5	2.3	1.8	2.4	2.1	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.4	2.2
Occupation	3.2	3.6	3.4	2.5	3.5	3.0	3.3	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.3
Income	2.4	1.9	2.2	2.0	1.0	1.5	1.9	1.0	1.5	1.5	2.1	1.3	1.8

Interpreting Table 2

How did we derive the four socio-economic categories? The questionnaires were the primary source of this information and we transformed the data as follows:

Education %

This records the percentage of each group who have attended University.

Education

The question asked, 'what is your highest educational qualification'. We gave scores to the answers as follows:

- High school or less = 1
- Apprenticeship, trade or commercial qualification = 2
- Attended University = 3

We then summed the members' scores within each group and derived a mean score, which is entered in Table Two. The lowest possible score is 1.0, the highest 3.0.

Occupation

We followed a similar procedure for the question 'what is your occupation?', using the following numerical values:

- Labourer = 1
- Tradesperson = 2
- Secretarial, sales, office worker = 3
- Professional and managerial = 4

Potential scores range between a low of 1.0 and a high of 4.0.

Income

Using a similar procedure, we derived the income rating using three categories of annual personal income:

- Up to \$25,000 = 1
- \$25,001 - \$50,000 = 2
- Over \$50,000 = 3

The group's income score can thus range from 1.0 to 3.0.

Critique of the Socio-Economic Categories

First, the measures are exceedingly gross and there is a wide variation within each category. Second, the personal income of the women's groups is only a partial measure. It takes no account of the husband/partner's income, nor does it indicate the number of people it supports. Similarly the men's incomes take no account of partner's earnings. Few women were in the labour force at the time of the group, influenced no doubt by being a mother of a child under two. Some subsist on Centrelink benefits plus income from part-time jobs.

Despite being very crude, these measures do enable us to make approximate, relative characterisations of each group. Simple group profiles can be constructed by combining the column data in Table Two.

GROUP PROFILES USING DATA FROM TABLE 2

Group One - Eleven Partnered Fathers

All the men were married, their mean age was 36.4 and their wives' average age was 35.4. They first became fathers at 34, though within the group the ages ranged from 28 – 44. 45% had been to University and their mean education and occupation scores were comparable to those of all men in the study. But this was the richest group, with a higher reported mean income than any other group.

Group Two - Ten Partnered Mothers

Nine were married and this was the oldest group in the study with mean and median ages of 38.0. They first became mothers at 34.6, a full six years after the women in the other groups. On average they had the highest percentage OF University attenders (60%), which correlates with the higher age at first birth, though we have no indication of their age when they attended University. The mothers of Group Two also have the highest education and occupational level scores in the study.

Group Three - Separated Fathers

At an average age of 32.5, this was our youngest group of men. Although three of the four were married, and they'd had their first child fully five years earlier in their lives (29) than the men of Group 1 (34.3). Educationally, they had the lowest proportion of university attenders (one out of four), and the group's total score was the lowest of the six. They also had the lowest occupational rating of the six groups and their income was marginally above that of the sole dads, but differentials in full and part-time work probably account for this.

Group Four - Separated Mothers

The ages of the five separated women were spread out between 22 and 40, and their median age was exactly half way between that of the other two women's groups. They had their first child nine years younger than the Group 1 average and two years younger than the sole mothers average. The percentage who had attended university (40) was lower than that for the other women's groups (60 and 50), and all the women had incomes less than \$25,000.

Group Five - Sole Fathers

The sole dads group had higher mean and median ages than the other two men's groups, and the mean age of the mothers of their children was lower than those of the other men's partners. More sole dads had attended university than was the case for our married and separated men. The group's educational rating equalled that of Group 1, its occupational rating was the highest of the three men's groups. Yet its mean income was the lowest, again as a function of some dads working part-time or being out of the labour force.

Group Six - Sole Mothers

The four sole mums were aged between 25 and 39, and averaged 31.5. They'd had their first baby at 28.5, and two had been to university. Occupationally the group rated lowest among the women, and they all earned below \$25,000.

These profiles arise from exceedingly small numbers, and could change quite dramatically with the addition of modest numbers of other people. We shall use them with extreme care, but even this small survey throws a little bit of light on some of the qualitative findings of our research investigation.

Selection Criteria for Staff

The Reference Group considered the staff member in charge of the Agency program to be the ideal person to screen and invite group members and co-facilitate the group. All six had extensive group work experience and, together with the Research Associate, made ideal teams. No conflict between any staff members occurred in any of the group sessions.

2.3 Objective 5: Engaging men

What measures did we use to secure men's attendance and involvement in the group sessions?

This question had two phases: how did we attract men to the group in the first place, and once there, how did we engage them in dialogue at a level beyond the trivial?

First, the obvious, these participants were not just men, they were fathers. They had a child under two in their care or joint care. Becoming a father has enormous potential to change men, and the little child, the connection between dad and child, and the connections between dad, mum and child, were the primary drawcards of these groups.

Proceeding to general principles, the website of the Child Support Agency has a section entitled 'Back on Track: Finding a Way Through Separation and Repartnering'.² It includes two sections for agencies seeking to work with men that are pertinent to this question. As these are written in compact form we reproduce them verbatim.

² <http://www.csa.gov.au/comm/repart/down.htm>

Back on Track: Finding a Way Through Separation and Repartnering

Engaging Men in Groups

It is well known that men are less likely than women to seek professional advice on personal issues, use relationship education or counselling services.

The challenge for service providers is to attract, engage and retain men so that they are provided with the information and support to enable them to make any necessary changes in their family relationships. Engaging men in these programs may provide the support needed to ensure that they maintain meaningful contact with their children.

Suggestions for attracting men to groups

- Adapt ideas from marketing
- Use single-night session format
- Use a single-gender focus (some men feel more comfortable talking about their feelings with other men)
- Offer sessions to include both genders and have sub-group discussions in single-gender groups
- Note that venue and times need to be taken into account when planning for men
- Look for a community venue likely to make men feel comfortable, for example, sporting venues, clubs (not venues where women are seen as gatekeepers)
- Network with other local organisations that are already working with men and offer courses on their premises
- Collaborate with these organisations to develop joint programs (for example, offer to provide a session or two on relevant topics to another organiser's existing program).

Strategies for Engaging Men in Groups

(Many of these also apply to women)

- Have a male facilitator or co-facilitator (male and female leaders can model positive ways of working together)
- Use task-focused, problem-solving activities
- Focus on men's strengths in working within task-focused and problem-solving approaches
- Build on these strengths through specific tasks, focusing on the present
- Acknowledge gender difference in learning styles
- Acknowledge that prevalent social messages encourage men to take on fairly traditional, stereotypical male roles and behaviours
- Encourage fathers who are seeking more contact with their children to do so
- Articulate the importance of fathers being involved with their children
- Acknowledge that feeling daunted and discouraged from time-to-time, is understandable and normal
- Offer hope and encouragement
- Acknowledge the social constraints that have limited many men in developing skills to respond to their own and other's emotions
- Develop a safe group environment which gives men permission to challenge dominant ways of being male
- Encourage men to discover their own ways to be a man, a dad, a partner
- Offer opportunities to develop fathering skills
- Take a non-judgmental approach to both men and women, in terms of acknowledging legal and social realities
- Affirm fathers who are assuming their parenting responsibilities

- Offer concrete strategies for dealing with 'unfinished business', (for example, suggest that the parenting relationship between ex-partners is a business partnership, in the best interests of the children)
- Encourage movement from an ownership model of parenting children, towards responsible parenting, which focuses on caring for children
- Acknowledge the strengths of traditional roles for men and women as 'tool kits' from which to draw flexibly, as men and women now take on aspects of both roles
- Accept expressions of powerlessness and anger as valid feelings
- Focus on parenting situations where fathers have some control, for example, when their children are with them
- Try to use metaphors which men will identify with. These may reflect men's language, culture, sport or work. For example, taking responsibility for one's own emotions could be 'not dropping the ball', taking time out when angry, rather than reacting aggressively or abusively, could be described as 'letting it go through to the keeper'.
- The 'company merger' has parallels with repartnering. Questions like: Who will be in charge? What will my position be? Will the culture change? Will it be a takeover? Will it work? Note: this metaphor needs to be used sensitively so it does not reinforce patriarchal attitudes and behaviours
- Acknowledge that some men may have had little experience in group work, and may not be comfortable in discussing their issues outside of their family
- Acknowledge men's courage in being prepared to discuss issues
- Ask men what exercises they are comfortable with (role playing, discussion?)
- Give men choices in activities
- Be careful in program content and structure to take account of the fact that men tend to be oral/visual learners and may get less from written materials
- Do not assume good literacy skills in all groups
- Combine discussion with active use of visual resources
- Use task-focused, problem-solving activities (brainstorming, suggestion circle) rather than open-ended discussion of feelings. Use the group to help you provide practical ideas and skills.
- Value the role of the parent who has ongoing responsibility for child support and emphasise the importance of financial and emotional support to the person in this role
- Acknowledge that parenting at a distance carries with it feelings of loss
- Note Amato's (1998) concept of 'healthy authoritative parenting' which combines a high level of parental support to children (warmth, responsiveness, everyday assistance) combined with non-coercive, rule-setting and appropriate discipline
- Teach and model respectful negotiating and conflict resolution skills
- Refer fathers to skill-building and advocacy programs which support these approaches (for example, men's support groups, play groups for fathers and their children, counselling and support programs that demystify Family Court procedures around contact, residency and parenting orders, and men's anger management programs)
- Ensure confidentiality and safety
- In summary, in working with men it is important to:
 - Expect them to be motivated and committed to positive outcomes
 - Convey that sometimes there are no short cuts or easy solutions
 - Child Support Agency

Value men's experience and build on their strengths.

Source: <http://www.csa.gov.au/comm/repart/down.htm>

In addition, the particular way we used the group process seemed to both inform and excite the men (they often talked on in the car park for half an hour after the group).

The men parenting together reported being so stimulated by the topics and the meeting with others, that they asked for a third session to discuss the report when it came out. So we held the third session. Six of the eleven came along, and again the meeting of minds, histories and visions around being dad to a child under two sustained the conversation quite deep into the night.

Among the men parenting in separation and on their own, we think that engaging with a micro-community of other men who faced similar situations which they handled in different ways gave participants the realisation that they weren't alone, that new possibilities were dawning for the sort of dad they could become, and that a network of support potentially lay within their reach.

The section entitled 'Process Within the Groups' details a number of our group processes designed to bond the men and deepen the discussion.

Up Against Reality – Men Don't Come Easily

Despite the techniques for attracting and engaging men, actually getting them there was not easy. As is shown in Table 2, the group numbers of both men and women not living with a partner (Groups 3 – 6) fell way below our target of ten. Yet a number of dads and mums who were interested in the topics, willing to share their stories and had accepted the agency's invitation did not arrive on the night.

Paul Murphy recruited eleven men into Group 3, yet only four came. So he did some phoning-around research to find out why. We tell the story in Paul's words:

Group Three Sample

The reasons for the seven men not attending are presented, together with some explanatory comments. Paul Murphy's 'comments' are based on:

- The literature of post-separation parenting consulted during his doctoral research and his other relevant research projects in the area of separation, divorce, and re-partnering (Murphy, 1994, 1995, 1996a and b, 1998a, b, and c, 1999);
- Literature consulted and data emerging from Paul's current secondment to the Family Court of Western Australia to evaluate the Columbus Pilot (differential case management) project (Murphy and Pike, 2002; Murphy, Pike, and Kerin, 2002; Murphy and Pike, 2003);
- Paul's contact with over 250 men (and almost 300 women) in the Mums and Dads Forever program over the past three years (Dickinson and Murphy, 2000; Dickinson, Francke and Murphy, 2003); and
- Data provided to the Youth Suicide Advisory Committee triennial planning meetings which Paul has co-facilitated for the past nine years (Harries and Murphy, 1995, 1998, 2000; Harries, Ladbrook and Murphy, 2001³).

Dickinson, J. and Murphy, P., " 'Mums and Dads Forever': A Cooperative Parenting Initiative", Paper presented at the Seventh Australian Family Research Conference, Sydney, 24-26 July, 2000. [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc7/murphy_dickinson.html]

Dickinson, J., V. Francke, & P. Murphy, "Reflections on the first three years of a post-separation parenting initiative: the 'Mums and Dads Forever' programme at Anglicare(WA)", Paper presented at the Eighth Aust. Family Research Conference, Melb., Feb. 12-14, 2003.

Harries M. & P. Murphy, "Future Directions and Planning for the Youth Suicide Advisory Council", unpublished Report prepared for the Youth Suicide Advisory Council, Perth, School of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, 1995.

Harries, M. & P. Murphy, "The YSAC 1998/1999 Triennial Planning Conference", unpublished Report prepared for the Youth Suicide Advisory Council, Perth, School of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, 1998.

Harries, M. & P. Murphy, *Youth for Life: Evaluation of a Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative conducted by The Peel, South West Division of General Practice*, Report prepared for the Peel, South West Division of General Practice, Perth, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, 2000.

Harries, M., D. Ladbrook, & P. Murphy, "Fourth Triennial Planning Conference", unpublished Report prepared for the Youth Suicide Advisory Committee, Perth, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, 2001.

Murphy, P., "Supporting Step Parents in Western Australia: An Evaluation of the YWCA Step Parenting Course", unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Perth, School of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Western Australia, 1994.

Murphy, P., "Issues in Step / Blended Families", Paper presented at the Catholic Sole Parents of Australia National Conference, Perth, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1, 1995.

Invitees' reasons for not attending

1. One letter was returned as the man had moved address in the few days between the contact phone call and the letter being sent. No forwarding address was available.
Comment: Such unplanned (and frequent) change of residence is a characteristic of post-separation life for many men who find themselves living alone and most separated men move residence at least twice in the twelve months following separation.
2. One man contacted both Paul and Denis Ladbrook advising that he had an inter-state business trip in the first week but would attempt to attend the second session. Unfortunately the second evening coincided with his fortnightly mid-week contact with his two small girls and the mother would not agree to change the contact arrangements.
Comment: Such inflexibility (and thus lack of control) in contact arrangements, particularly in the early stages of separation, is often a feature in the lives of men in this sample.

Murphy, P. *Integrating Stepfathers: An investigation of the difficulties couples face negotiating roles in Step Families*, International Year of the Family (W.A.) Report prepared for the Minister of Family and Children's Services: Perth, 1996 (a).

Murphy, P., "Methodology for Evaluating a Stepparenting Education Course", Poster presentation at the Fifth Aust. Family Research Conference, Brisbane, Nov. 27-29, 1996 (b).

Murphy, P., "Merging Families: Can merger management theory and practice inform understandings of stepfamilies?", Paper presented at the Sixth Australian Family Research Conference, Melb., Nov. 25-27, 1998 (a). [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc6papers/murphy.html].

Murphy, P., *Stepfamilies and Poverty: Balancing a "maintenance in, maintenance out economy" - some implications of repartnering*, Report prepared for the Western Australian Taskforce for the Eradication of Poverty, Family and Children's Services, Perth, 1998 (b).

Murphy, P., "Stepfamilies and Poverty: Balancing a 'maintenance in, maintenance out economy' - some implications of repartnering", Paper presented at the Sixth Australian Family Research Conference, Melbourne, Nov. 25-27, 1998 (c). [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc6papers/murphy2.html]

Murphy, P. (1999) "Stepfamilies as Mergers: Can organisational merger research, theory, and practice inform understandings of the stepfamily formation process?", unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, School of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, Perth.

Murphy, P. & L. Pike, *Columbus Pilot Project Evaluation: First Interim Report*, Report prepared for the Family Court of Western Australia, School of Social and Cultural Studies, The University of Western Australia and School of Psychology, Edith Cowan University, Perth, 2002.

Murphy, P., L. Pike, and P. Kerin, "Evaluating the Columbus Pilot in the Family Court of Western Australia", Paper presented at the Australian Association For Social Work and Welfare Education Conference, Perth, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1, 2002.

Murphy, P. and L. Pike, "The Columbus Pilot in the Family Court of Western Australia: Some early findings from the evaluation", Paper presented at the Eighth Australian Family Research Conference, Melbourne, Febr. 12-14, 2003.

Invitees' reasons for not attending

3. One man had apparently reconciled with his former partner and thus was no longer eligible. He did not think to advise the project team.

Comment: Reconciliation is a feature of post-separation life for many couples. Some men seek to retain contact with their children almost at any price.

4. One man had been in the Family Court on the morning of the first group and was too exhausted both physically and emotionally to attend. This man had not seen his two children for three months. The Court had that morning appointed a Children's Representative to assist the matter and the man had an interview with her on the afternoon of the second group. He was too preoccupied with this process to think of contacting the project team to advise them of the situation.

Comment: Seeking to regain contact through the Family Court is a lengthy, often expensive, and always emotionally-draining process which can take between six and nine months. It often involves periods of 'supervised' contact where the man is unable to be alone with his children and must 'prove' himself (via an independent observer) as a reliable father. Supervised contact can cost the man \$25 per hour and it is not unusual for some men to be paying \$150 a time to see their children (in addition to Child Support obligations).

5. Two men failed to admit during the phone conversation that they either had a new partner or that there were new (step)children in their lives. One of these men was living with the new partner at the time of the contact phone call but did not acknowledge it. He re-read the letter and decided that he was not eligible. The other man had met a woman and they had moved in together between the time of the contact phone call and the project group starting. He later apologised for not attending.

Comment: For many separated men, re-partnering is often at very short notice and with little apparent thought of the long-term implications. The immediate issues are frequently:

- An element of 'replacement' of a domestic lifestyle
- A return to some sense of 'normality' in being part of a 'family environment'
- Having somewhere suitable for their children to stay
- Gaining some adult companionship and, of course
- Sexual activity

The high break-down rate and short life-span (together with the inherent high mobility rates) is a feature of many post-separation relationships.

6. The sixth man had gained employment after some months without work and simply forgot about the group.

Comment: Unemployment is often an outcome of separation as people find that loss of motivation, concentration, or commitment makes them vulnerable in the workplace. Becoming employed, coupled with the emotional turmoil and disruption of the separation process, has a major impact on individual self-esteem and is acknowledged as a significant predictor in male suicide rates.

Source: Paul Murphy

What makes engagement precarious? Reality. Many unpredictable yet urgent issues intervene even in the plans of well-motivated and purposeful men. Women's reasons for not coming are comparable. We have included Paul's statement in full as collectively the comments describe the texture and flavour of limbo and change, the landscape of the early phase of separation.

2.4 Ethics Procedures

The Ngala Family Resource Centre's Professional Advisory Committee and the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee both approved the ethicality of the overall research proposal and the particular investigative method. Each participant was assured of the anonymity of his or her contributions in perpetuity. We have reproduced many statements verbatim in this report, but none is identifiable.

Each participant signed an Informed Consent Form, and was given the name of an agency staff member not involved in the project to whom any complaint could be directed. The signed consent form, and all the other forms and butcher's paper originals, are held in a locked archive at Ngala Family Resource Centre. No complaints have been received, neither has any ethical issue been raised with the research team.

2.5 Facilitator Orientation and Group Procedure

The Research Associate prepared and pre-circulated a proposed group Agenda (see Appendix 1) and held a three-hour facilitators' orientation meeting to introduce and debate the proposed process for the two three-hour group sessions each group would have.

After holding each group session, the two co-facilitators' de-briefed the happenings for about an hour, and cleaned up the meeting room.

The Research Associate wrote up a report of each group's process and the participants' views and stories, which he had recorded on an electronic whiteboard or butcher's paper during the group. This procedure gave participants the chance to fine-tune, correct or change any points before they were included in the draft report text. When compiling the draft group reports, the Research Associate often discussed ambiguous points or meanings with the co-facilitator.

We then circulated the completed draft report to all participants in that particular group for comment and amendment. This iteration gave our method a Delphi flavour⁴, and increased our confidence in its validity, in terms of being a faithful representation of the slice of opinion and experience offered by each group.

⁴ See Delbecq, Andre L., Andrew H. Van de Ven, and David H. Gustafson, Group Techniques For Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes, Glenview, Ill., Scott Foresman, 1975.

After all six groups had been completed, the facilitators met together to discuss the whole experience. They all reported that the participants' stories were broadly similar, in issues faced and approaches taken, to those they had heard in their clinical work of many years duration. The group members' stories also raised issues comparable to those reported in the Helpline Survey.

Receiving these professional opinions from experienced practitioners gives us a degree of confidence that we had tapped groups that parallel the stream of parents who seek the services of the agencies in our alliance.

Processes Within the Groups

After accepting the agency recruiter's invitation by telephone, we sent each participant three forms, letter of 'Invitation to Participate' (Appendix 2), 'Acceptance and Consent' (Appendix 3), and 'Questionnaire' (Appendix 4), they returned these at the first meeting. The Research Associate took a photocopy of each questionnaire and the information has been used in the analysis tables and accompanying text of this report.

The First Evening

We invited participants to come at 6.00 p.m. for the 6.30 meeting. Sizzling pizza arrived simultaneously so we started with the communion of a simple meal. This melted any ice and positioned participants comfortably for the evening's three hours of discussion. After welcoming group members, thanking them for their participation, and indicating the whereabouts of the facilities within the building, the facilitators set some ground rules for the study.

The main one was that the identities of people who contribute ideas and experiences within the group are held confidential to the group members. In their reports and presentations the researchers will make both grouped statements of commonality and verbatim quotations, but the identity of the statement-makers remains anonymous. Names given to participants in this report are fictitious. Each member, in turn, agreed to this norm, which is laid out and safeguarded in the previously-signed Acceptance and Consent Form.

The facilitators then introduced themselves in terms of their parenting situations, and invited group members to do likewise. We gave our names and ages, the names and ages of our children, our spouses' names, and how long we had been in relationship. The introductions started the bonding. Participants began to take an interest in the details of others' situations, and how they were faring with fatherhood. During the mid-session break they began to pal up in informal exchanges. These bonds strengthened as more of the stories came out.

The facilitator then put the first question to the group, recorded each person's responses on the electronic whiteboard or butcher's paper, and instigated discussion. Some participants said, and wrote on the feedback forms (see Appendix 5), that the questions and group dialogues had opened some unexplored territory in their minds and relationships.

We closed the evening by thanking the participants and asking them to do some homework, namely to bring to the second week's session a symbol of their relationship with their child - a photo, poem or song they had written, or a toy or object that had connective meaning for them.

Linking the two evenings and bonding participants

Sharing the framework objectives turned out to be a very significant contribution to the quality of the connections between group members. The most common symbol brought along was a photo. By telling stories about the photos, the dads and mums invited us into their families, and sometimes into deeper chambers of the self. We shall include some of the objects and comments participants made about them.

Symbols Brought to Group Meetings

Some Photos Depicted

- Shots of a twin getting his first feed in the hospital and his first bath from Dad:
'This was a defining moment in our relationship', said Dad.
'He's relying on me to protect him.'
- A proud Dad gives baby daughter her first bath:
'Because I breastfed the baby,' said Mum, 'he took the time to bath her and massage her with oil.'
- Every night when Dad's working away, Mum gets the children to say to his photo on top of the TV:
'Goodnight, Daddy'
- An older mother has 55 photo albums that give a detailed record of every stage in each child's growth, the major and minor events of their biographies, and the people who were significant to the family. She called it a:
'our treasure trove of memorisation'.

Other items were action-oriented

- A father brought and demonstrated the pouch he carried the baby in:
'My wife carried the baby in her body for nine months. I carried her too, very close to my body, throughout her first year'
- A girl was born in a room where a CD was playing an Irish melody, 'Welcome to the World'. So Paddy brought his uilleann pipes and re-enacted the moment by playing 'Welcome to the World'.
- A husband's bike helmet disclosed an important linkage with their two year-old son.
'Sometimes he rides an hour to work with Jimmy on the back, then I drive down and bring him home.'
- An auto electrician said:
'I want my son to know me in my area of expertise'
So he made him a strobe light and tool box. The three year-old plays at being Daddy.

- What could library cards reveal? A mum's school teacher husband has built a family culture around reading, and borrowing books and toys from the local library. He and the two children read together an hour a night, visit the book and toy libraries regularly, and their activities form a basis for teaching the values of respectfully using community resources, sharing, and expanding one's mind.

Source: Group Participants

Sharing the stories, symbols and textures of their home life was the single most valuable element in strengthening the bonds between participants, and a benefit only available in group work. A more grounded reality also emerged in subsequent responses to the research questions, e.g. separated people's symbols brought fondness and sadness, and the now departed 'good times' brought waves of nostalgia⁵.

The symbols and stories often reflected deep, archetypal images of family, both among those building partnered relationships and among those who'd lost or foregone their relationships. For many, despite the advances of the modern years, the retro images of 1950s family architecture was a durable dream, especially once a baby arrives.

2.6 Critiques of these Research Methods

Seven forms of critique are applicable to all social science investigations on these topics that use the methods chosen:

Small and Unrepresentative Sample

This tiny sample of 22 fathers and 19 mothers is by no means representative of the whole. They were selectively invited to join the group by agency staff members who knew them. Some had previously been or were currently associated with an agency service which has an educative focus.

As a whole, they are likely to have been older than the majority of parents with their first child or children under two (mean ages: Mums 35.0, Dads 35.9). The study has no teenagers, and does not take account of teenagers' expectations, experiences or visions. What we have is a collection of fathers and mothers with differing relationship histories.

⁵ 'A wistful yearning for return to some irrecoverable conditions in the past', Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Chicago, G. & C. Merriam Co., 1971.

Social Desirability Distortions

Fatherhood is a heavily ideologised concept. It stretches deep into the cultural foundations of our understandings of life desiderata. As a consequence, statements given as personal opinion, particularly those on principles or intentions, may have their origin in these high social values, in aspirational fatherhood, rather than being descriptions of validatable reality. Also, some goals may be desirable but are unattainable, such as 'always be there'.

Group Think

We are all influenced by our social context, and as 'being dad to a child under two' is not a familiar discussion topic among groups of men, the influence of articulate and persuasive group members may be mirrored, to a certain extent, in the responses of others. Similarly mothers' statements are subject to network influence.

Emotional Overlay

The study questions have emotional content and raise issues that are problematic in many relationships and parenting situations. Becoming cognitively clear takes time, and some dads and mums seemed to experience inner struggles with memories or current situations. The separated and sole parents, in particular, tended to view their biographies through lenses of bitter experiences, making their statements quite idiographic.

Compressed Opportunity to Speak

These were big, provocative questions, yet the dads and mums had to respond within a very short time-frame. Given greater opportunity to reflect, the memories may have flowed more fully.

Retrospective Recall

All participants were dads and mums who had been through the earliest months of parenting, and most had a child or children who were in their second year of life. Yet they were asked to remember back to what their expectations had been in their pre-parent eras. Subsequent experience is very likely to have influenced their posited 'prior expectations'. This issue contaminates all retrospective recall studies.

Uncorroborated Narratives

How similarly and how differently would the participants' partners have told the story? We cannot tell, although the likelihood is strong that where a rift has occurred a different story would be told. In some cases we have the testimony of one party to a dispute. In other cases we have unsubstantiated claims – for example of how much the men parenting together actually do. The stories from the mums parenting together had quite a different flavour, but then again, they were partnering different men.

How do these critiques affect the way we look at and interpret the findings of the study? Taken together, they do not necessarily invalidate the candid narratives of these fathers and mothers.

Facing comparable issues in many qualitative studies, Michael Patton echoes the views of our experienced group worker facilitators when he advises that:

'If we found this sort of thing with this group of parents, the chances are that given another similar group of parents we would find similar views'⁶

Yet the findings are limited. Being drawn from the mainstream population, they do not encompass the broad diversity of our society. The agenda is open for other researchers to move into the variegated permutations of Australia's complexifying social structure to explore how different dads, and different mums, addressing different circumstances, direct and experience their parenthood with children under two.

Different investigative methods could draw on different expressions of the parenting experience. In particular, a study of couples, where the stories of both parents are told, could define the areas of collaboration and conflict, of contribution and deficit, and could yield a more balanced account of what's happening in the families concerned.

Research methods, though, are unable to map the total relationship genome. There's so much variability and change, so many subjective and emotional considerations, that rationality-based methods cannot adequately encompass and represent them. In the end, it will be an accumulation of stories, stories that grasp lived realities, that give us glimpses through the fog of unknowing.

Despite the critiques, most of the expressed views have a semblance of face validity, and provide a beginning base for exploring issues of fathers' expectations of being dad, and mothers' expectations of the father of their child, the sources that contributed to the forming of these expectations, their experiences of direct fatherhood practice, and their dreams and visions for the future.

Having laid out the history, objectives and methodology of the Being Dad project, we now proceed to Chapter 3, the questions of what fathers expect, do and foresee as they focus on being a dad to a child under two, and mothers had expected experience and envision.

⁶ Patton, Michael Q., Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods (2nd. ed.), Newbury Park, California, Sage, 1990.