

CHAPTER 4

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN? MAKING SENSE OF THE FINDINGS

The narratives of this study raise many issues pertinent to our main quest, which is to establish the ways men contemplate, live out and forecast their identities as fathers of children under two, and what mothers expect, experience and envision with and for their spouses or child's father.

We have found both similarities and differences between fathers' and mothers' accounts, and between those who are parenting together, compared with those who are parenting in separation or alone.

We have also raised the issue of whether the outcomes of the Parenting Together groups are fuller than those of the other groups because of family structure, or because of the relationship processes that appear to characterise their partnerships. We shall now explore this question. We start with structural effects and the malleability of family systems, go on to discuss relationship processes, and then bring the two together.

4.1 Structural Effects and the Fluidity of Parenting Structures

Sociologists have mounted evidence showing that the structure under which one lives has effects on one's culture and behaviour. Studies of prisons, for example, find comparable behaviours cropping up wherever significant numbers of men, women, or children are kept under conditions of privation against their will.

We all recognise that under different socio-structural circumstances we act differently. Structural effects, then, are a function of the situation rather than the person only.

Although social and relationship structures influence the way people behave, they do not determine them. Structures affect different people differently. Nelson Mandela transformed the prison on Robben Island rather than it bending him into a cowed and defeated man¹. Viktor Frankl writes of the attitudinal and behavioural measures prisoners employed to survive the strictures of wartime concentration camps², and there are many examples throughout literature and personal experience of people who prevailed against the odds. They are true leaders.

How does this apply to family structures?

¹ Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom, London, Little, Brown and Co., 1994.

² Frankl, Viktor E., Man's Search for Meaning, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1963.

We have found among parents of children under two that parenting together creates a system of continuity, regularity, taken-for-grantedness, and in most cases a framework of nurture that addresses the baby's emergent needs. Strains and hassles pop up to be sure, but no one in Groups 1 or 2 questioned the fundamental existence of his or her family system. The structural effects are accordingly stable, need-meeting developmental outcomes and opportunities for the child.

Separation is characterised by change, disruption, anxiety, ambiguity and makeshift arrangements. Stretched parental energy, attentiveness and other resources may mean a triage operates at particular times. When prolonged, these translate into a sense of uncertainty in the child, balanced by the direct nurturing inputs of parent(s) and other adults.

The sole parents reported being more able than the separated parents to establish durable systems, though the mothers required severance from the fathers' influence and the dads experienced a lingering limbo of uncertainty over further losses. The effects of limbo in the infant could include a sense of incompleteness, of waiting, of unknowing.

Throughout our discussion we have tended to regard the three parenting structures as being airtight. Yet this is by no means the case.

Being in the Parenting Together groups now does not guarantee that participants will always be. Divorce statistics indicate that 35 – 40% of Western Australian marriages end through divorce, and separation is, by definition, more common than divorce, though no agency is positioned to keep accurate statistics of separations, as neither starting nor ending a relationship is a notifiable event.

Are our Parenting Together participants special then? In some ways, yes. All have benefited from contact with family service agency programs. All have been willing to tell their stories. All have come out for two nights to meet with a group of others. But none of this insures them against developing the fissures that split relationships.

The parents who are now separated and alone were once parenting together, though in some cases this was neither a long nor an actively participative period of life. Furthermore, their current separated status may not be permanent. Three of our sole parents are already at the threshold of building a new relationship.

In addition, some people separate temporarily, reunite, and then continue, often with a dilemma at the centre of their reconjunction:

We start again....
Is this reconciliation
Or relapse.....?

The group such people joined for this study, then, would be different if they were in a period of separation or back together when the study was conducted. Yet we put this aside to discuss the texture of fathers' and mothers' reality while they are living with their child outside the frame of parenting together.

The existence of the other parent also suggests that the Parenting in Separation and Parenting Alone groups overlap a lot. In neither case is the status unambiguously one or the other, and some are likely to shift from separated to alone and then re-partner. The distinction is really a subjective judgement. We do not know, for example, whether the partner of any separated or sole participant would classify him or herself the same way as our participants did. This suggests that the states of both 'separated' and 'sole parent' are, for many, temporary and redefinable.

The drive towards separation, or towards living partnerless, is fuelled, in many cases, by the hope that a change of living structure would be a change for the better. Ruby put it starkly:

'When his violence continued,...I decided we were better off on our own.
I took my baby and went.'

Almost half (20) of our participants were separated or parenting alone. This often temporary life-stage contains the gate of the second chance. Through the gate stretches a pathway leading to new directions – personal re-education, deeper relationships with their children, a new partnership with a different process.

The prospect of new relationships is rarely far from sole and separated parents' minds. Perhaps this shows how pervasive the archetypal dream is. It silently feeds one of humankind's deepest aspirations, to merge into one the masculine and the feminine. Perhaps, though, it is a call for support – for someone else to put in some cash, to share the parenting and household tasks, to develop a viable partnership, to co-create a sustainable future for living and child rearing.

A surge of cautious energy arises when a separated or sole parent is attracted to a new partner.

August afternoon.....
Flowers spring up in the dunes....
And bloom in my heart

Such an event, so common today, can transform their whole landscape of life, and that of the child. The pressure to form a new relationship is very strong. Paul Murphy estimates that men tend to re-partner within 12 - 18 months of separation (with or without a divorce), and women an average of 3 1/2 years.³

³ Official statistics on this situation do not exist, and Murphy has based these informal estimations on the hundreds of separation histories he has listened to over years of group work in the Mums and Dads Forever program. He discusses the whole area in Murphy, Paul, '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, 1999.

Sadly for many, the new structures may transport them from the frying pan into the fire, as divorce rates among remarried couples are higher than among first marriages. This brings us to the doorway of a far more complex parenting structure that we have excluded from this study, step-parenting.

We can not conclude, then, that it is the relationship and parenting structure per se that communicates the beneficial effects we have observed. Rather, we must first inform our assessment of this question by considering the processes of relating, the quality and texture of what actually goes on within these structures.

4.2 Relationship Processes: Collaboration and Conflict

All partnerships have zones of collaboration and occasions of conflict. Which of these two forces predominates in any given relationship?

In primarily collaborative relationships, the partners agree on broad directions, are guided by compatible values, and are able to communicate within a framework of mutual respect and affirmation. They develop ways of managing the differences that arise, so that conflict is contained within bounds. They create a relationship process in which they find resolutions to problematic situations. They then live with the agreed solutions and keep moving forward, together.

Clearly a live-in life partner has an impact on how one sees the world and behaves in it, as does the birth of a child. Accordingly the type of bond and interaction climate that regulates the home is critical for task effectiveness, relationship satisfaction, and the direction of family development. These are essentially collaborative relationship process characteristics.

Robyn Parker has combed the research literature for the ingredients of sustainable marriages⁴. She cites many studies that yield lists of relationship characteristics long-lasting couples have in common. One is the work of John Gottman, who concludes that

'a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship. The key lies in the balance between positive and negative behaviours.... Marital stability is stronger when the ratio of positive to negative behaviours is at least 5:1.'

Gottman's 'positive behaviours' come from an affirmative attitude towards the partner and the partnership, and include smiling at each other, respectful communication, valuing the other's views, working together, backing each other up, hugs etc. These micro-events were well represented in the stories of dads and mums parenting together.

⁴ Parker, Robyn, Why marriages last: a discussion of the literature, Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Research Paper No. 28, July 2002.

Relationships that could be called 'conflictful' have the opposite energy. Partners give more importance to issues on which they disagree than to those on which they do agree. The process is one of arguing, criticising, becoming stalemated. A climate of cross-purposes replaces joint goals. Sabotage replaces support. Hostility replaces respect. Living with increasing emotional burdens replaces finding a workable resolution. Staying stuck replaces momentum. And sustained conflict creates a prevailing mood of disappointment, de-energisation, anxiety, and fear.

Parental discord has a direct negative effect on children's life satisfaction and self-esteem, and increases psychological distress, whereas a high level of support between parents lowers children's psychological distress.

Jennifer McIntosh goes a step further by examining at different stages of the child's development what she calls 'entrenched parental conflict'. A child's psycho-emotional growth can be arrested at critical points by living in the crossfire of 'trench warfare'.⁵

One of our participants, who had lived with her parents until she was eight, when they separated, described an image of an entrenched situation:

'I was in the middle with Mum holding one arm and Dad holding the other. They almost pulled my arms out of their sockets.'

While collaborative styles must be deliberately built, conflictful styles develop by default. Virginia Satir maintained that the beginning of self-esteem is the recognition that I have a choice.⁶ Each participant's story is studded with choice-points, with actions taken as the best option at the time.

The choice point arises in how the partners manage the issues of relationship life – how they deal with their own or the partner's emotionality, or safeguard human rights in the family, whether to sleep in front of the TV or engage in child-building activities.

On the hinge of these tiny behavioural choices, when cumulated over the issues and the years, hangs the great door of family satisfaction.

⁵ Mc Intosh, Jennifer, 'Entrenched Conflict in Parental Separation', Children in Focus Workshop, Bundoora, La Trobe University, 2002.

⁶ Satir, Virginia, Peoplemaking, Palo Alto, California, Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1972

4.3 Collaboration and Conflict in Separation

Just as a living together partnership can have a collaborative or conflictful relationship process, so can a separation.

We have some clear evidence of this in our participants' stories. A collaboratively separated mother of three children, for example, said

'He's really a good Dad when he's normal, but when he's depressed it's different.... He comes about 24 hours a week, still does what he used to, and sometimes takes more responsibility.... I'm happy with the way things are.... My fear is that he'll meet someone else who doesn't support the close way we parent, or that I'll get a new partner.'

In short, this mother's set-up seemed to continue the parenting, in the new situation of living separately, much as it was when the couple lived together. She was comfortable with what was happening – and the envy of others in the group who were not so fortunately placed.

Parents creating collaborative separations are relationship entrepreneurs pioneering a new form of family structure in which the wellbeing of their child or children is central.

A large part of what happens in the young child's emotional system is transferred to her or him from the parents' feeling state. Parents who can quarantine their angst and achieve relative equanimity about changes in their family system find their children much more able to surf the waves of change than do parents whose own demeanour proclaims turmoil and disaster.

Post-separation collaboration is a powerful, formative force in the lives of children, who ideally learn to respect and love both parents, live comfortably with differences, and feel secure amid ambiguities that baffle others.

A detailed case-by-case study of men and women pioneering collaborative separations is urgently needed. Such an information base could address an enormous social need, bring healing and a way forward to parents trapped in narrow social stereotypes, and lead to a major advance in relationship process.

Conflictful separations tend to arise from the precedents established by living together conflictfully. The conflict dynamic is significantly interactional in nature. Counterbalancing pairs of interactions stake out each partner's territory or response.

These pairs could be

violence – restraining orders

domineering attitudes – secrecy

affairs – leaving the relationship

absence – finding someone else

criticism – withdrawal

emotional barrenness – drying up of positive outlook and action

depression – disruption of the normal flow of life

When these interactive sequences become entrenched, with two dug-in parents firing at each other, conflict becomes the primary flavour and theme of the relationship.

A key driver of conflict is disparity in the ways partners manage change. Changes in the social environment greatly affect the life chances of families. During the 1990s, for example, the mood in the world of work became one of uncertainty – permanency dried up, companies went bankrupt, and retrenchments were many. Some employees were just told their jobs were being dissolved, others received severance packages. Either way, they were out.

Retrenchment is a major life and family event, accompanied by a grief response. Old plans and dreams can't be fulfilled. A gaping hole appears in formerly firm ground. Family systems become unbalanced. Neither the workers nor the family feel secure. Some displaced men, unable to get other jobs, stay home and the partner/mother joins the labour force. The expectations of durable family roles were framed in the conditions of an older society, which is rapidly passing away. Times then were more secure, and so were roles.⁷ Is it any wonder that some of the women in this study wanted 'security' as a condition for nesting, and that some men felt the foundations of their anticipated life rumbling?

Negotiating such drastic changes in the midst of having a baby and the demands of the first two years requires really deep collaborative skills. Where workplace dramas and uncertainties wash over into the family and swamp its process, the opportunities for insidious divisive conflict are endless.

Managing the upheaval of radical change in work conditions may devolve into an ongoing challenge, as short-term or part-time jobs, being shifted around the country by an employer, working four weeks on and two weeks off on a fly-in fly-out arrangement, nightshift, and other forms of irregularity in the work environment overtax many families' adaptability resources, leading to disorientation and perhaps relationship distress.

⁷ For an expansion of this theme, see Ladbrook, Denis, 'Future Options in Intimate Relationships', Perth, Curtin University Research Paper, 2000.

These make the task of structuring a stable environment for the nurture of the young child a mammoth exercise in diplomacy and domestic management. Sustaining a collaborative style is a big ask. Yet many achieve it, and find that the quest to pool their human resources strengthens their relationships, which endure through thick and thin.

A central issue in relationship process is attachment style. Alexander and Feeney state:

'The two main dimensions of attachment style are discomfort with closeness (lack of comfort with intimacy and mutual dependence) and anxiety over relationships (fear of abandonment, of not 'fitting in' or not being valued)⁸

Clearly developing and sustaining secure attachment with each other facilitates collaboration between partners.⁹

4.4 Structure and Process

Which of the two dimensions, Parenting Structure or Relationship Process, has the strongest influence on parenting and its outcomes?

As the distinction between 'separated' and 'sole' is such a fuzzy one, and because a significant divide seems to appear between the experience of those parenting together and the other two structural groups, we may well combine the separated and sole parents into one group, leaving us with parenting together and parenting apart as two categories of structure.

Those whose process is collaborative and those with a largely conflictful process constitute two qualitatively dichotomised categories of relationship process.

Let us now put these two dimensions together in a 2 x 2 table. Although it is likely that different people have different preferences for their own living arrangements, the modal priority of our participants, inferred from their narratives, appears to be that depicted in Table 11.

What would your preference be?

⁸ Alexander, Richard & Judith Feeney, 'The Transition to Parenthood: Some Early Findings', Brisbane, University of Queensland Family Centre, 2001.

⁹ The research team at The Family Centre, University of Queensland, headed by Professor Patricia Noller, has established a rich tradition of research in attachment theory and its applications. See <www.uq.edu.au/famcentre> for publications.

Table 11. Parents' Preference by Family Structure and Relationship Process

		Family Structure	
		Parenting Together	Parenting Apart
Relationship Process	Collaborative	1	2
	Conflictful	4	3

What evidence can we bring to bear for this priority choice?

First, no one would debate that having a collaborative partnership is the top priority. It is the nearest to the dream, delivers the greatest security and wellbeing, and offers children the most open opportunities.

To assess the ranking of the others, we seek out the stories of the men and women who parent apart.

The mother with the collaborative separation said she and the children felt happy with the arrangement. It was the second choice.

All four sole mothers reported that leaving their conflictful relationship raised their self-esteem and sense of purposefulness, so they moved from the least preferred 'conflictfully together' box to the third choice, 'conflictfully apart'. It gave them space to breathe and to develop their own prospects.

We had no example of a person moving in the other direction.

As an unobtrusive way to examine the proposition that relationship processes exert a greater influence on the way dads and mums feel than does their living structure, we can look to another line of research, that into health status. Two American studies are suggestive in this regard.

Effects of the Quality of the Primary Relationship on Health and Happiness¹⁰

As happiness is positively related to good health, it is reasonable to expect happily married people to be healthier than unhappily married people. A national US sample divided into the happily and unhappily married showed that “marital happiness explains considerably more of the variance in the mental health of the respondent than does any of the control variables”, which were income, education, race, age and childhood experience.¹¹ Furthermore, unhappily married persons reported poorer mental health than respondents in any of the unmarried categories.

As the divorced population consists primarily of those who were formerly unhappily married, the process of divorcing may, in fact, have improved their health. This possibility was researched among a 7,000-strong sample in Alameda County, California in 1965 by Karen Renne¹², who found that overall health status was highest among those in happy first marriages, followed by the happily remarried, then the divorced, then the unhappily married and last of all the unhappily remarried. Health status is thus more clearly associated with marital happiness than with either marital status or marital history.

Do you think Western Australian couples in 2003 differ in this respect from Californian couples 38 years ago, or is this a common thread through all our times and places?

4.5 What difference does marriage make?

How important was being married, rather than living de facto, for our participants as parents to children under two? Marital status was not a selection criterion, and we did not ask about it directly.

Can our database throw any light on the question? Let’s have a look at what we have. Table 2 shows that 31 of our participants were or had been married to the other parent of their child, and ten had not married. Of the 31, twenty, or 65%, remained parenting together, ten had separated and one regarded herself as a sole parent. Of the ten who had not been married, one was still parenting together.

¹⁰ This section has been taken from Ladbrook, Denis A., ‘Sex Differentials in Premature Death among Professionals Part I’, *J. of the Aust. Pop. Assoc.*, Vol 7, 1, 1990, 15.

¹¹ Gove, Walter, R., M Hughes and C. B. Style, ‘Does marriage have positive effects on the psychological well-being of the individual?’ *J. of Health and Social Behav.*, 1983, 24: 22 – 31.

¹² Renne, Karen E., ‘Health and Marital Experience in an Urban Population’, *J. of Marriage and the Family*, 1971, 338 – 350.

Of the 21 fathers and mothers who were Parenting Together, twenty were married, and of the twenty who were parenting in separation or alone, eleven were or had been married. So in over half the cases of parenting in separation and sole parenting, marriage did not stave off separation where the process was flamboyantly conflictful. But eight of the nine whose union was de facto found themselves on their own with a child.¹³ Only one de facto mother remained parenting together at the time of the study.

When assessing what these figures mean we need to exercise extreme interpretive caution. They are tiny numbers, and relate to a population of parents of a child under two who were selected on account of their parenting with a partner, in separation, or alone. Even so, 35% of those who had married were no longer married – a figure consistent with Western Australian statistics of divorce.

Qualitatively, one sole mum lamented her lack of a wedding ring when she was pushing the pram. Clearly social stigmatisation remains an influential force in our community. How does even attributed stigmatisation affect the self-concept and feeling state of a young mother? Both Erving Goffman's work¹⁴ and the broad labelling theory¹⁵ suggest that social judgements powerfully influence self confidence and the sense of personal solidity that make such a difference when parenting a small child. This mother also said two other things. 'He wouldn't commit to me', and 'I was prepared (willing) to be a single parent.'

The partners of three of our four sole mothers put pressure on them to terminate the pregnancy. This pressure was so violent that three of the four were hospitalised with injuries. How can a woman trust a man if he so patently rejects the fruit of his seed? And how can a relationship develop and thrive without trust? Few relationships survive under these conditions, and none of our four did, the one's marriage notwithstanding.

Putting these points together, the scenario appears to be: when the conception, birth and nurture of a little child are of central concern, mums seek protection and security. They want the father of their child to 'be there' for them, to be Dad. They seek a secure attachment. Attachment is precarious where uncertainty, inconstancy or unkindness feature strongly in the relationship. Being married, while guaranteeing neither secure psychological attachment nor relationship continuity, nevertheless has, in the experience of our participants, provided a more certain and reliable framework for parenting a child than not being married.

¹³ In addition, one of the sole mothers 'had never lived' with the father of her child. This may also have been the case with an additional 'separated' mother who only came to one session, and for whom the qualitative data are less comprehensive.

¹⁴ Goffman, Erving, Stigma: The Management of Spoiled Identity, New York, Penguin, 1967.

¹⁵ See Lemert, Edwin, Social Pathology, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1951, and the long tradition of research and theory that arose from his insights.

We have also raised the question of whether the different groups have different outcomes because of socio-economic differentials. It is time to look at this a bit more closely.

4.6 Demographic and Socio-Economic Considerations

To what degree can the differences among the groups be attributed to socio-economics? Table 2 shows that, by and large, the education, occupation and income levels of the Parenting Together groups are higher than those of the other groups, though the income levels are significantly influenced by separated and sole parent unavailability for labour force involvement. But the ecological fallacy warns us of the problems consequent on attributing to individuals the average characteristics of the group to which they belong.¹⁶ Can we get inside the groups and look at couple data?

In traditional culture, men and women pair endogamously, that is, they seek to achieve parity within broad social groups. First marriage norms suggest that the husband should be 2 – 3 years older than the wife, and slightly better educated and qualified occupationally. Second marriage norms are much more liberal.

Under postmodern, open market conditions, these norms are breaking down, particularly given that more than half the undergraduate students in tertiary institutions are women, and that female-intensive professional positions have greatly increased over the past 25 years.

Leading-edge young people, taking note of these and other changes in society and peer culture, are reshaping their notions of relationships and of 'settling down'. Hugh Mackay, for example, produces evidence to show that the children of the baby boomers, what he calls the 'Options Generation', have very different approaches to those of their early post-War parents, the 'Stress Generation'.¹⁷

Individual choice is wider and parent influence lower, resulting in more custom-designed, individuated and opportunistic relationships. These newer patterns of relationship arrangement have both generational and gender implications for family dialogue, direction, leadership and sustainability.

Table 12 displays some grouped intra-couple configurations of age, education, and occupation among our participants. This information comes from the questionnaires participants filled in prior to starting the study. A copy of a questionnaire is contained as Appendix 4. Again, our methodological caution counsels us against putting too much weight on such small, unrepresentative figures. Yet they are interesting.

¹⁶ Robinson, W.S., 'Ecological correlations and the behavior of individuals', *American Sociological Review*, 1950, 15:351–57.

¹⁷ Mackay, Hugh, *Generations, Baby Boomers, their parents and their children*, Sydney, Pan McMillan Australia, 1997.

Table 12: Sociodemographic Scan.

Differentials in Age, Education and Occupation across Fathers and Mothers in two Parenting Structures

		Age Mean ages, (mean age difference) ¹⁸ (years)	Age (% with woman older than man)	Education (% with woman higher than man)	Occupation (% with woman (man) higher)	Notes
DADS	Parenting Together (Group 1)	Dads Partners 36.4 35.5 (2.1)	55	33	40	More have older wives + some wives higher in educn & occ
	Separated & Alone (Grps 3+5)	35.5 32.8 (4.6)	18	22	40	Greater age disparity; Many women higher occup
MUMS	Parenting Together (Group 2)	Mums Partners 38.0 40.5 (3.3)	20	0	20 (10)	Group fits norms of endogamy
	Separated & Alone (Grps 4+6)	30.9 33.3 (5.5)	17	67	75	Wide disparities in age, ed, occ. Different generations?

Table 12 shows that the married men of Group 1 were closest to their spouses in mean age (2.1 average years of age difference), and the separated and sole women of Groups 4 and 6 the most spread out (5.5 average years of age difference). Against the norms of endogamy, however, a high proportion of Group 1 men (55%) were younger than their wives, a finding unique in Table 12. Put differently they were the most peer-like, which fits with the contemporary trend. They share this with the Parenting Together women (3.3 years), much more than with the separated and sole men (4.6 years) or women (5.5 years).

Compared with other groups, the separated and sole women had twice the percentage with higher educational levels than their menfolk, and nearly twice the percentage with higher occupational levels. These mothers, then, had sizeable disjunctions with assortative mating norms. A number were partnering older men with lower educational and occupational levels than they. Some of these women also said that at the time they felt under pressure from their biological metronomes.

¹⁸ The mean age difference is not the same as the difference between the mean ages. It is calculated by averaging the differences in ages of all group members and their partners.

Although the numbers are tiny, the data in Table 12 do follow theory in that, in general, the more categories of life where the normative order is abrogated, the greater the prevalence of conflict and instability. Going against the stream delivers a unique package. But doing deals also imposes a massive strain on the couple's negotiating abilities and adaptive energies, and requires strong resources for handling the stresses of ambiguity and unanticipated differences over issues that are often grounded in deep, emotional soil.

In sum, age and socio-economic differentials are important. Deeper qualitative studies could flesh out how these differences impact on the relationship processes and attachments, which, in the final analysis, determine both the quality and longevity of couple relationships.

Another issue that kept on cropping up in the stories of both dads and mums was the nature, amount and sources of support they received. This matter is so important it merits upscaling to a theoretical discussion.

4.7 Social Support and Kinship Capital

The literature is rich in the contributions of social support to health, happiness, integration into community, child development, and indeed life itself¹⁹. The stories of our participants show unambiguously that grandparents, siblings, community organisations, family service agencies, the State, and other structures for social support and integration greatly enhance child development, parents' feelings of purposefulness, smooth domestic functioning, and health in the vital period of early childhood.

This supports, within kinship configurations, the principles and generalisations of the burgeoning literature dealing with the development of social capital in broader settings²⁰.

Francis Fukuyama defines social capital as 'an informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals'²¹. From this definition we can derive a concept of kinship capital.

¹⁹ Broadhead, W. E. et al, 'The epidemiological evidence for a relationship between social support and health', Amer. J. of Epidemiol., 1983, 117, 521-537; Cohen S. and L. Syme, Social Support and Health, New York, Academic Press, 1985; Gottlieb, B. H (ed), Social Networks and Social Support, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1991;

²⁰ Putnam, Robert D, Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002; Putnam, Robert D., Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York, Simon & Schuster 2001.

²¹ Fukuyama, Francis, Social Capital and Civil Society, The Institute of Public Policy, George Mason University, Arlington Virginia, 1999,

We shall define 'Kinship capital', as 'the relationship identities, attachments and interaction patterns binding family members together in an environment conducive to collaboration'. It is an indicator of quality in family relationships, of parents' investment in their children, of kinship communities sharing their modelling and resources with each other, especially with the new generation. As Desmond Tutu put it, 'We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.'²²

James Coleman, when investigating the contribution of social capital to children's school achievement, also mentions a more objective component of social capital, namely the networks of relationships within and outside the family that the child gains access to, familiarity with, and relationships within.²³ The greater this set of connections, the better positioned the child will be for the opportunities and exigencies of life. Kinship capital thus provides bridges to a wider world and keys to opening doors to other families and community networks.

In the first years, though, it is the net of relationships and interactions within the home that give the child his or her fundamental grasp of life and of the world.

When examining men's contributions to their children's lives, Paul Amato finds that two forms of kinship capital greatly increase children's wellbeing, 'the quality of the co-parental relationship' (especially the extent to which fathers model constructive dyadic skills, cooperate with mothers in childrearing, and are emotionally supportive of mothers), and 'the quality of the father-child relationship' (the level of support and effective control exercised by dads).²⁴

A child brought up rich in kinship capital has a sustaining source of life enhancement that outstrips that of a person rich in material but poor in relationship resources. Our Group 1 men, the best off financially of the six groups, put it succinctly:

If I ask a kid "would you rather live in a Peppermint Grove mansion with an absent dad, or in a shack with a dad who loved you?", the kid would choose the shack.

²² Battle, Michael Jesse, Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu, Cleveland, Ohio, Pilgrim Press, 1995:35.

²³ Coleman James S., 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,' American Journal of Sociology, 1988, Supplement 94, S95-S120.

²⁴ Amato, Paul, 'More than money? Men's contributions to their children's lives', in Booth A., & A. Creuter (eds), Men In Families: When Do They Get Involved? What Difference Does It Make? New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998: 247.

Paul Callister, speaking to New Zealand men, doesn't mince his words:

I'm sorry guys, but what you are in the big, wide world is without any significance at all for the quality of you as a father. For this is one thing all the experts agree on, even those at the forefront of the men's movement: it is your nurturing side that is beneficial to your children and that determines how they fare later in life. Everything else is secondary.

So if you are out of work, have never achieved anything significant in life, ride a bike instead of driving a flash car, don't worry. If your kids know you care about and understand them and you know how to feed, clean and respond to them, then you are not only a good father - you are also a good and complete man!²⁵

The seeds of trust (the sense of safety in the world which is acquired early in life, and without which neither children nor relationships thrive), reciprocity, competency in undertaking life tasks, intimacy and the characteristics so desired by both men and women, grow best in soils enriched with kinship capital.

Higher adult-child ratios have been found to increase capital within the family, and our data point in the same direction, e.g. people who come from Italian and Irish backgrounds or have significant connections with grandparents, uncles and aunts, told stories showing how family traditions, passed down by adult generations, give the receiving child a valuable store of kinship capital.

The adults need not necessarily be family members. When adults in Play Groups and other community associations, and other children connect with a young child, they make a bridge to the resources of the wider world.

Arising from primary relationships, kinship capital is the fundamental building brick of community capital, of the richness, inclusiveness and interactivity of communities, which in turn is the prime contributor to social capital.

Much of our study has focussed on the initial source of kinship capital, the family of origin. This family can be a continuing source of support. Many of the dads and mums parenting apart mentioned how much they relied on their parents and other close relatives for practical assistance and moral support.

It can also be a source of disappointment and hassle. Half the sole mothers lamented the absence of much needed support from their parents, and two sole dads mentioned that what was hardest for them was the absence of their family, one because they were 'over East', and the other because the family split their support between him and his wife.

Family rifts and feuds, exclusions, shunnings, invalidations or non-recognitions damage the intangible weave of kinship capital. They lead to what Robert Putnam calls 'social decapitalisation'.²⁶

²⁵ Callister, Paul, 'Fathers, Families and the Future: Fathering and Mentoring', *Father & Child*, 4, October 1999.

²⁶ Putnam, Robert, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993.

A task in all separations is to preserve and rebuild damaged kinship capital. Finding ways to keep disaffection, distrust and conflict quarantined from the souls of the very young rises in importance as this perspective becomes appreciated.

For many fathers and mothers this involves learning new motives as well as new behaviours. Expanding one's own inner spaciousness to move beyond the hurts that led to separation by focussing on building the child's base of kinship capital takes separated fathers and mothers on significant journeys of self-enlargement.

A valuable further study could inquire of separated people what forms of kinship capital they value most, how they build and rebuild it, and what has assisted and hindered them in this quest.

Limits of Kinship Capital

Ian Winter²⁷ cautions against making the family boundary too strong, its relationships too all pervasive. Where this occurs, he quotes a range of writers as saying, family ties can crowd out ties to community, and can be antithetical to building broad social capital. Narrow family life may limit the child's world-view and restrict access to competing value systems and wider frames of sociability.

Gender inequalities in traditional family practice may also remain unrecognised.

Winter cites a critique of adapting the concept of social capital to intra-familial transactions. G. Furstenberg maintains that social capital is a sociological construct, not a psychological one. This means that social capital is not reducible to the individual, as it only operates at a shared, collective level.²⁸

Yet the dyadic and family relationship networks model in miniature the interactions of the wider community. These interactions are social, not psychological. A functioning family system actually forms the tiniest prototype of a micro-community. Furthermore, the concept of kinship, with its indissoluble life-long identities, bonds and reciprocities of blood, has a resilience and durability that in many ways exceeds that of wider associations.

Looking at what happens when family support is weak or empty gives us an oblique-angle vision of its importance. Given our topic, let's look at a very sore spot in many participants' hearts – the vacuum left when there's no effective dad.

²⁷ Winter, Ian, Towards a theorised understanding of family life and social capital, Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Working paper no.21, April 2000.

²⁸ Furstenberg, G. (1998), 'Social capital and the role of fathers in the family', in Booth, A. & A. Creuter (eds), Men In Families: When Do They Get Involved? What Difference Does It Make?, Mahwah New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998: 296.

4.8 Father Absence: A swelling tide that squanders kinship capital

The effective presence or absence of both parents forms a critical bridge between parenting structure and relationship process. Given that most (but not all) children live with their mothers throughout their early years, the research attention has focussed on father absence and its effects. Mother absence has received less recent attention, but its effects are truly major.

Many of our participants spoke of 'dad not being there'. As children they saw dads giving their lives to work, not to family. The process of separating sharpens children's distress, and the effects of the gap in parenting trickle downstream throughout the children's lives.

Turning from our participants to Australia as a whole, Steve Biddulph asserts that

'Boys with absent fathers are statistically more likely to be violent, get hurt, get into trouble, do poorly in schools and be members of teenage gangs in adolescence.

Fatherless daughters are more likely to have low self esteem, to have sex before they really want to, to be assaulted, and not continue their schooling.²⁹

These effects extend far beyond Australia. In the United States, David Blankenhorn has marshalled a bookful of epidemiological evidence demonstrating that father absence damages the wellbeing of children. Indeed, this is the only generation of children in American history, he writes, which has inherited lower wellbeing and life prospects than their parents.³⁰

So a social split is happening. Children with two, interactive nurturantly involved parents are inheriting significant stores of kinship capital from which to make the most of their own relationship lives, and the opportunities of the emerging society. Children without dads who engage with their development start their journeys into the world with an unrecognised load. And their mothers (though where Mum is absent, it is their fathers) carry the responsibility for making the contributions of two people.

I found myself very touched by the courage and dedication of the separated and sole dads and mums in the research groups. Truly they stand in a gap between positive futures for their children, and social oblivion.

But the whole responsibility cannot be put solely on the remaining parent. National statistics show fatherlessness to be growing, and this calls for more insightful social policies and enhanced support to children with one parent, or with none.

Inchoate young voices also call out across a lonely sea to the lost dad who can link them with history and destiny.

²⁹ Steve Biddulph and Paul Stanish (illustrator), Raising Boys: Why Boys Are Different And How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men, Sydney, Finch Publishing, 1998.

³⁰ Blankenhorn, David, Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem, New York, Basic Books, 1995.

4.9 So What Do Dads Expect, Do, And Look Forward To?

It depends on who they are, what their experience has been, and how they look at their fatherhood.

In this study, about a third of the dads said they hadn't thought about what they would do as a dad before they were plunged into the imminence of fatherhood's daily realities. Other issues apparently took precedence in their bachelor days. Especially among these, the unconsciously written concepts and practices of their families of origin and society furnished their thoughts, images, and models. To use Peter Berger's words, their identity as a dad is 'socially bestowed'.³¹

Others looked forward and built a platform of knowledge about relationship processes, child development and care, and ways of building a family. Some adapted their dad ideas from the role sets of the culture. In doing so, they made mental preparation for two dimensions of family life, as husband and father.

What became very clear was that the continuum of preparedness for receiving and parenting a baby was a very long one, and that the further along the continuum the dad was, the more rewarding and sustaining was his experience as dad. Well-prepared dads have the advantage of anticipatory socialisation, which cuts through the fog of unknowing and leads them to confidence and competence in raising their child. They have a lot to contribute, and it shows. To be effective, indeed to keep his spouse, a reluctant father must overcome resentment and move with the changes that will transform his life.

Others men went further – they saw the changes of our times: a newer form of gender equity, a family-friendly balance between work and home, and the inestimable value to themselves, to their partner, and to the next generation of being deeply engaged with the life and growth of the children. So there is another continuum, from a generation of men with older traditional paradigms of the division of labour between mum and dad, to contemporary 'hands on' involved type dads.

These dads, and we have them in all three parenting structures, are creating fuller lives for their sons and daughters, better partner relationships (where these exist), and have deepened and broadened their own experience and journey through the stages of masculine identity and adulthood.

A man whose children's mother chooses to have no contact with their 8 and 10 year-old sons, for example, said: 'Parenting (alone) is a challenge I really enjoy'.

³¹ Berger, Peter L., *Invitation to Sociology*, New York, Basic Books, 1965.

Another spoke of his growth with true Aussie affection:

I've learned a shit-load from my little fella in the past twelve months.

A 45 year-old sole father put it poignantly:

'I've looked after a wonderful little girl for 7 1/2 years. When she hurts, I hurt. I got over an urge to suicide because of the rewards of this child, so my experience is bittersweet.³²

The data show that dads can learn to do just about everything for their infants, toddlers and school age children, though in actuality it doesn't often happen when a functioning mum co-parents. Many dads disclosed to the groups some unique experiences, which bonded them with their children. Where the dad-mum relationship is mutually affirming and collaborative, parents reported embarking together on a journey of joy. But this was not everyone's experience. Richard Alexander & Judith Feeney cite a research study that found that 20% of couples with a newborn child showed an increase in marital satisfaction, 30% showed no change, and 50% showed a decline.³³

Dads parenting together reported more positive and fewer negative experiences of upbringing, relationship and parenting. When one tapped the memories of fathers in the other groups, more aversive images sprang out, both from their families of origin and their relationships. I can't recall any, however, who spoke in negative terms about their tender-aged child.

Though parenting alone is lonely, I found myself admiring the way the men in the two groups (Groups 3 and 5) curtailed their work and social lives and built domestic routines around the needs of their children. Their greatest fear – often not far from their consciousness – was that they would lose the child, and with the child their identity as a father. Being Dad stretches very deep into the core of these men's souls.

Some separated and sole dads and mums, though, appeared somewhat gloomy about their past, their present and their prospects. This feeling seemed similar to that captured by Henry van Dyke in his poem 'Petition'³⁴:

And discontent casts a shadow grey
On the brightness of the common day.³⁵

³² Emile Durkheim showed that children preserve parents from suicide, and that as people generally tend to discharge voluntarily accepted obligations, a child and the attendant duties become 'a staff of life'. (Durkheim, E., *Suicide*, translated by J. Spaulding and G. Simpson, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1951:201).

³³ Alexander, Richard & Judith Feeney, 'The Transition to Parenthood: Some Early Findings', Brisbane, University of Queensland Family Centre, 2001.

³⁴ Weatherhead, Leslie D., *A Private House of Prayer*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1958.

³⁵ This suggests a structural effect: a connection between the durable conditions of their home lives and the mental health and emotional habits of people who parent alone.

Parenting in separation seemed to be the most difficult. The uncertainty of having to create and recreate then change and adapt their living routines and arrangements strains both the dads and their children. It also strains the mums and their children, and is an issue to come to terms with if stalled family momentum is to resume.

Yet where a collaborative separation becomes feasible (due to an approach on both sides that elevates the child's wellbeing above their own squabbles and rifts) the uncertainty begins to drain away, and a new workable solution takes over.

Some dads need help, and those with supportive families found a deeper dimension of kinship and friendship through their generational and sibling links. Others learned to ask, and in the asking found that they were chipping away at the granite of an older masculinity. They preferred who they were becoming.

The vision statements clearly showed that the dads all wanted to be significant in their children's lives, and that they were shaping their parenthood to have a long-term influence. They seek to be resources – 'I'm the Rock to whom she can always come'.

In most cases, particularly among those parenting apart – who had learned lessons in life that weren't always prominent in the partnered men's discourse – their visionary objectives emphasised the openness and self-directedness of their children's development. They recognise the power of choice, and see their guiding hand as providing scaffolding from which the children will gradually build the houses of their lives.³⁶

³⁶ A number of sole dads had older children – up to ten years. One had three children, more than any of the partnered men. Hence the partnered have time to catch up with this vision, though many of them already speak in these terms.

4.10 And the Mothers?

Some women see having a child as the gateway to the most important role of their early-adult life. A few accepted unsuitable partnerships to achieve this objective. Emerald's eloquent voice reveals the trade-off:

I was prepared to raise my child on my own.
Becoming a mother was the greatest desire in my life.

Yet the mothers in this study universally preferred a stable, collaborative relationship with a dependable partner who puts family first and who's there when it counts, rather than a makeshift arrangement within the sound of the body's bell.

The mothers' expectation statements also show that beyond this, the women seek an intimacy that grows from the primary dyad to encompass the whole family:

What we seek above all is a rich intimate relationship from which will flow fulfilling family life.

The theme of equality in the partnership, particularly in household tasks and parenting, comes next. 'I want a modern man, 50 – 50', said Freda. But not all. Some women see motherhood as their domain, keenly anticipated through their years of childhood and adolescence. It remained the primary role in their lives. So strong is this in some cases that some fathers felt 'gatekept out'.

In what Jocelyn Chaplin³⁷ calls 'the hidden hierarchies' of ongoing patriarchy, the man's role is to do his own thing – 'be a bit distant' – and to support and protect me and be there when needed. The mothers in Group 2 very clearly agreed on their expectation that 'I'd be the major parent and he'd supply supplementary child nurturing and domestic services'. Dads in these systems may find they have little chance of securing 50% of the decision-making. Some reported sensing that a 'glass wall' kept them segregated from the inner sanctum. Deep waters indeed.

Both mums' and dads' preferences, then, are positioned on a continuum from the firm roles of traditional culture to an emerging way of relating that renegotiates understandings and contributions dynamically as the situation evolves.

A 'reality gradient' was discernible in the stories and expressed views along the passage from parenting together mums through separated to parenting alone. Those together seemed to have relatively levelheaded, detailed and negotiated concepts whereas the others' views were more strongly fashioned by images and buried hopes, with little concurrence from partners at the detail level.

³⁷ Chaplin, Jocelyn, *Feminist Counselling in Action*, London, Sage, 1988.

One Group 1 mother said she and her husband had been to a pre-marriage preparation course, and through this had negotiated that they'd have a child after 5 – 10 years. They followed through on this, and the mum was delighted at how good a dad her husband had become, despite his prior reservations. How different life might have been had all the dads and mums been to such courses?

Mothers' experiences of the father of their child vary enormously, from the imaginative support of Lena's husband who 'exceeded my expectations', down a long hill to those who found themselves wounded and hospitalised at their partner's hand.

The testimony of the mothers Parenting Together (Group 2) was broadly comparable to that of the men in Group 1. They were going places, had plans, were well-adjusted to being Mum, and seemed to have collaborative relationships, though all said their husbands were overtired by their exertions in the workforce and that attention to children's needs suffered as a consequence.

Group 2 women's views were also closer to the Group 1 men's views than to those of the women in the other groups.

The separated mothers fell into two groups – two somewhat older mothers (both with three children) had relatively collaborative separations and felt in charge of their lives and their futures. The other three were terrified of the men who had fathered their children and had taken measures to keep them away, and keep their address secret. Most of these were younger, had had less time in their relationships, and were recently separated. Qualitatively, their raw stories are more akin to those of the sole mothers than to the two collaboratively separated mums.

The four sole mothers all had painful stories – very unsupportive, conflictful, neglectful and sometimes violent upbringings, and the stories of their partnerships followed fairly directly on from these early life journeys. All four, though, had turned the corner and were on paths to new biographies, to saner, more life-affirming destinations.

After journeying
Through the underworld
I feel connected again

The visions of the women parenting alone were mainly concerned with securing a positive future for themselves and their children. As to how they saw the future panning out for the fathers of the children, two wanted no further contact and took measures to secure this, and two recognised the validity of the father's continuing role and sought to move towards collaborative ways of arranging visitation. None was interested in reviving the spousal relationship.

Rather they saw themselves involved in new and radically different relationships. Diamond sought to build 'an ecosystem of support' in the broader community, two were already tentatively connected on a more equal basis with another man, and Emerald said:

'I'd like a new partner in my life – it's not natural to be everything for the child. But any new relationship will be built on respect.'

4. 11 Further Research Possibilities Identified During This Project

Our project surfaced many issues for investigation. The overarching umbrella of all these project possibilities is the quest to ascertain the measures that will secure the most effective structure and process for rearing children.

Here are the top six.

1. Preparing for a life as Dad

We found that dads who had read and taken courses to resource themselves on relating to a partner³⁸, the course of a pregnancy and an infant's growth stages, had a head start of pre-socialisation that enabled them to anticipate events and competently support the mother and child. This gave them confidence and led to a knowledgeable, hands-on type of parenting from which they, their spouse and the child benefited permanently. This is so clear it does not need to be redone.

A next step is to map the most important resources and skills that would assist contemporary men to understand, relate to and invest in their child's life. What preparation, when and from source would best build his knowledge and capacities? How can dads discern the child's teachable moments?³⁹

Garnish this with stories from dads who have taken the journey, and use the results to empower agencies and families to revolutionise early fatherhood.⁴⁰

³⁸ Pre-marriage courses and inventories typically provide a multidimensional framework for relating and building a family. Participants rate the courses highly, and claim they have long-lasting effects. See, e.g., Stanley, S.M. 'Making a Case for Premarital Education', Family Relations, 50: 272-280, 2001.

³⁹ 'Not education of fathers, but recognition of their role and contribution is the most important goal in developing support services. Service providers need to look beyond the traditional roles for mothers and fathers and develop services that encourage and enable team parenting.' Harald Breiding-Buss, 'Developing Support Services to Fathers', Wellington, New Zealand, Address to the Social Policy Forum on Fatherhood, 1999

⁴⁰ See, for example: Father & Child Trust, Dads in Ante-Natal Classes, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2000. Pudney, Warwick, and Judy Cottrell, Beginning Fatherhood – A Guide for Expectant Fathers, Sydney, Finch Publishing, 1998.

2. Creating a collaborative relationship style

A framework of practical collaboration enriches and preserves relationships, even in separation. What measures do parents take to reduce conflict, resolve dilemma issues and develop collaborative relationship styles while others harden their views into entrenched postures opposing their partners? And how can collaboration survive into separation, or be first built when separated? Let's compile a detailed case by case study of men and women pioneering collaborative separations.

3. Managing father absence

When Dad is psychologically or physically absent, Mum and the children feel a loss, a loss that has very deep effects. Let's trace how and when this happens, what its effects are, and explore ways of securing Dad's involved presence. Cases of what happens when Mum is absent also merit a study.

4. Building family support

Many separated and sole dads and mums with children under two survive by support from their parents, siblings and other family members. What types of support are most beneficial, and how and when are they best given?

And after a separation, how do parents rebuild the kinship capital lost in the chaos?

5. Emerging trends in fatherhood

If the generations have differing perspectives on the future, with its shifting images of masculinity and technological and social opportunity, how do young people see and anticipate fatherhood?

Diana Smart has investigated the expectations teenagers and their parents have concerning the young person's future relationships, marriage and parenthood, and whether boys' aspirations differ from those of girls.⁴¹

How can new parents surf the waves of major change in the social environment?⁴² An upcoming focus asks how the destruction of the World Trade Centre twin towers is reshaping the way men look at family, relationships and being Dad.

⁴¹ Smart, Diana, 'Relationships, marriage and parenthood: views of young people and their parents', Family Matters, 63 Summer 2002.

⁴² This theme connects with the key question of the Australian Institute of Family Studies' Research Program Area C: Family and Society. See <<http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/research/progA.html>>

6. How depression affects family life

Both post-natal and ongoing depression were significant in a number of families and led to some separations. This merits a study of depressed parents: how sufferers see their declining ability to cope, the short-and long-term implications for the partner, and the impacts on the children. Terrence Real has opened the hidden domain of men's depression, which he argues tends to co-vary directly with living out a stoic masculinity.⁴³

Let's seek out success stories of how parents have coped, lived effectively with, and overcome depression, and how partners and children have found ways of managing life with a depressed dad or mum.⁴⁴

Depression is different from unhappiness. Depression is a treatable medical condition, and could be grouped with all mood-related conditions. 'Lift the mood', said Ngala Professional Advisory Committee Member and Head of Psychological Medicine at King Edward Memorial and Princess Margaret Hospitals, Dr. Jon Rampono, 'and energy returns to feed and lift all family activities. It changes the landscape of relationship mood, tone and vitality. The possibility for optimism and momentum returns.'

In addition to the top six topics, dozens of applications of our work continue to pop up. We can divide these into population studies, separation process studies and theoretical studies.

Population studies

Our study was severely delimited to the 'mainstream' Western Australian population, all of whom had had some agency contact. This leaves untouched a vast structure of additional groups, including

- Aboriginal families
- Non-English Speaking Migrant families
- Rurally located families
- Same sex parent families
- Stepfamilies: Being Dad to someone else's children
- Blended families, including the impact of a new parent on child behaviour and wellbeing
- Families with adopted and substitute care children
- Parent(s) or children with a chronic disease or disability
- Families who have had no contact with Family Resource or Service agencies
- Parents who have had technologically-assisted conceptions
- Parenting a child after the assisted termination of an earlier pregnancy

⁴³ Real, Terrence, I don't want to talk about it: Overcoming the secret legacy of male depression, New York, Fireside, 1997.

⁴⁴ DepressioNet <<http://www.depressionet.com.au/>> provides a comprehensive resource for people suffering from depression.

- Racially or ethnically mixed families
- A whole slew of projects are potential in examining the relationship between occupation and fatherhood, e.g.
- Being dad on the farm
- Dads currently in military service⁴⁵
- Dads formerly in military service: family processes among veterans of war and their children
- Dads who work away (e.g. mining, prospecting and fishing industries)
- How sex workers have babies and rear their children
- Being Dad in a high pressure occupation
- Being Dad when a student
- After redundancy – Dads cut off in midstream
- When there is no work – parenting without employment

Separation process

- Finding ways to reduce the uncertainty of limbo
- Identifying and developing strengths in separated or bereaved families
- Dealing with the grief of separation while being Dad to a young child
- Restarting family movement after the stalled momentum of separation
- Mapping the phases of separation and Dads' best opportunities at each stage
- Decision-making options and procedures among recently separated parents
- Coming to terms with separation as the new reality
- Dealing with the changes when you or your ex finds a new partner
- Learning to trust again after betrayal, desertion or violence
- 'Go it alone' families who have negotiated separations without any contact with State services

Theoretical studies

- How can fathers contribute to brain development in the child's early years?⁴⁶
- While conflict is the manifest cause of most separations, how do we uncover and work with the latent factors that carry people into entrenched conflict positions?
- In what ways can the Family Strengths perspective contribute to collaborative separations?⁴⁷
- Exploring inter-generational transmissions of parenting structure (the parents of all our sole mums and most of the sole dads had divorced).

⁴⁵ A comment from Group 3 is worth following up: A father in the navy said: 'in uniform, you're different – it frightens the kids. When the men went home in civvies, the domestic violence dropped.'

⁴⁶ See, for example, Ontario Children's Secretariat, Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study Final Report, Toronto, Ontario, 1999.

⁴⁷ This perspective, and its application to family processes, is being systematically studied at the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle. For publications, see <<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/indexb.html>>

- How can attachment theory assist couples struggling with insecure relationship processes?⁴⁸
- Delineating psychosomatic connections amid relationship conflict during pregnancy
- Charting and measuring human rights in the family
- When death visits the family – picking up the pieces after the death of a child (or parent)

4.1 2 Social Policy Strategies

- Policy initiatives to encourage fathers to be more involved as caregivers and nurturers for their children.
- Exploring ways to adapt the language of official publications directed at parents to be specifically inclusive of fathers.⁴⁹
- Paul Callister⁵⁰ notes that many midwives form a strong bond with the mother but in the process can exclude the father. In what ways can midwives be encouraged to include dads?
- Dads as volunteers in child care centres, play groups and kindergartens.
- Data base development: A project designed to integrate data from the ABS, the ATO, Centrelink, Homeswest and the Family Court in an attempt to secure a statistical picture of separation events in Western Australia, including re-partnering patterns among men and women, and the financial basis of post-separation parenting.⁵¹
- How do the actions of regulatory agencies such as Centrelink and the Child Support Agency affect parenting and the wellbeing of children?

⁴⁸ For leads on this topic, read the papers of Professor Pat Noller and associates from the Family Centre, University of Queensland. See <<http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/family/>>

⁴⁹ Richard Fletcher at the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, has achieved some progress on this agenda in New South Wales. See <<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/indexb.html>>

⁵⁰ Callister, Paul, 'Fathers, Families and the Future: Fathering and Mentoring', *Father & Child*, 4,1999.

⁵¹ See Commonwealth of Australia, *A Guide to Commonwealth Government payments 1 January - 19 March 2003*, Canberra, Department of Family and Community Services and the Department of Education, Science and Training.

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