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Non-resident fatherhood: A qualitative study of fathers' perspectives, experiences and relationships in context

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Abstract

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Non-resident fathers have frequently been discussed as a significant social and economic concern for contemporary society. However, whilst non-resident fathers have arguably become visible in social welfare and policy agendas, relatively little is known academically about the lived experiences of these fathers in the UK. Previous research in this area has tended to focus either on the problematic nature of so called 'absent' fathers or on the financial responsibilities of non-resident fathers. Through a focus on the lived experience of non-resident fathers, this research developed a broader understanding of fathers' perspectives, experiences and relationships, with an appreciation to their circumstances such as socio-economic status, family relationships and employment.

Semi-structured interviews conducted with a diverse sample of 26 non-resident fathers who had ongoing contact with their children led to a wealth of insight into topics such as: similarities and differences between resident and non-resident fatherhood; building, restoring and strengthening of father-child relationships in post-separation families; negotiation and construction of fathering identities; and the balancing of romantic and social relationships with fathering. This thesis highlights how fathers' circumstances, most significantly their housing situation, their contact schedule with their children and interpersonal relationships strongly interact with, and at times hinder, their desired wishes for care and parenting. Findings within this thesis show that traditional attitudes toward the family that centre upon a one-family household model still dominates thinking within policy-making and practice relating to children and families. This marginalises non-resident fathers, at times not recognising their fathering practices, and fails to recognise that many children live in more than one home. Through its exploration of non-resident fathers' perspectives, this thesis draws several new and interesting conclusions relevant to sociological discussions of contemporary families as well as providing suggestions for improved social policy for separated families in the UK.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the research

1.1   Research rationale

Since the middle of the 20th century, it has been widely argued that in the UK there has been a rise in fluid and more diverse family forms, including lone parent families, same sex parents and step-families, and a decrease in the 'traditional' family form (heterosexual married couple with biological children) (Golombok, 2015; Smart, 2007; Hakim, 2003). Lone parents represented 22 per cent of households (1,781,000) with dependent children in 2017, with the vast majority of these households being headed by mothers (ONS, 2017a). This has resulted in an increase in men who do not live in the same house as their children, commonly referred to as 'non-resident fathers'. The term 'non-resident father' typically refers to fathers who have children that do not reside primarily with them. Fathers who are non-resident may care for children overnight (regularly or irregularly), have daytime only contact or have indirect contact (phone calls, letters etc.). Alongside family changes, in policy and popular discourse 'fatherlessness', or concerns about a lack of a male role model or no contact between birth fathers and children, has often been associated with social problems and youth delinquency, particularly within young males (Bradshaw et al., 1999; CSJ, 2007, 2013; Dermott, 2008, 2016). Consequently, how and why fathers should remain in contact with their children, and financial and caring duties to their children have been salient policy topics in recent decades (Skinner, 2013). A growing focus on the rights and responsibilities (both morally and legally) of parents and specifically fathers, through shifts to more neoliberal approaches to welfare provision, combined with qualitative studies exploring fathering practices in contemporary society, and an ever-growing public rhetoric surrounding fatherhood (and non-resident fatherhood), has thrust fathers into the political spotlight (Skinner, 2013; Philip, 2010; Featherstone, 2009).

Whilst there has been an increasing number of sociological studies of fathers, establishing 'fatherhood' as a sui generis topic of study (see Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2007; Miller, 2011), it has been recognised that a second wave of fatherhood research is needed to explore diversity of fathering in different contexts, as well as to better understand how fathering can become problematic or constrained. One limitation in studying non-resident fathers is that unlike lone parents, data on non-resident parents are not systematically collected and it can be hard to recognise non-resident fathers in large surveys. However, with substantial changes being undertaken in both the policy and legal landscape of separating and separated families in the UK, Poole et al. (2016) analysed data from the Understanding Society survey to develop better figures on non-resident fathers. The group found that 87 per cent of non-resident fathers report having at least monthly

contact with their children, and almost half (49 per cent) said their children stay overnight with them at weekends and/or during school holidays. These figures are higher than in studies from the late 1990s (see Bradshaw et al., 1999) suggesting increasing involvement of non-resident fathers in the lives of their children. Previous research conducted on non-resident fathers has tended to focus either on type and length of contact and maintenance payment arrangements, or their 'risky' or problematic nature, reinforcing discourses on 'problem families' and negativity of separated families. Moving away from a problem-solving rationale, this thesis develops a broad understanding of non-resident fathers in the UK, recognising the diversity of this group of fathers and aims to understand how location, work, care patterns, inter-parental relationships, social networks and socio-economic situation influences fathers' parenting and broader lives.

This thesis recognises that whilst non-resident fathers have arguably become visible in social welfare policy and practice agendas, relatively little is known academically about the lived experiences of non-resident fathers in the UK. In-depth understandings of the everyday lives and the family and social relationships of non-resident fathers in the UK is lacking, as is research that explores these fathers' understandings of their role and responsibilities as a parent in relation to other models of fathering. With the increasing commonality of non-resident fathers, an in-depth qualitative study of non-resident fatherhood represents an important topic of study when developing better understandings of fatherhood and families in the UK.

1.2   The research

To date, most models of fatherhood have been based on resident fathers, with non-resident fathers tending to be neglected within academic research. This is significant, because Skinner (2013, p. 262) argues: *"norms of fatherhood may not necessarily operate exactly the same way in the context of non-residential fatherhood".* As highlighted, previous research on non-resident fathers has tended to focus on non-resident fathers as a risk or their problematic nature, or on type and volume of contact. However, there has been little research exploring the everyday family and social relationships of non-resident fathers more broadly, appreciating and utilising the diversity amongst this group of fathers. There is therefore scope for more broad research into fathering and the lived experiences of non-resident fathers in the UK. This research has three main research questions:

1. How do men perceive, construct and negotiate their role as 'fathers' in the context of being a 'non-resident father' and how do they practise this role? And in what ways do fathers perceive that their social and family relationships and circumstances influence their construction and negotiation of non-resident fatherhood?

2. How do fathers perceive, negotiate and engage with the ways in which non-resident fathers are constructed and positioned in policy and social discourses?

3. What is the significance of statutory agencies and social services, in the broad sense of the terms, in the everyday narratives and lives of non-resident fathers? According to fathers, should and could these be developed in more 'father-friendly' or supportive ways?

Moving away from problematic definitions and framing of non-resident fathers, this thesis considers non-residency as a model of fatherhood amongst many others, rather than as a negative or a prohibitive position compared to co-residency. This approach recognises that fathering, and parenting and family relationships more broadly, encompass a range of complexities; just as not all resident fathers are the same, nor are non-resident fathers. Using Morgan's (1996, 2011) conceptualisation of family practices, the research questions underpinning this thesis are attempting to understand how non-resident fathers perceive their role and responsibilities, as well as their practices of fatherhood in relation to this. This research appreciates that the dynamics of family relationships and practices are influenced by institutional factors such as policy and laws relating to separated families, and structural factors such as gender roles, but that individuals have varying agency within these constraints based upon family/personal circumstances and preferences.

Whilst gaining an understanding of the experiences of all non-resident fathers could be beneficial for developing more responsive policy and services, this research focused on fathers who maintain contact with children, with different frequencies and means of contact being appreciated. This research aimed to give a greater appreciation of the heterogeneity of non-resident fathers, including by age, income and employment status. Whilst many non-resident parents emerge from the breakdown of a cohabiting relationship, some fathers have never lived in the same household as their children. As such, this research included men who may never have been a resident father to their children and fathers who live with some biological and/or step-children but have non-resident children living in another household as well.

This thesis is based upon semi-structured interviews with 26 non-resident fathers who had ongoing contact with their children. These fathers have varying socio-economic backgrounds, living situations and care patterns for their children. This research aimed to understand the lived experiences of non-resident fathers and as such lent itself to qualitative interview-based research. Interviews with fathers lasted around 1.5 to two hours and explored their family background, the contact they had with their children and how this had been arranged, as well as how they spent their time, both with and without their children. Analysis of

interview data focused upon how participants perceived their role as a father in a non-resident capacity and what factors they felt facilitated or inhibited the enactment of this role.

In an everyday sense and over the life course, fatherhood is best understood as a changing continuous practice (Dermott, 2008), with time acting as a significant factor within non-resident father-child interaction, both in time since transition to non-resident fatherhood and changes to father-child relationships as children grow older (Poole et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the time constraints of a PhD mean that the longitudinal element of non-resident fatherhood could not be captured. Whilst cross sectional studies and interviews can capture just a 'snapshot' of someone's life, through biographical experiences and reconstructing narratives, and different understandings of the past, present and future, interviews can produce a deeper understanding of someone's life (Birch and Miller, 2000; Scott, 2009). As such, a temporal element to fathers' experiences was gathered through reflection on the past and changes through time, as well as discussion of future hopes and aspirations these men had for their lives and that of their children and wider family.

1.3   Chapter structure

After this introductory chapter there is a two-chapter literature review that aims to provide a comprehensive overview of changes to families, personal relationships and fathering aforementioned. The first chapter blends a range of theoretical and empirical literatures from sociology and applied social policy with empirical data to give a comprehensive outline of issues affecting contemporary families in the UK. This includes a critical analysis of policies affecting families, specifically separated families in the last three decades. This first, and broader literature review chapter is intended to act as a springboard to a more specific second literature chapter which provides an in-depth discussion on non-resident fathers. This chapter is informed by literature from the emerging field of sociological and social policy empirical research on non-resident fathers. This second literature review chapter will, therefore, add to the literature and arguments about changes to contemporary families set out in the previous chapter, focussing specifically on non-resident fathers. The aim of this chapter is therefore not only to review the sociological and applied social policy empirical research that has been carried out with non-resident fathers but also, through reflection of discussions about broader family life in the UK, to highlight the need for a more holistic approach when researching these men.

Chapter Four will outline the methodology that underpinned this research, including the methods used in data collection, ethical considerations of the research and the approach to data analysis. This is followed by the findings of this thesis which are presented in four chapters. Whilst each chapter takes a separate thematic

focus, three arguments run throughout these chapters. The first of these is how notions of 'good' fatherhood are adapted and negotiated by non-resident fathers, in ways that are both similar and unique to other studies of fatherhood. The next is how normative models of the family permeate fathers' understandings of practices with their children, but where resources are present, some fathers can create their own definition of 'normal' fatherhood when non-resident. The third and perhaps most prominent finding is that of inclusion and exclusion; whilst living apart from their children leads to natural time apart, this research finds that actions of schools, the family justice system, the Child Maintenance Service, as well as the actions of their children's mothers act, sometimes concurrently, to leave fathers, particularly those that have a low-income or in another precarious position, feeling excluded from fatherhood and their preferred fathering practices.

The first of four findings chapters, Chapter Five, explores how fathers negotiate and experience becoming and being a non-resident father. Developing new methods of 'being there' as a non-resident father, as well as partaking in overnight care and mundane aspects of child-rearing, are strongly desired practices of fathers in the sample. For some in the sample, this is achievable and a newly found benefit of 'solo-parenting'. For others, inadequate care routines, or geographical distance from their children was felt to severely limit their abilities to interact and care for their children.

Discussion of fathers' perceptions of factors that develop or hinder constructive co-parenting relationships in Chapter 6 highlights how values of communication, compromise, trust and involvement in decision-making entwine to result in a sense of inclusion or exclusion from their children's lives. The passage of time onwards from separation generally allows for a settling of care patterns and stability of co-parenting relationships, but a focus on lived experiences demonstrates how for some parents, conflict can continue or increase over time. Chapter Seven examines some of the social relationships central to non-resident fathers' lives; whilst fathers face competing priorities in managing these relationships, in line with the prevailing narrative of the thesis, the needs and desires of their children are centred in fathers' decision making. Decisions to delay romantic relationships until children mature, difficulties reconciling care with social commitments, and the stresses of negotiations for satisfactory care routines with their children's mother is found to lead to loneliness and poor mental health for a large number in the sample.

Chapter Eight, the final findings chapter, has two purposes: the first is to highlight fathers' lived experiences of services aimed at separating and separated parents, as well as their experiences of broader services (welfare and educational) as a non-resident father. The second purpose is to highlight how services and interventions systematically exclude non-resident fathers and exacerbate previously discussed feelings of

secondary status as a non-resident father. Despite decades of research into the diversity of family form and family practices, fathers' experiences suggest that social interventions and services in the UK continue to operate based upon a one family household model. Chapter Nine will both conclude and draw together the four findings chapters as well as make policy suggestions that stem from the findings of this thesis. There will also be a reflection on the research process and suggestions for how to advance not only this specific research project, but the area of study generally.

Overall, this thesis adds to contemporary sociological discussions of the family through presenting perspectives from the sometimes lesser-heard members of separated families and shows how non-resident fathers share similarities with previously studied resident fathers, but also face unique experiences due to their non-resident status. An appreciation of social policy also means this thesis makes a number of suggestions to policy and practice to better suit separated families through better inclusion of non-resident fathers in family life.

Chapter 2: Contemporary 'families', parenthood and fatherhood

2.1 Introduction

The 'nuclear' family – married mother and father co-residing with their children - is often referred to as the 'traditional family' in discussions of family life in Western nations, with family forms often marked against this construction (Miller, 2014; Abela and Walker, 2013; Smart and Neale, 1999). This heteronormative model assumes co-residency of opposite sex parents, with two-generational families linked by marriage and biology. However, it has been widely discussed that there has been a decline of this 'nuclear family' in the UK, with increasing diversification of family forms and increases to the number of fathers who do not live in the same household as their children, referred to as 'non-resident fathers' (Featherstone, 2009; Smart and Neale, 1999). Alongside changes to the formation and make-up of families there has been social and employment changes that have altered the expectations of mothers and fathers in contemporary society, with many authors suggesting the role of men in family life has undergone significant change (see Speight et al., 2013). Moreover, analysis of rhetoric surrounding families and parenting, and changes to social policies and laws surrounding families, highlights a shift from parenting and family life being a private matter to becoming a prominent feature of contemporary social policies.

This two-part literature review aims to give a comprehensive overview of changes to families, personal relationships and fathering in Western societies in recent decades and recognises that changes in family life can be difficult to distinguish from broader social changes and social policies. A such, this first chapter will blend a range of theoretical and empirical literatures from sociology and applied social policy with empirical data to give a comprehensive outline of issues affecting contemporary families in the UK. This first, and broader chapter will provide a springboard to a more specific second literature chapter which provides an in-depth discussion on non-resident fathers and fathering in separated families. This is informed by literature from the emerging field of sociological and social policy empirical research on non-resident fathers.

2.2 Contemporary families and relationships

2.2.1 Family households: statistical trends and issues

A growing number of children in the UK live in 'non-traditional' families, raised by cohabiting but unmarried parents, step-parents, single parents or parents living in different households following parental separation or from the outset of parenthood; and in 'new family forms', such as those headed by same sex (married, cohabiting or living apart) parents or single mothers/fathers 'by choice' as well as children

conceived through reproductive technologies or surrogacy (Golombok, 2015). Table 2.1 shows trends in the make-up of households with dependent children in the UK since 1996. There has been a decline in married couple family households compared to 1996 (71 per cent to 61 per cent), through dissolution of marriage but also due to reduced marriage rates and a tendency toward cohabitation as an alternative or precursor to marriage reflected in the rise in cohabiting couple families (both opposite and same sex) (from 7 per cent to 16 per cent) (see also Noack et al., 2013). The substantial rise in lone parent family households in the UK in recent times predates this data, occurring over the 1970s and 1980s, and hence the percentage of lone parent family households since the mid-1990s has remained relatively constant at 22-25 per cent of families, with 9 in 10 headed by a mother (ONS, 2017a). Census data from 2011 suggested that 11 per cent of couple families with dependent children in England and Wales were stepfamilies (544,000 families) (ONS, 2014). Stepfamilies were much more common amongst cohabiting parents (20 per cent) than married parents (9 per cent).

Table 2.1: Family Households with dependent children in UK, 1996-2018. (Source: Labour Force Survey: ONS, 2019a). Includes author's own calculations.

		1996	2006	2018
Total family	Number	7,393,000	7,509,000	8,014,000
Married Couple	Number	5,223,000	4,682,000	4,892,000
	%	71	62	61
Civil Partnership	Number	n/a	n/a	7,000
	%	n/a	n/a	0.1
Opposite sex cohabiting	Number	539,000	954,000	1,285,000
	%	7	13	16
Same sex cohabiting couple family	Number	n/a	3,000	7,000
	%	n/a	0.1	0.1
Lone parent family	Number	1,631,000	1,870,000	1,823,000
	%	22	25	23

Interest in families that differ from the 'normative' model has often originated from a child-centred perspective, with large surveys based upon households and focusing on where children spend the majority of their time (Dermott, 2008). The nature of survey design also means that it can be hard to distinguish

between who is a biological, adoptive or step-father within and between households (see Goldman and Burgess, 2018). The data collection methods used in large surveys can construct families as 'households', position individuals in one-dimensional terms and not recognise the multiple roles that parents play between households, such as step-father in one household and non-resident father in another. In response to a 'Freedom of Information' request in 2017, the Office for National Statistics recognised that it was not possible to accurately measure the number of separated families in the UK, explaining that *"separated families cannot be defined from survey data because we do not collect information about relationships outside of the household."* (ONS, 2017b, para. 6). Poole et al. (2016) sought to establish an up-to-date 'father-centric' quantitative profile of non-resident fathers in the UK using data from the Understanding Society survey. Their findings suggest there were around one million non-resident fathers in the UK (980,000) in 2011. They calculated that this equates to 17 per cent of fathers of dependent children, defined as under-16 or in full-time education. This included men who live with some of their children or step-children and have biologically related children living in another household.

However, this figure from Poole et al. (2016) may be a significant underestimation when examining the numbers of lone mothers in the UK (1,645,000 in 2018: ONS, 2019a) and the number of stepfamilies formed with children who have a father elsewhere. When considering these factors, Bradshaw et al. (1999) estimated the number of non-resident fathers to be at least two million, but perhaps as high as five million, in the late 1990s. Whilst this five million figure may be an overestimate, it is worth remebering that the figure of non-resident fathers will always be much greater than the figure of lone mothers. This is because once a lone mother repartners she will be no longer classed as a lone parent, however, a non-resident father remains non-resident as long as his children remain under 18, regardless of his relationship status. These discrepancies of figures highlight not only the challenges of including non-resident parents in household surveys, but also some questions about the reliability of family household data. For example, Peacey and Hunt (2008) suggest that, in response to questions about children, there are often lower response rates from non-resident parents compared to resident parents in surveys. Whilst, on the one hand increasing parental separation and family diversity has to some extent reduced social stigma towards non-resident parents, on the other, researchers have argued that some men continue to under-report non-resident children for reasons such as lack of knowledge about, and relationships with, their children or troubled emotions associated with this (Stykes et al., 2013). It has also been suggested that some fathers may not acknowledge that they have non-resident children in surveys in order to avoid being identified by child maintenance services (see Skinner, 2013).

Furthermore, because data only allows for children to be registered as living in one household, figures on non-resident fathers can make it seem as if father-child relationships are non-existent, or at least not close. Goldman and Burgess (2018) argue this is problematic because non-resident fathers often spend a great deal of time (up to and equal with mothers) with their children, but that the role and positive outcomes associated with non-resident father involvement are often overlooked. As such, social trends indicate family forms have changed, leading to increasing numbers of cohabiting and non-resident parents, However, important sources of official data about 'families' have many problems including misrepresenting and under-estimating non-resident fathers. Furthermore, when considering the methods of collecting data on frequency of contact (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly, etc) it is easy to miss out patterns of contact that are less routine, including the common pattern of alternating weekends (Bryson and McKay, 2018). Variations can occur due to school holiday times, particularly where fathers live some distance from children and more frequent contact is not possible. A further problem with data collection methods is that surveys often focus on 'dependent children' aged up to school leaving age. However, this is an artificial cut-off to some extent as increasing numbers of young people are living with their parent(s), suggesting that parental roles for young people remain significant (see ONS, 2016).

When considering contemporary families, data on 'family households' must be viewed with caution because social understandings of family may not align with statistical models and approaches. These changes in families have on the one hand been cast as problematic and reflecting 'family in decline' and wider societal issues (see section 2.5.1) but, on the other hand, are also part of wider socio-economic changes occurring in contemporary society, to be discussed further in the next section.

2.2.2   Social change and the family

Socio-economic structural changes, such as labour market changes, have fundamentally influenced family relations, forms, lives and prospects - including, as some have argued, the changes in living arrangements, partnering and parenthood highlighted above. In the earlier post-war era, the functionalist conceptualisation of the family promoted clearly defined and complimentary paternal and maternal roles within the family (Edwards et al., 2012). The male-breadwinner ideal - *'the notion that the wage earned by a husband ought to be sufficient to support his family'* (Seccombe, 1993, p. 111ff) - was accompanied by assumptions of the female carer ideal, which positioned women as homemakers (Noack et al., 2013; Crompton, 2006). However, the 1970s and 1980s saw increasing numbers of women enter the labour market and remain working (often on a part-time basis) throughout their children's early years (Crompton et al., 2007). Table 2.2 shows that since the early 1970's, there has been a general trend of increasing female employment and

decreasing male employment (although recent years have a slight increase among both sexes after decreases shortly after the late-2000s economic decline and recession).

Table 2.2: Percentage of adults (aged 16-64) in employment in UK, 1971-2019 (Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS, 2019)		
%	**Females**	**Males**
1971	52.7	91.4
1981	55.6	81.5
1991	62.5	79.0
2001	66.1	79.2
2011	65.4	75.3
2019	71.8	80.5

These changes can be tied to deindustrialisation in the UK, with a decline in male dominated manufacturing and agricultural forms of employment and a rise in tertiary forms of employment, which are argued to be more suited to women, alongside more insecure/part-time employment forms, with women often working in these sectors (Wessels, 2014; Crompton, 2006). These changes to the labour market have arguably strengthened individualism in contemporary society and provide people, particularly women, with greater independence and influence (Amato and Boyd, 2013). Traditional gender-specific roles within couples have become more flexible, with discussion and negotiation of family division of labour becoming a more prevalent issue within households (Miller, 2017; Crompton et al., 2007; Lewis and Campbell, 2007). However, persistent social inequalities in the labour market and families mean that women remain disadvantaged in the labour market compared to men; these inequalities also exist between women along education, age and educational attainment lines (Connolly et al., 2016).

Over the last decade, a policy consensus has emerged that emphasises that increased female labour force participation, a better use of women`s skills and earnings, are central to promoting economic growth (Connolly et al., 2016). There has been moves towards developing an 'adult-worker' model of employment, where all parents combine paid work with family care. Increasing pressures and incentives (such as tax breaks) for lone mothers to engage with paid work highlight how earning money is increasingly considered a task of all parents not just fathers (Miller, 2014). According to the ONS in 2018, 75.8 per cent of mothers in a couple with dependent children were in employment, and 66.9 per cent of lone mothers with dependent children (ONS, 2018). This marks an increase from 67 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively, in 1996 when

comparable records began (ONS, 2013). Since the late 1990s there has been developments in work-family policies, with increases in maternity, paternity and parental leave, right to request flexible working, and provision of free childcare hours forming key elements of the family-friendly policies of the New Labour government 1997-2010 (Stewart, 2013; Lewis, 2012; Churchill, 2011; Kilkey, 2006). Approaches that take a 'universal caregiver' approach, that is that parents share care for their children alongside work places men at the centre of 'change' in the family. However, it is argued that this approach *'does not engage adequately with the deep investments men and women have in gender'* and to paid and unpaid work, which also involve deeply gendered practices (Featherstone, 2010, p. 175). Despite increases in leave offered to parents, the model of leave adopted by the government appears to demarcate mothers as primary caregivers, and fathers as being in a more 'supporting' role (Featherstone, 2014). Furthermore, whilst gender norms have undergone radical change across the Western world in recent decades (see Bjørnholt, 2014 and the next section of this literature review) school hours and expensive childcare across the UK results in a 'care gap'. The result of which is that there continues to be a suggestion that the responsibility for childcare, both practically and morally, remains within the family or 'private' sphere (Miller, 2017a; Yerkes, 2010). This 'care gap' is reflected in employment figures; whilst in most married or cohabiting parent families both parents are in employment (72.5 per cent), in almost half (49.1 per cent) of these families, the father worked full-time and the mother worked part-time (ONS, 2018). As such, failure to provide adequate full-time care for children means that gendered roles of parenting are reinforced by policy.

Whilst family-friendly employment policies, such as the right to request flexible working patterns, still tend to focus on women, there has been increasing provisions for men, such as the introduction of paternity leave in April 2003, signalling the governments recognition of men's caring role (Miller, 2011a, 2017a; O'Brien, 2013; Dermott, 2008). There has been some continuity in these policy goals after government change in 2010 with the introduction of Shared Parental Leave in 2015 allowing parents to transfer some maternity leave entitlement (52 weeks, 26 paid) to fathers to increase their significantly smaller paternity leave (2 weeks paid) (Gov.uk, 2019). This move to share maternity leave (rather than offer additional paternity leave) means that care of very young children is positioned as mothers work, that can be transferred to fathers at a mother's discretion. Unsurprisingly, the Department for Business in 2018 suggested that uptake of shared parental leave was only 2 per cent of eligible families (Gov.uk, 2018). Caring responsibilities have traditionally been assumed as instinctive skills that mothers possess, with a natural and moral capacity for care that is different, or even absent, within fathers. Miller (2017a) argues that in the United Kingdom the shift in increasing men's caring capacity has not been supported by significant enough policy changes, and

as such there is limited progression of gender-equality in caring compared to Northern European countries such as Sweden. Moreover, an analysis of data from the British Social Attitudes survey in 2013 highlighted how there was only minimal support for sharing earning and caring roles equally amongst those surveyed. The most favourable position in cohabiting families was for mothers to work part-time (see Scott and Clery, 2013). Further childcare investment and support has seen extensions to subsidised childcare provision for working parents from 15 hrs to 30 hrs a week for 3-4 year olds (Gov.uk, 2017a).

Alongside changes toward work within the family, it has been argued that changing demands in production and expansion in the service sector has changed the character of employment in the UK in recent decades. Changes to employment policy have aimed to increase flexibility in the labour market; whilst this has been positioned as positive for workers who can chose working hours and working schedules to fit around their life (such as family and/or care needs) there have been arguments that increasing flexibility in the labour market is most beneficial to employers who have power to control working hours to be as few or many as desired, and at any time desired (Limbrick, 2016; Wood, 2016). Increasing flexibility has seen a rise in so called 'zero-hour' contracts or flexible hours contracts, and increasing numbers of people working at evenings and weekends, and outside of the traditional '9-5' pattern. Labour market flexibility has also been argued as giving employers freedom to 'hire and fire' employees with increasing ease (Lott, 2015), increasing vulnerability, particularly to low-income workers. Another change seen in the labour market is increasing numbers of people becoming self-employed, with some of the biggest increases to self-employment seen amongst parents (Patrick et al., 2016; Craig and Powell, 2012). Heyes and Lewis (2014) argue that increasing flexibility in the UK labour market is causing workers to face increasing risks to their financial security, chiefly because labour market changes are occurring without corresponding social protections, such as flexible unemployment benefits. As will be indicated below, these socio-economic and social policy changes discussed here are important structural factors in the lives of non-resident fathers negotiating parenthood in contemporary times.

2.3 Reconceptualising family relationships and parenting

2.3.1 Changing discourses of 'the family'

Beyond the socio-economic and social policy issues discussed above, family relations and parenthood have profoundly changed in several ways in recent decades. Miller (2011b) contends that whilst societies are perpetually experiencing transitions, changes related to late modernity or postmodernity have occurred more rapidly than in previous epochs. This rapidity has led to a broad questioning of once established ways of

thinking and acting in society, including of normative gender practices and divisions of working and caring. There is also a questioning of established practices of intimate relationships and family, with less reliance and acceptance of traditional or taken-for-granted practices of previous generations (Williams, 2008). The sociological 'individualisation thesis' points to changes to traditional social relationships and societal structures whereby family formations and arrangements are no longer assumed to take certain forms but are actively chosen (Amato and Boyd, 2013; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992). It has been argued that there has been a cultural shift in relationships, with a move from marriage as an economic or religious union, toward companionate relationships based around compatibility and with a focus on self-fulfilment and personal emotional satisfaction (Abela and Walker, 2013; Smart, 2007). Giddens (1992, p. 61) explored this shift and described modern relationships as 'pure' relationships based on a 'confluent love' - an 'active contingent love' that people choose to enter and to leave if they are no longer fulfilled. This temporality means that romantic relationships are no longer expected to last 'for forever' (Smart and Neale, 1999).

While Gidden's has been criticised for over-stating the degree of 'free choice' some experience around marriage, separation and divorce (Williams, 2004); individualisation theories examine major social changes which have contributed to changing parental separation and divorce practices. Neale and Patrick (2016) discuss how the prevailing idea of a 'clean-break' meant that post-separation, mothers would often seek a new family unit with a surrogate father, and fathers would often start a new family, or join a single mother and her children (also Bradshaw et al., 1999). This approach was underpinned by the prevailing ethos in relation to children's best interests as closely aligned with maternal care and therefore a bias towards the 'mother-child dyad' in parent-child relations, which positioned fathers as more conditionally and insecurely attached to their children. However, in contemporary times the end of a marriage does not mean the end of parenthood and parenting. Rather, it has been argued by Smart (2007) that the parent-child relationship has replaced marriage as the relationship of permanence in contemporary society (see also Dermott, 2008; Neale and Smart, 1997; Smart, 1999).

As aforementioned, households tend to be the focus of official statistics and policies on families and kinship (Dermott, 2008), but for many people, 'family' is not usually enclosed in a single household – for example, extended family and step-families across households. The term 'family' is still regularly used both in broader society and academic studies and for many it implies emotional commitments and caring responsibilities (Edwards et al., 2012; Kvande, 2007; Smart and Neale, 1999), however greater flexibility of the term 'family' has emerged (Silva and Smart, 1998). Greater acceptance of who can call themselves a family outside of the heteronormative nuclear framework – such as same-sex couples or step-families -

means that arguably the ideological power of the term 'the family' has shifted. Moreover, greater appreciation has been shown to the fragmentation of families and the different ways in which individuals, who may or may not share geographical or biological ties, develop and maintain intimate interconnectedness (Pryor, 2013). Family forms change through time, as parents have additional children, as children grow older and leave their parental home(s), if family members migrate, if a family member dies, and if parents separate, re-partner and have additional children in these relationships (Golombok, 2015). Transnational families can be seen as an example of how 'networks of intimacy' and family relations can exist outside the family home and can transcend geographical borders (Reynolds and Zontini, 2014, p. 255). As such, it should be remembered that social understandings of family may not align with official models or statistical framings.

2.3.2   Family practices, and care within the family home

One useful way of conceptualising 'family' so that fluidity, diversity and complexity of family identities and relations are better recognised and socially situated is through the notion of 'family practices' discussed by influential family sociologist David Morgan (1996, 2011). Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'social practice', the concept of 'family practices', focuses on how social constructions and practices of 'family' and family identities are what constitutes family relations and family lives. Instead of understanding families through a static ideal of what they should look like, Morgan argues for the focus to be on how people *do* and perform or practice family and how they attach meaning to their (everyday) family practices. This approach recognises the variety of ways that family is lived and appreciates the actions and activeness of members rather than considering family as a set of positions, statuses or assumed normative forms. In addition, the approach recognises the 'everydayness' of family practices, and appreciates the similarities but also differences that occur between families (Smart and Neale, 1999). This involves understanding factors which facilitate or inhibit how individuals form their practices, such as legal prescriptions, economic constraints and cultural definitions of roles. Family practices overlap and interact with other social practices such as gendering practices; whilst the responsibilities individuals feel toward their kin stem from normative frameworks and rules of 'right or wrong', these frameworks are widely interpreted, practised and varying over time and space (Crompton, 2006; Finch and Mason, 1993). By using Morgan's 'practices' approach whilst examining parenting and wider family practices at the micro level of everyday life, the discourses and activities of parenting can be linked to wider social developments.

Bakker et al. (2015, p. 367) recognise that family practices encompass everyday "*family routines and rituals*", which become important to family wellbeing. They distinguish between routines and rituals, with

the former considered instrumental to family organisation, and the latter acting to provide a sense of belonging and emotional exchange among family members. Finch's (2007) concept of family display involves aspects of family ritual. Family display is defined by Finch (2007, p. 67) as:

> The process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant other audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships.

Increasing family diversity means that arguably, family display is needed more as relationships become less recognisable as family relationships. One significant space where family practices, rituals and routines occur is in homes; the everyday routines of domestic life are 'played out' in homes, and as such, the decisions made in (and about) homes are fundamental features of personal life (Allan and Crow, 1989). The home can also be considered a place where mundane actions take on more significant meaning - cleaning, cooking and 'making a home' can be seen as a project undertaken by one or more family members for the benefit of other family members, and thus takes on highly symbolic meanings (Smart, 2007; Allan and Crow, 1989). Where once family-centred priorities in the mid-20th century occurred alongside home-centeredness - situating home and decisions about home and homemaking as women's domains - changes to norms of caring can be seen to have an influence on practices inside the home, and practices of 'home making' as well. Family practices do not need to only occur at home however, and can occur outside the home with or without other family members; for example, shopping for the family, discussing family at work, attending school events with or for children, and similar practices.

Whilst these practices are historically and culturally located, social actors engage with these malleable practices and, depending on individual's constraints and personal situation, have variable levels of agency when interacting with them (Featherstone, 2009; Smart and Neale, 1999). This approach, no doubt influencing Kvande's (2007) discussions on using the term 'family' as a verb, captures how family is '*about process and doing'* (Morgan, 2011, p. 5). As such, when applying Morgan's notion of family practices to contemporary families, especially when considering changes to family function and formation over recent decades, families, and relations between family members, shouldn't be considered as fixed identities, but flexible and fluid. This concept of 'family practices' is influential in the proposed study of non-resident fathers as is this theoretical and sociological orientation to 'family' and 'family change' which moves away from defining 'family' and family orientations in static terms.

2.3.3   The intensification and monitoring of contemporary parenthood

Walker (2013) discusses how regardless of family structure, parents face far greater expectations now than in the past. Whilst children's needs obviously remain paramount for their survival, these needs of sustenance and shelter have become overlaid by additional elements of child-centred, time-intensive care in a manner that positions children as requiring more care than in previous times (Miller, 2017a; Wall, 2013). For successive governments in the UK, families and parenting have increasingly come to be considered as having a direct outcome on individual (adult and child) physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, as well as the functioning of society more broadly (Hartas, 2014). In relation to an analysis of changes in family policy under the former Labour Government (1997-2010), Murray and Barnes (2010, p. 541) explain:

> Families are invoked as nurturers of future citizens, as enablers of citizenship…they are the source of social breakdown and creators of anti-social citizens/deniers of citizenship.

The Social Justice Strategy 2012 (DWP, 2012a) stressed the importance of family in providing stability and support to children's lives, with quality and stable relationships of parents providing the best environment for children. As such, parenting has arguably been reconfigured by the government as a 'job', firmly situating families in social policy agendas (see Miller, 2017a).

It is argued child-centeredness and intensive child-rearing have become a feature of contemporary families, particularly in Western contexts as parenting practices come under scrutiny and a high value is placed on 'good' parenting in public and political discourse (Abela and Walker, 2013). In this regard, care work in families has become increasingly politicised and publicised. Miller (2017a, p. 12) highlights how this includes a *"discursive and conceptual move away from notions of 'child-rearing' to a preoccupation with parenting",* which binds particular parenting behaviours to particular outcomes for children (see also Daly, 2013). The perceived suitability of parents relating to adherence or not to 'appropriate' behaviours around decisions of feeding, education and discipline for their children is continually questioned from pregnancy and throughout the childhood years (Grant et al., 2018). Family and domestic life, especially many aspects of parenting, were previously constructed as private issues, which lay outside the realms of public intrusion. Home, in particular the family home, where parenting most often occurs, was traditionally considered the 'cornerstone' of the private sphere (Chapman and Hockey, 2002; Allan and Crow, 1989). Increased scrutiny of parents and their parenting decisions has arguably shifted 'private' actions, done in private spaces, into the public domain to be considered as 'public concerns'.

A professionalisation of family life, where interventions from external organisations such as healthcare workers or social workers have increased, focusing on constructions of 'normal' or 'abnormal' family practices (Hartas, 2014). Intensification of expectations have also occurred through a political preoccupation with neuroscience and child development (Edwards et al., 2015) leading to parental responsibilities resembling risk management strategies. Failure to adequately manage responsibilities and to enact 'good' parenthood are equated with a lack of desire to maximise children's potential (see Miller, 2017a). These notions have been bolstered by a plethora of sources of advice, including parenting classes, books for each stage of children's development, and online advice websites, including forums and chat spaces for parents to converse. Desiring and feeling necessitated to obtain advice highlights the increasingly professionalised nature of parents' everyday practices.

A neoliberal approach to family support starting in the 1990s, focused support on 'families in need' or children 'at risk' as opposed to universal approaches, following the introduction of the Children Act 1989. However, from 1997, a more comprehensive approach to family support which aimed to support working parents, reduce social exclusion and promote child well-being was introduced, stemming from Labour's overarching policy approach of child-centred social investment and social protection (see Churchill 2011; Hartas 2014). This can include standardised parenting programmes, and models of compliance and monitoring (i.e. promotion of 'appropriate' parental interactions with children's school) which reinforce the individualised nature of 'poor' or inadequate parenting practices (Miller, 2017a; Daly, 2013).

Increasing reliance on expert 'knowledge' and intensification of political rhetoric around parenting perpetuates a sense of 'good' parenthood against which parenting efforts are compared. This gaze is argued to be more focused on particular groups of parents and their 'bad' parenting practices, with notions of 'good' parenthood shaped by middle-class values and applied to perceived 'troubled' or 'failing' families (Crossley, 2016). Miller (2017a), similarly to Crossley, recognises that notions of 'good' parenthood and the increasingly politicised nature of parenting frequently fails to acknowledge the material and gendered circumstances in which parenting 'choices' and practices are made, assuming that parenting occurs independently of circumstance. Implying there is a link between low-income and poor child outcomes is a highly stigmatising discourse, which potentially disaffects large numbers of parents (see Morris et al., 2018). Moreover, whilst the term 'parenting' assumes gender-neutral engagement in care, and policy from successive governments has been 'gender-blind', Daly (2013) argues that mothers have been assumed to be the 'main audience' and as such can be seen to be under more scrutiny than fathers. Within developmental psychology research, from which much child welfare practice and policy is derived, findings about 'the

family' have traditionally been based exclusively upon the practices of mothers (see Scourfield, 2010). However, there has been some recognition of the need to target fathers specifically in relation to social work practices, which will be discussed in section 2.4.3.

This context of increasing pressures and expectations to perform time-intensive child-rearing practices alongside ever-increasing pressures to perform paid-employment outside of the home highlights how research into the everyday practices of parents has become an increasingly worthwhile topic of study. Recent decades have seen a rapid increase in studies of parenting and families, including the promotion of fatherhood as an important topic of study.

2.4   Contemporary fatherhood

2.4.1   'Intimate' fatherhood: continuity and change within contemporary fathering

> It has been suggested that mothers' increased participation in the labour market across Europe has been 'one of the most significant social developments of the 20th Century' and that 'fathers' active participation in family life' is set to be a significant development in the 21st century… (Miller, 2017a, p. 37)

Alongside broader changes to society and family life that have been outlined, fatherhood has emerged as a new field of family studies in recent decades (Dempsey and Hewitt, 2012; Edwards et al., 2009) with the role of men in family life frequently described as having undergone change (Speight et al., 2013). Tensions and changes from the discussions above clearly resonate widely with fatherhood. Where once the breadwinner model and feminisation of housework arguably placed men at a distance from their children, new approaches to parenthood and parenting emphasise and require involved relationships with, and investment in, children. Changes in family configuration, changes to the labour market, and increasing discussions of 'good' parenthood have led to challenges to how caring for children and maternal and paternal responsibilities are thought about and practised (Miller, 2017a). Several researchers have found a noticeable change or 'transition' of fatherhood (Björnberg, 1992) with men adding new dimensions of fatherhood atop traditional conceptualisations of moral guardian, financial provider and head of household (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Gillis, 2000; Lewis, 2000). This transition has created added layers of complexity and dilemmas within modern fatherhood, which will be the focus of this next section of literature review.

It is argued that within contemporary society, fathers have adopted more intimate and involved roles compared to previous generations, which is considered as positive, both for fathers, their children and mothers (Dempsey and Hewitt, 2012; Miller, 2011a; Dermott, 2008; Brannen and Nilsen, 2006). Tying

closely to discourses of family practices and actions of family members, and the increasing regulation of parenthood, discourses on 'good' or involved fathering have increased, with the actions and responsibilities of fathers being increasingly 'morally policed' (Miller, 2011b). Sanchez and Thomson (1997, p. 750) highlight how there has been a *'rising cultural importance of hands-on fathering'* with the importance of shared space, time and experience; being resident and providing economically is no longer deemed as 'good enough' in fathering. Intensifying under the New Labour government, through their social investment strategies, increased participation and responsibility of fathers in family life has been promoted (Featherstone, 2009), with changes being made to the role of fathers within families, and to the legal and financial responsibilities of resident and non-resident fathers (Williams, 2008). Expectant fathers in Miller's (2011a) qualitative study immediately associated 'responsibility' with the news of impending fatherhood; responsibility was understood as a commitment that will involve having a 'massive impact' on a child's life in ways that appear to be more than just economic but emotional too. Many fathers in the *Following Young Fathers* study – a longitudinal qualitative study of fathers aged 16-25 in northern England - recognised a change of thinking and actions towards considering the longer-term, in terms of work and family life, being selfless and putting their child(ren), mothers and needs of the whole family before their own (Neale and Patrick, 2016). An earlier study by Ferguson and Hogan (2004) suggested that in the case of young fathers who may be socially or economically excluded, fatherhood can act as a positive feature of their lives.

Dermott's (2008) study of fatherhood and subsequent book *Intimate Fatherhood* interviewed 25 predominantly white middle-class co-habiting/married fathers in South London with primary-aged children. Men in this project recognised the importance of play in their father-child relationship with play providing opportunities for fostering communication and closeness with children. Sharing the same space/household with children allows for interaction during day-to-day activities such as meals or during bath time and bedtime. Small pockets of interaction such as these were recognised by fathers as being integral to being a 'good' or involved father. Emotional and supportive actions such as fathers 'being there' for their children, both at home or at sports/school events and being available for support was also recognised as important (Miller, 2011a; Dermott, 2008). 'Being there' and being present in children's lives is considered a central tenet of being an emotionally attuned father, and factors that inhibit abilities to 'be there' significantly affect fathers' ability for copresence with their children.

A recurrent theme in studies was that fathers often reflect on the practices of their own fathers to shape their own parenting; perceived good fathering is to be replicated and bad fathering rejected, with fathers wishing to 'do better' than their fathers in that area. Fathers in Miller's study (2011a, p. 73) often fondly recalled

activities with their fathers, but rarely recalled emotional connections with their fathers or involved fathering, even when prompted by researchers, suggesting developments of fatherhood between generations. Cohen-Israeli and Remennick (2015) comment that parenting in the postmodern family is an expressive practice, and whilst it must be recognised that fathers can feel emotion without openly expressing it (as shown in historical sources), there is greater acceptance within contemporary society for men to demonstrate an emotional connection with their children (see also Dermott and Miller, 2015). Fathers in the study by Dermott (2008) for example, often refer to the relationship with their children in romantic tones, as a bond that is unexplainable to non-fathers.

Morgan in 2011 discussed the concept of the 'good family' arguing that this concept holds cultural status and is consequently the basis against which families are evaluated. For Morgan (2011, p. 3) this standard model of family life is typically portrayed as the nuclear family, acting as a normative model of what family *should* look like, against which people reference how to live their lives. Early et al. (2019) go on to argue that these ideals, or 'truths' about the family, and in turn fatherhood, shape how fathering fits into family life and how it is practised on an everyday basis. The authors argue that the normative representation of contemporary fatherhood emphasises that 'good' fathers place emphasis on father-child intimacy. However, notions of 'intimate' fatherhood are largely associated with particular family contexts, or as Early et al. (2019, p. 214) argue "*that is, 'good fathers' are part of 'good families'*". This assertion, they argue, is demonstrated through much work on problematised families or family contexts, including young parents or fathers, non-resident fathers and post-separation or divorce fatherhood. These family contexts can challenge idealised notions of 'intimate' fatherhood. Furthermore, they argue that intimate fatherhood has a distinct classed dimension, with middle class fathers considered as aspiring toward, and performing intimate and involved fatherhood more than working class fathers (Gillies, 2009). This raises interesting questions for how fathers in this PhD study strive for and perform intimate fatherhood, and how they classify 'good' or 'proper' fatherhood within their own non-resident status.

Another key sociological debate when examining contemporary fatherhood is around the issue of whether there are general trends and practices that distinguish involved fatherhood from involved motherhood. In a range of emerging qualitative studies of fatherhood, fathering is frequently referred to as a physical practice: active play, 'adventure', sports and *doing* things with children are marked out as a key feature of contemporary fatherhood (see Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2007; Craig, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Brannen and Nilsen, 2006). Doucet (2007, p. 196), in a qualitative study of stay-at-home and single Canadian fathers, found that many men desired to promote outdoor activities which included elements of risk, such as climbing trees or

riding bikes, which they felt fostered independence within their children. This caregiving can be linked to expressions of masculinity and demonstrates men's strategies to separate paternal and maternal caring practices. In Early et al.'s (2019) study with 10 families in the UK, this included doing activities together, but also fathers facilitating independent physical activity for their children through helping children to seek out a sports club, transporting children, and staying and watching their children. Early et al. (2019) suggest that physical activity is a means of fathers *doing* fatherhood in a way that is constructed as masculine. Outdoor play in particular allows for 'gender conventions' to be reproduced and embedded in family life. However, they also argue that for fathers in their study, there is an association between physical activity and intimacy as a family practice, meaning that physical activity, and facilitating physical activity for children is constructed as an intimate fathering practice. Brannen and Nilsen (2006, p. 249) explain that caring, whilst attracting different meanings over time, "*has often been associated with the antithesis of masculinity*". However, Dermott and Miller (2015) recognise that when studying fathering practices, masculinities - caring masculinity alongside more traditional hegemonic behaviours - can coexist.

Miller (2011b) notes that in-depth qualitative studies of parenting can highlight gendered differences in emotional and applied practices as well as the *thinking* and planning involved in parenting. In a later publication, Miller (2017a) argues that this distinction between doing and thinking allows us to analyse care undertaken in families. For example, mothers often combine play with children with other tasks of parenting, such as preparing meals or doing laundry. It can be argued that motherhood and fatherhood exist as a dualism because gendered assumptions of parenting and assumptions of gender roles are still deeply embedded in government policy, social and healthcare practices and workers, and everyday language (Miller, 2011b; Featherstone, 2009). Interestingly, Doucet (2007, p. 216) notes that fathers in her study often start their fathering narratives by discussing their children's mothers and comparing their practices to hers. Studies of fatherhood have tended to focus upon intimacy and the exclusivity of father-child relationships. However, this focus has left authors questioning whether through pursuit of intimate relationships, fathers are 'cherry picking' the fun or more rewarding aspects of parenthood and leaving more mundane roles to women (see Featherstone, 2010 and Gatrell, 2007). Whilst literatures across the sphere of 'fatherhood' have suggested there has been a change to fatherhood, this has largely been contained to taking care of children, whereas there has been a broad continuity in lower levels of involvement in housework and other tasks relating to children (Featherstone, 2010). Dermott (2008, p. 143) concurs, arguing that contemporary fatherhood is centred upon personal connections between father and child(ren), neglecting the practicalities of parenting.

This consequently results in a disparity between culture and conduct wherein men continue to do less care than mothers whilst expressing an intense commitment to, and connection with, their children.

Whilst research on families suggests there has been change in families, and much research in recent decades has focussed upon 'changing families', it must not be forgotten or neglected that continuity of family, and family practices remains. Whilst policy relating to parenting (see section 2.3.3), and the term 'parenting' itself may construe a gender-neutral role, and that mothers and fathers are interchangeable and disembodied subjects, research, particularly that by Doucet (2006) highlights how mothers and fathers are embodied subjects who traverse public and private spaces of care with relational and intersubjective practices. These practices change over time as mothers and fathers come into different experiences when caring (or not caring) for their children. Charles et al. (2008) through revisiting a site of research in the 1960s found that there was much continuity in how people 'do' family, particularly when considering gendered family practices. Therefore, whilst some men may report caring for children in ways traditionally considered 'feminine', mothering and fathering are not interchangeable practices (Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2007). Of course, we must also recognise that fatherhood itself is diverse and practised in different ways by men, dependent upon their family context, socio-economic status and personal preferences.

2.4.2   Employment, working hours and the breadwinner model

Viewing fathering only through physical and emotional care practices can ignore financial provisions, which many fathers consider a central feature of being a responsible or 'good' father (Morgan, 1998). As explained by Dermott and Miller (2015, p. 188):

> It is clear in this era societal expectations of fathers encompass responsibilities that include intimate engagement in multiple aspects of their child's life as well as financial responsibility.

Fathers in Miller's (2011a) study felt that whilst the pressure and normality of a breadwinner role had declined compared to their fathers' generation, they still felt a strong societal pressure to provide financially. Persistence of the 'breadwinner' model combined with attached parenting/fathering results in 'flexible fathers' who can integrate work and family responsibilities; contemporary fathers are expected to be *'flexible enough to both earn a wage and be able to help fix dinner and read a bedside story'* (Burnett et al., 2011, p. 164). Williams (2008, p. 496) discussed how for some fathers "*the attachment to the role of provider lingers",* even for unemployed fathers. Categorising fathers as either providers or active carers can fail to recognise the complex and multidimensional nature of fatherhood (Miller, 2011b) and risks framing fathers who focus more on financial responsibilities of parenthood as 'uninvolved' or lacking an emotional

connection with their children (Dermott, 2008). As such, although fatherhood is no longer *only* about providing money to the family (Featherstone, 2009) the concept of a breadwinner figure has never fully gone away: being a financial provider is a feature of 'doing' fatherhood and monetary care is for many fathers an important aspect of caring for children. The figures in section 2.2.2 demonstrate that fathers do not alter working hours (principally part-time working) to the same extent as mothers nor are they taking lengthy parental leaves after birth. This suggests that whilst fathers may desire an emotional connectedness with children, this isn't translated into their working hours (see also Dermott, 2008). As with contemporary notions of motherhood, it is critical to explore the potential tensions as well as opportunities arising from the multiple expectations and roles entailed in modern fatherhood.

The employment practices of fathers have a significant influence on how they interact with their children (Fong and Bainbridge, 2016). The way government and employer policies shape the initial years of childcare within families have lasting impacts on the way families operate (O'Brien and Wall, 2017). British men in full-time higher status employment report some of the longest working hours in Europe, with fathers tending to work longer hours than non-fathers (see Featherstone, 2009; Dermott, 2008). When talking to expectant fathers, Miller (2011a) recognised a pattern of fathers viewing 'good fathering' as sharing care with mothers, and finding a 'decent' balance between paid work and childcare. Policies to encourage both mothers and fathers to work and care have not been as effective as hoped, with fathers still framed as cash rather than care providers, and workplaces continue to be more accepting of women balancing work and home demands than men (Featherstone, 2009; Miller, 2014; Kilkey, 2006). Aforementioned low uptake of shared parental leave suggests that there are still factors inhibiting men's engagement with care, particularly when this involves (temporarily) reducing work. Employers may be unsympathetic to fathers needs and make it more difficult for men to utilise flexible working practices. Cohen-Israeli and Remennick (2015) argue that the ideal worker model persists, especially for men, although higher income males tend to have greater choice in the labour market and have greater access to flexible employment. Fathers' personal preference toward maintaining working hours or perceived pressure to provide financially for children may also explain disparity of working hours between mothers and fathers (see Kilkey et al., 2013).

It should be remembered that ideals of fatherhood can easily be thought up and strived for, demonstrated by studies of expectant fathers such as Miller (2011b) and men in the *Following Young Fathers* study of Neale et al. (2015) but fathers' agency is constrained by circumstances and structural factors that surround them and their families. As Williams (2008, p. 490) stated:

> Fathers are aware of the existence of ideal types of fatherhood that inform them what they should do but what they actually do is the result of circumstances that, in many ways, they do not choose.

Nonetheless, men tend to have greater power to choose their involvement in family life than women (Gatrell 2007; Lamb et al., 1987). Fathers in Dermott's (2008, p. 90) study often talked about being able to choose their parenting role in the 'free market of parenthood' meaning that although they constructed parenthood as having orientations towards a gendered division of labour, they were able to opt for the parenting role that they preferred. However, this ability to choose parenting role is perhaps a feature of parenting in higher income families where there are fewer structural restraints. Studies of fathers tend to focus on predominantly white middle class families, as it is assumed that their higher incomes afford greater choice and possibility in family structure and as such can 'lead the way' in examples of changing parenthood/parenting practices (Dermott, 2008, p. 3). However, findings from Dermott's study (2008) and an intergenerational study by Brannen and Nilsen (2006) highlighted how unemployed or underemployed fathers often expressed the strongest sense of nurturing fatherhood amongst their samples, because their employment status gave more time to spend on childcare. Tarrant (2018) suggests that men are more likely to be involved in care during economic turndowns, suggesting a link between employment and caring. There are, therefore, conflicting understandings of how income, employment and class interact with fathering. Nonetheless, as aforementioned, policy-sanctioned models of parenting and fatherhood are often grounded in middle-class perspectives, side-lining or problematising other models (Gillies, 2009). As such, fathering can be understood as a complex process which interacts with changing notions of masculinity, restricted by structural and societal norms and can involve different types of care and practices.

2.4.3   Fathers and fathering within social policy and service provision

As discussed already in this literature review, many developments to family policy came under the 1997-2010 New Labour government, which tended to focus upon supporting families and addressing family poverty and work-life imbalances alongside adapting to changing families (see Featherstone and Trinder, 2001). It has been recognised that in the early years of the New Labour government, explicit reference to fathers and their role in families was rarely mentioned within Green and White papers, and particularly in legislation, with gender-neutral terms of 'parent' or 'family' used instead (Page et al., 2008). Moreover, Page et al. argued that there was little recognition of the needs of different types of fathers (such as minority ethnic fathers, young fathers, lone parent fathers, resident and non- resident fathers) within policy discussions. The exception to this tended to be when focus was put upon 'problematic' fathers who were 'absent', minority ethnic or teenaged (see Kilkey, 2006).

The introduction of statutory paternity leave in the early 2000s suggested a move to recognising fathers' caregiving roles, and policies that included specific father-centred developments, particularly promoting fathers as a resource to children (Featherstone and Trinder, 2001). Across family-policy statements New Labour moved away from previous rhetoric of the potential problematic nature of fathers toward recognising their potential to become a resource for families (Di Torella, 2007). In November 2008 Minister for Children Beverly Hughes revealed a 'Think Fathers' campaign to include fathers in the work of services from birth and then throughout childhood. This campaign strengthened a year later with Hughes stressing the benefit of father involvement for children, particularly for boys (see Featherstone, 2010). This included plans to send children's school reports to fathers who live elsewhere; a specific government-run website for fathers; and training for professionals who work with fathers on how to communicate with fathers, amongst others. This approach with specific interventions for fathers suggests a gendered understanding of parenting, with different approaches and resources needed for fathers and mothers. It also suggests that a lack of engagement with fathers is the 'fault' of services, without recognising that some fathers are not able or do not wish to be involved with their children to the extent that policy makers wish (Featherstone, 2010). Campaigns to promote increased father involvement, and the policy makers behind them, can be argued to be imposing rigid ideas of fatherhood onto families and fathers whose lives involve much greater complexity than policies and campaigns appreciate (see Bristow, 2009). It has been argued that policies and legislative instruments of the New Labour government to increase father involvement in caregiving failed to capitalise on their potential, precisely because they failed to challenge traditional approaches to parenting, nor did they effectively conceptualise fathers' role in the care of children (Di Torella, 2007; Dermott, 2005).

At a local level and interventional level, to support family health and family support, Sure Start programmes were widely introduced to deprived neighbourhoods primarily in England (Churchill, 2011). However, an evaluation by Lloyd et al. (2003) found that although fathers recognised the importance of their role as a parent, some felt discouraged from attending Sure Start services with their children. One reason for this was that it was felt that services were aimed more toward mothers, and fathers could feel 'out of place' in Sure Start centres. Other family services, such as parenting support services and teenage pregnancy services were also recognised to have low levels of engagement with fathers. Page et al. (2008) highlighted a number of possible barriers to father engagement with family services, including: a predominantly female workforce in early years services; difficulties identifying young and/or non-resident fathers; teenage pregnancy targets focusing exclusively on mothers; and, working fathers experiencing difficulty accessing family services that occurred only during working hours, or in the case of non-resident fathers, outside of their contact time. As

care is historically a woman's practice, men who attend Sure Start centres or other spaces designated for children and their 'parents' could be considered as entering 'women's spaces' (see Featherstone, 2014). In Doucet's (2007) study men discussed feeling as if they are being observed, scrutinised and 'watched' when interacting with children, because they perceived that as men, they are marked as dangerous in an increasingly risk adverse society.

With regard to families who come into contact with social work services, Maxwell et al. (2012) conducted a comprehensive review of research exploring how services engage fathers in child welfare services. Through this review they argue that there tends to be poor engagement of fathers in child welfare services. They believe this is for three reasons. The first is that child welfare workers tend to view mothers as the primary caretakers of children and collect more information about mothers, in the process excluding or marginalising fathers from their work. This is potentially because of a 'pejorative practitioner culture' and assumptions about traditional gender roles in families. This focus only upon mothers, not only excludes fathers but can also place responsibility for child-rearing solely on mothers (see Scourfield, 2010), but also because a man's potential to be a resource in the lives of his children (and wider family) is not utilised. Moreover, if fathers or other adult male members of a family are not properly assessed, the risk they can pose to children may go unseen.

The second reason found through the review and discussed in great detail in the work of Featherstone (2014) is that within social work there is a tendency to rely on rigid or fixed thinking about fathers that defines them as either a 'risk' or 'resource' to children. This dichotomous categorising can have a number of harmful consequences. The first is that if men are labelled as a 'risk' then this can ignore the parenting role that they play in their children's lives, and limit fathers' abilities to challenge negative aspects of their behaviour. Moreover, by neglecting to engage with fathers when they are defined as a 'risk' to children, this may allow fathers to move on to a new relationship with children unchecked by social workers. Featherstone argues that a broader understanding of fathers is needed that recognises that men may incorporate aspects of both risk and resource to children and their families.

The third reason highlighted for exclusion of men in social work practice, was that some men are reluctant to engage with services, for a multitude of reasons, including concerns over losing access to their children; fears that involvement with the child welfare system would exacerbate problems in the criminal justice system; negative associations with social work services; and that parenting classes and other resources provided through social work intervention are targeted at mothers and not suitable for fathers.

Overall, this literature review has so far outlined the social changes occurring to families and parenthood, including diversification of family form, changes to employment of parents and developments to parenting and fathering more specifically. This has been grounded by moving away from considering the family as a fixed entity and appreciating the 'practices' and actions that family members do. The next section will focus specifically on representations and understandings of separated families.

2.5 Family breakdown or family transformations? Approaches to separating and separated families

This next section of the literature review will highlight two contrasting perspectives that run through academic, political and media discussions regarding separated families, divorce and non-resident fatherhood; the first is an approach that regards changes to family life as problematic and leading to a social crisis; the second approach portrays these changes to families as more nuanced and not inherently problematic. This is followed by an exploration of various social policy interventions that affect separated families within the overall culture of increasing expectations of parents.

2.5.1 Family and social 'breakdown'

Despite new conceptualisations of family life, the term 'family' *"generally conjures up an image of biological relatedness combined with degrees of co-residence"* (Smart 2007, p. 7). The traditional normative model of family *"remains the gold standard against which all other family types are assessed"* with a decline in marriage, increase in divorce and lone-parent families creating concerns over the stability of the family and child-rearing (Golombok, 2015, p. 3. See also Abela and Walker, 2013; CSJ, 2007, 2013). Family and social change as social problems were notably discussed by Charles Murray in his 'underclass' thesis which suggested 'family breakdown' and father absence leads to young men growing up 'unsocialised' and lacking responsibilities toward work and family (Murray, 1999, p. 2). For Murray these problems are exacerbated when there are high rates of 'fatherlessness' and family breakdown in a community; his 'underclass' is not characterised by poverty of income, although this is a common feature, but by a "*poverty of social networks and valued roles"* lacking work, family and community bonds (Murray 1999, p. 2). This emphasis on changes to family structure as problematic is stressed more recently by think tank *The Centre for Social Justice* (CSJ), who linked riots in UK cities during the summer of 2011 with the 'brokenness' of society and families (see CSJ, 2011). The CSJ reason that 'breaking' the link between parenthood and marriage has introduced instability into society, particularly amongst the poorest communities, because they argue that informal partnering greatly increases the risk of single parenthood,

and fatherlessness – they suggest one million children have no meaningful relationship with their father - which in turn leads to family dysfunction and poverty (CSJ, 2011). These concerns over lack of male role models and family instability were voiced also by then Prime Minister David Cameron and led to the establishment of the Troubled Families programme (TFP) in late 2011.

The TFP has an aim of 'turning around' the lives of 120,000 of the most 'troubled' families in England (see Crossley, 2016). Development of the 'troubled' family and a focus on the most marginalised families reflects aforementioned broader neoliberal forms of governing families in the UK. Crossley argues that the concept and subsequent focus upon the individual 'troubled family' deflects attention away from more complex (and costly) economic, environmental and structural conditions that often surround low-income families. This focus on 'family life' is argued as central to the programme of austerity post-2010 in the UK, where the concept of 'early intervention' for children is considered as imperative to the 'improving' of society (see also Gillies, 2014). This 'family breakdown' discourse has driven recent policy strategies under the Coalition (2010-2015) and Conservative governments (2015-present); ignoring other causes of poverty such as working conditions, and has arguably legitimated austerity measures in child benefits, tax credit and welfare benefits. However, fears of the impact of 'fatherlessness' existed in the previous Labour governments too (1997-2010), with Jack Straw, Justice Secretary in 2007 in a radio interview highlighted the importance of father figures for teenagers development and how 'lads need dads', promoting alternative male role models in Afro-Caribbean communities (Straw, 2007). Neale (2016, p. 78) explains that:

> There is a deep-rooted assumption that fathers who live apart from their children and are not in a relationship with the mother (who is usually the primary carer) are necessarily 'absent' and 'feckless', i.e. that they are uninterested in their children and do not wish to provide financially for them.

This stigma can have negative consequences on father-child relationships and is particularly felt by non-resident fathers who may otherwise be precarious, such as young fathers (Neale, 2016). This focus on absenteeism means that much literature on contemporary fathering stems from a problem-solving rationale, ignoring the considerable number of fathers who do maintain contact with children (Wilson, 2006) and framing non-resident fathers, and their families, as a problem that needs to be solved. As such, whilst the growth in family complexity and non-marital parenthood has reduced stigma of non-resident fathers (Poole et al., 2016), the idea that family breakdown and fatherlessness is directly associated with social problems and youth delinquency, particularly within 'at risk' families such as ethnic minorities and low-income households, has become highly influential in British public policy debates and developments, as well as being prominent among dominant social and media discourses (CSJ, 2007; Dermott, 2008; Silva and Smart,

1998). Assuming there to be an association between low-income or ethnicity and family breakdown, and subsequent child welfare concerns is a highly stigmatising narrative, that potentially places a large number of families in a position of scrutiny.

2.5.2 Alternative views of changing families

Viewpoints based around family breakdown tend to be based upon the traditional normative model and related assumptions of the family and neglects the normalisation and complexity of family change discussed in this chapter. A 'social problems' framing of change can focus on the 'loss' that can incur from change rather than a more rounded view which appreciates the benefits associated with change as well as the complexities (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2014). Baxter et al. (2011) argue that parental separation is best considered as a readjustment of relationships within families, rather than as a breakdown; similarly Philip (2013, p. 410) stresses that it is important to consider *"divorce as a transition in, rather than a collapse of, family relationships"*. As will be discussed in the next chapter, parental separation does not often mark the end of father-child relationships and some fathers even report a better relationship with children post-separation as their family relationships and lives improve.

The 'social problems' approach also presumes that the absence of fathers from the household where children spend most of their time impacts the ability of men to be involved with their children's lives (Dermott, 2008). Rigid understandings of family structures do not appreciate the practices that go on within families (Morgan, 1996, 2011). Issues of parental authority, family resources and family relationships should be separated from issues of household membership and living arrangements (Smart and Neale, 1999), rather than continuing to prioritise spatial (and financial) presence over other features of family life. Moreover, any discussion on absent fathers or father involvement post-divorce presupposes that fathers play a significant role in children's lives; and children's wellbeing is lacking with their absence (Wilson, 2006). This presumes narrow and restrictive conceptualisations of the role of mothers and fathers, as well as ignoring same-sex parenting and families affected by bereavement (Golombok, 2015; Morgan, 2011). A 'de-traditionalisation' within families, and a transformation of gendered division of labour, can provide opportunity for more democratic families, give parents the ability to enter and exit relationships more freely[1], and, as aforementioned, provide fathers greater freedom to foster more nurturing relationships with

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[1] although people are still often restricted within dissatisfactory or abusive relationships, nor does separation/divorce allow people to completely remove abusive or inequitable relationships.

their children (Edwards et al., 2009). Additionally, arguments around 'family breakdown' tend to be based on official data, which as highlighted earlier, is problematic and with many limitations.

The assumption that separation is detrimental for children is challenged by Baxter et al. (2011) who analysed data from the Australian Child Cohort study and found there are considerable similarities in wellbeing between children in intact and separated families, stressing that children are resilient and cope well with change. Rather, the important factor was inter-parental conflict. A similar study by Rabindrakumar et al. (2018) in the UK suggests there is little negative impact of living in a single parent household on child wellbeing, life satisfaction or positivity about family life. In fact, all children are likely to experience family troubles (including personal relationships) in some shape or form: however, an idealised notion of childhood as a time of innocence and protection in Western cultures, (tied to changes in parental responsibilities aforementioned) can exacerbate fears of the impact of parental separation on children (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2014). An assumption that changes in parenting and family form will rectify family problems, and societal problems more widely, ignores the effect of poverty and inequality in families. Whilst it is true that lone parent families are disadvantaged compared to dual-parent households, this can be attributed to lack of financial support for lone parent family households, rather than parental absence per se (Walker and Abela, 2013; Lamb, 2010). Moreover, Wilson (2006) highlights how economic disadvantage can lead to family stressors which in turn can lead to separation, and that difficulties faced by families post-separation cannot be separated from their pre-separation circumstances. As such, increases in separated families should not be considered as inherently problematic. A recognition of the changing nature of families in the UK as well as fears around family breakdown and a 'crisis' of fatherhood in the UK have informed recent social policy developments in the areas of family law, child welfare and family policy.

2.5.3   Social policy developments for child welfare and separating parents since 1989

As aforementioned, the family has featured as a central element to many key reforms in policy discussions (Daly, 2010). Table 2.3 below outlines some of the substantial policy strategy and legislation developments in family policy and family law from 1989-2019. These relate both to policies aforementioned in this chapter but also to policies relating to separation and divorce of parents. The Children Act 1989 intended for divorce to not alter a parent's legal relationship to their children (the status quo post-divorce/family break up should be equal residency) with prioritisation of parental responsibility given to biological parenthood not married parents (Silva and Smart, 1998). Parent-child relationships were thus fashioned as autonomous of spousal relationships. This highlights the end of the 'clean-break' era (see Neale and Patrick, 2016) and the

beginning of legislation that positions parenthood as a lifelong responsibility towards biological children irrespective of changes to partnering.

The 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing number of concerns about the problems associated with fathering after divorce or parental separation, and these primarily centred around fathers' financial provisions to their children (Featherstone, 2009). Featherstone explains that this focus on financial provision is linked to the UK's adherence to a male-breadwinner model, which emphasised fathers' financial role in child-rearing. This contrasts to other nations, such as the Scandinavian countries which have typically employed a dual-earner model and as such fathers' financial and caring roles remain significant as a separated or divorced father. As shown in Table 2.3, the Child Support Act 1991 and accompanying Child Support Agency (CSA) established in 1993 intended to ensure all non-resident parents provided a realistic amount of financial support (Poole et al., 2016; Bradshaw et al., 1999). The CSA emerged from concerns surrounding low levels of maintenance payments to lone-parent families (only around 30 per cent) and the increasing rates of single-parent headed families dependent on government support. As such the aim of the CSA was to offset welfare spending on lone parents through prioritising collecting maintenance from non-resident parents among families where lone mothers were reliant on benefits and then retaining these payments while mothers continued to be in receipt of benefits (rather than passing these payments onto mothers) – hence recouping the state costs (Skinner, 2013; DWP, 2012b; Bradshaw and Millar, 1991). Smart and Neale (1999) argued that a rationale for the CSA was to coerce fathers to be responsible, and through notions of rational economic actors, if men were financially responsible for all biological children, they would only have children that they could support. These policies stressed the lifelong financial obligations of parents even when parents separated or were not married or cohabiting.

Table 2.3: UK selective major policy strategy and legislation developments in family policy and family law relating to parental separation, 1989-2019			
Year	Bill/Act/Reform	Governing party	Brief overview
1989	Children Act	Conservative	- Children have right to protection from abuse and exploitation -Central tenet was that children are usually best looked after within their family.
1991	Child Support Act	Conservative	- All non-resident parents must pay reasonable level of maintenance
1996	Family Law Act	Conservative	-Parental responsibility for protecting children from harm during separation
1998	Supporting Families	Labour	-A consultation document to increase the support and help available to families.
2003	Every Child Matters	Labour	-A range of measures to reform and improve children's care
2004	Children Act	Labour	-Amendments to the 1989 Act to further improve the overall wellbeing of children -Specific inclusion of disabled children
2008	Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act	Labour	-Amends 1991 Child Support Act: amendments to calculation process, and mostly to strengthen the enforcement abilities of CSA - Voluntary arrangements are to be encouraged
2011	Family Justice Review	Conservative & Liberal Democrats	-Mediation and out-of-court settlements better than legal settlements in parental separation
2014	Children and Families Act	Conservative & Liberal Democrats	-Child welfare, paramount priority in parental disputes. Involvement of both parents beneficial for children post-separation
2019	Introduction of 'no fault' divorce	Conservative	-Recognition of need for 'no-fault' divorce to reduce parental conflict post-separation

With the change of government in 2010 came significant changes to the policy and legal landscape of separating and separated families (Poole et al., 2016). The coalition government maintained that non-resident parents have the same level of responsibility for raising their children as co-resident parents (DWP, 2012b). As aforementioned, 'family breakdown' discourses have driven policies in recent years, with policies such as the introduction of the Married Couples Allowance (Gov.uk, 2017b), a tax break for married couples pushing a 'pro-marriage' approach. In terms of separated families, broadly speaking, there is an

encouragement for private or 'family-based' arrangements after separation, which reflects broad shifts in policy toward reduction of state support. The Family Justice Review (FJR) released in 2011, concerned with preventing 'family breakdown' as well as reducing the state and social costs associated with services such as child maintenance, called for an expansion of help and support services such as mediation and dispute resolution services to reduce the use of statutory services and the courts (see Poole et al., 2016; Family Justice Review Panel, 2011). The Family Justice Review (2011) argued that legal processes can cause harm to children and that private arrangements allow for greater flexibility, which is needed in post-separation families. After separation both parents have parental responsibility for their children and are expected to make care and financial arrangements between them. Families and individuals are no longer eligible for financial support (legal aid) when undertaking legal redress for divorce and contact (except in cases of domestic violence). Instead, the government made a commitment to a £20 million fund for out-of-court support such as mediation under the Help and Support for Separated Families (HSSF) initiative (Poole et al., 2016). Separating parents must attend an initial mediation session (MIAM - Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting) either together or separately before parents can take a case to court (Ministry of Justice, 2017).

The Children and Families Act 2014 places child welfare, primarily the presumption that involvement of both parents is beneficial for children, as the paramount priority in parental disputes. At the time of writing, implementation of 'no-fault' divorce which removes the need for evidence or blame in marriage breakdown is being introduced to legislation. David Gauke, Secretary of State for Justice on the announcement of the plans explained that:

> The Government would continue to support marriage but that the law should allow people to move on constructively when divorce is inevitable, and that this would benefit children (as quoted in Fairbairn, 2019, para. 12).

This development demonstrates further commitment to reducing parental conflict in post-separation families alongside a propensity toward marriage. This clear stance that the wellbeing and outcome of children of separated parents is improved when parents collaborate is also apparent in more recent child maintenance legislation. The Child Maintenance Service (formerly the Child Support Agency) through the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act (2008), has seen recent changes which aim to encourage private arrangements and reduce use of the statutory system (DWP, 2012b). There is also a focus of individual parental responsibility and child-centred actions:

> In the vast majority of cases, it is right that parents should continue to collaborate and each play their parental role to ensure that their children receive the financial and developmental support that they need. (DWP, 2012b, p. 5)

According to the legislation, if parents cannot come to an agreement, a new statutory scheme provides a 'safety net' where needed, however this involves levies of 20 per cent to the paying parent and 7 per cent to the receiving parent to discourage use of the system. There is an online calculator for parents to calculate 'correct' amounts, removing the need to engage with the CMS at all. These policies move toward accommodating and recognising separated families and diverse family forms (Philip 2013). However, reducing use of statutory systems (both courts and the CMS) in cases of parental separation can be considered as cost cutting measures and placing responsibility on parents (Skinner, 2013).

2.6 Conclusion

Overall, this first literature review has aimed to give a comprehensive overview of empirical and theoretical discussions of parenting, families and family life. Through analysis of contemporary literatures and data, this chapter emphasises increasing diversification of families in the UK and the increasing intensification and professionalisation of parenthood. However, despite this there has been continued tendencies to consider family from a normative perspective leading to discussion and fears over family breakdown and the impact on children, which can ignore the complexity and fluidity of contemporary families and family practices. This has led to policy aiming to enforce fathers' responsibilities post-separation and in relation to never-married or cohabiting non-resident fathers. The next chapter will focus on the lived experiences of non-resident fathers within the current culture of parenthood, through an examination of studies from sociology and applied social policy.

Chapter 3: The emerging field of sociological and social policy research on non-resident fathers

3.1 Introduction

Fathers living apart from their children is not a wholly new phenomenon, and father absence due to work, war and death has been a common feature of family life in the past. However, non-resident fatherhood mainly due to separation of parents is largely considered a feature of contemporary Western society (Coontz, 2016; Bradshaw et al., 1999). Qualitative studies into non-resident fathers gained traction during the 1990s alongside a societal interest in so called 'absent fathers' and after the formation of the Child Support Agency in 1991. Research tended to be small-scale studies providing biographies of non-resident fathers' lives and their relationship with children and ex-partners (Kiernan, 2006; Bradshaw et al., 1999; Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Simpson et al., 1995). These studies highlighted complexities in fathers contact with their children, as well as attitudes to child maintenance and relationships with children's mothers and wider family members. Alongside a handful of recent work (e.g. Dermott, 2016; Skinner, 2013; Philip, 2010; Schänzel and Jenkins, 2017; Forsberg and Autonen-Vaariniemi, 2017), research on non-residency demonstrates how fathers should not be considered a homogenous group and how changes to fathering occur over time.

Previous research on non-resident fathers has tended to focus on legal and moral debates around the issue of contact between men and their non-resident children (Dermott, 2016; Poole et al., 2016; Featherstone, 2014). This narrow focus tends to emerge from the 'problem' perspective, highlighted in the previous chapter, with research focusing on problematic issues relating to parental separation or at-risk groups. There is therefore a noticeable evidence gap relating to non-resident fathers' lived experiences, with "*the difficulties experienced by divorced men as parents and individuals having received relatively little scholarly attention*" (Cohen-Israeli and Remennick, 2015, p. 538). This second literature review chapter will therefore add to the literature and arguments about changes to contemporary families set out in the previous chapter, focussing specifically on non-resident fathers. This chapter will review the sociological and applied social policy empirical research that has been carried out with non-resident fathers to highlight the need for a more holistic approach when researching these men.

3.2 Contact, poverty and homemaking as a non-resident father

The aforementioned substantial changes being undertaken in both the policy and legal landscape of separating and separated families in the UK, led Poole et al. in 2016 to establish an up-to-date 'father-centric' quantitative profile of non-resident fathers in the UK using data from Understanding Society survey collected in 2011. In this study the definition of non-resident father was male respondents to the survey who self-identify as having a non-resident child under 16 years old, of whom there were 1070. This study found non-resident fathers were more likely to be economically disadvantaged than fathers with no non-resident children: they were more likely to have no or fewer qualifications; more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive; less likely to be working, or have worked, in management or professional jobs than resident fathers; and around half were home-owners compared with three-quarters of resident fathers. Many of these patterns were also found in Bradshaw et al.'s (1999) earlier mixed-method study, suggesting a persistence of constraining factors. Ethnic background is also a significant factor in likelihood of being a non-resident father: Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani fathers are the least likely to be living separately from their children (6 per cent or 7 per cent of fathers) compared to Black Caribbean fathers who are the most likely to report not living with their children (32 per cent) followed by Mixed ethnic-background fathers (21 per cent) and Black African fathers (19 per cent). Non-resident fathers tend to be younger than resident fathers: one third of 16-24-year-old fathers (34 per cent) report having non-resident children compared with 14 per cent aged 45 or older (see Poole et al., 2016).

For much of the twentieth century, the limited research available indicated it was common for non-resident fathers to lose contact with their children. Estimates from the early 1990s suggested that up to 74 per cent of non-resident fathers lost contact with their children, with unemployed or low-income fathers most likely to lose contact (Simpson et al., 1995). This could be tied to leanings toward a 'clean-break' after separation discussed in the previous chapter. Recent analysis of survey data suggests a change in non-resident fatherhood with data from the Millennium Cohort Study showing that loss of contact is more the minority experience today (Haux et al., 2015). The research by Poole et al. (2016) found that 87 per cent of fathers (n=1070) maintain contact with non-resident children; 38 per cent have contact several times a week, 21 per cent are in touch once a week, 28 per cent are in touch less than weekly but at least a few times a year and 13 per cent report having no contact. Through its aspiration to transform parental relationships with children to responsibilities, rather than rights, the Children Act 1989 changed the legal term 'access' to the more neutral term 'contact' to recognise that contact includes other forms of communication such as letter writing and phone calls (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). With advances in technology and increasing means of

communication, as well as increasing numbers of children and young people having their own smart phone (Ofcom, 2019), it is feasible that father-child communication can now include instant messaging and contact on social media platforms.

When exploring contact with children, Poole et al. (2016) found three main constraining variables: economic and social resources; family situation/re-partnering; and location (see also Cheadle et al., 2010). Generally, fathers who were in more disadvantaged positions had less contact with their children, which Bradshaw et al. (1999), in their study of over 600 non-resident fathers, attributed to expenses of maintaining and facilitating contact (also Poole et al., 2016). Having other familial commitments, such as resident children or new partners/spouses can reduce fathers' financial, emotional and time resources for their non-resident children (Poole et al., 2016) and having a partner, and in particular having additional children reduces likelihood of contact (Cheadle et al., 2010). Fathers who had children living with them as well as non-resident children elsewhere saw their non-resident children less frequently than fathers who only had non-resident children. However, Poole et al. (2016) found that 71 per cent of non-resident fathers did not live with any other dependent children, and nearly half (46 per cent) were not living with a partner, suggesting that the 'clean-break' era has ended in the UK.

Philip (2013), through her qualitative study of 23 divorced or separated fathers in eastern England, found that home and housing was prominent within fathers' discussions; beyond the practical need to have housing sufficient for themselves, and to care for children, feeling attached to their home was also important. In cases of cohabitation before non-resident fatherhood, either they or their children's mother moving out of the 'family home' carried symbolic meaning of the ending of the relationship. Another study of divorced fathers carried out in Finland found that divorced fathers felt it best to leave the family home, to cause as little disruption to children as possible, and provide continuity and stability during a chaotic period (Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2019). If moving from the family home, gaining suitable housing was considered an integral part of 'good' fatherhood, and not being able to afford or provide housing led to feelings of inadequacy. Home, feeling at home and homemaking can therefore be considered an important aspect of study when examining the lived experiences of non-resident fatherhood in this thesis.

Living close by has been recognised by non-resident fathers as a beneficial situation, because it allows for more flexibility for care and engagement in more daily practices (Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2019; Bakker et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly, Poole et al. (2016) found that when fathers lived further away from their children, they were less likely to have regular contact. Moreover, the number of bedrooms and the

occupancy status of non-resident fathers' homes also has an influence on contact with children, with fathers in less secure financial situations less likely to have contact with their children (Poole et al., 2016; Bradshaw et al., 1999). Broad welfare reforms may have had a negative effect on lower income non-resident fathers; for example, the reduction of Housing Benefit (also known as the 'bedroom tax') for under-occupancy may prohibit fathers from having accommodation that would allow children to stay overnight. This is because non-resident fathers with no resident children are not entitled to financial support for their children, and as such are not entitled to a larger social housing property, or to claim Housing Benefit for additional bedrooms for children (see Fatherhood Institute, 2013). Building on discussions in the previous chapter, increased conditionality of financial support will affect non-resident fathers and cuts to welfare benefits and legal aid can impede care (Tarrant, 2018).

The individualised nature of austerity rhetoric means that the interaction of care and poverty for men may not be recognised. It has been argued that the financial situations of non-resident fathers, particularly poverty and disadvantage has largely been neglected in studies of these parents (Tarrant, 2018; Dermott, 2016). The research that has been conducted has focused on fathers' financial support and how this relates to whether lone mothers and children live in poverty. Whilst Poole et al.'s (2016) substantial study which highlights how non-resident fathers (compared to resident fathers) are more likely to have fewer qualifications, less likely to be homeowners, less likely to be in employment and less likely to be in professional positions cannot be seen as direct examples of economic disadvantage, it does highlight how non-resident fatherhood can be associated with lower living standards. One reason these conclusions are hard to make is that there is very little empirical research exploring how relationship breakdown affects fathers financial situation (see Dermott and Pantazis, 2014). Nonetheless, Stock et al. (2014) suggest that divorce or separation can increase fathers' risks of falling into poverty, particularly if they already have a lower income.

Dermott (2016), through analysis of the Poverty and Social Exclusion survey (2012) found that non-resident fathers (n=177, self-identifying with non-resident children aged under 19) were more likely to report their health as being 'bad' or 'very bad' (16 per cent compared to 2 per cent of resident fathers). 15 per cent of non-resident fathers said they were inactive due to ill health, compared to only 2 per cent of resident fathers. It can be difficult to extricate whether ill health and poverty among these men worsened due to non-resident fatherhood, or existed before separation, but Lyngstad and Jalovaara (2010) highlight how measures of poorer health are precursors to cohabitation breakdown. Dermott's study also found that non-resident fathers reported higher rates of poverty and deprivation than resident fathers. A higher percentage of non-resident fathers considered themselves poor as well – 63 per cent said they felt poor some or all of the time compared

to 36 per cent of resident parents. Moreover, Poole et al.'s data highlighting the lower educational qualifications of non-resident fathers also suggest that pre-existing socio-economic conditions are present for non-resident fathers. These findings highlight how the economic situation of non-resident fathers can be likened to the economic situation of lone mothers discussed in the previous chapter, and how economic disadvantage can lead to family stressors which in turn can lead to separation (see Walker and Abela, 2013; Lamb, 2010; Wilson, 2006a). Tarrant (2018) highlights how financial hardship intersects everyday family practices, and men with caring responsibilities face social and relational decisions which result in difficult choices about what care responsibilities they can afford to take on. As such, how fathers' socio-economic situation intersects with their perceived abilities to care for their children will be examined in this thesis.

Although divorce is the most common route to non-resident parenthood, and many empirical studies reviewed in this chapter focus on divorced and separated fathers, and the end of cohabiting relationships, it should be remembered that non-resident parents do not emerge solely from parental separation (Dermott, 2008). For example, Kiernan and Smith (2003, p. 33) found that whilst 15 per cent of mothers report that they are not in a co-residential relationship at the time of their child's birth, around half reported to being 'closely involved' with the child's father, highlighting the "*complexity and fuzziness*" of co-residential parenting and non-resident fathering. Around half of the participants in a study of men who became fathers before the age of 25 (the *Following Young Fathers* study) reported that they did not live with the mother of their child at the time of birth (Neale et al., 2015). Additional trends indicated by research suggest that fathers who have previously lived with their children tend to have higher levels of contact than fathers who have always been non-resident; living with children for some period means fathers arguably have had more extensive opportunities to enact the paternal role and bond emotionally with their children, which fathers who have never lived with their children may not have (Cheadle et al., 2010; MacLean and Eekelaar, 1997). Younger fathers are more likely to have been in a casual or short term relationship with mothers and as such are more likely to enter fatherhood as a non-resident father, or become so soon after the birth of their children (Neale and Davies, 2015). As such, in this research project, an awareness to the route to non-resident fatherhood as another factor of diversity amongst this group of men will be shown.

As with fathers, and parents per se, non-resident fathers also experience work-life challenges. In a study of recently divorced men and employment, Cohen-Israeli and Remennick (2015) found that whilst most men stayed in their same job, many found the long hours cultures and unfriendly management to be 'oblivious' to family needs, resulting in men reducing their hours or role, and long-term lowering their career expectations after becoming non-resident fathers. The authors tie this to continuing traditional expectations

of fathers as financial providers in the public sphere. Research by Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al. (2016) with lone mothers who work non-standard hours, found that over half reported that they used their child(ren)'s non-resident father for childcare, highlighting that father-child contact should also be understood in terms of mothers' working patterns, as well as fathers', and that balancing working patterns between mother and father continue across households.

3.3   Fathering when non-resident

It is argued by Poole et al. (2016) and Skinner (2013) that a major challenge to understanding non-resident fatherhood is that most models of father involvement are based on resident fathers. When conceptualisations of men's caring in families and norms of 'the good father' are based around resident fatherhood and living arrangements, non-resident fathers by virtue of not living with their children may be considered as 'dead beat' or 'feckless fathers'. Cheadle et al. (2010) stress the need to recognise diversity in both the quantity as well as quality of contact and involvement of non-resident fathers with their children.

Whilst co-residency can allow for development of involved but not necessarily intense fathering (Dermott, 2008), living in separate households should not be assumed as damaging to father-child relationships. Whilst concerns about the impact divorce and separation can have on children are warranted, researchers such as Smart and Neale (1999) and Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003) offer perspectives that frame post-separation fathering as a transition in parenting rather than an expected tragedy. Some recent studies have suggested that non-residency can be an advantageous feature of some fathers' involvement with children (Philip, 2010). For some fathers, level of involvement with children can sometimes be higher after separation than beforehand (Wilson, 2006; Cohen-Israeli and Remennick, 2015). Research with non-resident fathers has also highlighted a 'repairing' or 'restoring' of fathering once non-resident (Bradshaw et al., 1999). 81 per cent of fathers in Poole et al.'s (2016) analysis reported having a close relationship with their non-resident children. For these reasons, Philip (2013) argues that non-residency should be considered as a feature of, rather than as a barrier to, fathers' involvement with their children.

Separated families can challenge taken-for-granted family practices and demonstrate different or 'new' ways of 'doing family' (Bakker et al., 2015), and divorce or parental separation can be considered as challenging parenthood and in turn fatherhood, *"causing it to be reassessed and reformulated"* (Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2019, p. 23). In cases of the breakup of cohabiting parents, family practices need to be renegotiated and restructured from before; and in cases where parents have never lived together, family practices need to be constructed between homes. The distinction between family and household, and

recognition of relationships that occur between households could intensify the need for display; in the context of non-resident fathers, displaying their relationship with their children can increase perceived recognition as a father by other family members as well as friends and wider social networks.

Philip (2010, 2013, 2014) argues that when fathers display commitment to their children (and in turn their children's mother) they can be considered as presenting a moral act; as such, displaying a 'duty' or a sense of continuing responsibility to their children can be seen as displaying a commitment to their role as a father and moral or societal expectations of fatherhood. In some cases, divorced fathers were able to assert that they had remained present when the option to be 'absent' had been possible. Moreover, some fathers in her study compared themselves and their practices to 'other' fathers who perhaps had not maintained similar levels of contact with their children, something she demonstrates as highlighting that fathering after divorce can be considered as a moral practice in itself, and demonstrative of 'good' fatherhood. These findings reflect assertions by Featherstone (2010) that fathers' desires and demands for contact with children may be related to fathers wishing to portray that they are 'good' fathers who have fought to stay involved with their children. As such, caring for children post-parental separation may be less about sharing care, but more about disrupting the presumed primacy of mothers in children's lives (see also Featherstone, 2009)

One opportunity for non-resident fathers to spend intensive time with their children, is through going on holiday, something that can in turn improve emotional closeness considered integral to 'good' fatherhood discussed in the previous chapter (see Schänzel and Jenkins, 2017). Leisure time more broadly can provide opportunities to help children improve their physical skills and knowledge of nature and 'the outdoors'; for fathers in Schänzel and Jenkins's (2017) study, outdoor activities were considered more of a masculine domain, and an important task of fathers, particularly if it was felt that mothers were not providing enough outdoor experiences. Going on holiday can also act as a means of improving or repairing perceived poor relationships with older children, who may have been negatively affected by parental separation, or through their own development had less time to spend with their fathers. However, the authors recognised that care routines influenced fathers' feelings toward 'intensive' leisure time with children; where fathers saw their children more frequently or shared care, there was less desire to make time 'special' or to go on holiday, with holidays considered an extension of their routine daily life. However, a father's ability to spend prolonged periods of time engaging in 'leisure' time with his children will be significantly mediated by income.

Schools, and being involved in children's schooling and education, was recognised as a space for fathers to 'display' their responsibilities to their children (Philip, 2014). However, reiterating discussions in the previous chapter (section 2.4.3) some fathers in Philip's study expressed how they felt conscious of their physical presence as men in the often-female dominated settings of care and play; this expanded to concerns over physical expressions of love and caring practices, which they felt may be interpreted differently because they were men. Similar expressions of the inhibitive nature of female-dominated care were also found in Dermott's (2008) study of resident fathers, highlighting how similar parental challenges can be faced by resident and non-resident fathers alike.

Whilst some fathers commend the positive features of being a non-resident father, it should be recognised that empirical studies have highlighted how some fathers can struggle to adapt to their new role as a full-time parent during children's visits. Dealing with the immediacy of children's everyday needs in concentrated 'bursts' over the weekend can be a new experience to many fathers who had taken a more secondary parenting role when married/partnered (Bradshaw et al., 1999). More recently, fathers in another study described the difficulties involved in having sporadic interaction with their children, and how a lack of daily contact with their children made understanding minutiae aspects of their children's lives problematic (Cohen-Israeli and Remennick, 2015). Many fathers highlighted that during contact, time is spent getting 'up to speed' in what has occurred in times of absence; this segmented interaction can result in feelings of discontinuity within their parenting role (Bradshaw et al., 1999). Philip (2014) noted how divorced fathers in her study reported feeling detached from their children's social lives, particularly if only caring at weekends or sporadically, inhibiting familiarity and emotional closeness. When considering literature on 'intimate' fatherhood, where models of 'good' fathering highlight the importance of 'being there' and sharing space, non-resident fathers may struggle to enact this role (Dermott, 2008). This consideration also demonstrates the different experiences of non-resident fathers and the importance of not generalising about experiences. Bearing in mind these potentially varied and contradictory experiences of non-resident fatherhood, this study is keen to examine and explore their resonance with fathers themselves across a diverse social sample.

Cross sectional studies capture a 'snapshot' of fatherhood, which, whether resident or non-resident, is best understood as a changing continuous practice (Dermott, 2008). Some fathers gradually drift apart from their children, and one of the strongest associations with contact is the length of time since union disruption (Cheadle et al., 2010). The age of children also has an influence, with contact levels decreasing as children grow older (Cheadle et al., 2010). Literature on non-resident fathers tends to define a gradual decline in the

frequency of contact is the *typical* trajectory after separation, however, these conclusions are often based on the mean frequency of contact for all fathers. Contact over time is complex and nuanced and does not follow a linear pattern for families; simple statistics can mask the diversity within the population. Moreover, reducing parent-child time is not unique to non-resident parents, as ageing of children can frequently result in children developing their own social networks independent of parents. As research about non-resident fathers, particularly longitudinal research, is still scarce, there are significant gaps in knowledge on how time affects father-child relationships.

3.4   Relational practices with mothers and other family members

Fatherhood does not stand alone: it is constructed in relation to others, particularly mothers (Dermott, 2008). Fehlberg et al. (2011) explain that after separation, most parents mutually agree about arrangements. In only a small number of cases (10 per cent) are the courts involved to help decision making. A significant methodological problem with assessing the volume of contact is that surveys tend to capture formal contact arrangements. However, most separated couples do not have formal contact arrangements and father-child contact is typically a flexible process, particularly when parents have an amicable relationship. Levels of reported contact often differ between mothers and fathers, perhaps due to deliberate under and overstating respectively to official agencies or surveys, or due to different interpretations of what constitutes contact (Wilson, 2006; Bradshaw et al., 1999).

It has been widely reported that good relationships between mother and father post-separation is associated with increased father-child contact, closer father-child relationships and improved outcomes for children (Poole et al., 2016; Haux et al., 2015; Baxter et al., 2011; Lewis and Lamb, 2007). Walker (2013, p. 124) contends that *"children thrive best in families characterised by predictable and consistent care"* with this care associated with harmonious relationships between parents, regardless of their relationship status. Fathers in the aforementioned Finnish study recognised the importance of having a good relationship with their ex-partner and the value of cooperative parenting for child-centred parenting (Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2019). However, some studies have found fathers' parenting practices and time and engagement with children can be considerably regulated by mothers (Bradshaw et al., 1999). Wilson et al. (2004, p. 3) express a similar sentiment in their study, with some fathers feeling that they must *"perform in a role imposed on them"* by mothers. When relationships between parents were more strained, non-resident young fathers in the *Following Young Fathers* project felt it more difficult to be involved with parenting, and became aware of the mediating and gatekeeping role that mothers (and their extended family) can play

(Lau-Clayton, 2015). These problems were recognised as being exacerbated by geographical distance. Many of these young fathers recognised that 'getting on' with the mother of their child was needed for the sake of their children, demonstrating a prioritisation of children's needs (Neale et al., 2015). Strategies used to maintain an amicable relationship with ex-partners (and consequently spend more one-on-one time with their children) included open dialogue, clearly communicating feelings and being flexible with contact arrangements, such as providing care at the last-minute outside of pre-arranged times. The longitudinal element of the *Following Young Fathers* research project highlighted how relationships between separated parents evolve, and usually improve over time, as parents settle into their new parental role and, as in the case of these young people, mature (Lau-Clayton, 2015).

Bakker et al. (2015) in a study of 35 separated parents in the Netherlands highlighted how some parents continue to practise family rituals post-separation including going to school events and celebrating children's birthdays and Christmas together. Being involved together in routine activities, can turn them into family rituals. This is because the act is accompanied by symbolic meaning; a separated couple demonstrating their ability to cooperate and display to everyone that they remain a family unit, and fathers are displaying an enduring commitment to their children. Whilst many of these parents reported positive relationships, not all did, with some reporting how difficult it felt to maintain contact and engage in family rituals and routines together, particularly shortly after separation. In these post-separation families, parents discussed difficulties reconciling 'old' family practices with a new life, feeling as if new partners posed a problem. However, Bakker et al.'s study found that for most families, family routines and rituals were not shared practices post-separation, instead these rituals were conducted twice i.e. two Christmas celebrations, two birthdays, and holidays were taken separately. These parenting relationships were marked with low levels of communication and using emails or text messages instead of phone calls or face-to-face contact. Bakker et al. (2015) make a distinction between those parents that continue to perform family routines and rituals together and those that perform them separately; the first they argue continue to display that they are 'still a family', the latter perform that they are a 'new family'.

Extended family members also have an important function, with a number of studies recognising that grandparents, particularly grandmothers as having an influential role in negotiating fathers' continued contact with children in separated families, acting as 'invisible facilitators', especially when one or both parents live with their own parents (Bradshaw et al., 1999; Smart and Neale, 1999; Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). However, Lau-Clayton (2015) argues that rather than seeing mothers and grandmothers as gatekeepers in father-child relationships, co-parental relationships should be considered in a more nuanced

fashion, with consideration given to strength of relationship between parents, with push-pull factors ongoing and changing over time. Moreover, the agency of children must not be ignored in the maintaining of contact: as children grow older they may choose to spend more or less time with one parent or another (Bradshaw et al., 1999). Children's choices can cause conflict between parents (Cashmore and Parkinson, 2011; Smart and Neale, 1999). How children's preferences are recognised and acted upon from the perspective of fathers will be a feature of this research.

In terms of social relationships, in the aforementioned study by Dermott (2016), the author found that there was little difference in social contact between resident and non-resident fathers, with most non-resident fathers reporting talking to family members and friends at least once a week (80 per cent and 82 per cent respectively). However, when anticipating support, compared to resident fathers, non-resident fathers reported higher levels of feeling that they would not have practical or emotional support. Non-resident fathers living with a partner reported higher levels of support than single non-resident fathers – 24 per cent of fathers living in a couple anticipated they would lack at least one form of support, compared to the higher figure of 41 per cent for non-cohabiting non-resident fathers. This data introduces questions of support networks of fathers, both family and friends, but also the impact and choices made around cohabiting and non-cohabiting relationships. This thesis aims to develop a much more in-depth analysis of the choices non-resident fathers make about their social and romantic relationships.

3.5   Financial support and child maintenance

As across fatherhood research more generally, debates over the significance of breadwinning for the contemporary fathering role have been prominent. In relation to non-resident fathers, this has largely taken the form of examining the different legal mechanisms and expectations that exist regarding child maintenance, how fathers themselves view the payment of child support and the basis on which child support should be required and the relationship between child support and forms of contact with non-resident children (Edwards, et al., 2009). As aforementioned in section 2.5.3, early political and academic discussions of fathering after divorce or parental separation centred around fathers' financial provisions to their children.

Whilst many parents decide care arrangements privately, much higher proportions of parents use the statutory Child Maintenance Service (CMS) to arrange maintenance (DWP, 2016; Poole et al., 2016). The CMS, and its predecessor the Child Support Agency (CSA) has widely been criticised by academics and political actors for being both ineffective and adding further difficulties to families (Lewis, 2000; Bradshaw

et al., 1999; Poole et al., 2013). Despite broad discussions on father involvement in public and political spheres, the pressure from the Child Support Agency enforced a breadwinner model which *"jarred with men's ideas of good fatherhood and their rebuttal of the notion that breadwinning is seen as* the *fathering role"* (Dermott, 2008, p. 102) - suggesting tensions in policy between 'traditional' notions of fatherhood and more contemporary thinking discussed in this and the previous chapter.

Research has found that financial support is a contentious issue amongst fathers; whilst fathers tended to accept that they had a financial responsibility (and the majority of non-resident fathers do pay maintenance (see Poole et al., 2016)), many express anxiety and resentment at giving money to ex-partners whom they do not trust to responsibly spend their money (Skinner, 2013; Bourne and Ryan, 2012). These feelings increased when a resident parent remarries, if fathers felt they were not to blame for the break-up, if mothers are perceived as financially stable or if they did not have contact (see Bourne and Ryan 2012; Bradshaw et al., 1999; Skinner, 2013). It is argued that 'dollar for dollar', or 'pound for pound', child maintenance has more benefits for children than other sources of income such as government support. This is because maintenance payments are linked to increased contact between fathers and children (see Hutson 2007). It has been found in various studies that for separated parents there is an intrinsic reciprocal link between maintenance and contact, with payments seen as 'easing' relationships with mothers and improving chances of contact with children (see Bradshaw et al., 1999; Kiernan, 2006). Non-resident fathers may see financial support as part of the package of involved fathering, perhaps linked to notions of 'good' fathering (see Dermott, 2008). However, payments and contact are not an equation but "*two important indicators of an ongoing relationship*" (Dermott, 2008, p. 120; Bradshaw et al., 1999). Skinner (2013) suggests that there is a 'silent bargaining' process between contact and maintenance, where the 'proper thing' is that fathers should pay maintenance and mothers should facilitate contact. In terms of reciprocity, relationships between adults usually operate under 'balanced reciprocity' but exchanges between parents and children are usually unbalanced (generalised reciprocity) (Finch and Mason, 1993). These differences can lead to difficulties balancing relationships with mothers and children in unison, particularly if there is conflict with mothers. Additionally, many fathers report giving money or gifts to children informally (Peacey and Hunt, 2008), which official measures of child maintenance do not capture. Furthermore, an inherent link between maintenance and contact could mean if a father is attempting to avoid maintenance payments, he may avoid contact with his children too (Skinner, 2013).

Regular child support payments have been highlighted as very important in reducing the likelihood of children and lone parents living in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014; Stock et al., 2014). A focus

on child poverty, especially those in lone-parent families, and movement of finance from one household to another ignores fathers' poverty and hardships (Dermott, 2016; Peacey and Hunt, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 1999). Similarly, Dermott (2016) argues that analyses of lone parent poverty often neglects to examine the financial situation of those paying child maintenance, and that for some fathers, paying maintenance may risk them falling into, or further into, poverty. Whilst it cannot be argued that non-resident fathers face similar levels of poverty to lone mothers, moving finances from one poor household to another is not a sustainable model for reducing economic hardship. When considering methods of reducing child poverty, Dermott (2016) argues that there needs to be greater recognition of poverty and economic hardship that exists, pre and post-separation, for both parents when cohabiting relationships breakdown.

Changes to contact arrangements and maintenance payments toward more family-based models discussed in the previous chapter could give parents more responsibility and reduce hostility as negotiations are made outside of the statutory system (see DWP, 2012b; Punton-Li et al., 2012). However, as emphasised by Poole et al. (2016), legal and policy changes aiming to increase family-based decision-making will not be successful if there is a low level or lack of father-child relationships, poor relationships between parents and particularly if there is a lack of support services for families. It could be argued that an emphasis on policy orientated research and a lack of interest from a more sociological viewpoint means that the official agenda of what should be important to non-resident fathers (paying maintenance and ongoing contact) has been privileged over what non-resident fathers themselves might see as important to their lives. It should be remembered that non-resident fathers face similar difficulties and stressors as all families and communities: inadequate state and employer support or recognition of family needs; poverty; unstable employment; and, poor health can all impact fathering practices, relationships with family and friends, and overall wellbeing.

3.6 Conclusion

Whilst research on separated families has tended to focus on 'problematic' non-resident fathers, emerging sociological and social policy-based research has begun to highlight the diversity amongst non-resident fathers, both in terms of contact but also socio-economic profiles. Studies of non-resident fathers also outline some potentially 'child-centred' practices of fathers, including ensuring that father-child relationships are continued, if not strengthened, paying regular maintenance and ensuring that mother-father relationships remain communicative. However, research about how this diversity relates to everyday lives of non-resident fathers is lacking. Studies of contemporary fatherhood discussed in the previous chapter highlight diversity of fathering practices between men; this research aims to explore diversity of practices amongst non-resident

fathers as well. Moving away from problematic definitions and framing of non-resident fathers, this research considers non-residency as a model of fatherhood amongst many others, rather than as a negative or prohibitive position compared to co-residency. Little attention has been paid to fathers' lived experiences of non-resident fatherhood, their fathering practices or to how men construct and develop an understanding of their role and responsibilities as a non-resident parent. With families, in particular separated families, continuing to be discussed in public and political spheres, and high levels of non-resident fatherhood, developing a broader understanding of non-resident fatherhood in the UK is an important topic of study. The next chapter will outline the methodological considerations of this research, and outline the methods undertaken to carry out the research.

Chapter 4: Methodology and approach

The following discussions will explore the methodological logic underpinning the research approach and the practical methods derived from it. In this chapter, the aim is to make the processes of researching and their underpinning methodological rationales and choices explicit. Firstly, the chapter will explain the overarching methodology and qualitative interview-based research design. Secondly, there is an outline of the recruitment methods used to invite non-resident fathers to take part in the study and a description of this recruited sample. The third section of this chapter will explain the more in-depth details of interviewing carried out in this research, including development of the interview schedule, and the process of interviewing including any problems or challenges that arose. The final section of this chapter will detail how the data collected in interviews was analysed, as well as the processes of 'writing up' the research findings and creation of this thesis.

4.1   Research design: epistemological, theoretical and practical considerations

Qualitative research is grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly 'interpretivist' in the sense that researchers are concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced and constituted (Mason, 2002, p. 3). Blaikie (2000, p. 115) explains how *"interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social world people have produced and which they reproduce through their continuing activities"*. This approach assumes that knowledge can be seen as an interpretive understanding of 'realities' of research participants, and that multiple unique but potentially overlapping realities can thus exist. When considering the research questions of this project and the overall title, it is apparent that a key concern of this project is to explore the social world and lived experiences of non-resident fatherhood with a strong desire to illuminate areas that non-resident fathers consider to be important. The research process of this project therefore involved entering the participants 'worlds' and re-producing an interpreted portrayal, rather than an exact picture (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012). Mason (2002, p. 24) argues that *"qualitative research is characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive"* and these approaches are reflected in the methods undertaken in this research.

The approach taken by Doucet (2007) in her study of fathers in Canada which recognised and respected feminist research approaches influenced this research. This approach works toward challenging sex-based asymmetries of care and employment, and encourages and embraces active fathering whilst realising and valuing traditions of women's work and female identities of caregiving (2007, p. 30). In this thesis, this extends to recognising women's role in caregiving in separated families. The emergence of feminist research

theories desired to consider women and their roles in new lenses rather than those designed by and for the study of men. As such, research undertaken from a feminist standpoint exercises caution when attempting to understand the voices of one sex within a landscape designed by the other (see Sevenhuijsen, 2000; Edwards, 1990). Doucet (2007) similarly argues that these concerns should also be considered when we study men in female-dominated areas of social life. Care work, both paid and unpaid, is, despite changes recognised in the literature of this thesis, a female dominated sphere which builds upon traditionally feminine identities. The discussions in the previous chapters highlight how motherhood and fatherhood are not interchangeable and gender norms continue to play a significant role in understandings of parenting. As such, when studying men's caregiving, nurturing and parenting practices, it is important to resist the urge to evaluate them through female standards. Feminist and critical family studies methodologies recognise that research interviews themselves involve power dynamics which permeate the interview and consequently the data collected within it (Miller, 2017b). This leads to much deliberation about the importance of, and practise of, reflexivity within the research process, particularly in this research the process of being a female researching men's lived experiences. This will be explored further in section 4.5.3.

Fatherhood, particularly non-resident fatherhood, is an often controversial or politicised topic, with audiences expecting findings to follow one of two approaches, *"as condemning fathers or claiming they are oppressed"* (Dermott, 2008, p. 2). This provocative nature means that discussing their fathering practices can be a highly emotive topic for many fathers (Bradshaw et al., 1999). This thesis, whilst taking a father-centric approach, does not aim to validate or champion certain actors in separated families over others, but rather to develop a better understanding of non-resident fatherhood within the heterogeneity of family practices and formations. The topic's emotive and controversial nature was recognised throughout the research process, including when sourcing literature, interacting with external organisations for recruitment and dissemination purposes, when interacting with fathers during data collection, and when writing up this thesis.

4.1.1 Developing research questions

The initial phases of PhD qualitative research involve moving from a focal yet broad area of interest to formulating focused research aims and questions. My background, but also the disciplines of the previous research exploring fatherhood and non-resident fathers directed this project to straddle the disciplines of sociology and applied social policy. Whilst drawing from both sociological and social policy traditions, this work sought to contribute to both disciplines as well. As highlighted in the literature review, to date, most academic explorations of fatherhood have been based on resident fathers, with non-resident fathers tending

to be neglected within academic research (Poole et al., 2016; Miller, 2011a; Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2007). Writings that have focused on non-resident fathers have tended to focus on the problematic nature of this group of fathers. Other research has focused on quantitative features such as volume of contact or child maintenance payment amounts. However, there has been little research exploring the everyday family and social relationships of non-resident fathers more broadly, including studies that recognises the heterogeneity amongst this group of fathers. This lack of research is significant, because, as argued by Skinner (2013, p. 262) and discussed in the introduction, norms of fatherhood may differ between resident fathers, whom most studies of fatherhood have been conducted with, and non-resident fathers. There was therefore scope for more in-depth qualitative research into fathering and the lived experiences of parenthood amongst non-resident fathers in the UK. This research recognised that fathering, and parenting and family relationships more broadly, encompass a range of complexities; just as similarities and differences can be drawn about resident fathers, similarities and differences are expected of non-resident fathers in the sample. As demonstrated through the two previous chapters, whilst there are several studies exploring non-resident fatherhood, there are few in-depth qualitative studies of non-resident fathers that aim to explore lived experiences with a broad sample, and with sociological and social policy objectives. This project as such stemmed from a perceived 'gap' in knowledge about a contemporary social issue, with the specifics of this reflected in the three research questions:

1. How do men perceive, construct and negotiate their role as 'fathers' in the context of being a 'non-resident father' and how do they practise this role? And in what ways do fathers perceive that their social and family relationships and circumstances influence their construction and negotiation of non-resident fatherhood?

2. How do fathers perceive, negotiate and engage with the ways in which non-resident fathers are constructed and positioned in policy and social discourses?

3. What is the significance of statutory agencies and social services, in the broad sense of the terms, in the everyday narratives and lives of non-resident fathers? According to fathers, should and could these be developed in more 'father-friendly' or supportive ways?

The first research question stemmed from a desire to understand not only fathers' aspirations for fathering, but also to explore any factors they felt restricted this. As such, this demonstrates a desire to understand not only what fathers do, but to ask what they *want* to do. Including exploration of fathers' personal relationships and family relationships, and their socio-demographic characteristics and other circumstances (e.g. home, location, work, working hours) aimed to give a broader understanding of non-resident fatherhood and the

uniqueness of each father, that highlights how their fathering is not solely influenced by their residency status.

The second of these questions emerged from a desire to understand how fathers feel they are portrayed in policy and social discourses. This includes debates by politicians around the 'problems' associated with separated families, but also portrayals in popular culture such as the media. In order to explore this research question, I had to first answer the question *"How are non-resident fathers positioned in current social policy debates, discourses and developments targeted at families, parents and parental separation?"*. This question is arguably a research question that spans the entire thesis, however, as it is rooted in literature, and heavily explored in the literature review, but not explored in the empirical data, this question was removed from the three overall research questions.

The third question not only aided in understanding the everyday experiences of fathers, but also enabled me to look at whether the government's agenda for non-resident fathers (and separated families as a whole) and issues considered as important to them, is in tune with the feelings of fathers themselves. The part of the questions referring to 'according to fathers' not only means presenting fathers' actual spoken words about changes i.e. extracts from interviews, but also interpreting what could be father-friendly developments from the discussions had in interviews.

4.1.2   Choosing semi-structured interviews

The interpretivist epistemological positioning adopted in this research required methods of data generation which were flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data was produced as well as methods of analysis, explanation and argument building which involves understandings of complexity, detail and context. As a key driving factor in the research rationale was a desire to hear 'stories' of non-resident fatherhood, and with consideration of where and who could act as a source for the generation of this data, in-depth interviews were deemed the most appropriate method (see Head, 2004; Mason, 2002; Arendell, 1997). From the early stages of this project's design, it was planned that the study would be based on semi-structured interviews with non-resident fathers. Despite variations in style, qualitative interview approaches and techniques tend to include an interactional exchange of dialogue and have a relatively informal style of conversation or discussion rather than formal question and answer scenarios such as in journalism. Semi-structured interviews are guided by interview questions but allow for flexibility, meaning that interesting threads of conversation can be explored in more depth. Interviewing can be claimed as the most common research method, and in its simplest form can be labelled as providing empirical data about the social world

by asking people about their lives - asking questions is a common form of conversational inquiry to find out answers (Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). Enosh and Buchbinder (2005) explain how when involved with qualitative interviewing one should understand that interviewees are developing their own understanding and sense-making of her or his reality during the interview, rather than driving toward getting the interviewee to reveal the 'hidden reality' of their lives. As such, as a researcher my aim was not to work out where to 'find' my data or to presume my data already existed in a collectable state. Instead through evaluating my theoretical and practical considerations, I decided that semi-structured interviews would be the 'best' way to generate data from my chosen data sources. In other words, factual data about the social world is not being reported or uncovered in interviews, rather meanings and understandings of the social world are created or constructed in an interview setting, and co-produced by both participant and me, the researcher, who is asking and responding to the participant (see Mason, 2002).

As interviews tend to be the most common method of research, there can be a tendency to assume one's study will involve interviews without considering how other methods might be more useful or incorporated into a study. Other methods of enquiry, such as focus groups were considered in the research development stage, however there was concern that these would not reflect the research aims, because it could be difficult to elicit and separate individual data on lived experiences from group data (Barbour, 2007). There was a concern that more intimate topics would not be disclosed during a group interview, and also that what can be an emotive topic would lead to digression in group discussion, making it difficult for an inexperienced PhD social researcher to manage. In a practical sense, finding a time that was convenient for all focus group participants was expected to be difficult. A longitudinal study, or interviewing fathers on at least two separate occasions was considered. This would allow for a better understanding of how time interacts with fathering when non-resident (one example being Miller, 2011a). Another example of the interaction of time and changes to fathering practices is the longitudinal study 'Following Young Fathers' by Bren Neale and colleagues (Neale et al., 2015). This project carried out research with 12, and then a further 19 fathers aged between 16 and 25 between 2010 and 2015, engaging in many interviews and group exercises with participants. However, it was felt that the commitment required from participants for more than one research interview could act as a deterrent in recruitment. Moreover, the limited time given for data collection in a PhD was another factor that meant a longitudinal design was rejected.

4.2 Recruiting non-resident fathers

4.2.1 Recruitment materials

After the research methods were chosen, consideration was given to methods of recruitment. Whilst this study did not aim for a representative sample, nor is representativeness aimed for or considered achievable within qualitative studies (Mason, 2002), a purposive sample which appreciated the diversity of fathers' family situation and socio-economic status was desired. This was in order to better reflect my research questions; namely, to explore fathers' personal/family relationships, circumstances and socio-demographic characteristics in relation to their construction and negotiation of their role as a non-resident father. As aforementioned, contact levels between fathers varies greatly, from daily contact (co-parenting) to sporadic contact, or no contact at all, and this often can and does change through time. Whilst gaining an understanding of the experiences of all non-resident fathers could be beneficial for developing more responsive policy and services, the focus on fathering and fathering identity and practices meant that I decided to only research fathers who maintained contact with their children. This decision would still include a large range of non-resident fathers, with the different frequencies and means of contact across the sample being recognised and appreciated in analysis.

Considerable thought was put into designing recruitment materials. This research uses the phrase 'non-resident' to define the type of fathers I am interested in researching and stems from academic and governmental literature on separated families. However, when talking to colleagues and friends, it became clear that this wording 'non-resident' was problematic, as many people did not understand what a 'non-resident father' was. I had suggestions that it was linked to legal residency status of migrants to the UK; fathers who never saw their children; and, fathers who had never been co-resident with children, as well as complete bewilderment. Moreover, it was feared that this term could be off-putting to some fathers who see the term as side-lining their fathering role or who co-parent their children. Consequently, in printed recruitment material, such as posters and leaflets, I asked for 'fathers who don't live with their children for some or all of the time', with the phrase 'non-resident' introduced later in the recruitment material. An example of this can be seen in Appendix 2. The recruitment leaflet also highlights how the term 'interview' was not included. Whilst as a researcher I was aware that interviews tend to have a relatively informal style of conversation, it was felt that the word 'interview' might deter participants who are more used to interviews of journalistic or employment nature i.e. formal question and answer scenarios. Phrases such as 'I would like to talk to you about' or 'chat about' were used in recruitment materials and recruitment emails,

as well as emails or text messages to arrange meeting for the research interview. It was made clear that this 'chat' would last between one to two hours.

4.3   Ethical approval

This research was guided throughout by the University of Sheffield and the British Sociological Association ethical guidelines (University of Sheffield, 2019; BSA, 2017). These guidelines stipulate that participants should be provided with an information sheet outlining the research project, including the option of withdrawing at any point, and should be asked to sign a consent form demonstrating their understanding of taking part (see Appendix 3). Participants should also be anonymised throughout the project and any subsequent publications. As to be seen in the following chapters, all participants and their children have been given pseudonyms. Another stipulation is that any data collected will be kept strictly confidential; this was achieved by storing all electronic information in password protected files and any physical copies of data being kept in a lockable cupboard. To ensure my safety, interviews were only conducted in public spaces, but, as to be expanded upon in section 4.5.2, participants were offered the choice as to the location of this.

Whilst university ethics applications can seem to be a key point of concern in a PhD journey, taking an ethical approach to research should be considered throughout the research process. There is an ever-present ethical dimension to social research, and ethical issues remained pertinent throughout the study with issues arising during the research process. Remaining aware of potential ethical issues throughout the research process meant that in situ approaches and ethical practices were considered and available to be utilised should the need arise. I will return to ethical issues later in this chapter as I discuss issues of researcher reflexivity.

4.4   Generating the research sample

Whilst there has been increasing recognition of intersectionality within family and caring practices, including working-class and low-income households, ethnic minority families, and non-heterosexual couples, many studies of fatherhood have continued to focus on white middle-class co-resident families (see Miller, 2011a; Dermott, 2008). Doucet (2007) recognises that it is difficult to recruit parents from these non-traditional research pools, and even more difficult to encourage them to open up their private life to an

inquisitive researcher[2]. In order to capture fathers from the desired broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, a broad range of access routes were employed during participant recruitment. Emails were sent out to four major employers in two large cities in the UK; these organisations were chosen because the researcher had a connection to the organisation and felt it possible to have recruitment email sent to all employees, but also because these organisations were so large that they had employees from a range of occupations. Posters like the one shown in Appendix 2 were put in community centres and libraries in city centres and low-income areas of two large cities. A connection was made with a local support group for non-resident fathers who approached me after seeing recruitment material. The nature of the group meant many current and former members were from lower income backgrounds. Also, the support nature of the group meant that current and former members tended to be more comfortable talking about their feelings toward their children and non-residency, giving a boost to the sample toward the end of the recruitment period. Around three quarters of the 26 participants were recruited through these means.

The other quarter of my sample came through personal connections, primarily through word-of-mouth and social media advertisement. The prevalence and commonality of separated families means that most people know someone who is a non-resident father, be that a family member, a partner, a friend or a colleague. A challenge of using one's own social network to recruit for participants is that this can source participants from a narrow background. However, it was felt that a somewhat diverse range of fathers was collected through my own networks, particularly younger fathers. In most cases, fathers approached me directly after seeing the advertisements or emails, but three participants told me that they were recommended to take part in the study by an acquaintance who had seen an advertisement (friend, wife and ex-wife). When a participant contacted me about the study (usually by email) I gave an outline of my project aims, explained that this was my PhD study and sent a detailed information sheet to them. I also gave an outline of when and where interviews could take place and stressed that their participation was completely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time with no explanation.

Interviews were carried out between late October 2017 and early April 2018, with a lengthy break over Christmas. This 'pause' on interviewing occurred both because many people, including me, were busy over the Christmas season, but also because it gave opportunity to reflect on the interviews that had been carried out. The first 'wave' of interviews were transcribed and allowed for a 'stocktake' of the progression of the project and reflection on the content of interviews in relation to initial research aims and the characteristics

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[2] Doucet took three years to gain a sample which she considered to have a good level of diversity.

of the sample. A redistribution of recruitment materials happened shortly after Christmas and a subsequent connection with the aforementioned support group occurred which boosted the diversity of the sample. Knowing when to stop recruiting when carrying out qualitative research and 'how many' interviews is enough is one that is strongly debated (see Baker and Edwards, 2012). My justifications for stopping recruitment were three-fold: firstly, I felt that my data set had reached 'saturation' in that many topics were being repeated by participants and little 'new' information was being shared. Secondly, I felt the diverse sample desired had been achieved as much as I envisioned possible. Finally, after 26 participants I had over 40 hours of interviews which when transcribed were over 250,000 words. I felt that recruiting more participants would lead to a volume of data that was too difficult to manage, but also that the 'voices' of individual participants would become lost. By late March no new participants were coming forward from the methods of recruitment, and for the three reasons outlined, I decided to carry out no more interviews than the few remaining planned.

4.4.1   Sample characteristics

In order to aid analysis of data based upon fathers' characteristics, as well as being aware of the diversity of my sample through data collection, a survey which included details such as age, ethnicity, job, employment status and income as well as details about ages and location of children (resident and non-resident) was given to fathers after the interview (see Appendix 4). This wealth of quantitative data was collated into a large table alongside participants' pseudonyms aiding the analysis of data for each father and helping to contextualise some information. Including this table in the thesis was considered but rejected due to concerns that anonymity of participants would be compromised due to the volume of identifiable information alongside interview extracts in subsequent chapters. Instead the data has been collated allowing the reader an understanding of the characteristics of the sample as a whole.

The mean age of participants was 40, with the mean age of becoming a father being 29. Eight fathers had their first child before the age of 25 and could be classified as young fathers (see Neale et al., 2015). In terms of number of children, both resident and non-resident, including step-children: 1 father had four children, 6 fathers had three children (including 2 fathers who have one step-child), 5 had two children, and 12 fathers had one child. The sample appears skewed towards smaller families, however ONS data show that 55 per cent of single parent families have one child and only 13 per cent have more than two children, and one could assume similar figures for non-resident fathers (ONS, 2017a). Routes into non-resident fatherhood can be found in Table 5.1 in section 5.2.

Half (13) of the participants identified as single, and for the remaining 13 participants in relationships, one participant had remarried, six participants were cohabiting with female partners, and, six were in relationships but not living together. Only two fathers had children living with them full-time, smaller than the 29% of non-resident fathers who also have resident children in Poole et al.'s study (2016). This may be because my recruitment material made it unclear if those with resident children could also take part, and as such, mainly solely non-resident fathers responded to my invitation to interview.

Socio-economic characteristics were collected with these summarised below:

- In terms of tenure:
  - 1 participant owned his home; 12 had a mortgaged home; 7 rented a private property; 1 lived in a Local Authority/Housing Association property; 3 lived with friends or family paying board; and 2 did not disclose their tenure status.
- 16 were currently working full-time, 1 was working part-time, 2 were employed on zero-hours contracts, 3 were self-employed, 1 was a student and 3 were not currently employed.
- Occupations (or last previous occupation) were transferred into the ONS National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC):
  - 2 participants were in 'Higher managerial and professional' occupations; 11 were in 'Lower managerial and professional' occupations; 3 were in 'Intermediate' occupations; 4 were 'Small employers and own account' workers; 1 was in a 'Lower supervisory and technical' occupation; 2 had 'Semi-routine' occupations; 2 had 'Routine occupations'; and, 1 was a full-time student.
- In terms of highest educational qualification:
  - 13 participants had a degree or equivalent; 6 had A-Levels or equivalent; 1 had GCSEs or equivalent; 2 did not know their highest educational qualification; 1 said he had no educational qualifications; and, 3 did not disclose their highest educational qualification.
- Ethnicity was based upon the ethnic group question used in the 2011 census in England:
  - 18 participants identified as 'White British'; 1 identified as 'Any other White background'; 1 identified as 'White and Asian'; 1 identified as 'White and Black Caribbean'; 1 identified as 'Other mixed background'; 1 identified as 'Black British'; 1 identified as 'Black African'; and, 2 did not disclose their ethnic group.
- Participants were asked if they were religious;
  - 8 defined themselves as Christian; 2 defined as 'agnostic'; 1 defined as 'Atheist'; 12 said

they had no religion; and, 3 did not disclose a religious affiliation.

As can be noted for some demographic information, 'not disclosed' is used when a participant did not give an answer. Two possible reasons for this were considered: the first is that participants did not wish to disclose this information. The second is that as this survey was self-completed by fathers at the end of interviews, for some participants who had another meeting or engagement planned after the interview, their time was rushed and not every question on the survey was answered. It was thought that by giving the survey at the end of interviews, rapport would have been built between the participants and therefore questions about their family life, job, and income might be perceived as less invasive. However, it was not considered that if interviews lasted longer than projected, fathers would not have time to answer these quantitative questions. Some of the 'missed' responses were able to be discerned from interview data, but those that could not be confidently decided were left as 'not disclosed'. The low representation of specific minority groups in the study means that whilst a father's ethnicity may be influential in their lived experiences of fatherhood, it is difficult to generalise or draw conclusions about the association between ethnicity and non-resident fatherhood in this study.

4.5   The data collection process

4.5.1   Developing an interview schedule

Whilst free flowing and responsive conversation is desirable, semi-structured interviews still require some planning to ensure questions relevant to the research questions are covered (Mason, 2002, p. 62), maintaining a 'conversation with a purpose' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). An interview schedule tends to have a thematic or topic-centred approach as a set of starting points (see Mason, 2002, p. 62). The strategy for developing interview questions suggested by Mason (2002) was adopted: an interview guide was developed by breaking down bigger research questions. With focus on individuals' unique experiences and appreciating the everyday practices of fathering, the interview schedule roughly followed this pattern:

- Accounts of becoming a father for the first time and their circumstances, partner relationships and lives during this period; and accounts of how many children they have.
- Accounts of how fathers became a non-resident father and their circumstances.
- Relationship with non-resident children; contact with and caring for child(ren) and how care routines were arranged.
- Everydayness of fathering such as activities done with children and interaction with schooling.

- Interactions with statutory agencies and support services such as solicitors, CMS and other services.

These areas of questions were designed to generate rich qualitative data on the way fathers conceptualise and perceive their role as a father who is non-resident, and also to explore fathers' personal relationships, family lives and social circumstances on their own terms. As discussed in the literature review, fatherhood and fathering can be usefully conceptualised as dynamic aspects of identity and social practice (Dermott, 2008), with time, therefore, being considered as a significant factor within non-resident father-child interaction. This includes time since transition to being a non-resident father, changes that occur in family life through time, and changes to father-child relationships as children grow older (Poole et al., 2016). Unfortunately, as aforementioned, concerns over recruitment and the time constraints of PhD research meant that the longitudinal element of perceptions and negotiations of non-resident fatherhood were not empirically captured via a longitudinal methodology. Whilst cross sectional studies and interviews such as these can capture just a 'snapshot' of someone's life, taking a biographical approach to interviewing that invites reconstructing narratives and understandings of the past, present and future can help to produce a deeper understanding of someone's life (Scott, 2009; Birch and Miller, 2000). As such, reflection on the past and changes through time were discussed throughout interviews to gain a temporal element to fathers' experiences. Fathers were also asked to consider what they thought might change in their family in the future.

This research wished to develop an understanding of the history of a father's relationship with his child(ren) and their mother(s) as well as understanding a father's personal life. Whilst a narrative approach was not taken, a biographical element to the research, where people and their life stories are regarded as the data source and there is a desire to recount the past and discuss their hopes and fears for their future was taken (Mason, 2002). Biographical construction within interviews can, and often does, involve participants retelling stories of personal change (Birch and Miller, 2000). The 'personal change' being explored in this research is in relation to becoming a father and a non-resident father. For every father in some ways this story will be unique as well as embedded in relational and social contexts. Moreover, fathers' future hopes and aspirations for themselves and that of their children and wider family were also explored. Two pilot interviews were conducted and transcribed when ethical approval was obtained. Through doing these interviews and through initial readings of the transcripts, the interview schedule was reformulated, moving from an interview schedule with specific questions toward a topic guide approach. It was thought this would produce more open questions which invite and prompted longer narrative responses. The formatting was also changed to make this guide easier to read during an interview. This is available to view in Appendix 5.

4.5.2 The process of interviewing

Interviews were formal in the sense that they were planned, scheduled for a specific time and date, and through the recruitment material, the focus of the activity was very clearly about their life as a non-resident father, rather than informal or spontaneously occurring events. It was not uncommon for fathers to tell me the age, living arrangements and names of their children in email exchanges before the interview. However, I began all interviews in the same manner by asking fathers to tell me about themselves, their family, their children and their work. From this, fathers often recalled the process of becoming a non-resident father, usually their separation or divorce from their children's mother. From here, following the rough structure of the interview schedule most interviews followed a similar pattern.

Interviews took place in either at a private office at the university (n=5), cafes and pubs (n=12), participant's offices or private spaces at their place of work (n=7). In my introductory email I offered all fathers the opportunity to meet in a private room at the university, at their workplace or a café or pub of their choosing in the two cities I recruited from. I offered to meet at all times of the day and any day of the week, in an effort to fit around fathers' working and caring schedules. Meetings in cafes were usually during daytimes, with pubs being chosen for participants whom I met straight after regular working hours (5/6pm). One problem was that for fathers who were constrained by their work hours, and childcare responsibilities, the opportunity to meet at a private space at the university was not always available due to university opening hours of 8am to 6pm. This meant that meetings had to happen in a public space in the early evening or weekend. A further two interviews were conducted by phone because fathers lived some distance from the research cities and a mutual time could not be agreed to meet in person.

The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews reflects the conversational procedures that are considered routine to social life (Fielding and Thomas, 2008), and as such it is felt that through conversation, men's understandings of their role as a father will emerge. However, the clear focus of the interview meant that they were organised and the idea that interviews are a spontaneous, natural conversation can be seen to not be true, at least in the case of this research. Nonetheless, a conversational nature was aimed for, and interviews tended to be very flexible with topics often overlapping and I did not worry if conversation strayed from the interview schedule. For most interviews the interview schedule was laid in front of me, however, I was conscious not to look too frequently at this schedule in case it acted as a distraction to the participant. As the number of interviews carried out increased, my familiarity with my rough schedule increased, meaning an increase in the 'conversational' nature of the interview.

A major benefit of the flexibility of semi-structured interviews is that whilst the same topics are covered with each participant, there is room for individuals to respond in a way that is unique to them and their situation and gives the researcher room for responsive prompts to fully understand and explore personal priorities and experiences (Scott, 2009). This flexibility also meant that I as the researcher could probe further into areas that I felt were interesting or unique to a certain father's situation. Another aspect of the flexibility of qualitative interviews is the ability to prompt when it is felt more depth to answers could be given. For example, when discussing fathers' thoughts of what might change in their family in the future, some fathers were less forthcoming with answers than others. If fathers commented that they were unsure or had not considered the future, I prompted with suggestions from previous interviews, such as about their child(ren)'s independence as a teenager or changes to routines such as beginning primary or secondary school, and post-16 and post-18 education and work options.

As Mason (2002, p. 67) comments, *"good qualitative interviewing is hard, creative, active work"* and, to fully understand the perspective of the interviewee, interviewers must be responsive to the flow of the conversation, taking cues from the participant's responses as to how and when to ask questions. An important skill learnt through interviewing was that of 'tracking' conversations; knowing when to appropriately probe, and when to 'hold back' and follow up interesting strands of conversation at an appropriate time later in the interview. This was important both in remembering children's names, ages as well as facts about the father himself, such as if he had mentioned a partner or a job and the hours of that job. I also made effort to remember comments participants had made and then follow them up later in the interview where it felt appropriate. An example of this 'tracking' is an interview with one of the younger fathers in the sample. Nick had in the first sentences of his interview described himself as the *"black sheep"* of his extended family, as he described how his older siblings had married then had children, doing family the *"right way"* compared to how his daughter was conceived. I felt this was interesting and probing may highlight Nick's attitude toward family values. However, as the interview had only just begun, and this comment was made whilst Nick was outlining his family members, I decided to hold on to this thought and probe later in the interview when the conversation was flowing more freely (about 20 minutes later), as shown:

Interviewer: You mentioned that in your family you have your sister who is married, with a kid, your brother is married with a kid, and you are like the 'black sheep', why is that?

Nick: That's just how I felt. Obviously, I don't feel like that anymore, but that's just how I felt in myself, it was one of the emotional affects that it had on me, like, I felt like a let-down, like a disappointment to my family. Obviously, I am not, and I know that now, but when it first happened,

you do. Because I have been raised in that way, and around it all my life, that was the norm to me, that was the idea I got in my head of what would happened to me; I would meet someone, you do it the right way, shall we say – you meet someone, move in together, get married and then you have kids, you take it from there. Whereas I did it completely backwards.

Holding on to thoughts or following up on comments made by fathers not only helped to give more depth to fathers' opinions, but also built rapport with participants as I showed that I had been listening to them. However, one problem I encountered when attempting to 'track' details of participants' lives was that when asking participants to outline their family to me in the initial stages of the interview, some fathers had very complex families, and would describe multiple family members in quick succession. Remembering who was whom and all the names of family members, particularly children, was difficult. Similarly, some participants struggled to recall specific details of events that had happened in the past, sometimes over a decade before, or would give rough dates. For me as a researcher, both during the interview, but also afterwards during analysis, it was not always clear of the specifics of a family case e.g. if the family had been to court for child contact, and if so, how many times; time since separation; location of children's mothers; location of extended family etc. These difficulties led me to question whether interviews 'work' for all people, or whether they are better suited to those without complex histories. However, recognising some of these difficulties helped me to develop strategies to mitigate them - in one case, I asked the participant to draw his family tree with me, which helped me to make sense of his family members. On reflection, more 'creative' research methods like this could have been used in this project to develop more nuanced understandings of fathers' views of their family and social networks.

Holstein and Gubrium (2004) stress that interviewers should not consider themselves as neutral or 'fly-on-the-wall' researchers. Rather, interviews should be treated as a social encounter where knowledge is constructed within them. One aspect that demonstrated to me that interviews were not totally spontaneous was that through explaining the focus of the research and provision of an information sheet before the interview, at times, fathers appeared to have anticipated certain questions, such as questions about their attitudes to the Child Maintenance Service, with remarks such as *"I knew you would ask me this"*. Graham expressed concern that the interview would be one that criticised non-resident fathers:

I am glad that studies like this are being done, one way or the other. Like I said, when it first came up, my concern was that it was going to be "is it all about kids growing up with Daddy issues?" quite frankly". (Graham)

This raises the question that some fathers would be reluctant to take part in the research due to feeling stigmatised. It was not uncommon for fathers to reference the fact that they were being recorded, saying *"I

won't swear on recording" or pointing to the audio recorder. As such, it must be recognised that fathers' responses and the conversations had between me and each participant were constructed within the framework of being interviewed by an academic researcher.

Interviewing men about their family life, their separation and the relationship with their children can be considered as touching upon or entering the 'intimate sphere' - the sensitive or private aspects of people's lives – which can come with challenges (Birch and Miller, 2000). Wishing to enter the 'intimate sphere' is a difficult ethical dilemma because the focus of the research was to gather in-depth data about fathers' experiences, which inevitably would involve emotional experiences. However, as a researcher it is important to not harm participants in the quest of gaining a better understanding of their intimate feelings. Visual expressions of anguish and sadness when recalling an event or discussing a situation occurred in the majority of interviews, demonstrating to me the emotive nature of the topic. When these visual displays were expressed, but not followed with spoken discussion of emotion, I probed and prompted to develop a better understanding of fathers' feelings at the time of the discussed incident and at the time of interview. The simple question *"how did that make you feel?"* proved surprisingly effective in revealing deeper feelings. However, crying and other physical symptoms of upset were rare, and only occurred when interviews were occurring in a private space. Whether being in a private space allowed for this expression of emotion, or that these fathers predicted they would be emotional during the interview and therefore arranged to meet in a private space. When this level of upset was demonstrated I reassured fathers that they did not have to continue with the interview.

Being grateful for being able not only to speak of their 'stories' but also being prompted to develop their understanding of their emotions was discussed toward the end of a large number of interviews, or in follow up emails post-interview: *"It's been quite interesting talking to you actually, cos a lot of it I haven't actually thought about."* (Joshua). Miller (2015) found that fathers whom she interviewed remarked that they enjoyed the interviews and an opportunity to 'think' about their experiences of fatherhood, that they perhaps couldn't with friends. Similarly, in this study, numerous men remarked that they had seldom or never shared their experiences or feelings about their separation and their role as a father to the extent they did during our interview, something Arendell (1997) found in her study of divorced fathers in the USA as well. As expressed by Francis in this study: *"Like I said, I clam up a bit, I don't, this [interview] is like something massive for me, to do this, I don't normally talk"*. Narrative construction involves retelling stories of personal change which can be difficult to voice - reflexive retelling can be 'catalyst' to revisiting unhappy or private experiences. However, narration can allow for 'making sense' and people can develop positive

understandings of negative situations (Birch and Miller, 2000). Calum felt that reflecting on the four years of being a non-resident father made him relive difficult memories, but he also appreciated being required to do so:

> I haven't had to think about all of this for some time, but it felt good to rethink about things that have happened the last four years. It's not been very easy... (Calum)

Asking someone to talk about their life is asking someone to translate their sense of 'self' into language (Birch and Miller, 2000). Retelling past experiences can be an opportunity for reconstructing narratives and different understandings of the past, present and future. This was evident for Simon who expressed how the interview had made him re-evaluate his approach to requesting a change to care for his daughters:

> I think I have gained from this research, cos I have spoken about it in a unbiased way, and it's also opened my eyes to a lot of the things that I can do more of, or you know, like I never really thought so much as I have in this conversation about "yeah, maybe I should push for more access, maybe I should bite the bullet and do it" rather than being comfortable, maybe I need to take that risk? And without sitting down and talking about it with you today, I may not have had that. (Simon)

In a study of divorced men, Arendell (1997) recognised that men who participated in an interview may well have an agenda, that they may be angry and use the interview to express their displeasure with their ex-wife or other women. This was also a concern that I felt when recruiting participants particularly when reading the narratives of some 'Fathers' Rights' groups online. However, the 'agenda' that participants came to the interview with appeared to be to talk about their children and to talk about themselves. Whilst there was discussion of their ex-partners and feelings of unfairness in post-separation parenting, this was rarely done in an overtly sexist or derogatory manner. There could be a number of explanations for this difference; perhaps because my study is over 20 years after Arendell's and overt expressions of sexism are less appropriate, or perhaps because Arendell's study was more focussed on divorce, whereas this study had been positioned strongly as a study of fatherhood.

4.5.3   Reflections on myself as a perceived 'outsider' to the group of study

It must be recognised that the researcher has an impact upon all stages of the research process, from choosing the initial study aims to interpreting and presenting the findings (Mason, 2002). Reflexivity and being an 'active researcher' mean more than just listening and responding appropriately in an interview; it means having an awareness of your personal understandings, beliefs, prejudices, and world view (Arendell, 1997). Within reflexivity discussions, some authors have discussed the concept of 'insider' and 'outsider'. It can be argued that the personhood of a researcher, and whether they can be considered inside or outside the

group of study, is an *"essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation"* (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 55). Being an 'insider' can allow for shared identity, language, and experience between participants and researcher, which can give legitimacy to the researcher and help with recruitment as people may feel it easier to take part in a study where they are talking to someone who is in a similar position (Asselin, 2003). My status as a young woman was an initial and obvious sign of difference upon meeting the 24 participants that had face-to-face interviews, and participants could thus perceive me as an 'outsider' to their lived experience. An interesting reflection on fathers desiring to understand my 'insider-outsider' status was that only two participants enquired whether I was a parent. Perhaps this was due to my relatively young age and my disclosed status as a [PhD] student, or perhaps that it was easier for participants to build a connection with me as the child of separated parents[3]. Of the two who did ask if I was a parent, one was a phone interviewee and the other a 'young' father a similar age to me.

Morgan (2011, p. 8) recognises that everyone has strong views on 'family' as well as personal and social knowledge and assumptions due to everyone being involved in family relationships; this could be through the family they grew up in, the family relations they currently have, or relationships and family practices portrayed in public media. As such, when researching family and family practices, it can be difficult to separate one's own views of family from research on families. When researching family, the researcher or observer is deeply implicated in the topic area and should be aware of their understandings of family practices during the research process. As such, one cannot forget what they know and pretend to be unknowledgeable about the subject area – whilst it is difficult to argue that any researcher goes 'into the field' as an 'outsider', completely unknowledgeable about their topic, especially if they have done prior reading about the topic, it is particularly difficult to claim to be an 'outsider' when researching family life. Experiencing parental separation as a young child and subsequently being raised by a lone father will have shaped my understanding of fatherhood and constructions of family.

Notions of similarity and differences (or insider-outsider status) between participants and researcher are recognised as complex because this positions the participants as a distinctive group that I, as the researcher, am not connected to. The multidimensional and situated nature of one's identity means that factors other than parental status can produce recognisable similarities (and difference) between participants and I. Factors such as age, ethnicity, class, education and hobbies are all conceivable points of similarity between two people, potentially making two participants distinctly 'different' despite their perceived similarity as

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[3] I was happy to explain to participants that my parents had separated when I was a child, if they asked.

members of the group of 'non-resident father'. Conducting research in the city I had lived in for over a decade meant that during interviews aspects of shared experiences emerged such as shared neighbourhoods, favourite parks, frequented pubs or cafes, and supporting the same (or rival!) football club. Therefore, a binary distinction between 'insider' or 'outsider' should be considered as overly simplistic when exploring the relationship between the researcher and participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 62). Instead, a critical reflexive lens that considers and challenges the researcher's assumptions and shaping of the research and an approach which prioritises the participants' perspectives should be aimed for.

One of these lenses was recognising gender differences between the researcher and participants. Most significantly, is that my tacit knowledge about being a man and a father comes from interaction with others and in relation to social discourses and normative models of parenting, rather than through first-hand experience. My experiences in society more broadly as a woman places me at a distinctive 'outsider' to the male experience. However, experiences of being raised primarily by my father and the more-encompassing parenting role that he took will have no doubt influenced my embedded assumptions around parenting, and any differences that exist between mothers and fathers. Not being a parent also means that I do not have lived experiences of mothering. Moreover, studying a plethora of academic literatures relating to fatherhood in the year prior to interviews gave me interesting insights into fatherhood that I did not consider before undertaking this research. Whilst this range of factors meant that my positioning as an 'outsider' to the participant group was not under question, my understanding of the interaction between gender and parenting throughout the research process had been highly influenced by my own lived experiences. As discussed earlier in the chapter this research aimed to not apply 'maternal standards' of care to fatherhood. In order to do so, I had to frequently reflect on my gendered understandings whilst interviewing participants, and whilst analysing and 'writing up' this work.

Qualitative interviews are a distinct type of social relationship, that involve many aspects such as power, friendship, reciprocity and shared understandings (Birch and Miller, 2000). Given that society is stratified by gender, it was interesting for me to explore the potential power dynamics of being a woman who was studying men. Arendell (1997) discusses how in cases of women researching men, the usual power imbalances of society can shift because of a woman's 'expertise' with respect to the topic being discussed and the female researcher's initiation of the study. However, the topic of conversation, being a father, was one that my participants had knowledge and experience of. An interesting development was that because participants knew I had interviewed other fathers, there was a perception that I had an in-depth understanding of what they were discussing by virtue of having chosen this topic of study and having talked

about the topic with many other fathers. This was done through expressions such as *"…as you know"*, *"I'm sure you get this, and have heard this…"* and *"…which you understand, of course"* during interviews.

In terms of reflexivity, methods of being reflexive throughout the research process included inviting follow up discussions in interviews to check my understanding and assumptions of what was being said; questioning myself in data analysis when I was making judgements or interpreting data, and by keeping a research journal as a tool for aiding this reflection. However, I recognised that there are limits to the extent that I could be aware of myself and the influences I had on the research, both when I was preparing for the fieldwork, conducting interviews, analysing data and the year that followed writing this thesis. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argue that it is more useful to consider 'degrees of reflexivity', with some influences being easier to identify and articulate at the time of your work, whilst others take time, distance and detachment from the research project to recognise. I recognise that after this thesis is submitted, new reflections will become apparent that I may wish could have been included.

4.6   Data analysis and the process of 'writing up'

The final section of the chapter will explore the process of analysing data and organising it into a form appropriate to structure the rest of this thesis. Thematic analysis is *"a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data"* (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This flexible method of analysis is useful for providing rich description of data when investigating under-researched topics. Using thematic analysis as a means of data analysis is not to summarise the data content, but rather to identify, and interpret, the key features or themes of the research data, guided by the research questions (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Within this project, the use of themes allowed for comparisons to be drawn between participants' understandings of their role as a father, and in relation to wider societal and governmental expectations of fathers and parents. Analysis also explored if there were patterns in factors that facilitate or inhibit fathering practices.

The process of data analysis occurred in a somewhat logical manner but involved reforming and reflecting throughout the process. The first step of analysis occurred during data collection when I made notes and reflected upon my early impressions of the data. Next was the process of transcribing interviews, and through which I re-experienced the interview encounters, prompting further reflections to be made. After this, a full reading of all interviews was carried out where I noted down the significant issues and anything I thought would make for themes or potential codes. I combined these reflections with notes made immediately after interviews and during transcription. Through this familiarisation with the data, and

through the aide of NVivo 'mind map' feature I then gave consideration as to how these codes could be organised into thematic groupings. This process led me to feel more confident in the salient topics within my data, and I then progressed to coding using NVivo as an aide. Through coding and re-reading each transcript, a handful of additional codes were added to the overall list. Writing of findings chapters occurred after this, with the first iteration of 'writing up' aiming to organise interview extracts in a coherent order and begin to develop arguments. Each of these three chapters were then discussed with my primary supervisor and led to a second iteration of writing which aimed to reduce the volume of data and focus on developing arguments. At this point it was decided that the initial plan to have one chapter about 'social relationships' should be split into two separate but complimentary chapters due to a different focus between the two 'new' chapters. This fluid approach to analysis allowed for flexibility in including and excluding themes and data based upon discussion and reflection to the data and the research questions. After investing time in learning how to use the software, NVivo was a useful tool in organising and visualising my codes, and also aided the often messy and complex process of coding interview transcripts (Zamawe, 2015).

It can be argued that reflexivity has largely been considered in theory construction and data collection stages, as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argue that when considering analysis methods, one should not assume, as it is common to do, that analysis methods are neutral and mechanical and the individual carrying out the analysis is objective in their values. Methods of analysis cannot be considered to be neutral because they carry the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions of the researchers who developed them. Computer aided programmes for qualitative data analysis, such as NVivo used in this project, can further confer a sense of scientific objectivity to the process. Discussing how themes 'emerge' or are 'discovered' from the data is a passive account of analysis and denies the active role that the researcher plays in identifying, selecting and reporting themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Whilst there is a tendency to assume analysis only begins after data collection, analysis - or the process of making meaning from the data - is a continuous process beginning at the start of research as I had thought about potential codes or themes throughout the research process.

Moreover, when presenting data, particularly interview data and extracts, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) argue that there can be a tendency to assume that participants' voices 'speak on their own' and simplify the complex processes of representing the 'voices' of respondents which is mediated through the choices made by the researcher. To implicitly believe one has captured *the* voices of respondents and is telling *their* stories is assuming that what a person said in an interview context gives us direct access to their subjectivity and lived experiences. However, through an awareness of an interpretivist epistemological approach, it can be

seen that the data presented, and arguments constructed in the following chapters are based upon my interpretation of participants' interpretations of their own lives.

When selecting which data to present in the thesis, the nature of qualitative research suggests that the importance of a theme is not related to quantifiable measures, but whether it captures something important in relation to the research questions. However, whilst the relevance to the research questions was a paramount consideration of the research, the prevalence of a theme was undoubtedly considered as important, as can be seen in my using phrases such as 'many participants said...' or counting the number of participants. There was around 40 hours of interview for the 26 participants, resulting in approximately 250,000 words in transcripts. In order to reduce this data into meaningful findings, selections were made about what to include. I chose to include data based on what was most commonly said, what related to research questions and also what I thought was interesting. Moreover, when choosing specifically what interview extracts to include, decisions were made based upon the perceived relevance of a quote, the ability to convey meaning, but also the articulation of the participant. Whilst efforts have been made to include extracts from all participants, it should be noted that I felt some participants had better abilities to express themselves in more succinct ways than others. It was difficult to resist the temptation to rely on certain participants' extracts over others. However, I felt a sense of duty to include extracts from all participants across the following chapters. A final feature demonstrating to me how the data I am presenting is not a direct replication of people's interviews is that in a couple of occasions, people shared 'secrets' with me that they admitted had not been told to anyone else. These of course shaped the research findings, but I chose not to include many of these 'secrets' and if they were shared, they were done so without the corresponding pseudonym to further increase anonymity. As such, even though information given in interviews is known to be shared for the purpose of research, I have made a conscious decision based upon ethical principles to not share all data.

4.7   Conclusion

This chapter has explored the methodological logic underpinning this research and the practical methods employed to collect and analyse data. As aforementioned, the research aims of this study meant the overarching methodology of this research took a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews in order to hear 'stories' of non-resident fatherhood. Analysis of data and consideration to the research questions meant the data was divided into four thematic chapters. The first of these, in the following chapter, explores fathers' accounts of becoming and being a non-resident father. This chapter introduces the first of

three overarching findings of the research; demonstrating moral narratives of being 'good fathers' and demonstrating a child-centred approach which resonates with socially recognised normative discourses of fatherhood and parenthood are a key concern for non-resident fathers. However, non-resident fathers face unique challenges in performing notions of 'good fatherhood', and the next chapter introduces the complexity and diversity found across the sample.

Chapter 5: Negotiating and experiencing becoming and being a non-resident father

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of four findings and analysis chapters and explores fathers' accounts of becoming and being a non-resident father. This topic was chosen to be presented first because, reflecting research question one, exploring fathers' perspectives of becoming, and more significantly being a non-resident father will work toward exploring how men perceive and practise their role as fathers in the context of being a non-resident father. This chapter will demonstrate how majority of the fathers provided moral narratives of being 'good fathers' which resonate with socially recognised normative discourses of fatherhood and parenthood. Presenting a child-centred approach and making relational decisions inclusive of their children (and children's mothers) highlight how fathers' practices can be considered similar to those faced by resident fathers. However, this chapter will highlight some of the unique challenges that non-resident fathers face in performing notions of 'good fatherhood', both as a collective, but also in relation to their unique situations. Family profiles, including fathers' pseudonyms, their age, and the age, pseudonym and location of their children are available in Appendix 1.

This chapter centres around normative narratives that are perceived and negotiated by fathers in the sample. The first narrative discussed is the notion of normative childhoods and families; this is primarily focused upon maintaining heteronormative two-parent families, and how minimising variance from this norm can be tied to 'good' parenting practices. The second is discussions of 'normal' family practices, particularly the 'normal' actions of parents, and how being a non-resident father is considered as potentially restricting fathers' abilities to enact 'normal' fatherhood. The term 'normal' was repeatedly referred to by the majority of the sample when discussing fathering practices, and as such what is meant by 'normal' parenthood/fatherhood and why this is important to non-resident fathers will be explored. Care routines, particularly not caring for children overnight and only during the weekend inhibits fathers' perceived abilities to care for their children in the way they wish, leading to insecurities about the stability of their role as a father. However, expressions of the positive opportunities that come from solo parenting, particularly close relationships with children highlight how fathers' emotions toward non-residency are marked by complexity.

This chapter first explores the multiple and varied routes fathers in the sample took to non-resident fatherhood, followed by these fathers' reflections on this. In line with the aforementioned research questions, a large section of this chapter explores fathers' understandings of their fathering role when non-resident. This includes the perceived importance of emotional and geographical closeness to children and how this improves ability to perform 'good' fatherhood and 'be there' for their children. This section also includes discussion of how parenting an older child can provide additional elements of consideration for non-resident fathers. Discussion of desires to perform perceived 'mundane' acts of fathering highlights how home is considered an essential act of fatherhood. The final section of this chapter explores how fathers feel time, and the limited time afforded by their non-resident status both limits interaction and ability to 'be there' for children, whilst simultaneously leading to a perceived improvement in relationships as limited time is regarded as 'high quality' or 'intensive' time.

5.2   Paternal accounts of becoming a non-resident father

In terms of exploring routes to becoming a non-resident father, all participants had been in a romantic relationship with their children's mother, although the length of these ranged from 25 years to 'on-off' relationships of less than a year. In terms of routes into non-resident fatherhood, of 26 participants there was a total of 30 parental relationships that included children which ended in separation. Two fathers had non-resident children from two relationships, and one father had non-resident children from three relationships. The table below shows the 30 routes into non-resident fatherhood and the age of the eldest child at point of parental separation. In total, there were three cases of becoming non-resident before children were born, seven cases when children were under two years old, seven when children were in the pre-school years (two to four years old), nine when children were primary school aged (five to 10 years old), and four when the eldest child was in the early years of secondary school (11 to 13 years old). It is worth noting however, that for the three fathers who had non-resident children from more than one relationship, interviews focussed only on the relationship with one ex-partner and their shared children. This was because for Tim, he was estranged from his eldest child and her mother (aged 12), and focussed on his nine-year-old son Luke. Connor had one adult child Katie, and another daughter Ellie whom he had very little contact with. He therefore primarily discussed his youngest daughter Amy, and the relationship with Amy's mother in our interview. At the time of interview Dominic had a very young child, but he explained how the relationship between he and his daughter's mother was very complicated, as was the pattern for visiting his daughter. His interview focussed on his two older children. Therefore, going forward in this thesis, 26 father-child(ren) relationships will be discussed.

Table 5.1: A table showing the routes to non-resident fatherhood in the sample			
Type of relationship at separation	**Count**	**Age of eldest child at parental separation**	**Count**
Marriage	10	Under 2 years	3
		2-4 years	2
		5-10 years	3
		11-13 years	2
Cohabiting	14	Under 2 years	3
		2-4 years	3
		5-10 years	6
		11-13 years	2
Non-cohabiting or not in a relationship	6	Before birth	3
		Under 2 years	1
		2-4 years	2
Totals	30		30

Among the participants that had separated post-marriage or cohabitation, the decision-making process of which parent would become the non-resident parent was not described in detail. Instead, when discussing the initial separation, there appeared to be an unspoken or assumed perception that children would either stay in the family home with their mother, or if their mother moved out children would go with her. This was noted through comments such as "'*she moved away and, of course, the children went with her*" (Martin) and Ivan:

> Abbie's mum's reaction to us splitting up was to move out the house we shared, and I wasn't told about this until after it happened and she decided she'd move and take Abbie with her, of course…

Despite describing how he felt he took a more active or "hands' on" role in his son's early years, Joshua told me how upon separation, he moved out of the shared home and to his parents 20 miles away. When describing their separation, only one father in the sample described resisting his children's mother becoming the primary carer: Euan's children remained living with him in the family home after he separated from their mother after a 15-year relationship. In the interview, Euan stated that although in the early days he had majority care of his children, he considered this an unusual arrangement in comparison to other separated parents, and expected this to change toward a shared-care or minority care pattern for him:

As a dad, you kind of feel sometimes that you are almost expected to have them weekends, and they stay with their mum the rest of the time. That's how it was when I was a kid and my mum and dad split up. So, I think I always knew it wasn't going to stay that way, and I always expected it to get to 50-50, and even then, I always thought "if she gets 50-50, she will probably take more". So, it's not made me happy, but it's what I expected to happen. And I can see it from the kid's point of view, they do want to spend just as much time with her as they do with me. (Euan)

These widespread assertions reflect traditional maternal and paternal caring roles, and only one case of resisting these roles suggesting that post-separation, amongst the sample there was extensive conforming to perceived 'norms' of parental separation. Whilst interviews did not expand upon the acceptance of becoming the non-resident parent, fathers did go into much deeper discussions of the broader processes of parental separation.

5.2.1   Reflections on parental separation

The reasons provided for relationships ending were multiple and varied, but three groupings can be distinguished: fathers initiating separation, mothers initiating separation, and mutual agreement. Explanations for separation included frequent parental arguments, differences in parenting, feelings of 'drifting apart', adultery and parental addiction. Isolating who left whom in separation and pinpointing a specific 'reason' could lead to over-simplification of the often-complex processes that lead to separation. Narratives of fathers can only provide a partial account of what can be considered the 'shared reality' of separation. Moreover, the intricacies of parental separation are not the focus of this thesis.

For fathers who initiated separation, their decision was typically described as being considered during a prolonged situation of unhappiness in their relationships and feeling that negative emotions 'built up' to a point where separation was the only solution. Poor parental relationships, and low parental wellbeing, were considered as potentially impacting children's wellbeing; fathers Joshua and Francis talked about making the choice to separate in order to benefit their children, themselves and their ex-partner:

My ex has quite a strong personality, she tends be quite loud and she tends to argue a lot. That was why I drew a line under our marriage, that was when I left home, our family home, when I was starting to get shouted at in front of Charlie, I was like "no, this isn't how I want to bring Charlie up" so that's when we separated and that was the grounds for our divorce. (Joshua)

I used to go into their rooms and look at them and think "I can't leave", cos I knew I needed to for ages, but I thought "I can't leave them [kids]" but it just got to a point where I was that upset and sad and I felt that I could improve mine and [ex-wife's] lives, and therefore the children's lives if we split (Francis)

Where fathers had been more instrumental in separation, the wellbeing of their children appeared centred around not being exposed to conflict between parents. In contrast, when fathers felt less instrumental in separation decisions, their concerns over child wellbeing tended to focus around children not benefitting from having a two-parent household.

> I knew that we weren't getting on very well, but that came as a big shock. I was from a broken home and wanted to have a good family life, I put a lot of value in that. There was nobody else involved, and I was devastated at her decision [to separate]. (Paul)

Across the sample when discussing separation, it was not uncommon to reflect upon their own family structure during their childhood and upbringing. Seven participants discussed how they were raised in two-parent family households and had wished to replicate this for their own children: *"… my parents are still together, so that's how I have formed my ideas of family"* (Daniel). Feeling as if a two-parent birth family household is best for children and should be maintained, meant that becoming a non-resident father triggered feelings of guilt, and disappointment, independent of who triggered separation. A further eight participants who discussed the potential negativity of parental separation, discussed growing up with separated parents; like Paul above, and Euan below, reflections of not wishing to have their children grow up with separated families like they did, were expressed:

> I think it is always better to be from that kind of conventional nuclear family of mum, dad and two kids. So yeah, I do, I always feel that it's been inflicted on the kids by the parents who just weren't very good at managing their relationship. (Euan)

Euan's initial extract and Ivan's below introduce the notion that fathers feared separation would reduce time with their children. When reflecting on his own childhood - his parents separated shortly after his birth – Ivan said he felt very aware that ending his marriage would result in long periods of time apart from his daughter. He told me that his ex-wife asked to go to mediation before officially separating, saying: "*let's have some mediation, what about Abbie?",* which made him reflect on the decision:

> So, when it was mentioned about Abbie, I had second thoughts, I thought again about, having been brought up by my mum, when my dad left when I was six months old, I know it leaves a mark and I was beginning to come around to the idea of mediation. (Ivan)

Being unable to maintain a two-parent household for their children appears driven by notions of normative childhoods and families. Raising children in a two-parent family appeared to be the ideal across much of the sample, something that is particularly interesting for fathers who themselves grew up with separated parents. However, as will be demonstrated by an extract from Nick below, these notions of 'good' family configuration can be readjusted over time. This also reflects broader notions of fathers in other fatherhood

studies desiring to 'do better' than their own father and display more emotionally involved and intensive fathering (see Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2007; Miller, 2011a)

Nick separated from his daughters' mother shortly before his daughter turned one year old; in the interview he discussed how around the time of birth, he found out that she had been unfaithful. He told me that he spent his daughter's first year worrying not only that he was not the biological father of his daughter, but also that if he was, he would be *"labelled as a deadbeat [dad]"* if he did choose to separate. What's more, Nick spoke about how important it was for him to bring his daughter up in a two-parent family, as this was his upbringing and he felt it the best for a child. He explained that after a year he came to the decision to leave:

> I wanted to make it work. Like, I really wanted to make it work. I thought "I have just had a child with this person, and this child deserves both parents" but then I realised, as time went on, that you can still be good parents and not be together. You don't have to be together to be a great dad or a great mum. (Nick)

Whilst initially wishing to conform to the norms of family that had been demonstrated to him, after a period of reflection, rejecting of these norms appear to have given Nick the confidence to separate. Oliver, father to a four-year-old daughter, appeared to contrast many others in the sample because he demonstrated challenges to the normative model of family:

> My mum and dad separated before I was even born, so the person I consider my dad isn't actually my biological dad, but that never made any difference to me, because he was always around.

Oliver did not see being a father to a non-resident child as inherently problematic either, and on reflecting on his own experiences of being a separated father to his sister who is a co-resident parent, he explained that *"when you boil it down, there isn't that much special about separated families, just spread across two buildings".* This suggests that Oliver considers family ties to extend beyond biological and geographical ties that other fathers in this sample are more closely aligned with.

There appears to be a moral imperative to display that they are doing what is best for children shared across these groupings of fathers, whether that is attempting to maintain a two-parent family or reducing children's exposure to parental conflict. With regards to exposing children to the conflict and disruption that comes from parental separation, the age of children was considered significant; separating when their children were of an age that they would not remember the separation and could not recall their parents living in one home was routinely considered as the best solution to managing relationship breakdown:

> She is only 4, and I guess the advantage of it happening so early, is that our family situation is normal to her. I think if it had happened later on, it probably would have been a more difficult thing, but because it has happened when she was so young, this is just normality to her. This isn't weird or unusual, it's just how it is. (Oliver)

> I think she is, like I said, so used to the situation, that's all she knows. It's not like we are taking anything away from her or changing anything. This is always the way it has been between me and her. (Calum)

This suggests that whilst living with separated parents is seen as negative for children, it is the disruption that comes from separation that is considered the most significant negative factor. Graham explained he purposely separated when his daughter was still a toddler:

> I am the one who left, at the end of the day it was my decision, although it had been building up between the two of us for a long time. And one of the factors was, she was about 18 months old, so she would never have remembered life another way, and even now it seems like a very mercenary way of thinking about it, but in the long term it has turned out well. (Graham)

With over half the sample separating before their eldest was four years old, wishing to present a sense of stability for children could be a consideration other fathers in the sample gave[4]. Giving children stability could offset the potential troubles associated with parental separation, demonstrating commitment to reducing potential negative wellbeing for their children. Moreover, managing contact arrangements with younger children was considered easier, as younger children have less decision-making power, as will be expanded upon later in this chapter. Separating when children are in the early years of secondary school was considered as potentially problematic by all four fathers who separated when their eldest child was over 10 years old; in their experience, older children can find it harder to adapt to new family relationships, and care arrangements can be difficult to agree on. Adam, father to a 14-year-old, separated two years prior to the interview and reflected on the difficulties setting up a stable care routine: *"I strongly believe if she had been 7, let's say, that things would have been a damn sight easier"*. Another considerable factor when discussing children's wellbeing in relation to family configuration, was a widespread assertion that family configuration will have a long-term effect on children's wellbeing. Tied into anxieties of failing to maintain a family unit were fears that having separated parents would have a detrimental effect on children's abilities to form lasting romantic relationships in their adult life.

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[4] The early years and the additional stress having a baby can place on a relationship could also be considered as an explanatory factor in separation when children are still young, and Kieran and Graham specifically referenced how they felt having a young child exacerbated longstanding relationship difficulties.

> I do kind of worry what their attitudes toward relationships will be as they get older - so I quite often make the point of when I see families all together in the same house, saying: "you see, not everyone splits up. That's the norm and we are the unusual ones". Not in a bad way, just that most parents do make it. (Euan)

> I am sad that they have never seen their mum or dad in a happy relationship. And I think that that is not great for them venturing into their own relationships. I think when two people work collaboratively, love each other and enjoy each other's company, handle tough things, and the small things, I fear they haven't got a model for that. (Paul)

Concerns of intergenerational transmission of parental separation suggests that from the perspective of the fathers involved in this study, demonstrating 'successful' romantic relationships is a task of parents and another feature of 'good' parenting. Considering that their actions will have a direct outcome on children's wellbeing both in the immediate term but also long-term reflects arguments in policy making that parental input has significant impact on children's outcomes, particularly with regards to family structure. This reflects discussions in the literature review of the intensification of parenthood; rhetoric of how parenting and family practices can positively or negatively influence children's welfare appears to have permeated into these fathers' thinking (see Walker, 2013).

This introductory section has highlighted how for many fathers in the sample, normative models of family - two-parents linked by biology – dominated their sentiments toward becoming a non-resident father. Expressions of ensuring children's wellbeing before and after separation introduces notions of child-centred parenting. However, there were few expressions of how caring roles were decided after separation, with an almost widespread acceptance of fathers being the secondary caregiver.

5.3   Understanding the fathering role of non-resident fathers

5.3.1   'Being there' as a non-resident father

Within contemporary studies of fatherhood, much has been discussed about the intimate and involved nature of the child-centred approach to parenting. This is seen as contrasting to more traditional approaches to fatherhood where men predominantly focused on their authority or breadwinner role. This section will take a step back from these generalised views and examine in an in-depth manner the ways in which fathers constructed and narrated their values and practices as 'good fathers'. An overarching theme is the moral narrative of 'doing what is best for children' in the circumstances one has as a parent, and how doing what they think is best is central in their actions as a (non-resident) father. A prominent theme was accounts of 'sacrifice' and 'selflessness' in order to be a 'good' father. Tim explained what he thought were the central tenets of being a 'good dad':

Tim: So, I am trying to be the best dad that I can be before they grow older.

Interviewer: What do you mean when you say: 'best dad'?

Tim: Someone who is there for their children, someone who understands their children, someone who loves their children, does things with them, does things for them, looking after them, even if they are not there, just being there, being present and available.

'Being there' and being present and available were expressed as prominent markers of being a 'good father' in this study. Whilst 'being there' for resident fathers in other studies necessitate being in the same household as a marker of 'being there' (Dermott, 2008), within this sample of non-resident fathers, 'being there' encompassed a broader role. Being contactable when not together, and being fully present when in the same space, demonstrate to children that their father is 'there' for them, and that 'being there' is able to traverse physical time together. To be expanded upon later in this chapter, increasing phone and online communication improves this 'being there'. For Francis, who told me of the ongoing difficulties arranging a care routine for his teenage sons, 'being there' means being involved in their activities, driving his sons to sports as well as school whenever they ask, and being the manager of his son's football team. He outlines to me his usual weekly routine with his sons which involved transporting them to three different football teams, two swimming groups, visiting family on Mondays and spending time together on Saturdays. He links their desire to have lifts to school or friends as an expression of their need for emotional support:

Francis: I like it when they ask me [for lifts].

Interviewer: Why do you like it?

Francis: Cos I feel like they want me to do something with them, they want to see me. Cos rather than saying "Dad, I am missing you, I'd really like to see you" they are getting me to do something for them, where I've got to see them. Do you understand that? It's like, they probably wouldn't ever say "Dad, I really miss you" but they would say "Dad, can you take me to school in the morning?" when they don't need me to.

As such, in his life, despite having no overnight care for his sons, outside of work, much of his time is spent with his sons, and he tells me how he "drops everything" and cancels his social events to give his sons transport. Therefore, it can be seen that non-resident fathers in this study have constituted their own understanding of 'being there' for their children that whilst similar to resident fathers is directly associated with being non-resident. Presenting his needs as secondary to his child's needs and fitting one's life in around children is an emotion Vince reported when reflecting on his daughter's birth 14 years prior: *"when she was born, I told myself "it's not about you anymore, you are secondary for at least the next 18*

years."…". Joshua also presents his time management as evidence of his child-centred practices, comparing his decisions to his ex-wife's:

> Generally speaking, I think I have arranged my life around Charlie up until this point, and that if a hobby clashed with Charlie's needs, I just wouldn't do it. Whereas [ex-wife], rightly or wrongly so, if there was a clash she would just try and somehow work around it somehow, she would find some way of managing so she could still do her thing. (Joshua)

These child-centred narratives presented by fathers can be considered as presenting a moral narrative of good fatherhood, which positions children as priorities, and fathers, whether living with children or not, should position themselves as secondary. Another interesting case of fathers prioritising children's needs is presented when Robert discusses managing his sons' birthdays. Robert cares for his two sons every Saturday and Sunday but explained to me that his ex-partner wished to be with the children on their birthday every year, even if the birthday fell on a weekend:

> Robert: A couple of times when we first split up, I asked to speak to them on their birthdays and she said no, so I have not bothered asking again as I am not going to give her the power as to whether she can say yes or no. I just make sure now, that whether it is before or after their birthday, whichever weekend, that we do something special then and they know that I am thinking of them on their birthdays.
>
> Interviewer: So, do you get to see them on their birthday?
>
> Robert: Well it depends when it is, and if it's at the weekend, but say they have a birthday party on a Saturday, I will forfeit my Saturday, so that they can have a party with all their friends at hers, and we will just go out for pizza on the Sunday.

Robert 'forfeiting' his time with his sons even on their birthday so that they can have a party with their friends demonstrates a child-centred action and making sure his children knew he was thinking of them on their birthday by planning a special event demonstrates how he shows his sons he is 'there' for them. Whether through phone calls, sacrifice of their time and hobbies or performing strategies like Robert to demonstrate to children their centrality, non-resident fathers in the sample appeared to be adapting and negotiating their performance of 'being there' as a non-resident father. Fathers demonstrating the hard work they do to exhibit their connection with their children, both to their children, but to those around (and in the interview) perhaps demonstrates potential vulnerabilities fathers feel in relation to being considered as 'absent' from their children's lives. This reflects ideas presented in the literature (Philip, 2010) that non-resident fathers who continue to have a relationship with their children may feel the need to display this commitment in order to be recognised as displaying a commitment to their role as a father and moral or societal expectations of fatherhood.

5.3.2 Closeness and emotional connection

Whilst fathers discussed how hobbies and social activities are put aside to put children's needs first, they also pointed to the role of sharing hobbies and having similar interests as a means of improving father-child relationships and demonstrating to children a connection to their father. At times, comparing themselves to their children's mother, and questioning if they were in fact 'closer' or more involved with their children was something also expressed:

> I think because of the activities we do together, and also because we are actually quite similar in our interests and personalities, you know, I think, well maybe it's not fair to say this, but I almost feel like I understand him a bit more that his mother does, because he reminds me of what I was like as a child. (Brian)

> I think it's a cognitively good relationship, because she is academically minded, she is inquisitive, she is thoughtful, she is reflective, she is questioning, and so we can talk about things … And what I feel is a deep rapport with her, that is healthy, and I think it's mutual. (Ivan)

Ivan goes on to explain how he feels he is *"in tune"* with his daughter and how their close relationship is demonstrated through affection: *"I think it's very loving [relationship], not afraid, neither of us are afraid of a cuddle, or a kiss, and that physical demonstration of affection, and love"*. Similarly, to previous studies of fatherhood discussed in the literature review, having, and celebrating, a close emotional bond with one's child can be considered as central to men's sense of fatherhood. Building and maintaining a strong emotional bond with children whilst being a non-resident father was discussed in 23 of the 26 interviews. Children telling fathers their problems and 'opening up' was considered a positive marker of a close father-child emotional bond. Children being excited to see their dad, and sad to leave them, was also perceived as demonstrating a close father-child bond:

> When you see her tired and she comes to you, she sees you as the person to come to, for a hug, or a cuddle, or someone to sleep on. So that's really important, to know that, to have that relationship, to know what she thinks and feels about me. And just seeing her happy; when I pick her up from school, she will run to me, jump on me and give me a big hug, which is so great. (Calum)

However, in over half of the interviews, physical distance from children, or inadequate care routines were cited as restricting fathers' abilities to demonstrate and perform closeness with their children:

> The main thing is just being able to say at the drop of a hat that I want to see them, especially when my daughter might ring up and she is having a tough time of it, and just needs a hug, and I am not there, and it's really awful that I can't do that. Or even just to say, "I'll be there tomorrow", I can't even do that without a whole bunch of organisation. (Dominic)

Dominic's major barrier was that he lived in a different country to his children and arranging leave from work and booking flights meant he could not decide to visit his children instantaneously. Daniel also expressed feelings of distance, despite living only 10 miles from his daughter:

> My idea of a dad? Well it's being able to be there for her, wherever, whenever and whatever I can do, I'll do it. But when you are 10 miles away and you have to go through the mother, it's a lot harder.

Daniel also suggest his ex-partner acts as an obstacle for enacting what he considered to be the crucial aspects of fathering. Francis cited his inability to care for his teenage sons at his own home as a restrictive factor in him forming close emotional bonds, but that he was also not welcome in his ex-wife's home to provide emotional comfort to his sons. He explained how his ex-wife frequently tells him that his sons are unhappy in the evening:

> I wish I could see it, and be there to help them, even if they won't come to me, let me come around and talk to them when they are unhappy, but she [ex-wife] won't let me have anything to do with that. (Francis)

For Francis, the lack of emotional support he can offer as a non-resident father might be particularly severe as he described his family as 'very close' before their divorce. A desire to be physically present suggests interconnectedness through phone and internet, whist helping communication, is not considered equivalent to face-to-face care. Although there was much discussion of love and adoration of children, one father in the study told me of feelings toward fatherhood that contrast popular narratives of the involved, playful father usually espoused in research conducted with fathers:

> I don't know if I am a really great dad, I'm very, about being a father, I am quite, I would say, it doesn't make me happy very much, I don't derive much emotional happiness from it. I do see it as a duty, and I do my best to look after Max and make sure that he has a good time. But I don't typically enjoy those times a lot. (Kieran)

What sets Kieran apart from many of the other participants was that he openly recognised that he does not enjoy many aspects of being a father. Perhaps surprisingly, at the time of interview he was fighting to reinstate a care-routine with his ex-wife of every-other-weekend care, rather than a few hours every-other-Sunday. He goes on from the previous quote to tell me:

> There is nothing within me saying "I want to do more stuff with Max" it's more like what Max is owed, that he is owed time with his father and knows that his father cares about him and that his extended family are there and care about him. I think it doesn't matter that the quality of it is great, or that we are not having an amazing time together, doing something that we both love, as much as that I am just there. And I think that's what he looks for, he wants my attention, he wants to do his own

thing, but when he looks round, he wants me to be there. I think he just wants his dad to be there, I don't think he wants anything more really. (Kieran)

He expresses desire to 'be there', be present but more importantly demonstrate an emotional connection to his son. Believing that it is in the best interests for children to see their father (and extended paternal family), and that emotionally close paternal-child relationships are developmentally positive for children challenges some 'fathers' rights' perspectives to non-resident fathers contact with children. Harry told me of his desires to increase his overnight care for Alice up from four nights a fortnight because he felt – and had read literature from developmental psychology to evidence his argument – that it was better for his daughter to have *"proper access to her dad"* and to have a *"proper dad".* This discussion of 'proper' in relation to increasing father-child time suggests that Harry's understanding of good fatherhood functions around overnight or long periods of time caring for his daughter. The positive experience of having a relationship with fathers was mentioned both for sons and daughters, as succinctly said by Daniel, father to a nine-year-old daughter: *"We don't have that much input at the start, but when it comes to growing up, I think we have a lot to input as dads.".* Brian also expresses his thoughts that his child 'needs' an 'involved' father but he also expresses how he benefits from being a father:

> It's always been my priority to think that he needs a father who is involved in his life, and I think there would be a big piece missing if he didn't have that. And I suppose I need him as well; it gives me a sense of purpose and wellbeing to be a dad really, so, you know, it's one of the most important things in my life. So, therefore, everything else fits around it. (Brian)

These examples suggest that fatherhood is central to these fathers' identities, and also how this relationship is considered as significantly affecting their wellbeing. It was felt that not only is it important for children to spend time with their father, but also, regardless of their age upon parental separation, children should know, and be connected to their biological father. A noticeable similarity between fathers of younger children, particularly where contact was minimal or infrequent, was fathers wishing for their children to have a clear idea and attachment to them:

> Yeah, and I've already talked to her mum about [increasing contact], and I've said: "I'm not gonna shy away, I want to spend more time with her, I want her to understand that Daddy wants to spend more time with her" cos we are building up to her maybe staying over at my house. (Connor)

> At the minute, I think I just want to get through six months at a time, just making sure that Holly knows that I am her dad and I'm here. (Oliver)

> She knows I am still her dad and I am still being that father-figure as much as I can in eight hours. (Simon)

Simon highlights that where contact is short or infrequent, being a father, and the status that comes with that is realised and practised only episodically when non-resident. The influence that care routines is felt to have on ability to perform fathering practices will be expanded upon in the next two subsections.

5.3.3   Staying 'close by'

For many fathers in the sample, expressions of their life 'fitting around' their children and decisions made in the interest of children were evident. This frequently interacted with discussions of home, housing and distance between of fathers' and mothers' houses. In the sample, only five fathers moved away from their child(ren)/child(ren)'s mother: one to return to his home country after living abroad with his ex-partner and children; one to his home city after separation; two for new job opportunities; and one to live closer to his existing job. A further four fathers reported that their children's mothers moved away after separation with their children, usually to live closer to maternal family members. Upon separation, when fathers who were co-resident with their children's mother moved from the family home, a transition period ranging from a few weeks to many months then followed. In this time, fathers lived with their parents, slept on friend's sofas or had temporary rentals. These short-term living situations could often take fathers some distance away from their children, and result in care routines in the proceeding months being minimal and/or chaotic. However, after this initial period of a months, fathers tended to settle into more permanent housing. The importance of staying 'close by' when choosing new housing or remaining in the family home post-separation ties closely to demonstrations of 'being there' for children in the previous section.

> I would not have a particular attachment to the city even though I have lived here for a long time. So, I would have felt freer [after divorce] to have gone and done anything and lived anywhere. But the fact that I've got a son at school and everything, it's very much rooted me here, at least until he is grown up really. (Fraser)

> I will always be around. I made the decision that I won't move further away from him; so, I had a job offer overseas, and I can't do it. So, my view is that I will be available to him until he is a lot older, until he is 18 or whatever, and I will make sure that I am living where he can find me. (Kieran)

Not moving away from children even when rewarding work opportunities arise can be considered an example of fathers showing sacrifice for their children. This contrasts rhetoric of non-resident fathers not prioritising their children when making decisions, and rhetoric of 'absent' fatherhood. Ensuring spatial proximity to their child's other parent was something not only expressed by non-resident fathers; Euan stayed in the family home post-separation and explained to me he was initially unhappy that his ex-partner had rented a home in the same neighbourhood:

Euan: I wasn't convinced at first when she said, "I'm moving in around the corner".

Interviewer: Why were you not convinced?

Euan: I just didn't want to bump into them in Sainsbury's, her and her boyfriend, or down the local pub, I just, I didn't want to see them. At the time, I was like could you move out the city towards where he is from? Logistically though, it is so much easier to just live close by, you can literally drop them off in two minutes, in the summer they can get from my house to [mum's] house by themselves.

Recognising the benefits of renting or buying in the same neighbourhood as children's mother when becoming a non-resident father, because not only could children walk between the two homes, but they could also travel to and from school and friends' homes without either parent having to drive. Euan's extract also demonstrates a narrative of abating fathers' emotional difficulties in favour of fore fronting children's needs. Whilst being close is cited as practical for making care arrangements, Robert recognises that for his sons, being close is a symbolic marker. Upon separation, Robert stayed in the family home, which is close to the sons' school and their mother's current home. He tells me how he is unhappy with the mortgage costs of his current home, and also would feel happier transferring work to a town about 30 miles away, and closer to his parents, but that his sons have reacted negatively to this:

I was looking to move about half way between the new town and here, and their perception was that I would be moving to Australia or something! They were like "no, you've got to stay where you are, we're not coming to see you if you are that far away!" and I'm thinking "mate, it's like 15 miles away, a half hour drive at the most". So yeah, I guess it is convenient being close, but it is more their perception of me being close. And I think, another thing they like, is that this is the house that they were brought up in, for a decent portion of their lives, and I have made it clear to them that "this is as much your house as it is mine, cos you lived here before we split up, and this is still your home" and they are just as relaxed and comfortable here.

Robert goes on to explain that upon separation, his ex-partner and their sons moved out and a turbulent local renting market has led to them moving home five times in five years, as well as moving in with a new partner, which subsequently broke down. As such, Robert feels like staying in one known home is a good for his sons and told me that friends and family had also advised he stay put in order to provide stability to his sons. As such, staying put in an expensive home and unhappy workplace is something Robert is choosing to do as he considers this as best for his children to be geographically and symbolically close. These extracts indicate that ensuring stability and familiarity of home, neighbourhood and town/city is important to many fathers in the sample. Efforts are made, either in collaboration with, or in reaction to, their children's mother's decisions, to keep a sense of stability for their children alongside the changes that come with parental separation. Housing and home - whether fathers continuing to stay in the family home, or fathers

find a home close enough to facilitate regular care for their children - appears to be the most significant feature of stability when becoming and being a non-resident father.

5.3.4 Managing relationships with older children

Reflecting on how things had changed and looking forward to the future and anticipating changes that may occur introduced an array of hopes, fears and predictions from fathers. In terms of the age of the 45 dependent[5] children of the fathers in the sample: eight were aged four years or under, 16 were aged five to 10 years old, another 16 were aged 10 to 15 years old and the final five children were aged 16 or over. Unsurprisingly, discussion of how relationships have changed or anticipation of how change would occur when children grow older, even from those with children younger than ten, occurred in many interviews.

> I feel more like I am getting to, it's very strange to say, cos I do know different, but getting towards 18, I am realising that my job is coming to an end, and I will begin to not see much of them. (William)

William's extract about his teenage sons highlights that being the parent to an older child is a time of major and rapid change. The child-centred approach discussed earlier in this chapter can be argued as resulting in fathers keeping their free time for their children. The choices fathers have made about romantic relationships will be explored further in the next chapter, but at this point it is worth noting that excitement of children gaining independence is also marked with worries about being alone. As only seven or the 26 participants were cohabiting or married, children growing older was not always a happy notion:

> I know the older she gets, she is going to have to work, be it part-time or full-time, she is going to have to study, she is going to want to spend more and more time with her friends, and her boyfriend. And I have friends a bit older than me, some who have had kids, some who haven't, and they are all on their own. I will go and visit them, and I'll look at them and think "god, is that going to be me in 10 years?" and that isn't a happy prospect. (Vince)

> One thing that kind of concerns me about the future, is that once Alice is a teenager, and she wants to go and spend time with her mates, what's going to happen to me? Maybe I will have more time for a relationship, and be able to invest time into that, in a way that I wasn't able to do with [recent relationship]. (Harry)

Similarly to resident fathers, potential teenage difficulties and communication difficulties were expressed, but the nature of limited father-child time was feared as exacerbating communication difficulties. Whilst Brian's son is still in late primary school, and he jests at a typical parent-teen falling out, he is conscious

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[5] Connor has an adult daughter who is no longer dependent, but there are three young adults (18-21) included as dependent children as they are still in fulltime education or university.

that the nature of his family set-up - living in the same neighbourhood as his ex-wife - could present problems in terms of managing teenage behaviour unlike co-resident families:

> Teenagers can be a bit funny, can't they? I could say something silly to him, that he takes offense to and then he will never speak to me again [laugh]. Those issues could come up, couldn't they? Like "well, I'll just go and live with my mum then!". So instead of storming off to his bedroom, he'll storm out the house and around the corner to his mum's. (Brian)

Moreover, limited time spent together means that disagreements could take up a higher proportion of time for non-resident fathers than co-resident, meaning limited 'quality time' with children was wasted. What's more, managing conflict with children as a lone parent was something Paul, father to four children aged 13-21, felt acutely:

> With being on your own, you notice that you just haven't got a partner in crime, so if they are being a bit shitty and snotty with you, particularly if it's a Sunday afternoon and they are going back and I am not seeing them again until Wednesday, you have to cope with that on your own, and at 10 and 12 you would send them a text to say "sorry we had a falling out" on the Sunday afternoon and they would reply "love you loads" with kisses. As teenagers, you will just let it go and it's not as easy to handle that. (Paul)

Other parents to teenagers such as Vince and Adam expressed how their children don't express their love to fathers in such observable ways. Whilst this was understood as a feature of being the parent to a teenager, coupled with being non-resident and seeing children infrequently, lesser emotional connection exacerbated feelings of emotional distance. Another significant finding that emerged when talking about the future and apprehensive feelings of change was a sense that fathers' actions and efforts with their children, both in the present and in preceding years would impact on the relationship that they have with their children in the teen and young adult years. The next extract from Oliver shows the insecurities that can be present amongst non-resident fathers, even those of very young children:

> My biggest paranoia through all of this is that I am not doing a good enough job as a dad, that I am fucking it up, and it's all well and good now that Holly is little, but when she is like 10, she won't give a shit. And that is the thing that scares me the most, more than anything, that because I am that little bit removed, unless these things are agreed and stable, she may get a little bit older and say "no, I don't want to go to dad's this weekend". I mean, she says that now, when she is 4, because that's what kids say, but you can just say "sorry, that's tough, that's what we are doing" because she is young. But when she is a young teenager, you can't say "tough" quite so easily. Things can change, and that scares me. (Oliver)

The aforementioned practices of 'being there', being reliable, a 'constant' in children's lives and having an emotionally connected relationship were expressed as providing means of 'cementing' father-child relationships, that are able to sustain through potentially troublesome and busy teen years and beyond:

Maybe I am just an eternal optimist, but because I have maintained a close relationship with them and with their mum, it will be fine. One way or another we will find a way of making it work and it will be fine. Nothing is ever completely smooth, but we will find a path through it. (Leo)

Once she hits 16, 17, 18 and as she becomes more independent, then what I am hoping is that, it's not a return on investment, but we speak in these kinds of clichés, in shortened ways, but I am hoping that the quality of the relationship we have all forged together will mean that she would make choices to be with us sometimes. (Ivan)

However, not all fathers were confident that increasing children's choice would result in increasing or more routine father-child contact. Euan worried that his two sons might choose a favourite parent and his shared-care arrangement would be altered as his sons would begin to challenge him and potentially prefer the rules at his ex-partner's home. This again highlights the possible fragilities and anxieties that non-resident fathers can face, but Euan also recognises that this fear was likely felt by his ex-partner too, demonstrating that these anxieties occur from both parents:

I always worry that going forward, as they get older and a bit more likely to challenge us as parents, that they could end up having favourites, there is always that worry. I have this about her, and she probably has it about me to be fair. (Euan)

Brian similarly recognised that his son may choose a favourite parent, but envisaged that this will be managed by him and his ex-wife in a way that is not detrimental to all three:

And like I say, teenage years he might actually have favourites. And what can you do? I don't think you can blame him for that if he does, just try and encourage him to have a good relationship with both of us. And hopefully he will understand the importance of that, and the value in that. (Brian)

Here Brian demonstrates that the most important aspect in his opinion is to raise his son with a good relationship with both parents. This belief of the importance of having a good or strong relationship with children was also talked about by Harry; Harry explained how he suspected the arrangements with his nine-year-old daughter would change in the coming years, but felt confident that because of their good relationship, that she would still wish to send time with him:

Yeah, you know, she is getting to the age, it will be quite soon when she starts expressing her own opinion about what she wants to do. And not just expressing her opinions but saying "I am *going* to do this!" [laughter] making her own decisions, she is nine now, that will start happening when she is 11 or 12, maybe even 10. So yeah, I have to be prepared for that, and she might want to see me less, I don't know, she might want to see me more, she might want to change things round a bit. I don't think she will want to see me less; we get on really well, so I don't think it will change drastically. (Harry)

In addition to discussion about managing relationships with older children described here, in the next chapter there is discussion of managing care routines with older children and children's role in decision-making in separated families. Overall, when considering fathers understandings of their fathering role, it can be seen that some aspects of what fathers consider to be a 'good' father appear influenced by normative guidelines of co-residence. Through comparison to time spent as a resident parent, there appears to be an impression that being non-resident places restriction on some aspects of relationship building and potentially inhibits relationships with older children. Reflection and adaptation of fathering practices lead to new methods of 'being there' and being a 'good' dad relative to their particular capacities and circumstances. Through studying non-resident fathers, it can be seen that 'being there' can be reconstructed and performed in new and different manners than previously considered. As will be expanded upon in this chapter, whilst being a non-resident father involves difficulties, it is also marked by much pleasure through the emergence of different practices and closer relationships.

5.4   Enacting the mundane and 'everyday' aspects of fatherhood

A central and dominating theme throughout the interviews was the recurrent use of the word 'normal': there was a widespread feeling of missing out on the minutiae of parenting that comes from living with children all the time and being unable to function as a 'normal' father due to being non-resident. No fathers in the sample expressed desires to avoid the 'normality' of fatherhood or mundane aspects of parenting through becoming a non-resident father, although one participant did comment that he enjoyed only having to be a 'part-time' parent. Normality is of course relevant to one's own experiences and interpretation, but largely it tended to focus around practical tasks related to children, such as cooking and washing clothes; for Francis this constituted 'real life' as a father:

> It's hard, when you have nowhere to go on a Saturday except get in the car, drive somewhere, do something, spend a hundred-quid doing stuff, and lunch and that, and then getting them home. It's not a proper relationship, it's not real life. I don't have a real-life relationship with the kids, the relationship that I want, cos that would involve them coming to my house, staying over, me helping them with their homework, me cooking their meals, me cleaning their clothes, talking to me about any problems. (Francis)

Helping with homework, or making sure older children were 'keeping on top' of homework was important for fathers who saw their children during the week, but the disjointed nature of care from one day to the next meant fathers were not always sure of their children's progress. For fathers who saw their children less frequently, and only on weekends, desires to be involved in the 'normal' activity of homework were

expressed. Adam explained to me that his daughter Chelsea's last visit to him had been cut short due to her school work:

> [Chelsea] wanted to get back to her mums and start revising. Whereas what I was saying to [ex-partner] and to Chelsea when she was here, "if you've brought your work, you can do work here, I want it to be the norm" to just do normal things, rather than it all being about meeting in [nearby large city] and going for a pizza or bowling or pictures. I wanna do some just normal things. And if she wants her friends to stay over or you know, if she wants to go shopping then wander off a bit, that's fine. (Adam)

For Adam, who as aforementioned does not have a settled care routine with his daughter, doing her school work and bringing friends to stay is emblematic of a normal 'father-child' relationship. Similarly, Elliot, who does not care for his daughter during the week, expressed desires to help her with homework. As one of the last recruited participants, I reflected on the commonality of desiring to do homework with children across the sample:

> Interviewer: I never thought that so many parents would want to do homework with their kids! [laugh]

> Elliot: I mean, I hate it! I am not good at it, but I would like to be able to be offered that opportunity. Homework when I was at home, [ex-wife] would always do the maths and I'd always do English, cos I was good at English.

Robert explained that he is involved with his children's homework a lot less than he thought he would be when first becoming a non-resident father. He explained that his every weekend care routine meant that his children did their homework on school days, something his ex-partner encourages: *"I think she is good at dangling the "if your homework is not done, you won't be going to the football with your dad" type thing.".* As such, he is removed from their homework due to his weekend care routine, highlighting the significance of care patterns for non-resident fathers' practices. What these examples demonstrate is that discussions of 'normal' family life and the minutiae of raising and living with children is seen amongst fathers who lived in the same neighbourhood as their children, and those that lived many miles apart. Moreover, Elliot's reflection on his involvement with homework pre-separation succinctly demonstrates how mundane aspects of family life can be understood in relation to being a resident father. The weight that participants have given to performing the mundane nature of family relations and practices features strongly throughout this and the next chapters; fathers appear to be desiring the central tenets explored in everyday life studies. Perhaps for fathers in this study, disruption to the taken-for-granted mundane aspects that they consider to be central to family life makes the necessity of these banal tasks more important to them. The hidden nature of tasks relating to parenting are perhaps unhidden to non-resident fathers when they reflect on their

practices. Extracts such as those by Francis and Adam above, suggest that discourses of non-resident fathers being 'fun' and avoiding difficult tasks of fatherhood, are potentially untrue, and are countered with expressions of desiring to be involved in the mundane and everyday aspects of parenting. As discussed in the literature review, changes to fatherhood have largely been considered as occurring to the care fathers provide, but involvement with housework and other tasks has remained significantly lower than mothers (Featherstone, 2010; Dermott, 2008). However, these extracts with fathers desiring some more of the mundane practical tasks of fatherhood suggest that non-resident fatherhood has sparked a change toward a more encompassing parental role for these men. Perhaps becoming non-resident sparks changes in fathers gendered caring practices.

5.4.1   Home as a location for care

In this study, home acts as a significant location for performing 'normal' fatherhood and having space and capacity to have children overnight was considered as improving this ability to fulfil everyday notions of parenting. Home has been recognised as a place where mundane family practices and actions acquire meaning (Smart, 2014). Kieran and his ex-wife at the time of interview were having an ongoing disagreement about the care routine for their son, and Kieran only had his son to stay overnight once every six weeks. He explained how he felt being in his home with his son enabled him to fulfil more 'normal' or 'regular' aspects of family life:

> It's not like normal family life at the moment, it's very much like days out rather. So, it was a bit more normal, in fact this last week I brought him up last weekend, and that was more normal, so he got to just play at home, play with his cars, he likes little 'Hot Wheels' cars, go to the park, go around to my parents for dinner. You know, more normal things, something that resembles more of a regular life. (Kieran)

In our interview Francis recalled how his ex-wife had described him as a 'bad dad' during a disagreement. When I enquired what he considered to be a' good dad', he said:

> Things like being able to look after them, cook them their tea, know that you can provide them a place where they feel comfortable and are safe. (Francis)

Here, Francis demonstrates how providing a place where children are comfortable and performing mundane tasks such as cooking meals in this home is central to being a 'good dad'. Being able to provide a home where children feel comfortable and safe, have their own bedroom, and feel 'at home' and 'relaxed' was expressed in over three quarters of interviews, suggesting this is considered an integral aspect of fatherhood. When discussing how they spent their time together, and reflecting back on a time when he wasn't able to

bring her to his house because he was sharing with a friend, Elliot felt it was now much better for his daughter as she was more relaxed in his home rather than him having to care for her without a home 'base':

> It's much better to have a base really, somewhere where she has got her room; she has her own room at my home, and that is a lot better. And she gets to see the rest of her family. (Elliot)

As aforementioned, having a home close to children's mothers and schools facilitated overnight care for fathers, particularly during the week, and living close enough to children to have them stay at their father's house frequently is paramount to fathers fulfilling this 'normal'. Leo cares for his children – in his ex-wife's home – most weekends, but still reflected on the 'missing out' he experiences in the week. Our conversation showed how he had given much thought to his situation as a father:

> Leo: It is just a shame not to be there for the shitty stuff, if you know what I mean, and the waking up in the morning and going to bed. I do feel that I miss out on that. Hey ho.
>
> Interviewer: What is it about that that you think is important?
>
> Leo: Well, because I think, and there is a saying, and I can't remember the full quote, but it is something like 'who you are is actually what you do'; you can say you are all these different things, but really, what you are is what you do, and I think it's a very appropriate thought for parenting. And a large part of what you do, and therefore what you are is not the stuff that you do at the weekends, or whatever, its quite easy for that all to be a bit of an act. But actually, who you are is what happens in the daily parts of your life, just the days you don't remember. And those are the days I don't get with the children, and that feels sad.

Here, Leo describes the minutiae of daily life as the 'shitty stuff', not that these aspects of family are bad, but that they, in the course of a cohabiting family, could be considered as insignificant or mundane. As a non-resident father he was missing out on these practices and is again an example of how the 'hidden' nature of family life has become unhidden for non-resident fathers. Harry, who also cared for his daughter regularly and lived in the same neighbourhood, told me he wished to spend more time with Alice and change an arrangement where he cared for her after-school one day a week into an overnight arrangement. He felt this would encourage Alice to see her dad's house like a 'second home', and told me overnight care was significant because:

> I can read her a story in bed, give her a kiss, tell her that I love her, we can, it's that time, just in the lead up to bed; it's getting her ready for bed, asking "have you cleaned your teeth?", sitting on the edge of the bath whilst she is cleaning her teeth and having a chat and playing around, all that sort of stuff, getting her up in the morning, making her breakfast; being a dad. (Harry)

As above with being able to assist with children's homework, being able to partake in mundane aspects of daily family life, such as routines of morning and evenings form part of what Harry considers to be 'being

a dad'. For fathers who did not care for their children overnight - but desired to - reflection on previous daily routines when they were a co-resident parent featured in their interviews:

> I just don't have that interaction with her, like I did every day before, even when I was working night shifts, I could still come in and kiss her goodnight. (Daniel)

> The big thing to me, even when they were older, at home, every single night, whether I was just going to bed at a normal time, or if I'd be out for a drink or what, I just used to go in and give them a kiss and say night night. They were asleep, they didn't know, but it was something I always did. And I can't do that anymore. It's things like that. (Francis)

These reflections again highlight the significance of care patterns for non-resident fathers perceived ability to fulfil normative notions of fatherhood. These reflections also demonstrate how ideas of 'normal' fathering practices are sometimes formed in co-resident families and how non-residency can be considered as a barrier to 'good' fatherhood. Perceived barriers to ensuring stability and geographical proximity considered integral to 'good' fatherhood were expressed by around a third of the sample: not everyone could afford to live in their previous town/city or neighbourhood and moving away became inevitable. Moreover, not all fathers could afford to buy or rent a home alone; three fathers in the sample were currently living with their parents, one father was living with a friend, and one father had a friend living with him. Dominic described living with a housemate as *"a bit awkward"* when his children came to visit, and Simon, whilst expressing appreciation of living with his parents, felt his time with his daughters was at times *"meddled with"* and overshadowed by their presence. Where fathers had a lower income, and were in receipt of Housing Benefit, not being able to afford more than a one-bedroom home resulted in Vince's living room doubling up as his daughter's bedroom every other weekend, and Aaron letting his three children sleep in his room whilst he slept on the sofa. This contrasts to fathers who could provide a bedroom for their children, *"decorated just the way they want it"* (Calum), and highlights how economic resources intersect with fathers' capacities to provide satisfactory housing for their children. This is noteworthy, because significant numbers in the sample discussed the significance of home, and space to fulfil what they consider to be important aspects of fatherhood. As such, enacting aspects of fatherhood, especially 'good' fatherhood and home-making may be restricted to some non-resident fathers.

This section has demonstrated how fathers across the sample desire for the mundane aspects of daily life, and perhaps the 'hidden' practices of care performed by parents becomes unhidden to non-resident fathers due to their felt constraints. Care patterns, particularly overnight care, and weekday care can be understood as significant in performing desired caring practices. Again, fathers' capacities and circumstances intersect their ability to perform desired family practices.

5.5   Fathering full-time on a part-time basis

A significant barrier expressed to fulfilling these 'mundane' or 'normal' aspects of parenting amongst the sample was the time fathers spent away from children. Time fathers spent with children was usually dictated by care routines agreed by parents, with a brief outline in the table below.

Table 5.2: Reported care routines at time of interview of the 25 participants with direct contact with children[6]	
Sporadic care routine, with little or no overnight care	4 fathers
Day-time only every-other weekend, plus school holiday overnight care	6 fathers
Every other weekend, including a '3-day weekend' for children not in full-time education.	3 fathers
Every other weekend, and one night mid-week each week	4 fathers
Every weekend	4 fathers
5 to 7 nights a fortnight, spread across weekdays and weekend	4 fathers

For 21 of the participants, care for their children was predominantly done on a weekend or every other weekend basis, meaning that across the sample, fathers' care was often done in short, intense periods. This has been described by Bradshaw et al. (1999, p. 116) as 'fathering full time on a part-time basis'. This next section will focus on how fathers manage the periods of time they spend with (and without) their children.

5.5.1   Time together as quality time

As only seven fathers were in cohabiting relationships at the time of interview, for the majority of participants (n=19), time spent with their children was predominantly father-child based. Being a non-resident father is thus marked by periods of time acting as a solo parent, which could involve adjusting to new practical tasks and roles if previously co-resident: "*So, time goes on, and you get used to going on holiday on your own, doing activities on your own, driving them around, doing parties, doing life."* (Paul). Similarly, to Bradshaw et al.'s (1999) study, parenting alone was seen as a positive experience for many of

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[6] One of the 26 participants previously cared for his children every other weekend, but at the time of interview had indirect contact.

the fathers and facilitated an improvement in their relationship; particularly for fathers who felt that prior to separation their parenting had been monitored or mediated through their child's mother:

> I do have a better relationship with Alice now than I did when I was still married to her mum, especially the last few years of the marriage, because during that break up time, my ex-wife was, it was weird, she was constantly intervening and interrupting and driving between us, sequestering Alice away from me. (Harry)

> I mean, it's obviously, a lot different, but personally, I almost feel like I have got a better relationship with the kids, because I get to spend time with them, just me and them. I am not having to share with somebody else. (Euan)

Euan recognised that becoming a non-resident parent gave him an opportunity to reflect upon and develop his parenting role: *"I used to feel more like the disciplinarian of the family, in a more traditional "wait till your dad gets home!" kind of scenario. Rightly or wrongly, that's how I felt."*. Spending one-on-one time with children was frequently expressed as something that would be rare in co-resident parent families by participants, but as a non-resident father, 'quality time' and intensive father-child time together is achievable and beneficial to relationships:

> I think the relationship I have with them is very different to the relationship I would have with them if I lived with them … I suspect the fact that you are not there continually means that the time you spend together feels more valuable. So that's a really good thing. And the one-to-two and quite often one-to-one time I spend with them, I mean, I think I genuinely have a really enormous amount of quality time as a parent with my kids, in the way that lots of other people who are in much more conventional situations don't. (William)

> In the summer I take them away for three weeks, like last summer I took them away, and it was me and them and no one else. And that is incredibly high-quality time to spend with your kids, which I don't think most dads get. (Leo)

'Quality time', or intensive father-child time without children's mothers emerged as one of the most significant responses when fathers were asked to reflect on the positives of being a non-resident father. Harry, through comparing the time spent with his daughter to the time when he was a co-resident father, commented that he felt there is a stereotype that equates non-residency with absence. He considered this unfair as he felt parenting alone allowed him to be more involved than as a co-resident parent:

> I feel more involved with her now than in the last couple of years of our marriage, so, if ever I was a part-time dad, that was when I was part-time, now I feel, well it's certainly better than the last couple years of my marriage. There must be loads and loads of people who are regarded as full-time resident fathers because they are married, and they sleep in the same house as their child every night, but at the same time, actually are less of a father than I am now. So, why call me 'non-resident' when they

may be resident, but they are not present. So, a divorced parent, or a separated parent, but single parent. I am more of a father now than I was then. (Harry)

This also reflects notions that co-residency is no longer 'good enough' as a father and that demonstrating effort and being present and active is more integral to fatherhood. Going on holiday as a non-resident father for the first time was considered by some fathers as a marker of their abilities to be a sole carer; Euan explained that shortly after he and his ex-partner separated, they were due to go on a family holiday:

> So, before we split up, we had booked a holiday and then we split up, and I said: "well I'm just going to go anyway to be honest". So, we went, and me and the boys had two weeks in Majorca … And I mean, it was massive, because I was on the verge of cancelling it, because I didn't think I would be able to cope with them 24 hours a day, but it turned out to be one of the best holidays of my life. We really just bonded … yeah, it was a great experience for me, cos I was so worried about it before. (Euan)

Realising his ability to not only care for his children alone for a significant period of time, but also to enjoy that care, acted as a transformative moment for him. This reflects findings by Schänzel and Jenkins (2017) that non-resident fathers value holidays and 'intensive' leisure time with children. As aforementioned, intensive time together can mean that more commonplace aspects of having children can be considered more significant as a non-resident father:

> It's made me appreciate the small things a lot more, going out for a meal, a picnic, sitting and chatting, you have a relationship with them and time with them, and although it may be small, its precious. I spend a lot more time with them now. (Paul)

So, although it was recognised that post-separation for fathers, they spent less time with their children overall, they spent more time of 'quality' together and significantly more time as a solo parent than before. Alongside these discussions came discussions of how to 'make the most' of time with their children. When seeing children for a limited time, whether that be a couple of nights each week, or every other Saturday or Sunday, there were expressions that 'quality time' could be enhanced through doing 'fun' activities:

> I think because I don't see him that much, well quite a lot but not all the time, that when I do see him, I want to make that quality time. So, I won't go off into a different room and leave him watching TV, well I do sometimes, but generally speaking, I will say "we've got an hour before the next thing, or before you are going back to mum's, what should we do? So, we do play games and even if we watch TV, we will choose a programme to watch and we will watch it together. And so, when he is at my house we are very much together, doing things together, which is important to me, and important to him. (Brian)

This 'quality' time appears very child-focussed time, 'going out and doing stuff' and making time together 'count', usually doing activities that children enjoy with fathers alongside them. The desire to ensure that

time together is 'quality' is perhaps demonstrative of efforts to reshape notions of 'normal' paternal care when in a 'constrained' position (due to time, location, and as expanded upon in the next section, perceived resistance from their children's mother). Similarly, for Nick, this child-centred time dominates the nine hours a fortnight he spends with his three-year-old daughter; he listed the plethora of indoor and outdoor activities they do together, explaining how he felt that focused, active time is not only enjoyable for his daughter and himself, but also helps to develop a closer emotional bond between the two of them:

> So, when I do see her it's really nice because she wants my attention like constantly, but then I want her attention too. So, it's quite nice, because for that nine hours its literally just us. (Nick)

Feeling that time missed with children needed to be 'caught up' at weekends, and this 'catching up' means that father-child time can become filled with 'fun' or 'treat' activities. As explained by Vince below, seeing his daughter every other weekend means that their time needs to be shared across 'fun', 'discipline' and 'education', but 'fun' often saturates their time:

> You've got like 48 hours to cram in two weeks of discipline, two weeks of education, two weeks of fun, so you are often seen as the 'fun parent' that is something that [ex-partner] has said to me in the past, that I treat her too much. But if she lived with me, over two weeks that would go on her anyway. (Vince)

'Treating' children and acting in a way that is recognised as 'abnormal', was for some an active choice, and for others, such as Kieran and Adam, discussed in section 5.4, who felt forced to do 'days out' when they would prefer to be home. Moreover, as explained in section 5.4 in relation to Robert, weekend care routines mean that fathers can be removed from their children's homework, something that is considered a 'normal' or mundane task of parenthood. Vince and Robert, along with seven other fathers reported not being involved in children's school work. All nine fathers had either sporadic care routines or weekend only care. It was recognised that effort to make time together 'count' can be expensive, something Daniel struggled with:

> I like to try and take her out of the house. We like to do Pokémon go, we go to a nearby museum, and the park, there's always stuff to do in the museum … we went to a farm the other week, that was something to do. Anything that's local really, and that doesn't cost a lot. Lots of activities are really expensive, for me to just go somewhere and watch her play that's £5.

Consequently, it can be suggested that non-resident fathers from lower income backgrounds may feel struggles to make time with their children 'count'. Another recognised feature of being removed from the 'normal' aspect of parenting relates to discipline. Taking a more relaxed approach to parental decisions, or as Paul calls it: "*Not sweating the small stuff*", in order for limited time together to run smoothly was a

practice that fathers recognised. Not only would this not jeopardise father-children relationships, but it also made for time together to be more pleasant and less fraught. In demonstrating strategies to reduce parent-child conflict, fathers are potentially treating children in a special way, perhaps playing into stereotypes of being a 'fun parent' or weekend dad. However, within the sample there was also rejection of the 'fun dad' idea of making time together 'special'. Calum has been a non-resident father since before his daughter was born:

> It's very easy to be a weekend dad, and you kind of make the weekend really exciting, and full of this, and full of that. You know, that's not normal to do that. So sometimes we will just have a weekend where we do nothing, we just chill out and go for a boring old walk with the dog and pick up twigs … I just try and keep it as real as possible. (Calum)

Graham recognises that being too exciting or 'over doing' things leads to his daughter being over-excited and misbehaving. Oliver, reflected on how he felt he had once been a 'fun' dad to his four-year-old daughter, but as his care routine changed from sporadic to more settled, he felt he 'chilled out' in his actions:

> I think at first, especially the first year I worried about making sure that we did absolutely everything in those days, so like, weekends would be exhausting because I would be hammering it, nail and tongue for every minute of those days she was there … I would just be panic activity-ing because I was worried that I had to make it as fun as humanly possible, and then as I have settled into the routine, and as Holly has settled into the routine, it's become clear that sometimes actually what she wants to do is stay at home and play together, or just spend the morning watching TV together or something, just like normality. (Oliver)

Again staying 'at home' is linked to expressions of 'normality', and, interestingly Oliver links his 'fun dad' character to worry. Vince articulates why he feels that he and other non-resident fathers partake in these 'abnormal' 'fun-father' roles, and why this is unique to separated fathers:

> I feel that it's harder to parent, it's a completely different way of parenting because you are, I always feel that you have to work hard at that relationship with your child, which sometimes means you have to come down a bit to their level I suppose, to encourage them to keep coming back. (Vince)

Feeling as if fathers need to act in a way that keeps children returning to them highlights insecurities that fathers feel relative to their children, and that being a non-resident father involves working hard in a role that is not necessarily certain. Reflecting on the care-routine that families have also highlights that when not involved in day-to-day care for children, particularly around school hours, it is possible for fathers to partake in fewer mundane aspects of daily life and spend a higher proportion of father-child time engaging in more 'fun' activities. The fathers that tended to 'reject' the 'fun dad' role each had settled care routines,

highlighting that stability of relationship not only allows fathers to enact 'normal' fathering, but also to feel comfortable to be 'boring'.

5.5.2 Missing out and catching up

The 'on-off' nature of parenting as a non-resident father mentioned by Bradshaw et al. (1999, p. 116) was expressed by fathers in this study. However, rather than struggling with the transition from not parenting to having sole responsibility for children when under their care like in Bradshaw et al.'s study, in this study fathers tended to discuss the opposite; the difficulties of going from being a lone parent to having no responsibilities, and going from a noisy house to a quiet house. Expressions of missing children, feeling that the house was empty, and 'something is missing' negatively affected fathers' moods. Time apart could be spent wondering what children were doing, particularly amongst those with younger children who didn't have means to contact their dad, something expressed by Calum about his four-year old daughter:

> When she moved, that stopped, and it became 10-day, 11-day gaps, and that took a lot of getting used to. You know, cos the house is so full of, you know, Imogen, and Imogen's stuff, and her bits and toys. There is so much going on at the weekend, and all of a sudden, that just ends. You know what I mean, on a Sunday night. And sometimes when that first happened, and I was staring at 10 days of not seeing her, and a mum who was not agreeing to communication between the times that I see her. That just made for a very long period of time, and a period of wonder, sort of a bit of anxiety "is she alright, is she fine?". (Calum)

Whilst it has been discussed that time together can be fun, and allows for intense father-child time, because not all time was spent together, it was not uncommon for fathers to feel that they were missing out on aspects of their children's lives and they were having to make assumptions about things. Large gaps between seeing children like the one Calum describes, exacerbated feelings of being out of touch, particularly if children were not old enough to express what they had been doing in the intervening period. However, feeling remote and removed, that information is missing and having a disjointed understanding of children's day-to-day life is not something only fathers who saw their children on a fortnightly basis expressed. For Euan, who has shared care of his sons, there was a still a sense that he has a disjointed understanding of the day-to-day life of his sons due to his sons living across two homes:

> I know it's only two and a half days, but it does feel like you haven't seen them for ages. And you feel like you are missing out on school and things like that. I try and keep on top of my son's homework, but if he has had something say on the Monday night, or the Tuesday night, I am not aware of it quite a lot of the time. (Euan)

For him, longer periods away from his children would exacerbate a sense of 'missing out', and he reasoned their care routine in this manner: *"it seems like a bit of a faff switching every single night, but I prefer that*

to not seeing them for longer periods.". Ivan, who saw his daughter every other Sunday and during school holidays, felt that his relationship with her is given a sense of continuity from fortnight visit to fortnight visit, but that text messaging and online contact helps to improve this. He said that he felt that seeing his daughter periodically is akin to a 'dot-to-dot picture' of his daughter's life:

> But by seeing her on a fairly regular basis there is a chance to try and do dot-to-dot, its dot-to-dot really and you make an image of this thing, whether it's an emotion, and experience, and ambition that she has got, and I try to make sure that I am getting a clear picture from the evidence that she provides and what have you, from our conversations. So that's how I'd like to see it, over the course of time it's like a dot-to-dot, there are certain things that you keep checking on, and they might stay the same or change and you have to get used to a different kind of picture, or something else might be revealed, which makes you ask about other things. (Ivan)

For others, this picture was harder to draw, because phone contact was not made between visits, and when with children, they could struggle to recall information about what they had been doing, or even feel 'interrogated' if fathers asked them. There was recognition that children might be uncomfortable talking about what they had done with their mother or at their other home with fathers:

> There have been times when I have asked "what have you been up to this weekend?" or whatever, and not so much recently, but she used to clam up a little bit, I don't think she liked talking about what she was doing with one family with the other. And I don't know if she felt interrogated a little bit, so we kind of stopped asking her stuff. But she is a lot more talkative now than she used to be. I think that she started to feel a little bit torn…(Graham)

Worrying about missing out on information suggests that many fathers in the sample have an expectation that fathers should have an ongoing awareness of their children day-to-day. For the majority of the sample, missing out on information about children was attributed to not living with children full-time. Leo, father to two teenagers, presents a more reflexive understanding of information shortcomings:

> Teenagers aren't the best communicators. So, it's very easy to end up in a situation where you assume a lack of communication is because of your circumstance, but it could just be because I have teenage kids [laugh]. (Leo)

Here Leo attempts to normalise the communication dynamics in his family, bringing into question whether participants' feelings toward their role and involvement as a father are being dominated by perceived complications related to being non-resident. This section has highlighted that feelings of closer father-child relationships can be felt alongside fears of 'missing' out on important involvement with children, emphasizing the complexity of emotions involved. The nature of some fathers' care patterns means that the 'mundane' aspects of care such as homework are not possible and limited time together is felt in need of being savoured. Having fun together can also be tied to feelings of anxiety and precarity as a father.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on fathers' expressed accounts of becoming and being a non-resident father and has given insight into participants' lived experiences of fatherhood. Some of these experiences reflect findings from previous research carried out with predominantly resident fathers, demonstrating how non-resident fathers face similar experiences as other fathers. However, this chapter has shown how being non-resident can bring unique experiences and offers new insights into fathering that go beyond previous studies. A significant finding of this research that has been developed in this chapter and will continue to feature throughout this thesis is that normative guidelines of co-residence of fathers with children appear to structure ideas of 'good' fatherhood and 'normal' fathering practices. Care routines, particularly seeing children infrequently, and not overnight, as well as physical distance are considered as limiting fathers' abilities to partake in the minutiae of their children's lives. We see however that being a 'good' parent, that is intensive, child-centred practices, is still considered as possible as a non-resident father, but in order to do so fathers must adapt to the context of their own family arrangements. Striving to remain present in children's lives and sacrificing elements of their social life and career progression in order to remain 'close by' and available to their children is an example of how non-resident fathers wish for their lives to be deeply interconnected with their children. As will be demonstrated more in the following chapters, relational decision-making features strongly in the narratives of many fathers in the sample. It also appears important to display 'good' fatherhood and make it known that children are priorities in fathers' lives. This supports work by Philip (2010, 2013, 2014) that separated fathers do this in order to display that they are fulfilling moral or societal expectations of fatherhood, and to demonstrate ongoing commitment despite a change in family circumstances. However, this chapter has also demonstrated that actions of fathers suggest that they desire to display this commitment directly to their children, necessitated by not living with children all the time. Home emerged as a significant site for bolstering father-child relationships and the varied sample of this thesis shows how socio-economic situation can significantly impact on abilities to father in a perceived 'good' manner.

Having a sample of fathers who had children from a range of ages allowed for interesting insight into the interaction of age with fathering when non-resident. Children growing up involved mixed emotions for fathers. Living across two homes was feared to be problematic for teenagers: firstly because, for a variety of reasons, children may not wish to visit their fathers' home; secondly because it was feared that relationship difficulties that can occur between parent and teenager, whilst considered an ordinary developmental stage, could be exacerbated by physical distance between fathers and children.

The father-centric reflections presented in this chapter provide the opportunity to challenge assumptions about gendered capacities and desires to care, particularly in the post-separated family. Taking the lead responsibility for childcare during contact time draws fathers into more complete caring roles, that involve both active and 'fun' caring but also consideration to more mundane practical tasks of parenting such as cooking meals and washing clothes. As such, non-resident fatherhood appears to draw fathers toward more encompassing parenting that is not so closely tied to gendered caring practices. However, the restrictions of being non-resident including living far away from children and patterns of care meant that some participants felt their fathering role had been significantly negatively affected by becoming non-resident. These assertions exemplify what Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaraniemi (2019, p. 23) meant when they said that divorce and parental separation can allow family practices to be *"reassessed and reformulated"*. Despite perceived changes to fathering, both positive and negative, because the majority of fathers in the sample only cared for children for a few days a week/fortnight, the lead care role for children fell to mothers. This means that non-residency both challenges and reinforces gendered caring roles. The next chapter will explore fathers' interpretations of co-parenting with their children's mother, and shed light on how care is arranged between mothers and fathers across two homes.
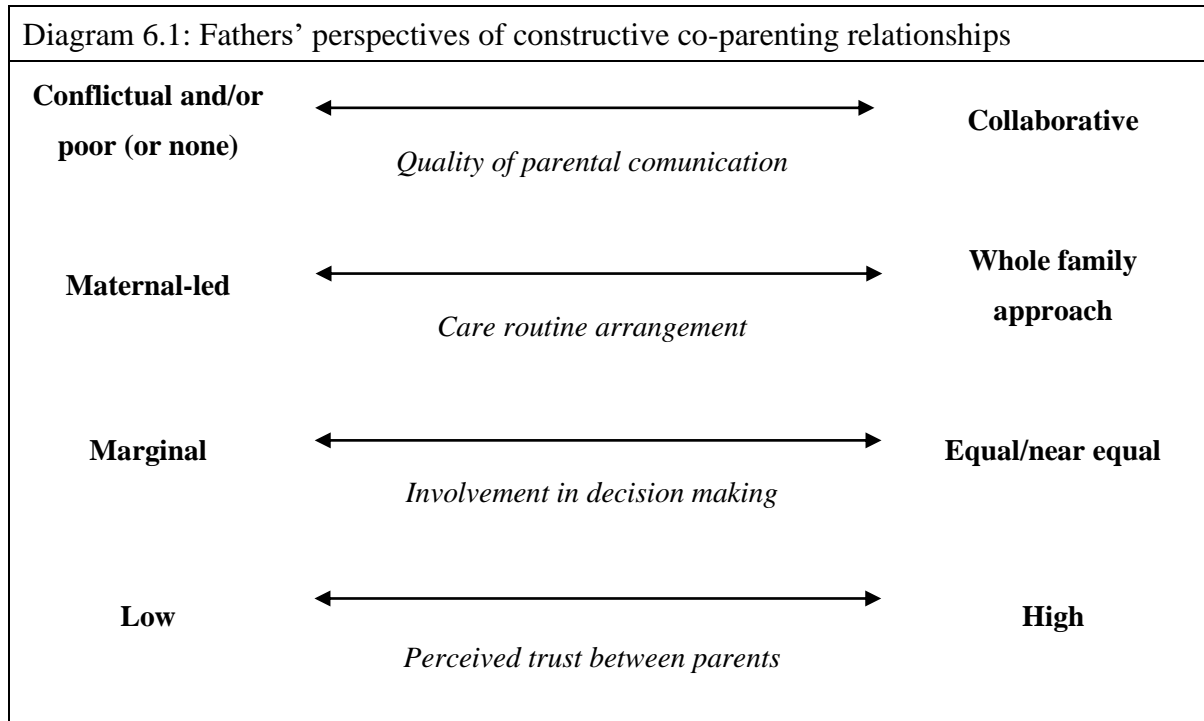
Chapter 6: Negotiating co-parenting relationships from the perspective of non-resident fathers

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores fathers' perceptions of factors that develop or hinder constructive co-parenting relationships post-separation and fathers' constructions of co-parenting. This chapter will explore fathers' relationships with their children's mother, exploring how perceptions of the quality of their communication is felt to have an impact on fathers' feelings of inclusion when arranging care routines and making decisions about their children's lives. Exploration of non-resident fathers' understandings and attitudes toward co-parenting is considered important due to much of the discussions in the literature review chapters. The first of these discussions relates to changes to policy and legislation to separating families in recent decades that has increasingly promoted continuation of both parents in the lives of children after separation or divorce. Whilst these initially centred around financial provisions, in more recent years the importance of non-resident parents for care have been stressed as well as the importance of parental cooperation and collaboration when making care and financial arrangements (see 2.5.3). The second is discussions in Chapter 3 from previous studies of non-resident fathers where there is a recognition of the importance of good relationships between mothers and fathers post-separation (see 3.4).

A classification of perceived values of constructive co-parenting relationships will form the structure of this chapter. This typology, grounded in the qualitative data of this thesis, centres around spectrums of communication and collaboration that can be considered as broadly negative or positive from the perspective of non-resident fathers. The first of these, as seen in Diagram 6.1 below, explores the level of communication between fathers and mothers, and ranges from 'conflictual' or poor communication (or in some cases no communication) through to 'collaborative' or 'cooperative' levels of communication between mothers and fathers. Another important variable to be discussed in this chapter is the involvement in decision-making that fathers feel they have. This includes decisions about their children's upbringing and decision about suitable care routines, both of which can be considered as examples of collaboration between co-parents. In terms of care routines, this chapter will highlight how this perceived spectrum ranges from decisions initiated and led by mothers (maternally-led) through to feelings that care routines were arranged to reflect the needs and desires of mothers, fathers and their children (whole family approach). In terms of decision-making about children's upbringing, this can be considered on a spectrum from 'little or no collaboration', through some involvement or consultation, to expressions of 'equal or near equal'

involvement. Trust between parents can be considered as traversing the three other markers of constructive co-parenting relationships.

Diagram 6.1: Fathers' perspectives of constructive co-parenting relationships

Conflictual and/or poor (or none)	**Collaborative**
	Quality of parental comunication
Maternal-led	**Whole family approach**
	Care routine arrangement
Marginal	**Equal/near equal**
	Involvement in decision making
Low	**High**
	Perceived trust between parents

From their descriptions in interviews, participants can be split into three typologies that reflect their represented communication levels, perceived involvement in care routine and involvement in decision-making about children's upbringing, as well as trust between parents at the time of interview.

Nine fathers represented their relationship with their children's mother in mainly positive terms as a **'good relationship'**; this included regular communications to discuss more than only logistical practicalities of sharing care, spending time together, and even sharing living space a few days a week. Little discussion of trust issues in the present.

Eight fathers talked about their relationship with their children's mother in more moderate terms, relationships that could be described as **'amicable'** or communicative; this included talking usually about 'logistics' when meeting, but with little friction. Fathers felt they had some involvement in decision making, but as will be explained, this often felt like consultation rather than conversation.

Nine fathers represented the relationship they have with their children's mother as **'conflictual'** in nature, characterised by frequent disagreements, or having very little or no communication, (this

included staying in the car at drop offs/pick-ups, or only communicating by email or text messages). These fathers reported that they were rarely involved in decision-making and that there were usually low levels of trust between parents.

This chapter will explain how the four values in the classification have an entwined relationship with one another. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, time plays a part in the way parents interact with one another; time post-separation often having a positive influence on communication, but, as to be demonstrated, this isn't universal across the sample. Negotiation and compromise emerge as central themes when discussing interaction with their children's mother. What the data demonstrate is a broad range of feelings, from heavily involved and sharing in decision making, through to those who feel care routines are dictated to them, and they are 'left out' of key decisions regarding their children. This at times extends to feelings that children's wishes are also not being considered. Building on themes in the last chapter of presenting notions of 'good' and child-centred fathering, as well as recognition, rejection and adaptation of normative models of the family, this chapter will introduce another key theme of the thesis. This theme explores how feelings of involvement or exclusion from child care and parental decision-making have a significant influence on feelings of recognition as a father when non-resident. This sense of recognition extends to discussions of precarity and insecurity as a father.

6.2   Parental communication

In the sample, the reported quality of relationships with children's mothers was mixed; this can be considered along a spectrum ranging from harmonious or good communication through to highly conflictual communication or no communication. In all cases, fathers had been in a romantic relationship with their children's mother prior to becoming a separated father, with the duration of these relationships ranging from a few months to 15 years. The perceived and experienced nature of parental separation appeared to be a strong marker for ongoing relationships between parents according to reports from fathers. Where separation was described as a mutual decision, communication between fathers and mothers appeared more unrestrained especially as time progressed away from separation. However, of the sample who had made the decision to end the relationship, fathers expressed feelings of resentment by mothers, who they described as using children as 'pawns' or controlled situations based on their ill-feeling. This notion will be expanded upon later in this chapter. When fathers reported that the relationship was ended by the actions of their ex-partner, having to continue to communicate could either be painful or upsetting.

Across the sample there were very few expressions of children's mothers being bad parents or demonstrating bad parenting practices. Rather judgement of their children's mothers appeared based upon their ability to communicate openly and in a positive or at least amicable manner with fathers. Expressions of negativity focused on problems with mothers' abilities to work collaboratively with fathers, something demonstrated by Calum, who communicates with his daughter Imogen's mother solely by email:

> I do think she is a good mum. You know, and I think she is doing a fantastic job with Imogen. But as far as promoting a healthy amicable relationship between two parents, she is pretty hopeless. (Calum)

Brian used the word 'amicable' to describe his relationship with his ex-wife: "*fortunately, we have been quite amicable about it, although there have been disagreements about it and we have had to work all that through.".* Graham, Connor and Joshua also positively reflected on their 'amicable' relationship with their ex-partners, suggesting that working through conflict and reaching a relationship that one can describe as amicable, somewhere between 'conflictual' and 'good' communication, is a sought-after state for non-resident fathers. Communication between fathers and mothers was frequently described as being of a 'logistical' nature, done through text messages, short phone calls or short conversations when collecting children. These 'logistics' primarily were about arrangements for care, collecting and returning children between homes, and the whereabouts of children's belongings:

> I think communication can be sort of on a logistical level, if you see what I mean. Probably if you go through my text messages you will see that [laugh]. So, we don't actually have proper conversations (Brian)

Having communication that involved being able to send text messages or calling to ask questions, was recognised as helping to manage day-to-day aspects of parenting such as making sure children have correct school books, football kit or hiking boots. Where mother-father relationships were 'amicable', but not 'good', these light-touch, 'logistics' conversations with little opportunity for in-depth discussion were considered the best course of action to minimise tensions, or as Robert puts it, *"winding each other up"*:

> There is actually very little contact with her mum at the moment, which I think is helping. We pick her up from her Mum's on a Sunday, and there might be a couple minutes of "any messages?" but generally its picking her up from school and drop offs there. (Graham)

> There is still a lot of distrust, and if we do have to speak for any length of time, it does eventually just turn a bit short and sharp and clipped inevitably, regardless of what we are talking about. (Elliot)

This 'trust' discussed by Elliot emerged as another key value of parental relationships amongst the sample, with trust discussed in 15 interviews. Trust can also be perceived to be on a spectrum from low levels of

trust, to high. A lack of trust of one another stemming from relationship breakdown made communication and collaboration more difficult, as highlighted by Elliot above. Trust was also expressed in relation to fathers feeling that their children's mother did not trust them to be a 'good' father and how this can inhibit negotiations of care routines and collaborative decision-making (see sections 6.3 and 6.4).

Where parental relationships were described as easily leading to conflict or involving fears of dishonesty, emails and text messaging were used as a means of communication, as these offered less possibility of hostilities arising due to the delayed nature of communication, as opposed to face-to-face or phone conversations.

> It's strictly by text, or WhatsApp, so I can prove what she has said, because I have had a few instances where verbally she has said something, and then completely denied it. (Robert)

> We have previously tried to talk verbally on the phone, but this had typically ended in shouting matches, because of long standing friction about expectations for civilised communication: I don't get her, she doesn't get me, and we can't communicate that way. It becomes emotional and that's difficult for both of us I think, because there appears to be a battle going on about who wins, and that just isn't constructive. So, the usual way of communicating is by email, which can be productive and straight forward. (Ivan)

Considering written communication as 'evidence' of agreements, demonstrates how low levels of trust can be felt by mothers, fathers and mutually.

6.2.1 The perceived importance of a 'good' parental relationship

Across the sample, the level of communication between parents was often discussed in relation to the quality of their relationship overall. Poor levels of communication were considered regrettable and fathers expressed fears that continuing negative relationships would have a negative impact on children, both during the childhood years but also into the future. Fathers expressed that they negotiated their feelings toward their ex-partner on a continuous basis, and depending on care routines, this could be from as much as everyday through to fortnightly or less. Recognition of the ongoing relationship parents would have beyond the childhood years, such as children's weddings, graduations and grandchildren were joked about - *"I'm tied to her for life"* - but also recognised as another reason for improving parental relationships.

> I just try to live for today, you don't know what's around the corner, but you think like, in years to come, if me and their mum still can't be in the same room together, what happens when they get married, and stuff like that? (Francis)

Comments such as Francis' demonstrate the consideration that fathers put into ensuring that their children remain at the forefront of decision making, both in the present but into the future as well. These expressions contradict stereotypes in policy discussions and popular culture of fathers disassociating from children after parental separation. Euan commented that he *"wanted a clean break really from it"* in relation to managing an ongoing relationship with his ex-partner who had been unfaithful, leading to the end of their relationship. He explained that he recognised a 'clean break' from his ex-partner was not possible if he was to continue to take a prominent role in his sons' lives. He explained to me how he did not wish for ill feelings to continue and ensured communication was not negative:

> I try to keep things on a level basis at home for my boys, I try to keep that relationship with my kids' mum cordial, and not end up sort of screaming at each other in front of the kids. (Euan)

Recognition that 'getting on' with their children's mother is likely better for children reflects sentiments discussed in other studies, such as Neale et al. (2015) and Bakker et al. (2015). Many of these young fathers recognised that 'getting on' with the mother of their child was needed for the sake of their children, demonstrating a prioritisation of children's needs (Neale et al., 2015). Where ill feeling was expressed about an ex-partner, examples below from Francis and Adam demonstrate that amongst the sample, it was considered that negativity should not be shown to children, with fathers explaining that they employ methods to 'protect' children from parental disagreements, extending to demonstrating care between parents:

> I am sure, absolutely sure, that some things were said [by ex-partner] that were not entirely appropriate. And I have been really very careful not to say anything negative about her mum or brother, cos I don't think it's helpful. It's hard sometimes though. (Adam)

> I didn't want to be one of those families where it's like "oh, your mum did this and your mum did that!" or going through the courts and the parents don't see or even speak to each other. It's all hostile, and I really didn't want that. I want them to see that I do still love her, I still want to be respectful towards her. (Francis)

Across the sample, child-centred priorities emerged for demonstrating good or amicable parental relationships or concealing poor parental relationships. In doing this, it appears that fathers in the sample, in collaboration with their ex-partners, are striving for an idealised notion of childhood where their children are not affected by or aware of 'family troubles' (see Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2014). What appears to matter in demonstrating this to their children was emotional management: not arguing, being respectful in communication and not expressing negative sentiments to children. Managing emotions in this manner would also not exacerbate conflictual relationships. As such, the open or amicable communication expected

from children's mothers is considered as equally important for fathers to demonstrate. This was evident with those that expressed seemingly good relationships with their ex-partners through to those that recognised that either their relationship with their ex-partner was mutually poor, or that they strongly disliked her.

6.2.2 Time and the improvement of communication and co-parenting relationships

In this study, time appeared to act as a mediating factor in parental relationships, with a trend for improvement of communication as time progressed. Connor had always been a non-resident father for his three-year-old daughter, with the first two years being described as 'very tough', with visits to the Family Court to arrange access. However, one year after the last visit to the Family Courts, Connor reported a positive relationship with his ex-partner, even exchanging birthday, Mother's Day and Christmas gifts between each other: "*we are seeing eye-to-eye now, and that's all I ever wanted. I just wanted to get on with her mum, so I could have a relationship with Amy [daughter]*". One explanation for the improvement of relationships over time is that negative ill-feelings from separation dissipate as time passes, potentially as parents develop new relationships (see Lau-Clayton, 2015). Harry described to me a positive improvement in the relationship with his ex-wife, progressing to a stage where once a fortnight he, his ex-wife and their daughter watched a TV programme together. This time together allowed them to plan holidays, school activities and sports for their daughter. He commented that this improvement had come about by them putting ill-feelings from their divorce behind them:

> The passage of time, we are a bit more relaxed and the relationship is behind us, and all the break up and that sort of thing is gone. I think that's really important. The other thing would be that both of us have made a really big effort to get on with each other, mainly for Alice's sake, but also for our own sakes, for peace of mind. That makes a big difference.

On discussing the progression of their communication, and spending time together he told me: "*It's not my favourite thing [laugh] but Alice loves it, so I am happy*". Spending periods of time together with their children's mother was not a widespread practice amongst the sample, but for six fathers, spending time together, sitting together at school plays or concerts, through to sharing a home each weekend or occasionally going on holiday together, were examples of the times they spent with their children's mother[7]. The presence of a small number in the sample who share family rituals post-separation reflects findings by Bakker et al. (2014) who make a distinction between those parents that continue to perform family routines and rituals together and those that perform them separately; the six fathers in this sample could be argued

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7 Attending parents' evening together is not counted in this number but is explored in a later chapter.

to continue to display that they are 'still a family', but the majority in the sample do not. This display could be for their children, their extended family or wider public, when they attend events together like parents evening or other events such as school plays or children's sports. With regards to enjoying spending time together, two fathers in the sample described their relationship with their ex-partner as 'friends', as explained here by Oliver:

> Looking back at it, we realised it wasn't actually a good relationship, and that we should have just been friends. And when we realised that, we drew a line under it and realised that we could be friends who have a kid together, that was really good. And it works really well.

However, other fathers in the sample who had a 'good' or 'amicable' relationship were more reluctant to define their relationship in such positive terms; whilst recognising that they 'got on', could be 'friendly' or even spend periods of time together, there was also a recognition of how they still found the relationship with their ex-partner difficult. Leo cared for his two children each weekend living in his ex-wife's home (150 miles from his home). Whilst he appreciated being able to stay at his ex-wife's home, reflecting on the situation, he told me:

> I think we probably both work very hard to maintain an aura of friendship, and I think to a certain degree there is a genuine friendship there. I think if we didn't have the kids, we wouldn't be in contact, and there are times that she really pisses me off [laugh] and I would certainly never choose to be in a situation where I was sitting in her kitchen having a cup of tea in my pyjamas in the morning type thing, but it's a price that's worth paying. (Leo)

This 'price worth paying' for spending time with ex-partners even when it was not enjoyable was an increase in the time that they spent with their children, as well as demonstrating to children the positive communicative relationship that their parents had. Leo's extract also demonstrates that, for fathers in this sample, managing a relationship with children's mothers post separation involves renegotiating the relationship from one as partners to one as co-parents.

This section has demonstrated how for many fathers in the sample developing and maintaining a good or at least amicable relationship between parents was an important feature of a co-parenting relationship. Demonstrating to children these amicable levels of communication and refraining from demonstrating negativity was considered an important task in ensuring children's wellbeing. Being able to communicate frequently can improve the care and 'logistics' of caring for children across households. Where communication was considered conflictual, emails and text messages acted as means to reduce the exacerbation of this conflict.

6.3   Negotiating and arranging father contact and care routines

The most significant area of interaction between mothers and fathers occurred when arranging patterns and routines of care or 'contact'. As highlighted in the preceding chapter, care routines are felt to have a considerable impact on a father's ability to care. Across the sample there are a range of care patterns, as evidenced in Table 5.2 in the previous chapter and repeated here. These categories are based on description of term-time care routines in interviews and were developed by the author during analysis of interview data. Care arrangements often changed during school holidays and in some cases were evolving over time. As such, differences of care can be observed within groups in the table as well as between.

Table 5.2: Reported care routines at time of interview of the 25 participants with direct contact with children	
Sporadic care routine, with little or no overnight care	4 fathers
Day-time only every-other weekend, plus school holiday overnight care	6 fathers
Every other weekend, including a '3-day weekend' for children not in full-time education.	3 fathers
Every other weekend, and one mid-week night each week	4 fathers
Every weekend	4 fathers
5 to 7 nights a fortnight, spread across weekdays and weekend	4 fathers

When discussing care patterns, for fathers in the later four categories, care was often talked in definite terms with arrangements fairly static over time, with negotiation having occurred shortly after separation. These care patterns for the later four categories tended to be quite regular and in place for some time, with fathers having been non-resident for three or more years. Fathers with these care patterns were often fairly happy with the arrangements. Those fathers who had 'sporadic' or 'day-time only' care patterns tended to have much more fluid care routines, often involving ongoing discussion and negotiation with their children's mother. In addition to practical arrangements for care, what was also mentioned was what fathers liked and wanted in terms of caring for or spending time with their children. Improvement to care patterns not only evolve around increased time with children (all but one did express desire to spend more time with their children though) but also about different times of the day or week that fathers felt would be better. Fairness was often discussed in relation to negotiations of care and contact between mothers and fathers – suggesting fathers have ideals of post-separation parenting and feel these should be adhered too, by both mothers and fathers. This next section will explore the negotiations that fathers have in the early months and years of

separation as well as focus on some fathers who have long-term difficulties negotiating a care routine that they feel is satisfactory for them and their children.

6.3.1   Negotiating care at the point of separation

As aforementioned, for some, their care routine was usually the same from week to week, with changes only occurring to adapt to school holidays. As highlighted in the previous chapter, a stable care routine can help fathers settle into their fathering practices. The routine of regular week to week (or fortnight to fortnight) care was considered to be beneficial for children, as suggested by Joshua, who explained his son never 'grumbled' about their shared care routine:

> Charlie is with his mum for four days of the week, and with me for three days of the week. Though obviously five of those are at school. So, we share the weekends, I have Charlie on a Sunday and he is with his mum on a Saturday. So yes, as I say, the distance between us makes that quite useful. We don't often swap around, we have quite a routine, which I don't know if that helps Charlie as he just knows where he is.

In addition to regular care routines being beneficial for children, for some fathers a regular routine is also helpful for them. Euan explained that he has always *"tried to push the idea of having permanent regular nights"* because he does not wish to go long periods without seeing his sons. For him, a longer period is more than two nights, preferring to alternate care every night. Oliver similarly appreciates having a regular routine with his daughter, something he says is beneficial to her as she is more settled in a routine of every other weekend, but also for him, as he admits he likes routine in his life:

> One of the things for us, that I've been really conscious to get, its stability, so I know when Holly is going to be here with me for the next year, I know when it's going to be over school holidays, I know that for over the next year. And that's really important for me to cope mentally, because I really struggle not being around her all the time.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, routine patterns for care also improve fathers' abilities to socialise. As aforementioned, the majority of fathers with care routines ranging from every-other weekend to five to seven days a fortnight felt their care was 'good enough', this had often been negotiated through the initial months and years of being a non-resident father. In some cases, these had been negotiated through solicitors or the Family Courts. With or without input from solicitors, care arrangements whilst managing separation, particularly if fathers had moved to live with their parents or friends, were described as difficult times, involving, at times, intense negotiation. Dominic's children lived in a different country, and on describing the process of separation and returning to the UK he explained that his ex-partner was refusing to draft or sign a contact agreement:

I said "I would like to have something in place. I am going away, I don't know when I will get to see them, and I would like to have something in place that says when I will see them, even if it's a formal agreement between us, that I get to see them at certain times". But she reneged on that a bit, and then drafted in someone else to rewrite it a little bit. So, I ended up just having to jump through hoops really and try and placate her and situation.

Francis attributes the difficult care routine he has with his teenage sons to the way his ex-wife reacted to their separation: *"A lot of that I put down to the fact that [ex-wife] didn't want them to go, initially, she does say now that she encourages them, she asks them if they'll come to me, but the initial thing was: "I didn't have kids to lose them every other weekend""*. William and Fraser also told of difficulties arranging care and contact (including phone calls) in the initial months of being a non-resident father, feeling that they were in a fragile position with decisions being made by their ex-partner:

I was in a vulnerable position, and that was a lot of what hurt me at the time, cos she could just stop me from seeing them and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. So, I kind of had to do what she wanted, in a way, to minimise any conflict, because at any time she could stop me seeing them. (William)

I kind of get this feeling, that, especially after we first split up, he wasn't really encouraged to have a relationship with me. So, I tried to as much as possible, to find a time where I could at least ring him. But they were always busy, he had school work, or he was having his tea. There was always something that made him busy, so it seemed that every time I called, she wouldn't let me speak to him. (Fraser)

Whilst both fathers have a fixed care routine now, the initial difficulties they faced in the early years were considered as 'unfair' and an unnecessary exertion of dominance from their ex-partner: "*She didn't have to do what she did and make it so difficult*" (William). Calum suggest that he was not trusted by his daughter's mother, and for that reason, he was restricted in seeing her:

She has never seen me as a good parent, she has never seen me as someone she can trust with her daughter; she has never seen Imogen as *our* daughter. She has had trust issues. So yeah, she has never really, I think it's just how I have explained it, its trust; she doesn't trust me. (Calum)

Similarly, to improvements in communication, alongside perseverance and commitment to maintaining amicable relationships, the passage of time can also improve negotiation of care arrangements; when describing the initial years after their separation nine years prior, Graham told me he felt that his daughter "*was used as a pawn a little*" by his ex-wife, especially when it was evident that Graham had been dating. He now says things have "settled" after a period of a few years where he felt care arrangements were often made outside of his control and *"it tended to be an argument every week as to whether that routine was adhered to or not"*. He reported to me that he is able to 'swap' care days depending on the commitments of

both he and his wife, and his ex-wife and her husband. Vince also explains that care arrangements were very difficult in the first few years of being separated, but that they were much improved:

> Before going to court, because she was denying overnight contact, she wasn't stopping me from seeing her, I didn't go without seeing her, but I didn't have overnight visits for inexplicable reasons which were unproved in court. Things between me and her mum are fine now, I took the matter to court, I got everything I was asking for, which is only a starting block. I got full weekend access, without any problems, plus a week in the summer to take her away. I have never let her down once, that is really important to me, and I have built a lot of trust with her mum, and now me and her mum get on fine. (Vince)

These extracts demonstrate that time, and displaying commitment to children over time, can improve care arrangements and provide stability, but fathers express feelings that, in the initial years after separation, decisions about care could be made without them, potentially due to fathers not being trusted to care for their children. Discussion of trust building suggests that some fathers desire to display to their children's mother that they are a trusted and committed caregiver, potentially as reasoning for why care with fathers should be maintained or increased.

6.3.2   Ongoing dissatisfactory care

Dissatisfaction with care routines was far more widespread with fathers who had either 'sporadic' or 'day-time only' care routines. Overnight care was a particular sticking point, with fathers wishing to expand their day-time care to be overnight. For this group of fathers, it was usual to be non-resident for one to four years, a relatively short time compared to others in the sample, and those with more satisfactory care routines. Nick struggled to understand the decisions his daughter's mother made about care arrangements, and told me he had requested different care routines, based on his work shift patterns, which would allow for more time with his daughter. He told me that he had repeatedly asked to care for his daughter overnight, and that his daughter had also asked for this, but he reported to me that his requests were unanswered:

> I asked her about three weeks ago face to face, if Phoebe can start staying round my house, but she was a bit flustered by it at first, although ultimately, she was like "yeah, yeah, we'll see" but nothing has been said about it since.

Expressions of mothers dominating care routines in order to benefit themselves or restrict time that children could spend with fathers at times led to criticism of their children's mother. Daniel saw his nine-year-old daughter every Sunday for a few hours and a court order mandated that he should also have overnight care, but this had not happened: *"I am assuming that it's the controlling mother that has caused that and arranging things that suit her".* Daniel's disparaging description of his ex-partner reflects the strength of

grievance toward his dissatisfactory care routine. Simon's feeling that his care routine is dissatisfactory led to him expressing similar resentful feelings of his children's mother when she expressed missing the children:

> I miss the day to day with the girls, so when their mum complains to me, saying that she misses them and says she wants to spend more time with them, I think "you what!? I get five hours a week, you get them every day, mornings, evenings, everything". I get no time and she gets everything, so it stings when she complains. (Simon)

As highlighted in the previous chapter, overnight care for children, particularly in their own home is significant to enacting 'good' fatherhood to a significant proportion of the sample. Feelings of restriction of performing these practices of fatherhood due to mothers dominating care routines can result in feelings of exclusion, and also frustration. These expressions of feeling not fully involved in making decisions suggest that some fathers in the sample may feel their relationship they have with their children is mediated through their children's mother and similarly to fathers in Wilson et al.'s study with non-resident fathers, they are having to *"perform in a role imposed on them"* by their children's mothers (2004, p. 3). However, the patterns of stabilising of inter-parental relationships and care routines discussed in this chapter suggests that unstable care routines and dissatisfactory feelings experienced by these fathers who were relatively recently non-resident could develop into more positive situations with the progression of time. This positive trajectory was not a universal experience though.

6.3.2.1 Ivan and Kieran

Whilst there appears a trend for time to improve parental communication and overall relationships, and in turn ease negotiations for care patterns, there were two fathers in the sample, Ivan and Kieran, separated for eight and 10 years respectively that show this trend is not universal. Both fathers lived at least a 90 minutes' drive from their child and ex-wife, and both have previously had an every-other-weekend care pattern for their children. They now both see their children for a few hours every other weekend, driving to see them, with the addition of a few weeks in the school holidays. Both fathers recognise a significant negative turn in their relationships with their ex-wife directly attributed to her choosing to move away and changes in care arrangements made by her.

> In the past I would have waited inside when I picked up Abbie to take her out, so I saw her last Sunday, but now I just knock and if she is ready, she will come out, and if she is not ready, I'll wait in the car and she'll come out to the car. I really just have very little to say to [ex-wife] now. (Ivan)

Yeah, so it kind of got better to the extent that we were able to have conversations about Max, what he did, what he was up to there, or what he was doing with me here, and we'd send pictures and things like that. So yeah, it got a bit better. Now it's kind of deteriorated again, to just the minimum. (Kieran)

No formal arrangements for care and poor communication between parents such as Ivan and Kieran can mean that school holiday arrangements are under constant negotiation. Frequent negotiations can aggravate fragile relationships and repeatedly highlight the precarity of a father's care routine:

We are sometimes in tune and we manage to agree in advance what we are going to be doing, but it seems that with some regularity there is something that comes up which creates a problem, so a decision she has made in advance about what Abbie will be doing during a holiday period which only leaves me with essentially half of that time, so it is de facto decided for me when I will be seeing my daughter. And that raises then questions of fair access and access arrangements being made on my behalf, and I don't like that. (Ivan)

Disagreements about contact, with Ivan wishing more time with his daughter in the school holidays, and Kieran wishing to reinstate the every-other-weekend care routine left both fathers wondering whether to pursue legal action. Chapter 8 discusses how the decision to pursue legal advice for care disagreements is often marked by financial and emotional difficulties.

6.3.3 Children as actors in care routine negotiations

Whilst the role of mothers in care patterns is discussed in much detail, fathers in the sample also recognised the role their children play in developing care routines. It was understood across the sample that as children grow older, they would and should have more say in where they spent their time and the level of contact that they had with their fathers. This was widespread from those that had pre-school aged children, like Nick, below, through to those with pre-teen children:

I am hoping, as Phoebe gets older, that she will be able to have a bit more of a say as well. And that will come into the equation. And she'll say: "I want to see Dad more" and her mum will say "okay". It's hard when they are so young, cos they can't speak for themselves, and you have to go on what their other parent says, even if it's not in the best interests of the child. (Nick)

For Nick, the best interests of his child should be the forefront of decision making, but he questions whether his ex-partner is doing the same. Where it was perceived that mothers acted as obstacles for fathers spending time with their children, older children having more capacity to express their desires was portrayed as positive, and correcting the perceived injustices that occurred in the early years:

[Ex-wife] has been shitty with me trying to reduce my access, but now the younger two are now 15 and 13, they are old enough to do what they want to do. (Paul)

In Paul's case, the care arrangement (6 days a fortnight across weekdays and weekends) had been in place since shortly after separation. However, the significance of his children growing older and having more capacity to make their decisions meant he was less anxious about his ex-wife changing care arrangements.

Phones and other forms of communication technology increase opportunities for fathers to contact their children. The use of technology for this communication was seen as increasing in the pre-teen years, where children are able to use devices without the aid of their mother or another family member. It was felt that using phones for contact with younger children can be difficult, as this involves help from mothers, who were not always felt to facilitate this. Moreover, it was expressed that the attention span of children can result in stilted and broken conversations, as described by Tim about his nine-year-old son:

> Sometimes when I am talking to him, he will just be running around and run away from the video, and I call him back and he says: "I thought we were done?". He is still so young.

It was felt that these phone conversations weren't conducive to constructive father-child communication and making children converse with fathers in this way was potentially unfair. However, when children are older, and have their own phones, telephone communication becomes far more central to father-child interaction. Phones can be used to increase dialogue of everyday conversations, and text messages act as touch points through the week between visits, and to help families make plans and keep up to date with children's plans. Group chats and open communication with children's mothers can help to facilitate contact arrangements, but phones also allow a private space of communication between visits where fathers can keep up-to-date with their children's ongoing lives from a distance.

> So, we all have a group chat which gets them to do that [discuss weekend plans]. And then Niamh, Alexander and I, we have a separate group chat, we have one that their mum isn't on, so that the three of us can talk. And I am sure she has one the same with them too, or maybe she doesn't need to cos she sees them every day. (Leo)

> It is getting easier now, as my eldest is old enough to have a phone. He got a phone for Christmas, so I can bypass her a bit, and have a few conversations with him. (Robert)

As such, mobile phones can be seen as reducing mother's ability to gate-keep father-child interaction. Connectedness over space due to the everyday nature of mobile phones means that it is potentially easier for non-resident fathers to 'be there', extending the ability to be present and available for children outside of designated care routines. Ivan kept his phone on the table during the interview and acknowledged that he was regularly glancing at it to see if his non-resident daughter had text him:

> All I can do is be available though, so I am looking at my phone now on the table, I am available anytime if she wants to contact me.

Increasing connectedness can also reduce likelihood of 'missing out' on aspects of children's lives as conversations can be had between physical visits. In addition to children's desires to spend time with both parents, children growing older and the changes that come with their own leisure time is a significant feature of arranging care routines in separated families with older children. Children's friendships, part-time jobs and increasing school work were the major factors expressed as potentially intruding on time children spend with their fathers. Vince recognised a need for flexibility in his previously established every-other-weekend routine with his 14-year-old daughter because she had begun to arrange events with her friends at the weekend. Whilst fathers felt excitement at their children's growing social relationships and gaining part-time work, it was recognised that as a non-resident father, downtime between teenagers' activities usually spent at home is not possible because teenagers are basing themselves out of their mother's home. Francis explained how he did not want his time with his teenagers to inhibit them seeing friends. He felt that if his children used his house as a 'base' it would make spending time with them easier:

> Now they are a bit older and they want to be with their mates at the weekend, and I understand that, and I say "look, if you don't wanna do anything on Saturday, you go off with your pals and do what you wanna do". But that would be easier to do if they were coming to me on a Friday night and staying until Sunday, and I just had to feed them, and do whatever they need, but know they are off with their pals, you know, like what you would do in a normal household. So, I've had to accept that they don't want to be with me on a Saturday, and it's not a case of "oh, we don't want to be with my dad!", its more "all of us mates are doin' this!". So, I am not gonna stop them doing things or missing out on doing things with their friends to spend time with me, is not fair.

Again, the importance of home in relation to fulfilling fathering practices is centralised in this father's perspective. When fathers lived some distance from mothers, and thus children's social networks, this distance was felt to exacerbate the problem of older children struggling to maintain competing desires. This was the case for Joshua who lived only a few miles from his ex-wife, and Kieran who lived 90-minutes' drive from his ex-wife:

> I think now as he is starting to grow up a little bit more, I think he finds where I live slightly more inconvenient as I don't live in the same area that all his friends do. (Joshua)

> At some point he will be able to decide what he wants to do, and he will be in charge of whether he wants to travel here or not, whether he wants to see his friends. And I am kind of happy with that, I will always be around …. I expect that as he gets older and he becomes more independent he will probably want to spend less time coming here to see his dad. (Kieran)

Encouraging children to engage in their own activities independent of their father, even if this involved a reduction of father-child time is another demonstration of how fathers sacrifice their own needs for their children. As such, one can see that many of these fathers consider their older children to be a third actor in separated families, with recognition from fathers that as children grow older and become more independent from their parents, they have more capacity and decision-making powers, and these should be respected.

6.3.4   The influence of paid work on care routines

Within the sample, particularly those fathers who reported caring for their children during the week as well as weekends, patterns of care were often discussed in relation to working hours, both their own, but also their ex-partner's. At the time of the research interview, Harry cared for his daughter every other weekend, and one overnight in the week. He also cared for her after-school on a Monday whilst his ex-wife worked. He explained how they shared care based around work routines, with his work offering flexibility to work around his ex-wife's freelance work routines, who in turn is flexible to his needs to travel overseas. Flexibility and working around employment hours were apparent in cases where parents lived close to one another. In fact, within the sample, all those who reported mid-week care for their children lived in the same town or city as their children's mother. Brian and his ex-wife shared care and lived in the same neighbourhood – on discussing the sharing of care, Brian's work meant he was able to do much more after-school care, and conceded that 'fairness' meant his ex-wife spent more weekend time with their son:

> I think [ex-wife] would generally see him a higher proportion of the time [at the weekend], which I think is fair enough, because it's the only time that she can really spend masses of time with him. But he will still come around to me for a few hours on a Saturday and then a few hours on a Sunday.

For those that tended to share care with their ex-partner, managing school holiday care was considered easier than as a cohabiting couple, as each parent's annual leave could be stretched further:

> We would have time off together then, so we would probably be more reliant on 'kids clubs' and grandparents. But say we both take two weeks off now, that's four weeks of the summer holiday sorted. But when we were together, if we took two weeks off together, that's still four weeks to worry about. So yeah, in a way, that's easier now. (Euan)

Joshua had flexible working hours, and recognised it meant his care during the summer was more dictated by his ex-wife's working schedule. For him, having his summer holiday care pattern 'organised' was not worth complaining about, contrasting Ivan's complaints in section 6.3.2.1 about his time being organised: *"as I have a slightly more flexible work, it tends to work, I tend to get organised by her, but I don't grumble. It works [laugh]" (Joshua).* However, Joshua, in contrast to Ivan, had a settled and long-standing care

routine and lived very close to his son. Balancing care arrangements around work suggest an element of 'shift-parenting' occurring between households where fathers care for children during the week, with this balance being most seen between parents with 'good' communication. This supports arguments made by Finnish authors Murtorinne-Lahtinen et al. (2016) who suggest that significant proportions of lone mothers rely on children's fathers for care when they are working, particularly if the work is done at 'non-standard' hours such as during evenings. However, in contrasts to those with flexible working patterns, work hours were also expressed as inhibiting care, and restricting the extent that care could be shared equally between parents:

> But, yeah, that's one of the things that frustrates me the most about the situation, it's come to a point where [ex-partner] is naturally the main parent, the main care-provider, but that couldn't really be avoided, because I needed to work. (Oliver)

> There are some [separated parents] where it's a proper half-and-half relationship, but I don't think actually that I could cope with that, because of the demands of my job. (Harry)

Whilst work and employment did not feature as central discussion points in interviews, these extracts highlight how working hours and employment should be considered as very important when examining the negotiation of care routines between separated parents. Overall, this section on negotiation of care routines has highlighted the challenges and rewards involved in relational negotiation both parents perform in separated families. This section has introduced the theme of fathers' feeling secondary in decision making, but also continues to demonstrate how children's wishes are centred in fathers' decision making. Continued exploration of decision-making will be done in the next section.

6.4 Decision making

6.4.1 Working collaboratively with children's mothers

Another significant feature of the separated parent relationship is the ability for parents to work collaboratively when making decisions about children's upbringing. In this research these decisions were at times discussed in ambiguous terms of 'parenting', but also specifically about educational decisions and managing expectations of children's behaviour. Across the sample, links can be made between the perceived and experienced quality of parental relationship and the ease of making joint co-parenting decisions. Vince is demonstrative of how progression between parents over time can improve co-parenting. After a difficult separation period which he described as *"no communication … if she had to talk to me it would be very abrupt, phones slammed down sort of thing"* and several years in the Family Courts to arrange contact, 10

years after separation he reported getting on very well with his ex-partner. He described the transformation to a friendly communicative relationship as a *"real blessing"*:

> There are things I'll think of that mum won't think of, and vice-versa, and whilst we don't agree on all our parenting - that's why we aren't together - we value each other's opinions a lot more now and we will listen to those, and it's all the better for Ella, I think. Without a doubt. (Vince)

Here Vince highlights how having parenting opinions listened to, and in turn listening to their children's mother is a marker for positive co-parenting relationships. Other fathers, reporting usually 'good' or 'amicable' communication also discussed how being able to converse in ways that were not confrontational allowed for productive conversations about their children's upbringing. Topics of conversation went beyond short conversations when dropping or collecting children, with phone calls periodically to 'catch up' or before a specific event, such as parent's evening:

> But when it comes to Joe, yeah, I think we communicate well. We try to have a united front about what his needs are; so, for example, if we go to parents evening, we both go together and sometimes we discuss beforehand the things we want to talk about. Because Joe might have said different things to each of us, so we are just working out what his particular needs are. (Brian)

> She and I quite often talk on the phone, often early in the morning, and less so now they are older. When they were younger, we used to talk a lot, maybe even two or three times a week, just catching up on where they were. (Leo)

Being recognised as an important actor in decision making, feeling as if one's opinions are valued in decision-making and being consistently included in decision-making - *"if there is any major decision or issue arising, we will always talk about it"* (Martin) – can aid parental communication, even if there is disagreement about the final decision. For example, Oliver felt that maintaining the positive and open dialogue he had with his daughter's mother was a central priority when discussing their daughter's needs. He explained this in the next passage regarding disagreements about schooling choices, where friends and family members suggested he got legal advice and 'fought' more for his opinion:

> I thought "well, yeah, this is one of the things I want, but I think what is more important is that me and [ex-partner] have a good relationship". Because if that breaks down and we don't have that good relationship then that's it, it's just not gonna work, it just doesn't bear thinking about. I see and hear so many stories of people being in situations where the only conversations between the two parents are by letters from one solicitor to the other; they never speak to each other and any change in arrangements down to like half an hour has to be discussed through lawyers. I want to be there; I want Holly to have two parents who love her.

Participants expressed needing to work with their ex-partner to create a 'unified front' for children, to ensure behaviour is controlled at both homes, even if fathers didn't wholly agree with the parenting technique of

their ex-partner. This included making sure that children were aware that parents communicated, that parents would 'back each other up' and parents should make effort to keep things 'stabilised' or 'similar' between the two households.

> As much as I don't always necessarily agree with [ex-wife]'s parenting admittedly, we have got to show some sort of unified front. I don't want to be giving my eventually teenage daughter a key to the house so that when she has had an argument with her mum she can disappear somewhere. I don't want to start that war where she is playing us off against each other. (Graham)

> Certainly, in front of the kids, they need to see that they can't go running from one to the other if they disagree. I mean, in full family units that haven't separated, kids will play mum off against dad and that sort of thing. But we don't want to exacerbate that sort of situation… (William)

Expressions of presenting a 'united front' illustrates that fathers wish to remain as a figure of discipline and rule-making alongside potentially new caring roles formed through non-resident fatherhood. As aforementioned, parents can communicate by phone call, either on a periodic basis, or sporadically. Parents can also discuss developments when children are being collected between homes, however, as shown by Joshua, this can be problematic:

> Saturday night and Sunday night are probably the biggest two times when we can communicate the most. And that could also be a friction point, if [ex-wife] is telling me things that have happened between her and Charlie, and if Charlie overhears that, he will go "[angrily] no! that didn't happen!" so that was a bit tricky to manage for a while. We had to learn not to do that, but that unfortunately means that sometimes you miss out on that communication. And then it's making other efforts to try and communicate it in a different way when he is not there. So, I guess there is the occasional text or WhatsApp message to let me know what's going off.

This extract from Joshua, highlights that parents working together and communicating is not always straightforward; some conversations cannot be discussed in front of children, and for the majority of parents in this study, the only time parents spent together included their children being present – i.e. dropping off or picking up children. This meant texting, emails and phone calls are often the means of communicating for separated parents where a face-to-face conversation might be more beneficial. This collaborative nature (or desire for a collaborative nature) suggest that fathers in the sample recognise the necessity to participate in family practices across households in order to facilitate effective parenting. It also suggests that creating consistency for children is an important task of separated parents. However, a noticeable exception to this pattern occurred in the sample highlighting how when parental communication was poor, desires to develop shared family practices are not prioritised:

> There has been an occasion where she has asked me saying: "Bethany's got this punishment, she's not allowed to do this or that; I want you to respect this or that", but because I only get to see her once

a week, I just say yes, but when we are together, its Bethany's time, and my time, and stuff what her mother says at the end of the day. (Daniel)

Daniel has a sporadic care routine for his daughter and described his relationship with her mother as *"neither here nor there and we have no love for each other at all"*. Low or poor levels of communication between parents and disagreement over care patterns can reduce desires to co-parent collaboratively.

6.4.2   Feeling secondary in decision-making

Communicative and harmonious co-parenting relationships were not expressed by everyone in the sample. Amongst those considered to have 'poor' communication with their ex-partner there were repeated expressions of feeling like they were not consulted, or their opinion was not valued when it came to making decisions.

> I have never ever been involved in [decision making], never once been asked, to be honest with you it's never even been brought up. I didn't even know that she was going to pre-school until months after she started. (Simon)

> When we split up my ex-wife went to live near her parents which is two and a half hours' drive away. And one of the first things she did without asking me is enrol her in a particular school. So, no decision there. (Ivan)

Here school features as a significant decision, but there was also less discussion of rules and creating consistency across homes amongst this subset of participants. Feeling that discussions would end in disagreement, or their feelings would be dismissed meant some fathers avoided raising issues with their children's mother, or felt expressing their options would be 'pointless':

> I try not to get into it. Cos, I think if I really thought about it, then I would really start to worry about everything to do with his upbringing, and really, I don't have much say in it. So, I try to avoid getting engaged in it. It would also mean engaging with [ex-partner] and that's not desirable. (Kieran)

> You kind of think the distance would make it easier to be level headed and communicate, but it isn't. So, there is still a little bit of friction. I try and relay information and she interprets it negatively. Or when I actually want to talk about something important, it's almost like she doesn't give me time. (Dominic)

These extracts suggest that fathers with poorer levels of communication with their ex-partners feel that they should be consulted on decision-making in terms of school (and pre-school) choices, but also in broader aspects of their children's 'upbringing' similarly to parents with more positive communication in section 6.4.1. Even where parental communication could be classified as good or amicable, there were still expressions of mothers taking a primary role in decision-making and having a more influential voice; where

fathers were included, their opinion was felt to be lesser, resulting in feelings of being placed in a secondary position. One example of this was Fraser who discussed feeling frustrated at being 'consulted' rather than 'involved' in decision-making when it came to choosing his 10-year-old sons' secondary school. Similarly, Dominic, whose daughter had been struggling at school, discussed how his ex-partner would ask his opinion, but he felt she was not interested in his reply: *"she will ring me up to get my opinion, but what she really wants is for me to say yes. So, when I try and offer a managed opinion or play devil's advocate, she ends up getting really annoyed at me"*. These extracts highlight a desire to be recognised as a more equal partner in decision-making.

Similarly, to improvement of parental relationships over-time, feeling involved in decision-making can improve over time. Harry, who has been separated from his ex-wife for nearly five years, felt that until very recently his ex-wife's approach to decision-making made collaborative parenting difficult:

> I think her mum is very much of the opinion that she is in charge of all of this, and that I am just a sort of addition, and that it is nice that Alice sees her dad every now and again, spends time with me. But actually in the last six months that has changed a bit, got a lot better, six months to a year I think, but previously to that she was very much "I make all the decisions around here when it comes to Alice". And that attitude would close down conversations, she was very good at closing it down. (Harry)

Partaking in decision-making about children's upbringing can be considered a parenting practice that is not easily measurable; whilst time with children and care given by fathers is a tangible family practice, co-parenting discussions, being listened to and consulted are less visible markers of fatherhood. These extracts however highlight how more hidden parenting practices are also considered fundamental to 'involved' fatherhood. However, poor parental communication, or perceived exclusion by their children's mother can mean access to this fundamental aspect of fathering is restricted. This contrasts feelings of recognition as an important actor in decision-making expressed by other fathers in the sample, potentially exacerbating poor parental communication and disagreements about decisions. For some fathers, a sense of lack of influence when it comes to decision-making when multiplied with difficult care arrangements that also felt out of their control resulted in a deep sense of instability and precariousness.

> I feel massively powerless, and it's like I said, I am just a person, in her eyes I might be a dad, this, that and the other, but in my eyes, I am just some bloke, I am not a dad, not a father. Alright, I give her mum £200 a month, I get to see her on a Sunday and we do something together, but I don't know, maybe things will change as she gets older. (Daniel)

> I have got no power and no say. I'd love to be more involved, but I can't, without going through the hassle of court and official means, I can't force her mother to give me more say. And that's the worst thing, you always feel like a secondary parent, one below, you don't feel equal and that's the hardest

thing. You always feel like they are dictating to you, and you always have to tiptoe around, like you are walking on ice. And even though we aren't together anymore I still feel like I can't upset her, cos she has the power to stop me seeing Phoebe. When someone has that hold on you, it's the worst thing ever. To know that someone can take your child away from you, it's awful, it's really horrendous. (Nick)

These extracts from Daniel and Nick, both of who have precarious and day-time only care routines, demonstrate how involvement in decision-making is integral to their identity as a father. They also highlight how perceived exclusion from fundamental parenting practices, as well as feeling unable to move from a secondary position can result in feelings of powerlessness and fear. Before summarising and compiling these three sections on relationships, care routines and decision making, a brief discussion of fathers' perceptions of maternal partners and the potentially problematic nature of another father-figure for their children is had.

6.5 Step fathers and maternal partners

Another potential actor in separated families is maternal partners. New partners of children's mothers and remarriage were discussed in around half of interviews, and attitudes to mothers having new partners, with fathers' attitudes to these partners themselves ranging from favourable, through ambivalent, to negative, with no consensus being able to be drawn across the sample. When a good or communicative relationship between parents occurred, new relationships on both sides could be discussed, but where communication between parents was more strained or poor this communication appeared much less. It was not uncommon in the sample for fathers to cite finding out about maternal relationships through children: *"this new boyfriend, which I am not privy to, but her mum hasn't told me this, what I know, I know from Abbie."* (Ivan). Not being told of a new partner, and in three cases, not being told when a new partner had moved into the maternal home, as well as never meeting or having very little contact with maternal partners was considered acceptable as long as children seemed happy and reported no ill-feelings toward this partner.

> Mum lives with a new partner now, I've never met him, but Imogen speaks very good of him. So, I haven't got a problem. She never comes to me and says you know, something bad about him. I think they have got a nice little set up down there. It doesn't bother me, as long as she's happy. (Calum)

No fathers in the sample reported spending time with maternal partners, except occasionally when collecting or returning to children to maternal homes. These interactions were short; a handshake and minimal conversation. However, five fathers did express negative feelings toward maternal partners because their children had reported ill-feelings; in these cases, though, fathers expressed a lack of capacity to make a change for their children: *"there's nothing I can do about it", "I am unable to do anything about it"* because

they could not, or would not, take these concerns to their children's mother in fear of causing conflict for them or their children. Nick in particular was vocal about disliking his daughter's step-father, telling me *"I think he doesn't like me being in their [daughter and ex-partner's] life"*. Nick explains that his daughter calls both him and her step-father 'Daddy' which he does not like and 'wants to put a stop to'. Uniquely in the sample, he said he had raised this grievance with Phoebe's mother:

> From day one, he tried to mark his territory which I think is really unfair. And he encourages Phoebe to call him dad. And I have questioned them on that. And [ex-partner's] reaction was "Well he is kind of her dad; he is her step-dad" and I said "he's not kind of a dad. You can't be kind of a dad. I am her dad; I always will be". Legally I am her dad and no relationship lasts forever but being a dad does. Don't get me wrong, he sees her every day, he raises her, and I appreciate him for that, I think it's great that she has a mother and father figure around her all the time. But I think when I turn up, I should be left to be a dad…

Nick's definition of fatherhood suggests he considers biological and legal ties as the main markers of fatherhood, not practical care. Poor levels of communication with his daughter's mother, unstable care routines, and expressions of imbalance in decision-making, and subsequent restriction in his ability to participate in fathering practices discussed in this and the previous chapter could be explanatory factors in why Nick has struggled to adapt to the presence of another father-figure acquiring the title of 'dad'. This contrasts to Calum, above, who had a stable (court ordered) care routine and has fewer negative feelings toward a new 'father-figure' in his similarly aged daughter's life. Feeling unable to intervene in situations with step-fathers due to fear of destabilising care routines is another example of precarity in fathers' ability to parent in the manner in which they wish.

Within the sample, over a third of fathers expressed a willingness for their children's mother to meet a new partner, as they felt this would improve mother's wellbeing, help to settle the relationship between himself and her, as well as give fathers more time with children. Tying into discussions of having more care for his daughter, Harry felt that increasing the time he cared for his daughter would improve his ex-wife's life: *"I think actually, my ex would benefit from having a bit more time for herself to go off and form a relationship, or expand her hobbies, or spend more time with friends … She could actually have a fuller life"*. Francis and William expressed similar sentiments about their ex-wife's meeting a new partner and being 'happy':

> I do genuinely want her to be happy. But her being happy will make my life happier, cos she will be an easier co-parent. And what I hope is that she finds someone and thinks "yeah, this is what I have been looking for all my life, this happiness, and I don't know why I was ever bothered about him and what he is up to". So yeah, for us both to be happy. For the boys to be happy with her new partner, for him to be a decent guy, and for the children to be happy for me and my new partner. (Francis)

Within this sample, it appears that non-resident fathers' attitudes toward maternal relationships are mixed but are often characterised by feelings of ambivalence and detachment. When maternal relationships are positive these are considered as positive for children as well, because household wellbeing would be higher, and maternal mood would be higher. However, if these relationships were poor, fathers felt little or no capacity to improve the situation for their children or their ex-partner, introducing an additional source of precarity.

6.6 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has demonstrated how a categorisation can be used to help explain the factors that fathers consider as developing or hindering constructive co-parenting relationships in post-separation families. The strength of communication between parents appears to be a significant marker of the quality of parental relationships overall. Efforts to improve or maintain lines of communication and put aside differences can be seen as another attempt for fathers to prioritise children's needs. Communication levels can be seen to have an impact on fathers' feelings of inclusion when arranging care routines and making decisions about their children's lives. It has been shown that time can, in many cases, improve parental relationships as ill feelings from separation dissipate. This has a consequential effect on other matters of co-parenting and could make arranging care and discussing children's needs easier. However, it is not always clear whether dissatisfactory feelings toward care reduced over time because care routines changed to something considered more satisfactory to fathers, or whether fathers became more accepting of dissatisfactory established care routines.

Feeling recognised as an important actor in decision-making, feeling as if one's opinions are valued in decision-making, and being consistently included in decision-making as a non-resident father has been demonstrated as aiding parental communication, even if there is disagreement about the final decision. However, for some fathers, unsatisfactory care routines are felt to be made outside of their control, particularly in the initial months and years after separation. These arrangements can lead to feelings of secondary status as a parent and extend to expressions of mothers gatekeeping father-child relationships, adding to past research on this topic (see Lau-Clayton, 2015 and Wilson et al., 2004, p. 3). Findings of this thesis show how feeling secondary in decision-making can lead to feelings of precariousness and instability in fathering identity. Ongoing disagreements about care routines can negatively affect once amicable communication between parents.

For some fathers, it was felt that younger children were restricted in their ability to build strong relationships with fathers because their young age meant that these relationships had to be organised with mothers' input. Whilst time may improve parental communication, care routines may change over time in separated families due to children growing older, highlighting how negotiating care routines is a continual process. As such, through examination of fathers' experiences, it can be seen that from non-resident fathers' perspectives, multiple dimensions of influence, including the strength of parental relationships, time, authority and care routines can impact fathers' feelings of a successful or inhibitive co-parenting relationship. Desiring to be involved in decision-making and feeling excluded due to being non-resident, suggest that alongside the tangible markers of care aforementioned in Chapter 5, being involved in decision-making whilst less tangible is also considered as significant to fathering. Wishing to be involved in decisions about schooling and discipline for children also builds upon arguments made in the previous chapter that fathers in this sample desire to take part in more mundane aspects of parenting. It is also an example of how being non-resident can leave fathers feeling as if they are 'missing out' on important aspects of their children's upbringing. As such, feelings of disconnection from fathering seen to be intrinsically related to their non-resident positioning and not spending time with their children on a daily basis discussed in the last chapter is potentially compounded by actions of children's mothers. The next chapter will explore the other major social relationships in fathers' lives aside from their children and children's mother(s); their own parents and family members, friends and romantic partners all featured in discussions of fathers' lived experiences.

Chapter 7: The extended family, romantic and social relationships of non-resident fathers

7.1 Introduction

Emergent studies of non-resident fathers have understandably focused upon their fathering role and the relationship with their children. However, within this thesis a broader perspective was aimed for, that took a more holistic approach to fathering and recognised that fathers are embedded within a network of relationships that while include their children and their children's mother also include their own family, their friends and in the case of separated fathers potentially new relationships. As such, a better understanding of these wider social networks is needed in order to better understand and support non-resident fathers.

This chapter will examine some of the social relationships central to non-resident fathers' lives, highlighting how fathers experience challenges and competing priorities in managing their social relationships as non-resident fathers, but as in the last two chapters, the needs and desires of children are centred in father's decision making. The chapter will analyse aspects and narratives of the quality of these social relationships including the negotiation of relationships, perceived ideals of relationships and sources of support, as well as change and continuity in relationships. The chapter first offers some insights into the sample's relationships with their extended family, exploring the practical and emotional support offered by fathers' extended family. This section also examines fathers' capacity to manage their children's relationships with their parents and other family members. In the next section, aforementioned child-centred approaches to parenting as a non-resident father highlights how reconciling new romantic relationships with caring for children can result in complications and conflicts. Friends and wider support networks outside of family and partners, can be a source of emotional support and offer stability. However, hard decisions about relationships, difficulties reconciling care with other time priorities, and negotiations for satisfactory care routines with their children's mother can lead to loneliness and poor mental health, discussed in the final section of this chapter.

7.2 Paternal extended family relationships

7.2.1 Fathers' role in maintaining paternal family relationships with children

A common theme in the interviews was the time and frequency of paternal grandparent contact with children, and the emotional and practical support paternal grandparents can offer to separated fathers.

Expressions of grandparents desiring to see grandchildren could often be expressed in a taken-for-granted manner: *"obviously, grandparents like to see their granddaughter more often"* (Calum), suggesting an assumptive interpretation of familial bonds. This was particularly true if the children were the only grandchildren in the family: *"he is their only grandchild so it's very important that they see him."*. Parental separation, and disruptive caring routines for fathers were considered as having a sequential effect on paternal family, who 'missed out' on seeing grandchildren. For example, Francis has four siblings, who he says before separation spent lots of time with his children, with one sibling providing lots of childcare when his sons were young. On describing changes to time spent with children after his divorce, he said: *"my family have missed out as well, my family have missed out terribly."*. As aforementioned, a change in Kieran's caring routine for his son had occurred shortly before the interview, resulting in him no longer caring for his son in his house. Through the interview he explained that he felt that this was not a good arrangement for his son or himself, but he also recognised the impact he felt it had on his parents. The occasional overnight care he has in the school holidays was often spent with his parents and siblings who lived nearby to him:

> The other issue with me going down to visit him [son in other city] is that he has lost the regular contact with one half of his family. (Kieran)

Similarly, Nick - who had spent a period of almost a year not seeing his daughter - recognised negative implications for his parents whilst explaining the problematic nature of the previous care routine for his daughter and himself. At the time of interview, he lived with his parents and spent every other Sunday with his daughter in their home:

> It's not only me that gets to see her, it's also my mum and dad. So, they appreciate it as much as me, because when I wasn't seeing her, they were missing out as well. And that was one of my reasons for saying [to daughter's mother] "look, I want to see her, you are not just punishing me, you are punishing them, and they haven't done anything wrong".

It appears that fathers desire to facilitate ongoing grandparent-child relationships in a similar pattern to before becoming a non-resident father, and are worried that becoming a non-resident father had impaired this. By ensuring connections with wider family, fathers can be seen to be counteracting some of what they consider to be 'problematic' parts of parental separation and reducing disruption to children by maintaining relationships with their wider paternal family. Interestingly, there was little expression of children benefiting from grandparent relationships; rather, continuing this relationship in a way that was similar to before becoming a non-resident father seemed to be a taken-for-granted notion amongst the participants. The fathers instead emphasised the benefits for grandparents to see grandchildren, and potentially reinforcing

normative models of attachment with biological family members. When fathers lived close to their parents, taking children to visit grandparents tended to be an activity for evenings and weekends. Grandparents and other paternal family members desires to spend time with children can place pressures on already limited time for fathers. However, it was considered important for fathers to make time for this. Euan explained that he and his ex-partner ensure that grandparents on both sides of the family were involved regularly:

> Before we split up, it would be quite common for the kids to spend a night at their grandparents, either my parents or [ex-wife's] mum's and that kind of stopped when we split up. So, we've tried to, you know, keep them involved as well. Separation is difficult for grandparents.

Euan reported that the common care routine for his primary school-aged sons was usually three nights a week, sharing care with his ex-partner who lives nearby. When comparing to the below passage from Ivan, who visits his daughter for a few hours every other Sunday, and cares for her a few weeks of school holidays, it can be seen that contact time is perhaps a significant factor in being content with sharing paternal time with grandparents:

> Generally speaking, when Abbie is with me, I am getting phone calls: "oh, is Abbie there, can we come and visit?". So, my time with Abbie becomes diluted, and so do the kids and [partner]'s by other's demands, and that's significant, that is a bit of a pain in the arse actually, for everyone. (Ivan)

What's more, when family live far away, travelling to them can mean father-child time is spent travelling, something Martin feels is *"not a great use of our time together"*. Phone and video calls to paternal family members during father caring time, and also taking and sending photos to family members were methods discussed to facilitate children keeping in touch with paternal family if they don't live nearby. A commitment to family members who live outside of children's family home(s) suggests that many fathers in this study consider family practices and family relationships to exist wider than the family household.

As such, it can be seen that a common theme within the interviews was a sense of responsibility to ensure that paternal family time with grandchildren is maintained within the sample, even if this is to the detriment of father-child time. Once again, this theme highlights the time constraints expressed by fathers in the sample; ensuring that father-child time together remains as 'quality time' is considered by some as possible alongside their extended family. However, for others, particularly where extended family lived some distance away, 'quality time' was inhibited by the necessities of spending time with extended family. Very few references were made to paternal grandparents having a relationship with grandchildren or children's mothers independent of fathers, and as such, within this sample, fathers appear pivotal in maintaining children's relationships with paternal grandparents. This contrasts previous studies which suggest that

paternal grandmothers can act as 'invisible facilitators' in separated families, particularly when fathers live with their own parents (see Bradshaw et al., 1999; Smart and Neale, 1999). A possible explanation for this could be that the mean age of participants taking part in the study was 40 at the time of interview, and this age range within the sample could mean that grandparents were also older. Perhaps grandparents may be more involved in facilitating this parental communication when separated parents are younger parents.

7.2.2   Practical and emotional support

In terms of support, both emotional and practical, fathers' family featured commonly at separation, with at least 10 of the 21 participants who experienced separation of a cohabiting relationship when becoming a non-resident father citing living with their parents or siblings immediately after separation. Having this opportunity was considered as kind and helpful of their family – "*I have a great family ... they let me move back home, which was very good of them*" (Daniel) - but often considered a short-term solution or 'not ideal', with fathers wishing to move out into their own home. This duration ranged from a few weeks to a long-term residency situation, with three fathers continuing to live with their parents at the time of the study interview. All three cited the high cost of living alone as the reason for continuing to live with their parents.

Grandparents did not always live nearby to fathers and their children, which inhibited the amount of day-to-day support they could give. Paternal grandparents were used for regular childcare by one participant, relied on in the school holidays in another two cases, and facilitated transport for another father to collect and return his daughter across the large city he lived in. Therefore, a reliance on parents for childcare or transport was not a widespread theme across the sample.

Feeling supported in their decisions after becoming a non-resident father, even if unexpected to family, for many fathers involved in the study was demonstrative of the emotional support fathers in the sample garnered from their family; "*they've been very supportive, and they haven't ever been angry toward me or [ex-wife], but I think it was the last thing that they were expecting.*" (Brian). Christmas was a significant time for extended family relations; changes to traditional routines, particularly giving time for fathers, or themselves, to transport children between maternal and paternal family homes, as well as facilitating 'double Christmas' for grandchildren who visited before or after the 25th December. This not only demonstrates the impact that non-resident fatherhood can have on extended paternal family members, but also demonstrates another means of support that paternal family can offer.

> Christmas and New Year's is more of a faff these days; I do a lot of the ferrying and the kids come and go. Whilst my parents appreciate seeing me every year, I think the revolving door of children is a

big change to the usual peaceful Christmas they have had in years previous. They haven't moaned though, there's always a big smile on their face and food ready for when the boys arrive. (William)

Emotional support could also be found through paternal family's reaction to separation. Where fathers had strained relationships with their children's mother, paternal family expressing similarly negative opinions of the ex-partner was interpreted as a recognition of the difficulties fathers felt they were facing. Nick recites when he decided to leave his ex-partner and called his father asking if he could move in:

Nick: I still remember the phone call; I rang my dad at home and he picked up the phone, and I literally said to him "Dad, I have a massive favour to ask you" and he just said "son, your bed is made, you can come back here at any time". I didn't even need to tell him, he knew. He knew what I was going to ask, and they have always been 100 percent supportive.

Interviewer: Do you think they had anticipated it?

Nick: Yeah. Definitely. I mean, my parents, in all honesty, they never liked her, they never got on with her, to be honest. I think they thought she was a bit of a user.

In this passage Nick eludes that his parents are supportive, and their expectation of his return to the family home is indicative of their dislike of his partner and support of his decision to separate, something that at the time of a difficult breakup was reassuring. Robert also tells of his parent's happiness at his separation from his ex-partner, describing them as "*chuffed*" because "*they didn't particularly like her by the end, and they get to see their grandkids more"*. Robert also feels he is able to spend more time with his sister and her children since becoming a non-resident father as well, contrasting to feelings from other fathers in the sample that paternal family can 'miss out' when parents separate. However, when exploring paternal family, it should be noted that not all fathers are able to access support or be in a position to facilitate their children's relationships with extended family. Below highlights some of these reasons from participants in my sample, demonstrating the complexity of extended families:

- One did not have a 'close' relationship with his family and talked little of them in the interview, except to explain he grew up not knowing who his biological father was.
- One had parents who had died, but he did occasionally spend time with his sister.
- One participants' father had died recently, and he hadn't seen his mother since he was a child.
- One did not mention his parents but did visit his sister and her children.
- One had family who were *"spread all over the world"*.
- Two made no reference to their parents or extended family.

Amongst these seven fathers there appeared to be no overt expression of desire for family support. Consequently, whilst it must be understood that for some fathers, they feel they must negotiate the needs of their extended family alongside their children's needs, across the sample, family circumstances differed, and extended family were not considered a high priority for all. These examples demonstrate the diversity of circumstance across non-resident fathers, and that support, both practical, financial and emotional is not a universal experience for non-resident fathers. It has also demonstrated that fathers are finding a way to manage grandparent-child relationships and facilitating this even at the expense of father-child time. As such, paternal family's needs and wants can be considered another concern for fathers in addition to their children's needs, their ex-partner's needs and their own. A one-dimensional view of non-resident fathers in policy literature that does not appreciate the competing and overlapping responsibilities and relationships they feel they face could hinder their fulfilment of caring practices that are important to them. The next section of this chapter will explore the formation and negotiations involved in romantic relationships as a separated father.

7.3   Managing romantic relationships as a non-resident father

Within this project, the forming and continuation of romantic relationships of the participants was an area considered exploring due to previous research on non-resident fathers. This research suggested that when non-resident fathers' re-partner and then have further children, their relationship with their non-resident children becomes weaker and contact time lessens (see Poole et al., 2016; Cheadle et al., 2010). Despite these concerns there appears to be little empirical research that explores non-resident fathers' decision-making processes when embarking upon new relationships. For these reasons, in line with the overarching research questions, exploring fathers' social relationships both romantic and friendships, is considered an important aspect of understanding their lived experiences. Within this sample, two methods of exploring fathers' romantic relationships were used. The first was during the interviews; whilst there were not specific questions asked about new relationships, when talking about social networks, living arrangements, time constraints and reasons for relationship breakdown, discussions of new partners were either raised by the participant or prompted by the researcher. The second method of exploring relationships was a question on the post-interview questionnaire which asked: 'What is your current relationships status?'. Answers given were: one married, five in cohabiting relationships, one listed his relationship status as 'other' but was cohabiting with a partner, six in a relationship but not living together, and 13 said they were single at the time of the interview. Of the cohabiting fathers, one had two further children with his new partner, and another lived with his partner's daughter, whom he considered a step-daughter. Sexuality of participants

was not asked either in the questionnaire or during the interview, but all those in cohabiting relationships were living with a woman, and all relationships discussed in interviews also featured women. This means that overall among the sample of 26 non-resident fathers in this study around ¼ were living with a partner, ¼ had a partner but were not living with them, and ½ had no partner. This is a higher percentage of fathers not cohabiting than figures calculated by Poole et al. (2016) as in their study, around half of fathers reported to be not living with a partner. However, their study was based upon a large data set and systematic explanations, so we should not read too far into comparisons of figures from their study to this.

7.3.1 Children first, relationship second: negotiating priorities

Following on from the child-centred decision-making discussed in the previous chapters, with regards to relationships, including decisions about becoming 'serious' and living with partners, a strong child-centred moral narrative emerged from fathers who were in a relationship and those who were not. Much of this approach focussed around not wishing children to think that a new relationship took a higher priority than them; that time with children should be given priority over time with partners (and additional step-children); and, that a father's home should be kept as a place for father and child(ren) only. As will be shown in this chapter, these sentiments were felt by those who saw their children frequently and those that did not. Displaying this to children through these symbolic means was considered as protecting, but also further developing, strong father-child relationships. For some fathers, they stated to me that following this approach meant deciding not to embark on any 'serious' relationships at the current time:

> I thought that our time shouldn't be encroached upon by someone else, which is why I never settled with anyone. I got close to settling with one or two people, but never properly settled with anyone else. (Vince)

> It's been hard compromising not having a relationship, but I feel that I have benefited from having a good relationship with my kids. (Paul)

Robert demonstrated efforts to delay having a relationship, suggesting that the time he has with his sons is limited, and that he does not want this to be taken up by a partner, much to the surprise of his friends:

> I get a lot of stick off my workmates and friends saying like "oh, sack the kids off this weekend, get yourself down to town; you know you need to get out on the pull" and that sort of stuff, and I think "nah" … my reply to that is "well my kids aren't going to be kids for ever".

The age of children being taken into consideration when deciding to postpone relationship formation highlights how time can play a role within fathers' decision making. Joshua did have a long-term partner,

but explained how decisions about this relationship were made with his 14-year-old son Charlie's needs fore-fronted until he reached adulthood:

> But as I say, I think until things sort themselves out, for Charlie and his education, then I can start to think about the house and I can start to think about my relationship with other people. So, I have put myself on a backburner, and yes, it is a conscious decision to do that.

He recognised that his son and his partner's son do not have a good relationship. He told me how he purposely tries to keep time between his son and his new partner and her son to a minimum, limiting time to one joint holiday a year, and rarely inviting his partner and her son to his home when his son Charlie is there. He stressed the symbolic importance of his home, emphasising that *"my house is really just me and Charlie".* Joshua cared for his son multiple days a week, and said he would not consider cohabiting with his partner until his son was an adult.

> Charlie is quite good about it [relationship], he doesn't tend to say anything to me, he has never acted jealous and I think I help with that by trying to stick to some kind of routine of when he is with me, I am with him, and that's our day together. It doesn't often overlap and mix, and certainly not on a weekday night. So again, it's trying to make things as simple as I can for him.

Martin expressed similar sentiments about his home being a space just for him and his daughter: *"She [daughter] doesn't want to be sat here with Dad with his arm around a new woman, perhaps sat here watching TV with some new step-siblings.".* Efforts to ensure that father-child time is not encroached upon by new partners and ensuring that fathers' homes are just spaces for children during contact, can indicate the symbolic importance of home as a place for performing fathering practices, but also suggests that identities of 'father' and 'partner' are considered hard to reconcile.

Where fathers had chosen to be in a relationship, or had previously been, there was description of the efforts made to keep these relationships separate to children. At least 12 fathers in the sample discussed not talking about partners, having no evidence of the partner in Dad's home and not expecting children to meet the new partner as techniques used to develop father-child space and time, and not blur boundaries between their fathering role and their social relationships. This approach took effort, and Fraser told me *"it takes quite a lot of work to keep those two parts of my life completely separate"* but qualified this 'work' by explaining *"it feels like it is right to keep that separate from them".* For one father, this went as far as to keep his relationship a complete secret:

> There's a slightly strange thing about the situation you can end up in when you are a father in these circumstances; there is a big chunk of my life that they [children] don't know about, and neither does anybody else actually.

These conflicting identities of 'father' and 'partner' demonstrate how fathers are managing competing priorities in their life, but are trying to prioritise being a 'good' father and acting in a way that they feel prioritises their children. This resonates with research conducted with mothers, in which they discuss how when forming step-families, the needs of their children were placed at the forefront of consideration (see Churchill, 2011; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). This similarity suggests that some of the lived experiences of mothers, and pressures to fulfil notions of 'good' parenthood are shared by non-resident fathers.

Keeping relationships separate or making sure father-child time does not mix with partners, was at times linked to fears that children would react negatively to relationships. For those that expressed these concerns, whether about past or present relationships, it was generally a hypothetical problem, rather than a real one, primarily because many fathers had not engaged in cohabiting relationships. However, Adam directly attributed his difficult relationship with his daughter to his relationship and living with his partner; he felt his daughter felt rejected by him and refused to meet his partner of two years. This was upsetting because he felt that his daughter would enjoy spending time with his partner:

> Chelsea says she doesn't want to meet [partner]. And that's difficult, and for [partner] as well. And actually, I think that [partner] would be amazing with her. So, from my point of view, I've no doubts as to what [partner] would be like and what she could bring to Chelsea's life actually, in terms of arts and crafts, and playing and make-up. I think [partner] would have a lot to give.

Francis also expressed doubts about telling his teenage sons of his relationship, due to their negative reaction to his previous relationship. The severity of their reaction led him to end the relationship:

> I went around one night, and we sat them down and told them, and they both kicked off, terribly. They couldn't believe I had got someone else. And this was like 18 months, I know 18 months isn't a long time in a child's life when their parents split up, but it's still a decent time. It's not like it was two weeks later like one of their friend's dads did, you know? When that all happened it just caused so much trouble, I thought "god, we're back to square one!" but after a couple days they came around and were okay with me. And I said "right, I won't see her anymore" and I didn't. That was that.

This negative reaction has left him reluctant to tell them of the relationship he was in at the time of interview - *"I daren't tell them"* - fearing a similar or worse reaction from his sons, particularly as his older son was preparing to take his school examinations, a consideration his ex-wife had also mentioned to him. Philip (2013, 2014), through discussions with divorced fathers in England, concluded that some fathers present their actions as a post-divorce father as 'moral' actions, and construct and present ideas of 'good' fatherhood through comparison of their practices to 'other' divorced fathers. By justifying to me the length of time between separating from his son's mother and developing a new relationship, and by comparing to another

father he knew who had waited only "*2 weeks*", Francis appears to demonstrate the moral practices involved in developing a new relationship as a non-resident father. Moreover, by showing me how he had prioritised his sons' wishes by ending a previous relationship he was displaying commitment to his children, something that can be considered an act of a 'good' father to me and to others that know him and his children. Considering the opinions and reaction of their children's mother was discussed as another factor to consider when both beginning and disclosing new relationships. Telling their children's mother of a new relationship was considered as potentially creating friction between parents:

> When I did end up with a regular girlfriend who I then went on to marry, it was, it was a competition thing, she [ex-wife] didn't want Mia having another mother figure around. So, when me and [current wife] were settling down and having more influence on Mia's life as a couple, it caused a bit of friction again, for about a year or so. (Graham)

> I have had other partners that I have kept quiet, only my eldest son I felt able to tell, because I didn't want the younger ones feeling compromised; so if their mum asked: "is your dad with anyone?" and then having to lie for me, or me subsequently having access threatened some more and life made more shitty. So, I have kept them quiet, but that obviously comes with a price, because people don't tend to like being kept a secret and they wonder why. (Paul)

As such, it can be seen that some fathers felt that new relationships can disrupt already fragile caring routines, potentially explaining why some fathers chose to hide relationships or avoid relationships entirely. What's more, as highlighted by Paul, managing perceived emotions of children and ex-partners can affect current relationships. One interesting reflection as a researcher was that four fathers didn't mention a partner during the interview but 'ticked' the 'in a relationship' option after the interview. This could suggest that fathers potentially came to the interview solely to talk about being a father and they consider their relationship as independent to the topic of conversation, and reinforces the idea that for some non-resident fathers, their identities as father and partner are deliberately kept separate.

7.3.2   Meeting a partner

Not all those who were in, or had been in, a relationship after becoming a non-resident father discussed the processes of meeting a new partner, but those that did, like Paul, cited difficulties in meeting a new partner as a parent. Being a father was felt as potentially being perceived as bringing 'baggage' to a new relationship, and thus dissuade potential partners:

> In situations where the dating looked like it may progress into a relationship it tended to fail, cos I was a single dad. And I obviously had to separate a certain amount of time to spend with Mia. For many reasons, women don't want to get involved with a single dad, there is obviously a lot of baggage there. (Graham)

This was particularly apparent amongst men, like Nick, who became a father, and non-resident father while still aged in their 20s, who often found themselves in a different life stage to their peers, and potential partners:

> You do get stereotyped as a single dad. And it did scare me at first, like when I first started seeking new relationships, I wouldn't mention that I had a child. 'Cos I was scared that if I said to a girl straight away that I had a daughter, they would automatically in their head be thinking "why? What went wrong? Is there gonna be some crazy psycho ex involved? I'm not getting involved in this". So, I actually used to keep it secret and then after a few months tell them I had a daughter. And then straight away they would break up with me, cos I had lied to them for so long. (Nick)

A conflict of time emerged for William who realised that much of his free time, primarily at the weekend, was spent with his children, something he found to be difficult to reconcile with meeting and developing a relationship in the four years since becoming a non-resident father. He recollected a short-lived relationship with a single mother and explained how they could not combine their two caring routines:

> The second partner I mentioned, I split up with her because of the kids. So, she had her kids at home all week, she didn't want to have to have my kids around at the weekend. I told her "I don't think that's reasonable".

This extract also highlights the temporality of fathers' relationships if they are not considered fulfilling or compatible with their and their children's needs. Long working hours and spending every weekend with his children in a city 150 miles away left Leo saying: "*I don't really see where there is time to have a relationship*". Harry had been in a relationship during his four years as a non-resident father but explained that this broke down because both he and his partner (who was also a parent) did not have enough time to spend together. Feeling as if they didn't have time to first meet someone and then dedicate time to a relationship suggests that some fathers have difficulties balancing a social life and care, especially when traveling to see children.

7.3.3   Cohabiting with a partner

As only seven of the participants were in cohabiting relationships and only two had full-time resident children, it is difficult to draw findings on the lived experiences of non-resident fathers who cohabit. Few elaborated on their decision-making process to cohabit, especially in relation to the impact this would have on their children. What did emerge though was that cohabiting partners could offer emotional support when facing difficulties, either with children, or with care arrangements, and offer an opinion on fathers' care practices, by 'shaking up' or questioning division of care. For example, when discussing Christmas plans,

Ivan told me that his usual routine of having his daughter after Christmas until New Year was questioned by his partner who felt this was unfair and not equal:

> She is sort of my conscience in some respects cos she will say "what's going on with this?" and she will in her own words say or suggest that Abbie's mum is taking the piss. You know, "what are you doing?". Cos what she can see is perhaps what I don't see so clearly, and that is that its unequal, and so she is very good at pointing out, or just on practical levels "when is she coming, so I can take days off work?" cos she wants to spend time with Abbie. (Ivan)

Similarly, Oliver recognised his fiancée has helped him to "chill out" when caring for his daughter and enact more of the 'normal' aspects of fathering discussed in Chapter 5, and reduce the number of fun activities that he does with his daughter. Noting the contributions of their partners suggests that fathers' partners can be considered another actor in the multiple relationships that fatherhood appears to be embedded within.

From this sample, avoiding partner-based relationships, or purposely keeping these relationships 'casual' and not cohabiting or introducing partners to children suggests that fathers are using romantic relationships not as a means of starting new families, but rather as companionate relationships arranged around other aspects of their life. This resonates with sociological analysis of a 'cultural' shift in relationships and notions of 'contingent love', where people choose to enter and to leave relationships if they are no longer fulfilled (see Giddens, 1992, p. 61). For fathers in this sample, it appears that when relationships are considered as not emotionally satisfying for them or their children, these relationships tended to not be undertaken. The data also suggest that introducing new partners to children was considered as potentially risky for children and father-child relationships, and therefore avoiding doing so was a risk-averse action of fathers. The formerly prevailing idea of a 'clean-break' discussed in the literature review where post-separation fathers could freely start a new family or join a single mother and her children is not only not commonly seen in this sample, but actively rejected. Discussions of new relationships in this study point to fathers considering the relationship with their children as being the 'relationship of permanence' in their life, at least until children reached adulthood (see Smart, 2007). Moreover, for some, the challenges of managing competing needs and interests of children, ex-partners and new partners means that forming a new relationship was considered as too complex or problematic. Being wary of romantic relationships (even temporarily) is an example of an active step taken by fathers to ensure that parental separation does not mean the end of their parenting or parenthood. These findings therefore counter rhetoric of 'absent' fathers and supports discussions of the fore fronting of the parent-child relationship in contemporary society.

7.4 Friendships and Support Networks

This section focuses on fathers' friendships, particularly how friendships can act as a source of support. Friends and social relationships were discussed in all but three interviews, highlighting that people outside of the extended family or romantic relationships perhaps play a significant role in non-resident fathers' lives. However, as this section will elaborate, the role and purpose of friends, as well as the classification of friends differed across the sample, highlighting the complexity of defining and exploring friendships amongst non-resident fathers.

7.4.1 Friends as emotional support

Talking to friends and using non-familial bonds as a source of support and conversation appears significant at relationship breakdown and becoming a non-resident father. Going for a drink or to the pub with friends was recurrently cited as a place to 'chat' and to 'talk it out' or just a place to socialise; in about half of the interviews, going to the pub was specifically associated with socialising with friends.

Having friends in common with their children's mother could make separation more difficult, due to feeling a lack of anyone to confide in or talk to who could be considered impartial. There could potentially be a loss of friendship afterward separation as friends decide to associate with only the mother or father. Graham explained that before separation he and his ex-wife worked in the same organisation, and had the same friendship group. When his relationship troubles spilled into the friendship group, he felt isolated: *"It felt like we were doing it in a fishbowl; everyone could see everything that was happening and there wasn't anyone to talk to outside the bowl.".* Similarly, Oliver faced difficulties with feelings that friends were 'taking sides' in his break up and offering unhelpful opinions: *"a lot of people who had been friends with us both stuck their oar in".* These comments demonstrate that fathers can feel a need for support, especially being able to talk freely and with objective sources, or at least friends who would support their decisions or be empathetic. Seeking support from friends was talked about solely in relation to relationship breakdown for some participants, but others in the sample recognised that when adjusting to becoming a non-resident father, they continued to seek emotional support from friends. Brian explained how he felt he relied on friends and family over the five years between separation and our interview:

> I have needed support from people, I've needed advice and I've needed encouragement, cos you know I've been quite depressed actually this last few years, so you need that kind of encouragement.

Support was discussed as both verbal (talking about family life) and non-verbal (being available, not questioning, accepting changes of plan etc.). This support could also be gained through acquaintances at

work; Ivan recalled the support he felt he received from colleagues when becoming a non-resident father and managing his care routine after his ex-wife moved away from their city:

> [In] those first two or three years, work knew my situation and I would disappear on a Friday afternoon to catch a train to go and see [daughter], and I wasn't given a hard time for it. I feel that although it was informal that I was supported very much in those challenging and difficult times.

When discussing friendships and social networks, a distinction was frequently made between friends, and 'good friends': good friends offer emotional support by giving their time to allow fathers an opportunity to talk and offer supportive advice. Adam explained that he felt some friends were uncomfortable asking about his daughter as care arrangements were unsettled. He made a distinction between friends who shied away from talking about his daughter, and 'good' friends who purposefully asked about her:

> It's interesting that quite a lot of people don't bring up Chelsea with me, because they know, it's probably because they know it's quite a difficult subject and think that its best avoided. Some, especially good friends, do say "how's Chelsea, have you seen her recently?". But also, some people can be quite cautious.

The participants in this study conveyed a sense that 'good' friends don't just ask about children; they include them as well. For Calum, being included as a non-resident father and inclusion of his daughter amongst his friends, defined them as good friends, and good people for his daughter to socialise with: *"They don't exclude me from anything because I haven't got a partner, or I'm not with her mum. Imogen is always welcome in their lives".* 'Good friends' such as these are described as not shying away from fathers because they are non-resident, demonstrating an expectation of continuity of friendship alongside changes in one's personal life. Talking about children and including them can also be considered a means of a father's friends recognising their status as a father, but also recognising the difficulties they face as a non-resident father. Adam, on reflecting on talking about his daughter with friends said: *"I'm happy talking about her and like to talk about her, but every time I have a conversation about her it's quite painful.".* Finding it difficult to talk about children was also expressed by Harry who explained that it had previously been too difficult to talk to friends about his daughter:

> I was going through such emotional turmoil anyway, I found that talking to other men about this was quite hard; it was very confusing, I was just day-to-day living.

He recognised that the 'emotional turmoil' had passed and it was easier to talk about his daughter and family relationships at the time of interview. As such the emotional support offered by friends was not always felt able to be used, and as to be discussed later in this chapter, emotional support was not felt freely available to many men in the sample.

7.4.2   Shared experience with other parents

Whilst fathers in the sample discussed having friends who were not parents, benefits could be seen from having friends who also have children. A shared sense of understanding with other parents, particularly fathers, was discussed in relation to becoming and being a resident father, and as a non-resident father.

> I don't really discuss it with [friends], I choose not to. Not only because, I did at first, and I am pretty sure people get bored of hearing it after a while, but I think unless you have got a child yourself, and this is no offense to anyone who hasn't got a child, but they will never understand, you don't get it. I know people can sympathise and empathise, but unless you have a child you won't get the emotional side of it. (Nick)

As well as offering emotional support, friends that have children were considered as having potential to offer parenting support and advice. This is something Paul, who has four teen and young adult children, appreciated from his friends (also parents of four) whom he describes as *"very balanced and considered"* and consequently a good source of advice. Oliver, who was aged 27 when his daughter was born, told me that he was the first in his friendship group to have children. He discussed a difference in their lives and how a lack of shared understanding left him struggling to find support as a new father:

> I didn't have any other families around me, there wasn't really anyone my own age that I could go to talk about it. I had friends, but for them it was quite an alien experience to talk about things like: "how do you manage childcare?".

Oliver also explained that he and his now ex-partner both stopped getting invited to social events after having a child, something he described as "*really frustrating*". Where the sense of shared experience being important to paternal friendships is perhaps most stark is amongst those fathers like Oliver who are the first in their peer group to become a father, and also amongst 'young' fathers in the sample. In the sample, nine became fathers by the age of 25 and for most of these men, there were expressions of moving to a different life stage from peers. Becoming a father can cause shifts to friendships which can be upsetting and isolating:

> I am not saying I didn't enjoy life when my daughter came along, but it just completely changes you, your responsibilities completely change, and that huge group of friends that you go nightclubbing with on a Friday and Saturday night, they just forget about you … they just stop asking cos they think you don't want to see them. When actually, a lot of the time as a parent you get lonely, you want your mate to text you, but they don't. (Martin)

> When you first have a child, you lose a hell of a lot of friends; a lot of people just drop out of your life … they just assume that having a child, your life will change, and things will be different … the friends that have stuck about, they have been supportive. (Nick)

Again, there is an expectation of continuity from friends despite changes in a father's personal life, and a distinction is made between friends who sever ties when men become fathers, and 'good' friends who continue to contact fathers, offer support, and make time for the friendship. It is worth considering that if a father feels he has faced a reduction in friendships after becoming a parent, then they may have a limited network to rely on for emotional support when becoming a non-resident father.

7.4.3   Managing time to care, work and socialise with friends

When discussing friendships, time availability often traversed the conversations. With regards to having time to spend with friends as a non-resident father, three broad perceptions emerged, led by care arrangements and working schedules: having lots of time; having fixed time; and, having no time. When a father has a sporadic care routine it can give a sense that they have a lot of free time. However, as demonstrated by Adam, time may be organised on the proviso that, if care arrangements change, spending time with children will be the main priority:

> I make plans for at the weekends, but I will quite often say to people "but, if I get the chance to see Chelsea, then I will have to cancel" and I do that regularly.

Having regular care routines can allow for fixed time for socialising across a father's week or fortnight. Martin recognised that the stability of caring for his daughter every other weekend means that one weekend in two is available for friendships. Similarly, Oliver appreciated the routine care arrangements he had developed with his ex-partner as he considered it beneficial to maintaining his friendship group and relationship with his fiancée:

> Me and [ex-partner] always talk about how it's one of the secret advantages of separating, that its actually much easier to have a social life when you are separated, compared to living in a family unit. When you are in this little family unit, and it's just the three of you, or however many, it's hard to manage a social life in that setting. But then when you are separated, you have defined times.

The final grouping when considering time and friendship, is those that felt they had little or no time for friendships. Similarly, to fathers who felt they had little or no time for a romantic relationship, long working hours left little time in the week, and weekends were set aside for time with children.

> In a way, I have sacrificed that social side in order to maintain that relationship with the kids. And I don't think you can maintain both, in order to maintain the relationship with them, the circumstances I am in, it was necessary to recognise the situation that I am in. I think it would be very difficult if I was going up to them at the weekend and then saying to them "actually, I am going out". (Leo)

These three sections have highlighted the multi-layered complexities of developing and maintaining romantic, social and family relationships as a non-resident father. The limitations that fathers in this sample expressed could explain the disparity between feeling a lack of practical and/or emotional support non-resident fathers expressed compared to resident fathers found in Dermott's (2016) paper. Notwithstanding whether the proportion of fathers in a relationship in this study is representative of the wider population, these findings suggest that choosing whether to embark on a relationship, and consideration to the most appropriate way to navigate this relationship, particularly with regards to time and space, is something that is at the forefront of fathers' minds, with children's wellbeing appearing central to decision making. Finding 'good' friends, often who are parents themselves, can provide a source of support. The multiple relationship commitments that fathers are involved with beyond their children, ex-partners and current partners demonstrated in this thesis demonstrate the need to support and understand fathers' social lives in a holistic way. The final section of this chapter will explore the potential consequences of having limited social relationships.

7.5   Loneliness and feeling low as a non-resident father

Whilst there are discussions of new relationships, spending time with paternal family members and socialising with friends, and the opportunities for practical and emotional support these social relationships can give, expressions of loneliness and feelings of little or no support networks occurred across the sample. This final section of this chapter will explore fathers' feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as exploring what help and support fathers feel would be beneficial.

7.5.1   Living alone

Seven fathers in the sample were in cohabiting relationships, three were living with their parents, one was living with a friend, and one had a friend temporarily living with him. This means that 14 participants at the time of interview were living alone, something which was frequently reflected upon in a negative manner:

> Well, you know, we have like 50-50 with the kids. But the worst thing for me is spending 50 percent of the time just at home alone. It's not really what I signed up for when I had kids. That's the worst thing. (Euan)

This explanation from Euan highlights how living alone and feeling isolated could be exacerbated by comparing one's current situation to life before separation, or a life envisaged when becoming a father. Working late was one tactic expressed to avoid being home alone or feeling lonely. Francis owned his own business (and premises), and told me he chose to stay there some evenings rather than going home:

> Rather than going home [in the breaks between work], cos I am going home to an empty house, I will stay here at work, find something online to watch, put my feet up, and sometimes I will even have a snooze here. In fact, when me and my ex first split up, I slept in here for a few nights…

As highlighted in the last chapter, excitement of children gaining independence is also marked with worries about being alone. Paul, father of four teenagers, whose third child was preparing to leave home at the time of interview, acutely felt the possibility of being lonely in the near future: *"as a single bloke you have fast looming the next chapter of life on your own.".* Similarly, Harry was worried about a future where his daughter was not reliant on him but viewed this with more positivity than Paul.

> And one thing that kind of concerns me about the future, is that once Alice is a teenager, and she wants to go and spend time with her mates, what's going to happen to me? Maybe I will have more time for a relationship, and be able to invest time into that, in a way that I wasn't able to do with [recent ex-partner]. (Harry)

Interviews occurred from late October to early March, meaning for many, Christmas arrangements were discussed in the interview. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, some fathers did not have close family connections, and for these fathers, if their children where not visiting them, Christmas was particularly difficult.

> I had Christmas day on my own this year, and there is no comfortable place to go, because you don't want to spend the day with other families and their kids, cos it shows you what you haven't got. It's a really tough situation. (Fraser)

> Six weeks ago, Christmas day, I got up, had cornflakes and went for a bike ride … and I am riding past all my friends' houses watching them get the turkey out, the tinsel strung up, everybody wearing their Christmas jumpers, and I'm alone. (Paul)

Friends and new partners can reduce loneliness, but when fathers felt they didn't have time for these relationships due to work and caring commitments or decide to keep social relationships to a minimum to prioritise children, feelings of unhappiness became acute. Prioritising the needs of children can as such result in difficult times for fathers, and an extended period of sacrifice of their own needs. The negativity discussed about living alone is an interesting reflection when considering the prominent feeling that having a home to share with children is an important and rewarding aspect of non-resident fatherhood. As was seen in section 5.4.1, living in a home alone that is big enough to have children stay over-night was not affordable to some participants. As such, whilst living alone is for some fathers associated with loneliness, for others it is a strived-for situation. These mixed experiences demonstrate how non-resident fathers should not be considered a homogenous group with the same needs and expectations; rather individual circumstances and preferences should be recognised.

7.5.2 Feeling depressed and low

In addition to feelings of loneliness, other emotional difficulties were discussed in relation to being a non-resident father. Many discussed 'unhappy', 'guilty' or 'depressed' feelings toward the end of their relationship with their children's mother and the initial adjustment to becoming a non-resident father:

> Life all just crashed together at that time. And it is bloody hard, and I can see why people fall into depression, because its achingly painful. (Paul)

For others in the sample, emotional difficulties continued when living as a non-resident father or arose directly from being a non-resident father. These difficulties, many of which have been expressed in this and the previous two chapters include difficulties making care arrangements, including feelings of powerlessness and that decisions were being made about themselves and their children that were out of their control. Living alone for periods of time, and adjusting from being a full-time carer for children to living alone also exacerbates the sense of difficulty:

> Those days where your child isn't there, it's harder to get yourself going, you do feel lower, because you forever feel there is something missing. (Vince)

These difficulties were discussed in relation to fathers feeling 'down' or depressed, being diagnosed with depression and in some cases, negative feelings escalating toward thoughts of suicide. These feelings were disclosed by over half of participants and demonstrate the prevalent emotional difficulties men can face when a non-resident father. The uncertainty tied to precarious care routines could also result in negative feelings, as demonstrated by Adam when discussing when he would next see his daughter:

> So like right now, I don't know when the next time I will see her is, and that's really hard. The not knowing. And it hurts. The longer it gets from when I've last seen her, the more difficult it gets and the more unsettling it gets.

There were expressions of wanting to talk, but for a range of reasons, fathers said that they were unable to talk openly about difficulties, instead compartmentalising feelings, at times resulting in these feelings of depression. Feelings of upset stemming from separation as well as having difficulties making care arrangements can be so acute that talking about these feelings is too difficult, as demonstrated by Harry in section 7.4.1. Alongside avoiding talking about emotional difficulties faced as a non-resident father due to it potentially being too difficult, a sense of feeling that *"blokes don't talk about that sort of stuff"* was expressed (Graham). It was expressed that there was not always space in friendship groups or in wider society for men to discuss emotional difficulties due to traditional masculine traits of not showing emotion, as succinctly described by Paul: *"it's all to do with males being macho".* Some participants appeared to

reject these masculine approaches and a number discussed an appreciation for the increasing awareness of mental health difficulties, particularly 'men's mental health' movements. Graham explained that his own low mood has led him to want to talk to others and support them:

> I am very vocal about mental health now, probably cos I wasn't at the time. I mean, six months after [ex-wife] and I split up there was a half-arsed suicide attempt on my behalf, and again, nobody knew, it wasn't a call for help, nobody knew at the time and nobody knew until about two years afterwards when I started talking about it. And it turned out that other people I knew had done the same thing. So yeah, I am very vocal about it all now. If I know some bloke is having issues with his missus, I am quite happy to talk to him about it.

Whilst the fathers in the sample have recognised the importance of talking and a desire to talk, a significant number commented that the research interview was one of the only times they have ever had a long conversation about themselves and their feelings toward fatherhood. Potentially remaining single and feeling a sense of restricted time for friendships has left some fathers with a reduced social network to discuss difficulties. Not only was taking part in an interview about their status as a non-resident father an opportunity to *talk* about their feelings, but it also required fathers to *think* about their feelings both during the interview, but also when preparing for the interview (i.e. anticipating possible topics of conversation) and reflections after the interview:

> It's has been good to have to think about how I feel and to be able to talk about how I feel as well. Thank you for this. I am glad you are researching this. (Brian)

> I appreciated the talk to be honest. Like this is probably the first time I have sat down and properly discussed it for this amount of time, in depth, with someone who is not emotionally involved, not knowing everything about it, you don't know me, you don't know her, so you haven't come here with a preconception or opinion. You have just sat there and listened, and that helps to be honest. (Nick)

Desires to talk about their difficulties could also suggest desires for their difficulties and efforts as a non-resident father to be given the opportunity to be heard. Due to men traditionally being reluctant to discuss their emotions it was felt that there were few formal services to support non-resident fathers.

> Once you open us up, we can't stop talking. It's just getting blokes into a place where they will talk, and we do want to talk and to be asked this stuff, cos you do often feel like you are the fun parent, the less responsible parent, the parent that isn't as interested, or you feel that you are personified that way, but I don't know if society does view us this way. But this is the hardest thing too, it's not easy to be a parent like this, and you don't know where to turn to for help. (Vince)

> And I think a lot of it for dads, is to have someone to talk to, definitely. Like if you go on these [online] forums, you will be amazed at how many dads are on there. And it goes back to this stereotypical "you're a bloke, you should get on with it". And you do feel like cos you are a bloke that there is that lack of support there for you. (Nick)

As discussed in the methodology chapter, interviews can offer an opportunity for narrative construction and retelling of stories about personal change which can include revisiting unhappy experiences (Birch and Miller, 2000). Whilst the interview offered an opportunity for fathers to 'open up' about their emotions toward non-resident fatherhood, the emotions discussed in many interviews appeared to be long-standing emotions. Discussion of the emotions related to non-resident fatherhood suggest that there is a mis-match between fathers' desires to talk about their low mood and emotional difficulties and their ability to find resources that they find supportive. It is not easy to decipher what support would be beneficial to fathers, however three participants had previously or were at the time of interview visiting a counsellor, which they talked positively of. However, the cost of this private means of support, as well as the ability to arrange appointments that fit work and care routines was difficult and had restricted two further participants from accessing this kind of support. The next chapter will explore some other resources that men referred to for support outside their social networks.

7.6   Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, paternal families' needs and wants can be considered another concern for fathers in addition to their children's needs, their ex-partner's needs and their own. However, when exploring paternal family, it should be noted that not all fathers are able to access familial support or be in a position to facilitate their children's relationship with extended family. A significant number of fathers either did not have a romantic relationship, or kept their relationship separate to their children, in an effort to demonstrate the centrality of children in their lives. Again, fathers expressed methods of reducing family conflict, primarily through reducing their relationships in order to not negatively affect father-child relationships and reduce potential friction with their children's mothers. These findings are significant because quantitative research by Dermott (2016) found single non-resident fathers are significantly more likely to report lower levels of social support than cohabiting non-resident fathers. Friends can offer emotional support, but this is considered easier if they are also fathers: age and time both act as mediating factors in maintaining friendships when becoming a father and becoming a non-resident father. Feelings of loneliness stem primarily from living alone and choosing not to have a relationship, and feelings about the future are mixed: fathers may continue to be alone once children have grown older, or they may develop time and space to have a relationship.

The management that fathers appear to exert over their own romantic relationships, as well as managing time for friends and family, and managing their children's relationship with their extended family appears

to juxtapose the feelings toward their children's mother discussed in the last chapter. Mothers are often positioned in a more central parental role, leading to a position of perceived authority with regards to care arrangements and decision making. Whilst the needs of children are placed at the centre of priority, also maintaining a positive relationship with their ex-partner in order to facilitate co-parenting, facilitate extended family's desires to see their children, and find time for relationships (romantic and friendly) demonstrate that fathers are immersed in a range of complex needs and emotions. This challenges policy discourses about fathers (and parents) that tend to present a one-dimensional view of parental roles and responsibilities and demonstrates why fathers should not be considered in a homogenous way when developing policy to support them.

Difficulties fulfilling these needs, in addition to other stressors like low income and housing difficulties associated with non-resident fatherhood, can result in feelings of loneliness and low mood. Over half of participants discussed feeling low or depressed since being a non-resident father but talking about these feelings outside of the research interview was considered difficult. Despite increasing discussion about how parents make arrangements for children after separation covered in the literature review, within these discussions there is little reflection of fathers' emotional needs and vulnerabilities. However, in this study, a significant proportion of fathers reported emotional distress related directly to non-resident fatherhood. This support deficit is particularly relevant considering contemporary discussions of the importance of recognising and supporting people experiencing poor mental health in the UK.

Chapter 8: The family justice system, schools and child maintenance

8.1   Introduction

In line with my final research question, this chapter aims to explore some of the social interventions and services experienced by the participants and the significance of these in the everyday narratives and lives of non-resident fathers. This chapter has two purposes; the first is to highlight fathers' lived experiences of services aimed at separating and separated parents, as well as their experiences of broader services (welfare and educational) as a non-resident father. This will include exploring how fathers feel they are positioned by services, and policies that direct services. This chapter builds upon themes presented in the previous three findings chapters, including how many of the relational decisions made by fathers in the sample can be seen to be child-centred. The second purpose is to highlight how services and interventions can at times act to exclude fathers and exacerbate previously discussed feelings of secondary status as a non-resident father. Moreover, the chapter will highlight how there continues to be little recognition of families outside of the normative model within welfare services and interventions.

Three types of services that fathers come in contact with and that were explicitly referred to in the sample are focussed upon in this chapter. This chapter initially explores the mechanisms that separated parents can use to settle disputes, particularly disagreements over father contact with children and fathers' feelings toward legal support. This is followed by an exploration of fathers' understandings of financial responsibilities and child maintenance, as well as experiences of the Child Maintenance Service. Moving away from services targeted toward separated families, the final part of this chapter will look at fathers' involvement with schools and children's learning. Through better understanding of non-resident fathers' experiences of these different services, paternal experiences of marginalisation via services can be discussed alongside evidence of better-quality services and support from fathers' perspectives. This will allow for suggestions of means of improving services so that they better include and respond to fathers' needs.

8.2   Settling disputes

As discussed in the literature review, according to recent UK studies the majority of separating parents make their own arrangements for their children without reference to family courts or lawyers. For example, it was estimated in 2011 that only 10 per cent of cases go to court (Fehlberg et al., 2011). Making private family-based arrangements has been promoted in changes to legislation included in the Family Justice Review, and if parents are struggling to reach an agreement, mediation services are encouraged. If parents remain unable

to make decisions, disagreements can be escalated to the Family Courts. In this sample, six of the 26 participants had interactions with the Family Courts and CAFCASS (The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service); four fathers had cases that were closed and resolved, one had an ongoing case, and one was in the initial stages of proceedings. In all cases which went to court to arrange contact and care for their children, there was considerable acrimony between parents. In these cases, the family courts were seen as the 'last resort' after mediation had been refused or had broken down, fathers felt arrangements (formal or informally arranged) where not being kept to, or fathers felt they were being ignored by their children's mother. Whilst only a handful of the participants had contact orders through the court, it was not uncommon for fathers in the sample to have consulted with a solicitor in order to explore and better understand their position within family law.

8.2.1   Accessing a solicitor for legal support

Within this sample, knowledge of the law concerning separated families and non-resident parents' access to children, as well as their connection with a solicitor, could act to gain fathers leverage in conflict with their children's mother and as a means of ensuring that they were being treated in a way they considered to be fair. When discussing his past difficulties arranging a regular care routine with his ex-wife, Graham told me:

> I have spotted in the past if things haven't gone quite right, the threat of it going further usually calms it down without it ever getting to court. I know some dads who have had it a lot harder than I have had with that sort of thing, but it was mainly when we had arranged time with her and a couple of days beforehand, or even sometimes that morning I would get the phone call "no, you are not having her" it was a complete change of mind. That happened enough times that I was threatening court, I went to a solicitor for advice, and then all of a sudden, [ex-wife] backed down and it has been fine since.

For Graham, having access to a solicitor supported him to uphold and be aware of his parental and paternal rights. As discussed in previous chapters, Harry feels the relationship he has with his daughter has improved as a non-resident father. This was due to him feeling his ex-wife could not "interfere" in their relationship, something he considered aided by being legally separated:

> She was constantly intervening and interrupting and driving between us, sequestering Alice away from me, over various anxieties that she had developed. And that was happening immediately after the divorce, but, the one thing that the law does benefit is that I did have recourse to a lawyer to say "look, you have to stop this", whereas within marriage you can't do that.

Using a solicitor and going to court was considered as an extreme, but at times necessary measure fathers could take to achieve what they considered fair and legal contact with their children. On considering using

a solicitor to help progress his dissatisfactory care routine with his ex-wife, Ivan said of legal support: "*I don't think of it as bullying, I think of it as a last resort",* suggesting informal arrangements were his preferred method of arranging care, but legal support was a viable method. However, his recognition that this method could be considered as 'bullying' suggests that legal support is seen as a contentious issue by some people. As evidenced here, knowing one had access to legal redress appeared to give fathers in the sample a feeling of security when seeking to uphold their formal legal rights:

> If I was in a situation where I was being refused custody or refused contact, and there had been a breakdown in communication, then suddenly I would need the law, I would need the government, I would need help to fight for what I thought were my rights, or what I thought his [son] rights were, what I thought was best. (Brian)

These extracts demonstrate there is a desire for informal arrangements to be made between communicative parents, and that legal arrangements should not be the initial course of action, but a 'last resort' to resolve otherwise unresolvable conflict and uphold paternal rights. A similarity between these fathers who consider a solicitor as a means of achieving rights and fairness (for themselves and their children) in child contact arrangements is that they tend to be highly educated and working in professional or semi-professional occupations (NS-SEC 1-3). Paul, also working in a professional occupation, wished to have contact arguments legally or formally 'tied up' and felt uneasy that contact with his children was precarious due to his ex-wife refusing to formalise this. Through the ways the fathers describe their paternal 'rights' there appears a widespread belief that within UK law there exists a protocol for fathers to see their children after separation. Some fathers appear to have the means to strategically engage with the law to achieve their rights as fathers. However, whilst there was a sense that paternal and children's rights existed in law, the application of these rights was doubted, with feelings that mothers and fathers are treated differently in legal proceedings. Euan shared the care of his son with his ex-partner, but on discussing disagreements they had had about care in the past, he said: *"as a dad, sometimes you don't actually think that you have the law on your side in those situations".* Doubts around the fair application of law tended to focus around feelings that mothers' wishes were given greater priority and fathers wishes were undervalued:

> My lawyer said: "what you will often find is, is that once a kid is secondary school age, if they don't want to see their dad, the judge will generally not make them see their dad". And actually, the way it was expressed was like if it was a mother, it would be different. I felt that the system as it was described to me was a sexist one and totally unfair. So, I found the whole system to be unfair. (Adam)

Building on discussions in Chapter 6 of mothers' primacy in informally arranged care arrangements, there were also expressions that when accessing legal support mothers are automatically considered as the primary

parent, and fathers were placed into secondary positions through a lack of recognition of fathers' wishes for care and defaulting to mothers being primary or resident parents:

> It sometimes feels like they are all about the mother; they always say the child should reside with the mother, even if the mother has a drug or alcohol or mental health problem, like it doesn't always mean a mum is the best suited parent to have that child. (Nick)

> I think all you can ask for is equality, and children's wellbeing. It's all about the child, and it's not necessarily about fathers or mothers, although those feelings should be taken into account, it is what's best for the child and you can't just assume that the child staying with the mother is always going to be the same thing. In terms of rights, I think they are equal, but in practice, it's not the case. (Brian)

Discussion of what is 'best' for children highlights how child-centred practices are focused upon when discussing care routines and the legal decision-making around these. These extracts also allude to a significant view that there is a tendency to prioritise the wishes of mothers over fathers in legal proceedings. This is something that is viewed as unfair and damaging to children, because the presence and involvement of fathers should be considered significant in children's wellbeing. Building on themes expressed in Chapter 5 about the importance of father involvement for child development, Daniel said of his experiences of court proceedings: *"They should definitely stop agreeing with the mother all the time, cos, even for a girl or a boy, they both need both parents".* Brian expressed similar sentiments of the important role he thinks he plays in his son's life, and how this is potentially made precarious by legal proceedings:

> I think quite possibly policy is more focused on mothers, not fathers. I know there was that campaign group 'Fathers for Justice' and I remember thinking back in the day "oh, these people, wasting everybody's time. You know, they should spend time focusing on their own kids, not on their rights" [laugh] but now I am much more sympathetic, cos I realise I could be in that same situation, but for the grace of god. So, groups like that, there is obviously a reason why they are campaigning and perhaps changes do need to be made to protect father-child relationships … obviously safeguarding is important, and I realise that fathers can be abusive, and safeguarding has to come first. You do get these horror stories of children being left with fathers and then it all ends tragically, but at the same time, you have to realise that these are isolated cases and really we need to be doing more to protect that relationship and to realise that kids need to feel loved by their father and not just their mother. (Brian)

The concerns expressed suggest that fathers in the sample felt father-child relationships were not being recognised or respected by professionals, and consequently these relationships fathers consider so integral to their identity could be inhibited or damaged by legal proceedings. This was expressed by fathers like Daniel who had limited day-time only contact time with his daughter, but also by Brian who saw his son throughout the week. This suggests that anxieties over the stability of their parental role are potentially ever-present for some non-resident fathers. In addition to accessing face-to-face legal guidance, another means

of gaining information on fathers' 'rights' after separation was online. Here Nick explains why this can be problematic:

> I have done the whole thing of going online and reading forums, but there is just so much information and it's so varied that you don't know if its UK based, if it's an American forum where the laws are different. Without speaking to a professional, there is no point even looking, cos you get bombarded with that much information that you don't even know what to do with it … if you google it, and bam! You have thousands of pages of information. Whether that information is relevant or correct or not, you don't know. So, without going on the gov.uk website or speaking to a professional, you can't be sure.

Whilst accessing information online can be more accessible and affordable, it was understood that this information is at times misleading and from biased sources. Nick conveyed that he couldn't afford to visit a solicitor, and his description above emphasises that there are potentially unmet support needs for fathers to access informative guidance and information without relying on lawyers. Moreover, considering the potential antagonising features to arranging care discussed previously in this thesis, accessing information that is factually and legally incorrect could further exacerbate parental disagreements. As such, it can be seen that whilst having a knowledge of the law regarding separated families can provide reassurance to fathers, there are fears that the application of law prioritises the wishes of mothers and does not recognise or safeguard father-child relationships. Despite fears that children's rights to time with fathers could be curtailed, across the sample the preference for making informal arrangements between parents and only using legal proceedings as a 'last resort' was a dominant expression. Using legal support could inhibit ensuring the short and long-term quality of relationships with ex-partners, something that in Chapter 6 was explained as an important task of non-resident fatherhood.

8.2.2   Mediation as an alternative to legal proceedings

Wishing to keep things amicable between parents even through separation proceedings and not create undue conflict when separating was a key priority for many of the participants. Mediation services, both state provided and privately arranged, and similar dispute resolution services were discussed by 16 fathers in the sample and used by nine. These services were discussed both in relation to managing finances after separation but also for planning contact arrangements. For Dominic having a single point of contact to manage separation and care arrangements was considered as a positive because he felt supported and treated equally to his ex-partner:

> Luckily, who we saw was very even handed and fair and pointed out that she [partner] was putting up obstacles where she shouldn't have been and said that I was doing everything that I was supposed to. So that was reassuring…

Business interests and profiteering were frequently seen as the primary aim of solicitors involved in parental disputes, and so avoiding these was seen as not only reducing the cost to parents, but also reducing inter-parental conflict:

> If you can separate without a solicitor, that is the best thing, as you can make decisions that are better for you, not their interests, which tend to be money. (Euan)

> We went through mediation, partly to reduce the costs, but also because we didn't want lawyers scrapping and making things worse, which they can do; I mean, they are not always like that, but they have a bit of a financial interest in making things difficult. (Harry)

> The reason for not using a solicitor is that it's in a solicitor's interests to create conflict, they make more money if they create a conflict between you. (Leo)

Using dispute resolution services after separating can result in informal agreements between parents: "*We just did it through counselling. I don't think any of it was a binding agreement as such*" (Joshua) - or can lead to formal agreements: "*We went through relationship counselling, which didn't work, and so that morphed into mediation, which morphed into making an agreement which the judge stamped.*" (Harry). As highlighted in the literature review, mediation is recommended as the first step in the majority of parental disputes. However, five fathers in the sample reported that their requests for mediation had been refused by their children's mothers, and a further four discussed how agreements made through mediation were later rescinded:

> I spent quite a lot of money on mediation, [ex-wife] who wasn't working at the time got it all on Legal Aid and didn't spend anything. And then after thousands of pounds and a year of mediation, she refused to sign the form. So, we had to start again. So, the only issue I have had with any of it is that when you get divorce, they recommend mediation first as an easier way of going about it, and it was an absolute waste of time and money. I took out a loan to pay for it, and it all fell through cos she refused to sign the form. (Graham)

The mandatory application for mediation as the first step in managing parental disputes discussed in Chapter 3, was considered by these nine fathers as a highly frustrating procedure of separating. This is because despite trying to engage with the 'correct' protocols of separating, they were unable to progress disputes due to the ineffectiveness of the service. With over a third of the sample reporting difficulties, this highlights a major unmet support need for managing dissatisfactory arrangements after parental separation. Kieran recognised that he could progress his dispute to court proceedings, but this was considered not only as

potentially further damaging the relationship between he and his ex-wife, but also that interaction with the courts would be emotionally upsetting for him.

> I would prefer if we could have come up with a compromise. [ex-wife] won't go to mediation, she refuses to go to mediation, and in theory I can then go to the court and apply. I was thinking about doing it, to try and force, I had taken legal advice, and the advice was that I would probably be able to get the old arrangement back, cos that's what the arrangement was, that's what Max knew, and it was a reasonable arrangement. But, having then dealt with the CMS, I mean emotionally, just the idea of having to deal with the courts, I can't do it. It's just emotionally too painful.

As such, he felt unable to progress his dispute over care routines to a satisfactory level. Whilst the expense of legal proceedings was discussed as a reason to not pursue them, fears of the emotional damage that legal proceedings would cause to their relationship with their ex-partner was expressed as a significant reason. Nick desired overnight care for his daughter, but expressed feelings that court would be difficult and create more stress in what was an already conflictual situation:

> I am just that tired of fighting, like, I really can't do with even more added pressure. I want to sort it out myself, if that makes sense? It does get hard, and I did have those, you know, I'll say it now [gestures at dictaphone], I have had those suicidal feelings, thinking "well what's the point?". It does really get to you. So, I want to deal with it myself, cos I think I don't want to be going through the courts and all that, cos that's just more pressure and I want to sort it myself.

Nick also expressed concerns that pursuing legal action would 'annoy' his daughter's mother, potentially disrupting his already fragile care routine. Overall, this section has demonstrated how services involved in helping parents manage conflict and disagreement about care routines can help fathers to feel supported, whilst simultaneously adding to feelings that fathers are positioned as secondary parents in post-separation families. There appears to be an economic restriction on accessing legal support, with higher income fathers gaining a sense of reassurance that legal support is available if needed, but lower-income fathers feeling that they cannot afford to access legal support or mediation services when they require it. Accessing various aspects of the family justice system is recognised as adding further stress to parents already experiencing stress because of the conflict-orientated system.

8.3   Financial responsibilities, support and services

This section will explore the perceived financial responsibilities for non-resident fathers, how amounts are calculated between parents, and interaction directly and indirectly with the Child Maintenance Service (CMS). The majority of fathers in the sample transferred money to their children's mother(s), either a fixed, calculated amount or ad hoc amounts. Two approaches emerged from those that paid maintenance; feeling

that money was benefiting their children and their ex-partners household; or feeling that expectations for child maintenance did not recognise the financial responsibilities fathers also faced. When money was seen as contributing to their ex-partner's household overall and having a knock-on effect or 'filtering down' to their children, expressions of how it would not be fair for children to *"go without"* or be *"wanting"*. Oliver was one of the fathers who expressed these sentiments:

> [We] just sort it between us, I just pay [ex-partner] every month directly out of my bank account, and that's always worked best. I proposed an amount myself, and she was happy with it, and as my wage has gone up, I've increased it and she has always been happy with it. Ultimately, I want Holly to have and I want [ex-partner] to have money she can spend on Holly when she is not with me. We have an agreement as well for like any ongoing agreements, like swimming lessons, I pay for that, because I can afford it, and it's difficult for [ex-partner] to work out if she can afford it, whereas I can just say "yeah, I can cover that".

This child-centred discourse to financial provision for children narrated by fathers focused on ensuring that children and their mothers were not financially restricted due to parental separation. Whilst not necessarily contrasting this child-centred approach to financial provision, nor expressing desire to not pay maintenance, another theme that came out strongly, particularly from fathers that had regular overnight care for their children, was a sense of resentment for helping their ex-partner to financially maintain a household when they felt they faced the same financial difficulties:

> In some ways, maybe I'd prefer "let's just not use [online calculator] at all, let's just agree within ourselves that I pay for some things, you pay for other things", because, I don't agree with subsidising [ex-wife's] mortgage for example, cos I've got my own mortgage. You know, I've got a big house for the purposes of having a child there. (Brian)

It was felt that the transfer of money was not necessarily to the benefit of children, because while it would benefit one parent, it restricted the financial capabilities of non-resident fathers to parent in the manner they wished. When fathers felt aware of their children's mother's financial situation, and felt she was financially comfortable, it was felt unfair to expect fathers to 'top-up' mother's income. Graham worked full-time and had an annual income of under £20,000; he felt that the restrictions his low-income caused in the care he could give his daughter two nights a week and during school holidays were further restricted by having to pay maintenance to his ex-wife and her partner:

> I am giving £160 a month to [ex-wife] who is regularly away on weekends, probably once a month to go to the seaside, they go abroad twice a year, and we can't afford to do that with Mia. We took her to Disneyworld last year, but that is the first holiday we have ever had with her and she is 10 years old. And a lot of that is cos we can't afford it. I can't afford to spend money on Mia cos I am giving it to her mum. They can afford to buy her all sorts of fancy things at Christmas, but I have to budget,

cos the money that I would spend at Christmas is money that *they* are spending at Christmas … I am kind of hampered in the care and effort that I can put in cos I haven't got enough money to do that.

Graham's example shows how low-income fathers who care for their children regularly can struggle with child maintenance amounts. These differences can lead to difficulties balancing relationships with mothers and children in unison, particularly if there is conflict with mothers. Another element of financial transfer considered unfair when having regular care for children was that mothers were entitled to child-related benefits and fathers were not: "*All of the state provided stuff goes to the ex, tax credits, child benefit, any vouchers and I pay her £300 a month child maintenance, plus I put £100 into a trust for university, if she wants to go*" (Harry). A double financial-penalty can be seen for non-resident parents, with fathers expected to financially provide for children but not entitled to financial support afforded to resident parents/fathers. For Vince, who was reliant on disability benefits, and lived in a one-bedroom property, this was particularly problematic:

> You can't get any state benefits [for non-resident children]. I can't even get my daughter a bus pass to travel on a child's fare on the local buses, because she is from a different county and lives there, so she is expected to pay full adult fare here. The scheme at the chemist, over the counter prescriptions, they can be given free to children, but your child has to be living with you. I took Ella for an antihistamine cream, and I'm showing the pharmacist this allergic reaction on her arm, and cos Ella had mentioned where she goes to school, the pharmacist said "No, she can't have it". So, you are cut out of those kinds of schemes, which is really unfair, cos of course you have the same responsibilities, so then its more money coming out of your pockets and if you are a very low-income dad, you just can't afford it. So, she had to wait 'til she got home to her mum. (Vince)

As the benefit system does not appear to recognise parenting across households, this can add to the vulnerabilities and additional costs fathers face. Calum also recognised that whilst he regularly cared for his daughter, 'officially' she only had one home:

> Children can't live in more than one place. They have stopped doing residency orders, that's an old term in the court, they don't say that anymore. So, I had my court order changed, from 'Imogen is resident with mum' to 'Imogen lives with both parents' … as far as Imogen is aware, she lives with both parents, she has two homes. But, if she has to fill anything out, forms for school or the GP, anything formal, then its Mum's address.

Only allowing one formal address for children, and only allowing one parent to receive child-related benefits can be seen to create a hierarchy of parenting authority and immediately places non-resident fathers as secondary in the eyes of services according to the reports of participants in this study. Difficulties accessing services when staying with fathers highlights how the benefit system is not acting in a way that prioritises children's wellbeing.

8.3.1 Calculations of maintenance and the associated problems

There was widespread knowledge of the recent amendments to the Child Maintenance Service where payers and receivers are charged to use the statutory system although no fathers reported paying through the 'Collect and Pay' service at the time of the interview. The online child maintenance calculator was known by all fathers and had been used by the majority of the sample, and was broadly considered a transparent method of helping parents calculate maintenance and come to an agreement. This calculator can instantly inform parents of the recommended child maintenance amount; however, this system is reliant on a level of trust between parents and an amicable communicative relationship where fathers share their annual income with their children's mother. This level of trust was recognised by Joshua: *"we don't do it through the child support people, we do it ourselves and she trusts me that I am telling her the right thing. I normally show her my income".* In situations of mistrust or conflict ex-partners might request an assessment through the child maintenance service due to suspicions of fathers' self-declared income. Calum explained that as he is self-employed his daughter's mother suspected he was not paying the correct amount of maintenance:

> I used to have a situation, a verbal agreement of how much it was going to be, me and mum. But then mum decided that, cos I am self-employed, she felt that she should be getting more money than what I was giving her. So, she got them involved, rang them up. They came and did an assessment on me.

The assessment calculated that Calum's previously informally decided amount was too high, but he told me he continued to pay the higher amount. Kieran also had a disagreement about maintenance with his ex-wife, and also had his previously informally agreed amount reduced, but reacted differently:

> I pay less money than what we had agreed together, because she wanted to go down a statutory route, and as far as I am concerned, there you go, you went down a statutory route and that's the result.

Kieran went on to recognise that this was *"vindictive"* but as will be explained later in the section, a long-standing disagreement about care routines for his son interacted with maintenance calculations. Involving the CMS to assess and calculate (Direct Pay) was seen by these two fathers as an antagonistic move, felt to stem from a lack of trust by mothers. Ivan also discussed an informal amount arranged between himself and his ex-wife shortly after separating. He explained how the amount agreed was unsustainable and had been agreed in a rushed manner:

> I think splitting up from a partner can be nicely organised, or it can be a bombsite, like an explosion goes off and everyone goes running off in different directions, and your decisions are made on the hoof. And the decision that was made on the hoof about maintenance was back of a fag packet stuff. (Ivan)

Changes in his circumstances, including housing, work and further children had meant he needed to formally recalculate his maintenance amount to avoid further going into debt. Changes in work were recognised as being poorly managed within child maintenance calculations, as found by Daniel who had lost his job and then moved to a 'zero-hours' contract, resulting in confusing calculations: *"When I lost my last job, they sent me a letter saying 'You have to pay £28' and then a letter saying I have to pay £200, I thought "pfft, I can't afford that!" that's ridiculous!'"*. Nick explained how his maintenance amount was calculated based upon his previous year's tax return. He described this as 'wrong' because he was no longer entitled to the overtime that had resulted in a higher than usual income the previous year. Simon also worked a variable-hours contract and remarked:

> It's based on income, but my income is so changeable that whatever amount they calculate it is not representative of what I am earning at the time. It seems the system is not designed for blokes in my kind of work, but for people with regular salaries and hours.

Simon went on to explain how he was concerned that due to not being able to afford his maintenance his daughters' mother would escalate their claim to the 'Collect and Pay' service, further increasing his payment amount. As such, issues of quality of the Child Maintenance System are raised, as well as issues of poor and confusing treatment of fathers without salaried work or variable-hours contract work. When considering how poverty amongst non-resident fathers has largely been a neglected topic of study (Dermott, 2016), and the increasing commonality of variable hours work (Lott, 2015), this thesis highlights how variable working hours and insecure employment need to be better accommodated when calculating child maintenance.

Another confusion expressed by large numbers in the sample was that whilst the online calculator tool provided by the CMS was considered simple to use, interpretation of what this calculated maintenance figure should cover is not clear. School uniforms and children's hobbies were frequently discussed as an addition to overall maintenance amounts. Whilst paying these additional amounts that directly relate to children can be seen as child-centred, within this sample, paying higher maintenance than the suggested amount (and bearing the cost of travelling to see children) was also expressed as a means of reducing conflict with mothers. One case of this is Leo: he lives over 100 miles from his children and recognised that travelling to see them three to four weekends a month was expensive and that he was *"carrying the cost"* of separation compared to his ex-wife. He explained that in addition to paying over the recommended child maintenance amount, he also pays his children's allowance, their 'major' summer holiday, his 'share' of school fees and additional sums to his ex-wife when he stays in her home:

From the very start I recognised that the easiest way to ensure that we kept things on the straight and narrow was to pay above the odds, you know, I had kind of rationalised in my own head that I could pay a solicitor an awful lot of money, or I could pay her an additional small amount of money to maintain the peace, and it was probably better to do the latter. Again, just absolutely pragmatic, the way to make it work.

Leo described to me that he made a rational decision regarding money in order to maintain amicable relationships with his ex-wife. 'Rounding up' suggested maintenance figures were also considered another means to *"maintain the peace"* within this research, in addition to methods discussed in Chapter 6. However, being able to pay additional sums of money was not possible for everyone in the sample: fathers, like Ivan, who has two resident children, and Martin below, discussed how they already struggle to pay the child maintenance amount and cannot pay any more:

There have been times where [ex-wife] has said "there is a trip coming up, can you pay something?" and I have just said "no, cos I pay what I pay and there isn't any extra money" and that's where it becomes a little bit fraught. (Martin)

Falling into patterns of paying for children's activities or additional informal maintenance amounts in the 'explosion' of separation decisions described by Ivan, could be seen to cause fathers to feel unable to stop paying, even if financial situations worsened. For example, Adam expressed that he felt unable to afford his daughter's multiple hobbies but told me: *"Chelsea says she enjoys [the hobbies] and so if I put a stop to any of the stuff, if I don't pay, I look bad."*. Elliot explained that his income had seasonal fluctuations and that *"some months it is easier than others"* to pay the higher levels of maintenance previously agreed. These examples demonstrate the interaction of moral and financial pressures as a non-resident parent.

According to some participants paying more than calculated is not only a tool for peace making but also a tool for leverage. Conversations and contestation around money come into play with previous divorce or separation settlements, such as in the case of Francis, who wished for his ex-wife to remain in the family home, as they had significantly renovated the property and Francis wanted it to remain with his two sons:

I should pay something like £140 that I should pay on that calculator, I give her 180 a week, cos I want her to stay in the house. So technically I am still paying the mortgage, even though I don't own it, cos I signed it all over to her. I am paying that amount cos I want them to keep it, and she threatened to move, and I said "please don't. I'll give you £180 a week if you'll stay there. If you don't, I'll just give you what I should give you". So, they have stayed in the end.

It can be suggested that according to the sample in this study, child focused concerns and efforts to maintain amicable relationships through financial means highlight how relational decisions are made alongside economic decisions. However, from fathers' accounts of their experiences, the rigid systems in place around

child maintenance do not recognise the nuances of each family's decision-making such as parents occasionally sharing a living space, parents giving money directly to (older) children, changes to income and maintenance decisions based upon financial settlements post-separation. These findings support arguments that fathers informal giving is not recognised by official measures of the child maintenance system (Peacey and Hunt, 2008), and adds an additional insight into how fathers make financial decisions outside of statutory methods. Conflict can emerge from fathers struggles to pay maintenance at, or above, their prescribed amount, and parental conflicts, as noted throughout these findings' chapters, has been linked to reduced contact time for fathers. As such, it can be reasoned that precarious income sources can be associated with reduced father-child time, with this counteracting aims of government to increase father-child time together.

8.3.2 The interaction of child maintenance and care routines

Skinner (2013) argues that there is often a reciprocal relationship between maintenance and contact, where the 'proper thing' is that fathers should pay maintenance and mothers should facilitate contact. Unlike other studies where fathers with little or no contact resented paying maintenance, findings from this study offered a different insight into the relationship between contact and maintenance. Overnight care is used by the CMS to decide who is the resident or 'receiving' parent and who is the non-resident or 'paying' parent and can be seen as another example of defining a hierarchy of parenting authority. Brian explained this in our interview: *"if you kind of look at the child maintenance website, you see that the indicator of whether you are the main parent or not is how many nights per week the child stays"*. The number of nights is aggregated to an annual basis to include long periods of time children may spend with non-resident parents during school holidays. Child maintenance calculations include a variable for the number of nights a child spends at the paying parents' house, with more overnight stays with the non-resident parent reducing the maintenance amount. The method of calculation employed by the CMS was contested by some fathers because it was felt to be open to manipulation by receiving parents who would restrict overnight care of non-resident parents. Fraser thought it was 'wrong' that the child maintenance service had been designed in a way that paying maintenance intrinsically interacts with child contact:

> It's wrong to take into consideration how many nights children spend where, that doesn't work in the father's favour because it just gives incentive for the mother to not allow the father to see the children, especially if it is a single non-working mother that needs the income. It's going to encourage mothers to make the father see the kids less for them to get more money … money shouldn't come into seeing your child, but it does. (Fraser)

Harry discussed how he felt the arrangements he has with his ex-wife led to his daughter Alice being very *"back and forwards"* between their two houses throughout the week due to what he believed was his ex-wife wishing for their daughter to stay overnight at her house:

It's [calculated by] nights, not time. So, Monday evening for example, because my ex-wife works until 7pm, Alice stays with me until 7pm, I cook her tea, do homework, and then her mother comes and picks her up, and she sleeps there. Because actually if she sleeps at my house, then I could start saying "lets renegotiate the child maintenance" and then she'd get less money. So, she is not going to let Alice spend the night with me.

Similar thoughts of child contact being highly influenced by maintenance arrangements or unfair calculations based upon inaccurate recording of childcare arrangements where expressed by over a third of the sample. As explained by Nick, the main concern was lack of time with children rather than an over-paying of maintenance:

To be honest, I think the reason I don't see Phoebe much and don't have her overnight is that she knows she will get less maintenance money. Which in my opinion, I don't care, I have even said to her straight that I don't mind paying the full amount, which I do, "just let me see her more". But it's still not happened. (Nick)

The reciprocal link between maintenance and contact, discussed in the literature review is thus seen in practice in this study, with fathers not only feeling that paying maintenance will improve chances of contact with children, but also that this link between contact and maintenance is a core tenet of the CMS, as contact is directly used in calculations. Basing maintenance on overnight care does not recognise the day-time care some fathers do, even where this care is an expense for fathers. Similarly, to Harry, Martin and Brian cared for their children after school whilst their ex-wives work:

Cos of my work hours, I can pick her up from school and take her to mine some days. And we do dinner, and homework and things. Then her mum comes to collect her, cos she likes to put her to bed on school nights. (Martin)

I give him his tea on a Monday, which I am paying for, I am heating the house up, but it doesn't count cos he is not there overnight. (Brian)

As such, when care routines are more flexible and shared, maintenance calculations based on overnight care may not be accurate. Joshua felt this is the case in his situation, but chose not to raise the issue with his ex-wife, with whom he reported a relatively amicable relationship:

It's not in my nature to grumble and disagree, but when I think about it like that and fill in the child support form and I am thinking about how many days I have had him, I think it's not been quite so bad of late, but she fairly frequently goes away for a week and that all eats into the split really. But I

have tended to not worry about things really, just to keep things simple and amicable between the two of us.

'Carrying the cost' of doing more care than is recognised in maintenance calculations is again being used as a mediatory factor in maintaining relationships. Using number of nights as a variable in the calculation methods can add an additional element of dispute to what are, for some, conflictual and fraught situations. As previously explained, at the time of interview, Kieran was in an ongoing dispute with his ex-wife about care for his son, particularly overnight care every other weekend, which had been in place for a number of years. As part of this disagreement, Kieran said his ex-wife asked for a recalculation of maintenance, using number of nights as the reason. Kieran felt this to be confrontational as he felt his overnight care with his son had been unfairly stopped by his ex-wife:

> She claims now that she didn't know that by doing what she is doing, which is blocking my contact time, or making it more difficult, that the impact it would have is reduce the number of nights below 52 a year. Her view was that "you don't ever do these many nights" and my view was that I definitely do. If you add it up, so that 52 threshold that the child maintenance service has. This is definitely one of the contributory factors to what's going on at the moment.

According to Kieran the added disagreement about maintenance amounts led to further deterioration in the communication between himself and his ex-wife. As their calculations are made by the CMS, he fears their annual recalculation will act as a repeated reminder of their disputes: *I think certainly the renegotiation has created a lot of ill feeling that no doubt the next one will as well"*. This section has highlighted concerns that the process of calculating child maintenance amount based upon the amount of overnight care is problematic because it was felt to potentially restrict the amount of overnight care fathers could give to their children. This is significant because in Chapter Five overnight care is seen as a significant feature of fathering and an important time for father-child bonding. These calculation methods could also cause disruption to children, highlighting another way in which government services are neither centring child wellbeing, nor fulfilling fathers' needs for support and a quality service when engaging with the CMS.

8.3.3   Interactions with the CMS directly

As many parents arranged payments themselves or used the online calculator, there was little direct interaction with the CMS. However, a handful of fathers did express views that the CMS were 'incompetent', and this led to feelings of resentment and distrust. For example, Nick, Kieran, Fraser, Daniel and Elliot each explained that the amount calculated by the CMS was different to the amounts shown on the online calculator. Elliot received many letters from the CMS with different information. He feared this would create conflict between his daughter's mother and himself because of unclear calculations:

I don't trust them to do anything right. And I have wondered what my ex would do, because she was presented presumably with all of these numbers as well, none of which, there isn't a single one, I don't even know what the number is anymore, they have sent different numbers, and the number changes depending on whether it's a weekly payment, and they told me there was money missing, which I just ignored. But it, it just became lunacy really. Every week they would send, in triplicate, some new letter with a new amount and no justification of where it would come from.

A lack of transparency in calculation methods as well as poor levels of communication were also expressed by Ivan who felt he was treated very poorly by the service:

If the CSA was emblematic of what the state's message is about non-resident fathers, then it's awful. The communication, the form of words they use in the communication, the presumption of guilt, and failure in the tone of the voice of the operatives working for these organisations. I have never been so angry as I have been receiving their communications or talking to their staff, because having been the one who instigated contact, after that, all the contact was presuming that I was the one being chased, that I was the one who hadn't paid money and that I was the one who was under scrutiny for my behaviour. It seemed to be an organisation without memory, without any kind of narrative of previous contact, each contact appeared to be new, and again with this presumption. I think that gave me a very bad, and continues to give me a very bad view of what the state's involvement might be.

He described the interactions he had as judgemental and depicted the maintenance service as "*some faceless organisation, that is connected with the government, making claims about you, or asserting that you have wrongly behaved in a certain way, is quite powerful*". Ivan's assessment of the poor service he feels he received by the CMS is symbolic of wider problems he feels the state's interaction and treatment of non-resident fathers. This poor interaction expanded to feelings of criticism: Ivan explained how he had been contacted telling him he owed money, something he found upsetting, and something he found to be *"a questioning of my support for my child"*. Nick also found his interaction with the child maintenance service to be difficult, due to them offering no support for his care disputes, and not signposting him to appropriate support:

When she took me for the maintenance I said to the chap on the phone "I have not seen her in three months, she is refusing me access" and he said "sorry, that's nothing to do with us, you need to ring a family court. We just deal with the money side" and I said: "well you have worked out how much I am paying based on the fact that I have her zero nights a week" I asked him that and again he said "that's not our place. You have to sort access through the court". So, it doesn't make sense. How can they sort it out when they don't even sort access?

This is a potentially upsetting action because as demonstrated in this chapter, there is felt to be an inherent link between maintenance payments and fathers' care for their children, but this is not recognised by the siloed approach of the CMS. Overall, poor treatment when interacting directly with the CMS suggests that non-resident parents are positioned as financial providers, who are assumed as not committed to their

children. These findings come 10 years after Dermott (2008, p. 102) expressed that the CSA enforced the breadwinner model, which contrasts to contemporary thinking that frames fathers as responsible for more than just financial care.

8.3.4   Irregular maintenance arrangements

Continuing on from discussions of how fathers perceived the rigid systems in place around child maintenance that do not recognise the nuances of each family's decision making. For example, around a quarter of the sample did not pay regular amounts of maintenance. Irregular payments were most common amongst the low-income fathers in the sample. Similarly to earlier discussions of not wanting children to 'go without', these fathers explained how they provided money when it was available to them - "*I contribute when I can*" (Dominic) - or when asked by their children's mothers. Vince, who was in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, explained that his daughter's mother didn't want regular maintenance:

> She is a very stoic lady, and she already had three children when I met her, she's raising them alone. She's done it all. But, since she has been able to talk to me and since my economic position has improved as well, but even then, when it was weak, and I couldn't afford to pay regular maintenance those times when she needed something, she would have gotten what she needed from me. So, it's very fulfilling to me to be able not just to be able to help my daughter, but also her mum. It's my duty and she wouldn't have gotten pregnant without me, and she wouldn't be in the position where she is raising a fourth child without me. She has recently changed jobs, and cos I came into some money when my father died, I have been able to pay her a lump sum in maintenance, and she has been able to buy a new car and have money whilst her new job is sorted.

This extract demonstrates that Vince and his ex-partner negotiate financial provision for their daughter on a continuing basis, based upon both their financial situations. It is successful, because, as in Chapter 6, they have a cordial relationship. Tim was unemployed at the time of interview and had a changeable relationship with his son's mother: *"she didn't want me to be involved at all, she said "we don't want your money""*. He explained that he still paid money into her bank account when he could, as he felt this was a paternal duty: *"because I have her bank details, I don't care what she thinks, I just have to do what I do. I just put money, that's it"*. As aforementioned, financial arrangements made at parental separation can influence maintenance payments, and for Robert, taking on the costs of a formerly joint mortgage was cited as the reason for not paying a regular maintenance amount. He told me that when they initially separated, he left the family home, but was waiting for his ex-partner to move out in order to sell the house:

> I said: "are you any closer to finding somewhere else?" and she said no, and I said "Well, I need to know, cos I need to get the house on the market. I can't afford to keep it if you are taking 20 percent of my wages" and she turned round and said "who says I'm taking 20 percent of your wages?" and I

said "that's the done thing, isn't it?" and she said "I'd rather you kept this place here, and kept somewhere decent for the boys to go at the weekend, rather than having to rent a room somewhere else, and I wouldn't know how safe it was, or what kind of place they are staying in" and I said "I'll have that in writing then". And she did put it in writing, and we both signed it, but then I have had a couple of texts since saying "it ain't worth the paper it's written on". I am not so sure it would happen now, but you do have it hanging over your head, that you could have a letter through your door saying that you are suddenly 20 percent worse off.

Furthermore, Robert explained that an informal agreement has also been reached between parents and children that Robert is responsible for paying for clothing and sports equipment his children need:

She knows that anything like [shoes and clothes], I'll just say "yeah, alright" and I'll take them into town, or anywhere and get them anything they need. I will never see them go without, she knows that if they need anything, then it gets paid for; so, I pay for all their courses, holiday clubs, school shoes. We have sort of ended up keeping it that way really."

This arrangement was one that was agreed and preferred by both parents, but still places Robert in a financially fragile position as he was aware that he would be liable for maintenance payments alongside an expensive home, should his ex-partner change the arrangement. These examples show that if there are not formal arrangements for maintenance, this does not necessarily mean that fathers do not wish to financially provide for their children and their children's mothers.

Overall, this section has highlighted how within the sample of this research, there was a widespread desire to financially provide for children and ensure they are not 'without' due to parental separation. However, rigid calculation methods were felt to hinder father-child time together and favour resident parents, as well as not recognising the financial demands that non-resident fathers have. This combined with no access to welfare services means there is a double financial-penalty for non-resident parents, particularly those working in insecure or variable hours' employment. According to many of the fathers involved in this study, interactions with the child maintenance service often added to parental disputes and fathers' stress levels. These findings continue discussions by Lewis (2000) and Poole et al. (2013) that the CMS is ineffective and adds further difficulty to families that may well already be experiencing difficulties. As such, despite changes in processes within the CMS aiming to increase communication between parents and reduce both conflict and use of the statutory system (DWP, 2012b), reports from fathers in this study suggest that rigid calculation methods are continuing to create significant areas of conflict between parents.

8.4 Fathers' involvement with schools and children's learning

Following on from discussions of the role of homework and being involved in children's learning for enacting everyday fathering practices, as well as fathers' desires to feel informed of their children's educational wellbeing in Chapters 5 and 6, this section will explore fathers' perceptions and accounts of interaction with their children's schools and associated educational issues. Twenty-one of the participants had children in school (primary, secondary and further-education colleges), and four had children in pre-school (private nurseries or school-based) preparing for school entry in the school year following the interview. Whilst schools and interaction with children's educational development is a topic worthy of exploration due to the expressed centrality of this in fathering practices (as demonstrated in Chapter 5), school and preschools can demonstrate interaction between non-resident fathers and non-targeted child and family services more broadly. Some of the difficulties that fathers express can be seen to be similar to parents in cohabiting relationships and other family set ups, highlighting how non-resident fathers have experiences similar to all parents. This expands to gendered differences in parenting expectations and treatment by schools. However, experiences and difficulties unique to non-resident fathers are also apparent. Examples of good practice are also included, demonstrating how a range of different experiences for families can be experienced across the educational system.

8.4.1 Formal communication between school and parents

The major expectation of schools expressed by fathers was receiving information about their child's well-being, learning and progress at school. Much of this revolved around formal feedback on children's attainment, namely annual school reports. Interim reports and academic updates from schools and knowing how children were 'getting on' were also expressed as important. Requesting and re-requesting for academic reports to be sent to fathers' home or email addresses as well as mothers was commonly expressed, with some fathers feeling that schools weren't suited to having parents who live in different households:

> My main problem with the school in the last few years has been getting them to send me reports in the same way that reports are sent to her mum, and I have got to a point where I have complained to the Board of Governors having sought to address this with the headmistress and with the main administrator … I have found that the school isn't geared up to sending more than one copy when the parents of a child don't live together. To me, it's a simple administrative task, it seems to be beyond the school and their admin systems. So that has been a real challenge, that's been quite upsetting... – Ivan

Ivan demonstrates an expectation for his daughter's school to adapt to separated families and felt upset that he was being treated in a different way to his daughter's mother despite his frequent requests for information.

This contrasts to Brian who seemed to rationalise any potential exclusion from school information due to his 'unusual' family setup.

> I am sure we are not the only people in this situation but, you know, clearly for most of the kids, they will have a single point of contact, they only need a single point of contact. So, asking for the reports and letters to be sent to both homes was just to kind of ensure that they keep both of us informed really. (Brian)

A sense of doubt or distrust of the school's administrative systems to handle two parental households emerged from participants, including Brian, who specifically wrote "*please send to both*" when replying to the school's request for parent email addresses. Daniel, who after having had a meeting with school to explain their separation and request his own copy of his daughter's report, expressed scepticism at the school's ability to send information to two households. He told me that he "*sometimes, when they remember*" receives academic reports. These accounts are troubling when remembering the pledges of the 'Think Fathers' campaign in 2008, which aimed to increase father involvement with children, including a pledge for children's school reports to be sent to fathers who live elsewhere. Similar to knowing how to access legal support in cases of dissatisfactory care routines, it could be argued that some fathers have the means to strategically engage with schools in order to increase their visibility within schools (e.g. knowing how and when to complain to governors).

Another key point of contact between school and parents is parents' evening, usually held on an annual basis. Leo, who lived approximately 150 miles from his children, told me how he was able to take an afternoon off work to attend parents' evening for his two children: *"As long as I know about things in advance, I can flex my time-table here at work".* This contrasts to Ivan, who lives over 100 miles from his daughter and has less job flexibility: "*it's impractical; parents' evenings, are technically in the early evening. I have a full-time job, it's not possible [to attend]".* Distance and job flexibility (or flexible employers) can be seen as acting as a barrier for some fathers to attend parents' evening, but also the timing immediately after the school day can also act as a barrier. Whilst this can be seen as a barrier to all working parents, the distance that can exist between non-resident fathers and their children's schools can exacerbates difficulties for some fathers to attend.

Across the sample, parents' evening was seen as a point in time where separated parents had to meet together. For fathers like Joshua, Brian and Leo, 'getting along' with their children's mothers means that going to parents' evening together is not considered problematic. Considering notions of family display post-separation discussed by Bakker et al. (2014), parents' evening is a very visible moment for displaying

the relationship between parents. Attending is also an opportunity for fathers to display to schools that they remain present in their children's lives and wish to be involved in their education. However, where parental relationships where more conflictual, this could result in some fathers not attending parents' evening even when they wished to. For Francis, who separated from his wife around two years before the research, an ongoing difficult relationship meant his two teenage children requested that he did not attend in case of conflict. This was despite him living a similar distance from the school as his ex-wife, and frequently taking his sons to school:

> I've not been able to go to parents' evenings, cos the kids said it would be too awkward, so their mum goes with them to school … I always ask them how school has gone, I say: "how's school gone?" or if I pick them up in the morning: "what classes you got on today?". They'll tell me what lessons they have got on: "oh, that's alright" "no it isn't dad, its rubbish! I don't like that class" and I would say "oh, I used to enjoy history" "oh, I don't like history" so I do talk to them, but it's hard to find out what level they are at school with not going to parents' evening.

Francis explained how not attending parents' evening left him feeling disconnected from his son's attainment, something he found particularly difficult as his older son approached his GCSE examinations. In addition to difficulties attending parents' evening stemming from work restrictions or poor parental communication levels, Graham's assessment of his daughter's most recent parents' evening, demonstrated that problems can also stem from the actions of schools:

> I don't know if it's because its only fairly recent that school have had more than one kid who's got separated parents, but they don't seem to know how to handle it. The last parents' evening that I went to, the start of this year, cos I remember thinking that it was weird that it was at the start of the year, September time, we both, [ex-wife] and I both went to the parents' evening, both sat with Mia's teacher, she had printed two copies of the report, which we had asked for, however, she didn't know how to refer to me. She referred to [ex-wife], "oh, can Mia's mum and" waved in my general direction "come in". She didn't know what word to use to describe me, and it was noticeable.

Whilst this may be a rare occurrence, Graham's example demonstrates that some schools may find managing separated parents difficult, even if parents have an amicable relationship and non-resident fathers are regularly involved in school collection/drop-off as Graham was. Vince also expressed difficulties attending parents' evening due to feelings that the school couldn't adapt to separated parents. He explained that he was told he could not be on school premises at the same time as his ex-partner despite reporting to school a good mother-father relationship and wishing to attend together:

> It was excuse after excuse and then they finally said, the school said: "Mum will be attending with Mr [name], her husband, will there be any problems?" and I replied "no, I haven't come to see him, I have come to see you about my daughter".

Defaulting to mothers and restricting fathers' access to parent's evening in cases of - or fear of - parental conflict, and awkward haphazard interaction with fathers at school meetings can act to compound a sense of exclusion from children's educational attainment. A propensity to exclude fathers from school involvement, particularly if mothers are present suggest there is a tendency to consider non-resident fathers as a 'risk'. This is problematic because as Featherstone's (2014) writing on how fathers are categorised as a 'risk' in social work practices discusses, this categorising can lead to practitioners ignoring the parenting role that fathers play in their children's lives. However, examples of good practice were described by Vince, who reported that his daughter's primary school was much better suited to interacting with separated parents, as well as Aaron who had indirect contact with his three primary-school-aged children:

> I've been going up school. I got a school report last year, and I have been up to see the teachers, me and their mum have separate meetings, and the school says they are doing really well, and they are always on time. They say they are bright children. They haven't always, I had to go and request it.

Taking a proactive role in managing school's communication after parental separation demonstrates efforts to receive recognition from school of fathers ongoing involvement in children's lives. Allowing separate meetings such as reported by Aaron, could aid other fathers in the sample like Francis. When considering how parental engagement is key to facilitating children's learning and support for schoolwork, the range of engagement with schools demonstrates how children of separated parents can experience unequal levels of engagement depending on the schools' protocols and treatment of separated families.

Across the sample, interaction with schools and educational developments was recognised as expanding beyond reading reports and attending parents' evenings; wishing to understand friendships, child-teacher relationships, and children's favourite subjects, as well as attending school plays, sports events and other activities were considered as important undertakings for fathers. For Paul, being able to attend school events was significant to his identity as a father:

> Parents' evenings and sports. Even on my non-seeing them days and weekends, I would go and watch my sons play rugby or daughters play hockey, or school shows, that sort of thing. Fully involved.

Paul had lived very close to his children's schools for the nine years he had been a non-resident father, and proximity can be seen to play a key role in fathers' ability to engage with the more everyday aspects of schooling. This is because engaging with children after-school during the week, being able to interact with teachers or other parents in the school playground or being able to read newsletters and information sent home from school was possible. Brian lived very near to his son's primary school, and had flexible working patterns, so often collected his son from school. He told me how he was *"quite involved with the school"*

and the teachers *"knew his face"* due to chairing a parent-teacher committee and attending parent assemblies each week. He reflected that "*it's good, because it's important for me to be involved in the school, to know the teachers, to know other parents, you know, and to be around*.". Unsurprisingly, he felt informed of his sons schooling.

Conversely, Adam lived over 50 miles from his daughter Chelsea's school, and did not attend parents' evening due to the distance and a poor relationship with Chelsea's mother. He found it very difficult to get information beyond reports, telling me: *"I get sent reports, but the reports are absolute nonsense".* He explained how these were accessed online, but beyond contacting the school to arrange this intranet access he has struggled to maintain dialogue with the school. Whilst this could be argued as a complaint for many parents of secondary school-aged children, Adam's distance from his daughter's school, conflictual relationship with his ex-partner and sporadic contact with his daughter exacerbated feelings of low engagement with the school. He found this particularly difficult as whilst he had few concerns about his daughter's academic abilities, he wished to have more information about her wellbeing, particularly when she transitioned to secondary school. Despite being pro-active, Adam felt he was still receiving low levels of engagement with the school:

> The form teacher was supposed to ring me, but never did. I have spoken to Chelsea about her form tutor and she says she's not very good and doesn't know what's going on anyway. But what the report does, it literally says what level they are at, is it 'outstanding' or whatever, but she is generally outstanding except for drama and art and stuff. But what none of it says is how she is doing with her friends and other aspects, how she is settling in, which annoys me. (Adam)

Vince talked at length about problems with his daughter's school, and his feelings of exclusion by them. He was particularly troubled by a number of serious incidents at school concerning his daughter, including issues of bullying on social media and self-harming. He explained that whilst his daughter's mother was spoken to on the telephone, he "*heard nothing*" despite the school having his contact details. On describing the incident concerning his daughter, he told me they had called his ex-wife, and she had relayed the information to him: *"thank god that my ex-partner is talking to me, cos school made no attempt to contact me and let me know about this issue. And things like that are very important".* When reflecting on feeling excluded by the school over issues relating to his daughter both academic and pastoral, he told me:

> You [feel like you] don't have an opinion or that your opinion isn't worth as much, because it's all based on worry, which it is of course, because all parents are worried. But I think bottom line, the school doesn't want to get involved in parental conflict, but that's not what I am asking; I want to be sent letters, and they have had my details since she started there and I have never had a letter. I do occasionally get a report sent, but usually I am asking Ella to bring it with her at the weekend, which

can take like six weeks for her to remember. I will get directed to the website a lot, but I haven't got a log on access for it. So, it's kind of made me give up, give up bothering with the school itself…

Vince's experiences and desires to 'give up' with the school encapsulate the combination some fathers in the sample faced with the difficulty of engaging with the school, being physically removed from children during the school week, and struggles to knit together information from children during infrequent time together. It also highlights how schools are positioning mothers as principally responsible for children, and consequently rely on mothers to relay information to fathers. In placing all the responsibility on mothers while excluding fathers, not only increases the labour of mothers, but through excluding fathers from information, may reduce likelihood of fathers engaging with schools in the future. These insights into non-resident fathers' interactions with schools boosts knowledge in an under-researched area and raises significant issues in relation to parental engagement with school.

8.4.2   Feeling reliant on children and ex-partners

Relying on children to retell information from school was a common strategy for fathers, particularly for children at secondary school. Fathers discussed the problematic nature of relying on children for this information with Elliot saying that he felt his 12-year-old daughter was not old enough to relay information when she started secondary: *"at secondary school, the responsibility is all on your child to tell you stuff, but at 11 years old, they are not old enough at all.".* This left him feeling lacking in information and marginalised from engagement with school. Martin expressed similar sentiments about his seven-year-old daughter Naomi, who could forget information between their every other weekend contact:

> I always ask her what she is up to, what she's been doing. And she often says: "I don't remember!" or if I pick her up from school, I'll ask what she has done that day and she says: "I don't know" [laugh] it's all changed from when I was at a school, so it's doesn't make sense sometimes. (Martin)

Ivan, who in Chapter 5 explained how periodically seeing his 11-year-old daughter and talking together every-other-weekend helped him to paint a 'dot-to-dot picture' of her life. However, he recognised that talking about school and friendships there could led to her feeling pressured or withholding information:

> Yeah, I always like to catch up with her, we just sit in the car and I ask: "what's your news?" and depending on how she feels, she will tell me, or she won't tell me. She won't sit there and sulk, but sometimes she can't be bothered to play out everything, so I don't push too hard, but I do press a bit, cos I am interested. So, I will ask about school in particular, how her friends are, because sometimes without encouragement she will tell me that she has fallen out with someone, or she met a nice boy, which has come up a little bit. (Ivan)

These examples contrast to examples by fathers like Brian and Joshua who see their children throughout the school week and as such have opportunities to 'catch up' more frequently. Vince relates his sense of lack of information directly to schools, feeling as if schools expect fathers to use their children and children's mothers as sources of information, rather than communicating with schools directly:

> I think they [schools] think we [non-resident fathers] worry more, they say that it's the mother's responsibility to keep fathers informed, and if not the mother then it's the children's responsibility. And is your kid really going to come to you and say: "Dad, I've got three detentions for not doing my homework, will you come and help me with it?". And aside from that, coming at the weekend, they are not thinking about homework. So that has been difficult, and all I have been able to rely on is reports.

Whilst children forgetting information or not wishing to share with parents may be a concern for all parents, for some non-resident fathers in the sample, the difficulties are exacerbated by the time between seeing children and a reliance on their ex-partner, whom not everyone had positive levels of communication with. Kieran said of his son's schooling: *"I don't really get involved with school. It's a good school, and that's enough for me"*. The physical distance from his son's school combined with feelings of exclusion by his ex-partner (discussed throughout this thesis), means that Kieran is removed from the everyday actions of school, but seems to justify this to himself as a coping mechanism to reduce worrying about his son's attainment. Kieran seemed to speak from a powerless position; this powerlessness comes through a sense of limited formal rights and influence and forced reliance on an ex-partner with whom he has ongoing disagreements. He also expressed that he was excluded from making a decision about which school his son would attend: *[ex-wife] makes all of the decisions and doesn't consult me"*. This contrasts to Joshua's experiences with his secondary school-aged son Charlie; similarly, to Brian, Joshua cared for his son after school often, and reported how the frequency of interaction with Charlie throughout the week and regular communication with his ex-wife helps him to feel informed:

> Yeah, because I am involved with Charlie three days of the week, I think we are quite good at sharing maybe letters from school, school is quite good in that they will send information via email, and you can follow the school by Facebook or twitter, they will email you school letters. So, I feel like I am as involved as [ex-wife] is.

Feeling as though they are recognised by schools at a similar rate to their children's mothers appears significant for fathers in the study. Joshua's extract also demonstrates the multiple ways in which information can be shared by school with both parents which does not rely on mothers. Not having information sent directly to fathers at times resulted in expressions of annoyance or upset that events had been missed and can exacerbate broader feelings of exclusion and secondary positioning within their

children's lives. Leo explained how he felt included in schooling because he was not reliant on his ex-wife to pass on information. On asking him if he received his children's school report, he told me:

> The communication with the school has always been that if they are contacting parents formally then they should contact both of us. So, headmaster's letters, or school reports or anything else. So, we are never in a situation where I am reliant on [ex-wife] to pass on that information.

He still however recognised that communication problems occurred: *"sometimes it feels a bit frustrating that things happen, and I think "gosh, I don't even know about that" but I think it's kind of the normal course of things."* Leo related the problems he faces to non-separated families, attempting to normalise and rationalise the actions of those involved. For others, such as Ivan, who told of missing important school events his daughter featured in – *"she might win a prize at school, I don't find out until it's too late to organise to go and watch her receive her prize"* and Oliver, explaining how he missed a recent parent's evening, being non-resident led to situations that are felt to be distinctly different to co-resident parent families:

> I do sometimes feel like my voice is a little unheard. I think [ex-partner] is also conscious of that too, and if it does happen, she is usually very apologetic about it, so for example, I missed a parent's evening at the nursery, because she didn't tell me about it until the day it was happening, and she was just so upset with herself. (Oliver)

Both these fathers live in different cities to their children, and ad hoc, or last-minute organisation was not feasible. This was also experienced by Leo who explained he could attend evening events at his children's schools only if "*I know about things in advance".* Missing out on school events can compound fathers' sense of being in a secondary parenting position. Regular interaction with children during the week, and a communicative relationship with one's ex-partner also increase feelings of inclusion and knowledge and reduce the chance of 'missing' information. A centrality of mothers not only in acting as a messenger for school news, but also in daily interaction with teachers and involvement in school life was expressed; mothers, both their children's mothers, and women more broadly were described as 'very involved', 'assertive' and 'tiger-mom' like in the school playground and when interacting with teachers after school or at school events, leaving little space for fathers to talk to teachers. Whilst these expressions may not be specifically relevant to non-resident fathers, the feelings of secondary status in relation to school can compound already held feelings of secondary status through non-resident fatherhood. Exclusion from parents' evenings and lack of information exchanged between school and fathers can exacerbate primacy of mothers and act to further exclude fathers.

Whilst poor service or treatment by one service may cause fathers to feel excluded, the cumulative effect of multiple interacting forms of exclusion both from services but also perceived exclusion from fathering practices by mothers (discussed in Chapter 6) can be seen to result in an overall sense of marginality. Ivan expressed a deep sense of exclusion through various services he interacted with, and explained how this influenced his sense of fatherhood:

> Motherhood, being a mother, underrated though it is, does get the credit it is due, generally speaking. But when you are the father to a child that is not living in your house, there is a feeling that your status as a father is only realised episodically. The status is realised when we meet each other and spend time together, the status is realised when I am with my younger children, or family members, or when I show her off, bring her to work and things. The status is not realised in the actions of the school, where I have had to fight for recognition. It is not realised at all in my interactions with my former wife and so, it is precarious, and any way in which that is challenged, or ways that people may seek to undermine that status, either deliberately, or by omission, or by the CSAs typeface and choice of font, or language, that cuts and hurts.

In summary of this section, there appears to be a strong desire to be informed of their children's educational attainment but also broader wellbeing in schools. However, expressions of exclusion by schools were articulated across the sample. This included receiving lesser amounts of communication than their children's mother, and also feeling that schools are deliberately making them reliant on their ex-partners or children. This leads to fathers feeling ill-informed on their child's educational and emotional wellbeing, missing school events, and broader feelings of exclusion. When this persists over a long period it can make it hard for fathers to continue to engage with schools. Moreover, through creating barriers to fathers' engagement with them, some schools are potentially hindering good practice in tackling wellbeing concerns for children. Adapting interaction with parents based upon the wishes of both parents, either separate meetings, or allowing meetings together is seen as a positive action in this sample.

8.5   Conclusion

Overall this chapter has used examples of fathers' engagement with family solicitors and mediation services, the Child Maintenance Service and schools to demonstrate how social interventions and services can significantly influence the everyday lives of non-resident fathers. Mediation was widely seen as a positive service, which reduces conflict and cost in situations of disagreement, suggesting that fathers tend to align with the approaches of the Family Justice Review. However, being able to access reliable and low-cost support was considered imperative if mediation was unsuccessful and agreements couldn't be made. In the sample, there is a widespread desire to financially provide for children and ensure they are not 'without' due to parental separation. However, calculation methods were felt to hinder father-child time together and

favour resident parents. They were also considered as not responsive to fathers' financial responsibilities or the changes in their lives. This combined with no access to welfare services means there is a double financial-penalty for non-resident parents, particularly those working in insecure or variable-hours' employment. Whilst mixed experiences of interaction with schools was expressed, receiving lesser amounts of communication than their children's mother, and feeling that schools are deliberately making them reliant on their ex-partners or children for information can be seen to leave non-resident fathers feeling ill-informed of their child's development. The aims of government to increase dialogue between parents, and private or 'family-based' arrangements after separation (see Poole et al., 2016) emerges strongly in father's accounts of interaction with services. However, in doing so, this can create additional levels of conflict for parents who are in situations of high conflict.

When considering these services collectively, these statutory agencies and services, and the policy which underpins them, appears to position non-resident fathers in a secondary or superfluous position. This is done through adherence to a family household model by schools or welfare services that presumes that family life occurs in one home, and does not recognise that children can have more than one home. Nor does this approach recognise the family diversity so often discussed in policy discourses, including that parents that provide care may live across two homes. This is problematic for two significant reasons. The first is that the actions of services that position fathers as secondary appear to be directly contrasting desires for increased father involvement in children's lives. As has been seen through accounts of fathers in this study, whilst they wish to be involved in more care for their children and remain informed with their children's education, these desires can be inhibited through the mechanism of services, at times resulting in fathers feeling disillusioned and withdrawing from involvement. Expressions of exclusion seem apparent even when fathers report communicative relationships with their children's mother.

The second reason this is significant is because fathers' narratives point toward mothers being assumed to be the main carer for children. This not only side-lines fathers, but places separated mothers under high levels of responsibility and scrutiny from schools and services, when this responsibility could be better shared between parents. This then adds to discussion by Daly (2013) and Scourfield (2010), that within a culture of increasing parental monitoring, mothers face higher levels of scrutiny than fathers. The findings discussed in this chapter have highlighted significant issues in relation to the engagement with separated parents, and offered new insights into how fathers feel they are positioned within policy relating not only to separated families but within broader children and family services as well. Overall, and as will be expanded upon in the following conclusion chapter, the perceived sense of exclusion and lack of recognition found in

previous chapters is compounded by the systematic exclusion of fathers from social interventions and services.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Revisiting the research rationale

This research stemmed from a rationale that whilst non-resident fathers have arguably become visible in social welfare policy and practice agendas in the UK, relatively little is known academically about their lived experiences. Whilst exact figures of non-resident fathers are unknown, it is thought that the rates are significant, and thus research about fathers in these circumstances and understanding more about them represented an important topic of study when developing better understandings of fatherhood and families in the UK. A broad research rationale that went beyond the problem-solving rationale often associated with non-resident or 'absent' fathers allowed for broader understandings of fatherhood and fathering to be explored. This research aimed to explore fathers' understandings of their role and responsibilities as a non-resident father as well as to gather in-depth understandings of their everyday lives including their family and social relationships. Non-resident fathers are found across differing socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds and in rural and urban areas, and thus an appreciation of the diversity amongst this group of fathers is necessary when wishing to better understand and support them as a whole. There is little research about social lives and social support in relation to non-resident fathers and their everyday lives, and this also became a component of the study.

The research aimed to thus improve understandings of contemporary family relationships within sociological discussions of the family and add to discussions of analysing and improving social support for non-resident fathers. This research was guided by three main research questions:

1. How do men perceive, construct and negotiate their role as 'fathers' in the context of being a 'non-resident father' and how do they practise this role? And in what ways do fathers perceive that their social and family relationships and circumstances influence their construction and negotiation of non-resident fatherhood?
2. How do fathers perceive, negotiate and engage with the ways in which non-resident fathers are constructed and positioned in policy and social discourses?
3. What is the significance of statutory agencies and social services, in the broad sense of the terms, in the everyday narratives and lives of non-resident fathers? According to fathers, should and could these be developed in more 'father-friendly' or supportive ways?

Using Morgan's (1996, 2011) theory of family practices as a framework in which to understand practices related to family roles and relationships was a useful tool in exploring non-resident fatherhood as it gave the ability to recognise care that can occur in the home, but also outside and when children are present or when they are not present – i.e. discussing children's school results with their ex-partner can be considered to be a family practice. It was also a useful tool in exploring the everyday social lives of families and family members. This research also appreciated that the dynamics of family relationships and practices are influenced by institutional factors such as policy and laws relating to separated families, and structural factors such as social constructions and normative prescriptions about gender roles.

This final chapter aims to conclude this thesis, clarify the overarching findings in respect of the three main research questions and deliberate the wider significance of the findings. Firstly, the key findings of this thesis will be summarised, with threads that ran through each of the four findings chapters integrated together here. The second section of this chapter will reflect upon the methods used in this study. This is followed by a series of policy critiques and suggestions that stem both directly from fathers' suggestions in interviews, but also from this author's interpretation and analysis generated from the primary research data. The rationale for this work highlights the prominence and importance of further developments in empirical research on non-resident fathers; through reflection of the research process, suggestions for how to advance not only this specific research project, but the area of study overall will be made. Whilst the sample of this study cannot be considered 'representative' of the broader population of non-resident fathers in the UK (partly, as there still remains uncertainty around the exact figures for, and make up of non-resident fathers in the UK), the diversity amongst this sample means that conclusions in this thesis can be useful to furthering understandings of non-resident fathers in the UK.

9.2 Key findings

9.2.1 'Good' fatherhood and child-centred practices

The first overarching finding of this thesis relates to notions of 'good' fatherhood introduced in the first data chapter (Chapter 5). Through recalling participants' accounts of becoming, but more significantly being a non-resident father, multiple narratives of 'good' fatherhood developed. The abstract nature of the term 'good' means that notions of what is 'good' or 'bad' are inherently subjective to parents' own understandings; however, these moral narratives of being 'good fathers' tended to resonate with socially recognised normative discourses of involved and child-centred fatherhood and parenthood discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. When considering how fathers developed their narratives of 'good' fatherhood, notions

of family display (Finch, 2007) help to make sense of how fathers are expressing and displaying their desired fathering practices. Finch's work assumed that family display was for the benefit of 'others', that is, those outside the family, and placed little focus on how parents may feel they want to display family to their own children. However, an interesting finding of this research is that when a father is non-resident, there is potentially a strong desire to display family to their own children. This is done in order to show how they are still committed to them and that they are central to their life. This display is also shown to children's mothers, as fathers wish to show they remain committed and are a trusted caregiver. It can also be done in ways originally discussed by Finch, with displaying good fatherhood and commitment to children beyond separation counteracting 'absent father' rhetoric that permeates the positioning of non-resident fathers.

Comparing to studies of resident fathers and expressions of 'good' fatherhood in these, it can be seen that non-resident fathers adapt and negotiate more nuanced versions of 'good' fatherhood dependent upon their own caring position. One significant way this was demonstrated was through discussions of fathers' abilities to 'be there' for their children. The concept of 'being there', discussed by Dermott (2008) and Miller (2011b) through their empirical studies of predominantly resident fathers, involves fathers being present or 'there' for their children physically, both at home or at events out of the home, as well as being 'there' emotionally and being available for support. Whilst it was felt that reduced time spent with children limited interaction and ability to 'be there' for children as a non-resident father, this thesis demonstrates how through using family practices as a conceptual framework for understanding family life, new means of 'being there' for children can emerge. Phone contact, particularly instant messaging, offers a 21st century solution to the minutiae interactions that can occur between parents and children in resident situations; through actual contact, but also the ability to be contactable at any time is a significant method for fathers to demonstrate to their children, particularly older children, that their father is 'there' for them. These insights into how fathers have adapted traditional understandings of 'being there' demonstrate how studying non-resident fatherhood can help develop understandings of family practices outside of normative models of the family. This reconceptualisation also shows how traditional ideas of family that are based upon 'family households' ignore significant aspects of care and important relationships in families.

Other means of 'being there' and presenting child-focussed decision-making was seen through fathers making themselves available for children, including outside of designated contact time. One significant way this was managed was through limiting time for friendships, personal hobbies and romantic relationships, discussed in Chapter 5 and 7. Much of this approach focussed around not wishing children to think that fathers' wishes, particularly a new relationship, took a higher priority than them. This extended to ensuring

fathers' homes (when they had the resources to provide a home) should be kept as a place for fathers and children only. These homes should, when possible, be close to their children's other home, even if this was not a father's preferred location to live. Prioritising and protecting father-child time in this manner suggests that fathers desire to demonstrate that they remain committed to their children and ties into Smart's (2007) reflections that parent-child relationships have replaced marriage as the relationship of permanence, and of prominence, in contemporary society. Expressions of feeling the need to 'make time count' with children suggests a desire to improve father-child relationships within the boundaries of limited time together. This can involve a change in fathering from before becoming non-resident, whether that is spending more time with children, or fathers changing how they interact with their children. Father-centric narratives about how they care for their children, and how they adapt to and enjoy being the sole carer for their children during contact time demonstrates how non-resident fatherhood can draw fathers toward a more encompassing parenting role that is not so closely tied to gendered caring practices. Strong desires to be involved in mundane aspects of parenting demonstrate how the research with non-resident fathers in this study has offered new and interesting insights into fatherhood when comparing with previous studies of (predominantly) resident fathers. These reflections demonstrate the significance of the concepts of family practices and moral rationalities to findings of this thesis; whilst 'being there' was important to most participants, they practised this moral rationality in multiple ways negotiating how to best 'be there' in the circumstances they faced. Circumstances varied according to care routines, working hours, whether there were additional children or step-children, and distance from non-resident children. Links between 'being there' for children and parental sacrifice are more usually reported in research with lone mothers (see Churchill, 2011, p. 162); the findings in this research offer new and interesting insights into how non-resident fathers negotiate and manage their role as a parent. If 'being there' is only viewed in terms of being resident there is a risk that social practices that are important for family relationships and span across more than one household are not appreciated.

Discussions in Chapter 7 highlight how being a non-resident father can involve management of a number of different identities which do not always harmoniously coexist. One prevalent example of this in this thesis is the conflict occurring when managing new companionate relationships, and how fathers make differing decisions on how to proceed with relationships dependent on factors such as their children's age, the care routine they have with children and other factors. Recognising that new relationships could disrupt already fragile caring routines and feeling as if it is important to use contact time to spend time with extended family, demonstrates how non-resident fathers are involved in ongoing complex relational decision-making. These

relationships, whilst primarily involving and prioritising their children, are also inclusive of their children's mothers, fathers' family, any new partners as well as their housing and employment circumstances. Emotional management in the presence of children, including demonstrating respectful ongoing communication with their children's mother, was largely found across the diverse range of inter-parental relationships that occurred in the sample, both because it was felt that conflict could reduce father-child time, but also that parental conflict had a detrimental effect on children's wellbeing. Paying child maintenance, either formally or informally, which the majority of the sample did, is another method of how fathers are displaying ongoing commitment to their children by ensuring that they are not living 'without' at their mother's home. Overpaying recommended maintenance amounts was also presented as a means of not exacerbating inter-parental conflict and demonstrates how economic decisions of non-resident fathers are made alongside relational decisions. These relational decisions demonstrate how non-resident fathers should be understood within the context of their wider social identities and relationships, and also how in doing so, significant diversity amongst this group of men can be seen.

A similarity across these fathers' narratives and accounts of family and parental practices was to emphasise children's needs. This emphasis is in line with discussions in Chapter 2 of how parenting practices are increasingly coming under scrutiny and a high value is placed on 'good' parenting in public and political discourse (see Abela and Walker, 2013). Thus, non-resident fathers can be considered as acting in ways that are similar to resident parents and face the same moral expectations. However, what is potentially unique to non-resident fathers is a desire to be recognised as remaining committed to their children and their role as a father. This is done through displaying intensive child-focussed 'good' fathering that included sacrificing their own needs. This commitment is displayed to children, their children's mother, their extended friends and family, and to wider society through a multitude of methods discussed in this thesis. This is also displayed to me as a researcher through discussing factors that show commitment and sacrifice to their children in the research interview. In doing so, it could be conceived that fathers are attempting to counteract rhetoric of 'absent' or feckless non-resident fathers.

9.2.2 Desiring and displaying 'normal' fatherhood

Whilst the purpose of data analysis is to explore similarities and difference between participants in a more abstract manner, one feature that was obviously clear without detailed thought was the overwhelming use of the word 'normal' to describe fathering as a non-resident parent, or more specifically, how being non-resident could lead to care and family practices that were considered not 'normal'. Considering their practices through a sense, or deviation from 'normal' suggested that normative models of the family

permeated fathers' understandings of practices with their children. These models seemed, for these fathers, to also stem from heteronormative models of the family, their own childhood and, perhaps due to a large proportion of the sample entering non-residency through cohabitation breakdown, their practices before separation.

Through this thesis it has emerged that care routines, particularly not caring for children overnight and only during the weekend are considered as inhibiting fathers' perceived abilities to care for their children in the way they wish, or in a way that they perceived as 'normal'. Normality of parenting practices is a subjective and cultural notion, but through the course of interviews, this notion largely tended to focus around practical, often mundane, tasks related to children. As the majority of participants had once been resident fathers, it can be perceived that disruption to the taken-for-granted mundane aspects that they consider to be central to family life and reflection upon changes to their practices means that mundane tasks become central to their thinking. This can also be seen as another method in which fathers in this study have attempted to counter negative discourses of non-resident fathers; by desiring to be involved in the mundane tasks of parenting, fathers are potentially countering judgements of fathers being 'fun' and avoiding difficult tasks of parenting. As has been outlined in this thesis, for many in the sample there appears to be a sense of precariousness and strife associated with parenting when non-resident. Through performing tasks associated with practical aspects of care not only are they displaying a continuation of fatherhood to their children and their social network, they could also be acting in ways of self-fulfilment, to demonstrate to themselves that they are continuing to *be* a father and *do* fathering according to normative discourses. This idea is supported by the upset and worry fathers expressed when they could not perform 'normal' aspects of care for and with their children.

Similarly to previous studies of non-resident fathers (Cohen-Israeli and Remennick, 2015; Philip, 2013; Bradshaw et al., 1999), in this thesis, 'quality time', or intensive father-child time emerged as one of the most significant positive aspects of being a non-resident father. However, simultaneously to this, being non-resident was also recognised as causing fathers to 'miss out' on significant aspects of children's lives and the more mundane aspects of parenting. When comparing fathers in the sample, individual circumstances, particularly care routines and the quality of the relationship with their children's mother, resulted in different experiences of fatherhood. However, almost all fathers interviewed expressed positive and negative reflections of their position, referring to multiple factors within their own life that increase or decrease a sense of inclusion from desired fathering practices. As such, through this study it can be seen that being a non-resident father is a position marked by confusing and often contradictory emotions.

Through discussion of desires to perform perceived 'mundane' acts of fathering highlights how care routines intersect with fathers' abilities to provide a home; having a space to care for children, particularly overnight, can be seen as an essential act of fatherhood amongst the sample. Whilst providing a home, and the financial costs associated with this could be considered as performing to norms of the 'breadwinner' or 'provider' role of fatherhood, in this study providing a home progressed to delivering nurturing and caregiving for children. As such, it is considered 'normal' to provide a home for children not only as a function of parenting, but because home is the space where 'normal' parenting practices can occur. Efforts to ensure that father-child time is not encroached upon by new partners and ensuring that fathers' homes are just spaces for children highlight the symbolic importance of home as a place for performing fathering. Where fathers cannot provide a home for their children (e.g. living with their own parents or sharing with a friend) or children do not visit their home or stay overnight, there is concern for the negative consequences this could have for children and for father-child relationships.

9.2.3 Inclusion and exclusion from fathering

Expressions of inclusion and exclusion from fathering are present throughout the findings chapters. The reflections from the diverse sample shows varied experiences both positive and negative of parenting when non-resident. This includes expressions of how the acts of children's mothers, and the positioning of fathers in policies, and treatment in related government services can result in feelings of exclusion and inclusion in fathering. Chapter 6 demonstrated how care routines that are decided mutually between parents (and children) and are considered as 'fair' can increase feelings of inclusion in fathering. Communicative relationships between parents also appear to correlate with feelings of inclusion in decision-making. Conversely, fathers who reported poor relationships with their children's mother also tended to report feeling marginalized and excluded from decisions about when they could see their children, if this care was overnight, and other decisions that related to their children. Moreover, not being able to care in ways considered 'normal' compounded feelings of exclusion, leading to insecurities about the stability of their role as a father amongst some participants. Even where parental communication could be classified as good or amicable, there were still expressions of mothers taking a primary role in decision-making and having a more influential voice, consequently placing fathers in a secondary position. Perceived imbalances of influence and authority in children's lives and upbringing can result in a sense of fragility within fathers. As such, being recognised as an important actor in decision-making, feeling as if their opinions are valued in decision-making (even if they are not agreed upon) and being consistently involved in decision-making is seen as important to fathers in this study.

Whilst fathers can feel to be made marginalised through the actions of mothers, in this study, the mother-dominant narratives of services compounded feelings of exclusion. As highlighted in the previous chapter, when discussing direct interaction with schools, fathers across the sample reported feelings of exclusion, particularly compared to their children's mothers. This included lack of information about children's development and wellbeing, and exclusion from parents' evenings. There was also references to receiving lesser amounts of communication than their children's mother, and also feeling that schools are deliberately making them reliant on their ex-partners or children. Not only does this increase work for mothers, but it also can leave fathers feeling ill-informed of their child's educational and emotional wellbeing, as well as missing school events that children and their fathers consider important. Considering how children's schooling (including related aspects such as homework) is frequently cited as important to fathers, missing out on information could have a detrimental effect on father-child relationships. Within the sample, if feelings of exclusion by schools persist over a long period, this can result in fathers feeling disengaged. When fathers reported positive communication with schools, this often stemmed from being recognised and valued in their role. Adapting interaction with parents based upon the wishes of both parents, either separate meetings, or allowing meetings together was seen as a positive action in this sample.

Discussions of how notions of intensive child-rearing and 'good parenting' can be aligned with middle-class ideals of parenting (Crossley, 2016), as well as narratives that parental separation is detrimental to children can make vulnerable fathers be marginalised in similar ways to vulnerable mothers; that is, they are being stigmatised as not good parents by virtue of their circumstances. From reports from fathers in this study, child maintenance calculations that do not reflect the precarious nature of some fathers' can also position low-income fathers as avoiding responsibilities when they cannot afford to pay the directed amount. Struggling to afford to maintain a household for themselves and their children during contact time, as well as financially providing for their child in another home (including 'additional' maintenance for children's hobbies) can make fathers feel as though they are not succeeding in fulfilling socially constructed narratives of 'good' fatherhood. From fathers' accounts of their experiences, it appears that the rigid systems in place around child maintenance do not recognise the nuances of each family's decision-making. Rather an insistence of maintenance suggests that the CMS continues to position non-resident parents as primarily financial providers without recognition of caring responsibilities. Potentially more worrying were the expressions that calculation methods of the CMS limits non-resident parents' care due to potentially incentivising resident parents to limit overnight care. Moreover, unclear maintenance calculations by the

CMS and confusing communications has also been seen to increase inter-parental conflict, something which is directly in contrast to aims of the Family Justice Review.

The role of the family justice system to alleviate parental disagreements and uphold paternal and child rights had mixed opinions across the sample. Those with ability to involve legal professionals considered it possible to uphold paternal rights, those without access (primarily due to financial reasons), expressed more sceptical opinions. Whilst it was recognised that father and mother 'rights' are often formally equal within family law, perceived imbalances of implementation of these laws that prioritise the wishes of mothers can be seen as exacerbating feelings of exclusion from fathering. The financial restrictions expressed in the sample suggest that access to the family justice system is not equal. These findings reinforce arguments made in the literature review about the primacy of mothers in service provision and how services and policy related to services can be detrimental for fathers, particularly fathers coming from marginalised groups, as concerns over the 'risk' related to these fathers means there is a lack of recognition or support for them.

As such, whilst living apart from their children can lead to feelings of removal from physical and emotional aspects of child-rearing, the practices and actions of other actors in fathers' lives can be seen as directly contributing to feelings of inclusion or exclusion. The actions of schools and the Child Maintenance Service, as well as feeling not involved in decision-making about care routines and other aspects of their children's lives through the actions of their children's mothers cumulatively act to leave some fathers, particularly those that are low-income or in another precarious position, to feel excluded from fatherhood and desired fathering practices. This thesis has shown how in some families, significant amounts of care is done by fathers despite living in a different home to their children some or all of the time. However, an overreliance on the family household model of family across social policy, the legal system and family services, where children have only one recognised home, can mean that non-resident fathers caring responsibilities are not recognised or supported. This also places responsibility for children in separated families on mothers, and can limit father-child relationships, directly in contrast to policies striving for increased father involvement in family life.

A lack of recognition of support needs involves both support in fulfilling fathering responsibilities, but also support for these men individually as they balance caring needs with work and their own social lives. By neglecting to support fathers struggling with issues in their lives beyond those directly related to their children, these personal troubles could have a knock-on effect to how they care for their children. As noted in section 7.5, emotions stemming from becoming a non-resident father, but also from ongoing unhappiness

with fathering and difficulties reconciling conflicting identities can result in feelings of marginalisation, low mood and depression. The loneliness and isolation, inter-personal difficulties and associated mental health difficulties that appear connected with non-resident fatherhood should be considered another key finding of this thesis. So too is the recognition that non-resident fathers, through virtue of not being recognised as having caring responsibilities can 'fall through the net' of practical and emotional support. These fathers may well not be considered as 'high risk' fathers in terms of child protection but they have housing, financial, employment and health needs that could be better supported through services.

9.3   Reflection on the methods

Whilst there is increasing discussion in academic literature about the need to consider family in more fluid and flexible ways that are not based around a single-family household, this thesis has greatly added to understandings of the practices that occur in families when parents are not cohabiting. The concept of understanding families through their practices, or what they *do*, and how they attach meaning to their practices, rather than through static ideals of what families should look like - or narrow focus on specific issues the researcher decides are the focus of the study - underpinned this research. In order to do this, semi-structured interviews with a loose interview schedule was the method undertaken. This was considered the most appropriate method because it was hoped that interviews would be led by what fathers considered important to them. In doing so, a deeper insight into fathers lived experiences could be developed allowing for fathers to construct their own understanding of family. This was important as there have been few studies that explore fathers' lived experiences nor that explore how non-resident fathers understand and practice family. As has been shown in this conclusion chapter and throughout the findings' chapters, novel understandings of non-resident fatherhood have emerged through this thesis.

As explained throughout this thesis, the topic of conversation in interviews took a broad or 'everyday' focus, which contrasts to many previous studies of non-resident fatherhood that stem either from a problem-solving rationale or a focus on separation. Whilst parental separation featured in interviews, it was made clear from the outset of participation that this project was focused upon fatherhood, through not using words such as 'divorce' or 'separation' in recruitment materials. This focus arguably took aspects of confrontation away from the interview and allowed the limited time available in interviews to focus upon fathering when non-resident. Reflections in Chapter 4 demonstrate how participants found interviews to be a useful method of constructing and sharing their feelings toward fathering as a non-resident parent, allowing for exploration of how fathering when non-resident can be experienced in both problematic and unproblematic ways.

The structure of interviews also allowed for insight into the wider social identities and relationships of fathers. This allowed for a development of a more holistic understanding of fathers that moves away solely from their role as a provider of care or money, and constructed fathers as individuals with complex lives. This also allowed for better insight into how fathers' circumstance, such as their income, wider family network, new relationships and working hours influenced their fathering practices. These wider understandings of non-resident fathers allow for more tailored and effective support to be developed. Collection of data about participants' occupations and other socio-demographic information also highlights how significant diversity exists amongst non-resident fathers and how non-residency should not be associated with specific social groups. The broad recruitment category meant that a range of care routines were evident in the sample; these ranged from daytime only care through to an equal or near-equal care pattern and changed over time, demonstrating the dynamic nature of fathering when non-resident.

9.4   Policy implications

The purpose of this research was to not only understand lived experiences of non-resident fatherhood, but to understand the significance of statutory agencies and social services within these lived experiences, and explore if policies and services could be designed in a way better suited to fathers. The central tenet of these policy suggestions lies within the major rationale for the research; non-resident fathers are a significant social group according to government family policies, but as a group, they remain largely unknown in their numbers and social make-up, and in their needs. Through this in-depth qualitative research, it was possible to gather opinion from a range of fathers; this allows for policy suggestions to be informed by fathers' experiences in their diversity, rather than policy informed by what policy makers consider important.

The first action needed is for better discourse of family that recognises diversity of families, and the breadth and prominence of non-resident fathers in the UK. By developing a different, more encompassing definition of fatherhood that recognises fathers that are resident or non-resident (or both), a new discourse of fatherhood can be developed. Moreover, a discourse that recognises that parental separation and the breakup of cohabiting parental relationships need not mark the end of fathers' caregiving practices, moving away from the problematising and stigmatizing of separated families in general. This can be done through better recognition of non-resident fatherhood across a range of targeted and non-targeted services, and better data collection methods. As argued in the initial chapters of this thesis, data collection methods of families are usually based around the 'family household'. This study demonstrates that families, family practices, and caregiving traverse the boundaries of a single home, echoing arguments in section 2.2.1 that data collection

methods about families fail to capture the multiple and overlapping networks of care that occur between family members. In this sample, this includes parents who live in separate households but share care of children, and separated parents who share a living space for part of the week. There are also examples of other caregivers such as grandparents who give regular care to children who move between multiple homes. As such, there is a need for more inclusive data collection methods that capture and reflect the diverse nature of contemporary families in the UK. There also needs to be a more concerted effort to develop more precise figures on the number of non-resident parents in the UK. This development should be carried out by government services and statisticians who are responsible for survey design, as well as developing new methods of analysis that focus upon individuals and can track relationships between survey respondents.

Non-residency should not be associated with specific social groups, and as such policy relating to non-resident fathers should be broad in its reach in order to reflect the diversity across society. This study has demonstrated that non-resident fathers are a diverse grouping, and many do not come into contact with any family support services (outside of schools) despite potentially benefiting from that support. Therefore, movement beyond the focus on 'risky' fathers that uses broader access routes is needed to recognise non-resident fathers and connect them with support services. Coming into contact with services such as GPs and hospitals, employment support services or the criminal justice system could act as points to detect men who have caring responsibilities but do not have children living with them fulltime. The benefits of this would be twofold: the first is that increasing recording of men with caring responsibilities will increase knowledge of these fathers. Secondly, in light of the findings of this study of the mental health difficulties that can come with non-resident parenthood, service providers can be aware of any additional support needs.

With regard to specific suggestions to improve services fathers interact with, policies relating to child maintenance should consider the sharing of finances between households in more nuanced manners. The financial struggles faced by some fathers in this sample, including not being able to afford to sustain a household for themselves and their children support arguments made by Dermott (2016) that some non-resident fathers face significant financial hardship, and moving finances from one poor household to another is not a sustainable model for reducing economic hardship. Greater recognition needs to be shown to poverty and economic hardship that exists, pre and post-separation, for fathers when cohabiting relationships breakdown, and an awareness that fathers' socio-economic situation and the methods in which maintenance is calculated intersects with fathers' perceived abilities to care for their children. Whilst there has been a reorganisation of the child maintenance system in recent years, this appears to not recognise the nature of work and employment in the 21st century which increasingly involves self-employment and variable-hours

work. A child maintenance system that better supports its users, both those paying and receiving, is needed in order to reduce inter-parental conflict and individual parent stress levels.

In light of the overwhelming prominence fathers in the sample place on housing and the centrality of home, and overnight care in their fathering practices, reflection on policy toward housing is necessary in this policy implications section. Non-resident fathers cannot claim Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit for additional bedrooms for their children (Fatherhood Institute, 2013). However, as highlighted by fathers such as Daniel and Dominic, not being able to afford housing big enough to host their children overnight was felt to significantly reduce their father-child relationship and impact on their perceived abilities to care 'normally' for their children. Giving fathers who regularly care for children, or who wish to, the ability to claim housing benefit for an additional bedroom would enable care overnight, and stop fathers, or their children using living rooms as bedrooms during contact time. Improving financial support for fathers to be able to care for their children overnight could significantly improve father-child relationships according to findings in this thesis. Not being able to receive any financial support relating to children also seems at odds with increasing father involvement in family life, particularly when fathers are caring for children on a regular basis. When determining financial or other welfare support, there needs to be a movement away from the family household model toward recognising that many children can and do live in more than one home. There must also be recognition that many 'single adult' households in the UK consist of fathers who have caring responsibilities, and with these caring responsibilities come financial pressures.

The 'Think Fathers' campaign introduced in 2008 included plans to send children's school reports to fathers who live elsewhere. Findings from this thesis show how this specific intervention considered important to involving fathers in the lives of their children is still not being fulfilled over 10 years later. Whilst mixed opinions of schools were expressed in this study, it is possible to suggest that an awareness campaign is needed within schools to increase understanding of the prevalence of separated families, the difficulties that parents and children in these families can face, and the importance of information sharing with fathers. Increased involvement could be managed by ensuring that both parents' and any other regular carers' email and telephone numbers are known by the school. Due to changing care arrangements over time, and the commonality of moving house experienced by non-resident fathers in this study, these details should be sought at regular intervals to ensure fathers remain informed. Contacting fathers directly, whether they be resident or non-resident, would act to prioritise parental engagement, reduce the need for parental interaction where conflict can occur, and reduce the overreliance on mothers so prevalent in society.

9.5   Non-resident father research development

Through reflection on the findings of this study, and the methods used, there are multiple ways in which this specific research project could be improved, as well as a number of reflections to improve the study of non-resident parents in general. Whilst this study has demonstrated how there is significant diversity amongst non-resident fathers, on reflecting upon my sample, there are multiple ways to further improve understandings of diversity amongst non-resident fathers. Whilst the sample is somewhat diverse in terms of socio-economic background (occupation, income and educational background), there is less diversity of religion, sexuality, ethnic background, and only one participant was born outside of the UK. Further research on non-resident fathers could focus on fathers from specific ethnic minority backgrounds, or the experiences of multinational fathers. Another means of diversifying the sample could be to include more fathers who have resident as well as non-resident children. In this study, only two participants had children who were full-time resident with them. However, research by Poole et al. (2016) suggest that around a quarter of non-resident fathers in the UK have resident children as well. It is conceivable that the recruitment methods of this study meant that fathers who were cohabiting and/or had resident children did not feel they were suitable to take part. A study that specifically focusses on fathers with both resident and non-resident children could give insights into how fathers manage competing care interests. Another potential restriction of the recruitment material was that there were few fathers who had not been full-time resident with their children before becoming non-resident. All participants had been in a relationship with their children's mother, and there were only three incidences of fathers being non-resident from birth. As findings discussed above suggest, perceptions of 'good' or 'normal' fatherhood may have stemmed from fathers' practices when co-resident. As such, a study that explores fathers who are non-resident from birth could improve insight into how these fathers develop and understand fathering practices. Moreover, only two fathers in this study had step-children, meaning that there was little exploration of difference in fathering for biological or social children.

As highlighted in the literature review, it has been argued that the financial situations of non-resident fathers, particularly poverty and disadvantage has largely been neglected in studies of these parents. This thesis has demonstrated how low-income fathers struggle to provide housing for their children. As such further research into fathers experiencing poverty, precarious employment and precarious housing could greatly improve understandings of how poverty and low-income intersects with fathering when non-resident. While occupation and working status was recorded in this study, and some references were made to work, further research is required to understand how employment, particularly employment hours interact with fathers'

care. As highlighted in section 6.3.4, there appears to be an element of 'shift parenting' occurring between separated parents. A study of both mothers and fathers who are separated could further highlight how care for children is managed by working parents who do not live together. With regard to forming new romantic relationships, there appears to be significant similarity for both mothers and fathers after separation, as parents are negotiating sometimes conflicting identities of parent and partner. This resonance with lone parenting literature is not sufficiently researched or theorised in this thesis, and would make for interesting further research. Whilst it has been explored in this thesis, it was not the focus, and further in-depth research that focuses on fathers' decision-making practises regarding relationships is warranted.

Reflections on the past and considerations for the future that were present in many fathers' discussions demonstrate how time plays a significant role in fathering practices and social and family relationships. Eight months after our interview, I bumped into one of my participants, who told me that his daughter now lived with him full-time. He noted how this had been a significant development in both their lives as he had previously only seen her sporadically. This development in this father's life, and the extensive findings from other the longitudinal works, such as that by Neale et al. (2015), demonstrate how a longitudinal study of non-resident fathers could offer some very interesting insights. Another means of developing insight into non-resident fatherhood would be through a comparative research project. This could allow for better understanding of how cultural understandings of fatherhood, as well as social policies unique to the UK and the comparative countries have influenced non-resident fathers' construction and negotiation of fathering.

In this study, exploration of fathers' lived experiences included reflections on services and policies related to non-resident fathers. This raised many interesting insights, and further qualitative research that takes a more in-depth approach to exploring fathers' views of the state and services could lead to improvements in policy for fathers and their children. This could include research into how low-income fathers experience the family justice system when there is family conflict and could shed light on the impact of the removal of legal aid for separating parents. This could be extended to research with children and family services to understand how service providers construct ideas of family, and how they include non-resident fathers in their service. The findings in Chapter 8 that suggest that mothers and fathers are being treated significantly differently in services related to separated families, but also schools and welfare services necessitates further exploration. This could involve both mothers and fathers who are caring for children after separation, to develop a broader understanding of how separated families are positioned in services and by practitioners.

9.6 Concluding thoughts

Non-resident fatherhood is a prevalent feature of contemporary British society and policy relating to children and families must reflect this fact. However, despite sustained political nervousness around parental separation and the societal consequences of father absence there remains troublingly little evidence about the number or makeup of non-resident fathers, nor is there research that explores whether these fathers' attitudes toward fatherhood are as troubling as they are depicted to be. This thesis set out to develop a broader understanding of contemporary fatherhood and families in the UK by undertaking an in-depth qualitive study of non-resident fathers. Family practices was used as a conceptual framework in this work in order to explore family diversity, family fluidity and care that is done outside of normative models of 'the family', and to explore how fathers attach meaning to their parenting actions. Despite political rhetoric that associates parental separation and non-residency with low-income families, this thesis has demonstrated how non-residency should not be associated with specific social groups. Instead, to develop a better understanding of these men, non-resident fathers should be understood and supported within the context of their wider social identities and relationships.

Despite decades of increasing family diversity in the UK, the family household model continues to be the structure in which social policy, the legal system and social support services for the family are made. This system is seen in this thesis to place structural and financial barriers to non-resident fathers' involvement in children's lives, seemingly in contrast to policy desires for increasing father involvement and avoidance of 'absent' fathers post-separation. The findings presented in this thesis have demonstrated why there is a need to de-stabilise some of these out-dated and detrimental discourses and assumptions about families where parents do not cohabit. Non-resident fathers remain involved in their children's lives, often reporting stronger father-child relationships. Children appear to be central to fathers' decision making, and examples from this thesis show that fathers strive to remain committed to their children regardless of residency status. If we continue to consider family from a family household model perspective, then a significant number of families will be considered as problematic or 'complex' by virtue of having non-cohabiting parents. However, if better understanding and representation is given to the realities of contemporary families in the UK, and an approach is taken that champions parent-child relationships then the pervasive problem rhetoric associated with non-resident fathers and separated families more broadly will dissipate. A more holistic understanding of non-resident fathers that recognises their caring responsibilities and how they share many of the work-life balance challenges as other parents will allow for a more supportive environment in which for them to parent.

Chapter 10: Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant information

Table 10.1: A table showing the pseudonym, age and children's details of the 26 participants				
Pseudonym	**Age**	**No of children**	**Pseudonym and ages of children**	**Distance from children**
Aaron	32	3	Jade (9), Nathan (8), Jordan (6)	Same town/city
Adam	38	1	Chelsea (14)	50 – 100 miles
Brian	38	1	Joe (8)	Same town/city
Calum	49	1	Imogen (4)	Less than 50 miles away
Connor	51	3	Katie (32)	Same town/city
			Ellie (17)	Less than 50 miles away
			Amy (3)*	Same town/city
Daniel	40	1	Bethany (9)	Same town/city
Dominic	39	3	Laura (15)*, Jamie (10)*	Abroad
			Natalie (5 months)	Abroad
Elliot	36	1	Olivia (12)	Less than 50 miles away
Euan	46	2	Tom (9), George (5)	Same town/city
Francis	44	2	Owen (16), Louis (13)	Same town/city
Fraser	38	1	Jake (10)	Same town/city
Graham	38	1	Mia (10)	Same town/city
Harry	53	1	Alice (9)	Same town/city
Ivan	46	3	Abbie (11)	100 - 200 miles away
			Nicole (7), Edward (4)	Full-time resident
Joshua	44	1	Charlie (14)	Same town/city
Kieran	40	1	Max (8)	50 – 100 miles
Leo	49	2	Alexander (15), Niamh (13)	100 – 200 miles away
Martin	28	1	Naomi (7)	Same town/city
Nick	26	1	Phoebe (3)	Same town/city
Oliver	31	1	Holly (4)	Less than 50 miles away

Paul	60	4	Anna (21), Patrick (19), Philip (15) Molly (13)	Same town/city
Robert	39	3	Amber (18) (step child), Bradley (11), Dylan (9)	Same town/city
Simon	27	2	Grace (3), Gemma (2)	Same town/city
Tim	38	3	Sarah (12)	100-200 miles away
			Luke (9)*	Less than 50 miles away
			Zoe (11) (step-child)	Full-time resident
Vince	46	1	Ella (14)	Less than 50 miles away
William	36	2	Ryan (14), James (14)	Same town/city
N.B. Separate rows for the same father signifies a different biological mother between children. As per discussion in section 5.2., * denotes the child that father discussed in interview.				

Appendix 2: Example of a recruitment poster

Are you a father?

Do you have children who don't live with you full-time?

Want to talk about your experiences of being a dad?

I am a PhD researcher at the University of Sheffield interested in recruiting fathers to take part in a research project. This project aims to find out about people's views and experiences of being a dad when their children (aged under 18) live in a different household for some or all the time. These dads are sometimes called 'non-resident' fathers.

I am interested in talking to all kinds of non-resident fathers, including those who have some children who they live with full-time (including step-children), those that live far away from their children and fathers who have shared care of their children.

Taking part would involve meeting the researcher in [research city] and would be strictly confidential. Interested in taking part or want to learn more about the project? Please contact Winona at [email] or leave a message at [number].

Appendix 3: Participant consent form

Life as a Father with Non-Resident Children
Participant Consent form

Researcher name: Winona Shaw
Contact: [email]

Please read each part clearly and initial the box if you consent:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated   [   ]
   __/__/__ explaining the above research project and that I have had the
   opportunity to ask questions about the project
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to   [   ]
   withdraw at any time (including after participation) without giving any
   reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition,
   should I not wish to answer any question, I am free to decline.
3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I   [   ]
   understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials
   and I will not be identified or identifiable in any reports that result from
   the research
4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research by   [   ]
   Winona
5. It has been explained to me that the organisation that funds this   [   ]
   research (ESRC) ask for anonymised copies of the interview transcripts
   to be saved onto a digital archive run by the Economic and Social Data
   Service (ESDS) which can be accessed by other researchers
6. I agree to Winona saving an anonymised version of my interview   [   ]
   transcript in this digital archive
7. I agree to take part in the above research project   [   ]

_____   __/__/__   _____

Name of participant   Date   Signature

_____   __/__/__   _____

Name of researcher   Date   Signature
to be signed and dated in the presence of the participant

Copies:
Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant should receive a copy of the signed
and dated consent form and the information sheet, which includes the researcher's contact
details. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will also be kept by the researcher in a
secure location.

Participant identification number:

Appendix 4: Participant Background Form

This form is designed to give the researcher an idea of some characteristics of you and your family, including information about your age, ethnicity and employment status, as well as about your family members including non-resident children and your household. You are asked to fill it out at the end of your meeting with the researcher who will aid you if necessary.

What is your current relationships status?
- single
- in a relationship, not living together
- in a relationship, living together (married)
- in a relationship, living together (Cohabiting)
- other _____

Do you have any resident children? If so, what are their ages and are they step-children?

Age: ___   Step-child: Yes/No

Age: ___   Step-child: Yes/No

Age: ___   Step-child: Yes/No

Age: ___   Step-child: Yes/No

Are there any other people that live in your house? _____

How old are your non-resident children and where do they live when they are not with you? (same town or city/less than 100 miles away/more than 100 miles/ abroad):

Age: ___   _____

Age: ___   _____

Age: ___   _____

Age: ___   _____

In terms of employment, are you currently:
- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Self-employed
- Not in paid employment
- More than one form of employment _____

If you are in employment, what is your current job(s): _____

What is your age: ___

How would you define your ethnicity?

White
- British
- Irish
- Traveller/Gypsy
- Any other white background _____

Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Background
- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other multiple ethnic background _____

Asian and Asian British
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background _____

Black/African/Caribbean/Black British
- African
- Caribbean
- Any other Black, African or Caribbean background _____

Other ethnic group
- Arab
- Any other ethnic background _____

How would you define your nationality? _____
Are you religious? If so, what is your religion: _____
What is the first part of your postcode? _____
In terms of the house you currently live in, do you:
- Own it outright
- Buying it with the help of a mortgage or loan
- Pay part rent and part mortgage (shared ownership)
- Rent it (Private)
- Rent it (Local authority/housing association)
- Live rent-free (incl. rent-free in relative's/friend's property excluding squatting)
    - With whom? _____
- Other _____

What is your highest educational qualification:
- Degree level qualification
- A-level/AS-level/International Baccalaureate/Vocational equivalent
- O-levels or GCSE/Vocational equivalent
- Other work-related or professional qualification
- Don't know

Over the last year, what was your income on a weekly, monthly or annual basis (just pick one)?

WEEKLY	MONTHLY	ANNUAL
Less than £190	Less than £820	Less than £9,850
£190 to under £250	£820 to under £1,100	£9,850 to under £13,190
£250 to under £310	£1,100 to under £1,360	£13,190 to under £16,320
£310 to under £380	£1,360 to under £1,640	£16,320 to under £19,650
£380 to under £450	£1,640 to under £1,960	£19,660 to under £23,520
£450 to under £540	£1,960 to under £2,330	£23,520 to under £28,000
£540 to under £650	£2,330 to under £2,820	£28,000 to under £33,790
£650 to under £790	£2,810 to under £3,450	£33,790 to under £41,350
£790 to under £1,050	£3,450 to under £4,580	£41,350 to under £54,910
£1,050 or more	£4,580 or more	£54,910 or more

Thinking back over the past 5 years, how does your current income compare to previous years?
- A lot more
- A little more
- About the same
- A little less
- A lot less
- Not sure/not applicable

Appendix 5: Interview schedule

Introductory questions: Questions to get an idea of the father, his current situation and information about his children and other family members

☐ Can you tell me a bit about yourself, who you are and where you are from?
  ○ Work? Working hours?
☐ Who do you live with now?
☐ Can you tell me about your child(ren)?
  ○ How old are they? Where do they live?

Becoming a non-resident father

☐ Can you tell me how you came to live in a different house to your children? What is your story?
☐ What do you think is similar in your experiences compared to others? What is unique do you think?
☐ How do you find it being a father now? How does it compare to before?
☐ What are the pros and cons of your situation as a father?

Contact and time spent with children

☐ How often are you in contact with your children? When and where? Do you contact them by phone between seeing them?
  ○ Has it always been like this?
  ○ What would you like to change?
  ○ What do you envisage for the future?
☐ How do you arrange the time you spend with children?
☐ What do you think your children would want in terms of where they spend their time?
☐ Special occasions: Christmas, birthdays.

Life as a non-resident father: Exploring the everydayness of fatherhood and interactions with others in relation to fathering

☐ How would you describe your relationship with your children?
  ○ How has this changed over time?
☐ What things impact this relationship? (e.g. mum, family, work)
  ○ How is your relationship with your children's mother(s)? And other people in her household? Grandparents?
  ○ What about your children's relationship with your current partner/additional children?
☐ What is the most important thing/best thing about being a parent?
☐ How do you think your children feel about their family? Do you think they would say the same things as you? Do they talk to you about it?
☐ How involved are you with school and your children hobbies etc.?
☐ Do you pay financial support? How do you feel about that? How do you arrange this?
☐ Support: Friends, family, services, solicitors?
☐ What would you like to change about your family? What's the ideal?

Non-resident fathers and society

☐ How do you think non-resident fathers are perceived in society? By the media? By politicians? Is this right?
☐ What about the term non-resident father, do you think it is good/bad term?
☐ How you find balancing work + parenting? Is your employer helpful?
☐ What challenges have you faced? What would help you as a non-resident father? What could the government do?

Concluding questions: Do you have any questions for me?

Fill in the survey together – explain purpose if not already done so. Make sure they take away their information sheet + signed copy of consent form!

Chapter 11: Reference list

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