

*The Experience of Fatherhood for  
Separated Non-Resident Irish Fathers*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using qualitative descriptive analysis this study sought to understand how separated non-resident fathers experience changes in the role of fatherhood after separation. The fathers of this study portrayed fatherhood as multi-dimensional with a particular emphasis on developing a social and emotional relationship with their children. The major issue for the fathers after separation was their loss of influence in their children's lives which was related to their limited contact with their children. The key determining factor in how the fathers experienced the changes in fatherhood after separation was the adversarial relationship with their ex-wife, in which fathers positioned themselves with a sense of perceived disadvantage in relationship to their wife as they endeavoured to remain involved in their children's lives.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Experience of Fatherhood for Separated Non-Resident Irish Fathers* is a qualitative data-led contextual and explanatory piece of research. This study shall describe participant separated non-resident fathers' subjective interpretations of their father involvement, what they actually did with their children in the married family household, and the changes that may have occurred in these roles as a result of becoming a non-resident father through separation. *The Experience of Fatherhood for Separated Non-Resident Irish Fathers* shall also examine what lies behind, or underpins the decisions, attitudes and behaviours of how the participant separated non-resident fathers' experience any changes in their father involvement after separation and becoming non-resident.

### **Marital Breakdown in Ireland**

The dominant form of family unit in Ireland is still the traditional unit - that of husband and wife with children (CSO 2006). However, family life in Ireland, in recent decades, has diversified in a number of respects. The variety of family types is growing and the nature of family life itself is changing. The union of marriage is no longer viewed as permanent, but rather as contingent and the possibility of breakdown accepted.

Though the rate of marital breakdown in Ireland compared to other developed countries is low, certain forms of instability in marriage have become

steadily more common since the 1980s and the incidence of divorce in particular grew when divorce legislation came into effect in 1997, though the rate of increase has leveled off over recent years (Fahey and Field, 2008:20). In Ireland the divorce rate is an imperfect measure of marital breakdown. This is so partly because many Irish couples whose marriages break down do not get divorced but simply remain separated, and partly because there is a minimum of four years of separation required to obtain a divorce. Thus, for the purposes of this study the term separation shall be used to describe the status of both separation and divorce. Between 1986 and 2006, the total number of people in Ireland whose marriages had broken down increased fivefold, from 40,000 in 1986 to just under 200,000 in 2006 (*ibid.*, 22).

Separation is an emotional and stressful event the lives of the husband, wife and children. Such events create fundamental changes in the organisation of families. In Ireland, predominantly, the mother is seen as the children's main carer and they reside with her (Nestor, 2007). Their father then becomes what is known as a non-resident father; with access to his children agreed with his former spouse or determined by the family law court. A literature review of the subject would suggest that this arrangement is a common pattern in Western societies. The 2006 census figures for Ireland state that there are just over 45,000 separated (including divorced) mothers with children in the state (CSO 2006). There is no figure given for the number of non-resident fathers, but it is reasonable to suggest that there are a similar number of separated non-resident fathers in the state.

In general, fathers who have been married and who co-parented in the early years of rearing their children are more likely than never-married fathers to commit to maintaining an active role in their children's lives over time (Corcoran, 2005). This research recognises that there are other routes into becoming a non-resident father - for example unmarried fathers - and acknowledges the importance of their experiences to discussions of non-resident fatherhood. However, since the focus of this study is on the changes to father involvement after separation, it is for the above reason together with the fact that under Irish law the right to guardianship and custody of children is conferred jointly on married parents that the focus of this study shall be on separated non-resident fathers.

### **Perspectives on Fatherhood Roles**

To fully understand the experiences of separated non-resident fathers, it is important to place their experiences within the larger social context. It is the social setting that, to a large extent, structures the family roles of men and women in particular ways and patterns the personal and social meaning attached to those roles. Fathering has always encompassed multiple roles and expectations, as men engage in the work of raising children. However, each historical period also has a dominant fatherhood model that portrays an ideal vision of fatherhood, a model that is rooted in a particular economic, social, cultural, and political context (Pleck, 1987: *as in* Ciabattari, 2007). Although, it must be noted that the dominant image in any period, coexisted alongside

concerns about other important conceptions of fatherhood (Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000)

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, fathers were the moral overseers of their children. They were ultimately responsible for teaching their children religious values and a strong work ethic, and they held patriarchal authority over their households (Pleck, 1987: *as in* Ciabattari, 2007). Industrialisation and the capitalist mode of production brought about a distinction between the domestic and work realms. This process resulted in the crystallization of ‘male spheres’ and ‘female spheres’. In practical terms, this specialisation of roles within the family involved the husband adopting the ‘instrumental role’ as breadwinner, and the wife assuming the ‘affective’, emotional role in domestic settings (Giddens, 2008:240). In the mid-twentieth century the differentiation of gender roles found expression in Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism which saw social practices and customs evolve because they benefit social cohesion. Parson’s argued that bringing up children required attuned and dedicated specialists and this role fell to women. The logic of the argument is that men are not biologically as attuned to being committed fathers as women are to being committed mothers (Collier & Sheldon, 2008:90). Despite the fact that functionalism has been out of favour in sociological scholarship for some decades, the construction of the fatherhood role in the family as instrumental or breadwinning was predominant in the twentieth century; and the image still retains popular expression.(Catlett & McKenry, 2004; Cabrera *et al.*, 2000).

Ireland has been categorised as a strong male breadwinner-type state (Kennedy, 1999) and 'disturbingly gendered' (Lentin, 1998: *as in* Tovey and Share, 2003:240). Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 of the 1937 Constitution place wives and women within the family and the home. This positioning of women is still recognised within the official definition of the family in Ireland for legal purposes (Daly, 2004:23). The Constitution reflected the dominant Catholic social teaching of the period. Within such a model women are perceived primarily as potential mothers. This ideology was reflected in social and economic policies. Some of these have been explicit, for example employment legislation. After Independence, legislation was introduced which actively discouraged women's participation in the public service upon marriage, referred to as the 'marriage bar'. This was adopted by private employers and was not abolished until 1973. Other policies were more subtle, for example legislation relating to the availability of contraception (Kennedy, 1999). Such State enacted legislation legitimates a particular version of the family in which the father is perceived as the breadwinner.

Within Irish society the unequal domestic power relations and the lack of support for women in public sphere - such as the comparative lack of maternity entitlements; poor child care provision; high involvement in part time work - can be traced back to the fact that it is built on a strong male breadwinner model (Tovey & Share, 2003:245). This ideology also accounts for a preference for the mother as the primary carer of the children upon separation. Indeed, the traditional principle of the courts, viewed that young children were

better cared for by their mothers, not as a rule of law, but rather as a matter of 'common sense and human experience' (Nestor, 2007).

Changes in family life, gender relations and childhood have meant that men are now expected to be more actively involved as fathers and partners than was the case 30 or even 20 years ago. Gender roles are no longer fixed in the traditional mode where men were the breadwinners, and respectable masculinity was defined in terms of the 'good provider' role. Women's identities were cast solely in terms of caring and meeting the physical and emotional needs of families (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). A 'new father' ideal has emerged in response to women's increased labour force participation, the absence of many men from their families and the increased involvement of other fathers in children's lives (Cabrera *et al.*, 2000). In this model, men's and women's separate spheres erode and men are expected to assume more of the parenting and domestic duties in families (Coltrane, 1996: *as in* Catlett & McKenry, 2004). The father provider model has remained a dominant cultural ideology, but increasingly the norm is that of father as co-parent. It is against this background that it can be argued that the family is becoming more democratic in form, as roles and relationships have become negotiated. However, Lewis and O'Brien question the assumption that men are now more involved in family life, pointing out the difficulties in measuring couples' division of labour in childcare and housework that is a key element of the acclaimed new fatherhood (Lewis & O'Brien, 1987 *as cited in* Hayword & Mac an Ghiall, 2003:53)

In the past breadwinning and economic support of children were intertwined in men's identities. This has led some scholars to suggest that the decline in the provider role has prompted confusion and tension in men's sense of self (Gerson, 1993: *as in* Catlett & McKenry, 2004). However, discourses of fatherhood that portray provision and nurturance as competing concerns neglect the complexities in how men define fatherhood for themselves. Ciabattari's (2007) quantitative study into how new unmarried fathers in the U.S. define the fatherhood role found that fathers endorse a multifaceted view of fatherhood that encompasses provision, direct care, protection, discipline, teaching, and love. Yet, few men identify the most tangible parenting activities— economic provision and direct care—as most important. Rather, men endorse the more general “providing love and affection” as most important (Ciabattari, 2007). While earning money is a significant activity and work is important for their sense of self-identity, paid work was not viewed as central to their role as fathers. Dermott's (2003) study of British fathers who combine paid employment and family life acknowledges the “recession of traditional fatherhood centred on breadwinning” and found that ideas of emotional openness, communication and a close relationship to children are essential components of involved fathering. However the study does point out that this version of modern fatherhood does not necessarily translate into increased “investment in caring labour”.

In fact there is little empirical evidence of men's participation in domestic responsibilities and childcare matching up to the projected notion of active fathers (Hayward and Mac an Ghail, 2003:52). However the purpose of

this study is not to examine whether the ‘new father’ image exists in reality, but rather, to articulate the specific dimensions of father involvement of participant separated non-resident fathers, taking into account the shifting patterns of gender relations and Ireland’s embedded social structures and cultural practices.

In their paper ‘Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century’ authors Cabrera *et al* (2000) identify three specific dimensions of father involvement: accessibility, a father’s presence and availability to the child; engagement, a father’s experience of direct contact, caregiving, and shared interactions with his child; and responsibility, a father’s participation in such tasks as making doctor’s appointments, selecting childcare and afterschool care settings, talking with teachers, and monitoring children’s whereabouts and activities (Cabrera *et al.*, 2000). *The Experience of Fatherhood for Separated Non-Resident Irish Fathers* shall describe participant separated non-resident fathers’ involvement with regard to these dimensions, and what changes, if any, have occurred in these respects as a result of being separated and non-resident. The other component of this study is to understand how the participant separated non-resident fathers experience any changes that may have occurred in the role of fatherhood after separation.

### **Separated Non-Residential Fathers**

The impact of marital breakdown and issues arising out of becoming non-resident has a far reaching impact on the role of fatherhood. Understanding more about fathers’ subjective experience of their involvement with their

children after separation is important when one considers some of the reported effects of father involvement post separation for all family members. For example, when children do not live with their fathers for a substantial amount of time after separation, their relationship with their fathers suffered (Fabricus, 2003: *as in* Hallman *et al.*, 2007); and that frequent, meaningful contact with their non-residential fathers benefits, both father's and children's well being (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1996: *as in* Catlett & McKenry, 2004). Many factors appear to influence the degree men are involved as fathers after separation including custody arrangements, men's economic status, mothers' interference with visitations, the establishment of a co-parenting relationship between ex-spouses, and social ambiguity regarding the parental roles of separated fathers (Hallman *et al.*, 2007).

Life after separation involves a process of constant adjustment. Men may experience the loss of their home, the loss of their major source of social support, and perhaps most important, the loss of regular contact with their children (Braver, 1998: *as in* Catlett & McKenry, 2004). The loss of day-to-day time with their children results in missing aspects of their children's development, as well as, opportunities to have an influence in their children's lives. Hallman *et al.* (2007) research into significance of parental time to fathers' experiences of parenting after separation reports the participants' experience of securing and protecting their rights to time and how they coped and adapted to the change in the quantity and quality of contact time with their children after separation. The study concluded that there was an "overall tension experienced when desires for time with their children conflict with the time

available to fathers”, viewing time as more valuable, precious or limited after separation and “cherishing” the time they spend with their children after separation. In addition, the parental identities of the men were directly influenced by the time they have with their children; as this time is an opportunity for these men to have an influence in their children’s life and therefore act out the role of a father (Hallman *et al.*, 2007).

Separated non-resident fathers have expressed an acute sense of powerlessness in several areas: with respect to their status as non-resident fathers, the imposition of child support, the mothers of their children, the family courts, and lawyers and helping professionals (Erera & Baum, 2009). They are often characterised as angry and frustrated, believing that the legal system is discriminatory in the way it treats fathers in separation (Erera & Baum, 2009; Corcoran, 2005; Catlett & McKenry, 2004; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). Catlett and McKenry (2004) argue that the recently divorced American fathers of their study perceived loss of power is related to the reorganisation and of financial and parenting roles following divorce. From a gendered-focus viewpoint, men occupy positions of relative privilege when married, and divorce calls this status into question. These fathers no longer perceived that they had control of, their children’s daily lives; access to their children; and the financial support to their children (Catlett & McKenry, 2004)

Furthermore, non residential fathers have often stated in studies that they must overcome negative stereotypes that depict separated fathers as lacking time with their children or only spending fun time with them (Hallman *et al.*,

2007). In Ireland fathers are sometimes depicted as ‘uninterested, uninvolved and unable to parent’ (Ferguson & Hogan 2004). In Corcoran’s (2005) exploration with non-resident fathers into the key issues affecting the development and maintenance of a fathering role after a relationship had ended, many Irish men expressed the view that they had been re-labelled: from a co-parent, involved with their children to a detached visitor in their child’s life to the more negative ‘deadbeat dad’, ‘feckless father’. These stereotypes they believed were strongly dependent on the structural constraints imposed by a system that, they argued, acknowledges and promotes the rights of the mother over the father. Nevertheless, the fathers in this study all shared a commitment to their children and to embodying a fathering role, even in the face of institutional, social and economic barriers (Corcoran 2005).

### **Aims of the Study**

Contemporary fatherhood has come to incorporate care and nurturing in addition to economic provision. No ideal fatherhood role can claim universal acceptance or empirical support. Rather, fathers' expectations about what they should do, what they actually do, and their effects on children must be viewed within the contexts of family relations and as well as wider societal relations. Separated non-resident fathers must negotiate their fatherhood roles with regard to cultural expectation of fatherhood and the social ambiguity regarding the parental roles of separated fathers. International studies have shown that separated non-resident fathers experience a perceived loss of influence and power as a result of the changes in their involvement with their children after

separation and becoming non-resident. Yet these studies in the main have not significantly focused on the specific dimensions of father involvement in terms of availability, engagement, and responsibility before separation. By exploring the specific dimensions of father involvement when part of the married family unit and the changes that occur to these dimensions after separation the study intends to illuminate further the experiences of separated non-resident fathers.

In Ireland it has been shown that parenting is associated more with mothering than with fathering. Moreover, policy and practice agendas regarding family in Ireland tend to have a mother and child focus which it has been recognised more likely to inhibit than encourage an active parenting role by fathers who find themselves on the margins of their families (Fahey & Field, 2008:47). At the same time there has been little empirical research done on fathers in Ireland (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). This study seeks to contribute to this field by focusing on separated non-residential fathers by articulating their father involvement. One study of note is Corcoran's (2005) which focuses on the extent that non-resident fathers, unmarried and separated, in Ireland identify with a fathering role and the impact of non-residency on developing and maintaining that role, identifying a range of institutional, economic and social barriers as affecting their capacity to adopt a positive fathering role. The present study differs in that it looks at the specific dimensions of the fathering role and the changes, if any, that have occurred in the fathering role after separation and how these changes are experienced, with respect to the deeply embedded social structures and cultural practices present in Ireland. This study aims to capture

and convey as full a picture as possible of the nature of the multifaceted reality of participant separated non-resident fathers.

The core research question explored in this study will be:

**How do separated non-resident Irish fathers experience changes in the role of fatherhood after separation?**

## METHODOLOGY

*The Experience of Fatherhood for Separated Non-Resident Irish Fathers* is a qualitative descriptive analysis, data-led piece of research. Qualitative descriptive studies have as their goal a comprehensive summary of the phenomena under study (Sandelowski, 2000). Taking the stance that an external reality exists independent of our beliefs or understandings and that that reality is only accessible to through subjective interpretations of the relevant research areas, the function of the research is contextual and explanatory (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:19). The research adopts a descriptive approach to report the dimensions of fatherhood involvement and any changes that may have occurred to these dimensions, and how they experienced these changes that the participant separated non-resident fathers interpret to be salient.

### **Participants**

This research was based on the freely given informed consent of separated non-resident Irish fathers. Participants were drawn from a number of sources. An advertisement was placed in a number of national papers requesting participants for the study. A request for participants was also forwarded to a number of father activist groups, support and counselling services, and family resource centres. A totally of 16 separated non-resident fathers responded to these requests. These received an information document briefly explaining what the study was about; what was required of them as participants; and the obligations and aims of the research. An initial questionnaire collected relevant

background information on the participant. From this group six participants that captured the diversity of situations of this group of separated non-resident fathers were purposely chosen for the interview sample that provided the raw data for this research.

Three of the participants were from Dublin and the other three participants were from different counties in Leinster. The participant's ages were well distributed from early thirties to early sixties. Two of the participants were employed, three were unemployed (but two only recently due to the economic recession in Ireland), and one was unable to work due to long term illness. The highest education level any of the participants had achieved was the Leaving Certificate. The number of children the participants have that are no longer residing with full time ranged from one to three – two fathers had more children from a relationship formed after marital breakdown. Their children's current ages ranged from 9 years to 39 years. While the children's ages at time of separation ranged from 3 years to 12 years. The length of time that the father's had been separated ranged from two years to thirty years.

All the father's had maintained a relationship with their children. The amount of time spent with their children in a typical month varied from eight overnight stays and 12 days to no overnight stays and eight days. Four of the fathers arrived at the current arrangements through court imposition, one father through a mutual arrangement with ex-wife, and the other had no regular arrangements. Three of the father's were not members of any father's organisation or support group. Two of the father's were no longer a member's

of a father's organisation but had previously been. One father was actively involved in a father's right's organisation.

### **Procedure**

The primary source of data for this study was face to face in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in March 2010 by one male interviewer and lasted from thirty-five minutes to one hour and forty minutes. The interviews can be considered as semi-structured because they were guided by a set of topics to be addressed. Questions generally were open-ended with follow-up probes designed to direct participant's attention to the major areas of interest (Patton, 2002:343). Corresponding to the research question, the interviews were designed to generate a description of separated non-resident father's involvement with their children in terms what they actually did with their children and for them within the married family unit and what they actually do with their children and for them during the access time they have with their children after separation. The interviews were also designed to generate a focused exploration on subjective explanation of their roles and the changes that may have occurred after separation.

### **Data Analysis**

The first two interviews were tape recorded using a Sanyo Talk-Book Dictaphone and the other four interviews were digitally recorded using the voice recording application on a Nokia 5800 handset. The interviews were later

transcribed verbatim. In the transcripts participant's names and those of their children and ex-wives have not been used. A qualitative content analysis process was applied to the research data, orientated toward summarizing the informational contents of the data. Specifically, the interview narratives were analysed using Nvivo8 program for analysis of qualitative data. Each transcript was examined for salient topics covered as well as for regularities and patterns both within and across cases. To represent these topics initial broad coding categories of fatherhood roles, changes in fatherhood roles after separation and non-residency, and experiences of separation and non-residency were then developed. Next the transcripts were coded into more specific themes of the various dimensions of fatherhood involvement and various, the major changes occurring to those dimensions after separation and non-residency, and the most commonly expressed feelings and interpretations of the experience of these changes. These themes were further categorised into sub-themes which are outlined in the results section below and form the basis of the discussion of this study.

## RESULTS

### Fatherhood Roles

The fathers in this study were asked to characterise their understanding of fatherhood and to recollect their relationships with their children before separation. The father's were also asked to specify what they actually did with their children in the time they were available to them. The following are the themes and sub-themes that resulted from the content analysis of participant's responses.

#### *Being involved and doing their best*

All the participating fathers of this study readily identified with being a father and recognised the responsibility bestowed on them as fathers, particularly those that after separation had access to their children through court imposed arrangements. Being a father is very important to the to the participants sense of identity. For example, a father of one states:

“I couldn't imagine not being a father now, you know. It is who I am”

Most of the fathers expressed variations of being proud to be the father of their children and one father stated that he “always wanted to be a father”. All the fathers described becoming a father as a brilliant and wonderful experience. When asked about their relationship with their children before separation most of the fathers described their relationship as strong and positive; claiming to be expressive fathers easily telling their children how they felt and

showing affection in by way of giving “hugs and kisses”. The exception was the oldest father, in his early sixties, who described his relationship with his children as “normal, nothing extraordinary” and who wasn’t “overly expressive”.

The most frequently expressed idea of what fatherhood meant was the general and brief terms of being responsible for their children, being involved in their children’s life, and striving to do the best they could for them, typified by such statements as:

“I loved them and you know they were my children. And you know I was, I was a father that done the best I could for them and I wanted to be involved in their lives”

When probed further to elicit what kind of roles being involved and doing their best actually entailed the following themes were discussed.

### *Childcare*

Most of the father’s of this study claimed to have carried out direct childcare and talked about changing nappies and feeding their children when they were infants. However, as the children got older the levels of involvement in direct childcare, such as making dinners, feeding them, and washing and preparing their clothes, varies considerably for different reasons. The oldest participant, early sixties, besides making the “odd dinner” carried out very little direct childcare. He was of the opinion that he hadn’t got the “same skills that a woman would have” and that the mother was the “natural primary carer”. For other participants work was a mitigating factor in the level of direct childcare they were involved in. In two cases there was the traditional gender division of

roles where the man went to work and the woman stayed at home, responsible for most of the direct childcare and other domestic chores.

Two fathers of this study described their involvement in childcare within the married family unit as being equal to that of their ex-wives. In fact a father of one in his early thirties proclaimed proudly that he was “quite good at it”. Within these family units both parents were working. At the birth of their children both mothers took maternity leave of three months and then returned to work. Thereafter, both fathers tell how they and their ex-wives “juggled” their work lives and the looking after the children between them, so that their children were with one of them as much as possible. When this was not possible the children were with a child minder, a professional in one case and the father’s mother in the other.

“The kids went to a minder when there were three months old. When that happen [wife’s name] went back to work. I had been working away but she was on maternity leave and after three months the kids went to the minder. After that the household duties were split between us, you know, put on a wash, take out a wash, you know, making the dinners as the kids got older and that. That was basically it. We had a childminder that was an extra pair of hands...But we did, we shared the household work, the looking after them...We both did our share with them. It wasn’t, because she was working, it wasn’t always left up to her, you know.”

### *Providing Income*

The issue of having to work to provide financial support for their children was referenced frequently in the interviews with participants. Where the father’s wage was the only income coming into the family unit, these fathers seen it as their role to support their family.

“You know, the father’s role is to go out and earn the money and that. That’s what we’re led to believe like...The man earned the money and he handed over all the wages. The food was got and the bills were paid.”

The role of financial supporting their children also was reference strongly by fathers from the two-income married households. Though both wages were contributing to the family budget, these fathers talked about the expectation that was on them to provide for the extra expenses that arose.

“Within the family then for some reason and I’m not saying that [ex-wife’s name] didn’t pay her way, but anything that [daughter’s name] ever needed I was told to get it, you know what I mean. If [daughter’s name] needed a new pair of runners, I’d have to go down on a Saturday and get the runners. Financially it was my role to support [daughters name]... I felt that I was paying for nearly everything there for [daughter’s name], Christmas presents, birthday presents, you know, anytime she had to go to a friend’s party.”

Another father from a two income household states

“Needless to say, I had to buy them phones and pay for their credit on their phone.”

### *Daddy’s Time*

The term ‘Daddy’s time’ is a term this research has attributed to the types of activities the father’s of this research did with their children to develop their social relations with them. When asked to describe what they typically did with their children in the time they spent with them in the married household, it was these activities that were detailed first and only after probing did the father’s discuss time devoted to direct childcare. The primary association of these activities with the time they spent with their children indicates that

developing a social relationship through these activities was an important dimension of being involved in their children's lives.

Many of the fathers relayed how they would watch cartoons together, play with them, read stories, or bring them for walks. As one father put it

“I'd always try to have a laugh and a joke with them”

One of the fathers explicitly states that he saw this dimension as his role:

“Well she was, my role would have been to do things with [name of daughter], bring her to where she wanted to go, if she was playing, like birthday parties, err, hurling and stuff like that, I would have been bringing her because I would have been there at the weekend or after work or whatever you know. [Name of ex-wife] would have worked different, but she would sort of leave it to me to do all that. I enjoyed bringing her to all those things anyway.”

Taking an interest in their children's sporting activities or other hobby is referenced by most of the father's in this study as well. The father's agreed that in the main that they were the primary facilitator's of their children's leisure pursuits.

### *Guidance and Support*

Many of the fathers of this study talked about giving guidance to their children and being a 'role model' to them. The fathers discussed that they would let their children know that they could talk to them about any issues they would have and said they would try to give their children advice.

“You would have to show them example, try and put them wise to the world.”

The task of disciplining and setting boundaries for their children was generally shared among fathers and mothers. Though some of the fathers expressed how their children saw them as having more authority, and when the

children overstepped their mark these fathers were called upon to provide discipline.

“I definitely know she looks to me, she asks me the questions things that are right and things that are wrong you know what I mean like. I’d have to give the discipline to her, tell her not to do this or that.”

However these fathers made clear that they were not physical in their discipline. The discipline generally involved “chastising” and being firm when their children were “throwing tantrums”. Two of the fathers of the study said that their ex-wife would have taking on the role of disciplinarian more than they would have. In one case leading to the situation where

“Probably I was the good guy and she was the bad guy.”

Taking an interest in how their children were getting on in school was also mentioned as quite important to many of the fathers. This included bringing and collecting them from school, asking how they were getting on in school, helping with their homework and attending parent teacher meetings. However for most of the fathers this interest in their schooling was equally shared with their ex-wives, and in two cases the ex-wives would have been more involved in these types of activities.

### *Changing Expectations of Fatherhood*

A number of the fathers spoke of their awareness of a change in expectation of the role a father should play in the family home. One father, early thirties, described himself as a “hands-on active father”, contrasting his approach to fathering to that of the distant instrumental father of past

generations. Another father, early forties, contrasts his style with that of his father:

“Times were starting to change when [first daughter’s name] was born. I always wanted to be the opposite to my own father. I didn’t want to be domineering and shouting, and all that carry on. I tried to be a friend, like my father would have been very authoritative...he would never had told me he loved me and I would have never told my father I loved him”

The dimensions of father involvement described above outlined the various roles and the extent that they carried them out within the married family household. When asked how these particular roles emerged, all fathers stated that they fell into the pattern. A father in his early fifties whose ex-wife also worked full time explains:

“Yeah it was never a conscious decision we’d do this and do that, yeah we just fell into it, it just what suited us at the time, you know. For convenience sake, we just kind of took up these particular roles. It wasn’t the case that we sat down and decided it.”

### **Fatherhood Roles after Separation**

It comes as no surprise that the event of separation was described as a stressful and difficult time by the fathers of this study. All of the fathers left the family home and talk about the difficulties in “starting all over again” as one father put it. The family and friends of the fathers provided much needed support to these fathers in the immediate aftermath of separation and many expressed a debt of gratitude towards them for their help. However, the scope of this study did not allow a full examination of these issues and focused on the

involvement the fathers had with their children after separation and how they spent their time together. From the fathers' discussions of these topics the following themes emerged.

### *Change in Contact Time with Children*

The fathers accepted as an inevitable consequence of separation that their time with their children was going to lessen. As being involved in their children's life was important to these fathers, it is no surprise that all the fathers were determined to maintain contact with their children and continue and develop their relationship with them. For example:

“I think they can talk to me. They can, I call them every night, keep the contact up. I would never let that slip because they are mine and nobody else's. And I want to keep that.”

However many of the fathers expressed their unhappiness at the limited time they had with their children. Four of the fathers had access arrangements through court imposition, while another had arrangements agreed mutually with his ex-wife. All these fathers talked frequently about being constantly aware that they had only a limited amount of time together at each access. They complained about being restricted to having to have them back by a certain time. A father of a 9 year old girl and who has been separated for just over two years explains:

“We have a great time together, but you know, if your there, because it is a court imposed arrangement she has to be back at a certain stage, if anything is going on and its not over till seven o'clock, I'd have to explain to [daughter's name] that she cant go, even though she might want to go. Because there is no leeway at all.”

Although fathers that have been separated for a longer period comment that after an initial rigidity in the visitation rights, the arrangements become a bit more flexible.

A major issue for all the fathers, except the father who had mutually agreed arrangements with his ex-wife, was that of access being denied, particularly in the immediate aftermath of separation, but also at later stages even after the arrangements were court imposed. Given that these fathers had expressed that they had strong positive relationships, being denied access left them feeling angry and bitter towards their ex-wife.

#### *Continuation of Daddy's Time*

When the interviews focused on what the fathers actually do with their children during the time they had together, it soon became clear that the pattern of developing a social relationship had continued, though with the above mentioned limited time a restricting factor. Many of the fathers described how they would bring their children for walks or drives, or go to the cinema with them. Three of the fathers who had their children for at least two weekends each month described how they would plan to have something to do when their children came.

“They were delighted to see me and I was delighted to see them. We’d just try to do enjoyable things with the time we had together. Try not to be sitting in watching telly and stuff like that. Do something so that they could have a memory and something to talk about. I wouldn’t want to lie about and watch telly, I’d try do something you know what I mean and make life enjoyable.”

These fathers would bring them horse-riding, ice-skating, or swimming – “whatever she wanted to do really”. Another father talks about being their “taxi-driver” ferrying his teenage son back and forth to football training and matches.

With regard to looking after their children in terms of cooking meals, and preparing clothes and such, the two fathers that had previously been part of a two-income family unit and had done their share of childcare before separation found that the changed circumstances had not resulted in any new challenges. Although one of them remarked that he and his children frequented fast-food outlets more regularly now, then would have been the case before separation. One of the fathers from a traditionally gender divided family unit commented that getting groceries and preparing meals was a new experience for him. However, he stated that he made a great effort to ensure his son was fed before going home to his ex-wife.

### *Maintenance*

What is important to note here is that of the court imposed arrangements the two fathers from the two-income family household were granted the most access time, followed by one of the fathers from a single income household. The least amount of access time was granted to a father who was unable to work due to a long-term illness. He saw his teenage daughter every Saturday, and she was allowed stay overnight. During that time the father remarked that she looked after him.

Of the other five fathers, three of them had maintenance orders made against them. The other two fathers, one who had access arrangements through a mutual agreement with his ex-wife and the other who had no formal arrangements for access, stated that they made irregular contributions whenever they could afford, or if their children want something in particular. A father from a single income family unit said he had no objection to paying maintenance and that he wanted to financial support his children, but felt that the order was too high given his circumstances and means, especially as he said that he was responsible for outstanding debts occurring from the married family household.

The two fathers from the two-income family household had the biggest grievances with the maintenance orders. Both of them were of the opinion that the money was not being spent directly on their children, questioning “who am I maintaining?” One father was of the opinion that the amount he had to pay was excessive, having little regard for his standard of living. The other father reason because he had his child every weekend Friday to Sunday and for one evening during the week that he should not have to pay any maintenance, particularly as he had recently become unemployed and was at the moment struggling to “mind her, feed her and clothe her”:

“I am sort of on the breadline, I haven’t got a penny...there is no need for them, in my opinion, when I have [daughter’s name] four days a week. [Ex-wife’s name] is working full time, she’s only looking after her three days of the week, if you know what I mean. What’s the need for them like, who I am maintaining?...and I know full well that the money is not being spent on [daughter’s name]. [Daughter’s name] will tell me herself and I can see it myself like. The maintenance payments, are, in my opinion, are a joke to be honest with you, but it’s the law”

*Being more expressive*

As highlighted above, all the fathers claimed to be expressive fathers when part of the married family unit. The showing of love and affection continued, and a number of fathers talked about being more expressive after separation. They had said that spending time apart from their children had heightened their sense of love for them. Some of the fathers felt that it was necessary to be more expressive towards their children after separation as it offered them assurance in what was without doubt a traumatic time for children.

“She was affected by what happened you know, but she’s coming around now, I think... [daughter’s name] was worried herself that it was her fault. And she had to be constantly, not bombarded, be told that it wasn’t, what happened had nothing to do with her. So obviously then around all that you’d have to be more expressive. And when she was asking me when I was coming home, when she’d prefer me to come home, you’d have to keep telling her, then again, “I love you” and “it’s nothing to do with anything you have done”, you know. It’s actually more so since the separation.”

*Missing the normal all day every day experience*

One of the most mentioned differences or drawbacks to the current arrangements of only seeing their children for a limited period was that of the missing out of the normal day to day everyday experiences that would be taken for granted within the married household. For example:

“You are not with the kids anymore, you don’t have to be there to make sure their teeth are clean before they go to bed, the normal day to day things are gone and you have no input into it. That’s kind of a strange feeling.”

Another father expresses his sadness at “not being there for the night before they are making their communion or going to school for the first”. However, it is not just the important milestones in their children’s lives that the participants are missing out on, but also their children’s development as persons. One father who sees his children every second weekend talks about the sense of artificiality to the visits

“I think they kind of put on a bit of a show, well I wouldn’t say show but they would be nice to each other and nice to me type of thing, because maybe they see me so little. They don’t want to upset me or want me to be in a position to have to try discipline them, you know... So, not seeing them all day everyday you don’t get to see them in total, in 100 per cent. I wouldn’t turn around and say I knew the kids 100 per cent because I just wouldn’t see them enough. They can put on a front then all sweetness and nice and everything is great, you know, to me. But when they go home then they might be different, acting up with my ex-wife. That’s probably one of the drawbacks of being separated, you just don’t see them all day everyday and you’re only getting bits of their personality. That would be one of the major drawbacks.”

Some of the fathers grievance at missing the day to day interaction with their children was compound by the fact that they were not made aware of incidents that had occurred in their children’s lives.

“I’m frustrated because...like [daughter’s name] has some things on her skin. She was in hospital and I wasn’t even told she was in hospital. Like, I found out of [daughter’s name] after she came out of hospital. That’s extremely frustrating and worrying then, because you know if something happens to [daughter’s name] your not going to be told, so, you know”

This was quite a common theme among four of the fathers, complaining that they were the “last to know” if anything was going on in their children’s lives.

*Separation limits your effectiveness as a father*

As result of having limited time with their children and missing out on everyday contact with the children, most of these fathers felt that they had not enough time with their children to fulfil their role as a father. They contend that their effectiveness as a father has lessened. Three of the fathers, the ones with the least amount of access time, felt that they had little influence as regards forming their children's lives

A father explains:

“Well what do you do if you have a day with one child, one day a week from twelve to six, what do you do in those six hours? You cant, you cant be a father in that time.”

When probed to further explain in what ways they feel their effectiveness has been limited, all the fathers talk about experiencing a loss of influence in their children's life. A father who sees his child every weekend and for one evening during the week said the following about having no influence:

“...you lose control in a lot of ways, I've lost control in a lot of ways. Not control as in dominating, controlling, but I've lost control over, you know...like, she has already being signed up for secondary school for example and I got no say in which secondary school, I was never asked whether it was the one down the road, the one in [another town]. I wasn't even consulted on the matter...very frustrating... it cuts your balls off really. You can do nothing. You know what I mean, you can't actually do anything... you have no say in anything whatsoever. The power shifts automatically towards the mother for some strange reason. She gets a say in every decision and I'm not allowed an influence in anyway.”

Indeed, three of the fathers talk about the fact that they did not have a say in which school their children were sent to and one of them expresses his regret that he wasn't there to support her daughter in her schooling:

“Well I would have preferred [daughter's name] to go to the Catholic school, it was a better school, but the secondary school was only down the road. If I was there I would have been more influential with that. I would have got her going to the Catholic School, even though it was a bus ride away... I would've liked to be there to help her with her homework and stuff like that.”

### **How the Changes in Fatherhood are Experienced**

This section of the results describes how the participant fathers experienced the above outlined changes to the dimensions of fatherhood. This analysis contains the emergent themes from the interviews of how the participant fathers felt about the changes that occurred and their subjective explanations for them.

#### *Perceived sense of disadvantage relative to their ex-wife*

To varying degrees the relationship breakdowns of all participants was acrimonious and adversarial. The nature of the relationship between the fathers and their ex-wives after separation and how that effected the participant's involvement with their children is a theme that is analysed on its own merits below. The sense of conflict between the fathers and their ex-wives was palpable and permeated the interviews. From this pervading tenor quite a strong theme of a perceived sense of disadvantage relative to their ex-wives emerged. All the men expressed the opinion that regarding the ability to parent society in general and the legal system in particular favoured the woman. A father

separated just over two years who is not a member of any father's organisation or group states:

"I've always done my best and anyone that knows me knows that I've always done my best. Probably more than what others done. But yet she goes around playing the big 'mammy thing'... A lot of people's opinion is still 'mother knows best', you know, a lot of people."

A father of a 17 year old child, separated for 15 years and previously a member of fathers organisation claims:

"...it is all according to her, and that is happening on so many occasions... people believe the woman, 100 per cent. Doctors, psychologists, they all believe the woman because she will say "he's this, he's that""

Four out of six of the participants had separation agreements fought out in the family law court. Three of the four described the judgements very harsh on the man and all four expressed the opinion that they thought the family law court was biased against the man. This was also the opinion of the other two fathers, even though they had no personal experience of the family law court. A main issue that the fathers have is that they think the court system only views them as a financial provider to their child and does not recognise their emotional attachment to their children. When asked what they thought the family system viewed the father's role as, one father replied:

"As a bank machine, basically. "You pay the money, she'll rare the child, you get to see her when I say you get to see her and that's it out you go." There is no allowing for, there's definitely no allowing for the fact that the father has an emotional attachment to the child, you know what I mean. They sort of see emotion with the woman. The woman, like, is like that because they're mothers and they have a maternal thing. But a father doesn't have a paternal thing. He just, he goes out to work, he wants a few pints, and the child is only there running around his feet. That's the attitude I think that the judges have, they're not, they're not in the twentieth, err, wherever we are today. Their

attitude is sort of harking back to the fifties, when the father would hardly speak to the child, that's their attitude still."

Many of the fathers were of the opinion that men were treated poorly in court. One father stated that he felt he was treated like a "second class citizen". Another thought that the court gave no regard to the standard of living of the man after separation. The fathers also felt that they had to battle against a general negative perception of separated fathers as being "bad", that "he must of being guilty of something for her to kick him out".

Metaphors such as "being hamstrung", "hands are tied" and "being two-nil down" were used to illustrate this perceived sense of disadvantage. The fathers of this research depict themselves as embattled, expressing concerns of relative powerlessness and helplessness in the face of perceived injustice. They claim they are not given an opportunity to be listened to in court, or if an access order is broken that nothing will be done about it.

This sense of perceived disadvantage in relation to their ex-wife and the associated sense of powerlessness and helplessness translated into four of the fathers feeling that there are being "dictated to" when they could see their children. For example:

"The worst part of it was when we met at the Four Courts...you have people, strangers for want of a better word, telling you when you can see your kids. Dictating when you can see them, "oh you can't see them", you know, "your wife said you can have them every Tuesday"... Like, they weren't the father of the kids I was. And it was being dictated and decided by other people when I could see them. I didn't think I deserved to be treated that way...my access to them and how I was going to see them for the remainder of my life was being decided by other people. It was

very clinical, I thought. You know like, they might have been arguing over a used car or something, it made no difference to the solicitor or barrister what they were arguing over. But it was very fundamental to me when I could see the kids”

### *Relationship with ex-wife*

It is important to note that the interviews invariably involved descriptions of the participants’ relationships with their ex-wives, both before and after the divorce, particularly to the sources and amount of conflict in the relationship. The descriptions and sources of these conflicts are, to some extent, beyond the scope of this paper. However, the adversarial nature of the relationship during the marriage break-up and subsequently was a dominating factor in how the fathers of this research experienced the changes to the dimensions of fatherhood after separation.

The relationship with their ex-wife is intrinsically linked with the sense of perceived disadvantage in relation to their ex-wife. The fathers talked in terms of a shift in power, where their ex-wives were now in control. The fathers felt their access to their children was at the mercy of their ex-wives, especially in the immediate aftermath of the break-up. As one father who separated after seven years of living with his daughter and now sees his daughter every weekend and one evening a week through court imposed arrangements tells:

“Well the changes in the arrangements when I separated first...I was blocked constantly from seeing [daughters name] at [ex-wife’s name] whim. When it suited her for me to have [daughters name] I could have her. When it didn’t suit her I wasn’t even told. I’d turn up to collect [daughter’s name] and she wouldn’t be there, you know, and I wouldn’t see her then. I wasn’t allowed talk to her on the phone. I’m still not allowed talk to her on the phone or anything. You know like, even things like, I bought her

a mobile phone, she's not allowed have it, because [ex-wife name] doesn't want me ringing her".

Two of the fathers interpreted this behaviour in terms of the ex-wives being "spiteful" and using the children against them. This is how a father whose marriage ended 20 years ago when his daughter was three years old and had no formal arrangements for access explains his ex-wife's actions:

"It was hard for a long time for a long time, because she was bitter and used the child against me. It was my choice, totally my choice for splitting up. So she used the child against me for as long as possible. But as she got older she was able to say what she wanted to do. At the beginning I was limited to seeing her for an hour or something...I would have tried not to let it affect me and the relationship with the child even though it was hard to have a relationship with the child when she was being dodgy with access...but in the end it's just a power thing to use the children to upset the father more than anything else."

#### *An emotional time*

Throughout the discussion relating to the changes the fathers experienced a range of negative emotions were articulated. Many of the fathers told of the heartbreak they experienced when having to leave the family home and their children after separation

"So when I left the house, it was an emotional time, kids standing at the door crying and all that kind of stuff...I must say at the start of it there was nights that I lay in bed crying and wondering what was going to happen to me"

Three of the fathers who had experience of the family law court said they had felt particularly low after their hearing. They felt that there sadness they were experiencing as result of the separation and missing their children was

exacerbated by the “impersonal” nature of the court system and the perceived sense of injustice.

The fathers talked frequently about feeling angry and frustrated with the at the perceived sense of disadvantage and loss on influence in the in children’s lives. A father of three and an active member of a separated father’s rights organisation discloses:

“Well, it, it made me feel angry. It did make me feel angry like and that I felt I was totally let down by, by the State, not being given the option of being, you know, to have, still have contact with my children on an equal basis, like”

Another father voices his frustration:

“...you don’t get a say in a lot of things, schools and things like that. You’re just told what is and what isn’t....[I feel] frustrated in the extreme, at the system, at her, at her mother, you know. It’s just, there is nothing that can be done”.

### *Relationship with Children after Separation*

All but one of the fathers stated that the relationship with their children had been affected by non-residency. This father was separated the shortest and also had the most access time. He felt the relationship with his daughter was as strong as ever though admits that she was affected by the separation, and is aware of his daughter at times “playing one against the other”. For two of their fathers – one had three children and the other two - a relationship with one of their children broke down completely for a number of years, but as the children have gotten older they have stated communicating again. The other fathers said there had good relationships with their children but that limited contact with them had changed the quality of the relationship, as was the case with the father who sensed that his children were putting on a “front” when with him.

## DISCUSSION

Using qualitative descriptive analysis this study aimed to describe the participant separated non-resident fathers' subjective interpretations of their father involvement, what they actually did with their children in the married family household, and the changes that may have occurred in these roles as a result of becoming a non-resident father through separation. The study sought to understand how separated non-resident fathers experience changes in the role of fatherhood after separation and examine what lies behind, or underpins their decisions, attitudes and behaviours. The specific dimensions of the participant's father involvement in the married family household and the changes and continuations of these roles after separation as outlined in the results section of this study form the context in which the core research of how separated non-resident fathers experience the changes in fatherhood after separation will be discussed.

Before the results of this study are discussed, it is important to draw attention to some of the limitations of the study. The study draws on six interviews conducted with separated non-resident fathers who had maintained contact with their children. All the fathers described the relationship with their ex-wives during the marriage breakdown and subsequently as adversarial. These particular characteristics of the interviewees should be borne in mind and any generalising from these fathers' experience to the experience of the wider population of separated non-resident fathers needs to be circumspect. Another point that needs to be highlighted is that this study was conducted by a male. Some researchers suggest that men doing gender related research on men can

result in male-bias findings (Flood 2000 *as cited in* Haywood and Mac an Ghiall, 2003:109). This research has sought descriptive validity by staying close to the data in articulating participants experiences. However the “human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis” (Patton, 2002:433). It is recognised that aspirations of neutrality and objectivity can not be obtained because personal interpretations are important both in terms of the participants’ perspectives, and in terms of the researchers’ understanding and portrayal of the participants’ views.

The accounts given by the individual fathers of the role they carried out in the married family household offered an insight into how these men recognise and interpret possible ways of being fathers and how they apply them to their own circumstances. The fathers of this study portrayed fatherhood as multi-dimensional with a particular emphasis on developing a social and emotional relationship with their children. The desire to be involved in many aspects of their children’s lives and to do the best they can for them is an indication of the emotional investment. The fathers of this study reject the distant instrumental model of fatherhood and have no problem showing their children love and affection. This finding is consistent with other research into contemporary fatherhood. The fact that this greater involvement in their children’s life does not translate into greater involvement in direct childcare is also bore out in other studies. In fact, Lewis and O’Brien (1987) suggest that on the social level, men perform a far less childcare role than women in all societies, however variations between individual fathers can themselves be

considerable (Lewis & O'Brien, 1987 *as cited in* Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2003:52).

However the fathers of this study view the nurturing aspect of the parenting role as more diverse than just direct childcare. They invest a lot of time into developing a social relationship with their children offering them guidance and providing them with opportunities to develop as rounded individuals. This is not to say that this role was exclusive to the fathers when part of the married family household, but it was a salient component of their engagement with their children in that context.

The concept of the father being the breadwinner is still quite prominent, and may in part be explained by the fact that a number of the participants would have become father's in the 1970s and 1980s when traditional gendered division of labour was prevalent in Irish society. Although these fathers acknowledged that expectations of fatherhood had changed and had embraced a more expressive involved approach of fathering. The fact the two of the participants with children all younger than 15 and whose ex-wives were working full time alluded to the expectation they felt to financial provide for their children, over and beyond that of their ex-wife, would suggest that notion of the father as the breadwinner, by concomitantly parenting is associated with the woman, is still strongly embedded in Irish cultural practices. The fact that there is no statutory provision for paternity leave is an indication that Ireland is still a male breadwinner type state.

The event of marital breakdown entailed immense personal and physical adjustment for the participants of this study. An obvious consequence of separation of course was the time fathers had with their children was reduced. The missing out on “all day everyday normal” aspects of their children’s lives that married family life afforded them is accepted by all the fathers as inevitable, even if sad for them. However, to a large extent, father’s descriptions of how they spend they time together during access remains unchanged. There is still a massive investment in maintaining and developing the social and emotional relationship. Though there may be an intensification of this effort on the part of some fathers as they are determined to make the time they spend with their children special.

The issue of limited time with their children was massive for all the fathers, both in terms of not having enough access to them and the restrictive nature of access hours. Hallman *et al.* (2001) contention that loss of contact time with their children results in a loss of influence that non-resident fathers have in their children’s lives is reflected strongly in the findings. The fathers related this loss of influence to limiting their effectiveness as a father, a lessening of their role in their children’s lives. When describing the specific dimensions of fatherhood involvement within the married family household the fathers of this research talked about giving guidance and support to their children. Being a role model for their children and having a influence was an important aspect of fathering to them.

The loss of influence in the children's lives can be attributed to the conflict and lack of communication between the fathers and ex-wives. The adversarial relationship with their ex-wife is the key to how the fathers of this research experienced the changes in their role of fatherhood, specifically their loss of influence and limited access time, after separation. There have been many researches to identify factors that may affect separated fathers parental behaviour. Aside from findings related to some of the socio-demographic variables, the most consistent finding is the relationship between the separated parents. Tense, hostile and conflictual relationships have been associated with low levels of involvement (Baum, 2004). Yet the fathers of this study were determined to remain involved and had regular contact with their children. The adversarial relationship between fathers and ex-wives, this research finds, results in access being denied on occasions and a loss of influence in their children lives; a sense by the participants that they are not being allowed to be fathers to their children.

The prevailing theme that emerges from the participants experience is conflict and loss, and the fathers position themselves with a sense of perceived disadvantage in relation to their ex-wife. The fathers of this study, resonating with separated non-resident fathers of other studies into the subject, claim that family law system is biased against the man. However, it is possible that their main grievance with the family law system is that it does not fully recognise their multi-dimensional fatherhood role that they have describe in this study. In fact it could be argued that the courts view on parenting is black and white – reducing parenting to simply childcare and supervision and economic provision.

But that is the nature of the legal system and there is a long running argument that the court setting is not the most appropriate tool in dealing with matters of intimate family relations.

It is established that expectations of fathering have changed over the past number of decades, but also that there is deeply embedded societal and institutional culture in Ireland that associates parenting with the woman. These two ideals both exert strong influences on contemporary ideology surrounding fatherhood. From this perspective, participants' perceptions of being disadvantaged in relation to their ex-wife might warrant some justification. These fathers view their parental role as multi-dimension, including economic provision, but strongly value the social and emotional bond with their children. However as separated non-resident fathers, they perceive their role to be not fully recognised, and reduced to that of economic provider.

However the fathers perceived disadvantage in relation to their ex-wife, results from the adversarial relationship with their ex-wife. This research finds that it is the conflict between participant and ex-wife that is the determining factor in loss of influence in their children's lives. It is the hostile relationship and no communication between the fathers and ex-wives that is key to many of the issues that participants expressed angry and frustration at.

## **Conclusion**

The fathers of this study portrayed fatherhood as multi-dimensional with a particular emphasis on developing a social and emotional relationship with

their children. The major issue for the fathers after separation was their loss of influence in their children's lives which was related to their limited contact with their children. The key determining factor in how the fathers experienced the changes in the role as fathers after separation was the adversarial relationship with their ex-wife, in which fathers positioned themselves with a sense of perceived disadvantage in relationship to their wife as they endeavoured to remain involved in their children's lives.

As the fathers of this study all had adversarial relationships with their ex-wives, the subject area would benefit from further research into father whose relationship break-down was not adversarial. Also the area would benefit greatly if a similar study was conducted into dimensions of motherhood in these circumstances.

To address the continued association of mothering with women and create greater gender equality, paternity leave of equal length to maternity should be made optional to fathers.

In the case of relational breakdown where children are involved comprehensive mediation should be made compulsory. Mediation would involve counselling and educational courses to help both parents cope with the changed circumstances and agree a mutual beneficial strategy for raising their children.

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