

Errata

- Page 13 para 2 line 8: replace 'agencies' with 'agencies' '
line 10 delete comma after 'with'
- Page 16 para 1 line 1: replace 'workers' with 'workers' '
Page 20 para 1 line 20: replace 'fathers' with fathers' '
Page 23 para 1 line 17: replace 'impacts' with 'impact'
- Page 25 para 2: last line bracket 2009
- Page 27: table bracket after 'programs'
- Page 29 para 2 line 9: replace 'effects' with 'affects'
- line 11 replace 'practiced' with 'practised'
- Page 30 para 1 line 2: replace 'has' with 'have'
- Page 32 para 1 line 14: delete comma
- Page 33 para 1 line 1: either delete 'the' or add a possible missing word after
'prevention'.
para 2 line 2: delete 'and'
- Page 34 para 2: last sentence is grammatically incorrect
- Page 35 para 1 line 4: add 'were' after 'eight'
(other errors occurring between pages 35 and 49)
- Page 49 para 3 line 2: replace 'numbers' with 'number'
- Page 50 para 1 line 3: insert full stop after 'father)'
para 2 line 1: add 'As' before 'A' at the beginning of the sentence
para 3 line 7: add 'that' before 'have'

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The Absence of Fathers in Child and Family Welfare Practice

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Families do not own their children.

They hold them in trust for society

(Garbarino and Barry, 1997, p 85).

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all children who have suffered abuse and neglect, but in particular to *Daniel Philip Deneel Appollo Valerio* (1988 – 1990).

Declaration

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

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Abstract

Parenting tends to be regarded as synonymous with mothering, and it is with women and children that professional relationships are formed. This means that fathers are not engaged with about their role or the parenting - what we call 'fatherwork' - they do, or would like to do, with their children. Any problems fathers may have are not dealt with, which only contributes to the risk of trauma and family breakdown (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p 2).

Fathers and father figures in child and family welfare have been a neglected topic and focus of social research and interest in Australia. Yet fathers are more than ever being recognised as being a key to the functioning of the family, mostly driven by social policy trends to include fathers more in family life. The absence or the lack of presence of fathers in child and family welfare practice has not been viewed in the literature as a problem for men but as a problem and injustice to women. This is because they are ultimately the ones carrying the burden of care and so are subjected to child protection investigation when there are reports of child abuse. By looking at the diverse dimensions of fatherhood, it is contended that there is no definitive discourse regarding fatherhood in the same way as it is suggested about motherhood. Whoever these fathers are and whichever ethnic group or culture they may originate from, it is argued that they have been ignored or avoided in child and family welfare practice settings. This study examines child and family social and health workers own experiences of fathers and father figures in their daily practice. The study was exploratory and qualitative in its approach and design, which incorporated a Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM). Both semi-structured interviews and a survey questionnaire were conducted with child and family welfare professionals. The themes explored related to the literature on fathers in health and family welfare and father involvement, particularly focusing on the concept of father absence in practice.

The substantive theory which emerged from the data, explains the process that occurred when social welfare and health professionals were asked to discuss their experiences of fathers in their practice. *Not knowing fathers* emerged as the core category that arose from the data and represented the complexity that practitioners expressed when they were asked about their professional experiences with fathers. This core category subsequently led to the psychosocial problem being studied which was *the absence of fathers from their practice*. This psychosocial problem developed from four key influencing factors that emerged from analysis of the data.

These four key influencing factors were: the *absence of practice theories*, the *absence of service knowledge*, the *absence of engagement opportunities* and the *absence of alternatives to their personal biographies*. The findings in this study have important implications for social work practice as well as other professionals working with children and families. The major findings of this study suggested that more needs to be done to address the gap between practice and theory about gender, and in particular, how it is constructed in child and family welfare services. Appropriate support systems, which include making changes to agencies' practices with fathers, as well as appropriate training and education in working with fathers and men, needs to be available to practitioners to help facilitate effective practice with mothers, women, fathers and children respectively.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Child welfare and father absence

There is a certain exasperation expressed about men's incompetence as carers and as clients. They are variously described as unable to cope, childlike, deluded, obsessive, and stubborn. They are seen as difficult to work with ... They are regarded as of little practical use in terms of family life... (Scourfield, 2001a, p 81).

This statement comes from Scourfield's (2001a) ethnographic study of a local authority social work team practice in the United Kingdom (UK). In his study, he found that in examining the occupational culture of child protection social work, men were constructed in a negative way and that this construction became an accepted rationale for not working with them. This left women responsible for children and placed fathers at the periphery of practice. Throughout the literature there is a growing body of knowledge suggesting that men are often left out of child welfare practice, particularly where there have been reports of child abuse (O'Hagan 1997, Milner 2004, Featherstone, 2006). My focus is not to replicate this appraisal, but rather to explore, in a broader context of services, how professionals construct fathers in their day-to-day work with families. The prime focus of this study is from the position that helping professions have expanded and now include both social work and non-social work disciplines and professionals. My research seeks to examine how child welfare professionals engage with fathers in an Australian context and how they respond to them at various levels of child and family welfare practice. This is because the absence, or the lack of presence, of fathers and father figures in child welfare has not been viewed in the literature as a problem for men but as an enduring problem for mothers.

This is because mothers are represented as the ones carrying the burden of care and the ones featured in and subjected to child protection investigations (O'Hagan and Dillenger 1995; Milner, 2004). A central purpose of my study and transition from practitioner to researcher (Brydon and Fleming, 2010), is to seek out why this construction of fathers in both child and family welfare practice and policy is so pervasive. To achieve this I planned an exploratory qualitative study of child welfare professionals in Australian practice contexts. In the past, no Australian studies have specifically sought to provide an exploration of how child and family welfare professionals engage with fathers. This study seeks to develop a theory around the way in which fathers are perceived by child and family welfare professionals. Grounded theory was selected as the most appropriate means of achieving this aim. I hoped that through the analysis of their experiences in practice, I might generate a substantive theory about the practice with fathers in child and family welfare. Based on the findings from this study there will be some key future recommendations made in the conclusions relating to the areas of social work education, research, policies and, most importantly, practice.

1.2 Research perspective

My interest and my research for the current study about the absence of fathers in child and family welfare practice has emerged from my own social work practice experience over fourteen years, in particular my six years spent working in state based statutory child protection and in child welfare and child health settings (Fleming, 1998). In researching this topic, I am guided by the strong belief that engaging fathers is essential to effective social work practice with families. A father's absence from child and family welfare practice should be seen as a problem, not as usual practice.

1.3 Definition of Social Work and father absence as a practice issue

According to the Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) definition of social work

The social work profession is committed to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society. Social workers work at the interface between people and their environments, utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems (AASW, 2008, p 5).

Accordingly, the core business of social work is therefore concerned with addressing the barriers and inequities that exist in society. The profession's aim thus is to work towards changes in practice that assist each individual, group and community in society reach their full potential (AASW, 2008). As a social work practitioner I believed that I was trained and had the required knowledge and skills to apply the definition of social work with families. This work included mothers, fathers and children. Using Berlyn *et al's* contemporary definition of a father, these fathers in my work could potentially be biological, social or ideological fathers, including foster and adoptive fathers (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008, p 10). Yet what I found the most challenging in my practice was that my work routinely involved mothers and children and rarely involved fathers. This was, I thought, in conflict with my understanding of social work. It was not that this was intentional, or at least I felt it was something that I did not carry out deliberately, but in reality that is what happened. Out of this realisation came a suspicion and concern that my professional practice might contain some serious flaws and oppressive practice with families.

This was something that did not sit comfortably with me professionally. I felt the need to address this issue of practice, not only for myself, but for other child and family welfare professionals in the field. The aim of the study ultimately was to seek a better way to respond to these concerns regarding fathers and their absence from child and family welfare services

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis seeks to explore how fathers are viewed, described, talked about and engaged with by child and family welfare professionals in their practice. In Chapter 2, the literature is reviewed in relation to what has already been said about fathers being present or absent in child and family welfare practice. Chapter 3 describes and details the research methodology and design selected for this exploratory piece of research.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present and discuss the findings of the research and include some of the problems associated with access to participants for the research. In Chapter 7, I discuss in detail the core categories that link together to form the substantive theory which emerged from the data. The resulting theory describes the psychosocial processes that occur when fathers are viewed, described, talked about and engaged with by child and family welfare professionals in their practice.

Chapter 8 discusses the implications of the findings and concludes with reference to finding some ways forward to build a future research agenda for this important practice area for professionals within child and family welfare systems in Australia and possibly elsewhere.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Problem

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the need for research into the experience of professional workers of fathers' involvement in child and family welfare practice in the literature. The review presented will be on fathers in general, and in child and family welfare practice. The literature review will cover the areas of post-war family change in Australia, fathers in Australian society and child and family welfare practice in Australia. This chapter will show how families have changed, how this has had a significant impact on how professionals practice with fathers and what impact this has in providing services to families in Australia. Theorising on fathers has received increasing attention in recent years, specifically around the effects of absent fathers (Phares, 1993), men's role in family life (Doucet, 2006), parenting and work responsibilities (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004), and even representation of fathers in popular child - rearing books (Fleming and Tobin, 2005). The length of this final section reflects the need to acknowledge that practice absence for fathers is a problem not only for fathers but also mothers and children. The key challenges at the interface between child and family welfare and the family is how to shift the orientation of a child-focused workforce towards the parent-child relationship being the primary unit of attention (Scott, 2009, p 39). The third section commences with a historical account of changes to families and the impact this has had on mothers and fathers over the last fifty years in Australia. Reviewing historical changes to families is necessary and fundamental to understanding how these changes have had an impact on child and family welfare policies, services and practices with fathers and families. The final section describes the research problem and research question.

2.2 Child and family welfare system in Australia

2.2.1 Introduction

Throughout this thesis the child and family welfare system is broadly defined as a group of services that includes primary, secondary and tertiary services as well as targeted prevention services for families. This service focus was chosen because if a traditional focus on the definition of child and family welfare services in Australia meaning statutory government child protection was used in this research, it would have two main disadvantages. Firstly, it would have narrowed the discussion to only one specific practice area, that being forensically driven child protection. Secondly, it would have avoided discussion and analysis of other non-statutory services that now make up the wider child and family welfare sector in Australia.

The family has historically been the preferred site for nurturing and development of children. Both fathers and mothers have acquired the status of being the ones charged with this responsibility by society and the law. Parents and families in Australian society however are highly diverse and family formation is constantly changing, often in response to the impact of socioeconomic changes. The reality is that families are changing and adapting to meet the current and emerging demands of a dynamic society (Coontz, 1997). Parents at certain times may ask for help or may be given help to assist them in their roles as caregivers and social guardians of their children. This help may be imposed or sought out voluntarily. The growth in personal helping services in Australia over the last fifty years is one key indicator that both mothers and fathers are increasingly and more frequently in need of professional help to care for children.

These services have expanded in recent years and now there is a wide range of health and welfare agencies, both social work and non-social work, including the expansion of non-government services which include those established through churches and charitable organisations (Scott, 2009). These services are generally classified into the category of the human services industry (Jones and May, 1992). This growth has been reflected in the changes to the definition of abuse and neglect and the increasing number of child protection notifications. At the same time concerns about these changes have not resulted in increased service provision but have exposed more children and families to investigation rather than support (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2008, p 327). Despite attempts to include fathers in family-based services, they still remain absent from these services as compared to mothers (Ferguson and Hogan 2004). The purpose of reviewing the literature on fathers in child and family welfare practice is to show that socio-legal changes (Brown and Alexander 2007; Collier and Sheldon, 2008) as well as changes in social expectations in Australia for both maternal and paternal responsibilities (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008), have failed to highlight the need for these services to adapt to the changing roles that parents play in the lives of children. Furthermore, services for families and children have been slow to adapt practice to meet the changing needs of contemporary family life. Identification of this problem for fathers with these services supports the need for an exploration of just how child and family welfare services involve fathers' more in practice. While research shows fathers involvement benefits children's well-being (Phares 1996; Marshall *et al.*, 2001; Sullivan 2001; Smit, 2004) , the child and family welfare system seems to contradict this in its practice (Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Scourfield 2002a; Strega *et al.*, 2009; Featherstone *et al.*, 2010; Fleming and King, 2010).

2.2.2 The apology

At 11am on Monday 16th November 2009, the then Australian Minister, The Honourable Kevin Rudd, MP, delivered a National Apology to the Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants. The apology, which had bipartisan support, acknowledged the abuse and neglect suffered by many of these children and reflected the Government's determination that these terrible practices will never be repeated.

Mr Rudd commenced his speech by saying:

We come together today to deal with an ugly chapter in our nation's history. And we come together today to offer our nation's apology. To say to you, the Forgotten Australians, and those who were sent to our shores as children without your consent, that we are sorry (Rudd, 2009, p 1).

He continued with a long and disturbing list of the abuses that children in out of home care and in institutions experienced. The national apology gained wide media coverage and has generated a series of recommendations, which included a national find and connect service and improved aged care for care leavers. Whilst the apology signified an important step toward acknowledging the wrongs done to children, at the same time it highlighted how complex child protection practice is and that past policies can indeed have serious and long term effects on children. This has led, through media reporting and child death inquiries, to closer monitoring within child welfare organisations and has reinforced the function of social work as a service to individuals rather than to communities (Parton, 1998). This has resulted in social work, particularly in child and family welfare practice, becoming a more case-accountable, managerially controlled and procedurally regulated activity (Bilton, 1998, p 201).

Child and family welfare practice and child and family welfare services as discussed in the introduction of this chapter, broadly describes an array of prevention and intervention services to children and families. These services focus particularly on children who have been or are at risk of abuse or neglect, children with special medical or mental health needs, and children who do not have adult caregivers. In Australia, family and child welfare policy is the responsibility of three tiers of government. The Federal government is responsible for broad social policies, each individual State government sets its own child welfare policies and legislation and each local government has the responsibility for policies and services in its own municipal area. In addition, there is a strong non-governmental involvement in family and child welfare in Australia, through religious and philanthropic agencies (Gregory 1981; Tomison, 2001).

Historically, the Australian child welfare system has functioned on the basis of the state as the authority on parental roles and responsibilities for children's upbringing, socialisation and well-being. It has been argued that the system has been predicated on the view that children needed to be rescued from those parents who did not have the innate qualities, right values, correct attitudes and appropriate behaviours considered to be necessary to be a parent and act in a socially acceptable way (Scott and O'Neil, 1996, p 25).

In recent years there has been a greater awareness of child abuse as an issue. Tomison (2001, 2002) argues that child protection policies have tended to be cyclical and that many present policies have been tried by governments and other agencies over many years.

This has resulted in significant changes to reporting child abuse which can be described as being more open than had been the situation previously. The increased awareness and reporting has led to various church - based and charitable institutions that provided residential care for children, as well as Government departments responsible for child protection, coming under greater scrutiny for past and present practices that may have, or are, adversely affecting children in their care (Higgins *et al.*, 2009). The catalyst for these changes in responding to child abuse has been driven by a number of child abuse and fatal child death inquiries, particularly in Victoria (Victorian Child Death Review Committee, 2009), Queensland (Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004), New South Wales (Wood, 2008), Western Australia (Gordon *et al.*, 2002). 2009). Child and family welfare practice does not exist in a vacuum and policy changes impact significantly upon how professionals both, social work and non-social work, are required to respond to children and families. More recently, it also includes the ongoing Federal government intervention in the Northern Territory in response to Aboriginal children's sexual abuse and exposure to diverse social problems, primarily with alcohol abuse, low rates of education and the presence of pornography (Wild and Anderson 2007; Flaherty and Goddard 2008; Fawcett and Hanlon, A major trend over the last decade in terms of child protection policy has been a move away from more punitive measures to an increased emphasis on early intervention and education strategies. With these initiatives in re-focusing upon supporting families instead of investigating families, has been an increasing focus on early intervention services. This approach has been seen by some commentators to be beneficial for two key reasons.

Firstly in effectively reducing the needs for more intrusive child protection interventions at later stages (Scott and O’Neil 1996; Scott 2002; Tomison 2002; Hayes, 2008) and secondly as a social justice approach to address the consequences of family disadvantage, often poverty for children (Hayes 2007a; 2007b). In some areas of Australia, cross-departmental strategies also exist by attempting to assist families in a more holistic way, by coordinating service delivery and providing better access to different types of child and family services. For example Tasmania’s child protection services are continuing to undergo reforms as part of transformation of the entire Tasmanian child and family services sector. This reform includes re-directing low-level child protection cases to non-government agencies (for further detail see *New Directions for Child Protection in Tasmania: An integrated Strategic Framework*, DHHS, 2008). A similar development has taken place in other States such as Victoria with the introduction of the Child FIRST (Child Family Information, Referral and Support Team) (Child FIRST Fact Sheet, 2006) and in New South Wales with the Brighter Futures program (NSW, 2009).

The last decade has seen some major changes in policies and delivery of family and child welfare services in Australia. These key changes, that have changed the landscape of child welfare practice in Australia, can be summarised under two key areas: the introduction of mandatory reporting and ‘net-widening’ in child and family welfare practices.

2.2.3 Mandatory reporting

A key response from the early 1990s to address child protection practice errors such as false negatives and false positives (Dale *et al.*, 2005) has been the introduction by most States and Territories of mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect.

The basic framework of protection and support services aimed at preventing child abuse and helping children and families affected by child abuse is essentially a State responsibility, although the commonwealth government has introduced the National Child Protection Framework as a policy direction for all States and Territories (COAG, 2009).

Mandatory reporting procedures all have one thing in common in Australia in that there is some level of legislation requiring the compulsory reporting to State and Territory child protection authorities of child abuse or neglect. This means that medical practitioners, and often other professionals such as teachers, police and health workers, are required by law to report any suspected or actual cases of child abuse to the relevant authorities (Appendix 10). Some States of Australia, such as Tasmania and New South Wales, have included the designation of mandatory reporting of children living with domestic violence (Humphreys, 2008). The breadth of professionals and organisations mandated to report varies widely across the States and Territories and certain groups of professionals in specific circumstances are mandated to report. In addition to requirements under State and Territory legislation, Family Court personnel are also required under the *Family Law Act 1975* to report all suspected cases of child abuse (AIHW, 2009, p 4). Recent details of the mandatory reporting requirements in each State and Territory in Australia are set out in Higgins *et al.*, (2009).

Whilst mandatory reporting has some important benefits, especially the recognition by the Federal government that child abuse is serious, the literature identifies that there are some problems with such a system. The first is the inadequate resources being provided for the child and family welfare sector to cope with the increased reporting and management of child abuse cases. In an analysis of the impact of changes to mandatory reporting criteria in Victoria in 1993, Mendes pointed out that unless there is the political will to resource the change, the major effect is that welfare resources from non-government family support and prevention services are simply diverted into the statutory sector (Mendes, 1996, p 31). Secondly, in order to cope with the increase in reports, some child protection departments have increased the threshold or level of seriousness of reports that give rise to an investigation (Higgins *et al.*, 2009, p 5). This has resulted in families being referred to non-government agencies or cases being prematurely closed.

2.2.4 Net-widening in child and family welfare practice

Before and after the introduction of mandatory reporting, there has been gradual pressure both from community and media to adopt alternative approaches to supporting those families that would benefit from a less forensic approach (Goddard and Saunders 2001b; Tomison 2002; Scott, 2005). An example of this type of response was the New Directions in Child Protection and Family Support in Western Australia (Family and Children's Services, 1996). New Directions was introduced as a way to move away from a narrow forensically child maltreatment investigation toward more differentiated approach and to place greater emphasis on voluntary family support (Lonne *et al.*, 2009, p 40).

This has led to a greater emphasis on building partnerships with families, looking for strengths rather than risks and a greater focus on prevention applying a public health model to child protection intervention (FaHCSIA 2008; Lonne *et al.*, 2009). In the public health model of disease prevention, preventative interventions are described as either primary, secondary, or tertiary interventions (Tomison and Poole, 2000). Child maltreatment prevention programs are also commonly categorised as primary, secondary, or tertiary interventions/prevention programs. As Table 1 illustrates, child maltreatment prevention programs can be conceptualised according to a public health model: primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions based on their level of operation or focus, that is, children, parents or community.

Table 1 Types of child maltreatment prevention programs

Focus	Intervention level		
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Child	Personal safety programs	Assertiveness training for 'at risk' children	Therapeutic programs' (e.g., group or individual therapy for abused children)
Parents/Family	Universal nurse home visiting programs	Parent education programs	Child protection service referrals (e.g., anger management programs)
Community	General media awareness campaigns	Targeted media campaigns in 'at risk' communities	Intensive community interventions (e.g., alcohol zero tolerance zones)

(Bromfield, L and Holzer, P (2008) A national approach for child protection Project report, National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p 54)

In the public health model, child maltreatment prevention programs are focused on early intervention and premised upon working collaboratively with other non-statutory services. Child and family support systems are characterised by an approach that works in partnership with families.

These service systems assess the needs and strengths of families to determine appropriate responses in their role of supporting families, and recognise the effects of social disadvantage on vulnerability (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2009). In comparison, the statutory child protection system is characterised by an approach that centres on immediate risk to a child of child abuse and neglect. Processes for assessing risk involve surveillance and investigation of families in a legal approach rather than working with families in partnerships. Parents report judgmental rather than supportive attention given to social disadvantage in child protection agencies, and a focus on individual responsibility (Thorpe, 2007, p 41).

As Humphreys (2008, p 232) observes, despite the best intention of adopting a less intrusive system with families and children, any system that moves towards greater investment in prevention and intervening earlier in children's lives also means greater regulation by the State of family life, a so-called Surveillance State. These reforms are based on two assumptions; that modern life presents both increased opportunities for children and increased risk and uncertainty, and that the evidence base is now strong for informing who is or will be most at risk. This effect has been termed 'net-widening' by screening in more families in the child protection system (Lonne *et al.*, 2009, p 54).

A recent example of net widening occurred when parents from Logan (a suburb south-east of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia), were at risk of having their government benefits removed if they failed to send their children to school (Dunlevy and Cartwright, 2009).

Through a trial scheme under the Federal government's School Enrolment and Attendance Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM), parents or carers receiving welfare were compelled to provide details of their child's school enrolment to the Federal social security agency, Centrelink and if they were not able to provide a reasonable explanation for their child's absence, they would then be issued with a notice requiring them to address the situation within 14 days, or risk having their welfare payments suspended for up to 13 weeks. This potentially would leave families without any source of income. There are a number of explanations behind net widening in child and family welfare practice: they include greater public awareness of child abuse and neglect, increased procedural protocols within and between agencies (including more police involvement in child protection) and increased media coverage of child abuse failures (Thorpe and Bilson, 1998).

It has also been identified that because social work has ceased to be a private activity between client and professional, with both becoming politicised and public, child and family welfare practice is now more vulnerable to social and political expectations (Ferguson, 1996). The policy and legislative changes that have taken place in the child and family welfare sector over the last twenty years have had a direct effect on how organisations carry out the work in practice. What has been identified early in this chapter is the result of more intrusiveness into family life by the State as a consequence of responses to rapid social and economic changes to family life. This not only affects how parenting is undertaken in families, but also highlights the lack of evidence behind the effectiveness of policies and how child and family welfare is practised with those fathers and mothers.

2.2.5 Gender and social welfare practice

Definitions of work, as masculine or feminine, are no longer fixed entities as rapid changes to the nature of work, mostly through new technology, have seen many traditional occupations once designated as men's work now employing women. For example, women are now working in many non-traditional industries, such as mining. However, certain professions such as nursing, teaching and social work are still dominated by the employment of women (McLean, 2003, p 50). Social work is identified as a caring profession and has been described as a 'non-traditional' occupation for men (Scourfield and Coffey 2002; Scourfield, 2006) because the majority of social workers, social work students, and social work service users are women.

In addition to social work being a 'non-traditional' occupation for men, most social service users are predominantly women/ mothers and the majority of presenting problems such as child care and care of dependent adults are women-focused. Thus there are few expectations placed on men and little scrutiny of them except as abusers (Hanmer and Statham 1988; Pringle, 2001).

The practice by women workers at the front-line of child welfare therefore focuses on women clients. However, rather than receive support ensuring that mothers are provided with a service to assist them with these problems, they often do not receive such a service. Instead they receive rigorous scrutiny termed 'mother blaming' to describe such practice (Hooper, 1987; Davies and Krane 1996; Davies, 2009).

Humphrey also noted that training and socialisation into the disciplines of psychology, counseling and social work frequently involve learning to accommodate high levels of mother-blaming (Humphrey, 1994, p 55).

In the recent development of practice literature that calls for the urgent need to involve men more rather than less in child and family welfare practice (O'Hagan and Dillenberg 1995; Scourfield 2002; Milner 2004; Featherstone, 2009), it would be expected that father blaming would also be found among practitioners. However, this has not been the case as studies suggest that a gendered occupational discourse in child welfare is pervasive and that it continues to support absenting men rather than anything else (Scourfield 2002; Coohey and Zang 2006; Featherstone, 2010). Within child welfare, fathers are not just discounted, they are often not 'seen' at all, even when they are present (Brown *et al.*, 2008, p 25).

An example of this gendered occupation discourse comes from a recent series of studies conducted in Canada (Strega *et al.*, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2009a). These researchers examined child welfare and related social welfare policies and practices that affect how fathers are seen or not seen in child welfare. They considered how social workers are prepared to work with fathers. In their study, they interviewed 11 fathers with extensive involvement in child welfare, conducted a review of 116 randomly selected child protection files from a child protection agency and held focus groups with social workers and their supervisors. They found that fathers are largely invisible in the official record of child welfare. In addition, almost 50% of fathers were considered irrelevant to both mothers and children.

Over half (60%) of the fathers who were identified as a risk to children were not contacted by social workers and were similarly not contacted 50% of the time when they were considered a risk to mothers (Walmsley, 2009, p 2). The fathers in the study were configured around three types of stories by social workers: heroes, ghosts and monsters. Firstly, there were the 'heroes' who required no social work intervention and rarely came to their notice, or their case was quickly closed. Then there were the 'invisible men' or 'ghosts' who moved in and out of children's lives but were subjects of surveillance or control in case they interacted with children. The researchers chose the word 'ghost' to describe these fathers in child welfare because in order to see a ghost, one has to believe in their existence and relevance (Brown *et al.*, 2009a, p 26). The third story was of 'monsters' that had to be kept out of women's lives to protect women and children (Strega *et al.*, 2009, p 86). These researchers identify that in order to begin to see fathers, practitioners working in child and family welfare practice must examine our biases about gendered roles and our fear of the unknown.

2.2.6 Perpetuating father exclusion in service provision

With increased media and public scrutiny surrounding the need for children to be protected and prevented from harm by adults, comes greater focus on the role of both mothers and fathers in family life and child care tasks. This increased scrutiny has required an expansion of traditionally based statutory child protection services into increased funding of non-government charitable organisations (Cortis *et al.*, 2009) to undertake intake and assessments of families that come into the child protection net (Scott, 2009, p 40). The child welfare system is now even more complex involving many organisations, institutions, and individuals both social work and non-social work specific.

These initiatives are often framed under prevention in child welfare, but rarely involve working with the most complex cases which would have been given a service through the child protection (statutory) agency.

The generation of such services is due to the acknowledgement that child abuse and neglect cannot be easily disentangled from individual, family and community issues such as poverty, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, mental health issues and social isolation (FaHCSIA, 2008, p 3). Despite the best intentions to involve fathers more in family-based welfare services, much of the direct work provision seems to have focused on the issue of working with, and supporting women and mothers. These services now include much broader organisations such as schools, child health centres, hospitals and family relationship centres and are often designed with the involvement of mothers as primary caregivers in mind. In doing so, child welfare services have in part, maintained and perpetuated the notions of gendered division of labour in terms of child care (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan, 2003, p 401).

Child and family welfare professionals in these agencies can be either uncertain about their role in involving fathers or even actively hostile in the case of non-resident fathers where there is ongoing parental conflict (Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Richardson, 2002). As Walsh has observed, despite attempts over time to rebalance services away from the child protection mode, towards a broader family preservation family support or child welfare paradigms, the child protection discourse has generally remained resistant to change (Walsh, 2010, p 275, cited in Featherstone *et al.*, 2010).

Whilst non-government family and child welfare services have limited statutory requirement to promote the welfare of children and work with families, they can be potentially more active by including fathers in assessing and using the parenting resources available in families (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004).

2.3 Fathers in child and family welfare research

There is now a significant body of literature from the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia concerned with the practices by professionals in child and family welfare engaging solely with mothers and ignoring or avoiding the fathers (Fleming 2007; Fleming and King, 2010). These concerns have been raised in the family and children's welfare industry which include such services as parenting programs, child protection, schools and early learning programs (Richardson, 1998; Bartlett and Plows, 1999; Ghatge *et al.*, 2000; King, 2000, 2001, 2005; Lloyd, 2001; Fleming, 2002, 2007; Fletcher, Silberberg and Baxter, 2001; UnitingCare Burnside 2003; Burgess and Ruxton 1996; Clawley and Goldman 2004; Burwick and Bellotti, 2005; Ashley *et al.*, 2006, Burgess, 2005; Strega *et al.*, 2008b). A review of this literature from the UK (O'Hagan and Dillenger 1995; Scourfield 2002; Milner 2004; Featherstone 2009), Canada (Brown *et al.*, 2009a), the USA (Berger *et al.*, 2009; Bellamy 2009; Raichel, 2009) Israel (Davidson-Arad *et al.*, 2008), and Germany (Sabla, 2007) on fathers and practice absence in child and family welfare and social work, consistently demonstrated that child and family welfare professionals are focused on the mothering role, and gave little attention to the role of fathers, fathering and fatherhood discourse, as highlighted through the research literature..

Ferguson and Hogan (2004) undertook research into child and family welfare professional practice. In their study they conducted semi-structured interviews with fathers, mothers, children and professionals. Of the 19 professionals in their study, eight were statutory social workers employed in Health Board community care teams and 11 were family centre workers. Separate semi-structured interview schedules were constructed for the fathers and mothers, children and professionals (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, pp 6-9). They concluded that the professionals did ignore fathers and that father avoidance was entrenched in the professional practice. They found that it was the personal biographies of workers together with their own constructions of gender and parenting that significantly contributed to the invisibility of fathers in practice. Their study identified that social welfare professionals would base their assessment and decision to involve fathers on the basis of their physical appearance (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p 33). Constructions of gender and parenting by workers were also found in a study conducted by Douglas and Walsh (2010).

The study focused as it was on the relationship between understandings of domestic violence and the child protection response of child protection, found that there was a lack of understanding among child protection workers about the dynamics of, and issues related to, domestic violence. They identified that:

According to several of the participants in our study, these assessments can lead to children being removed from the mother (who is judged as failing to protect the children) and placed in the care of the father (the perpetrator of the violence against the mother). For example, one study participant stated, "Our experience is that Child Protection will give the children to [fathers] . . . who have long histories of violence." (Douglas and Walsh, 2010, p 494).

They also made several key observations with respect to how child protection workers do their job:

1. That child protection workers often assume that mothers have the primary care responsibility for children;
2. That child protection workers often assume that mothers are responsible for any domestic violence in the home;
3. That child protection workers typically hold mothers responsible for failing to protect their children from domestic violence;
4. That child protection workers will commonly issue mothers with an ultimatum to either leave violent relationships or lose their children; and
5. That child protection workers will commonly refuse to support mothers who are caught up in violent relationships (Douglas and Walsh, 2010, pp 493-503).

They concluded that there is much pressure on frontline child protection workers in terms of too many clients and not enough supervision. The focus of child protection workers is an entrenched practice fixated on fixing defective mothers (Douglas and Walsh, 2010, p 495).

2.3.1 Fathers as risks in families

The role of men in families, as viewed by child and family welfare practice, has been characterised by the belief that men do not play a very active role in family life and that they are risks to families and children (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). Analysis within a practice situation often has been dependent on perceptions of social workers, who spend considerable time focusing on mothers, ignoring, or avoiding fathers or father figures, who do actually pose a risk to children and mothers (Cruz 2002; Milner 2004; Dubowitz 2006; Fletcher and Visser, 2008). Furthermore, in child protection cases, women often are held accountable, even when they themselves are victims of abuse by the male in the home.

This has been identified as ‘patriarchal mothering’ a situation where women are often ‘held responsible in law, social service practice and psychological theory for child abuse, even when the mother and child are being abused by a male perpetrator’ (Stark and Flitcraft, 1988, p 98). Furthermore the attitudes of health and welfare workers concerned with children and families portray ambivalence about the role men play in the home - trouble if they are there and trouble if they are not (Edwards, 1998, p 260).

Instead of trying to work with the father, the response by professionals is to continue to concentrate on the woman’s role. If the fathers are the non-abusing parent, they are expected to protect the child or children. If the fathers are the perpetrator, the mothers are expected to change their behaviour (Dempster 1993; O’Hagan 1997; Featherstone 1997; Christie 1998; Scourfield 2001; Daniel *et al.*, 2005).

Jonathon Scourfield (2002), a former probation officer and drug rehabilitation worker, now working as an academic at Cardiff University, undertook ethnographic research in relation to gender constructs in the area of child protection. His research focused on exploring the organisational, or industry, culture and the knowledge and values of professionals that influence contemporary social work regarding the area of child welfare. Scourfield’s (2002) research in a social work team, focused on how clients were constructed as gendered in the office culture. Scourfield observed interactions in the office, including team meetings and supervisions, conducted in-depth interviews with staff, and read case files. He identified within child protection work how male and female clients were constructed as different. In his study he found much of the discourse around masculinity within child protection agencies was negative.

Scourfield identified six differing constructs of male clients, relevant to the child protection process: men as a threat; men as of no use; men as irrelevant; men as absent; men as no different from women, and men as no better than women (Scourfield, 2002, p 105). Social workers, according to Scourfield's research, applied a rigid template to physical and sexual abusers all of whom were regarded as recidivist offenders with no possibility of change.

The mothers in the study were expected to make a choice between their partner and their child or children, and if they did not choose their children, they were seen by social workers as 'failing to protect and seen to transgress' (Scourfield, 1999, p 97). Social workers in his study constructed men as being of no use, meaning that they were not contributing to the child's well-being. 'Men as irrelevant' were seen as having little to do with household or outside employment. These views of men by workers often evoked office humour and irreverent comments. When in a childcare situation, men were seen as either rare or incompetent. This type of gendered construct justified their reasons for not engaging with them:

There were various ways in which it was explained that working with men is not always part of the job. If a man is in prison, it is not part of the job to go and see him. Pragmatic considerations can mean that men are not worked with. For example, in the case of a man who is violent to his women partner it is not considered part of the job to work with him to change his behavior but rather to pressurize the woman to leave him, thus protecting the children (Scourfield, 2001, p 14)

This meant that decisions not to work with violent men were based wholly on focusing on females leaving the relationship. 'A man as absent' was a construct where a man's legal status or abusive behaviours rendered them non-clients.

If the safety for the child was the priority, it meant the worker would concentrate on the child's mother. These men may be outside the home or away when the social workers call on a visit. The 'men as no different from women' construction described that in some families the man and woman are as bad as each other. Finally discourse of 'men being better than women' occurred in a small number of cases, in which the woman was identified as failing in her expected role as mother and the man was seen as capable in contrast to the woman. The construction of gender within child protection work described by Scourfield (2001) unfairly designates to the mother the majority of the workload for making the family safe. It also has the potential to infer that these women are putting their own needs before those of their children when they do not comply with a worker's direction for these changes. (O'Hagan 1997; Dubowitz 2006; Featherstone, 2006).

This focus upon the mother for protection leads professionals to see that fathers are less significant in the process of protecting children largely due to the gendered nature of practice in child and family welfare (Trotter 1997; D'Cruz 2002; Scourfield 2002; Dubowitz 2006; Christie, 2006).

2.3.2 Fathers as resources in families

Expectations of fathers have changed, and many fathers in Australia today are facing role confusion. Fatherhood, according to Lupton and Barclay, is a phenomenon, around which many and often competing discourses exist and where there is no one fixed way of representing fatherhood (Lupton and Barclay, 1997, p 9).

Fathers can contribute a lot to families and children such as developmental benefits in early child development (Reyes, 2009) and emotional well-being in adolescent development (Neilson, 2001).

Collier and Sheldon, however, argue that fatherhood in contemporary society, is more open-ended and fluid than ever before, and can no longer be understood in a conventional way through the binaries of 'good' and 'bad' dads, or 'new' and 'traditional', but must be seen as complex and ever changing (Collier and Sheldon 2008, p 236) . Similarly, Dermott argues that the routes to fatherhood are diverse and multiple, preferring to speak of a collection of fatherhoods (Dermott, 2008, p 24). The role of a father as provider and nurturer, has gained increased prominence since the 1980s. Researchers and other professionals recognise that men as well as women can be engaged in caring for, and having healthy relationships with children (Pruett, 1989). This, usually, is referred to as 'non-deficit perspectives' to fathering, where men take an active role in family life and the care of children (King, 2005, p 2). While there is merit in seeing fathers play an active role in family life, the child welfare literature reflects an opposite view of the roles of fathers (Green and Moore 2000; Coley, 2001).

In Grief and Bailey's (1990) review of five major social work journals over a 27-year span, they found that mothers featured more frequently and that the prevalence of research in terms of their role primarily concerned gender issues in respect to parenting. Furthermore, the articles on fathers focused narrowly on fathers as perpetrators, missing, and embattled.

Their conclusion was that if social workers understood fathers, their understanding was not gleaned from their reading of major journals in their field (Shapiro and Krysik, 2010, p 3). These restricted perceptions can create an unhealthy picture of fathering and father stereotypes, misconstruing the motives, feelings, attitudes and hopes of most fathers (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997; Scourfield 2001; Dubowitz, 2006). The role of the mother, according to the research literature, is assumed to be filled by a primary care-taking, biological mother whereas the role of the father could be filled by any number of male individual types, such as the biological father, the step-father, or a father-figure, any of whom may or may not live with the child (Phares *et al.*, 2005, p 631). Researchers often assume that men may refuse to take part, or be available, so are not usually considered when framing the studies (Lamb 1975; Haskett *et al.*, 1996; Seiffge-Krenke, 2002).

However, Phares (1992, 1996) in reviewing the literature on participation rates of mothers and fathers, concluded there was no evidence that fathers were more difficult to recruit for research purposes, or less likely to participate (Haskett *et al.*, 1996). In response to the many ‘deficit theories’ surrounding absent fathers, few authors have taken up the challenge to unpack the most fundamental construct of fathering, commonly referred to as a ‘non-deficit perspective’. The idea of systematic theory-building about fathers from a non-deficit perspective has been developed through the work of Doherty *et al.*, (1998) and Dollahite *et al.*, (1997).

These researchers conceptualise fathering as generative work, or work that is part of the life cycle, as opposed just to a ‘socially’ constructed role. This indicates a shift from the dominant binary and societal perspective of fathers as either risk or resource or good and bad fathers (Featherstone *et al* 2007a, p 2), to the role of fatherhood as a developmental perspective or journey (Hawkins *et al.*, 1993). Generative fathering, as a theory, refers to paternal conduct driven by the physical, emotional and cognitive needs of a child. Generative fathering as a type of involved fathering implies that a father is focused on affectionately nurturing his child and improving the well-being of his children, instead of merely conforming to what is stipulated by society and cultural norms, with regard to paternal role obligations (Fleming 2002, 2007; King and Fletcher, 2007). The generative fathering framework is based on two main ideas, that human context creates needs in the next generation, and that fathers have an ethical responsibility to meet, with fathers and their children all benefiting and developing from this work (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997, p 4).

Within the framework of generative fathering, key concepts such as ethical work, stewardship work, developmental work, and relationship work, are integral. Ethical work is about commitment to providing a secure, trustworthy environment, responsive to the needs of children. Stewardship work involves a dedicated effort in providing resources for children and the family, and providing opportunities for children to develop and learn. Developmental work involves a caring effort in sustaining healthy development and adaptability, across time and circumstance. Relationship work is the devoted effort used in order to facilitate attachments and understandings between children and others, and develop a child’s ability to understand the needs of others (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997, pp 27-29).

The Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) argument offers a useful, alternative view to fathering, as opposed to social role approaches already documented. In reality, many fathers are still seen as an all or nothing scenario in family life, and social workers' concerns focus on the problems associated with their absence from family life, rather than promoting a father's potential strengths (Gillingham 2004; Smit 2004; King 2005; Fleming and King, 2010).

2.3.4 Summary

In summary, the considerable evidence from these researchers, covering the key themes that emerge from the literature that is representative of fathers as risks and fathers as resources, suggests that blaming mothers while ignoring fathers is not only a barrier for effective practice but also prevents the opportunity for practitioners to widen their theoretical base with fathers, mothers and children (O'Hagan, 1997) .

2.4 Fathers in special circumstances

There is a slowly growing body of literature that focuses attention on fathers in special circumstances, such as young (teenage) fathers, incarcerated fathers, disabled fathers, fathers who are perpetrators of family violence, separated and divorced fathers and drug-taking fathers. These groups often are described in the literature as vulnerable and hard to reach, as they do not fall neatly into the traditional definition of fatherhood (Bellamy 2009, Berger *et al.*, 2009).

They often are seen to be marginalised from mainstream parenting services and stereotyped as hard to reach. Yet, each of these groups is representative of the diversity that exists when we look deeper into fatherhood as a social and cultural construct in our society, even though these father types are not fully represented or understood in the research literature.

2.4.1 Young fathers

Young fathers are defined in the literature as males under the age of 24. They often are in a relationship with a younger female, usually between the ages of 18-19 years (Dudley 2007). In the somewhat limited literature about young fathers in the UK and the United States, suggestions imply that their circumstances and backgrounds are very similar to teen mothers (Bunting and McAuley, 2004). However, the degree to which their involvement in family life as fathers occurs is mediated by contextual circumstances, such as whether they are employed or have financial, peer and family support (Rhein *et al.*, 1997; Bunting and McAuley, 2004).

Other literature suggests that there is no single barrier to being an effective father, rather that there is a series of barriers young fathers face as opposed to what older fathers face. These barriers impacting on young fathers and their capacity to care for a child, can be caused by role confusion associated with being both a young adolescent and a parent (Kahn and Bolton, 1986) having, or being in, an at risk group that suffers higher rates of depression (Miller, 1994), and having a general lack of preparedness for fatherhood (Guterman and Lee, 2005).

Services for young fathers need to take these important factors into consideration, as the birth of a child represents a major life-changing event, and can offer an opportunity for young fathers to move away from being marginalised (Florsheim and Ngu, 2003). Despite this opportunity to engage young fathers, services on the whole are not working effectively with these fathers (Strega *et al.*, 2009).

They mostly are ignored, continue to be marginalised, often are made to feel uncomfortable by child health and family welfare services, may not be informed of their legal rights, and generally do not feel welcomed at family support groups for parents (Speak *et al.*, 1997; Quinton *et al.*, 2002; McKinnon *et al.*, 2001; Bunting and McAuley, 2004). A key challenge for child and family services working with young fathers, is to see them as a unique and significant group when dealing with children and families, as this group often is rendered invisible by social workers (Quinton and Pollock 2002; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). Rendering them invisible only reinforces moral panic about what these fathers cannot provide, rather than reinforcing what they would like and are keen to provide (Duncan, 2007, p 318).

2.4.2 Incarcerated fathers

As of June 30, 2007, there were 25,240 persons in custody in Australian prisons, 22 per cent of whom were on remand (ABS 2007a). The Australian indigenous imprisonment rate was almost fourteen times higher than the rate for non-indigenous persons. Indigenous prisoners comprised twenty-one per cent of the total prisoner population in 2004 (AIC, 2006).

Only in the last few years has the effect of incarceration of a parent on children been recognised in the research literature (Western 2000; Howard 2000; Cunningham 2001; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Flynn 2008; Walker, 2009). The research identifies the many factors that complicate relationships between incarcerated fathers and their children. Incarcerated fathers, and also mothers, often are rendered unimportant, due to distance from their children. Opportunities to parent are consequently narrowly proscribed, because of their status as a prisoner (Healy *et al.*; Howard 1994; Howard 2000; Flynn, 2008). Security and safety are the core concerns of the prison system, not families, and therefore this creates difficulties in the maintaining of relationships between prisoners and their children, including adolescents (Morris *et al.*, 1995; Caddle and Crisp 1997; Flynn, 2008). The regulating of outside communication with family members, whether via mail, telephone or a visit, was not found to be sensitive or flexible to a family's needs. In addition, incarcerated fathers often are viewed by child welfare services as being uninvolved or absent from decision-making, and sometimes can be seen as poor role models (Howard, 2000). As offenders these fathers are deemed to be dangerous and unreachable and professionals can become fixated on images of dangerousness (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p 93).

However, as Ferguson and Hogan commented: in general, there is nothing to suggest that vulnerable fathers love their children any less than other men (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p 54). In a study by Hairston (1995), it was found that fathers in prison often were seen only with regard to their prison status and not as a parent. The study, which surveyed 126 men, most of whom were under 40 years and serving long prison terms in a maximum security prison, examined incarcerated fathers' familial relationships.

It found overall, that fathers' familial relationships were weak. Contact with children was limited and thirty per cent of surveyed men had not seen their children since imprisonment and less than half had seen their children during the six months prior to the survey (Hairston, 1995, p 33). There were many reasons given by these fathers for the lack of visitation. The two most important reasons given were firstly, that the child had no one to bring him or her to visit, and secondly, that the mothers of the children did not want them to visit their fathers. The study highlighted that despite the low frequency of visits, these fathers continually expressed genuine interest, sharing concerns with others about their children and their well-being. It concluded that although incarcerated fathers were not visited frequently by their children, they were concerned about them and would like to have been better parents, needing assistance in learning how to become involved with their children in positive ways.

2.4.3 Disabled fathers

According to recent literature there is a lack of information about disabled fathers as parents, and what role they play in family life (Priestley 2000; Olsen and Clarke 2003; Kilkey 2007; Kilkey and Clarke, 2007). The main reason for this is that, as fathers, they occupy an incongruous position in discourses on 'fathering and disability' (Olsen and Clarke, 2003). Furthermore, because fathering often involves an economic breadwinning role, fathers with a disability are not seen as having the capacity to play a role in family life and therefore are rendered invisible (Lewis, 2000).

An ongoing research study conducted by Kilkey (2007) on disabled fathers and their experiences, found that disabled fathers were the least likely to be engaged by social care services, that these fathers experienced difficulties in being recognised as fathers because their disability preceded their fatherhood role. In circumstances where both parents were disabled, social care services were particularly interventionist with those fathers who had a learning disability (Kilkey, 2007, p 21).

This finding also fits in with Scourfield's (2006) account about the attitudes of some practitioners, who in general, view fathers as irrelevant to their children's lives (Scourfield, 2006, p 443). Disabled fathers thus will remain marginalised, because parenting is seen as the dominant discourse which locates mothers in the caregiver role, not disabled fathers. This attitude towards disabled fathers inadvertently will displace disabled fathers from social work practice.

2.4.4 Fathers and family violence

Violent men, as fathers or caregivers whether separated or divorced, belong to another group that has been overlooked in socio-legal research literature, as well as in policy formation and practice, in the UK, Australia, and elsewhere (Daniel and Taylor 1999; Eriksson and Hester 2001; Harne 2004; Coohy 2006; Scourfield 2006; Featherstone and Peckover 2007b; Collier and Sheldon 2008; Lapierre, 2009). The two main reasons cited for the lack of focus on violent men, are firstly, because family violence has not been seen in context with the physical abuse of children and secondly, these men as fathers have avoided the attention of social workers and other professionals (Brown *et al.*, 2000; Featherstone and Peckover, 2007b).

The threat of or actual violence or intimidation by male service users has been cited as a key reason why practitioners avoid or neglect to engage with fathers (Littlechild and Bourke 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2009b; Kaspiw *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, this leaves mothers to primarily ensure a child's safety to the satisfaction of social workers (Milner 2004; Featherstone and Peckover, 2007b) and, if they fail to protect, there is emphasis on these mothers being deficient (Lapierre, 2008, p 456). Particular groups of fathers are identified in the literature, as being at greater risk of perpetrating family violence. These groups are predominantly those fathers who are unemployed and young/adolescent, inexperienced fathers, who have children under the age of five years in their care (Coohey, 2006, p 468). Furthermore, research on fathers who perpetrate family violence, shows that there is a correlation between the amount of time a father spends in caring for children and doing household tasks, and the incidence of family violence (Featherstone and Peckover 2007; Coohey, 2006).

In this context, the lack of attention on fathers who perpetrate family violence, and abusive men as fathers, enables them to remain absent and avoided by social workers until more constructive ways of thinking about how family violence and gender intersect with children and family life (Featherstone and Peckover, 2007b, p 196).

2.4.5 Separated and divorced fathers

In the last fifty years, a father's relationship with his children is occurring outside of the traditional nuclear family (Walter, 2000a). In addition, a growing number of non-custodial, single and unwed fathers add to the number of children who no longer live within a nuclear family situation.

Australian research (Smyth 2004; 2005) indicates that 26% of children have contact with their fathers less than once per year and 4% of children rarely or never see their non-resident parent (typically their father). Reasons for this may include issues or allegations involving child protection, domestic violence, and conflict with the mother of their children or issues about how the father copes with the legal and social issues surrounding the separation (King and Fletcher, 2007, p 21).

As a result of this change, both in Australia and elsewhere, there has been an increasing interest in how fathers can share the care of children following divorce or separation provided it is safe to do so (Smyth *et al.*, 2004; Smyth 2005; Collier and Sheldon, 2008). Changes to the Australian family law system, which include new services, legal processes and new legislation, has attempted to place fathers back into children's lives regardless of where these fathers reside or how frequent they may see their children (Caruana, 2007, p 44).

Prior to the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parenting Responsibility) Act of 2006 (Cth)*, most of the debate around parenting separation remained entrenched in mathmatising time rather than looking at the quality of the parent (father) - child relationship (Smyth, 2009, p 36). With the introduction of *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parenting Responsibility) Act of 2006 (Cth)*, shared parenting was introduced to redress mathmatising time for families post-separation. However it does not automatically guarantee that all fathers will take this up this option (Smyth, 2009, p 40). There are many models of non-resident parent-child contact have emerged and that have been used by parents or applied through courts of law (Jenkins, 2006, p 4).

The more frequently applied or interpreted models in Australia have been researched by Smyth (2005). Smyth's research, which was undertaken on father-child contact post-separation and divorce, identified five different patterns of father-child contact. These are 50/50 shared care, little or no contact, holiday-only contact, daytime-only contact and 'standard' contact (Smyth, 2005, p 1). According to Smyth's (2005) research, 50/50 patterns of father-child contact was the preferred option. However, for many parents who chose this pattern of contact, there were complexities including change-over arrangements, the requirement to have flexible work arrangements, and the need to keep track of schoolbooks and equipment as the children moved between households. Nonetheless the 50/50 pattern was preferred, mostly as it allowed both parents to have a life socially and space to organise their week during the time apart from their children (Smyth, 2005, pp 7 - 8).

In Smyth's (2005) research little or no contact pattern, fathers saw themselves as being excluded, whereas the mothers saw the fathers as excluding themselves from the contact. The main reason behind the little or no contact pattern was that many fathers in the focus group reported conflict with their former spouse which they perceived as maternal obstruction, thus leading them to disengage from their children. It was also acknowledged that the children in this situation were caught up in the conflict leading to intermittent or no contact arrangements (Smyth 2005, p 9). The holiday only contact pattern was related to the geographical distance and relocation of one or both separated parents. Thus contact was built around school holidays and chunks of time to meet the needs of the parent's employment/ career arrangements. This type of contact was seen by the participants in his study as being problematic for a number of reasons.

These included resident parents not having enough respite time away from their children due to time constraints around annual leave, the non-resident parent in securing enough leave to facilitate the contact, and not knowing when the contact would occur to assist with work and travel arrangements (Smyth, 2005, pp 12-13). Daytime-only contact pattern is more time limited and structured around mutually rewarding leisure activities than overnight stays. Although according to Smyth daytime-only contact can be beneficial, it potentially limits the non-resident father's time to get reacquainted with their child or children which are also necessary for children's social, emotional and cognitive development (Smyth, 2005, p 14). In addition, fathers with daytime-only contact were more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of the relationship with their former partner and also that time spent with their children, compared with 50/50 shared care or standard care, was also of concern.

Finally, the 'standard' contact pattern according to Smyth has been built around certain beliefs that parent-child contact occurs every alternate weekend and half school holidays and these are often embedded in traditional gender roles and work patterns (Smyth 2005, p 16) which will be discussed in more detail later this chapter. Despite this belief, participants in his study believed there was much more diversity in the 'standard' contact pattern where some arrangements included mid-week overnight stays in addition to weekends as well as no school holiday contact. The study also identified that parents may opt for 'standard' contact initially as they are unaware of any other feasible options (Smyth, 2005, p 17).

How shared time between fathers and children occur and is organised has now become more widely debated, focused on what fathers do with children during the shared parenting. The concept of ‘meaningful relationship’ is a key part of the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act of 2006 (Cth)* (Smyth *et al.*, 2004).

Whilst the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act of 2006 (Cth)* allows the child to spend substantial time with both parents, this requirement is subject to the wishes of the parents, any abuse towards the child, and whether such an order is ‘reasonably practicable’. Thus, there are certain limitations to shared parenting for both fathers and mothers. As discussed earlier in this chapter, in conjunction with these shared parenting requirements, Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) were established to assist families through the process of separating (Moloney, 2006). An important element in the successful mediation provided to families at FRC’s in post-separation parenting disputes is the engagement of fathers.

It has been argued that gender differences have not been considered when mediation is offered, particularly when a father’s personal well-being is under threat (Fletcher and Visser 2008; Fletcher, 2010). This is particularly important where methods currently employed by service providers, prove more conducive to engaging women than men.

2.4.6 Summary

When identifying how to involve fathers in a child's development, it is important to consider how families have changed in society and what these changes have meant for the role of a mother and father.

Evidence from the literature suggest that the nuclear family has been slowly declining with increasing numbers of people being raised in family structures quite different from the norm. As a consequence, father types and the roles they play are also now more diverse and include young (teenage) fathers, incarcerated fathers, disabled fathers, fathers who are perpetrators of family violence, separated and divorced fathers and drug-taking fathers. Engaging fathers in this new context has been a challenge to both child and family welfare services, practitioners and the legal system. Responses to these challenges in Australia has primarily resulted in a number of reforms to family law legislation, as described above, and has attempted to place fathers back into children's lives regardless of where these fathers reside or how frequent they may see their children.

2.5 Changes to the Australian family

There is significant evidence that Australian families have undergone considerable change over the last fifty years (Wise 2003; de Vaus, 2004). The family was a heterosexual nuclear family, established through legal marriage (Fineman, 1994, p 14). It was the core by which we as a society respond to social and economic changes (Wise, 2003, p 4).

In Australia, major changes occurring within families have reflected demographic, social and economic trends as well as changing values, attitudes and aspirations (Fleming 2007; Collier and Sheldon, 2008). It is within this socially sanctioned form of the family that modern society has today been assisted in responding to the rapid social, economic, legal and cultural developments of post-war Australia (Collier and Sheldon, 2008, p 11). These changes to families have occurred in the areas of marriage and partnering; divorce and separation; workforce participation; decline in fertility rates, and changes to parenting roles (Gilding 2001; Hugo 2001; Weston *et al.*, 2001).

2.5.1 Marriage and partnering

According to a number of leading commentators on the family in Australia (Gilding 1991, 2001; Edgar 1992; Hughes and Stone, 2003), the nuclear family consisting of two parents and their children, was more widespread than ever before in Australian history during the 1950s and 1960s. Households with domestic servants had all but disappeared, and the growth of the Australian welfare state meant that families were no longer required to accommodate additional relatives in times of crisis. Economic growth also during this time, described as the 'long boom' (Gilding, 2001, p 9), promoted marriage and family formation. As a result, more men and women married than in the previous fifty years, and they married earlier than they do today (Edgar 2000; Hays, 2008). More couples are now delaying marriage, and there is evidence of an increase in the number of couples cohabitating together with and without children.

For instance, the age for first marriage has risen from 21 years in the early 1970s, to 28 years in 2005 for women, and from 23 years to 30 years for men, during the same period (ABS 1980, 2006c).

2.5.2 Workforce participation

According to the research on families in Australia, work has become the main factor that affects the parenting roles of men and women (Gray *et al.*, 2003; Berlyn *et al.*, 2008). The male breadwinner role in Australia was supported through the Conciliation and Arbitration Court's decision in 1904, titled the Harvester judgment, to ensure all employers provide workers with a fair and reasonable minimum wage, covering a man and his family (Donaldson, 2006), with the assumption being that there would be only one male breadwinner supporting the family. Today, working mothers can provide an additional household income as an increasing number of women with children work either full-time or part-time (Baxter *et al.*, 2009). Mothers working and earning have altered the role of fathers as the sole breadwinner and have challenged the traditional notions of masculinity that had been linked to the world of work outside the home (Donaldson, 2006, p 51). The increase in employment for women (Gray *et al.*, 2003) has, however, not led to greater equality in the gender division of domestic labour, between working men and women. Women still continue to carry the greater responsibility for child rearing and other unpaid work (ABS 2006). Less time doing paid work for women often equates to more time spent in unpaid work (Bittman and Pixley, 1997).

Longer working hours has been regularly cited as the main reason for the absenteeism of men from their fathering roles (Baxter *et al.*, 2009). Longer working hours can adversely affect the practical ability of a father to attend appointments with health and family welfare services.

These services mostly operate between nine and five and thus often cannot be flexible to accommodate working fathers (Fletcher *et al.*, 2001; Fletcher and Visser 2008; Berlyn *et al.*, 2008). According to Hawkins and Dollahite, this makes these fathers physically present, but functionally absent in the private sphere (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997, p 7).

2.5.3 Divorce and separation

The increase in the divorce rate represents another important family trend of the 20th century. Divorce was rare prior to World War II. The rate declined slightly until the 1960s, when it began to rise substantially. Those who had married in the 1950s and 1960s had by the 1970s decided that divorce was an acceptable solution to unhappy relationships. The high divorce rate for this group is partly related to the early age at which many people married during the 1950s (McDonald, 1988, p 42). From 1966 to 2006, the number of children under 18 years, whose parents divorced, increased from 12,950 to 48,396, although it is important to note that proportionately, divorces involving parents of children in this age group declined from 65% to 50%. Given that some people cohabit, trends in divorce do not provide a full picture regarding the incidence of relationship separation, especially among younger couples (Western and Qu, 2006, p 9).

Higher rates of separation and divorce as well as the increase in a variety of one-parent families, including parents who have never-married has contributed to the dramatic changing nature of family formation. (Campbell and Charlesworth 2004; ABS, 2006b).

An Australian Bureau of Statistics report (2008) highlighted, that in 2006-07 there were more than one million children in Australia under the age of 18, who were living with one natural parent and having another parent living elsewhere. In nearly all situations, it was the result of a breakdown in relationships or marriage. The consequence of family breakdown has often led to fathers being absent, or fathers absenting themselves from their child's life. Sometimes this is a result of fathers not being able to access their children through the legal system and feeling disenfranchised (Braver and O'Connell 1998; Strega *et al.*, 2009), or as a result of them moving into other new relationships (Smyth and Moloney, 2008).

2.5.4 Family Law

The changing nature of family law broadly reflects the patterns of social change experienced in Australia over the last century. It has been argued that the *Family Law Act (1975)* has been a major driver behind how families are constructed in today's society, and that it has challenged and changed the traditional concept of the nuclear family and the relationships within (Collier and Sheldon, 2008). The best interest of the child principle has been retained throughout the various amendments of the Act over the last 30 years, but the current debates and conflict has been how to interpret these best interests.

The Family Law Act and the subsequent amendments has sought to deflect disputing parents away from the courts, to minimise the adversarial nature of proceedings involving issues related to children and also to encourage a culture of cooperative parenting following separation (Kaspiew *et al.*, 2009; Australian Law Reform Commission 2010). In this way, the legislation concerning parents has aimed to achieve the strongly normative goal of changing parental behaviour after separation and divorce.

Since 1975 there have been a series of amendments to the *Family Law Act*. Family Law legislation was amended to remove the concept of seeing children as ‘property’ in family law disputes, and moved towards parental obligations and responsibilities (Fletcher and Visser, 2008). The introduction of the *Family Law Reform Act 1995 (Cth) (Reform Act)* was an important part of the Federal Governments policy agenda to increase fathers’ participation in family life. It was introduced to achieve the strongly normative goal of changing parental behaviour after divorce.

In June 1996 it came into effect, and made major changes to Division VII of the *Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) (FLA)*, which governs disputes over children in the context of family breakdown. These changes embodied the legislature’s aspiration for post-separation parenting to be conducted co-operatively in their children’s lives after separation and allowed more opportunity for children to have contact with both parents, as well as any other significant people in their lives (Harrison, 2007, p 21).

In July 2006 the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parenting Responsibility) Act of 2006 (Cth)* came into effect. According to Brown (2009) this new legislation had grown out of dissatisfaction regarding many issues relating to post-separation parenting, including dissatisfaction:

- that fathers were treated less well than were mothers in disputes about parenting,
- that fathers were not sufficiently involved in their children's lives following separation,
- that domestic violence was not being addressed appropriately,
- that the child support formulae were not fair, especially to second families,
- that the family law socio-legal services system was confused and confusing with no clarity or consistency,
- that that system did not provide sufficient mediation resources,
- that legal practitioners inflamed rather than calmed partnership disputes, and
- that recourse to the courts to settle such disputes was expensive, slow and not necessarily beneficial for parents and children (Brown, 2009, p 12).

Under the 2006 legislation, each parent has responsibility for their children, unless otherwise provided by a court order. Sharing of parental responsibility essentially creates an obligation on both parents to consult with each other and reach an agreement on long term issues for their child or children which include religion, culture, health and even the child's name. The child's best interests are still the paramount consideration in making a parenting order and the new section of the Act develops a two tier approach to determining the child's best interests, primary considerations and additional considerations. Primary considerations include the benefit to the child of having a meaningful relationship with both parents and the need to protect the child from emotional or physical harm (ALRC, 2010). Additional considerations include the willingness and ability of the parents to facilitate and encourage a close and continuing relationship between the child and the other parent.

This currently has raised concerns by some advocacy groups about the effect of this provision where there has been the presence of domestic violence or children who have witnessed domestic violence (Harrison, 2007, p 30). Amendments to the *Act* have also introduced parenting plans. Parenting plans are any agreement on parenting issues, written and signed by the parties. Unlike parenting orders there is no mechanism to make them enforceable.

Along with the introduction of the *Act*, Family Relationship Centres (FRC's) were established throughout Australia. These Family Relationship Centres are places where practitioners conduct family law dispute resolution processes without lawyers being present and offer, or link through referrals, a range of services including family dispute resolution and counselling (Fletcher and Visser, 2008, p 55). In addition to these Centres, the legislation mandated that divorcing couples must seek Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) such as mediation before applying for a Parenting Order through the Family Court of Australia or Federal Magistrates Court. Family dispute resolution is guided, under the Family Law Act, toward agreement on a parenting plan, a non-binding written agreement between parents relating to parenting responsibilities post-separation.

The requirement to undergo family dispute resolution does not apply where there is family violence or abuse or the risk of family violence or abuse (Family Law Council 2006). This process is known as Compulsory Family Dispute Resolution (CFDR).

The changes are based on the presumption that where possible, both parents will have an equal role in making decisions about major long-term issues involving the children. This presumption does not apply in cases where there are reasonable grounds to believe that there is family violence or abuse (New South Wales Parliament Legislative Council: Standing Committee on Law and Justice (2006)).

By emphasising both parents' roles, the *Family Law Amendment Act 2006 (Cth)* is far more inclusive of fathers than previous legislation. Once again, the rationale behind these initiatives aims to achieve the strongly normative goal of changing parental behaviour after separation and divorce.

2.5.5 Fertility rates

Changes in fertility rates in Australia represent another dramatic change to family formation. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined from the 1961 level of 3.5 to the current level of 1.7 in 2006 (ABS, 2006d). Reasons for the decline in the fertility rate include women's ability to control reproduction through the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill in 1961, the availability of abortion, and supposedly through their increased participation in the labour force (Paice, 2003). While total fertility rates over the last decade have been the lowest on record, the proportion of children born outside marriage has increased progressively, from around 4-6% of total births in the early 1960s to 33% in 2006 (Qu and Weston, 2008, p 14).

Although it is not clear how many of these children were born to cohabiting couples, the increase in the ex-nuptial birth rate corresponds with the increased number of cohabiting couples and with an increased proportion of babies having birth certificates containing the father's name. The proportion of birth certificates containing the father's name increased from 58% in 1980 to 90% in 2006 (ABS, 2001, 2007b).

2.5.6 Parenting roles

Throughout the last fifty years the main basis for parenting in Australia has come from the establishment of a committed relationship between two adults who cohabit. Today, this no longer is the case, as changing patterns of family formation appear to be more closely intertwined with a shift away from traditional divisions of labour between men and women, to more emphasis on both fathers and mothers sharing the role of parenting children (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008, p 3).

Social expectations of parents, regarding the socialisation and development of children driven by policy and legislative changes, have added to the rhetoric and the reality of what constitutes 'good parenting'. Contemporary parents in Australia are now faced with a complex and challenging set of responsibilities that differ vastly from those experienced by their own mothers and fathers, over the last fifty years (Bowes and Hayes 1997; de Vaus, 2004). The role of being a parent can be hindered or enhanced, depending on the types of support available to families. For example, in Australia, despite 'family-friendly' work initiatives, broader policy changes (market de-regulation and changes in the nature of work) are making it difficult for parents today, especially mothers, to combine parenting and paid work (Probert, 1999, p 64). Furthermore, the review of the literature suggests that more than ever, personal preferences concerning lifestyle choices beyond parenting, for women in particular, have increased as a result of social attitudes, economic changes, and social policies (Hakim 1996, 2000, 2003). However, despite these changes, Australian studies about the division of labour within the home, indicate that women are still responsible for most domestic labour, especially the caring of children (Bittman *et al.*, 2000; Craig, 2005).

Studies have also shown that child and family welfare services (including non-social work professionals and services) that are designed to support families are more likely to engage with mothers rather than fathers because mothering equates with parenting and child care tasks (Daniel and Taylor 2001; Doucet 2006; Dermott 2008; Raichel, 2009). This focus on motherhood fails to take into consideration that pathways to becoming a mother today are more diverse than fifty years ago. Now mothers can be married, single, employed, or same sex partnered. Similarly, fathers also have these choices, but the practice research literature has only recently begun to acknowledge this reality (Peterson and Steinmetz, 2000, p 316). Non-traditional family forms such as single-parent families, step and blended families, same-sex couples with children, and foster families, are becoming an increasingly common feature of Australia's childrearing landscape. Declining rates of marriage and fertility, rising divorce rates and other social trends mean that fewer people will live in the ideal family of a 'nuclear family'.

It is therefore important to understand the sources of family diversity and the impact of diversity on family members themselves and what this impact this has on being a father and fatherhood today.

2.5.7 Australian fatherhood

Although there is lack of agreement by researchers and commentators on what it means to be a father (Palkovitz, 2002, pp 4-5), the commonly accepted term is taken to mean: males caring, fostering, nurturing and teaching babies and children, and is not restricted to biologically- based parenting (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002 cited in Berlyn *et al.*, 2008, p 10).

Father substitutes which are termed 'social fathers', can be either intra-familial or extra-familial. Intra-familial can include uncles and stepfathers (Fleming, 2007). Extra-familial father figures include adult friends of the parents, teachers, sports coaches, religious leaders, and for adolescents and adults, social workers/counsellors/youth workers and mentors. Fatherhood, like motherhood, is not value free, and is constructed socially and culturally around certain pre-formed beliefs and assumptions about the status and role.

Fathers who are physically present and provide for their family and children are accorded the status of 'good dad', whilst fathers who are elsewhere are seen as bad or irresponsible (Scourfield, 2001), for example as in 'deadbeat dads' as described in debates around fathers not providing child support (Bartfield and Meyer 1994; Sullivan 2001; Collier and Sheldon, 2008), despite the fact that fathers may remain involved at some level (Pleck and Pleck, 1997).

In Western society this dominant view, of fathers needing to be physically present rather than absent, has been built around the marriage contract. The research paper *Fatherhood: Legal, Biological and Social Definitions* (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002), provides a helpful summary of varying as well as competing conceptions about the term father, and fatherhood. The authors explore a range of understandings that currently exist within both the legal and social environments, and challenge the simplistic notion about fatherhood being linked solely to biology. Fletcher and Willoughby (2002) argue that there is an adequate theoretical basis for recognising fatherhood as being both biologically linked and socially constructed.

It is the attribution of the status of 'father', based on the legislated notion, that they say forms only part of the definition which is needed to properly promote children's well-being (Fletcher and Willoughby, 2002, pp 13-14). Their research paper also offers a rethinking of fathers and fathering in general, as well as acknowledging the current types of fathers including those who are absent or appear to be absent from family life. Fathers come in a variety of types in contemporary society and the many father types reflect the diversity of fatherhood. Fathers can be biological, be non-biological, such as de-facto fathers, step-fathers, adoptive fathers, uncles, grandfathers, or an older sibling placed in the father role. These alternate forms of fathers often are categorised under the term known as 'social fathering' (Lewis and Lamb, 2007, p 17).

In the last fifty years, single mother families and step-father families have reduced the presence of biological fathers in nuclear families (Lewis and O'Brien 1987; de Vaus, 2004). Increasingly, a father's relationship with his children is occurring outside the traditional nuclear family (Walter, 2000a). The growing numbers of non-custodial, single and unwed fathers, add to the number of children who no longer live within a 'nuclear' situation. The role of fathers varies substantially across social and cultural contexts, and the social construction of fathers, families, and father absence, is constantly undergoing redefinition (Bartlett, 2004, p 159). As mothers are more likely to end a relationship, re-establishing their lives with their child or children, many fathers enter the role of what has previously been referred to as the 'non-resident father' (Seltzer 1991; Seltzer and Brandreth, 1994).

This is now more appropriately termed ‘non-primary care fathers’ and reflects the different ways fathers can be involved with their children post-separation and divorce (Jenkins and Lyons, 2006). As discussed previously in this chapter, there are many factors that influence non-primary care fathers’ contact and interactions with their children, including interpersonal conflict with the resident parent, work commitments, and re-partnering (Collier and Sheldon, 2008). However the quality or nature of the time non-resident fathers and children spend together is not determined exclusively by the amount and timing of their contact. According to Green, contact is one thing; real involvement is another (Green, 1998, p 65).

Whilst there are debates about how much time a father should spend with his children and family (Daniel and Taylor 1999; Lewis, 2000), the research literature reveals that Australian men in general play less of an active part in the home as fathers, than in previous times (Hernandez and Brandon 2002; Baxter, 2009). Children spend considerably more time with their mother than their father and children spent relatively small amounts of time with their father without their mother also present. Women still undertake the majority of household tasks and caring for children (Ferri and Smith 1996; Kearney *et al.*, 2000).

There are three major themes that recur throughout the review of literature on fathers. Firstly, there are a number of writers broadly representing the mens’ rights viewpoint (Dennis 1993; Dennis and Erdos 1992, 1999; Dench 1994, 1996; Lyndon 1996; Johnson 1999; Hobson 2002; Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Secondly, social problems such as poverty and crime are often directly linked to the relative absence of fathers, both physically and emotionally, within families (Featherstone, 2006, p 304).

Thirdly, there are socialistic and pro-feminist approaches, that have concerned themselves with how men as fathers are involved or engaged in family life (Doucet 1995; Bradshaw *et al.*, 1999; Burgess *et al.*, 1996; Dench 1996; Burghes *et al.*, 1997; Neale and Smart 1997; Burton *et al.*, 1998; Oakley and Rigby 1998; Corden 1999; Speak *et al.*,; Warin *et al.*, 1999; Ferri and Smith 1996, 1998; Lloyd 1999; Kiernan 1999; Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Smart and Stevens 2000; Kearney *et al.*, 2000; Lewis *et al.*, 2002).

The value placed on fathering in families in contemporary Western society has been widely questioned and debated. Some commentators have challenged the need for fathers at all (Hester and Harne 1999; Pringle, 1998b). Analysis of the research drawn from studies of children brought up within lesbian households for example (Golombok *et al.*, 1983), suggests that the value of fathering, as opposed to parenting, may be over-rated. Furthermore, it also has been suggested (Pringle, 1998b, 1998c) that the unspecified benefits to women arising from a man's greater participation in child rearing is not inevitable, and largely depends on the recurrence of broader anti-sexist changes in Western society. However, within the academic literature, it not only is the question of precisely who does what household tasks in the home that leads to differences of opinion on men as fathers. The main issue is how to interpret men's commitment to parenting itself, and there are different and opposed perspectives on this issue. Commentators from socialist feminist perspectives (Moss 1994; Burgess and Ruxton 1996; Owen *et al.*, 1998) would argue that a man's role as a father is highly significant and has benefits for a man's partner and their children.

These benefits include improved cognitive competence in infants and better academic achievement in school-aged children and adolescents. In addition, the more fathers are involved the more likely they will have positive peer relations (Allen and Daly, 2002). However, other central commentators have raised the question about how critical is the need for men as fathers or father figures, to be present in the family household (Pringle 1995, 1998b, 1998c, 1999; Oakley and Rigby 1998; Smart 1999; Hester and Harne, 1999). These include difficulties in parenting by women experiencing domestic violence (Humphreys, 2007) and that 'Fatherhood', 'is still to an overwhelmingly large extent constructed as essentially nonviolent' (Erikson and Hester, 2001, p 780).

2.6 Father involvement: a practice perspective

The rapidly changing social terrain, which includes lower marriage rates and rising divorce rates, new reproductive technologies, and political consequences of the second-wave feminist movement, have all contributed to a re-assessment of fatherhood and parental responsibilities and roles (Collier and Sheldon, 2008, p 11). As a consequence child and family welfare practice has not effectively kept pace with these changes and this has led to concerns of how social workers and other professionals practice with fathers (O'Hagan and Dillenberger 1995; Daniel and Taylor 1999; Farmer 1997; Scourfield 2001, 2003; Fletcher *et al.*, 2001; Dubowitz, 2006).

This relationship is closely dependent on the attitudes, behaviours, and discourses of social welfare professionals, as well as concepts of fatherhood revealed in public policy discussion, and the legal framework and institutional practices developed since the postwar decades of the 1950s and 1960s (Haskett *et al.*, 1996; Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Fletcher *et al.*, 2003). This, in particular, is the case within child protection and family welfare settings, where abusers predominantly are fathers. Fathers are most visible within the child protection system, but it is not always clear how the system is managing these fathers. Professionals still struggle to see these fathers as a resource even with men who are not abusers and wish to care for their children (when the mother is unable to care), (Ashley *et al.*, 2006).

Farmer and Owen gathered data on 44 children from a sample of 73 newly-registered, child abuse cases that had been placed on the child protection register, from two local authorities in the UK. They demonstrated how gender impacted at each stage of the child protection process, and showed how mothers were under-represented in relation to offers of services, and over-included regarding an agency's efforts to control them.

They concluded that the implications of this gender bias were particularly important, when looking at situations where men were the primary or sole perpetrators of violence, as in cases of child sexual abuse and domestic violence (Farmer and Owen, 1998, p 561). Peled (2000), using material from a number of countries, argued that professionals can no longer continue to ignore the role of abusive men as fathers within families. In this context, abusive men are defined as those who are physically violent to their partners.

Furthermore, it is argued, that holding such men accountable for their children's well-being, may, under certain conditions, contribute to the healthier emotional development of their children (Featherstone 1999; Dubowitz, 2006).

This research supports earlier research findings, on how the child protection system tends to concentrate its intervention on mothers, regardless of whether the alleged perpetrator (in cases of physical abuse) is the father or the mother (Dempster 1993; Farmer and Owen 1995; Scourfield 2001b; Dubowitz 2006; Pittman and Buckley, 2006).

In another study, Lloyd conducted a series of in-depth interviews with those involved in ten established fathers' projects in the UK, identifying that often there is a combination of factors that render fathers invisible to child and family welfare practice. He found:

- That professional' attitudes towards fathers may be influenced by outdated notions about the role of fathers within the family;
- That men are reluctant to look for information and seek assistance in their role as fathers, and
- That many people do not have a clear view of a father's true role, nor of their benefits to children (Lloyd, 2001, p 27).

This view of men and fathers exists in both child and family welfare practice, and in the way professionals include or exclude men in their research. Kosberg undertook a content analysis of articles, book reviews, and published advertising, appearing in the following publications since 1990: *Social Work* (National Association of Social Workers), and the *Journal of Social Work Education* (Council of Social Work Education).

From the hundreds of articles analysed, he found that just a small fraction (twenty five) were about men (Kosberg, 2002, p 6). Furthermore, his study highlighted that in the literature, half the articles were about homosexual men, and the rest were categorised as abusers, absent fathers, Aids sufferers, prisoners, and the homeless. Whilst the article by Kosberg (2002) may have some methodological problems, as the review is limited to two American journals, it raises further issues about how males are represented in the domain of child and family welfare.

The article, in concluding, advocates for more in-depth awareness of the needs of heterosexual men in social work education and training. Thus, if we are to avoid the risk of repeating history, and move from using rhetoric about working with families, to a reality, a conscious effort must be made to challenge and begin unraveling the differences between role and gender.

O'Hagan identifies two categories of avoidance when working with males in child protection: psychological avoidance and physical avoidance. O'Hagan defines the term avoidance as:

...making no effort to understand the significance of men in child protection work and/or the relationship which men have with mothers of children allegedly abused (O'Hagan, 1997, p 28)

This could also be applicable to child and family welfare services in general, since much of the contact with a father can occur at any point in the process. The difficulty here for many professionals lies in the ability to engage the father, and when this is done, maintaining and developing that engagement. Absence or under representation of men in health and welfare services is not simply a one-way process.

It is this viewpoint, about how fathers are being avoided or neglected by practicing social workers that initially motivated this exploratory research, from the perspective as a social work professional and also as a male working in the child and family welfare field.

2.6.1 Research problem

As the literature has identified, fathers as a socio-cultural phenomenon have been studied far less than mothers (Barclay and Lupton, 1999). Furthermore, the literature review has also identified that mothers have been the central focus of assessment, intervention and monitoring by family welfare services and professionals. However, the focus on fathers has been minimal or non-existent (Scourfield 2002a; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Featherstone 2009; Featherstone *et al.*, 2010). A key reason for fathers being absent from practice has primarily centred around debates concerning the resources that fathers have to offer against the potential risks they pose for women and children (Taylor and Daniel, 2005, p 267).

This chapter has presented and discussed a wide body of research concerning how professional workers can potentially address this practice issue. On this basis, further research, particularly in Australia (Fleming 2002, 2007), is needed which explores the issues of importance from the perspectives of professional workers in child and family welfare practice.

2.6.2 Research question

Two main influences generated my research question for this study. In my practice as a social worker in child and family welfare, I noticed that in the work I conducted and that of my colleagues, fathers were rarely seen in practice. The work that I carried out was varied and included foster, adoption and family assessments (home visiting), family reunification where there was planning for children to return home, statutory intervention where children were placed away from the family because of child abuse or neglect. I also worked in health agencies as a child development social worker as well as a generalist social worker working with families in hospitals. It became accepted practice that parenting tended to be regarded as synonymous with mothering, and it is with women and children that professional relationships are formed, rather than fathers.

Secondly, in my post-graduate studies I came across media reports and other documents that presented the case of Daniel Valerio. In 1990 when Daniel was just two years and four months old, he was violently abused to death by his stepfather. A post-mortem revealed 104 bruises over his body.

The circumstances of the murder exposed issues into how child abuse was being dealt with in Victoria, Australia (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). Daniel had been seen by 21 professionals including a number of doctors. I wondered why this stepfather was not seen or engaged with by professionals, even though there was clear evidence that Daniel had sustained regular physical abuse. I thus became motivated and interested to explore how professional workers involved fathers in their work. The research focus and question that emerged as a basis for this study was:

How do professionals working in child and family welfare services view fathers and how, if at all, do they incorporate them into their practice?

2.7 Literature review summary

The literature review indicates there is strong acceptance that fathers should be involved in children's lives, providing there is no risk of abuse to the child or mother. However, how to involve fathers effectively in child and family welfare practice that remains largely unexplored. In particular, there is a need to investigate how practitioners in Australia, working in diverse child and family welfare practice settings, view and work with fathers in the course of their practice.

This chapter has examined aspects of fathers in relation to their role and presence in family life; changes within family life in the last fifty years; and welfare services; socio-legal aspects such as changes to family law and changes to families and fathers in general.

The traditional nuclear family in Australia, of mum, dad and the kids, has been in slow decline, and an increasing number of people are creating or being raised in family structures that are quite different from this model. In reviewing the literature, it is argued that while significant policy and legislative changes are aimed at including fathers more in child and family welfare services, the extent to which this becomes manifest by practitioners is not clear and missing in practice. This practice issue as a research problem therefore requires further exploration and analysis.

This chapter also has framed different approaches related to both father absence and father inclusion. It has summarised and analysed the main arguments and implications for practice, in child and family welfare, arising from this literature. The literature highlights some of the main concerns emerging from recent research and scholarly studies on father diversity, and calls for more analysis to explore the issues faced by social workers and others, who work with both socially affected and biological fathers in a post-modern society.

The analysis relates to what supports are required for professionals working with fathers, as well as what occurs within the professional client-worker relationship. The review shows, that in spite of progress in research on gender, fathers and family life, there still are significant gaps in this focused area of practice.

In summary, men often have difficulty articulating the meaning of their paternal role. As referred to earlier in this chapter, there are many and varied discourses and representations about what constitutes a father, and different interpretations can influence how fatherhood is defined. This chapter has provided a useful insight into representations of masculinity, fathers, gender and family life. It still does not form a complete picture as to what is happening for fathers in contemporary child health and welfare services in Western society, which is the focus and direction chosen for this research. More importantly at a practice level, the reasoning and decision-making processes that are used by practitioners when they choose to engage or not with fathers, requires study. It is the aim of this research to investigate this gap in practice knowledge. In the following chapter the aims and methodological approach of the research is described.

Chapter 3: Methodology and procedure

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the methodology and procedure used to conduct this study and will outline the study's research aims and the research design. A brief summary of the development of grounded theory method is provided and rationale for utilising the method for the current study will be given. A brief operational definition of the concept and role of the term father used in this thesis will also be given in this chapter. The chapter will also present how the data was collected and analysed and discuss ethical issues including informed consent, access to participants and confidentiality. A discussion on some of the problems encountered in conducting this study will also be presented.

3.2 Research aims

As noted in Chapter 2, there is evidence that fathers historically have not been engaged by social welfare workers both at a practice and policy level (Taylor and Daniel 2000; Milner 2004; Scourfield 2002; Bellamy 2009; Featherstone 2009; Fletcher, 2010) and it was critically identified that social welfare workers commonly avoid working or engaging with fathers or father figures with children at risk (Milner 1993a, 1992b 2004; O'Hagan and Dillenberg 1995; Berger *et al.*, 2009). Men were identified in the literature as either reluctant users of health and child and family welfare services, by being absent, or they avoided engaging with such services.

In addition the presence of social work professionals tended to exacerbate this avoidance rather than address the reasons behind why fathers are not engaged in child and family welfare services and how to introduce and apply more inclusive strategies (O'Hagan and Dillenger 1995; Farmer and Owen 1995; Smith 2004; Milner 2004; Scourfield, 2006). Engaging fathers can be a challenging task for professionals who seek to support men in their parenting and their relationships (Kullberg 2005; Berlyn *et al.*, 2008; Featherstone, 2009). There have been many possible reasons proposed why this task is so difficult, including the female orientated culture of child and family welfare services (Swift 1995; Russell *et al.*, 1999; Fletcher and Visser, 2008), and long working hours. These are barriers to accessing such services (Russell *et al.*, 1999; Healy 2000; Weston *et al.*, 2004). Whilst these reasons are all valid and important to gaining an understanding and build theory of why practitioners do not involve fathers in their work. My strategy was to research with practitioners (as Geertz, 1983, might put it), on their lived practice experience and what was important to them as participants in the process. It was achieved with the aim of discovering what was significant to them in their day-to-day encounters with families. In seeking to describe child and family welfare practice I had taken the stance that the practitioners lived experience was worth documenting and to identify both the universal themes and their stories of their practice. Thus, the view I decided to take for the study, came through an acute awareness of the imbalance between what was written and documented from recipients of child and family welfare services as opposed to the experiences, knowledge and views of practitioners (Turnell, 2007, p 60-61).

3.3 Operational definition

3.3.1 Who is a father?

According to Dictionary.com (2009) a father is a male parent, and the term can also include a father-in-law, step-father or adoptive father (<http://dictionary.reference.com>). This definition seems to be rather old-fashioned or out-of-date, because the application of the term is more complex today. It has come to mean more than is included in this definition. Fathers today can incorporate any combination of the following four types: biological, judicial, social or psychological. Firstly, a biological father refers to the biological origin of a child through conception or reproductive technologies. Secondly, a judicial father is a man who has established the legal paternity of a child. Thirdly, a social father is one who shares his everyday life with a child, living together with him or her, and responding to the daily needs of the child. He also can be a judicial or biological father. Fourthly, a psychological father is a man who has established a close, reciprocal relationship with a child, living with or living away from a child, and the child or children regard the man as their father. The term psychological father refers to a kind of an emotional attachment and is often assessed as the most meaningful form of the term 'father' (Huttunen, 2005, pp 28-29). Therefore, fathers by definition are a diverse group and cannot be easily identified. This is because, as was discussed in Chapter 2, the role that fathers play in families today has been shaped and moulded by the socio-economic changes that have taken place over the last fifty years. Therefore, it is better to use the Peterson and Steinmetz observation of fatherhood that it is not a static phenomenon but more like a moving target (Peterson and Steinmetz, 2000, p 315).

3.3.2 Key terms used in this thesis

The terms **family and families** as used in this thesis refers to two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household. The basis of a family is formed by identifying the presence of a couple relationship, lone parent-child relationship or other blood relationship. Some households will, therefore, contain more than one family (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1286.0 - Family, Household and Income Unit Variables, 2005).

The terms **father and fathers** as used in this thesis is inclusive of stepfathers, grandfathers, the mother's partners (father figures, de-facto's, boyfriends), non-biological gay parents and other men who are parenting, and includes foster fathers (see Fletcher, Silberberg and Baxter 2001; Sullivan, 2000).

The term **child and family welfare practice** and **child and family welfare services** broadly describes an array of prevention and intervention services to children and families, particularly children who have been or are at risk of abuse or neglect; children with special medical or mental health needs; and children who do not have adult caregivers. This term in this thesis has been expanded to incorporate a range of professionals (social workers, physiotherapists, nurses, welfare workers etc.) working in child health, community health and mental health and hospital settings.

3.4 Research design

This was an exploratory, interpretative study that employed a qualitative method of data collection and analysis. Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to examine in detail the professional experience of child and family welfare agencies and their work with fathers in the context of their daily practice. Grounded Theory as a method traditionally uses an inductive strategy that attempts to identify the underlying structure in what people do and say. From a social work perspective this is extremely important as the method allows the researcher to engage with practice in an attempt to discover and construct a meaningful account of the phenomena in question. A Grounded Theory approach, therefore, provides this study with a viable means of generating theory grounded in the realities of everyday practice.

3.4.1 Basis and rationale for the use of a qualitative methodology

Qualitative methods were developed to address some of the short-comings of pure quantitative research, and worked to place a more human focus on natural enquiry such as cultural and social phenomena. Some methods used by qualitative researchers include grounded theory, case study, ethnography, and phenomenology. Empirical information is acquired from numerous sources, but is usually confined to observation, interviews, questionnaires, documents, historical interaction and a researcher's impressions and reactions (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Alston and Bowles, 2003). There are several considerations when deciding to adopt a qualitative research methodology.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim that qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known. They can also be used to gain new perspectives on things about which much is already known, or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively. Thus, qualitative methods are appropriate in situations where one needs to first identify the variables that might later be tested quantitatively, or where the researcher has determined that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation. Research problems tend to be framed as open-ended questions that will support discovery of new information (Green, 1994). These distinguishing principles of grounded theory render it an excellent tool for analysis of social phenomena, particularly when there is little known about the situation under investigation. There are important differences in the various qualitative methods that researchers need to consider when selecting the method appropriate to the particular research question they wish to explore. If the purpose of my research study was to investigate the actual experience of child and family welfare professionals having personal beliefs and values challenged, rather than the processes used to deal with such experiences, then phenomenology (a qualitative method used to describe particular phenomena, or the appearance of things, as lived experience) (Sarantakos, 2005, p, 47) would have been the appropriate research method to use. If the purpose of my research study had been to explore the development of patterns used to deal with challenges to personal beliefs and values, and their meanings, used by child and family welfare professionals from a particular ethnic or cultural group, then ethnography (a qualitative method used to gain understanding of the behaviour of a group of people in the context of its culture) (Schneider *et al* 2003, p 180), would have been an appropriate methodology to use.

From these qualitative methods briefly described, neither was suitable for the research question which guided my study. In the case of this research, and this researcher, grounded theory was the method of choice because it enabled an understanding of an area which requires no preformed concepts of knowledge or reality. The ontology and epistemology adopted in this research accepts that knowledge is not static, but is always emerging and transforming, and is interpreted by both observer and participant. Meaning is conveyed through dialogue and action and within dialogue and action are embedded understanding, experience and emotion (Turnell, 2007).

3.4.2 Grounded theory defined

Grounded theory refers to a particular method of performing data analysis during data collection and its purpose is to generate theory to aid in explaining human behaviour. It was used in this study to generate new theory and understand about a phenomenon, rather than test existing theory (Morse and Field, 1995). Grounded theory methodology (GTM) was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to allow them to generate theory in areas where little is already known, or to provide a fresh slant on existing knowledge about a particular social phenomenon (Goulding, 1999, p 6). This approach emphasises the process of exploring human behaviour through a process of induction and discovery rather than from a more traditional and quantitative process (Elliott and Lazenbatt, 2005) of hypothesis and deduction:

The methodological thrust of grounded theory approach is towards the development of theory, without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests. So it is not really a specific method or technique. Rather it is a style of doing qualitative data analysis that includes a number of distinct features, such as theoretical sampling, and certain methodological guidelines, such as making consistent comparison and the use of a coding paradigm, to ensure development and density (Strauss, 1987, p 5)

Grounded theory has been adopted in many fields outside Glaser and Strauss's sociological discipline and is used widely in disciplines such as management, psychology, health science, nursing, marketing and social welfare (Glaser 1999; Locke, 2001). Grounded theory is rarely presented as a tightly woven set of interrelated categories, definitions, and propositions. Rather, the theory is expansively developed in narrative form as categories, and the relationships are defined, elaborated, and illustrated by the data. The methodology was designed to enable theory development by the researcher, which at the time went against the more traditional functionalist approaches in which quantitative research was seen as the only viable method to conduct social inquiry. Therefore one main reason for considering grounded theory was the study's purpose. The study sought to improve professional practice through gaining a better understanding of how fathers and father figures are seen by social workers and other professionals. It seems self-evident that little improvement can be expected without further systematic knowledge concerning what is actually going on in case work with families with fathers or father figures (Milner, 2004). I was also concerned about the gap between theory and practice in social work and other disciplines in regard to father absence in practice. Although I was taught about the theory of anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2008) and critical theory (Fook, 2002) when working with individuals, families and groups, my practice/work with families in child protection and family welfare mostly revolved around assessment and intervention with mothers. I thus became aware of the injustice towards mothers by 'ignoring fathers' (Milner, 1993, p 56) in my practice even where it was clearly fathers who were primarily the causes for concern.

The methodology was initially designed not to include any 'literature' that had been written about the subject previously because the views of other researchers may influence or bias a new researcher to the studied area of interest (Dey, 1999). This thinking, to not include any background literature on the topic being studied, was later reviewed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and both acknowledged that reviewing previous literature would sensitise the researcher to the topic rather than influence their thinking and create researcher bias.

3.5 Grounded theory process explained

3.5.1 Identifying an area of interest

As a beginning, with any piece of research, the process begins with an interest or curiosity in an area or topic that the researcher wishes to explore further. In many cases the researcher may select GTM where the topic of interest has been ignored in the literature or has been only given little attention to in the field or practice setting. Glaser and Strauss (1967), for example, studied the hospital care of dying patients. In the field of social work, there are numerous topics well suited to grounded theory analysis (Melia, 1996). In the case of this study, it is to better understand the case practice with fathers by child and family welfare professionals, and to seek to develop a theory that provides understanding of the phenomenon and a framework for action.

3.5.2 Collecting and interpreting the data

Once a research topic has been chosen and the literature has been read and reviewed, the researcher then chooses an appropriate site where the data can be collected.

The data can then be collected in a number of ways such as observation, interviewing and from literature or available documents.

According to Glaser it is essential to understand that grounded theory is a 'package of research methods' which includes theoretical sampling and sorting, data collection, coding and analysing through memoing and writing (Glaser, 1998, p 12). Theoretical sampling in grounded theory refers to a sample determined to examine the phenomena where it is found to exist. It is a process that continues until the very end of the research. This type of sampling must be understood in its association with data analysis (Elliott and Lazenbatt, 2005).

Sampling is used in a way that is most likely to select participants who can contribute information to the main categories that will evolve during the analysis in the study and thus data analysis informs subsequent data collection and sampling (Glaser, 1999). Coding for data analysis may be carried out in different forms but usually involves assigning a symbol or number to each coding category. As the data is collected, the analysis begins by seeking to find out all possible interpretations. In grounded theory, this requires systematic coding procedures which consist of three different types: open; axial; and selective coding. According to Spiggle, open coding process is early concept development which consists of identifying a chunk or unit of data (a passage of text of any length) as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon (Spiggle, 1994, p 493).

Axial coding involves the creation of concepts. This requires the systematic analysis and constant comparison of data to refine the number of codes and to gather them together, and then begin to identify a relationship with these codes.

Finally, Strauss and Corbin define selective coding as the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p 116). Through the process of selective coding the core categories are integrated and developed into the theory. According to Goulding, coding in GTM allows for direction before becoming selective and involves the researcher asking key questions throughout the process, such as:

What is happening in this data?
What is the basic socio-psychological problem?
What accounts for it?
What patterns are occurring here? (Goulding, 1999, p 12).

In applying GTM, text from transcripts of interviews or observation is examined in detail either line-by-line or whole paragraphs. This can be done by hand using the margin of the paper alongside the interview transcript to note which of the three codes applies and then the raw data can be entered into a computer software program for further sorting into more manageable units for analysis (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986). In open coding, the incidents or events are labelled and grouped together as a constant comparison to form categories and properties. Secondly, axial coding represents the marking out of hypothetical relationships between categories and subcategories. Finally, selective coding can be described as a process by which categories are related to the core category which ultimately becomes the basis for the grounded theory (Glaser, 2001).

Following the coding process, ‘theoretical memoing’ is undertaken to assist the researcher to record their own thinking in the process and may involve a model or diagram that is drawn to illustrate what is seen in the data. In grounded theory, memos are produced from the beginning to the closure of the analysis process. Once the coding and memoing have been achieved, categories become the product from which common themes emerge. Data continues to be collected until categories become saturated, which refers to the process where no new data or additions are added to the category and where one overriding core category can explain the relationship between all the others in the data (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986).

3.5.3 Substantive versus Formal Grounded Theory

Grounded theory can be either substantive or formal. Glaser and Strauss provide the following to distinguish between a substantive and formal (grounded) theory as follows:

By substantive theory we mean that developed for a substantive or empirical area of sociological inquiry, such as patient care, race relations, professional education, delinquency, or research organizations. By formal theory, we mean that developed for a formal or conceptual area of sociological inquiry such as stigma, deviant behavior, formal organizations, socialization or status congruency. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 32)

To summarise: grounded theory represents a broader context (for example, Stigma) which could be relevant to a number of populations, like divorced people, victims of sexual assault and persons wrongly accused of a crime, whereas a substantive theory concerns a specialised population and context (McCann and Baker, 2001, p 532). In summary, this study has provided the data and subsequent analysis for the emergence of a substantive theory.

The study on practice absence of fathers in child and family welfare required a methodology that would enable a detailed exploration of the processes that exist in service provision and case practice. The following section of this chapter will describe the application of grounded theory method to the research.

3.6 The method

3.6.1 Setting

As mentioned, after identifying the topic and reviewing the literature, a data collection site was selected. In this study, a State government state-wide statutory child protection department in Perth, Western Australia was the initial site identified for the data collection. Because the participants in a grounded theory study need to have experience of the phenomenon under investigation (for this study that means ‘child and family welfare practice’), this site offered an opportunity for the data to be collected and analysed. However, due to problems with accessing this sample with this agency, I had to change this setting, a process which will now be discussed further in detail.

3.6.2 Determining the research sample: a personal journey

The key context for this study was the services where child welfare professionals were working with fathers. As an experienced social worker with many years working in child welfare services, I assumed that my colleagues in social work, both past and present would have an interest equal to mine and support my endeavours. Furthermore I had worked in these settings and had made connections.

However, despite having these connections, problems in gaining access to the services and to professionals became a major issue and I had to make some alternative enquiries to identify alternative approach (Hornsby-Smith, 1994).

3.6.3 Access problems

Before discussing the various efforts I made, it is important to discuss more generally the issues for researchers in seeking access to agencies or individual respondents when the topic selected may be sensitive.

There is evidence and recognition that any research process poses many challenges for the researcher and the participant and even more so when researching sensitive, contentious or taboo topics (Lee 1993; Campbell 2002; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). For example, topics such as death, cancer, drug use, homosexuality or violence fit easily into the definition of sensitive research.

Research is embedded in institutional contexts which can shape and limit research in many ways (Lee, 1993). For example, gaining access to people for research in an organisation is controlled by the organisation's management. They may grant access, place restrictions on the kind of material that can be made available to the researcher or refuse access. In child welfare organisations restrictions can be due to many reasons, including the concern that the child welfare professional's practice will be scrutinised or evaluated and made public. An organisation may be concerned that what is reported may not be an objective representation of their true experience or be afraid of any action that is made public (Tomison, 2000).

Whilst my research topic did not seem particularly sensitive (Lee 1993; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007) in discussions with colleagues, the relationship between the topic and socio-political context could become particularly problematic at any time.

Another explanation that has been offered for difficulties in gaining access to professionals, is that child and family welfare work has long been recognised as a very stressful and high profile public activity (Parton *et al.*, 1997). Practitioners, who do this work, feel under constant scrutiny, in part due to the ambiguous nature of their work, stressful working conditions, and the bureaucratisation of their practice, and they feel that they are ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’ (McMahon, 1998, p 3). This can result in them either becoming defensive when revealing to outsiders what they are doing in their practice (Parton *et al.*, 1997; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Lonne *et al.*, 2008) or be unwilling to participate at all. In addition, they can feel their role is misunderstood in their community and that those organisations that employ them do not provide the support they need in order to do their work well (Lonne *et al.*, 2008; Davies 2009) thus further alienating them from the research.

However, discussion of fathers among my colleagues in child protection practice did not suggest that this was a particularly ‘sensitive topic’. In retrospect however, my expressed motivation for wanting to conduct the study, may have been misinterpreted or seen as a threat as these workers carry with them their own narratives of their encounters with researchers and what it potentially may be used for and who will own their information (Thorpe, 1994).

Research in child protection and child welfare practice in Australia, in general, has been successfully achieved (Stanley and Goddard 1993; Thorpe 1994; McMahon 1998; Trotter 1999; Natalier 2003; Tucci 2004; Stanley and Goddard 2002; Mudaly and Goddard 2006; Turnell, 2007).

However, recently it has been acknowledged that it is becoming more difficult to gain access to participants in this area of practice (Tomison 2000; Harris and Roberts 2003; Hayes and Devaney 2004; Strega *et al.*, 2007). There is suspicion and wariness about a researcher undertaking research with any vulnerable groups (homeless, indigenous, mentally ill, disabled), and children and parents involved in child welfare services are very vulnerable (Walsh and Mills 1998; Tomison, 2000). As less powerful groups with social problems, hence subjects for investigation, the participants have been seen as needing protection from researchers (Stanley and Wise 1993; Hammersley, 1995). Jonathon Scourfield (1999) recalls his particular experience with an initial meeting when attempting access to a child protection agency and its staff:

Despite the politeness, however, and his extremely nervous manner, he (*senior manger*) made it quite clear that his main concern was that my request to research work with men raised the possibility that I might be a 'paedophile' wanting to use the research to contact other abusers (Scourfield, 1999, p 43).

Research thus cannot be separated from its social context and often involves a degree of power imbalance between the researchers and those being researched. This power imbalance can inevitably increase the level of mistrust. Whilst seeking to protect the rights of individuals in conducting research is important, the lives of these same individuals may go unstudied with the consequence that they receive less appropriate services (Stalker *et al.*, 2004; Hayes and Devaney 2004; Munro *et al.*, 2005).

This has lead to some reluctance and wariness, particularly with frontline child protection workers and their managers in becoming involved in research (Smith *et al.*, 2003; 2004; Scourfield and Coffey 2006; Suleiman Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt, 2008).

My own experience in gaining and securing access to potential participants was an experience similar to that of other researchers already outlined. These difficulties I experienced will now be outlined under two separate headings using synonyms for each agency being discussed.

3.6.4 Uptown Community Services (UCS)

I began my negotiations for my first data collection site with Uptown Community Services (UCS) asking for access to a suitable sample of child protection workers from early February 2002 up until August 2003. Discussion in relation to my research was held with a number of people both inside and outside the organisation. I initially approached people I knew from my previous employment with Uptown. These initial discussions went well with much interest in the research topic. In my initial research planning I wrote to a senior manager whom I shall refer to as Bettina Lowe from UCS. In this letter, I stated that I wanted to study fathers in child welfare and that I was interested in seeking participants from UCS. Bettina's response was positive and my telephone conversations with her were encouraging. My PhD supervisor also spoke with her and received agreement in proceeding with the research. Bettina then recommended that I take it to the next step which was to lodge her organisation's own application form. The application form was lodged soon after but after three months it had not been formally approved.

In seeking feedback on why it was not approved from the organisation, I was told it was a confidentiality issue by the Director of Research and Development and they were not convinced that participants' identities would be protected.

The issue around confidentiality of participants was respected, but not entirely justified as the proposal to undertake the research would also have to be approved by the Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans where Section Four of the guidelines states:

Indicate how the participants' identity and issues of confidentiality will be maintained during the project, when the results are published and when the data is stored (SCERH, 2008, p 3).

In retrospect it was difficult to predict how exactly UCS would interpret my interest. Whilst disappointed with the response this type of wariness can most obviously be explained in terms of agency defensiveness and possibly a fear that they may be blamed for any findings that are not what they wish and expect (Parton *et al* 1997; Scourfield and Coffey, 2006).

Thus, without a supportive research culture (Lee, 1993) any attempts to conduct research can be perceived as a threat that can potentially expose the organisation and workers to public criticism (Lee 1993; Tomison, 2000). Whilst every opportunity was taken to reassure UCS management that this research was not about reporting of poor or substandard practice, I had to respect the decision taken by UCS to refuse access.

3.6.5 ‘Barnabas Family Services’ (BFS)

It was late in 2003 that I approached ‘Barnabas Family Services’ (BFS), a large and well-established not-for-profit children’s and family welfare agency with many offices located in a regional area of Victoria, Australia. BFS employed over 270 multi-skilled staff in human services ranging from youth services to parent support and training services, many of whom were professionally qualified social workers. Knowledge about BFS came through my conversations with a fellow Higher Degree by Research (HDR) student at Monash University, Kelly (not her real name). Kelly, who was also employed at BFS, had informed me that her agency had recently formed a research unit within the organisation and they were looking to attract research.

After speaking with my PhD supervisors about this possible option, it was agreed that I should approach BFS to see if there was interest as Kelly had indicated. The next stage was to contact the person who was overseeing the research unit at BFS, who I shall refer to as Jenny (again not her real name). Jenny was approachable and friendly and very keen to see that BFS take an active part in assisting with my research. Jenny indicated that BFS was looking at ways to increase their involvement with fathers in their casework with families and children.

This was confirmed to my PhD supervisor via a letter in September 2003 by Jenny, and included some recommendations, such as the completion of the Monash University SCERH process in order to further advance the request. These recommendations were completed some four months later and in January 2004 I received a letter from the Chief Executive Officer of BFS granting permission to conduct the research.

Following this approval, there were many telephone conversations and much email correspondence with Jenny. I also travelled from Western Australia to the provincial town, north of Melbourne in Victoria, where BFS was located to sell the research to potential participants. This involved an intensive two days at the BFS presenting my proposal to groups of staff and managers and providing handouts, flyers and general information and how to contact me to register their interest. This process invited BFS staff interested in participating in emailing or telephoning me (reverse charges), and I would then send out a package which contained the consent form, the explanatory statement and the survey questionnaire (see Appendices 2, 3 and 4).

I returned to Western Australia cautiously optimistic that I had finally secured access to a potential sample for the research. However, many months passed by with only two responses from staff interested in participating. In order to address this low response rate, I placed notices in the agency's monthly newsletter and also contacted Jenny and other managers to bring it to the attention of staff. By the end of 2004, some 10 months after the initial meeting with BFS only a total of four staff had returned the survey questionnaire.

Although the Chief Executive Officer and other managers of BFS were generally supportive of the research, anecdotal evidence would indicate that as I was located off-site and geographically distant in Perth, Western Australia, I could not motivate workers to respond to the survey. This subsequently resulted in low survey return rates and a disinterest with the research topic.

At a broader organisational level, another explanation for the poor interest from BFS could have been the view that my research was not a high priority for them, an issue which has been documented as problematic in undertaking social research (Pithouse, 1987). However, there was no solid evidence that these factors may have contributed to difficulty in recruiting participants. Whilst somewhat despondent, closer reflection into my second failed attempt provided the necessary impetus and insight to approach the research in a different manner.

3.6.6 An alternative approach

Drawing upon other researchers who experienced similar problems (Pithouse 1987; Pithouse and Atkinson 1988; Scourfield, 1999) I was encouraged to try something different. This was achieved by recognising that despite my best intentions, some research participants will respond and others will not on the basis of the researcher's gender, the nature and scope of the research topic, the institution the research is affiliated with (i.e. university) and also the organisational priorities of the data collection site. In reviewing this situation and having a discussion with my supervisors, it was decided to harness a sample in two ways. Firstly, I would seek potential participants in Western Australia. This would address the issue of geographical distance of the researcher, probably a key factor in low response rates with BFS. Secondly, I would use my local connections, beginning with those I knew who were interested and attempt a snowball sampling method (Patton, 1990; 2002). This I hoped would address the issue of participant motivation. Thus I began with some potential colleagues who had indicated their interest in the research I decided to start at this point, also rather than discount the two returned surveys from the staff at BFS.

I decided to capitalise on their responses by including them in the sample and then to follow up with them about a possible in-depth interview at a later stage. The main rationale for the use of a snowball sampling method being used was the difficulty faced in recruiting child welfare professionals with both UCS and BFS. The sample was achieved through starting with participants whom I worked with at a metropolitan Child Development Centre.

3.6.7 Sampling

Snowball sampling, which is a special non-probability method and its objective, is to locate research subjects when the desired sample characteristic is rare or difficult to locate (Alston and Bowes, 2003). In snowball or chain sampling recruiting someone who meets the criteria for inclusion in a study is identified and contacted by another person., who in turn provides the name of a third, and this continues until saturation point is reached (Vogt, 1999). There are a number of advantages of snowball sampling. Firstly, it can provide access to a previous 'hidden' or hard to reach population. Secondly, because the researcher is known to the referrer, they are likely to develop trust which helps in playing a part in referring and gaining additional participants. Thirdly, it can be an economic and efficient means to gather a sample.

Whilst there are advantages with snowball sampling, it is not without certain problems.□ Some of the key problems with snowball sampling relate to finding respondents and initiating a chain referral that represents a broad range of respondents sufficient to reduce the likelihood of researcher bias (Sarantakos, 1993; 2005).

Emotional tension in undertaking research between practitioners and researchers, particularly in sensitive practice settings such as child protection has been identified in this chapter and elsewhere in the literature as a major issue. (Stevenson, 1992).

3.6.8 Sampling bias

The quality of the data and in particular a selection bias which limits the validity of the sample, are the primary concerns of recent snowball sampling research (Kaplan *et al*, 1987; Van Meter, 1990). Because the sample size of this study was small the need to recruit both male and female respondents using the snowball sample was not possible. This is because elements are not randomly drawn, but are dependent on the subjective choices of the respondents first accessed. Most snowball samples are biased and do not therefore allow researchers to make claims to generality from a particular sample (Babbie, 2009). However, sample size in this study was adequate to satisfy data and category saturation, which in grounded theory studies is the more important determinant of appropriateness of sample size, rather than participant numbers (Patton 1990; 2002). Generalisation to the broader child and family welfare services sector was not an aim of the study. Rather it was to generate a substantive theory from the data, and the data were sufficiently saturated for that to occur.

As Brown and Goddard (1991) have identified, successful large scale in-situ research projects cannot be imposed but rather they must be developed in a partnership with the agencies and workers 'on the ground'. Hence I chose to take a more personal approach, contacting colleagues that knew of my practice and research.

3.6.9 Data collection strategy

Data was gathered through two collection tools: a self-administered questionnaire that the participant completed and returned, and a following in-depth interview. My plan for data collection was to request that those staff interested in participating be provided with the Explanatory Statement (Appendix 2) and who would then contact me for further information.

Self-administered mail-out surveys were then posted to participants and also to other potential participants. The mail-out surveys sent to the participants contained the following items:

- 1) Cover Letter/ Instructions
- 2) Explanatory Statement (Appendix 2)
- 3) Consent Form (Appendix 3)
- 4) Self-completed survey questionnaire (Appendix 4)
- 5) Stamped Addressed Return Envelope

3.6.10 Self-administered survey

Careful construction of the self-administered survey questionnaire was undertaken prior to it being mailed out. This was achieved by identifying relevant themes that were elicited from the literature review. The self-administered survey questionnaire was then pre-tested (Alston and Bowles, 2003) with a small sample of three participants in order to check the suitability of the questionnaire where they were asked to respond to whole or part of the questionnaire.

The results of the responses from the small sample were then analysed and interpreted and necessary adjustments or minor revisions were made to the format. The initial first draft of the self-administered survey questionnaire was also sent for external scrutiny to a staff member from the Monash University Statistical Consultancy Service. The format and some questions on the survey were amended to ensure clarity and to assist with coding. The self-administered survey questionnaire contained 23 items (see Appendix 4), which asked a specific closed question followed by an open-ended 'please comment' question. Demographic information sought included gender, occupation, type of agency and approximate number of families on their caseload. Respondents to the survey were not required to provide their names and remained anonymous. The respondent was then required to either tick [✓] a box with a Yes or No answer or circle a point on a Likert scale (Sarantakos, 1993). For example, question 23 reads: *Has the service or agency ever considered any issues for working with fathers?* The respondent was required to answer either a *Yes* or *No*. The next step required the respondent to comment on their answer in more detail. Both filter and contingency questions (Sarantakos, 1993; 2005) were used in the self-administered survey questionnaire. The questions covered how workers saw fathers being involved or absent from their service, and specifically some of the things that fathers are involved with at their service, and any benefits or disadvantages that fathers may pose for their service. In collecting richer data beyond the self-administered survey questionnaire, a semi-structured interview method was chosen.

Semi-structured interviews according to Minichiello *et al.*, (1995) are used in the qualitatively oriented in-depth interviewing model. This process involves researchers using the broad topic in which they are interested to direct the interview.

A 'funnel approach' in the interview was applied, whereby questions from general to specific facilitated a richer engagement for the participant (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995).

Further information on the framework for the interviews is presented in Appendix 5.

3.6.11 Participant recruitment strategy

To start the snowball sample strategy I used participants I knew and those who were identified through word of mouth. In addition, advertising for the project was undertaken by posting information and flyers to agencies in regional and metropolitan areas both in Western Australia (WA) and Victoria, Australia.

The majority of the participants were recruited from Western Australia, as it was more feasible for the researcher to access workers in his home State and conduct in-depth interviews when required. The Men's Advisory Network (MAN), a peak clearinghouse for men's health and welfare issues in Perth, Western Australia, placed an advert in their electronic newsletter over their website (www.man.org.au) and one national advertisement was placed with Dads In Distress on their website (www.did.org.au). Participants were working either in government or non-government public health and welfare settings. Participants had formal tertiary qualifications in Social Work, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Nursing or Management.

3.6.12 Agencies not recruited for the study

The study sought to examine the role of fathers in child and family services work. It was decided not to approach those organisations that solely provided father - or male - specific services. The rationale behind this was that these services were not specific child and family welfare services, the site of the practices the researcher sought to study. Some examples of such agencies that operated in Western Australia included: Men's Own Counselling Service, Lone Fathers Association, Hey-Dad WA and Dads@Lifeline as well as many others which were comprehensively listed in Men's Advisory Network link *Where to Go for Assistance* on their official website (see www.man.org.au). A list of those agencies and services that were not recruited for this study is included in Appendix 2.

3.7 Data collection

3.7.1 Method One: Survey questionnaire

Once participants were located using the snowball sample method, a mail-out survey questionnaire was sent to the participants. The mail-out survey questionnaire contained the following items:

- 1 Explanatory Statement (Appendix 2)
- 2 Instructions / 25 Survey Questions (Appendix 4)
3. Consent Form (Appendix 5)
4. Stamped Address Return Envelope

Prior to the survey questionnaire being mailed out, the questionnaire was constructed by identifying relevant questions that were elicited from the literature review and also the themes that had already been identified about fathers and father figures with the assistance of my supervisors.

3.7.2 Survey questions

The survey questionnaire contained 25 items, which asked a closed question followed by an open-ended question. Both filter and contingency questions (Sarantakos, 1993) were used both in the survey questionnaire and also with the semi-structured interview, which had the benefit of providing more detail and depth about the respondent's experience and thoughts surrounding the topic of father and father figures.

3.7.3 Method Two: Semi-structured interview

All the respondents involved in the survey (Method One) were given the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. From the survey questionnaires returned, ten participants consented to a follow-up in-depth interview and provided their names and contact details. Interviews can be classified as structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all those health and welfare professionals, comprising of five (5) males and five (5) females. These professionals were employed full-time and were based in nine metropolitan suburbs and one rural town in Perth, Western Australia.

The Grounded Theory Methodology mostly uses focussed questions and a semi-structured format (Glaser 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Semi-structured interviewing is located somewhere between structured and unstructured interviewing. Questions asked on the semi-structured interview schedule were the same asked of each participant but included enough flexibility to allow probing, clarification and digression which often occurred during the interview. All the semi-structured interviews conducted were electronically-recorded with the participant's consent and they were transcribed verbatim. I transcribed and read all the interviews onto a personal computer. There was considerable benefit in this transcription as listening and recording the content of all the interviews provided a richer and deeper meaning to what was being said by participants (Unrau and Coleman, 1997, pp 505-506).

As Lipson writes:

...good interviewing and careful listening; astute observation and interpretation on several levels simultaneously (e.g. verbal and non-verbal behaviour, meaning and context); and the intentional use of self ...will yield better data (Lipson, 1991, p 77).

Therefore it was essential that I personally undertook all the interviews rather than employ a person to do this as this enabled and established good rapport with each interviewee. Interview transcripts were written up verbatim and sent back to the participants for proof reading and editing. These transcripts were then coded for analysis. The interview content, conducted with the aid of QSR NVivo (version 7) software, was deconstructed into themes. The software is described in 3.7.7. The stages of data analysis included open coding (Strauss, 1987), axial coding and matrix building (Richards 2005). The follow-up interviews were conducted face-to-face at a time suited to the participant.

The participants identified the venue, which was usually their workplace during normal office hours. In order to maintain confidentiality, I requested that they locate a room at their workplace where they would be comfortable and uninterrupted. The average length of time of the interviews was about one and a half hours. As a result, once transcribed, there was a great deal of text to manage.

3.7.4 Interview schedule questions

The questions for the interview schedule derived from two sources: the literature review and the survey material. The literature review was undertaken at length in regard to the practice absence with fathers in child and family welfare, and from this a list of questions was developed. The two main researchers who emerged from the literature were consulted for ideas about the types of questions that could be asked from participants. The first source was one from a study by Ghate *et al.*, (2000) a United Kingdom (UK) study on father engagement in family centres. The other source was also the UK study by Scourfield (2002), mentioned previously. These individuals were consulted by me via emails, in regard to the types of questions they asked in their studies (Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Scourfield, 2001). Whilst their information was helpful, the construction of the survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview was designed solely on the basis of my own original ideas and exploration with the topic. All the interview schedule questions in this study (Appendix 5) and the interview process were constructed to reflect the range of issues identified in the literature review and research topic in mind with some flexibility with the wording of the questions and themes that had been identified from data that emerged from the survey questionnaire (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995).

Some of these topics covered were: characteristics of fathers/father figures that attend or did not attend; expectations and views of fathers/father figure by workers, and the language used by workers and agencies to describe the work undertaken with fathers/father figures. The complete set of questions is shown in Appendix 5. The interview process was conducted in three phases, often not prescribed but generally as a process that was familiar to most practitioners working within the human services field. These phases were the beginning, middle and end.

The beginning consisted of general rapport building and ‘getting to know you’ or socialisation. This consisted of talking about a wide range of topics such as current practice, activities outside the work environment which included sport and family topics and about the current research being undertaken by myself. It also contained a review of the interview agreement and the importance of maintaining confidentiality. The next phase was the middle phase where the participant was initially asked a broad open-ended question such as *Can you please tell me about your experiences with working with fathers?* This question was designed so that there was no restriction to talk about any particular event or experience. Once this information had been gathered, information on particular experiences of their work with fathers could be recorded.

If there was difficulty by the participant in understanding the question, prompting through the use of a clarification question would be asked such as, *Can you tell me of a recent example?* The interview schedule was applied to every participant and is shown in Appendix 5.

3.7.5 Reliability and validity of interviews

In-depth interviewing is a process whereby the researcher keeps close to the experiential reality so that there is a close connection between the data collected and what people actually experience. It is a type of interview where researchers seek to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view or situation. In-depth interviewing is often a qualitative data collection method; it is also referred to as 'qualitative interviewing' (Patton, 1990; 2002). The interviewer is always examining awareness and understanding of the respondents against a mass of potential sources of inaccuracy. The respondents were recruited on the basis that they all were currently involved in casework with families or had experience in working with different types of families involved. For data to be reliable, it ultimately must show that the research can be repeated and also replicated (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995).

In undertaking the research, and in obtaining the data, the researcher must use the same interview guide and research questions to all respondents and participants, whether by interview or mail-out questionnaire. This ensures data reliability. Any measure is only reliable when consistent results are obtained.

Thus, in this study, a process remained constant and was undertaken repeatedly with respondents to maintain dependable data. The process followed in analysing the data was that recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). All data from participants was transcribed in verbatim form without any identifying features, and fictitious names were applied.

3.7.6 Length, order and locations of interviews

The participants would be contacted either by telephone or email to arrange a suitable interview date, time and venue. The feedback from the participants about the interview process indicated a positive process and enabled some reflection on practice with fathers that they may not have had the opportunity to talk about in the past. The main aim was to find a location that would minimise distractions and where they felt comfortable to talk in private to maintain confidentiality.

3.7.7 Data analysis

Data was analysed concurrently with the aid of a computer software program called NVivo (version 7.0). NVivo is software designed by QSR International, specifically to assist researchers to manage non-numerical and unstructured data in qualitative analysis through a process of indexing and searching (Bazeley, 2007). The software is most useful in assisting the researcher to manage large amounts of data in transcript form, field notes and memos. It can assist the researcher to explore ideas about the data collected, link these ideas and construct theories about the data (Richards 1999; web: <http://www.qsrinternational.com/index.htm>).

3.8 Ethics approval

Research requires that ethics and ethical conduct and principles apply to our interactions with other humans, animals and also the environment. Ethics in research in Australia is guided and set by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research involving Humans (SCERH) (Appendix 1), after evidence was provided that this study had met the research guidelines set down by the NHMRC in the Statement of Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (1999).

3.8.1 Informed consent

Informed consent is seen to be one of the most critical issues in qualitative research; indeed, it is regarded by some as the key issue in research with human beings (Bogdan 1992; Evans, 1996). Informed consent occurs when potential participants are given sufficient information about the proposed research, are capable of understanding that information and have the power of free choice that allows them to either give or withhold consent to participate. Informed consent will also include the following information to be provided to the potential participant:

- The right to withdraw consent at any time without reprisal
- Why the research is being undertaken
- Details of how the research will be conducted
- Anticipated benefits and potential risks
- Potential inconveniences or discomforts
- Any costs to participants
- How confidentiality will be maintained
- Possible conflicts of interest
- Institutional affiliations of the researchers
- Possible outcomes, including publications
- Participation is voluntary (Sarantakos, 1993, p 173).

This study outlines all the above items, both in written form provided through the Explanatory Statement as well as in verbal form before and after each interview by the researcher (see Appendix 2).

In addition, contact details for the Monash University SCERH were provided in written form, should any of the participants wish to make a complaint or believe that there has been a breach of the ethical guidelines.

3.8.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

With any research, both anonymity and confidentiality are an essential part of the process (Alston and Bowles, 2003). Confidentiality means that the information given to the researcher will not be given to others except in the reporting of the research as agreed by the participant in their informed consent.

It also means that the information provided by the participant will not be used for any other purpose other than for the research at hand. It has been acknowledged that in qualitative research methodologies it can be difficult to achieve anonymity because the researcher knows the identity of the participants (Yegidis and Weinbach, 1991; 2010). In this study some participants were known to me, having worked in the same organisation settings as myself. Thus, particular care was essential to ensure that these participant identities remained anonymous. To overcome this issue the use of codes and pseudonyms for each participant and any other person who was mentioned by the participants was used. Reference to the health or welfare service agency was reduced to a general term such as 'community centre' rather than a specific name of that centre which would identify the location of the participant. In seeking to maintain confidentiality a code number was assigned to the participant and the code reference book with names, address details and transcripts of the interviews were kept in a separate locked filing cabinet.

All participants were informed of this process and also that the researcher and their supervisors were the only persons that could connect them with this data. Finally, due to the nature of the topic being researched some of the participant's pre-interview and post-interviews could cause some level of discomfort relating to their experiences of father or father figures at a personal or professional level. As an experienced social worker, I felt confident in identifying and managing any level of discomfort that these participants may encounter.

It was also part of the strategy for ethical approval that supports were identified should the participant become distressed at any stage of the research process. This strategy included details of a national confidential crisis line – Lifeline - which operates 24 hours a day and seven days per week; that I would be available to discuss any issues that they had regarding the study, including those of a personal nature, and that they would be able to access counselling and support through their own Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which operates in many organisations free of charge. All participants who were involved in this study reported that they were able to complete the survey questionnaire and in-depth interview without any distress. In addition, the participants said that the interview provided a positive opportunity to reflect on their practice.

3.9 Study limitations

Certain limitations in the research must be acknowledged. The snowball sample technique was a very useful way to gain access to what was a very difficult sample population on the basis of what has already been discussed. However, it is not without its limitations as with most research methodologies.

The use of snowball sampling introduces a bias to the discussion, since the data is collected from a group of people who can be linked or are alike and it runs the risk of missing those individuals who are not so integrated into the economic, political cultural or social networks (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). In this first phase of the research, the initial participants were known to the author and were asked to assist in locating others in the sample. In the first phase of the data collection, snowball sampling was not a 'stand alone' tool (Patton 1990; 2002). For the first phase in the study, the survey method was applied as a way of recruiting participants, and then in-depth interviews were used in the second phase. Whilst the response rate with this research was relatively high, self-administered survey questionnaires generally have lower response rates than telephone or face-to-face interviews. This is because the respondent is left to return the survey and it is also more work for the respondent, as they have to fill in the self-administered survey questionnaire themselves without assistance. This was overcome by keeping the number of questions to a minimum, providing a return envelope (postage paid) and ensuring that the cover letter and explanatory statement outlined the aims and importance of the research.

3.10 Chapter summary

The purpose and focus of this chapter has been to discuss the research design, the many design issues and in particular the use of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and its relevance and application to this study. The data was obtained from survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews from participants working in health and welfare settings.

The survey questionnaires and the in-depth interviews were transcribed and entered into a computer software program in preparation for data management, which occurred concurrently.

Field notes and memos were also kept and included in the qualitative data collection for analysis. The data was analysed according to the principles of grounded theory, and coded with the aid of QSR NVivo (Version 7). The following three chapters will present findings on the data from the survey questionnaires and the in-depth interviews, arranged upon and around rich and discrete themes that emerged from this process.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

The next three chapters will discuss the findings of the study in detail. This brief chapter will provide a summary of the research perspectives and the characteristics of the respondents and participants. In Chapter 5, the results from phase one of the study and analysis of the surveys that were completed by the respondents, will be presented and discussed. In Chapter 6 the results from phase two of the study from analysis of the interview transcripts that were undertaken with the interviewees, will be presented and discussed.

4.1.1 Research perspectives

The research topic for this study emerged from my own practice experience (Fleming 1998) of working as a social worker for over 15 years, entering other people's worlds and seeing possibilities of being able to make a difference in their lives and their community (Ferguson, 2003). As a social worker employed in working with families, I collected a lot of information about the mothers and children. However, on reflection of my social work practice (Fook, 2002) I thought my work contained very little information about fathers in those families in my practice. I found that my observations were shared by my colleagues in child protection but we did not articulate or document these experiences and we seemed to be unable to give voice to the work (Weick, 2002, p 396).

This 'theory-practice' gap often described in social work practice (Healy, 2005), led to my interest in seeking out what other researchers had written about this topic (Milner 1993; Farmer and Owen 1995; O'Hagan and Dillenburg 1995; O'Hagan 1997; Scourfield 2002; Featherstone, 2009) as a way to learn how my practice might be more inclusive of men and fathers. I was motivated by awareness that my practice might be oppressive, as discussed in Chapter 1, and that there may be an urgent need to address gender bias in social work practice. This has been described in the literature as a situation where men are screened out of practice by social workers and women excessively scrutinised in child and family welfare practice (Milner 1993; O'Hagan, 1997). I was also guided by the belief that engaging fathers was essential to effective and timely good social work and professional practice.

As discussed in Chapter 3, grounded theory research methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was chosen as a means to unpick and critically reflect on a process which was not well understood in practice (Pithouse 1987; McCracken 1988; McMahon 1998; Gould, 2000). The primary aim of my research was to explore and discover what professionals working in the broader child and family health and welfare services, say and do in everyday practice about fathers and analyse these responses in relation to relevant aspects of social theory.

The research sought to develop theory about social work practice in relation to fathers and attempt to bridge the practice gap noted by other researchers (Scourfield 2002, 2006; Featherstone *et al.*, 2006b; Featherstone 2006, 2009; Featherstone *et. al.*, 2010).

4.2 Surveys conducted

The first phase of the study comprised locating a sample of practitioners using a snowball sampling technique. Potential respondents were mailed a survey questionnaire (Appendix 4). The sample was obtained by asking one or two respondents known to the researcher to pass on the survey to others who may be interested in completing the survey. A total of 24 survey questionnaires were mailed out to those located as intended respondents over a six month period. The survey, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3, consisted of a five page A 4 questionnaire with 23 response items (Appendix 4). The postal survey questionnaire sought to elicit respondent's perceptions and experiences of certain key issues that they may have experienced in their work with families such as: engagement with fathers; need for training around working with fathers, and their employing agency's views of fathers. As time had been lost in the previous attempts to obtain participants, the main rationale for choosing a survey was a means to begin a dialogue with respondents. In addition, due to the problems of accessing an initial suitable sample, a survey was deemed to be a less intrusive means of gathering data than a telephone or face-to-face interview, and would promote anonymity. Also, most people have had some experience in completing questionnaires and are not made apprehensive by them.

4.2.1 Profile of the respondents: Survey

A total of 19 surveys that were returned were examined in the study and their profiles are detailed in the following tables. As indicated in Table 1, the main respondents were female.

Table 1 Gender of the respondents

Gender	N = 19
Male	8
Female	11

Respondents in the survey were all professionals, employed in either a health or family welfare setting. Nearly all respondents were professionally qualified social workers. All the respondents in the survey sample were employed full-time.

Table 2 Occupational status of respondents

Occupation	N=19
Social Worker	8
Physiotherapist	1
Manager/Coordinator	4
Occupational Therapist	1
Community Health Nurse	1
Youth and Family Worker	4

As indicated in Table 3, the majority of respondents were working in metropolitan areas. Fifteen respondents were living and working in Perth, Western Australia and the remaining four respondents were from regional Victoria, Australia.

Table 3 Location of respondents

Location	N=19
Western Australia	15
Victoria	4

In Table 4, the majority of respondents were employed in government hospitals or health services and non-government child and family welfare service. The remainder were employed in non-government hospitals and private health services.

Table 4 Agency by category

4.3 Profile of the participants: Interview

Table 4 Agency by category

Agency Type	N=19
Government Hospital/Health Service	9
Non-Government Hospital/Health	2
Non-Government Family /Child Welfare	8

The second phase of the study comprised of a series of interviews undertaken with respondents to the survey questionnaire. All respondents to the survey were asked if they wanted to undertake a follow-up interview and 10 were prepared to undertake this interview.

4.3.1 Background of interviewees

A summary of the profile of the interviewees is provided in Table 5.

Table 5 Summary of the profile of the interviewees

Case		Age	Occupation	Exp.	Qual.	Agency	Location
1	Gary	45	Senior Social Worker	15	Bachelor of Social Work	Public Hospital	Central, WA
2	Peter	47	Senior Physiotherapist	11	Bachelor of Social Science	Child Development Centre	East, WA
3	Alice	41	Social Worker	3	Bachelor of Social Work	Community Health	Country East, WA
4	Sonia	49	Community Health Nurse	13	Bachelor of Nursing	Community Health	Country East, WA
5	Bob	37	Senior Social Worker	5	Bachelor of Social Work	Child/Adolescent Community Health	South East, WA
6	Penny	44	Senior Occupational Therapist	4	Bachelor of Social Science	Child/Adolescent Community Health	South East, WA
7	Sue	51	Senior Social Worker	16	Bachelor of Social Work	Child/Adolescent Community Health	East, WA
8	Greg	39	Social Worker	12	Bachelor of Social Work	Public Hospital	North, WA
9	Debra	43	Social Worker/Manager	8	Bachelor of Social Work	Non-Profit Organisation	Central, WA
10	John	42	Senior Social Worker	9	Bachelor of Social Work	Adult Mental Health	East, WA
	N=10						

They are not listed in the order in which they were interviewed; rather they are presented in random order, as a means of adding to the protection of their identity.

Also to support participant confidentiality, all interviewees were given pseudonyms in reporting of the data as represented in Table 5.

The participants for the in-depth interviews were recruited using a snowball sample resulting from the first phase of the study where those who completed the surveys could indicate their willingness to be interviewed. This process has previously been discussed in Chapter 3.

All of the 10 interviewees were employed full-time in a variety of health and welfare agencies and came from both social work and non-social work disciplines. There were eight from the metropolitan area and two from rural areas in Western Australia.

Interviewees identified their practice experience ranging between three and 15 years experience. The interviewees had worked in a large range of clinical and non-clinical areas with representatives from child and family welfare practice, primary health and acute care.

The specialty areas in which interviewees had worked included social work, child protection (with several specialties identified), paediatrics, accident and emergency, adult and child and adolescent mental health and community nursing. Some of the interviewees were employed by the public health system, others by private institutions or facilities. One interviewee was currently working in a practice area that was not clinically focused such as administration, education and research.

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the characteristics of the sample. Data for the study was collected from two sources: a postal survey questionnaire and a follow-up in-depth interview. From the 19 returned questionnaires 10 participants volunteered to participate in an in-depth interview.

The two major sources of data used were the written responses to the self-completed questionnaire and verbatim transcripts of the in-depth interviews conducted.

This chapter is offered as a prelude to the presentation of the findings from the analysis of the survey and interview data. Chapter 5 will discuss the results from the self-completed postal survey questionnaires and Chapter 6 will discuss the results from the in-depth interviews.

Chapter 5: Results from the Self-completed Postal Survey

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter the views of health and welfare professionals who responded to the mail- out survey questionnaire will be presented and explored. Excerpts from the responses to the questions are examined in relation to how these health and welfare professionals defined and experienced their work with fathers.

5.1.1 Data analysis

As discussed in Chapter 3, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was the method of analysis chosen for the data. As a method of qualitative analysis, grounded theory focuses upon the discovery of relevant categories and the relationships within these categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; McCracken 1988; Alston and Bowles, 2003).

Grounded theory was seen as a suitable choice for this study because one of the main aims of the research was to discover new perspectives on absent fathers at the point of contact with child welfare staff and in the agency context. As the data was coded line by line, understanding of the subject matter was refined as different themes and categories were identified. Within QSR NVivo (version 7), data frequencies can be identified, relationships can be cross-referenced and notes, memos and ideas can be recorded and later incorporated into the data analysis. The 19 responses to the self-administered survey questionnaire were thematically analysed in relation to the question in which the response was recorded.

5.2 Survey themes

Throughout the survey, respondents were asked about their experiences of working with fathers. There were four key themes that emerged from the data. The first theme was the respondent's views of the meanings assigned to being a father. The second theme was the respondent's views of fathers in two practice situations: those that were present and those that were absent. The third theme was respondent's views of fathers as a resource. Finally, the fourth theme was respondent's views of fathers as a risk.

5.3 Theme One: Defining a father

The survey questionnaire requested that respondents provide a definition of both a 'father' and 'mother'. This question was purposely constructed to elicit how child health and welfare professionals see the term 'father' in their daily practice. The term 'father' is based on a social role with both a biological and cultural origin. Although fatherhood is often predicated upon a biological act, the enactment of the role as it applies to intervention in social work practice in regard to parenting is more social than biological. In answer to the question about defining a 'father' 17 respondents defined the term more broadly than the traditional biological construct. In their responses to this question about what does the term father mean to them, they were more creative in constructing a definition. They saw fathering as being beyond biology and as a role that could also include many other types of fathers.

Respondents with this view said:

Male person involved in the care of children. May or may not be the natural father, may or may not be living with children (Jenny, Coordinator).

1. Male caregiver/nurturer of a child. 2. Biological male parent of a child (can be 1 does not have to be 2) (Sue, Senior Social Worker).

The remaining two respondents held onto the traditional, narrower construct. For example responses from those who saw the term narrowly said:

A male parent – biological or assumed due to involvement and care of a child or children (Debra, Social Worker/ Manager)

and

Adult male, biological parent (Youth and Family Worker)

These excerpts indicate that most respondents could articulate fathering as being more than just a biological connection to the child and family. Nevertheless, despite the welcomed and varied answers to the ‘father’ definition, by comparison all 19 respondents had much more to say in their responses to the question about a mother’s role. For example:

Adult, female, biological parent, living long term in a family, who contributes to the running of the household. In various situations, some young people find it easier or harder to accept father/mother. I generally respect each family and they inform me if someone is mum’s boyfriend, our new dad etc etc (Youth and Family Worker).

and

A mother can be defined as both biological and through attachment in the upbringing of a child (Greg, Social Worker).

Clearly, both the Youth and Family Worker and Greg articulated a more inclusive definition when talking about mothers. Their responses acknowledged respected different family formations and that a mother has an attachment to a child. The Youth and Family Worker also stated that he relied on the young person for cues as to how they defined the term mother and father presumably because he saw them as flexible definitions.

Respondents did not identify in thinking about fathers, the different forms of fathering or fatherhood that can occur in intact and separated family types. These types have been given the term ‘social fathering’ (Fletcher 2003; Berlyn *et al.*, 2008).

Respondents may have found the question difficult to answer because they could only see social fathering as a one-dimensional construct, being located in their biology.

That is legitimate fathering and fatherhood can only be seen in a context where the father has a relationship and also cohabitates with the mother and child or children.

This dominant form of fatherhood is often premised by child and family professionals without consideration of the changing social landscape in which there have been major structural shifts in child care arrangements (Scourfield 2001; Featherstone 2004a; 2005; Featherstone *et al.*, 2007a). Their responses rarely incorporated other forms of fathering such as older male siblings, de-facto relationships, grandfathers, gay parenting and non-residential categories. Furthermore, some respondents viewed fathering as a role that could be legitimised only through the connection to the mother. This process is demonstrated by two social workers in the following excerpts:

Biological father, male who assisted in the rearing of the child/ren
(Debra, Social Worker)

and

A man who has parental responsibilities of a child either through conception or relationship (Greg, Social Worker)

From this position, both of the respondents hold onto the notion that to be an effective father, the father role needs to be grounded in the parenting work with the mother as well as based in the relationship with the mother. It is not enough for a father to manage parenting from outside the relationship with the mother.

5.4 Theme Two: Constructing fathers

The second theme identified how respondents viewed fathers encountered in their practice. Respondents were given a choice of responses and were asked to circle on a Likert scale (Appendix 4) how they viewed a fathers involvement from 'highly positive' to 'highly negative'. They were then asked to comment on their choice on the scale.

5.4.1 Constructing fathers: Those who are present

All of the respondents circled 'highly positive' and some made comments saying that they believed that father involvement was important in their work with the family. A common response to having a father involved was regarded by all the respondents as having a positive benefit to their work. That is, engaging the father assists them in promoting better outcomes for the child and family.

These two excerpts from respondents describe just how important having a father present in the contact with the family:

I feel that it is a positive occurrence for the child for the father to be involved with the agency, as service provision aims to increase the parent's understanding of the child's difficulties and to improve parenting skills, family relationships and decrease parental conflict (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

and

If we can work with both parents, we generally have better outcomes in relation to increased parenting techniques (Family Support Coordinator)

Whilst all of the respondents recognised the positive importance and contribution of fathers to their practice, there was conflict between their individual agencies' opening times and the ability of a father to attend, which caused some difficulties in promoting engagement as this respondent describes:

Yes and no, fathers and father figures can attend but appointments are only during the daytime hours, many father/father figures will not attend because of work (Peter, Senior Physiotherapist)

Despite this conflict respondents were still keen to involve fathers where possible. They provided a rationale for those fathers who were unable to attend due to inflexible working hours of the father or other agency resource constraints and did not blame the fathers for this problem:

Depends upon the situation....a father may not be able to be available 9-5pm, but this would not mean they do not care (Youth and Family Worker)

and

I don't think my agency places enough importance on work with fathers (Family Support Worker)

In promoting father involvement in their work, respondents were open to ways to try to find ways to achieve it as part of good practice. Father involvement for them was positive and of benefit and they did not give up on the notion of engaging with fathers despite the obstacles around work hours. As one worker said:

In my work there are many reasons why a father cannot be involved (e.g. work, separation). If it is a choice or inability I will work at connecting in some way (Youth and Family Worker)

This comment highlights Lipsky's (1983) description of social workers as 'street level bureaucrats' where he argued that policy lies not so much in the decisions of governments but in the definitions, explanations and actions of frontline workers (p 3). This was very relevant to how the respondents saw their role when attempting to engage with fathers in their work. Although agency policies did not facilitate the involvement of fathers, some workers manoeuvred around the policy. Whilst there are no guarantees, practices and views taken by workers regarding fathers like the ones described, may eventually lead to policy shifts at a higher level for child and family welfare services.

5.4.2 Constructing fathers: Those who are absent

The third theme that emerged from the survey was respondents views of fathers who had a lack of involvement with their agency. Again the respondents were requested to circle on a Likert scale from 'highly positive' to 'highly negative' their views and also add their comments. Respondents identified that the reasons for father absence from their practice was because of organisational, institutional barriers and personal barriers.

5.4.2.1 Attitudes towards father absence reframed as an 'agency system barrier'

When commenting on the absence of fathers from their practice, respondent's attitudes to absence were seen by them as a 'system barrier'. An agency system barrier existed when respondents provided a rhetoric around the importance of 'family inclusiveness', but in reality could not adequately accommodate fathers in their practice.

An example of a systems barrier common throughout the survey responses was the lack of flexibility in the opening times of the agency (for example 9-5pm) to allow work with fathers after five o'clock. Any attempt to meet the needs of fathers beyond the nominated work hours was seen as problematic by the agency, as both time and resources were described as not allowing the workers the opportunity to effectively engage with the fathers.

In these comments two respondents describe this difficulty with the systems barriers of time and resources:

Clinic opening hours...we have considered an after hours service for fathers who may not be able to attend during work hours but wider health service dictates hours (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

and

We would need to be better resourced to be more inclusive of fathers (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Whilst the systems barriers were seen by the respondents as problematic for their work with fathers, some respondents saw that specific training was needed to address systems barriers as these three respondents describe in these excerpts:

Staff need training as some staff are frightened of fathers...some are biased...some don't think to include fathers....some accept reports from mothers that fathers have left and are not interested (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Training, yes....it is important that fathers be viewed as providing individual and expert care for their children....not viewed homogenously (Greg, Social Worker)

We need to keep up to date and learn about the correct research that is occurring regarding males and fathers (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

These excerpts provide important insights into how these respondents reflected upon their own individual practice wisdom (Dybicz 2004; Halverson, 2004).

Although respondents identified some solutions to addressing these systems barriers they also assumed that fathers themselves would accept these barriers, such as not being able to leave work, and this would then legitimise their absence from the agency.

5.4.2.2 Fathers own personal barriers

Respondents viewed fathers as excluding themselves from practice and this was described by them as a personal barrier. The respondents saw personal barriers as ones imposed upon by the fathers themselves, as a form of self-exclusion from services. Respondents reported that in their view, fathers were often absent because they felt as a father they may see their own behaviours or actions coming under scrutiny by the professional or the agency and they wished to avoid this scrutiny. As one worker commented:

Even though requested to come later they may be reluctant as their actions/values may be challenged (Debra, Social Worker)

Other respondents saw a personal barrier for fathers as being their belief that childcare or therapeutic counselling was ‘women’s business’ and thus the reason behind a fathers absence from practice. As two respondents pointed out:

Children’s care and health care are often viewed by men and women as women’s business. (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

and

When my client is a mother and we invited her partner to attend for counselling, it is often knocked back with comments like ‘I don’t need counselling’ (John, Senior Social Worker)

However, rather than see these personal barriers as a type of male or father flaw, some respondents reflected upon ways to understand what may be going on in this situation. Some workers had considered the issues and sought to address them. One respondent commented that:

I feel for guys who are not ready to take up the option we provide...but rather than resent them for it, I try to understand them and the forces that are shaping their resistance (Manager/ Coordinator)

In stark contrast, other respondents highlighted an opposite experience of fathers and said they saw no real rationale behind fathers excluding themselves from their practice as they provide the necessary environment to enable fathers to be included:

What do fathers need that mothers don't? We provide chairs, toilets etc etc for males and females (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

They (fathers) are no different to females. (Youth and Family Worker)

In summary, all these excerpts from the survey exemplify the types of practices that may impact on the father being included or excluded from the work. These can often be used to provide powerful rationales for workers excluding fathers in their practice and to negate any reasons for trying different approaches to facilitate father inclusion. The findings and the words and language used by the respondents illustrate that there is ambivalence in placing fathers as a central player in their practice. In other words the challenge for respondents in this situation to see the mother, child and father all at the same time was missing from their practice (Daniel and Taylor 1999; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Scott, 2008).

5.5 Theme Three: Fathers as resources

All respondents recorded that fathers bring significant benefits, often referred to in the literature as ‘resources’ or ‘assets’ (Daniel and Taylor 1999; Featherstone 2003; Daniel *et al.*, 2005; Featherstone, 2009). Professionals view these resources as useful and so include fathers in their work with families. Resources relate to how professionals view the usefulness of involving fathers in their work with the family, usually in the form of things such as improved family functioning or resolution of personal difficulties and crisis.

Under theme three, fathers as a resource, respondents identified three main benefits or sub-themes involving fathers in their practice. These were: having an increased awareness of the family’s perspective; enabling a male perspective to be applied to their work, and having a positive influence on child development and family wellbeing (see Chapter 5 - 5.5.3).

5.5.1 Having an increased awareness of the family’s perspective

Respondents thought that involving fathers in their practice was an effective way to engage with the whole family that, in turn, increased impact of their intervention. Furthermore this could lead to greater cooperation with the father. The following two excerpts highlight this theme:

They (the fathers) can ask their own questions and gain their own understanding of what the intervention is about...so more consistency can be gained in carrying out intervention at home (Peter, Senior Physiotherapist)

and

For a father the reassurance that they can give to a patient can be useful for the patient to discuss ideas with and help keep the patient calm and occupied (Greg, Social Worker)

Having a father as a resource or benefit is often neglected in the literature (Milner 1993b; Scourfield 2002; Featherstone, 2004a) but the two previous respondents could see the advantages of working with fathers and valuing their contribution to any intervention plan. Constructions of fathers in child and family welfare in the literature has not been overly endearing and have mostly centered upon risks and dangers that they can pose to mothers and children as well as limiting the role to one of a breadwinner (worker father) (Dale *et al.*, 1986; Daniel and Taylor 1999; Johnson, 2005).

Whilst in some cases fathers, including father-figure types, can and do pose real and potential risks to the mothers and children (Farmer and Owen, 1998), hegemonic masculine beliefs, that all fathers are problematic, can lead to fear and avoidance by child and family professionals when engaging with fathers and men (O'Hagan and Dillenger 1995; O'Hagan 1997; Daniel and Taylor 1999; Featherstone, 2004).

However, this view of fathers as only risks and economic providers has been challenged in recent times and there is now greater support for professionals to deconstruct the role that fathers play in family life. It also acknowledges the benefits of their contribution to mothers and children in the family (Lamb 1997; Hawkins and Dollahite 1997; Featherstone 2003, 2004a, 2006; Scourfield 2006; Featherstone and Peckover 2007b; Nettle, 2008). Respondents reflected this challenge to the fathers role as highlighted in the following two sub-themes: enabling a male perspective to be applied to their work, and having a positive influence on the child development.

5.5.2 Enabling a fathers perspective to be applied to their work

It has long been recognised in the literature that child and family welfare services are focused mainly upon mothers and children whilst avoiding fathers (Daniel and Taylor 1999; McClean 2003; Simpson 2004; Scourfield 2006; Strega *et al.*, 2008). The research also suggests that the child welfare system tends to also concentrate upon intervention with mothers regardless if there is a father present. Even in child welfare settings workers focus on mothers regardless of who is the alleged perpetrator of abuse (Milner 1993b; Farmer and Owen 1995; Daniel and Taylor 1999; Featherstone 2006; Strega, 2008).

In this situation professionals are locked into the dominant discourse of what a fathers role is through their training and own experience. This is that parenting is equated with nurturing which, in turn, is equated with mothering, not fathering. This results ultimately in a skewed perspective being applied to child and family welfare practice, and challenging the status quo becomes a difficult and complex task (Daniel and Taylor, 1999, p 214). As a result, the language of child welfare services is disproportionately focused around the mothers role which, on the one hand, can conflate mothers and fathers as parents and, on the other, disregard non-abusing fathers (Trotter 1997; Featherstone, 2004b). Respondents in the survey believed that having a fathers perspective was important in ensuring that their work was more gender balanced towards both parents. In the view of Debra, the fathers role is a core component when they sought to validate their role in the family:

Validates their (the fathers) role...allows them to voice their positive and negative views...assists in any change that may be required...he (the father) is part of the dynamics of the family...he (the father) is needed (Debra, Social Worker)

Another respondent extended this theme further and suggested that involving fathers more in their practice would change the social perceptions of the roles of parents. This respondent said:

For the long-term benefit of the children and assists in changing social perceptions of parents (men as providers, women as nurturers) (Greg, Social Worker)

These are important statements. They have identified that fathers do in fact form part of their thinking in regard to their practice, even when perhaps it may not be a view shared within the agency or the wider society as the same respondent above describes:

Very difficult to attract men to work in an agency that is predominantly viewed as being a 'woman's service'...This has as much to do with societies perception as it does with the agencies outlook (Greg, Social Worker)

Thinking beyond services just for women can be a difficult task for those employed in child and family welfare services because, as we have seen, there is no definitive dominant discourse regarding the 'fathers role'. The mothers role on the other hand is much more explicit and accepted as a construct (Johnston 1988; Clarke and Popay, 1998).

5.5.3 Having a positive influence on child and family wellbeing

There is a large body of work that shows just how important fathers are at different stages of a child's life even when the father is absent from the family (Balcom 1998; Flouri and Buchanan 2003; Ngala 2003; Bartlett 2004; Lewis and Lamb, 2007).

Furthermore, there has been a steady increase in research that also recognises that there is a direct correlation between a child's general well-being and the amount and quality of information they have about the absent parent (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt 1997; Clarke and Popay 1998; Pruett 1989; Lewis and Lamb 2007; Nettle, 2008). An important sub-theme that emerged from the survey data was that respondents reported that having a father's input was crucial to a child and family's wellbeing. There was a diverse set of views expressed about the importance of a father in a child's development. One respondent viewed a fathers input as having a direct influence on the child's view of their service:

If a child, young person etc. sees their father/FF (father figure) utilising a service it can be a positive experience e.g. "if dad can use it, I can" (Debra, Social Worker)

Another respondent embraced the usefulness of a fathers input into a family members care in hospital:

For a father the reassurance that they can give to a patient can be useful for the patient to discuss ideas with and help keep the patient calm and occupied (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Finally, one respondent recognised that involving a father is central to not only understanding a child's difficulties (in this case at a child and adolescent mental health agency) it is also an opportunity for the father to develop parenting skills and decrease parental conflict:

I feel that it is a positive occurrence for the child for the father to be involved...aims to increase the parent's understanding of the child's difficulties...improve parenting skills, family relationships and decrease parental conflict...a father who wants to be involved is viewed very positively as one who is interested in the wellbeing of their child (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

All three excerpts from respondents are equally important as they convey the key message that despite many fathers being absent or often difficult to engage at times, fathers can have key role to play in the family as protectors and nurturers.

5.6 Theme Four: Fathers as risks

The construction of fathers in child and family welfare contain many tensions and contradictions. Whilst some fathers can be seen as a resource to the family in child and family welfare, some fathers can also be seen as a risk. This is because when men and fathers are known to be violent or aggressive, engagement must begin with screening for safety; intervening with men and fathers must not place mothers or children at more risk (Goodmark 2004; Daniel and Taylor 2001; Lonne *et al.*, 2008; Perel and Peled, 2008).

Yet, the research identifies that men and fathers who are violent or aggressive are in many cases not worked with effectively and, even worse, avoided by social workers (Milner 1993; Gilligan 2000; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Featherstone 2004; Littlechild and Bourke, 2006). Only five of the 19 respondents from the survey sample found that violence and aggression was a barrier to their work with fathers. Of these five respondents a common thread in their responses was that violence and aggression was a problem for themselves as practitioners or others in their agency. One social worker responded with this remark:

Possibility of violence, DV (domestic violence) situations may place volunteer or worker in dangerous situation (Alice, Social Worker)

Another social worker with 15 years experience began his answer in the following way:

Some fathers are violent or aggressive and staff find this difficult to cope with...some fathers want support to prove the mother to be unfit or to take Family Court action (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Whilst these respondents recognise that violence and aggression are factors that prevent effective work with fathers, there is no recognition by the respondents that aggression and violence is also a real issue for mothers and children (Daniel and Taylor 1999; Stanley and Goddard 1997; 2002). Because a survey questionnaire does not allow an opportunity by the researcher to collect additional information while the questions are being answered (Sarantakos, 1993), the reasons behind why respondents did not see that aggression and violence is also a real issue for mothers and children, may never be fully known. However, this theme will be revisited in-depth in the next chapter, being the second phase of the results.

5.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have focused on presenting and discussing the results from the postal survey questionnaires. As the first phase of the study, its aim was to attract some interest in the topic of father absence in child and family welfare. This initial first phase was essential to the life of the research as it was originally very difficult to recruit participants for this study due to both the nature of the topic and relative lack of interest by social welfare professions in speaking about work practices with fathers as discussed in Chapter 3. This chapter has highlighted the relative difficulty that experienced child and family welfare practitioner's face when they attempt to involve fathers in their work.

It also offers up some important insights into some of the potential barriers that prevent fathers from being a part of child and family welfare practice. Understanding some of the reasons behind father absence requires seeing that, like mothers, some fathers too may pose risks, some may be resources, and some may incorporate aspects of both. In the next chapter, an analysis of the results from the interviews with some of these respondents from the first phase will be presented in detail.

Chapter 6: Results from the in-depth interviews

6.1 Introduction

In the last chapter the findings from the survey of respondents were reported and discussed. Respondents to the survey were asked if they would like to participate in a semi-structured interview. The findings from these semi-structured interviews will now be presented. This chapter explores the way in which fathers are spoken about in detail by child and family welfare professionals.

6.1.1 Interview process

As discussed in Chapter 3, the data collection tool was a semi-structured interview on a range of themes identified from the literature review and also from my practice experience as a social worker. Interviews were undertaken with 10 health and welfare professionals using a snowball sampling technique. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 5) was constructed to allow participants every opportunity to give as much detail as possible in their answer (Sarantakos, 1993). My interview technique was through a dialogue with each of the respondents in which I tried to create a relaxed and open environment for the flow of ideas to be germinated and expressed. This was achieved through sharing my own personal and professional challenges. I found that working in child and family welfare I could offer some connections between the study I was undertaking and practice issues. This approach was met positively by all the participants as they could appreciate the importance of recording with credibility and genuine interest their responses and that I was not there to 'check up' on them or evaluate their practice.

All the interviews were conducted at the interviewee's workplace and the interviews ranged in time between 45 minutes to one hour duration. Interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed into a word processor file.

My relationship with these ten participants was fairly relaxed and amicable and many of these participants had been keen to be involved in the research from the very beginning. All the interviewees agreed with the format of the interview and structure of the research and appeared to be at ease about the topic, possibly as they were in the "business" of talking to help people (Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988). Although the interview questions were broad and open-ended, I endeavoured to ask some specific questions that requested some clarity about the topic (Appendix 5). However, in analysis of the interview transcripts, it was clear that many of these interviewees indeed found it difficult to verbalise their experiences of working with fathers. This was reflected in the number of marked changes in the direction of the interviewee's speech, such as the number of pauses and the short length of answers to the questions that were provided. In the next section, the key themes arising from the interview data will be presented.

6.1.2 Interview format

The ten interviewees were asked a set of eight questions in sequence from the interview schedule (Appendix 5). The questions were in a similar format and were open ended such as: 'can you tell me your experiences about working with fathers'? Answers to the questions by the interviewees were recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim. All of the questions from the semi-structured interview schedule focused on how participants described their experiences of fathers in their practice.

6.2 Focus on the mothers, not the fathers

The value placed on the mothering role was well supported by all the interviewees, but the role of the father was not articulated in the same way. One interviewee developed the following argument in relation to this theme:

To be honest in most cases it is assumed if that they (fathers) are not there... there are reasons for that... I mean when I do the social work assessment, it's usually the mothers that we do deal with and then if the fathers are not seen we will inquire why the fathers are not seen and if there's not been contact with the father and the child and the mother then it won't be followed up (Bob, Senior Social Worker)

Another interviewee made comment on the value of the mothering role and emphasised this by saying that it was the mothers who would often give up their paid work to care for their children in times of crisis, not the fathers:

A lot of times dads are not a consistent figure and often not home, such as being a truck driver and spending time away (Penny, Senior Occupational Therapist)

Experiences working with fathers were often seen through the worker's own personal ideas of what constitutes a 'family', not what is often reflected in practice. In this situation, fathering was equated to parenting, which was equated to mothering.

An example of this type of practice is illustrated by Bob where he makes the observation that he only deals with mothers in his work:

There is not a time that I say "oh there's a dad" I know that I have dealt predominantly with mothers as being the primary care givers especially for adolescents... even as social work as a profession is meant to work with all people... as a whole, dads are just another part of the family system... I think there is quite a marked absence of fathers and that mothers are the primary caregivers and fathers are an adjunct to the family system and missed out in the work (Bob, Senior Social Worker)

In the interviewee's responses, it was the mothers that provided the most care and nurture to children even when the father was able to be physically present and available for this work. Another example was where Gary, who works in a large suburban teaching hospital, referred to mothers as the ones that were reliable from the very beginning of their child's diagnosis and treatment. Getting fathers involved was often unexpected and an assumption that the fathers would not be involved. Gary in his response did not challenge this situation, but instead accepted it as being standard practice in his workplace:

Generally, this is a "Women and Children's Hospital", and the title therefore I guess excludes fathers... men are included and can be included but I think there are some structural things that prevent that and the structural things are that men work a lot more than mothers do. Fathers work more than mothers do... I supervise the people (Social Workers) who work in Oncology and the kids diagnosis is usually a major crisis for a family and if mum and dad are working, it's usually mum that gives up the work and dad continues to work...dad relies on mum to hear what the doctors say (Gary, Senior Social Worker).

Working with a family was not seen from a fathering perspective, but rather from a hetero-dominant discourse of mothering-fathering being that 'mum's responsible and dad helps out' (Brown *et al*, 2009a, p 25). Other interviewees accepted and did not challenge the idea that fathers were absent from the social work intervention. In the following excerpt, there was a strong belief by Alice that fathers were generally not of any particular use, they often caused more problems for the family, and they had long-lasting effects on family life:

I've met him (the father) to wave to and say hello once and that was before he went to prison... he was never very involved in any of the work that we (the mother and social worker) were doing, which was about her trying to find a home for them... now because of his (criminal) charges no one in town will rent her a house because they don't want him in it, even though he is away for at least two years... so she's actually been discriminated against because of him (the children's father) (Alice, Social Worker)

Alice in her response is reflecting what Brown *et al.*, (2009a) has called a 'ghost father' which was a title that arose from their study of 116 randomly selected child protection files in Canada (p 26). A 'ghost father' by their definition, is where a father has been or is involved with a family, but rarely are they seen (invisible) or worked with or acknowledged by child welfare professionals:

Ghosts seem to lack substance and can appear unexpectedly. The malevolent ghosts of men who have been violent to mothers and children often engender fear; the ghost of fathers past can elicit feelings of longing and regret, while friendly ghosts of capriciously involved men can be equally unsettling (p 26).

Whilst this father that Alice describes above exists in the family, although not physically present, he has been manufactured by Alice as being intrusive and disruptive to the family and having no real benefit. To some extent Alice may be correct in her appraisal of this father due to his criminal behaviour, which partly contributes to her reluctance to engage with this father and which renders him invisible. This however does not help the family as they are still very much being affected by the fathers actions and it leaves little opportunity for constructive work with the family.

Where the fathers were seen to be of use by the interviewees, it tended to be because the mother was failing to cope with child care tasks due to their own personal problems. The following excerpt below is an example of this:

...there are a few dads I know that have the full time care of their children perhaps because the mother is on drugs or is an alcoholic or is gone off with someone else...I mean its not usual but there are those fathers who are very, very good dads. I mean they might go about it differently to the mums but the dads are still doing a good job (Sonia, Community Health Nurse)

This practice situation is not an uncommon phenomenon, as other researchers have found similar processes operating in child and family welfare settings (Clarke and Popay 1998; Scourfield 2002; Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Daniel and Taylor have termed this process the 'parenting-mothering-nurturing chain' (Daniel and Taylor, 1999, p 214). In this situation 'parenting' means 'mothering' which in turn equals a female activity. Mothering implies nurturing which is carried out by women and includes domestic tasks. They also argue that there is no such equivalent chain when considering the role of men as fathers (Daniel and Taylor, 1999, pp 48-49).

Interviewees acknowledged that these men as fathers could in fact take on a 'parenting' role, but they usually referred them elsewhere to other services external to their agency for 'parenting' or 'counselling' services. The assumption was that these fathers could not cope as much as mothers. The following observation was made by John:

...the one that comes to mind is a recent referral... a guy who's looking after his children himself, so he's become the main parent having the children in his care it has been quite difficult getting him to engage with different services...because he's got the young kids he's a bit sort of lost so I did refer him to some men's counselling services and parents without partners and things like that (John, Senior Social Worker)

The value of the father's role in this case was not seen by John as an important aspect of his work. A father in this case, one who is 'not coping', is seen by John as difficult to engage with or hard to get him to comply with other services he has suggested the father attend. This is because interviewee John operates from his personal beliefs and biases about fathers from his own past experiences.

This, in turn, affects dramatically the way in which fathers are conceptualised by child and family welfare professionals. Hence it leaves little opportunity for fathers themselves to speak to the worker about their own meanings of their role and how they see their world of parenting (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). Interviewees also made constant references to the idea that their practice was guided by who they consider important in the family. In many instances it was heavily biased towards the mothers and children and not the fathers. In the following excerpt, Greg questions the need for the father to be involved in his work which is again dependent upon what role a father can play in the family:

I am more likely to inquire about the children with the mother and how it's going to affect their terms of illness or terms of healing ...as I pointed out earlier, the limitations of this service of not needing to directly get fathers involved as "fathers" more on the lines of 'are you a support person?' (Greg, Social Worker)

Similarly, another interviewee commented:

...we work in a family and child and adolescent agency which in turn means all those children have parents, all those children have fathers...the definition of fathers varies much from one who is the sole caregiver and has significant contact with us and our agency to a person whom is a biological person in that child's life so that sort of answers the question of my experiences of working with fathers... I probably find it harder to define a 'father', it would be easier to ask me what is a 'mother'? I would find it a bit easier (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

Sue in her response, argues that all children have parents. To her this equated to both mother and a father. However, toward the end of her response she said it was much easier to describe a mother's role, than a father's role. Interviewee's articulation of how they saw their current work with fathers was also influenced by their own past experiences of fathers they had come into contact with in their practice. For other interviewees it was their hesitance about involving fathers that was the main barrier to effective work.

In summary, whilst there is some expectation for fathers to be involved with parenting by the interviewees, it is not always the case in their practice that fathers will share the role equally or for fathers to be seen by the interviewees as having other possible roles.

6.3 Working with a fathers absence

Three main central themes emerged from the data collected regarding interviewees' experiences of father absence in child and family welfare. Firstly, in their responses interviewees had well-developed and constructed rationales for fathers being absent. Secondly, they often neglected to ask about the father in their work. Finally, when they did ask for information about the fathers, they relied solely upon the mother to volunteer this information.

6.3.1 Absence justified

A number of interviewees had well-constructed answers around the reasons why fathers were not involved or were absent from their practice. The excerpt below illustrates some of the ways in which fathers are described in regard to their absence. Alice in her response has resigned herself to the fact that she has tried to get fathers involved, but without much success:

Well I've tried to get fathers to come when it's involving children or stepfather's or the male figure in the family but they (fathers) never seem to want to become involved (Alice, Social Worker)

Whilst some fathers, like mothers, may exclude themselves from practice, fathers can also be made absent by the way child and family welfare professionals frame their practice.

This can be done from the way professionals use the language of child and family welfare work where parenting for them means a mother is expected to carry the work load, while not acknowledging the father role in family life (Popay *et al.*, 1998; Daniel and Taylor 2001; Featherstone 2004).

6.3.2 Neglect to ask about the father

Interviewee's responses also often focused upon questioning the involvement of fathers in family life. These interviewees were open and honest about the fact that they often did not include the father in their day-to-day work. In the following two excerpts there is a sense in which the interviewees were, at the same time, somewhat apologetic about this situation. For example, Sue stated:

We probably don't know. Firstly because we don't know who they (the fathers) are and secondly we don't ask them (the fathers) (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

Another interviewee, Penny claims that:

A lot of times dads are not a consistent figure and often not home, such as being a truck driver and spending time away (Penny, Senior Occupational Therapist)

This lack of attention on fathers by these interviewees is a difficult choice that they make and often their choice is based upon pragmatic decisions about who they can realistically work with at the time. All the interviewees worked in very busy child and family welfare settings, some with high caseloads and with often limited resources in the agency to carry out the work. In this context working with the mother seemed to be the best use of time and a way to reduce professional stress.

However, whilst this factor is important to consider, interviewees' neglecting to involve fathers may be a reflection of their priorities as much as the reality of practice (Ghate *et al.*, 2000). In other words, the interviewees concentrate their efforts where they are most likely to be successful, often opting to work with the mothers as they are more easily accessed, but still doing this because they place less value on fathering than on mothering.

This is a reflection of social work and other child and family welfare professional practices, regarding mothers as the most important pathway by which children's health and welfare can be promoted and safeguarded (Calam and Franchi 1987; O'Hagan 1987; Featherstone, 2006).

6.3.3 Maternal gate-keeping

Interviewees reported that their practice with fathers was often reliant upon parents, which again equates to mothers reporting the presence or absence of the father. In the following excerpts Gary describes how much this reporting influences his practice:

What I notice a lot is that we get driven a lot by parents reporting and there may be a single mum who says 'oh, dad's not on the scene' and the hospital accepts it (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Reliance upon the mother for information about the father can mean that these fathers are not invited into the work or automatically excluded. Gary's response indicates a hesitation about the way he approaches fathers in his work. This has been described in the literature as 'maternal gate-keeping'. Maternal gate-keeping is defined as a situation whereby the fathers perceived investments in their parental roles and actual levels of paternal involvement are moderated by mothers' beliefs about the role of the father (McBride *et al.*, 2005; Doucet 2006; Zacharostilianakis-Roussou, 2010).

However, even when a father does become involved, the focus of their work in practice still tends to be in relation to mothers rather than on solutions or benefits that fathers could perhaps offer to the work. In the following excerpt, Sonia argues that it is indeed the mothers who drive the intervention, and thinks very negatively about one particular father:

Well I asked could I meet the dad, could we all get together and she says 'no' because he works but I don't find that as a valid excuse, I find that a cop out. Because if my four or five- year-old had been abused and they asked me to come in I would be in there so fast their (social workers/professionals) heads would spin so why can't the fathers, why don't the fathers appear to have that same commitment...as women are supposed to be? (Sonia, Community Health Nurse).

In summary, the potential involvement of a father is strongly influenced by the way these individual workers construct their practice around mothers and children. This again often led to interviewees questioning why fathers should be involved rather than how to involve them in their practice. If at any point in time these fathers are seen to be difficult, then there would be less of an opportunity to develop a relationship with them leading to more concentration upon the mothers. This would leave fathers absolved of the responsibility for the welfare of the family and child.

6.4 Working with a fathers presence

Although some interviewees regarded a father as important aspect to their work with families and children, for the fathers role to be an effective the father had to be physically present, which meant doing something practical to assist the mother with the child.

The following excerpt is an example of this process:

We often get dads bringing the kids up to the clinic for their needles, the mum would say you hold it...the mums don't want to hold the kids while they are being immunised it's like a betrayal you know especially for little babies...I think that's what it's all about and dads just take on that role really well...I'll protect you, yeah dads are pretty good mainly. (Sonia, Community Health Nurse)

Sonia's response sees the fathers of some use when they attend the clinic for immunisations. But it is a role that is restrictive as well as beneficial in the sense that it carries with it some degree of having the dads being seen as the ones that are seen responsible for the children's pain. In this sense Sonia reflects some confusion about the role of men in family life. This confusion was something that Daniel and Taylor (2001) highlighted in their research where child and family welfare professionals often believed that effective fathering cannot take place unless the fathers are physically present. However for other interviewees, they would question just how important a father's physical presence was to the intervention and what value they could be to the family when they did attend.

In the following excerpt, involvement by the father was seen by the interviewee as problematic to them because the fathers they had contact with usually were suspicious of their involvement:

I think some of them (fathers) are a bit suspicious sometimes you know ...if you ring up I find when I ring and they answer the phone ... 'Hi I am Alice I'm the social worker' and I can immediately hear the note of concern from the father (Alice, Social Worker)

This response reflects what has already been presented in the literature (see Chapter 2) about child and family welfare professionals' ambivalence towards fathers, particularly those unmotivated or living in hard to reach families, variously described as unable to cope, childlike, deluded, obsessive, and stubborn (Scourfield, 2001).

However, the practice research on fathers in child and family welfare highlights that fathers can and do play important roles in family life even when they may not physically be present. Fathers also can be both risks and assets to families and children (Featherstone 2003; 2009). Those interviewees who demonstrated particular empathic responses towards fathers they have worked with were often men who were fathers themselves. In the following excerpt, the interviewee reflects on this strength he brings to his practice:

My understanding is that once they (fathers) get started around engaging in services they actually benefit quite a lot... there was another CF (Cystic Fibrosis) family where I got rung by one of the male doctors saying 'I've got so-and-so in the clinic and he's in tears can you get up here straight away!' Medical staff get a bit freaked out about men being emotional and crying: something they don't see very often and when they do, it must be really bad. A real advantage about working with men is that I'm a bloke and so men I think engage around that ...men think, oh she's not a bloke she won't understand
(Gary, Senior Social Worker)

This is an important statement. Gary has identified that by being a 'male' rather than being a 'social worker' he asserts some degree of credibility for other males who may seek out his help. Gary also recognises that other medical staff may not be accommodating to men when they are emotional and he engages effectively to address this practice issue.

6.5 Working with mothers and fathers over time

When asking the interviewees about working with fathers over time I was seeking to find out if there were any differences in the number of fathers coming into their agency as opposed to mothers.

A selected period of time of three months was chosen as it would allow adequate recall of data by the interviewees without checking official case records and, generally, client statistics from their respective agencies records were kept over three month time periods. Whilst statistical data was not required by the interviewees they all were confident in supplying this information on the spot. All interviewees identified that a large part of their work was concentrated upon mothers, as represented in the following comments:

I say I see more mums than dads (Greg, Social Worker)

Four out of thirty-eight, so there's not a lot. Mums are a lot higher percentage (John, Senior Social Worker)

All the interviewees were unable to give any explanation for the low numbers of fathers in their work and also were not concerned or worried about these low numbers. Only one interviewee was able to indicate that they worked with both mothers and fathers, however they found it difficult to maintain the father's involvement beyond the initial first session:

Seventy five per cent of my work would be with mums and twenty five per cent with dads... the mothers are the ones that do the bulk of the care, fathers one or two sessions at the start, which is bugger all really (Bob, Senior Social Worker)

Clearly, their responses indicated that parent involvement actually translates in practice to 'mother involvement' a translation that is also supported in the literature (Daniel and Taylor 2001; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Featherstone 2006; Doucet, 2006). This situation is not unusual, but raises practice concerns as it is the mothers who will encounter the child and family welfare professional first and carry the majority of responsibility for the family's welfare, regardless of whether fathers are seen as risks or assets. Often the professionals neglect to focus their attention on both the father and the mother (Kullberg 2005; Scourfield, 2008).

6.6 ‘Embodied masculinity’ as an exclusionary dynamic

Interviewees contemplating the work with fathers would apply some degree of selectivity and make an assessment of inclusion and exclusion. Within this inclusion, fathers would have to prove themselves worthy of the service where the mothers would not necessarily be subjected to the same requirement. These two excerpts exemplify this perspective:

...a ‘male mum’ that just came to mind when you asked that question... that would be my immediate response, how does he (the father) measure up to the mums that come along? (Sue, Senior Social Worker).

...why can’t the fathers, why don’t the fathers appear to have that same commitment to their child’s mental and physical wellbeing as women are supposed to be? (Alice, Social Worker).

The need to establish these views about fathers is further explored in the subsequent sections of the thesis. However, it is worth noting that both Sue and Alice are prepared to see fathers, but the implication is that these fathers have to be measured against motherhood before they can earn the right to engage with them. In their practice it appeared to be a form of ‘embodied masculinity’ operating (Connell, 1995, p 45). Embodied masculinity occurs where certain dominant ideas are expressed about maleness or how men are or should act or behave in society (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, p 5). Generally, men are often seen as being emotionally unavailable and have no need for HELP or do not seek it out (Ferguson 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Smith, 2006). This is not obviously how men and fathers are in reality, but it can be a powerful construct and one that is reinforced through the way child and family welfare professionals see fathers as individuals.

Emerging from the data, there were six patterns of rationalisations through which the dynamics of exclusion were manifested. These were: fathers using overt violence; fathers using implied violence; drug-taking fathers; fathers not wanting to attend appointments; fathers not contributing when attending and finally, the lack of a trusting working relationship with the father.

6.6.1 Fathers using overt violence

In regard to overt violence, male interviewees were more likely to describe this work as more difficult than female interviewees. Being a male social worker did not make this work any easier. In fact being a male worker seemed to make this work more problematic and complex. For example, Gary a senior social worker employed in a large children's hospital commented that:

I suppose the hardest thing is being frightened of violent men, men who deal with the problems of the world by being violent that's hard mustering a bit of courage to face men... I think that's an issue that faces everyone with men: the fear around men this fear of men, fear of men and their sexuality, fear of men and their violence... when you say what's the most frightening?, I think for me and I am generalising here... I think a lot of people fear of men's violence is a big thing for me...the question I ask is am I going to get clocked in all of this? (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Another male social worker, Greg, argued that in his experience overt violence was something he had to deal with as part of his job and that this was because of his role as a qualified social worker in his agency, rather than something that was seen as personal threat:

I've had fathers who are aggressive towards me but as a representative of the "system" (Greg, Social Worker)

When overt violence occurred, it was the male social worker who was sent out to deal with the problem. Gary, a male senior social worker, was faced with this scenario and expressed difficulties and his feelings about being the one sent out to prevent overt violence:

...because we (supervisors) need to be available for staff we hear people getting aggressive towards the front desk staff... I cruise out there. When they see a bloke they calm down. See a bloke with a tie that actually is a variable that actually makes it a bit different if my interviewees I hear some voices raised in their offices I just cruise past....you know I get a bit pissed off that because I'm a bloke I don't have to do that...pissed off about that dynamic (Gary, Senior Social Worker),

This comment by Gary reflects a major problem in social work and the caring professions in general. This is that social workers are expected to handle violence, particularly female social workers (Stanley and Goddard 1997; 2002). Stanley and Goddard (1997; 2002) also suggest that the complex set of dynamics within abusive families can draw the worker into the role of victim, which means they are unable to challenge the abuse (Stanley and Goddard, 1997, p 47). Advice in handling violence to workers in the literature is limited (Davies, 1988) and advice when given can be unhelpful where the message is 'not to get hit'. This often can lead to social workers adopting a number of strategies to deal with violent fathers including avoidance. In Gary's case his masculinity was an important and common strategy used by the agency to manage potential overt violence by fathers (Scourfield, 2003). For the most part, the advice to workers is unhelpful as the literature highlights that in reality when workers are faced with violence, they often redefine the issues as 'child welfare or child protection' concentrating more upon the mother and further avoiding the father. (Maynard 1985; Milner, 1993a).

Judith Milner, an experienced practitioner and academic who briefly returned to child protection practice over a period of six months, writes openly about her own experience of this and how the agency systematically dealt differently with mothers and fathers. Milner (1993a) found that even with her feminist perspective in her practice, she had persisted to work in such a way as to make mothers responsible for protecting children:

How, then, is it that I spent most of my time during a recent return to field social work working with mothers, particularly single mothers, and ignoring fathers?That I managed largely to ignore fathers is even more surprising when I consider the knowledge base which informed my practice. (Milner, 1993a, pp 48- 49).

This concentration upon mothers when workers are faced with violence by fathers, further marginalises the family. In this situation child and family welfare professionals become unwilling to challenge the fathers behaviour and re-categorise them as 'difficult' (Scourfield 2003; Ferguson and Hogan 2004), even when the mothers take protective actions (Coohey, 2006, p 478).

There is also evidence that men's potential violence towards others becomes a reason for female social workers to avoid men in child protection practice (Buckley 2002; Coohey 2006; Featherstone and Peckover, 2007).

6.6.2 Fathers using implied violence

Implied violence is a situation where violence becomes more a psychological act than physical one. Female interviewees who experienced implied violence were more likely to describe this work as difficult than were male interviewees. In addition, female interviewees were more likely to replace the term 'father' with 'partner' when they felt the presence of implied violence. In the following excerpt, Sonia, a community health nurse, summarises her perceptions of a situation she recalls:

...I do not feel very comfortable about it...we do occasionally get the male partner standing over watching and listening and he is there to make sure his wife or his partner does not say anything incriminating or you just know that you are being monitored in what you're doing and you can get some really bad vibes (Sonia, Community Health Nurse)

Another female interviewee, Debra, experienced some weariness about fathers coming to her service because of her perceived potential for abuse:

I am always wary, especially where there has been past abuse and violence...what's their (the fathers) intent, purpose, where are they (fathers) coming from? (Debra, Social Worker/ Manager)

However despite experiencing implied violence as a threat, this does not necessarily prevent those female interviewees from attempting to engage with fathers. The same interviewee, Debra, developed the following argument for engaging with a father in a situation where an adolescent wished to re-engage with their father post-separation:

I think sometimes we go too far to the right and we give them (fathers) too much latitude or we restrict them too much but I think it's got to marry together, to provide an avenue where those possibilities are explored especially if the contact with their father has been initiated by the young person, and if their father is willing to engage in that process who am I to step in and say it's not going to happen. Each and every one of us has to have a place where we belong and feel that we belong. That's normally invested in the family (Debra, Social Worker/ Manager)

However, not all female interviewees saw engaging with fathers was a viable option when implied violence occurred. In the following excerpt, Sonia, a community health nurse, recounts an example about a time when she would plan to assist a particular client to leave a relationship where it was alleged domestic violence was present.

Sonia consciously took up a position as an ally of the mother to assist her in protecting the children and in ultimately trying to exclude the violent partner and father:

I spoke to a lady a few weeks ago at the child health clinic and she wants to leave her husband as he's a bully he is a control freak...she's got five kids and she feels trapped, feels resentful he controls the money ...I've told her pack a bag bring it up to my office, I'll keep it under my desk, the next time he gets like that ... leave the house, come to my house, I'll take you to the (women's) refuge you know I'll get your bag, make sure you put away ten dollars a week for however long and save yourself some money so you can go to a hotel for a couple of nights ... I mean...I never ever met the guy but I hate his guts from the way she describes the situation ...
(Sonia, Community Health Nurse)

This excerpt has been presented in some detail because it offers an important insight into how the meaning of this father was based solely upon what the mother has told them in the clinic. Whilst this is not suggesting that this observation by this professional is not important, the father's voice was not included in the assessment of the family. It also highlights that this professional was operating with her own professional biography (Scourfield, 2003) whereby her own experiences of these types of males influences her observation of the situation. This leaves little room for undertaking an inclusive balanced assessment. In addition, it highlights that when workers are faced with violence they redefine the issue and focus on mothers (Milner 1993a, 2004; Scourfield, 2008).

Whilst it should be highlighted that avoiding fathers is not necessarily inappropriate in certain situations, ambivalence about which fathers should be engaged or not engaged within an organisation, may inherently make it difficult to legitimise or give justification to this avoidance in practice. This leaves both the social worker and the family open to harm (O'Hagan, 1997).

In summary, if a father has a problematic past or present in terms of overt or implied violence this aspect can tend to dominate all other professional perceptions of them, including, and perhaps especially, his capacity to parent (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004).

6.6.3 Drug-taking fathers

Fathers who had a current use or history of drug-taking were seen as difficult for the interviewees to engage and would often be avoided in their work. Whilst interviewees did not specify which types of illicit drugs could be problematic, they often referred to the common ones such as cannabis and some prescription medications. In the following excerpt, Sonia expresses her apprehension around a father's use of drugs:

...you know there are situations that I have had to go into where I felt quite threatened um... usually it's where drugs are involved, DCD (Department for Community Development – Western Australian State child protection agency) are involved and I've got to accompany one of the other child health nurses because she has had to do a home visit and I did not feel very comfortable about it which are often associated as you know or issues regarding, um, care you know, care of the child so that they know they are being watched or checked out and they feel very threatened so they feel defensive and you get the vibes and it's uncomfortable (Sonia, Community Health Nurse)

Often with interviewees there was some degree of difficulty in engaging with fathers because of their drug-taking. This again was seen in the context of their own gendered practice with mothers as compared to fathers. For example, Gary a senior social worker stated that:

I suppose the most difficult thing for them (the fathers) is to get the guy to open up and give a very good history of what's been going on, um-I think a lot of guys that I've worked with have got um, co- morbid drug use as well, so I think they are often masking their symptoms by abusing alcohol and drugs so you know ...so I guess it's... you know just getting the guys to give you their history of their childhood and things...these things seem to become easier for women (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Again, this is an example of an exclusionary dynamic process where there is a powerful assumption that women would find it easier to talk about issues than a man even when there may or may not be the presence of drug-taking. As well it also shows just how powerful the language of father involvement can overshadow the means to accommodate fathers and take into account other explanations for a fathers absence (Featherstone, 2009).

6.6.4 Fathers not wanting to attend appointments

Interviewees also expressed problems with fathers who do not want to keep, or attend, set health or welfare appointments in regard to the family's health or welfare issues. This was seen as a negative by the interviewees and made them view fathers as being time wasters. The following excerpt is an example of this attitude:

They (fathers) won't bloody show up, they find an excuse... most of them sit there like 'stunned mullets' anyway and don't say anything. They get uncomfortable or something's said they won't look at you and they won't answer they just give one-word answers (Alice, Social Worker)

In this excerpt, Alice here is unable to reflect upon and identify what may be happening in her practice where fathers did not show up for appointments. In her response there is almost an unwritten requirement that fathers have to prove themselves to the worker that they are worth the effort to be a part of the intervention. Failure by the father not to meet this standard often set by the worker, not the agency, potentially labels them 'difficult' (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004).

6.6.5 Fathers not continuing to attend appointments

There was also a common concern expressed by the interviewees that when they did eventually engage the fathers, attendance would be sporadic or taper off and would even stop. Again, there was no real explanation given by the interviewees why this was the case. In the following excerpt, Sue, an experienced senior social worker, struggles to understand why fathers do not continue to attend appointments. She states:

A lot of dads come along just for one session and I often wonder why that is sometimes? I think it's because they want to check out where their child is coming to and they want to see what sort of service or treatment they are going to get or if it is OK for the child to be coming along (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

While the level of frustration experienced by the interviewees in response to a father's absence from appointments can be seen as reasonable, interviewees were unable to offer up any ideas of how this situation could be different. The lack of continuing appointment's was unlikely to be followed-up by the interviewees, even though there was evidence that some interviewees could see that fathers can show interest in the work if encouraged. Peter, a senior physiotherapist, acknowledges this in his physiotherapy practice:

Most fathers who attend are interested on the whole... intervention relies on take home work (therapy tasks)...for most cases I do not see the father...but the ones that do come show interest. One's (fathers) that often come are not working (unemployed) and also have time off. More often unemployed or are self-employed. (Peter, Senior Physiotherapist)

Again, the problem for many interviewees with father engagement is that they see a father's physical presence as the only way they can effectively work with the family. However, when they are present, they are unable to adjust their practice frameworks to meet the father's individual needs and that of his family. In this sense their own 'theory' about working with fathers is called into play. They do not offer alternatives like less clinic appointments or flexible service operational hours.

6.6.6 Lack of a trusting working relationship

The level of trust between the interviewee and a father was a very important element in their practice. Trust here refers to an interviewee's perceived ability to be able to engage with the father in an open and honest way. If this trust was not present, then it was less likely an effective relationship could be established as this one interviewee stated:

Most difficult is trust, engaging them in a relationship of trust, engaging them in building relationships... (Debra, Social Worker/Manager)

Sonia took the view that a trusting relationship with a father was difficult because of her professional role and authority figure as a community health nurse. She stated that:

I get it more from men than women. They just say oh, oh yeah...sort of alarm bells go off... so maybe it's my voice, they just think it's the school nurse ringing...something must of happened, or what's he (the father) done...(Sonia, Community Health Nurse)

All the interviewees saw developing a trusting relationship with the fathers as an important mechanism for safety and welfare of the children and mothers. However, building this trust with these fathers in their professional roles was not an easy task as most of their focus and involvement would be with the mothers.

6.7 Services for fathers

This interview question was seeking to find out about interviewees' knowledge of services specifically for fathers. Five interviewees could name the services that men could use, but these services were not father specific. In addition, they were unable to list what these services provided or how they could refer to them if they were required. The following excerpt is an example of this practice:

I think there is one run by The Salvation Army down in R (suburb)...The Lone Fathers Association, I don't know if they are still operating? ... there is that feral group (laughs) that hold the placards outside the family law court (Debra, Social Worker/Manager)

Furthermore, interviewees in their responses could identify services that were more about rehabilitation for men as fathers, such as addressing domestic violence, but nothing in relation to specific preventative services for fathers such as parenting skills, early childhood services or visiting health services. In the following excerpt, Sue, a senior social worker, with many years of experience names the services she has heard about, but in her response she is not really confident about what she knows of these services:

Yeah, there's a couple out there, apart from the men's domestic violence line..., there's that...is it called dads incorporated? dad company or something like that? I think it's run through Anglicare (agency)? (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

The remaining five interviewees did not have any knowledge of specific services for men or fathers even when there was evidence that these services did in fact exist (Men's Advisory Network, 2008). The following two excerpts are examples of just how little knowledge of services that they knew about services for fathers:

No, none. (Bob, Senior Social Worker)

None that I can think of... probably a men's group?
(Penny, Senior Occupational Therapist)

Lack of involvement of men in child and health services is a recurrent problem that is presented in the literature (Hickman 2003; Smith, 2006) mainly brought about by the lack of confidence of professionals to refer men to the services that already exist (Ghate and Shaw 2000; Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). This is despite a steady increase in the number of services for men and fathers in Australia and elsewhere over the last three decades, although such men-specific services have started at a much slower rate than those services for women (Smyth and Weston 2003; Lamb, 2004).

6.8 Men as fathers in their own right

All interviewees were able to identify a variety of practice situations where the work with fathers was seen as being of some benefit to men as fathers in their own right. These case practice situations were enacted through a critical reflection process (Fook 1996; 2002) on a particular case they felt worked well. These interviewees were not prompted to provide a 'best case scenario' but one in which they felt the work was of benefit to the fathers and also the family. A common theme that was identified in the transcripts was a genuine need to provide responses to men to support them as fathers in their role, not just seeing the fathers as either cooperating or undermining them in practice (Connell, 1995).

6.8.1 Helps us to make sense of the work with fathers

The interviewees work contexts were diverse and varied, from a large teaching hospital to small teams in community health and welfare. All these interviewees had very high workloads and were often the first point of contact with families.

Whilst the interviewees were able to access a mother and children most of the time they were not able to involve fathers as frequently and there was missing information about the family or child that should have been provided by the father. This missing information compounded the complexity of the interviewee's daily work at all levels of assessment through to intervention. The following excerpt by a senior physiotherapist demonstrates where the father's presence helped to make sense of the problem:

Family irritable baby...12 months, only settles with mother. Four kids in the family...not same father, three different surnames. Dad is unemployed. Baby has Cognitive delay... Came in two times with mother. Baby stops crying when mother holds. Mother reports dad picked up but would not settle...idea of bringing dad in to see if we could look at ways to assist. I requested mother to invite dad in. Dad accepted. So was able to use sessions to find out what dad was like with baby. It was good for me to see that the mother had seen the dad involved with the session (Peter, Senior Physiotherapist)

For Peter, the time spent with the father observing in the physiotherapy session and also asking questions provided valuable insight into a more accurate assessment of the father in the relationship, as well as being an effective intervention and outcome for the family with the child's physiotherapy. Peter thus may be more likely in future to involve fathers as he has seen the benefit that this can offer to his practice and that he can potentially build upon his practice wisdom.

6.8.2 It is all about the relationship with the father and mother

Interviewees said that the effectiveness of the work involved what they described as ‘being about the relationship with both the father and mother’. The relationship here in this situation meant that interviewees placed importance on engaging with both the father and the mother on an equal basis. In this excerpt, Gary describes his work with the father of a family with a child recently diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis (CF):

I asked this guy about supports, this is bit of a tough journey um, who you talk to, who are your supports... this guy acknowledged that he was a bit thin for supports so through his wife had that support but in fact he was ‘cracking up’ (emotionally) quite a bit about his daughter having cystic fibrosis (CF) and she going to die before him and they were on tenterhooks. So just a couple of sessions with him, made a bit of a difference um... so it was just right to bring them both in together. They both were a bit nervous about where it would go... it’s useful to be able to work with both of them to what workers don’t get comfortable about doing is about working with couples. What I think is that it is probably a very necessary thing for most social workers to be able to do um, because men traditionally don’t access services but they might come along if it’s about the relationship (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

This is an important reflection. Gary has identified that to engage meaningfully with the father, it was important to establish what role the father is playing in regard to the diagnosis. Often child and family welfare professionals inadvertently get caught up in an assessment of the family whereby they believe they are considering parenting but in fact are only considering mothering. Through Gary establishing in the family system just who has connections with the child recently diagnosed with CF, Gary was able to also see that the couple’s relationship was in crisis and he worked towards the resolution of this crisis without losing sight of his role with the father.

6.8.3 Mounting a combined front

As previously discussed in Chapter 5, work arrangements can be a major barrier for many fathers, both preventing them from attending and also providing them with an excuse or reason for not attending child and family welfare agencies. Also in turn child and family welfare professionals can be left feeling frustrated and can potentially collude with mothers to exclude fathers from practice because of their work commitments.

In this excerpt a senior occupational therapist demonstrates that it is possible to provide a service to the family in a situation where a father's employment arrangements potentially are a barrier to practice:

This was a case of a young boy who had many hospitalisations for schizophrenia symptoms but we were not sure, as there were many oppositional behaviour traits. The father was a truck driver and home not very often and very inconsistent... the rules would change when the father returned home and left... We involved the dad when he was home by doing home visits and also providing education. A male Mental Health Nurse was also part of the intervention with this family. We also challenged the father about why he had to work away so much as they did not seem to be struggling financially. Dad then became more involved when he came home such as taking his son fishing. We also modelled what we expected from the family by consistently having appointments and mounting a combined front. (Penny, Senior Occupational Therapist)

Penny in her approach recognised again the importance of identifying what role the father was playing in the family. She decided that she should work with both parents even though it would perhaps have been somewhat easier to work exclusively with the mother, particularly since the father was often absent from home due to his employment.

However, by challenging the father's need to be away as often as he was, Penny provided the family and her team with an opportunity to look at the situation differently and get the father to re-think his role in the family. Here, Penny, along with other members of her team, was simultaneously asking both 'why' and 'how' to involve the father (Featherstone, 2006) and had some vision of the role that this father could play given his employment situation.

6.8.4 Relationship between the child and father important

Interviewees also stated in their responses that their work was more effective when the child had a good relationship with the father. This is a situation where the father developed a positive relationship with the child and was supported by the mother. A father was seen to be more involved by the interviewees who made their work more effective for the child and the family. In the following excerpt Sue, a senior social worker, makes this observation:

The mother initially came with her son, but I think it was the boy who told his father about coming here, the father then asked the mother about this and she suggested that he come along to alternate sessions with the boy. The father was interested to know about his son's difficulties and how he could assist. He took time off work and travelled a big distance to attend the appointments. The boy also liked his father being interested, he liked the one-to-one time they had in the car as the father had to pick him up from school...the boy already had a good, open relationship with his father and was able to talk with his father about the counselling and his father in turn was able to respond with interest. The involvement of his father, in turn, helped to further strengthen the father / son relationship (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

The picture here described by Sue of both the mother and the father being involved with the child and mother is perhaps rare and is contradictory to the results that were presented earlier in the previous chapters, where certain images of fathers described by the interviewees as being problematic were more powerful.

It highlights the discourse on fathers is a highly contested area of practice and is subjected to a different set of rules surrounding it than mothering. Sue's reflection identifies that practitioners need to be encouraged to focus on the quality of the father's relationship with the mother and child and whether these fathers are physically present in the waiting room clinic. It is about forging a relationship with all the players rather than dissecting or compartmentalising the family or parenting which has often come to mean the work done with mothers and children.

6.9 Their final word

The last question of the semi-structured interview was an open-ended question asking the interviewees if they wanted to add to the interview. This was a valuable opportunity for interviewees to provide information about fathers that may have not been asked in the interview or been covered by the interview schedule. From the ten interviewees, four male social interviewees and three female social workers wanted to add what they had already said to their previous responses. Two themes emerged in their responses. Firstly they saw that it was imperative that they needed to focus more on fathers in their work. Secondly, that the rhetoric about involving fathers was common but missing from their practice reality, but they thought this could be overcome if their agency was more equipped to accommodate fathers more proactively and explicitly, rather than rely on a more general approach in which fathers are accommodated under the banner of 'family'.

In the following excerpt, Gary, a senior social worker, describes that working with fathers is often put up as a good idea in his agency, but that it is seen as something that is external to the core business of his agency, described by Gary as a 'project':

I think in terms of engaging fathers everyone would say it's a great idea but there are some structural barriers to it, one of them being a lack of resources... it would be great to offer some services to men but we would need the resources to do it... you know my boss would say it's a good idea why don't you (Gary) take it on as a project with the expectation that I would do the rest of my work too! (Gary, Senior Social Worker)

Gary's response indicates some commitment to seeing fathers included more in his work and that of his agency. However, he also indicates he is somewhat constrained by his role in his agency and this reflects a general ambivalence that often can prevent services developing more inclusively for fathers (Fletcher and Visser, 2008).

According to Sue, a senior social worker, it was how services were traditionally delivered to families that may have prevented her agency from including males of all ages in her practice, stating that:

The way we provide services...we sit in an office, we sit on a chair we use lots of language you know, and you wonder is that the best way to reach the needs of males young and old? I think we need to look at that, I don't know if that's right or wrong but I have a feeling probably the way we deliver the services could be looked at too? (Sue, Senior Social Worker)

Interviewees also identified that the mismatch between the rhetoric of father work and the reality was often due to the lack of research and education about gender in child and family welfare practice. This was particularly about challenging hegemonic discourses of masculinity and traditional views of fathers. For example, Bob, a senior social worker, stated that:

...there is a societal almost revulsion of the idea that gay males definitely as opposed to a lesbian relationship there's even more of an anti-sort of feeling of against gay males providing being father. We might have a guy being the biological father of that child but then for whatever reasons decides that he wants a gay relationship later in their life. I have not come across it myself but I imagine there will be a lot of prejudice displayed (Bob, Senior Social Worker)

Another senior social worker, John described how there was a health service for women that was doing some good work, but there was not one for men. John questioned the possibility of creating a mens-only health service but in his response is unsure if this in fact would work:

I've got a very clear issue that I'm concerned about is that we do have a very well funded woman's health centre in M (suburb) that does some fantastic work, but I see no planning to set up a men's one whether that's because people don't think there's a demand... Could you create a men's only service? I don't know (John, Senior Social Worker)

John believes that a 'men's only service' would be beneficial but compares it with a women's health service. In his response, John inadvertently has failed to see that women's and men's issues are often quite different. His response also reflects a lack of understanding of diversity amongst men which is a form of hegemonic masculinity associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, marriage, authority and physical toughness (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

John also shows the lack of professional knowledge about services for men as fathers which takes into account diversity. Whilst it was somewhat disappointing to see that only a few interviewees had anything to add by the end of the interview, what came out of the process was some acknowledgement that fathers perhaps could be considered more in the interviewee's practice. This view was reflected in Debra's response:

Absolutely, I think there needs to be a huge systemic change in the way we work with fathers. The main focus has always been on the female within the system (Debra, Social Worker/Manager)

The lack of having anything to add by many of the interviewees may have been due to their consciousness being raised through the interview questions about their practice with fathers. This will perhaps be never fully known. It does however provide some hope that fathers and men are being thought about by workers, albeit at a subconscious level.

6.10 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the views of professionals were examined in relation to how they defined and described fathers from a child and family welfare practice viewpoint. This being the second phase of the study, it builds significantly upon the results taken from the first phase of the data. In the next chapter, a discussion of the implications from these results will be undertaken. Also, based on the findings from this study, there will be a discussion and conclusion on the key recommendations that can be made relating to the areas of education, research and practice.

Chapter 7: The substantive theory

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will provide information aimed at portraying the context from which the developed theory emerged. This chapter will present a discussion of the literature outlined in Chapter 2 in relation to the concepts of the substantive theory. While there is a gradual emergence of literature related to fathers and their experiences of child and family welfare services, there is little literature which explains the experiences of practitioners. The literature that was identified in relation to the social phenomenon reflected the experiences of the practitioners in this study. I will also outline a brief overview of how the substantive theory developed from the study data. A comparison of the substantive theory with other research findings will then be briefly discussed. The whole theory and its implications for child and family welfare practice and conclusion will then be detailed in Chapter 8.

7.2 The substantive theory

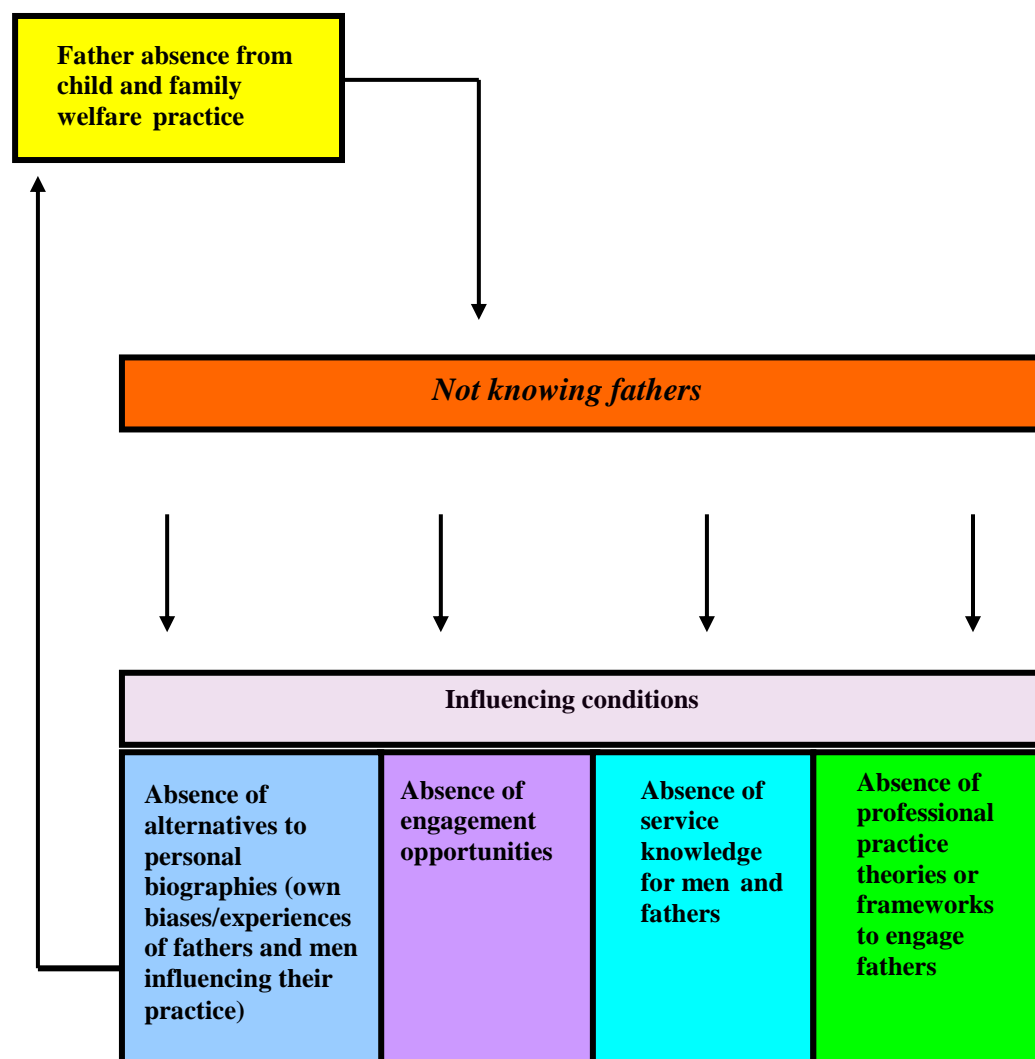
The assumption underlying grounded theory methodology is that the participants who experience the phenomenon being studied all share a basic social psychological problem or issue of concern. This shared issue of concern may not be completely articulated by the participants but the problem is addressed through their engagement in a psychosocial process. The goal of this method is to develop inductively derived theoretical categories that address the phenomena under study (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The most important category in a substantive theory is the category identified as the central phenomena.

This phenomenon can be a central idea or happening around a particular event or action in which all other categories are linked into wherein the theory is developed (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The phenomena that had the greatest effect on the practitioners in the study were identified by the researcher as being *not knowing fathers*. Figure 1 below illustrates the substantive theory, outlining each of the categories involved in the process and showing how they link.

Figure 1: The Substantive Theory

Core psychosocial problem: Father absence from child and family welfare practice

Basic psychosocial process (core category): *Not knowing fathers*



7.3 Not knowing fathers

Not knowing fathers emerged as the basic psychosocial process used by professionals in this study and is therefore the core category in the theory. *Not knowing fathers* represents the complexity that practitioners expressed that arose from the data when they were asked about their professional experiences with fathers in their work. This core category has subsequently led to the psychosocial problem being studied which was *the absence of fathers from their practice*.

This psychosocial problem developed from four key influencing conditions that emerged from analysis of the data. These four key influencing conditions were: *the absence of practice theories*, *the absence of service knowledge*, *the absence of engagement opportunities* and *the absence of alternatives to their personal biographies*. These will now all be discussed more in detail.

7.3.1 The absence of practice theories

The absence of practice theories was the first influencing condition (sub-category) to emerge under the core category. Participants in the study could not identify any practice theories which they could have applied in their work with gender and fathers. Participants spoke frequently about the difficulty in locating and engaging with fathers but did not articulate or discuss ways in which fathers could be worked with in their practice. All participants had more than ten years post-qualifying practice experience working with families. They also had been engaged in a wide range of tasks in their work including bio-psycho-social assessments, case planning, home visiting and referrals to other services.

These practice tasks would assume that professionals put into operation a number of practice theories and models for work with individuals and families. In fact most of the course content in undergraduate social work education is heavily devoted to social work theory and practice, for example units such as *SWK3120 - Working with families and groups: Theory and practice* (Monash University Handbook: Social Work 2010) which is worth 6 credit points for a Bachelor of Social Work course of a total 96 credit points. It is also forms part of the Australian Association of Social Workers Practice Standards for accreditation of social work courses in Australia which states:

Standard 1.4 The social work assessment and the intervention taken is appropriate to the client's situation, in keeping with ethical and legislative requirements and directed towards appropriate outcomes reached in agreement with the client wherever possible. Appropriate social work knowledge and theory is identified as a basis for offering a social work service (AASW, 2003, p 9).

Therefore it seems difficult to understand the rationale behind the absence of applying relevant theories to practice when the participants were asked to reflect on their work with mothers, fathers and families. One explanation may be due to what was previously discussed in Chapter 2 in regard to the changing nature of child and family welfare work in the current sociopolitical context in Australia. A shift in child and family welfare practice has resulted in more families being investigated and fewer being offered supportive intervention. The child and family welfare industry now involves a large number of non-statutory agencies, in some cases, working alongside State and Territory child protection organisations. This shift in focus has resulted in the therapeutic skills being replaced by monitoring and review (Parton, 1996). Also it may be a result of the training that child and family welfare professionals have received in their undergraduate education and whether there is a link that is made with gender, children and fathers (Taylor and Green 2008; Featherstone, 2009).

An example where gender and families have largely been ignored is in a recent text, edited by Connolly and Harms (2009) titled “Social Work: Contexts and Practice (2nd ed)” which is a recommended textbook in some undergraduate social work courses in Australia. This text, whilst covering important contemporary social work practice issues and skills, has 32 chapters of text but there are only a few pages that make reference to gender. This text whilst covering important contemporary social work practice issues and skills has 32 chapters of text, but there are only a few pages that make reference to gender. Furthermore there is no reference to fathers in the context of contemporary society and no reference to how social workers can work with fathers. This omission of fathers as a subject in its own right indicates that they are not seen as an important component in social work theory and practice, something which James (1988) highlighted over 20 years ago. It potentially reinforces the ‘deficit perspective’ that assumes that men are largely uninvolved and uninterested in the lives of their children and unwilling to change (King, 2000, p 1).

7.3.2 The absence of service knowledge

As well as being overlooked through the absence of practice theories and its application in their child and family welfare practice, the second influencing condition (sub-category) to emerge under the core category appeared to be a lack of knowledge by the participants about suitable support services and information materials for fathers. Participants were all asked if they knew of any services for fathers and whether they had used these services. All but two participants could not identify any services for fathers and the remaining two participants were vague in their recollection of such services.

This was a very surprising piece of information to emerge from the data from the point of view of the researcher as; again, all the participants had ten years post-qualifying practice experience. There also were a number of services for men that existed for fathers available locally, from individual counselling to group work, and to family support services specifically targeted for men and fathers. Also, the peak body of men and family relationship services, the Men's Advisory Network Inc. (MAN) established in Western Australia (WA) in 2002, has a website which lists all the current services and resources for men and fathers. MAN Inc. also produce a free e-newsletter monthly that is distributed widely both in WA as well as other states. MAN Inc. also organise and sponsor a bi-annual conference which attracts practitioners, academics and policy makers from all over Australia, generating interest in men's health, fathering, youth and indigenous men's issues. Not knowing about services for fathers and also their families presents a real challenge to practitioners in their practice as they again assume that all fathers will present at their agency under the banner of family support. There is nothing in the data that suggested the participants were not interested in involving fathers but through their omission of service knowledge they limited their capacity for creative and effective work with fathers and their families.

7.3.3 The absence of engagement opportunities

The third influencing condition (sub-category) to emerge under the core category was that participants could not adequately capitalise on engagement opportunities in their practice.

Whilst it has been noted that statutory social workers are in general much less father inclusive than non-statutory agencies (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004) the participants had no legal or agency restrictions that prevented them engaging with fathers more inclusively. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, many participants did indeed reflect that there were certain benefits to engaging with the fathers, included the more balanced view of the family in assessments and case planning.

It was also reported by participants in the data that involving fathers would benefit both the mother and child or children particularly where there were therapeutic tasks around the child's physical and emotional development. Despite their best intentions, participants' engagement with fathers was limited, and in some situations just brief encounters. Common responses for this from participants was blaming a father's employment hours, seeing threat of potential or real violence from fathers, and fathers not wanting to be involved in their service.

Whilst some of these are legitimate, such as violence, participants could not provide or offer up alternative strategies for engagement, thus reinforcing a father's absence from their practice. The data consistently showed that participants did not know the fathers, were ambivalent about working with them and rarely spoke about discussing fatherhood with men and about responsibility for parenting away from mothers.

7.3.4 The absence of alternatives to their personal biographies

The absence of alternatives to their personal biographies was the fourth influencing condition (sub-category) to emerge under the core category. When child and family welfare services are involved with a family, how and whether fathers are engaged in a planning and decision-making for their children, remains largely dependent on the skills, knowledge and attitudes of individual practitioners. This has been referred to in the literature as personal biographies (Brown *et al.*, 2009a). As discussed in Chapter 2, child and family welfare services mostly employ women and therefore constructions of fatherhood are more likely to be based upon personal experiences of men and fathers from a female perspective.

The dominant discourse around gender construction of male as the breadwinner and mothers as the caregiver arose from the data and played an important part in how the participants described mothers and fathers in their practice. Although there was an equal number of male and female participants in the sample from the in-depth interviews, this did not however alter or change how fathers were constructed by both male and female participants in their practice.

It can therefore be argued that the absence of alternatives to the participants' own personal biographies can leave professionals to reinforce their views about fathers based on their own personal observations. There were many examples of this that emerged from the data, mostly where the participants would make personal judgments based upon their own personal beliefs about fatherhood and the types of fathers that they would prefer to work with in their practice.

These personal judgments would contain words and phrases that impacted negatively on their views of fathers, specifically where the fathers failed to measure up to their personal standards of fatherhood, again reinforcing the deficit perspective rather than looking for alternative narratives on fatherhood.

7.3.5 Comparison of the substantive theory with other research findings

Having discovered the ‘problem’ to be studied from the accounts of participants in a substantive area, the current study found that *not knowing fathers* had the greatest effect on the practitioners’ practice in the study.

This formed the substantive theory in which the core psychosocial problem of *father absence from child and family welfare practice* emerged as the central thesis. In keeping with the grounded theory approach, literature was also used as data. I accessed relevant literature as data to make comparisons, particularly in relation to the properties and dimensions of the concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). There were some similarities between the substantive theory, *not knowing fathers* to other relevant research findings and theories which were discussed in detail in Chapter 2. However the literature review identified that there was no theory that was identical to the substantive theory in this study. Research on fathers in child and family welfare practice has gained significant currency over the decade, particularly in the UK (O’Hagan 1997; Milner 2004; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Scourfield 2006; Featherstone, 2010) as well as Canada (Strega *et al.*, 2008b) and the USA (Berger *et al.*, 2009). Many of these studies have focused on experiences of fathers themselves, or professionals in the context of child protection.

These studies have looked at the involuntary and ‘vulnerable’ fathers and families to highlight the omission by professionals, namely social workers, from including fathers in their practice. They all argue for a more balanced re-assessment of family life and the need to review practices with families and children that include fathers whether they are risks or resources. All these researchers offer valuable and important insights into how professionals can improve their practice with fathers as well as contribute important policy changes in regard to promoting father inclusiveness. This study sought not to replicate their contributions, but rather to explore how child and family welfare professionals construct fathers in their work with families.

Comparing the substantive theory developed in this study with other research findings, the experiences of the participants were unique because of the very detailed outline of the influencing conditions in relation to their practice which was not reported elsewhere in the literature. This was evident for three key reasons. Firstly, this study focused on the experiences of non-statutory professionals and voluntary agencies. Fathers accessing these services would not have been required or mandated to attend services and therefore it could be assumed that they would be more father-friendly than a child protection agency. However, the participants who provided their experiences of fathers all expressed difficulty in finding ways to engage fathers in their practice and agencies.

Secondly, the sample consisted of other professionals, not just focusing on social or welfare workers. This provides some insight into how other professions are trained and educated as well as what may be occurring in their individual organisations around gender and its relevance to practice.

Finally, all the participants could identify that fathers were of some benefit to their work and that they did not deliberately set about ignoring fathers in practice. However they could not articulate what these benefits would be in detail or how they could engage with fathers more effectively.

7.4 Summary

This chapter began with a presentation of the substantive theory of *not knowing fathers*. Following this, the discussion focused on a brief discussion on comparing the substantive theory with other relevant research. The literature presented demonstrates some similarities to the findings of this study. Whilst this study has some similarities with the relevant literature reviewed, the very detailed outline of the four influencing conditions: *the absence of practice theories*, *the absence of service knowledge*, *the absence of engagement opportunities* and *the absence of alternatives to their personal biographies*, in relation to their practice was not reported elsewhere in the literature. The theory offers up a potential framework for practitioners, in broader practice settings, to perhaps consider when they encounter fathers. Chapter 8 presents the implications of the findings of this thesis along with some recommendations and concluding statements based on the findings of this study.

Chapter 8: Implications of the findings and conclusion

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the research is examined in regard to its possible contribution to the study of the absence of fathers in child and family welfare, in particular as it relates to the practice of social work in child and family welfare in Australia. The major themes identified in the preceding chapters on findings are examined with reference to the research questions proposed and the implications of the findings. Also, this chapter will provide a review of the methodology including the limitations of the approach. Finally, directions for future research will be presented and a conclusion to the study will be detailed.

8.2 Professional practice within child and family welfare remains gendered, with a focus on mothering and an avoidance of fathers

In the analysis of both the survey data and interview transcripts with participants in Chapters 5 and 6, it was noted that all workers found their practice with fathers difficult to conceptualise. Consistent throughout the survey and interviews was a great amount of hesitation and ambivalence by participants in their conversations about their practice with fathers that seemed to reflect a sense of being somewhat overwhelmed by the subject. Participants also demonstrated more confidence when speaking about mothers than about fathers, and there were also different perceptions by participants of the parenting responsibilities of mothers and fathers.

The term 'parent' was being used by participants to describe the primary caretaker for bringing up children, but the term only applied in their practice to the mother and they did not often made reference to the father despite the existence of a father as mothers were the ones most often held to be responsible by the participants for addressing and resolving problems in the family. The presence of violence, drug use or other difficult behaviours by a father did not make participants any more concerned or motivated to include the father in their practice.

Whilst all the participants held formal qualifications and had many years of direct practice experience working with children and families, their practice focused strongly on the mother-child dyad and demonstrated a lack of understanding of a father's ability to parent. In this sense their practice was gender biased and failed to take into consideration constructs of fatherhood beyond the biological connection to the child. An example of gender bias from the research literature are where women attend case conferences but not men, and also when men are not called to give evidence in court even though these same professionals identified that these fathers were seen as having great benefits to the family (Edwards, 1998). For example, Penny (Chapter 6 – 6.3.2) neglected to invite fathers into her practice because she saw fathers as being the ones away from the home working, even though they could potentially be engaged with in practice. The way in which fathers were constructed by the participants reflected what was written about fathers and their absence from child protection and family welfare practice.

Over a decade ago, in a paper based on personal experience of overseeing the work of child protection teams (O'Hagan, 1997) proposed that there was an avoidance of fathers and male cohabitants by child protection workers who operated from a tradition of involving both parents but who nevertheless failed to engage the male partners of women, regarded by the workers in the study as a 'single' parent. Daniel and Taylor (2001) proposed that child and family welfare professionals often see that effective fathering cannot take place unless fathers are physically present. More recently, Featherstone (2004a) proposed that many professionals, particularly those working in child and family welfare, are often concerned about exploring the 'why' of father involvement rather than looking at 'how' to involve fathers in their practice. In addition, Brown *et al.*, (2009a) in their three year multi-methods analysis of gender, class, race and culture of child welfare discourses, described how fathers are seen as deviant, dangerous, irresponsible and irrelevant. Even further, they look at how father absence in child welfare is inextricably linked to blaming mothers. They proposed that in failing to work with fathers, child welfare ignores potential risks and assets for both mothers and children. Participants appeared to find it very difficult to locate fathers in their practice and overall were unable to see that involving fathers would lead to a more balanced and inclusive practice. It was perceived by the participants that involving fathers in case studies was complex and their own experiences had little success. The workers saw insurmountable problems in working with fathers but if a mother had raised the same issues they would have seen them as not so difficult or complex. Such experiences by participants with fathers form part of accepted practice that perhaps would not apply to a mother in the same situation. From this perspective participants seemed to find themselves frequently stereotyping fathers in their language, seeing fatherhood as a secondary concept.

As Edwards (1998) has pointed out, professionals' failure to involve men in child and family welfare interventions has the effect both of absolving them from responsibility and of excluding them from discussion of the welfare of their children.

8.3 Fathers are more likely to be involved if their child's mother is involved

The child and family welfare industry has historically focused on mothering rather than parenting (O'Hagan and Dillenburg 1995; Popay *et al.*, 1998) and central to the participants' about how to involve fathers was the type of relationship that the mother had with the father. A fathers' presentation at child and family welfare services was dependent upon the mother's views of the father. Fathers were more likely to be included in a worker's practice if the mother had a good relationship with the father. A 'good relationship' would consist of stability within the couple relationship, a high degree of emotional support and the absence of intimate partner violence or other undesirable behavioural issues such as alcohol or drug abuse. Also, a father's inclusion in services was seen as more beneficial by workers if the father was physically available, usually translated as residing in the same household. The further a father was physically distant, the less likely he was to be included in case planning or clinical appointments for the family. This view taken by professionals ignored contemporary thinking about family formation in society today.

It did not take into account the diverse makeup of families that was discussed in Chapter 2 and whilst a father's presence in a family can have some benefits it is not necessarily a pre-requisite to emotional well-being for children and families (Pringle 1998b, 1998c; Featherstone 1999; Lloyd 2001; Dubowitz, 2006).

8.4 Fathers are often viewed by professionals as risks rather than seen as resources for the family

Even though contemporary research supports a father's input in family life whether they are resident or non-resident (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008), the analysis of the data with each of the key informants showed that fathers were viewed more as a risk rather than a resource to families. This finding supports the literature on how fathers are constructed by professionals (Smyth 2002; Scourfield 2008; Fletcher and Visser, 2008) which identifies the methods employed by child and family welfare personnel which may be more conducive to engaging with mothers. This is a process that operates in direct contradiction to the significant societal changes that have taken place over the last three decades in regard to family life (Daniel and Taylor 2001; Scourfield 2008; Featherstone, 2009).

When fathers are identified as risks, research has shown they face less scrutiny by child welfare professions in practice (Swift 1995; Scourfield 2003; Milner 2004; Littlechild and Bourke 2006; Featherstone and Peckover, 2007b). They are also less likely to be avoided when they may be a potential resource for the family (O'Hagan 1997; Trotter 1997; Daniel and Taylor 1999; Featherstone 2006; Strega *et al.*, 2008).

8.5 Predictors of father absence in child and family welfare services

In recent years there has been research generated in attempting to engage with fathers more effectively in services (Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Fletcher 2004; King and Fletcher, 2007) with a shift in focus from their absence to a greater understanding of their role in the family (Lamb *et al.*, 2004; Lewis and Lamb, 2007).

Whilst for the most part this approach has been helpful, it is premised on the ideological construction of fathers as ‘missing out’, leading to a sense that fathers are victims of a system over which they have very little control (Drakich 1989; Featherstone, 2009). As highlighted in Chapter 2, both mothers and fathers can be absent from the family over a child’s life for a variety of reasons. In this respect, many of the participants appeared to identify valuable predictors of father absence in their practice, rather than simply focus on a ‘recipe like’ discussion of their own ways to engage fathers more constructively in their practice. These are now listed and discussed below.

8.5.1 Employment

In Chapter 2 it was revealed that fatherhood historically has generally been constructed around notions of ‘breadwinner (worker father)’, despite this construction being also complemented with fatherhood being associated as a sex-role model and nurturer (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). Despite the evidence that a father’s role as a provider is receding (Dermott, 2008) and the possible father roles that may overlap or complement the mother’s role, participants in the study identified that a predictor of a father’s absence was his employment status. Many participants described their difficulties in getting a father along to their service, blaming their own agencies inflexible operational hours. However, there was no appreciation that the mothers may themselves find it difficult to attend because of their employment status. This was something that was assumed by the participants that mothers would ‘manage’ to attend their service a lot more effectively than the fathers.

8.5.2 Violence and other difficult behaviours

Engaging with men as fathers is not simply about a professional's attitudes and practices but also about real issues with men as clients. Fathers, as we have seen in Chapter 2, can be resources for a family but they can also pose certain risks to women and children due to violence or other difficult behaviours. As discussed in Chapter 2, this phenomenon is particularly evident in child and family (child protection) welfare practice where some fathers may avoid professionals or confront them forcefully if they are challenged.

When it occurs, there is often an under-reporting of abuse by male clients towards staff in the helping professions (Stanley and Goddard 2002; Littlechild and Bourke, 2006) that can seriously affect the worker-client relationship and place the women and children at risk of potential abuse (Milner 2004; Featherstone and Peckover 2007; Bellamy 2009; Berger *et al.*, 2009). Many of the participants described their work with fathers who were violent or had other difficult behaviours, such as drug or alcohol abuse, as problematic to their practice.

Participants would see these fathers as constraining their work with the family, which they equated with the mother and children (Edwards 1998; Williams 1998; Scourfield, 2006). However rather than attempting to understand the effect this would have upon the family, the dynamic was consistently translated into their practice as a concern about the participants' own personal safety.

The impact that men presenting with violent or problematic behaviours can have upon front-line staff cannot be over-estimated, particularly for female workers, but at the same time avoiding those fathers that presented because they were problematic implies that the mothers would be the ones left to 'fix' the family (O'Hagan and Dillenburg 1995; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Scourfield 2003; 2006). Given the recent evidence on the co-occurrence of child maltreatment and intimate partner violence (Stanley and Goddard 1993; Peled, 2000) and its effects upon children (Bedi and Goddard, 2007), participants in the study appeared surprisingly ill-prepared to engage fathers because of fear of anticipated violence or intimidation. These fears appeared to be based upon their own personal experience of violence which participants openly reported as problematic in their ability to offer a service to fathers. This dynamic was felt by both male and female participants alike and being a male worker did not make it any easier for them to work with fathers where there was fear of anticipated violence or intimidation. Therefore, one of the key challenges that are often faced by child and family welfare professionals is how to engage with fathers through practices that challenge inappropriate behaviours and also recognise men's vulnerabilities as well as their violence (Frosh, 1994).

8.5.3 Participants own personal and professional biases

Participants appeared interested in having fathers included in their practice but only in the context of a traditional notion of family. A traditional notion of family for participants represented one where the father was cohabitating and physically present. Participants found it difficult to construct family types that were representative of contemporary families today as discussed in Chapter 2.

What appeared to be operating was the participant's own personal and professional bias (Daniel and Taylor, 2001) about what a father meant to them and despite their admission that they supported for more fathers to be involved in their practice, it was incongruent with how they practiced. Fathers were mentioned or discussed independent of the mother, but were not the central focus of their work. Often, positioning the father in comparison with the mother was used by participants as a way to justify a father's absence from the work with the family. Whilst recognising some of the benefits of involving a father, mothers would be seen as more helpful, available and compliant with child care tasks and responsibilities and participants struggled to offer a service to fathers because it involved more time that was not available to them or the agency. Although more flexible appointment times for fathers were given some consideration in their responses, it was often reported by participants as a less feasible option due to concerns of safety, or the agency policy of not offering a service after five o'clock.

Involving a father therefore appeared to be seen as requiring more work for the participant and it was easier and a more valuable use of time to assume fathers were absent. This is a significant implication for a child and family welfare practice as it places a greater burden of care upon the mother and fails to ensure that men, as fathers, are accountable for their absence. It also implies that these participants are colluding with the fathers and supporting them in their absenteeism, a finding that supports what other researchers have found in child and family welfare practice with fathers (Kullberg 2005; Strega *et al.*, 2007; Brown *et al.*, 2009a).

Participants in this study were less likely to draw upon their own formal professional sources in seeking to understand their work with men and fathers. Rather they were much more inclined to draw upon their own life experiences and culture of child and family welfare work handed down by others in the agency.

8.6 Social work education and the father absence–mother blame paradigm

As direct service delivery in child and family welfare is most frequently undertaken by professionally qualified social workers, it would be fair to assume that the education of social workers would include some content on fathers and fathering.

However, research has shown that this has been the opposite, with a lack of attention to fathers and fatherhood in the social sciences and social work literature both in Australia and elsewhere (Greif and Bailey 1990; Haskett *et al.*, 1996; James 1988; Kosberg 2002; Greif and Greif 2004; Strug and Willmore-Schaeffer 2003; Walmsley *et al.*, 2006; Featherstone, 2008). In addition social work education has failed to appreciate the complexity of contemporary family life, rarely referring to different types of fathers and mothers in families, particularly non-resident, difficult or ‘hard to reach’ and culturally diverse fathers. This lack of father inclusive knowledge has primarily been reinforced and embedded by parenting and child development theory that often renders fathers invisible by the use of gender neutral terms such as parents and families (Fletcher and Visser, 2008)

This lack of attention about including fathers in social work education and training, whilst significant to practice, does not fully support this exclusion, as there has been a relatively steady increase in literature on fathers and child and family welfare over the last decade (O'Hagan 1997; Daniel and Taylor 2001; Scourfield 2002; Fletcher 2004; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Fleming 2007; Featherstone 2009; Fleming and King, 2010) and also outside child and family welfare (Ryan 2000; Ghate and Shaw 2000; King 2005; Pease and Camilleri, 2001). Furthermore fathers as members in this culture (Liu, 2005) may assume that just because a social worker is trained, they (the fathers) will be understood and seen as important to the family. However, the data showed that often the mother appeared to be seen by the participants before the father even when the father was resident in the family. Participants also appeared to rely on information provided to them solely by the mothers as well as relying on the mothers to relay information back to the fathers, without any direct reference to the father himself. The mother was viewed by participants as the most important parent in the family and the child's development and welfare. This in turn lead to the fathers being relegated a peripheral role when the intervention was taking place by the participants. This practice significantly highlighted the participant's limited understanding of services for fathers that would support fathers in their role, or their ability to offer alternative ways to increase a father's involvement in family life, such as men's support services and male-specific telephone counselling services.

As a result, the implication is that fathers are not seen by professionals as potential resources and this increases the likelihood that a mother will be seen to carry the greater burden of responsibility which is often referred to in the literature as 'mother blaming' (Brown *et al.*, 2008).

The practice by participants in this study is in direct contradiction to current law and social policy around increasing and involving fathers in child and family welfare (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs 2003; Fletcher 2008b; Berlyn *et al.*, 2008). It thus highlights that child and family welfare practice with fathers, as opposed to a mother's, is far more complex and requires addressing not only the way in which professionals construct men as fathers but also how they are currently educated and trained to work with this complexity.

8.7 Contribution of the current study to the understanding of the absence of fathers in child and family welfare practice

As Chapter 3 outlined, this study broadly sought to examine how child welfare professionals, employed in both social work and non-social work occupations, engage with fathers in an Australian context and how they respond to them at various levels of the broader context of child and family welfare practice. The study aimed to explore the following research questions:

How do professionals working in child and family welfare services view fathers and, how, if at all, do they incorporate them into their practice?

The current study applied an exploratory and qualitative methodology which sought to make an important contribution to the current understanding of father absence in child and family welfare practice. The study has also responded to the call of a number of commentators in this field to 'widen the theoretical base' (O'Hagan, 1997, pp 37-38) by asking professionals how they do business with fathers in their day-to-day practice. It has achieved this on a number of different levels.

8.7.1 Fathers, fatherhood and practice absence

Firstly, this study confirms the complexity and ambiguity involved in understanding the roles fathers play in contemporary family life in Australia. The literature review undertaken in Chapter 2 offered an important insight into the current issues faced by child and family welfare professionals working with fathers in practice. It also identified that neglecting fathers and their role in families can lead to more problems not less problems for mothers and children, particularly in the area of child protection and family violence. Within social work training and practice there is a firm emphasis on anti-discriminatory practice. At the same time, however, fathers are often marginalised or ignored in child protection practice (Daniel and Taylor, 1999, p 209). Therefore it should no longer be accepted practice that fathers are ignored or avoided (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008). Secondly, the research builds upon previous studies about men in child and family welfare (Milner 1993; O'Hagan and Dillenger 1995; Edwards, 1998) based upon gender and its impact on a child and family welfare organisation's ability to delivery services to families (Farmer and Owen 1995, 1998; Dicks *et al.*, 1998; Ghate and Shaw 2000; Scourfield, 2002). It also offered up an opportunity to explore how fathers in an Australian context are constructed by different professional occupations in child and family welfare. Finally, and most importantly, the research focused beyond what was already known about fathers and men in child and family welfare settings in the research literature. It achieved this through the substantive theory of *not knowing fathers* and identifying that those participants would not automatically accept that a father's absence was an acceptable practice as previous studies have shown (Milner 1993a; Dicks *et al.*, 1998) but voice their concerns that a father missing from the work was a real problem.

These participants all shared a common concern that the absence of a father in their professional practice and specific discipline areas occurred as a result of a combination of factors, which include the fathers own choice to avoid professional gaze (Connell 1995; Featherstone and Peckover, 2007b). Gender discourses therefore are constrained only by the social world in which they exist. For example, a biological resident father status is an important aspect of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and therefore represents the dominant discourse on fatherhood and child and welfare practice. This then results in other forms of fathering such as step-fathering or non-resident father types to being relegated to a less important position and often rendered invisible in child and family welfare practice. Whilst professionals in child and family welfare practice are often reluctant to admit they may have certain gender biases, this research has demonstrated that under certain conditions, professionals do in fact operate with a gender bias toward fathers (and mothers) . The implications of the research are therefore in agreement with prior studies such as Scourfield (2002a). By undertaking an ethnographic study of a child protection office, which identified that practitioners, in failing to engage men, meant that women were also likely to be the ones who bear the greatest responsibility to change the families, equated to 'fathers' problems. Furthermore, the implication of the research also confirms the work of Featherstone and White (2006) from a two year project in the UK that looked at the largely neglected area of fathers involved with social care agencies because of child welfare needs or concerns. In particular, from the results of Round 1, it was decided to seek funding to survey higher education institutions (which became Round 2), as accounts from fathers suggested that many social workers had little knowledge of the law, or of assessment and intervention processes (Featherstone, 2009).

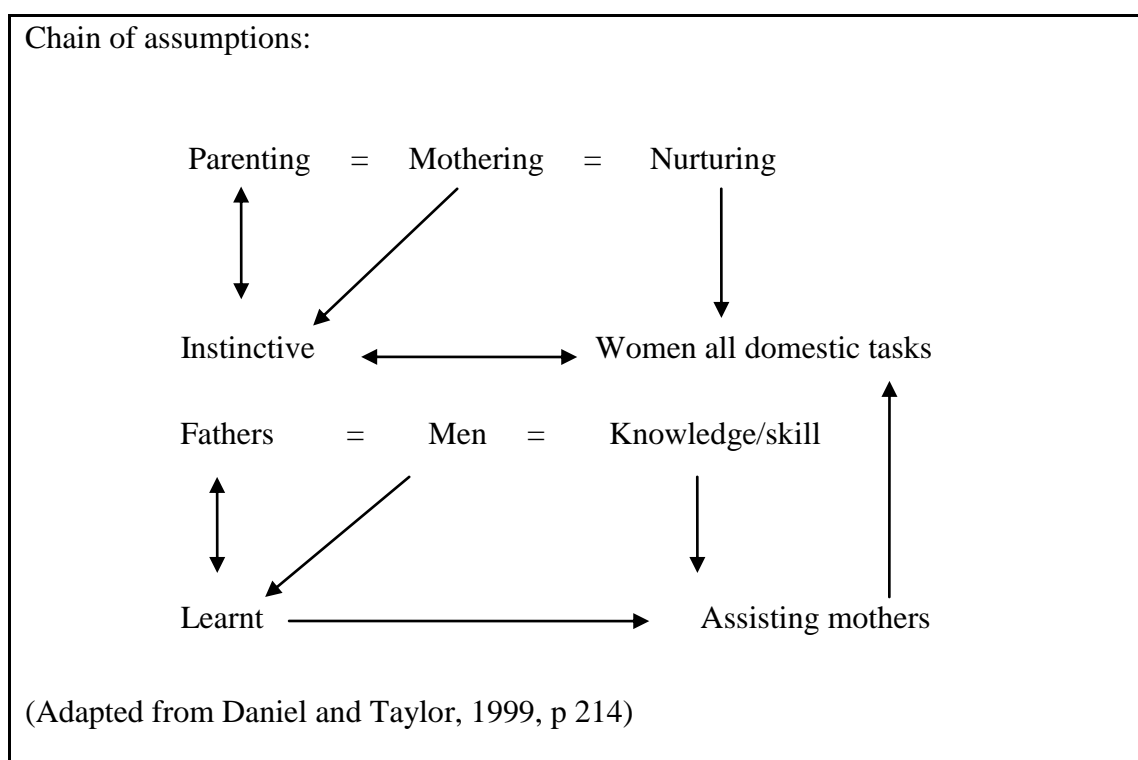
Whilst it is not possible to report the full account of the study here, it identified most significantly that the curriculum content mirrored practice — that is, that practice with fathers was not a priority, and this was reflected in practice (Roskill *et al.*, 2008, p 62). In all, these findings have important implications for researchers and child and family welfare professionals alike, possibly opening up new ways of seeing fathers beyond the heavily infused notions of risk and danger, often a dominant theme in the literature (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). It assists professionals to look deeper into the identity of a father. A criticism of past research has been that many studies looking at mothers and fathers in child and family welfare have relied on the perspective of the client, usually the mother (Haskett *et al.*, 1996; Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer 2003; Greif and Greif, 2004). As a result, efforts were made in this study to seek the perspective and rich practice wisdom from the professional working with fathers. These implications have provided important insights into the ‘theory’ operating in situ about fathers in child and family welfare practice.

8.7.2 The decline of the ‘ideal’ family type and contemporary social work practice

Collier and Sheldon argue, that decades of social, cultural and legal change mean that fatherhood is ‘open-ended, fluid and fragmented’. The lives of men cannot be comprehended through the deployment of binaries of good and bad dads, new and traditional fathers (Collier and Sheldon, 2008, p 236). Moreover, they argue that ‘traditional fatherhood’ is persistent in its continued hold over social and cultural expectations of fathers, making tensions for some men who have to choose between employment ‘breadwinner’ roles versus family and childcare commitments.

Their framework of ‘fragmenting fatherhood’ is useful to social workers and other professionals in this respect, as it offers up a new way of seeing fathers beyond the traditional frame of reference. Child and family welfare services need to be responsive to fathers and mothers equally, with an emphasis on the caring relationships significant to children regardless of whether this caring occurs in a (hetero) sexual family or other forms of family types (Collier and Sheldon, 2008, p 235). The participants in this study defined and constructed the fathers they worked with (or not) in direct opposition to what they identified the mothers role to be in their practice. Participants held onto the traditional ‘ideal’ family type, which in turn created a degree of ambivalence about working with fathers that did not ‘fit’ this ideal family type. This can be represented in the following figure:

Figure 2: Conceptual model of assumptions about fathers in child welfare practice



Men's parenting, as depicted in Figure 2, is often constructed in child and family welfare settings as something that is an adjunct to mothering and it is usually seen through a lens of deficit rather than strength or 'non-deficit' perspectives (King, 2000, p 24). 'Parenting' usually translates to mothering which is associated with nurturing and is instinctive.

For fathering, there is no such chain of assumptions, but rather an assumption that fathers will fill a role that complements the mothers and this 'parenting' by fathers has to be learned (Collier, 2001, p 538). Fathers are seen only through their absence in family life such as working long hours, non-resident or at risk (Daniel and Taylor, 1999).

The assumption which dominates is that mothers are instinctively 'parents' and that a father requires training/education about childcare. Lessons over the last three decades have affirmed that changing fathers and men is not simply about finding ways of equipping them with techniques to manage destructive behaviours and acquiring better parenting skills in some limited technical sense.

Significant change occurs in therapeutic and support work with the men often in tandem with their partners and children as it supports fathers and men to question the basis of their identity as men (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004). There is evidence that fathers are taking on greater responsibility for childcare, mainly due to the participation of women in educational, occupational and social spheres (Wise 2003; Berlyn *et al.*, 2008).

These changes have in turn resulted in a change in the ways family life is formed and developed today, with more diversity in non-traditional family forms occurring than previously. These non-traditional family forms, as discussed in Chapter 2, now include sole parent families, step and blended families, same sex couples and foster families. Professionals need to begin to respond to these changes in family formation and understand the important relationship between family structure and child outcomes that exists. This requires that quality care-giving and protection for children is the most important element in family life, no matter what family forms are in place (Wise, 2003, p 5).

8.7.3 ‘Good fathers’, ‘bad fathers’ and social work practice

The discourse in social policy and practice on the subject ‘engaged fathers’ (good fathers), runs parallel to those on ‘problem fathers’ (bad fathers). Here, ‘bad fathers’, (those who are absent) and irresponsible fathers (financially and otherwise) are potentially to blame for family conflict and poor childhood outcomes (Collier and Sheldon 2008; Featherstone 2009). Ashley *et al.*, have also highlighted the need for a much more inclusive approach by services towards fathers (Ashley *et al* 2006, p 66). Their research indicates that ‘professionals need to engage with fathers’ in an open and exploratory way, avoiding premature foreclosure and precipitous categorisations (Ashley *et al* 2006, p 81).

8.7.4 Developing policy and best practice with fathers: can it be done?

Virtually all the participants in this study indicated that they could not identify services specifically for fathers as described in Chapter 6.7. This is an important issue which raises further questions about how services for men and fathers are promoted to social workers and other professionals. It is also an important issue which requires consideration from a social policy perspective in Australia. This issue is important because invariably all families involved with child and family welfare services have a range of complex needs, often directly associated with relationships and parenting. Parenting is often considered and debated around mothers, with fathers being delegated to the periphery of services, even when they are a risk to children and families.

If social workers and other professionals working with these families are not able to identify father inclusiveness in their work or refer to services that do, the potential of fathers is minimised (Brown *et al.*, 2009b). Although there are no simple or quick fix answer to applying a more inclusive service practice framework with fathers, this study's findings make it clear that more coordinated and explicit information is required about the relationship between father absence and mother blame.

Social workers and other professionals will need to find opportunities in which they can include fathers without excluding mothers or blaming mothers, particularly when the fathers are not present or willing to engage with child and welfare services.

An example of such a service is the Hey Dad Western Australia (HDWA) program run by Ngala: Parenting with Confidence. Ngala: Parenting with Confidence was originally known in the 1890s as the House of Mercy and then the Alexandra Home for Women. It changed its name in the 1950s to Ngala meaning 'Mother and Child' or 'We Two' in the Aboriginal Bibbulmun dialect (www.ngala.com.au). Ngala: Parenting with Confidence, has historically focused on mothers and children but now provides an integrated parenting and children's service to both mothers and fathers, including a telephone help-line, centre-based and home-based consultation services, community-based programs, parenting and professional education and early learning and development services. The HDWA program, which is strategically co-located with Ngala's: Parenting with Confidence other programs, offers two key services to fathers. The first is the Dads Time Fatherhood Sessions which is a workshop for Dads to obtain information and discuss aspects of parenting and family life. The second is Skilled Dads workshop, again workshop based, offering practical parenting skills, focusing on fathers with children up to 5 years and suitable for fathers with limited time and residence with their children, as well as for those who live with their children full time. The HDWA program was showcased on a site visit in the 2009 IPSPCAN and ACCAN Conference in Perth, Western Australia .

Throughout theme three, described previously in Chapter 4, participants valued input from fathers when they were involved in their practice at a micro level. However, they could not see that what they were experiencing could potentially be used to inform and add value to their agencies policies at a macro level. The social work profession has an integral role in developing social policy that starts with the practitioner.

It can be argued that change in practice begins with the child and family welfare practitioner as they are 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1983) and the very ones that work day-to-day with fathers, mothers and families. They can be instrumental in developing and addressing the issues and challenges that they face when they are working with fathers, particularly fathers that pose risks to families and children (Featherstone and Peckover 2007b; Roskill *et al.*, 2008). Social work has had a long history for working within the 'person-in-situation' or 'person-in-environment' which characterises social work as a profession and what distinguishes social work from other non-social work helping professions (Hare, 2004). As such, this concern needs to be developed and applied more constructively with fathers in families (Cornell, 2006, p 50). Where there is a lack or absence of services for fathers, then reflective practice (Fook, 1999) should inform the worker that something needs to be done to develop such services.

It also should provide a catalyst for more development of social policy in Australia around working with fathers and mothers collectively. This has been the focus and direction of policy for families in the UK, albeit not without its critics, (Hobson 2002; Gillingham, 2008) since 1997. A full account of this policy is available (Featherstone and Trinder, 2001) but in general this new range of policies for children includes: the importance of early intervention, involving fathers in the care of their children and importantly to consider the needs of children and their parents more holistically (Scourfield and Drakeford, 2001). It is also an expectation now in the UK that local authorities, health care providers and other organisations will include fathers in the delivery of services regardless of their social background (Collier and Sheldon, 2008, p 22).

8.7.5 The way forward

The findings in this study suggest that child and family welfare settings may unintentionally discourage fathers from becoming involved with services. As reported in both Chapters 5 and 6, this phenomenon occurred frequently in the participants' practice and workplaces for many reasons, but most commonly because the participants adopted gendered approaches to their work with mothers and fathers. Participants reported that they held onto their own personal biographies (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004), beliefs and attitudes about the ideal family type.

Where this ideal family type was not in existence the participants struggled to find ways of reconfiguring their practice to meet the needs of the non-ideal family type that included fathers who were non-resident, unemployed or were assessed as risks for children. The effect of these personal assumptions and beliefs about fathers held by the participants in this study resulted in the majority of fathers being overlooked as resources for the family in general as well as for the social workers and practitioners. This was the practice norm for most participants, whether these fathers were seen to be present or absent as a risk or asset to the family. For example, Alice (social worker) in Chapter 6 - 6.6.4, could not understand why fathers did not engage with her service, stating they sat there like 'stunned mullets'. Alice's own professional framework of how to engage with men as fathers was limited to her own personal biography. Alice in this case did not articulate alternative practice frameworks (see Tehan and McDonald, 2010) that may have assisted her practice to more effectively include the fathers.

Whilst some workplaces and occupations can be a barrier to a fathers involvement with his children (Russell and Hwang, 2004), professionals need to identify these issues and work out alternative opportunities for fathers to be involved in services. This study highlights the urgency for professionals to reconceptualise current definitions of family to include all family types and father types. This will require moving away from a nuclear (heterosexual) family model to one more inclusive of the diverse range of families that exist in contemporary Western society. Men's involvement in fathering, no matter what family type these fathers identify with, has the potential to positively affect men's health and well-being, foster personal growth, and create opportunities for men to be more involved in their communities, increasing social capital and social inclusion (Palkovitz, 2002).

If social workers and other professionals are to move forward to develop ways to include both fathers and mothers in practice, they must start to challenge the traditional economic view of fathering, which dominates social policy and practice discourses alike (Ghate *et al.*, 2000; Collier and Sheldon, 2008).

8.7.6 Rethinking child and family welfare practice with fathers

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the phenomena of how fathers can be absent from child and family welfare settings, and to develop a substantive theory to provide understanding of the phenomena and a framework for action. It is clear from the participant's responses that their involvement with fathers in families can be described as ambivalent, resulting in the theory of *not knowing fathers*.

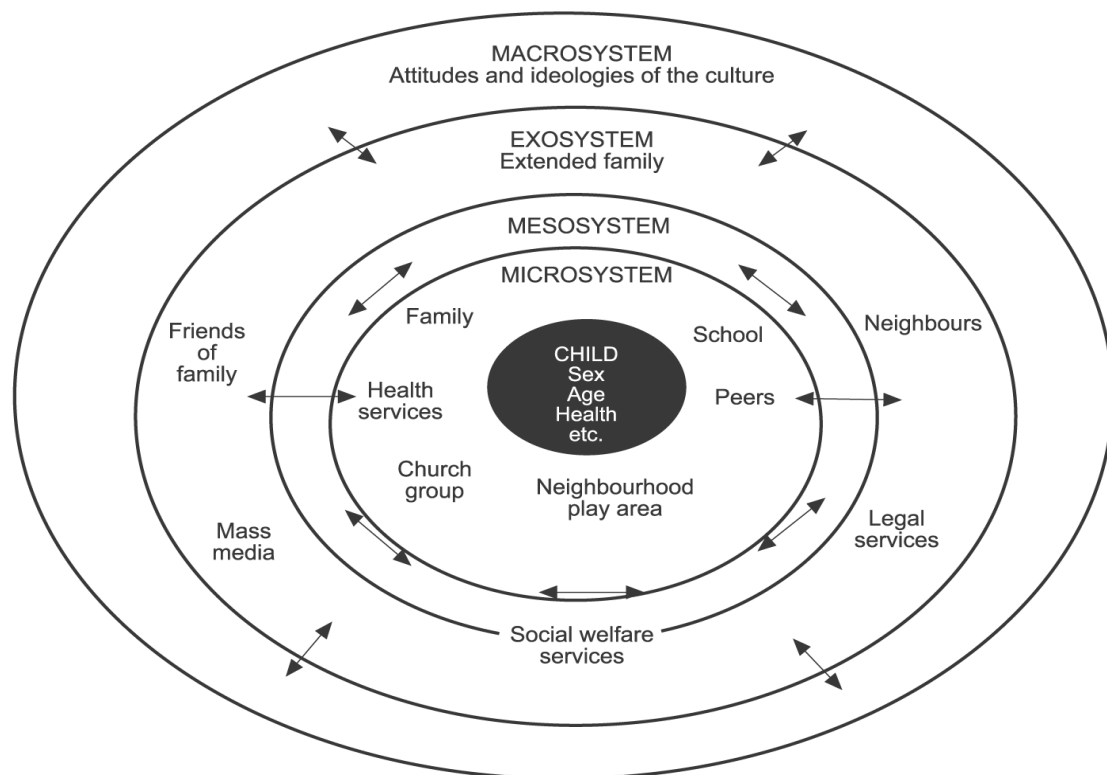
The process in which fathers are absent from child and family welfare settings is influenced by a number of conditions and processes that emerged from the data. These factors and processes can be grouped under the key theme of personal biographies, which is as Ferguson and Hogan (2004) note, have contributed to fathers being rendered invisible in child and family welfare practice settings.

Therefore rethinking practice with fathers in families requires social workers and other professionals to see families as dynamic and fluid. In addition, it requires practitioners to approach the family as a constructed quality of human interaction rather than a detached social investigation. This will enable a practice to free the family from the dominant binaries of public/private, hetero/homo (sexual) and caregiver/breadwinner (Collier, 2001, p 536). Mothers, fathers and children, including the extended family, are all part of the family picture and family histories are marked by the enduring presences of absent members over time and place.

The main tension that has operated in child and family welfare practice has been in trying to answer the question: what should fathers really be doing inside the family/home? Without an extended understanding of fathers and fatherhood incorporating diversity and change, this question will remain at the centre of the debates about the future of fatherhood (Collier, 2001, p 520). Rethinking practice can be embraced by social workers and potentially can influence other professionals in child and family welfare to engage with fathers with families more holistically.

Social work has a history of applying an ecological person-in-environment view of the human condition to practice (Barker 1965; Germain 1973; Hartman 1979; Pardeck 1996; Jack, 1997) and the application of its use to practice research has also more recently gained some renewed interest (McBride and Rane 1998; Adamsons *et al.*, 2007). Ecological systems theory offers a way of conceptualising the relationship between people and environments and encourages a balanced approach to both domains of practice. Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005) first introduced and identified the importance of relationships for a child within and across four domains or 'systems': microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem as represented the Figure 3:

Figure 3 Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development



Source: Dockrell and Messer (1999, p. 139)

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005) identifies the individual at the center of a series of concentric circles that gradually move away from the immediate and familiar context to community and finally society.

Each microsystem, although not exclusive to the others, has its own pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p 148). Thus social work assessment and intervention with fathers in families could potentially be of benefit. By applying an ecological systems perspective social workers could seek to understand what forces are occurring within and between systems such as what aspects of fathers and fatherhood (men's) lives are stresses (risks) and what are strengths (resources) to children and mothers (Wise, 2003).

This was illustrated to some degree by Gary (senior social worker) in Chapter 6 – 6.8.2. Gary described his work with the father of a family with a child recently diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis (CF). Whilst the focus of concern was with the child with CF (micro-system), Gary acknowledged it was important to work with the father to locate support services for him. In doing so Gary was already beginning to apply the ecological person-in-environment framework to his practice. Working with the father alone would not provide what the family needed to help them through this difficult time.

By applying an eco-system framework to practice the various individual and contextual factors that influence fathers' involvement with their children can be assessed more comprehensively. Men as fathers can contribute to children's lives in a range of ways that can sometimes resemble the work of mothering (Doucet, 2006). Social workers and other professionals working in child and family welfare settings will need to begin a process of re-conceptualising their practice from its present gender bias construct with its implicit focus on mothers, to become more explicit with father inclusiveness.

As a starting point, agencies need to acknowledge the fathers and fathering persons who exist in the lives of children in practice and plan to include them at all stages of assessment and intervention.

8.8 Limitations of the current study

There were a number of limitations that emerged from the current study. These are listed and discussed below.

Firstly, the small snowball sample relied on people who proposed potential participants that they knew well and who shared their own views. This means that small groups of interest can often pass by unnoticed and be left out of research (Miles and Huberman, 1984). As a result this study may have unintentionally left out potential participants who might have provided alternative or different perspectives on the research topic. Secondly, the difficulty experienced by the researcher in accessing participants for the study was also a limitation. Originally a much larger sample was sought, as discussed in Chapter 4. However due to a number of practical barriers, this was not to be the case. Access to a larger group of participants may have provided greater detail about the daily practice experiences of professionals with fathers. Thirdly, it was difficult to assess just how much of what the participants reported in the surveys and interviews were constrained by their own concerns and fears about how their practice would be seen and reported.

Whilst every effort was taken to assure participants that their information would be kept confidential and that it was not an 'evaluation' exercise or to see if they were constructing fathers correctly, they may have expressed a biased view because of this concern.

These limitations aside, the results of this study are a beginning to unravelling how fathers are seen by child and family welfare professionals in their practice. It has shown that professionals from different disciplines, including social work are still operating with traditional gendered notions of parenting. It appears that despite information about how to work with fathers is on the increase (Featherstone, 2009), professionals are not utilising this information fully in their practice or focusing on the 'why' of needing to work with fathers. Further research is necessary into how and why social workers can develop ways to include fathers in their work so as to inform effective policy and practice responses in child and family welfare.

8.9 Future research

In a paper by Scourfield (2008) titled *Real men, real women: A rounded view of gendered practice in child protection*, he calls for greater focus on real problems with men as clients. This study has attempted to address this call by seeking to identify how men as fathers are described, discussed, and constructed by child and family welfare professionals. Since contemporary fathering is increasingly more diverse and complex than it was three decades ago, the Australian child and family welfare system in particular would benefit greatly from the funding of similar practice-based research.

In particular, there is a greater need for practice-based research into successful interventions with fathers who are often described as ‘hard to reach’ (Brown *et al.*, 2008) and with those fathers who are potential risks to children and families, some who have repeatedly perpetrated family violence (ALRC, 2010). So far there have been significant gaps in this type of research, or that it has only focused on ‘voluntary’, resident fathers (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008).

8.9.1 Social work curricula in child and family welfare practice education

Child and family welfare services have always been concentrated upon women rather than men (O’Hagan and Dillenger 1995; Brown *et al.*, 2008) and what has been written and taught about families in social work and child welfare education and literature is often heavily concentrated upon mothers in child development psychology and theory (Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Strug *et al.*, 2003; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Strega *et al.*, 2008). An example of this is reflected in a recent text by Lonne and colleagues, *Reforming Child Protection*. Here in all of the 213 pages, only a few paragraphs address ‘fathers as service users’ (Lonne *et al.*, 2008, p 85).

This in itself is surprising given that men, when encountering professionals, particularly in family relationship work and child protection, are often described in practice as difficult and presenting problems to the mothers and children and that is why many of these services exist for families in the first place.

In this sense, it is imperative that future research should seek to explore the connection between what professionals do in their practice, as well as what they are learning in professional programs about men as fathers. Whilst some of this research has just begun to emerge in Australia (Berlyn *et al.*, 2008; Fletcher 2008, 2010; Fleming and King, 2010), focusing on key skills that professionals need to engage with fathers, it is mostly about 'relationship-building skills' working with fathers (Berlyn *et al* 2008, p 26).

This research does not examine why some professionals may do this work well and others not so well (Forrester *et al.*, 2008). My research has shown participants could describe some of the benefits of including fathers in their practice, but these were limited and not always consistent with what they did with fathers in their practice. The more the fathers were described as physically absent, non-resident or as having abusive social histories, the fewer participants appeared to have the necessary skills and knowledge to include fathers in their practice. I agree with Scourfield (2008) and others (Franck 2001; Ferguson and Hogan 2004; Risely-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Featherstone, 2009) that fathers can no longer be ignored or be allowed to be absent from practice, whether they reside or do not reside with the mother or their children. This lack of attention to fathers in social work education in Australia leaves practice in a vulnerable state and one which is at risk of criticism from other disciplines such as psychology, law and nursing.

I believe that in order for this situation to move forward, we need to shift away from the popular language of father engagement to the language of mother-child-father engagement including both genders. A starting point for this would be to undertake research on undergraduate social work courses in Australia, such as has been similarly achieved in Canada (Doucet 2006; Walmsley 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2009b) and the United Kingdom (Featherstone and White, 2006).

This work needs to look at how gender is represented in the curricula and on placements at all levels, from individual work to policy and from early intervention where there is no risk to children to where there are child protection concerns. Given that all social work programs in Australia are accredited by the AASW (2008), this would be a good place to start and one which could be incorporated in the AASW Practice Standards (2003).

8.10 Conclusion

The major research goal of this study was to explore how fathers were both perceived and engaged with by child and family welfare professionals in their daily practice. The findings of the study suggest that professionals are largely ambivalent about including fathers in their work and concentrate instead on mothers. This is despite the case that many of the professionals in this study found it helpful and beneficial to their work if a father was included or was present. The exploratory study has therefore added new insights to what is already known about the complexity of the process involving men as fathers in child and family welfare.

It also demonstrated that avoiding fathers in child and family welfare is often an acceptable practice by professionals even when there are clear indicators of possible maltreatment or abuse to mothers and children. This confirms that many of the professionals in this study were operating with their own personal frameworks about fathers in family life, rather than from any informed practice or current legal and policy knowledge regarding how to include fathers in their practice. Whilst there were certain methodological limitations identified in this study as outlined earlier in this Chapter, there are a number of recommendations that could be implemented in the future. Firstly, there is a need to undertake further research into how families are seen by child and family welfare services in Australia, particularly those charged with the responsibility for the protection and safety of children. Secondly, there needs to be more work undertaken with training and educational institutions in regard to what is being taught in courses with undergraduates in relation to men, gender and fathers in social work. Finally, child and family welfare services need to review their practices with men as fathers including current operating hours and current theories that inform or hinder practice.

In this chapter, the research was examined in regard to its possible contribution to the study of the absence of fathers in child and family welfare practice. This chapter also identified some of the limitations to the research and made some recommendations for future research in the area of fathers and child and family welfare practice. It is hoped that this thesis has highlighted a need for more research to be undertaken in Australia and will encourage researchers in gender studies and the like, to build upon this study and find more effective ways to work with families and fathers at a policy and practice level.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Monash (SCERH), Ethics approval letter and Monash Ethics Amendment (email)

Appendix 2: Explanatory statement



EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Title of Project: *The Absence of Fathers in Child and Family Welfare*

My name is Joe Fleming (Co-investigator) and I am undertaking a research study for my Doctor of Philosophy by research (PhD) at Monash University, Victoria under the supervision of Professor Thea Brown (Chief Investigator), Department of Social Work in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Primary Health Care in Caulfield.

The aim of my research is to explore the area of practice with *fathers in child and family welfare, both in practice and in theory. The current theory developed overseas suggests that male parents are somehow absent in child welfare services and I wish to explore this particular view further in the context of Australian child and family welfare services.

Being part of this research will take 1 hour of your time during a weekday. It will involve responding to a topic guide, which is a type of questionnaire that will help to gather data about you and also your views of the agency in which you work.

The interviews will be held at a location that you will feel most comfortable and private. The information collected will be written down and recorded. This information is confidential and the data will be presented in a non-identifying manner in accordance with ethical guidelines. An example of this will be that your name will be recorded as worker X and agency Y. All information collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet with access only being permitted by the Chief Investigator (Professor Thea Brown) and Co-investigator (Joe Fleming). In accordance with ethical guidelines, information will only be stored for five years and then destroyed.

If at any point during this study you wish to withdraw, you can do so without prejudice. Participation in the studying purely voluntary and without any coercion.

If the interview or any part of the study causes you distress, I will ensure that you have access to local support services in your region. In addition there is a national counselling line provided by LifeLine which is 131114.

In the process of the interview there is any information that may indicate that a child, children or adults may be at risk, I am mandated to report this to the Department of Human Services or appropriate authority.

If you wish to discuss the study further with me before deciding whether or not to participate, you are welcome to telephone me on [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED]

If you need to make an STD call you can give me your phone number and ask me to call you back. If you also have any queries you can also contact my supervisor, Professor Thea Brown on 03 93003553 (normal working hours) or email thea.brown@med.monash.edu.au

Any complaints about the study you can contact the Monash Ethics Committee on Research Involving Humans. Their contact number is 03 99052052. You can also write to them at this address:

The Secretary
The Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH)
PO Box No. 3 A
Monash University
Victoria 3800

Thankyou

Joe Fleming
PhD Candidate
Monash University
Caulfield Campus
Victoria Australia

Appendix 3: Consent form



INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: **The Absence of Fathers in Child and Family Welfare**

I agree to take part in the above Monash University research project. I have had the project explained to me and have also been provided with a copy of the Explanatory Statement, which I can keep for my own records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- Be interviewed by the Co-investigator (Joe Fleming)
- Allow the interview to be documented in written form
- Make myself available if necessary for a further interview

I fully understand that by being involved in this study I am under no coercion or duress and that at any stage of the study I can withdraw without prejudice. I also fully understand the methods employed by the Co-investigator and that:

- No information will lead to the identification of myself
- Confidentiality will be maintained and all records of interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet with access only to be provided by the Chief Investigator (Professor Thea Brown) and Co-investigator.

I also have explained to me that if information that I provide will place any child or person at risk, the Co-investigator is mandated by law to report this to the Department of Human Services Victoria under the Children and Young Persons Act 1999.

I have read the Explanatory Statement and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this activity, realising I may withdraw my consent at any time without prejudice.

I agree that research data gathered for the study to be published provided my name or any other information will not identify me.

Print Name _____ (Participant/ Authorised Representative)

Signed _____ Date _____

Witnessed _____ Date _____

.....
Co - Investigator

Date.....

Supervisor/ Chief Researcher
.....

Date.....

Appendix 4: Self-completed survey questionnaire



Confidential

Where are the Dads? Questions about Fathers in Child Health and Welfare....

Dear Colleague

The Project

Are you interested in participating in an exciting and important research study that Joe Fleming, a social work practitioner is conducting?

Research Objectives

The purpose of the study is to obtain a clearer understanding of the views that workers in health and welfare settings have about Fathers and Father figures in practice. The project is being undertaken for a Ph.D. and is being supervised by Professor Thea Brown, Department of Social Work at Monash University, Victoria

Please Contact Me

If you are interested could you contact me to undertake a brief questionnaire and a follow up interview about your views and experiences as a worker in child health and welfare services of working with fathers.

I can be contacted at my e-mail address

████████████████████

or by telephoning ██████████

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your participation in this study will be completely anonymous.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

The questionnaire should take you approximately 10-15 minutes to complete, and the interview will be either face to face or via telephone between 45 minutes to one hour

Yours sincerely,

Joe Fleming

PhD Candidate

Monash Student ID: ██████████

Mobile: ██████████



MONASH University

Questionnaire

- Work Title:
- Agency (please tick ✓) Health: Govt ☐ Non-Govt. ☐
 Child Welfare: Govt ☐ Non-Govt. ☐
 Other _____

- Approximate number of families on your caseload (n=)

1. Does your work involve fathers? (Please tick ✓)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐

If Yes, number of fathers n=

What does the word 'father' mean to you?

2. Does your work involve mothers? (Please tick ✓)

Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐

If yes, number of mothers (n=)

3. What does word 'mother' mean to you?

4. At your service or agency approximately how many fathers use the service? (Please circle)

Numbers : <5..... 5-15..... >15

5. What service or services are fathers involved with? (Please tick ✓)

Parent education ☐

Child Health ☐

Ante Natal ☐

Post Natal ☐

Counselling ☐

Other _____

6. Fathers are important to my case planning (Please circle)

Strongly agree-----Agree-----Undecided-----Disagree-----Strongly
Disagree

Comments

7. How do you view fathers being involved with your Agency? (Please circle)

Highly positive----Slightly Positive-----Slightly Negative-----Highly Negative

Comments:

8. How do you view fathers not being involved with your Agency? (Please circle)

Highly positive----Slightly Positive-----Slightly Negative-----Highly Negative

Comments:

9. Do fathers get invited to attend services? (Please tick ✓)

Yes ☐ No ☐ (If NO why?)

10. Is your agency designed to accommodate for fathers? (Please tick ✓)

Yes ☐ No ☐

If YES what sort of things does it provide?

Comments: _____

11. Can you describe what factors may be present for why fathers use the agency or services?

Comments: _____

13. Can you describe what factors may be present for why fathers DO NOT use the agency or services?

14. Can you list any benefits of working with fathers?

15. Can you list any negatives of working with fathers

16. Can you describe what types of activities are fathers involved in with your service (i.e. parenting group, counselling)?

17. Do Fathers/father figures attend formal meetings or appointments at the service or agency? (Please tick ✓)

Yes ☐ (if YES how often?) No ☐ (if NO why?)

Comments: _____

18. Are there any males employed (voluntarily or paid) at your place of work (i.e. social worker, health nurse, trade person)? (Please circle)

☐ Yes - Numbers : <5..... 5-15..... >15

☐ No (if NO why is this?)

Comments:

19. What types of things does your agency do to promote a father involvement? (i.e. posters, flyers, brochures, programs etc)?

20. Would you like to see fathers involved more or less in your service? (Please tick ✓)

☐ More ☐ Less ☐ Unsure

Comments:_____

21. Do you think that staff require specialist training to work effectively with fathers? (Please tick ✓)

☐ Yes ☐ No

Comments:_____

22. Has the service or agency ever considered any issues for working with fathers?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Comments:_____

23. Do you have any questions that in the future could be asked from workers about fathers?

Comments: _____

Thankyou for completing this questionnaire

The next step is for an interview via telephone or face-to-face as a follow-up to this initial questionnaire. Would you be available for a FOLLOW-UP face to face in-depth interview? **(Please tick ✓)**

☐ Yes (Name) Daytime contact _____

Contact
address _____

☐ No thanks

Please return or email this questionnaire marked “confidential” to:

**Mr Joe Fleming
PhD Candidate**

E-mail: _____

Appendix 5: Interview schedule

Interview Schedule

Name:

Occupation:

Organisation:

Type of Employment:

Age:

Date of Interview:

Q1. Can you please tell me first about your experiences about working with fathers?

Q2. From your experience, how do fathers who are not involved view your agency?

Q3. Can you please tell me about any experiences of fathers who are involved with your agency? (probe any thoughts, feelings)

Q4. Can you describe any thoughts or feelings about fathers in particular?

Q5. In the last three months, approximately how many fathers have you worked with?

Q6. In the last three months, approximately how many mothers have you worked with?

Q7. What do you find the most difficult or easy about working with fathers?

Q8. What do you find the easiest about working with fathers?

Q9. Can you give me a case example of a time where something worked well, not so well with fathers? (probe for what worked well, thoughts, feelings)

Q.10. Can you please tell me if any, what services are available specifically for fathers?

Q11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thankyou, Close

Appendix 6: Table 1: Types of child maltreatment prevention programs

Focus	Intervention level		
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Child	Personal safety programs	Assertiveness training for 'at risk' children	Therapeutic programs (e.g., group or individual therapy for abused children)
Parents/Family	Universal nurse home visiting programs	Parent education programs	Child protection service referrals (e.g., anger management programs)
Community	General media awareness campaigns	Targeted media campaigns in 'at risk' communities	Intensive community interventions (e.g., alcohol zero tolerance zones)

(Source Bromfield, L and Holzer, P (2008) 'A national approach for child protection Project report', *National Child Protection Clearinghouse*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p 54.)

Appendix 7: Table 2: Primary data – Surveys

Gender	N = 19
Male	8
Female	11
Occupation	N=19
Social Worker	8
Physiotherapist	1
Manager/Coordinator	4
Occupational Therapist	1
Community Health Nurse	1
Youth and Family Worker	4
Location	N=19
Western Australia	15
Victoria	4
Agency Type	N=19
Government Hospital/Health Service	9
Non-Government Hospital/Health Service	2
Non-Government Family Welfare	8

Appendix 8: Table 3: Primary data – Interviews

No.	Name	Age	Occupation	Years of Experience	Qualification	Agency	Suburb/town
1	Gary	45	Senior Social Worker	15	Bachelor of Social Work	Public Hospital	Subiaco, WA
2	Peter	47	Senior Physiotherapist	11	Bachelor of Social Science (Physiotherapy)	Child Development Centre	Midland, WA
3	Alice	41	Social Worker	3	Bachelor of Social Work	Community Health	Northam, WA
4	Sonia	49	Community Health Nurse	13	Bachelor of Nursing	Community Health	Northam, WA
5	Bob	37	Senior Social Worker	5	Bachelor of Social Work	Child/Adolescent Community Health	Bentley, WA
6	Penny	44	Senior Occupational Therapist	4	Bachelor of Social Science (Occupational Therapy)	Child/Adolescent Community Health	Armadale, WA
7	Sue	51	Senior Social Worker	16	Bachelor of Social Work	Child/Adolescent Community Health	Midland, WA
8	Greg	39	Social Worker	12	Bachelor of Social Work	Public Hospital	Joondalup, WA
9	Debra	43	Social Worker/Manager	8	Bachelor of Social Work	Non-Profit Organisation	Perth, WA
10	John	42	Senior Social Worker	9	Bachelor of Social Work	Adult Mental Health	Middle Swan, WA

Appendix 9: List of data bases searched

Area	Data Base
Australian	APAIS AusStats Service AUSTROM FAMILY ATSIROM MultiSearch (Monash)
Subject Specific/International	PsycINFO ERIC Meditext Medline Ingenta Informit
Internet sites	AIFS ABS Monash University University of Cardiff (UK)

Appendix 10: Child Protection Systems in Australia

The following table provides the relevant departmental sites in each state and territory and the main legislation covering child protection in each jurisdiction:

NSW	<u>Department of Community Services and the Commission for Children and Young People</u>	<u>Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998</u>
VIC	<u>Department of Human Services</u> <u>Child Safety Commissioner</u>	<u>Children, Youth and Families Act 2005</u> <u>Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005</u>
Qld	<u>Department of Child Safety</u>	<u>Child Protection Act 1999</u>
WA	<u>Department for Child Protection</u>	<u>Children and Community Services Act 2004</u>
SA	<u>Department for Families and Communities</u>	<u>Children's Protection Act 1993</u> (as amended in 2006)
TAS	<u>Commissioner for Children</u>	<u>Children Young Persons and their Families Act 1997</u>
ACT	<u>Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services—Office for Children Youth and Family support</u>	<u>Children and Young People Act 2008</u>
NT	<u>Department of Health and Families</u>	<u>Care and Protection of Children Act 2007</u>

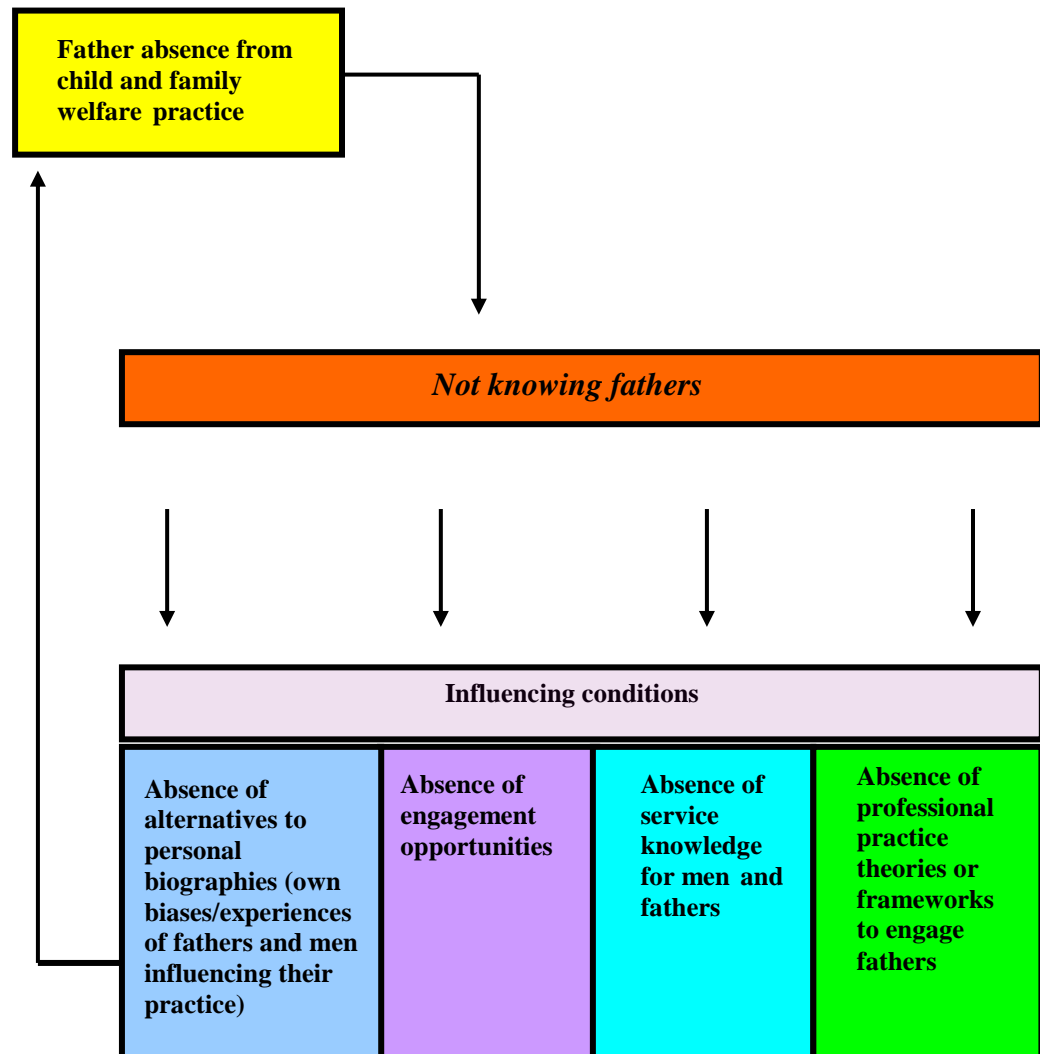
(Source Child abuse and protection in Australia Online only 18 March 2009
<http://www.aph.gov.au/Library/pubs/bn/2008-09/ChildAbuse.htm>)

Appendix 11: Figure 1: The Substantive Theory

Figure 1: The Substantive Theory

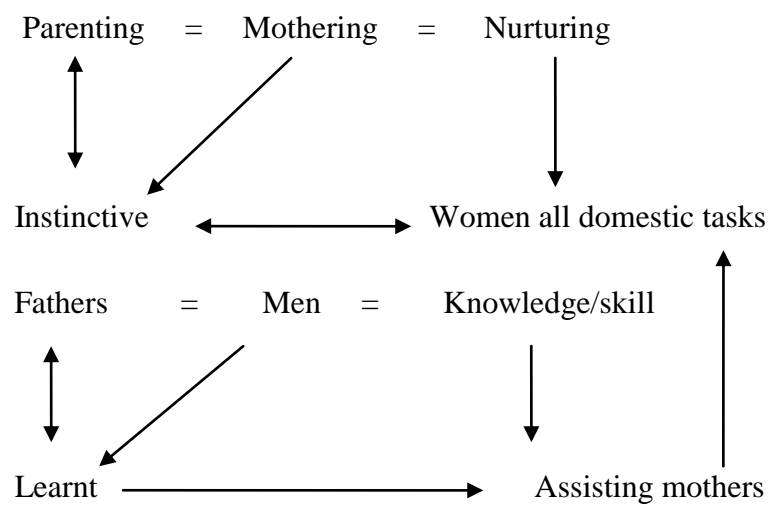
Core psychosocial problem: Father absence from child and family welfare practice

Basic psychosocial process (core category): *Not knowing fathers*



Appendix 12: Figure 2: Conceptual model of assumptions about fathers in child welfare practice

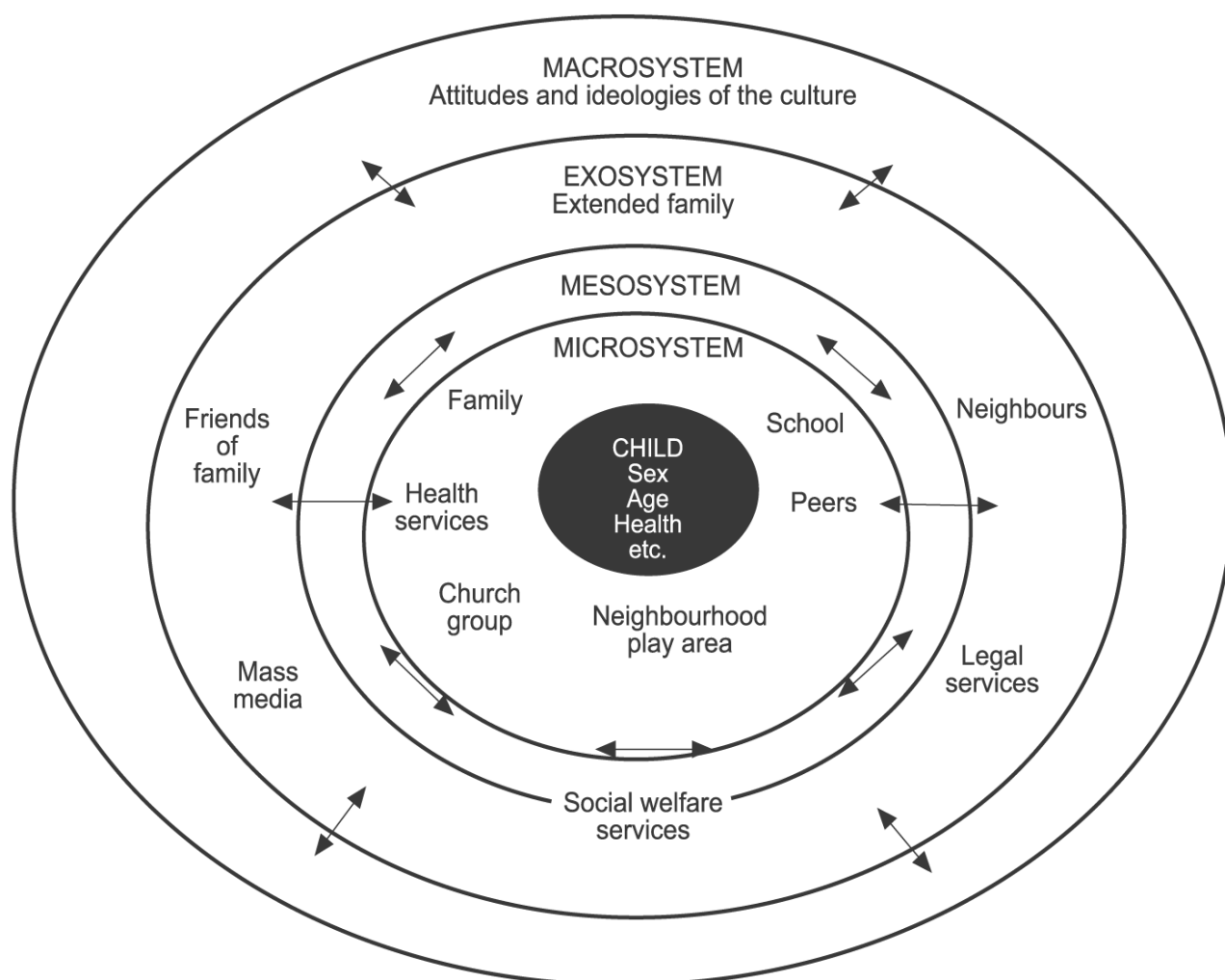
Chain of assumptions:



(Adapted from Daniel and Taylor 1999, p214)

Appendix 13: Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development

Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development



Source: Dockrell and Messer (1999, p. 139)

Appendix 14: Conference/Workshop publications

Fleming, J (2003) 'Where's Daddy? PowerPoint Presentation' at the 9th Australasian Child Abuse and Neglect Conference Many Voices Many Choices, 24-27 Nov. Sydney Convention Centre South, Darling Harbour, Sydney, Australia.
<http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/acan/postconf/presentations/2S2C-2.pdf>

Fleming, J (2004) 'Working with Fathers in Families: Beyond the Rhetoric', Paper submitted at the 5th National IFS Symposium, In Partnership with families: stepping off the roundabout 31st March to 2nd April 2004, Swiss Grand Hotel, Bondi Beach, Sydney.
http://www.mob.com.au/ifs2004/presentations/10.1_FLEMINGJoe_Fathers.doc

Fleming, J (2004) 'Fathers in Child Welfare and Child Development', Paper presented at the Society of Professional Social Workers (Inc) Inaugural Social Work Conference, Building Our Place, Relationships, Partnerships, Communities, 4th of May 2004, Wollaston Conference Centre, Mount Claremont.
<http://socprofsocwkr.highway1.com.au/pdfs/conference-04/04-conf-program.pdf>

Fleming, J (2006) 'The Absence of Fathers in Child and Family Welfare', 'Men's Advisory Network, 1st National Conference, 31st October 2006, Perth, WA
<http://www.promaco.com.au/conference/2006/man/manprogram.pdf>

Fleming, J (2007) "If we get the mums and kids in we are doing well": An Exploratory Study of Father Absence in Child and Family Welfare', Gender & Child Welfare Conference - 2nd Interdisciplinary Conference, University of York, Wednesday 19th September 2007.

Fleming, J (2008) 'Fathers, Workers and Welfare: A Compatible Mix?', 'Men's Advisory Network, 2ND National Conference, 6th August 2008, Perth, WA.
<http://www.promaco.com.au/2008/man/>

Fleming, J (2008) 'Fathers, Workers and Welfare: A Compatible Mix? Strength on Unity Conference, Luna Park, Sydney, 9th -12th November 2008.
http://www.iceaustralia.com/strengthinunity2008/pdf/SIU_Program_Draft.pdf

Fleming, J and King, A (2009) 'Engaging men in family based services', Workshop: Campbell Town, Tasmania, 5th March 2009, <http://www.groupworksolutions.com.au>

Fleming, J (2009) To Engage or Not to Engage: The Rhetoric and Reality of Working With Fathers in Child Protection and Family Welfare, 8th ISPCAN Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, incorporating the 12th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Perth, Western Australia, 15th to 18th November 2009.

Fleming, J (2010) The Generative Approach: Using the skills with men, Wesley Conference Centre, Sydney, NSW - Wednesday 18th August 2010 (DVD also available). <http://www.groupworksolutions.com.au>

