FATHERS AS CO-PARENTS:
HOW NON-RESIDENT FATHERS CONSTRUE FAMILY SITUATIONS AFTER DIVORCE OR SEPARATION

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ABSTRACT

Co-parenting is a legal and social construction whereby parents who have separated are expected to co-operate with each other to fulfil their parental responsibilities to their children. Fathers, usually the non-resident parent following separation, have been criticised as co-parents in terms of both their co-operation with the mother and the quality of time spent with children. However, their perspectives are little researched. A review of relevant literature suggests that non-residence is an important factor in contact maintenance, and supports the centrality of both father-child and father-mother relationship quality to the success of co-parenting. Fathers themselves may feel powerless, attribute conflict to other sources and attach greater significance to money. However, the predominance of quantitative methods in this field raises methodological concerns regarding demand characteristics and sampling. Qualitative methods can accommodate the influence of cultural beliefs about separated fathers, and allow them to report in their own terms. In particular, personal construct psychology permits a holistic and detailed examination of these fathers' experience and perspectives. A model of the co-parental role based on personal construct theory is described, with inter-parental conflict explained in terms of the constructivist concept of hostility. Four unstructured group interviews, on the theme of the experience of separated parenthood, were conducted with separated fathers (n=14) from throughout Strathclyde. Thematic analysis of the results suggests that while participants recognised the importance of maintaining relations with the other parent, that relationship was seen as adversarial, and fathers frequently feel controlled or powerless; different strategies for coping with this control emerged. From common post-separation parenting experiences recounted by the participants, situational elements were developed for a series of repertory grid interviews, intended to identify and examine the co-parental role construct system. Grids were administered, at three points over a year, to a cohort of separated, non-resident fathers from Strathclyde (n=17) still in contact with their children. The results were analysed using construct content categories developed for this research, inter-element distance measures, and asymmetric coefficients to assess ordinal relationships between constructs. Support was found for the model of a co-parental role covering interactions with children and their mothers. Perceptions of parity in parents' flexibility regarding contact arrangements were associated with recent experience, particularly ongoing disputes over contact allocation, and reflect strategies for dealing with being controlled. Conflict emerges as having distinct and multiple implications for separated non-resident fathers, whose responses to change were also consistent with the constructivist conception of hostility. One strategy for dealing with this may be a gradual distancing from the role of co-parent, in line with recent theories of core construing. These findings are discussed along with strengths and limitations of this research; implications for policy, practice and future research are outlined.

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This thesis is dedicated to the fathers who took part in the study, and their families

I, Graeme Barnetson Wilson, declare that this is an original thesis conducted under normal terms of supervision

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background - Fathers in Separated Families

In the last quarter of the last century, there were significant changes in the structure of family life in the UK, with which legislation has struggled to keep pace. In England and Wales, divorce rates have recently risen to their greatest number since 1996 (Carvel, 2003a), and the proportion of children living with cohabiting biological parents who are married to each other (a 'nuclear' family) has fallen to 59% (Carvel, 2003b). One consequence of this transformation has been the growing number of fathers who do not live with their children; where parents are separated, it is almost always the mother with whom the children stay. In recent years, this has prompted a burgeoning of interest in how, why or indeed whether these fathers should remain in contact with their children. This is most obvious in the growth in media coverage of the difficulties facing non-resident fathers or their children (McVeigh, 2001; Summers, 2001). There has also been a flourishing of groups intent on changing how these fathers are able to interact with their children, such as Fathers Direct, Families Need Fathers or Fathers 4 Justice (Hill, 2003).

In Scotland, recent research interest in separated fathers has been driven by developments in family legislation. The Children (Scotland) Act, which came into force in November 1996, brought Scots law in line with the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was also intended as a measure to deal with the concerns, held by many of those whose work encompassed children's welfare, which arose from a series of Reports and Inquiries into cases highlighting the vagaries of the existing laws pertaining to children (Cleland, 1995). The central aims of the act were a commitment to 'child-centredness', and the non-intervention of the courts wherever possible, in cases involving children. This constituted a sea-change in how children were viewed and dealt with in legal processes, which was broadly welcomed at the time and since. However, this has had significant ramifications for parents. Under the Law Reform (Parent and Child) (Scotland) Act 1986, parents had rights of "guardianship, custody, and access" (Norrie, 1995) which were not mediated by their children's rights. The new parental rights in Section 2 of the Children (Scotland) Act

exist "only to enable him [the parent] to fulfil his parental responsibilities in relation to his child" (Section 2.1). They exist, in other words, for the child rather than for the parent; and they are only granted to unmarried fathers if the father's name appears on the child's birth certificate by agreement between the parents.

For many non-resident fathers locked in disputes over having contact with their children following a separation, the idea that they themselves do not have a legal right to time with their children per se is difficult to grasp. Many of these issues are currently in debate as part of the White Paper on Parents and Children (Scottish Executive, 2003). A further aspect of this problem is the lack of dedicated service provision for non-resident separated fathers in Scotland. While services exist (or have existed) offering mediation, parenting education and lone parent support, these tend to be offered as a generic service to all separated parents and their uptake tends to be largely by mothers. Perhaps partly as a result of this, and partly due to the prevalence of strong cultural beliefs about parental roles and characteristics, there has, however, been negligible research in Scotland into the particular views of separated, non-resident fathers. While some statistical evidence of trends in fatherhood are available, the psychological processes of fathers themselves have been largely ignored. This mirrors a general tendency of research in the wider international context. The present thesis addresses this research need; the following sections describe the identification of issues and the approach taken.

1.2 Research issues

A recent study in Scotland, examining the impact and efficacy of an information service providing advice on children's issues to separated or separating parents, raised several concerns relating to the perceived behaviour of non-resident fathers following divorce or separation (Mayes, Gillies, MacDonald, & Wilson, 2000). These issues were categorised as: disengagement, co-parenting, quality of contact, and extent of service use. However, the nature of this study, which interviewed focus groups of children, legal professionals and parents attending the information service, qualified what conclusions could be drawn in relation to these issues, and a need for

further research was identified. These aspects of the previous study are discussed below.

1.2.1 Co-parenting

It was a widely expressed view amongst the participants that fathers' conduct as co-parents fell far short of the joint and co-operative involvement envisioned in the Children (Scotland) Act. This was identified as a problem by almost all the mothers and most solicitors interviewed. Reports were given of fathers not abiding by mutually agreed arrangements for looking after children, prioritising their own convenience over that of their ex-partner or children, or being unreasonable or intransigent in discussions and disputes over the children's upbringing. The data did not suggest, however, whether fathers and their solicitors hold the same views of mothers; the majority of service attendees interviewed were mothers. Nor could it be ascertained whether this behaviour was associated with fathers as men or as the non-resident parent; mothers are almost always resident parents after separation. Again, however, if this problem is widely perceived by mothers and the legal profession, it constitutes a problem for the welfare of separated families and the implementation of the Act.

1.2.2 Quality of contact

The children's expressed appreciation of contact with their fathers depended very much on whether they felt that time was oriented towards them. Many children in the previous study reported fathers drinking, being neglectful or distant, or behaving in such a way as to make them feel under pressure during their time together. Data, though, were not available to suggest how they spent time with other family members - mothers, grandparents etc.- nor was it established whether they held the same expectations of how time should be spent with each person. However, given that the Children (Scotland) Act grants rights of contact to divorced fathers only in order that they can fulfil their responsibilities to their children, this recurring theme was seen as having important implications.

1.2.3 Disengagement

While several children in the focus groups reported that they did not see their fathers any more, background data were not available on participants to confirm this situation; neither could the fathers' reasons for their absence be ascertained. It may be, for instance, that the fathers felt that the child's mother had kept them apart. Some of the fathers who were interviewed reported that they were prevented from maintaining contact. Also, it was not always clear for how long contact had ceased, or whether it was expected to resume. In terms of the Children (Scotland) Act, the absence of one separated parent from a child's life is not usually seen as being in that child's best interests. Both fathers and children in the study also expressed regret at this situation. Disengagement of fathers from their separated family was therefore regarded as a problem for investigation.

1.2.4 Service use

The number and profile of men attending the service being studied and the views of solicitors in the study suggested that separated fathers are less inclined to take up the opportunity of a service for separated parents. This effect may, of course, not be particular to the programme that was evaluated; other service organisations in this field may encounter similar recruitment problems. It may also be that those solicitors willing to be interviewed were not representative of all family law practitioners. Nevertheless, the frequent reiteration of the view that fathers needed to attend the programme most but were least likely to do so suggested that their perceptions should be examined in more depth. Developing parent services in order to target fathers would be a significant contribution towards tackling the other problems outlined.

1.3 The present study

This thesis was therefore commissioned by the Central Research Unit of the Scottish Executive, as part of a programme of research following up the implications of the Children (Scotland) Act, to add the voice of the father to those of children and

mothers in the previous study. While the issues for this research were to be those discussed in the previous section, disengagement was prioritised lower than the issues of co-parenting, quality of contact and service use. Apart from the difficulties involved in setting a period of no contact beyond which a father could be considered disengaged, there was already research under way into Children's Welfare Hearings that was expected to focus on separated families where contact arrangements had failed or gone drastically wrong. It was therefore intended that this work should focus on the experience of those fathers who were continuing to see their children - practising co-parents - to counter any possible research bias towards separated families with negative experiences of parental involvement.

This study therefore aims to:

- Gain access to the voice of the non-resident father in separated families in Scotland
- Contribute to separated family studies by developing understanding of fathers' experience
- Develop a theoretical and methodological approach to conceptualising the co-parental role for fathers
- Make recommendations for policy and practice

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will present the following stages of the study:

- Review of existing literature
- A theoretical model of the co-parental role for fathers based on Personal Construct Psychology
- Group interviews with non-resident separated fathers
- A longitudinal study with non-resident separated fathers using repertory grid interviewing
- General discussion, including implications for policy, practice and future research.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

A review is presented here of the existing literature relating to the research questions identified in the previous chapter. Ideas about the role of fathers in the separated family have changed over the last few decades; this development has informed and been informed by a wide range of studies in several disciplines. Following an outline of this history, six areas of research interest are examined, which have emerged more or less in sequence:

- the effects on children of parental separation;
- fathers' involvement with their children after separation;
- the relationship between non-resident father and child;
- the relationship between parents following separation;
- the views of fathers themselves on being a separated parent;
- typologies of separated families.

Finally, conclusions are drawn from the review to inform the present study.

2.1 Previous study of separated families

The nuclear family (wherein children are raised in one home by a married couple, usually with the father as economic provider and the mother as the children's economically inactive carer) has been suggested as a social construct, often deployed to meet political ends (Smart, 1997). Yet the UK government still views this model as "the best basis for raising children and for building strong and supportive communities" (Advisory Group on Marriage and Relationship Support, 2002). Given that child-rearing by *separated* parents is becoming established as a facet of the 'pattern of diversity' which characterises the contemporary family (Dallos & Sapsford, 1995), much research in the last couple of decades has sought to investigate the causes and consequences of increasing divorce rates in Western societies. Within family studies, a growing interest in the nature of fatherhood was precipitated by the widespread loss of fathers from families as a result of the Second World War

(Burghes, Clarke, & Cronin, 1997). However, the increasing dissolution of previous family structures since that time has led to a focus on the disruption of the father-child relationship through divorce and separation. Issues arising from this have a broad relevance, intersecting with many policy areas - law, social policy, psychology, health, education, economics etc. Research in the area is therefore highly diverse; nonetheless, this chapter seeks to identify broad themes in this literature.

Prevailing assumptions of what should replace the nuclear family format in the event of parental separation have been subject to change. Children of divorce were expected to reside with their fathers until developmental psychology in the early twentieth century began to see the mother-child relationship as centrally important in childhood, giving rise to the so-called "tender years" doctrine (McWhinney, 1995). Custody decisions came to reflect the view that children would fare better if this bond were allowed to flourish through continued residence with the mother, while the father detached himself and became free to build a new and separate family. Legislation enabling no-fault divorces (such as the Divorce Reform Act 1969 in England and Wales) was intended to support the institution of the family (Smart & Neale, 1999). The rationale for this, Smart & Neale argue, was that facilitating the swift departure of a non-resident parent (typically the father) allowed the child to be quickly resettled into a new home life with the resident parent, while the non-resident parent was freer to start a new family elsewhere. This 'clean break' would thus provide the basis for serial parenting based on social circumstances rather than biological ties. These perceptions of parents' roles are still prevalent as societal attitudes or discourses (Coleman, Ganong, Killian, & McDaniel, 1998; Trinder, Beek, & Connolly, 2002) but have been challenged as conforming to gender stereotypes of a nurturing domestic identity for women and one oriented towards career rather than children for men (Simpson, McCarthy, & Walker, 1996).

A new understanding began to take hold towards the end of the seventies. The break-up of many families was coming to be acknowledged as an inescapable feature of contemporary life (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987), intensifying debate over what the wider, social consequences of this change were, and whether children were indeed well served by the custody arrangements of the day. A pioneering study sought to 'illuminate the experience' of divorce by interviewing all members of a cohort of 60

families, focussing on the perspectives of children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). It was concluded that children suffered widespread, persistent anxieties and ill effects as a result of the divorce. The heavy demands of the (typically) custodial role on the mother were seen as contributing to this, and children were found to experience failing or non-existent visitation from the non-resident parent negatively as the 'loss' of a central relationship. (Wallerstein, 1984; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975). The emergence of this shift to a child-oriented view was reflected in legal arguments that arrangements for child-rearing following a divorce or separation should first and foremost reflect the child's best interests, as expressed by the child. Many countries have now adopted legislation designed to maintain the Rights of the Child as prescribed by the UN Convention of 1989. Thus, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 removed the previous legal concept of parental rights to their child and replaced them with responsibilities to ensure the child's welfare (Cleland, 1995). Wallerstein's simultaneous assertion that parents' custodial and non-resident roles were part of the process whereby children were disadvantaged by divorce heralded a new opposition to the 'clean break' in custody decisions. If children's negative outcomes from divorce were a by-product of having to live with one parent and lose the other, it was now seen as the child's right to enjoy access to both parents after separation should they wish. In the United States, joint custody (whereby the child's residency alternates between parents who share important decisions) was now held by some authors as the best arrangement to defend this right. Beyond this specific legal formulation, a broad support emerged for both parents remaining involved in their child's life despite the child being resident with only one of them after separation. *Co-parenting* (Bohannan, 1971) requires that, while parents accept their spousal relationship has ended, they remain committed to involvement with each other on matters pertaining to their children and facilitate the child's access to the non-resident parent through regular contact. Thus the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 allocates equal responsibilities to both parents for their child's upbringing in the event of separation or divorce. While contact orders can be used to enforce time for the child with a non-resident parent, the 'no order' principle of minimum intervention by courts encourages parents to decide and maintain contact arrangements themselves. Only through a commitment to negotiation with each other could the nuclear family become 'bi-nuclear', capable of optimising children's adjustment (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987).

Yet a mixture of attitudes towards co-parenting prevails. In the vast majority of cases it is still the mother who becomes the resident parent following a divorce or separation. Debate on policy for divorced families therefore developed a strong concern with fathers, who, as the non-resident parents, were initially seen as reneging on their family commitments by losing touch or defaulting on child maintenance payments. Prescriptions for 'responsible fathering' began to be established (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1996). However, another school of thought emerged which cast mothers as 'gatekeepers' in the father-child relationship, and saw systematic support for serial parenting as being in opposition to most fathers' wish to continue as biological parents (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). In the last two decades a very active fathers' rights movement has emerged that enthusiastically champions the principle of co-parenting on the basis of equity between parents (Bertoia & Drakich, 1993). Groups like 'Families Need Fathers' in this country see this as an alternative to a perceived systematic bias against their involvement with their children under non-residency, one which they argue damages children and fathers (Gregory, 1999). Some writers, however, have countered that the promotion or enforcement of a non-resident father's family involvement can seriously compromise the mother's attempts to start anew, or indeed her safety, where there has been violence or coercion in their relationship (Smart & Neale, 1999). Smart and Neale point out that the discourse of child welfare is an 'empty vessel' that has been co-opted to serve different ideologies. Arguing that the ethic of co-parenting has emerged from psychology's focus on the individual, they suggest that separated families must be treated individually and holistically, rather than prioritising the needs of some of its members.

Much of the available research behind arguments over non-nuclear families has used quantitative measures based on survey data, which will be discussed first. In this corpus, a range of outcome measures has been investigated that reflects the ideological progression outlined above. Early assertions that divorce could be damaging to the lives of children in those families (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976) have led to a body of literature assessing how their characteristics or adjustment might be affected. As factors began to be identified, they came to be investigated as outcomes in themselves. Concern over 'bad dads' (Furstenberg, 1988) has fuelled examinations of the payment of child support and the extent of fathers' contact with children and

participation in child rearing. However, the alternative theory that children and fathers were being denied a meaningful place in each others' lives by the dynamics of current family structures has led to a focus on relationships within the family (the interaction and quality of those between father and children and between father and mother).

Numerous factors have been considered as predictors of these outcomes. One study (Arditti & Kelly, 1994) distinguished independent variables in their regression study as parental factors (aspects of the parent/child dyad), *interparental* factors (aspects of the mother/father dyad) or *macrosystem* factors (wider family, social or cultural circumstances). A later study categorised variables as *socio-demographic*, *attitudinal* or *situational*, the latter being characteristics of family functioning (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). While there is some overlap in these schemes, they indicate the areas of influence that have been examined to explain the effects described above.

2.2 Effects on children

Divorce and separation have been suggested as affecting children adversely (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Some differences between children from divorced and intact families have been observed in terms of educational achievement, economic or social problems (Kelly, 2000). In a Dutch national panel study, adolescents from single parent families were found to start forming relationships at an earlier age (Spruijt, 1995). Children's functioning, though, may be relatively unimpaired in the long term; an overview of research on this topic argues that they can exhibit greater resilience than children from intact families can (Emery, 1999). Evidence from developmental psychology instead implies problems in terms of emotional and psychological outcomes for children (Kelly, 2000; Lamb, 1999). A meta-analysis of 37 studies on children's outcomes indicated that adults who had experienced the divorce of their parents were significantly worse off on collated psychological, family and socio-economic indices (Amato & Keith, 1991). However, the effect sizes here were small and appeared to have dwindled to those levels through the 80s; the authors highlight the importance of examining mediating influences such as the education and occupational status of the parents.

A sense of 'loss' of the non-resident parent (typically the father) from a child's life has been identified; others have seen this as an important cause of distress and adverse behaviours (Emery, 1999; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). Custody arrangements, representing the physical extent of this loss, have been investigated as predictors of children's outcomes. However, one study comparing divorced families with joint and single custody, found that these arrangements affected the adjustment of parents attending an information intervention but not their children (Pearson & Thoennes, 1990); while another actually found joint legal custody to be associated with worse outcomes for children in their sample (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989). These studies, however, gathered data from parents rather than children. Such findings may reflect a partial view of children's outcomes; cultural expectations of children of divorce as victims make it likely that adult perceptions of children's maladjustment will be somewhat exaggerated (Amato, 1999). Also, custody arrangements reflect the intended allocation of contact rather than what the child may actually experience. Seltzer (1991) posits fathers' post-divorce involvement as comprising contact with children, economic support, and participation in child-rearing decisions, having found reports of all three to be consistently associated at various stages before and after divorce or separation in data from the US National Survey of Households and Families. King (1994) and King & Heard (1999) examined mothers' reports from two large US surveys for main or interactive effects of father involvement on children's behavioural outcomes. Involvement was measured in terms of visitation frequency and the payment of child support; the only significant association, however, was the effect of support payment on educational achievement. While this has ramifications in terms of the social exclusion of children living with one parent, it does not indicate the direct psychological impact of a 'loss'. Furthermore, parents from the same family have been shown to differ significantly in their reports of family events and characteristics (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Fogas, & et al., 1991; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) corrected for the problems of partial reporting among the 63 studies in their meta-analysis on non-resident parenting and children's psychological, social and academic problems, weighting independently reported data as of higher quality. Independent variables were coded into those corresponding to contact, economic support and 'parental support and control' with a fourth factor, the warmth of the father-child relationship. They too found that, while maintenance

payments were significantly correlated with children's academic achievements, there were no beneficial effects associated with the frequency of a non-resident father's visitation.

The amount of opportunity that children have to interact with their non-resident fathers, then, does not appear to affect how they cope. But contact with non-resident fathers was associated with beneficial outcomes for children where the father's parenting style was authoritative rather than permissive, and where the father-child relationship was reportedly characterised by 'feelings of closeness'. Like many writers, Amato & Gilbreth therefore find frequency of contact to be less important to children's well being than the quality of that contact (e.g. Burghes et al., 1997; Pruett & Pruett, 1998). Hoffman (1995) found that non-resident fathers who reported fewer problems for their child after a divorce were also likely to view their relationship with the child as good. Again, a self-selecting sample and gathering of fathers' self-reports create problems for these results. But, in a longitudinal survey of teenage lifestyles and health in the West of Scotland, data were gathered on family circumstances from a more representative sample of adolescents (Sweeting & West, 1995). A poor quality of parent-child relationship was found to be associated with low self-esteem, poor psychological wellbeing and a disadvantage in the labour market for these young people. More recently, a study of 476 children of divorced parents in England found that their own views of the closeness of their relationships with non-resident parents significantly predicted adjustment problems, even taking into account the parents' income, relational history and own family background (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001).

It has also been argued that the quality of the relationship between parents is potentially a more important predictor of children's outcomes than that of the father-child relationship, and that this will mediate the effects of other variables (King, 1994; Whiteside, 1998). The extent and nature of inter-parental communication, conflict and co-operation have been seen as influencing the ease with which children adjust to family break-up. Although King & Heard (1999) found no association between frequency of visitation and child adjustment, they showed that mothers who reported frequent contact as well as a dissatisfaction with it were significantly likelier to report problems for their children. Fathers who report a supportive parenting

relationship with their child's mother tend also to report few behavioural problems in their children (Hoffman, 1995). These findings, however, were for families that had been separated for a number of years, by which time levels of conflict in the inter-parental relationship might be reduced. Where levels of conflict are high, such as in the first few years of separation, outcomes for children are expected to be poor; Scottish teenagers' health and lifestyles, for example, are negatively associated with levels of parental conflict independently of family structure (Johnston et al., 1989; Sweeting & West, 1995).

Children, then, are widely seen as suffering in the wake of a divorce or separation. This has been attributed by many to the removal, *de facto* or otherwise, of the non-resident father from their lives. But there is little evidence to suggest that the more children see their father after the break-up, the better things will be for them. Where contact does take place, the nature of paternal involvement, the parent-child and inter-parental relationships have instead been identified as important factors in these effects (Lamb, 1999). A recent decade review of empirical research supports Emery's 'risk-resiliency' perspective, pointing out that statistics taken to indicate detrimental outcomes for young adults can only be *interpreted* as such (Kelly, 2000). The presence of conflict (rather than its intensity) may simply reflect family culture, and early relationships may represent a coping strategy that results in greater emotional resilience in later years. Furthermore, Kelly argues that long term negative outcomes associated with divorce could not be distinguished from those associated with adverse family conditions before the divorce. Empirical evidence from a more recent longitudinal study of outcomes reported by a large sample of schoolchildren corroborates this assertion (Sun, 2001).

Any effects on children's well-being arising from divorce, however, could be expected to be complex and multivariate (Sweeting & West, 1995). In another recent meta-analysis of divorced family studies, all of the variables discussed above (frequency and quality of contact, the nature of the father-child relationship and the co-operation and quality of relationship between parents) were found to have some direct or indirect association with children's psychological, social and cognitive outcomes through a systemic model (Whiteside & Becker, 2000). As these factors

have come to be widely recognised, other research has concerned itself with what in turn predicts them.

2.3 Involvement

The view of payment of maintenance and contact frequency as complementary aspects of a non-resident father's role has been influential (Arditti, 1991; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Stephen, Freedman, & Hess, 1993). Visitation and support payment have been found to be associated significantly (Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989). Reduced levels or discontinuation of maintenance payment have been found to be associated with the distance between parental homes, and are more likely if the parents were not married at the child's birth; joint legal custody has also been seen as associated with greater rates of payment (Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer, 1998b). But although data for the studies above were gathered from a large national survey (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988) the findings are largely based on mothers' responses and can not necessarily be considered independent. They were also cross-sectional, making it impossible to attribute causality. Other research, pointing to differentials in mothers' and fathers' reporting of divorced family characteristics, has gathered data from both resident and non-resident parents. Longitudinal studies of this nature have found that any relationship between child support payment and visitation rates could be attributed to unmeasured socio-demographic characteristics, and that child support compliance is predicted by the father's employment status and income and perceived control over parental activity (Braver et al., 1993; Veum, 1993). This may support the finding above regarding joint legal custody status, since it is associated with socio-economic status. Smyth, Sheehan & Fehlberg (2001a) also corroborate Seltzer's finding that maintenance payment is associated with visitation rates, using data from a large sample in Australia.

Fathers' commitment to staying in touch with their child has been the focus of a greater amount of research into involvement. This has been interpreted variously in terms of frequency and duration; a study could measure either how often a parent sees one or more children, or how long they spend in each other's company, or both. Measurement may be interval or ordinal. Some studies include measures of contact

by telephone and mail ('indirect' contact) as well (e.g. Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Stephen et al., 1993). A wide array of factors has been investigated. National differences in contact rates have also been pointed out in a recent comparative overview of separated fatherhood in the US and UK (Clarke, Cooksey, & Verropolou, 1998). Non-resident parents of both genders maintain contact at equivalent rates; however, while visitation rates are similar, mothers have recently been found to maintain greater levels of indirect contact when non-resident (Stewart, 1999a). Contact frequency is expected to diminish with time following a separation (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Stephens, 1996). Nonetheless, there is little evidence from longitudinal studies to separate such an association from cohort change; Bradshaw Stimson, Skinner & Williams (1999) point out that contact patterns can be expected to vary substantially over time, making it difficult to see trends as definitive. Also, even if contact becomes less frequent, the equivalent time may be re-scheduled into longer episodes (Seltzer, 1991). Income has been found to be associated with the frequency of both direct and indirect contact, but only in studies of resident mothers' reports (Seltzer, 1991; Stephen et al., 1993). Multivariate studies of contact in large samples of non-resident fathers, however, have been carried out in the US (with data from the *second* wave of the NSFH) and in the UK (Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams, 1999; Cooksey & Craig, 1998). These samples may have been subject to self-selection bias – fathers in the latter study, for example, reported unexpectedly high rates of contact and low rates of conflict, and 56% made visits to their children's resident home - but they do offer the fathers' perspective. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, Bradshaw, Stimson et al. found that contact was more likely to take place if the father was employed; while Cooksey and Craig found associations between the father's level of education and rates of contact. (They also found that contact was more likely to be indirect if a child was female, but that indirect contact was less likely if the father was a fundamentalist Protestant).

Situational characteristics arising in the wake of separation have also been seen as influential on contact patterns. Both Bradshaw, Stimson et al. and Cooksey & Craig find that rates of contact participation suffer with the arrival of new children in a non-resident father's life, and support Stephens' (1996) finding that cohabitation with a new partner reduces the likelihood of (even indirect) contact. Cooksey and Craig

(1998) also find that fathers whose new partner also has non-resident children are less likely to maintain contact . However, a study using the same data source but adopting a longitudinal model, found visitation frequency related to the *number (*rather than simply the *existence)* of new children, but not to new relationships per se (Manning & Smock, 1999). These data were self-reported by fathers, though, who may have been self-selecting and may not have wished to describe their new relationship as interfering with their separated parental role.

Custody arrangements have also been examined as a factor in contact. The likelihood of visitation increases with the number of non-resident children at the mother's house (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). The existence of legally determined custody arrangements is perhaps justifiably expected to affect the occurrence of contact. Both mothers and fathers with joint custody report a greater rate of visitation (Arditti, 1992; Braver et al., 1993; Seltzer, 1998a; Stephen et al., 1993). However, an empirical study comparing custody arrangements in 64 separated and divorced families which took the couple as the unit of analysis (rather than one or other parent) found no effect on visitation rates (Ehrenberg, 1996). It was suggested that joint custody may be a proxy for other, parental characteristics. The other situational factor identified by Furstenberg, Nord et al. (1983) is the distance between parental residences. Living at a distance from the child has been widely shown to be deleterious to visitation frequency (Arditti & Bickley, 1996; Braver et al., 1993; Seltzer, 1991; Smyth et al., 2001a). Yet this cannot simply be attributed to logistical problems; a decrease in residential propinquity is also associated with a reduction in indirect contact by phone or mail (Cooksey & Craig, 1998).

The nature of the inter-parental relationship has been widely studied following early observations that the involvement of both parents was associated with interaction or discussion on child rearing (Ahrons, 1981; Seltzer, 1991). In a longitudinal study of 64 pairs of former spouses, Ahrons found a positive association between her measure of the Quality of Co-parental Communication (items assessing levels of conflict and co-operation between parents) and levels of paternal involvement (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). In Ehrenberg's (1996) study discussed above, the level of agreement between former spouses also emerged as the significant predictor of contact continuance. More particularly, it has been found that ongoing, regular contact is associated with

low levels of conflict in this relationship, although 'conflict' may be subject to interpretation (Smyth, Sheehan, & Fehlberg, 2001b).

A high quality of the father-child relationship before divorce or separation has also been proposed (somewhat counter-intuitively) as being *positively* associated with disengagement. In a cross-cultural study of eighty divorced fathers, those who reported strong relations with a child before separation were more likely to lose all contact in the wake of a divorce (Kruk, 1992b). This was attributed to a combination of the constraints of the legal process, and the strain and distress caused by adjusting to their new status. It was theorised that fathers who had been more devoted to their children before separation suffered greater distress at having the relationship curtailed and were more likely to disengage to assuage this, while less devoted fathers would find it easier to adjust to limited contact. However, a subsequent empirical test of this claim found more support for the view that a close prior relationship predicts the *continuation* of paternal involvement (Lewis, Maka, & Papacosta, 1997). Little further research, though, has been done on the effect of this relationship on the probability of contact.

Finally, some attitudinal factors may have an effect through mediating variables (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). Living at a distance, a predictor of reduced contact rates, was associated with a low interest in contact. Espousing a traditional view of gendered parental roles, however, was associated with the continuation of contact. The authors suggest that those holding such views will be less likely to live with a new partner (another contact inhibitor). Yet it may also be that a more harmonious basis for co-parenting exists if the father accepts the idea of a mother as the natural primary carer (cf. Trinder et al., 2002). Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley & Buehler's (1995) attitudinal model of the post-divorce paternal role has disengagement as an outcome of decreased salience of the paternal identity. Thus, the loss of daily interaction with his child may reduce the importance of the 'father' role relative to the others a divorced man may be operating. A recent empirical test found support for this model and for the influence of satisfaction with legal experience on paternal involvement (Stone & McKenry, 1998). However, the sample used was unrepresentative and subject to a number of biasing factors. For instance, respondents were recruited through a court-mandated parent education seminar and therefore involved in legal

proceedings; having just completed the programme, their attitudes should have been recently influenced.

Research has tended to focus on the nature and extent of fathers' involvement with their children after divorce. In trying to predict behavioural outcomes for fathers, conventionally held views about the reasons for the loss or damage of parent-child relationships have been undermined. Traditionally seen as a consequence of men's innate lack of interest in child-rearing or limited engagement with their children, poor contact has been found by many authors to be attributable to a range of other factors and actually a source of distress to many disengaged fathers (Stone, 2001). However, these factors are far from universally agreed, and it is worth noting that most of this research has emerged from the USA. A retrospective study in the UK, on the other hand, found no characteristics of the initial divorce process that predicted rates of contact in later years (Simpson et al., 1996). Also, Burghes et al (1997) make the point that the level of involvement of separated fathers with their children can be higher than that of many within a nuclear family. Whether child-centred or investigating the distress of parents, most research is now aimed at illuminating the exclusion of fathers so that it can be redressed.

2.4 The relationship between non-resident father and child

Research that examines the role of the father after divorce from an empirical perspective implies a set of objective standards by which fathers can be assessed on their 'performance' after divorce. Whether such work adopts a negative ('what predicts poor fathering?') or positive ('what predicts good fathering?') approach, it still tends to view fathers as a separate entities. More recent work has therefore moved towards examining the relationships which fathers have with other family members (Burghes et al., 1997; Pruett & Pruett, 1998). Fathers are situated within a dynamic network of interrelated involvements with the rest of their family that have been altered to various extents by divorce or separation, a transformed 'family culture' (Woollett, 1999). Given Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) finding that the character of the relationship between non-resident father and child is the strongest predictor of the child's well-being, some research has been conducted on what may predict its quality.

Pruett & Pruett (1998) suggest that insufficient trust in the relationship will lead each to over-scrutinise the other's actions, leading to misinterpretation. The nature of the pre-separation father-child relationship has also been considered as a predictor of the nature of the contact relationship, though contradictory views emerge. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found little association in the families they studied between father-child closeness before and after divorce. A quarter of fathers in their study became closer to their children after a divorce, while a similar proportion actually grew more distant following the family break-up. Kruk's (1992) findings suggest the opposite, that those fathers with poor relationships with their children before separation will have a stronger relationship afterwards. Methodological limitations apply to measures in these studies, however, given their use of small sample sizes, self-report, self-selection and qualitative interviewing.

Aspects of the relationship between separated parents have also been seen as affecting the relationship between father and child. Measuring the relational dimension of *cohesion* (emotional 'connectedness') through questionnaire responses (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979), one study found that levels of this characteristic in the father-child relationship were significantly predicted by the quality of the co-parental relationship (Esposito, 1995). Again, however, the sample was not representative and may have been subject to self-selection bias. However, a recent study using a large sample of fathers from the NSFH indicates that the child's residence is a factor. The detrimental effects of divorce on fathers' perceptions of their relationships with their children were significantly worse for non-resident fathers than those with residency, controlling for socio-demographic factors (Shapiro & Lambert, 1999). Finally, Stone & McKenry (1998) report an indirect effect of joint custody on levels of involvement through their degree of identification with the father parenting role, suggesting that custody arrangements may have some effect on how fathers perceive their relationship to their child. Participation in a parent education programme has also been found to enhance separated parents' perceptions of their relationships with children over a four-year period (McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999).

Most of these studies nonetheless measure fathers' perceptions of relationship quality rather than gathering independent assessments or the child's view. But they do represent empirical attempts to investigate determinants of the nature of the post-

divorce relationship between father and child, an under-researched area. Mediation and information services are increasingly recommended as a means of bringing fathers back into involvement with their children, and reducing the impact of separation on the welfare of all members of the family (Kruk, 1992a; Salem, Schepard, & Schlissel, 1996).

2.5 The inter-parental relationship

The co-parental axis has come to be one of the most investigated aspects of the separated family. In their endorsement of co-parenting, Ahrons & Rogers (1987) stress the importance of both the extent to which parents interact and communicate in child rearing and the qualities of conflict and co-operation in this relationship. As one of the elements of the parental role discussed previously, participation in child-rearing decisions was found to be associated with marital status at the child's birth and distance between parental homes (Seltzer, 1991). A survey of a large sample of mothers and fathers three years after divorce showed that remarriage for either parent was associated with a reduction in the frequency of co-parental interaction (Christensen & Rettig, 1995). Mothers' reports both of fathers' income and that of their own household have been found in these studies to correlate with their reports of co-parenting taking place (Seltzer, 1991; Christensen & Rettig, 1995). Testing a resource exchange model on a sample of 212 separated fathers, (Rettig, Leichtentritt, & Stanton, 1999) also found that those who reported better economic well-being were likely to report more co-operative communication while co-parenting. However, examining non-resident fathers' reports on semantic differentials, Seltzer & Brandreth (1995) found that co-parenting was more likely to be *perceived* as manageable if neither parent had a high level of education, and if split residency was the arrangement (whereby each parent has residency of one or more children). These seemingly contradictory findings may be a reflection of different attitudinal components; the former measures inter-parental *behaviour* experienced, while the latter measures a *belief* about co-parenting. It may be that more educated parents have greater reservations about co-parenting as an idea but have more resources or skills with which to cope, and therefore have a better experience of it.

Madden-Derdich & Leonard (2000) found that the amount of co-parental interaction reported by the 70 non-resident fathers in their study was significantly predicted in a hierarchical regression by how supportive they found their child's other parent to be and by how they rated their performance as parents. An interaction was also found between this latter variable and custody status, such that fathers with joint custody who were satisfied with their parenting performance were more frequent co-parental participators, while in families with sole (mother) custody, fathers who were satisfied with their own parenting reported less parental communication. Pearson & Thoennes's (1990) reanalysis of data from parents in mediation projects likewise found that joint custody arrangements (where residency passes from one parent to the other on a regular basis) led parents to report greater co-operation with their child's other parent.

The extent of interaction between separated parents has not been the subject of as much consideration as its quality, however. A widely used measure of the Quality of Co-Parental Communication has been designed consisting of ten items, six assessing levels of mutual support and four assessing levels of inter-parental conflict (Ahrons, 1981). In Ahrons' study of 54 former couples with children, reports of this quality were found to be significantly associated with the frequency of interaction and whether parental issues were discussed. Thus parents who communicated often and consulted each other on major decisions for their children perceived their relationship as more supportive and less characterised by conflict. Ahrons & Rogers (1987) situate this understanding of the co-parental relationship within a systemic perspective, in which characteristics or perspectives of any member within the family system will have consequences for the rest. Arditti & Kelly (1994) examined the effect of ten variables (classified as *macrosystem*, *parental* or *inter-parental*) on Ahrons' (1981) measure in data from a large sample of fathers recruited through court records. Although this assessed only one point of view on the relationship, they argue that a systemic approach implies that anything that affects fathers will have a knock-on effect on the inter-parental relationship and hence the separated family. A study that provides a useful comparison is that reported by Ehrenberg (1996). Questionnaires were administered to both parents in 32 ex-couples, assigning each ex-couple to one of two groups of 16 according to whether they 'agreed' or 'disagreed' in their parental interaction. This was assessed upon recruitment and corroborated

across couples to ensure that the categorisation did not reflect the view of one parent only; the groups were found to be well matched on demographic characteristics. Thus, although the sample size is considerably smaller than many of the studies discussed above, the problems of different responses from each parent are avoided.

Significant macrosystem factors in Arditti & Kelly's (1994) multiple regression analysis were the number of children, educational levels and satisfaction with the legal settlement of property from the marriage; no significant effect of joint custody arrangements was found. The finding that a higher level of education was associated with a positive rating of the relationship is in contrast to that of Seltzer & Brandreth (1995) above, whereby co-parenting was seen as more manageable if neither parent was highly educated. Fathers in that sample also perceived their relationship with their child's other parent more positively the fewer children they had, and the happier they were with how property had been divided up. Yet Ehrenberg (1996) found that 'agreed' couples in her sample tended to have *more* children, proposing that fewer children were more likely to provoke parental competition, and that parents from larger families would have greater parental experience (their relationships were also longer). Furthermore, although mothers in her sample always had the children for more time, the disparity between allocations of custody times for mothers and fathers was greater among 'disagreed' couples, while the co-operating parents showed more variance in their custody arrangements. These contrasting findings may reflect the different outcome measures used. There might also have been cultural differences between Arditti & Kelly's American sample and the Canadian couples interviewed by Ehrenberg. However, the difference in data sources, with the latter studies having gathered responses from both mothers and fathers, may be of most consequence. In a subsequent study of 212 divorced mothers, Arditti & Bickley (1996) did find a significant relationship between custody arrangements and the reported quality of the co-parental relationship. Custody arrangements may therefore be more salient to mothers' experience of that relationship than to fathers'.

However, attitudes towards custody, rather than the arrangements themselves, do appear significant. Fathers who are better satisfied with custody arrangements report inter-parental relationships of significantly higher quality (Arditti & Kelly, 1994). Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Christopher (1999) also find that both mothers' and

fathers' perceived satisfaction with custody arrangements during the first year after a divorce are significantly associated with their scores on the subset of conflict items from Ahrons' (1981) index. Their separate use of the conflict items reflects a view that inter-parental conflict is a distinct quantity from inter-parental support (Fishel & Scanzoni, 1989; Madden Derdich & Arditti, 1999); they may also have different effects for each parent. Mothers' reports of conflict have been found to predict their perceptions of co-parental relationship quality (Arditti & Bickley, 1996; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999), while recently divorced fathers' involvement in inter-parental interaction predicts Ahrons' (1981) support items, but *not* those for conflict (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000).

Satisfaction with other aspects of separated family life has also been tested as a factor in co-parental relationship quality. Ehrenberg's 'co-operating' ex-couples (1996) were significantly more satisfied with their work situation, housing and relationships with new partners. Another study, gathering questionnaire data over three years from 93 former couples, found that resident parents who experienced more problems with visitation tended to be angry or hurt about the divorce, and had greater concerns about their former partner's parenting abilities (Wolchik, Fenaughty, & Braver, 1996). Fathers' attribution of blame for the divorce is associated with their perceptions of inter-parental relationship quality (Arditti & Kelly, 1994) while, perhaps unsurprisingly, the level of hostility in the divorce process is a strong predictor of the inter-parental relationship quality for mothers (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Christopher's (1999) test of a family systems model (Emery, 1994) also showed that levels of conflict between parents were associated with their 'boundary ambiguity', the extent to which parents still saw themselves as spouses rather than as separated parents. Failure in one or both to adapt to the new role led to frustration when implementing a co-parenting strategy. The intrapersonal variables that were associated with boundary ambiguity were however shown to have different effects for mothers and fathers. Intensity of feelings about the other parent, financial security and satisfaction with their own performance as a parent were shown to be influential for mothers, but only the first of these for fathers. However, attachment between parents is also suggested as an outcome of shared parenting, predicted in divorced mothers' reports by co-parental relationship quality and the length of the marriage (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999).

The quality of the co-parental relationship is then determined by many interpersonal factors. It has also been found to reflect what parents interact about. Fathers who discuss a wide range of topics with the mother report significantly better relationship quality (Arditti & Kelly 1994). Fathers' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with children before separation are also significant, though not as might be expected; those who felt close to their children while married tend to view their co-parental relationship more positively (ibid.). The authors suggest that this may be a causal relationship, with involvement with the child benefiting or motivating subsequent interaction with the mother, or may be an association reflecting the father's characteristic relationship skills. Yet change in closeness after the divorce was not related to how the father felt about the relationship between parents. It may be that fathers who viewed pre-divorce relationships positively were less inclined to perceive divisions in the family after divorce. Ehrenberg, Hunter & Elterman (1996) also looked for factors behind inter-parental conflict within shared parenting agreements by testing a systems model of parenting attitudes in the same study as Ehrenberg (1996) above. The study found that couples who viewed themselves as 'agreed' held more child-oriented parenting attitudes. Although social desirability may have influenced some responses to questionnaire items, this supports Arditti & Kelly's (1994) association between a perceived close relationship to the child and co-operation among parents.

Finally, a number of situational variables and personal characteristics have been considered in relation to co-parental relationship quality. Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999) found that a good co-parental relationship was most likely to be reported by British fathers living close to mother and child, and by those who lived on their own (rather than those living with a new partner). This latter reflects Christensen & Rettig's (1995) finding in the USA that remarried parents report less support from their ex-spouse and a more negative disposition towards them. Rettig et al. (1999) report that non-resident fathers' social-psychological well being was significantly associated with the frequency of conflict in the inter-parental relationship. Ehrenberg, Hunter & Elterman (1996) also found that co-parenting couples who had both described themselves as fulfilling the criteria for co-parenting were less likely to have narcissistic personalities or report interpersonal vulnerability.

2.6 Voice of the father

The studies discussed so far frequently proceed quantitatively from the researchers' interpretations of what relationships exist and why; they have all sought objective verification of the influence of various factors on non-residential fatherhood. However, many authors, particularly in the United Kingdom, have complemented this approach with the subjective evidence of fathers' own accounts. The reasons given by fathers themselves for their behaviour as co-parents may not represent an external reality of family circumstances, but can go a long way towards explaining the situation. Gaining access to the voice of the father in separated families has been identified as a key objective for this research, and previous work in this area is therefore highly pertinent.

A qualitative study of 30 divorced families in Oxfordshire was among the first to invite fathers, 27 of whom were non-resident, to identify what was salient for them in their experience (Lund, 1987). All had initially experienced intense loss of their child at the separation; contact was therefore the most important issue and all expressed a desire for more extensive contact. However, it was generally felt that the existing provision was right for the children, who had initially been upset at visiting their fathers. They described a process of learning to be a non-residential parent and estranged partner. For instance, some felt inhibited from disciplining their children by the fragility of contact arrangements, though it was widely attested that children were so desirous of contact that discipline was never necessary. Clear agreements were necessary for contact to work. Problems they identified in maintaining involvement included the resident mother's opposition and anger, and the regular stress of parting at the end of contact episodes. For some, residual guilt was a problem, and many were uncomfortable with the intensity of their feelings; in such cases, a clean break, with the father 'sacrificing' his connection to his children, was seen as favourable and ultimately beneficial to their emotional welfare. Five of the fathers here had in fact ceased contact with their children. Kruk (1992), examining this phenomenon through in-depth interviews with a cross-cultural sample of 80 fathers, also found a strong desire for custody ('residence' in current legal

terminology) and symptoms of grief for the 'loss' of their children. He noted the perceived intrusive effects of solicitors' involvement as well.

Two studies in the US have focussed on the causes of stress identified by non-resident fathers in the early years of divorce (Arditti & Allen, 1993; Umberson & Williams, 1993). For fathers in both studies, the quality of the co-parental relationship was tied up with recriminations for the separation. The respondents perceived themselves as lacking control, particularly over the visitation schedule, and felt that their ex-partners actively withheld or obstructed access as a retaliatory measure. The common themes in these two studies may in part reflect the similar profiles of respondents - typically white, in their late thirties and relatively affluent. But while Umberson & Williams' respondents voiced uninstantiated concerns that their former partners spent maintenance money on themselves, these fathers tended to describe the mother as a good parent for their child; it was felt that she encouraged contact, albeit in her own interests. Arditti and Allen's interviewees, meanwhile, were disillusioned and saw themselves as widely disadvantaged in the parental relationship and in the legal arena; lawyers were seen as being too powerful and motivated by money, while their ex-wives were able to manipulate the courts. The 87 respondents in the latter study were those among a larger survey sample who chose to respond to open-ended questions. Self-selection may therefore have resulted in a more embittered group than the 45 interviewed by Umberson and Williams, recruited from court records and through snowballing. However, a more recent study also highlighted frustration at the perceived inequality of the mother's co-parental control among the views of fathers who had taken part in a court-mandated parent education programme (Stone, Clark, & McKenry, 2000). Although there were indications that these fathers had learned and applied programme concepts such as the need to separate children from inter-parental issues, and might therefore be expected to have less adversarial views than average, they still saw the intractability of the child's mother parent as the fundamental problem.

Some of these issues have also been found important to fathers in other countries. Interviews with 48 separated fathers in Australia also produced emergent themes of the mother's interference and exclusion from important decisions (Nicholls & Pike, 2002). The two studies of British non-resident, separated fathers mentioned

previously drew on both quantitative and qualitative data. One gathered open-ended questionnaire responses from both parents in a large sample of separated couples and subsequent interview data from 20 fathers (Simpson et al., 1995); the other conducted in-depth interviews with two cohorts of 18 fathers (Bradshaw et al., 1999). Both studies identified themes of conflict as blamed on the other parent (this was reciprocal in the responses gathered independently from couples), a sense of loss, and feeling controlled and powerless to discipline or make decisions about their children. The former authors, however, point out that the mother's control over the children's realm may only be *perceived* as a result of the separation, and may have been implicit and unproblematic during the intact relationship. Some of the difficulties of being a non-resident father were attributed to uncertainty about what this role should constitute. Simpson, McCarthy & Walker's respondents described a sense of unfamiliarity at separation with an identity for which nothing had prepared them, and for which there were no clear cultural exemplars. Loss of routine in their lives was also important; their distance from the 'fine grain interaction' of family life left them with a disjointed experience of their child's development. Bradshaw, Stimson et al. also highlight role uncertainty; but, writing somewhat later, identified in their younger participants more assurance with what being a resident father should entail (and therefore a greater dissatisfaction with impediments to this role). While they attempted to lead a normal life with their children rather than just 'doing things' during contact, they felt their own lives were on hold, and found it difficult to adjust to adjust to the immediacy of children's needs during short bursts of contact.

Simpson, McCarthy & Walker (1995) further found that, while co-parental conflict was still prevalent, fathers' accounts could be characterised either by resignation or resentment, which seems to echo the differences between the findings of the two US studies above (Umberson & Williams 1993; Arditti & Allen, 1993). The loss of intimacy with children was keenly felt, and being available to children should any need arise was consistently seen as a *raison d'être* for these fathers. Distinct problems were identified for different groups of respondents. The larger sample included fathers with no contact with their children; the authors found them more likely to suffer from problems relating to family relationships, such as bitterness. Those fathers who saw their children regularly, on the other hand, gave more reports of personal problems (e.g. loneliness, alcohol dependency) and difficulties with new

relationships, while those who did not communicate with the mother were most likely to feel a sense of personal failure. Housing was also found to be a major problem for those with contact; there was little external recognition of father's need to provide a home environment for visiting children. Also, Simpson, McCarthy & Walker found the non-resident fathers they interviewed to be unexpectedly positive on various aspects of their experience. Through being a separated parent, some fathers felt they had got to know their children better and had developed a unique relationship characterised by friendship rather than distant authority. They were aware of a heightened focus on a more valued parental role, and felt they had improved themselves to some extent. Even the influence of a mother's new partner was viewed by some as positive, providing a 'crucial role model for the children' which had to be supported rather than antagonised (Simpson et a., 1995, p. 67).

The data gathered by Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999) also covered relationships within separated families. They found in some cases a pivotal role for the father's own mother in the post-divorce family, both in her influence on and support of him as a parent, and through more direct involvement with the children and their mother. The men they interviewed tended to measure their performance as parents against that of their ex-partner. New partners for the children's mothers were seen as a problem here; where fathers had a new relationship, though, this was not viewed as creating any difficulties. Like the issue of blame, this outlook can probably be assumed to be exactly counter to the views of mothers; it perhaps suggests, however, an inability on these fathers' part to apprehend her viewpoint. This study, conducted after the implementation of the Child Support Agency, focussed more on financial matters, which emerged as a significant issue for fathers. Where the Agency had been invoked, maintenance payments became a source of bitter recriminations. Some fathers in the sample paid child support willingly, seeing it as an unquestionable need of their children. These fathers tended to enjoy frequent contact, and their previous relationship with the mother had been relatively amicable. But others, who struggled to see their children and had experienced a hostile relationship with their ex-partner, withheld child support payments in retaliation. The authors explore in some depth the frequent occurrence in relation to this topic of 'atrocity stories' (instances of the mother's financial malfeasance whose telling is characterised by vilification). While none of these fathers objected to the principle of paying for their children, they felt

they could not guarantee where the money was going or that the child would be aware of the source of the money that maintained them. Highlighting the importance of the role of economic provider to fathers within intact families, the authors suggest that acknowledgement of such contributions is of central importance to what some separated fathers view as a diminished or uncertain parental identity. However, they point out that none of these respondents substituted provision in kind for financial support; having withheld the money, they did not use it themselves to buy things for the children. Uncertainty over how maintenance money is dealt with, as expressed in the 'atrocity stories', may therefore just be used as a justification for bargaining economic support for time with the children. Finally, fathers were also frequently bitter about their experiences in the legal system (cf. Arditti & Allen, 1993, above).

By analysing fathers' own interpretation of their situation, qualitative researchers provide a picture of what is experienced, rather than what is observed. Thus, Lund's (1987) and Kruk's (1992) findings that many fathers see the cessation of contact as a sacrifice in the best interests of their family contradicts assumptions that these fathers were uninterested in their children. The more recent studies of Simpson, McCarthy & Walker (1995) and Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999) have also identified some distinct strategies or characteristics of successfully co-parenting fathers as a basis for recommendations. Both stress the importance of fathers' commitment or ability to adapt to ongoing family change, which is more extreme following a divorce or separation, and an acknowledgement or acceptance of the mother's needs and dominant role through residency. Negotiation is seen as a key process in the continuance of contact. While the earlier study purposely addresses the positive aspects of being a non-resident father and emphasises their desire for contact (Simpson et al., 1995), the latter study expresses some reservations about how fathers bring this perspéctive to bear within the separated family. Examining the withholding of payments as a tactic, Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999) remind us that some fathers' willingness to pay was viewed as a contract with their child, while the unwilling payers perceived maintenance as a contract with the mother. Contact was therefore seen, albeit in a small sample, to work best in families where the father expressed a child-centred outlook.

Qualitative approaches, then, have been used as a means of illuminating fathers' experience of divorce or separation rather than examining their behaviour. Broadly speaking, much of this work examines problems for fathers rather than problems with fathers. It reveals the practical and psychological difficulties facing non-resident fathers in surviving separation and maintaining child contact: travel and accommodation difficulties, economic worries, adjusting to the loss of their partner and home, coping with the perceived intransigence of their ex-partner and building new relationships with their children. However, Simpson et al.'s (1995) examination of qualitative data from mothers in the questionnaires in their earlier study allowed the comparison of accounts given by both halves of former couples, and revealed the very different interpretations put on their situations.

2.7 Separated families - typologies

Parenting styles have been suggested in developmental psychology to explain different family outcomes (eg Baumrind's three classifications of authoritative, authoritarian and permissive, in Woollett, 1999). Similarly, different models of the co-parental relationship have been used to distinguish family circumstances after separation among the studies discussed previously. Ehrenberg (1996) categorised couples who maintained contact as 'agreed' or 'disagreed', while Kruk (1992) distinguished fathers who had 'disengaged', or cut themselves off from their family. Lund (1987) unites these in a typology of: Harmonious Co-Parents, who co-operate relatively amicably to maintain a contact relationship between children and non-resident parent; Conflicted Co-Parents, whose contact arrangements take place against a background of parental hostility and intractability; and Single Parent families, where the father had no contact or next to none. Families where children had been harmed were excluded from this system. Harmonious fathers were more involved: they received information on their children from the mothers and complied with maintenance payments. Conflicted fathers, on the other hand, received information via their children or others; the only issue they discussed with the mother was money. They tended to be litigiously inclined. Overall, the approach taken to contact by fathers was seen as affecting the parental relationship. Simpson, McCarthy & Walker (1995), investigating fathers, termed the first and last of Lund's

categories as 'communicative' and 'no contact', but had a third category of 'parallel parenting', where fathers participate in child rearing while remaining hostile towards, and detached from, their ex-partner. Unlike the communicative parenting of fathers who engaged their whole family in their role, the children in this group were exchanged without interaction between their parents. These fathers reported the most stress in maintaining relationships. And Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999), investigating only fathers with contact, make a finer distinction between those Harmonious Co-Parents whose co-relationship had always been harmonious since separation and those who had overcome earlier conflict to achieve this. Other fathers were still seen to be locked in a 'cycle of bitterness'.

Two recent qualitative studies, taking a more holistic approach to the family as a whole rather than the father per se, have also formed ad-hoc categories of family based on the type of contact taking place. Trinder, Beek & Connelly (2002) interviewed 83 parents and 57 children or young people from 61 families in England that had been separated for an average of 4.8 years. Separating out the problems raised by different family members, they found that those for non-resident parents (usually the father) included adjustment to their new status as a contact parent, insecurity in their relationship with their child, conflict and the logistics of maintaining contact from a distance. These corroborate the picture of separated fatherhood from the studies in the previous section. The study also adopts similar broad categories to Lund (1987) - terming these Consensual Committed, Conflicted and Faltering - but develops 8 subcategories within the first two of these (Trinder, Beek & Connelly, 2002). They observed that families where co-parenting was most harmonious were often a looser reconfiguration of the previous family structure, with family members enjoying regular contact and living near each other. But ongoing contact and co-operation was also maintained somewhat reluctantly by other parents; while some separated by considerable distances still agreed to keep the child in some regular contact with both parents. While each of these family formats may embody ideal co-parenting, they were seen to make high demands of parents; those in reconfigured families, for example, were rarely in full-time employment, and had few new partners. The conflicted families were distinguished by the various stages or levels of conflict; it could be ongoing or past, could be contained within the family or have spilled over into a legal dispute, or could have threatened the safety of mother or

children. Although families whose conflict was routine and did not escalate into litigation did appear to fulfil many of the requirements of co-parenting, the presence of conflict was seen to cancel out the benefits of contact wherever it took place.

A range of differences was highlighted between these various types of family. Contact seemed to work best where it had been clearly established at an early stage of the separation, where parents were committed to it, and where their relationship was empathic. It was 'faltering' among those with young children where the parental relationship had been short. The nature of the separation was reflected in levels of contact; new partners, money problems, parenting styles and parents living far from each other were also all typical of those with poor contact experiences. The legal arena was not seen to have helped any except those mothers who were at risk, for whom the courts' recognition of their fears was supportive. Finally, a clear difference was observed between the discourses used by different categories of parent. The authors identified a prevalent reference to the child's welfare as a guiding principle among their 'consensual committed' families, with little reference to parity between parents. Indeed, both parents generally acknowledged the mother as the major-domo in the child's life. Parents whose contact was 'faltering' were more likely to invoke the idea of the 'clean break' as beneficial for children, the discourse of co-parenting being seen as invalidated by the other parent's non-compliance. Conflicted parents, on the other hand, overwhelmingly framed their views in terms of demands for parental rights and equality; some also referred to *parental* welfare as a consideration.

Parents' 'moral reasoning' was the focus of another study of 60 English parents interviewed just after their divorce or separation and again 12-18 months later (Smart & Neale, 1999). Several discourses were again identified in these accounts. Parents were found to have strong expectations of damaging effects on their children from divorce, possibly arising from a 'doctrine of harm' in separated family research. But they countered this with the idea that it was worse in the long run for parents to stay together for the sake of the children. It was also seen that while interviewees showed a general acceptance of child welfare principles, they would not always make connections with what this might entail in their own circumstances. The responses of some suggested that they conflated the child's interests with their own. There was some feeling that parents were owed the love of their children. Furthermore, the

other parent was frequently viewed as acting manipulatively to disrupt the child's relationship with themselves. Views such as these, while they may reflect one parents' understanding of their experience, tend to deny agency to the child, seeing them as a passive 'victim' of the other parent. Parents operated varying constructions of their children, perceiving their children's autonomy or dependence differently at different times.

For Smart and Neale, the distinction between child-centred discourses and those prioritising equality and parental rights was most clearly observed between the data from mothers and fathers respectively. They contrast mothers' central 'ethic of care', which formed the basis of their parental decisions, with the fathers' reasoning predominantly based on an 'ethic of justice'. Mothers tended to evaluate parental options by taking into account the quality of the previous and current inter-parental relationships, the potential upset to all family relationships, the timing of a decision, and the likely impact on all family members. Like Trinder et al., they found that problems arose where parents did not have expectations of traditional family roles in the separated family context. If parental roles had not been equal before, then expectations that they should be now were found to limit mothers' essential rebuilding of the self. Mothers often saw their experience as carer for the child as undervalued and typically felt disregarded in attempts to reduce that role. However, where fathers sought a new parental identity based on a larger caring role, they tended to feel they were losing out on involvement; yet it was observed that their expressions of feeling powerless frequently came from those who had relatively extensive involvement in their children's lives. Smart & Neale see the struggle for new self-identity as an inevitable source of asymmetry in co-parenting; they point out that one parent will always have been better prepared for the separation, and hence for the transition to a new identity. Arguing that the considerations of an ethic of care are a better principle for apprehending separated families both in research and in law, the authors classify separated families according to the parental division of *care* (physical and emotional involvement in child-rearing) and *authority* (input into decisions about the child's life). Co-parenting for Smart & Neale is where mother and father share both these aspects of the parental role; families of this sort were characterised by constant and demanding negotiations, which could become coercive or conflicted. In Solo Parenting, neither care nor authority is shared; involvement of both parents may be

recognised as impractical, and the idea of a 'clean break' propounded. In most of the families they studied, however, parental care was shared but authority remained the preserve of the resident parent; this they termed Custodial Parenting. Although these families seemed relatively stable, commitment of all members was still required for its continuance; conflict arising from parents' need for control was contained.

Smart and Neale argue that any attempt to identify best practice for separated parenting, such as divorce courts undertake, must take account of individual family contexts. In fact, whatever differences there may be between the various typologies suggested by different authors, the widespread observation of different patterns of post-divorce parenting indicates the importance of recognising the individuality of family circumstances. Researchers using qualitative methods have sought to illuminate this diversity, pointing to the complexity of relationship networks within which the separated family is situated, particularly where step-parents are introduced. However, Smart and Neale further argue that separated families are characterised by ongoing change and fluidity. While it has previously been recognised that separation or divorce must be viewed as a process rather than an event (e.g. Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Madden Derdich et al., 1999), the transition is nonetheless often viewed as a reconfiguration of the previous unit arrived at after a period of time. Some authors who have established typologies of separated families have observed, either through longitudinal interviewing or by asking respondents about their family history, that families can change from one parenting type to another over time. Simpson et al.'s (1995) longitudinal approach allowed them to observe that over time there was some movement between their categories, generally in a continuum from 'no-contact' to 'parallel' to 'communicative'. Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999) note that the fathers in their study reported considerable fluidity in levels of contact over time, although the recollections of participants in the Trinder et al. (2002) study suggested little change in contact types. But at the stage of the second interview in Smart & Neale's (1999) study, some 12 to 18 months after separation, a constant pressure to respond to change was the modus operandi.

All the studies discussed in this section recognise the particular demands of remaining a co-parent. On the basis of parents' accounts of dealing with change, Smart & Neale (1999) summarise a broad consensus in identifying four integral

components of the co-parental relationship, each of which can determine its success or failure. The relationship must be of suitable quality; must be capable of change (fluid); must be allow both parents to function separately as individuals; but must also keep them connected as child-rearers. Successful co-parenting fathers, then, must remain relatively amicable; Simpson, McCarthy & Walker (1995) identify a businesslike relationship with the mother described by those respondents who continued to see their children. Bradshaw, Stimson et al. (1999) recognise the demands of responding to the dynamic circumstances of a separated family. They also require a high degree of commitment to the continuance of family relationships, while simultaneously empathising with distinct roles for each other (Trinder et al., 2002). However, it is unlikely that all parental pairs have the capability to co-parent successfully (ibid.). The demands can possibly only be met by a limited number of individuals (Bradshaw et al., 1999); and the considerable effort required to submerge a parent's new self and change their behaviour to accommodate another's point of view may not make the rewards seem worthwhile (Smart & Neale, 1999).

2.8 Summary & conclusions

Examining the literature on separated fathers from the last two decades, then, a number of points emerge.

- Concerns over the effects of divorce on children have led to the view that children should be able to maintain contact with a non-resident father, except in cases where there has been abuse or violence. Research has sought to explain the processes of contact by examining the behaviour of separated fathers, their relationships within the family, and the separated family as a whole.

- Children experience the 'loss' of the non-resident parent (usually the father), though this has been found to affect their emotional adjustment more than their social or academic functioning; but long-term effects associated with divorce or separation may in fact arise from pre-divorce family conditions. Key factors in children's social & psychological outcomes are the quality of their relationship

with the non-resident father and the quality and level of conflict in the relationship between the parents.

- Non-resident fathers maintain less indirect contact (phone calls, letters and e-mails) than non-resident mothers. Their rates of visitation are similar; this has been shown to decline over time, but contact may be redistributed in fewer, longer episodes. Fathers maintain higher levels of contact if they have more education or are employed, and if they live near to the child's residence. The rate of contact increases with the number of their children resident with the mother, but decreases with the number of children they have in a new relationship. Finally, contact is more likely where there is higher agreement and low levels of conflict between the parents.

- The quality of the father-child relationship suffers under non-residency, though the effect of the pre-divorce relationship quality is unclear, and is affected by the Quality of Co-parental Communication. Residency arrangements may affect the salience of the parental role to a father's post-divorce identity. Attending a parent education intervention may improve a father's relationship with their child.

- The continued involvement of both separated parents in child-rearing is more likely if they have joint custody, if they are economically better off, and if they perceive their ex-partner to be a capable parent. Co-parenting is *perceived* as more manageable if neither parent has a high level of education; also, fathers are more likely to participate in important decisions if they were previously married to the mother and if they live nearby. However, fathers with greater levels of education, or who perceive themselves as having been close to their child before the split, tend to have *experienced* a better quality of interaction with the child's mother. The frequency of co-parental interaction and the range of topics discussed are also associated with the perceived quality of the co-parental relationship. Other factors are satisfaction with custody arrangements, their own lifestyle and the other parent's child-rearing abilities; feelings associated with the divorce and parental adjustment to it; and characteristics of the parents'

personalities. A new partner for either parent is associated with a decline in the co-parental relationship quality.

- Non-resident fathers themselves are distressed by the loss of their children, and want more contact. They frequently attribute parental conflict to recriminations over the break-up, and perceive the resident mother as intractable, acting against them and exerting control over contact. They feel themselves to be relatively powerless as parents, and may be either resigned or resentful; economic support may be viewed as a bargain for contact time. Fathers also describe problems with the artifice of the contact environment, being unprepared for their new role, and adjusting to a new relationship in interactions with their child. While their life may feel 'on hold', the separation can bring about a positive transformation in their parental relationship.

- Broad distinctions have been made between families where contact is in place on the basis of the parental relationships described, which can be characterised by conflict, harmony or non-communication. Different discourses, including those of child welfare, parental welfare, equal rights, care and justice are used distinctly by parents in these different categories, and at different times. A useful alternative may be to typify families on the basis of parental roles rather than contact and conflict. Finally, contact is maintained in some families despite risk to one or other family member.

Research into fathers and their children after divorce or separation has moved from an examination of fathers' behaviour to a broader focus on separated family systems and fathers' own experience of separation as a process. A wide range of factors has been examined to predict diverse aspects of the process. Work in this area has been undertaken from a number of different perspectives - sociological, psychological, psychiatric, and legal - and has used a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods in data collection and analysis. There are drawbacks to most of these approaches - family systems models are vulnerable to the interpretations of their authors, while self-reported data will invariably be slanted to one or other parent's view. The differences between families in terms of time and family cultures are

difficult to account for without a longitudinal element, and it has been seen by some authors as important to view divorce or separation as a process, and the ex-couple as the unit of measurement within it. These methodological issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

However, the review presented in this chapter informs the research questions in a number of ways. Non-resident fathers maintain similar levels of post-separation contact to non-resident mothers; therefore, being the non-resident parent may be a major reason for poor maintenance of contact arrangements, more so than being a father per se. Contact is likelier if parents get on well; rather than being a characteristic behaviour or choice of fathers, then, any poor co-operation reported by their ex-partners may be an effect of the quality of the relationship between parents. Some children report an unsatisfactory experience of time with their non-resident fathers (Mayes et al., 2000). To some extent this may also be an effect of the circumstances of non-residency. Research has, however, increasingly identified the quality of the parent-child relationship as the strongest predictor of child outcomes; what is important may not be so much what takes place when father and child spend time together, but how it takes place.

Finally, views obtained from non-resident fathers have implications for services, particularly their sense of powerlessness, their attributions of conflict, and the significance of money. Many studies recommend mediation or information services as a means of restoring fathers to involvement with their children after family break-up. Yet the attempt in children's rights legislation to create responsible fathers by removing obstacles to contact has been criticised for ignoring how divorce destroys the previous negotiation of parental and career roles fundamental to bringing up children (Smart, 1997). Smart argues that parental activity cannot be expected to continue as before since all the other adult roles pertaining to those of the parenthood have changed, and that equity in parenting is an unworkable imposition in the vast majority of families where this has not been the pre-divorce pattern. There is, then, much work to be done yet not only on how separated parental services are accessed and experienced by fathers, but what the objectives and expectations of such a service should be.

Chapter 3 A Constructivist Model of Separated Fatherhood

This chapter will present first a discussion of the methodological issues raised by the literature review,

3.1 Qualitative and quantitative methods

Much of the previous literature relating to this field has adopted a quantitative approach. A series of paternal behaviours such as payment of child support (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999), inter-parental conflict (Ahrons, 1981), or involvement with children (Rettig et al., 1999) have been highlighted by researchers and defined as problems. Attitudes such as boundary ambiguity (Madden Derdich et al., 1999), traits such as child-orientedness (Ehrenberg et al., 1996) or demographic characteristics such as number of children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998) are treated as factors and measured in, or inferred from, questionnaire responses. Empirical methods are then used to test whether any associations found support the researcher's understanding by excluding the likelihood of chance occurrence. However, many of the problems associated with such methods are particularly relevant to the investigation of separated or divorced fathers. The consistency of disparate research, which should be the hallmark of an empirical approach, is not evident. There are few replicated findings, and measures and units of measurement are far from consistent; some doubts have at times been expressed over what exactly is being measured.

Statistical tests of significance are predicated upon a random sample of respondents being investigated. With separated and divorced fathers as participants, this seems unrealistic. Obtaining a large sample presents a considerable problem as response rates for this population are notoriously low (indeed the reason for this study itself was the disinclination of fathers to take part in the PIP and its evaluation). The widespread reluctance of separated fathers to discuss their experience would make it unrealistic to address problems of reliability through rigorous re-testing. Furthermore, ensuring that even a sizeable sample remains representative of all fathers is unlikely (Hoffman, 1995). Questionnaire or contact letters sent to all those

listed in divorce cases may target a group shown to be representative of the demographic characteristics of the wider population. But within any social sector, respondents might be assumed to be those individuals whose temperament or personality most disposes them to talk to a stranger about their personal situation, or to 'have their say'; or to be those most equable about what they have gone through. A favourable disposition towards research also suggests a particular set of attitudes towards social science, the role of the individual in society and the importance or duty of contributing one's own knowledge to the wider good. If a group exhibits a propensity for particular traits or attitudes in this way, it can hardly form a representative sample among which to measure personality traits or attitudes, unless these are all completely independent attributes. Concerns have also been raised with the validity of fathers' self-report in these circumstances (Seltzer, 1991; Simpson et al., 1996). The emotive and adversarial nature of most post-divorce relationships encourages a polarisation in parents' interpretation of events (Mayes et al., 2000); demand and volunteer characteristics are therefore likely to create particular difficulties. Initial themes from groups in the present study do suggest that those separated and divorced fathers frequently feel victimised as 'delinquent', and are particularly keen to present themselves in a positive light.

Central concepts such as ex-spousal conflict have therefore been formulated in terms of theories geared to investigating attributes (e.g. Hoffman, 1995). Most studies of this nature only demonstrate an association in a proportion of those they study; in many cases this may be significant without being very high. But statistical significance only tells us that the association for this group could not have occurred by chance, and assumes that findings for those individuals who did not exhibit any association were affected by confounding factors. Depending on the proportions involved, this can discount a considerable amount of data. Furthermore, any attempt to demonstrate the reliable presence of these attributes rests on an assumption that the behaviour of separated parents is largely determined by innate characteristics. The hypothesis-led investigation of these issues seeks to explain proposed, separable characteristics by studying them in isolation, rather than as aspects of a holistic process. This privileges the researcher's conception above those of the parents investigated, without acknowledging it. The researcher asks parents how they rate themselves in the terms *she* or *he* has proposed. Behavioural models, then, are

informed by their designers' conceptions of the situations experienced by fathers rather than the fathers' own conceptions (Burghes et al., 1997). But the separated family can be more productively viewed as a social entity defined by relationships in permanent flux and increasing in complexity, rather than a reconfiguration of the previous unit arrived at after a period of time (Smart, 1997; Smart & Neale, 1999).

The problems outlined above are seen in the qualitative critique as a product of an empirical approach; by the same token qualitative theories have a great deal to offer this research. If the sample of research participants is not representative, then *inconcludability* becomes a problem (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1998); that is, the conclusions are not extendable to other populations or individuals, since each addition to the sample would change its composition (cf. Hoffman, 1995). Qualitative methods address this by attempting to characterise a sample as fully as possible. Rich data should be gathered in a way that allows any atypical features of the sample to be identified and interpreted. Findings are generated from *all* data obtained; those fathers whose behaviour is not consistent with the majority in the sample are not excluded from analysis (Lamiell, 1995). Research into attitudes or traits presents participants with propositions formed by the researcher; qualitative approaches are led by the invited input of participants, from which the researcher interprets. In this way, the role of the researcher in shaping what is found is acknowledged as a central process, rather than something to be discounted (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Qualitative findings also enrich those that have gone before by creating a larger interpretation, and do not delimit future research to verifying a central hypothesis in another population (Banister et al., 1998). For instance, the 'sacrifice' rationalisation identified by Trinder et al. (2002) is a recurring feature of findings from previous qualitative studies that has informed other subsequent research into separated fathers (Backett, 1987; Kruk, 1992b; Simpson et al., 1996). Fathers themselves seek to make sense of their situation, and examining the sense they make can be more likely to explain their behaviour. A qualitative approach would seek to form an understanding of their situation as *they* see it, and consider how this might interact with the research issues.

Qualitative methodology is of course far from homogeneous; it encompasses an array of approaches from different disciplines. Two methods were considered well

suited to understanding what being a separated father can mean for fathers. The first method, unstructured group interviewing, is widely used to generate a large body of data richly expressive of the participants' viewpoints (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). Instead of supposing an underlying factor for some behaviour and trying to demonstrate that it reliably characterises a sample, this method gathers as broad a scope as possible from fathers of how they might reason situations to themselves. This technique would allow the research issues to be approached from the point of view of fathers, and also provide complementary data to that previously gathered in a similar way from children (Mayes et al., 2000). By these means, the diversity of individual circumstances among respondents can be recognised and displayed. However, a theoretical framework is necessary to support these myriad conceptions; while acknowledging their difference, they must be viewed in relation to each other if some sense is to be made of the mechanisms by which fathers' perspectives interact with co-parenting behaviour and experience. The second method derives from Personal Construct Psychology, and is introduced in the next section.

3.2 Personal Construct Psychology

The problems of predicting the parameters of an objective reality from the subjective reality reported by separated fathers can be addressed further by a method grounded in the Personal Construct Psychology developed by George Kelly. It presupposes change in individual cognitions, so fathers would be expected to develop their perspective rather than exhibit fixed characteristics. While still a qualitative approach, quantified data can also be gathered in a structured way using the Repertory Grid method that allows the research issues to be elucidated systematically with rich data from a small sample. It is also frequently emphasised that the productive use of repertory grids in research depends upon not dissociating them from their theoretical basis in Personal Construct Theory (Bell, 1988; Fransella & Bannister, 1977). Rather than simply employing repertory grids to gather data, then, the research questions should be cast in terms of the theory such as to elaborate a constructivist model of paternal separation. This permits a holistic examination that recognises the entire gamut of fathers' experience. If PCT is appropriate, then both

our psychological and 'political' understanding of separated fathers should be usefully informed by considering such a model.

3.2.1 Theory and method

> *FUNDAMENTAL POSTULATE: A PERSON'S PROCESSES ARE PSYCHOLOGICALLY CHANNELIZED BY THE WAYS IN WHICH HE* [sic] *ANTICIPATES EVENTS*
>
> (Kelly, 1955, p. 46)

The theory expounded by Kelly in *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* was developed as a universal, cognitive approach to understanding human behaviour in terms of the 'processes' by which each person conceives of and predicts external events. It sees individual responses to other people, events or situations (referred to as *elements*) as based on entirely personal arrays of bipolar distinctions (*constructs*) based on previous experience. Thus, a person might classify those with whom he or she comes into contact on idiosyncratic dimensions from, say, 'responsible' to 'unreliable', or 'temperamental' to 'reserved'; an event could be viewed as 'helpful' or 'unhelpful', 'upsetting' or 'relaxing' etc. All such *systems* of constructs will be unique to each individual. Kelly laid out these and other central tenets of PCT in a series of corollaries; the previous few sentences summarise the Construction, Individuality, Dichotomy, and Organisation corollaries. The Choice corollary holds that when a person applies a construct to an element they will evaluate it in such a way as to fortify or develop their whole system, enabling better predictions to be made in future. This has been described as moving "in those directions which seem ... to make most sense" (Bannister & Fransella, 1971, p.25). This "elaborative" choice (*ibid.*, p65) means that each construct/element relationship is related to the whole system to some extent. In this light, if we are attempting to ascertain what precipitates human behaviour, we must proceed from an elucidation of the subjective frameworks through which people *construe* their world. Anything expressed by a person relating to a specific action or behaviour can only be understood in terms of how it elaborates their own system of constructs.

The (Role Construct) Repertory Grid technique of interviewing was also developed by Kelly as a means of gathering data to measure an individual's construct systems (Kelly, 1955). Presented with various combinations of elements related to the area of interest, the interviewee is asked to describe in their own terms constructs they would use to distinguish or connect them. Typically, the elements are presented in triads, with the respondent being asked to suggest what for them makes two seem similar, then asked to characterise how the other element seems opposite to this. Thus, if the element titles were family members, a person might be asked to describe in what way, say, 'mother' and 'father' were similar to each other, but different from 'sister'. The verbal content of these construct labels can be treated as qualitative data describing their worldview. However, this should not be treated as the construct per se, but the participant's attempt at representing verbally an internal, preverbal dimension (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). Instead, in the final stage of the repertory grid interview, the participant is asked to measure each element on each construct. This can be done either by assigning an element to one pole of a construct, or giving it a ranking or rating on a continuum between the two poles. A grid is produced within which the construct is defined by its relationship to the elements used; various analyses have been applied to data gathered in this way (Bell, 1988; Bell, 1990). The information is still essentially qualitative, since it derives from definitions brought to the interview by each individual participant; but the enumerated relationships among constructs and elements can be subjected to a wide range of statistical comparisons (Winter, 2003). For instance, correlation scores between construct pairs can be examined to assess whether they have similar implications; cluster analysis of the grid can show which elements are seen as similar or dissimilar; and a principal components analysis of the grid can show which construct meanings are associated with the similarity of certain elements. Following the assumption that a statistical association between constructs is a reflection of a psychological association between them (Fransella & Bannister, 1977), the system within which these constructs operate for each individual can be measured while taking cognisance of the individual interpretations of interviewees.

3.2.2 PCT in this research

Personal Construct Theory and the repertory grid interview are ideally suited to tackling the methodological problems identified at the start of this section. Some grid studies have sought to show some degree of test-retest reliability (Epting, Prichard, Wiggins, Leonard, & Beagle, 1992; Feixas, Lopez Moliner, Navarro Montes, Tudela Mari, & et al., 1992; Hagans, Neimeyer, & Goodholm Jr, 1999; Smith, 2000). But retest reliability in a repertory grid is a contradictory expectation (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). The grid works by testing PCT propositions, and Kelly's theory was an explanation of mental change and cognitive development; hence his concentration on processes rather than attributes. The completion of a repertory grid has been described as a structured conversation (Procter, 1985) and the data gathered will always be specific to that interaction. It is this inherent expectation of transiency in repertory grids that renders them suitable for researching the protean separated family. A social entity consisting of an endlessly dynamic system of relationships may be anathema to empirical reliability, but its fluctuations can be conceptualised within PCT as changes in construing - the effects (laid out in the corollaries of the theory) of the interaction of construct systems.

Another great strength of the grid is the richness and quantity of data that can be derived from a relatively small sample, allowing each participant's perspective on being a non-resident parent to be measured as fully as possible. Representativeness is only a problem where a random sample is required; PCT, like other qualitative theories, is built on the assumption that inconsistencies between individual cases and group averages must be explored as meaningful rather than discounted as error (Lamiell, 1995). Likewise, the validity of self-report by fathers is only a problem if they are assumed to be giving information about facts or attributes that exist independently of their discourse (Banister et al., 1998). A repertory grid would seek to measure the interpretation they bring to their own experience rather than the experience itself or some external factor that predicts it. All the construct data gathered uses verbal labels provided by the participant to describe their own idiosyncratic dimensions. Instead of trying to see through fathers' 'spin' looking for hard facts, the 'spin' (being their own explanation of circumstances) is seen as the best explanation from which to proceed. Therefore the research no longer proceeds as a test of the researcher's insight into separated fatherhood, but allows the fathers themselves to set the terms and agenda of what should be looked at.

In the half-century since repertory grids emerged, there have been innumerable adaptations and refinements of the technique, many arising from the broad range of issues to which personal construct theory has been applied. Originally developed for clinical purposes, this is still where the most prodigious application of the theory and its repertory grid methods takes place. The developments of Bannister and Fransella in the field, for instance, came from their work on treating schizophrenia and stuttering (Bannister & Fransella, 1971; Fransella, 1965). Neimeyer has written extensively on personal meanings of death in relation to psychotherapy for the terminally ill; and the analysis of articulation structures was developed through their work on obsessional neuroses (Neimeyer & Epting, 1992; Norris, Jones, & Norris, 1970). Much recent literature still relates to clinical or health use (Jones, Harris, & Waller, 1998; Leach, Freshwater, Aldridge, & Sunderland, 2001). However, Kelly's theory was intended as a universal model for the processes of human thought, applicable to any area of psychological enquiry. Repertory grids have been adapted for use in many other fields such as organisational and developmental psychology, or social work (Beail, 1985; Jankowicz, 1990; Maitland & Brennan, 1990). Some of this broad sweep of research is of particular relevance to the present study.

3.2.3 PCT and the family

The personal construct literature relating to developmental psychology, family therapy and relationship counselling is important to the current study. These fields are by their nature focussed on social configurations (couples, families or parent-child dyads) rather than the individuals within them. Yet as a theoretical perspective, constructivism primarily examines *intrapsychic* processes, the internal experience and construction of the individual rather than interactions (Feixas et al., 1992). Some relevant developments of Kelly's theory have come from those using a PCT approach to address a field dominated by systems modelling.

Mascolo & Mancuso examined parental reprimands as instances of problem solving from a personal construct perspective (Mascolo & Mancuso, 1988). In this they draw on Kelly's sociality corollary, which states that a person can engage in a social

process with another person only insofar as he is able to construe the construct system of that person (Kelly, 1955). A child acting counter to the predictions of its parent's construct system would instigate a reprimand, where the parent attempts to persuade the child to accept their (the parent's) construal of the event. In this way the parent passes on what is referred to as the 'parent role construing system', a knowledge base that guides how they construe their child's responses. Mascolo & Mancuso suggest that parents will construe a range of conceptions of their role as a parent (easy parent, tough parent etc.). It was further argued that, like expert problem solvers in other fields, expert parents are able to perceive an underlying deep structure; construing past the surface features of the transgression to the child's construct system, they are able to use more relevant reprimands. Analysing 16x14 grids for the parental role construing system, they examined clusters (or categories) of roles to establish which of these roles formed 'prototypes'. Prototypical roles were those sharing attributes with most others in their category but few in other categories. Stage analysis interviews (Eimer, 1981, cited ibid., p216) were used to find those who "did not believe a reprimand has any effect without changing the transgressor's construction". Findings confirmed that the grids of these expert parents exhibited a greater number of prototypes; the authors theorised that this would allow such individuals to function more efficiently as parents. They also found that the grids of non-experts were more likely to be idiosyncratic, while experts' grids were structurally similar.

The duty of reprimanding is of course common to all parents. However, this study establishes a number of useful concepts for research with separated fathers. If parental roles can be expressed to which constructs (or parenting beliefs as Mascolo and Mancuso refer to them) are applicable, then co-parents might be expected to have to operate a distinct role or range of roles. It has previously been argued that non-resident fathers' views of separated parenthood will be qualitatively different from those of mothers, lawyers, children or researchers; they might then be found to construe such a role distinctly. The association of 'expert parenting' with certain knowledge structures obtained from the grid of this system is also important if grids are to be used to examine the relationship of separated fathers' construct systems to their behaviour. Mascolo & Mancuso do, however, caution that the definition of 'expertise' in parenting is itself a construct of the research and cannot be held to be an empirical standard; parents cannot be cast as good or bad without recognising the

source of any criteria used. The *permeability* of expert and non-expert systems (their ability to accommodate new elements) was not compared here. It may be, for example, that inexpert parents, while having fewer established parental role prototypes, are better able to generate and accommodate new roles – better able to innovate as parents.

The Commonality Corollary has been seen as an alternative to attitude theory in understanding the mechanics of relationships (Duck & Condra, 1990). The corollary states that people's psychological processes can only be as similar as the constructions of experience they use (rather than the attitudes they exhibit); Duck and Condra found that friends were more likely to be similar in their construing than non-friends. However, the causality of this association is not clear; and the explanation, like the attitude theory it seeks to replace, maintains a focus on individual dispositions (Lakin, 1994). Neimeyer moves closer to the current research area by applying the dictates of the Choice Corollary to marital relationships. His view is that these relationships are formed such that partners 'validate and extend' their individual construct systems by construing each other, and that the success and maintenance of the relationship depends on the extent to which this takes place (cited in Feixas, 1992; Neimeyer, 1985). Both of these studies are tangential here in the respect that they are concerned with the formation and development of relationships as personal choices. The current project looks at the transformation of old relationships, or how they can work, whether commonality of *individual* construing exists or not; and individuals are studied who do not have a choice of who to form relationships with in the separated family. Nevertheless, seeing the maintenance of a relationship as predicted by similarity of constructs and by how partners construe each other leads to the idea of *shared* constructs.

Procter, using PCT methods in a family therapy context, completed repertory grids with all members of a client's families (parents and children) as participants (Procter, 1985). Family members have been used as elements in individual grids from Kelly on, but here the family itself is being examined rather than the individual. After completing grids using 16 family role-titles as elements, members of a family were asked to complete further grids in the way they thought each of the others would. The correspondence of self-evaluations to the various other-evaluations was then

examined to test the extent to which family social processes could take place within internal relationships. Procter maintains that this interlocking of social processes allows 'family constructs' to be created – constructs which are not necessarily those of any one individual, but are arrived at and used as working beliefs by family members during interactions. These still operate in subjective realities rather than being objective attributes. Unlike Duck and Neimeyer, then, he suggests that construing beyond the level of individual systems is a feature of group processes essential to understanding them. He proposes additional Group and Family Corollaries to align these ideas with Kelly's central theory. The Group adapts the Sociality Corollary – a person can take part in group processes if he can construe relationships between others in the group. The Family corollary is based on choice and commonality, such that a family can remain intact if its members can adapt their construct systems to apprehend a general, shared view of relationships in the group. As aspects of PCT, these constructs are of course expected to be flexible and responsive to changes and developments in the dynamic engine of development that is the family. Feixas develops Procter's arguments in an overview of personal construct work relating to the family and relationships (Feixas, 1992). He outlines construing at individual, group and dynamic levels within a family and restates Kelly's original corollaries for these two new levels. Crucially, Feixas sees conflict as arising from family members encountering poor predictions of events from their constructed reality; these "moments of perceived invalidation" (*ibid.*, p225) are however the means by which the family system evolves and develops. This recognition of inconsistent situations where family views are elaborated is important for the present study. His new Choice Corollary stipulates that family members choose to act to elaborate their individual systems, and thereby elaborate the group construction.

3.2.4 A PCP understanding of separated fatherhood

It appears that *separated* families, and fathers in particular, have not yet been studied using repertory grids. Yet the utility of the approach has been demonstrated in the study of parenting and families. If, as has been suggested (Smart & Neale, 1999), the separated family like the non-separated family is identifiable as an integrated

structure to some extent, then the above contributions of PCT research into families can be useful in trying to gain an understanding of separated parents. This may depend on whether a separated parent still construes themselves as part of a family unit in any measure; but it seems reasonable to assume that this would only fail to be the case where a father has severed all contact for some period of time. The concepts of expertise in a parental role, shared construing amongst family members and the importance of events where old constructs fail to predict can form the basis of explaining how fathers maintain contact. The productive use of repertory grids in research depends as ever upon not dissociating them from their theoretical basis in Personal Construct Psychology (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). This will be addressed in the following section.

3.3 Research issues and personal construct theory

3.3.1 The co-parental role

The sociality corollary discussed above is particularly relevant to explaining the situation and behaviour of separated fathers, concerned as it is with how a person "may play a role in a social process" (Kelly, 1955). Through examining parental reprimands from a constructivist viewpoint, the interaction of a parent with their child has been identified as a social process wherein the parent plays a role (Mascolo & Mancuso, 1988). A separated, non-resident parent is still required by the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to maintain interaction with their child through contact arrangements; yet the transformed circumstances of this social process would require fathers to play a very different role from that of a non-separated, resident father. In a unified family parents will more often than not carry out distinct, complementary roles with the father typically being less involved with their children, maintaining a more reserved relationship with them and taking less part in domestic activities. A separated parent looking after their child is required to fulfil the duties of both parents during that time; the greater adjustments faced by fathers in adapting to this co-parental role have been noted (Backett, 1987). The role still encompasses interaction with the mother, however. By its very nature, co-parenting precludes the operation of

the father-child dyad in isolation; the minimum intervention principle of the Children (Scotland) Act represents an intention that parents should liase and co-operate with each other over contact wherever possible. The co-parental role is, then, essentially a family role.

On p. 97 of *The Psychology Of Personal Constructs*, a role is characterised as "a psychological process based upon the role player's construction of aspects of the construction systems of those with whom he attempts to join in a social enterprise" (Kelly, 1955). Kelly goes on to point out the significant features of a 'role' thus defined (*ibid.*, p.98-99):

- it is the product of a personal construct system.
- it is a process which emerges only in relation to other people.
- commonality (a similarity of construing) between those involved is not a prerequisite.
- it depends only on one's own construing of their systems (therefore their reciprocal construing is not directly influential).
- it is not an understanding of one's self, but of what is or should be done under certain circumstances.

'Role' is a term much bandied about in literature on parenthood and systems modelling; but Kelly's is a distinct conception, given these specifications. For instance, Ihinger-Tallman et al.'s idea of a father's 'role' is that of an aspect of his identity, 'self-meanings' (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1995). This does not equate with Kelly's idea of an intra-psychic construction separate from the self. The constructivist co-parental role is a product of a father's personal constructs. It can therefore be investigated within the framework of PCT, and is recognised as being qualitatively unique to each individual. It relates to his interactions with those to whom he is required to be a co-parent and is not relevant to his actions with others; the co-parental role is therefore a practical concept for investigating the current research issues. He may play a co-parental role whether or not his constructs of this role are similar to those of other family members; and his construing of a co-parental role depends on how he views the systems of his children and their mother but not on their constructions of him. The existence of any objective demarcation of the role is

seen as illusory, instead, the father's own subjective processes, accessible by a repertory grid interview, should be examined to investigate a co-parental role. And rather than being a conception he has of himself as a person, the co-parental role represents the options he sees for himself in the social processes of contact.

This last point distinguishes the role of a non-resident separated father from that of a father in a unified family. The role relates to different social processes - those of contact rather than the 'in-house' interactions of a unified family. The conflicting findings of those studies (Hetherington, 1979; Hoffman, 1995; Kruk, 1992b; Rettig et al., 1999) which seek to predict parental behaviours and attitudes for separated fathers from aspects of their earlier parenthood seem inevitable if the pre- and post-separation realms are served by divergent role construct repertories. With the concept of a co-parental role established, the main research issues of inter-parental conflict and quality of father-child interaction can be specifically addressed.

3.3.2 Experience and Expertise

The experience corollary indicates that construct systems are a product of experience; in repeatedly encountering an element, a person forms and refines constructs relating to it (Kelly, 1955). This takes place according to Kelly in a "validating process" (*ibid.*, p. 72) whereby a construct occurs to or strikes the person, is used to predict a subsequent encounter or encounters with the element, and is evaluated and adapted accordingly. In this way the structures of construct systems are seen as becoming inevitably sophisticated by experience, though this is perhaps not necessarily beneficial of itself. As Bieri (1955) points out (citing Hamlet), a complex system may not be the most relevant to bring to a simple problem but it still has the potential to be constricted for less nebulous applications. The differences in complexity developing in a structure through experience have been considered in terms of differentiation (Bannister & Fransella, 1971), hierarchical integration or articulation (Norris et al., 1970), ordination (Landfield & Schmittdiel, 1983) or orthogonal combinations of these (Neimeyer, 1992; Zimring, 1971). However, in all cases, a system whose structure is enriched by transitional experience is seen as better equipped to accommodate diverse circumstances. Gallifa and Botella have

demonstrated measurable differences in the structural features of expert and non-expert construing systems (2000).

Mascolo and Mancuso (1988) use these ideas to model parenthood in general, but their conception can inform our understanding of relations between a separated parent and their child. Their study distinguishes 'expert' and 'non-expert' parents in terms of the resources displayed in administering reprimands. They saw expert parents as administering reprimands using a system with 'deep' structure, like expert problem solvers. A construct system relating to a co-parental role should be expected to develop similarly through the opportunities a father has to play that role. As a father is required to use his co-parental constructs to predict or apprehend his family from a separated, non-resident viewpoint his construct system should become more robust, discerning and broadly applicable and he should become a more expert co-parent. At first, a separated father may construe a broken contact arrangement as a deliberate denial of his rights by the mother. Successive situations of this kind may be poorly predicted by this construct; reflecting on this can create an opportunity to view such events as less adversarial, perhaps more related to the child's response to social commitments. In this way, the father's co-parental construct system can be elaborated through his experience as a co-parent.

3.3.3 Hostility and Parental Interaction Quality

Procter's idea that the family that construes together stays together was formed in a family therapy context, with the aim of helping families overcome problems to avoid separation (Procter, 1985). This may not seem immediate relevant when looking at a family that have not stayed together, and are trying to adjust to not staying together. Likewise, Feixas' view that families must maintain a common construction of their relationships to stay together may not be extendable beyond the explanation of unified families (Feixas et al., 1992). But the separated family is still 'together' at some level as a social entity, albeit in a more dynamic system (Smart & Neale, 1999), required to maintain interrelated interactions between various members. The centrality of construing processes to familial relations seen by Procter and Feixas

suggests that the modelling of unified family interactions in personal construct terms could offer as much insight if applied to separated families.

Feixas also writes of family construct systems evolving through "moments of perceived invalidation" (Feixas et al., 1992, p.225). Kelly's ideas on such moments provide a useful basis for understanding how conflict can arise between separated parents. PCT predicates human behaviour on change; the Experience corollary states that as we repeatedly come across events, the construct system through which we anticipate them varies (Kelly, 1955). However, the Modulation corollary sets limitations on this according to the *permeability* of the relevant constructs; if too many new elements cannot be apprehended by an existing construct, that construct is deemed to be impermeable and must be replaced by a new or modified construct (*ibid.*). This is seen as potentially difficult and disorientating if the construct in question is a *core* construct, one of "those by which [a person] maintains his (sic) identity and existence" (*ibid.* p. 482). Kelly describes this as a possible outcome of an individual having to make a transition between modes of construing when redefining roles (particularly core roles such as those of parent or co-parent). He defines *guilt* as the anxiety or discomfiture experienced by an individual who is aware of the redundancy of some such central aspect of how they see themselves, yet resisting the adoption of a new self-conception (Kelly, 1970). This may not be a problem if another, more permeable construct can be brought to bear on the new elements. If, however, a *superordinate* construct (one that predicts others in the system) is impermeable, a new construct may not be admitted to the system. Accepting such a change can only be perceived as threatening or unpleasant and it will be resisted. Persisting with an outmoded construct leads to persistently wrong predictions of the situations that are subsequently encountered. Kelly also observes that one strategy for countering guilt from this might be to "extort validational evidence" (*ibid.*, p 29) for the incumbent constructs, to "force the circumstances to confirm one's prediction of them" (*ibid.*, p. 28). He offers this as a definition of *hostility.*

It is not difficult to see hostility in its broader, everyday sense as a possible feature of the relations between ex-spouses. However, the understanding of hostility provided by PCT is particularly informative of the mechanism of conflict here. For parents, as

has been observed, separation is a transition that requires considerable adjustment to a potentially core role. A central relationship has ended; social and physical environments will probably have changed; and each parent must now take on both parental roles when responsible for their child. Rather than adopt the new or permeable constructs of a co-parental role, a father may attempt to assert his old parental role. Perhaps in the old days time spent with the children was governed by the father's work; the co-parental role, however, requires that he be more accommodating. The essential differences between a *parental role* before separation and a separated, *co-parental role* mean that a significant transition will be required from one set of core constructs to another. If he continues viewing contact arrangements with his old priorities, hostility arises from his outmoded construing of the relative importance of work and parental schedules and leads to conflict.

This, as was suggested above, may have more radical implications for fathers than mothers (Backett 1987). Furthermore, within a 'united' family, fathers' interaction with their children tends to be mediated by the mother. If differences exist in the quality and magnitude of these transitions for mothers and fathers (or for resident and non-resident parents) then perceptions of fathers' behaviour after separation as contrary or combative can be explained from a constructivist viewpoint. This would see hostility arising from the process of divorce or separation, rather than individual characteristics. The hostility arising from a father being unable to revise his redundant constructs from the previous parental role would affect his performance as a co-parent (Kelly, 1970); this should be reflected in the structural features of the system in which the relevant constructs operate.

3.3.4 Sociality and Quality of Father-Child Interaction

The interaction of a separated father and child is, as has been stated, a social process, and therefore comes under the proviso of the sociality corollary (Kelly, 1955); social interaction depends on whether we can apprehend the sense another person makes of the situation. A father's ability to make time spent with his child rewarding to that child is concomitant upon his ability to construe the child's construct systems. If some aspect of his way of thinking renders him less able to identify the distinctions

and similarities which comprise his child's worldview, then we could expect that their encounters would be less socially satisfying for the child. The father himself may view a Saturday together as fun or rewarding. His child, however, might also find it slightly upsetting if he or she has to forfeit seeing their usual friends that day. If the father cannot grasp this extra dimension to the child's view of contact time, then he will fail to predict his child's responses to contact situations and the quality of time will be the less from the child's point of view. Adams-Webber finds that the ability to apprehend another's self-construal is related to "the relative complexity-simplicity" of the construct system in the individuals involved (Adams-Webber, 1998). Once again, then, structural features of a father's construct system of the co-parental role should indicate how well they are able to provide rewarding time together for their children; the capacity to apprehend the child's world view would indicate a propensity for better parental relations.

3.4 Model

Elaborating from a personal construct conception of a co-parental role allows the research issues to be explained by a father's subjective construction of his experience as a separated parent. In line with Personal Construct Theory, some propositions can be made regarding the construct systems of separated fathers:

- separated fathers will operate a distinct construct system in relation to a perceived role as a co-parent. The ways they see themselves as being called on to act in their current parental circumstances will require separated fathers to adjust or replace their ideas of being a parent from before the separation.

- those fathers who have had most opportunity to act as a co-parent will have more complex co-parental construct systems; the systems of recent co-parents or those with no experience as a co-parent will be simple; the systems of those who maintain a co-parenting agreement will grow more complex over that period of time. A father becomes an expert at the co-parental role as he is called on to play the part; the more he apprehends situations as a co-parent, the more opportunities he has for distancing himself from the former parental role.

- the co-parental construct systems of those separated fathers with more grasp of their child's point of view will be less simple; those less child-oriented will display simple systems. A father whose co-parental constructs allow him to make better predictions of the similarity, difference or both between events in the separated family's realm will be better placed to predict his child's considerations.

- those individuals whose superordinate constructs in the co-parental system are able to encompass new constructs as elements will be less prone to hostility (inter-parental conflict). If a father is flexible in how he construes his role in the family situation, he will be able to cope with its vagaries and co-operate successfully with the child's mother.

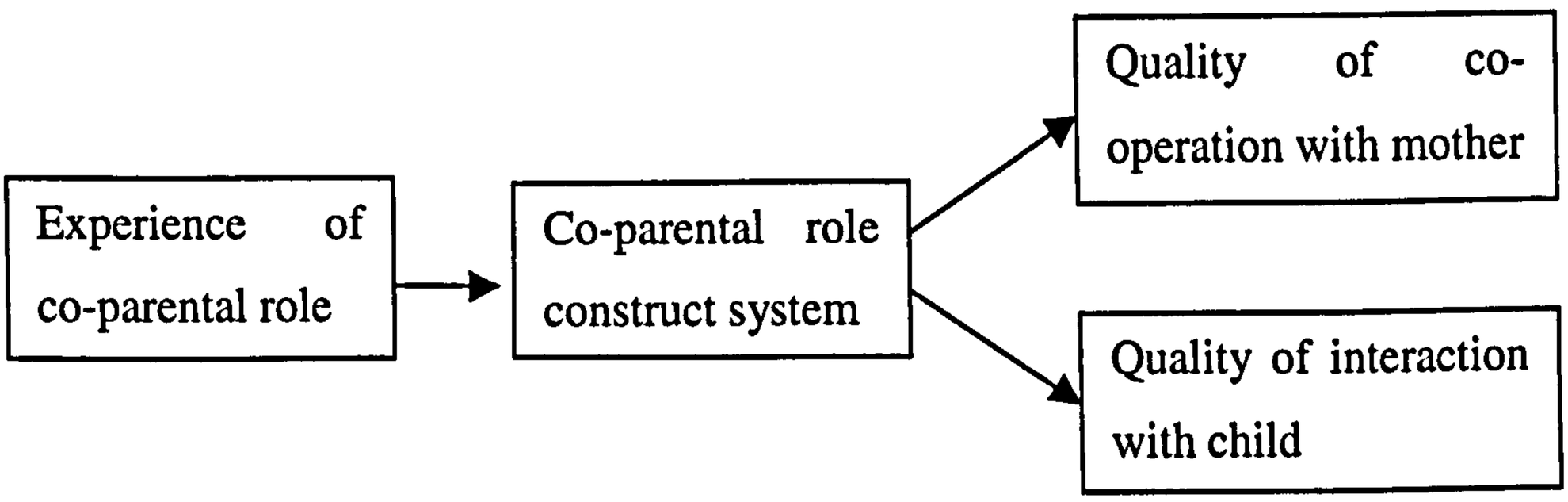


Figure 3.1 Representation of model of the co-parental role for fathers

3.5 Strengths of a PCP approach

Several features of Personal Construct Psychology and repertory grids make this qualitative approach suitable for this study. The very rich set of both expressive and statistical data derived from a relatively small sample allows the examination in depth of both the meanings underlying particular cases and the ways those meanings function for that individual. This is particularly useful given the difficulties of establishing contact with separated fathers (Mayes et al., 2000). The findings from repertory grid data are valid to the extent that they represent the fathers' subjective reality, not something external and permanent. For this reason, a personal construct approach can escape the problem of self-report identified by Seltzer (1991) and others

by not seeking to avoid fathers' interpretative input. Nor is the researcher's input denied. Instead of trying to demonstrate that an explanation of some of the data stands independent of the researcher who devised it, the researcher's interpretative role is acknowledged in the 'conversation' of a repertory grid (tackling the qualitative concern of *reflexivity* (Banister et al., 1998)). A subjective explanation coherent with all of a dense body of information can provide broadly applicable findings. If some features of an explication based on repertory grids are not demonstrable in another population the greater range, volume and depth of the data from each subject allows any difference to be understood or explored in the new context, rather than used to discount the findings and start again. This qualitative criterion of *generalisability* (Johnson, 1999) should be looked for in the ability of repertory grid results to explain all the problems of co-parenting rather than any re-test reliability (Fransella & Bannister, 1977). Hill further notes that Kelly prescribed "usefulness and increased understanding" over what Mahoney terms "bedrock validity" (Hill, 1990; Mahoney, 1988 p.5, cited ibid.).

All concepts, themes and measurement units dealt with derive from participants' own thought and terminology, rather than the conceptions of other populations or the researcher. Using repertory grids will also give the data a statistical basis while expanding on the context of such information. Adopting a theoretical model of separated fatherhood based on personal construct theory would also be a means of consolidating the diversity of contributions in existing literature to our understanding of the issues for this research. Finally, the separated family has recently been recast as a social entity defined by relationships in permanent flux and increasing in complexity, rather than a reconfiguration of the previous unit arrived at after a period of time (Smart & Neale, 1999). A sequence of repertory grid interviews with a cohort can give a longitudinal dimension by which patterns of change and development in fathers' construing can be assessed. The transitional model outlined above offers this project a means of considering the research issues within a single conceptual framework, and forming coherent predictions about these diverse perceived behaviours. Testing such predictions will allow us to consider whether problems relating to separated fathers can be considered an outcome of the changes that separation has brought on, and establish the potential for overcoming these problems. But it is important, as before, to recognise that persons are viewed as systems of

change in PCT. Fathers may not have a very good grasp of their child's constructs at a given time; but if their construing should become more sophisticated the more they encounter co-parental situations, it becomes important for policy to acknowledge the need or opportunity for separated fathers to transform their parenting.

Chapter 4 Group Interviews with Separated Fathers

In chapter 3, qualitative methods were identified as an appropriate and useful means of studying the views and experience of non-resident fathers; and a co-parental role for these fathers was modelled using personal construct theory. In order that this model could be tested, a definition or understanding of what constituted the co-parental realm was required. Rather than have this decided by the researcher, a series of group interviews were conducted to examine what being a co-parent meant for a sample of separated non-resident fathers, in their own terms. The current chapter describes this first step. As well as highlighting common and particular issues in fathers with a diverse range of experience, these data were used to identify common situations in their accounts. Treated as elements, these archetypal situations would structure the realm of inquiry for subsequent waves of repertory grid interviews. This chapter will cover method, the results of the thematic analysis, and the development of situational elements.

4.1 Method

4.1.1 Design

As discussed in Chapter 3, unstructured interviewing of groups of respondents was seen as an appropriate means of gathering data from separated fathers. The format of the interviews followed the principles of focus group theory and practice advocated by Barbour & Kitzinger, (1999). The benefits of this design for this research were seen to depend on there being at least one other separated father for any participant to talk with, exempting the researcher from having to take an active part in the discussion. However, since some authors define a focus group as consisting of three or more respondents, the interviews here are simply referred to as group interviews. Four interviews were to be conducted, to allow different discourses to be constructed depending on the varied experience of those present.

4.1.2 Materials

A protocol of relevant, non-leading questions was prepared by the researcher, to be used on an ad hoc basis to start or re-start discussion between participants, or to redirect conversation where it was felt to be straying too far from the research issues (Appendix A).

4.1.3 Participants

Between May and October 2000, separated non-resident fathers from Strathclyde Region were recruited as participants through contacts in family service organisations, and publicity in national and local media; a study description was supplied to these agencies and interested individuals (Appendix B). Forty-eight men responded, three of whom lived too far away. During the initial recruitment phone call, the nature of the project was explained. Participation was agreed on a voluntary and anonymous basis, though expenses were paid; a letter arranging participation in the next interview and giving information about the study was then sent (Appendix B). The only initial recruitment criterion was that the respondent's children should be aged less than 18 at the end of the study. However, the third meeting highlighted a considerable disparity between the experience and discourse of fathers unable to see their children and those maintaining contact, making it difficult to integrate their input. Those with no contact were not able to discuss its practice, tending to want to talk about their (frequently extreme) legal and court experiences instead. The main research questions, concerning the experience of contact, were inapplicable to these men. Since this divide hindered the discussion, and since the interviews were intended to explore fathers' perceptions of being a parent rather than a litigant, only those respondents who had seen their non-resident child at least once within the last month were asked to participate in the final group.

A random sample was seen as an unrealistic expectation, and indeed some recurring characteristics of volunteers were apparent. Those who responded were disproportionately: well versed in the language and concepts of social studies or social work; divorced for a number of years; from a higher socio-economic

background; and vociferously adversarial towards their former partner. Many turned out to have contacted or be part of the pressure group Families Need Fathers; FNF members in the interviews tended repeatedly to divert the conversation from discussions of contact experience to an agenda along the lines of the organisation's policies on legal matters. The sample, then, is perhaps not as diverse as might have been desired. However, the accounts provided by those attending proved to be extremely varied.

Four of the 38 eligible respondents declined to take part, or said they would think about it and did not contact again. The other 34 were contacted whenever a group was next being organised, to arrange their attendance. A further two respondents declined to take part at this stage, and seven were unable to be contacted again. Finally, of the 25 who arranged to attend a group interview, eleven did not turn up. The attrition from the sample may reflect the transitory circumstances in which respondents find themselves; several of those who took part mentioned that they were staying with relatives or about to move house. It may also be that high proportions of separated or divorced fathers have employment requiring them to travel or be away from home quite frequently.

Participants described a range of employment, though mostly middle class - engineers, teachers, social service or voluntary sector workers, media workers, but also a building worker and former oil rig worker. Although no structured interviewing took place at this stage, some quantitative information about participants' background or circumstances emerged from their discourse or was volunteered over the phone during recruitment. This information is of interest, and as such is indicated below. However, it is important to recognise that the figures apply only to those participants whose contributions contained this information; for each point, an indication of how many of the sample this applied to is given:

- All 14 participants indicated at some point whether they currently had arrangements in place for contact with their child(ren); 11 did, 3 did not.

- Twelve fathers mentioned the number of complete years they had been separated. For these 12, years of separation ranged from one to 12, with a mean of 5.17. Two fathers, however, did not supply this information in the discussions.

- Five participants mentioned new relationships for themselves in their contributions to the groups; the other nine did not indicate whether they had a new partner. Two fathers stated that their child's mother had formed a new relationship since the separation; the other 12 participants did not indicate their ex-partner's current status.

- Where participants indicated how many children they had (other than those by current partners), the number ranged from one to four. The mode for the sample was one, with seven fathers having a single child.

- Some participants indicated the ages of their children from the separated relationship. Ages for the oldest children ranged from 3 to 19, while the age of the youngest child ranged from 1 to 15.

4.1.4 Procedure

The group interviews (one in FMS West in the afternoon and three in Glasgow University in the evening) normally lasted around an hour and were facilitated by the researcher. Discussions were unstructured where possible. Fathers were simply asked to talk about their experience and opinions as separated parents, and prompted where necessary using a list of standard prompts (to avoid excessive divergence or a hiatus in conversation). Participants were also advised that if they did not feel willing or able to talk about some aspect of their experience they were under no obligation to do so. Tea and coffee were provided, and participants were offered £10 towards expenses.

4.1.5 Data processing

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher; the documents were then imported to NVivo software for coding and thematic analysis. These data were primarily intended to offer a rich source of fathers' perspectives on the issues raised in a previous study, and to identify situations demarcating a co-parental role for use as elements in a series of repertory grids.

4.1.6 Analysis

Issues of the relationship between parents, quality of father-child contact, losing touch with families and services for separated fathers have been identified as central to this research. Text was initially coded within a framework of four broad headings representing these issues:

- Co-parenting
- Father-child relationship
- Disengagement
- Support

with further categories being developed on an inductive basis where themes were seen to recur in the participants' discourse (Hayes, 2000). Coding was not exclusive; thus, an item could be included under more than one category. During coding, it also became apparent that material being coded at categories representing two of the research issues, **father-child relationship** and **co-parenting** was always coded for one or more other categories. These latter nodes were therefore grouped under one of the two issue-based headings as sub-categories. In this way the data were organised such that the fathers' perspective on co-parenthood could be considered in both their own terms and those of the research questions.

Secondly, a co-parental role has been proposed distinct from that of parents who live together as a family. A further objective of the coding exercise was to identify a set of familial situations or scenarios whose comparison would give access to participants' construction of such a role. These would have to be recognisable

enough for participants with a broad range of circumstances to identify them in their own experience. Material in which speakers describe or refer to any such situation in their personal experience was therefore coded together. The 'coding on' of this material into an emergent typology is discussed in section 4.3.

4.2 Results of thematic analysis

The subsequent sections each describe what was coded under one of the main headings for the analysis, the first four relating to the research issues and the last to what emerged from the participants' accounts:

- Co-parenting
- Father-child relationship
- Disengagement
- Support
- Emergent Issues

4.2.1 Coparenting

This heading contained material dealing with the maintenance of contact arrangements, a major cause for concern among mothers in a previous study (Mayes et al., 2000). Five subcategories were developed for this heading: relationship between parents, control and other aspects, decisions, exchange of children and new partners. These last three, as relatively small categories, will be discussed here as 'other aspects'.

Relationship between parents

Participants frequently described or referred to the relationship between themselves and their ex-partners as having an impact on contact arrangements. This material allows us to examine the presentiments with which fathers engage in these arrangements. Some fathers had taken the view from an early stage that a good relationship with their ex-partner was vital to their functioning as parents, though they acknowledged that this often required a concerted effort:

I really was very, very determined that I was going to retain contact and do everything to retain that contact, so I mean at that point I personally felt that I worked very hard to keep things kind of nice, if you like, between me and ex-partner.

These fathers also tended to recount positive instances of negotiation with their child's mother as having 'helped change, kind of move things on a bit ... in the right direction'. However, the relationship between parents was widely characterised as adversarial. For those most embittered, this tended to be viewed in a legal context:

So that was her one up, I was losing. Very difficult to get a solicitor to take on any case then. Eh, I was basically beaten. That was it, that was ... the ace card.

Negotiations reported by these fathers were characterised by ultimatums and polarised attitudes, and seen as negative occurrences. This created negative expectations of such interaction:

But it's always lurking in the background that will she make things difficult for the children, will she embarrass them, will she go up to the school and start shouting at the teacher?

Some reference was also made to violence in parental interactions, from both sides. One father reported that his partner's violence towards him had kept him from pursuing contact for a period of time, while another saw himself as excessively punished by denial of contact for his own resort to violence:

A skelp on the face is sore and it's stinging but it's no' going to stay with you for the rest of your life.

The participants perceived relations with the children's mother as a major factor mitigating their role as parents after separation. All experienced difficulties in communication arising from these relations. These could be seen either as something that must be overcome through conscious effort, or an unavoidable barrier to parental

participation. They were acknowledged as having an effect on their children's interests, and were often (perhaps unsurprisingly) attributed to the mother's feelings 'because I had left'. But there were some expressions of common responsibility:

This is what I regret now, you know, the arguments that we had in front of the kids, because it really comes back to haunt you in later years

There was also a recognition among those who had been co-parenting for some years that these effects could be short term outcomes of the initial feelings aroused by the break-up, and that the communication difficulties became less of a problem as time wore on:

A lot of the anger starts to subside as well and it has, yeah, definitely been easier.

To summarise, the fathers in these interviews recognised inter-parental relations as central to sustaining contact. However, their experience of that relationship was mostly described as adversarial, though it was felt that the negative aspects of the relationship could be ameliorated by time, or a commitment to making it work. Some participants saw both parents as responsible for conflict.

Control

A rhetoric of control permeated the participants' discussion of co-parenting; they saw themselves as subject to the dictates of mothers in maintaining contact. At a time when both partners are struggling to achieve independence from each other, any perceived influence is likely to be more keenly felt. This may be especially so for men, given prevailing social gender beliefs:

Doesnae matter how you get on in the divorce, if you get away with some money and you get a good lawyer, you're never ever get a, a life where you're going to be a boss again.

The most obvious perception of control was however external to the parents' relationship; the legal system was seen as having an unequivocal preference for

mothers. Most felt that their ex-partners enjoyed the full support of the law for their position. Several also saw this operating through financial considerations – legal aid was seen as freely available to mothers but not fathers, and lawyers' fees were cited as preventing some participants from seeking legal support.

Legally you've no' got a leg to stand on, man. Maybe it's getting better, I don't know, but at the time for me it was, absolute disgrace.

I wasn't getting to see them, I couldn't approach her, she's got interdicts out, this that and the other. All I need to do at the moment is sneeze and I can get, because she's in receipt of legal aid and I'm paying for it, all I need to do is sneeze and I can get another lawyer's letter.

Despite many participants' reported struggle to achieve legal recognition for their position, most saw their former partners as having the power to ignore court decisions at their whim without fear of redress:

There's all sorts of obstacles put in your road and the, the access and custody at the weekend. If you just do something or say something wrong to her

Some participants also felt themselves emotionally manipulated into a subordinate role:

I just agreed to whatever schedule she would say. Cause I knew if I tried to change it, it would be a lot of, of grief and torment involved and eh, it would ... reflect back onto my son and his well-being

Many participants, especially the more embittered, conceived their ex-partner's words and actions as part of an actively malicious agenda against them;

She [most recent partner] *is now seeing how she can abuse the system and has went to my wife's solicitor and is now more than willing to collude to oppress me further*

At a less dramatic level, mothers were seen as using this power, 'that kind of wee bit of pressure on you' to mould contact arrangements to suit themselves.

She was pressurising me into being a weekend Daddy, which is not really what I want to be

This perceived control was also mentioned as a source of difficulty with new partners, experienced as a 'holding role' over the current relationship. Apart from the obvious feelings of anger and upset, many participants spoke of being left with a general feeling of powerlessness. Given this, most could not conceive of themselves as able to function fully as fathers:

I don't have any direction in our son's life, where he's going or anything. Just because she's got the power.

Perceived control by the mother created an underlying tension in all their parental activity, a 'balancing act'. They frequently described what they had to do in terms of putting on a performance – a 'diplomatic tightrope', 'juggling the balls', having to 'sit up and beg' - suggesting a feeling of pressure or exposure. This qualified their parental interaction:

You always think about what you're going to say to her

Being a non-resident father meant that 'you're kind of trapped into getting on with the mother but the mother isn't trapped into getting on with you'. Many felt a need not to be seen as a 'bad father'. Continuing with whatever contact was available was held to be essential for the children. In this, the mother's 'power' could be approached either as something to be borne with resignation; as something to work at and try to improve; or as something to be overcome, defeated:

you're always focussing on what's right for your kids, so you say, "No problem, I'll bring her home or I'll do this or I'll do that"

And you go "Well … can I maybe get him the next weekend?" And you try and sort of do that kind of deal.

he asked me if I would video the school concert at Christmas there, and - So I was there, I was the star man! She was kind of pissed off. Cause she had it all her own way in primary school, but things are changed now.

A less antagonistic reaction to the mother's power tended to come from the younger fathers in the interviews.

In summary, the participants saw themselves as controlled by their ex-partners. Various motivations were ascribed to mothers for pursuing this through preferential legal status or emotional tactics. The control, under which fathers felt like performers, was seen as heightening difficulties with being a parent, and with forming new relationships. The participants attested to different strategies for coping with this.

Other aspects

Other material coded under **co-parenting** dealt with involvement in decisions; exchange of children; and new partners.

The participants by and large felt that they were excluded from decisions affecting their children's lives. Most described being 'kept in the dark' about important choices through poor communication with the children's mother, schools, and doctors, or else treated as a secondary parent. Some resorted to asking children for information, though they did perceive that this might put the children under pressure. In terms of more routine decisions about what was appropriate for their child, some fathers would apply their own set of 'house rules' when they had contact, accepting that a different parental decision might apply in the child's other home:

So I phoned his Mum and said, "Look, you might hear this CD at your house. But listen, I'm across this. I've listened to it. I'm going to have a chat with him about it, about the language that's used in it."

Consultation over child-rearing issues was reported as more achievable by those with some degree of stability of contact.

In the interviews, the exchange of children between parents emerged as a manoeuvre that threw co-parenting issues into sharp relief, creating difficulties of accommodating the other parent's schedule, communication, and organising children's clothes etc. A new partner for either parent was also seen as increasing the potential for problems in maintaining contact, though as this only applied to around half the sample it was not discussed as fully as it might have been.

The participants, then, saw themselves as disenfranchised in child-rearing, with new partners or the hand-over of children intensifying tension in the co-parental relationship. However, these fathers may, at different points, hold distinct perceptions of themselves and their ex-partners as either competitors or collaborators. Comparing material coded under 'parents' relationship' with that coded under 'control' revealed little overlap; any collaborative aspects of the co-parenting were discussed separately from issues of power. The elaboration of fathers' understanding of co-parenting provided by these data also informs the views of mothers identified in the PIP evaluation (Mayes et al., 2000). In that study, many mothers complained of their ex-partner's poor observance of contact arrangements. Here, one father interpreted his ex-wife's challenge that he was not abiding by contact agreements as an attempt to assert control and broker a better deal in the legal arena:

But she, to this day, has still got the power to stop it, or if I say 'oh I can't pick him up this weekend' she's got the power to get her lawyer to send me a letter. "You fought through the court for these access, for these hours you agreed to them. And now you're not turning up."

This participant had indeed spoken of years of struggle to be able to see his children, and had complained of his ex-wife's expectations that he should look after the

children when she wanted to make other arrangements. Yet in the quote above, he still found it reasonable that he should be absolved of a contact commitment if he felt unable to make it himself - 'I can't pick him up this weekend'. These data remind us that fathers' accounts will serve to enhance their idea of themselves. However, they also demonstrate that fathers are aware of co-parenting problems as issues, but hold distinct constructions of how these problems arise and how they could, or should, be dealt with. While they may recognise, for instance, the impracticality of a rigid schedule of contact exchanges, requests for 'one-off' changes may be understood as simple contingencies or direct attempts at manipulation by the other parent.

4.2.2 Father-child relationship

Another issue for this research is the perception of how separated fathers spend time with their children; the heading above was used to code any material relevant to this. Some of the material simply described what took place during contact. The practical difficulties experienced by fathers were also highlighted, as were the participants' expectations of contact and the understanding they had of their children's expectations. Finally, references to feelings experienced in their relationship with their children were gathered.

Contact & practical difficulties

There was no discussion of the experience of contact from one group; despite some prompts from the researcher, these participants persistently returned to discussing legal matters and their relationship with their former partner, rather than the time spent with their children. This may be a reflection of the priorities of some individuals, who were vociferous, bitter, and engaged in extremely accusatory legal disputes. These fathers tended to dominate the discussion, repeatedly trying to interrupt, talk over others or leave no pauses for others to come in. However, this was also the largest group; it may be that discussing a relationship with one's child needs a more conducive environment than a large and somewhat bullish group of male litigants. In the other groups, fathers spoke of the need to establish a routine in contact arrangements if they were to succeed. Many commented on the

inappropriateness of their new home as a venue for contact due to its size or facilities. The fathers' home emerged as a place visited rather than stayed in by the child, which many felt created an artificiality in their activities with the children. It was seen as harder to let children 'be themselves'. Without the friends and possessions with which children were most familiar, the participants felt there was more pressure on them to occupy their child's time. Swimming, cycling lessons, or trips were commonly mentioned as contact activities, though those who had been separated longer spoke of gradually being able to view homework or spending time in the house as contact activities in their own right. Many had experienced, or were continuing to experience an expansion in the parental role they had prior to the separation. Cooking for the child, transporting them, and difficult 'talks' were all cited as duties new or relatively new to participants, though whether some of this was a reflection of the child's development rather than the separation was hard to gauge. Maintaining separate 'house rules' was also tricky for many fathers.

Most of the practical difficulties in maintaining contact involved financial considerations and employment commitments, which were never referred to as a lesser priority. Organising babysitting was seen as a practical problem, as well as raising feelings of guilt at missing time with children. Several participants described feeling "schizoid", or torn between commitments as a persistent sense. Despite this, when participants did speak of the time spent with their children, it was always described in strongly positive terms, as 'great!', 'it's everything!'

In summary, then, not all fathers seemed able or willing to discuss time spent with their children. Where it was discussed, though, contact time tended to be eulogised over, but presented many logistical and contextual problems; a transformed or increased set of duties associated with parenthood had to be assimilated following separation.

Expectations

Almost all participants saw their children as expecting or wanting contact itself:

And, and my son said the other week, you know, I'll - on a Thursday night he thinks, "Oh that's good, I'm seeing my Dad tomorrow".

They did, however, recognise that the constraints of situation, finances and time referred to above could conflict with their children's expectations; this left one father feeling that:

without even meaning to I think they can become quite mercenary about it.

One father also found the different expectations of his two children arising from their different ages was a particular problem. The time available for contact meant that only one child was likely to get to do what they wanted with their father. Furthermore, there was some acknowledgement from those with older children that a child's expectations of contact might exceed what the father could cope with while they were young, but end up short of his expectations by the time they were teenagers.

there's, you know, the worst thing a thirteen-year-old can have is his Dad as his best friend. I mean he's got to be in the company of other thirteen or fourteen year olds.

There were also noticeable differences among participants of different ages in terms of what they *themselves* expected from contact:

I wanted to - I want to speak to her every day of my life.

Younger fathers tended to seek involvement in all aspects of their children's lives, while older fathers were more likely to complain of a lack of attention from their children or poor discipline; this may, however, reflect the different ages of their children. Several participants spoke of the desire to know more about their child or hear more from them, but felt they had to offset this need against the risk of causing a 'scene'.

I was upsetting her [respondent's daughter] *by phoning every day. So I have to back off now and just speak to her occasionally, because it was having an effect on her.*

Most of the respondents felt that contact arrangements did not offer enough time to do all they'd want with their children; festivals without the children were mentioned as particularly depressing. The impulse to lavish expense on children was frequently discussed, along with the difficulties of learning to control this. One father found that his new family had helped him gain a sense of proportion in what he could or should provide for his child:

And you do go over, you overcompensate I think at the beginning in so many ways. I've found that I'm just trying to level things out a bit, em, where it's not all treats and going out and doing special things em because well, because you can't afford to. But also it's not, eh, it's, I don't think it's good for the child.

Participants, then, saw both themselves and their children as wanting continued involvement with each other. But there was recognition that both children's and fathers' expectations had to be compromised under the circumstances of a contact relationship, though this was not necessarily a bad thing.

Feelings

The feelings mentioned in connection with their children tended to represent the negative side engendered by the problems of contact, though never held against the children. Participants mentioned feeling angry, confused, destroyed, desperate, guilty, jealous, "mad things", unsure, or easily upset. This focus may be partly an expression of the sense of collective outrage that the groups tended to foster:

I've cried so much about my own situation as I'm quite sure each and every individual here has if they're really wanting to be honest about that. Em, that's part and parcel of it. And I would cry for every one of you myself because I thought I'd really heard all the horror stories.

However, this indicates that the participants maintain strong feelings about their children. Some mention was also made, though, of positive feedback from children giving a sense of joy and progress:

you're getting the, the - a double eh benefit from it, knowing that you're enjoying it but also that they're enjoying it as well.

Either way, there was a recognition that the feelings under the restrictions of a contact situation were intense and changeable:

And with love and with the feelings that go with love there's a lot of conflicting feelings. Sometimes you're, you're ok about it, sometimes you're down in the dumps. You can be angry about it, you can laugh about it, you can - So there's a lot of emotions fluctuating within that, that system as well.

Rather than feelings generated by the father-child relationship itself, then, the fathers' accounts tended to focus on their feelings about the constraints on that relationship. These were negative, but this may have been a reflection of the time or composition of the group, since feelings were described as fluctuating considerably.

4.2.3 Disengagement

Terminating contact with children and their mother to make things better in the long term, 'walking out', has been identified elsewhere as a conscious decision taken by some fathers (Kruk, 1992b; Simpson et al., 1996). At the time of the group, none of the fathers saw themselves as disengaged; while some had not seen their children for some time, they all still expressed an intention or desire to do so. Loss of contact, then, was mostly referred to as a threat or a condition imposed on fathers; yet it had been, or was still, considered as a possible strategy by some participants. (Indeed, one participant has 'disengaged' as a conscious decision since the grid interview). There was, however, a wide variation in what disengagement might be attributed to, or how it might be rationalised: 'for the good of my health', the impossibility of overcoming 'the wife's influence', legal/financial obstacles, or the effects of the ex-partner's violent behaviour on the children. Nonetheless, fathers who had 'disengaged' at some time before did caution against it, having found it to be detrimental for themselves and their children in the long run:

I got back in contact with her two years ago, em, it's virtually, it's not impossible. You can get back to a sorta, a relationship. But what you're confronted with is a stranger. I mean that was eight years.

One participant described a complete break from the family as an 'old-fashioned' idea; he himself considered that a father who took such a course of action was 'giving up too much'. Although disengagement was recognised by the participants as a course of action that could be taken by a father, then, it tended to be framed as something undesirable, not a choice for most of these fathers.

4.2.4 Support

The fourth research issue was the provision of services for separated parents, and their uptake by fathers.

Services for separated parents, where an opinion was expressed, were seen as being geared to women's needs. Mediation was seen as unsatisfactory for various reasons, including poor organisation and availability. One father had repeatedly found that CALM lawyers he had approached were unable to take them on or simply ignored them; another father found that practical difficulties of getting to a Family Mediation office by car put him off attending.

More commonly, problems were attributed to the refusal of the child's mother to participate. This did not imply that the speaker was poorly disposed towards mediation per se; in fact compulsory mediation was frequently hailed as a positive idea by these participants. Those who had actually attended mediation sessions with their ex-partners had varied experiences. One father, who was still not able to see his children, felt that it had been 'literally a slag off', simply providing his wife with a platform to inveigh against him. Others (with some contact with their children) found that the Family Mediation Service had 'treated us both equally', and brought about some change:

we ended up going to that, cause, cause just, couldn't talk to each other. And that was quite good from my point of view because I said what I have to say; she said what, what she had to say. And just someone being there was enough

One father who had been to CALM lawyers had found them prohibitively expensive, and offering less chance of success in his terms:

It's a money-making exercise. They want to string it along. If you want to get a lawyer, mean I've, what I've discovered is, if you want a lawyer, you need to get one of these hard-nosed criminal lawyers that does a wee bit of civil work on the side. Cause they go h-hell for leather. But they do good.

The only other organisation cited as helpful was the pressure group Families Need Fathers, whom many had contacted or found out about (though only a few had joined). Some had done so through the internet. It may be noteworthy that this group is run by and for men. Although it is not specifically promoted as a 'men's group', fathers may feel more comfortable contacting them for this reason. Finally, several fathers had received support and advice from their own families, or described discussing things with their friends or colleagues as helpful.

Have to say at the time I separated I didn't really know about the existence of, you know, of the organisations that might have provided support, really. So there wasn't anybody at that time, other than friends and family. Funnily enough, I've got a friend at the moment who's going through a separation, so I mean I find in a way maybe it's part of the benefit of the experience as well. He seems to feel ok talking to me about it and I feel I'm able to speak to him as a friend about that as well, so I mean I think that can be important.

Participants in the fourth group in particular felt that their own mothers had been a source of valuable advice. And two of the older participants had found their workplace to be a nexus of informal 'counselling' among divorcees. However, there was some feeling that talking to friends and family could only go so far before one became a liability:

eventually I turned round and noticed my friendship with him was really going down the toilet. So I had to apologise and say, right I won't talk about it again. So I end up talking to myself.

Only one father saw it as important to evaluate advice critically, taking into account who was offering it:

That's one potential danger is that you find in the field of law people have, people have trained in the law and they can be experts in that field. But I think people who deal in child law should also have training and awareness of issues of child development as well.

To summarise, fathers were aware of mediation services, but mostly cited various reasons for not using them. Some of those who had been reported positive experiences; it was felt by others that attendance at such services should be made compulsory, and that this would make them more effective. Support was more likely to have been experienced from networks of family and friends, and this was seen in a more favourable light. However, there was a risk that sympathies could become strained if a father 'went on' too much; and the context or source of any advice should always be evaluated rather than accepted on faith.

4.2.5 Emergent Themes

Where recurring themes were found that did not correspond directly to any of the identified research issues, coding categories were established to accommodate these. In this way, the research can better apprehend the particular ways in which fathers themselves view their situation. These categories included 'good things', 'a place to stay', 'money', 'blame' and 'control'. Prior text was re-coded whenever any new categories were established in this initial process.

Good Things

Some positive light was shed on being a separated parent. Nobody regretted their separation on balance. Several participants felt separation had improved relations with their child's mother, and suggestions were made of benefits to themselves (they had a greater appreciation of the time they now spent with the children) and to their children. The children enjoyed a broader experience of family life, encountered less parental conflict, and their parents sought to compensate them in other ways for remaining separate.

Family history

Participants frequently used their own experience *of* separated parents as a yardstick for their experience *as* separated parents. There was, however, a tension in the simultaneous wish to acknowledge this as both a source of their behaviour (inevitable) and a model of what to avoid (subject to their initiative). Thus, having come from a family where the father was largely absent was sometimes used to rationalise a participant's own fragmented relationship with his child:

I didn't have my father there to guide me or to guide my brothers. And I think we're sitting here and we're, we're in the same scenario. You didn't see your father and I've no' seen my father. D'you think somehow that's tied into our relationships or how we're turned out in our relationships?

More frequently, however, some participants saw this as giving them a greater motivation to make contact work:

I was actually, I grew up in a lone parent family myself, and my parents split up when I was two and I never saw my dad, I never had a dad relationship. So I think from that point of view I was extra conscious of it; and I was very, very determined to, to, to stay in contact.

Money

Perhaps as a corollary of their strong negative views of the Child Support Agency, money was a fairly constant concern for these fathers. The costs of legal fees, mediation, contact and settlement were seen by some participants as a device used manipulatively or maliciously by ex-partners to disrupt contact arrangements. If for example a court-ordered contact provision was not observed, this was likely to be seen as a calculated tactic on the understanding that the father could not afford to enforce the order through further legal action:

After three or four letters I've had to cancel cause I cannae afford eighty, eighty-five quid for letters. You've got to bow down and grovel to your ex-partner

One participant described how his ex-wife inflated the real cost of school trips she expected him to pay for. Financial matters, then, emerged as a polarising influence, in that those who talked most about money described the least harmonious relationships. There was also considerable awareness of the costs of contact on top of the payment of Child Support:

mean when I first started seeing her the first six months easily a hundred and twenty pound out of my wages I was spending on that one day.

Courts

Discussion of adverse experiences in court took up the bulk of one interview. There was a strong desire among these participants to have contact schedules ordered and enforced by the courts, with their own observance of these orders vindicated and the mother recognised as having disregarded them. Yet none of the respondents seemed satisfied with what legal support they had received for their situation; courts in fact tended to be blamed and labelled as oppressive mainly by those who looked to them for redress. The following exchange illustrates the simultaneous views of legal action as an essential strategy and a lost cause:

A.H. *But, at the end of the day, all my wife has to do is turn round and says, I mean say, "The children are sick. You're no' seeing them tonight," and there is nothing you can do about it as far as I can gather.*

D.S. *Just as, though, that's contempt of court like, you should bring a court order. If they're sick you usually [A.H. Well, but I-] had the responsibility of looking after them. If they're [A.H. Right, ok, well I-] bedridden, then that's, that's*

A.H. *Yeah, I havenae, havenae got to that stage but the process that you have to go through - if she turns round and says, "The children are sick", what do you do? Go back to court [D.S. costs you money] say, "My wife didnae hand the children over". It's costing me money.*

For D.S., the most appropriate response for A.H. to take to not getting to see his children is to 'bring a court order'. A.H. sees this as his ultimate recourse; yet recognises the likely futility of trying to present such a case to the court, even if he could afford it.

The accounts of those with extensive court experience in connection with separation or contact were redolent of court, e.g. "the sheriff refused to take on board my undertaking not to go near the ex-marital home". Experiences were often recounted in a rehearsed manner as if presenting testimony:

My wife was wanting me to take my daughter to my mother's on the nights that she worked and I says no, you're not on. Continuity in a child's care of just over a year (she'd, by this time she was coming up a year and a half) is, is obviously the paramount concern, to keep that child in the, in a home that she's used to. Continuity with both parents actively involved in her life until such a time as I could receive my own premises, could get it furnished. And then we could sit down and look at the parenting issues and how we share that residence that we'd agreed on.

Went to the interim hearing. I got a letter in the 9th of February that the hearing was on the tenth, stating that I agreed to my wife having residence of our daughter and I

agreed to the divorce on my unreasonable behaviour. They would not seek the interdict. Now that is an appalling abuse of process.

These fathers' keenness to point out how an ex-partner or someone on her 'side' had been in breach of law suggests that with repeated or prolonged packaging of their experiences for court, family situations tend to be perceived first and foremost as an extension of the courtroom struggle.

Emergent themes in the data showed that, despite their difficulties, these fathers were able to see the separation as a positive outcome for some aspects of being a parent. Being from a separated family background was more likely to be seen as a motivation for remaining in contact than a reason for losing touch. However, money was a constant source of concern and an aggravating influence. And for some fathers, vindication in a court of law was a powerful objective, even though the legal system might simultaneously be seen as discriminating against them. Prolonged pursuit of legal redress tended to affect how co-parental experience was framed in participants' accounts.

4.2.6 Summary of thematic analysis

- Inter-parental relations were recognised as centrally important, but experienced as adversarial. Negative aspects, which might be seen as the fault of both parents, could improve with time or effort.
- Ex-partners were widely viewed as exerting control through varied means, creating difficulties for participants who felt under pressure to 'perform'. Different responses to this control were described.
- Only some participants discussed time spent with their children, tending to eulogise over it. Contact presented many logistical and contextual problems and required the acquisition of new skills.
- Fathers were aware of mediation services, but held varied opinions of its efficacy, with some in favour of compulsory attendance. Family and friends were a more approved source of support and advice, though within limits; and one father recognised that advice from any source might not be impartial or expert.

- The participants were able to see the separation as a positive outcome in some respects; however money was an important and inflammatory issue. Being from a separated family themselves may have contrasting implications at different times for fathers. A strong desire for legal redress, which sometimes framed participants' accounts, co-existed with a perception that courts and lawyers did not serve their interests.
- Fathers' discourses may operate to bolster their self-image, but demonstrate that they are aware of the issues for this research while operating varied constructions of how these problems arise.

4.3 Situations

I wanted to go up to her [his current partner's] *parents' for a weekend and take L, just have a weekend away up in Aberdeen and in the country sort of thing and eh, and his Mum was like "oh, wait a minute, wait a minute" and things started getting difficult, it's like "wait a minute, no I'm not in control there so I'm not sure if anything's going to happen". So after I, you know, a fair bit of debate and reassurance that he wasn't going to be out of my sight at any time -*

This heading was used to code unsolicited descriptions offered by participants of situations in their experience that required them to function as "co-parents"; that is, negotiating with their former partner over arrangements for their child or taking their child's interests into account while spending time together. Much of this material had also been coded under the thematic headings above. The intention here, however, was to identify the recurrence of particular configurations of events, rather than the significance attributed to them by fathers. By attaching ad hoc descriptions to these accounts, a typology of situations was arrived at. This is outlined below, with examples from the transcripts.

4.3.1 Types of situation

Making mutual decisions with the child's mother

I think both, well, have got our heads together a bit more and we can kind of just discuss something the likes of what school are you gonna go to? You know, and we'll both be totally involved in making that decision.

Participants mentioned times when both parents had to, or should have had to, reach a joint decision regarding their child. These were usually related to the requirements of the education system – permission for school trips, representation at parents' nights etc. – but also included the establishment and alteration of contact arrangements. Some references to exclusion from such decisions were also coded here.

Disagreeing with the mother over what the child is allowed to do -

A week later, because my child or my oldest son didn't get to a birthday party on the south side, a week later we got another letter from her solicitor.

Participants described instances where they had disagreed with the child's mother about some aspect of parental responsibility – what films the child was allowed to watch, what they listened to, how their hair was cut etc.

Mother altering contact arrangements at short notice -

I've had instances where [daughter]'s been with me at the weekend, and her mother would phone and say "Her cousin's arrived, can you bring her home early?" And I think, "Well, that's my weekend knackered because I know what I'm meant to be doing this weekend."

Many references were made to the difficulties of an inflexible contact system. Examples were given of one-off requests by mother, father or occasionally a child to

alter contact arrangements at short notice (for example to organise a trip), or of arrangements being altered by default through failing to abide by them (e.g. turning up late for an exchange). Accounts of the child's mother changing arrangements were usually given to illustrate the uncertainty that the participant had to cope with.

Father altering contact arrangements at short notice -

And something came up and I said "I cannae take him and she said "How no?" And she went completely crazy cause I couldnae take him one Wednesday night when I'd been doing it for months.

In contrast to the previous category, participants tended to describe their own attempts to change standing arrangements temporarily as justified requests met with intractability by the mother. Also, some situations dealt with changing arrangements with the child. One group of fathers discussed whether or how they would arrange supervision for their child during a contact period if they had to go somewhere without the child.

Child altering contact arrangements at short notice -

He phones me sometimes on a Saturday and says "Oh, some of my pals from school are coming round, is it ok if I don't see you today?" [J.T. Mm] Sometimes I'm quite relieved and I say, "As long as you give me notice" you know.

Fathers with older children also found that contact time was beginning to be infringed by their child's activities with their peers. In contrast to the above two categories, this was seen as something to be expected and not directed against the father, though it might cause them some regret.

With the child –

I mean we do go swimming and we do go out to, you know, get her to the cinema or various things like that. It's nice to do that.

Participants described time spent with their child during contact. This could be at the father's residence (maintaining a 'normal home' environment) or on excursions or trips during contact (e.g. to Butlin's, the supermarket).

Situations involving mother's new partner –

when em my ex was first going out with this fella. Em, and he was buying things for my son. Em, and you start thinking, yeah we had, my ex and I had words about, well, you know, why is he buying so many things?

References were made to incidents where tension was created (or assuaged) by the arrival of a new partner for the mother. Participants usually described this as bringing a feeling of uncertainty to their own status, but would also describe such difficulties being overcome.

Situations involving father's new partner –

I've got a new partner and some of the stuff that used to bounce back, the wee one used to come and say "My mum says" such and such.

New partners in a participants' life also gave rise to difficult situations discussed at the interviews.

Father can't meet child's demands -

But the year before I took him, I couldnae afford to take his pal the year before, we went to Disneyland in Paris. And he was really pissed off cause he was there with his Dad.

Many participants spoke of times when they had felt pressure to spend money on their children beyond what they felt they could afford, and described either giving way to this or reasoning with the children. Non-material expectations could also be a problem; fathers might not feel able to provide the time for taking a child somewhere.

One participant also described the difficulties presented by his child's demanding to go back to one parent while with the other one.

Asking the child about their other home (mother's) -

he's only got a wee mind of a five-year-old and I'm asking him, eh, "Where was your Mum last night?" And I'm saying it without thinking. And he feels as if he's an inquisitor

Some fathers discussed times when they felt they had used their child to 'spy' on the mother or her household. This was seen as negative behaviour, but something that was difficult to be aware of at times.

Explaining the family situation to other people –

I think that's the thing that hurts me or affects me most, that although, em, because of my relationship with my ex, I'm still his father, em, you, you drive in [to son's rugby club] *to collect B. And it's 'B's dad' coming to collect him. It's not, "Hi, J, how are you doing?"*

Several participants recounted their feelings when adjusting to a new status within social situations as a separated parent; some talked of this as 'the hardest thing'.

4.3.2 Assessing categories

A further purpose of identifying co-parental situations was to find typical events that might be recognised by other separated non-resident fathers in the repertory grid interviews to follow. Since the researcher formed the definition of a situation and carried out data gathering and analysis, it was felt that the clarity of these categories of situation might be improved by examining how other raters applied the definitions. In elaborating individual conceptions of experience, qualitative research is concerned with the specificity of response and interpretation, rather than isolating replicable characteristics of a sample. Instead, the individual findings of the researcher are

strengthened through *investigator triangulation* (Banister et al., 1998). If analysis is qualified by comparison with other observers' conclusions about the data, then the subjectivity of the original assessment is reduced.

The typology of situations was rated for relevance by independent judges. Six independent raters (3 male, 3 female), all with experience in psychology or working with families, were given a ten minute sample (20^{th} – 30^{th} minute) of each interview (see Appendix C) and asked to code it wherever they identified a 'situation', according to this definition:

> Any event or set of circumstances described as occurring or recurring ***in [the speaker's] own experience*** since separation, in which they interact with their child(ren), their ex-partner, friends or family.

Following this, they were given headings and definitions corresponding to the researcher's typology (see Appendix C) and asked to assign each of the total 75 situations identified by the researcher to one of these categories, with a 1-5 confidence rating. They took between 2 days and 2 weeks to complete the task in their own time. Participants were encouraged to read back through what they had coded after completion and make any changes they deemed necessary; feedback was also sought from all judges following the task, to highlight any uncertainty that was created by the definitions supplied. Their input was considered in relation to the researcher's interpretation; to facilitate this, the researcher also completed confidence ratings for his original assignment of categories.

To see whether these results suggest a corpus of broadly agreed situations in the data, the number of judges coding simultaneously was considered. The researcher had identified situations in 19 passages in the sample transcripts used in the first part of this exercise. All of these were coded by at least one other judge; seven passages contained coding from all 6 judges, five contained coding from 4-5 judges and six contained coding from 2-3 judges. Where material had been coded by a judge but not the researcher, there was little agreement with other judges. The researcher's identification of situations in the sampled documents was therefore largely supported by the judges' selection.

The other half of this exercise examined whether the judges could meaningfully apply the researcher's categories – several people may have identified a situation referred to in the focus group discussion, but did they see it in the same terms as the researcher? The mean confidence rating from all five judges was 2.28 (s.d. 0.51) - 'moderately' to 'quite' confident. While not particularly high, this does argue that the judges found the category system relevant overall to the group of situations. To compare how they applied it a Kappa statistic, an established measure of inter-rater agreement (Carletta, 1996), was calculated, following the procedure for a group of judges rating the same items (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). K for the six judges and the researcher together was 0.42, $p<0.001$. While agreement can be expected to be negatively related to the number of judges (Kappa is often used to compare only two raters), this was still seen as a relatively low score.

To explain this, further analysis was carried out on the confidence and rating data from this exercise following recommendations by Uebersax (2001). It was found that situations that were allocated diversely received low confidence ratings, suggesting that the divergence was due to uncertainty over how the category system could be applied in some cases, rather than a firm difference of opinion about the meanings of particular descriptions or situations. This suggests that a common understanding of the definitions exists among raters, but that the judges do not find them as widely or easily applicable to the situations as the researcher did.

The judges typically showed a low confidence in applying the typology to situations that the researcher coded as *decisions* or *can't meet child's demands*; they tended to code these as *disagreements* or *with the children* instead. This suggested that certain categories were being viewed in a hierarchy to resolve uncertainty. Thus, the judges showed greater confidence in using the categories *with the children* and *disagreement*, and there was more likely to be a consensus among raters in the use of these categories. It may be easier to view any inter-parental negotiations presented in the materials as disagreements, than to discern whether the parents referred to were reaching a child-rearing decision. Likewise, any situation where the father cannot meet the child's demands will probably involve a father being with the children and could more readily be seen in the broader category. A qualitative re-examination of

the situations that gave rise to disagreement supported this view. For instance, it was found that situations coded by the researcher as decisions tended to be coded for 'disagreements' by the judges. On examination, the contested selections did mostly contain differences of opinion on the way to a decision, e.g.:

My wife was wanting me to take my daughter to my mother's on the nights that she worked and I says no, you're not on. Continuity in a child's care of just over a year ... is obviously the paramount concern, to keep that child in the, in a home that she's used to.

Feedback from the judges supported the interpretation of the rating data. The development of elements for the repertory grids described in the next section was informed by this analysis.

4.3.3 Element definitions

Elements were intended to be events that specifically occurred in the enactment of a co-parental role, or had different implications for parents once separated. These elements had to be discrete and interchangeable in the triads used to generate the constructs. Piloting the proposed elicitation procedure suggested that the number of elements should not exceed eight, since more than that might become laborious, time-consuming and potentially confusing for participants. Given the number of types of situation identified, and the results of the judging task, the headings of the researcher's typology of situations needed to be refined for use as elements.

Any obvious hierarchical differences (e.g. those emerging from the judges' exercise) were therefore removed. It was observed that almost all situations involved communication of some sort; therefore, all situations were worded as situations where the respondent was 'talking about...' something in particular, with someone in particular. For instance a specific activity (discussing the next contact time) replaced the heading *with the children* so that *discussing the child's other home* would not be seen as a subset of this. It was also desirable that all respondents should recognise all the elements. Situations involving new partners were not used, since they could both

create hierarchies and exceed the experience of many participants. On a similar basis, it was felt that to maintain a common scope for the separated family, only situations involving respondents' children or the children's mothers should be used; the number of situations involving the child and mother respectively were kept the same. Definitions were thus arrived at for eight elements:

Talking to the child's mother about a school or health issue relating to your child.
Talking to the child's mother about whether a toy, game or activity is suitable for your child.
Talking to the child's mother about a temporary change that she has requested to the contact arrangements.
Talking to the child's mother about a temporary change that you have requested to the contact arrangements.
Talking to your child about a school or health issue relating to them.
Talking to your child about how they have spent the previous week at their mother's house.
Talking to your child about how they want to spend their next contact time with you.
Talking to your child about something that they want but which is beyond your resources.

4.3.4 Summary - situations

- A range of co-parental situations was identified in data from the group interviews. These functioned as instances defining the speaker's personal experience as a separated parent, but were frequently recognised by others present.
- Independent judges provided substantive support for the initial identification of situations within these data, and qualified support for the characterisation of situational types.
- Findings from this stage were used to develop a set of eight situational elements for the repertory grid interviews.

4.4 Discussion of group data

The group interviews provided a rich source of data on separated non-resident fathers' views regarding the research issues. Whatever criticisms have been made in other research of fathers' parental co-operation and observance of contact arrangements, the evidence here suggests that such behaviour is not because they see co-parental

relations as unimportant. The interviewees were well aware of how much their relationship with their children depended on keeping in with the children's mother. However, they did not tend to view interaction between parents as co-operation - they were more likely to see themselves as acting under duress or in competition. This was frequently characterised as performance, and this is perhaps a distinguishing feature of the experience of fathers in the separated family. Whatever they do as parents, they see themselves as being judged on how they conform to the perceptions of others, and feel they are slotting into a co-parental role that does not correspond to their own sense of self. Sustaining performance requires a constant effort and vigilance (having to 'watch what I say') rather than experiencing the role as 'natural'. While sentiments like these are usually voiced as a complaint by the respondents, they may not be so negative from other points of view. Kelly's sociality corollary argues that apprehending another's perspective is essential for maintaining social processes. If fathers are aware of how other family members might see them, they are at least construing their systems. Learning to 'perform' might increasingly lead to successful predictions of family events, and allow the fathers to integrate the new role; even if parenting is 'performance', those who do so continue to interact. But if this aspect is still begrudged, any co-operative relationship may not be stable. Negative evaluations of 'performing ('have to sit up and beg') suggests that such a transition is being resisted, which may generate hostility.

Some fathers were of the opinion that negative features of the co-parental relationship could be improved with effort, or might improve over time. Three strategies for coping with perceived control were identified in the data - putting up with it, negotiating to improve things, or struggling against it. These findings suggest that fathers do seek to rationalise inter-parental problems to themselves, and that many see those problems as something that can be addressed. Furthermore, they show potential as the basis for interventions. If fathers can be encouraged to work with perceived control rather than fight it, this might help generate an acceptance that control can be changed rather than resisted or borne with resentment. This seems more feasible given that although some fathers struggled against control, they continued to see their children.

However, some fathers contradicted themselves in their reasoning, sauce for the goose not being viewed as sauce for the gander. It was seen that one father, who had told of his struggle in court to gain an order for contact, complained of his wife berating him for not turning up for this contact. This failure he saw as entirely justifiable, having been busy at the time. To some degree, then, some fathers tended to see themselves as victimised for behaviour that, had the mother engaged in it, she would perhaps have been seen as wilfully maltreating them. This also suggests that the proactive agenda they ascribed to the children's mothers may function as a construct for apprehending particular behaviours. Again, this indicates that interventions could help fathers examine whether behaviours they see as problematic could be construed differently.

Fathers have elsewhere been criticised for not spending contact time with their children in a manner appropriate to the child (Mayes, Gillies et al., 2002). But the participants reported being confronted with considerable changes in what they had to do and provide for their children following separation. The sample of separated fathers in these interviews can be expected to show volunteer characteristics, i.e. they are likely to be quite committed to their role as (separated) parents. Given the sense of surprise and discovery with which these fathers describe how much things had changed, it seems likely that others in the same situation may not grasp by themselves these unique requirements of contact time. Multiple constraints were also experienced. An unfamiliar home environment for the children, disenfranchisement from a guiding role in the child's life, and the sense of artificiality or 'performance' in parenting discussed above may make it difficult for fathers to interact wholeheartedly with their children during contact time. If a father feels he is 'having to watch what I say', it may constrain his interaction with the child to some extent. The participants were also aware of some disparity between their expectations of contact time and those of their children. The children, of course, may not be aware of this; and how well the father's understanding corresponds to theirs cannot be assessed here. Some participants thought it was important, indeed beneficial, for the child to have their expectations met only within reasonable limits, and this reserve over what is supplied to the child may be carried to excess by some fathers. This, though, was mostly in connection with financial or material resources.

A range of attitudes to contact time was, however, seen in the interviews. In the first, second and fourth interviews, it was variously seen as intensely rewarding, or something to be made as normal as possible, or a creative process of discovery. The third group, meanwhile, did not talk about it at all, despite prompting. The preoccupation of several attendees with legal battles may have tended to overshadow any thoughts of the time with their children they were fighting to achieve. Nonetheless, this avoidance cannot be assumed for all those in the third group; it seems likely that some of those present would perhaps have talked about how they spent time with their children had they been at one of the other interviews. Some fathers, or fathers in certain situations, may be more child-oriented than others; but if it is still difficult for them to talk about that relationship in the group context, it is perhaps not a role or activity that any of them are fully comfortable with. This may in turn contribute to children's feelings of dissatisfaction with contact time. If such is the case, the problem is not fathers' lack of concern or thought about how children experience their time together, but their facility to express or act on that concern. The participants voiced firm views on whether a child should always get what he or she wants; they may also feel that there is not much they could do about these wishes even if resources permitted. But where contact time was discussed, it was always highly valued, especially by younger participants.

The sample of fathers here may not represent those fathers who disengage from their families, given that such individuals may be less inclined to discuss their situation. The indications from some interviewees, however, that they had considered cutting themselves off from their family confirms that this probably is a conscious choice of many fathers in the wider world, even if none of those here had actually done so. However, a number of distinct rationalisations for such a course of action were identified – participants suggested that disengagement might be justified in terms of a father's own wellbeing or that of their children, or out of resignation to the inevitable. But the few fathers at these interviews who were not able to see their children at all tended to see disengagement as something that had been imposed on them. All the interviewees still wanted to see their children, and there was some opinion, especially among younger respondents, that sacrificing this time for the benefit of children was a fallacy. If fathers do take decisions to separate themselves from their children, then the reasons that may drive this choice must be acknowledged to understand and

address the process fully. From the evidence, a decision to lose contact with children would be extremely difficult for a separated father to take. If disengagement is seen as something to be countered, then any intervention should seek to engage the process of this decision.

The participants tended to view what few support services they were aware of as being designed for mothers rather than themselves, and few had made use of any. Problems with mediation services were raised, though some of these may be rationalising a general aversion to attending (e.g. the father who didn't attend because there were no parking spaces). If this is the case, then services must be more proactive in engaging with fathers. Offering practical support specifically in those parental duties that fathers find challenging after separation might be a more neutral way of engaging this population than an intervention that involves their ex-partner. However, the approbation of compulsory attendance voiced by some participants seems of a kind with the desire observed for vindication in the legal arena. Fathers may look to mediation for the same reasons as they look to courts - redressing the imbalance of power they perceive. Finally, if separated fathers view family and friends as a support network, they may be an alternative means of directing information to those individuals. But fathers may be more inclined to seek or accept advice from these sources or from organisations like FNF because they tell them what they want to hear. There was little or no indication in these data that fathers recognised the potential partiality of these voices.

The data from the group interviews, then, are highly informative of the research questions. However the context in which these data were gathered could have had an influence on what emerged at the group interviews. Having been advised that findings from this study were intended to be published, fathers represented here may have tended to be those with a greater urge to broadcast their views and experience. Participants certainly showed interest in why the research was being carried out, what issues were driving it, and for whom it was intended. They were, then, likely to be well-disposed towards the idea of separated families being studied; as mentioned in section 4.1, educational levels and socio-economic status were relatively high among respondents. Yet respondents' initial expressions of interest in the study suggest that they could have been motivated either by a wish to highlight their disadvantage, or to

show that co-parenting *can* work. It cannot be assumed, then, that an interest in the study presupposes a sense of injustice or outrage. Demand characteristics and social desirability suggest that those present would tend to present their experience in a positive light; or show themselves to be good fathers. But since questioning was unstructured, it was left to respondents to decide what constituted a positive light on their experience; this in itself is informative. For instance, some sought to present themselves as flexible co-operative co-parents, while other, more aggrieved participants were more concerned to show how scrupulously they had complied with court orders.

The circumstances of speaking in a room full of men must also have shaped the participants' discourse, although mixed company would perhaps simply have presented a different constraining effect. Participants may have felt less able to empathise with mothers under the circumstances, or discuss their relationship with their child, especially in the presence of a domineering individual with a sense of outrage. This seems to have been the case at the third interview, where the limited contributions of some participants suggested they held relatively moderate views. Indeed, particular configurations of interviewees will have shaped particular discourses. There was more discussion of what a father's role should be among a trio of fathers with different ages and backgrounds at the second interview. Likewise, only two fathers in the sample discussed, with each other, the support they received from their own mothers. It seems likely that other interviewees had similar experiences, but that this was only expressed by the two who discussed it as a result of the direction of their conversation. Of course, the intention of having four interviews was to generate different aspects. In considering these findings, then, the amount of fathers expressing a view is not necessarily an indicator of its general importance.

These interview data present a group of individuals who express a strong concern for maintaining involvement with their children while not resident with them, but whose concern has led them to quite diverse circumstances and conclusions about their role. It was seen that the participants operated distinct understandings of their ex-partners at different times. A balance of different views of other family members suggests that a basis exists for an intervention geared to change, more so than if one unvarying

attitude was held towards each of them. The observed influence of the legal context on the style of some participants' discourse shows how such perspectives can be altered. This raises questions about the validity of separated father's answers to structured survey questions in research that adopts such a methodology, particularly where data is gathered by postal questionnaires, and highlights the limitations of hypothesising characteristics of separated fathers as a population, rather than appraising them on an individual basis.

Finally, the findings from the group interviews offer support for the co-parental role model outlined in chapter 3. The unexpected difficulties and new requirements under contact described by participants are indicative of a new role as co-parents. Furthermore, some participants were able to describe adaptation to this role either through time or concerted effort. At various points, participants ascribed a separate viewpoint to either their children (their expectations of contact) or the children's mother (seeing him as a 'weekend Daddy'). The various responses described to perceived control and the accounts of legal wrangling, however, suggests that not all find that their construal of the construct systems of child and mother lead them to successful predictions, with resulting hostility. Drawing such conclusions from group interviews rather than from individuals must necessarily be tentative. Because the data were gathered through fathers' discussions amongst themselves, specific ideas cannot be pursued as they emerge. However, a number of distinct family situations were identified with which participants instantiated their experience as separated, non-resident parents. Used as elements in repertory grid interviews, these can provide a working definition of the co-parental realm within which to explore the construing of individual fathers. By administering these on multiple occasions, the development of the varied perceptions identified in this chapter can be measured, and compared with what is prescribed by law or theorised as the role of co-parental fathers. An account of such a study is presented in the succeeding chapters.

4.5 Conclusions

- Four unstructured group interviews were conducted with separated non-resident fathers from the Glasgow area, discussing their experience as co-parents.

- The importance of the co-parental relationship to maintaining child contact is recognised by separated fathers, but perceptions of co-operation as capitulation or performance will contribute to difficulties in that relationship.

- Fathers' strategies for dealing with perceived control can inform interventions, which should be designed to address the bases of (potentially inconsistent) views of the actions of each parent.

- Unfamiliarity with a new role, a sense of artificiality, parenting beliefs or inhibitions all may contribute to unsatisfactory contact experiences for children.

- Disengagement is seen by separated fathers as a potentially justifiable strategy, but a bad idea in the long term.

- Services for separated fathers should be proactive in reaching the population, and should address a number of issues:

  - expectations that mediation will deliver what fathers also expect from the courts;
  - a perception of family and friends as a likelier source of support or advice;
  - perceptions that services are intended for women, and the popularity of organisations with a largely male profile
  - fathers' potential selectivity in accepting advice

- Some initial support was found for the co-parental role model; situations particular to this role were identified and used as elements to define a co-parental realm.

- The importance of recognising the individual experiences of separated fathers is highlighted in these data.

Chapter 5 First wave of repertory grid interviews

This chapter will present and discuss findings from an initial wave of semi-structured and repertory grid interviews conducted with a sample of separated fathers whose children did not live with them, but who still saw them. Taking place between May and October 2001, these provided quantitative and qualitative data (both verbal and statistical) for analysis. Findings from these interviews are discussed under the following headings:

- Method
- Background
- Construct content
- Element relationships
- Construct-element relationships
- Predictive relationships between constructs

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Design

The interviews contained three components: a semi-structured interview gathering background information, a questionnaire regarding inter-parental communication, and a repertory grid interview, using supplied elements to elicit constructs.

5.1.2 Participants

Twenty fathers were recruited for these interviews, all from Strathclyde region. All had at least one non-resident child of school age from whose other parent they were separated. Some had previously taken part in the group interviews; others were recruited through family service organisations, municipal nurseries and publicity in local papers and the university newsletter (Appendix D). A further criterion at this

stage, however, was that fathers should have seen their child or children at least once in the preceding month; it was intended that this stage of the study should focus on the experience of co-parenting rather than disengagement. On contacting the researcher, the study was explained to participants; if they agreed to take part, an initial interview was arranged, either at the university or their own home or workplace (the information sheet sent out at this stage is shown in Appendix E). One participant repeatedly failed to show up for interviews, and subsequently could not be contacted. Another turned up for his first interview stating that in fact, he had not seen his daughter for several months, and did not expect to again. A third participant began the interview, but did not wish to complete it, finding the elicitation of constructs to be too confusing, and not what he had anticipated. The final sample, then, numbered 17.

5.1.3 Materials

The interview schedule first gathered demographic and family background information. Next, the ten items of Ahrons' Quality of Coparental Communication Scale (Ahrons, 1981) were asked. These comprise a 6-item subscale assessing extent of support (e.g. 'Is the other parent a resource to you in raising the children?') and a 4-item subscale assessing levels of conflict (e.g. 'When you discuss child-rearing issues, how often does an argument result?'). Items are scored from 'always' (1) to 'never' (5); support item scores were reversed such that a low score over all 10 items indicates poor communication. To assess the level of co-parental experience of each participant, they were asked to state: the frequency, length and location of contact episodes with their children in the previous month and how (if at all) this differed from the overall pattern of contact since separation; also the frequency and medium of any communication with their child(ren)'s mother in the previous month, and how if at all that differed from previous patterns of communication. Finally, constructs relating to co-parenting were elicited from triads of the elements described in the previous chapter; each element was then to be rated from 1-7 on each construct to create the repertory grid.

5.1.4 Procedure

Interviews generally took 50-100 minutes; however one interview with an individual with health-related difficulties took almost three hours. Most were conducted in private, though three participants' current partners were present for some of their interviews. The researcher asked the questions comprising the interview schedule (Appendix F) and filled in the participant's answers. During construct elicitation, the elements were presented in a booklet of 13 pages, each with three of the co-parental elements on it (Appendix G). The triads were selected by the researcher such that all the elements were evenly represented, and ensuring that there were two pages with only 'child' elements and two with only 'child's mother' elements. After the elicitation process had been explained (Appendix H) participants were first asked if these elements were recognisable as having happened to them at least once (if any were not, the interview proceeded without triads containing that element). They were next asked to suggest which two seemed most similar to them, and describe both this similarity and how the odd element differed from them. The interviewer entered the participant's terms for construct labels into two columns on a sheet of paper (Appendix I). None of the participants was able to supply constructs for all thirteen pages; the number of constructs supplied ranged between 7 and 10. Finally, the interviewee was given a score sheet for each element with a row of seven boxes (Appendix I). They were asked to indicate with a tick where they saw the element between the two contrasting descriptions at the poles of each construct – a rating of 4 was explicitly identified as indicating that an element was no more like one side of the construct than the other. These sheets were later combined into a grid with a column of scores for each element. At the end, the interviewee was advised that they would be contacted for the second interview in 5-6 months time.

5.1.5 Analysis

There are a number of statistical tests for grid systems in relatively wide use. Most directly, Crockett (1965) proposed that the number of constructs in a grid forms a useful measure of the sophistication of a construct system, though this does not take into account the degree of similarity or difference in the application of these

constructs. Bieri's (1955) cognitive complexity measure and Landfield's (1976) index of functionally independent construing derive from the sum of similarities between dichotomous construct scores, or scores collapsed to left, right and mid-point ratings respectively. Bannister's (1960) intensity measure retains more information by summing the correlations of ranked scores on constructs. With the rise of principal components analysis as a viable means of analysing grid data, the percentage of variance accounted for by the first factor (O'Keefe & Sypher, 1981) has also been much used as a statistic, and can be deployed with interval scale ratings. These summary measures are all intended to indicate complexity, or the degree to which an individual is able to differentiate or integrate elements within the range of convenience of their construct system. However, comparative assessments of these measures (Epting et al., 1992; Feixas et al., 1992; Smith, 2000) have achieved differing results, casting some doubt on their concurrent validity. Some uncertainty also exists over whether differentiation and integration are opposite qualities or orthogonal dimensions (Neimeyer, 1992; Gallifa & Botella, 2000). Zimring (1971) has pointed out that low differentiation cannot be assumed to imply a simplistic or less desirable use of constructs.

In the present study, it may be considered a positive aspect for, say, a father to construe discussion of a school matter with either mother or child in similar terms, yet also to be able to apprehend differences between the various conversations with his child. In this respect, statistical tests such as those above, which provide an index for the differentiation or integration of a grid as a whole, constitute a reduction in the richness of the data (Leach et al., 2001) and would be less flexible measures. Grids are used idiographically in this study; the effect of a particular intervention on an assumed attribute of the construct system as a whole is not being tested. To this end, a small sample, which is not intended to represent statistically a wider population, is investigated in as much depth as possible. The grids are therefore examined on an individual basis. In order to retain as much of their original meaning as possible, the statistical measures used in this study are based on pairwise comparisons of elements and constructs using Slater's (1961) distances and asymmetric coefficients respectively (Schoenich et al., 2002; Bell, 2002b). The relationships between elements and constructs are examined through analysis of outputs from cluster analysis and PCA; while this represents statistical manipulation of the data, all the

element and construct relationships are presented simultaneously (Leach et al., 2001). These analysis methods will be discussed in further depth in sections 5.4.1, 5.5 and 5.6.

5.2 Background information

Background data were gathered in the interview schedule on rates of parental communication and contact, the average length of contact, and whether these rates were fluctuating. Some family history was also gathered – how long the parents had been apart, and how long their relationship was beforehand. Results from these data are presented here.

5.2.1 Participant characteristics

	Mean	s.d.	Minimum	Maximum
Respondent's age	39.29	6.45	28	55
No. of female children*	1.18	.88	0	3
No. of male children*	.41	.51	0	1
Eldest child's age*	10.18	3.64	3	15
Child's mother's age*	38.18	6.29	29	49
Months relationship pre-separation	108.71	59.32	36	228
Months since separation	58.24	32.01	30	144

Table 5.1 Summary measures of demographic characteristics

(*Non-resident children only - none of the sample here had non-resident children by different mothers)

The participants came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds: unemployed, freelance workers, skilled and unskilled manual workers, office and managerial staff and academics. Their ages ranged between 28 and 55 (mean 38, s.d. 6.45). Between them, they had 16 female and eight male non-resident children; four of the sample also had a daughter by their current partner. None had more than two non-resident children. The ages of these children varied between three years and 15 years; the

mean age of the eldest child was ten (s.d. 3.64). The mothers of these children had a mean age of 38 (s.d. 6.29); the mean age difference of parents was 3.12 years (s.d. 2.89). The mean time since separation was 4.85 years (s.d. 2.67); the relationship before separation had lasted on average 9.06 years (s.d. 4.94). Twelve of the respondents were currently with a new partner; twelve of their children's mothers had new partners.

The general profile of this sample then, is of middle-aged fathers with one or two children, who had been with the children's mothers for most of a decade before splitting up with them a few years prior to this study. They had somewhat more daughters than sons.

5.2.2 Contact & communication

Summary measure		Quartiles/s.d.
Mean contact episodes per month	4.68	*sd 3.7*
Median contact episodes per month	4	*2 , 7.25*
Median hours per contact visit	15	*10 , 29*
Mean monthly communication with mother	6.44	*sd 7.4*
Mean quality of co-parental communication	29.18	*sd 7.07*

Table 5.2 Contact & communication - summary measures at wave 1

The rate of contact in the month previous to the interview ranged from once, the minimum requirement for participation, to 12 times; the median frequency of visits was weekly (inter-quartile range 5.25). This did not include phone conversations, text messages or e-mails. Although some participants saw these as an important aspect of maintaining contact with their children, it was felt that they were distinct modes of interacting, and did not particularly require a familial role. The length of a typical contact episode varied between a few hours and a weekend, Friday evening to Sunday evening; the median was 15 hrs (inter-quartile range 19). Most contact took place at the father's house. The number of times participants had communicated with their children's mother in the last month varied between 0 and 30, with a mean of

6.44 (s.d. 7.4). Communication was usually by phone, in person or both, but occasionally took place through a relative.

Cases were further coded into three categories of contact or communication: less than weekly, weekly or twice or more a week. Participants were also asked how their present rates of contact and communication compared with previous months. These answers were also coded into three categories depending whether contact and communication was diminishing, increasing or was stable. Frequencies for these categories are shown in tables 5.3 and 5.4.

	< weekly	**weekly**	**≥ twice weekly**
Contact episodes	7	6	4
Communication with mother	8	3	6

Table 5.3 Frequency categories of contact with child & communication with child's mother at wave 1

	down	**stable**	**up**
Present contact cf. last 6 months	9	4	4
Present communication cf. last 6 months	3	9	5

Table 5.4 Comparison categories of contact with child & communication with child's mother at wave 1

Only a few participants, then, saw their children more than once a week, and communication with the child's mother was on an occasional basis for nearly half the sample. Most were experiencing a reduction in contact frequency; however, most were not communicating with the child's mother any more or less than normal.

Finally, the 10 items of the Quality of Co-parental Communication measure (Ahrons, 1981) were also administered to participants. On this index, scaled from 10-50, a high total score represents a higher quality of parental communication. The mean total score (see Table 5.1, above) for respondents was 29.18 (s.d 7.07). However the

scale incorporates two sub-scales for conflict (4 items) and support (6 items) each scored from 1-5; thus, a 5 represents high conflict or support.

	Mean	S.D.
Support (mean item score)	3.11	0.74
Conflict (mean item score)	3.37	0.92

Table 5.5 Quality of Coparental Communication: mean sub-scale item scores, wave 1

The mean item score for conflict was 3.37 (s.d. 0.92); that for support was 3.11 (s.d. 0.74). This compares with mean item scores for fathers reported by Ahrons (1981) of 2.67 and 3.13 respectively. Mean scores for the items ranged from 2.47 to 3.94 except for one of the support items: 'do you go out of your way to accommodate any changes she needs to make?' In the present case, the mean score was 4.35, s.d. 0.61. The minimum score for this item was 3; that for all the others was 1.

The participants in the present study, then, report a similar level of support to Ahrons' sample but somewhat greater levels of conflict. They viewed themselves particularly strongly as being supportive of the mother. In Ahrons' study, both parents were interviewed, though separately; the knowledge that their former partner's report would also be contributed may have ameliorated reported paternal attitudes. In the present study, fathers might feel freer to take a less equable view knowing their ex-partner would not be talking to the researcher. However, in her work, Ahrons also found that fathers tend to report less conflict in a relationship than mothers do.

5.2.3 Background - summary

- Participants were typically middle-aged fathers with one or two children, separated for a few years following a long relationship.

- Many had only occasional communication with the child's mother, and few saw their children more than once a week.

- Scores for the Quality of Coparental Communication were comparable with those reported in the original study.

5.3 Construct content

One hundred and forty-nine constructs were elicited at the first wave, with the number of per grid ranging between 6 and 10. Fathers varied in the extent to which they used the full seven-point scale; in many grids, some or all constructs were used in a binary fashion, with elements being assigned to one of two ratings. The extent to which 4, the midpoint rating, was used, also varied considerably. Some constructs were specific to either mother or child situations, in which case the others tended to be coded at 4. For other constructs, only some elements could not be placed at either pole (perhaps if a situation was a relatively rare occurrence). The heavy use of 4 in constructs that had no ratings on one side of the scale also suggested that poles elicited in contrast to each other could not be meaningfully compared a short while later. This was frequently the case where participants had supplied a variety of contrast poles to one main label.

Some had supplied other constructs, but given each element an identical score on them. These were removed; if the respondent can make no distinction between any elements on a construct, then it has no meaning within the system – the contrast identified at the elicitation stage has not been applied. Another problem arose with constructs being supplied whose ratings fell entirely in one half of the scale or at the mid-point, 4. In these cases, one of the elicited poles has not retained a meaningful contrast to the other within this system of elements; the variation offered is in how well the latter pole describes the elements.

5.3.1 Coding

The content of these initial 149 constructs was examined for themes. Some, for example, differentiated what situations were 'about', or highlighted what the

respondent's concerns would be; others discerned shades of the father's feelings, or characterised the way discussions took place. It was seen as important to be able to distinguish constructs on the basis of their content, particularly in order to make comparisons between waves. For instance, a scheme for the thematic coding of constructs in the clinical use of grids has recently been proposed (Feixas, Geldschlaeger, & Neimeyer, 2002). The system developed by these authors is, however, particular to the construal of persons as elements; therefore, the researcher developed a dedicated coding scheme for constructs in this study. Constructs at the first wave were categorised under eight ad hoc, emergent headings. These were subsequently used to code constructs in the second and third waves, with further headings adopted as required.

With all the constructs gathered, the coding system was reevaluated. Some headings were felt to be unsatisfactory, either because they represented few constructs, or because they were indistinct. For instance, only twelve constructs dealt with 'wariness'; and the ad hoc category of 'routine' frequently applied only to one pole of a construct, the other seeming more appropriate to the larger heading of 'priority'. To be useful, thematic categories must be exclusive (Feixas et al., 2002). The system was therefore refined to five categories based on the most robust and distinct of the original headings. Names and descriptions were finalised for these to subsume or redistribute less useful headings. For instance, 'wariness' constructs described either feelings of apprehensiveness, or how a situation might be subject to the mother's perceived connivance. These were now seen as part of the more general categories of **feelings** and **participation and control.**

The researcher re-coded the total sample of constructs under this system using this scheme. To test the objectivity of this coding, two independent judges, both psychologists with experience of family research, were given descriptions and examples of the category headings and asked to complete the same coding task (see Appendix J). The researcher then discussed any uncertainty in their interpretation of category headings and refined the descriptions given to them, following which the judges re-coded the constructs. The rates of agreement between the researcher and judges 1 and 2 were 90.1% and 79.5% respectively, which compares favourably with the 87.3% agreement between two raters for Feixas et al. (2002). For all three raters,

agreement was 75%, with a Kappa value of 0.77 (Siegel & Castellan, 1988). Agreement varied little across the categories, and marginal frequencies were found to be similar for all three raters (see Appendix D). The final coding system was as follows:

A **Significance/import** - In these constructs, respondents described what a situation was about how and to what extent it was important (*relating to care of the child / temporary change)*, or whether they were interested (*only involved because I have to be / I'm really interested).* This category subsumed headings of 'interest' and 'routine', since both were semantically linked to importance.

B **Participation and control** - This heading covered descriptions of how the respondent takes part in a situation, or how it is controlled: the mode of interaction. For example, *I'm being told / I have to negotiate; hard, have to watch what I'm saying / open discussion.* The smaller heading of 'control' was incorporated here since it could be seen as a specific characteristic of interaction.

C **Conflict** - Constructs of this description expressed the respondent's expectation or prediction of <u>overt</u> conflict or antagonism etc. in a situation. For example: *straightforward / argumentative; nice / goes ballistic; confrontation / more relaxed, clearer picture.*

D **Who is present** - these constructs are denotative, distinguishing on the basis of who takes part in a situation (not who it is about, as this would be **significance**). For example: *children have a say / between mother and father; daughter can play parents against each other / between the parents.* This was the smallest category, and very few constructs from the third wave were coded thus; however, it was still felt that it formed a distinct basis for construing difference.

E **Feelings** - Respondents' descriptions of their own feelings associated with a situation, for example: *frustration at not getting point across / sadness, you*

feel like you're letting them down; I feel comfortable / would feel nosey; didn't feel good; uncomfortable.

Categories A, B, D and E are mutually exclusive, dealing with evaluative, procedural, physical and emotive aspects of situations respectively. Category C, **conflict**, was retained as being of specific interest to the research questions, and therefore useful to distinguish. However, the contrast to the manifestation of conflict was frequently an aspect of **control**, or the respondent's **feeling**. To preserve the exclusiveness of categories, any construct wherein overt conflict was specifically referred to was coded as C. The researcher's coding under this system forms the basis of construct content analysis in the following chapters.

5.3.2 Content at this wave

Significance/import - This was the largest category at the first wave, with 42 constructs of this type. Many of these constructs at this wave distinguished a higher priority where the interests or welfare of the child were at stake (*important for the child, concerns child's welfare*). Situations might otherwise be seen as having the *father's interests* as central; being *not worth arguing about, routine*; or involving a *temporary change* or more interestingly *negotiation*. The gravity and consequence attributed to issues of children's welfare appear to function for fathers as grounds for absolutism, resisting negotiation and change. Some other bases for importance were offered, however; for example, situations *about the relationship between the three of us* were separated from the *less important*. One father distinguished situations that had to be dealt with immediately from those he could defer; others construed *serious, formal* situations separately from *casual* ones, or *basic* conversations from *in-depth*. Alternatively, the father might have to get across *that I've got another life*.

Participation and control - These 32 constructs accounted for around a quarter of those supplied. Respondents were concerned with whether they felt they could be passive or active in situations. A lack of interaction was contrasted with the potential for development. Thus, a situation was not a *waste of time* if it involved *getting some information*; if *what I say doesn't seem to matter*, then the situation was not *happy,*

flowing. At times, this bespoke an internal/external relationship to the family; without *involvement* and *development*, one father saw his participation as *intrusive*. Interaction was construed in many more diverse ways: who would initiate; how *flexible* the discussion was; or how duplicitous the mother's motives might be (*hidden agenda*, *she wants something from me*). Control did not emerge at this wave as the explicit theme it did in the group interviews; nevertheless, some respondents did view situations in terms of whether they saw themselves as *dictated to* or not, or whether they had to *beg*. Some constructs also dealt with the sensitivity of approach to these contingencies (*don't hurt them*, *more explaining*, *easy for the child*).

Conflict - 20 constructs (14%) were supplied dealing with *conflict*, *aggravation*, *tension*, *friction*, *arguments*, *problems* etc. Sometimes this was explicitly tied to the issue of control, i.e. situations that the father felt they controlled were 'no problem', while the mother's control caused 'friction'. The number of these constructs confirms that conflict is a prevalent consideration even for fathers with ongoing contact arrangements. Most of them contrasted conflict with its absence (e.g. *doesn't cause friction*). Some stressed positive aspects in opposition to conflict: *enjoyment* or *developing a relationship*. But elsewhere, *disagreements* were opposed to <u>not</u> being *involved in talking*, and a *battle for ideas* with *having to beg*. Contention between parents is at least still participation in a family process; after all, arguing about arrangements and children's issues can be characteristic of non-separated families too. Arguments may cause tension, but they are still involvement of a sort. Depending on their outcome, they may shift the balance of control and may represent for some fathers an opportunity for improving circumstances to some extent.

Who was present - At this wave, 17 constructs simply distinguished which family members would be implicated in certain situations. (e.g. *tripartite* or *between parents*).

Feelings experienced - In 23 of the constructs supplied, fathers used a range of feelings to construe the co-parental situations: *concern*, *worry*, *happiness*, *formality*, *sadness*, *stress*, *anger*, *frustration*, *tension* and *interest*. As well as expressions of fathers' negative and positive feelings in the element situations, there were also shades of feelings, e.g. contrasting *frustrated because I have no say* with *frustrated*

because children might get hurt. Other construct poles supplied by more than one father included feeling uncomfortable, intrusive or *snoopy* (usually in relation to discussing the previous week with the child). Again, feeling more isolated or *like a separated parent* was contrasted with *natural* or *involved* conversations. The idea of *natural* experiences of fatherhood is held by some fathers as an expectation, its lack of fulfilment attributed to being a separated parent. These constructs evaluate situations in terms of whether they allow fathers to carry out some natural or familiar role. Their continued validation in a co-parental construct system suggests that for the respondent, co-parental involvement can only be *proper* involvement if it approximates to what ideal or non-separated fathers are supposed to do. It is not clear, however, whether in certain situations non-separated fathers might also feel less than *natural* without having separation to blame it on.

5.3.3 Construct content - summary

- A system of five discrete categories for coding construct content was established for this study.
- Most constructs at the first wave dealt with the significance or import of a situation.
- A fifth of the constructs supplied concerned conflict, which could be seen as an alternative to exclusion or control.

5.4 Elements

For convenience, these will be abbreviated as follows:

MS *Talking to child's mother about a school or health issue relating to your child.*

MT *Talking to child's mother about whether a toy, game or activity is suitable for your child.*

MCS *Talking to the child's mother about a temporary change that she has requested to the contact arrangements.*

MCY *Talking to the child's mother about a temporary change that you have requested to the contact arrangements.*

CS *Talking to your child about a school or health issue relating to them.*

CP *Talking to your child about how they have spent the previous week at their mother's house.*

CN *Talking to your child about how they want to spend their next contact time with you.*

CR *Talking to your child about something that they want but which is beyond your resources.*

Two participants found one element to be beyond their experience, while another participant rejected two elements. The rest of those interviewed found all the situations used as elements to be within their range of convenience. Sometimes respondents stated that one or other situation 'didn't happen', but when asked if it had happened 'even once' were usually able to recall a relevant instance. For example, one father reported he had never lacked resources to meet his child's wants. When asked if he was also considering resources of time, it emerged that there had been an occasion when he had to explain to his daughter that he couldn't take her on a holiday with him. This participant was subsequently able to use this as an instance of the situation CR.

The elements, developed from earlier interview data to demarcate a co-parental realm, did therefore translate to the experience of this second group of fathers. However, their varying familiarity with these situations may create different hierarchies among the sample. If recalling an instance of one or other of the situations described is not fairly easy for someone, then the elements may push at the limits of their range of convenience and be harder to apprehend through the co-parental system. Sometimes particular elements did seem poorly related to a system they generated, having a rating of 4 on three or more constructs. Such a situation could not be meaningfully discerned by several of the ways that this individual used to distinguish other co-parental situations. Where this occurred, it was typically with situations CS and CR.

	MS	MT	CP	CN	CR	MCS	MCY	CS	
more routine situation	2	3	7	4	5	2	3	4	have to recognise child's autonomy
co-operative; working together	3	3	1	2	4	5	5	4	very emotive; might make my hackles rise
don't have such a problem	5	3	2	2	3	6	3	4	more tension because it's her request
Talk easily	5	7	1	1	3	7	7	4	Heated: No come and go

Figure 5.1 Sample constructs

For instance, constructs from this wave such as those in Figure 5.1 (above) distributed six or seven of the elements at one pole or the other, but not a conversation with the child about a school or health issue (CS) - it was rated at 4. These mid-point ratings could be interpreted in three ways. For CS it may be: a) that neither pole of these constructs applies; b) that both poles apply; or c) the negation of one pole might not imply the other. Considering the constructs in Figure 5.1, talking about a school issue may be neither *routine* nor require a *child's autonomy* to be *recognised.* The discussion may both be *co-operative* and *make hackles rise.* Finally, if it is not *easy* to *talk* about, it still may not become *heated.*

Whichever explanation applies, a frequent rating of 4 for a particular situation suggests that it cannot generally be considered in the same terms as the others. Fathers whose constructs of type C **(conflict)** did not differentiate CS were all in their late thirties, and had been separated for around 3 years after a 6-8 year relationship. It may be that at this stage in their development as separated parents, school or health 'talks' have not occurred often enough for a pattern to be established or regular predictions to be made on the same basis as for other co-parental situations. Explaining a lack of resources to children (CR) was also poorly related to the construct system for some fathers, but this element tended to be rated at 4 on constructs of type D **(who is present)** such as:

different details depending who I speak to / expect a different opinion from mine being a parent on your own / have to get across I've got another life

Fathers who rate CR at the midpoint on such constructs, then, apprehend the other situations in terms of who is party to the discussion; but these considerations are not seen as applying to an explanation to his child of why he can't supply something. Yet CR is the only situation that does not explicitly involve contact arrangements or some engagement with the mother's 'territory'. The fathers for whom CR was not characterised by who would be present tended to have a well-established level of involvement with both mother and child. To this extent they were able to engage with their child on the matter of resources without considering this solely as a matter between themselves.

5.4.1 Element pairs

The direction of the scale used to rate each construct is arbitrarily assigned, and could be reversed for any of them without changing their meaning. Yet doing so will affect the correlation values between elements (Mackay, 1992). Euclidean distances are therefore recommended as a measure of similarity between elements in a grid (Bell, 1995; Leach et al., 2001; Slater, 1977). The self-identity plot (Norris & Makhlouf-Norris, 1976) is an established technique in constructivist clinical practice (Winter, 2003) based on a measure derived from Euclidean distances. Using role titles as elements, all are plotted according to their similarity to the elements *self* and *ideal self*. Coefficients from 0 (identical) to 2 (entirely dissimilar) are obtained by dividing actual Euclidean distances by expected values (Slater, 1977). This means of visualising the relationship of important pairs of elements to a set has been extended to examine the elements *mother* and *father*, the Family System Plot (Schoenich, Walter, Weber, Thier, & Klapp, 2002). The authors term Family System Plots where no elements are seen as similar to one or both parents as **isolated.** They also distinguish grids where the parents are seen as similar or dissimilar to each other, terming this **convergence** or **divergence.**

This approach was used to examine the element pairs MCS/MCY and MS/CS in the present study. Plots for these pairs, such as those in Figures 5.2-5.4, were produced using the software package Gridlab (Walter, 2002b). Parameters can be set for each axis to indicate the range within which 90% of standardised values fall under the distribution curve obtained from randomly generated grids (Hartmann, 1992). If an element lies outside this area of indifference (indicated in Figs. 5.2-5.4 by the shaded area), it is seen as strongly similar or dissimilar to one or both of the elements forming the axes. However, it has been argued that Slater's distances are not comparable where grids do not have the same number of constructs, since the distribution curve will vary for grids with different numbers of constructs or elements (Walter, Schoenich, & Klapp, 2002). Inter-element Slater's distances in this study were therefore compared with values of the cumulative distribution function particular to the dimensions of each grid; cut-off values of 0.975 and 0.025 were adopted as a basis for similarity or dissimilarity (Walter, 2002a). What follows, then, is an analysis of the data from the first wave adopting the approach of Schoenich et al. (2002), but using specific pairs of situations instead of role titles.

MCS & MCY

The 'minimum order' principle of the Children (Scotland) Act envisages that parents should work together to maintain a schedule of contact (Mayes et al., 2000); yet several authors have pointed out that this can only work if parents acknowledge each other's need for flexibility in arrangements (e.g. Smart & Neale, 1999; Bradshaw, Stimson et al., 1999; Trinder, Beek & Connelly, 2002). Successful co-parents, then, should be able to treat unforeseen changes to contact arrangements with equanimity no matter whose interests are being accommodated. In this respect, elements MCS and MCY were of particular interest. Since they are defined by which parent's needs are to be accommodated, or which parent initiates the discussion (a change *she* has requested, or one *you* have requested), it was felt that they should reflect the respondent's understanding of the balance of parental needs.

Only three fathers perceived any other situations as significantly similar to MCY, and only one saw another situation as similar to MCS. MCS and MCY, then, were overwhelmingly seen as quite distinct from the other elements (Fig 5.2).

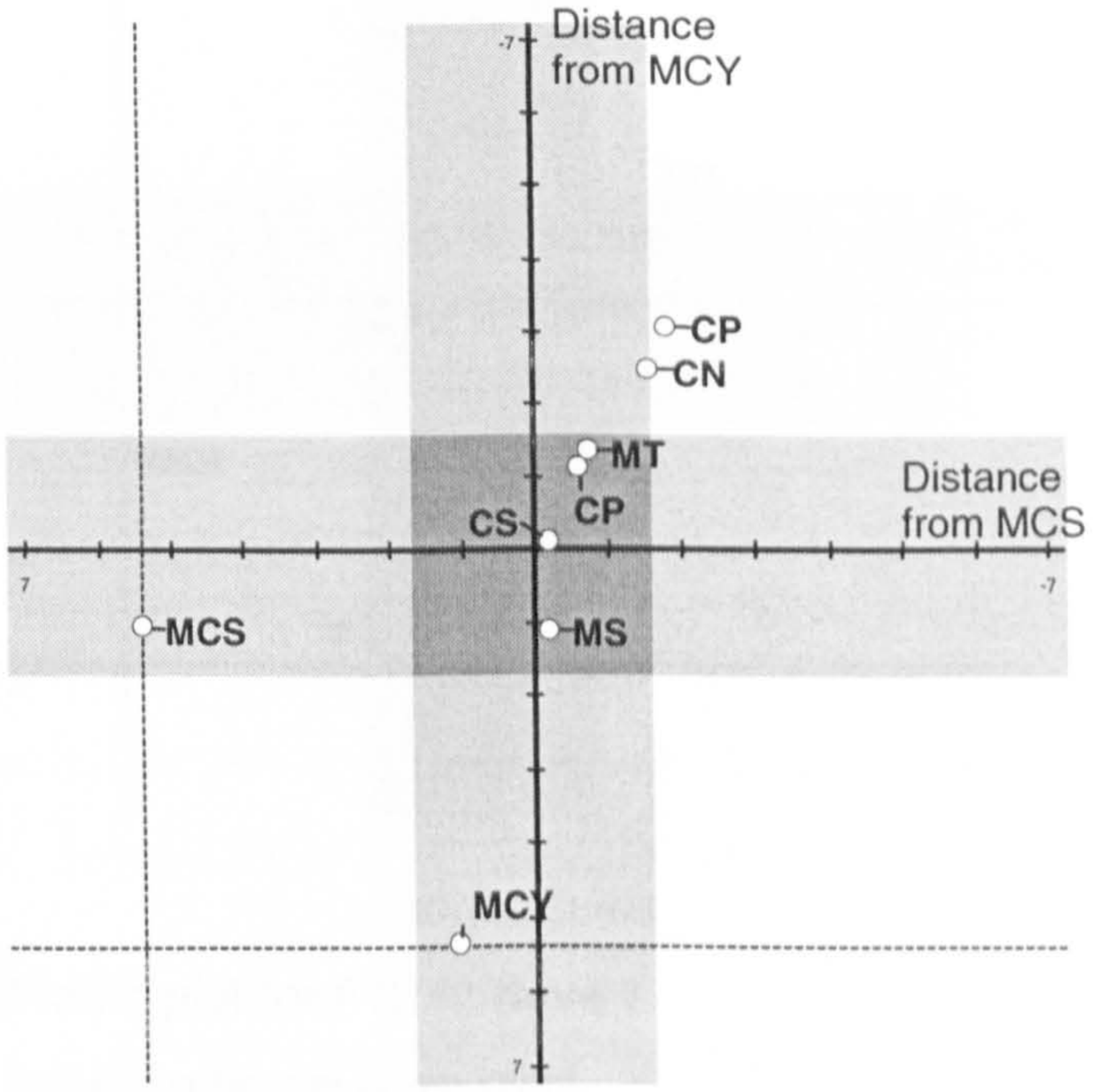


Figure 5.2 MCS/MCY plot for F18 at wave 1

The two elements are not similar, and are isolated from the others.

They may have been set apart from the other situations as being more inter-parental than familial. In support of this view, it was also found in the grids of seven fathers that both situations were significantly *dis*similar to one or more of the 'child' situations (an example is shown in Fig. 5.2), with another three finding MCY as dissimilar to CN or CP. All but one of these respondents had children aged 11 or under; this suggests that the distancing of MCS & MCY from the other elements reflects the difficulty of perceiving a conversation with a pre-teenage child in the same terms as one with an adult. As a child reaches a certain stage of development, the co-parental realm may become easier to construe consistently.

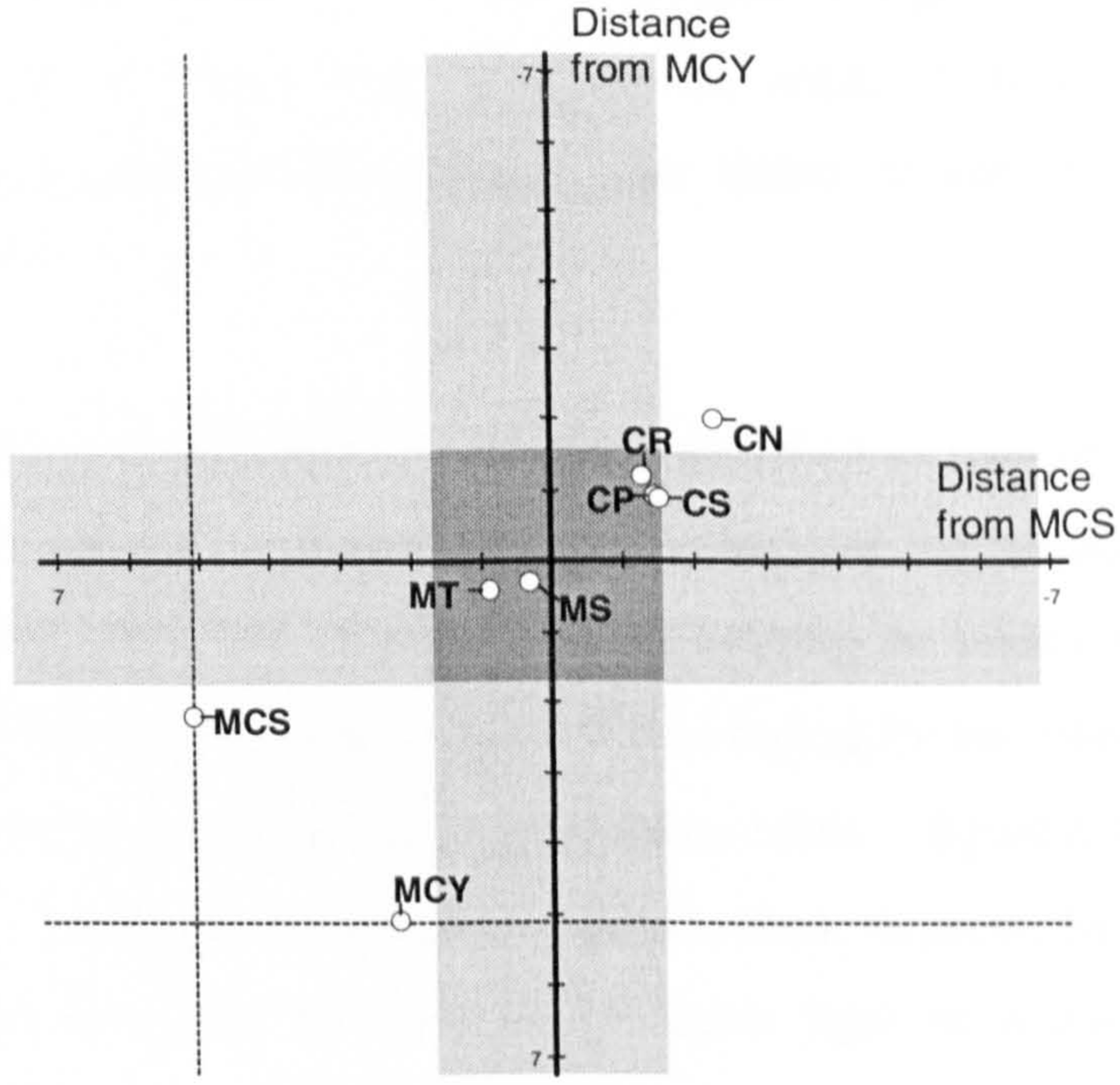


Figure 5.3 MCS/MCY plot for F12 at wave 1

The two elements are convergent.

MCS and MCY were found to be convergent with each other for ten interviewees at the first wave (an example is shown in Fig. 5.3). In seven of these cases, they were the most similarly rated elements. There were distinct patterns of communication with the mother among these ten fathers. F12, F13, F14, F16 and F17 communicated at least weekly, while F6 (having only one, relatively old, child) communicated every fortnight; F8, F9, F15 and F19, by contrast, only communicated occasionally. The Quality of Co-parental Communication was also sharply different for these two groups, with scores for the former ranging from 30 to 39 and those for the latter ranging from 19 to 24. Regular conversation with the mother implies an ongoing commitment to family involvement; within such family practices, it may be more feasible to view negotiated alterations to the schedule as a routine matter, independently of who is asking for them. If, however, communication only takes place out of occasional necessity, a reluctance to operate within a parental relationship of poor quality may lead fathers to view all conversations with the mother about changing contact arrangements as equally negative, no matter who initiates the request. Construing similarity between requests from each parent to

change arrangements, then, may either represent an egalitarian recognition of both parents' need for flexibility, or an indiscriminate resignation to the necessity of keeping in touch. In either case there was an acknowledgement that the current regime of contact (whether favourable to the father or not) would prevail for the foreseeable future.

Most participants who did not perceive these elements as similar (e.g. Fig. 5.2) were dissatisfied with current arrangements and were seeking to adjust the prevailing pattern of contact. F3, for example, was preparing to return to court, seeking a change to his allocation of contact time; F7 was trying by his own efforts to persuade his ex-wife to allow the children to visit more often. Against the backdrop of an attempt to make a long term change to contact, then, requests from the mother for a short term amendment are not seen in the same light as requests from the father himself. While not necessarily experiencing more conflict (co-parental communication scores in this group ranged from 22-43), fathers in these circumstances are more likely to perceive a differential in parental power.

Parental requests for a temporary change to contact arrangements, then, were by and large not seen as similar to other co-parental situations, though this might depend on the age of children. Participants who did not distinguish these requests on the basis of which parent made them might either be in very frequent or very infrequent communication with the child's mother, but expected contact to continue on its present basis. Fathers who saw the mother's request as dissimilar to theirs tended to be in dispute over the amount of time allocated for contact.

MS & CS

The relationship between MS and CS was also of interest; given the same topic of discussion, it was surmised that any differences or similarities between these situations would particularly reflect how the respondent was able to construe on a family basis. In fact, only one father at this wave saw these situations as convergent (F18, Fig. 5.4).

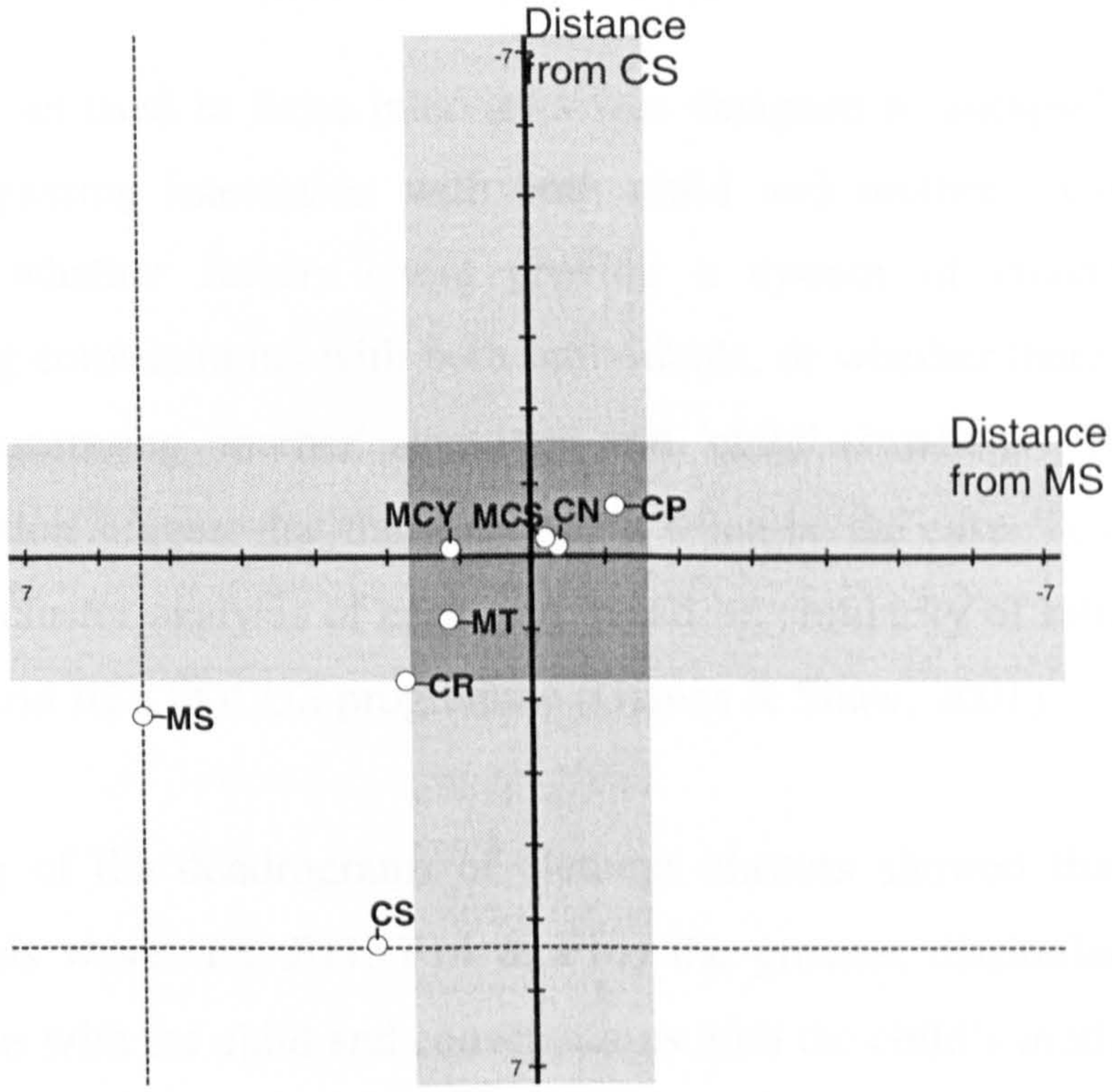


Figure 5.4 MS/CS plot for F18 at wave 1

The two elements are convergent, and similar to element CR.

For most fathers, MS and CS did not bear any strong relationship to other elements either. Nonetheless, four fathers did find MS dissimilar to another element situation (usually a 'child' situation) and six saw CS as strongly unlike another element (usually a 'mother' situation). On the other hand, seven fathers perceived MS as strongly like another 'mother' situation and seven perceived CS as strongly similar to another 'child' situation. Where MS and CS were distinguished in relation to other elements, construal therefore seemed to be more on the basis of the person spoken to than the issues under discussion.

The participants, then, did not tend to see similarity between talking to their child and the child's mother about a school or health issue. Instead, they were more likely to be similar to other conversations with the same person.

5.4.2 Clusters

The element set used in these interviews was designed to encapsulate a co-parental role, encompassing interaction with both child and mother. One issue for this research is whether fathers could provide a system of constructs capable of apprehending conversations with both individuals, or whether there was no common ground in construing 'mother' situations and 'child' situations'. The results in the previous section suggest that the latter might often be the case. To investigate this, a hierarchical cluster analysis of each grid based on similarity of ratings was obtained using WebGrid III's FOCUS programme (Gaines & Shaw, 2001).

Examination of the dendrograms of element clusters showed that for four of the fathers at this wave (F8, F11, F14 & F16) the greatest dissimilarity was between conversations with the child and conversations with the child's mother (an example is shown in Fig. 5.5).

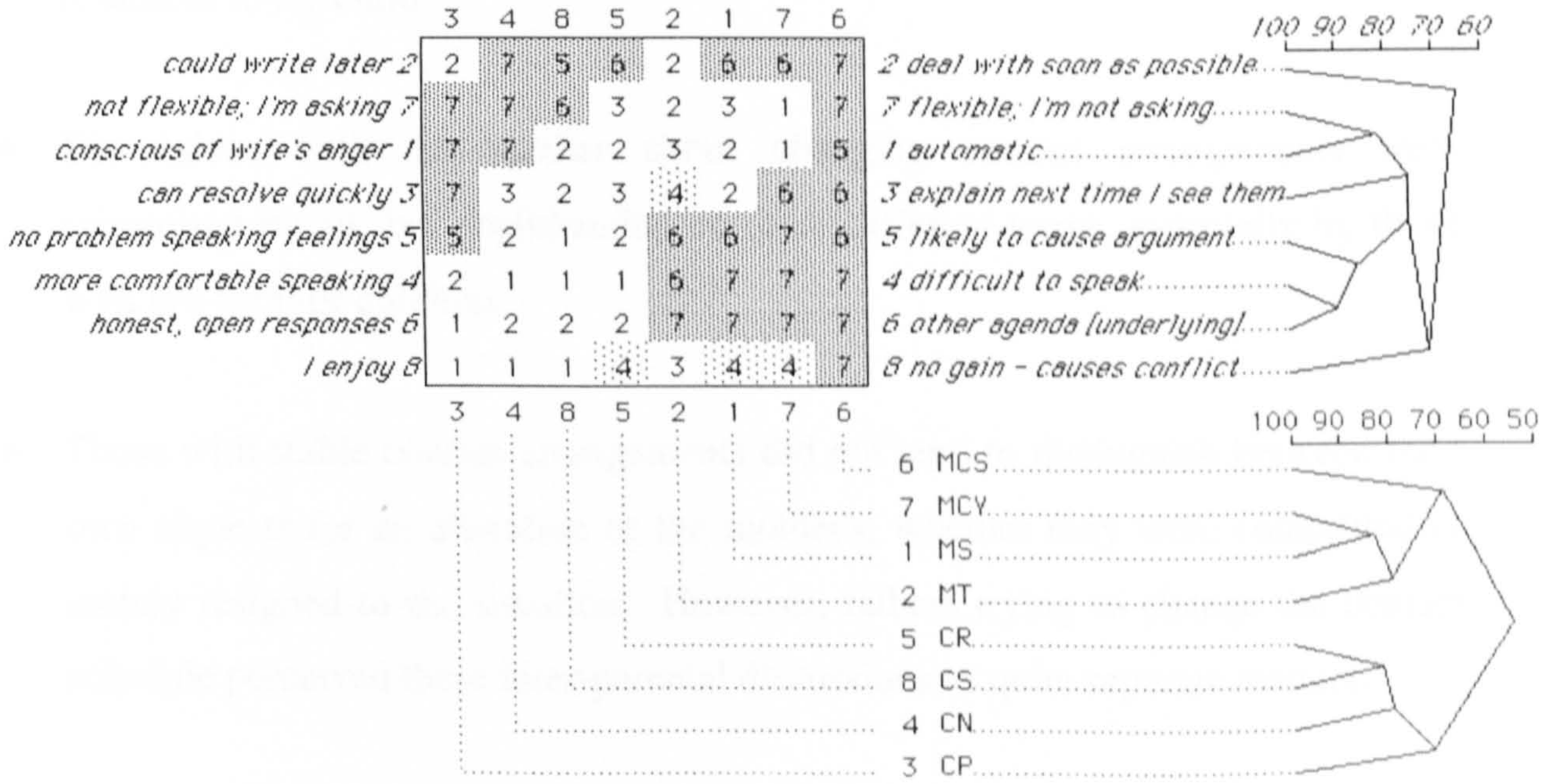


Figure 5.5 Cluster analysis for participant F11 at wave 1

Contrary to the principles of co-parenting, they perceive no common ground; their constructs are used almost entirely to distinguish interacting with their child from interacting with its mother, rather than perceiving any commonality as familial discussions. These four fathers seemed to have little in common to set them apart

from other respondents. They had been separated for between three and five years, and three of them had recently increased their rate of communication with the mother. But two reported vituperative relations with their ex-wives and great difficulty in getting to see their children, while the other two had relatively harmonious circumstances with regular contact; their children ranged in age from 5 to 13. Nevertheless, the fact that there were only four fathers whose grids offered separate construal of mother and child situations indicates that most fathers are capable of construing from a co-parental perspective. What is anticipated in a family discussion is not, then, entirely dependent on who will be spoken to.

5.4.3 Elements - summary

- All elements were recognised by most participants; those recently separated were less familiar with talking to their child about school or health issues, while those with well-established contact were less familiar with explaining a lack of resources to the child.

- Discussions with the mother about changing contact arrangements were recognised by all, but apprehended on quite different terms, especially by those with pre-teenage children.

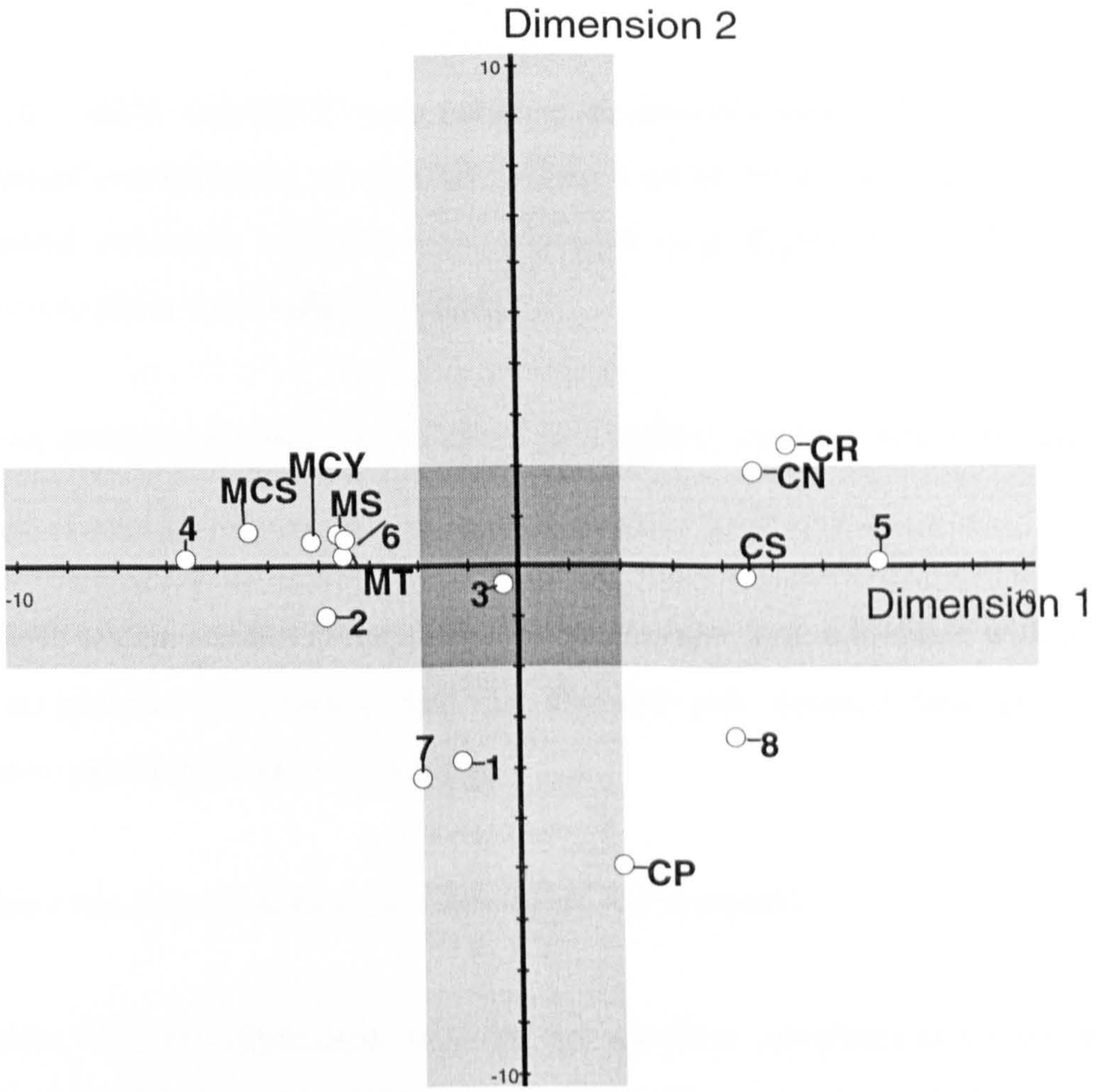
- Those with stable contact arrangements did not tend to distinguish between their own requests for an alteration or the mother's, whether they were committed or merely resigned to the situation. However, fathers trying to change the contact schedule perceived these inter-parental discussions as quite separate matters.

- Talking to the mother about a school or health issue was rarely seen in the same way as talking to the child about the same subject. These situations were more likely to be seen as similar to other discussions with the same person.

- However, most fathers in this sample seemed able to apply their co-parental constructs across the co-parental realm.

5.5 Construct-element relationships

If participants see certain situations as similar or dissimilar, it is also useful to know why they seem similar; in other words, which constructs in particular account for the variation in scores for those elements. A principal components analysis (PCA) of a grid gives an indication of the meanings attached to the similarity between element pairs by the respondents; graphic outputs offer a visual representation of these construct/element relationships. Such graphs were therefore obtained from grids in the present study using Gridlab software (Walter, 2002b), as a means of understanding the bases of the similarity for the participants between element pairs. The PCA carried out by Gridlab is performed directly on the grid using Euclidean distances as a measure of association, rather than on a correlation matrix. As well as providing the percentage of variance accounted for by the first factor and loadings for constructs and elements in this way, Gridlab produces the conventional output of plotting both constructs and elements in a space defined by the two dimensions of the principal components, allowing a qualitative interpretation of the organisation of concepts in this system. In Figure 5.6, the elements MCS and MCY are aligned together on the first factor near the construct labels for *disagreement* (6) and *tension* (4), but also *getting a consensus* (2); their similarity is therefore based on both of them being volatile and involving negotiation. The factor loadings of elements and constructs were compared in all grids to establish the basis of similarities identified in section 6.4.



Construct alignment on dimension 1 -

	Negative axis	Positive axis
1	I'm not generally pro-active	look at things to occupy child
2	getting a common consensus	general contact
3	potential for tensions & difference of opinion	me being consulted
4	potential for tension	dealing with my daughter directly
5	potential for disagreement	I'm in control of deciding
6	issues which can lead to disagreement	checking out about issues [they] raise first
7	I tend not to talk about this	common issues between daughter and I
8	ok if resolved but can lead to disagreements	won't really get involved in talking about this

Figure 5.6 PCA plot for participant F14 at wave 1

5.5.1 MCS/MCY

In section 6.4.1, MCS and MCY were found to be strongly similar for fathers who saw their contact arrangements as ongoing. Almost all of those with regular contact and a perceived similarity between these elements (e.g. Figure 5.6) had the pair located nearest to poles for **conflict,** such as:

Disagreement; potential for tension; potential for conflict; emotive, makes my hackles rise

However, those whose contact arrangements were sporadic and associated with a low quality of co-parental relationship had the element pair situated near poles for **significance** or **participation** in their plots:

Formal, what I say doesn't matter, less important, not enjoyable

The PCA plots of those respondents who did not see these situations as similar were also examined. For those with children aged 10 or 13, none of whom had weekly contact, the two situations were distinguished by **significance or import.** Only MCS was aligned with poles for:

Happy at sorting something everyday; chance to improve things for the kids; automatic, everyday; basic; not worth arguing.

For two fathers with more than weekly contact whose children were aged 3 and 7, however, the situations were distanced along factors associated with **conflict** and **control**. For F3, MCY involved *friction* and the *dictates* of the *child*; for F5, MCS was a *problem* with him being *less involved*, while he had *control* over MCY.

Those participants who were frequently in communication with their ex-partner tended to see requests for temporary change to contact as similar in having a potential to flare up, while those who saw little of the mother felt requests for changes to arrangements were similarly out of their control. Fathers who were disputing the

standing contact arrangements, though, perceived that their own requests for a temporary change were much more of a problem than when the mother made such a request.

5.5.2 MS/CS

Examining the plot for the one father who perceived MS and CS as similar shows that the two elements are located near the pole *doesn't happen much*; the only basis for similarity at this wave appeared to be that school or health discussions are relatively rare.

5.5.3 Clusters

An examination of the plots for those fathers whose elements were clustered into mother and child groups (F8, F11, F14 and F16) shows them to be divided along first factors such that **conflict** (*heated*, *aggravated* etc.) is associated with the 'mother' situations and *quality time* with the 'child' ones (e.g. Fig. 5.5 earlier). Arguments and friction are associated with bad **feelings** in all grids - *stress*, *tension* etc. However, for the one father here who was rarely allowed to see his child, that conflict was associated with being *dictated to*, while for those in more regular contact it was associated with *have to negotiate, other agenda* and *you have to be careful.* While conflict appears here to be a predominant issue substantially distinguishing talks with the mother from those with the child, it may either be associated with diplomacy or exclusion.

5.5.4 Construct-element relationships - summary

- Principal components analyses of the grids supported the findings in section 5.4.

- Similarity between parental requests for contact changes tends to be based on conflict for those in frequent communication with the mother, and control for those who rarely see her.

- For those in dispute over contact, who perceived a difference, MCY tended to represent more of a problem.

- Conversations with mother or child about a school or health issue were similarly rare or unusual.

- Where mother situations were clustered separately from 'child' situations, the former were usually negatively associated with conflict, and the latter with positive experiences.

5.6 Predictive relationships between constructs

Hostility is diagnosed by Kelly as arising from the impermeability of a construct at the top of the hierarchy to new constructs (Kelly, 1955). Considerable divergence exists in the literature, however, over terminology and how the ordination of constructs can be measured. Bell (2002b), in disputing whether constructs can simultaneously be elements or not, argues that what matters is *prediction* and proposes the use of asymmetrical coefficients to explore system hierarchies. Somers' D gives two statistics of association between variables (constructs in the present case) showing the percentage of error reduced when each variable is used to predict the scores on the other. Scores range from -1 to +1, with a value of 0 indicating no association. The variable that reduces most error in predicting the other can, Bell argues, be considered the better predictor of the two. For instance, one father offered the constructs *Important to both* [parents]/*Important to one* and *wouldn't/might cause arguments*. The value of Somers' D for the association between these constructs is 0.71 when the first one is treated as an independent variable; but is only 0.22 when the second one is taken as independent. Therefore, knowing how the elements are rated in terms of being important to one or both parents allows for considerably more reduction in error in predicting whether a situation is viewed as causing arguments. On the basis of this predictive strength, it can be considered the more important construct of the two within this father's system.

Comparing all constructs in a system pair-wise allows the identification of the construct that predicts most others, which can be considered as the most important in the hierarchy. A cut-off criterion of 0.10 is recommended - if the difference between a pair of Somers' D coefficients is greater than this, then a predictive association exists between the constructs. If the difference is less than this, the association between them is considered to be symmetrical - neither is a better predictor of the other, and they are equivalent within any system hierarchy. If the coefficients themselves are less than 0.10, however, then the relationship between the constructs can be considered fragmented. The ordinal relationship analysis facility in the Gridstat software package (Bell, 2002a) returns the number of predictive and symmetrical relationships for each construct in a grid, and also returns the overall proportions of predictive, symmetrical and fragmented relationships for the grid. An example is shown in Table 5.6 below, where the third construct emerges as the most important since it predicts the most other constructs.

Predictor	Predicted	Symmetric	Construct
0	2	6	mother's input, avoid prying / down to myself
1	0	5	my interest at heart / not as interested
6	**0**	**2**	**conflicting views / talking directly**
0	2	6	at ease/ tense, flashpoint
0	2	6	being a part-time father / being a father
4	0	3	I don't have control / I have limited control
0	2	6	some input, less hassle / reasons suspected
0	1	7	Tentative / feel subservient to mother
0	2	5	no hidden agenda / apprehensive

30.56 Percentage Super-subordinate
63.89 Percentage Equal
5.56 Percentage Fragmentation

Table 5.6 Representation of output for participant F11 using the ordinal relationship analysis function in Gridstat (Bell, 2002a)

In this example, constructs are strongly related; 95% of relationships between them are predictive or symmetrical. However, if hostility is heralded by the onset of new constructs that cannot be subsumed within the existing system hierarchy, then a high proportion of fragmentation in a grid, identified using Bell's method, would indicate

that some constructs lack association with the other constructs, or are losing their former associations. They are therefore present in the system but not subsumed into the hierarchy, corresponding to Kelly's conditions for hostility.

An ordinal relationship analysis was carried out on each grid in the first wave, using Gridstat, to identify important constructs and proportions of each type of relationship. Where two constructs predicted the same number of others, the differences in mean independent (predictor) and dependent (predicted) values of Somers' D for each construct were compared; the construct with the greatest difference in these scores was taken as the more important (Bell, 2002b).

5.6.1 Important constructs

In the first wave, 14 grids produced at least one construct that predicted more than one of the others. Two of the remaining three showed no predictive relationships between constructs; one of these was a grid with very few constructs anyway and the other contained very little variance between constructs. Another grid had only a few constructs that each predicted one other; again, this grid had more than 80% of its variance explained by the first factor in the PCA analysis. If all the constructs a father uses are broadly expressive of the same idea, then it may be unlikely that any one will be more important than any other. This could reflect either an initial reticence to elaborate on their personal outlook to the researcher, or a failure to engage with the process of the repertory grid interview. However, these grids may also be explained as indicating that the respondents have a limited conception of a co-parental role as defined in this exercise; they may not construe it as comprising ideas with separate priorities.

A construct at the top of the hierarchy of the construct system should indicate which aspects of a situation are most fundamental to an individual's perspective on the co-parental role. The labels of the 14 important constructs were therefore examined for content. Some dealt with the **significance** of a situation for their children - whether they were *bigger issues* or *mundane* for them, whether you might be *letting them down*, or simply whether they related to the children. The group of fathers for whom

this was the case (F5, F12, F14 and F16) were those fathers within the sample who were in contact both with their children and the children's mother two or more times per week, and tended to spend the most hours with their children. For F1, whose contact and communication were weekly, the significance of parental interaction was important - whether a situation was *important to one* or *both parents*. Other labels related to the respondents' level of **participation**: for example, whether there was scope for *development* (F6), *interaction* (F3), or whether the mother was likely to have *another agenda* (F11) and *try and turn things to her advantage* (F18). Two fathers' important constructs dealt with their **feelings**: their experience of situations as *frustrating* or *sad* (F7) or *casual* or *formal* (F19) was highly predictive. Their relationships with the children's mothers were described in the interviews as harrowing. Finally, conflict and control emerged in the group interviews (Chapter 5) as prominent themes in fathers' co-parental role understanding. Only one father (F15), however, had a construct of **conflict** as the strongest predictor; F5 also had an important construct contrasting *may be a problem* with *I have control*.

For most participants at the first wave, then, a construct could be identified at the top of a predictive hierarchy within their co-parental role construct system. For fathers in frequent contact with their children and ex-partners, the significance of situations for children tends to emerge as important, while for those with less interaction, how the interaction takes place or how they feel are stronger predictors of how they view family situations. However, the almost total absence of important constructs dealing with conflict or control suggests that whether fathers see situations as controllable or as generating conflict largely depends on other, more important dimensions.

5.6.2 Prediction & fragmentation

Some important constructs predicted nine others, while some only predicted three; some grids also have many predictive and predicted constructs, while others have only one or two predictors, with symmetric or fragmented relationships otherwise. However, the numbers of predictive relationships cannot be usefully compared across grids here, since they are of different sizes. Instead, the proportions of the three

different types of relationship were examined in each grid. The mean percentages and ranges of the three types of relationship for this sample at wave 1 are:

	Mean %	s.d.	Range
predictive	20.71	*17.64*	0, 57.14
symmetrical	66.97	*16.94*	28.57, 100
fragmented	12.43	*9.02*	0, 33.33

Table 5.7 Proportions of construct relationship types at wave 1

In only three grids, specific constructs could be identified as dissociated from the rest of the system in that they showed fragmented relationships with most other constructs. These dealt with **conflict** (*wouldn't/might cause arguments,* F1) or **significance**: whether things could be put off or ignored (*deal with ASAP/send card, see next week,* F11), or whether situations had a personal effect (*concerns both parents/me personally,* F16). These are clearly expressed as discrete ideas from the prevailing important construct, whether because they are new perspectives (F1 described conflict resulting from recent family events) or cannot be reconciled with other areas of the system. Giving some situations a low priority may take place, but may not be seen as something that should depend on the important construct of the mother's *'other agendas'*. However, fragmentation was low in general; only two fathers had a level of fragmentation more than one standard deviation above the mean. Both of them described their family circumstances as extremely bitter, seeing little of their children or the other parent (once a fortnight or less), and their grids showed little or no predictive structure.

5.6.3 Predictive relationships - summary

- Important constructs were identified in most grids at the first wave.
- These were constructs of **significance** for those who encountered their family often, and otherwise were constructs of **participation** or **feelings**.
- Only one important construct dealt with conflict.

- There were few examples of highly fragmented systems or individually disassociated constructs.

5.7 Discussion

The fathers who took part in this study were diverse in their backgrounds, but all were at least a few years past the separation of a unified family, and still in contact with their child or children. In this respect all were co-parents, having had a significant portion of their child's life during which to experience the processes of maintaining contact under non-residency. They are, then, fulfilling the role prescribed for them by law to some degree; the data explored in this chapter have allowed an exploration of both their experience and understanding of that role. For most, this had led them to see little of their ex-partner; most also reported that their contact with children had declined to less than weekly occurrence. Their self report on the co-parental communication scale suggests that they viewed themselves as strongly supportive of their child's mother, but that they also saw more conflict in this relationship than participants in Ahrons' (1981) original study.

The set of elements developed from the group interviews (chapter 5) and used to circumscribe this role was successfully apprehended by almost all participants. These discussions therefore characterise the particular experience of being a non-resident co-parent - navigating through flexible contact, planning allocated time and resources with a child, or debating emergent issues of importance with other family members. Furthermore, very few participants found all the 'mother' situations to be more similar to each other than to any 'child ones'; so a whole co-parental role exists for most in relation to this realm, capable of apprehending encounters with both individuals in some of the same terms. But there are some clear distinctions within that role - talking to the child about a school matter is rarely seen as similar to talking with the mother about it.

When the participants construed this role, it was most often in terms of the significance of various situations, or the manner in which they expected them to proceed. Their feelings and the expectation of conflict were still part of the construct

system; but most of these systems showed a hierarchy of strong associations, within which one construct emerged as important. Almost no constructs of conflict were found to be predictive, suggesting that these dimensions are seen as following on from the more important considerations of what the implications of a situation are, or what is likely to happen. However, conflict has some interesting and individual implications for these fathers. Rather than just being a quality that is present or absent in a situation, some respondents saw it in opposition to being excluded from discussion, or being manipulated. This suggests that conflict between parents, while it may be recognised by fathers as a bad thing, may also have implications of justified resistance to being pushed out of a paternal role.

The need for flexibility in co-parenting arrangements has been repeatedly stressed in the literature, and requests for a temporary change in contact were two of the elements recognised by fathers in this co-parental role. Important differences emerged between fathers in terms of how they viewed those requests. Some viewed such requests as a source of conflict, a mundane occurrence, or a situation dictated by their ex-partner depending on how frequently they were in touch with them, but without differentiating who was seeking the change. These tended to be fathers prepared to work with contact as it stood; what matters for them in these situations is the disruption to a routine. Other fathers who were engaged in a struggle to change the overall allocation of contact, however, did not perceive this similarity, and saw their own request for temporary change as a more difficult or volatile event than the mother's request. The change of a routine heightens their insecurity or frustration as non-resident fathers, and highlights for them how much support they believe the child's mother can expect compared with how little they can.

The contact maintained by these fathers at the time of interview was largely seen as what was realistic given current family circumstances, rather than what they wanted. While maintaining contact with a non-resident child is a responsibility laid down in law, it cannot be ascertained whether this contact was sufficient for them to fully discharge their responsibilities of guidance for a child; certainly, many did not think so. But the findings here do suggest some support for the view of some recent authors (e.g. Smart & Neale, 1999; Trinder, Beek & Connelly, 2002) that families prepared to work with the status quo of contact have greater success in achieving the

flexibility and mutual accommodation necessary to co-parenting. However, conflict was still a feature of the co-parental role for most respondents with some individual implications. Conflict in divorce studies is usually treated unequivocally as a negative factor, and parent education programmes are at pains to stress the negative aspects of conflict in separated families. If it is associated for some fathers with the opportunity for involvement in big issues, the bringing about of change, then they may come to view it as a necessary evil. Achieving parental influence may justify the generation of conflict as an alternative to passive parenting under the perceived control of others.

The circumstances of the participants in this sample may differ in some ways from other non-resident fathers. All those here had previously been in a stable relationship with their children's mother, and all their non-resident children were from these relationships. Their children were mostly of school age, and most still lived reasonably close to their separated family. However, these limits may in themselves be characteristic of co-parenting fathers; it is not clear whether many other kinds of father (e.g. those who have never lived with the child's mother) are likely to thrive as co-parents. The sample could also represent those fathers who are most inclined to take part in research and talk about their experience, and possessed a strong enough motivation to follow through on the initial contact. The attrition rate from first contact at recruitment suggests that while many other fathers were interested, they lacked the motivation to arrange and attend an interview. However the phone calls received suggest that this has not led to a sample who are all negative or all positive about their experience. Fathers turning up for interview included those motivated to communicate their sense of achievement at making co-parenting work, and those who wanted to tell others how hard it was for them. Furthermore, since this study is adopting a qualitative approach, the principal concern is not whether the sample is representative of a general population, but whether they can bring suitably diverse experience and interpretations of the co-parental role to enrich an understanding of it. The range of circumstances and perspectives offered by these fathers appears satisfactory in this respect.

Finally, the repertory grid method used may have had some bearing on the data gathered. The procedure proved daunting enough for one father not to wish to

continue. Certainly, despite a description in the initial phone call of what was involved, participants' comments suggested that the interview proved not to be what they were expecting. Their unfamiliarity with this procedure may have led to the use of denotative constructs. Certainly, the interviews took somewhat longer than expected, and required quite extensive and careful explanations for some participants. For this reason, it was felt that subsequent interviews should also be tape recorded with the respondent's consent, since this may prove a valuable source of data. However, most participants were interested in the method and in the use of their own terms to measure their perspective; all those who completed the interview were keen to take part in the subsequent waves.

Some implications arise from this discussion. If a distinct co-parental role has been identified, this is a distinct entity from the parental role of a resident, non-separated father. This distinction should be recognised both by services and policy; performance as a co-parent should not be judged by the same standards as those of non-separated parents, and the same expectations of the role cannot successfully be maintained by non-resident fathers themselves. Furthermore, the repertory grid methodology has allowed the individual nature of such a role to emerge; fathers construe this role on an entirely personal basis. Uniform prescriptions as to how the role should be enacted may therefore be of limited appropriateness to the actual majority of fathers. In particular, the likelihood that some fathers hold distinct views on conflict should be recognised by any services for separated families.

The repertory grid interviews were used to assess the constructivist model of the co-parental role outlined in Chapter 3. A coherent and distinct role as co-parents for these fathers was identified in these data, providing a useful demarcation of the realm where this role is enacted. The effects of experience on the co-parental role construct system cannot be assessed at this point without a second wave for comparison. However, constructs were identified in most grids as most predictive within the system. A comparison of these with important constructs at the subsequent waves will enable the model of co-parental hostility to be examined.

5.8 Conclusions

Initial support was found for the constructivist model of the co-parental role: such a role was identified within a realm represented by the situational elements used.

The types of constructs used to apprehend this role were identified and categorised; the significance and expected procedure of family situations are likely to be primary considerations.

These constructs operate within a hierarchy for most respondents.

Patterns of construing in relation to elements suggest that co-parental role systems respond to the experience of fathers.

Expectations of conflict may not influence other considerations - but may be seen as an aspect of resistance.

Chapter 6 Second wave of repertory grid interviews

This chapter will present findings from the second wave of repertory grid interviews with the sample of non-resident, separated fathers. Participants were contacted for the second interview after an interval of five months. There was no attrition from the first wave; however participants' circumstances and seasonal events meant that there were often considerable delays between contact for this wave and the interviews themselves. It was therefore not possible to replicate the sequence of interviews in the first wave. The intervening period ranged between 150 and 250 days, with the average interval between interviews being 27.5 weeks, just over six months. These interviews were tape recorded with the permission of all interviewees. Since many construct labels were arrived at after some preamble, it was felt that it would be helpful to be able to refer back to a fuller description of some labels during analysis. Discussion during the interview also gave a broader view of what may have taken place in the intervening period.

This chapter will largely follow the structure of the previous one, examining:

- Background information - participant characteristics, contact and communication, experience and events reported
- The content of constructs supplied
- Element relationships
- Construct - element relationships
- Predictive relationships between constructs, this time including a comparison of important constructs at the first two waves.

6.1 Background information

6.1.1 Participant characteristics

Background information was gathered again, using a reduced interview schedule (Appendix K). In the period between the two interviews five respondents had

experienced a change in employment; two of these were promotions within the same workplace. Two (F13, F9) had gone to more demanding jobs, one in a different town (though he had not yet moved house). Two freelancers reported change - one had moved to a temporary job in sales (F1) and another (F6) had increased the amount of his freelance work and started some Higher Education teaching as well. All were still apart from the child's other parent, and ten of the fathers reported no change in relationships for either themselves or their children's mother. Three respondents had a new partner, two had separated from their partner at the first interview, and four reported the mother having a new partner (two cases reporting changes in both parents' recent relationships). None of the sample reported any new children for either parent in the time since the first interview. There were also no changes in their children's residential status; all still lived with their mothers.

6.1.2 Contact and communication

	Wave			
Summary measure	**1**		**2**	
Mean contact episodes per month	4.68	*sd 3.7*	4.12	*sd 4.20*
Median contact episodes per month	4	*Q's 2;7.25*	3	*Q's 1;6.5*
Median contact hours per visit	15	*Q's 10;29*	13.88	*Q's 4.5;35*
Mean monthly communication with mother	6.44	*sd 7.4*	4.21	*sd 4.3*
Mean quality of CP communication	30	*sd 7.07*	31	*sd 8.1*

Table 6.1 Contact & communication - summary measures & indices, waves 1-2

The mean frequency of contact episodes for the sample was slightly lower than at the first interview, with broader variation; the median change in frequency was 1 but six fathers reported no change in contact rates. The duration of each contact episode was

also slightly shorter on average, with a median change of 4, though variance was again greater. One father (F17) had experienced considerably more contact in the preceding month, since it included a two-week visit by his daughters during their school holiday. The rate of inter-parental communication was quite considerably lower than before (65.3% of the previous rate); the standard deviation was lower here than that of the first wave. The median extent of change was 1.5, and in most cases there was a reduction in communication.

	< weekly	weekly	≥twice weekly
Contact episodes	11	2	4
Communication with mother	9	2	6

Table 6.2 Frequency categories of contact & communication at wave 2

	down	stable	up
Present contact cf. last 6 months	9	4	4
Present communication cf. last 6 months	7	9	1

Table 6.3 Comparison categories of contact & communication at wave 2

Examining the coded categories of frequency of contact and communication suggests that at the time of the second wave of interviews, weekly contact and communication were less likely. Most participants were now in touch with their family less than once a week. The majority were still reporting a falling-off in contact, but communication with the child's mother was also very likely to be lower than normal at the second wave.

There was negligible difference in the total scale score for the Quality of Co-parental Communication (see Table 6.1, above) . The mean item scores for the sub-scales shown in Table 6.4 suggest that what decline there was in quality constituted a reduction in perceived support between parents, rather than a rise in conflict.

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Support (mean item score)	3.11	*0.74*	2.88	*1.06*
Conflict (mean item score)	3.37	*0.92*	3.26	*0.81*

Table 6.4 Quality of Co-parental Communication: mean sub-scale item scores, waves 1-2

Contact, then, was less frequent at this wave. Previous research has argued that frequency of contact with a non-resident parent tends to decline over time (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Stephens, 1996). However, some participants' arrangements were affected by Christmas and school holidays. It may also be that respondents were more likely to contact the study at a time when things were going well, since when their rates have regressed towards an average. The diminution of inter-parental communication may likewise represent a turn for the worse in relations between parents. It could also be that in the previous month, there had been less *need* to communicate than in the month previous to the first interview. However, there had been a slight decline in reported levels of support between parents.

6.1.3 How things had been

Notes were taken from the conversational sections of the interview recordings. Participants tended to give a general evaluation of how things had been since the last interview; from this account they were categorised according to whether they thought things had got better, worse or stayed the same, or had had recourse to legal procedures (shown in Table 6.5).

Most of the participants - nine in all - described things as having got worse in the period since the last interview. For one father, contact had stopped after 'things had got pretty nasty' (F10); another felt that 'all the hatred and resentment's thrown back at me just now' (F18). A few of these mentioned the effects of the Christmas season -

F7 felt that that things were 'going better till just after Christmas', when contact was stopped. Five respondents had experienced some improvement: there was 'not such a big drama now' (F5), or there was 'a lot more give and take since last time' (F16). Only three of the sample saw things as similar to the first wave - they described either the continuation of long-established contact patterns (F6, F17) or a negotiated exchange of existing contact times (F12).

The period between interviews, then, had brought change in the co-parental relationships of almost all of these fathers. For most, however, the festive season had intervened; this is traditionally a time when family relationships are under strain.

F	How things had been	Events
1	worse	Job change
3	worse	Court, wife's new relationship
5	better	Expecting child
6	about the same	No events
7	worse	Engaged to new partner
8	worse	Court hearing;moved house, relationship ended
9	worse	Job change; death in family
10	worse	Child Support Agency Dispute
11	worse	Divorce finalised
12	about the same	Holiday disruptions
13	worse	Job change; death in family
14	Better	Maintenance renegotiated
15	Better	Wife moved to shift work
16	better	Divorce finalised
17	about the same	No events
18	worse	Wife's new relationship broken down
19	better	No events

Table 6.5 Participants' descriptions of intervening period at wave 2 - summary

6.1.4 Events

All but three participants described events in the period between interviews that they felt had precipitated or contributed to any change; these included episodes relating to the Child Support Agency, court hearings, changes in the mother's domestic circumstances or divorce papers coming through. However, the events identified in the interview notes do not necessarily correspond to the characteristics from the questionnaires. For instance, although three participants answered 'yes' when asked if they had new partners, none subsequently discussed this as an event with an impact on the family circumstances. The list of events in table 6.5 in the section above therefore represents what the *respondents* saw as significant events within the realm of their co-parenting.

Two participants reported their divorce papers coming through since the previous interview. For F16, whose ex-partner had been waiting to remarry, this had improved things between the parents, but F11 found the parental relationship had worsened as a result. Other relationship changes also had an impact. One participant (F3), who had found out about the child's mother's new partner for himself, saw this as ammunition for a coming court case, while the end of a mother's new relationship had raised tensions for another participant (F18). F7 meanwhile viewed his own announcement of engagement as having sent shock waves through the separated family, and the end of a new relationship for F8 had required him to move to a new house. Changes in the fathers' circumstances also included new jobs and the death of their own mother for two participants (F9 and F11), both seen as having a negative impact; a change in employment conditions for the ex-wife of another respondent had brought some more understanding to the co-parental relationship. The expectation of a new child for F5 was likewise seen as having improved things. Finally, three of the sample (F10, F12 & F14) described significant negotiations with the child's mother involving Child Support or the pattern of contact. Only three respondents viewed the intervening period as being without incident.

6.1.5 Background - summary

- While family configurations remained unchanged, there were several changes in terms of employment and relationships for participants in the six months following the first interview.

- At the second wave, a general downturn in reported rates of inter-parental communication (and, to a lesser extent, contact) coincided with a reduction in reported levels of support between parents; this might reflect seasonal effects of the Christmas period.

- Almost all of these fathers perceived change in the family situation having taken place during this period; again, family relationships are traditionally under strain around the festive season.

- The high incidence of reported family events during these six months concords with the view of the separated family as affected by a high rate of change.

6.2 Construct content

The total number of constructs at this wave was slightly greater - 148 rather than the previous 135; the procedure outlined above might account for this increase. They were generally more connotative than before. Denotative constructs (prevalent in the first wave), though part of an interviewee's repertory, may offer little insight into their processes (Stewart, 1999c). For instance, a construct such as *about my daughter / about something she wants*, though differentiating what situations are about, is couched in terms of external features and is difficult to generalise to other situations. It refers merely to the wording of the situations rather than any particular significance this difference might have for the participant. For this reason, the interviewer on the second wave purposely tried to identify denotative constructs when these were offered and encourage interviewees to elaborate upon them, following Stewart's recommendations (ibid.). Thus a response to the example above might be, 'What

difference does it make that these situations are about your daughter rather than something she wants?' or 'How is that contrast significant for you?'. Such questioning would be followed until the respondent supplied a personal contrast between the elements that could be generalised to others; for example, 'important/could be dealt with later'. While this amendment to the elicitation procedure may have resulted in more meaningful constructs being produced at this and the subsequent wave, it must be recognised that the alteration may have had an effect on the results obtained on these occasions, and may underlie some of the changes observed.

6.2.1 Content at this wave

The proportions of the five categories were somewhat different from the previous wave.

Significance/import - 34 constructs were of this type at the second wave. Again, some dealt with imminence (e.g. *can be rescheduled)* the importance of the issues at stake (e.g. *integral to child-rearing, more about practical details)* or the implied demands of the situations (e.g. *temporary relevance, let it go by).* There was also some concern with: whether the *views, convenience,* or *feelings* of the child or a parent were central; whether the child *had a say*; or whether a situation *might involve somebody not getting what they want.* Some labels described situations as unusual (e.g. *not something that would usually arise*), with contrast poles to these (e.g. *natural part of coming and going*) suggesting that some situations are part of an expected routine for fathers. In effect, these constructs distinguish situations that may not be within the range of convenience of their current system. Finally, a consideration for some fathers was whether a situation might have some impact on their current relationship (*I have to think about my partner*) or their individual circumstances (*might have impact on my home situation*). Other constructs indicated whether or not a father found a situation, for example, *relevant to me* or whether he was *only involved because he had to.* These self-oriented concerns were not explicit in any of the constructs supplied in the first wave.

Participation and control - 46 constructs dealt with this theme. Aspects of involvement included whether fathers *initiated* or were *informed* (*active / passive*); whether there would be *mutual input* or a *foregone conclusion*; whether *consensus* was needed or whether they *would be actively excluded.* There was some consideration of the mother's point of view in terms of whether it might have to be discussed, taken on board, or just accepted. One father saw this as maintaining a link with the other parent's life, *keeping a toe in the water.* But mothers' motives were often seen as a suspicious feature of participation. They were construed by some fathers as being *manipulative*, capable of *coming across all motherly* or *using the children.* Some constructs in the first wave talked of a feeling of apprehension. This time round, however, references were more specific to a sense that one had to be wary or consider in advance what one said or did in some situations (*think carefully about what you say; on your guard).* There were, meanwhile, noticeably more constructs dealing with control on this occasion. Specifically, these constructs referred to whether the participant felt in control or not, either explicitly (*I'm in charge, I have control*) or less directly (*up to me to decide, I'm in a position of power*). In contrast to these labels, the participants tended to describe their experience of not being in control, rather than describing somebody else in control: *walking on eggshells, don't know what will come.* While the nature of participation was a major theme for the fathers at this wave, there was considerable emphasis on the extent or the ways in which their involvement is permitted. Whether or not this level of control exists, participation is rarely seen as a matter of choice. There were some constructs, however, that suggested they did compare the involvement they were allowed with the expectations of involvement they held (e.g. *being cut out of being a dad* or *treated with no respect as a father).* It has been argued in the literature that mothers may act as gatekeepers in separated families (Braver & O'Connell, 1998); they are certainly regarded in this light by the fathers in this sample. Finally, one father focussed on his parental ability to participate (*not sure if I'm doing ok as a parent*). One participant also saw only some situations as allowing him to feel *like an equal partner.*

Conflict - If conflict is more readily seen in terms of being present or absent, then it might only be specifically referred to (and thus coded under **conflict**) when its presence is associated with a situation. Conflict was, in fact, most frequently

contrasted with aspects of involvement or feelings, and it may be easier to express the feelings one has in the absence of conflict. This theme was still to the fore, accounting for 21 constructs; some new metaphors offered were *there might be hell to pay* or *tiger by the tail.* The contrasts that were offered to these labels again suggested distinct attitudes towards conflict. Some constructs simply opposed conflict with neutrality or an absence of problems (*it's not a problem, simpler, more relaxed*). Elsewhere it was seen as an alternative to consensus or co-operation between parents (*open discussion, plenty of input from me, what I say is accepted*); this is the understanding of conflict prevalent in separated family literature. However, once again, other constructs located conflict in opposition to situations where the father felt excluded or that the mother held all the cards (*not really a choice, ignored & thought irrelevant, put back to me 'you're going to hurt kids'*). Further examples contrasted conflict with feelings of *apathy* or *frustration.* In this respect, the respondents do not automatically see conflict as entirely negative; it was variously seen in opposition to both satisfactory and unsatisfactory involvement. One respondent also construed the presence of harmony or disharmony between parent and child.

Who is present - There were only four of these constructs at this wave, compared with 17 on the previous occasion. This change in particular may be attributed to the change in interview procedure noted above. However, this was a small category even at the first wave relative to the total number of constructs elicited.

Feelings - Constructs describing participants' feelings were numerous at this wave, at 43. This preponderance was reflected in almost every grid. The increased number of these constructs may reflect greater introspection or willingness to 'open up' on re-administration of the grid, with participants feeling more comfortable with the grid procedure or with talking to the interviewer. However, the more rigorous elicitation described above might also have contributed to this. Labels from the previous wave were largely in evidence again (*anger, frustration* etc.); new labels offered included *comfortable, estranged, warmth, embarrassment,* and *formality.*

6.2.2 Content and intervening period

Participants' accounts of intervening events were recorded in the conversation during the interview, and any evaluation of how things had gone for them. The constructs used at both times were also considered in relation to these accounts. Seven participants felt that things had got worse for them since the last interview. In almost all cases, this was described in relation to a significant family event: a change in employment for one or other parent, the pressures of Christmas, a dispute with the CSA or the end of a relationship for the children's mother. Five of these showed an increase in the Quality of Co-parental Communication index; the two who had changed their own job scored the same or less. The last individual (F13) found the increased commitment of his new (and soon to be abandoned) job personally stressful in that it reduced his availability for contact; nevertheless he did not see this as worsening family relationships overall. In other words, it did not seem to affect his ability to co-operate with the child's mother. Some changes were evident in the constructs used by these participants; 3 introduced or increased their use of **conflict** constructs at the second interview. Participant F13 introduced labels referring to *parent-child disharmony* and feelings of *frustration,* but also *warmth.* Those for whom Christmas had made things worse introduced constructs relating to *stress, argument* (F7) and also the idea of *cynicism* in parental behaviour, *using the kids to mess the other parent about* (F11). Where there had been a change in the mother's situation, there was little change in the overall balance of themes in the two grids. However, some new labels appeared at the second interview. The father whose ex-wife had ceased her latest relationship now construed in terms of whether a situation *might have an impact on* [his] *new partner,* and anticipated his former partner's *resentment* of him (F18). The participant whose ex-wife had started a new business in the interim now viewed situations in terms of whether he was allowed to be involved **(participation & control),** whereas before his concerns were whether it *needed discussion,* or whether he *could be bothered* (F1). He also described some situations as being where *something might be taken away.*

Two respondents were awaiting an imminent return to court to appeal against court decisions on contact arrangements. One of these had had what he viewed as an

unsatisfactory sheriff decision in the preceding six months - the sheriff had made 'suggestions rather than prescriptions'. The other felt that 'because I'm male', the sheriff at his hearing had 'turned round and said "she [the mother] decides"'. His advice to other fathers was 'don't put faith in the court system'. Nevertheless, both of these fathers had initiated appeals, and were hopeful that they could effect some positive change. Their accounts during the interviews reflected this perspective. The first father (F3) described his monologic summary of what had taken place since the first interview as 'putting things on a formal basis', citing sections of the Children (Scotland) Act and incidents of the mother's uncooperative behaviour in the face of his concern. While he estimated he had had only 30% of the contact time he was due in the intervening period, he felt that there was 'nothing he can do' but record the details for his next court visit. Both parents had started new relationships. His first grid had more **participation** constructs than any other type, and dwelt to some extent on the father-child relationship. At the second interview, the majority of constructs were still of **participation** (*manipulative/fluent*; *have to discuss/I have my own ideas*) but some of these now dealt with whether he had **control** or not, which had not been an issue before. The second father (F8) had attended an initial consultation at Family Mediation, which the mother had refused to take any further. He saw this as good for him in a way: 'I can use that basically to go up and say ... "I've tried to mediate but she's not having it" ... that's all I can do in that respect'. This individual's second grid contained none of his former references to **conflict** (*heated*; *aggravation)* but did mention some of own **feelings**. He had only had one opportunity to see one of his children since the last interview. It may be that, in the absence of any interaction, his own feelings were a more prominent concern than conflict. Alternatively, the build-up to a court hearing might have led him to view moderation and conflict avoidance as more presentable virtues, or given him a 'wait-and-see' outlook. Both these fathers scored higher at their second interview on the Quality of Co-Parental Communication index. If the imminence of a court appearance does have an effect on the constructs that a non-resident father uses to describe his role, he may be trying to see himself as closer to what he perceives as a social or legal expectation of that role.

Other respondents saw some improvement in their circumstances between the first and second interviews. These five felt that things were 'not as bad as before' or that

things had 'settled down a bit'. The improvements were also described as originating in family events. The consolidation of new relationships for one or both parents seemed to be seen as a force for harmony; as one father opined:

Through time it gets a bit easier. Once both parents have settled a bit – I know there's been a big difference since she's met someone else and is going to get married. She's a lot happier so that tends to mean there's a lot less stress both ways. (Participant F14).

Two of the five had recently seen a satisfactory outcome to legal or maintenance disputes. For one father the enactment of contact arrangements prescribed by the court just before his first interview had given him more time to spend with his children. He showed no appreciable difference in the constructs used at the two interviews; however, the number of constructs supplied was fairly limited on both occasions (F19). The other (F14) had ameliorated a CSA decision through negotiation with his ex-wife; at his second interview, the **conflict** type constructs from his first grid had disappeared and he supplied more **participation** constructs describing **control** (*I'm in charge*) and his **feelings**. He also introduced the label *gives me the position I should have as father.* Another respondent felt that expeecting a baby with his new partner had improved things for him: the partner was now more 'understanding' and his daughter's visits were consequently 'not such a big drama now'. Yet **conflict** constructs only appeared in his second grid. The situations MCS and MCY, however, were by then distinguished as *confrontational* and *explosive*, whereas he was *in control* of the others (F5). This suggests that any improvement had been limited to the respondent's own domestic sphere; practical co-parental arrangements with his wife, on the other hand, were still causing upset. Thus at the second interview, he also introduced the construct of having *impact on my home life.* One father thought that his divorce coming through not long previously had brought more 'give and take' into the contact arrangements. **Control** appears as a theme in the second interview, as does the label of *relaxed* (F16). However, his expression of control incorporated *I'm in a position of power, got all the cards.* Whether the perceived improvement represented an improvement in inter-parental co-operation or simply that he felt more able to hold sway is debatable. The last father in this group cited employment difficulties for his wife and her partner as the source of

improvement in circumstances. They both had to work shifts at odd hours now, which had led them to rely more heavily on his contact time to accommodate this. He expressed empathy with their situation, however, and felt it only right to help them through this. His second grid interview, however, had to be terminated after only four constructs, when he became agitated at what was being asked, saying that he had said all he could about his situation (F15).

Finally, three of the sample felt there had been little overall change in their circumstances. Although one of these was actually spending less time with his son, he attributed this to the son's busier schedule as he grew through his teenage years. The only new construct he supplied was *think carefully about what I say/give my opinions freely*; otherwise, his constructs were not substantively different from previously (F6). Another (F12) had been experiencing some fluctuations in contact arrangements; he currently saw his son on Friday afternoons instead of Thursday overnights and reported that they were 'in the progress [sic] of disagreeing about that'. These, however, he saw as temporary glitches, and he expected things to 'change a bit' anyway in the school holidays. The third of these fathers (F17) also perceived the situation as 'necessarily fluid'. Both F12 and F17 supplied fewer constructs than before; they were less denotative than previously, but dealt with similar themes.

One of the fathers pursuing court action and the first father for whom things had improved described inter-parental relations on both occasions as extremely bitter and uncooperative (F8 & F19). Yet they offered no constructs on the theme of conflict at the second interview. Neither had any direct communication with the mother other than through legal channels at this point in time; disengagement from the mother but not the child through recourse to a solicitor may represent a strategy of conflict avoidance. Both considered either that there had been some improvement between interviews in the inter-parental relationship, that 'things had settled down' or that they were more resigned to their situation.

It was seen in section 6.1 that most fathers viewed things as having changed for them since the last interview. The content of their constructs, then, were seen to change with fathers' perceptions of how things were going. Fathers finding things getting worse tended to move towards constructs of conflict where they continued to see the

mother regularly, or towards constructs of control or their own feelings where there was little communication. One father, meanwhile, experienced an upturn in circumstances and ceased construing in terms of conflict; and those few for whom things had not changed showed little change in the constructs they used. There is some suggestion here that the types of construct used by fathers in their co-parental role reflect their recent experience; and that these are further affected by the regularity of communication with the child's mother.

6.2.3 Construct content - summary

- At the second wave there were more constructs supplied dealing with participation (particularly in relation to control) and feelings, and fewer dealing with significance and import, or who was present.

- Conflict was again seen variously in opposition to satisfactory or unsatisfactory involvement

- The types of constructs used by fathers changed somewhat in response to their reported experience and how often they saw their ex-partner.

6.3 Elements

At the first wave, it was found that most fathers saw situations MCS and MCY as distinct from the other elements; they were seen as strongly similar where some form of status quo was accepted over contact arrangements. However, MS and CS were rarely found to be similar. Instead, they were more likely to be viewed in the same terms as other 'mother' or 'child' situations respectively. These element pairs were examined again at this wave using the same approach.

6.3.1 Element pairs

MCS & MCY

Six fathers construed MCS and MCY as convergent this time. There was, therefore, less perception of similarity between the two elements at this wave. As before, none of these respondents were engaged in dispute over contact arrangements at this point. However, some were communicating with the mother at least weekly (F5, F13, F16, F17), with the other two reporting sporadic or no communication (F9, F10). F5, F13 and F16 also saw their children on a weekly basis or more, while F17 maintained regular contact with both his children and their mother via phone or e-mail. (Since his children lived with their mother in England, this was the only regular approach practical for him). The Quality of Co-parental Communication was distinct for these two groups, those with regular family involvement scoring between 27 and 38 (high quality) and those without scoring 13 and 21 (poor quality).

As at the previous wave, then, there appeared to be little distinction between one's own and the mother's requests for a temporary change where contact itself was not currently at issue. There were, however, differences in family interaction among these fathers, which were seen at the first wave as reflecting different bases for similarity. The reports of co-parental relationship quality in this wave again suggest either a perception of mutual input, or of resignation to little or no paternal participation, depending on the father's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the prevailing contact arrangements. In support of this interpretation, it was observed that for F5, F13 and F16 (shown in Fig. 6.1), MCS and MCY were significantly unlike CP and some other 'child' situations; whereas for those with limited involvement, child situations were not particularly dissimilar.

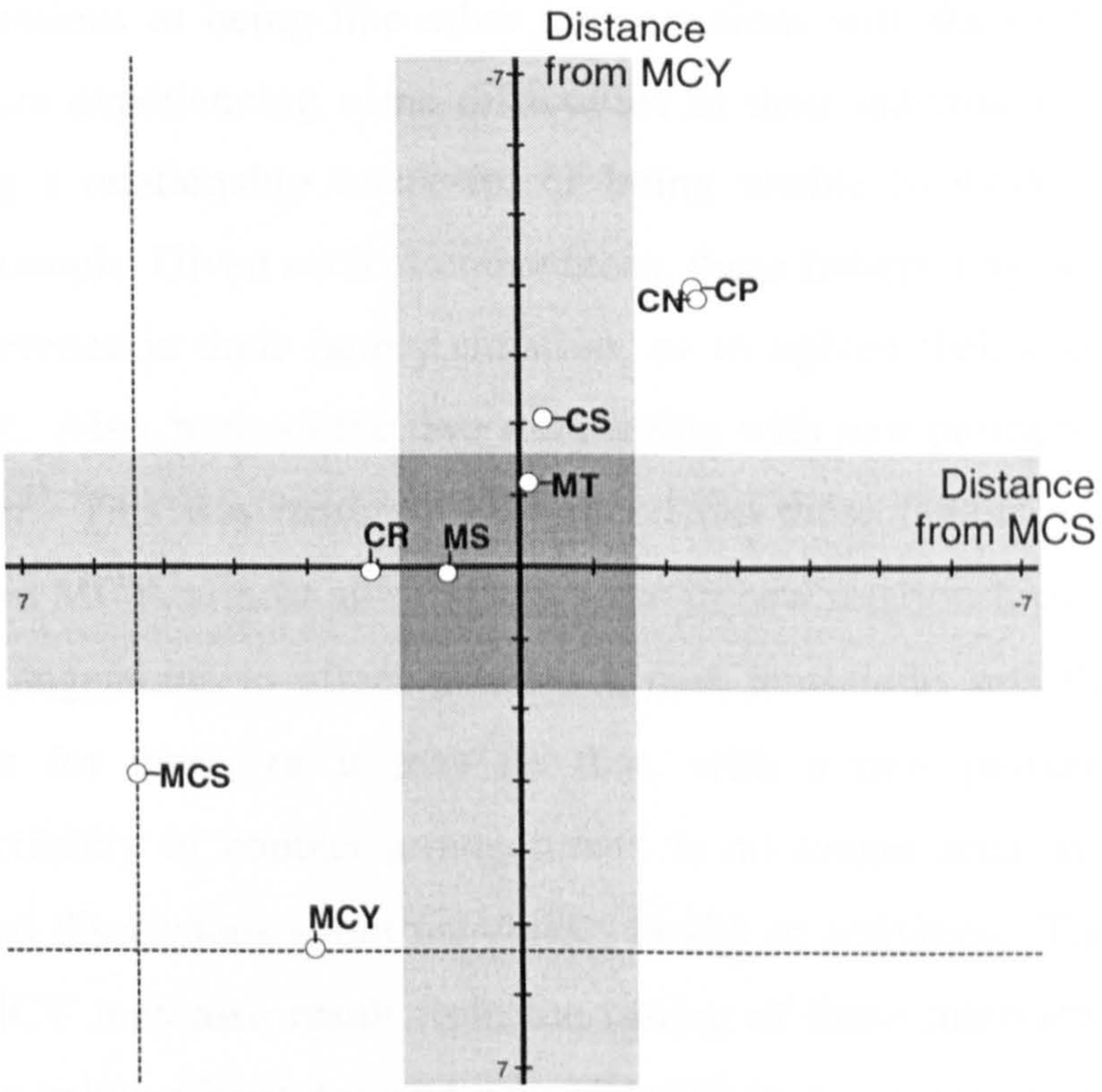


Figure 6.1 MCS/MCY plot for participant F16 at wave 2

The two elements are convergent, and dissimilar to CP & CN.

Those without regular involvement or a good working relationship, then, are less clear about different aspects of their role. Also, a high proportion of those fathers who did not perceive MCS and MCY as similar at this wave were now involved in contact disputes (F1, F3, F7, F8, F11, F12, F18). F7, for example, reported at this wave that his wife had stopped allowing the children to visit him since he announced his engagement. If it is harder for these fathers to assume continuity of contact, we might expect them to start perceiving inequality. Any similarity between the non-resident parent asking for a change and the resident parent doing so is lost as the imbalance of power is felt more keenly. (It is worth noting, though, that MCS and MCY are never seen as divergent).

It was, however, still largely the case that MCS and MCY, whether convergent or not, were isolated from the other elements in the set. For 11 respondents, no other discussions were seen as similar to MCS and MCY (including five for whom the pair converged); another two fathers had one of these elements isolated. Those few for whom one or both of these situations were *not* isolated (F3, F6, F8, F11 and F16) tended to perceive them as similar to MS and MT - in other words, they were able to

view such discussions as being like other conversations with the mother. Three of these fathers were experiencing some difficulties in their individual lives – moving house following a relationship break-up, or being unable to work through health problems, for example. Given such circumstances, these fathers may be more inclined to look for coherence in their family situation, or to tighten their construing of the separated family. Also, none of the five were living with new partners; only one had a current partner. This was markedly different from those fathers with an isolated view of MCS and MCY, almost all of whom were in new relationships. The potential for changed arrangements to affect a father's new household sets these situations apart somewhat for them; or it may be that, with a new partner to consider, maintaining flexibility in contact arrangements is no longer seen as equivalent to more issue-based discussions about the child's health or activities. The setting apart of MCS and MCY may also result from the timing of these interviews in the early part of the year, when Christmas and school holidays have put extra strain on the flexibility of contact arrangements. (In the interview notes at this wave, the modal category for 'how things had gone' was 'worse', and two fathers - F3 and F8 - had been to court).

Perceiving similarity between MCS and MCY, then, was again seen to depend on perceived stability of contact. They were rarely seen as similar to other situations, and if they were, then usually to MS or MT; the data at this wave suggest that this may reflect current circumstances in terms of employment or relationships.

MS & CS

Almost all grids at this wave had MS as similar to MT, and CS as similar to CN or CP. However, there was also significant similarity *between* MS and CS for six respondents at this wave.

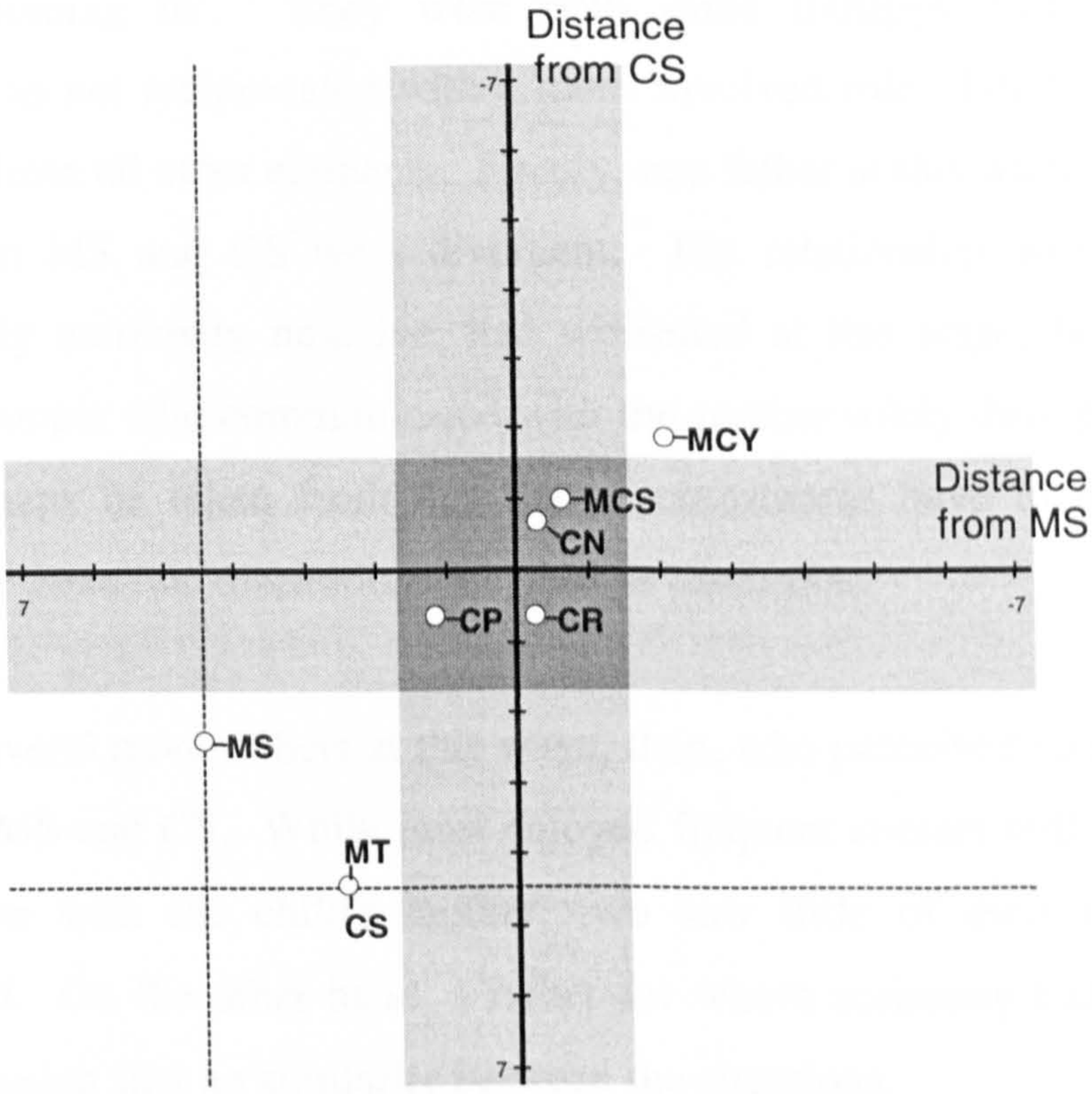


Figure 6.2 MS/CS plot for participant F12 at wave 2

MS and CS are convergent with MT.

Four of these fathers (F5, F6, F12, F18) were the only respondents who also found CS to be significantly similar to MT. This suggests that they were able to apprehend similarity based on the discussion of a child-rearing issue whether they were speaking to their child or to the mother; thus, the issue is understood as one affecting all family members. These fathers were seeing their children fairly regularly, though F6's son had been on a trip abroad in the previous month. When they did see their children, they spent relatively long periods of time with them – between 20 and 50 hours per visit. They also spoke with their children's mothers twice a week, apart from F18 whose shift work made fortnightly communication more practical. This active commitment to a co-parental role is consistent with the idea that a school or health issue can be discussed with either mother or child with similar implications. The other two fathers for whom MS and CS were similar (F9 and F10) saw themselves as actively excluded from participation in child-rearing decisions, which may have been the basis of the similarity they perceived. F9 felt, for example, that 'if I was hit by a bus tomorrow, I don't think they [mother and child] would notice except the cheques

would stop coming in'. They were both quite unhappy that their financial contribution was not reciprocated with a more involved role. For F10, MS and CS were isolated from all other elements. Finally, one father at this wave (F11) provided a grid wherein MS and CS were divergent. His relationship with his children's mother, already extremely negative, had worsened at this stage; he was the only father in the sample who communicated with the mother solely through a third party. It should perhaps be taken from this that circumstances have to be substantially adverse before these two discussions are seen as *dis*similar.

There were several more fathers at this wave, then, who perceived similarity between the elements MS and CS. While most enjoyed frequent contact with their child and communication with the child's mother, two saw little of their family and felt disempowered. On the other hand, a father for whom acrimony had brought about the same exclusion saw no similarity between the situations.

6.3.2 Clusters

The other feature of element relationships observed at the first wave, where the 'child' and 'mother' situations were seen to cluster separately from each other, was again observed in a few grids at this wave. An example is shown in Fig. 6.3.

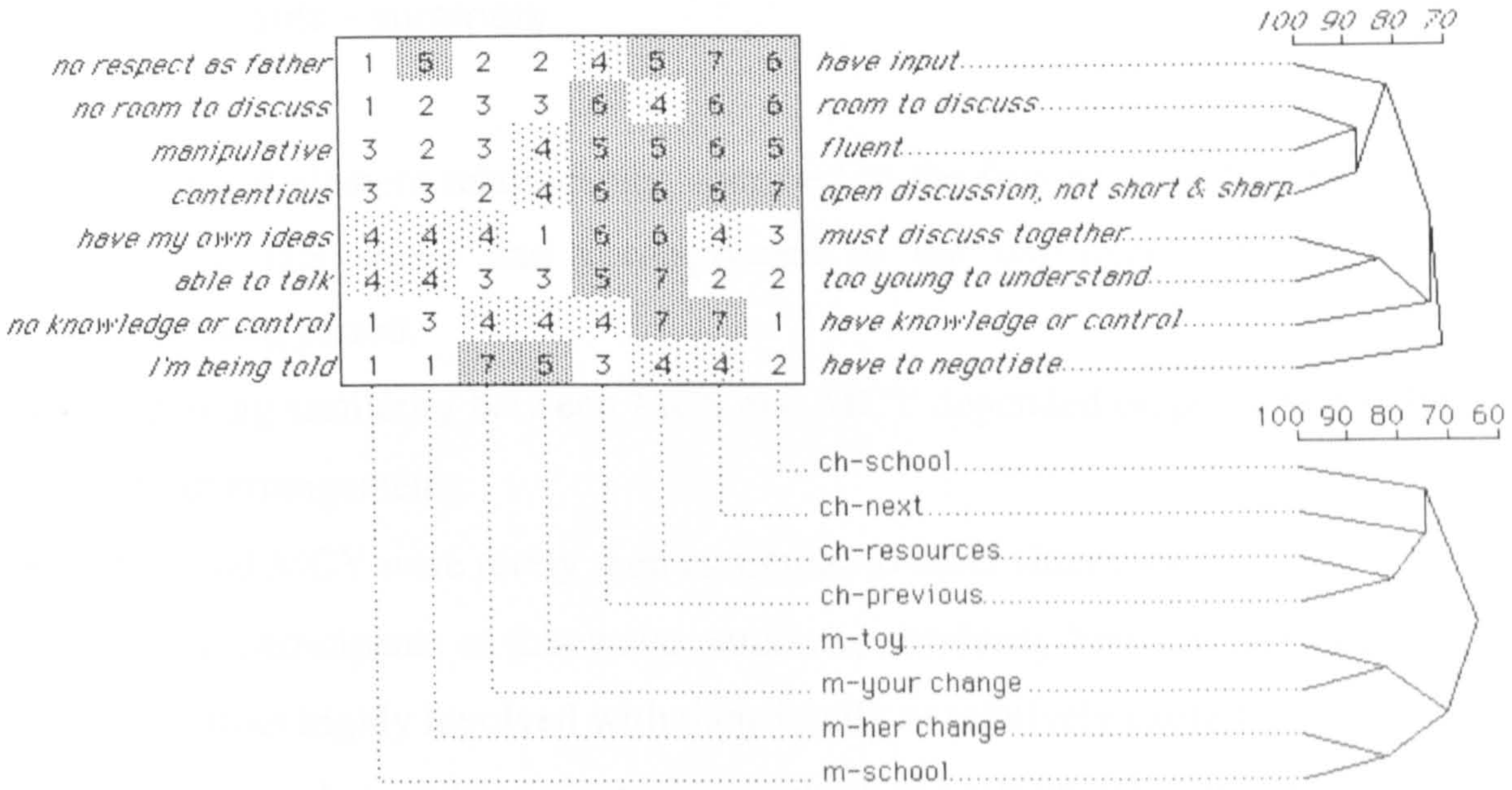


Figure 6.3 Cluster analysis for participant F3 at wave 2

The three fathers construing in this way (F3, F17 and F19) were different individuals from those doing so at the first wave. As before, no clear distinction of the group could be made from the rest of the sample. They had been separated for a similar length of time to the 'mother/child' construers at the first wave (3 to 5.5 years), but had less contact with the mother. They saw very little of the child's mother (1-3 contacts in the last month) and had not recently experienced any increase in communication, although F17 maintained more contact by e-mail. Two of these fathers, however, were in the aftermath of going to court to resolve a contact dispute. Although F3 had not been happy with the outcome, both viewed this period as something of a lull.

Why the mother/child construers from the first wave were no longer doing so is also debatable. Some may have recently had to divert their attention elsewhere than on their family unit – F8, for example, had had to move flat, and F11's health had deteriorated considerably. It would appear, however, that once again, most fathers in this sample *were* able to provide constructs for a co-parental role system, given that there was one less respondent whose system showed a fundamental separation of the 'mother' and 'child' elements.

6.3.3 Elements - summary

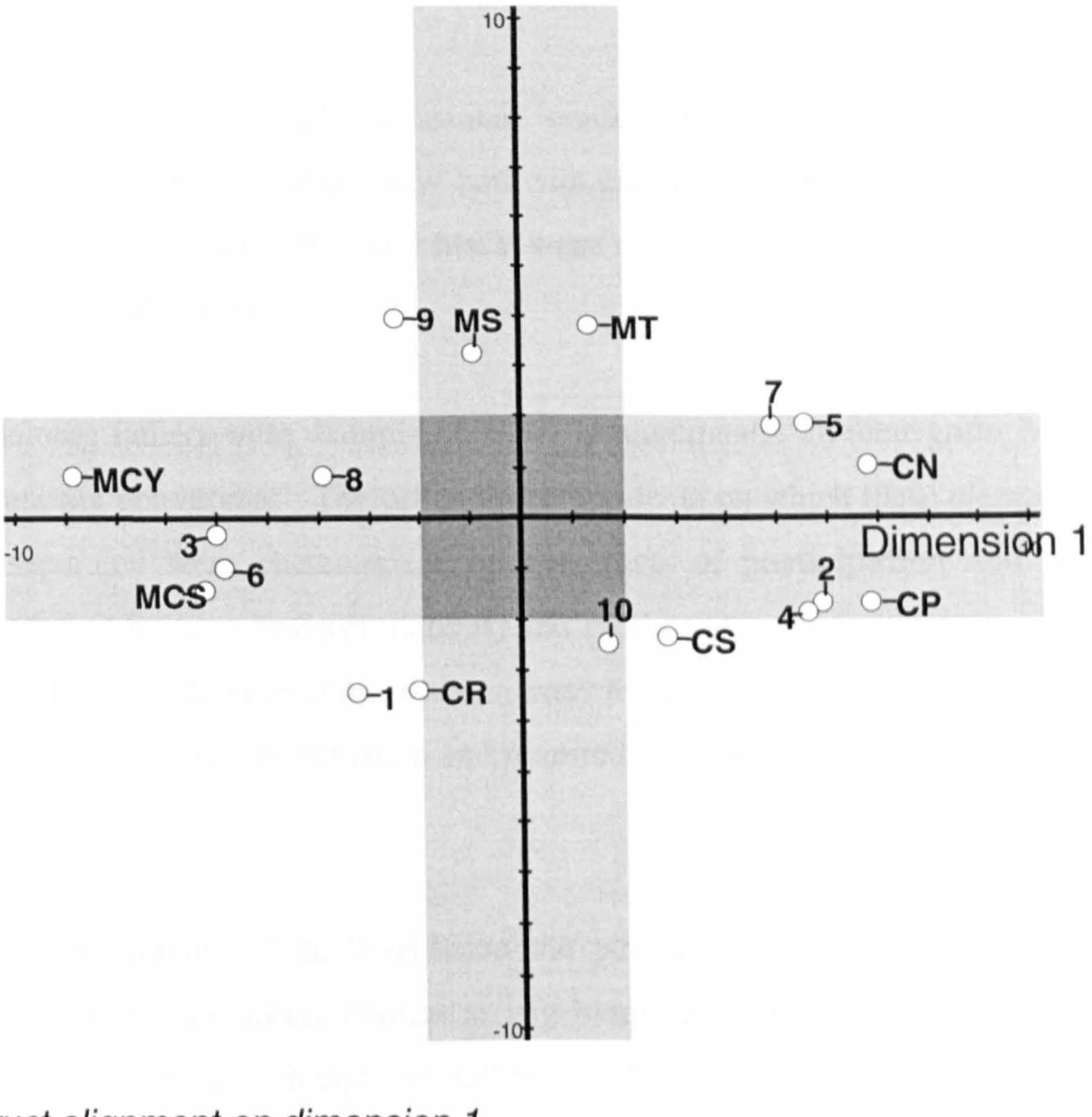
- Patterns of element relationships observed at the first wave were consistent with those at this wave, and corresponded to the experience of fathers in the intervening period.
- Perceiving similarity between MCS and MCY depended on perceived stability in contact arrangements.
- MCS and MCY were rarely seen as similar to other situations.
- Several participants at this wave perceived similarity between MS and CS; they were either highly involved with their family or relatively excluded.
- Once again, few systems clustered 'mother' and 'child' elements separately; most therefore were able to construe a co-parental role rather than separate parent and ex-partner roles.

6.4 Construct-element relationships

In section 6.3 above, the structural relationships between MCS and MCY were seen to corroborate the observations made and the factors identified at the first wave (being similar for those who perceived stasis in their contact arrangements), while MS and MT were only seen as similar at this wave by a small group of respondents. PCA plots were again examined to identify meanings behind these aspects.

6.4.1 MCS/MCY

The similarity between MCS and MCY perceived by six respondents was again on the basis of either **conflict** and **feeling** constructs, or **significance and import.** F5 and F16 (whose PCA plot is shown in Fig. 6.4) were in regular contact with their families and reported better co-parental communication quality, but nonetheless viewed MCS and MCY as similarly *uncomfortable, explosive, unsure* or *apprehensive, change* and *stress*ful. They had younger children than F13 and F17, though, for whom MCS and MCY were routine matters *not spoken about at length*; they *wouldn't dwell* on them.



Construct alignment on dimension 1 -

	Negative axis	Positive axis
1	personal effect; change	common interest
2	potential argument, disagreement	very loving
3	apprehensive; change	relaxed
4	necessary but have to think first (on your guard)	something I look forward to
5	difficult	more likely to agree
6	stress	straightforward
7	more complicated; have to get a lot more involved	nothing difficult would come up
8	tolerate because of child	responsibilities I have to pass on
9	you'd get parent's view	you'd get child's view
10	walking on eggshells; got to grovel	I'm in position of power; got all cards; in control

Figure 6.4 PCA plot for participant F16 at wave 2

F9 and F10, however, with occasional contact with their children and little communication with the mother, saw both situations in terms of having *no parental role to play* or *no choice*; MCS and MCY were characterised by negative aspects of **participation and control.**

The remaining fathers were disputing contact arrangements. In their grids, MCS and MCY were not convergent. The principal components on which these elements were usually separated were characterised by constructs of **participation and control.** MCS tended to be seen as determined by the mother (e.g. *no involvement, what she says goes*) but easy to cope with (*normal, easy to relate*). In contrast, MCY, though *initiated* by the father, was uncertain and required diplomacy (e.g. *I have to negotiate, can't control*).

Disputes over contact, then, heightened the perception of a disparity in parental interaction. However, where contact arrangements were accepted, fathers perceived requests for a contact change as either similarly volatile, routine or dictated, depending on the extent of their involvement with other family members.

6.4.2 MS/CS

At this wave, these elements were convergent for six fathers. For the four who also perceived them as similar to MT, the convergence was based on poles such as *unworried* (F6), *can agree* (F12), and *nobody's trying to con me* (F18). These fathers were experiencing relatively high rates of contact (20 hours or more in the last month). Where MT was not included in the convergence, it was associated with *conflict, disappointment, not being interested* or the mother *dictating*; MS and CS were similarly *relaxed* without there being *really a choice* (F8), or else *relevant*, but with the mother *coming over all motherly.* These latter fathers had all but given up on seeing their children (4 and 5 hours in last month respectively), and control was a major issue for them.

While we might expect that MS and CS would be similar on the basis of their significance (that of an educational or health issue for the child), the two situations are in fact rated most similarly in terms of the mode of interaction. Perhaps other situations have as much significance for fathers, but these are the only situations where that importance is recognised by the mothers as well, allowing harmonious co-operation. Where substantial contact takes place, this congruence is seen to extend to MT as well; otherwise MT is associated with parental conflict and control. Talking to the mother about whether something is suitable for the child was not the same for them; this situation centres on different parental values, without the external values of a school or doctor.

Where the two 'school or health' situations were not convergent (the majority of cases), MS was perceived as *frustrating* or fraught with conflict: *argument, stressful, walking on eggshells.* CS, on the other hand, was seen as *relaxed* or *loving*, and one could *talk.* For most fathers, then, issues of education and health were not separable from interpersonal relations.

6.4.3 Clusters

'Mother' and 'child' situations were separately clustered for three fathers at this wave with low rates of communication with the child's mother (F3, F17 and F19). The factors on which these situations were distinguished were characterised by constructs of participation and control. 'Mother' conversations were strongly associated with labels like:

no respect as father, annoyed, estrangement, no room to discuss

while those with the child were contrasted as:

I have input, enjoyable, relaxed, conversational.

For these fathers, then, all family discussions are apprehended in terms of their expectations of the other person (mother or child). Conversations with the mother

were certainly out of the ordinary for these fathers, and this may make it more difficult to apprehend them in the same terms as child conversations, although they were not the only ones with low communication rates. Again, however, the fact that there are only three for whom this is the case underlines that most fathers here are able to see beyond this to some extent.

6.4.4 Construct-element relationships -summary

- Disputes over contact, then, heightened the perception of a disparity in parental interaction. However, where contact arrangements were accepted, fathers perceived requests for a contact change as either similarly volatile, routine or dictated, depending on the extent of their involvement with other family members.
- Issues of education and health were not separable from interpersonal relations for most.
- Where MS and CS were similar, this was in terms of fathers' constructs of **participation.**

6.5 Predictive relationships between constructs

6.5.1 Important constructs

An important construct was identified in all grids supplied at the second wave. Constructs were elicited afresh at each wave; therefore, an important construct was seen as having been retained where the researcher judged its labels to be substantively similar to those at the previous wave. Where labels were not clear, the participant's discussion of the construct on the interview tape was referred to. In Table 6.6, an 'R' in the final column indicates where the important construct was taken as being retained. It was pointed out in section 6.2 that an alteration to the interview procedure designed to reduce the number of denotative constructs may have had some impact on results. However, none of the important constructs at either of these waves was from category D, **who was present.**

F	WAVE 1	WAVE 2	*
1	Important to both, needs discussing/ Important to one, doesn't	These would interest me/ wouldn't interest me	
3	conversation, development/ No interactive conversation	have to discuss together/ I have my own ideas	R
5	Relates to daughter/ Between myself and wife	just trying to establish what's going on/ don't know which way it will go	
6	development & involvement/ intrusive	just part of life/ don't want to be interfering	R
7	frustration at not getting point across/ sadness, letting them down	someone can take something away/ up to me to decide	
8		limited conversations/ children not restricted	
9		I felt awkward/ anger-provoking	
10	A must/ beg situation	continuity; I can plan/ I have control	
11	another agenda would be raised/ honest, open response	more cynical/ issues for the children	R
12	about child/ about me	discussing something, open/ asked to do or agree with something	
13		will lead to conversation/ won't lead to a conversation	
14	looking to occupy child while with me/ I'm not generally pro-active	keeping a toe in the water, some connection/ not much conversation	
15	arguments/disagreements/ don't have a problem	only involved because I have to/ I'm really interested	
16	mundane to child; easy to talk/ Big issues to the child, hard	walking on eggshells, got to grovel/ in a position of power, got all the cards, in control	
17	about their life with myself/ about their life with mother	I would want to explore fully/ would seek meaningful directions	R
18	she might try & turn to her advantage/ she's no interest; can't argue	we don't have a problem/ I'd be very wary	R
19	Casual/ serious formal talking to	enjoyable; conversational/ annoyed; bit of a pain in the arse	R

Table 6.6 Important constructs, waves 1 & 2

(*R indicates important construct was retained)

The priority of issues for children was not as frequent this time - this emerged as important for only one father (*issues for the children*, F11). Instead, some would primarily be suspicious of the mother's motives or the unpredictability of situations (F5, F7, F11, F18); they didn't *know which way it will go* (F5), or would *be very wary* (F18). These fathers were all in the process of consolidating relationships with new partners, and had experienced some event with a bearing on their previous relationship. One had finalised his divorce; another had become engaged to his new partner; another was now expecting a new child with his new partner; and the last reported that the breakdown of his ex-wife's new relationship had left her vindictive towards him. These shifts in the equilibrium of the inter-parental relationship are brought to the fore in the co-parental role system. For others, their involvement or ability to be involved was reflected in the important construct labels (F1, F12, F13, F14); whether they would be *discussing something, open* (F12) or encountering a *foregone conclusion* (F1) with *not much conversation* (F14). These fathers were all in touch with the mother once or twice a week and had expressed commitment to making the co-parental role work at the time of the first interview. This had become more difficult for most since then. Two fathers had found established contact arrangements beginning to be restricted, while another found his new job impinging on contact time. The last father in this group had resolved his contact arrangements in the last six months; this had involved some amount of discussion with his ex-wife. Where fathers do communicate frequently with the child's mother and contact arrangements become an issue, it becomes important for them whether a situation is going to involve such a discussion and whether they will have a say in it.

For another three, the most important construct was whether the situation was interesting for them (F1, F17, F15). All had been parents for some time and maintained a strong relationship with their children, but not with the mother. Two had constructs distinguishing their feelings as important predictors (F9, F19); these were the only fathers in the sample who described a child as having a hostile attitude towards them. Only one of these fathers associated any child situations in the grid with negative feelings (CN and CR were labelled with *hostility*, and being made to feel *boring*). He attributed this to his daughter being a teenager. Nevertheless, the assumption of love from their children may constitute an important counterweight for fathers to the negative associations of the child's mother. If conflict is perceived in

their relations with the children as well, their circumstances may become more emotionally fraught and the impact of situations on their feelings consequently a greater concern. For another two fathers, aspects of the co-parental interaction were the most important constructs on broadly different terms - whether one was *prying* or a *normal parent* (F6), or in another case whether there was *consensus* or he had *his own ideas* (F3).

Finally, three grids from the second wave had important constructs concerning whether fathers *have control* (F10) or are *in a position of power* (F16). These participants did not share any particular circumstances or outlook; the importance of control for them could be in response to the destabilising effects of Christmas holidays on contact arrangements. None of the important constructs in the first wave dealt with control; it is more in evidence as an issue of importance at this wave. Conflict, however, was once again barely represented as important (despite the Quality of Coparental Communication index being quite high for this sample). Although conflict is frequently a consideration, they may not see it as influential on their other constructs - supporting the idea that it may represent a 'necessary evil'. If other characteristics of a situation, such as control or involvement, are more important, conflict is being interpreted as concomitant upon some other consideration. The general disappearance of significance to children's welfare as an important construct at the second interview could be a result of further introspection making it easier for participants to go beyond the first answers that occur to them.

At the second wave, then, some changes were seen in the content of important constructs. The importance of issues for their children was no longer represented as critical. Where a change had taken place in one or other parent's current relationships, fathers had constructs dealing with suspicion of the mother's motives or uncertainty as important. Where established and committed parental co-operation was undergoing difficulties, fathers' most important construal dealt with how they were able to participate in family situations. Where fathers reported maintaining a strong relationship with their children over a long period while distancing themselves from the mother, the important construct was how a situation might interest them. The important constructs of the two fathers from high-conflict families who reported antipathy from a child focussed on their own feelings.

6.5.2 Prediction & fragmentation

The mean proportions of the different types of construct relationship calculated by Gridstat for this wave are shown in Figure 6.7 below.

	Wave 1		**Wave 2**	
	Mean %	s.d.	Mean %	s.d.
predictive	20.71	*17.64*	25.68	*16.06*
symmetrical	66.97	*16.94*	59.86	*14.83*
fragmented	12.43	*9.02*	14.46	*9.51*

Table 6.7 Proportions of construct relationship types, waves 1 & 2

These proportions are reasonably similar to those of the first wave, with slightly more predictive relationships and slightly fewer symmetrical ones; this increase in overall hierarchical structure may reflect an elaboration of perspective on the co-parental role at the second interview. The rate and range of fragmentation remained relatively constant, however. There were four fragmented constructs among all the grids (compared with three at the first wave), from participants with important constructs concerning **participation and control**. Being *uncertain if I'm doing ok as a parent* was a new construct not associated with most others for one participant (F14). Since the first interview he had negotiated a reduction in child support with his ex-wife, leading him to view his role in the family in a more positive light: a "big change" that meant "it's going to be better". The other three whose systems contained a fragmented construct had experienced a more negative transition, reporting that contact had been curtailed or stopped altogether by the mother. Their new, dissociated constructs suggested an encroaching lassitude towards the co-parental role: *about something possible/not possible* (F12), *if it doesn't get sorted, let it go by* (F1) and the pre-emptive attitude of the child's mother, *"she's my daughter"/"you have to"* (F10). The overall proportion of fragmentation in their systems was relatively high, ranging from 17.86% to 33.33%; participant F1's grid had the highest fragmentation in the sample, more than a standard deviation above the mean. This

was the case for only one other father at this wave, F3, who had experienced a court hearing that failed to deliver what he expected of it.

At the second wave, then, only slight differences were seen in the proportions of different construct relationship types. There was somewhat more hierarchical structure in the participants' systems overall, with newly-arrived constructs of resignation being at odds with the prevailing structure for some.

6.5.3 Comparison of waves 1 & 2

Having data from two waves of grids allows them to be compared to assess whether they support the PCP concept of co-parental conflict. According to this model, a father may experience conflict where a prospective change in family relationships necessitates the introduction of new constructs that cannot be reconciled with an existing important construct. Four aspects of the data were therefore considered:

- Participants' evaluation of their co-parenting experience over the previous months (from section 6.1.3 above).
- Reports of significant events for the family since the last interview (from section 6.1.4 above).
- Whether the important construct was similar to that at the previous wave (from section 6.5.1 above).
- Whether the proportion of fragmented relationships in their systems had changed.

When grids from waves 1 and 2 were compared on these criteria, four patterns of construing emerged; these were termed stability, hostility, transition and emergence. These headings are discussed in turn below.

Stability

If, at a first interview, there was little evidence of family conflict or a highly fragmented grid, and no upheavals in family circumstances were reported at the second interview, it might be expected that the constructs and hierarchy of a father's co-parental role understanding would remain similar. Three participants (F6, F17 & F19) reported no major issues or transitions in their family life between interviews, with things staying the same or getting better for them. Their important constructs were seen to be retained; however, while the proportion of fragmentation in F6's grid was reduced to 0, the proportion for the other two had increased

The most important construct from the first interview with participant F6 was whether he felt *intrusive*; at his second interview, not wanting *to be seen as interfering* most strongly predicted the other constructs. Participant F17's two important constructs are not quite so obviously linked; *their life with me/ their life with mother* is quite denotative, whereas *I would want to explore more fully/I would seek to direct to more meaningful dimensions* implies a more personal significance. The interview tape, however, suggests that these are strongly related ideas for him, in the sense that he would only want to *explore fully* a situation that was *about their life with me* and tried to avoid talking *about their life with mother.* Although F17's second grid had somewhat more fragmentation, most of these two fathers' labels from the first interview reappeared in similar form at the second wave (for instance, *primarily child-centred issues/primarily about adults* from the first wave compared with *child-centred/convenience of parents is important* from the second). Both had been co-parents and had enjoyed stable contact arrangements for some years. Finally, participant F19 reported that the contact arrangements that had just come into force at the time of his first interview had stayed in place in the interim, with no other issues emerging. His important constructs, in two grids of few constructs, made a similar distinction between positive or negative **feelings** associated with taking part in situations - *casual/serious, formal* then *enjoyable/annoyed.*

These fathers, then, showed no substantive change in their important construct across the first two waves, having encountered no significant events, and reported no adverse experience. Their construct systems were permeable enough to cope with whatever they experienced since the first interview. Perceiving importance in not being intrusive, or acknowledging what remains between the children and their mother, seem suitable for functioning as a co-parent. The increasing fragmentation in two of the grids over the two waves, however, suggests that this condition may not prevail. F17 and F19, in fact, hardly ever encounter their children's mother, which may be a means of avoiding events. If something did take place to force change in family relationships, the stability observed here might not be expected to continue.

Hostility

The grids of three of the participants (F3, F11 and F18) were characteristic of hostility in PCP terms. These fathers described an increase in inter-parental conflict following a transitional event between interviews; and the same construct emerged as important in all their grids, with the second showing increased fragmentation or a fragmented construct.

Participant F18 described increased conflict following the breakdown of the mother's relationship with her latest partner, identifying her as the instigator: "all the hatred and resentment's thrown back at me just now". (However, the constructivist view of conflict is as a social process, requiring the input of two sides; his grids also contain the constructs *pumps your adrenaline up* and *nice/angry*). His important construct was strongly similar on both occasions – whether he would be *wary* in a situation because *she* [the mother] *might try and turn it to her advantage.* Rationalising situations in this way allows him to confirm his construal of her as the instigator of conflict. The level of **conflict** he reports, however, suggests that this is not allowing him to make successful predictions of family situations on any other level. Participant F3 had taken his case to the Sheriff Court between interviews, but without what he regarded as success. His view at the second interview was that the mother was still "manipulating the situation" and that he "can't get agreement with her other than through the courts". The most important construct with which he apprehended

the co-parental situations was whether they involved *interactive conversation* at the first wave, or whether he would *have to discuss together* at the second. His system at this interview was also highly fragmented; the second interview elicited the disassociated construct *I'm being told/have to negotiate.* For F11, the most important construct on both occasions concerned the perceived machinations of the children's mother - situations could have *another agenda* in the first grid, or be *cynical* in the second. The high level of fragmentation in his first grid was reduced to nearer the mean at the second interview; at both times, however, a construct distinguishing *important* situations from those that could be *side-tracked* was dissociated from most of the others. He avoided communication with the mother, and had previously found her violent towards him; he had also not been able to see his children since shortly after the first interview, attributing this to events that occurred over the Christmas period. His limited opportunity to experience the parental relationship may have allowed somewhat less fragmentation in his perception of the co-parental role. However, the retention of a fragmented **significance** construct suggests hostility rather than a stable system. Seeing situations as primarily manipulated by the mother or free of her influence may allow him to regard his relationship with his children as something out of his hands, at a time when he finds himself seeing very little of them. Nevertheless, this is not easily reconciled with the idea that he might assign different priorities to family situations himself, independently of her supposed manipulation.

These three fathers, then appear to be undergoing hostility: while retaining an important construct in an increasingly fragmented system following some significant event, they are experiencing conflict within the family. If they perceive the most important aspect of a situation to be whether or not their ex-partner is conniving, or whether or not conversation is feasible, they may be prone to expecting problems. However subjective these predictions are, they are unlikely to ease flexible functioning as a co-parent.

Transition

The systems of 8 respondents in the sample who had experienced changes in family life showed signs of a transformation of the system hierarchy. Most showed an

increase in fragmentation, and they had adopted new important constructs. However, their experience of family relations in the intervening period was varied.

For four of these fathers (F5, F12, F14 & F16) the change had allowed things to stay the same or improve. The most important construct at the first interview for all was whether the situation was primarily about the child, or *bigger issues to the child* (F12); all had changed their important constructs by the second interview. Constructs in F5's second grid dealt with what situations are like for him rather than what he saw them as being about; the previous important construct of *about my daughter* was therefore not present. The most important construct was now rather one that dealt with unpredictability but not control: *just trying to establish what's going on/ don't know which way it will go.* His current partner had become pregnant again in the interim, which he felt had brought a change in relations between his household and that of his first child's mother; however, by reconstruing his role with a new important construct, he avoided fragmentation building within his system. His use of constructs, then, appears to have been flexible enough to bring any new, dissociated constructs together into a coherent system by the time of the second interview. This resolution involved him seeing past a central concern with whether he could *control* situations (maybe not so important now he has a new child on the way to dilute his responsibilities) to whether he can predict them. As his new family expands, he may feel less impelled to maintain control over situations involving his eldest daughter and her mother, as long as he can still know *what's going on.*

Attempts to negotiate an increase in his contact time and disruptions to the routine during the holidays had led F12 to report conflict and some obstruction of contact by the second interview. Like F5, his previously important construct (*someone might not get what they want/ trying to make things better for the child*) remained in the system but had fewer predictive relationships. Instead his most important construct at this wave now dealt with how he would be involved, in *open discussion* or being *asked to do or agree with something.* The second grid also contained a dissociated construct, *about something possible/not possible*; the proportions of both fragmented and predictive relationships had increased by around 10%. The conflict caused by an impasse over contact provision has brought constructs into the system that are not under the aegis of the older important construct (especially whether things are

possible or not), as evinced by the higher level of fragmented relationships. However, through the emergence of a different construct as the most important, the development of hostility has been averted. The dominant characteristic of a situation was previously how important it was for his child. To accept the conflicting idea that some things may not be possible anyway, the primary characteristic of a situation has to be seen as whether he can be involved or not, recasting his role as enforcedly passive.

Participant F14 was also involved in negotiations with his child's mother (over child support amounts); however this had been successfully resolved, and had led to a more co-operative regime. The changes this represented for his role are manifest in a new dissociated construct within his increasingly fragmented system, *uncertain if I'm doing ok as a parent/ know what I'm doing with this.* His important construct had previously distinguished actively looking to entertain his daughter from not being *pro-active.* Now, however, the most important construct was whether he was *keeping a toe in the water* of his child's other household instead of there being *not much conversation.* The first of these reflects a narrow focus on his child's life, excluding aspects other than those involving only him and her. However, he has coped with the transition constituted by the parental negotiations (avoiding the build-up of hostility) by lending more weight to considering whether he is integrating himself at a familial level. This has, though, brought the threat of a new concern with his own parenting skills.

Participant F16 also experienced a positive transition, reporting that there had been 'a lot less stress' and more flexible contact arrangements since the divorce had been finalised after the first interview, and the child's mother had found a new partner. By the time of this more co-operative post-divorce period, the most important construct is no longer the import of situations for his child, but one of *walking on eggshells* as opposed to being *in control.* This may represent a more pragmatic outlook. Another construct, *concerns for both parents about child/ affects me personally,* had only a few associations at his first interview; but by the second interview a construct of *personal effect* had more predictive relationships. A system governed by the import of situations for his child may not be one in which this growing concern for his own situation, arising from the process of finalising a divorce, will sit comfortably.

Clearly all is still not rosy from this participant's point of view. But by re-deploying his constructs to acknowledge the balance of parental power as the main determinant of a family situation, he has managed to reduce the proportion of fragmentation in his system, and avoid hostility arising from the transition.

Other participants whose hierarchy had changed had not, initially, held the significance of situations for their child as an important construct. Participant F15 reported at the second interview that his ex-wife and her partner now relied more heavily on him to look after his daughter since they had both moved to awkward working hours, which he felt sympathetic towards despite the extremely bitter inter-parental relations he described previously. The important construct in his grid has correspondingly changed from one of conflict (*arguments/ don't have a problem*) to one of interest (*involved because I have to be/ really interested*). There are no fragmented relationships in either grid; not many constructs were supplied on either occasion. Those that are present are very similar on both occasions, however. This father's use of a new important construct has allowed him stop anticipating situations in terms of whether he expects an argument. Someone in the grip of hostility might have continued to perceive conflict as most important, rather than acknowledge an improved situation of parental co-operation and what that would entail.

For another three fathers (F1, F10 & F7), the important construct from the first interview still had a number of predictive relationships at the second, but had been superseded by another construct. Participant F10 reported that since drawing both parents into a "pretty nasty" dispute over Child Support some time after the first interview, he had only been able to see his child once, through a fortuitous encounter while the child was visiting relatives. By the second wave, his initially important construct of *a must/have to beg* (obligatory involvement because of parental responsibility versus something seen as his wish) had given way to *I can plan/I have control* (being able to influence a situation by foresight rather than being in direct control of it). The proportion of fragmentation in his system had also increased. However, the first important construct, couched in terms of the mother's typical statements (*"you have to"/"who do you think you're talking to?"*), still had some predictive status. In a similar way, whether a situation was important to both parents and needed discussing was no longer the strongest predictor for participant F1 at the

second interview. In his second grid, the construct *might discuss things/there's no talking about it* was present but was predicted rather than a predictor. F1 also reported a worsening in inter-parental relations with a development in his wife's career, and talked of resorting to legal proceedings to restore obstructed contact. The strongest predictor was now his own interest in a situation, and a strongly fragmented construct was present in *let it go by/ discuss if there's a problem.* Both these fathers, faced with transitional events in family life, show a reduction in the predictive strength of former important constructs within their systems and some degree of fragmentation as new understandings of the co-parental role impinge. While there has been conflict, new constructs have gained importance in line with their experience. Although the CSA events had worsened F10's contact situation, he saw the outcome as an improvement since the agency had acted in his favour, vindicating his sense of injustice; he could now see some means of *control.* F1, finding his efforts as a co-parent repeatedly stymied, begins to find himself first and foremost disinterested in some family situations, having begun to let some of them go by. These fathers are beginning to cope with hostility by bringing other constructs to the fore, and relinquishing older important ones that no longer let them apprehend events.

Finally, another participant had, over the Christmas period, announced his engagement to the partner he now lived with, and attributed a curtailment of his contact time to this (F7). While the construct labels he supplied on both occasions were quite similar, his feelings (*frustration/ sadness*) were no longer the most important construct at the second interview. Instead, his most important construct was whether *someone else can take something away* or it was *up to me to decide.* By accepting that some situations may primarily be ones where it's not up to him and something may be taken away, rather than focussing on the frustration or sadness he may experience, he has been able to cope with the negative aspects of the transition to his engaged status. The proportion of fragmentation in his grids remained constant at just above the mean for the group.

Transformations in the hierarchies of the systems of these fathers have allowed them to limit or avoid fragmentation and ride out periods of transitional conflict. Most described things as having got better or no worse since the first interview even though some of them had experienced a reduction in contact - things were 'a bit easier', or involved 'less drama'. Even F7, despite worsening inter-parental relations, felt his

years of experience made it easier for him to cope and just 'take it as it comes'. Although finding it stressful not to be able to see his children, he was now able to see this as a temporary bad patch. While the constructs that now assumed importance for these fathers were quite varied, all could be seen to facilitate their functioning under new family circumstances; for them, events have provided an opportunity or impetus to change rather than a threat.

Emerging systems

Finally, the three fathers for whom no important constructs emerged at the first interview - F8, F9, F13 - were not included in this section of the analysis, since the retention of an important construct could not be looked for. If they had no developed hierarchy when first interviewed, being a co-parent may not have been a distinct or established enough role for them to prioritise some distinctions over others. This may certainly have been the case for the first two of these respondents, who saw almost nothing of their children or their mothers.

The grids from waves 1 and 2, then, were seen to relate to the PCP model of co-parental hostility in a number of different ways depending on respondents' circumstances. Those who reported no major events in family life retained most of the constructs from the first wave, with the same construct as important. Of the fathers who reported a transitional event between interviews, some went on to report increased conflict at the second interview and showed greater fragmentation in their grid system, having retained their most important construct from the first interview. Other respondents undergoing changes managed to cope without experiencing conflict or showing increased fragmentation of their system - these fathers did not retain their important construct, but instead reconfigured their hierarchy of constructs to accommodate new distinctions and deal with the changes. Comparing these results for the two waves supports the explanation of inter-parental conflict as hostility when faced with changes in family life. Where conflict is avoided, however, this may be through transition and the adoption of a new important construct, rather than as a result of a permeable one being retained; in such a case, a family event may act as a catalyst for transition rather than being perceived as a threat.

6.5.4 Construct hierarchies - summary

- The constructs identified as important in the results of the Gridstat analysis complement the description of family events and circumstances by the respondents. There was a greater incidence of important constructs dealing with participation and control; conflict, however, remained poorly represented among them.

- Among the sample at the second wave there are still very few strongly dissociated constructs (those with few associations with other constructs). The proportions of predictive, symmetrical and fragmented relationships overall show only a slight trend from symmetrical to predictive relationships since the first interview.

- A comparison of the important constructs and background data from waves 1 and 2 suggested four categories of development in construing - stability, hostility, transition and emergence - supporting the PCP model of co-parental conflict as hostility.

- Transition may be achieved through a change in the important construct in response to an event.

6.6 Discussion

The six months since the first interviews saw some change for fathers in terms of their own lives - work and relationships - while they remained non-resident parents. Along with this, they tended to be seeing less now of their children and their ex-partners, and experiencing a range of significant family events (frequently associated with the Christmas season) that allowed very few of the sample to feel their family circumstances were stable. Smart and Neale's (1999) understanding of the separated family as an ongoing system of destabilising change is very much concordant with this picture; but the change was nonetheless positive for some. The participants now

construed their role most often in terms of how participation took place; conflict could again be seen variously in contrast to satisfactory or unsatisfactory involvement. The content of constructs was seen to change with their perceptions of how things were changing (though the elicitation procedure had changed somewhat). Fathers finding things getting worse tended to have introduced constructs of conflict where they continued to see the mother regularly, or constructs of control or their own feelings where there was little communication. One father, meanwhile, experienced an upturn in circumstances and ceased construing in terms of conflict; and those few for whom things had not changed showed little change in the constructs they used. There is some suggestion here that the types of construct used by fathers in their co-parental role reflect their recent experience; and that these are further affected by the regularity of communication with the child's mother.

Participants continued to construe a co-parental role that took in both mother and child, rather than separate parent and ex-partner roles. Examining the element pair MCS/MCY, disputes over contact were again seen to heighten perception of the father's disadvantage in requesting change. However, where contact arrangements were accepted, fathers perceived requests for a contact change as either similarly volatile, routine or dictated, depending on the extent of their involvement with other family members. Importantly, those fathers perceiving similarity at this wave were not necessarily those who perceived it at the first wave. This pattern of construing can therefore be considered a response to recent experience, rather than an individual characteristic. At this wave, most fathers continued to see a school or health issue as something they were able to talk about with their child, but a conflicted or controlled situation when discussed with the mother. However, some fathers who remained relatively involved tended to see both in the former terms, while others with sporadic family involvement viewed them both as flashpoint situations. It may be easier, then, for parents with a high rate and quality of interaction to set aside personal considerations when considering a matter of some import for their child.

The results from the ordinal relationship analysis of the second wave of repertory grid interviews show distinct changes from the picture drawn from at first interviews. Those fathers whose system hierarchies remained stable generally reported an established and uneventful system of co-parenting, though it could be that their

systems were permeable enough for any events not to be as threatening for them as for some others, and therefore not reported. However, important differences were noted between those participants who experienced hostility in the face of transition and those participants whose system responded by replacing the important construct; and those undergoing hostility tended to apprehend the outcome of situations as emanating from the mother's wilful behaviour or 'hidden agenda'. Those who replaced their important constructs and thereby reduced conflict may be considered to have achieved transition successfully; but the important constructs they turn to imply that the co-parental role represented by this system is less central to them and therefore less costly to modify.

The constructivist model of co-parental hostility, then, seems well served by data at this wave as well. Changes in co-parental construct systems corresponding to what has taken place in the interim confirm the expectations of Kelly's (1955) Experience Corollary; and a comparison of the these changes with individual meanings and experience conforms to his understanding of 'hostility'. The inter-parental relationship can therefore be considered to depend to some degree on the father's co-parental role construct system. If the difficulties of essential separated family transitions are rationalised as being part of the mother's agenda, fathers are less likely to apprehend situations in new ways that will facilitate co-parental interaction. Disengagement may thus come to represent a favourable option as a coping strategy.

On the other hand, many have resolved their fragmented outlook by adopting **prioritising** or **control** perspectives as important within the construct system. Whether such coping is compatible with the construction of co-parenting in the Children (Scotland) Act is another matter. Seeing only a passive role for themselves may lead them to distance themselves from fully discharging their paternal responsibilities under the Act. If fathers who do maintain contact with their children after separation still edge towards separatist strategies as a result of transitional conflict, an understanding of this phenomenon can indicate what could be done to alleviate this. It may be hard to convince separated fathers to adopt a different perspective if this disenfranchised view has allowed them to rationalise anxiety or hostility within the family. Yet it is perhaps more in the fathers' interests than those of children for them to neutralise the hostility from the mother's perceived intransigence and the courts' apparent indifference by seeing all situations as

inevitably undermined by the mother's agenda. This outlook may also be a precursor to the 'clean break' philosophy identified in other literature (Backett, 1987). In this respect, it should be a priority for policy & services to address the construction of the mother's 'hidden agenda'.

The lack of attrition at this wave was a positive outcome for this study; however, this may again suggest that the fathers here are particularly committed to the idea of research on separated fathers, or that they particularly appreciate the experience of talking about their situation. The researcher may also be seen favourably as an empathic figure. Some of the differences found in construing may also be the result of the participants feeling more comfortable with the interview procedure. For instance, at the first interview, a combination of demand characteristics and the uncertainty of what they were being asked to do could have contributed to the predominance of constructs on the theme of priority for their child. A second introspective exercise might also have afforded participants a fresh insight into their own perspective; nevertheless many of the changes have been shown to correspond meaningfully to the family circumstances they describe. Finally, it was surmised that many of the effects seen at this wave may have been attributable to the timing of most interviews over the Christmas period. An examination of the third wave of repertory grid interviews, presented in the next chapter, will allow further consideration of the possible effects of repeated interviewing and seasonal differences.

6.7 Conclusions

Fathers were seen to be construing a co-parental role in response to fluctuating family circumstances.

The nature of those constructs used to apprehend this role changes in response to circumstances, and bears some relationship to rates of communication with the mother.

The perception of parity in how parents were able to adapt existing arrangements supported the interpretation of data from the first wave, but was seen to depend on recent experience rather than individual characteristics.

Further support was found for the constructivist model of the co-parental role, and the data support the understanding of inter-parental conflict as hostility in Kelly's terms.

Where transition has been achieved in construct systems this may also represent a diminution of the importance of the co-parental role for fathers.

Aspects of fathers' individual perspectives were identified as important for services and policymakers to address, in particular the perception of an active agenda held against them by their ex-partner.

A further wave of repertory grids can allow a consideration of seasonal and procedural influences on these findings.

Chapter 7 Third wave of repertory grid interviews

This chapter will present findings from the third and final wave of repertory grid interviews, which took place approximately one year after the interviews at the first wave. At this stage, one participant cancelled or postponed his interview several times, then stopped answering his phone (F10). All the other participants were interviewed, though their various commitments once more made it impossible to replicate the sequence of either of the previous two waves. The interviews were again tape-recorded; after the completion of the repertory grid, interviewees were asked how the previous six months had been. Feedback was offered from the previous two interviews and discussed; and they were finally asked whether they had any questions about the study or anything that they wished to add to what they had supplied. Before leaving, a description was given of what would happen to the data. Participants were invited to contact the researcher at a later date should they wish.

As at the second wave, the following aspects of the data were examined:

- Background information
- Construct content
- Element distances
- Construct-element relationships
- Predictive relationships between constructs

7.1 Background information

7.1.1 Participant characteristics

All respondents remained separated or divorced from their child's mother; in all cases, the children also continued to reside at their mother's house. The only changes in employment had been one father who had returned to the job he had held at the first wave, and another whose job description had changed. Another father whose work was freelance said that he was 'looking for something else' now. One participant had

a new child; some changes had also taken place in the mothers' relationships. Two reported that their child's mother had a new partner, and another that the mother's new relationship had ended. One child's mother had now married her new partner, and another father reported that his ex-partner had started cohabiting. On the whole, then, there was less change in economic, family and relational circumstances between the second and third waves than between the first and second.

7.1.2 Contact & communication

	Wave					
Summary measure	**1**		**2**		**3**	
Mean contact episodes per month	4.68	*sd 3.7*	4.12	*sd 4.20*	4.56	*sd 4.56*
Median contact episodes per month	4	*2 , 7.25*	3	*1 , 6.5*	4	*1 , 6.75*
Median hours per contact visit	15	*10 , 29*	14	*4.5, 35*	11	*5 , 25*
Mean monthly communication w. mother	6.44	*sd 7.4*	4.21	*sd 4.3*	3.94	*sd 4.83*
Mean quality of co-parental communication	29.18	*sd 7.07*	28.24	*sd 7.85*	29.62	*sd 6.97*

Table 7.1 Contact & communication - summary measures at all 3 waves

The mean rate of the fathers' contact with their children (4.56 occasions per month) had returned to nearly the original figure. In both the first and third waves, then, a weekly visit was typical; the median rate was 4 at both times. The lower median of 3 at the second wave may be the result of fluctuations over the Christmas holiday period. However, the reduced contact time observed at the second wave was slightly lower again; the rate of communication with children's mothers had also continued to decline.

	< weekly	weekly	≥twice weekly
Contact episodes	7	6	3
Communication with mother	10	2	4

Table 7.2 Frequency categories of contact & communication

	down	stable	up
Present contact cf. last 6 months	6	8	2
Present communication cf. last 6 months	5	9	2

Table 7.3 Comparison categories of contact & communication

The distribution across the three categories of contact frequency had returned to the pattern of the first wave, while the number of participants communicating with the child's mother on a less than weekly basis had continued to rise. Less change in these rates was being experienced, however.

Mean scores for the Quality of Co-parental Communication were almost identical at each wave (see Table 7.1 above). Table 7.4, below, shows that the mean item score for support had also returned to its initial level

	Wave 1		**Wave 2**		**Wave 3**	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Support (mean item score)	3.11	*0.74*	2.88	*1.06*	3.10	*0.76*
Conflict (mean item score)	3.37	*0.92*	3.26	*0.81*	3.25	*0.77*

Table 7.4 Quality of Coparental Communication: mean sub-scale item scores, waves 1-3

At the third wave, then, summary measures of contact and communication are consistent with a general trend towards the distancing of separated fathers over time (cf. Furstenberg, Nord et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Certainly, the findings do not match those of Seltzer's (1991) suggestion that diminishing rates of contact

may be replaced by longer episodes. However, the re-establishment of the pattern of contact in the three categories suggests that the drop in weekly contact observed at the second wave may indeed have been due to the (festive) season. The communication quality scores indicate a reliable attitude to the co-parental relationship; the relationship of this finding to the other data will be discussed later in the chapter.

7.1.3 How things had been

F	How things had been	Events
1	worse	Row over mediation letter sent without warning
3	better	Unsuccessful hearing to increase contact
5	better	New child and new house
6	about the same	No events
7	worse	Marriage to current partner
8	better	No events
9	worse	Moved 40 miles away; splitting from new partner
10	---	---
11	worse	Hospitalised; letter from children's lawyer
12	worse	Been (unsuccessfully) to mediation over contact
13	about the same	No events
14	better	No events
15	about the same	Mother had 'called in' CSA without warning
16	better	No events
17	about the same	No events
18	better	New relationship for child's mother
19	about the same	No events

Table 7.5 Participants' descriptions of intervening period at wave 3 - summary

The interview notes were, as before, examined qualitatively for accounts of intervening family events and evaluations of how things were going. Table 7.5, above, summarises whether the respondents had described things as getting worse,

better or staying the same; and what, if any, events they described as having had an impact on their family circumstances.

Six participants described things as having improved for them since the second interview; for these fathers it had 'not been too bad' in comparison, things had 'settled down, got easier ... in the last six months'. This could involve 'getting into a wee routine' with the contact (F14) or both parents consciously trying 'to make things a wee bit more plausible for everybody' (F5). F3, however, had been through another court hearing to try and improve his allocation of contact, and was dissatisfied with the outcome of the legal process so far. Nevertheless, he felt that 'contact over the last six weeks certainly hasn't been too bad'. Another five participants considered that there had been little or no change during the intervening period; it was 'still the same scenario as last time'. In all cases this was seen as a good thing, the family situation or contact arrangements being seen as 'fine' (F6). Five others among the sample tended to view their circumstances as having got worse. For three of these fathers this was the outcome of deterioration in the parental relationship leading to the withdrawal or restriction of contact. F7, for example had experienced a 'total breakdown' in the parental relationship; although dialogue had now resumed, he felt he had had to take a 'step back', and did not go so far as to describe them as 'okay'. F9 and F11, however, reported the cessation of contact as being at their children's behest, though F11 saw the mother's hand in this.

Figure 7.1 (below) suggests that participants' evaluation of their experience at this wave corresponded strongly to the age of their eldest child. Those for whom things improved almost all had children aged ten or under at the start of the study, whereas those with older children find continuity or a worsening of their situations. Given that this was not the case at the second wave, it may be that the Christmas season has a greater impact on those with younger families. The categorisation of experience is, of course, based on the respondents' perceptions of how things have gone, rather than whether they actually saw less or more of their children. There may also be some conflict between how they see the overall situation and what their internal feelings are about it. For example, although F8 felt that things were better in that there was 'rarely' any hostility (in the general sense) and that he didn't 'feel stressed' any more, he also averred that he still felt angry and frustrated "deep down".

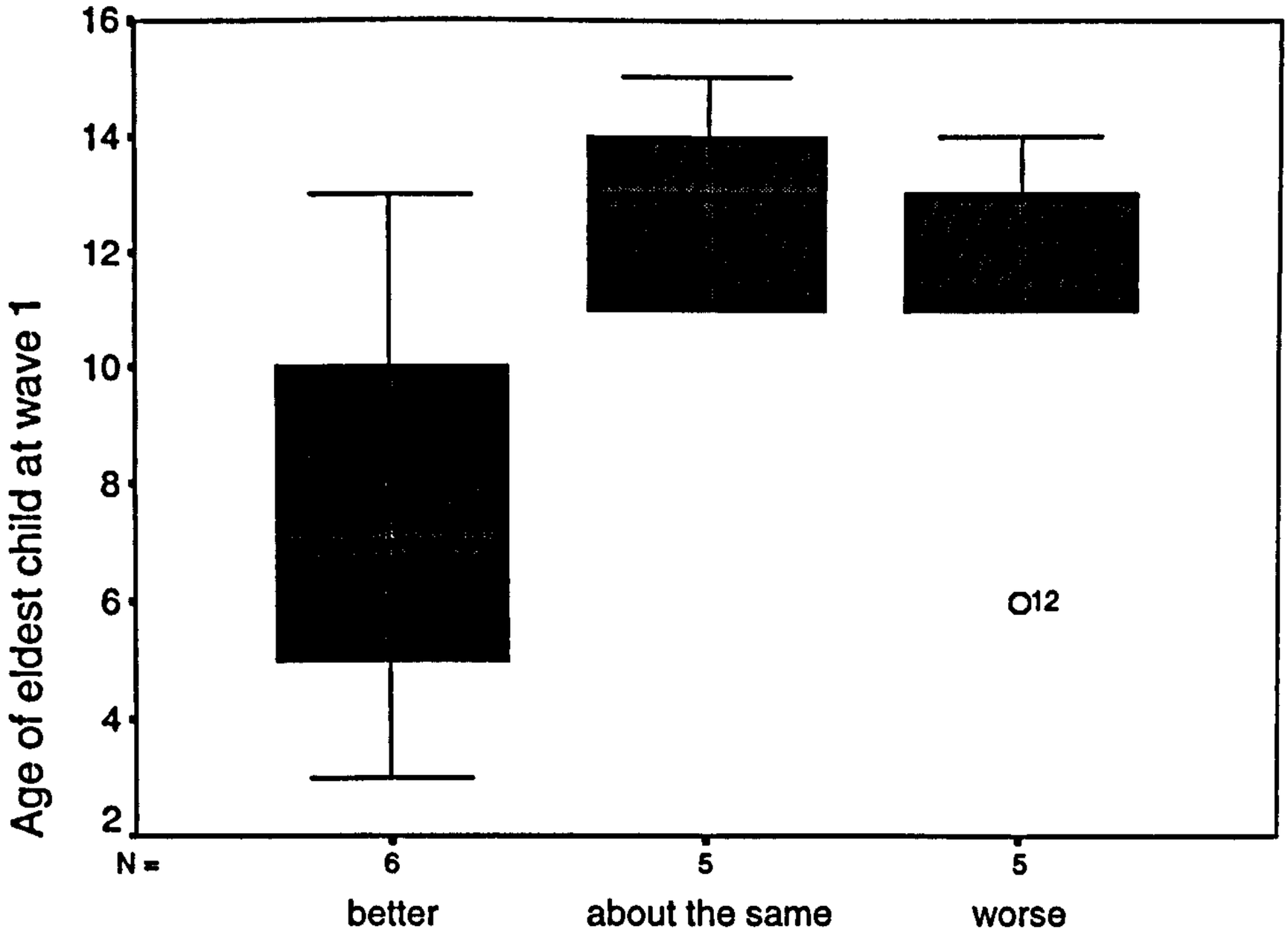


Figure 7.1 Boxplot of age of children and description of experience at wave 3

7.1.4 Events

Nine of the fathers referred to the impact on their circumstances of some event in the intervening period (see Table 7.5 above). Four of these were changes in family relationships. One participant (F5), whose partner had been pregnant at the previous interview, now had his new child and had moved to a new house in the same area, with a spell in rented accommodation during the move. Another (F18) reported that his wife had found a new boyfriend. Both felt that things had improved with these turns of events. The father who, at the last wave, had announced his engagement to his current partner (F7) was now married. Another (F9), who had now moved with his current partner to a new house some 40 miles away, reported that he was 'splitting up' with her. These fathers saw deterioration in their circumstances as co-parents.

Four reported incidents centred on the involvement of some external agency in the family situation. Participant F12 had been to mediation with his child's mother, but this had broken down, he felt, without achieving anything; F1 also reported a major

disintegration in communication between parents resulting from a letter about mediation. One participant (F11) had been admitted to hospital on a long-term basis; some time before this, he had received a letter from a lawyer acting for his children stating that they did not wish to continue contact, and he had not seen them since. These fathers were among those who saw things as having worsened. F3 had experienced a court hearing to try and effect a change in contact arrangements. Things were now 'better', although there was no suggestion in his interview that he saw this as a result of the hearing, which he felt had gone against him. Finally, one father (F15) mentioned that his wife had 'brought in' the CSA without telling him, resulting in an increase in his payments; nevertheless, things were as before.

The other seven participants did not describe any major events since the last interview; there had been no 'real issues' (F14) or 'major changes' (F13). Things had improved or stayed the same for all of these fathers.

Relationship changes and relocations were reported at this wave by fathers with worsening or improving circumstances; such occurrences, then, are not necessarily detrimental to a father's experience of family life. The involvement of external bodies, however, was more likely to coincide with a downturn in family relations; where it did not, it was certainly not seen as having helped. This may reflect the fact that services and legal provision are turned to or invoked as a last resort, when situations are already worsening and it may be too late to do anything about it anyway. But it is also consistent with the frequent observations by fathers that they feel disenfranchised by these external bodies (law courts, mediation services, statutory agencies etc.). They may be inclined to view the involvement of 'outsiders' in a family matter as invasive, or making their status less certain; at some level, it may require an unwelcome acknowledgement that they are unable to cope themselves. The association of a lack of events with unchanging fortunes, meanwhile, may either affirm that family incidents 'rock the boat'; or that events are only seen as such where they create upheaval.

7.1.5 Background - summary

- There was less change in economic, family and relational circumstances between the second and third waves than between the first and second.
- Summary measures of contact and communication were consistent with a general trend towards the distancing of separated fathers over time; the findings do not suggest that diminishing rates of contact may be replaced by longer episodes.
- Participants' reports of how things had gone suggest greater fluctuations in the perceptions of those with younger children as a result of the Christmas season.
- Reported events coincided with changing experience; relationship changes for parents and moving house are not necessarily detrimental to a father's family life, but the involvement of external agencies in family problems has negative associations.

7.2 Construct content

One hundred and forty constructs were elicited at the third wave, making a total of 424 supplied across the three waves. Each of these categories of construct was examined separately in the third wave of data.

7.2.1 Content at this wave

	Significance & Import		Participation & Control		Conflict		Who was present		Feelings	
	N	*Row %*	N	*Row %*	N	*Row %*	N	*Row %*	N	*Row %*
Wave 1	42	*31*	32	*24*	20	*14*	17	*13*	23	*17*
Wave 2	33	*22*	46	*31*	21	*14*	4	*3*	43	*29*
Wave 3	39	*28*	43	*31*	17	*12*	5	*4*	35	*25*

Table 7.6 Proportions of content categories at waves 1,2 & 3

Overall, there was less difference between the distribution of construct types at the second and third waves than between the first and second. The only appreciable

difference was a drift of some 4-6% of constructs from category A to category E. The denotative constructs of **who was present** were again notable by their virtual absence. And although a small proportion of **conflict** constructs were supplied, that proportion had been maintained throughout the study.

Significance/import - Most of these constructs distinguished between run-of-the-mill situations and those of broader consequence (e.g. *matters of principle)*; some specifically emphasised the child's welfare as the basis for this importance though fewer than at previous waves. Other than this, the father's interest or wish to be involved could be the basis of significance; some other aspects emerged, such as whether or not the issues at stake were *concrete,* or *sensitive.*

Participation and control - There were still at this wave a considerable number of constructs describing parental control or power. Of these, only a few distinguished on the basis of the father's control (e.g. F16, *make point as equal/I'm in charge*). Most contrasted being controlled by the child's mother with being included (e.g. F14, *mother's got the power/has to be negotiated*). Despite this greater passivity or resignation, there were more options seen here than at previous waves - some labels described tactics or strategies to deal with being controlled (*use my experience and wisdom; thinking ahead; try to give advice*). There was less reference to perceptions of manipulation by the mother's *other agenda* than at the previous wave. More neutral aspects included whether the conversation required *dual input* or constituted basic *information exchange*; whether it was *rational* or *irrational*; and whether there was *flexibility* or *room for manoeuvre.*

Conflict - Similar descriptions of antagonism emerged to those of previous waves (*friction, tension, verbal abuse, going ballistic*). But as before, there were a range of contrasts to situations of conflict. One father (F14) saw that where there were *no issues involved,* there was no potential for *dispute*; another found that *friction* emerged in situations he *could not deal with* [him]*self.* Conflict here was therefore associated with matters of principle that brought the two parents into negotiation. For others, anger or hassle were contrasted with having some input, willingness to talk, being easier understood; thus conflict is associated with exclusion, the absence of negotiation.

Who was present - There were only five of these constructs at this wave; the experience of previous grids may mean that participants were better able to look beyond the immediate characteristics of situations.

Feelings - The feelings construed at this wave were similar to those on previous occasions; they represented 25% of constructs supplied, and appeared in the systems of all but one respondent. Feelings of wariness and "spying" were still suggested (*apprehensive, intrusion*). New labels were of this nature (e.g. *painful, like playing poker, jogging with a grenade, made to squirm, feel like an inconvenience).* As before, contrasts could be positive (*relaxed, enjoyable, wonderful*); neutral (*feels bog-standard, normal self*); or the contrast may be between two negative aspects - (*tentative/subservient*).

Almost all respondents' systems contained constructs from categories A, B and E; five fathers at this wave, however, supplied no constructs from category C (Fs 3, 6, 13, 15 and 17), and very few supplied any categorised as D.

7.2.2 Content and intervening period

The content of constructs was examined in relation to the interview notes for the third wave. Some broad distinctions emerged relating to the three categories of how things had been (see section 7.1.3). Most of the six respondents for whom things had got better also supplied more constructs of **participation and control** than at the last wave, and fewer constructs to do with **feelings.** In contrast, all five fathers who felt things had got worse supplied more constructs to do with **feelings** than at the second wave. Those who perceived improvement in family functioning, then, focused on social processes in their construing; control was particularly central to the construing of F5 and F8 who felt circumstances had changed to bring greater certainty to their lives. Those who saw adversity increasing, however, had a more prevalent concern with internal emotional experience; which might be expected. But constructs of feelings have two poles usually contrasting good with bad; what is also here implied is that increasing harmony is associated with a lowering of emotionality in fathers.

What rouses both negative and positive feelings - their resentment and their tenderness towards their children - is the perception that things are getting worse.

Furthermore, all but one of the grids in these two categories still included a construct dealing with **conflict.** In contrast, the remaining five respondents, for whom things were the same as before, supplied no constructs of this type. Most (F6, F13, F15, F17) had either one **participation** construct or none. The grids of F6 and F17 (with older children and a track record of parental co-operation) consisted instead largely of **significance/import** constructs, while those of F13 and F15 (who had more recently seen a threat to contact subside to some extent) mainly dealt with **feelings.** Only those experiencing change, then, apprehended family situations in terms of conflict. In stable circumstances, conflict is not an issue; neither, however, is control. As with those for whom things got worse, fathers for whom nothing had changed were less inclined to supply constructs concerning family interaction.

As discussed in section 7.1.3 above, fathers' descriptions of their experience corresponded somewhat to the ages of their children, with things going better for those with children under ten and staying the same or worsening for those with older children. This is further reflected in the ways in which they construe situations. The improving circumstances of those with younger children go along with a concern with how family discussions are transacted. To some extent, this may seem to vindicate pragmatism – a focus on process, rather than feelings or issues, being associated with the best outcome. The heightened feelings or prioritising seen in those with older children suggest that this will not prevail in the long term. But it may also be that those with younger children are of a generation more attuned to the co-parental agenda: a cohort shift rather than a process of development. Likewise, perhaps fathers who see most of their sons' or daughter's childhood still to come are more likely to talk about the business of keeping contact going; while those whose offspring's childhood has more or less run its course, and who are starting to make their own separate lives, are more concerned with adjusting (or not adjusting) to this than to the mechanics of separated family life.

7.2.3 Construct content - summary

- The second and third waves had more similar distributions of construct types than the first and second waves.
- The diverse contrasts supplied for conflict again suggest that it has distinct and varying implications for different individuals.
- Those for whom things got better tended to have younger children and to have focused on social processes in their construing, while worsening circumstances were associated with increasing emotionality in the father.
- Conflict was not an issue for those not experiencing change

7.3 Elements

From wave 1 to wave 2, there were developments in the construal of elements. Although MCS and MCY were usually isolated from other elements in the grids, some considerable turnover was seen in terms of who construed similarity between them. This was, however, found to be consistent with the recent experience of fathers on both occasions. The number of fathers construing similarity between MS and CS, on the other hand, increased at the second wave. At both waves, these situations were usually seen as similar to other 'mother' or 'child' situations respectively. These element pairs were finally examined in the data from the third wave.

7.3.1 Element pairs

MCS/MCY

At the third wave, all but one of those fathers (F12) who construed MCS and MCY as significantly similar in the first wave had returned to this perspective. (MCY was not within the range of convenience for F15 at this wave). F5, for whom they were similar at the second wave, no longer construed this similarity. The same divisions between them in terms of rates of communication with the mother and Quality of Co-parental Communication scores were observed. F6, F13, F14, F16 and F17 were in

regular communication and had co-parenting scores ranging from 36 to 42. F8, F9 and F19 rarely, if ever, spoke to their child's mother, and had scores ranging from 19 to 26. As previously, all fathers in this group who perceived similarity accepted the prevailing contact schedule, many referring to it in the interviews as 'routine' (e.g. F13, F14). Although F8 and F9 felt they had been more or less shut out of their children's lives, they felt resigned to this at least. F8 stated that, though he might want change in the contact he was allowed, he had 'just got to realise that I'm not going to get it'. Almost all reported things as going better or staying the same. Most of the other fathers, who did not see MCS and MCY as convergent, described things as having gone worse in the interim; as before, contact was being disputed with the other parent. F1 and F12, for instance, were preparing to consult a lawyer for the first time to try and enforce arrangements.

Only seven respondents construed one or both of these elements as similar to any others in the set. This was, however, a slight increase on previous levels. Only two of these fathers, (F8 and F9) integrated both MCS and MCY with other elements. Again, their grids showed little differentiation between any elements, probably the result of their dwindling contact with their families. MCS was still seen as isolated by almost all fathers.

From the vantage point of the third wave, then, a pattern can be seen in the grids whereby fathers in dispute over contact arrangements are unable to see discussions of their short-term changes in the same way as discussions of the mothers' requests. Those who accept the status quo of visiting arrangements have the equanimity that should be necessary for flexible co-parenting; however, this does not guarantee their satisfaction with arrangements. Their outlook may arise from resignation. One other general difference is noticeable. Five fathers in this sample – F1, F3, F7, F11 and F18 – did not see MCS and MCY as similar at any of the waves, and described dissatisfaction and turmoil in their family life over the entire year of the study. All but one were in manual occupations or unemployed. On the other hand, the four fathers for whom MCS and MCY converged at all three waves - F9, F13, F16 and F17 - all had managerial or academic jobs. There may, therefore, be a correspondence between socio-economic status, education, or financial security and a propensity for flexibility in parenting arrangements.

MS/CS

The two elements were again seen by almost all fathers as similar to at least one other element in their respective 'mother' or 'child' subsets; they were more often seen as dissimilar to other elements at this wave as well. Convergence between MS and CS was only found in a group of three grids at this wave, again nearer the rate for the first wave. As at the previous wave, CS was only similar to MT for fathers in this group (F3 and F6), though there are perhaps not enough in this category to draw any conclusions as to why they were able to see child-rearing issues as relevant to all the family.

7.3.2 Clusters

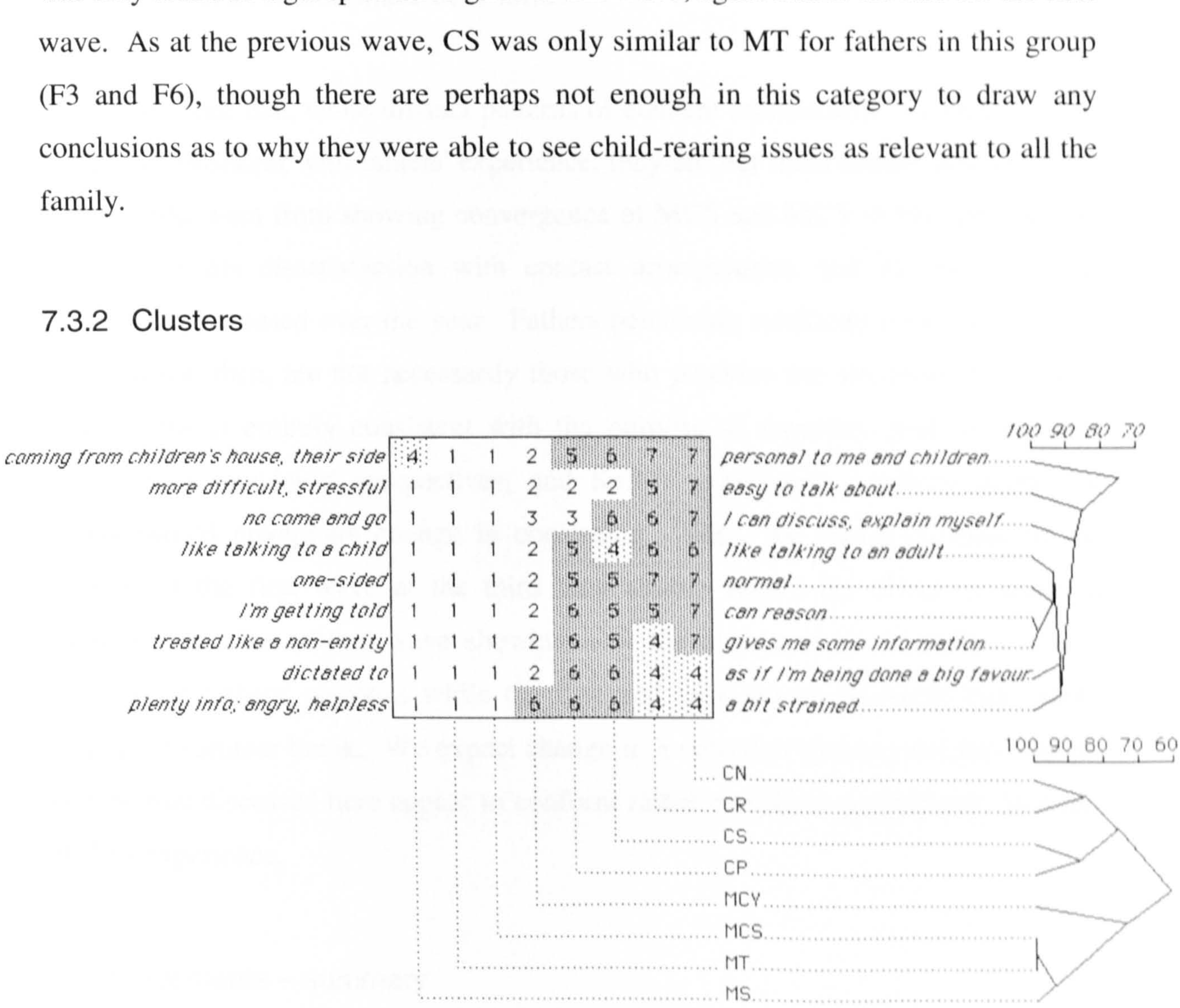


Figure 7.2 Cluster analysis for participant F8 at wave 3

At the third wave, the fathers whose elements were clustered according to 'mother' or 'child' situations were F5, F8, F16 and F19 (Fig. 7.2). All, then, had shown the same clustering at a previous wave. They shared no obvious demographic characteristics, though they reported stable family circumstances (for better or worse) at this wave.

Once again, there were only a very few respondents who construed mother and child conversations using separate subsystems. Most fathers, then, are able to construe a co-parental role to some degree; where this separates into subsystems for mother and child, this is only on a temporary basis.

7.3.3 Element relationships over time

It has been seen that, while distinct patterns of element relationships are clear at each wave and consistent with fathers' experience, they are not fixed characteristics. F12, for example, went from showing convergence of MCS and MCY at the first wave to isolation as his dissatisfaction with contact arrangements and the inter-parental relationship increased over the year. Fathers perceiving similarity between elements at one wave, then, are not necessarily those who perceive the similarity at the next wave. This is entirely consistent with the purpose of repertory grids to measure change in respondents' perspectives; and Kelly's experience corollary states that events should precipitate change in construing. Thus, the return of some of the features of the first wave at the third may simply reflect the effect of seasonal circumstances, the second wave showing how the events of the Christmas season impinge on fathers' outlooks while the first and third waves represent their views during the summer break. We expect change in a construct system; and the changes in construal discussed here appear to conform rather closely to participants' accounts of their experience.

7.3.4 Elements – summary

- Fathers in dispute over contact arrangements are unable to see discussions of their short-term changes in the same way as discussions of the mothers' requests.
- Accepting a prevailing contact schedule gives the equanimity that should be necessary for flexible co-parenting, but fathers may be resigned rather than satisfied.
- Once again, very few fathers saw talking to the mother about a school or health issue as similar to the same conversations with the child; but very few saw 'mother' and 'child' situations as fundamentally dissimilar either.

- Changing patterns at the three waves suggest that construing responds to seasonal circumstances and their effects on the family.

7.4 Construct-element relationships

A principal components analysis was once again carried out on the grids provided at the third wave, to examine the bases of element similarities.

Wave	**Mean PVAFF**	***s.d.***
1	56.68	*12.15*
2	59.79	*13.87*
3	63.80	*12.13*

Table 7.7 Percentage of variance accounted for by the first factor, waves 1-3

Over the three waves, the mean proportion of variance accounted for by the first factor rose somewhat (see Table 7.7), suggesting that over the year the participant's discernment of their role became less fine-grained. Throughout this time, however, very few of the grids showed below 72% of variance explained by the two factors that form the dimensions of the bi-plot space, and only one below 65%. The analysis solutions, then, can be taken as generally representative of the systems.

7.4.1 MCS/MCY

As stated in section 7.3.1, respondents who were not in dispute over contact once again perceived similarity between MCS and MCY. For those with little communication with the mother and high Co-parental Communication scores (F8, F9 and F19) the two elements were closely aligned with disfavourable poles of **participation and control** constructs:

one-sided, I'm getting told; made to squirm; frustrating, unlikely to be resolved

Once again, then, fathers who did not see much of their ex-partners found the two contact change discussions to be alike as conversations under someone else's control. However, fathers at this wave who did see the child's mother relatively frequently and reported a better quality of co-parental communication perceived similarity between MCS and MCY either in terms of **conflict** and **feelings** of apprehension, or as situations of minor **significance.** For F14 and F16, the two elements were associated with:

Like playing poker; potential dispute or *conflict; jogging with a grenade*

While for F6, F13 and F17, associated poles included:

Technical details; neutral exchange of information; or *less long-term significance.*

The meanings attached to element similarity at this wave, then, are along the lines of those at the second wave. Of the fathers for whom MCS and MCY were divergent, some made the same distinctions as at the second wave. For F7, F11 and F18, who had children aged 3-11 and low but stable rates of communication with the mother, MCS is *easy* and *can be discussed* while MCY is refractory, uncertain and stressful (*difficult; antagonistic; a no-no*). F3 alone saw MCS as a situation that *wouldn't be discussed.* F1 and F5, with older children (10-13) and high rates of communication with the mother, singled MCS out as unwanted (*wouldn't like, apprehensive, not interested*).

7.4.2 MS/CS

It was observed in section 7.3.2 that, for most respondents at this wave, MS and CS were not seen as similar. For these fathers MS is associated with negative aspects of participation, feelings and conflict (e.g. *unlikely to be resolved, impersonal, flashpoint*) while CS usually emerged as a positive situation (e.g. *agreeable outcome, positive input, relaxed*). But among the few fathers at this wave who perceived MS and CS as being alike, there was little consistency in the similarity. F3 found himself *restricted* in these situations, which *she controls.* For F6 they were near the labels

feels bog standard and *would happen to any parent*, but were also characterised by a *genuine interest*. These fathers also saw MT in the same terms. F1, however, saw MS and CS as g*ood*, with *plenty to talk about* and was *not bothered what* [her mother] *feels*; but MT was determined by *what suits her mother*, though the *child understands*.

The latter three fathers also had diverse circumstances and experiences, though all saw their children weekly and had experienced no recent relationship changes for either parent. F1 and F6, the two fathers who had been separated the longest, are also the only two to apprehend MS and CS as similarly positive. Both had purposely maintained contact and inter-parental communication throughout, and still lived, without any new partner, near to the child's residence. A positive association between these two elements may therefore only be the outcome of considerable experience of co-parenting; and even then, something that has emerged at this wave and not the others. As F1's relationship with his child's mother develops greater antagonism, MT (for this participant, a discussion over whether the child should have a mobile phone) was now seen as a parental battle of wills. F3, on the other hand, had the youngest child in the sample, was the most recently separated, and was the only one to see both situations in the same negative light. Having recently been back to court to try to change contact arrangements, it is no surprise that he takes a dim view of discussing school or health issues with the child's mother. (Health issues, in fact, played a part in his proceedings, since he recounted to the court an incident where he had been prevented from taking the child into a doctor's surgery). But as the only respondent whose child's age would limit conversation on these matters to some extent, he may be less able to distinguish CS as more positive.

7.4.3 Clusters

Child situations were rated under the poles:

Normal, can reason, being a father, at ease, talking directly

while only situations involving the mother fell under:

one-sided, I'm getting told, conflicting views, part-time father, tense flashpoint

So, for the few fathers for whom 'mother' conversations were all more like each other than any child conversations at this time, the basis of this distinction was participation, conflict and feelings; the experience of conversations rather than their significance.

7.4.4 Construct-element relationships - summary

- The meanings attached to element similarity at this wave, then, are along the lines of those at the second wave.
- One-off requests to alter contact routines could be seen as similarly controlled or conflicted, depending how much communication was taking place with the child's mother. Where they were dissimilar, the father's request was seen as more problematic, especially by those with younger children
- 'Mother' & 'child' conversations were only separately clustered on the basis of how they were conducted, rather than what significance they had.
- This may only be overcome by those with considerable experience of co-parenting, who may be able to apprehend discussing school or health issues with either mother or child in the same positive light.

7.5 Predictive relationships between constructs

7.5.1 Important Constructs

As at the second wave, none of the important constructs in this wave or their labels (see Fig. 7.8, below) were categorised under **conflict** (though one had a pole labelled 'conflicting views'). Only three were under **significance**, and these were only concerned with whether the respondent was interested or not. Of the 13 important constructs identified, four dealt with the father's **feelings**. The trend identified at the second wave away from a concern with priority based on the child's welfare therefore

seems to have continued. This may result from an increasing alienation from the co-parental role over time, or repeated administration or increasing familiarity overcoming demand characteristics; the fathers may feel less pressure by the third interview to show that they are responsible enough to place their children's welfare above all else.

F	WAVE 2	WAVE 3	*
1	These would interest me/ wouldn't interest me	would like to know about this/ I don't like this	R
3	have to discuss together/ I have my own ideas	she [mother] controls/ she [mother] needs me	
5	just trying to establish what's going on/ don't know which way it will go	conflicting views/ talking directly	
6	just part of life/ don't want to be interfering	Straightforward/ specific reason relating to son	
7	someone can take something away/ up to me to decide	negative, can't guarantee what I can offer/ can give a more positive input	R
8	limited conversations/ children not restricted	more difficult, stressful/ easy to talk about	
9	I felt awkward/ anger-provoking		
11	more cynical/ issues for the children	on her terms/ I get children's point of view	
12	discussing something, open/ asked to do or agree with something		
13	will lead to conversation/ won't lead to a conversation		
14	keeping a toe in the water, some connection/ not much conversation	I'd want to know, it's my business/ don't feel it's my business	R
15	only involved because I have to/ I'm really interested	fine, don't get angry/ really angry	
16	walking on eggshells, got to grovel/ in position of power, got all cards, in control	may not agree/ unconditional love	
17	I would want to explore fully/ would seek meaningful directions	sensitive, avoid prying/ minor importance	
18	we don't have a problem/ I'd be very wary	to do with the kids/ their mother wants something	R
19	enjoyable; conversational/ annoyed; bit of a pain in the arse	Enjoyable/ frustrating	R

Table 7.8 Important Constructs (*R indicates important construct was retained)

7.5.2 Prediction & fragmentation

	Wave 1		**Wave 2**		**Wave 3**	
	Mean %	s.d.	Mean %	s.d.	Mean %	s.d.
predictive	20.71	*17.64*	25.68	*16.06*	13.31	*12.48*
symmetrical	66.97	*16.94*	59.86	*14.83*	79.56	*15.02*
fragmented	12.43	*9.02*	14.46	*9.51*	7.14	*6.02*

Table 7.9 Proportions of construct relationship types, waves 1-3

The balance of construct relationships was quite distinct at this wave. There were fewer predictive and fragmented relationships, and a greater proportion of symmetrical ones. There are a number of possible explanations for this. The change in proportions could be an effect of repeated administration of the grid. If repeated self-reflection required in the grid procedure caused respondents to change their construing, they might become more selective about what they suggest such that they filter out subordinate ideas; the more they rehearse their repertory, the more uniform their understanding of the role becomes. This would not account for any reduction in fragmentation, though. It could alternatively be that the interviewees are simply getting bored with the interviews, and not really concerning themselves about the extremity of the ratings they use. It could also be that the interviewer's mode of discussion in the process of elicitation has changed over time to make construct poles more contrived and less likely to be used meaningfully by the participant in the rating procedure. However, any such effects of repeated administration or interviewer's technique might have been expected to be observable at the second wave, when in fact the proportion of equal relationships went down. If there is an effect of procedure, then it cannot be the only source of variance over the three waves.

A seasonal effect might certainly account for the reduction in symmetry at wave 2. However, the first and third waves took place at broadly similar times of year; there was still a sizeable shift towards monolithic construing from one year to the next (Fig. 7.3).

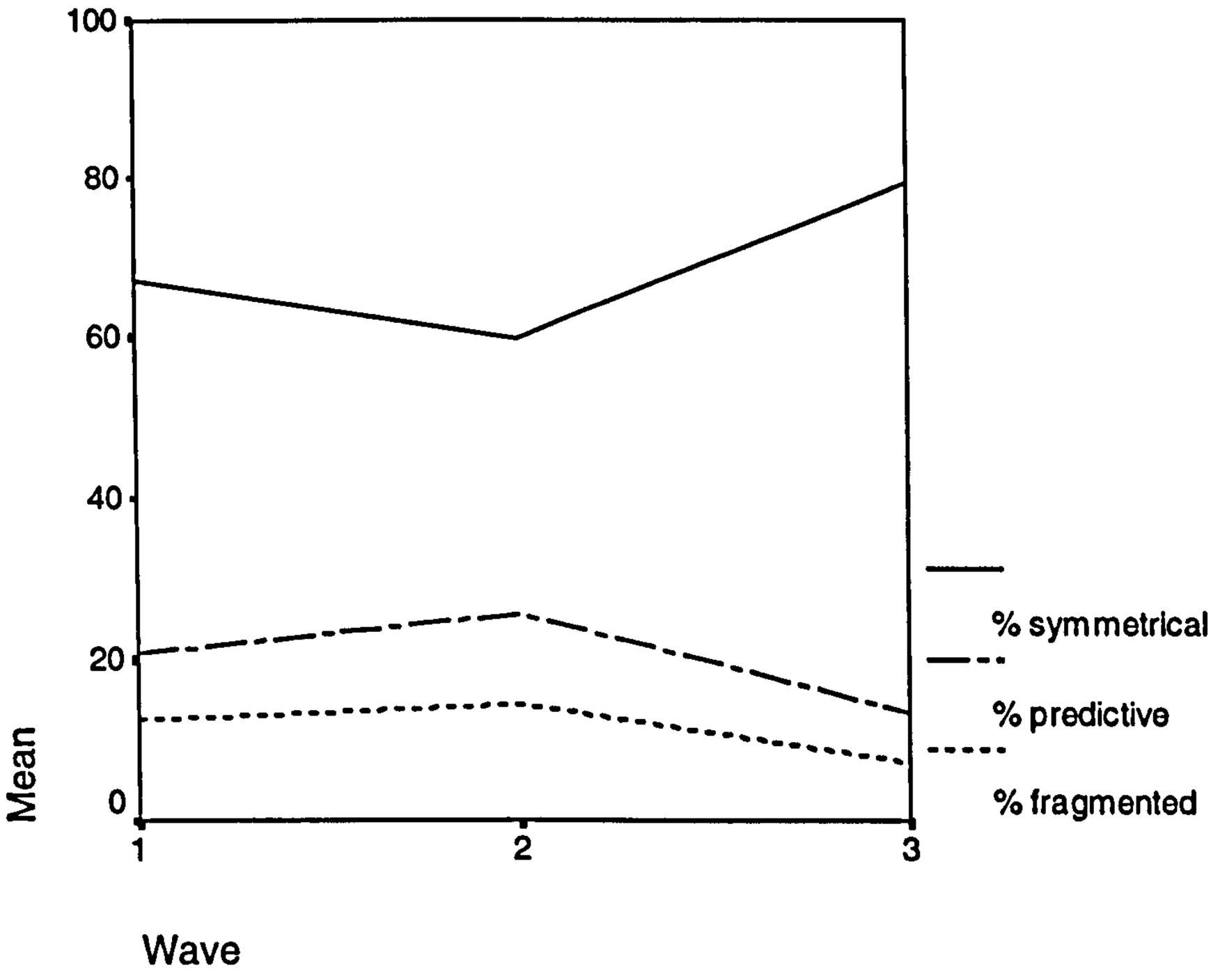


Figure 7.3 Graph of proportions of construct relationship types, waves 1-3

If the construct systems of these fathers are becoming more one-dimensional over time, it might be that they are becoming increasingly distanced from their families and less concerned about the co-parental role as a means of coping with the pressures of change or their feelings of powerlessness. Although the sample of fathers is small, a comparison of levels of fragmentation with categories of experience (Fig. 7.4) suggests that those for whom things have got worse have quite fragmented systems (mean 10.33%, s.d. 8.35). Those fathers who feel better about their circumstances, on the other hand, all have less than 10% of fragmented relationships in their systems (mean 4.57%, s.d. 3.67). If fragmentation reduction is an effect of distancing from the co-parental role, it is allowing fathers to see things as improving. (Grids with no fragmentation at all tend to be those with very few constructs). However, the fathers for whom things have gone better also tend to have higher proportions of predictive relationships in their systems than those with worsening circumstances, as Figure 7.5 shows.

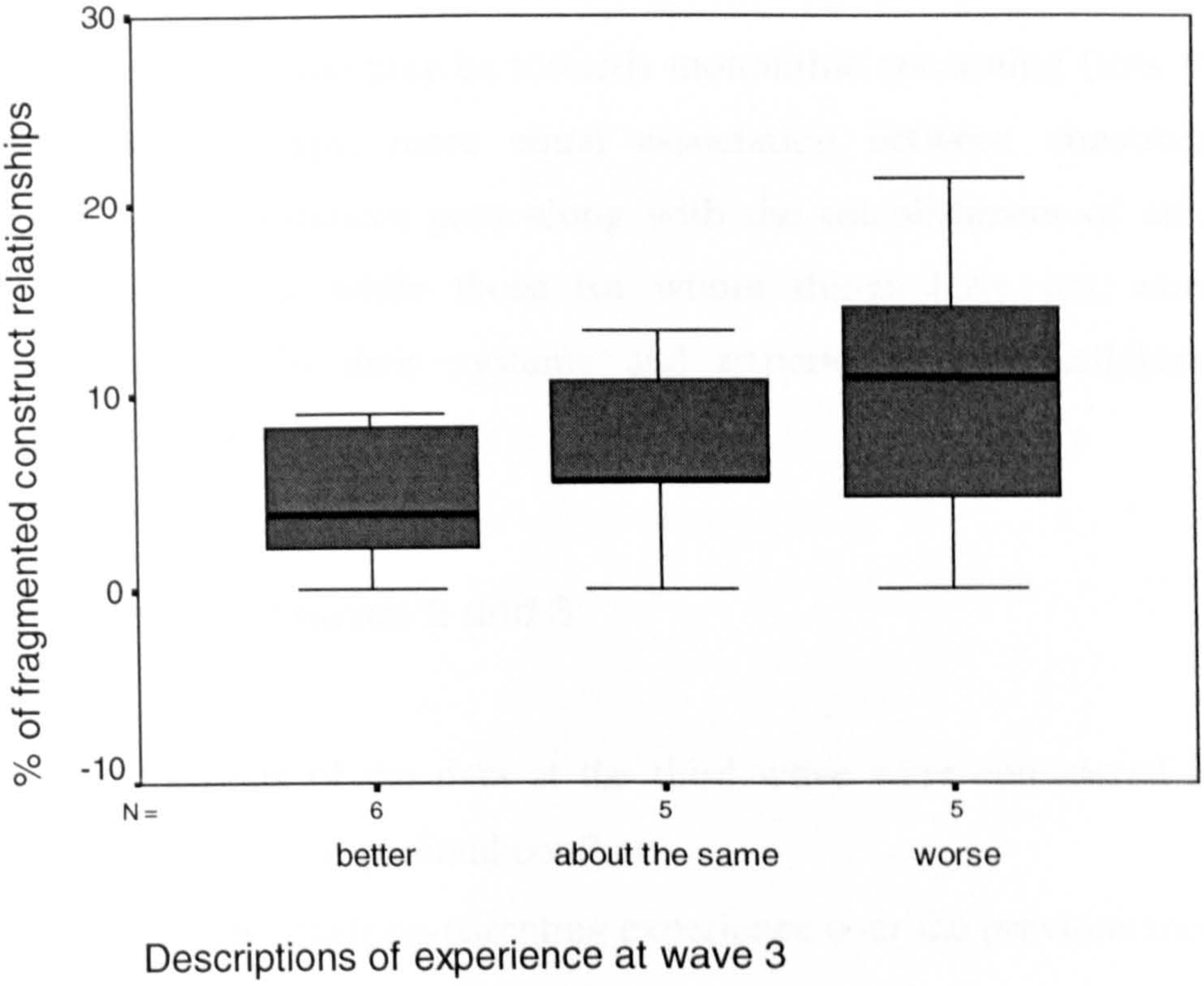


Figure 7.4 Boxplot of proportion of fragmented relationships by experience categories at wave 3

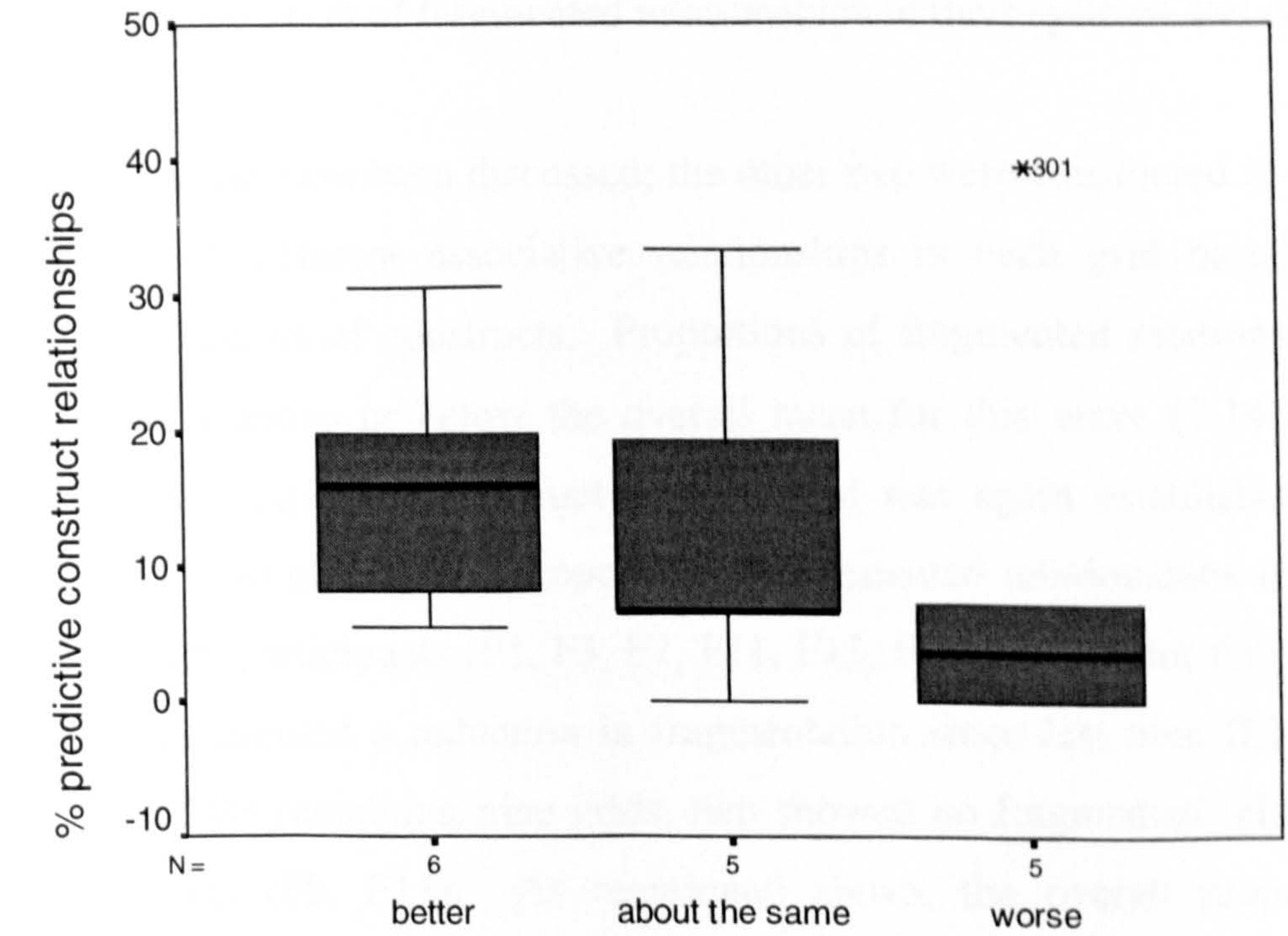


Figure 7.5 Boxplot of proportion of predictive relationships by experience categories at wave 3

The general trend over time may be towards monolithic construing (less fragmented or predictive relationships, more equal association between constructs). But improvement in circumstances goes along with the establishment of an integrated *hierarchy* of constructs, while those for whom things have got worse lack a hierarchical structure in their systems and experience irreconcilable ways of apprehending situations.

7.5.3 Comparison of waves 2 and 3

As before, four aspects of the data at the third wave were considered in order to assess the PCP model of co-parental conflict:

- How they evaluated their co-parenting experience over the previous months (from the interview notes).
- Whether they reported any significant events for the family since the last interview.
- Whether the important construct was similar to that at the previous wave.
- Whether the proportion of fragmented relationships in their systems had changed

The first two of these have been discussed; the other two were considered in terms of the proportions of different associative relationships in each grid based on the asymmetric coefficients of constructs. Proportions of fragmented relationships one standard deviation above or below the overall mean for this wave (7.14 %) were identified; and the important construct in each grid was again established as that which predicted most others. The proportion of fragmented relationships was above the mean for seven participants (F1, F3, F7, F11, F13, F16 & F19); for five of these, however, this represented a reduction in fragmentation since last time (F1, F3, F7, F11 & F19). Of the remaining nine grids, two showed no fragmented relationships between constructs (F9, F15). As mentioned above, the overall proportion of predictive relationships in this set of grids was substantially lower than in the previous two waves. In fact, three grids had no predictive relationships between any constructs (those from F9, F12, & F13); it was therefore impossible to identify an important construct for them. Five participants retained the important construct from

their previous grid (F1, F7, F14, F18 & F19); while a different construct emerged as important at this wave for the remaining eight (F3, F5, F6, F8, F11, F15, F16 & F17).

These characteristics of the co-parental role systems were compared with the accounts of co-parental experience leading to the interview to assess how well the PCP model explained the third wave of data. Four types of grid were identified in the previous wave – those consistent with Kelly's hostility, those where transition had been achieved, stable systems and emergent hierarchies. The last of these would not apply at this stage, since all grids at the last wave showed signs of hierarchy.

Stability

Three other respondents retained their important construct (F14, F18 & F19); they described things as having stayed as they were or improved. F18 reported that his children's mother had formed a new relationship in the interim; this had changed things for the better since she was 'a lot less stressed'. His system showed a low level of fragmented relationships. These characteristics are consistent with the important construct being sufficiently permeable for fragmented constructs to be associated within the system as a whole. In this case, viewing situations in terms of whether a situation involves his wife's machinations (*to do with kids/ their mother wants something*) may lead to successful apprehension of family situations. The labels suggest that, whatever disagreements there may be, he still feels involved and called on both by the children and their mother. While he may seem cynical of the mother's motives, he feels happy that his strategy for dealing with them (just giving her 'a straight answer, yes or no') enables them to maintain a working relationship. He therefore perceives no threat in the mother's new relationship ('you've got her, pal; you're welcome to her'). F19's questionnaire answers indicated that his ex-partner had also formed a new relationship, but he did not report this anywhere else as having had any effect on himself or family circumstances. His permeable important construct, then, has enabled him to apprehend this development without experiencing any disconfirmation.

The important constructs for F14 and F19 were also similar to those from the second wave. Neither of these fathers' interview notes contained descriptions of events having an effect on family circumstances. However, the information gathered from them by questionnaire indicates that they experienced events that were significant for others in the sample. F19's wife had formed a new relationship, as was the case with F18; and F14, like F9, had experienced the break-up of his own relationship. Since no 'fall-out' from these events was described it may be surmised that the permeability of their (retained) important constructs allowed them to cope with the transitions – things were about the same for F19 and better than before for F14. They were able to integrate new subordinate constructs under the important one (in accordance with the fragmentation corollary) that enabled them to predict new situations without disconfirmation. Thus F14 (whose previous important construct dealt with whether he *kept a toe in the water* of the mother's sphere) continued to predict situations in terms of whether or not it was *my business*, recognising that certain things were strictly between his child and her mother. His previous fragmented construct of uncertainty as a parent has not recurred, and the proportion of fragmented relationships in his grid has dropped to 2.22%.

On the other hand, while F19 retained his important construct of whether situations were *enjoyable*, his proportion of fragmentation was one of the highest in the sample. One might expect him to be suffering hostility if he had reported any events as having an impact and had found things had gone worse. It may be that while irreconcilable constructs are building up in his system, his total lack of direct communication with the mother has not recently created any situations requiring him to make predictions as a co-parent. Although things were relatively stable for him, this father did express some anxieties. He was planning to ask for a re-adjustment of how contact visits were distributed, and was concerned about the possibility of one or other parent moving to a job elsewhere in the near future.

Hostility

Two respondents (F1 and F7), having described a worsening of their co-parental situation in the wake of a family event, displayed highly fragmented co-parental role

systems (more than one standard deviation above the mean) with the same important construct as before. In the previous five months, F1 felt his contact time had got shorter and shorter, and he hadn't 'really spoken' to the child's mother since she had received an initial letter from a mediator following his approach to the service. He had not yet informed her about this, so she had 'seen red' and given him 'dog's abuse'; it had 'actually made things worse'. His most important construct was still whether he was interested or not (*I don't like this/would like to know about this*), which is more likely to generate disconfirmation in family situations. Had he approached the mediation event with *important to one of us/both of us* as his most important construct (as in the first wave) he might have encountered greater confirmation. F7's important construct at this wave still dealt with his uncertainty over the outcome of situations (*can't guarantee what I can offer/ can give a more positive input*). The build-up to his wedding had led to a 'total breakdown in the relationship again' between him and the children's mother, with the result of a four-month period where she had not let the children see him. Construing family situations primarily in terms of what agency he expects to have is perhaps unlikely to lead him to share a perspective with the children's mother or the children themselves. Both these fathers, then, report conflict and deterioration in family circumstances, and display co-parental role systems that instantiate Kelly's conception of hostility.

Transition

The important construct had changed for almost half the interviewees - F3, F5, F11, F15, F6, F8, F16 and F17. The first four of these also reported the impact of events in the interim. F5 and F15 had experienced positive effects from what had happened; this was in a sense confirmatory. Their last interviews showed them as having already experienced 'breakthrough' events (new partner becoming pregnant, the child's mother coming to depend on his support through contact time to cope with her job) leading to a successful change in construing and improved outlook. F5's partner had now given birth to their new child - this was seen as having cemented the positive outcome of the pregnancy in terms of co-operation with his former wife. The co-parents were 'trying to turn a corner' in how they dealt with situations. The most important consideration for him now was whether there would be *conflicting views* or

direct talk, rather than whether he *knew which way it would go*. Being a father again meant that his previous concern with the uncertainty of co-parental situations was now less important. The event described by F15 (the child's mother 'calling in' the CSA unannounced) does not seem to have a positive potential. But although the event is related, it is not described as having any *negative* consequences. In fact, the conversation about this was cited as an example of how the father's new important construct (*fine, don't get angry/really angry*) was used successfully:

...there's tension and atmosphere. But because I keep my calm, I can talk to her and then that's the end of the situation. (F15)

In this situation, then, he has found that viewing his anger as a predictive rather than subordinate construct allows him to apprehend successfully a co-parental situation that might previously have led to bitter arguments. He is able to see his anger as a choice rather than an outcome; the event is therefore positive for him, since it lets him feel capable of continuing as an involved co-parent.

The other fathers here, F3 and F11, also reported events but with negative significance. F3 had been to court and F11, having been hospitalised, found his co-parental circumstances worsened in that he was now unable to do anything about restoring contact with his children. However, these events, negative though they were, may likewise have offered these fathers the means to alleviate the hostility they were experiencing at their previous interview. Before going to hospital, F11's children had ostensibly excommunicated themselves from him by lawyer's letter, the culmination (as he saw it) of a worsening feud between the parents. Faced with this, being confined to hospital allowed him to reconstrue himself as beyond involvement anyway, rather than be primarily concerned with the mother's *agenda*. F3's court case did not achieve what he wanted it to. However the attention paid to his struggle in a court case may have fortified his idea of himself as a committed parent - he certainly intended to return to court. His important construct changed from one of whether a situation had to be *discussed together* to *she controls/she needs me*. Preparing to represent himself as a reasonable co-parent in court had previously led him to maintain the importance of discussion with his child's other parent, at which time he was showing hostility in his construing. But the conclusion of the case allowed him

to move to seeing her control or demands as prime determinants of co-parental situations. While this is not what he might hope for, and could represent an incentive to disengagement, it might allow him to make more successful predictions about situations as they stand. For both these fathers, their reported downturn in circumstances has not led to an increase in fragmentation. If things are not how they would wish, they are at least able to successfully apprehend them as such.

The other four fathers in this group - F6, F17, F16 and F8 - reported no family events, and all had found things the same or better over the preceding months. It seems unclear, then, why their important construct should have changed. If their co-parenting arrangements were relatively stable and no imminent transitions were being precipitated by significant changes in family life, these fathers' systems might be expected to be functioning well as predictors and in no need of overhaul. One possibility is that transitional events were taken on board so successfully that they were not discussed at any length during the interview. F16's level of fragmentation was above the mean at 9.09%; and his questionnaire indicated that he had experienced events that generated considerable effects for others – the finalisation of his divorce and the mother's remarriage. However, he viewed this as enabling both parents to consolidate their own lives; a reduction in the extent of interaction between parents may be something to which he can happily adapt. His most fragmented construct in this grid contrasts *for the benefit of the child* with *for myself, personal* - a new concept in his system. His important construct has changed from being to do with parental *power* and *control* to distinguishing situations of *unconditional love* from those where they *might not agree.* Such a pattern of construing is consistent with a separation of the co-parental realm into a father-child and an inter-parental realm.

This father's experience, then, may be like that of F5 and F15 above, except that he does not connect the improvement in his circumstances explicitly to 'breakthrough' events. F8's experience, in a similar way, may be parallel to that of F3 above. Although his last attempt to increase contact through a court hearing had failed, it allowed him to see himself as helpless in the face of the mother's intransigence. His unfragmented system reflects that he is currently better able to predict any (now rare) family situations on the basis of their difficulty (an introspective concern) rather than

on whether the children were restricted (a family concern). The high level of symmetry in his construct relationships, however, may also be an outcome of his virtual disengagement; in the previous months, he had only had one, begrudged, contact episode. However, the other three fathers here did not even report any changes in their circumstances in the questionnaires, and had low levels of fragmentation or none at all. The PCT conception of a construct system, though, is of an organism perpetually in search of elaboration. There may be enough incremental changes brought on by minor family discussions to tip the balance of importance from one construct to another. Also, transition within the separated family is generated not only by the external relationships of its members, but (like unified families) by the development of the child. Two of the fathers here were identified as stable in their construing at the second wave. Their children were also the oldest in the sample, however, and contact arrangements had been kept going for some years. By the time of the third interview, these children were approaching school-leaving age. F6, for example, found that his son was spending more and more time at the weekends with his friends rather than with either parent; under these circumstances a concern with whether his interaction with son or mother might be intruding on the mother's realm has come to be less relevant. Instead his important construct is whether situations are *routine* or come about for a *specific reason relating to* [his] *son*. Being able to relate this change to the normal experience of any parent means that it is seen as gradual and inevitable rather than a threat; thus, both fathers' grids had levels of fragmented relationships somewhat below the mean at 5.56%.

In fact, the characteristics of F6, F17 and F8 may be a result of their limited scope for co-parental experience. The first two have settled routines and outgoing children and things have been more or less the same for them; the other has stopped trying for contact, but feels things are better as a result. They may cope better *because* (as all three put it) they see less of their family now compared to the time of their first interview, and are drifting towards disengagement. Seeing their children less than weekly, as they do, puts them among those fathers with the lowest contact rates in the sample - importantly, they also *expect* to see their children this rarely, or perceive a trend of diminishing contact. The only other fathers with contact this infrequent are: F18 (whose contact rate goes up and down according to his shifts at work); F19 (whose contact has actually risen to this rate); and the final group of fathers below,

whose monolithic systems may be an advance indication of what is beginning to happen with this group.

Symmetry

F9 is all but unable to see himself as a co-parent by now, having been cut off by his family, moved house and job and gone through relationship break-up. The few constructs he offered have only symmetrical associations. F12 and F13 have almost entirely symmetrical systems as well; certainly, no predictive constructs could be identified.

7.5.4 Predictive construct relationships at wave 3 - summary

- The trend among constructs at the second wave, away from expressing concern with priority of the child's welfare, was seen to continue.
- A general trend over time was found towards monolithic construing, with little difference in importance between constructs.
- However, improving circumstances go along with the establishment of an integrated *hierarchy* of constructs, while those for whom things have got worse lack a hierarchical structure in their systems and experience irreconcilable ideas of family situations.
- A comparison of experience with the content of important constructs was found to support the interpretation of co-parental conflict as hostility in PCP terms. However, re-construing the co-parental role as less important may be a strategy for coping with this hostility.

7.6 Discussion

At the third wave, the fathers were around a year further on in their development as co-parents from when they were first interviewed. Although contact was now less than monthly for a couple of respondents, only one felt he had disengaged from his family, and this only because of his hospitalisation for a serious (and possibly stress-

related) illness. In the period leading up to these final interviews, circumstances were less turbulent for the respondents. It may be, then, that their increasing flexibility and facility with the role of non-resident father are smoothing out the trials of family life. This is the view of divorce as a finite process of transition. Of course, the final period of the study did not encompass the minefield of the festive season. Family events, where reported, were always seen to affect how fathers evaluated their circumstances; the third wave, it might be argued, took place at a time when fewer events would be expected. Yet it appears that upheavals within the family were not necessarily for the worse. Some of those reporting relationship changes or moving house had found things getting better. Only the involvement of external agencies (removing fathers' own agency to some extent) was always a bad thing from the respondents' point of view.

The dwindling of both time spent with the child and communication with the child's mother throughout the period of the study, however, offers a qualified explanation consistent with this idea of 'settling down': adaptation to the co-parental role is achieved through a systematic distancing from the family. Instead of acquiring through contact increasingly rich understandings of how their family life can be enacted, fathers may be gradually moving closer and closer to a view that, while it allows for a functional involvement in their family, sees themselves as essentially disenfranchised or minimally in the picture. This may of course parallel what takes place in a unified family; as a child grows older, its need for parental presence diminishes and less and less time is spent with the parent. But under the circumstances of non-residency, this is less likely to be experienced as wholesome. If the child's activities are centred on a different environment from a father's residence, then the father may be more likely to perceive the parental relationship as slipping away from him. Thus, those in the sample with older children were once again more likely to report that things were no different or worse. Whether circumstances had actually declined or whether this reflects an increasing cynicism on their part, the fathers here seem less than wholeheartedly positive about their role as their children become teenagers; certainly, nothing gets better for them.

These ideas were explored in the repertory grid data. Relatively stable experiences were reported this time, and the distribution of construct categories was very similar

to that of the previous wave. But some differences emerged. The grids of those for whom things were getting better (usually those with younger children) contained mostly constructs of participation, while those for whom things had deteriorated supplied more constructs of feelings. Family relationships, then, tended to be seen as improving by less experienced fathers whose attention was focussed on the mechanics of those social processes. Where family life was not seen to be improving, a father's awareness of his own internal states was heightened. In either case, conflict was likely to play a part; only those who experienced no change did not include this theme in their construing. The implications of conflict, however, were again far from consistent, since it could be an alternative either to control or exclusion, to negotiation, or to relaxed participation.

Once again, fathers who were in dispute over prevailing contact arrangements did not construe similarity between parents asking for contingency alterations to that schedule. If the underlying contact agreement between the parents is contested, any such request becomes loaded with the perceived unfairness of the balance of parental power. In contrast, fathers who were in agreement with their ex-partners over contact schedules saw the two discussions over changes to arrangements as very similar. Where there was little communication between the parents, this could represent resignation to being controlled in this scheme; where communication was more frequent, the two situations could be seen as similarly minor, or else as having a similar potential for conflict. Thus, fulfilment of the co-parental role does not imply fulfilment of the father's ideal. Although some fathers were able to recognise the similarity between their requests for change and the mother's, they could be seeing these as routine matters, or recognising their own dependency in either case. Or they could be aware that either conversation has the potential to flare up; therefore, acknowledging that no one parent precipitates conflict. Any of these approaches might provide the father with a level conceptual playing field on which to co-operate with the mother in a flexible contact regime; but it is important to recognise that a reciprocal outlook on co-parenting may be supported by very different understandings.

As at the first wave, the discussion of child-centred issues was not enough to provide a common basis for the construal of mother and child conversations for almost all

participants. Talking to each about a school matter was again associated with distinct uses of constructs for all but the most experienced co-parents. But the majority of those interviewed did not cluster all discussions with the mother separately from all those with the child. Most of the fathers were therefore able to apply some similar considerations to both; in other words, the system is coherent for the entire family realm, and is therefore a co-parental one.

The changes observed in element relations at this wave are consistent with a pattern over three waves corresponding to the seasonal effects of Christmas, confirming the expectations of change in construct systems in response to events. The meanings attached to element similarity at the final interview largely reproduce those seen at the second wave. The systems, then, behave as collections of constructs rather than innate characteristics, in that they respond to reported experience rather than individuals. The results from the analysis of hierarchy at this wave also support the constructivist model of a role within the fluctuating realm of a separated family. The continuation of an important construct within a father's co-parental system cannot be assumed, even over a six-month period; only five out of the 16 were retained. Data from these five are consistent with the co-parental models of hostility or, alternatively, with having a permeable important construct. Fathers holding on to an important dimension in the face of change either experienced conflict where that understanding did not help them predict situations following the change, or found their important construct could cope with new ideas under the new circumstances.

According to the experience corollary (Kelly, 1955), change should be precipitated by new events; if nothing happens, an individual need not alter their construct system. But even fathers not faced with any threatening transition (not reporting any family events) displayed new important constructs in their co-parental role from wave to wave. This may be characteristic of relationships that are less set in stone than those of a unified family. Non-resident parents are the individuals most likely to perceive the fragility of their connections to the family. Frequent shifts in what is seen as important may be characteristic of their unique viewpoint on co-parenting, an alternative to maintaining a construct system built round a permeable and sustainable important construct. This may go some way to explaining the widespread notion among separated fathers in general of the 'clean break', identified in other research.

Faced with maintaining this level of change in construing, viewing the co-parental realm as remote or inaccessible, and their role as less important, may afford them at least some degree of stability in their outlook.

The third wave data also throw light on the relationship of significant events to transitions in construing. Events such as new relationships, new children or maintenance disputes require a change in outlook for family members. According to Kelly's theory, if an alternative cannot be seen, events may represent a threat to a system with which the father is happy. The threat seems associated with an event's perceived impact on family circumstances. If a father perceived, for example, the remarriage of one parent as a threat, hostility was generated; worsening circumstances were always seen as resulting from some such occurrence. But for many fathers, change seems quite acceptable or even welcomed; for them, the situation was not perceived as a challenge. Instead it was seen to offer a 'way out' to a system already facing or overcoming threat from another event, by presenting an alternative option for the important construct. This may be related to whether impending change is gradual or sudden. If occurrences with drastic consequences for some fathers were welcomed by others, services for separated parents might be designed to encourage those experiencing hostility to view upcoming family situations as experiments in Kelly's terms: opportunities to test a new way of construing.

7.7 Conclusions

- Separated non-resident fathers report slightly improving circumstances over time, but decreasing involvement in the family.
- Changing circumstances are associated with changing evaluations of co-parental experience and perceptions of conflict in parental relations.
- Events involving external agencies are likely to be viewed negatively.
- Conflict has variable implications for fathers.
- Parity and flexibility in parental co-operation over contact is only likely where the underlying contact arrangements are endorsed by both parties, whatever the implications of acceptance may be for fathers.

- Interaction with a child and with the child's mother are unlikely to be seen as similar, but can usually be seen in some of the same terms.
- Some fathers' response to change confirms the personal construct model of co-parental conflict. Others' responses, however, suggest that in the absence of relational constraints, a strategy for dealing with change or inter-parental conflict is to re-construe the co-parental role as less central.

Chapter 8 General Discussion

In this final chapter, the key findings will be discussed in relation to the theoretical model proposed in Chapter 3 and the research questions. Some implications for policy and practice will also be outlined, and finally the strengths and limits of the project considered with directions for future research.

8.1 Key findings – summary

The interviews with groups of separated fathers (Chapter 4) detailed the views and experience of some non-resident separated fathers in Scotland. They perceived relations with their ex-partner to be central to their continued relations with children. Interaction with their child's mother, however, was characteristically described as a performance in an externally imposed role; while this fostered resentment in some, it allowed most to function as co-parents. Conflict and control emerged as significant experiences of parental interaction, with participants variously inclined to respond to control with negotiation, toleration or retaliation.

In the three waves of repertory grids conducted (Chapters 5-7) the co-parental situations drawn from the data above provided a workable definition of the realm within which the co-parental role operates for non-resident fathers. Situations were almost always recognised by the fathers taking part, and a typology consistent with all three waves of constructs used to apprehend this role was developed. Fathers' perceptions of parity in their parental relationships depend on whether there is agreement over the contact schedule, and whether they see the other parent frequently. Those participants who were actively trying to change a prevailing allocation of contact tended to construe themselves as less able to request temporary changes without creating conflict. However, those who were accepting of the current contact arrangements perceived their requests as having the same positive or negative implications as the mothers', depending how often they were in communication with her. Fathers' construct systems also responded to their experiences of family change in ways concordant with the constructivist account of hostility. The analysis of

ordinal relationships between constructs at all three waves suggested that while many of the sample changed their important construct in response to significant events taking place, others resisted changing their important construct and experienced conflict. However, the replacement of an important construct may be an indication that constructs in the co-parental system are becoming more interchangeable as it becomes a less accessible or important role for the father. Over the year of the study, the proportion of symmetrical construct relationships in grids from the sample increased; some participants showed no ordinal relationships between constructs. Furthermore, the results support the personal construct understanding of a construct system as a reactive structure of meaning, and the repertory grid as an instrument for measuring global change in individual understanding. Features of construct systems such as the similarity of element pairs were not consistent for individuals across three waves, but were consistent with reported events and experience between waves.

Finally, conflict did not emerge as a primary consideration but can have varied implications for different fathers, not all of which may be negative. Conflict constructs were rarely found to be highly predictive in the ordinal analyses of grids. Yet analysis of the group interview data and the content of construct labels showed that conflict could be contrasted with being controlled, with being excluded, or with negotiation and discussion. It tended to characterise discussions about change for those who saw their child's mother frequently.

8.2 PCP model

In Chapter 3 a model of the co-parental role was outlined. A new and individual system of constructs should serve this new role following separation; it should develop in response to experience of the role; the father's relationship with other family members depends on how this system allows him to interact with them; and conflict between the parents is generated through the mechanism of hostility as Kelly has defined it (Kelly, 1970).

The findings support the conception of a distinct role as co-parent for those interviewed. In section 3.7.1 above, Kelly's definition of the features of a role were

discussed. Firstly, a role is the product of a construct system; all of these participants were able repeatedly to supply constructs particularly relating to the elements proposed as defining the co-parental realm. Secondly, a role emerges in relation to other people; these fathers were mostly able to construe a single familial role relating to the other family members. All the elements involved one or other of these 'other people'; and only a few respondents used all their constructs to distinguish conversations with the child from conversations with the mother. Thirdly, commonality with these other people is not a prerequisite; instead, the role depends on an individual's construing of others' systems. While commonality cannot be assessed without interviewing other family members, fathers in the group interviews indicated that they recognised that their children held different expectations of contact. They may therefore operate their co-parental role without sharing the same conception of it as others in the family, but by forming a working understanding of what the perspectives of the child and the mother are. Thus, many of the constructs attributed motives to the mother, perceiving her as having an active 'agenda' against the father. Finally, the role "is not an understanding of one's self, but of what is or should be done under certain circumstances". For almost all those interviewed, the particular situational elements used in this grid were recognisable in their experience since separation, and to that extent the co-parental role system is an understanding of how to respond to the 'certain circumstances' of being a co-parent. This role is not a part of the self, as Ihinger-Tallman et al. (1995) would have it. In the group interviews, fathers described being a co-parent in terms of a performance, according to external expectations. For some, it was therefore a far cry from their idea of self; but playing the role in the circumstances of co-parenting allowed them to continue as involved fathers. Nevertheless, there was some suggestion in the trend towards interchangeable and symmetrical constructs that it may become tenable for some only if it can be construed as less central.

In section 3.7.2, it was suggested that the co-parental role construct system should undergo structural change through experience. There were no distinct and consistent characteristics of those fathers who had been co-parenting the longest in this sample. However, it cannot be assumed that the effects of experience should be cumulative, producing an expert co-parent over a period of time. While Mascolo and Mancuso (1988) measured expertise in non-separated parents, their study was concerned with

the parent-child dyad only; and within a non-separated family, it can be assumed more readily that there will be a consistent rate and level of social processes between them. Some fathers in the present study have had more time within which to act as co-parents. Nevertheless, the rates of contact with other family members and of transitional events during that time will have varied, and any effects on the system may not be cumulative if long spells of detachment have occurred. Instead, this study allows the examination at a detailed level of how a year of co-parental experience brings about change. The occurrence of new family events should require the consideration, testing and adoption of new constructs. Most of the sample remained in contact with their family throughout the three waves, and showed changes in response to family events both in the constructs they were using and the hierarchical properties of their grids. Furthermore, perceived similarity between elements was found to be on a distinct basis for fathers who reported frequent interaction with their family in the intervening period. These findings confirm the implications of the Experience Corollary for the co-parental role model.

It is beyond the scope of the current study to assess whether the co-parental systems of participants concur with those of their children. Nevertheless, Procter's Group Corollary (1985) suggests that the ability to construe relationships between others in a group such as the separated family allows an individual to take part in that group. Insofar as they are maintaining contact with their children, the fathers in this sample are taking part in the separated family group. Most also construe some degree of relationship between other family members, given that relatively few participants clustered discussions with their child and the child's mother separately. The fact that these few construe talking to the mother in terms of conflict supports the idea that they may be struggling at the time to continue their group construal, and thus participation. There is, then, some indication that fathers' ability to engage in social processes with other family members is dependent on their co-parental construct system. Finally, the findings from the analysis of ordinal relationships between constructs were supportive of the theory that conflict arises where the replacement of an important construct is resisted following a transitional event. While this was the case for only a few fathers at each wave, it might be expected that hostility would not be a frequent occurrence among fathers recruited on the criteria that they were functioning as co-parents.

Conflict, then, was seen to arise from poor predictions of events by some participants who resisted accepting the transformations they implied. However, new events are the engines of change in personal construct theory. It was also observed that for other participants, a family event precipitated a transition in construing that led to perceived improvements in their circumstances. While some events may generate hostility, others present an opportunity to resolve hostility from previous events. In the absence of any intervention to change a hostile father's construing, it may take many disconfirming events before a father comes to test a new way of construing, and acceptance of the new system may not be immediate even then. The varied proportions of fragmentation and experience of those whose important constructs changed may therefore reflect the nature of change as a process in these terms, occurring through a series of family experiences.

It has been proposed in previous literature that elaboration of the group construction of a (non-separated) family comes about as family members make choices in response to those experiences to enrich their individual systems (Feixas, 1992). However in the separated family it may be more apparent to fathers that the co-parental role is only one role they may choose to elaborate - after all, they frequently perceive others as not wishing them to participate as co-parents. Faced with an increased rate of transition and more curtailed relationships with family members under non-residency, fathers may instead choose to elaborate another role system - for instance that of the divorcee making a clean break. Predicting family situations from this role may in the end allow them to predict family situations with less subsequent conflict, though any group constructs of the co-parenting family are unlikely to be elaborated by this choice. It was observed that one participant, whose contact was tenuous at the start of the study and who saw himself as disengaged by the end, was among those whose co-parental role system ended up with no predictive structure. The group (co-parental) role he perceives as available to him is no longer one he feels able or inclined to perform. As he has moved to viewing his role as that of a detached father, his co-parental system has atrophied. Therefore, change that takes place in co-parental role systems such as those in this study may not be only within the system. In a fluid group such as a separated family, adhering to a different

role may be another means of coping with change, and one that seems more achievable to non-resident fathers.

This understanding of non-resident fathers' relationship to the role of co-parent is consistent with recent theories of core construing. It has been argued that core constructs are those used in the current process of construction of 'self' (Butt, Burr, & Epting, 1997). This notion of self is constantly subject to revision, and roles may correspond to it so long as they do not produce disconfirmation of the core constructs. It has recently been suggested that the experience of 'being oneself' is associated with the lack of self-consciousness (Fry, Butt, & Bell, 2003). The indication by fathers in the group interviews that they feel they are performing to external expectations suggests that some experience considerable self-consciousness in the co-parental role, and therefore the role would be one in which it would be difficult to maintain core constructs as important. If a father experiences less hostility (and therefore self-consciousness) in another role, he may come to identify that role more closely with his idea of 'self'. While some co-parental constructs may continue to be more important than others, they are no longer core constructs; and it is a perceived threat to a core construct that generates hostility (Kelly, 1970). Thus, the co-parental role loses its predictive hierarchy of constructs to some degree; as a less important role, it no longer threatens core processes.

The findings from the repertory grids, then, indicate that the constructivist model of the co-parental role offers a consistent understanding of the reports of participants. The choice of personal construct theory in this study has allowed the diversity of that experience to be addressed. Furthermore, the association of features of construing with reported experience rather than individual characteristics confirms the function of the repertory grid in allowing us "to understand the meaning of change" (Bannister & Fransella, 1974).

8.3 Research Issues

In Chapter 1, a number of areas of research interest were identified relating to separated non-resident fathers. These were: their co-operation with the mother in

maintaining contact arrangements; the quality of time spent with their children; disengagement from their families; and their uptake of services. In this section the findings will be discussed in relation to these issues.

Resident mothers may perceive their children's fathers as negligent in their fulfilment of contact responsibilities (Mayes, Gillies et al., 2000); this may also be seen as the prevalent stereotype of the 'deadbeat dad' (Furstenberg, 1988). No objective measure is possible of how diligently the fathers in the group interviews for this study conformed to contact arrangements. However, these individuals acknowledged the importance of the inter-parental relationship to their contact with children. If any were not abiding by contact agreements, it was not because they trivialised co-operation with their child's mother in their own perspectives. Instead, various discourses emerged from their accounts to indicate why functioning as a parent in co-operation with their ex-partner might be difficult for them. There was an observed tendency to attribute events to the mother actively militating against them; and interacting with the family was compared to performing in a role not of their own making. Whether these fathers are scrupulous in their contact commitments or not, and whether the agenda they perceive as being held against them actually exists to the extent they describe, these fathers at least recognise that they should be acting in co-operation with their child's mother. Despite this, their understanding of that role is often that it is being subverted through the mother's control. Of the various strategies adopted by fathers in response to such a (subjective) experience of control, only one - negotiation - suggests a working approach that might allow both parents to feel that co-operation was taking place.

Recruitment for the group interviews did not distinguish between those who were able to see their children and those who were not. However, the sample for the repertory grid interviews comprised only fathers who remained in contact with their children - practising co-parents. Yet the content of construct labels at all three waves showed a similar and increasingly prevalent perception of **control** in how these fathers construed their co-parental role. Furthermore, the comparison of element distances at the three waves provided an analogue of the three responses to control seen in the group interviews. The strategy of retaliation is apparent in those fathers who perceived it as harder for themselves to request a change, and were engaged in

disputes over altering the contact arrangements. The strategy of toleration is apparent in those who accepted the prevailing contact schedule, but viewed all requests from whichever parent as a demonstration of the mother's control, and saw little of her. Finally, the strategy of negotiation can be seen in those who still saw their child's mother frequently and saw both parents' requests as equally routine or likely to generate conflict. Whether they expected things to be heated or pass unremarked, this last group saw both parents as able to request relaxation of the contact arrangements with similar implications. It has been repeatedly argued in the literature that successful co-parenting depends on the parents' commitment to flexibility in contact (Bradshaw, Stimson et al., 1999; Smart & Neal, 1999; Trinder, Beek & Connelly, 2002); both parents, then, should feel able to rely upon that flexibility and recognise each other's need to do so. Yet among the fathers in the repertory grid interviews, all of whom were continuing to see their children after separation, most at any one time were unable to see such a co-operative route as open to them.

However, these features of construing were observed in different fathers at different waves, and therefore did not represent types of father. Instead, they were seen to develop in relation to participants' experience of contact in the intervening period. This confirms that negotiation, toleration and retaliation are essentially alternative responses to change. Change, as has been repeatedly stressed, is more pervasive in the separated family; moreover, many changes are likely to be experienced by a non-resident parent as having taken place in another sphere of activity from their own domestic environment. This perhaps makes a non-resident father more likely to feel himself controlled.

On the face of it, the option of toleration may seem the best strategy of the three suggested here. After all, fathers with this approach tended neither to report nor construe conflict, which may appear to offer a functional family environment. However, both toleration and retaliation are strategies that conserve an outdated construct system, which will not allow a father to adapt as a co-parent. Only negotiation implies that a new outlook will be tested in response to change, and therefore, this represents the only way by which fathers can keep up with change and remain meaningfully engaged with the family in the long term. Yet some of these fathers saw both parents' requests as likely to generate conflict. This should not

imply, however, that conflict is an essential or inescapable feature of remaining a successful co-parent within a separated family. The important constructs identified over three waves rarely dealt with **conflict.** Participants, then, apprehended it as a (possibly inevitable) sequitur of more important constructs within their system. It is the facility with which these larger ideas change, seen in the three waves of repertory grids, that determines the presence or absence of conflict, as Kelly has argued (1970). In section 8.3 above, it was iterated that the build-up of hostility and the achievement of transition might take place, messily, over a period of time. Facilitating that change as swiftly as possible may alleviate conflict in co-parental relationships, and strengthen the perception of parity between parents; this should be a basis for co-operation between them.

It has been suggested here that the reason fathers in the study by Mayes et al. (2000) were perceived as being unreliable at sticking to the contact plan was because they did not construe the family flexibly enough to cope with changing circumstances. The conflict generated by this process, being seen as beyond the father's control, takes on distinct connotations for them. It might, of course, be that these fathers are not representative of the ex-partners of those in the earlier study. However, the subjective views expressed by this diverse group of fathers nonetheless provide a coherent demonstration of why those mothers and children may have been led to report this.

The issue of separated fathers' loss of contact with their families - disengagement - was not specifically addressed by this study, which focused on those who remained in contact with children. Some aspects of the findings are relevant to this issue nonetheless. Although the idea of cutting oneself off from a family as a better course in the long run was generally rejected in the group interviews, the fact that it was mooted indicates that it is an accessible discourse for separated fathers (cf. Simpson, McCarthy & Walker, 1996). For such a coping strategy to function, being a co-parent would have to be construable as less of a core role than that of a disengaged father. As was discussed in section 8.2 above, the process of transition in the construct hierarchies of many of the participants in this study suggests that they construe co-parenthood as a progressively less defining role for themselves. Within a family living together, the rate of substantive change is less than that of a separated family.

When it does occur, the role of father will seem relatively immutable where family members share their place of residence, economic base and relationships. There is therefore greater pressure or incentive to cope with change within the current parental role. But for a father who lives, works and forms relationships in separate spheres from his former partner and children (and whose contact and communication with them is already limited) changing role may present a more feasible means of coping than adapting the existing construct system and trying to continue as a co-parent. Given the fluctuating dynamics of a separated family, the co-parental role of a non-resident father has perhaps a threshold of change beyond which he is drawn to elaborate that system such that it is no longer a core role.

A number of possibilities are suggested by the findings of this study as to what aspects of separated fathers' perspectives might prevent them attending an intervention for separated parents. The fathers in the group interviews often perceived support services as being intended for women; therefore, they might not expect to feel welcome attending such a service. This view might also incline them to apprehend a family service as likely to be complicit in their ex-partner's control. Participants in the group interviews also tended to look to the legal system for redress, despite its perceived failure of them on previous occasions. This disposition reflects Smart and Neale's 'ethic of justice' (1999) - fathers seem here to be primarily concerned with achieving external verification of their view of an equal dispensation of parental involvement. A mediation or education intervention, whose goal is to facilitate the best possible parenting practice and arrangements for the child, will perhaps be seen as less likely to interpose on the father's behalf to establish what he sees as fair. Interventions tend to be provided for 'parents' rather than 'mothers' or 'fathers'; given their promotion of co-operation, they are perhaps unlikely to proceed from a view that one parent is actively attempting to engineer the other's removal from their child's life. Yet if fathers attribute family processes to a maternal campaign waged against them, they may see a service that does not share this view as only useful for parents other than themselves, and at worst as likely to side with a malicious adversary. Furthermore, the message that parental conflict can have adverse effects on children is likely to be a prominent feature of most parenting programmes. However, if some fathers, as the accounts and constructs in this study

suggest, view conflict as a 'necessary evil' in sustaining involvement, they may reject some of the programme's content or question its validity.

The findings in this study reflect only the views of separated fathers. The views of mothers and children in an earlier study showed a distinct understanding of those aspects of fathers' co-parenting that cause them concern. There is no way of objectively ascertaining whether, for example, a participant's ex-partner did or did not purposely attempt to foil his efforts as a parent. But the qualitative approach adopted here has allowed those features of fathers' behaviour to be explored within their own terms, to show how their own perspectives operate to guide their behaviour. Identifying the processes of reasoning within the framework, or construct system, of fathers' individual understandings of being a co-parent is essential to understanding how the separated family can best be supported.

8.4 Strengths of the present research

This study has a number of strengths in relation to the existing literature on both separated fathers and applications of personal construct theory.

The research is entirely framed in the terms of co-parenting fathers themselves. This is in contrast to much research drawing on household survey data, where the self-report of mothers (as the typically resident parent) is more likely to be accessible and relied on (e.g. Seltzer, 1991; Stephen et al, 1993). Furthermore, the use of construct elicitation and group interviewing means that participants' reports have not been gathered or considered in relation to external preconceptions of them and their motivations.

The study also presents a rare instance of a diverse sample, willing to present themselves for interview on a number of occasions, from a population who are difficult to access. Relatively few studies have been able to amass and follow up groups of non-resident fathers other than by relying on particular avenues of recruitment (e.g. through church networks in the USA (Ihinger-Tallman et al, 1995) or service attendees (Stone & McKenry, 1998)). Even fewer have been able to do so

with qualitative approaches, since these can be quite intense experiences for the participant. In addition, all the fathers for the grid interviews were practising co-parents – and fathers who do manage to fulfil parental responsibilities laid out in the Children (Scotland) Act have been little researched. The use of multiple avenues of recruitment and participant-led research methods are important factors in this success.

The study has established a working delineation of the realm of the co-parental role for non-resident separate fathers. Although legal measures such as the Children (Scotland) Act and many research findings recommend a role for non-resident fathers in children's lives following separation, there have not been many attempts to clarify how this role can be understood and how it is distinguished from the previous role within a non-separated family. Furthermore, co-parenthood is presented in law as a relatively undifferentiated role for both parents. By examining co-parenting in practice, rather than where it has gone awry, this study has shown that non-resident fathers have multiple and diverse experiences within the enactment of this role that may be strongly differentiated from those of their children's mothers.

The research methodology has been flexible enough to investigate the co-parental role as operating in a fluctuating system, following recent theories of the separated family (Smart & Neale, 1999). Quantitative methods, widely used in studies of the separated family, must necessarily compare the reports of participants with a preset understanding of how that family is configured; yet for each individual, relationships and circumstances within the family may differ markedly over a period of time, however stable they appear at any one point. The use of repertory grids has allowed this research to map fathers' perspectives through the dynamic changes within each family unit. Furthermore, this has been done making use of recent developments in the analysis of construct grids (Bell, 2002b; Walter et al., 2002), widening the application of these methods.

In the use of these analyses, personal construct theory and methods have been applied to social research. While these have made valuable contributions to the fields of occupational and educational psychology, much PCP work remains in the clinical realm. There has been some work on personal construct theories of non-separated families; the present study has shown the usefulness of adopting such an approach to

the separated family as well. Moreover, it has shown that PCP methods can be valuable to those not working with populations in treatment.

The particular strengths of the PCP approach for this research have included the development of a theoretical model of the co-parental role, which can be tested by appropriately flexible methods. The deployment of constant elements with constructs elicited at each wave allowed for variation in individual perspectives and experience while maintaining a basis for comparison across grids and waves. The ability to monitor change in dynamic individual systems on a longitudinal basis has proved a useful means of researching this population.

Finally, the gathering and analysis of rich data has allowed a detailed examination of the meanings fathers attach to their role and experience, and how these meanings interact and structure themselves for a range of individuals. This may be a useful contribution to a field where social and legal norms and beliefs can be divergent and strongly held. In such a research context, it is likely that prior assumptions about fathers and families could bedevil less rich data.

8.5 Limitations of the present research

Some limitations of the present study, in terms of procedure, sampling and design, should also be noted.

Administering the grids for this study required the participants to dedicate a significant amount of time and concentration. This was such that one father initially recruited chose to remove himself from the study, finding the interview to be too demanding and not what he had expected. In designing the interviews, a balance had to be struck, since these were not interventions for the participants, between the time they could reasonably be asked to commit and the size of the grid. It may be that some participants still felt uncertain about some of their answers or the tasks they were set, but did not wish to say. However, any more time spent explaining might have represented an unacceptable over-run, and any fewer elements would have compromised the scale of the role being investigated. The choice of situations as

elements in the grids was successful insofar as they were recognisable to a wide range of participants and brought a focus on events and experiences. Nevertheless, since paper materials were used, participants were required to retain the memory of which of their personal experiences they had chosen to represent each situational element. It may be that some participants found it harder to retain their focus on their individual situations and tried to construe differences between abstract titles. It has been recommended that element titles should be kept as concrete as possible (Stewart, 1999b); future studies using situational element titles such as these might be better to use an elicitation procedure that allows the descriptions of situations chosen by each individual to be used in elicitation. These limitations are, however, perhaps further attributable to the wider limitation of the difficulty of access to a sample. Had there been a larger sample population available, there might have been greater opportunity to pilot these interviews.

Some other issues arise from the sampling for this study. The participants for the grid interviews were drawn from the ranks of those who were successfully co-parenting. However, it may be that those presenting themselves for participation were among the more positive about their experiences, or those most inclined to talk about their experiences. Further studies with samples drawn from different areas in different ways could productively enrich the understanding of the co-parental role gathered from this study. The use of conversations with a child as elements also restricted recruitment to fathers whose children were old enough to hold such conversations. While this placed a fairly small restriction on recruitment, varying the elements used might be another way in which future research could enhance the findings of this study to include separated fathers with very young children.

It should also be underlined that the findings in this study are drawn entirely from the self-reports of fathers. However, including the views of other members of their families would not necessarily have given any objective measure of their experiences, but simply have offered alternatives. Even if an objective truth of an event for a family is supposed (and this is certainly not the view of some schools of thought), it cannot be assumed that any one member's account of it is nearer that truth than another's. Without the yardstick of experimental manipulation of family life (an unethical prospect to say the least), the qualitative approach of acknowledging the

bias in individual accounts allows at least the truth from one individual viewpoint to be examined. Couching this study in terms of fathers' perspectives in this case has allowed one corner of the separated family to be better understood, enriching our understanding of the whole family through comparison with qualitative findings from other studies of separated mothers and children.

One final concern with having situations as elements is that this was the choice of the researcher. While it is felt that their use has allowed the examination of construing in relation to events rather than to individuals (who may be construed in other roles as well), it is possible that the use of different categories of element may cast a different light on the role (for instance, using family issues). Again, future research could address these possibilities by varying the approach taken here.

Bell's method for identifying ordinal relationships between constructs was used in this study. This has a number of advantages over other methods - it does not require introspection from the participant (asking the participant to name the most important construct may reintroduce the problem of demand characteristics), and proceeds from a pair-wise comparison of constructs rather than a comparison of individual construct with characteristics of the grid as a whole (e.g. loadings on a first factor). However, as a relatively recently proposed method, it has not yet been widely evaluated in other research. Nevertheless, this study constitutes an early application of this technique as part of such a process. From this point of view, the statistic has identified predictive relationships that are logically consistent in terms of their content and identified important constructs that have usefully explained participants' accounts of their experience. In this respect, analysis of the grids with asymmetric coefficients has fulfilled Fransella & Bannister's (1977) criterion for a measure in that it does "effectively reveal patterns and relationships in the data" (p.92), helping to understand what is being said.

A number of limitations of the present study, then, have been discussed here in relation to procedure, sampling and design. However, ways in which these could be addressed have also been suggested, and may be seen as indicating directions in which our understanding of the co-parental role could be extended.

8.6 Implications & further research

There are a number of implications for research, policy and practice from this study. It has been underlined by this study that the co-parental role should be regarded as something different and distinct from a parental role in a non-separated family. The separated family, then, should not be viewed by researchers as a modification of the family that existed before, nor should it be expected to remain as a constant configuration following an 'adjustment' period. For these reasons, it may also make little sense to attempt to predict behaviour in the separated family from pre-separation characteristics; parents are required, and are attempting, to carry out family interaction of a different nature, under fundamentally different conditions. In terms of constructivism, a wider range of social research should seek to apply the theories and methods of PCP, as a useful means of modelling change in areas of complex perspectives. Assessments of risk behaviour in drug using populations, for example, could usefully apply the approach in this study to detail changes in individual understandings of use and risk. Furthermore, the efficacy of the analysis methods adopted in this study suggests that they have considerable potential for such other research contexts. For example, the use of element distances to measure changes in analogous perspectives identified in group interviews should form the basis of other investigations in greater depth of findings from more discursive qualitative methods.

Several recommendations can also be made for services and policymakers. This study supports the view that even among those fathers who are practising non-resident co-parents, the role is fragile, intangible and demanding, and many fathers may cope with this by distancing themselves from it eventually. Laws and services that propound co-parenting for its benefits to the child should recognise that co-parenting is a limited and difficult practice as it stands, for which many may be poorly prepared or disposed. Furthermore, the disparity between the experiences, and thus the views, of resident and non-resident parents suggests that any prescribed co-parental role should be specific in its implications for each. Given that the overwhelming majority of non-resident parents are fathers, laws and services should also address the different outlooks of fathers and mothers separately. Finally, any provision for separated families must allow for change over time. Arrangements and

orders made for the discharge of parental responsibilities must be flexible or have at least some expectation that they may be changed according to contingent needs over time. This may be difficult to reconcile with the ethic of justice espoused by many fathers; for such provision to succeed, their expectations of authoritative judgements should also be addressed. In seeking to minimise conflict in families, for example, the different interpretations of conflict that fathers may hold will have to be engaged with if measures are to be successful.

Given these suggestions, there is a strong need for services and interventions targeted specifically at fathers and their understandings as non-resident parents, or at least services with the capacity for distinct provision. In a parent education service aimed at promoting co-parenting, their information needs may be distinct from those of mothers, and they may hold different views on what those needs are. Their expectations of the service, which may be seen as something for mothers, should also be taken into account when advertising, or designing materials for, the service. Some debate also exists, however, over the extent to which parent education programmes effect changes in behaviour (Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, & Trotter, 1992; Kramer & Washo, 1993). One-to-one interventions structured along the lines of clinical uses of the repertory grid, may be a more effective means of achieving change, through allowing the father to understand the implications of co-parenting for his own individual outlook and circumstances, and helping them understand where flexibility may be required in their own lives. A constructivist therapeutic intervention has, for example, been recommended for working with the impermeable constructs of police officers coping with excessive threat to their role (Winter, 1993).

These recommendations, and the strengths and limitations outlined in the previous section, also suggest several avenues for future research. While more research already exists on the views of separated mothers, using the approach of this study to examine their understanding of their co-parental role would provide a useful counterpoint. Likewise, understanding how the minorities of resident fathers and non-resident mothers construe their situation would also elucidate to what extent the findings from this study are connected to gender or residency. It has also not been possible in this research project to compare the construing of fathers with their children. Such a study could test the implications of the Sociality and Commonality

Corollaries for the model by examining what aspects of the father's construal of his role conform to his child's construal of it. For constructivist research, the use of asymmetrical coefficients as a measure of ordination has been demonstrated as a useful tool in this study. Their potential could be further enhanced by an evaluative comparison with other methods of identifying superordination or system hierarchies, extending earlier overviews such as that of Fransella & Bannister (1977).

Finally, it has been suggested in this section that a co-parenting intervention aimed at cognitive and behavioural change for separated fathers might productively use constructivist approaches. If such a programme could be piloted, then a further study could adopt an action research approach, measuring change in repertory grid assessments before, during and after the intervention.

8.7 Conclusions

This study has detailed the views and experience of some non-resident separated fathers in Scotland.

Fathers are aware of the importance of the relationship between separated parents, but often feel controlled; different strategies for coping with feeling controlled were identified.

A workable definition of the co-parental realm for non-resident fathers has been provided based on common co-parental situations for these fathers.

A constructivist model of the co-parental role was found to offer a consistent understanding of the reports of participants.

Fathers generally construe that role in relation to the whole family.

Fathers' construal of parity in their inter-parental relationships was related to aspects of those relationships at the time of interview, confirming the repertory grid's function as a tool for measuring changing systems.

Conflict in family situations, as a secondary consideration with varied implications for many non-resident fathers, is subject to individual interpretations.

The responses of fathers' co-parental role construct systems to change are consistent with the personal construct conception of hostility.

In the fluid group of a separated family, a non-resident father may be more likely to feel himself controlled; adhering to a different role may offer a more achievable means of coping with change to many non-resident fathers. This understanding of non-resident fathers' relationship to the role of co-parent is consistent with recent theories of core construing.

Qualitative and personal construct methods have proved useful in researching the separated family.

Various strengths and limitations were discussed in relation to this study, from which a number of implications for policy, practice and future research were drawn:

Policy and services for separated parents should address the differences in experiences and perspectives between resident and non-resident parents, and between fathers and mothers. In particular, fathers' understandings of 'conflict' in family situations should be engaged with.

Education or support interventions should be provided for, and targeted at, separated non-resident fathers; these could adopt personal construct approaches.

Future research should enhance the understanding of the co-parental role established in this study; the approach can also be usefully applied in other areas of social research.

This research set out to focus on the practice of co-parenting rather than its failure, and provides an insight into the experience of a large sector of the populace. While this initial attempt at mapping out their realm may be enhanced by further research

with different populations, this study emphasises that co-parents should not be viewed in the same terms as non-separated parents, and that they must be understood on an individual basis as mothers and fathers.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A - INTERVIEWER'S PROTOCOL FOR GROUP INTERVIEWS

Introduce myself.

The study – to try and focus on fathers' experience as counterbalance to PIP study.

Part of CSA work.

Focus group – ideally, you talk to each other and I listen. Recording – is that ok? I'll take notes to assist transcribing.

Don't have to talk if you don't want to; don't have to discuss anything you feel's too personal. Can contact me any time if there's anything you want to add.

It's confidential – participants won't be named on any transcripts.

1 SEPARATION

What kind of feelings did you have at the time of the divorce?

At that time, how did you expect things would turn out?

What were the first six months after that like?

Did other people's attitudes towards you change? How?

How, if at all, have your feelings or expectations changed since then?

Looking back, is there anything you would do differently, or that you wish had happened differently?

2 CONTACT

How do you spend time with your children?

What do you like, and what do you not like, about contact time?

What do your children like to do when they see you?

What do you talk about, if anything?

How often do you see your kids now?

Where does this take place?

What would an ideal contact situation be?

Is it different for other fathers?

3 CO-PARENTING

What practical difficulties get in the way of maintaining contact?

What would make it easier?

Has it become any more or less easy over time?

What involvement do you have in making decisions about your children?

How, if at all, do you discuss arrangements with the children's mother?

Are any other people or family members involved in these arrangements?

4 HELP

If things are difficult, or you have any problems, who would you go to for help or advice?

Anywhere/anyone else?

How helpful has this been for you? What differences has it made?

Are there any services you would like to see available for fathers?

Are services you are aware of suited to fathers' needs? What could be changed?

5 OVERALL

Talked a lot about problems and disadvantages; have there been any benefits to being a separated father?

What is it that children gain from having a father?

What advice would you give to other fathers?

Anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX B - SAMPLE CONFIRMATION LETTER & STUDY DESCRIPTION FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Dear Mr ,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the next group interview for this research, which will take place on Tuesday the 4th of July at 6 pm at the University. Five fathers, including yourself, have indicated they will attend. Please find directions enclosed; expenses of £10 will be paid, and tea and coffee will be available.

This discussion will take no longer than an hour, and will be to do with issues for fathers in being a separated parent; however, anyone who finds that they do not wish to discuss details of their own situation in this context will not be expected to do so. The aim of the interview is to gather information and opinions from fathers in their own terms, and the discussion will be tape-recorded for later reference. This recording will be held in strictest confidence by the researchers, and no names would be used in any subsequent references to its contents. If you do not wish the conversation to be taped, or have any other queries, please contact me.

I would like to thank you again for your time and trouble in taking part in this research; your contribution will be greatly appreciated. I look forward to meeting you on the 4th,

Yours sincerely,

Graeme B. Wilson
E-mail graeme@psy.gla.ac.uk
Tel. 0141 330 3610

Divorced or Separated Fathers: Discussion Groups & Interviews

At the University of Glasgow, we are looking at the experience of families after a separation or divorce for the Legal Studies Branch of the Scottish Executive. Much of this work involves seeing what the Children (Scotland) Act of 1995 has meant for parents, so that their experience can help to decide future policy. At the moment, we are trying to find out more about how fathers' relationships with their children are affected, asking them to state their opinions and explain how they see their situation.

We would like to speak to fathers who have been through a separation or divorce, whether they stay with their children or not, and whether they are still able to see them or not. To do this, we are trying to organise a focus group meeting where fathers would be asked to discuss among themselves what issues have been important for them. A researcher will take notes and record the discussion so that an overall view can be reported. The information will remain confidential and anonymous, however. Taking part is voluntary, and nobody would have to talk about their own personal situation if they didn't want to.

We will also be looking for volunteers to take part in some one-to-one interviews over the next couple of years, following up what's talked about at the group and seeing how people's situation changes over that time. There would be 2-3 of these interviews per person; they would last about half an hour, and would be arranged individually at a place and time that suited. These would involve some questions about your own experience; again, anything you tell us would be treated in strictest confidence.

If would like to take part in this research, or are interested in finding out more about it, please contact me at the number below, or ask the staff here; expenses will be paid to all those who take part.

APPENDIX C - EXPLANATORY MATERIAL GIVEN TO JUDGES

a) *Coding data from group interviews for situations*

Attached are some excerpts from transcribed conversations in which separated fathers whose children do not reside with them discuss their views and experiences. Please highlight any section of the text where participants describe *specific* situations in separated family life - any event or set of circumstances occurring or recurring ***in their own experience*** in which they interact with their child(ren), their ex-partner, friends or family. These are usually given to demonstrate the speaker's point.

Hypothetical situations, anecdotes about others' experiences or broad views and generalisations *should not* be included; nor should events that took place before the separation. The coded passage should contain only the description of the situation, the point which it demonstrates for the speaker (if any), and any interjections by other speakers within the sequence. The passage can begin and end from any word within a sentence.

Some of the passages contain strong language.

Examples

1.

DK D'you feel that you, if you're foreign and have to travel [?] I, I, I always thought in the beginning I wanted to speak to my wee one's six now, so she's coming out of her shell now. I wanted to I want to speak to her every day of my life.//

JG Aye, well, that's the same with me, that's the same.//

DK But I felt that phoning, I've st- I can't do that now because it was, it was, em frowned upon because I was upsetting her by phoning every day. So I have to back off now and just speak to her occasionally, because it was having an effect on her.

JT Almost to the extent as well that you

2.

JT Yeah, into the, you know, into the street, not my, what hell could be [JG Aye] happening to him out there and what's he learning? He also bought a CD recently by a gangsta rap artist called Eminem. And I thought, Eminem, that sounds quite a nice easy, you know, must be named after the sweets and stuff like that. And I sort of, he cop-, he copied it at my house and em, I sat and listened to it.

JG The swearing on it. It was banned on Radio One.

JT I couldn't believe it. So I phoned his Mum and said, "Look, you might hear this CD at your house. But listen, I'm across this. I've listened to it. I'm going to have a chat with him about it, about the language that's used in it [JG Yeah]. And it turned out he'd never actually heard it before he bought it [JG No]. But his pals in second year had said, "There's a cracking CD, you've got to go out and get it" -//

JG It was the in thing to get, that, man. It was banned on, on Radio One.//

3.

I might be quite lucky compared to some of these guys, I don't know. But, at the end of the day, all my wife has to do is turn round and says, I mean say, "The children are sick. You're no seeing them tonight," and there is nothing you can do about it as far as I can gather.

DS Just as, though, that's contempt of court like, you should bring a court order. If they're sick you usually [AH Well, but I-] had the responsibility of looking after them. If they're [AH Right, ok, well I-] bedridden, then that's, that's

AH Yeah, I havenae, havenae got to that stage but the process that you have to go through, if she turns round and says, "The children are sick", what do you do? Go back to court [DS costs you money] say, "My wife didnae hand the children over". It's costing me money. All - all she has to do is come up with some report saying the kids had a headache or something and I mean the system I think is totally weakened against the male.

4.

And eh we trooped round and there was a stolen Fiesta and there was engines frae cars and car radios, wall to wall. And this was all going on while I was working away from home, and I thought things were getting on I thought we were doing ok. So when my son came in that night I said "That's it, you can pack your bags, you're off". And my wife said, "If he goes I go." And I said "What?" And at that, it was up to that point I thought we were reasonably happy. And she said "If he goes I go" and all hell broke loose. And at the end of it I went, I went to stay in a hotel in Paisley.

a) Categorising situations from group interview data

Here are some descriptions of types of situation encountered by separated fathers:

A - decisions
both parents are involved, or are trying to be involved, in an important decision or event relating to their child(ren)

B - disagreements
the father finds something to be less appropriate (or more appropriate) for his child(ren) than he thinks the child's mother does.

C - mother alters arrangements
a temporary change to, or lapse of, arrangements for father-child contact being instigated by the child's mother.

D - father alters arrangements
a temporary change to, or lapse of, arrangements for father-child contact being instigated by the father

E - child alters arrangements
a temporary change to, or lapse of, arrangements for father-child contact being instigated by the child

F - with the children
father and child spend time together

G - mother's new partner
a situation involving someone with whom the child's mother has formed a new relationship

H -father's new partner
a situation involving someone with whom the speaker has formed a new relationship

I - can't meet child's demands
child(ren) want(s) or expect(s) something that the speaker cannot provide, or doesn't think they should

J - other home
finding out from the speaker's child(ren) about things at the mother's home

K - with other people
interacting with friends or family as part of the process of adjusting to separated parenthood

On the following pages are a series of extracted items from the transcribed interviews in the first task, where participants refer to some previous experience. Please code each item according to which category describes it best, together with a rating from 1-5 of how confident you feel in assigning the item to that category:

1 Extremely confident
2 Very confident
3 Moderately confident
4 Not very confident
5 Not at all confident

Example –

That eh, again I think my wife, I mean, to show you how ridiculous it was, she agreed my proposal for contact. A week later, because my child or my oldest son didn't get to a birthday party on the south side a week later we got another letter from her solicitor saying that eh she had actually objected to the original proposal.

Category - B Confidence rating - 3

APPENDIX D - SAMPLE LETTER TO POTENTIAL RECRUITING AGENCY

Dear ,

FATHERS AS CO-PARENTS

I am carrying out a research project concerning separated fathers (commissioned by the Scottish Executive's Central Research Unit) at the University of Glasgow's Department of Psychology. I am currently trying to interview fathers who are in the early years of establishing and maintaining a contact arrangement with their children following a separation or divorce. It was suggested to me that Family Learning Centres, as a focal point of parenting arrangements, might be organisations through which separated fathers in Glasgow could be made aware of the project either directly by staff or by displaying the enclosed description on a notice board. I am therefore writing to enquire whether you would consider doing so at your centre.

We only wish to speak to separated fathers whose children do not reside with them, and *not* to the children or their mothers. We are trying to make such individuals aware of the study so that they can make the initial contact if they are interested, after which interviews are arranged between the respondent and myself. It would however be most helpful if I could add to the notice that the Centre's staff could be asked about the project if fathers did not wish to approach me straight off. I realise this would be entirely dependent on how you felt about this. However, my previous experience with recruiting through a family organisation suggests that many felt more comfortable about phoning me if they had mentioned it to a member of staff they were familiar with first. If this were possible, I would ensure that staff at a Centre had whatever information they required about the study and the researchers to allow them to assess it themselves.

I have asked permission from the GCC Education Service to approach FLCs around Glasgow, and enclose a copy of their reply as they requested. It is hoped that studies like these will help policymakers and services to address the needs of parents and children in this situation. If you think there might be any separated fathers among parents using the Centre who would be interested in taking part, and felt you could bring the study or this notice to their attention, I would be delighted to answer any further questions you have.

Yours sincerely,

Graeme B. Wilson

E-mail graeme@psy.gla.ac.uk

Tel. 0141 330 3610

APPENDIX E - STUDY DESCRIPTION FOR REPERTORY GRID INTERVIEWS

DIVORCED OR SEPARATED FATHERS: RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

Researchers at the Department of Psychology at the University of Glasgow are looking at the experience of families after a separation or divorce. Much of this work involves seeing what the Children (Scotland) Act of 1995 has meant for parents, so that their experience can help to decide future policy. At the moment, we are trying to find out more about how fathers' relationships with their children are affected and how they themselves see their situation; there is a lack of research in this area that must be addressed. Last year our interviewer spoke to groups of fathers who had been through a separation or divorce, and whose children no longer stay with them. These discussions covered issues they had found important in their experience as non-resident parents.

We now wish to speak *individually* to separated or divorced fathers who do not stay with their children but *are* still able to see them. If this description applies to you and you think you might be interested in this project, the researchers would be delighted to hear from you. Taking part would involve 3 interviews per person over the course of a year, each lasting about 45 minutes to an hour; these would be arranged individually at whatever place and time was convenient. The interviews will follow up what was talked about at last year's groups and monitor how people's situations change over that time. After some questions about your own circumstances and how you find being a parent under contact arrangements, the interviewer would ask you to compare different family situations that were raised by fathers in last year's group interviews.

In all of this, no judgements are being made about people. We are simply requesting information, and not offering advice. Anything told to us will remain strictly confidential and anonymous, and will only be seen by the research team; no participants would be named in any research findings. Taking part is voluntary, and nobody is expected to discuss aspects of their own personal situation that they don't wish to. If you would like to take part in this research, or are interested in finding out more about it, please contact me at the number below, or ask staff here.

Graeme B. Wilson (Researcher) tel. 0141 330 3610

e-mail g.wilson@psy.gla.ac.uk

APPENDIX F - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE AT WAVE 1

Fathers as Co-Parents –

Study for CRU, Scottish Executive

Department of Psychology

University of Glasgow

58 Hillhead Street

Glasgow G12 8QB

Researcher – Graeme B. Wilson

Cohort Interview Schedule

No.

Date

Time

Background information

The questions on this page are about your family background. Separated parents' circumstances can be very different, and the information here will help the researcher to take account of these differences between fathers taking part. Any information will be treated as confidential and anonymous, and will only be seen by the researchers.

1. How old are you?

2. Please describe your occupation:

3. How many children do you have?

   What are their ages; which are male and which female?

FEMALE	MALE
☐☐☐☐	☐☐☐☐

4. Do any of these children stay with you?

   YES NO [Skip to 5]

   Which children?

FEMALE	MALE
☐☐☐☐	☐☐☐☐

5. Have you had children with different partners? (If so, please give details)

   YES (please give details) NO [Skip to 6]

The following questions are about the other parent of a child who doesn't stay with you. If you have more than one child who doesn't stay with you and they have different mothers, please decide which child you have spent the most time with (this may not necessarily be the eldest) and answer about that child's mother.

INDICATE CHILDREN FROM THIS RELATIONSHIP:

FEMALE	MALE
☐☐☐☐	☐☐☐☐

6. How old is your child's mother?

7. Does she have any children other than those you've told me about? [DETAILS]

8. How long was your relationship with her before separation?

years months

9. How long is it since you separated?

years months

10. a) Have you formed a new relationship since then?

YES [go to 10b] NO [skip to 11]

b) Is this relationship current?

YES [go to 10c] NO [skip to 11]

c) Does this person stay with you?

YES NO

11. a) Has she (child's mother) formed a new relationship since then?

YES [go to 11b] NO [Next page]

b) Is this relationship current?

YES [go to 11c] NO [Next page]

c) Does this person stay with her?

YES NO

Co-parenting (raising children as separated parents)

The questions in this section are to do with help between parents and your experience of this.

Please answer the following questions using one of these five answers:

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

		always	often	some times	rarely	never
1	When you need help regarding the children, do you seek it from their mother?					
2	How often is conversation with the child's mother stressful and tense?					
3	Do you feel that your child's mother understands and is supportive of your particular needs as a parent?					
4	Do you and your child's mother have basic differences of opinion about issues relating to bringing up children?					
5	Would you say that the child's mother is a resource to you in raising the children?					
6	Would you say that you are a resource to the child's mother in raising the children?					
7	How often is the underlying atmosphere between yourself and your child's mother one of hostility and anger?					
8	If the child's mother has needed to make a change in visiting arrangements, do you go out of your way to accommodate?					
9	When you and your child's mother discuss child-rearing issues, how often does an argument result?					
10	Does the child's mother go out of her way to accommodate any changes you need to make?					

Being with your child

The questions in this section are to do with how much time you're able to spend with your child or children just now, and how much in the past.

On average, how often has contact taken place in the last month?

On average, how long did each of these contact times last?

Where did you usually see your child during the last month?

Would you say that the last month was representative of the pattern of contact since you separated from the child's mother?

YES NO

If not, could you describe the pattern of contact between you and your child over that period?

These questions are to do with how you communicate with the child's mother.

How often did you communicate with the child's mother over the last month?

Was this in person, by phone, or via messages?

Would you say this last month was representative of how you've communicated since separation?

If not, could you describe how communication between yourself and your child's mother has varied over that time?

APPENDIX G - SAMPLE PAGE FROM BOOKLET OF ELEMENT TRIADS FOR REPERTORY GRID INTERVIEWS

A Talking to **child's mother**

about a school or health issue relating to your child

B Talking to **child's mother**

about whether a toy, game or activity is suitable for your child

C Talking to **your child**

about a school or health issue relating to them

APPENDIX H - EXPLANATORY MATERIALS AND EXAMPLES FOR PARTICIPANTS IN REPERTORY GRID INTERVIEWS (TALKED THROUGH BY INTERVIEWER)

Everyday situations described by separated fathers

Last year we spoke to groups of separated fathers about being a 'co-parent'. Many of them described being involved in similar types of discussions between separated parents and children. To look at these situations on a broader scale, this section of the interview asks you to describe in your own words what different implications they might have for you. There aren't any 'right answers' here – we expect that everyone's ideas will be unique.

The discussions have been put randomly into groups of 3. For each group we would like you to:

- *Think whether you have been in situations like these.*
- *If they are familiar to you, please consider which two seemed the most similar to you, and describe why in the left-hand box.*
- *In the right-hand box, please describe how, for you, the other situation is different from them.*

These descriptions only have to be a few words, and should be to do with your feelings or what you thought about being in those situations. If you want to ask the researcher about any of this, please do.

Everyday situations described by separated fathers

Last year groups of separated fathers spoke to us about being a 'co-parent'. Many of them described being in some similar types of discussions between separated parents and children. To look at these situations on a broader scale, this section of the interview asks you to describe in your own words what different implications they might have for you. There aren't any 'right answers' here – we expect that everyone's ideas will be unique.

The discussions have been put randomly into groups of 3. For each group we would like you to:

- *Think whether you have been in situations like these.*
- *If you do recognise them, please decide which two seemed the most similar to you, and describe why in the left-hand box.*
- *In the right-hand box, please describe how, for you, the third situation is different.*

These descriptions only have to be a few words, and should be to do with your feelings or what you thought about being in those situations. If you want to ask the researcher about any of this, please do.

EXAMPLE -

How are 2 situations similar?	*How is the other situation different?*

APPENDIX I - CONSTRUCT ELICITATION FORM & SAMPLE RATING STRIP

How is the other situation different?

How are 2 situations similar?

(placed on elicitation form to rate element MCS)

6. Talking to the child's mother about a temporary change that she has requested to the contact arrangements

1	2	3	4	5	6	7

APPENDIX J - ASSESSING THE CODING SYSTEM FOR CONSTRUCTS

The kappa scores for the rating task outlined in Chapter 5 are unlikely to have been badly affected by marginal frequencies (the extents to which each of the five categories was used) since these were broadly similar for all three raters (Table J.1). However, the second judge still favoured categories B and C over D and E to some extent, suggesting slightly divergent applications of the category headings where the wording of a construct was ambiguous. For instance, *being conscious of my wife's anger* was coded as **conflict** by judge 2, but as a **feeling** by the researcher and judge 1 (since the respondent does not describe reacting to this consciousness).

Judge	CATEGORIES					
	A	B	C	D	E	Uncoded
R	115	121	58	26	101	3
J1	117	119	58	25	100	5
J2	114	129	72	19	89	1

Table J.1 Category use by judges

(Numbers represent how many constructs each judge coded under each category heading)

Category	% agreement on category	% agreement against category
Import	0.67	0.83
Participation & control	0.64	0.85
Conflict	0.66	0.93
Who is present	0.38	0.98
Feelings	0.61	0.91

Table J.2 Agreement by category among all three judges

Uebersax (2003) suggests examining the proportions of agreement for each category should be examined to assess whether the overall agreement statistic is representative; agreement should be high on both counts. The total sample of codings is considered in this procedure as a score for or against the category being considered (Table J.2, above). The only inconsistent category was **D, who is present.** However, this category was little used by any of the judges; since the number of codings involved is relatively small, this does not have a serious effect on the overall rate of agreement. But for the category to be useful, the reasons for the divergence should be sought.

Most of the disagreement arises from judge 2's coding of constructs as **A** against the others' coding of **B** and vice versa. Some of this seems due to labels whose wording contains or expresses more than one quality. For instance, a construct with the label *have to achieve a rational consensus* was coded by two judges as **significance/import** (*have to...*) and by the third as **participation** (*...achieve a rational consensus*). Ambiguous constructs of this nature may be an effect of the use of situations as categories; it may be harder for respondents to single out individual aspects of these than when considering people or objects. It might also result from a tendency to consider the given descriptions of situations rather than the particular instances they recalled. However, the problem seems to be with the wording of constructs used by the respondent rather than the coding scheme itself.

APPENDIX K - BACKGROUND QUESTIONS FROM INTERVIEW SCHEDULE AT WAVES 2 & 3

Background information

The questions on this page are about the background information you supplied last time. The research is taking place over the course of a year; the information here will help us to take account of the different experiences during that time for fathers taking part. Any information is still treated as confidential and anonymous, and will only be seen by the researchers.

Has your occupation changed since last time?

Have you had any new children since we last spoke?

DETAILS -

Has the residential status of any of your children changed?

DETAILS -

I asked some questions about your child[ren]'s mother last time. I'd just like to check if some of those details are still the same or not.

Are you still separated/divorced?

Has she had any children since we last spoke?

DETAILS -

Have either of you experienced changes in terms of new relationships?

DETAILS -

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