# Cohabitation, separation and fatherhood

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# 1 Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been great shifts in how we understand family life. This has been caused partly by changes in family forms: an increase in divorce and remarriage, shifts in women's employment patterns, changes in the ages and spacing of childbearing and a dramatic rise in alternatives to marriage, which most obviously include lone parenthood and unmarried 'partnership' or 'cohabitation'. Almost four in ten babies are now born out of marriage and two-thirds of these are to couples living at the same address. Such couples have a higher chance of separation than those who marry before parenthood, particularly if they remain unmarried (Kiernan, 1999a, 1999b). In over 90 per cent of cases, the father becomes 'detached' from the household when a parental separation occurs.

This study reports on interviews we conducted with 50 parents who had initially raised their children in cohabiting relationships and then separated. The focus was on how fathers fare after the dissolution of a cohabitation. Our aim was to take a father-centred view of relationship breakdown as analysed by both men *and* women, in order to compare fathers' and mothers' potentially different perspectives on the same experience. The second half of this chapter will describe the study, but first it is necessary to explain why we feel that such a father-centred approach is warranted.

## Why study fathers after the break up of cohabitation relationships?

This study is one of a series of Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports into cohabitation.[1] There are two reasons for studying cohabitation breakdown and men's subsequent relationships with their children. First, as cohabitation relationships are more likely to end in separation, there is a need to understand whether and how non-resident parents maintain their responsibilities towards, their care of and their relationships with their children. Second, there is less within the research literature on parental separation in general, and after cohabitation in particular, on what happens to separated fathers. The role of these men is particularly in need of attention because unmarried fathers are in an ambiguous legal position as parents, so their paternal contact is seen as problematic. They are liable to provide financial support to their children under the Child Support Act (1991), but do not automatically have parental responsibility as defined by the Children Act. Such ambiguities in the law have focused our attention on the various responsibilities (financial, legal, etc.) of men towards their children, while uppermost in many fathers' minds are their relationships with, and their feelings about, their 'rights' over their children.

In this section, we explore three issues about the changing nature of the family that set the study into context: the nature of cohabiting relationships, the legal responsibilities of parents in these relationships, and what we know about fathers and parental separation.

### Cohabitation as a lifestyle

Government public policy statements, like the Home Office discussion paper *Supporting Families* (1998), often appear to make contradictory statements about the contemporary family. They state that the marriage is the most 'reliable framework' for rearing children and yet they attempt to depict other forms, like lone or unmarried parenting, as acceptable alternatives. Such contradictions may be based in part on a fear that current rates of family division are unprecedented and are a social problem, and certainly reflect how divided opinion is about arrangements like cohabitation. In this section, we attempt to show the links between cohabitation and other recent social changes.

Demographers describe a story of continual change in patterns of marriage and family responsibility when we look further back than the immediate post-war period (see Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993; McRae, 1993 for reviews). Indeed,

some analyses of the nineteenth century suggest that cohabitation was very common and, as now, was often a transitional state between being single and married (Gillis, 1985).

While diversity of family forms is not new, the patterns of current family diversity are interesting and need to be considered together. While marriage is still the prominent setting of partnership and childbearing, there have been the following trends:

- A sharp decline in marriage rates from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, the lowest of the twentieth century being recorded in 1993 in part because of the rise in cohabitation (Haskey, 1987, 1995).

- An inverse relationship between social class and cohabitation rates: 'cohabiting couples with children were two or three times as likely to be in the semi-skilled and unskilled groups' (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993, p. 16).

- An increase of age at first marriage for both men and women. In 1971, the average age at first marriage was 24 years for men and 22 years for women. This compares with 29 and 27 years respectively in 1997 (Office for National Statistics, 2000).

- An increase in divorce. The average length of a British marriage is estimated at nine years (Abercrombie *et al.*, 1994) and falling, compared with 12.9 years in 1964 (Coleman and Salt, 1992).

- An increase in remarriage. Over two-fifths of marriages in 1997 were remarriages for one or both spouses (Office for National Statistics, 2000, p. 37).

So, how does cohabitation fit into this pattern of fluidity in relationships? Each of the changes listed above fits with the increase in cohabitation. The age of first marriage, for example, has risen in part because some choose to cohabit first. Similarly, 90 per cent of divorcees who remarry first cohabit

(Haskey, 1995). The British cohabitation rate rose rapidly between 1979 and 1999 from 11 per cent to 29 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2000). A large proportion of these couples have children. Unmarried childbearing remained below 5 per cent until the 1950s, but in 1999 it was estimated at nearly 40 per cent of all births (Office for National Statistics, 2000):

> In 1998 about four-fifths of births outside marriage were jointly registered by both parents; three quarters of these births were to parents living in the same address. (Office for National Statistics, 2000, p. 43)

By this reckoning, 24 per cent of all deliveries occur in cohabiting relationships, and this figure excludes those who do not jointly register or declare their shared residence.

The term 'cohabitation' identifies many types of relationship. Kiernan and Estaugh (1993) identified three types. First, it can be a short-lived phase that is a route either into marriage or separation. Kiernan and Estaugh termed this 'nubile cohabitation' and there is evidence to suggest that it is becoming a prevalent pattern:

> Seven out of 10 marriages in the early 1990s were preceded by cohabitation compared with only one in 10 in the early 1970s. (Haskey, 1995, p. 5)

Second, it can be a transition between family forms for divorcees, increasing from 30 per cent in the 1960s to about 90 per cent of divorces in the 1990s (Haskey, 1995). Third, cohabitation appears to be for some an alternative to marriage and involves child rearing. This group seems to be small, but has been identified as an important one to monitor for social change (Abercrombie *et al.*, 1994).

While the third of these types of relationship is relatively long lasting the bulk of cohabiting unions are unstable. Kiernan and Estaugh (1993) showed that in the early 1990s fewer than one in five cohabitions lasted more than five years. The majority (54 per cent) ended within two years. Since less than one in ten cohabiting parents with

children remain unmarried for more than ten years, the study of cohabitation breakdown is timely.

## Cohabitation compared with marriage: equal parental responsibility?

The increase in parenting within cohabitation relationships is surprising on one level. It was not until the Children Act, 1989 that access to parental responsibility was granted to cohabiting fathers. The Act allowed men to establish such obligations towards the child either in a Parental Authority Agreement with consent of the mother or a Parental Responsibility Order through the courts (see Burghes *et al.*, 1997 for a review).

Following the Children Act, research has found that cohabiting parents perceive themselves to be in the same legal relationships with their children as married couples. As Kiernan and Estaugh (1993) wrote:

> *On a day to day basis there may be little to distinguish between the two types of union and there may be more variation within marriage and cohabiting unions than between them. The major difference between the two types of union are* [sic] *less to do with the private domain and more to do with their relationship to the institutional framework of our society.* (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993, p. 70)

There are still clear differences resulting from the legal position of unmarried men, since only a tiny proportion seek parental responsibility (Pickford, 1999). Given that the Child Support Act of 1991 identified unmarried fathers as having a financial obligation to support their children who do not live with them, there is much discussion about whether more general parental responsibilities should be granted to all unmarried fathers. A consultation document prepared by the Lord Chancellor's Department prompted lively debate following a government intention (July 1998) to recognise paternity through joint registration on a birth certificate. However, at the time of writing (September 2001), the parliamentary bill in which such a law would be enshrined has not passed beyond a second reading in the parliament of 1997–2001 and has yet to be redrafted by the new government (see Chapter 7).

In keeping with research in the early 1990s (McRae, 1993), Pickford's (1999) study shows that many cohabiting couples appear to be in blissful ignorance of the father's legal position. In this study, 87 per cent expressed dissatisfaction with the legal position of unmarried fathers when this was described to them in the interview. Most cohabiting men assume that they have common law 'rights' as a result of their name being on the child's birth certificate. Does this mean that, in practice, as long as legal processes are not involved, cohabitation is indistinguishable from marriage?

A debate about how cohabitation is perceived and experienced by couples has been increasing in tempo since the 1970s. Researchers and policy-makers seem to have held contrasting opinions about what cohabitation signifies. Most have been puzzled about how it relates to changes in marriage (e.g. Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Smith *et al.*, 1996). The liberal view has long been that it represents a new form of relationship between partners (Macklin, 1972), or that it is an indication of people seeking new lifestyles away from the constraints of marriage (Freeman and Lyon, 1983). More conservative commentators suggest that cohabitation is a threat to marriage or a sign of societal decay (Axinn and Barber, 1997).

The evidence suggests a greater difference in the attitudes than the behaviour of those in cohabiting relationships. Cohabiting couples appear to hold less traditional attitudes towards gender roles compared with married couples (Clarkberg *et al.*, 1995; Duvander, 1999; Kotkin, 1983). However, studies that have explored the division of housework suggest that cohabiting women still assume the major responsibility (South and Spitze, 1994, Stafford *et al.*, 1977). In her analysis of cohabitation in the early 1990s, Susan McRae (1993, p. 83) concluded that:

*… long term cohabiting couples are not noticeably more egalitarian in beliefs than other couples with some experiences in cohabitation nor are they particularly more likely to share daily household chores.*

However, McRae reported that married mothers were more traditional in both gender attitudes and behaviour, which suggests that cohabiting couples might be making small inroads into changing traditional patterns.

Given the legal position of unmarried fathers, and the complexity of opinion and evidence about the nature of cohabiting relationships, this study set out to explore in more depth the ways in which people who had been in cohabiting relationships described their experiences and the nature of cohabitation itself.

### Fathers after parental separation: the evidence from divorce

The research on fathers after cohabitation breakdown is sparse compared with that on divorce. The majority of 'non-resident' divorced men appear to reduce the quantity of paternal contact after a separation (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1983; Seltzer and Bianchi, 1988) with most men becoming less nurturant and more detached from their children, particularly in the long term (e.g. Arditti and Allen, 1993; Arendell, 1986, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Hess and Camara, 1979; Hetherington *et al.*, 1976, 1985; Kruk, 1991; Stephens, 1996; Umberson and Williams, 1991; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). While much of this evidence is from the United States, British research shows that after the separation only 50 per cent of cohabiting fathers maintain 'committed' contact with their children and the rest have either sporadic or no contact (Bradshaw *et al.*, 1999; Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). Which factors appear to influence the amount of paternal involvement?

A number of issues have been linked with the drop in paternal contact. These include repartnering or remarriage and physical distance caused by moving apart. While such factors are often correlated with a reduction in paternal contact, the quality of the relationship between the ex-spouses has consistently been linked with the amount and type of paternal contact (Ahrons, 1983; Ahrons and Miller, 1993; Arditti and Allen, 1993; Arendell, 1995; Dudley, 1991; Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Furstenberg *et al.*, 1983, 1987; Kruk, 1991; Lewis *et al.*, 1997; Minton and Pasley, 1996; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer and Brandreth, 1994; Stephens, 1996) and the relationship between divorced parents is often related to the amount of maintenance paid by the father (e.g. Stephen *et al.*, 1993). Given the decline in paternal contact over time, most analyses of men after divorce have simply assumed that fathers, as less psychologically involved parents, simply drift apart from their children (Friedman, 1980; Furstenberg, 1988a; Hodges *et al.*, 1991; Lowery, 1986).

However, the recent literature on fathers and divorce has strongly questioned this assumption. There have always been men who behave in an unpredictable way after a separation, for example by cutting off contact having been very involved or by suddenly becoming involved parents after the separation (Hetherington, 1979). In addition, comparisons between men's and women's accounts of their divorce suggest two things. The first is that the studies of men's reactions to separation from their children are relatively under-represented and many studies of paternal contact after separation have in fact used mothers as respondents. Second, when asked to describe the events and their feelings about the divorce process and its aftermath, men and women give very different accounts (Seltzer and Brandreth, 1994).

Those studies which have taken a father-centred view of divorce do not find that men meekly drift away from their children (e.g. Arendell, 1995; Kruk, 1991; Simpson *et al.*, 1993). These argue that we have neglected the man's emotional reaction to separation. Kruk's study suggested that it is fathers who invest highly in their relationship with

children who are *more* likely to drift away from their children's lives after a divorce, because they cannot cope with the sense of loss that they feel. While Kruk's study has been hard to replicate (Lewis *et al.*, 1997), it places men's perspectives squarely on the agenda.

Given that the divorce literature has turned to examine men's reactions to separation from their children, it seems timely to explore paternal involvement after cohabitation breakdown, when fathers' legal position is far less secure. Paternal absence is often discussed in policy terms with reference to men's financial contributions to childcare and their contact with the Child Support Agency. The divorce literature reviewed here suggests that we should explore paternal responsibility in terms of fathers' relationships with their ex-partners and their children.

## The study

The studies funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the early 1990s were based on large-scale samples or demographic databases (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993; McRae, 1993). These provided vital information about the patterns of cohabitation, its characteristics and its outcomes – in terms of marriage, the continuation of cohabitation or separation. McRae's study also attempted to explore the meanings of cohabitation relationships. Like hers and more recent studies (Pickford, 1999; Smart and Stevens, 2000), this project used qualitative analyses of face-to-face interviews about the experience.

The study set out to sample a range of ex-cohabiting couples from within a relatively small population. The sample was thus not 'representative' in demographic terms. However, our aim was to explore the depth and complexity of individual accounts of cohabitation, separation and paternal involvement. As such, we wished to depict typical (i.e. representative) accounts of this complexity in the expectation that, while different

individuals and groups' representatives would have had different experiences, the issues which we discussed with this sample shared common dilemmas with those from any social background (following Billig *et al.*, 1988).

**The sampling procedure**

It is vital to describe any sample, particularly one obtained for a small-scale project like this one. Our main aim was to obtain a community-based sample of ex-cohabitees from around the north of Lancashire and we set up a sampling procedure that reflected this, targeting community workers, health visitors, after-school clubs and a number of key contacts. Such contacts proved to be invaluable and often led to further respondents, through a 'snowballing' procedure. Figure A1.1 in the Appendix shows the snowballing pattern starting from six initial contacts and filtering into each community. These included a community worker and a health visitor whose 'patches' were working-class districts in Lancaster, two playgroups, an after-school club and four 'key informants', including a single mother who lived on a new estate in Preston and a 22-year old ex-pupil of a large secondary school – the most successful link shown on Figure A1.1.

The intention was to find fathers *and* mothers because, first, we wanted to obtain both perspectives on the same experience and, second, we knew that access to fathers after separation is usually easier via mothers, whose role as parents is typically more visible. We set out to find men and women using the following criteria. The respondent must have:

- cohabited with partner for at least six months

- had at least one dependent child from this cohabiting relationship

- separated within the last ten years. Our initial focus was on parents who had separated within four years, but we added two couples and one individual father who

had parted a longer time before, so that we could get a longer view of the issues under discussion.

There were two intentional biases in the sample. First, given that cohabitation is over-represented in working-class, younger parents (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993) and represented to a lesser extent in those with professional backgrounds (Turner, 1990), we set out to obtain roughly equal numbers of these types of parent. Second, we decided to target the organisation Families Need Fathers, as this group has long represented men after parental separation and we wanted to give them a voice. Four such men were interviewed. Given their involvement in this pressure group, we anticipated that they might be different from fathers who were obtained through community contacts. In the report that follows we do not distinguish them as they were not obviously different.

**The sample**
The ideal aim was to find equal numbers of men and women to fit these criteria and where possible we wanted to interview both members of a separated couple. The sample comprised one or two ex-partners from 36 relationships, involving interviews with 50 individuals. In 14 cases, both partners were interviewed, in 13 cases only women and in nine cases only men.

The reasons why we did not interview both partners in 22 cases were complex. In some we tried to get hold of the other respondent but received no reply or found that he or she had moved away. In others the parent refused, either because of difficulties between the ex-partners, or because they did not want the possibility of what they had said to filter back to their ex-partner, despite our assurances that the interviews were confidential. We did not press our case once a refusal had been made.

The sample divides roughly into two groups, separated by age and social class background. Table

1 shows the division of the sample into those who do blue-collar and white-collar jobs. While occupation was the main criterion for determining social class, we also checked this against information about educational attainment, financial circumstances and residence status.

The working class (i.e. blue-collar) respondents tended to establish cohabitations at an earlier age and to be younger at the time of the interview. For example, Table 2 shows the ages of the men and women at the start of this cohabitation. The average ages of the men and women at the onset of cohabitation were 26 and 25, respectively, but the range extended up to 40. Three women and two men had been married and separated before this relationship had been established.

The couples had their first child at an average age of 27, although three women already had a child by a previous marriage. This average conceals the fact that 38 per cent became parents before the age of 25, because the sample includes four respondents who had their first child over the age of 36. Seventy-two per cent had only one child before the relationship ended, 19 per cent had two children and 8 per cent had three.

The relationships lasted slightly longer than the demographic research suggests (see the summary

**Table 1  The social class of the respondents**

| Social class | Men | Women |
|---|---|---|
| White-collar | 10 | 14 |
| Blue-collar | 13 | 13 |
| Total (N) | 23 | 27 |

**Table 2  Age at start of cohabitation**

| Age (years) | Men | Women |
|---|---|---|
| 14–20 | 2 | 8 |
| 21–25 | 12 | 6 |
| 26–30 | 6 | 8 |
| 31–35 | 2 | 4 |
| 36–40 | 1 | 1 |
| Total (N) | 23 | 27 |

of Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993, above), but this is probably because all of these cohabitees were parents. Slightly over half (53 per cent) of cohabitations lasted for less than two years. However, the average was 4.7 years as five lasted over ten years. Figure 1 shows this distribution.

At the time of the interviews, the average length of separation between partners was almost five years, ranging from five months to 15 years. One father had married, five respondents were in new cohabiting relationships, 11 were in 'dating' relationships and 33 were not in a relationship. The average age of the children was seven years. Table 3 displays the current occupational status of the 50 respondents. In keeping with larger-scale surveys of cohabiting parents (e.g. Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993), it shows that 28 per cent of the parents were not currently in a job. It also shows that five (22 per cent) of the men worked part time, which is far higher than the national average of 2 per cent for all

fathers with children under the age of ten (Burghes *et al.*, 1997).

**The interview**

Our particular focus was on men who have cohabited and separated. Each respondent was interviewed for over an hour (and much longer in many cases) and the interviews were transcribed and analysed within particular themes described here. In what follows, we report on a qualitative analysis, in which we have taken pains to conceal the identity of the participants. We have used pseudonyms, but omit these when the respondents discuss sensitive or relationship-specific topics.

Given the discrepancies between men's and women's accounts of separation and the imbalance towards women's perspectives (discussed above), we took an unashamedly masculine perspective on issues to do with paternal contact with children. We addressed the following questions that are discussed, respectively, in the next six chapters of the report:

1　How is cohabitation described, particularly when it is compared with marriage?

2　How do men and women describe fathers' involvement in care, responsibility and relationships during the cohabitation?

**Table 3  The respondents' employment statuses**

| Employment status | Men | Women |
|---|---|---|
| Employed full time | 12 | 6 |
| Employed part time | 5 | 10 |
| Not employed | 6 | 8 |
| Students | – | 3 |
| Total (*N*) | 23 | 27 |

**Figure 1  Duration of the cohabitation relationships**
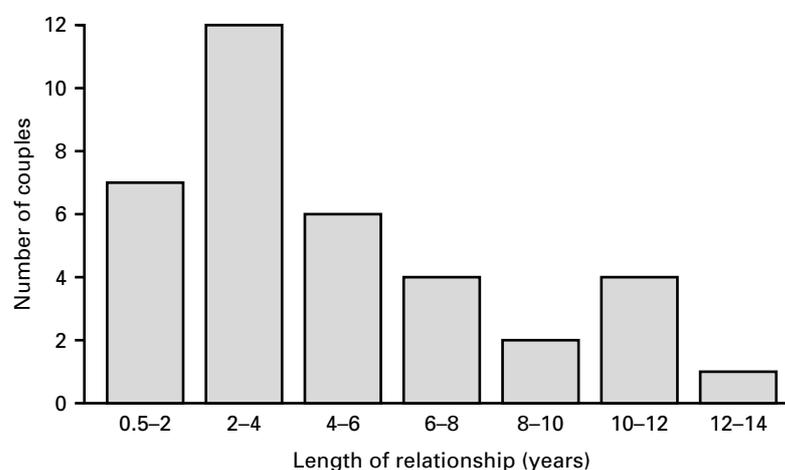
3  How is the separation in each relationship described?

4  How are residence and childcare arrangements determined after a cohabitation, and what is the pattern of contact between father and child after the dust has settled?

5  How can we understand the nature of parenting in cohabitation relationships?

6  How do non-resident, unmarried men describe their contact with, and attitudes towards, the social and legal agencies, which mediate between them and their children.

## Summary

- Cohabitation has become widespread as a family form. As these relationships are likely to dissolve, the study of cohabitation breakdown seems to be highly relevant to social policy debates.

- Opinion is divided about the responsibility of cohabiting fathers. The law does not recognise their responsibility as parents, except their financial obligations.

- Some commentators depict cohabitation as a sign of social decay, while others see it as a new and more equal lifestyle.

- Studies of families after divorce suggest that many fathers do not maintain contact with, or responsibility for, their children. While it is often assumed that men naturally drift away from their children, many recent studies have suggested that the man's psychological adjustment to separation is a crucial factor in understanding the divorce process.

- This is a study of 50 parents and explicitly aims to explore the father's adjustment to cohabitation breakdown, as described by mothers and fathers, to ask the six questions posed in the section on 'Interviews' above.

# 2  Understandings of cohabitation

*As in most intimate relationships, living together is seldom the result of a considered decision, at least initially, but rather results from a gradual, often unconscious, escalation of emotional and physical involvement.* (Macklin, 1980, p. 219)

Why do cohabitees (people in cohabiting relationships) choose to cohabit rather than marry? In Chapter 1, we showed that there is a diversity of views about cohabitation. The interview aimed to ask cohabitees whether marriage and cohabitation differ in terms of their influence on a couple's relationship. Two issues became very apparent. First, a large majority described events that fit in with Macklin's analysis, outlined above. In 29 (out of 36) couples represented in this sample, the establishment of the cohabitation was not described as a deliberate decision and, where both partners were interviewed, there was a high level of agreement between the mother and father. The following accounts are typical (the respondents are not ex-partners):

*We didn't make a clear decision, it just sort of happened. He started staying a lot and then we got a house together, it was an evolutionary thing. We didn't say 'Oh right, we're going to live together'. It just sort of happened.* (Kate Cox)

*In fact when we moved in, or when I moved into where Anna was living, it wasn't really as if we'd made a conscious decision to move in together. It's just that I spend a lot of time there, and then ... it was really a continuation of our relationship … there was no discussion, or anything like that.* (Paul Gamble)

These descriptions appear to match those of Smart and Stevens (2000, p. 24), who make a distinction between *contingent commitment*, where expectations about the relationship are left unspoken and appear minimal, and *mutual commitment*, where couples seek jointly 'to define the nature of their relationship and its boundaries or qualities'. Smart and Stevens' figure of 72 per cent of ex-cohabitees who describe their relationship in terms of contingent commitment squares with 81 per cent of initial responses in this sample and the descriptions in McRae's (1993) study.

However, a second issue was clearly in evidence. When the respondents described the nature of cohabitation further, they suggested complex processes which go way beyond descriptions of Macklin's 'often unconscious, escalation of emotional and physical involvement'. Their analyses of cohabitation were necessarily expressed views that a surface analysis would deem to be contradictory. In this chapter, we will describe how these dimensions fit together, by summarising how separated parents compare cohabitation and marriage. Underneath surface descriptions of a 'drift' into cohabitation, most clearly espoused a belief in cohabitation as a commitment to a relationship, but this has to be understood in terms of their understanding of marriage in particular and relationships in general.

## Marriage and cohabitation compared

Table 4 presents a summary of the three most common responses to a series of questions that we asked about marriage and cohabitation as relationships. In this discussion, the interviewer and interviewee negotiated between general expectations and each respondent's specific experiences. More often than not there was agreement between these levels of discussion, but the general–specific difference allowed individuals to suggest ways in which their circumstances might differ from those of others. We examined each statement made and classified any comparisons in terms of the three broad categories in the table – that marriage is a preferable arrangement, that there are essentially no differences, or that cohabitation is preferable. Note that a respondent might make statements that support more than one of these and so the total number of types of response adds up to more than the sample size of

**Table 4 Comparisons between marriage and cohabitation**

| Response category | Number (sample = 50) |
| --- | --- |
| Marriage is preferable as a living arrangement | 24 |
| There is no difference | 23 |
| Cohabitation is a preferable arrangement | 33 |

50. Indeed, two-thirds of the sample made such contrasting statements in order to convey the complexity of their viewpoints.

Table 4 shows that, when asked to compare the two relationships, just under half the sample described cohabitation and marriage as similar, as shown in many of the comments made in Box 1. In addition to claiming that each relationship shows the same level of commitment, these respondents commonly suggested that in both types of arrangement couples appear to try hard to maintain the relationship. At the same time, just under half at some stage in the discussion depicted marriage as a 'preferable' living arrangement, while two-thirds also described cohabitation in more glowing terms. For example, in two sections below, we describe contrasting views from a respondent whose pseudonym is Katherine Emerson, in which she recognises the social status which marriage accrues but rejects it as an institution. Recent analyses of the family (e.g. Morgan, 1998) have claimed that family relationships should be understood in terms of dynamic *processes* rather than static factors. These processes become evident in apparent contradictions within accounts of everyday activities and we do not find it surprising that two-thirds of the sample present the two types of relationship in more than one of the three categories depicted in Table 4. In order to explore these issues, we discuss in turn each of these three categories.

**'There is no difference': commitment inside and outside marriage**

The word used by the vast majority of interviewees to describe cohabitation was 'commitment'. Others referred to similar terms, like the 'bonds' of their relationship. As Leslie Farrimond puts it, the expectations of the relationship by most of the respondents were very high:

> *It's a commitment to sharing things and to grow and explore together. Really, I don't see it as any different to getting married really ... That you do the same things, that you share bills, you work together to make a home, that you have a commitment to each other, loyalty, honesty, clarity. I wouldn't expect any different from somebody I was living with than if I married them.*

Box 1 presents a sample of such descriptions from one-fifth of the sample to show how pervasive these were. Shirley Smith makes the point that there are 'individual' levels of commitment in any relationship, married or not:

> *Basically I don't think it makes any difference at all. It's down to the two individuals whether you're married or you're not married. I mean, do two people ever live together the same as any other two people? I don't think they do because we're all individuals.*

The common link between all these men and women is that they had experienced a separation. Indeed their involvement in the study was contingent upon them being identified as 'ex-cohabitees'. It is thus not surprising that many referred also to the chances of separation being comparable to those in marriage:

> *I think the relationship between two people is an extremely personal thing. And a marriage certificate isn't a guarantee that a marriage is going to last or a relationship is going to last.* (Peter Cross)

> *I don't think people are not going to split because they are married, I don't think it makes any*

*difference. It is the commitment to the relationship that holds people together.* (Paula Palmer)

As Amanda Lennox puts it:

*I think if you live together or whether you are married you still have to put 110 per cent into it whatever kind of a relationship.*

**Box 1    Typical descriptions of cohabitation as a 'commitment'**

*My commitment to a relationship is the same, regardless of the piece of paper.* (Paul Gamble)

*I don't think you need to get married to show a commitment to somebody. I don't honestly think there's much difference in it at all. I think it's the same.* (David Riley)

*I suppose, just, as I say, if two people live in the same room together, I suppose, married or not, they're … if the relationship is happy itself it doesn't really matter, I suppose.* (Gavin Fraser)

*Well like as a partner then I wouldn't see it as being any real different to being officially and technically married really.* (Bob Hinde)

*I've been as committed to a partner in a cohabiting relationship as I would had I been married.* (Steve McMahon)

*I really can't see any difference, I think if you love someone, if you're committed to someone, whether you're married or not, it's still the same.* (Roger Burns)

*Well I don't know that I've seen them as that different really. I think you can have a committed relationship without marriage. It felt like it was our own private commitment and that felt equivalent to marriage to me.* (Tanya Brown)

*Well, it just, I mean, my friends that are together that aren't married I see them in the same way really, like 'Oh they're married', because they've got, even though it's not on paper, they've got that bond really.* (Penny Landis)

*I don't honestly see a lot of difference between marriage and cohabitation ... what matters is the relationship and whether it works or not, you know.* (Marie Martin)

*I think if you are in a really serious relationship where you have commitments you work at it, whether you are married or not; it's reaching that level of a relationship really, I think. And that can happen whether you are married or not.* (Linda Nicholson)

**Marriage as preferable**

When describing the virtues of marriage, the respondents described three issues on which their judgement rests. The first concerns a belief in marriage as a basis of a continuing relationship. In such statements, words like 'security' and 'safety' are used to depict marriage. A typical sample of these statements is presented in Box 2. As a typical member of this group, Philip Armstrong, a manual worker, expresses a deep commitment to the idea of marriage:

> *Marriage ... you stick together for life, it's not like a quick year or two, or even years, marriage is for life. And that is what I've wanted all my life. I've wanted to get married, stay related to one person and that's all I wanted ... you know that the love is always gonna be there.*

Like Philip, respondents who expressed a desire to marry tended to suggest that there was always an uncertainty in the relationship which we were discussing, matching Smart and Stevens' notion of contingent commitment. More often than not, one partner was described as having a concern about the other partner's commitment or the compatibility of the couple even though, or because, she or he was highly committed to the ideal of marriage. Claire Simpson, for example, was

firm in her belief that marriage would have been 'right' with Bob, her partner for three years. However, when she described the cohabitation she expressed insecurity:

> I think if I was to enter into a marriage I would regard that as a much more committed thing than just deciding to go and live with someone. Like, when I went to live with Bob, I went on the understanding that it may well not be forever … If I could have felt more secure in the relationship there wouldn't … I would have been more relaxed which would have meant that the relationship wasn't as tense and Bob would have felt more secure.

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**Box 2    Marriage involves more 'commitment'**

*I always wanted to be married, I believe in marriage. I do believe in being faithful and all the rest of it and I believe in that bond, and I think it's very important.* (Tim Bridges)

*Well, if you get married, maybe it was just the way I was brought up, but if you get married it's for life. That's the way you should look at it. If you are going to marry someone you should be thinking in your mind 'I want to spend the rest of my life with this person'.* (Peter Willis)

*I believe more than anything in marriage ... and I don't agree with divorce. I think if you're married, you're married for life.* (Helen Entwhistle)

*To me being married is that you feel a unity and everybody else sees you as that, you are one solid unit ... and personally I'd rather be married than live together, I think because you are more formed in a way ... would make me feel closer.* (Amanda Lennox)

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A second and obviously related reason for stressing the importance of marriage is that some depict cohabitation as a lesser form of relationship. As the statements in Box 3 show, living together or cohabiting is described following the term 'just', to

signify the importance of marriage. If people '*just* live together' this suggests that cohabitation does not quite match the gold standard of marriage.

The third point on which marriage was compared favourably concerns the social status that it accrues. However committed a cohabitation might be, many feel that it does not achieve the same recognition in the eyes of other family members or friends. As Kate Cox put it, 'it's as they see it or other people perceive it as there's less need to be committed'. In such comments, three points were made about the importance of marriage as a social contract: the declaration of intent made in the marriage vows, other people's perceptions of 'married' individuals and the support network that may be more in evidence for married couples:

> Well it [marriage] *means commitment obviously. I just think, if you marry someone, that is making a statement, you are saying that you, you're declaring to the world, to the law, that you want to live with this person for the rest of your life … I would like to be* [married], *I just think that 'Mrs' sounds better than 'Miss' ... I mean I know that's probably very old-fashioned now but that's how I've always felt, I've always wanted to be Mrs … Mrs somebody or other.* (Jane Hampson)

> I think you get more respect from people if they think you're married. I think you gain respect from being married. Whereas, if you say 'Oh I'm just living with someone', you don't gain as much respect from society as what you do if you're married. Marriage is still seen as 'Oh yes the right thing to do'. (Katherine Emerson)

> Marriage serves a greater function than merely one between the two partners involved. And I think something I've come to realise since my relationship was the kind of social construction of marriage and the way that it taps into whole other areas of support from friends and family outside the couple. It symbolises just that link between the union of the couple and the kind of social glue, built around the

*family, society and the state, and upwards from there. So, in a sense, marriage is a tried and tested formula for doing that and I think it's a very successful one. (Alan Rowlands)*

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**Box 3    The advantages of marriage over 'just living together'**

*I imagine that married couples try harder, I would imagine that they would try harder to try and keep the marriage together. You've got a lot more to consider than just cohabitation.* (Mary O'Sullivan)

*More commitment if you are married, I think a lot more commitment, because you have to pull together cos you are going, you are supposed to stay together for ever if you get married ... If you are just living with someone, it's easier to get up and go if you just live with somebody than what it is to walk out of a marriage. So it's the point of you being married, you are giving yourself to somebody for the rest of your life. That's what I think it is anyway.* (Lucy Smith)

*I think people think more about coming out of the relationship if it is a marriage more than they would do if they were just living together because nobody wants to get divorced and I think maybe they'll make that little bit of effort.* (Sally Rogers)

*I think it gives people a stronger reason to stay around ... that's just something that's in the back of their head thinking I'm married and I can't let go of this, it's so important. Whereas when you're not married maybe there is this slight sort of, it's not important after all.* (Gary Smart)

*I think by the time someone's got round to getting married they've probably discussed things more than they would than if they'd just cohabited with someone.* (Rosina Stewart)

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**Cohabitation as preferable**

In the extract above, Alan Rowlands mentions how his views about marriage changed as a result of the breakdown of his cohabitation. When ex-partners describe the full details of their relationship and changes over time, they identify a complexity of factors which combine to mould their feelings about relationships. While, in the extract above, Katherine Emerson feels that marriage brings respect on a social level, she also expresses an antipathy towards it. Roger Burns is also explicit in his claim that cohabitation is a more ethically sound or honest relationship:

> *I think marriage, the actual … it's an institution basically and it's basically … sort of tries to keep people together just by having this ring or whatever, and it's harder to get out of the relationship officially. So I don't agree with marriage myself. I think it's basically a profit-making industry now, it doesn't mean anything these days at all. I don't agree with it at all.* (Katherine Emerson)

> *For me personally, I said 'There's no need for us to get married', because if you love someone then you don't need God or law or anything to sanction that … it* [cohabitation] *is more honest, I think that's it really, but that honesty is like a big factor I find, I don't know, it's a really big factor.* (Roger Burns)

As Table 4 shows, two-thirds of the sample described marriage in negative terms at least in part of their description of their relationship. The views of Katherine Emerson are typical. The majority opinion was that marriage reinforces traditional values that they reject while cohabitation reflects and permits a sense of individual freedom. The traditional values that ex-cohabitees reject fall into two types. The first concerns a general antipathy to control of the individual by church or state:

> *Well, I never wanted to get married. Um, it always struck me as a kind of rather imposed institution, marriage. I never really liked the idea of being obliged*

*to stay in a relationship because of an agreed contract through a third party. You are either committed to each other in an honest, straightforward, one-to-one way or … so it all seems a bit pointless.* (Craig Parker)

*I can only say what my experience is … is that I don't, I had no respect for the process of marriage. I've never been married, it's meaningless to me ... I detest the process whereby couples seek the approval of the state hierarchy or the religious hierarchy in order to do what they want to do. My view is, if people want to be together, let them be together, they don't need anybody's permission.*
(Mike O'Brien)

*I don't agree with it, it's just not for me really it's just, um, I don't want to be known as somebody. I don't know, I just want to be known as myself really and not part of somebody's wife or something.*
(Sheena McCall)

Like Sheena McCall, other men and women described what they perceived to be an institutionalised sexism in marriage: the second 'traditional' value. As Katherine Emerson suggests, marriage is 'like an ownership of the woman, [I] never want to be owned by anybody'. Box 4 summarises the range of issues that are used to define marriage as oppressive.

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**Box 4     Marriage defined as oppressive**

*Yes cos, well I don't know, cos most of my friends that are married, their husbands seem to be quite possessive over them and 'You're not going out there' and 'You're not doing this'. We sort of tended to 'Yes you can go out if you want, off you go'. I don't want* [to be] *tied to a man by a piece of paper or a ring. I am just as happy without it.* (Nicole Armitage)

*I think our culture taught me to be a coordinator kind of thing. I think marriage is a licence, I think in women's eyes and in men's eyes there is considerable thought about it, the marriage licence is a licence for the*

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*stereotypes to exist, the man coordinating things on a certain level. The sense of the men ruling the house, I think marriage probably reinforces that.*
(Jason Robinson)

*I think it* [marriage] *influences a relationship quite a lot on the male part… the fact that I think when people got married the man thought that that was it then, he had this woman for the rest of his life and he would domineer her from then on.* (Sally Rogers)

*I think marriage can put more pressure on your relationship. I think maybe subconsciously people think it's like a ball and a chain on your feet.* (Paul Fletcher)

*Marriage is a form of a formal contract, socially imposed. Marriage, I think, appears to have a negative impact on a lot of people … In fact marriage can actually force people to stay together that should never stay together anyway. A lot of people stay together simply because they're married and the marriage itself acts in a sense like a prison.* (Peter Cross)

*Perhaps married, I mean, you could say perhaps married fathers will be more 'I want to go out to the pub and you stay at home'. These are just the sort of people I see at work, the married fathers I see at work, I find quite, I despair of them really, but more in the way that they speak about their partners and that. I find it quite disturbing to have such a lack of respect for someone you're with and I don't understand why they do it, but they do.* (John Downing)

*I think that people often changed through relationships and marriage is making something solid that might change ... and also things like being attracted to someone else if you're in a marriage it's just seen as so terrible, it's not seen as something that happens it's, especially if it's a woman.* (Penny Stephenson)

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A rejection of 'traditional' values goes hand in hand with a belief in other values associated with cohabitation. If marriage concerns a duty to adhere to a set of principles which restrain its participants,

cohabitation offers a freedom to negotiate within and outside relationships. As Box 5 illustrates, cohabitees feel able to monitor and re-evaluate their relationships at any time. The freedom to end relationships if they 'grow apart' is compared with married couples who feel a lot of pressure to stay together and 'put up with a lot more'. Another perceived aspect of the freedom is the space allowed for self-development in cohabiting relationships, rather than on pre-defined rules about how to live one's life signified by marriage. In Box 5, Tanya Brown, for example, contrasts being 'yourself' with 'following a pattern'.

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**Box 5    Cohabitation and individual freedom**

[Cohabitation] *allows more room to really be yourself and listen to your own needs rather than following a pattern.* (Tanya Brown)

*It would probably put a burden there, a bit of a strain, because I suppose the concept of marriage is that you have no freedom anymore. Um, that is the person that you have* got *to put up with for the rest of your life, whereas, if you just cohabit, well, if you get fed up with them, I can move on, you know.* (Mary O' Sullivan, her emphasis)

*I think there's less stress or tension in not being married. Um, in the sense of like you haven't got this like duty. Like in marriage they'd be like the pressure of that. There's some sort of spiritual thing and society's pressure that you must stick together because you made the vows and it's got the law, so it's like legal binding. And I think that does put pressure on people and encourage them to stay together and put up with a lot more. Um, but just cohabiting I think it's a bit more relaxing, that people feel they can just walk out whenever they want to. Um, and it's more freer. And, in my opinion, it's more honest as well in a way …* [Later] *I think that they* [cohabitees] *believe in freedom. I think they, yeah again it's, like, more of a belief in themselves.* (Roger Burns)

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*I never felt I'd need to marry someone cos I'm sure that feels like quite a restriction of freedom in a way … I am sceptical of the fact that marriage makes people stay together and perhaps they shouldn't.*
(John Downing)

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided three issues for further discussion in the report. The first was to show that cohabitees describe their relationships in complex ways. The various descriptions of cohabitation appear to contradict one another. This is partly because cohabitation is not a uniform phenomenon. Each cohabiting relationship encompasses many activities that change over time and permit a range of understandings that may not fit squarely with one another. Some people seem to have engaged in a cohabiting relationship even though they report being highly committed to the institution of marriage, while others may have continued to have a 'contingent' view of cohabitation, but report being very committed to the particular relationship under discussion. However, a larger number of this sample appear antithetical to marriage, which they see as suppressing individual freedom, particularly for women.

Second, the very complexity of accounts supports a claim that the processes by which cohabitees construct an understanding of their relationships are not as 'unconscious' as the quotation from Macklin at the start of this chapter suggests. We were impressed by the measured way in which the respondents reflected upon cohabitation as a type of relationship, or perhaps more accurately as a variety of types of relationship. Such views will contrast with the descriptions of the break up which we will present in Chapter 4, in which one partner was described as less responsible than the other.

Third, the emphasis placed by a majority on cohabitation as a relationship that is more

negotiated than marriage serves as a backdrop for understanding the central issue under investigation. If parent–parent relationships are depicted in this way, what is implied for parent–child relationships? We explore this issue in the following chapters.

## Summary

- While most couples and individuals describe how their relationships evolved in a gradual way, cohabitation is depicted largely in terms of the commitment that partners make to the relationship.

- Marriage and cohabitation are compared in three main ways: as indistinguishable and in which one or other form is a preferable arrangement.

- We have quoted almost all the sample to show that most respondents provide highly principled judgements about marriage, social values and the expression of self and identity in relationships.

- For a majority, cohabitation is depicted as a moral obligation or commitment, but also as more 'honest', since change and dissolution are seen as part of a negotiation process rather than as a breach of marriage vows.

# 3  The cohabiting men as fathers

Do men in cohabiting relationships have different commitments to parenting than their married counterparts? Two contrasting hypotheses about their involvement can be derived from the research literature discussed in Chapter 1. Some might suggest that cohabiting fathers would be as 'irresponsible' in parenting as they are in their adult relationships. Others would imply that cohabiting fathers would be more likely to express beliefs and a greater commitment towards their responsibilities as parents. Some research supports this latter view (Clarkberg *et al.*, 1995; Cunningham *et al.*, 1982; Mika and Bloom, 1980), but the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 suggested that a belief in egalitarian parenting might not be matched by changes in behaviour (see also Macklin, 1986). The first two sections of this chapter examine how much these cohabiting parents aspire to the so-called 'new father' ideal and how far they live up to it. The latter sections present case examples of paternal involvement.

**Men's and women's beliefs about gender divisions in labour and care**

In the interview, discussion compared the respondent's views about appropriate levels of paternal involvement with their reports of the actual involvement engaged in by the father. The vast majority of women and men in this sample rejected traditional assumptions that women's roles centre on housework and children while men's roles revolve around financial provision. Most aspired to a belief in the notion of the involved father who assumes equal responsibility in parenting. Table 5 summarises the responses to the question 'What do people expect of fathers these days?' Having inspected the transcripts, we coded responses into two broad types: 'egalitarian' which referred to expressed beliefs in sharing childcare, financial provision and housework. 'Traditional' parents specified that the father should primarily

be responsible for providing for the family or ensuring that it is 'safe', 'secure' or 'disciplined', while the mother should have primary responsibility for childcare and household chores.

Table 5 suggests that most ex-cohabitees expect fathers to be actively involved in childcare. Thirty-one mothers and fathers responded exclusively that they expect fathers to share the care of their children and another five stressed both the caring nature of contemporary fathering and more 'traditional' values concerning financial provision. As Table 5 shows, only 14 parents espoused the belief that fathers are expected to be primarily responsible for providing an income for the family.

Box 6 presents the responses of 25 per cent of the sample to this question to illustrate their adherence to terms like 'sharing' and having 'equal' responsibility. Responses like that of Penny Landis suggest that the notion of sharing might not be completely straightforward. When she says that fathers 'are expected to chip in more with housework and things like that', this suggests that fathers and mothers do not expect domestic tasks to be divided equally between them. Research since that of Katherine Backett (1982; see also Lewis, 1986) has long shown that 'sharing' between partners is more of a commitment to the idea of equality than a manifestation of complete parity. Before we asked questions about the man's specific involvement, we assumed that parents like Sally Rogers (see Box 6) were in a minority for expressing a belief in complete equality.

**Table 5  'What do people expect of fathers these days?'**

| Type of response | Mothers | Fathers |
|---|---|---|
| Egalitarian | 15 | 16 |
| 'Traditional' | 8 | 6 |
| Partly egalitarian, partly 'traditional' | 4 | 1 |
| **Total** | **27** | **23** |

**Box 6    'What do people expect of fathers these days?' The modal response**

*Shared responsibility for any children, or any financial businesses in life, support, stable background for the child.* (Craig Parker)

*It has changed so rapidly ... fathers are expected to be much more female, if more caring.* (Kate Cox)

*I think it has got a lot more to do with a kind of joint looking after the kids, or taking more responsibility, and so on.* (Andy Evans)

*I don't think they are expected to be the breadwinner, they are expected to chip in more with housework and things like that and childcare really.* (Penny Landis)

*Equal babysitting, equal picking up from school, equal cooking, just generally doing what everybody should do ... sharing responsibilities and just sharing all the bills and tidying up.* (Mavis Danton)

*I think that they expect them to be a supportive co-parent and to share the child's care.* (Tanya Brown)

*You do the same things ... that you share bills, you work together to make a home, that you have a commitment to each other.* (Leslie Farrimond)

*I think there's very high expectations of fathers these days. I think they expect a lot, cos there's a hope of shared childcare and shared sort of child interest.* (Rosina Stewart)

*Both parents have a responsibility to financially support their children and a responsibility to care for them equally.* (Marie Martin)

*I think sharing the responsibilities of, well, even washing up and doing the chores in the house.* (Mick Tanton)

*I think just you can look at it in terms of parents rather than fathers and I would say that parents have a responsibility to care for their children.* (David Riley)

*The role of the father I think involves everything that the role of a mother does and I don't think personally that it should be any different from father and mother. I think it should be the same equal responsibility.* (Sally Rogers)

*Fathers these days, it's all changed, they expect a lot more. I mean you expect men now to change nappies and to get up in the night.* (Helen Entwhistle)

There are grounds for believing that these parents were more committed to an ideal of shared parenting than the research from the 1980s suggests. Their descriptions of what went on in their shared home linked to wider social changes, particularly the employment of mothers. The shift towards women taking as much responsibility for financial provision ties in with the expectation that men will involve themselves in the home. Peter Cross and Paula Palmer illustrate below some of these perceived changes. Paula lumps the domains of childcare and financial provision with the notion of shared *responsibility*. Peter draws the connections between a number of types of 'emancipation', including the sexuality of the parents and the nature of cohabitation. He describes cohabitation in the same consensual way as marriage has been described since the 1920s, as a 'companionate' relationship in which people live together because they 'like each other' rather than out of the legal commitment at the heart of marriage:

*I think their responsibilities are the same as the mothers, that they have a responsibility for supporting, maintaining, nurturing their children, both in* [the] *practical, financial domain and in the emotional and personal domain. Yes, they have all the responsibilities that a mum has.* (Paula Palmer)

*It's ... the whole of society's changed ... um, the male and female roles are no longer applicable as they were 50 years ago. Er, the woman is no longer expected to be the housewife, the husband is no*

*longer expected to be the provider. Um, relationships now whether they're heterosexual or homosexual tend to be, um … because people actually like each other and they want to stay together, um, it doesn't matter who actually goes out to work or whatever, it's a case of actually living together because they like being together ... there's also been the emancipation regards work, women now go out to work as a matter of course.* (Peter Cross)

**A commitment to paternal nurturance?**

The mothers and fathers depicted the father as competent in demonstrating practical and emotional responsibilities towards his children. Most criticised a popular assumption that mothers have superior capabilities in childcare by advocating, first, that parenting is not an ascribed status that mothers automatically occupy and, second, that parenting, like any relationship, is a continual process of adaptation. Not only is it a man's duty to contribute equally to childcare, but also this commitment is seen to have the capacity to change the nature of masculinity and the identity of fathers:

*Our own sort of media and advertising and the film world all reinforces the idea that the woman is the capable one, which of course is placing so much on women. Women aren't that good at it either, I don't think nobody is. It's not easy to be a parent and the idea that a lot of men have and I think I have the idea that 'Okay, we're no good at it but girls are really good at it, they'll just straight in there and do it all like some sort of superman'. And I think this mentality contributes to men deserting first … they don't know what to do, they are hugely uncomfortable, they feel marginalised, they feel irrelevant, and they also feel that the woman probably can do as well without them as with them. Um, I think this is largely excuses for not doing something.* (Mike O'Brien)

*Um, well what I expect myself of fathers is basically for them to do basically what I do, if you're gonna have a child together ... I mean, I didn't know how to*

*change a nappy so why should he sit there and not learn? If I'm learning he can learn too. So, I expect … yeah, change the nappies, bath the child, um feed the child, take the child out, expect him to do everything that I would do. It should be a shared thing cos you're both responsible for this child … this child hasn't asked to be born and it needs looking after by both parents.* (Katherine Emerson)

*I think fathers are just as capable, I mean people say that, you know, men aren't so emotionally bonded ... from my experience that's rubbish, and kids need their fathers as much as their mothers. I would actually love to see more fathers fathering and role reversal. I think it's the most wonderful thing and it's so healing. And it would do guys so much good to find that female side of them.* (Stuart Saunders)

**Mothering, fathering and financial provision**

As part of their bid for gender equality, these parents stressed the importance of the financial aspect of the maternal role. The increased participation of women in the labour force was identified as a major social change for improving women's position in the family. It was commonly suggested that women should assume an equal responsibility in assuring a secure income for their children.

*I think we've gone through a period of change and obviously there are families where the woman is the main earner and the man stays at home and looks after the child and they are both happy with that.* (Marie Martin)

*Women have equal rights to do what they want I'd say. I mean if they want to go out and work then so they should be able to.* (Stuart Saunders)

**Exceptions to the norm**

As Table 5 shows, one-quarter of the men and women appeared to hold different beliefs about the expectations and practices of contemporary

fathering. Their views can be described as 'traditional' in that they suggest that men's primary responsibility is to provide for the family. Box 7 records these views as identified in respondents' descriptions of the roles of contemporary fathers.

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**Box 7     What do people expect of fathers these days? The minority response**

*I've always felt that people, the main thing that's expected from fathers is actually to bring money in and to provide for the family.* (Steve McMahon)

*I still think it's money, personally, money … all the people I know their main worry is money, but I suppose that's only in families where the dads are only doing the work. But that's most of the families I know, I must admit.* (Pete Small)

*The primary responsibility is paying, maintaining the children, cos most fathers even today are the breadwinners. You still as a father should join in because that's the only way a father can make a bond with a child.* (Mary O'Sullivan)

*I am old-fashioned. I believe a man should go out to work, put the money on the table, go to the pub on a Friday, have a couple of pints, come back home, the week's done.* [The woman's responsibility is to] *look after the kids when I am working, should have my tea ready for when I come home … wash the clothes, do the major things like pay the bills, if I can go to work for 12 hours then she should be able to clean the house out.* (Philip Armstrong)

*I really believe that the role of the father is actually to make sure that the child has a secure home.* (Claire Simpson)

*Just being there financially and being there for support.* (Paul Fletcher)

*Old-fashioned types mainly to do with the finances to bring money in to stabilise the family.* (Gavin Fraser)

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*I think it's still often the provider role, I mean I personally would be quite happy to be in a relationship where the man went out to work and I looked after the children.* (Vicky Cotterell)

## Paternal commitment to early childcare

In studies of fatherhood since the early 1980s, parents' expressed beliefs in sexual equality in the home have rarely been seen to be matched with equality in practice. We mention above how Katherine Backett (1982) showed how lip service to democratic ideals masked real differences between mothers' and fathers' gender roles. Recent research continues to show a division between paternal provision and maternal responsibility for care (e.g. Warin *et al.*, 1999), and also that some highly involved fathers do not express a belief in involved fatherhood (Wheelock, 1990).

Given these problems in matching beliefs and practice, we asked detailed questions about the history of the father's involvement with the child. The level of involvement of many of the men in this sample was reported to be higher than we expected and, where both partners were interviewed, mothers' and fathers' reports showed a high level of agreement. Five (out of 36) took over the major responsibility for the child's early care, while 12 had shared care with their partners at least for part of the time they were living together. For example, when their first child was born, the following father was an engineering student while his partner was in a business career. He appears to have taken a passive role in the decision for him to become the primary caregiver of the baby:

*Having our first child, I stayed at home to look after him …* [ex-partner] *went back to work and I found I was looking after a baby ... and I brought him up from birth to about five years old I think really.*

We report here five case examples to illustrate the involvement of fathers in their child's early

care, not citing their pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of the interviews.

**Case study 1**

Couple 1 are both unemployed and have a two-year-old daughter. They lived together for one year up until their child was eight months old. The father adhered strongly to notions of egalitarian parenting:

*I think in the circles that I move in there's a high emphasis on sort of mutual nourishment in relationships and obviously the father is one half of that.*

He explains why he and his ex-partner decided to live together in order to provide an equal share of care for their newborn baby:

*Practically in terms of sharing the lack of sleep and just creating a base ... because we both wanted* [child's name] *to have continuity and a domestic setting and then we just felt sort of natural, you know, responsibility for* [child's name] *could just shift in a natural way.*

Given that his partner decided not to breastfeed their daughter, the father felt able to undertake further responsibilities in the care of their child:

*That's been one of the weird things about it that* [child's name] *wasn't* [breastfed] *because it's meant that I've been more a mother to* [child's name] *than most fathers would have been really, I just carried her round all night while* [ex-partner's name] *slept and then* [ex-partner's name] *could hardly sit down for two weeks and I did a lot of the caregiving. I think the vast majority of months, if you took each month in turn, I would probably have done at least half of, perhaps more than half of, the caregiving in one way or another, so it was very different to the typical infant sort of situation.*

The father's accounts of his commitment to childcare practically and emotionally are profound.

He gave up his work commitments in the interests of childcare:

*I feel very, there is a very maternal bond and a very maternal dynamic between me and* [child's name] *... because there has always been that really intense love. I've never, I've made a point of not working since* [child's name]*'s been around because to get a full-time job I wouldn't see anywhere near as much of her and you know I have always done everything, there's not been anything that I haven't done regularly with her that* [ex-partner] *has done, so in a way on a sort of practical level I've been ... that maternal bond has been there. I am using the word maternal archetypally and with a view that everyone contains maternal and paternal feelings.*

**Case study 2**

Couple 2 have a seven-year-old boy. They lived together for three years. At the time of separation their boy was two years old. They had established a role-reversed arrangement with the father as the primary carer:

*Well the basic part was* [ex-partner's name] *you know ... was having a child you know and because I did the sort of 90s' house-husband bit and stayed at home and she was already kind of well into nursing and me being a musician is sort of completely different.*

He states how he retained the major responsibility of early childcare, which was laborious as well as pleasurable:

*To look after a child obviously is a full-time thing ... she'd go out to work and I'd do the, kind of, all the baby duty stuff and then she'd come home, and I'd try to have the dinner ... to something which was totally new to me you know, that kind of rigid kind of structure to your life which a baby brings is, um ... and it was great as well.*

**Case study 3**

Couple 3 lived together for two years. They have a six-year-old son. At the time of separation, he was

two years old. They are both unemployed. He describes their attempts to share childcare equally:

> *We'd share doing stuff together, it was hard work cos, er, getting up in the middle of the night, feeding him with bottles and stuff like that but generally it was easy-going, like it was easier* [with] *two of you.*

She explains how his lack of work commitments enabled him to provide an equal amount of childcare:

> *I think he actually liked it because it was like he hadn't sort of had many jobs and this was like a job, cos it was a shared thing really ... I think he did the hardest bit really when you've got sleepless nights and everything.*

### Case study 4

Couple 4 lived together for four years. They have an 11-year-old daughter. The mother is a registered general nurse and the father is a teacher. They separated when their daughter was one year old. He retained full responsibility for providing practical care for their daughter when his ex-partner went back to university to finish her degree. She states how her ex-partner enjoyed being involved with their child:

> *Certainly he seemed to cope better with it I think in the early stages than I did anyway, I don't know whether that was because he was enjoying it more. He is quite a loner really and so I think probably that he could just get on his own with* [child's name] *and enjoy time of his own.*

He sketches his 'routine' as primary carer:

> *Particularly in that year when* [ex-partner's name] *was finishing her degree, my whole life was devoted to* [child's name] *and looking after her and I felt quite happy about that ... the actual looking after* [child's name] *and the routine of our day which was from when* [ex-partner's name] *got up till whatever time at night, it was just like being on my own with* [child's name] *quite a lot of the time.*

### Case study 5

Couple 5 have two girls, seven and 11 years old. They lived together for 11 years. By the time they had their first child, he was happy to reduce work commitments in the interest of child-care:

> *By the time* [child's name] *was born I was able to drop my hours at work, so I was working part time and* [ex-partner's name] *was working part time and we shared our childcare 50/50.*

He refers to his parental role as a major source of self-fulfilment:

> *It was just wonderful seeing my children develop and grow and like they were getting stronger every day and just seeing them develop and being able to participate in their development and help them.*

## Conclusion

The first half of this chapter echoed previous research in which men are described as equal partners within couple relationships with a young child (Lewis, 1986, Chapter 1). Less than half the sample (34 per cent) espoused a belief in 'traditional' or role-differentiated parenting. Previous research shows that, despite a lip service to equality, fathers' contributions to childcare tend to be token. However, 47 per cent of these fathers were reported to have been at least as involved with their children as their partners and the agreement between ex-partners suggests that this was not an over-estimation. The strength of this commitment to the child is demonstrated in the extracts from the interviews and case examples presented here.

## Summary

- A large majority of these unmarried mothers and fathers proclaimed strong beliefs in egalitarian gender roles. Sixty-two per cent professed these beliefs exclusively and a further 10 per cent of

descriptions of paternal roles made reference to a commitment to shared parenting.

- Many depicted the father's commitment to childcare in terms of a social change. By promoting women's right in earning money for the family and men's capability in caring for children, they fostered their egalitarian beliefs and a more sensitive masculine identity.

- Almost half (47 per cent) of these fathers were reported to have a major or equally shared involvement in their children's care when they were cohabiting.

- The five case examples reported here illustrate the extent of some men's commitment to parenting, suggesting that for some cohabiting men the label 'new father' might be appropriate.

# 4   How parents negotiate the break up of a cohabitation

Why does a separation occur in a cohabitation? How does a separation between cohabiting partners influence the father–child relationship? By studying the descriptions of the breakdown, we see cohabitation in a light which is different to the one which respondents use to illustrate cohabitation relationships in general. In the majority of cases, men are perceived as being in a precarious relationship with their ex-partner and children. Before we examine the contact between fathers and their children after the separation in the next chapter, we explore two issues in this one: the respondents' descriptions of the separation, and parents' knowledge and use of the law when establishing their lives apart.

## Perceived causes of the separation

To understand the breakdown of the respondents' relationships, it is necessary to set the accounts given in the two previous chapters into context. The large majority described an antipathy to marriage and a desire for greater equality between the sexes. A substantial minority appeared to put these ideas into practice by establishing a childcare regime where the father was either highly involved or the child's primary carer. These practices form part of a much larger system of values that may include a struggle for a new lifestyle. Within an interview, at least, many described themselves as unconventional. While a commitment to sexual equality was most common, they often professed an antipathy to contemporary material values, or an immersion in alternative cultures. In several cases, this centred around the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. In the interviews, discussion about the cohabitation and its breakdown invariably involved either the effects of such activities on the stability of the relationship or one respondent's attributions of fault in their ex-partner which result from these activities. For a larger number, an, often implicit, reference to the problems of shared parenting was made, particularly the different opinions about appropriate parenting.

When we asked respondents to identify what led to the breakdown of the relationship, they each mentioned a set of complex factors. As the divorce literature has long shown, there is no easy way to classify people's accounts of separation. The same is the case for cohabitation. The participants raised a range of factors, each mentioning on average three issues. We classified these into the 15 types presented in Table 6, in order of their frequency of mention and discuss these types below.

## New values vs 'immaturity'

In Chapter 2, the association between cohabitation and a reluctance to accept traditional values was described by some as a sign of high moral principle. However, the same respondents depict another side of cohabitation when they describe the separation. Many simultaneously perceived their search for an alternative lifestyle as a sign of immaturity, and this was particularly the case for the part played by the men. Table 6 shows that in many cases one partner was perceived as being at 'fault', usually through their personal 'failings'. As the top row in the table shows, the most common description concerned a lack of love, which was often attributed to a personality problem, like 'insecurity', 'coldness' or being 'emotionally cut off'. While the men attributed such feelings to themselves and their ex-partners equally, the women were three times more likely to select their partner as being at fault.

A term like 'immaturity' was used by 40 per cent of respondents, particularly the women,[1] to describe paternal behaviour – and in two cases maternal behaviour. This was characterised in four ways:

**Table 6  What caused the separation between the parents?**

| Response category | Mothers | Fathers |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Lack of love or honesty | 12 | 10 |
| One partner is 'irresponsible' or 'immature' | 15 | 4 |
| Incompatible lifestyles or aspirations | 7 | 11 |
| Partner does not 'talk enough' | 5 | 8 |
| One partner starts a new relationship | 6 | 7 |
| Violence between partners | 7 | 5 |
| Drink problems in one partner | 8 | 3 |
| Money problems | 6 | 4 |
| Personality clash | 2 | 6 |
| Depression or illness in one partner | 4 | 4 |
| Different approaches to parenting | 1 | 5 |
| Sexual problems or incompatibility | 2 | 3 |
| Drugs | 3 | 2 |
| Wanting time / space to oneself | 1 | 2 |
| 'Being a male' and being seen as 'evil' or harmful | 0 | 2 |
| Total number of respondents | 27 | 23 |

1   the man's failure to live up to his responsibilities by finding gainful employment

2   a failure to 'support' the partner in her maternal responsibilities

3   a lack of attendance to family need, by 'going out'

4   a lack of involvement in housework.

As Gary Smart put it, 'I just hadn't grown up, Jo'.

The notion of immaturity of course suggests that respondents assume there is a level of 'maturity' at which people are 'ready' to become parents. This involves a sacrifice of individual pleasure in the interests of the child, or to support a partner, child or family. The third most common reason for the separation concerns incompatibility, but again, in almost all the cases, this was qualified by the respondents claiming that the father was more nonconformist than the mother. The man's attempt to free himself from social pressures to fit in with traditional expectations of fathers was depicted as part of the 'irresponsibility' described by the women.

In the following extracts, a typical father and mother (not ex-partners) contrast their own view with that of their partner. The father mentions a typical theme from the men, that he maintained their alternative lifestyle, while she changed. The mother again gives a typical account of the father's failure to provide financially and her concern about him as a parent:

Charlie:   *Um, can we get back to your relationship, if you had to put your finger on a number of causes, what would you say the causes of the breakdown were?*

Father:   *… there's something that, um, that happened as well which is quite important.* [Ex-partner's name] *would describe it as she grew up but I didn't. And her, um, kind of idea of what's fun and so on, um, changed I think as she was kind of moving up her business she came into contact with people who were interested, well the way I think of it, more interested in gardening than sex really* [laugh] *… which is ...*

Charlie:   *Oh right. So that's entering into middle age rather than into adulthood?*

*Father:* Yes, yes, that's an interesting way of putting it, becoming stuffy, in a more right-wing and less adventurous and so on. And so, she's gone in this kind of more, um, quiet mode and I'm just 'not grown up' as she would say.

*Charlie:* Let's think about the relationship then in its bad times, what was the greatest conflict in your life when the relationship was at its worst?

*Mother:* Money. Right, he was a lazy lout, he didn't want to get a job, where I did.

*Charlie:* Yeah, did you want to get a job or did you want him to get a job?

*Mother:* Well I have had quite a few jobs, er, the reason I've had to give up the jobs is because he won't look after the children properly. He was dumping them on people, rather than looking after them himself.

The rest of the items in Table 6 either fit in with the notion of paternal immaturity or they reveal issues which are common in the divorce literature – a lack of 'effective communication', the infidelity of one partner, violence and arguments over the best way to bring children up. In 70 per cent of the couples we interviewed, both partners agreed that it was the mother who initiated the separation. This is consistent with the claim that male 'immaturity' accounts for the demise of the relationship. For example, in one couple, where the father had continued to use their flat as a centre for his drug-taking activities, she described how she left the town where she and her partner were living. When asked whether the decision to separate was a joint one, the father said:

*Em* [pause] *I don't know. No, I wouldn't say that at all, that was what* [ex-partner's name] *wanted at the time, and I definitely didn't want … but she was adamant about it, you know.*

The mother was of the same opinion:

*I think he's stopped now. He waited until I'd moved out and then cried a lot and then begged to come back for about a year-and-a-half and then stopped and then like got a job and became all responsible. But all too late!*

In a second couple, the father's 'immaturity', as perceived in his partner, included not only participation in alternative political activity and heavy use of alcohol, but also a chronic problem with depression:

*He said that he'd, you know, sort it out and stop drinking and he'd tried a few times and it was just one more lapse really and one more suicide attempt … And his brother lives in Lancaster and knew that he was bad and had said before that he would have him so … I remember I just phoned him up that Monday night and said 'I think he's got to go'.*

What determines the nature of a separated father's contact with his children? The rest of this report addresses this issue, but first we explore a further complication – the role of the law in parental negotiations. Studies suggest that men's position in divorce remains precarious in that only around 10 per cent of men seek residence with their children, although half of them succeed (Maclean, personal communication). As we discussed in Chapter 1, cohabitation relationships differ in that fathers have no legal rights over their children and we were keen to discuss how this influenced their post-separation parenting.

## Separation and the legal status of unmarried fathers

Pickford's (1999) recent study of parents in cohabiting relationships reveals that they know little about the legal position of fathers, so it might be expected that the law plays little part in cohabitation breakdown. Responses to questions about the legal status of unmarried men and the

role of the law in the amount of father–child contact suggest that many fathers learn about their rights in negotiations over the children once separated from them.

Table 7 displays the mothers' and fathers' understanding of paternal rights after cohabitation. Knowledge was attributed to respondents if they acknowledged that unmarried fathers have no automatic rights or if they stated how they might obtain them. The category 'does not know about father's rights' was scored when an explicit 'don't know' was given or if the respondent falsely assumed that unmarried fathers had rights – if, for example, they presumed that a name on a birth certificate was sufficient. Overall, 52 per cent of women and 43 per cent of men were correct in their definitions.

Most of the parents who did not seem to know the legal position of unmarried fathers assumed that they have the same rights as married men. Fine legal details were not of primary concern. Indeed, some described paternal 'rights' in the same way as cohabitation, as being separate from or even above the law. To illustrate Table 7, the first of these extracts was scored in the 'does not know' category, while the latter parent was attributed with some knowledge:

> *I haven't thought of that* [laugh]. *Um, the legal rights … I don't look at* [it] *in terms of legal rights. I see it more as social justice and moral right … moral right more than the legal right. Whereas if you're married it's because the marriage and the family is like this legal thing then there are these legal rights.*
> (Roger Barnes)

**Table 7  Parents' current knowledge of the unmarried father's lack of rights**

|  | Does know | Does not know |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Women (*N* = 27) | 14 | 13 |
| Men (*N* = 23) | 10 | 13 |

> *When you have the children you have to have … the father either has to adopt them even though it's his, or I can't remember but there is some kind of stupid, legal thing … reregister them or something, I can't remember what it is now exactly. I think you have to reregister them if we had got married.*
> (Amanda Lennox)

When discussing unmarried fathers and the law, three interrelated issues became clearly apparent. First, knowledge of the law was usually acquired after the separation, usually to clarify the father's role during negotiations over childcare and paternal contact. Second, there is an assumption of a primacy of maternal authority which is seen often as being more important than the parents' legal rights. Third, when a parent learns about the legal status of the unmarried father, this learning usually takes place within a continuing negotiation over paternal access and rights.

We examine each of these issues in turn.

**Learning the truth**

The following father learned about his legal position the hard way. To sort out her depression, his partner took their daughter 200 miles away for a brief trip. When she phoned him to say that neither she nor the child was coming back, he assumed that he would be able to obtain residence since it was he who took the major responsibility for his child over the first two years of parenthood:

> *When we split up the, um, she went and saw the solicitor and, you know, said 'I've had words', you know, and read me the Riot Act and stuff and, you know, then I went down to the Citizens' Advice and, you know, found out what rights unmarried fathers had, which was none, you know, and, um, and I thought, 'Right … OK'.*

The following mother reported how she went to a solicitor to resolve a dispute over contact with her ex-partner. This initially involved a conflict in which she thought that he would sue for residence

(or custody as she puts it), but this has very recently changed as he has just married and reduced his contact greatly:

> They haven't got any, they haven't got any rights whatsoever, em. [Child's name]*'s dad … I went to see a solicitor about two months ago, thinking of getting a, em, legal custody, I thought, you know, 'Maybe do I have to get some kind of legal right to her to prevent him from taking her away from me?', em, I did find out that he hadn't got any legal rights whatsoever. The only legal right he would have is he had had a strong relationship with* [child's name], *you know, after we'd split up. Like now, at present, which he hasn't got a strong relationship with* [child's name] *and he hasn't stuck to the things he is supposed to do so basically that is the only right that he's got, if he could prove that he is, em, you know, a good father and a strong character for* [child's name] *and that he would give her any sort … well he could provide for her, as in emotionally, and in every way really, then he has got a tiny, tiny bit of, of say in it but really none, none whatsoever, unless we were married, he hasn't got many rights whatsoever.*

For most of these parents, the law played no role in determining the amount and nature of paternal contact. In the following response to a question about legal rights, David Riley shows how involvement in, and knowledge of, the law is only part of the negotiation process that may follow a separation. We gained the impression that the parents who finally go to law do so because they cannot resolve issues which they feel are best sorted out between them:

> I didn't do at the time no, but I do now, cos I've had to see, you know. Since we've split up I've had to sort of look into it, but I didn't at the time, no. They [fathers] *have very few legal rights actually yeah. Um, I had to go to, um, court to get a parental responsibility thing and also a residence, um, order, but I dropped that, and we sort of have shared care. I didn't really realise all these things at the time, no.*

> Um, but I do now, yes. Um, and I do think it's probably one area of the law where it sort of favours women and probably … I don't know, I mean maybe my circumstances were different to sort of most people that I wanted more contact, or equal contact with Hilary when we split up and then found that the law and everything doesn't give you any whatsoever.*

**The primacy of maternal 'rights'**

David Riley and his partner worked out an 'amicable' arrangement in which his child stays over with him for three nights per week without taking out a Parental Responsibility Order to resolve their initial disagreements over the child. In all but two cases, which we discuss in the next chapter, such resolutions usually take place with the mother in the driving seat. David's success at negotiating contact contrasts with that of other fathers who feel that their ex-partners are less accommodating. These fathers often referred to the difficulties they have in the negotiation process. For example, this man describes the rights of unmarried fathers in relation to their partners making things difficult:

> Amalia:  *Do you know the legal rights of fathers when they're living together with their partner?*
>
> Father:  *Um, probably not much as far as I remember. I mean I've never had any help with any of my, um, legal rights in relation to* [child's name] *say, or anything like that. I don't believe that you have many legal rights at all really. Um …*
>
> Amalia:  *After separation do you know about …?*
>
> Father:  *You probably could get, you know, if it came down to if you were in big conflict with, you know,* [with] *your partner, you probably could get access or something like that, you know, to your child. But if that partner wants to be difficult with you … you probably end up in a bad way.*

He attempted to assert his claim to keep up his contact with his child, but his ex-partner sees his efforts as 'threatening':

*Amalia:*    *Did you know the legal rights that* [father's name] *had at the time that you separated?*

*Mother:*    *He, um, he didn't have any.*

*Amalia:*    *He didn't have any?*

*Mother:*    *No*

*Amalia:*    *Has this affected his relationship with* [child's name]*?*

*Mother:*    *No, well I mean it affected his relationship with me because he felt insecure.*

*Amalia:*    *Right, he felt that you had control of the situation?*

*Mother:*    *Yes, yes, so I mean that's why he tried to impose his control at times by being threatening you know, so, I mean in that sense.*

Such perceptions of 'threat' and 'resistance' are not always resolved. Another mother puts this down to the fact that the rules are not written for cohabitation breakdown:

*When you're not married I don't think the father has any right as, um, to have any custody rights to the child. I would say if you separated and you are ... er ... married it's probably easier to sort out childcare than it is when you're not married because you can go straight through the courts or something. But when you're not married you have to battle it out between yourselves.*

Her ex-partner feels that he has lost out of this battle:

*Jo:*    *Do you know what are the legal rights of fathers, when they are just living together with their partners?*

*Father:*    *Yeah I became very, I studied it really, for a while after we split up because of all the battle we were having really about how to bring him up. I was asking for access that she wasn't giving me. She was very much*

*wanting to keep me in the role of a weekend father.*

**When parents resort to legal agencies following relationship breakdown**

We asked the respondents about whether they had had contact with or views about the Child Support Agency. While there was a general feeling of antipathy towards the Agency, this was not always the case. For example, this father saw a legal endorsement of his responsibility as a way of ensuring his claim to the children – an approach that was supported by his ex-partner:

*Father:*    *If you agree to pay maintenance ... and you split up and you finally find yourself in court, at least it gives you some rights over those children that you didn't have before.*

*Mother:*    *When we split up, because* [ex-partner's name] *was also aware that he had no legal rights over the children he insisted on getting a court order … he insisted that if we got a court order for him to give me money which he felt would establish some claim some legal claim on his part and be a legal demonstration of his responsibility towards the children.*

This father is now positive about how the separation has forced him to confront his lack of rights and establish his claims through the courts.

*Back in the days when* [children's names] *were born I had absolutely no rights whatsoever. I had more rights over my children after I stopped living with* [ex-partner's name] *than I did when I was living with her.*

When a parent's responsibility over their children is endorsed through the courts that parent is likely to experience a strong source of power in negotiations with their partner. This father describes the support he has gained from the legal system in just such a way:

*Cos I got to see* [child's name] *after that. I actually felt that taking* [ex-partner] *to court made her see I was serious about seeing* [child's name] *... I got support from my solicitor. That felt good.*

However, most fathers do not consider the courts as a route to increased involvement with their children. The following mother perceives that the lack of legal rights for unmarried fathers leaves them powerless and insecure compared with women:

Mother:    *Fathers that I know who aren't married feel much more insecure in relations with their children so it's not easy for them.*

Amalia:    *Mmmm, I mean, can you sort of say what that insecurity is about for them?*

Mother:    *That's about not having any legal rights really, yeah, about the mother having the power.*

In Chapter 6, we return to the issue of power in relationships between separated cohabitees.

## Conclusion

The views of separated fatherhood discussed in this chapter seem to be at odds with those expressed about both the nature of cohabiting relationships in Chapter 2 and the father's involvement in early care in Chapter 3. There are many possible reasons why an 'egalitarian' spousal or parental relationship might also be defined as differentiated after separation so that the man is 'immature' and the woman has a 'divine right' to the children.

It might be the case that lip service paid by partners to equality merely conceals the contradictions in these respondents' lives – an 'immaturity' on the part of the men and/or a reluctance in women to share or release the reins of parenting. Or perhaps the contradictions revealed here show that cohabitees cannot fully justify the lifestyle that they have adopted? However, such assumptions too quickly dismiss the attempts made by the majority of these respondents to maintain an involvement with, and responsibility for, their children. In the next chapter, we examine the patterns of contact between father and child before attempting to identify how cohabitation breakdown exposes and/or creates divisions of power between mother and father – the focus of Chapter 6.

## Summary

- Discussion about the separation evokes very different feelings about the nature of cohabitation from those described in Chapter 2.

- There seems to be a division between the sexes. Men describe their attempts to become involved in childcare as a sign of their commitment to their children.

- However, often the separation is attributed to the man's 'immaturity' in his failure to provide for his family and if he has been trying to break away from this 'traditional' expectation. This view was expressed particularly by the women.

- No man in the sample had obtained Parental Responsibility before the separation and few used the courts to maintain contact.

- More important than the man's legal position, there was a deeply held assumption that maternal 'rights' have a primacy over paternal responsibility.

- Finally, a few mothers or fathers do approach the courts in order to establish procedures for contact with the child and these parents reported feeling on a stronger footing as a result.

# 5  Contact between the father and child

The accounts of parenting presented in Chapter 3 would predict a high degree of paternal contact after the separation. Indeed, given that so many men had a major role in their children's early care it might be expected that the fathers would maintain some responsibility for them and even have residence where they had been the primary caregiver. However, the accounts of respondents, particularly the women, of the separation in Chapter 4 would suggest either that men are too 'irresponsible' or 'immature' to care for their children alone, or that their legal position prevents them from becoming involved in decisions about the child's care. In this chapter, we explore the patterns of current contact between cohabiting fathers and their children. After the first section, which reports patterns of contact, the second and third parts attempt to show that, in keeping with the recent divorce literature, men's contact changes depending on a number of influences, notably the relationship between the mother and father. Second, we attempt to explore how men usually take on a secondary role in childcare and this leaves many feeling not only that their part in parenting is of secondary importance, but also a feeling of loss and 'disengagement' (Kruk, 1991).

## Patterns of current contact

We asked participants to describe the amounts and types of contact between father and child since the separation. The response was much more in keeping with previous studies of cohabitation breakdown (e.g. Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997), which find that large numbers of fathers lose contact with their children at least in periods of flux in the relationships between the parents.

While paternal care tended to be greatly reduced immediately after the separation, contact was usually re-established over time. This pattern was very clear in three cases. For example, Gary Smart's partner lived half a mile away when their relationship was at its stormiest and he hardly saw

their children. When she moved 100 miles away, the difficulties between them lifted and he now hitch-hikes down to see them every few weeks.

For other fathers, the pattern was the reverse. Initial contact was followed by a gradual or sudden severance of contact. In Maclean and Eekelaar's study, 69 per cent of fathers had regular contact that decreased to 51 per cent over time. In this sample, two of the men fitted this pattern and, following a deterioration in the relationship with their ex-partner, contact gradually petered out. Among other fathers, the patterns of contact were more fluid and, as we shall show later, depended on a mixture of factors.

Figure 2 displays the current contact arrangements of 35 fathers.[1] In keeping with previous studies of divorce, it shows that there are great variations in the amount of contact between different men and their children. Most fathers saw their children at least once a fortnight.[2] However, in order to understand the reasons why the father has become, or has remained, involved, we need to explore the issues surrounding paternal contact after separation.

As Figure 2 shows, two fathers had residence and a further ten appeared to be regularly involved with their children, with at least weekly contact. These figures have to be explained. In the two cases of paternal residence, the mother initially had the care of the child. However, in each case, the child had elected to reside with the father, after some years of contact visits. Both were families who we interviewed some years after the separation and the children were teenagers when the decision to change residence was made. Two issues need to be pointed out: circumstances change over time, even many years after the separation; and without the child's intervention maternal residence would have persisted.

Ten fathers saw their children either daily or for up to half the week. Six of these fitted what Smart and Neale (1999) term 'co-parenting' in that they were involved in the sharing of both parental care

**Figure 2  The amount of current contact between father and child**



Current contact arrangements
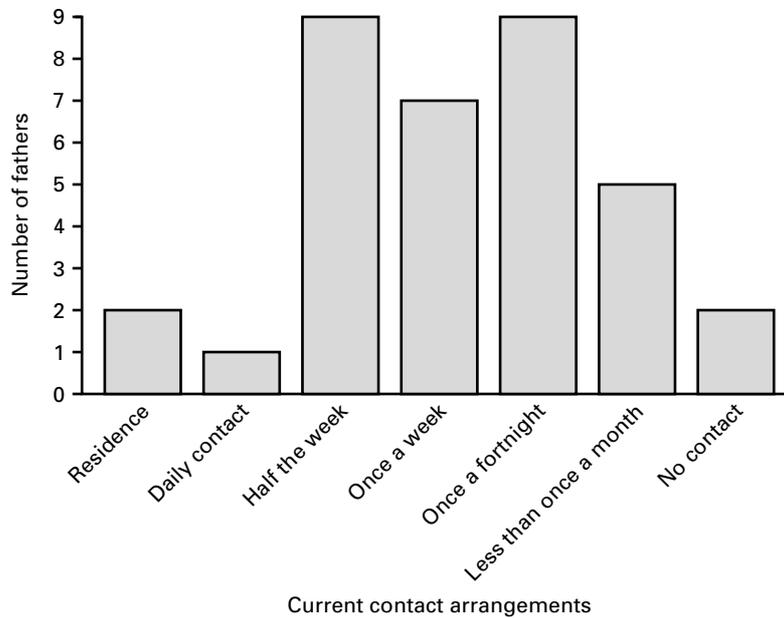
and parental authority. However, as we discuss below, in these cases it was clear that respondents attributed mothers with ultimate control of the extent and nature of paternal contact. Even though they were regular contributors to the children's care, including having them for overnight stays, these men commonly expressed a feeling of being second-class parents, as it was usually the mothers who decided when the visit should take place and any changes in the routine. As Andy Evans put it 'she still arranges everything'. Even if the child spends time with the father, he often describes himself as in some way inferior to his ex-partner as a parent:

> I'm not saying that I'm useless. I do have a contribution to make. I'm only saying they could manage without me, whereas they would have a much more difficult time managing without their mother, um … who has in proportion to how much control she has exerted, she has an interest in their school work and followed closely what they're doing at school. Um, by the same token, I've had sort of less sort of power and less involvement and less commitment to checking their homework and things like that. (Mike O'Brien)

Within the 'Contact of less than once a month' category in Figure 2, there is a variety of types of patterns of paternal psychological involvement. The influences on such 'disengagement' are varied and complex, but factors such as geographical distance, illness, new partners and other children seem to play as important a role as painful experiences of the loss of the child. The two extremes are represented in the following examples:

- Hugh Penn declined to be interviewed as he also was excluded from seeing his child. His ex-partner describes a very acrimonious and difficult separation dominated by Hugh's depression and emotional breakdown. At the time of her interview, Hugh had not seen his child for well over a year although court proceedings for reviewing the contact arrangements are still continuing.

- On separating from his partner Sue, Matt Smith had sporadic contact with his daughters. At the time of Sue's interview, he had moved to work in Australia on a three-year building contract with his new partner

and their child. He visited his children briefly at Christmas and he phones them occasionally. We made many attempts to set up a telephone interview, but Matt declined to participate in the study. We felt that Matt was one of a few men in the sample who might fit the stereotype of 'errant father' (i.e. a man who abrogates his paternal responsibility), but, given that we did not interview him, we cannot be sure of this diagnosis.

## The psychology of paternal contact

How do men react to having less contact than they were used to before the separation? The two fathers with residence were an exception. For the rest, even those who cared for the child regularly expressed feelings of personal loss. In the following extract, Rosina Stewart reflects on the separation from her ex-partner, Tim's, viewpoint. She recognises what he and other men go through in order to bargain for his daughter's twice-weekly stay at his house:

> *Um, er, I think it's very tough … for fathers who split up from their children … people who haven't got married are even on a more sticky slope. I think it's tough for all fathers you know to suddenly lose their children and they may not have been the ones, um, that started the whole process, it seems terribly hard … I see a lot of men really struggling and really trying to see their children and really bargaining and begging for their two or three days, or their weekend or whatever and I think it's particularly terrible for people who've lived in a family you know for some while and then had that sort of robbed of them … and that must be traumatic for any parent of any sex to suddenly not be with your child. And I know some men find it so painful they just can't hack it and they move away altogether because they just can't deal with the pain.*
> (Her emphasis)

In Chapter 1, we discussed Edward Kruk's suggestion that the 'disengagement' of fathers from

their children may arise from their painful feelings of loss as a result of separation. If Rosina Stewart says that her ex-partner feels pain as a result of the drop in his contact, then what expressions of loss should we expect in men who have much less contact with their children? Many of these fathers were clearly very disturbed by the separation. The two men who had no contact with their children were not 'errant fathers' intent on shirking parental responsibility. Indeed, both had been prevented from seeing their children through court orders.

For example, Alan Rowlands[3] referred to the post-separation period as a 'very sad time indeed' and 'it was hostile and bitter'. A brief attempt at reunion with his ex-partner marked a watershed in the separation, resulting in mutual recognition that 'it wasn't gonna work'. Alan moved out and has not seen them since, a four-year absence, because his ex-partner made allegations that he had been sexually abusing their daughter when she had been 18 months old. This resulted in an eventual 'No Contact' order from the courts.[4] How does Alan react to being kept at arms' length from his child? He says 'I burn a candle for [my daughter] every day' and that he is constantly involved in his battle to reverse the court decision and obtain 'custody'. He is also in regular and frequent contact with other fathers through membership of the support group Families Need Fathers and he claims that these activities 'affirm my bond with [my daughter]'.

While some men did not express strong negative emotions within the context of the research interview, those who did used the opportunity to express their sense of deprivation. For example, Bob Hinde had given up a successful career to move to be near his ex-partner's new home. She still restricted his contact to supervised, irregular visits:

> *It's very painful not having access, it's extremely painful because I feel I can't contribute, that I can't be a proper dad any more because I'm being restricted all the time … [later on] … It's very difficult, its, er, I*

*find it very difficult. It's the most painful thing I've ever known … last year was the worst year of my life because I was so far away from them and I was so distant from them.*

While Bob's position is common, it is clear that some mothers tended to regard a deterioration in contact simply as a loss of interest in the child, particularly, as is the case here, when we did not interview the father:

> [Ex-partner] *just accepted that she would go with me and that was it. It never even came into discussion that she would stop with him, never. He's not really been interested … not been there for her.*

In some cases, men made particularly emotive descriptions of the *child's* feelings of pain and hurt at times of separation. For example, the primary caregiver father discussed in the last chapter, because his partner suddenly left him, has recently resumed visits with his child. He describes his young son's behaviour when it was his turn to return to his mother: 'it was horrible sometimes when sort of leaving … he'd be screaming, not wanting to'. He reports that their son would sometimes say 'go away Mummy' when required to go to her which, he appreciates, made it difficult for her.

A father's psychological reaction to separation from the child cannot easily be distinguished from his feelings about his ex-partner. For example, Leslie Farrimond describes how his attempts to 'deepen' his relationship with his daughter have always been thwarted by his ex-partner, Tanya. This has been the case right from the pregnancy which was a 'heart-rending' time for Leslie as he found Tanya was very inconsistent about the degree of involvement she wanted from him. In the early days of their separation 'she didn't want me to see Daisy at all. I begged her to let me see her many times. I begged her to let me hold my child and she wouldn't.' The strongly emotive language he uses suggests he feels very deprived of his child,

but such sentiments seem interdependent with feelings of blame and anger towards Tanya.

## 'His' and 'her' understanding of post-separation fathering

While fathers who discuss their emotions tend to cite the pain of living apart from their children, their partners do not always present the same picture. The same goes for the amount and type of contact between father and child. Almost 30 years ago, the sociologist Jessie Bernard (Bernard, 1972) suggested that any marriage can be portrayed quite differently by each spouse. In the 1990s, divorce has been similarly depicted. The same holds for ex-cohabiting mothers and fathers. For example, in the following extracts, two parents, who had been partners, describe their feelings about the fact that the mother organises who looks after the children and when. Her view of his lack of organisation is complemented by his perception of her as 'controlling':

> Mother:  *I have made certain demands over the years about carving up the responsibility, it's still always been me really that's managed in that sort of sense about who does what … I have played a strong role in organising it, cos he's not a particularly good organiser.*
>
> Father:  *She still arranges everything and is controlling really and I mean someone has to do it I suppose. But it's just I feel again, as ever … I have to fit in with her plans.*

Such differences of view are not restricted to opinions about routine. In the following extract, Peter Cross describes how his relationship with his son is strong enough to override what he perceives to be his ex-partner's attempts to undermine it:

> *There are so many ways that she's affected my relationship with John or tried to. The one thing she couldn't affect was how John and I felt about each*

*other, that's the one thing she couldn't affect, the one thing that she could never have any control over because it was outside her experience.*

## The dynamics of father–child contact

The discussion about the patterns of contact between the fathers and children shown in Figure 2 invariably involved consideration of the negotiations between the parents. While most couples had been through ups and downs and continue to depict events and relationships in very different ways, by the time these interviews took place some form of stasis had been reached in their arrangements about paternal contact. Table 8 presents the responses to the question: 'Have you encouraged or discouraged [partner's] relationship with the child / children? In what ways?' For 43 respondents, we were able to code their answers into a predominant category. As the table shows, these varied from active discouragement to strong encouragement.

In the three cases of discouragement of their partners' involvement, negotiations over the nature of paternal contact were heated, as was discussion about financial exchange. For example, Lucy Smith stated simply, 'I would prefer him to keep away full stop, yeah'. Fifteen respondents, most of whom had been separated longer, described a period of initial discouragement immediately after the separation, followed by either a gradual acceptance of the partner's involvement ($N = 6$) or an indifference ($N = 9$). However, in the majority of cases, the account emphasised an encouragement

of ex-partners' continuing involvement with their children ($N = 20$) or strong encouragement ($N = 5$).

In the discussion about their partner's relationship with the children, a complexity of issues emerged. Four can be distinguished. The first concerned the parents' negotiation over their joint responsibilities. Some men mentioned their rights to a continuing attachment to the child, while some women wanted to negotiate to get some respite from the toils of childcare. Tanya Brown, for example 'encourages' the father's relationship with daughter Daisy:

*Definitely encouraged … I take her over to his house, I actually deliver her … we've come to this arrangement where it's once a fortnight … but, um, if he reduced it from once a fortnight I'd be annoyed, um, because it's my only chance to get out and have a night life.*

Second, the majority of parents described in Table 8 acknowledged the rights of their partner. This did not just involve the claims that fathers had on keeping in touch with their children. Some mothers described how it was important to them that their partners were *not* forced or persuaded against their will into maintaining contact if they did not want to. Rosina Stewart, for example, maintained: 'I've encouraged him to be what he wants to be and as involved as he wants to be'. Mia Richardson describes her partner's continuing relationship with daughter Tracy as follows:

*He has done it all himself really … I wouldn't have forced him. I wouldn't want that you know. I wouldn't*

**Table 8 Responses to the question: 'Have you encouraged or discouraged [partner's] relationship with the child/children? In what ways?**

| Strong encouragement | Encouragement | 'Take it or leave it' | Initial discouragement followed by encouragement | Discouragement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 20 | 9 | 6 | 3 |

*have wanted that their relationship to have been under false … you know him not wanting to really.*

Clearly, what Rosina, Mia and other women desire is for their partners to *want* to be involved. However, given that mothers appear to assume that the child will live with them and is primarily 'theirs', they often depict paternal commitment to maintain contact as voluntary.

Third, parents' feelings about the appropriateness and benefits of the child's relationship with the other parent were described in very dynamic terms, reflecting mainly the parents' changing views about each other. For example:

- Stewart Saunders and Jane Hampson both described the aftermath of their separation as a difficult time during which Jane was effectively preventing Stewart's involvement with their son by physically removing him to live in a different town. However, now both parents agree that Jane encourages Stewart's relationship with their son 'after the first stage when things got a bit mellower and, er, Stewart got over his upset'. For his part, Stewart describes how: 'the first year was difficult because there was resentment going on and … we had arguments' and he contrasts this with the current more harmonious relationship between them: 'you know that she's a good friend … now we can talk to each other, um, very openly'.

- A second father had made an unsuccessful effort to assert his paternal claims when his partner had taken their son on an extended trip abroad. We interviewed the partners several years later, after the onset of his drink-related problems, having to be persuaded by his ex-partner to take a more active part in the child's upbringing:

*There was a time where I felt like I had to say to him that* [child's name]*'s missing you, you know, it's been a while and, er, but I think he just felt like he wasn't fit to do the job really.*

The fourth issue concerns a strong belief in maintaining a status quo for the sake of the child. This manifested itself in many respondents' accounts of the need to present the ex-partner in a positive light to the children, whatever their own feelings about them:

*I try to be positive about him … if I'm going through a phase where I feel it's all a bit much coping on my own, like you know, I'll say things like 'oh I wish your dad was here' or something like that but on the whole I'm positive about him.* (Vicky Cotterell)

*And I have launched into some tirade about 'and your bloody father doesn't do anything useful' or whatever and the kids have basically turned round and said 'Don't have a go at dad – it's not his fault' and I've always consciously tried not to do that … but I have on a few occasions.* (Paula Palmer)

*I've always said 'your mum comes first, your mum's best, your mum's number one always – because the mistake my parents did – my mother undermined my father through us. She used to say 'Your dad did this, your dad did this' … she made my father out to be some sort of an evil man.* (Tim Bridges)

There is a range of ways of encouraging the ex-partner's relationship with the children. These include passive strategies such as not standing in the way of contact and ensuring that negative comments are not made about the ex-partner. They also include the active promotion of contact, the encouragement of phone calls and letter writing, and reminding the partner about birthdays. Sometimes they include the organisation of 'family' get-togethers, mainly at birthdays and Christmas, in which ex-partners tolerate and even enjoy each other's company in order to demonstrate solidarity to their children. Such solidarity was especially in

evidence in Peter Cross's account of the time when he let his ex-partner live with him again when another very traumatic and violent relationship had ended for her:

> *She took over the place. I mean, it wasn't my place any more. She is a very dominant personality, very difficult personality to live with … we've never had a good relationship. But I … she's Phil's mum so I looked after her … her parents wouldn't do it and there was nobody else, she didn't have any friends, nobody else would look after her. I'm making myself to be a saint here … but basically I just did what I thought was necessary to make things easier for Phil, I didn't like it, but, er, I did it anyway.*

## Conclusion

This chapter echoes much previous research (e.g. Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997) in showing that the paternal contact is fluid and determined by the interaction of many factors, centred around the negotiation between mother and father. These negotiations demand a focus on the power relations that exist between the parents as both parties attempt to maintain or develop their respective responsibility and attachment to their children. This process will provide the focus for the next chapter.

## Summary

- The man's role in childcare drops considerably even if he has been the primary carer of his child, but usually increases with time as the parents' relationship reaches an even keel (see Figure 2).

- Given that they all acquired residence with the children, the mothers were depicted as being in control of paternal contact, both in keeping men at arm's length in some cases and encouraging their involvement in others.

- Many mothers and fathers acknowledge that parenting at a distance is a painful experience for men.

- Mothers and fathers often depict the same events and relationships in different ways.

- Once the mother–father relationship has settled down, most encourage their ex-partner's relationship with the child.

# 6 Who 'owns' the children? Power and parenting after separation

*... the mother as the resident parent is the gatekeeper to the father's physical contact with children, thus her central position, between father and child, is fundamental for a relationship with children in the context of non-residency.*
(Bradshaw *et al.*, 1999, p. 208)

This chapter re-examines the couple's negotiations over the child in the light of the legal issues described at the end of Chapter 4 and the parents' descriptions of the father's changing contact with the child in Chapter 5. Parenting is a complex mix of authority, responsibility, psychological attachment to and investment in a child. Each aspect is mediated through the relations between partners after separation and concerns issues to do with ownership and power:

*I think an awful lot of men and women too for that matter view offspring as some sort of possession, as some sort of social status, as if they've bought the new flipping Toyota or something, you know what I mean.* (Tony Lucas)

Analyses of the family have increasingly focused on the use of power in relationships between parents (e.g. Bradshaw *et al.*, 1999; Dallos and Dallos, 1997; Simpson *et al.*, 1993; Smart and Neale, 1999). For example, Bradshaw *et al.* describe a reciprocal loop between the mother and father over paternal contact and child maintenance. As the two previous chapters testify, on every topic which we discussed (not just the issue of maintenance), the respondents drew us back to the issue of power. The sections of this chapter attempt to map its dimensions over and above the immediate concerns over child maintenance and contact. In addition to the legal and cultural issues discussed in Chapter 4, these include matters concerning housing and property 'rights', financial obligations, social support and physical power. We will discuss each of these dimensions in turn.

## The power of residence: an Englishwoman's home is her castle

At the point of separation, relationships that previously have appeared to be based on egalitarian principles soon resort to type. Not only is it assumed that it is 'right' for the children to live with their mother, in the vast majority of cases it is also assumed that the father will leave the place of residence. In the 36 households discussed in our interviews, the father moved out at the separation in 31 cases and mother and child moved away in four. Craig Parker gives a typical account:

> Amalia: Did you want him to come and live with you?
>
> Craig: Oh no ... We had this agreement about the house ... it was much more sensible that she stayed with the kids and had the house and they had a kind of stable, domestic environment.

Craig's ex-partner Kate Cox gives the following account of Craig's approach to the matter of their son's residence: 'he felt that Edward was better off in a secure house, a house he knew'. Similarly, Gavin Fraser sees his partner's claim to the council house and their children as interdependent, although he is less accepting of the assumption that mothers should naturally reside with the child on separation:

> I thought to myself, well, you know, if she wanted to finish with me and move on I could have kept – stayed there with my little lad like, but she ended up having it and I got myself a flat and the kid a couple of days a week.

Gavin implies that his ex-partner may have forfeited some of her 'ownership' by initiating the separation, although he does not seem to have felt on strong enough ground with this source of power to exercise it. Why did Gavin underplay his own contribution to the outcome of the 'negotiation' by

using the phrase 'she ended up'? 'Ownership' of the child is strongly linked to place of residence and provision of an appropriate 'home'. Later in the interview Gavin said: 'she wanted to finish with me and it went without saying that she got the house, I didn't even bother fighting for it'. The described effects are common. Gavin defers to his ex-partner: 'she's generally ... I agree with everything, she's a good parent. I shall only agree with everything she does with him like you know.' Even though he initially had regular residential contact for two days a week, this soon diminished to a weekly visit:

> But in time, facilities for me were much more difficult for a child than it was for her. She had a nice council house with his little bedroom. Sometimes I'd have a bedsit where he'd sleep in the same room as me ... it felt more like it was his proper home where the council house was, you know ... where he was brought up.

Gavin sums up the power of residence very clearly. When a man leaves his partner, child and home he is often forced, by geographical distance and an inability to provide the same quality of housing for the child, into becoming a secondary parent. In Gavin's case, this is given as a reason for a gradual shift from regular paternal care to weekly contact. Craig Parker, who was cited above, has two or three nights of residence with his child per week, so not all fathers are thwarted by having to move out. Nevertheless, a large number of men commented on the disadvantages of not being able to offer an environment that matched that of the mother's home.

## Financial power: 'I have to pay to get my child'

As Bradshaw *et al*. (1999) suggest, one very tangible form of staking a claim to the children is to provide for them. There are many cases where there is an implicit understanding that financial contribution to the child's upbringing buys the contributor a

greater share in the child. In some cases, this is explicit and often it has become so because the trade-off between money and contact time with children has been a major cause of conflict. In this father's case, the conflict has ostensibly come about because his ex-partner failed to turn up for the appointed times of contact:

> I asked her what it would take in order for her to turn up to the meetings we had arranged and she told me that, er, she would feel she would do that if I paid her some money and, er, I was horrified really because I felt that I was basically, er, either you can either perceive it as a kind of blackmail ... I had to pay £5 a week out of my dole in order to get to see my daughter, which I did do, but I wasn't very impressed really ... I have to pay to get my child.

In presenting himself as a highly attached father who cares deeply about the maintenance of his relationship with his daughter he has to make sacrifices:

> Father:   Living on the dole ... I am happy to give her money when I've got it. Er, sometimes I've given it to her when I haven't got it. I've gone hungry to give her a few pounds.
> Jo:       Why have you done that then?
> Father:   Um to make sure that the contact with [child's name] *stays consistent because otherwise* [ex-partner] *sabotages it, to be blunt.*

One of the two fathers whose child chose to live with him also reports on the bartering that went on with his ex-partner where he was allowed to see his son in return for money:

> I gave her money for [child's name] ... I've always been the complete father despite the circumstances ... she used to get money off me so she could go out with a guy: 'If you give me money so I can go out you can have [child's name] *tonight'* ... so I'd give her money, so I could get [child's name]. *I bought him, basically.*

While some fathers feel that they have to 'buy' contact with their children, some mothers feel ambivalent about their desire to seek financial support. For example, Linda Nicholson is aware of the same trade-off but believes that if she insists on her ex-partner contributing financially she will risk souring their relations and compromise his relationship with their daughter:

> He's never contributed to her upkeeping in a financial sense. And I think in the end it became too bitter to discuss with him because I was more concerned with the fact that he wasn't coming up to see her. So I decided that I wouldn't mention money any more you know, because I'd rather he came up to see her ... I thought if I made him angry about discussing money then he's not going to come up and see her.

She believes he has no feeling of responsibility for his daughter but she recognises that he believes: 'if he doesn't see her he doesn't have to pay'.

Nine couples had decided that the mother should claim benefits as a single parent, effectively hiding the father's continuing financial involvement with his child. During the cohabitation both parents were able to benefit financially from this arrangement but after separating this left the father financially powerless and also without claims to a family residence in council housing:

> Well, she just had everything for him. She lived in a council house, she got all the money for him ... Child Benefit, she had it all, that was it. She had it all ... she was in control of the money ... single parent, yeah. (Gavin Fraser)

Financial power does not only concern issues to do with access to the children. Where one ex-partner earns more, the other often feels aggrieved and the divorce literature is full of the expression of such feeling in mothers. In this sample, there were as many cases of the father feeling aggrieved at his less stable financial position, particularly if his ex-partner had both more contact with the children and a better job:

> Father 1: Nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine times out of a thousand I'd go along with it, she would argue it's because I'm an idle bugger and I have nothing else better to do than look after children while she goes and shifts bits of paper around up at toy town, you know.

> Father 2: I would prefer not to have anything to do with her any more ... I imagine I might have got on a bit better if that had been the case. But I am constantly being, um, kind of reminded by how powerful she is and how much money she's got and how many friends she's got and you know what a kind of shit life I've got instead.

## Social power: support from friends, parents and new partners

One source of power for both parents in their negotiations over 'ownership' of the child is the practical and emotional support of others. Three main categories of social support were raised by the respondents:

- a social network of friends, often in a similar position themselves

- the child's grandparents

- new partners.

### A social network of friends

In keeping with the general literature on parenting, respondents often mentioned that the activities they undertook with the child and their level of parental self-confidence were influenced by the perceptions of support from friends. In the case of 'Father 2', cited above, the man had had primary care of the children when they were young. Each parent placed a strong value on the role of friends, described as fulfilled in the mother's case but unfulfilled in the father's. In the extract reported above, he portrays her as having lots of friends and

sees this as part of her power. He says he was 'stuck with this screaming baby and not having any friends'. She recalls that she 'went back to work' and he 'didn't have any friends in that part of Preston'.

This mother now has residence and she stated that she now has a network of friends who are mothers, resident with their children after separation, who both care for each other's children and offer a listening ear. Such mutual support seems to be an important aspect of the daily lives of many women in the sample and does not seem to apply to the men we interviewed. Penny Landis, for example, describes this form of social support:

> I am lucky I've got a lot of support really from friends and we do lots of swaps you know. Weekends we look after each other's kids so we get breaks and things. So in a way it's like, um, it's good because my friends always used to say that to me ... I thought 'no I can't do it alone' and they always said 'Well you've got lots of friends – you've got lots of friends in the same boat' ... with like single parents who you know, there's just no fathers about at all.

**The role of grandparents**
Some respondents stressed the role of the child's grandparents in the negotiations over childcare and support. For example, in Linda Nicholson's case, her 'out-laws' took her to court on their son's behalf so that they could maintain contact with him. Sally Rogers, in contrast, set up an arrangement for her ex-partner's mother to care for her daughter when her ex-partner rather suddenly appeared to turn his back on his daughter. Not only did she feel that it was important for her daughter to maintain contact with her father's side of the family, she also needed someone to help care for the child while she worked.

We did not explicitly ask about grandparents, but they came up in discussion enough to signal their importance in couples' separations and in continuing patterns of contact and care. The most

extreme example of this is a father who gave a chilling account of the way his mother-in-law has manipulated his access to his two daughters making it extremely difficult for him to see them. His ex-partner had been reasonably accommodating of his desire to keep in contact with the child until she moved back to her mother's house. He left his job and moved hundreds of miles to be within visiting distance, only to find that his ex-partner now refused him permission to go near them, explicitly as a result of advice and support from her mother. In other cases, the grandparent's support is less overt but forms a significant contribution to the parent's overall power base.

**New partners**
It is difficult to ascertain how much power is exercised by new partners – but in some accounts the new partner seems to have a considerable influence on access arrangements. In the following extract, a man describes the influence of his new partner and then, later in the interview, the influence of her new partner:

> When I split with [ex-partner's name] I went out with somebody else. She didn't particularly like kids so it was difficult for me to have the kid because she didn't want me to have my kid, she just wanted me to myself like ... [later] Adrian [ex's new partner] laid the rules down ... saying 'Oh well, you can't do this and can't see him there and all that and then sometimes she's wanted me to go round there ... and sit in their house with her and her boyfriend and I don't want to play 'Happy Families' doing that with them ... I want to spend time on my own with him.
> (Father)

Another mother described the influence of her new partner's presence on the father, both in terms of the new man laying the law down and her ex-partner's response:

*As I said at the beginning, partly due to* [new partner]*'s influence pushing him to getting into some sort of organised structure rather than being very ad hoc and fluid, I have made certain demands over the years about, um, carving up the responsibility ... I don't remember actually sort of arguing with* [ex-partner's name] *with what we should do about the kids because we were doing what* [new partner] *wanted essentially ... but* [ex-partner's name] *is compliant in that sense ...* [later] *He* [ex-partner] *wasn't easy coming to my home because there was this other man there, as he would have been if I had been on my own.* (Mother)

## Physical power

No analysis of power between ex-spouses can neglect physical power. Like others before us (e.g. Smart and Neale, 1999), we did not set out to look for descriptions of violent incidents but such accounts emerged. Three of the mothers and four of the fathers described incidents of violence, and women as well as men voiced violent feelings towards their partners as an aspect of the stressful process of separation. Given the focus of this report on fathers, we briefly mention this reversal of the traditional understanding of couple power relations, although we do not wish to accentuate this or deny the important issue of men's violence towards women.

The following father was explicit about this reversal of physical power. First, he describes how his ex-partner would use access to their son as a reward for the man's sexual favours:

Father:  *Every time I saw* [son's name] *it was a bargaining thing.*

Jo:  *Bargaining over what?*

Father:  *Over sleeping with her. 'You can have* [son's name] *if you sleep with me' ... Yeah it is incredible. It was always dealing, wheeling and dealing.*

He also elaborates on the gap between society's traditional views of men and women and his own experience, by describing his ex-partner as 'extremely violent ... extremely violent ... extremely violent verbally. A very, very aggressive person.' He adds:

*The other hard thing about it was that, being the male, being the man, I am automatically in the wrong, in the eyes of society. The female always has the edge ... Women can do no wrong as far as society's concerned ... I'm talking about the difference between the ideals that people have and the reality of what a woman is. Now the ideal of a woman is the one who is dominated by the men all the time, that's the image the poor helpless woman ... The reality of it is that women can often be far more destructive and far more damaging than the man can in many ways ... in many ways.*

A second father commented:

*She was violent with me, physically violent and I found that extremely distressing ... She only attacked me once or twice really and it was quite savage and it was provoked by me having spent an hour with somebody that ... I was organising a course with who was supposed to be her best friend and, er, she attacked me, hit me and bit me really severely and left me with a bad bite mark on my palm. I mean I was just so shocked really. It's not the first time I've been attacked by a woman.*

Later he describes his own lack of violence in the relationship:

[Ex-partner's name] *went round telling people I was unreliable, violent and didn't give her any money. And, in fact, I feel that I was really reliable, I was paying money in order to see* [daughter] *and I definitely wasn't violent. Definitely not. The most violent thing I ever did was to thrust a bottle of remedies towards her* [laugh]*, not even hit her with it or anything, no.*

A third father describes the threatening behaviour of his ex-partner and is anxious to distance himself from the 'traditional' pattern of gender relations:

*As far as I know I never threatened* [ex-partner's name] *in any way whatsoever. My major act of violence towards her was when we moved out and I threw a cushion at her because she wasn't pulling her weight as far as moving the furniture was concerned. Um, but she took to going to bed with a hammer under the bed, um, which, you know, it felt threatening to me even though I wasn't threatening her.*

He associates his ex-partner's behaviour with his general feeling of powerlessness:

*I don't remember a single event where, you know, I threatened her or I didn't do what she wanted me to do. I mean I felt very much, especially for the last two years, like I was under her control, you know, like I would do whatever she wanted in order to keep the relationship together.*

A fourth father adds:

*She was always apologising for thumping me ... she was a troublemaker and, um, the violence as well. If I stood up to her, I hated ... I'm not a person who likes rowing, but if I did stand up to her she used to get quite violent ... She would start shouting, which I would then try and cool down because she shouts so loud the whole house would hear you see and it would frighten the children. But she sometimes used to get so wound up and then she'd kick me or go at me with something.*

He describes a particularly violent incident which acted as a watershed in their relationship and led to the separation:

*She ... beat me up, probably the worst she's ever done ... bust me nose, me eye, me lip, bruises all over me, in front of the kids, in front of neighbours, in front of witnesses.*

## Conclusion

In keeping with Smart and Neale's (1999) analysis of families, this chapter has attempted to show that mothers and fathers negotiate their rights over residence, property and contact with the child in subtle and not so subtle ways. Smart and Neale use the term 'debilitative' power when the give and take of a relationship is impeded. When they discussed the events of the separation, the respondents in this study often used language that depicts such power relations. For example, one of the primary caregiver fathers felt that the imbalance occurred when he and his partner reversed roles:

*I did resent, um, having to do a lot of the childcare and not being valued very much for that ... my whole self-image took a terrible plunge.*

Leslie Farrimond describes a relationship where he has always felt powerless. He uses many phrases that convey a strong sense of powerlessness: 'I felt very trampled on ... I felt very crushed ... I felt toyed with ... she wouldn't listen'. Leslie described the separation experience as 'she threw me out'. Andy Evans believes that his ex-partner perceives him as 'weak' and that she does not adequately understand his depression:

*I think her phrase that she would use is that 'you are so weak – I didn't realise that you are so weak'.*

It is perhaps partly because many in this group of men were striving for more balanced gender roles that they felt so aggrieved about events. This father describes the decision-making process between himself and his ex-partner during their cohabitation:

*I was probably told,* [name] *being* [name]. *This is the way it's going to happen, this is the way I've decided and that's that. And I probably just went along with it, being mere male.*

Throughout the interviews, we were impressed by the assumption made by respondents, despite their attempts to bridge the gender divide, that mothers have a 'natural' claim to ownership of children. What do our respondents say about the source of women's superior power regarding their claims to children? We end this chapter with a lengthy assessment of the difference of men's power by one father. He not only raises the issue of the feelings that give rise to the need for a power struggle after separation and the negotiations that occur when the mother lets the father back into the child's life. He also defines women's power as 'awesome' and describes how he feels he has claimed his own empowerment through his own independence:

> Father:    Mmmm, I mean since kind of separating from [partner's name] *and* [daughter's name] ... *the most difficult thing was* [partner's name] *is sort of slightly, her anger and her bitterness at the situation, the predicament ... she didn't always make it easy for me to cope with my situation and never really was prepared to look at it from my perspective as well as her own. So I found that I was continually having to appease, I felt that she could manipulate me at any time she wanted. I did feel that she allowed me in and I was always very, very ... um, I respected her you know, I was pleased that she, that she didn't prevent me from seeing* [daughter's name] *or anything like that. But, um, I felt that there was always, I didn't like the way she would, um, I felt, I felt, I did feel though that she had the upper hand and that she used it and that she knew she always could, until I had more of a track record, which I have now. And it's just because of that that I have more power in a sense just because I have now established myself with and* [daughter's name] *... I've found*

> *my own autonomy, I've found my own power essentially which a lot of guys who are desperate who go and do awful things, they don't feel empowered.*

> Jo:    *How have you managed to find your own power then?*

> Father:    *By going out and getting it, by learning to stand on my own two feet, which is still a struggle because blokes, I mean, it's not talked about ... but in psychological terms I think guys put on a bravado of being able and capable but I mean at the end of the day mothers, because they bring children into the world, women have, and because of their sexual power, have awesome power and, um ... now women have economic power as well. Um, it's very easy to be pushed around and not be your own person and to become a victim of that.*

> Jo:    *You feel you've somehow acquired the power?*

> Father:    *Well by actually moving away and doing my own thing I've acquired that.*

## Summary

- Living in a new residence puts the father at a considerable disadvantage. His accommodation may not have space for the children and may be removed from their belongings and the area with which they are familiar.

- Negotiations over money are perceived differently by ex-partners. He feels that he has to 'buy' his rights to see his children, while she might feel that he is not living up to his commitments.

- Many fathers commented that they did not have the social support network to help them in their parenting activities that their ex-partners had.

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- While we acknowledge that violence is used more often by men on women, we chart here some examples of women's violence towards men.

- Given that many of the women in this sample were expected to have a natural ownership of the child, many men felt powerless in their attempts to maintain their contact with and responsibilities towards their children.

# 7  Conclusions

This report has attempted to broaden the debate on parenting after cohabitation breakdown. The perspectives of and about fathers after parental separation presented in this report suggest that key issues need to be better understood so that policies concerning such families can become more 'joined up'. Over the past 15 years, governments of very different political persuasions appear to have united in their efforts to renegotiate issues of responsibility between parents, children and the state. In this chapter, we briefly summarise the study before considering in the final chapter these parents' own reflections on the policy implications surrounding how we understand cohabitation, its breakdown and services for parents in their circumstances.

## Summary of the main findings

The study focused on cohabitation breakdown in order to illuminate three issues: the nature of cohabitation as a lifestyle, the commitment of fathers within cohabiting relationships and the contact between men and their children once a cohabitation breaks down. Before we summarise the findings, two 'health warnings' should be issued:

1  *Perspective of the study*: the aim was to explore the father's angle on the separation experience. Even the mothers in the sample were asked to reflect on the father's perspective. This means that the accounts reported here present only one of many, possibly divergent, ways of describing the experiences of post-separation parenting and should be understood as such.

2  *Generalisability of the findings*: the accounts presented in this study represent the views of a small sample which, despite attempts to select from across a local community, could not be deemed to be representative of the population. The accounts should be read as a reflection on diverse experiences, rather than a reflection on all men's feelings about cohabitation breakdown.

The aim of the study was to look at the ways in which cohabiting relationships and fathering are understood, with a level of detail that is not characteristic of most studies of cohabitation and relationship breakdown, even if the sample is 'unrepresentative'. The views of these parents should be taken seriously both because of the complexity of analyses of individual experiences given to us and the fact that we interviewed a variety of couples and individuals.[1]

The picture of cohabitation presented by these respondents was that it cannot be described in simple, unitary terms. Within a research interview (or when ex-cohabitees describe the breakdown in other settings), it is easy to depict a relationship that has ended in a straightforward way – for example, as a transient state, as a mistake that was dogged by the 'failings' of one partner, or as a permanent relationship that went wrong. However, Chapter 2 attempted to explore the depths of individual accounts to show that, beyond such surface descriptions, respondents depicted greater complexities, contrasts and contradictions. Some described it as a lesser form of relationship to marriage – often using the term 'just cohabitation' to make such a comparison. A larger proportion depicted the two types of relationship as being broadly equivalent forms of 'commitment' between partners. The predominant response was for cohabitees to argue that this relationship is a more morally sound relationship than marriage. That many individual respondents negotiated between these ways of comparing the two reveals the tensions in individual viewpoints and the need to move beyond simple classifications of relationships.

To support their expressed commitment to equality in cohabiting relationships, in Chapter 3 it was noted that 72 per cent of respondents reported a belief that the father and mother should be

equally involved in childcare. Over half of these (47 per cent) had carried out such an arrangement for at least part of the time they lived together with the child. How do such patterns fit in with national data? There have been increased trends towards reported sharing of parental responsibilities in couples (e.g. Ferri and Smith, 1996) but there have always been questions about what 'sharing' might mean (Lewis, 1986). In these families, many fathers had undoubtedly been very involved in childcare to the extent that five (14 per cent) had had the main caregiving responsibility at some stage in the cohabitation.

Despite an expressed commitment to egalitarianism in the partnership and childcare, these relationships divided along lines of gender once they started to go wrong, or perhaps before. In keeping with the literature on divorce, Chapter 4 showed how the mother and father depict the relationship in different ways, particularly when the dissolution was discussed. 'She' describes his immaturity, in part because his commitment to childcare and issues which promote cohabitation as a lifestyle militate against him fulfilling traditional expectations that a man should be the main breadwinner for the family. 'He' describes the problems with breaking away from traditional values and her lack of understanding. Similar differences of viewpoint have also been noted in recent research on divorce (e.g. Seltzer and Brandreth, 1994) and cohabitation breakdown (Smart and Stevens, 2000). Such different attributions of the same experiences are the material of disputes and feelings after relationship breakdown.

Whatever the reasons for the separation, the mother retained residence with the child even when the father had been the primary caregiver. In Chapter 5, these parents described the many changes, negotiations and renegotiations in the amount and nature of contact between father and child that have been described in the recent analyses of parenting after divorce. Many fathers attempted to maintain their levels of contact, but felt thwarted in part by their precarious legal position. As both parents suggested, the father's contact with the child depended in large part on the changes in their relationship with the mother. However, in two cases, the child had elected to live with the father after many years of visitation.

In keeping with the divorce literature, parents describe cohabitation breakdown in terms of the power relationship between parents that centres around where each partner lives (and with whom), financial exchange and social support, among other factors. Chapter 6 attempts to show that negotiations over managing the relationship and its break up, childcare and parental responsibility have to be seen in the context of the continuing and changing power dynamic between the parents. As a result, the child can be depicted as a commodity who is alluded to using a language of 'ownership' by one parent or another.

## Conclusion

The reflections of parents presented in this chapter draw the study to a close. They suggest that any understanding of fathering after the breakdown of cohabitation must take into consideration the complexity of factors that influence our assumptions and judgements about the obligations of non-resident fathers towards their children and their perceived rights to have regular contact. While these men (they are not necessarily representative of all fathers after cohabitation breakdown) reported themselves and were reported by their ex-partners as highly involved when they were resident, they became distanced from their children after separation. The views they presented about their position within the law and services to support families and children affirm a first conclusion that the debate about non-resident fathers needs to continue. Second, the parents in this study suggest that we need to place greater emphasis on the individual and relationship issues

that this report has discussed, as these are vital in the more pressing financial obligations that are negotiated through interactions. We leave the last word to one father:

*There's too much talked about money and maintenance and not enough about relationships and engaging and sorting things out, and the realities of the economic world we live in and how ... things actually take years to sort out sometimes and you can't expect instant results ... the government should talk less about Child Support Agency and more about the difficulties of absentee parenting, the nightmares involved of absentee parenting. And, unless you're really strong, which I am, you'll never manage and you'll cause more problems for the children and more problems for the exs.* (Tim Bridges)

# 8  Policy issues

The topics covered in this report raise a number of issues which are being hotly discussed in the press and wider policy debates. Many of these go beyond the scope of a report of this kind as they involve much wider values. For example, the increase in divorce and cohabitation has prompted a widespread debate about the religious and social sanctity of marriage, exemplified by the debates over Clause 28 in Parliament in March 2000. However, the cohabitees quoted in Chapter 2 take a different ethical stance on their relationships. It is important to understand such a stance, since almost four in ten couples now reject these values and choose to bear children out of wedlock (Office for National Statistics, 2000).

A second issue which serves as a backdrop for the discussion here concerns a debate which has been continuing for over 25 years, mainly prompted by the organisation Families Need Fathers (e.g. Secker, 2001). This is the automatic assumption that mothers are the rightful 'owners' of children when a couple separate. While both parents have been legally entitled to obtain residence with the child, paternal responsibility for the child is very much the exception. Even when the parents have been legally married, in nine out of ten cases the woman assumes residence with the child and in half of the rest of cases (i.e. 5 per cent of the total) she 'wins' residence. So, when we discuss paternal responsibility after cohabitation below, we must take the maternal 'right' to the child as a benchmark. As Katherine Emerson puts it:

> And, um, I suppose as well with cohabiting now being the in thing rather than marriage, they haven't got as many rights over the children, I suppose, that's another downfall. Mind you, I don't think they have many rights anyway, I think the law automatically sees that the mother's gonna get custody of the children unless she's been an absolute bitch, basically, or the mother gives the children up.

In this section, we report our discussions with our respondents about three policy issues which relate specifically to cohabiting fathers: parental responsibility, paternal obligations and process of parental negotiation after separation. We discuss each of these issues in turn.

## Parental responsibility and cohabiting fathers

In concluding her report on parental separation, Ros Pickford (1999, p. 42) stated 'The current law is not functioning satisfactorily'. As we reported in Chapter 4, the parents in this study echoed her conclusions. Most knew almost nothing about the law concerning unmarried fathers' responsibilities. One clear reason why they are confused is that many separated fathers think of their 'rights' to contact with the child, while the law focuses on their legal responsibilities.

There is a general assumption that a name on the birth certificate signifies such parental responsibility (or in their terms 'rights') for the child. The latter confusion will change if promised legislation is enacted to identify parental responsibility in all fathers whose names are on the birth certificates of their children. As Smart and Stevens (2000) suggest, this change would simply bring the law into line with current assumptions and practice. There has been a three-year lag between the government's expressed commitment to such a law. At the time of writing (April 2002), the Adoption and Children Bill is likely to pass into law by June 2002. This would give parental responsibility to all fathers named on their children's birth certificates. However, this legal change would not necessarily clarify the position of men who have cared for their children and who seek to maintain that care. The implementation of the Human Rights Act (November 2000) appears to have done little to allow men to establish or fulfil their obligations to their estranged children.

All the issues discussed in this report reflect on the issues surrounding parental responsibility once a separation has taken place. Such issues usually revolve around men's reactions to becoming non-resident parents. Like men following divorce, these fathers usually lost daily connection with the child and were continuing to renegotiate with their ex-partners. Such a distance between non-resident fathers and their children is usually taken as a sign of paternal indifference, particularly as many fail adequately to provide funds for the child and appear to their ex-partners to forfeit their rights to regular contact. In keeping with the literature on non-resident fathers (e.g. Bradshaw *et al*., 1999), there were clear inconsistencies in some men's accounts. Men acknowledged that fathers should provide for their children but expressed reasons for not doing so based on issues over having to pay to see their child and their continuing struggles with their ex-partners.

It is easy simply to rule men out of the picture as shared parenting is difficult, particularly for mothers as resident parents (e.g. Gunnoe and Braver, 2001). Yet, these fathers were highly committed to a belief in paternal responsibility. Like Edward Kruk (1991), whose study was discussed in Chapter 1, we found that many fathers expressed feelings of disturbance at being separated from their children. This was the result of not being able to maintain the frequent and regular contact that fuels an emotionally close relationship with a child. The issue for these men was not to do with the unmarried father's lack of legal rights, unless of course these prevented him from gaining access to his children. For most men, parental responsibility, in terms of their psychological commitment to their children, was very strong:

> *It's a huge ... well everything, it's not just one thing, parenting is a whole life, it should be, it should be a whole life. It's doing things by example, it's by teaching, it's by being close, it's by showing the children that they've got someone there who loves*

*them no matter what. There's such a huge range of things, it's not just one thing about being good as a parent.* (Bob Hinde, his emphasis)

The very commitment of many fathers in this sample reinforces the need to keep open the debate on parental responsibility into the new parliament. Large numbers of men fail to acquire responsibility for their children and, while some may not 'deserve' such contact, most of the men in this study were reported to be highly committed to the care of their children and to their duties as parents. The Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law published its consultation paper *Making Contact Work* in 2001 to open up debate about how contact between non-resident parents (i.e. men) and their children might be maintained. While many men in this sample would appreciate such moves, they would be more likely to support the Families Need Fathers position that shared parenting is the solution, not better contact for a second-class parent (Secker, 2001).

## The Child Support Agency: a narrow, pragmatic view of fathering?

While the legal position of most unmarried fathers remains unclear, since they so rarely take out Parental Responsibility Agreements, they are financially liable to support their children, following the Child Support Act of 1991. By focusing exclusively on men's roles as providers, the procedures of the Child Support Agency (CSA) necessarily influence the ways in which we understand and discuss fathering in separated families. In short, the CSA reinforces a cultural norm that men's predominant role is financially to provide for children (for a discussion see Warin *et al*., 1999).

We asked parents explicitly about their involvement (actual and possible) with the CSA. The parents seemed to divide along lines of gender in ways that are in keeping with differences

reported above, linked only by a general mistrust of the role of the state in dealing with private negotiations between ex-partners. The fathers were highly critical of the Agency and indeed of any partners' attempts to negotiate through it. Their view was that the CSA interfered with the subtle negotiation process in which non-resident fathers gradually acquire and maintain contact with their children. In the following extract, David Riley, like eight other fathers, contends that his payments actually prevent him from directly contributing to material goods for the child:

*Well I think it's totally crap, it's just a con that, it means that* [ex-partner's name] *is worse off, it means that I am worse off, so I've got less money to buy her clothes with and shoes with and all that sort of thing ... Well it doesn't go to* [ex-partner's name], *it goes to the Child Support Agency and I suppose they just pay state benefits out, don't they? They don't actually give the child the money. I would have no objection whatsoever giving, say, £100 a month and that goes on buying things for* [daughter].

Although most men appeared to accept the principle that fathers should contribute to the financial support of their children, most felt that the Agency takes the impetus away from parents to sort things out. Nine fathers mentioned this issue:

*It takes it out of your own hands to negotiate and I can understand when men don't want to negotiate, um, you know, well it's necessary maybe that it is taken out of their hands, you know if the man doesn't want to give anything ever, time, money, food or whatever it is to his child then somebody has to do something but, er, they don't take into consideration your own negotiations with it. They take it out of your hands in a way. Um, you know, as I say it's necessary at times but there's other times when people would have wished to do it their own way. I think a lot of people like to do it their own way and it doesn't allow that. Um and um, so I don't know really, it's one of those things, it's one of those things. I don't like this*

*particular organisation, the CSA, from what I can see of it. But I don't know it well anyway but I can see that it's been really unpopular and I never liked it and I never liked the way that they dealt with it. I don't like the way that the forms come, I don't like dealing with somebody I don't know, someone else, and it's something to do with my child, those sorts of things.*
(Steve McMahon)

Perhaps the most direct criticism of the CSA was that men who had experience of the Agency felt that they were the wrong targets. The CSA is seen as an organisation that selects involved fathers, not errant men who abrogate their responsibilities. As John Downing put it: 'They don't punish the absent father, they punish the fathers who are still there.'

The mothers tended to give a different response to this question. They tended to start their response with a general statement that men should provide financially for their children:

*Before the CSA there was this massive imbalance between men and women and children. Women and children on their own ... single parents were all living at the poverty level and a lot of the absent fathers were* [laugh] *... I don't think it's good for fathers to be, you know, for getting excessively big mortgages and then be rewarded for that. I think it's better that they know from the outset that a certain percentage of their money is gonna go towards the children, and for them to then work their finances around that.*
(Marie Martin)

In one-quarter of cases, the mothers made criticisms of the CSA either because they agreed with their ex-partners that its business should really be conducted independently by the parents, or because the Agency ties them into a formal relationship with someone whom they were trying to cut out of their lives:

*The CSA they, as soon as you claim as a single parent, the CSA get on your back and they really do pressure you, and pester you, and your life's not your*

*own. And I think a lot of the time you just want privacy to sort your problems out yourself.* (Katherine Emerson)

*I would prefer to have personal autonomy and separation from this person, from this man, and do without. I think he should contribute and I am grateful if he does and it's very helpful, but if he doesn't and it's not voluntary I prefer to just get on with it on my own. It's sort of my pride that's in the way.* (Claire Simpson)

## Closure: mediation and family breakdown

A third policy issue has been under discussion for the past several years. This concerns the role of external agencies in the breaking of intimate relationships. Debate and interest peaked in 1996 with the passing of the Family Law Act, which, among other things, attempted to break away from 'fault' as a basis for divorce and to establish a system of mediation for all divorcing couples. The implementation of this Act was abandoned by the Lord Chancellor (15 January 2001). One issue that was discussed at the beginning of this project concerned whether the services developed under the Act should be extended to all separating couples, regardless of their marital status. We asked all the respondents about their contact with marriage guidance and counselling services, like Relate, and about whether they would have been interested in mediation like that being piloted. Although the Act has been abandoned, we note their comments here.

We were surprised that one in three of the respondents had been involved in counselling, at least in terms of seeking personal help to manage the despair caused by the separation or to patch up the failing relationship. The reasons for contact were very varied and we did not ask specifically about who initiated contact with the agency concerned. Rather we focused on respondents' reactions to outside help. These reactions divided

into two diametrically opposed groups. The first reflects a, largely male, suspicion of outside 'help', while the second appears to suggest that skilled counsellors can be very useful in helping couples negotiate a change in their relationship:

*Towards the end we went to, um, er, a person at Relate but, um, in* [names a town], *but after the initial interview we were kind of given to a counsellor as it were and that session went so badly. And I think in part because this, um, counsellor was so, um, poor really. They spend a lot of time doing the kind of eyes up in the head kind of thing, as if it was all very boring and we were being silly.* (Andy Evans)

*Jo:* What, um, have you had any contact with mediation services like Relate?

*Paul Lofts:* Yeah Relate were brilliant. Yeah, [ex-partner's] *idea, er ... when* [daughter] *was born to go to see Relate to see if we could resolve some of the situations and they were fantastic. And they told us they were there to try and help us to clarify what we wanted, either to be together or to remain apart, and they did that, they clarified for me that we should remain apart. And very emotional thing for me the whole thing and it was brilliant and it really clarified for me that I was doing the right thing. And it was the best thing for* [daughter] *as well.*

The critical issue that appeared in so many interviews concerned the tension between individual freedom to negotiate yourself into and out of relationships and the problems involved in a process that was not regulated by the law, or by an outside agency. We conclude with two diametrically opposed statements about the role of mediation in working with couples as they separate. The first represents mothers who are convinced that any mediation will undoubtedly place them in a precarious position. The second is from a mother who sees that any attempts at

intervening with parents must look at the whole picture, not just the issue from the perspective of one participant:

Amalia: *Did you have any contact with mediation services like Relate?*

Mary O'Sullivan: *No, no, none at all. No.*

Amalia: *Did you know about the existence of any mediation services?*

Mary O'Sullivan: *Yeah, I've certainly heard. It was encouraged, no suggested by the Welfare Service that we went for mediation but we both refused. I didn't want to have any of it because what I've been told about mediation is that it is basically there to coerce the weaker party, which would have been me. Er, and I wasn't prepared to be put in that situation, cos I felt, and still feel, that I'm doing what is absolutely right for Christopher and I'm not going to have any do-gooder telling me that I'm doing wrong. Um, so the only mediation that looks possible is this face-to-face confrontation with* [ex-partner], *with the Welfare Service.*

*I think we need, I personally feel that we need, er, sort of* [to] *combine the legal process and the mediation processes and counselling and emotional support all together, because you can't work through some of the factual basic things that need sorting out without dealing with people's emotional at the same time. And I also felt very, very aggrieved at the lack of support that there is for the mother. I'm sure the father says the same thing from the other side. But I just, I don't know, I don't think you can separate out, but I think, OK, we've got to consider the needs of the children, but I just think it is a nonsense to not consider the needs of both parents really, but particularly the mother if that's where the child is living, because the health of the child is directly related to the stability, and emotional and psychological help of the mother, so I just can't see that you can divorce yourself from that fact.*
(Claire Simpson)

# Notes

## Chapter 1

1  The main reports in this 'series' on cohabitation are by Kiernan and Estaugh (1993), McRae (1993), Pickford (1999) and Smart and Stevens (2000).

## Chapter 4

1  Female respondents were significantly more likely to use a term like 'immaturity' to describe the failings of one partner (Chi-squared [1, $N = 50$] = 7.68, $p$ <.01). None selected themselves as the immature partner, while only one man selected his ex-partner.

## Chapter 5

1  There were 35 fathers represented in this analysis as one had recently died.

2  In this study, 15 per cent had no contact. This compares to 21 per cent in Maclean and Eekelaar's study.

3  We did not interview Alan's partner.

4  While Alan did not specify which legal order his partner had taken out against him, we presume it was a prohibited steps order of Section 8 of the Children Act, 1989.

## Chapter 7

1  In the overall sample, we interviewed both ex-partners about their relationship in 39 per cent of cases, in 36 per cent of cases we interviewed only the mother about her ex-partner as a father, while in the remaining 25 per cent of cases we interviewed only the father.

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# Appendix: The sample

Figure A1.1 (see page 60) is described here. Our aim was to obtain fathers from a variety of backgrounds, so that our sample did not contain just one subset of men. We knew that cohabitation is more likely to occur in unskilled workers who are in relatively deprived areas, but also in smaller numbers in middle-class groups. To locate both these types of fathers within an area with a small population we used the variety of informants identified at the top of Figure A1.1. Groups like after-school clubs were selected because they cater for parents who need additional support for the children and are likely to include lone parents.

Each number at the end of an arrow represents an individual or pair of ex-partners (e.g. 2b and 2a), with 'a' being the male and 'b' the female respondent. The sequence of arrows represents how the snowballing procedure worked in each case. While it was expected that we would obtain different types of individual from different sources (e.g. middle-class informants from 'Personal contacts' and working-class respondents from 'Community workers'), the process was much less clear-cut than this. As Figure A1.1 shows, a majority of initial contacts ended with one interview completed and no follow-up either with an ex-partner or with an acquaintance. However, some (notably 7b and 8b) led to large numbers of interviews.

**Figure A1.1  The snowballing procedure**