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**“Two bedrooms, two toothbrushes” : A qualitative study of
shared care parenting.**

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Abstract

Shared care is a post-separation family living arrangement whereby the children move between the parents living in two separate houses. This custody arrangement has grown more popular in the last few decades, although little is known about a young person's perspective of living shared care. The present study examined the views of 12 young adults who had experienced shared care family life. Thematic analysis revealed five broad themes. Firstly, "*The catalyst: parental separation*" focuses on the actual separation event, what they remembered, how it was communicated and what they would advise parents contemplating separation. The second theme '*logistics: two homes, one bag*' explores practical aspects of shared care; how participants adapted to two houses and their likes and dislikes about the arrangement. The third theme explores '*relationships: many and varied*' to discuss how shared care impacted relationships with each parent; the co-parenting relationship and the complexity of introducing new members into the family. The fourth theme examines "*wellbeing changes*" including mental and emotional wellbeing as well as financial changes participants experienced. The last theme "*reflections*" uses a strength based perspective to explore positive aspects, attributes and values that the participants attributed to their shared care family life. Participants strongly identified with having two separate valid homes. They adapted easily to shared care and found it unremarkable. They sometimes found the living arrangement inconvenient and the bag or suitcase that went between the two homes was a symbolic and evocative representation of living in shared care. Participants acquired personal attributes including: resilience, independence, compassion and adaptability. They also acquired enhanced interpersonal skills through managing different networks of people. Family life was important to them and they enjoyed warm relationships with both their parents. Whilst they discarded the traditional nuclear family convention, they embraced a fluid, versatile, encompassing and relational view of family view.

Acknowledgements

While writing the final chapter, I heard the shocking news that Kermit the frog and Miss Piggy are to part ways. Relationship separation is becoming pedestrian when puppet characters are joining the fray. If they had children I have no doubt that Kermit and Miss Piggy would consider shared care for their offspring.

Thank you to my supervisor, Keith Tuffin, who reminded me that writing a thesis, will take as long as one expects it to take (and then some). He kept me sane and supported me from, quite literally, all around the world.

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In memory of my mother, Mariett who knows all about the lovers, the dreamers, and me.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

When parents go through a separation it is self-evident their children are impacted by the changes to their family. One of the key decisions separating parents must consider is how the children will be cared for and where they will live. The need for responsive and effective post-separation living arrangements for children has evolved since divorce rates spiralled from the 1970s and since then the focus on what is best for the child has intensified (Kelly, 2000).

Shared care refers to a post-separation arrangement whereby the children move between the parents living in two separate houses, and spend a specified amount of time in the care of each parent. In New Zealand shared care is legally understood to be when a parent has custody of a child for at least three nights a week (Families Commission, 2009). In a practical sense, shared care consists of various hybrids including 50/50, 80/20, 70/30, and 60/40 time allocations. There are different ways of structuring this time. For instance 50/50 can be alternating weeks or fixed days (for example, Monday and Tuesday with one parent; Wednesday and Thursday with the other parent and alternating weekends). Shared care does not necessarily mean that a child should be with each parent for the same amount of time. The term *shared care* belies a fixed definition and is constantly evolving. Note for instance the less common but emerging development called ‘nesting’ where the children live in the family home while each parent takes turn residing in it (Kruk, 2013a).

The term ‘shared care’ reflects the evolution of language used to describe changing family dynamics, and terminology is barely keeping up with the rapid changes occurring in the family structure. Interchangeable terms denote post-separation parenting arrangements including ‘joint custody’, ‘shared parenting’, ‘shared care’ and ‘co-parenting’. Fundamentally while they all refer to arrangements where a child spends a specified amount of time in the care of each parent they also reflect the evolution of the terminology with ‘joint custody’ being more commonly referred to as ‘shared care’. This changing vernacular reflects a cultural change aimed at among other things, shifting post separation parenting from adversarial to collaborative. Traditional proprietary terms such as ‘custody’ and ‘visitation’ are

changing to ‘shared parenting’ and ‘parenting time’ to reflect this change of focus. The expression ‘child custody’ with possessive overtones is being replaced with language evocative of more mutual parental involvement of ‘shared care’. Language can be problematic because as Smyth (2005) highlighted, the terms “joint custody” and “shared parenting” are often used without the distinction being made between “joint *legal* custody” (decision-making) and “joint *physical* custody” (children’s living arrangements).

In New Zealand policy makers have recognised the power of language in relation to the Family Court (Callister & Birks, 2006) whereby ‘day-to-day’ care is defined as ‘having a child live with you on a daily basis, and being responsible for everyday things’ and ‘contact’ is when a child spends time with a parent or other person who does not have day-to-day care of the child (previously called ‘access’). Reflecting contemporary vernacular the present study will adopt the term ‘shared care’ to refer to the post-separation care of children where they share two homes.

The shared care model is predicated on the assumption that the structure provides a more equitable and less adversarial way for parents to manage their post-separation family. Shared care is an attractive option for many parents as it appears to be fair to both parents. It provides a form of custody for both adults, therefore in theory, serves the children well. In practice, shared care can be a test of parental maturity and resilience which some authors (Pryor, 2005a) argue few parents are capable of when experiencing the emotional turmoil of separation. Shared care might seem equitable but it is logistically complex and influenced by several factors, including structural, legal and social considerations.

Structural Considerations

To appreciate how the shared care model came about it is necessary to consider historically how families and their respective roles have been influenced by their structure. Prior to the 19th century, family members generally had a shortened life expectancy and the household was essentially an economic unit where children were often apprentices (Pryor, 2005b). The 19th century heralded the industrial revolution which effectively separated home and work. Fathers and children moved into factories to work and women remained in the home which became a place of

emotional and spiritual refuge as they focused on mothering and home making. Children were 'projects' and the importance of the early years and the primacy of mothers was emphasised (Bowlby, 1969). Gender roles became more distinct as men increasingly became the main providers and in command of the household. (Pryor, 2005a). The introduction of compulsory education for children had the effect of taking children out of the work force. They became more educated and knowledgeable than their parents, challenging the existing hierarchy. Parents were married, men were providers, and women focused on being mothers.

There was a period of comparative prosperity in western society after the Second World War and, combined with the changing role of women in families, culminated in the emergence of the nuclear family. The feminist wave in the second half of the 20th century gave the impetus for women to go back to the workforce by choice, rather than from necessity. Women found themselves working as well as doing the housework. The dual earner household emerged and children entered childcare at a young age.

The 21st century family is by comparison smaller, more diverse and will likely experience numerous structural changes. Forming a family is tending to happen later in the life cycle with the average age of marriage at late 20s (Families Commission, 2012). Frequently couples choose to live together before marrying or choosing cohabitation as a long-term arrangement. Divorce rates have risen rapidly in most western countries but are now levelling off as cohabitation becomes more common. Contemporary family structures can be complex due to the relationships they include. Separated adults often do not remain single; the majority re-partner within five years of separation forming stepfamilies. Children whose parents separate can experience multiple transitions; they have citizenship in several households and are required to negotiate the relationships in each home (Pryor, 2005b).

Legal Considerations

The interaction between families and the legal system has a complex and extensive history. Presumptions concerning the custody of children have played a decisive role in law (DiFonzo, 2014). From the 18th century, a father had absolute dominion over children who were considered part of property rights. In most custody cases sole

custody was awarded to the father unless he was deemed an unfit parent. In the late 18th century, courts invoked the doctrine of *parens patraie* (the state's power to intervene when a child needs protection) to sidestep paternal supremacy and to consider the welfare of the children (DiFonzo, 2014). With the industrial revolution women emerged as domestic caregivers while fathers became the wage earners outside the home. Mothers were seen as instinctive custodians for children and the 'tender years' doctrine allocated custody of young children to their mothers following divorce or separation. In the courts, paternal supremacy gave way to the tender year's doctrine but both assumed that children could be raised by only one parent. The shift from the natural rights of the father to the instinctive role of the mother governed the assumed best interests of the child.

With increasing divorce rates in the last half-century a paradigm shift has taken place which has ensured ongoing debate and interest in custody issues. The movement for gender equality with father's rights groups provided a spotlight on the importance of both parents being involved in caring for children. Courts in the 1970s began to realise that some mothers do not want to be 'at home'. Gendered doctrines were challenged and the tender year's doctrine has been replaced with gender-neutral custody standards (DiFonzo, 2014).

Until the 1970s courts regularly refused to order shared parenting, as the dominant view was that a child needed the stability of a single home. The acceptance of shared care came about when parents began assuming more equal parenting responsibilities and also because it avoided the 'win-lose' mentality of child custody cases. Courts came to see shared care as an opportunity for the child to have strong relationships with both parents.

In New Zealand, decisions about what happens to the children following separation have been influenced by policies which assume children benefit from having an ongoing relationship with both parents following separation (The Family Proceedings Act 1980; Care of Children Act 2005). Since the introduction of the Care of Children Act in 2005, it is a requirement that the best interests of the child are paramount in all custody arrangements. These directives have governed custody decisions in recent decades. Until recently support for separating families has included Family-Court sponsored counselling and judge-led mediation. Separating

parents wishing to resolve conflicts around care arrangements for children were entitled to up to six free sessions with a counsellor. In September 2013 Parliament passed the Family Court Proceedings Reform Bill into law with the changes taking effect from March 2014. These new provisions reflect a move to cater for children adversely affected by prolonged litigation and parental conflict with the Family Court becoming the last resort when parents cannot agree on care of their children. Separating couples will be encouraged to use the new Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) service where a trained mediator will try to help parents reach their own arrangements as to how their children will be cared for (Ministry of Justice, 2015).

Shared parenting is in legal transition. There is a general agreement that the child's best interest is paramount and they generally do best when both parents remain active in their lives, but these underpinnings are subject to interpretation. While culturally shared parenting is becoming the new norm it is questionable if the legal system is the best way to facilitate this process.

Psychological Theory Considerations

Several psychological theories and conceptual perspectives have explored the process of separation and how it affects individuals, families and their relationships. The most frequently cited theory relating to divorce and post-separation families is attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) which suggests that the bond between child and primary caregiver is very important to enable the child to develop a secure base. When a child has a secure attachment the world is safe and predictable and there is a high probability of healthy relationships. Conversely when attachment is difficult the world is perceived as unsafe and unpredictable and there is a high probability of emotional and behavioural problems developing. Attachment theory views the experience of divorce as having the potential to change parent-child attachment from secure to insecure. In shared custody situations some authors (McIntosh, 2008) argue that attachment security is not assumed to transfer from one parent to another when the child change houses. From an attachment theory perspective the child can have more than one care giving relationship but the important point is that when the child moves from one parent to another, the attachment formation may become disorganised which can inadvertently bring about difficulties. In Maori culture, it is commonplace for a child to be whangai or raised by whanau or extended family

members and recognises that children can form multiple attachments. Disorganised attachment may apply particularly when children make transitions between high-conflict parents who are unable to conceal their feelings in the presence of the child. These children can become adept at actively monitoring the emotional temperature they encounter in each household.

More recently, stress frameworks dominated the literature on post-separation families. Theoretical perspectives have drawn on the notions of stress, coping, risk and resiliency which Amato (2000) argues can be subsumed under a divorce-stress-adjustment perspective. His perspective emphasises that a complex interaction of stressors, specific vulnerabilities, and protective factors determine the individual child's adjustment to divorce. The assumption is that separation is a stressful life transition through which adults and children must adjust. It is a process that unfolds over time, not a discrete event. Because a large number of factors influence children's reactions to divorce, adjustment can occur at different times with different consequences. Amato suggested that people vary greatly in their reactions. Spouses and children in the same family might experience different levels of emotional distress at different times in the divorce process.

The present study

There is little known about how New Zealand children are affected by growing up in shared care households. The research to date (covered in more detail in the next chapter) on the effects of parental separation is deficit focused. The demands on Court professionals to solve custody dilemmas have been hindered by a lack of evidence. In addition, although the body of research on custody modes has grown considerably, there is still little that reflects the voice of children most impacted (Pryor, 2005a). Although children have been seen as the primary concern their views are not reflected in the research. The paucity of research in New Zealand on the experiences of children in shared care situations provides an opportunity to contribute to the limited body of knowledge. As shared care has become a more prominent form of custody in New Zealand since the 1980s, there is now a cohort of children that have grown up under this arrangement and will be in a position to reflect on this custody mode. This research is concerned with how children have made sense of the experience of shared care; moving between two parents and two

homes. It will explore whether a shared care living arrangement leads to the child feeling “richly shared, or deeply divided” (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008). It is hoped that listening to their voices and understanding their perspective will illustrate in a small way some of the subtleties of the contemporary post-separation family. The next chapter examines the literature on divorce, shared care, family and gender roles (mothers and fathers) and the muted voices of children.

Chapter Two: Literature review

Divorce

Shared care parenting has evolved from the body of divorce literature that escalated alongside the growing number of divorces since the 1970s. Early studies typically compared children of divorced parents with children from non-divorced families. As divorce was a relatively new phenomenon in the nuclear family landscape it is easy to understand the interest. Not surprisingly, most of these studies found there were differences between children who grew up with divorced parents compared with 'intact' two-parent family counterparts. The research was arguably deficit focused as it highlighted how children with divorced parents were disadvantaged and achieved poor outcomes at school and poor mental health (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Bauserman, 2012; Kelly, 2000; Wallerstein, 2005). When these children entered their adult years the negative portrayal intensified with research suggesting they also have poor outcomes as adults (Amato, 2000, 2007; Bauserman, 2012; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Wallerstein, 2005). Cherlin (1988) found children of divorced parents experienced unexpected serious psychological difficulties after they reached adulthood. Other studies have documented negative outcomes including: compromised financial circumstances (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003); anxiety around forming and maintaining adult relationships (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004); and issues with trust, sexual intimacy and commitment to marriage and parenthood (Amato & Keith, 1991).

One of the few meta-analysis found that children from divorced families scored lower on a variety of outcomes albeit with small effect sizes (Amato & Keith, 1991). These authors concluded that divorce is probably more harmful than helpful for children. Later updated this study examined 67 studies published in the 1990s that compared children with divorced parents to children with continuously married parents on academic achievement, psychological adjustment; self-concept and social relations (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). They found that the gap between these two groups of children increased again during the 1990s where children with divorced parents continued to fare worse than children with continuously married parents, particularly at school, behaviourally, emotionally and interpersonally. According to the authors, while a risk factor for a range of undesirable outcomes, the differences

between the two groups were relatively small reflecting the diversity among children in both groups (Amato et al., 2011).

A prolific contributor to the grim divorce research findings was Wallerstein (2005) who followed 131 children with divorced parents from the early 1970s for 25 years and tracked the impact of the divorce experience at three junctions: five years; 10 years and 20 years following divorce. Her findings may be pertinent to the present study as they highlighted how the children believed divorce affected them.

Participants recalled feeling shocked, lonely and unhappy at the time of the separation and they vividly recalled these feelings 25 years later. Regardless of how much time they spent with each parent they frequently grew up with the core belief that 'relationships are unreliable' (Wallerstein, 2005, p. 359). Over half of the participants reported a strong memory that they frequently internalised into a later core belief, for instance; "I would never do to another human being what my mother did to my father" (Wallerstein, 2005, p. 413). The central finding of this longitudinal study was that children of divorce encounter difficulties in achieving love, sexual intimacy, and commitment to marriage and parenthood. Wallerstein argued that the impact of divorce was most significant when the children of divorce entered adult years. This study challenged the widely accepted premise that divorce represented a crisis from which resilient children could recover within a couple of years and positioned divorce as a life-transforming experience for the child.

Despite methodological criticism (Amato, 2003), Wallerstein's work has been pivotal and influential in policy and practice in family courts of western nations. The research was undertaken over the time where sole custody, usually with the mother, was the norm. The sole parent family generally suffered from reduced financial circumstances and the lack of cultural status afforded to the nuclear family. The father-child relationship often changed with the father's absence in the child's life. Wallerstein argued that a divorced family was an inherently unstable structure which constituted a different culture. Nowadays the culture of a family is arguably more accepting of different types of families of which children can be members of including: nuclear; shared parenting; gay parenting; and grandparent-headed families. While Wallerstein's commentary did not focus specifically on different

custody arrangements, overall she contended the long-term effects of divorce occurred regardless of the custody arrangements (Wallerstein, 2005).

A preoccupation in the divorce literature was a focus on the impact of parental conflict on their children. Some argued that parental conflict seriously compromised child mental health (Amato & Booth, 2001; Cherlin, 1988; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008). Hetherington argued interparental hostility and lack of cooperation between parents following divorce was a consistent predictor of poor outcomes among offspring (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003). Other researchers (Buchanan et al., 1991) found that parental conflict following divorce was related to adolescents feeling caught in the middle between parents which led to deviance and depression. One longitudinal study (Katz & Gottman, 1997) found when parents ceased making derogatory comments about each other the children had better outcomes, and this protective factor the authors referred to as 'emotional scaffolding'. Lack of parental conflict, these authors argued, was a more important predictor of child adjustment than the divorce event itself (Katz & Gottman, 1997).

While there is little research in New Zealand on the effects of divorce, one study (Fergusson & Horwood, 2001) suggested that children whose parents separated were at increased risk of later psychological and behavioural problems. However, this research highlighted the increased risk was more likely due to factors that existed prior to parental separation such as socioeconomic disadvantage, elevated risk of adverse life events and higher levels of interparental conflict. Once these factors were controlled, there were fewer tendencies for children exposed to parental separation to be at increased risk of later conduct, mood and substance abuse problems.

Until recently few studies have looked at parental separation rather than divorce. An Australian study (Lodge & Alexander, 2011) asked 623 adolescents, some of whom were in shared care, about their experiences of parental separation. Their findings suggest that most adolescents were satisfied with their living arrangements and they remained involved with both their parents regardless of who they were living with. Above everything else, adolescents wanted and valued flexibility in their arrangements. When an adolescent had a secure relationship with at least one parent

they adjusted with high self ratings on school achievement, self-confidence and general happiness.

The research on the effects of divorce would indicate that children of divorced parents may be at risk of psychological and interpersonal problems in adulthood (Amato, 2000; Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2000; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). The pertinent conclusion is that this risk of negative outcomes is a possibility for some children of divorce, not an inevitable consequence. Divorce research, it could be argued, perpetuated the damage divorce could be responsible for. While there is very little research on any positive effects of divorce, some of the studies did consider how the negative impacts could be mitigated including primarily the need for effective parental conflict resolution (Smith, Taylor, & Tapp, 2003). Emerging perspectives within the divorce literature are now focusing on the number of family transitions rather than on divorce or separation as a single event. As divorce spearheaded the need for post divorce living arrangements for children, the literature on shared care has steadily increased.

Shared Care

The early studies on joint or shared custody emerged in the 1980s and were small, exploratory and often involved parents who voluntarily agreed to shared care as opposed to being court mandated to do so. As with the divorce research, this research focused on differences between children raised in shared care families compared with those with continuously married parents. Again much of the research focused on the negative consequences of shared care (Zemmelman, Steinman, & Knoblauch, 1987). This study noted specific characteristics associated with negative outcomes for children as interparental conflict and anger between parents; domestic abuse; substance abuse; fixed belief that the other is a bad parent and inability to separate their own feelings and needs from those of the child (Zemmelman et al., 1987). A recent study (Carlsund, Eriksson, & Sellström, 2013) explored shared care after family separation with children aged 11-15. They used scores for health complaints and well-being to conclude that children in shared care and single-parent families were more at risk of negative outcomes. The odds of reporting low subjective well-being were 67% higher for shared custody children compared with children in two-parent families (Carlsund, Eriksson, & Sellström, 2013).

Other studies were more optimistic about specific aspects of the arrangement. Steinman (1981) concluded the parents generally liked the arrangement. A meta-analysis (Bauserman, 2002) found shared care children were better adjusted than those from sole custody homes (even after controlling for levels of parental conflict). However, as highlighted by other researchers (Nielsen, 2011), 23 of the studies in the Bauserman meta-analysis were unpublished and some did not distinguish between children who actually lived with their fathers from those whose simply had joint legal custody. Another study (Carlsund, Eriksson, Löfstedt, & Sellström, 2013) examined risk behaviour, specifically drinking and smoking, in adolescents and found that adolescents living in shared physical custody had slightly higher rates of risk behaviour compared to adolescents from two-parent families, but significantly lower rates than those from single-parent families. They concluded that shared physical custody constituted a health protective factor for adolescents.

Research on divorce suggested that a child's well-being will be jeopardised if they are exposed to ongoing high levels of parental conflict (Buchanan et al., 1991). This theme was also a focus of studies looking at children experiencing shared care. One such study (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008) of over 300 children in court mandated shared care with high conflict parents suggested that 28% recorded emotional distress. McIntosh argued that these children were placed in an atmosphere of "psychological strain" (2008, p. 4). Shared care children were more likely than other children to report feeling 'caught in the middle' of their parents' conflict. Other researchers agreed. Another study of children from conflicted separating families found that an estimated 40% of children raised in shared care suffered grave psychological symptoms (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989). The Chisholm report (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008) questioned the purported benefits of shared care, finding that children in high-conflict families are significantly worse off. As noted by some researchers, Nielsen (2011), the way the research was presented in the media led to unsubstantiated conclusions about shared care. Conveniently omitted in the media coverage was the relevant conclusion of the study that children's anxiety scores were not as a result of the shared care living arrangement but more likely due to other factors such as parental conflict, low education of the father and poor parenting skills.

It has been acknowledged that much of the existing literature on post-separation living arrangements focused on ongoing post-marital conflict and the effects on children. A study of 99 college students argued that subtle distress may go unacknowledged as it does not develop into psychological disorders (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). In this study overt conflict was less evident than passive expressions of anger between parents. This behaviour, for example, when parents made disparaging comments about each other, interfered with their capacity to provide cooperative co-parenting. While these children might not develop diagnosed mental health issues, their sense of family belonging was impeded.

Another study (Neoh & Mellor, 2010) compared 27 children of shared parenting with children from intact families on a range of adjustment measures and used both self- and parent reporting to see how the children felt about their living arrangements. Findings suggested that shared parenting was not necessarily associated with better outcomes for the child. Shared care parents tended to underestimate the degree of emotional problems that children experienced. Shared care fathers were most satisfied with the arrangement and were less stressed than children or mothers. The benefits of shared care appeared more evident for parents than for children. Children in shared care families reported more stress than children from sole resident and intact families. The authors contested that children in shared custody are not necessarily better off than children in other post-separation arrangements (Neoh & Mellor, 2010).

A review of 20 studies (Nielsen, 2011) explored shared care to decipher what the most beneficial living arrangement was for children following parental separation. The study specifically examined whether shared care was a better arrangement for children compared to a mother-led family. This review only included studies where children spent at least 35% of time with each parent. The review questions were founded on existing literature which highlighted the importance of the father-child relationship following separation. According to the author, children of divorce benefit most when their father is actively and regularly engaged in their daily lives, and the relationship is encouraged immediately following the separation, otherwise the children will grieve the loss of the paternal relationship. One study reviewed examined 92 shared care families (Buchanan et al., 1991) and found that most

parents entered the shared care agreement reluctantly; they were not more cooperative, wealthier or more educated than other divorce parents. The parents communicated in a business-like manner referred to as 'parallel parenting' (Buchanan et al., 1991). Neilson concluded that shared care parents differed from other divorced parents in two key ways: they were committed to active father involvement and the father had a flexible work schedule (Nielsen, 2011).

This review also explored how well the children who grow up in shared parenting families fared compared to those who live almost exclusively with their mother. Again the Stanford study (Buchanan et al., 1991) was cited to demonstrate that four years after the divorce, the dual residence adolescents were better off academically, emotionally and psychologically compared with sole parenting counterparts. They felt closer to both of their parents and less likely to be stressed by feeling the need to take care of their mother. When parents did not get on they were more likely to be caught in the middle of disagreements. However, having a closer relationship with both parents generally offset the negative impact of the parents' conflicts. After controlling for education, incomes and level of hostility, shared care children had better outcomes than those in sole residence (Buchanan et al., 1991). This is consistent with another study (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007) which found 80 students from shared care families were in better physical and mental health than those who lived solely with their mothers. Overall the author of this review contended that shared care children benefit from enhanced relationships with their father; parents can make a shared care arrangement work even if they do not get on particularly well; young people liked the arrangement and the research has an important role to inform what is best for children in shared care arrangements (Nielsen, 2011).

Recently Australia has produced an influx of government mandated reports on what is best for children post separation alongside the revision of custody laws in 2006. This included research completed in 2004 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. This qualitative study of 10 focus groups included one group which comprised shared care parents. This study found that shared care parents had a distinct demographic profile as they tended to be well-educated, dual career, with primary school aged children. Both parents discussed how shared care enabled them to be more child-focused when children were in their care and allowed more free

time to get organised when the children were with the other parent. These parents believed shared care promoted better parent–child relationships. Most of the co-parenting couples had established the arrangement without going through the court system and maintained the arrangement for some time. For many of the fathers with shared care, their own need to be involved as a parent seems to be a key motivating factor for 50/50 care, while co-parent mothers appear to be motivated by the rights of both the child and the father to continue their relationship. The motivations for shared care were different for mothers and fathers but nonetheless were mutually reinforcing and ensured that they tried to keep the focus on the children’s needs. By and large, co-parents seemed happy with the shared care arrangement for themselves and their children. This finding partially concurs with Neoh and Mellor (2010), who also found that fathers were very satisfied with shared care.

The shared care research highlights some broadly agreed recommendations for ensuring that shared care is more effective. Children will fare better if they see both parents where the parents can communicate without too much conflict. This view is supported by New Zealand research (Robertson, 2008) which argued that the quality of the parents’ relationship and their ability to communicate with each other are the key factors to establish satisfactory care arrangements after separation. The Australian policy suggestions further included: proximity between two homes, work flexibility or family-friendly work practices, a degree of financial independence, and a cooperative co-parenting style as enhancing the arrangement (Smyth, 2009). This study found that many parents needed more information and support while separating and lacked resources that would help them decide what was best for the children. Several studies have encouraged the establishment and regular review of parenting plans (Smyth, 2005). Some have discussed the need for emotional support for parents, as the ubiquity of grief and loss was prevalent for parents and their children (Smyth, 2009). Some authors suggest that separating families may be better served if interventions were more child-focused and child-inclusive to assist achieving child-sensitive outcomes (Fisher & Pullen, 2003). Other authors (Elizabeth, Gavey & Tolmie, 2012a) discussed an approach based on work by Smart & Neale (2001) which advocated four guiding principles to achieve dialogue between parents and children. Firstly, decisions should be grounded in the reality of the lives of the people involved including: past patterns of caretaking, children’s needs and wishes

and the emotional climate of the family (the ‘Principle of actuality’). Secondly, children need adequate care and parents should also be treated with care (the ‘Principle of care’). Thirdly, mothers and father need to be able to shape their lives autonomously (‘Principle of recognition of selfhood’). Fourth and finally, the ‘Principle of loss’ recognises the pain of loss that parents often experience when they spend less time with their children.

In his 5-year retrospective of post-separation shared care research, Smyth (2009) argued that shared care after separation has remained unhelpfully focused on “mathematising time” where shared care becomes a proxy for equal care and responsibility of children. Despite a focus on amount of time shared with children, Smyth argues it is the quality of relationships between parents, and between parents and children, that is critical for children’s wellbeing. Shared parenting is one mode of custody, but not the only way to create what Smyth (2009) calls ‘being time’; where parents and children are spending time together. The post-separation literature is fraught with challenge; no single post-divorce arrangement is best for all children. As each child and each family is unique the research would suggest that separated parents be creative and flexible in the arrangements they adopt for the care of their children.

Family and gender roles

Carried through the research on divorce, separation and post-separation arrangements is the assumption that the intact two-parent family type is the gold standard. The nuclear family is normative and romanticised. Axiomatic as it is to state that the well-being of children is paramount, some argue that this goal privileges the nuclear family as the best structure to promote their well-being (Porter, 2001). This ignores a blatant reality; changes in family life are indisputable; divorce and separation are common. Why therefore is family diversity not more acceptable?

The traditional importance attributed to the nuclear family encompasses an inherently conservative value system. Terms like ‘family values’ or ‘intact family’ or ‘traditional family’ have been used to both implicitly and explicitly denigrate other household types (Porter, 2001). In the literature it is widely taken for granted that the traditional family structure fosters good parenting. Yet two parent families can be

the site of deep discord, violence and abuse. The traditional family system is arguably based on inequality and restrictive gender stereotypes (Porter, 2001).

Prior to separation the parenting couple is represented as one unit (the parental-dyadic object) in which the mother and father are assumed to have common interests and goals regarding the children. Following the separation event common interests and goals usually diverge except the expectation that parents continue to work together in regards to the children. Several writers have commented that it is a lot to expect that parents can cooperate with parenting their children in a shared care arrangement (Greenberg, Martindale, Gould, & Gould-Saltman, 2004). Turkat (2002) developed specific criteria for what he terms 'shared parenting dysfunction'.

Responsible shared parenting usually acknowledges the parents entitlement to a fresh start or a new relationship. The child too has rights to full access to love from both parents. Inherited characteristics, early roots and family ties are part of one's identity. The children are bonded to a mother and a father and to the extended family and these networks can be of immense value to children. Shared care is viewed as a fair system that is equitable to both parents as they are afforded equal status in relation to their children. The principles and rhetoric of shared parenting supposedly enshrine and promote gender equity. Some writers have argued that the issue of gender is highly relevant (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Lacroix, 2006) but often obscured in the shared care literature especially with the move to gender neutral terminology in the Family Courts. Post-separation parenting can be a location of contested gender politics (V. Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Lacroix, 2006).

An Australian study (Lacroix, 2006) explored the experiences of 10 separated couples and argued that shared care attitudes are highly gendered. She stated 50/50 sharing of time does not translate into an equal sharing of parental responsibility as "women do more of what the men do, as well as much that the men do not do" (Lacroix, 2006, p. 184). Shared care can result in a more equitable sharing of child rearing responsibilities but the gender divide remains. Paid work, child care and housework are not evenly distributed. She argues the impact of the gender gap is underestimated and men's contribution is over-estimated, especially by men.

Why is the responsibility for the care of children not more equitable? According to Lacroix (2006) men usually state they are prevented from more involvement by work

commitments and by women, who don't like them to share. Evidence suggests, however, that women do desire more equal sharing and even when workplace policies encourage parental leave for men they do not avail themselves of entitlements. One study from Sweden showed that when fathers are offered parental leave entitlements similar to women, they tend not to take up entitlements (Eveline, 1994 as cited in Lacroix, 2006).

In the Lacroix (2006) study, mothers reported doing most of the tasks related to child raising including: laundry; organising extracurricular activities; doctor's appointments; liaison with the school and helping with homework; haircuts and transportation. As well as dealing with practical matters mothers reported taking most of the responsibility for their children's emotional needs. They organised their lives around their children's needs and undertook many of the tasks when the children were with their father. They did not experience themselves as being free from responsibility at any time and often this meant they were working part-time and/or in flexible working arrangements. The fathers described their living situation very differently. They did not reference what they did for the children and when asked directly offered short explanations (for example, preparing food). When asked about specific activities according to the authors they had one of two responses: the mother did it or the needs of the children were minimal. Fathers had little, if any, contact with the children when the children were not with them. They did not see themselves as responsible for any of their needs when the children were not with them. Lacroix also commented that the values were also different: men expected praise for their contributions whereas the women's efforts were invisible. The men generally earned more than the mothers but it was rare for the financial imbalance to be redressed. For mothers the financial inequity was something they could live with to 'keep the peace'. When it came to sharing responsibility for raising children there was a fundamental difference: if they weren't sharing then the mother would be doing it all. It was generally understood by both that the father could choose not to continue to take responsibility at any given point in time.

New Zealand researchers (Elizabeth, Gavey & Tolmie, 2010) found similar themes in their study of 21 women who organised care arrangements through the family court. This study found that women in custody disputes faced a moral dilemma.

According to the authors there is a double standard at play as mothers and fathers had a different set of expectations around parenting. Popular discourse dictated that children needed an active and loving relationship with their fathers therefore these mothers were morally obligated to encourage their role in their children's lives. Whilst these mothers believed that it was important for their children to have contact with their father they questioned the form this contact could have, given that they were treated with the 'reductive rubric' of a hostile mother. They argued separated mothers were constructed in a pejorative way (for example, as hostile and alienating) and this influenced how they engaged in the custody process. Accordingly mothers were evaluated in terms of their conduct in relation to the father of their children, rather than her own relationship with the children.

Another study explored gender dynamics for women engaged with Family Court counselling and found that shared care had adverse effects on women and children (Elizabeth, Gavey & Tolmie, 2012a). They contended that the counselling and mediation processes designed to support separating parents erroneously assumed equal power and capabilities between couples which resulted in mothers being marginalised and coerced into the parenting arrangement. They found that 18 of the participants considered counsellor-led conciliation a negative experience; they felt intimidated by counsellors, who regardless of the circumstances, encouraged father-child contact and overtly favoured shared care arrangements.

In a third study, these same authors (Elizabeth et al, 2012b) explored the governance of gender through custody law to argue that the state resembled the role of the dominant male. They argued that three "logics" shape the current operation of family law: durability (once a parent always a parent); gender neutrality (mothers and fathers are equal) and present/future temporality (men care 'about' rather than care 'for'). These logics allow fathers to intervene and control the lives of mothers through the threatened or actual instigation of family law processes (or 'swap their fists for the system'). Shared care requires parents to remain in relationship with their children, and thus in relationship with each other. The women in the study discussed that the father was in a powerful position as the women were fearful of a system that the fathers could turn to apply bullying tactics. They compromised even when they didn't think it was in the children's best interests. The mothers, vested in

their identities as mothers, were easy targets for fathers who wished to punish them, Paternal practices the participants discussed included: attempts to disrupt breastfeeding routines; requirement that children call new partner 'mum'; constant applications to the family court for increased contact time and the vilification of mothers in front of children. This fear was perpetuated in media coverage as for instance in the extreme case reported of a court appointed lawyer for a four month old baby, who recommended that the mother stop breastfeeding so that the baby could spend half the week with the father (Harrop, 2010).

Mothers

The divorce and shared care literature highlighted that children raised in single-parent headed families were disadvantaged compared with two-parent families. Although anecdotally success stories do exist, there is a dearth of research on children raised in a single parent family who adjusted well. The single parent family is usually mother-led and single motherhood is a mainstream phenomenon. In New Zealand, nearly one in two mothers will experience single parenthood and up to 40% of children will live in a single-mother family for a period of time (Fergusson & Horwood, 2001). Despite its prevalence single mothering is seldom recommended as an ideal alternative to the nuclear family despite the fact that it is usually a reaction to destructive or unsatisfactory relationships. The tasks of a single mother are formidable; they shoulder many additional burdens and must raise their children alone often without any support. Probably, most single mothers would prefer to be with a caring partner, both committed to raising their children together. Currently in New Zealand the solution for the feminisation of poverty that typically accompanies single mothers is to adopt policies that encourage single mothers to become employed. As single mothers are frequently portrayed as being problematically dependent on handouts, market activation is often seen as a tidy solution. This does not take into account nuances of single parenting and disguises the important social role that these mothers contribute: that of caring for their children. While poverty exists in two-parent families also, children who are well-off economically generally depend on two adult incomes. Single mothers are more likely to experience poor mental health than partnered mothers, and the primary factors associated with this are the presence of financial hardship as well as the lack of social support (Crosier,

Butterworth, & Rodgers, 2007). Most studies indicate that poverty, not parental separation, is the factor most likely to lead to poor child outcomes (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1998).

Few studies have looked at positive outcomes for children from single parent households. One exception is the study by Arditti (1999) which examined the mother-child relationship following 58 college students who experienced parental divorce. Students viewed their mothers as friends and their relationship as a source of positive emotional support and closeness. Arditti (1999) suggested there are transformational qualities divorce might bring to mother-child relationships although little is known about this aspect.

In recent times, some single parents are proactively making the decision to parent alone by use of sperm donor and IVF programmes. Arguably these women plan for the economic and cultural implications and their decision to parent alone allows them to make the best decisions for their children. They have the freedom to act in the child's best interest without needing to compromise for a partner's differing personal beliefs, needs or career demands. Many single mothers are good parents, but this is not reflected in the literature. In future, research emphasis needs to be on good parenting rather than focus on the family structure.

Fathers

The role of fathers has received considerable attention in the research. Many have argued that increased involvement of fathers in shared parenting is a prominent factor in improving children's experience (Amato & Keith, 1991). Findings are inconsistent, for instance Glover and Steele (1988) found that children from shared care families were just as ambivalent about their fathers as sole resident children. Another study (Fabricius, 2003) found that young adults wanted to spend more time with their fathers and believed that their fathers wanted more time as well. Fabricius also found that relationships with fathers suffered if they did not spend substantial amounts of time living with them, as those who had minimal contact with their father had high levels of anger and low levels of closeness to their fathers as young adults (Fabricius, 2003).

A New Zealand study (Mitchell & Chapman, 2009) argued that there has been little attention to the consequences of separation for fathers. They found that men were generally unprepared for the separation process and found it stressful. These men lacked support; experienced issues with health and wellbeing and needed to manage changed relationships with the mother of their children. These men also commented on how legal processes further exacerbated an adversarial situation as the legal system was fundamentally acrimonious. A New Zealand telephone survey of 1,700 fathers (Families Commission 2009) painted a very positive view of the role of fathers post-separation and found that most were satisfied with their performance as co-parent and did not require additional support.

The uncritical assumption that children's contact with both parents is necessary now pervades the courts and the media. One reason for the popularity of shared care has been attributed to the contemporary fathers' rights movement who have been active in promoting their rights (Chesler, 2011). This movement has not been without controversy. For example, Flood (2004) argued that fathers' rights groups privilege contact with children over their safety from violence. According to Flood two erroneous beliefs are guiding family law: that contact with both parents is in the children's best interests in every case, and that a violent father is better than no father at all. Other authors (V. Elizabeth et al., 2012a) suggested that the fathers' rights movement has encouraged fathers to seek shared care while coercing more mothers into it.

As discussed by Lacroix (2006), emerging father discourses are based on the assumptions that men have suffered due to their lack of involvement with their children and that a man's lack of involvement has been largely due to his lack of choice. The role of the father post-separation is now presumed crucial despite evidence to the contrary. Women have come to have a greater investment in father-participation than fathers have themselves.

The muted voices of children

Historically, the voices of children have been conspicuously absent from decisions that affected their wellbeing following their parents' separation. Within the body of shared care literature the role of parents has been studied more extensively than how

children experience shared custody. Few studies have focused on the children's role in the separation process and how they adapt to post-separation family life. The lack of understanding and knowledge about how children experience their family changes has been acknowledged by early researchers. For instance, Wallerstein, a passionate advocate for children from divorced families, believed that children's feelings and preferences should be seriously considered (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). But as noted by Pryor (2005a) listening to what children say is contentious. Smyth (2009) also reiterates this view when he states "It is imperative that children's experiences and views continue to be heard in the next phase of research" (Smyth, 2009, p. 54).

Although there is limited research about the child's perspective of shared care, some studies have demonstrated that children want to stay connected to both parents after separation. A New Zealand study (Pryor, 1999) found that most adolescents and adults endorse equal time with both parents following separation. The Fabricius (2003) study of over 700 undergraduates whose parents had divorced found that 70% chose equal amounts of time with each parent as the ideal post-separation scenario. 93% of those who had experienced equal time with parents endorsed that living arrangement. Theoretically, at least, children value the virtue of fairness by endorsing equal time with both parents following a separation.

One author considered the advantages and disadvantages of listening to children (Warshak, 2003) and argued that despite the axiomatic appeal, listening to children's views following separation is not universally accepted as appropriate. The rationale for listening to children is twofold he argues: firstly, children have something important to tell us (the enlightenment rationale); and secondly, children profit by participating in decisions that affect central aspects of their lives (the empowerment rationale), (Warshak, 2003). This study highlighted the obvious pitfall that by listening to children they can be delegated too much authority and be inappropriately burdened. Children do not always know what is best for them and they may tell each parent what they think that parent wants to hear at the time. Children sometimes express poor reasons for their preferences and may align themselves with one parent over the other through fear or misplaced loyalty. There is a risk that the child becomes a pawn in the parents' battles (Warshak, 2003).

An Australian study (Campbell, 2008) found that children needed information from their parents about the separation but wanted parents to make the final decision about their living situation. A similar finding in a New Zealand Study (Smith et al., 2003) whereby authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 107 children and looked at whether children wanted to be involved in decision making following parental separation. These authors found children did not feel burdened by responsibility if they were involved in post-separation arrangements as long as the parents provided a suitable environment for conversations to occur. When asked what advice they would give to parents who were separating, the most common response offered by the children was the importance of consulting with them. Other advice included parents not arguing in front of the children or getting in the way of children having a relationship with both of their parents (Smith et al., 2003).

When children have had an opportunity to be involved in mediation, one study (Goldson, 2006) found that the children expressed a need to comment on their changing family relationship and appreciated being heard. This study examined the efficacy of a model that included working with children and their parents from 17 families in parts of the mediation process. A total of 26 children ranging from six to 18 years and 34 parents were interviewed. All parents reported that their children found the separation difficult. The majority of parents found it difficult to establish an effective co-parenting relationship with their former partner. This study demonstrated that when children were given the opportunity to have a voice they experienced decreased anxiety about their rearranged family life. Parents also experienced a high level of satisfaction with the process and reported a greater awareness of the effects of conflict on their children and the need for parental cooperation. Children from this study told researchers that they wanted to talk to one or two 'special people' (such as grandmother or trusted family friend) other than their parents. They did not like talking to strangers and experts, as it felt disloyal. The children were keen observers and careful listeners which was often underestimated by the parents. Children frequently sought balance in time shared with both parents and the theme of fairness prevailed. All parents in this research commented positively on the impact on their children of involvement in the mediation process (Goldson, 2006).

Goldson (2006) reiterated that there are gaps in New Zealand research regarding the connection between family law intervention and its impact on the wellbeing of children and their families especially when it comes to how and where children's voices should be heard. The family law arena is a place of ongoing and numerous reforms she argued but these have not included involvement of children. The rights of children are disregarded unless they are represented by experts such as psychologists. Goldson insisted that children benefit when they are allowed to have their views heard. A significant finding from this research is that children are saying they want to be heard from within the centre of their own families and their parents are saying that they are helped by hearing their children in this context.

While there are a few studies on children's involvement in the decision-making about how their family life would be structured following the separation, there are fewer still that examined how children find the experience of living in a shared care arrangement. One early study of 32 children living in a shared care situation (Steinman, 1981) found that the reaction of children was highly individual. Children appeared to have two 'psychological parents'; had strong loyalty to both and were not triangulated by loyalty conflicts. The children in this study accepted their parents' differences and appeared able to adapt to each household with a minimum of conflict and confusion. While the children adapted well, the shared care situation was not as desirable for them as living with their original family. A UK study, (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001) interviewed 117 British children aged between 4-20 in shared care. These children complained of moving house every week, keeping to inflexible schedules and confusion resulting from constant change. Younger children described the distress of missing the parent they were not with. Adolescents tended to find the arrangement more inconvenient than younger children as it interfered with their social lives. Along similar lines Marquardt (2005) found offspring reported that they were forced to take on adult responsibilities as a child, felt lonely and experienced family events and holidays as stressful. Some mentioned having to become 'a different person' in each parent's home. Despite this, most preferred living in two homes to living with only one parent. More recent studies on shared care explored what conditions encouraged shared care to work. Haugen (2010) examined 15 children's experiences of shared care through the lens of three characteristics; flexibility, ambiguity and rigidity which points to different challenges

in understanding the circumstances in which shared residence becomes a valuable arrangement for children. The author argued that asserting shared care as being in the best interests of a child, risks reproducing the adults' understandings of the needs of the children.

While the notion of the 'best interests of the child' has been the key consideration the idea has been dominated by professional assumptions about what is good or bad for children. One study suggested the 'best interests' principle has not been based on listening to children's perspectives (Smith et al., 2003). The principle of 'best interests of the child' is indeterminate and open to interpretation and contestation. This principle is currently interpreted as an ongoing relationship with both parents that accords the rights and responsibilities of parenthood to both parents irrespective of the nature of the relationship. Despite children being seen as the primary concern and their best interests taken seriously when parents separate, their interpretations of their own childhood experiences are often ignored. Children, even within the same families, can have different experiences and feeling after parental separation. As Pryor (2005b) suggests children might know something unique about their experiences but there is a risk in taking this too far. Increasingly professionals are asking how to find meaningful ways to include children's voices in the context of shared care but there is no consensus about the best way to do so. The next chapter addresses methodology in the current study, including how the young people's views were obtained, the framework applied and analysis undertaken.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Why qualitative?

Truth depends upon personal perspective. As psychological beings (Martin & Sugarman, 2001) we think, feel, behave and try to make meaning of our experiences. As authors of our own experience, we are best equipped to understand and interpret our experiences. Meaning is not therefore discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 1998). Constructing meaning can be very helpful as we seek to make new stories about our lives. We try to turn experiences into something we understand and can share. Different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Even when individual experiences seem contradictory their subjective experiences are valid, (Willig, 2011). Qualitative research allows for a variety of perspectives; it honours individual experiences and associated subjective meanings. Not bound by rigid dichotomies, qualitative approaches allow a variety of views, methods and approaches reflecting the diverse subjects being examined. Like the participants under study, qualitative approaches are diverse, complex and nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

As children's perspectives of living in the shared care arrangement have not been extensively researched, the research is primarily exploratory. The paucity of research on shared care has been identified by Smyth (2009) who stated that there is so little empirical data on shared parenting that even the smallest morsel of information can help grow the knowledge pool. Given that the topic has been under-researched, qualitative research is considered the best method to allow for the experience of participants, the interactions they encounter and for their beliefs and attitudes to be articulated. Meaning can be extracted from the everyday experiences of those living in a shared care situation to explore how the participants made sense of their living situation.

Why Postmodernism?

As discussed by Boney (2003) studies on the consequences of parental separation for children have been guided by the modernist assumption that the traditional heterosexual nuclear family is the most effective family structure in which to raise

children. Other household types are by default treated as deficit in their ability to provide for the needs of children. Researchers from the modernist perspective tend to conceptualise separation as a negative life experience to which family members must adjust and accordingly stress and coping theories have dominated the research literature. The approach has been criticised for having a problem-focused lens on negative outcomes. Modernism constructs something as a problem and promises a cure. Furthermore, modernist research has been criticised for its andocentric bias; it has been seen by some as oppressive and biased (Hare-Mustin, 1978). Feminist researchers in particular have critiqued modernist theories of family life and exposed the gender bias inherent in traditional research paradigms.

Postmodernism has as its guiding assumption that truth is socially constructed by individuals and families. The shift from modernist to postmodernism research has resulted in an emergent focus on adaptive aspects of individual behaviour in juxtaposition with the focus on deficits and pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). The major distinction between the modern and the postmodern eras according to an interview with Gergen (Bubenzer & West, 1993) stems from the multiplicity of perspectives that now exist and that serve to challenge the concept of objective knowledge.

Postmodernism recognises that no generalisations can be made about the definition or structure of family life (Lewis, 1993). The approach has been widely used to recognise and confront culturally embedded meanings that have been disguised as universal truths (De Haene, 2010). A postmodern lens legitimises the viability of alternative family structures as it provides a different framework for discussing the unique experiences of individuals and families affected by separation (Boney, 2003). What people call a dysfunctional or broken family is a misunderstanding or biased concept. By examining family processes postmodern researchers can view family change not merely as a negative event but can also see how the change develops competencies and capabilities of family members. Contemporary researchers are now starting to argue that all families, regardless of structure, have family strengths and that non-traditional families are legitimate for successful parenting (Boney, 2003).

Several postmodern frameworks are potentially relevant to the phenomena of shared care. Phenomenology posits that human beings care about their own lives and therefore their actions are meaningful (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). With its focus on careful attention to essential features of phenomena, adopting a phenomenological lens allows for an investigation that obtains a descriptive and rich understanding of the participants' experiences. It also looks at how individual experiences may vary from situation to situation. Truths are made possible because of shared experiences which are contributed through interactions with others. The approach is consistent with a knowledge claim about the primacy of experience; it is how a person lives out their experiences that is an important starting point for phenomenological enquiry.

According to Gergen (1985) feminist thinkers have been among those most acutely aware of the possibilities of postmodernism for social analysis. For feminists, the modernist orientation to knowledge manipulates, suppresses and alienates those under research scrutiny. Modernist approaches failed to recognise the importance of social context as a determiner of behaviour and how sex roles prescribed by society disadvantaged women (Hare-Mustin, 1978). In the search for alternative forms of understanding feminists have found social constructionism an attractive approach because of its emphasis on the communal basis of knowledge, processes of interpretation and concern with values (Gergen, 1985).

Social constructionism is concerned with how people "describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). Common forms of understanding and knowledge can be built from the process of social interaction. The study of social process could be generic for understanding the nature of knowledge itself. According to social constructionism many classic problems are products of linguistic confusion; with clarity the language problems can be untangled. The approach has challenged several taken-for-granted notions including gender, mental illness, suicide, domestic violence and menopause. In each case the objective criteria for identification are shown to be highly circumscribed by culture, history or social context (Gergen, 1985). How we understand the world is through our interchanges with others. The social exchanges are subject to vicissitudes and the rules are inherently ambiguous and evolving. Knowledge therefore is not what we read about in books but rather something people

do together which Gergen refers to as 'linguistic rendering'. At times when a person's sense of identity is challenged they create new stories about themselves (Willig, 2011). To try and make sense of what is happening to them they make the new events part of a new narrative so it can be understood and shared with others. The new narrative provides a compass and a sense of where the person is now heading.

Postmodernism heralds a challenge to traditional knowledge claims. Consistent with a postmodern approach the research will attempt to be both faithful to the individual experience and cautious with its conclusions. Nonetheless the research hopes to reveal essential features of the shared care experience, as reported by children who have grown-up with this family arrangement. The reported narratives will help formulate themes that may give insight into the experience of shared care.

Postmodern approaches provide a valuable theoretical framework that lie between the problematic explanatory domains of psychology and sociology. By considering the contextual aspects of research, including its social, cultural and historical situations, the postmodern approach offers a critical platform from which to interpret the interview data.

Thematic Analysis

Although not theoretically bound, thematic analysis is compatible with the postmodern paradigm. Thematic analysis has been defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). According to these authors, when used thoughtfully, thematic analysis is a sensitive way to report the experiences, meanings and reality of participants. Highly flexible, thematic analysis is an appropriate way of discerning patterns in the participants' experiences of shared care. This methodology is known to be of use when investigating an under-researched area. In such cases a rich description of the data set may be useful when the views of participants on the topic are not known. The themes will be identified by an inductive approach as there is very little information that currently exists to illuminate how children find the experience of shared care.

Despite having what is referred to as ‘theoretical freedom’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) this does not mean that ‘anything goes’ and although thematic analysis has been criticised for the absence of clear and concise guidelines, these authors have explained that there is a ‘recipe’ for how to do thematic analysis which will be adopted for this research following their six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The engagement with the data began with the transcription process which was an excellent way to become familiar with the data. Phase one involved a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, and re-reading the transcriptions numerous times. The second phase involved the generation of initial codes or features of the data. Coding started literally with post-it notes and margin comments, noticing what was to be noticed. In the early stages nothing of interest was eliminated and this stage involved a great deal of different codes. A consideration of possible themes followed in phase three and the various codes were collated and sorted into an initial thematic map. These themes were reviewed and refined in phase four, resulting in some candidate themes without sufficient data supporting them to be removed. By phase five the thematic map was refined further and key themes named. Each theme was considered not just for the story it told but also how it contributed to the overall picture in relation to the research question. The final phase appears as the written findings in the next chapter.

Method: Semi-structured interview

Qualitative research can involve several ways of engaging participants including interviews which are an interactional and relational process. As with all relationships it is in a continuous process of change. Interviewing is a creative process where both parties must be powerfully engaged to share and capture relevant information in a limited amount time.

As individuals are considered experts of their own experience the semi-structured interview was the method considered to be the most appropriate form of data generation (Eatough, Smith, & Shaw, 2008). The researcher had a set of questions to guide the interview but remained responsive to the participant’s process. Broadly participants were asked what they remembered of their parents’ separation; if and how they were involved in the decision making about their living arrangements.

They were also asked what they liked and didn't like about shared care. Relationships with their parents were explored as were other relationships that had significant impact on their living arrangement. Finally they were asked about their values and views of love, marriage and family. The interview questions that guided the study appear in Appendix C. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in preparation for analysis.

Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was initiated by snowballing, a sampling technique that used personal networks to contact suitable subjects. Initially an email was sent out to friends and fellow students targeting people in the Wellington region.

Advertisements were also placed around campus and community notice boards.

Participants needed to meet the following criteria: aged at least 16; to have been in a shared parenting arrangement for at least two years; to be aged at least five when the shared parenting arrangement began and for the arrangement to consist of at least three nights a fortnight with each parent.

Interested participants were encouraged to make initial contact with the researcher through email or phone. During the initial conversation the purpose of the study was outlined and any questions the participant had addressed. If the participant verbally agreed to take part, an interview time and place was established. Generally the interviews were held at the participant's home or in an office at Massey University campus. By way of acknowledging their time and contribution to the research endeavour participants were offered koha in the form of a \$20 movie voucher for their involvement in this project.

Ethics

This project was evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. The researcher and supervisor were responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. One ethical consideration was gaining informed consent of participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study initially by a discussion with the researcher supported by an information sheet (Appendix A) sent out. Participants were made aware of their rights on the information sheet and these included: that they could decline to answer any particular question; withdraw from the study at any point in

time; ask any questions about the study at any time during participation; be given a summary of the project findings when it is concluded and ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview. The participants were not placed under any duress in terms of agreeing to participate in the interview. All participants willingly agreed to take part and signed the research consent form (see Appendix B).

Inviting a discussion of a person's childhood experiences and their relationships with their parents can be sensitive and highly personal. The individual's need for confidentiality was therefore another important ethical consideration. It can be difficult for participants to discuss their living situation without referencing their parents, therefore participants had the opportunity to read the transcript and edit their comments. Pseudonyms were used in the documentation of information and privacy of all participants was maintained at all times.

The risk of harm to participants was considered to be low. Nonetheless it was recognised that a discussion of childhood experiences may raise some negative emotions. If any participants found the interview process in any way distressing they were encouraged to explore these issues with a trained therapist and a list of referral support services was provided. In actuality, none of the participants indicated a need for emotional support following the interview.

Participants

The young adults in this study ranged from age 16-32. The one participant in their thirties had been raised in shared care and is now also bringing up a son in a shared care arrangement. Six of the 12 participants were teenagers and the remaining five were in their twenties. All but two of the participants had a shared care arrangement for numerous years, indeed most had maintained the arrangement during their informative years from around age seven until they left home. The twins (Sophie and Harper) experienced parental separation later in life and they had experienced shared care for the shortest length of time of two years when interviewed. Five of the participants did 50/50 week about. One of the participants did four days with one parent then three days with the other, rotated (50/50 but split week). One of the participants moved between the two homes without any fixed schedule. The

remaining four participants did one night a week and alternative weekends with one parent and the rest of the time with the other parent (70/30).

1. Jennifer, female aged 26. Her parents separated when she was four. She and her older sister stayed with their father Wednesday nights and every second weekend. In addition she usually spent at least one day on each weekend with her dad usually around sporting events and practices. This arrangement continued until she was 12 and both parents remarried. Shortly after her dad's new relationship Jennifer and her sister lived full-time with their mother.
2. James, male aged 22. His parents separated when he was 12. Shared care 50/50 week about until he went to University.
3. Emma, female aged 32. Parents separated when she was five. She has a two-year older brother. Up until the age of seven they stayed with their mother during the week and stayed weekends with their father. From age seven they went 50/50 week about. Emma has a young son who also does 50/50 shared care.
4. Olivia, female aged 18. Parents separated when she was five. She and her brother stayed with their father on Wednesday and Saturday nights each week. This arrangement continued until she moved to University.
5. Ava, female aged 25. Parents separated when she was 10. She and her younger brother spent every Wednesday and every second weekend with their father. Arrangement continued until she was 18 and went to University.
6. Sophia, female aged 17. Her parents separated when she was 15 and since then she has been doing 50/50 week about. Sophia has a twin sister (Harper).
7. Harper, female aged 17. Twin sister of Sophia. 50/50 week about shared care since parents separated when she was 15 along with her sister.
8. Lucy, female aged 22. Parents separated when she was 11. Has a younger sister of two years. Lucy doesn't remember having a fixed arrangement but explains the shared care as moving between the two homes in a fluid way. She tended to spend most weekdays at her father's and most weekends with her mother. This arrangement changed to a more 50/50 split at some stage so she also spent some time with her mother during the week. Her dog also went with her to each home.

9. Michael, male aged 18. Doesn't remember his parents ever living together. Recalls being 'brought up' by his mother's friends around the age of three. Following a court case when he was four years old he started going to his father's house in the weekend. As he matured this arrangement became more flexible. There were some complex issues for Michael as sadly his mother died when he was 15 and his teenage years were heavily shadowed by this event.
10. Madison, female aged 21. Parents separated when she was 11. Madison also has a younger sister by three years. Madison and her sister would spend every Friday and every second weekend with their father.
11. Henry, male aged 18. Parents separated when he was 12. Henry and his younger sister alternated between one parent; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday nights and weekends with the other parent. This arrangement continued until he went to University. Now he stays primarily at his father's but also stays with his mother every second weekend.
12. Andrew, male aged 16. Parents separated when he was 13. Has been living in 50/50 week about ever since. Has a younger sister who does same arrangement.

Researcher

The role of the researcher is an active and integral part of the qualitative approach. Social constructionist and phenomenological perspectives have always appealed as valid approaches when examining social interactions including my own experiences. It is important to acknowledge my involvement in the research process as I do not own the words of the participants; I have borrowed what they said and interpreted their meanings. My interest in shared care parenting is intensely personal. I am a mother of two teenage daughters who, until recently, were in 50/50 week about shared care arrangement. This arrangement was in place for nine years following our separation in 2004 and was voluntarily agreed. At the time of separation I searched for advice and guidance as to what was best for our young girls. I was strongly influenced by the available literature that was resoundingly in favour of shared care but I found there was little practical support for parents separating and I felt as though I was groping in the dark. I am now aware of some support in place for parents, including parenting after separation courses, but I wonder if many parents

still find it difficult to work through what might be best for their children post-separation with the conflicting information on offer.

Over the years I have maintained an interest in the effects of divorce and separation on children and custody arrangements that are, it seems, brought about through a combination of research, legal practice and whimsy. I bring to this thesis my fears and hopes for my children raised in shared care; and all children raised in diverse family types.

Chapter Four: Findings

Thematic Map

Theme One	Sub-Themes
The catalyst: Parental Separation	We remember it well My parents will stay apart Don't assume we want to talk about it What we would say to parents separating
Theme Two	
Logistics: Two houses, one bag	Yes, I had two homes Gender roles rule We celebrate together The suitcase kid It's normal for me
Theme Three	
Relationships: many and varied	I know my parents better this way Walking the tightrope My parents as parents apart Sharing parents with others
Theme Four	
Wellbeing Changes	Mental and emotional wellbeing Financial wellbeing
Theme Five	
Reflections	It's made me the person I am today Love, marriage, family: yeah, nah, maybe

The themes revealed through the analysis process will be outlined over the next five chapters. As expected with this form of analysis not all participants were represented in each theme and there are instances where the identified themes merge and demarcation lines become blurred. The themes highlight participant experiences and understanding of how their reformed family life has affected them.

Theme One: The Catalyst – Parental Separation

We remember it well

My first memory when we moved was looking out the window sitting on Dad's knee and the moving truck being outside. (Jennifer)

What became evident through the analysis was the significance of the initiating event to shared care, that of the parents separating. All participants remembered the day they were told their parents were separating with the exception of one whose parents separated before he was born. Consistent with Wallerstein's (2005) polemic many participants had vivid memory fragments of the moments they were told of their parent's separation and remember feeling shocked and unhappy about the news as expressed in the following excerpts by Emma, Madison and Lucy:

They were never meant to be together obviously, it really didn't work out and so they, all I remember is them having this big fight, we got shunted next door, I remember them throwing stuff, yelling, rubbish sacks full of things being, you know, one packing, then the other, I don't know what, and the next thing then the police car comes, the police car comes and takes Dad away. That was probably the hardest bit is to see Dad taken away in the police car. (Emma)

It was Guy Fawkes night and it was quite a tense family meeting and as soon as they kind of said come sit down at the table with us I could sense something was up and they had been fighting a little bit before..I remember asking my Mum to tell us if there was ever a chance they were going to get divorced they would have to tell us and so..yeah I don't remember the exact language but essentially they told us they were going to get a separation.

INT: do you remember how you felt at the time?

I guess a little bit like the world was falling to bits. (Madison)

I remember in the morning, it was a weekend and it was just before my sister's birthday and we were playing outside and Dad came outside and said 'we need to talk to you'. And I just had no consciousness at all that anything was wrong there was no fighting nothing.. It was a real shock. I remember going inside and the look

on his face was so grave the first question was 'has someone died' and he was like 'no' (laughing) but we sat down on the couch and I think Mum told us actually she said "I'm moving out, we love you very much but we don't want to be together anymore" and my sister who's younger than me, two years younger than me was like not fine with it but she already knew cos she had dreams about it and stuff..yeah she knew and I was just so gutted. I remember my first response was like "well what are we going to do with the cats?" I got really fixated on the kind of domestic details of it like how were we going to figure arrangements and stuff like that. (Lucy)

The language invokes the sense of shock the participants recall and the images are striking in their visual clarity. To remember seeing her father 'taken away in a police car' unsettles our everyday understanding of how fathers are usually viewed by their children. Again, 'the world was falling to bits' belies what we hope childhood memories are based on. Both sentiments highlight the significance of the event. There is sense of detail portrayed in terms of place, time and location in each of the extracts which suggests the memory has become indelibly etched in their minds. The news of the separation is vividly recalled in terms of time and place but less so in terms of the message content. Lucy recalls what her parents said but what lingers is that she 'was just so gutted'. It is the emotional tone of the recollections that stand out; this was an event that changed their lives. Interestingly in both Madison's and Lucy's accounts they mentioned a premonition about what is about to happen with Madison asking her mother to tell her if they were ever to divorce and Lucy's sister dream which proved portent. Some researchers have commented that children are keen and perceptive observers of their family dynamics (Goldson, 2006) and this would indicate that they had a sense of what was going on even if they did not fully understand the ramifications. This is juxtaposed with a typical childlike interpretation as expressed by Lucy, "what are we going to do with the cats". Not all participants recalled feeling upset about the news, but they did remember being told as reported by Olivia, Hannah and Ava:

Ok I don't really know too much about it cos I was younger at the time. I don't know why my parents split up or anything but I think I was about five it was around that time, I'm not too sure what age I was but then I just, Dad just moved out.. I remember my Dad and we were in the car and he said that he was going to move out

but that was it. [laughing] yeah It wasn't really like, they didn't really kind of like we didn't sit down and we didn't discuss it, this is what's happening and at the time I didn't know, I just kind of went with it. I wasn't like upset or anything. (Olivia)

I can remember being quite upset like, it wasn't something I wanted to deal with ..yeah..I sort of was in complete denial really. It came out of nowhere for me cos I was 10 years old it's not the kind of thing you really pick up on like I said it was a pretty amicable separation so they weren't fighting all the time or anything. They just sort of decided that they didn't want to be together anymore for whatever reason. (Hannah)

I think that I wasn't actually terribly troubled by it. I don't remember being cut up about it for a long time. Certainly distressed like at the very beginning but..(Ava)

Apparently relatively unconcerned, for these young women the parental separation, while remembered, did not have the intense emotional component. This may be a reflection of how their parents communicated the separation to them. How parents cope with the separation may in turn affect how the child internalises the event. The young women have little knowledge about what caused the separation and the event was not associated with the same strong visual memory fragments. Their developmental age may also have been a factor as they could have been considered too young to be involved in discussions about the decision and this appeared to have sheltered them somewhat in terms of their emotional reaction. Nonetheless they do remember being told and there is an impression that this day was stored away with other significant childhood memories akin to the first day of kindergarten or school; the first visit to hospital and the special birthday present of a new bike.

Another frequently observed factor throughout the interviews was the tendency for participants to use minimisers in their language in an apparent attempt to reduce the impact of the news as seen in the following excerpt:

I had a friend over for the weekend and that was fun and we went out to where this friend lived and dropped him off and then we went I forget where but we went for pizza where they told us and then we sat in the car and that was fine and then we picked up the bed that I think mum was going to move into her new house and that all happened in one afternoon. The reason the friend lived out where we were

picking up this bed from, I remember it was pretty bad but it was sort of nothing too bad...when I got told it was quite like yeah this has sort of happened I was sort of expecting, not really expecting but aware of? The thing that went with that is I sort of told myself it might almost be temporary or it might go back to how it was which it didn't. (Henry)

After Henry was told of the separation 'and that was fine' he remembered it 'was bad' but 'nothing too bad'. Henry justified or minimised the news perhaps as a protective coping mechanism with the thought that the separation might be temporary. This occurs frequently throughout the interviews; participants frequently acknowledge some negative emotion and then in the same sentence it is justified or verbally minimised. This is an understandable reaction as the young people are stalwart upholders of family loyalty and find transgressing family boundaries extremely uncomfortable. As Boney (2003) commented children of separated parents frequently come up with an explanation for their situation that absolves their parents of responsibility for the event. A similar reaction was expressed by Harper:

I don't know I guess I was kind of sad. I don't know. I don't find it that sad. Yeah. Um I cried in the car but then after that it was ok. (Harper)

Although a pivotal childhood memory once the separation announcement was made most participants accepted the news with relative equilibrium; for one the news was recalled moving from confusion to sadness to acceptance in one swift sentence:

Yeah I think they sat us down at the table I think I was maybe 13 or 12 or something and they sat us down at the table and they just sort of told us and I was sort of a bit like I didn't understand at first and I was a bit sad then and then I don't know it was just sort of a big change (Andrew).

Some authors (Wallerstein, 2005) have commented that parental separation is a defining moment and for the children and young people affected it stands out as the most formative and negative event of their childhood:

Up until 12 years old my life was awesome and then I kind just didn't realise that it stopped being awesome at about 12 years old. (James)

Regardless how the children reported their reaction on the day, the news was a signpost in the timetable of their lives; irrevocably from this day forward their lives would change:

You know those moments sometimes, I've only had like two or three of them ever, this being one of them, when everything goes like white and really as if it freezes, it was like that just for a moment. (Lucy)

For participants their parental separation was a significant event, and most recalled vividly the day, time and place where they were told the news. For some this was an upsetting and distressing development in their family life but with a retrospective view their language tended to justify, modify and accept their changing circumstances.

Often discussed in the literature is the inclination for children and young people of divorce and separation to have reconciliation fantasies. The next sub-theme looks at this wish with the participants.

My parents will stay apart

I can't imagine it if my parents were together. (Ava)

One study which included the views of children doing shared care (Steinman, 1981) argued that reconciliation fantasies were common for most children of separation and even if they did not think their parents would reconcile it remained an emotional issue for them. The children in the Steinman study were young (aged 4-15) and the author questioned if shared care was in part responsible for keeping alive the wish for a united family. Reconciliation fantasies were not experienced by participants in this study:

I think it's funny like in the past I've imagined if they were still together and I talk about everything with Mum, we are really open and she has said heaps of times "I have often thought I should have stayed with your Dad" she always says that. And I always say "no, imagine how bad it would be, he's so weird". (Jennifer)

Perhaps a reflection of their age and associated maturity the young people in this study were very realistic about their parent's reconciling and any fantasies were fleeting.

At the time I think I did want them to stay together. But it was also like really cool cos they got so much more relaxed like Dad started buying grain waves and we had nutella (laughing) all this stuff like Dad was a bit more lenient than Mum I think, he spoilt us a bit more and same with Mum I could have boys over and stuff like that later in a way that I don't think would have been able if they had been a united front. (Lucy)

Not only did they not expect their parents to reconcile but they could see a wider perspective and different possibilities for their reformed family life. Several participants commented that once the change had occurred they did not envisage a return to 'normal' and accepted that the new way of being offered fresh opportunities.

No, even if they did get back together it would be completely different. I would want it to be different, I wouldn't want it to go back to how it was. (Harper)

The participants were very clear that their parents once separated were going to remain that way. They did not demonstrate any reconciliation fantasies and viewed their new family life with realism and optimism. The next sub-theme discusses if the participants were involved in discussions about their reformed family and how they would be cared for post-separation.

Don't assume we want to talk about it

Sometimes I just don't want to talk about it. (Harper)

Involving children and young people in discussions about their post-separation living arrangements has received some attention in the research literature. Some studies, (Campbell, 2008; Goldson, 2006; Smith et al., 2003) found that children wanted to be listened to but did not want to be responsible for the final decision about who they live with. At the heart of this dilemma is the concern that children and young people will feel obligated to choose one parent over the other and feel caught in a loyalty

bind. Most participants confirmed that they had been consulted and had discussed prospective living arrangements with their parents. They appeared comfortable both with the discussions and the outcome:

I have a vague feeling that they might have talked to us about who do you want to live with. It wasn't a decision we had to make obviously outright. We were never going to be living with just my Mum or just my Dad. (Ava)

Participants were comfortable with discussions about whom they would live with and most had these discussions with both of their parents. Most of the participants' parents did not go to the family court to determine post-separation living arrangements and it seems apparent that the young people felt consulted, included and not conflicted around these discussions. However, there was a distinct reluctance to discuss their changing family life outside their immediate family. Participants in this study reported they did not want to speak to an authority figure or anyone outside their extended family. This was consistent with a study by Neale 2002 (as cited in Campbell) that young people see professional involvement as intervention not support. Sometimes even well intentioned people close to the young person did not help:

I definitely recall my teacher who was a divorced father I guess you would call him and he talked to me outside on the steps which was quite nice I think he tried to help me understand it I think he failed terribly but he tried. (Madison)

There is a fine line between encouraging discussion, due to a belief that the young person would benefit from having someone to talk to, and the genuine reluctance of the young person to discuss their family life. As highlighted by James when asked to reflect on the separation and what would have helped, he stated:

It just would have been good to have someone else other than my parents to talk to. Someone wise and kind and really cares about you..you just want supportive people around you. Doesn't have to be a counsellor or something ideally it would be people who know you like an Auntie or Uncle, Grandparents or family friends (James).

Yet he acknowledged that even when prompted he was not comfortable discussing his family situation:

I had one good hockey coach who seemed to really like me and wanted me in his team, because he had come through a split family as well. He was really nice to me and stuff but I don't know whether he asked much about that and how I was. I don't think I was very open to it. (James)

Most of the participants were comfortable with talking to their parents about where they would live and appreciated having the opportunity to do so. Most were not so keen to speak to others especially those outside their immediate family. The inherent incongruence of what the participants are saying remains a challenge for those wanting to support young people both within and outside of their family. It cannot be assumed that talking about it is what they need or want. In the last sub-theme participants offer advice to parents considering separation.

What we would say to parents separating

But yeah, take care of yourself as much as you can.

Work through your own stuff cos it does impact your kids. (James)

Participants were asked what advice they would give to parents going through a separation and they reflected on what they thought their own parents had done well:

I think one of the things my Dad, my parents, did really well was like made sure I didn't feel any fault, like it wasn't my fault at all, so that was good. (James)

I think probably just to set a good example when relating to the other person. Like my parents did they obviously were always friendly and civil like even if you can't be friendly at least be civil. Kids are probably going to lean more towards one parent I think so trying to I don't know encourage them to still have a good relationship with the other person. (Ava)

One of the participants was brought up in 50/50 shared care household and now also parents a child doing 50/50 shared care and can claim to have a unique perspective:

Honestly, I know what works, I know what doesn't work. I know that putting this huge distance between my son and his father and I is really going to cause strife... I'm know that what works with shared parenting is that the parents are amicable and communicating and there's that sense for the child that these are actually friends, they get along, and we have that—and I know about flexibility and the fact it needs to be about the child. (Emma)

Ultimately all participants recognised that how the parents handled the separation was important to them. This is in line with several authors (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Smyth, 2005) who contend that most important factor for children's adjustment post-separation is the quality of the relationships, especially between parents:

I don't think kids have any say in what happens so you can't advise a kid what to do cos they just do what they're told. It all just happened around me. So, no, I think it's all on the parents. (Jennifer)

This chapter explored aspects of parental separation, the catalyst for the shared care living situation that transposed. Consistent with earlier research (Wallerstein, 2005) most participants had lucid recollections of the day they were told of this event even while they experienced it with different levels of emotional intensity. Parental separation remains a formative turning point in a person's life. Participants did not demonstrate any reconciliation fantasies and were very clear that their parents once separated were going to remain that way. Young people were comfortable with discussing with their parents prospective post-separation living arrangements. They did not want to talk to people outside their immediate family or close friends and often simply did not see it as an issue that needed talking about at all.

Finally, participants had some advice for parents contemplating separation based on their lived experience which included: dealing with emotional issues so the children do not feel blamed in any way; understanding if the children have different relationships with each parent; not staying together for the sake of the children and most importantly – parents' behaviour will affect the children.

Chapter Five: Two houses, one bag

Yes, I had two homes

I had kind of two of everything my toys at Dad's and my toys at Mum's and my one toy that went everywhere. (Jennifer)

Once their family was reformed and shared care in place, most participants appeared to adapt to their new family structure and to make the transition to two homes with relative ease. Almost without exception the participants felt at home in two different houses. They exhibited a pragmatic and accepting attitude about having two homes and their discourse was lucid and unambiguous as the following extracts demonstrate:

Yeah definitely. Two homes. (Emma)

Yep. Two homes definitely: two bedrooms; two toothbrushes. (Lucy)

Yeah, two separate and full homes. (Henry)

The only exception was Ava who attributed the differences to the adjustment to a new family:

Partly, Mum's house was definitely more home than Dad's particularly because he had another partner and her kids lived there and there was always a bit of a clash there. (Ava)

Ava found the adjustment to living with another family impacted her sense of home at her father's house. For Ava this was compounded by several moves and having to share a room with her brother when at her father's house.

Research highlights that young people believe that shared care is a fair way to retain a relationship with both parents and it appeals to their sense of justice (Fabricius, 2003) which was replicated in this study:

I think it was just 50/50. I think that 50/50 is fair and week on and week off sounded fine at the time. (Andrew)

The participants on this point were emphatic, resounding and unequivocal with their views. They had two houses and two homes. The two homes were different however, and different houses come with different rules and cultures and it is these differences that are explored in the next sub-theme.

Gender roles rule

Mum was kind of the boss of it all. (Jennifer)

Each participant was clear about the new routines and schedules which were established in each home and these were articulated in a matter of fact manner. They had no problems explaining how the shared care worked. Previous research also indicated that children were easily able to differentiate between their two homes (Steinman, 1981). There was a sense of everyday lived normality as the follow accounts demonstrate:

Initially we went weekdays with Mum; weekends with Dad for two years until I was seven. And then when I was seven, we went week on and week off. (Emma)

Although clear about the logistics of the arrangement it was also apparent that each house had different cultures, atmospheres and ways of being that were found to be located in gender of the parent as demonstrated by Emma's narrative:

Dad's house was more fun and Mum's house was stability. Dad would take us out on a Friday night, midnight we would be roaming the streets of Queen Street, going to cafes, we would always be going to cafes, he would take us to theme parks and on holidays and it was a more fun, kind of spontaneous, impulsive lifestyle, which I quite liked..suited my personality just fine. Mum's was stability, it was routine, it was just the very average, like the idea of fun night at Mum's would be like, we would have dinner and then the kids would all put on a show and it was more kind of organic rather than let's just throw money into our life. So that had its perks and it was a lot more outdoorsy Mum's life, Mum's house. (Emma)

Each home might have been different to what they were previously used to but again this was accepted as their kind of normal. In theory, shared care promotes and supports gender equity but it was clear from the young people's perspectives that

living with Mum was different from living with Dad. Generally the mother's house was more structured, stable and less spontaneous. At the father's house participants generally had more independence, fun and fewer rules. The young people appeared to accept the difference and adjust accordingly:

It was always a treat going there and hanging out with Dad. I think we got a little bit spoilt with Dad. We were allowed to eat rubbish and stay up a bit later and watch movies. It was kind of like a bit of a holiday going to Dad's. Cos at Mum's we were doing our homework and our chores. Dad and I both played hockey and basketball and I did athletics and every Sunday Dad would take me to athletics and sit there for the whole day in the stadium and he would take me to the pool quite a lot. (Jennifer)

There was one notable exception to the gender divide and that was in Lucy's family where her mother worked full-time and her father had always assumed the day-to-day care of the children from before they separated:

Dad was a stay at home house husband for all of our childhood so we already had that Dad was the main caregiver sort of..Yeah I think at some point they split up more evenly so that we had some week time with Mum because we were having fun with her but she had no idea how we were doing at school and stuff and Dad didn't get to have fun time with us so I think we ended up splitting it. (Lucy)

While shared care maintains involvement with both parents it is evident that gender differences exist in the two homes. Participants had different homes with each parent but adapted to each house with comparative ease and frequently enjoyed the differences. The next sub-theme explores family ritual activities through the lens of how participants enjoyed birthdays, Christmases and other celebrations in their post-separation family.

We celebrate together

We would start at one house and then we would go to the other.

It's nice but it's exhausting. (Emma)

New traditions were established and events such as birthdays, Christmases and holidays also continued in a different way. As discussed by Costa (2013) one effective way of studying families is to explore what they do rather than what they are and family rituals are an important way for members to interact. The participants enjoyed family occasions and celebrations retained their importance to their sense of family identity:

Usually Christmases my Mum's family has a tradition of doing brunch so we would almost always be there for brunch and go to Dad's in the middle of the day and do that hang out there for a few hours and hang out there with my step-grandmother and either stay there or go back to Mum's in the past few years it's been go back to Mum's but in the last few years mercifully they have stopped putting lunch on at Dad's. (Olivia)

Rotation was a frequently mentioned strategy by participants for special occasion days and they became used to switching between homes and different family ways of celebrating. What was retained was the importance of connecting with extended family:

For Christmas it's supposed to alternate I think one year we did a lot with Dad or something, my Dad really wanted us there, we split a day once, the emphasis was we always saw our grandparents and Aunt and Uncle. Every year we went to our Aunt and Uncle's house. I really enjoyed that. (Henry)

Christmas has always been we'd stay the night at one parent's house then wake up in the morning and they would have Santa gifts for us and then about 2 o'clock or 2.30 or something like that we would go back to the other parent. (Madison)

Rituals reflect what is happening to contemporary families (Costa, 2013) and participants recall family celebrations as a special time which they valued. For children shared care often had the additional benefit of presents from two families.

The next sub-theme explores what participants found most inconvenient about living in two homes.

The suitcase kids

I hate carrying luggage around it's so annoying.

It's a massive suitcase, it's so huge. (Harper)

Participants were asked what they didn't like about shared custody and most frequently mentioned was having to pack a bag and constantly move. There is very little research that has looked at how children find the nut and bolts of the arrangement, although one study (Smart et al., 2001) interviewed 117 children in the UK and mentioned some aspects that children complained about. These included moving house every week, having inflexible schedules and feeling confused with too many changes. The participants concurred with the Smart study that the transience imposed by the arrangement generated negative reactions as seen below:

After so many years of every Monday, there were definitely aspects that traumatised us, like once we were week on week off, every Monday we had to shift house and so I now have a dread still to this day of Sundays and Mondays oh yeah, wow, it's like every Sunday packing and changing and moving its just and what made it hard it that my parents lived on opposite sides of the city so Dad lived Eastern suburbs of Auckland; Mum lived on the North Shore. (Emma)

I remember it being a hassle more than anything to go back and forth between houses cos like I said they're about 20 minutes drive from each other so having to sort of pack a bag ..to have to sort of pack the bag in the middle of the week, just to go there and to leave quite early in the morning to get to school on time. (Ava)

The thing I found worst was that having to move about, you know. (Henry)

It's sort of annoying sometimes cos you have to move around and stuff (Sophie).

I think the week on week off thing is a bit stressful.. cos I have to get all my stuff and move it into the other house and then it sort of takes a week to settle in really and then I have to leave again. (Andrew)

The bag was an evocative and perpetual symbol of shared care that most participants commented was an unpleasant side effect of shared care.

You literally had to pack everything up for the week and take it with you. I always had a big school bag and stuff. (Emma)

It kind of seems like a hassle we had to pack a bag and we would have what we wanted when we were at Dad's and we'd have to pack it back up on Sunday nights so we could go to school and then Dad could drop it off on Monday night it was just kind of a bit like a pain in the arse. He had drawers that we could put our clothes in when we weren't there but cos we were only there for 2 or 3 nights it was kind of like it can just stay in my bag. (Madison)

Well we were only living out of a suitcase when we were at Dad's but just to have to pack a bag every few days..I mean it wouldn't be too much of a big issue but certainly inconvenient on the whole. (Ava)

It's perhaps not surprising for participants to find regular moves inconvenient. It is one aspect of shared care that stands out from other family forms. Young people and children in shared care households frequently move and while they don't mind having two homes they do mind the mechanics of packing up and shifting places. Some of the participants found this worse than others and nearly all commented that arrangements changed in teenage years with a preference to stay longer in one house. The Smart et al. (2001) study discussed that older children were constrained by missing out on time with friends and some extracurricular activities which was also mentioned by some of the participants in this study:

I think the main inconvenience to me as a teenager was like all my friends are in Tawa but I am here this weekend. (Ava)

I remember at one stage wanting to play netball but the Shore girls played netball on the Shore; the city girls played in the city, my parents wouldn't agree for me to play; neither wanted me to play with the other... all these kind of annoying things. (Emma)

Participants find frequent moves between homes annoying and the bag or suitcase was a symbolic representation of shared care living. It is the one aspect of their

family life that separates them from other family structure types and one that they certainly found inconvenient, but as the next sub-theme explores, it was still for them, normality.

It's normal for me

I think it just was, it's all I knew. (Emma)

At a fundamental level most of the young people accepted that shared care was their normal; it was what they knew and what they became used to. There was an acceptance, resilience and pragmatism with their views:

So all I remember as a kid thinking..I wouldn't want them together, this works out just fine. The going back and forth like from house to house was, it works. I never questioned it, never was like, I want it another way. It seemed to work. (Emma)

Yep, I always told my friends, I was never kind of ashamed of it or anything that's just how it was, and that's how I knew it. (Olivia)

There was never a time when I was at Mum's house and I was like I just want to go to Dad's or when I was at Dad's there was never a time when I was like I never want to be here I just want to be at Mum's. I was always happy wherever I was. (Ava)

I don't look at it as what I enjoyed more it just happened and I'm not complaining about it. Now I don't really care cos it was for the best, I realise that now and since then it now it's normal it would be weird not to. (Henry)

The Steinman (1981) study found that while the children adapted well to the shared care situation the living situation was not as desirable as when the parents were living together. Contrary to the Steinman study participants for the most part were happier with their parents living apart. They commented on the key advantages including their parents being happier as the following extracts demonstrate:

They used to sort of argue a bit and they still do but they are happier, yeah so that makes me happier. (Andrew)

I guess it's kind of good because they're kind of more themselves and it's just more fun and stuff..I think most of the time it's better. (Harper)

I mean obviously it's a benefit to my parents and in that way I think it's been good for all of us. It wouldn't have been any good for anyone if they had stayed together and tried to make it work for us I don't think that's constructive really. But also having that shared arrangement I think is beneficial rather than having us stay only with one parent or only see each other on special occasions. (Ava)

Where I am now I am happy so it must have been a good thing. (Henry)

I had such a good upbringing. (Olivia)

I sort of like it more cos you can get to know each parent better like I talk to Mum more and Dad. I still find it better. (Sophie)

Well I like seeing both my parents and I think that's important (Andrew)

Theme two explored the practical matters around having two houses and participants strongly identified with having two separate and valid homes. They adapted easily to new routines, schedules and traditions which were upheld in different but meaningful ways although gender differences were evident. Participants found frequent moves and having to pack inconvenient. The bag, suitcase and/or overstuffed school bag were symbolic representations of living the shared care arrangement. On balance the inconvenience appeared an acceptable 'price to pay' for the young people to have experienced two valid family homes and to retain a relationship with each parent. The next chapter explores these relationships in more detail.

Chapter Six: Relationships: many and varied

I know my parents better this way

I have a week with just one of my parents so I get to know what they do and everything a bit better. (Andrew)

Several participants commented that they developed different relationships with each parent as a result of shared care. One of the advantages was getting to know their parents better as individuals rather than viewing them as the parental-dyad. As the relationship with each parent developed separately there was a sense that the young adults viewed their parents as fallible individuals rather than authoritative all-knowing figures and the shared care process humanised the connection. This was enhanced by observations of the way their parents coped with the separation and managed their lives as single people. The parenting relationship became characterised by each parent being able to parent according to their own value systems which the young adults noticed and appreciated. Concurring with Steinman's (1981) notion of two "psychological parents" with mostly two parents available, the participants were loyal to both and appreciated the differences in parenting as where Olivia discusses her relationship with each parent since moving out of her home town to University:

It's really close, since moving down here, he's really sad. We like Skype like three times a week. Every Wednesday night my brother comes over cos he's like flatting now – he goes over to Dad's on Wednesdays for dinner and we Skype him, it's kind of like a tradition Yeah. And then every Friday he sends me a parcel. He's more sentimental than my Mum. Yeah no we have a very good relationship. It's very fun.

INT: and your Mum?

Yeah the same thing. We have a very close relationship as well. I guess we, we are not really, we are open, we always say how we're feeling and stuff but some things we just don't really talk about, but we still do have a really close relationship. (Olivia)

Olivia notices and seems to appreciate the differences in her parents approach and their individual qualities. As other participants have commented technologies such

as Skype and texting allow other ways for young people and their parents to maintain contact which is particularly pertinent to shared care arrangements. Similar to Olivia the next excerpt from Lucy would seem to confirm that for some, shared care has resulted in an enhanced and valued relationship with their fathers:

My relationship with my father now is really really good. We are super super close. Little bit characterised by this thing of reciprocracy like I just feel like he just gave me so much and now it's my turn. Compared to my peers I noticed that I have a really strong sense of duty, to especially to my Dad my also to my Mum, my god, to both of them and I think it's weird cos it was really damaging, well it felt really hurtful at the time but looking back it's like going through that experience with them made it highlighted that they were our parents, and they were looking after us and they were providing for us and making an effort for us and so in a weird paradoxical way I saw how much more I owed them I think. (Lucy)

For Lucy, her living situation is a reminder of how much her parents made conscious decisions about their parenting ethos in order to prioritise their children's needs. The separation and decision to raise the children in a shared care arrangement enhanced their role for Lucy who does not assume that all parents are so thoughtful about parenting and she recognises the effort that her parents have made on her and her sister's behalf. She goes on to explain, replicating the opinions of other participants:

And also I think the major learning was getting to know both my parents separately better. Like I have a really really good relationship with both of them now and I just don't know what that would have been otherwise and part of that is because we are helping each other heal from it. (Lucy)

There is a resilience operating here; it hasn't always been easy but working through the family separation and altered living arrangements has resulted in closer, more meaningful understanding and appreciation of her parents. The participants felt able have a relationship with both parents without undue interference from the other. They valued being close to both parents. This did not preclude them from worrying about their parents and they remained aware of being fair to both parents but they did not seem burdened by this responsibility but rather freer to explore deeper relationships with each parent separately.

Walking the tightrope

They will talk to each other and stuff, but I feel the tension is a bit awkward.

(Sophie)

Although most participants developed excellent relationships with each of their parents separately they usually still found it difficult when their parents were both in attendance at the same event. The participants also found it tense to be in the same place as both parents, particularly if it was necessary for them to choose who to sit with:

It's happened a couple of times with production things they came on the same night and I don't know who to sit with and it's awkward cause I want to sit with both of them. So with Fame I went with Dad but then I met Mum at the beginning and then Dad and in the middle I tried to find Mum and it was just awkward (laughing).

(Harper)

I made a booking for a restaurant and they sat at opposite ends of the tables we had a L-shape and they sat at opposite ends and I don't think they talked to each other at all during the night and their partners were both there. I know that my Nana from my Mum's side talked to my Dad at one point but yeah and it was kind of a bit awkward thing for my sister as well cos it was like who does she sit with cos obviously I was going to be in the middle with my friends but then where does that leave her is she picking a parent or kind of where does that leave her so she sat next to me in middle so she wasn't picking she was just there (laughing). (Madison)

Both Harper and Madison found managing the tension difficult and they described these times as 'awkward'. Participants are all too aware of the tensions between parents and they are not immune to the subtleties that this entails in daily interactions:

I sort of have to ask permission from both parents if I'm going somewhere sort of thing they sort of disagree on something and that can be annoying. ...um if I want to go to party or something my Dad says "no" and my "Mum" says yes. (Andrew)

Sometimes they're not that awkward – they are just polite but I am just standing there I just feel really weird about it, like if Mum comes and picks me up from Karate or something. (Harper)

I think it's quite difficult cos from my perspective it's quite difficult trying to make sure they are going to be ok at the same time from their perspective it's probably quite difficult to be in the same room together cos they've got whatever tensions are happening. (Madison)

Some things together are awkward so if you want to do something with Dad and you're at Mum's or something it's a bit awkward asking like you are taking out their time and you feel a little sad about that– it's ok but you just have to think about what you are doing a bit more (Sophie)

When my Dad and my Mum both ask me to do something like go out with them on the same day and I have to decide or and tell one of them if I can go or something. (Andrew)

Managing time fairly between parents and having heightened awareness at events where both parents were present caused apprehension and discomfort for participants. There is no book to guide their behaviour in such situations and it's clear to see that participants are thoughtful and considerate with their interactions and demonstrate emotional intelligence in handling delicate situations. They are not immune to their parents' feelings and show insight and maturity when working out how to manage this tension. How they viewed their parents' ability to cope as co-parents is the next sub-theme in focus.

My parents as parents apart

Yeah they really agreed on us. That was the annoying thing - Lucy

Many of the participants in this study did not experience inter-parental conflict nor felt 'caught between parents' as reported in (Buchanan et al., 1991). Contrary to what is usually reported in the literature most participants were positive about their parents' co-parenting relationship:

They actually did talk. I never really noticed it. They always just got along. I always think it's just how it was then it wasn't until high school and then I met one of my friends whose parents had split up and I'd see them argue and stuff and then I thought, reflected on my parents relationship and that it was never like that and Dad kind of said to me it was like how they wanted it to be, they wanted to be able to get along for us so like whenever Dad would come and pick me up he would always come inside and have a little chat to Mum while we would get our stuff, he would never just wait in the car and not come inside or anything. They would text or they would call if there was something about us that they needed to talk about. (Olivia)

They were pretty good generally and they're still pretty good. They are cordial with each other they went to a party together last weekend. Yeah it was my Aunt's 50th and so lots of family and friends and yeah they were fine like they were never been hostile towards each other or anything. Oh yeah there was never any real animosity between them and they were always quite supportive of each other like supportive of the other as co-parent even though they weren't together. (Ava)

They disagreed on everything else but they just had really solid parenting..they basically didn't talk about anything else but they could communicate really clearly about us they knew what, even just down to bedtimes and what we should be eating. (Lucy)

In the above extracts it is clear that the parents worked out an amicable co-parenting relationship. The co-parenting relationship has been studied in the literature, where conflict between the parents existed and resultant impact on outcomes for the children of the conflicted divorce. The Chisholm inquiry in Australia received considerable media attention for the arguably misconstrued focus on the 'psychological strain' shared care arrangements might place on particularly young children (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008). The risk is that children will become pawns in their parents' disputes and become triangulated (Buchanan et al., 1991) if they attempt to form an alliance with one parent against the other parent. While many of the co-parents in this study clearly made a concerted effort with their co-parenting relationship in some instances the young people discussed situations where they felt exposed to their parents' differences; most noticeably when their parents made disparaging comments about one another:

I mean Mum has been very vocal about the things that she doesn't like about Dad whereas Dad is I don't want to cloud your vision of your Mum but then will make cynical comments and things but he's way more sensitive about it about not being derogatory about her.. I just don't really like people being put down generally but your parents they're supposed to.. you are the product of them loving each other, it's like hearing your own purpose negated or something. (Lucy)

Lucy eloquently describes the impact of parents making negative comments about the other. Here the loyalty bind is apparent; they love both parents and try to maintain relationships with both but when one 'attacks' the other they have no reference point for what to do with the information and the associated uncomfortable 'bad' feelings. As one author argued children of divorced parents are "resilient but not invulnerable" (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000, p. 672) and in this study participants clearly objected to parents' putting each other down. Thankfully, most participants' believed that their parents were able, for the most part, to put their differences aside for their sake even if it was somewhat artificial:

Apparently it wasn't that way. Apparently they were putting on a face but to us they were really amicable. (Emma)

Sharing parents with others

You're not just sharing parents you're sharing families. (Henry)

For many participants parental separation resulted in one or both of their parents meeting and forming a relationship with a new partner. This resulted in numerous structural changes to the family as well as introduced the complexity of managing a blended family. For some this was one of the more difficult aspects to come to terms with and the issues could involve their relationship with the stepparent; stepsiblings or managing their jealousy over having to share their parent with others. Of the many changes they experienced throughout altered living arrangements several found managing the new relationships to be very challenging. As noted by Lodge and Alexander (2011) the quality of the relationship between the stepparent and the adolescent can be related to the risk of the adolescent developing emotional and behavioural problems. Shared care advocates espouse the ability of the arrangement to maintain and protect the relationship with both parents but evidently the

stepparent relationship can strongly influence this protective factor. In this study, where participants had a disagreeable relationship with a stepparent it profoundly affected their relationship with their parent:

Dad and Nina got married first and then Mum and Jake got married later the same year when I was Form 2, so 12 I think...She was really nice when they started kind of going out. She used to do lots of girly things with us..yeah, buy us makeup and do our hair and stuff. And then slowly after they got married all within probably six months we were kicked out and we weren't allowed back there..she got rid of all our stuff and she sold all our stuff to the neighbours cos the neighbour, the lady had a day care centre thing at her house, like a home based care thing and so our trampoline and all our toys and things went over there and my bedroom got changed..It was a little girl's room with two little single beds, posters, toys and all my certificates and things on a big notice board. And then one day I came back and it was all re-wallpapered, all my stuff was gone and it had a double bed in it and a lamp and that was it...that was an awful time for me. I got really homesick for Mum's place every time I had to go to Dad's. I got really scared, couldn't sleep. Then had issues with staying over at people's houses for about two years after that. I couldn't go to birthday parties and sleep over or anything. Kind of had this weird fear of leaving Mum for a few years. So that was quite hard actually and she just kind of pushed us out. We had to eat our meals at like five o'clock and go and sit in the lounge and go to bed early and not really eat with them or anything and she had these two cups that had 'guest' on them and they were our cups and that's all we were allowed to drink out of - the guest cups. And then my bedroom became the guest room. I just got so upset one day when Dad came round to pick us up on a Wednesday I just sat there crying and mum said "she doesn't want to come and they had a big barney about it and Dad yelling and stuff and me sitting there crying and they had a big argument and he left and we didn't go and that was the end of it. We weren't allowed back there after that cos I think I think she rang my mum up and they had a big argument as well. She said she didn't want us around there anymore. I think I remember thinking oh it's my fault cos I didn't go that night and now I am not allowed to go ever again. I called, I used to ring Dad at home all the time and then I remember ringing once and she answered the phone and she hung up on me.

Since then I haven't been allowed to ring the house either. So.. I haven't been there since I was 12 but they still live there...

Our relationship is pretty bad now...We just started having lunch with each other once a fortnight when we would have normally come to see him, stayed with him. Then as I got a bit older, my sister went to Uni, and I was a teenager at high school, it became like, once a month when we had lunch, with no contact in between because I couldn't ring the house. Then it got further and further apart. And then I left Uni and went overseas and I didn't hear from him for two years while I was overseas. I emailed him a couple of times and never heard back. And then since I've been back living here and I feel like the adult in the relationship, I initiate all contact and we have lunch and I sit there and listen to him talk about real surface topics about sports and weather and stuff and he's not interested in what I am doing. He doesn't know me. So that's our relationship now. (Jennifer)

The wicked stepmother is an enduring image from fairy tales and brought to life with Jennifer's discourse of how her relationship with her father changed drastically when he remarried. From the honeymoon period when her stepmother "used to do lots of girly things with us" there is a slow infiltration to the point where "she got rid of all our stuff". Her motives are questionable from Jennifer's perspective: she is interested in the partnership not the stepmother role. Her stepmother ejected Jennifer out her father's home by a series of domestic changes which undermined her sense of belonging. One author (Planitz & Feeney, 2009), discussed the role of stereotypes and argued that psychological representations of the characteristics featured in step families. Although they may have a degree of accuracy this author found that the stereotypes of stepparents tended to be oversimplified and often focused on negative generalisations. This study found that stepmothers and stepfathers were perceived as less caring than biological parents. Jennifer's experience of stepfamily life would demonstrate a truth for her – there is a kernel of truth to stereotypes. She recalls having 'an awful time' and she experienced separation anxiety for a several years following the breakdown in the shared care arrangement and contact with her father. Jennifer felt responsible as well as distressed about not seeing her father and in this instance shared care was no protective factor in preserving their relationship. Despite feeling blamed "it's my fault" Jennifer tried to keep in contact with her

father and recalled feeling angry at her father for not standing up for her. Prior to the new relationship Jennifer had a close and affectionate relationship with her father and this was shattered following his new marriage. Ava also found that the introduction of a stepmother and stepsiblings impacted her relationship with her father:

I think we clashed more with his partner than with her kids. She's very particular about her house especially like do everything the way she wants it to be so we definitely clashed a few times over that and my Dad is very nonconfrontational he hates any kind of conflict so if he like has the opportunity he won't engage with any of that at all so I think that was a little frustrating for both of us we just get put in this room together the two of us and it was kind of like the rumpus room or something so there were stairs going straight down into it and then it went like into the garage. I still went cos I didn't realise it was an option for me not to go. Yeah. And I enjoyed spending time with my Dad but not with my pseudo stepfamily. (Ava)

When a parent enters a new intimate relationship it can highlight, from their child's perspective, character flaws if they are not seen to support their 'original' family members. Several participants commented in similar fashion to Ava that they found one of their parents to be 'weak' for not defending the parent-child relationship over the new love relationship. With Ava's extract there is a sense of her being moved to the garage, almost disposable and the feeling of powerlessness that she experienced about voicing her concerns. The young person is understandably jealous of the new relationship but also aware of the jealousy. This is not a comfortable position to be in and it requires delicate handling by all involved as Lucy's excerpt highlights:

Our relationship kind of started building again from there cos it had been pretty shit to be honest.

INT: Why do you think that was?

Oh cos me and my sister were heinously jealous of her new husband. He just took all her time and we moved in with him and she threw out all of her old furniture and she lied to us about having a new boyfriend, and we were just loyalists to our father through and through you know yeah there was so much jealousy, so much jealousy and just that it was instant you know, it was like straight away when they were

together. We had so many conversations about it. But she kind of she did this weird thing, I get it, I get that I've really hurt you and it's a really hard situation, but what, she put it to us I think that was the horrible thing what could I have done differently, what would you have me do differently and it was just like that was an impossible question to ask just don't do it in the first place what do you mean so she treated us like adults from the very start as friends rather than daughters I think rather than how could I have done this better rather than accepting that it was really shit and just mitigating. (Lucy)

Lucy acknowledges the part her jealousy played in reforming her relationship with her mother. Again talking about it with her mother didn't reduce the intensity of the emotion as she was expected to show empathy for her mother and see it through adult eyes. This was an impossible conundrum for Lucy, resolved ultimately by the passing of time, leaving home and supporting her mother through her husband's death several years later.

It wasn't easy and there were definitely definitely times when it was like I would rather be anywhere than here, I'm really grateful for that experience of having him in my life and like struggling with this difficult stepfather and difficult mother and like it's still definitely a valid and valuable family. I think I saw it as being a negative thing partly because I did anyway but also because society said like there is a thing about broken families and evil step-parents there's this whole it's a fairy tale. (Lucy)

Lucy also acknowledges that working through her complex relationship with her mother and stepfather were valuable learning experiences but it was easier to see this retrospectively. At the time it was a difficult and unhappy experience. She sees the impact of social and cultural mores on how separated families and stepparents are portrayed. Not all participants found the introduction of new partners as a negative event; some participants enjoyed the new dimension added to their lives by the new relationships:

Yeah I get along with them really well, I call them by their first names, I call them Pete and Leanne. I get along with them really well. Leanne always wanted children and so me and my brother were like her children, we always got on really well. She

would always kind of look after us and so would Pete my stepdad. He never wanted children and we were quite young when he got with my Mum, like when they got together, and then he never wanted children and so it was kind of like a sacrifice he made to be with Mum but now we are older so it doesn't matter (laughter). But he was always so lovely to us and he'd always looked after us so yeah. (Olivia)

Some of the participants could see that the new relationship was healthy for their parent. After finding it initially difficult to come to terms with, several participants adapted to the new situation after working it through in their own way:

In the beginning it was fine. Then I had this stage 'oh I just don't like you' and I told Dad and he was like 'oh that's natural'. But it didn't last very long. She's a nice person and then I just she's fine..it's not as though.. it's just like having a flatmate. I felt like I should hate her or something but I didn't and then also if I was like if I hate her Dad will be upset and I didn't actually hate her or anything so I did what I felt like and now I'm fine. (Harper)

Harper's quandary is understandable: initially she dislikes her father's new partner, arguably a combination of jealousy around losing her father's attentions and loyalty to her mother. Then she realises that disliking the new partner is disloyal to her father. Finally she is 'fine' when she resolves this new situation according to her own values and it has a new clarified meaning for her.

This chapter highlighted the importance of parental behaviour in determining how the young people felt about the shared care arrangement. Generally participants were able have a relationship with both parents and they valued both relationships. Sometimes loyalty binds were evident and participants commented specifically that when one parent put down or made disparaging remarks about the other parent it eroded their sense of wellbeing and security. Participants appreciated their parents needed to be actively aware of their needs when co-parenting and for the most part believed their parents managed this role sensitively. The introduction of new partners for their parents and adjusting to step-parents and step-siblings was for several participants very challenging. For some it directly and detrimentally affected the relationship with their parent.

The next chapter discusses the theme of ‘wellbeing changes’ and includes the sub-themes of ‘emotional and mental wellbeing’ and ‘financial wellbeing’.

Chapter Seven: Wellbeing changes

Mental and emotional wellbeing

I just had to harden up and carry on. (Emma)

When parents separate, their children lose something. Despite how well they might adapt to changing circumstances, loss and the associated grief can be prevalent and legitimate. This takes time to work through and frequently the acknowledgement of this grief is confronted when the participants reach young adulthood rather than during childhood or early adolescence. It is simplistic to say that shared care protects the relationship with both parents and therefore protects the child from any adverse effects of the separation. For many, the negative emotions were authentic and painful. The process of talking to participants about loss and grief was revealing as, according to some researchers (Neoh & Mellor, 2010), parents underestimate the degree of emotional problems that their children had. These authors suggested parents were poor at estimating the subtle distress children may experience. Generally in the research the child or young person's mental and emotional wellbeing has been measured by parents and teachers but not assessed by the children themselves. Some participants in this study acknowledged that one way of coping with changed family circumstances was to deny, block or shut down emotionally:

It did have a huge effect on me at the time. I was, I am a very emotional person. But what happened is just that I actually shut off my emotions. It was too much and from 5-8 my parents used to call me the ice queen, I just had zero emotions or empathy, nothing. That was probably the biggest effect of the separation was the impact it had on me psychologically in that regard with the shutting off of the emotions. (Emma)

Well, my coping mechanism until about two years ago was be strong and take it all and kind of block it out. I blocked it all out. I was the strong person, I became really independent from about 15 and didn't take my Mum's advice on anything and did everything by myself. Moved out of home soon as I turned 18. Was just a strong person. Didn't really have that that much emotion, and, which is really unhealthy.

And since I have had counselling over the last few years I've actually dealt with all of that grief and realised that my coping mechanism is just blocking it out and not seeing it and dealing with it. Now I get really emotional and deal with things when they happen. Yeah. Which I am so glad I've done cos I don't want to go through life being...cos everything was fine and I was just happy about everything all the time, nothing affected me which was why I was in those horrible relationships.. with guys and yeah..I've learnt a lot.(Jennifer)

Children and young people who are dealing with adverse circumstances often handle it differently than adults would expect. Most of the participants commented that they didn't want to talk about the separation when it was first announced despite retrospectively thinking talking might have helped them manage their emotions better at the time. They didn't want to be an additional burden to their parents during a difficult time and being attuned to their parents' needs they kept their feelings to themselves. Frequently, as was seen in Jennifer's extract the grief and loss didn't disappear but re-emerged at a time when she could unpack the experience with a trusted confidant and make sense of the emotions that were too complex to understand at the time. With hindsight the participants were able to see that appearing strong and unaffected was a maladaptive coping mechanism and six of the participants have at some stage explored the themes of grief and loss with a therapist or support person as James and Jennifer explain:

It changed everything. I was really proactive in my own growth in my own figuring out what was going on in my own head; feelings, thoughts and stuff like that. I think I was depressed as well ..Depressive-genic assumptions or whatever you call it. Mum had a really negative outlook on life I guess and that rubbed off on me. Yeah so, Youthline was really hugely helpful to do it. But I've still done a lot myself and I'm still taking care of myself a lot. (James).

Cos I knew what we had and he could be awesome. And then I just grieved for it when I lost it. It was kind of like it was all taken away. Yeah I often think about that and I have had to have counselling as an adult about a few things. (Jennifer)

When parents separate and form new families, children's needs may be compromised. For some this can develop into what looks like role reversal where

the child becomes the adult and looks after the upset parent. Wallerstein (2005) discussed how parents can consciously or unconsciously use the child to fill their own emptiness and they become the surrogate spouse or confidante. According to family system therapists, boundary violations can occur when parents turn to their children for emotional sustenance (Arditti, 1999). In this study the participants who adopted a care-giving role of a parent were painfully aware of disparities in the well-being of their parents and compassionate towards the more suffering parent but they found it difficult to look after the parent in need and sometimes resented this role.

There was a lot of criticism and not a lot of attention on me in a positive way and like, I don't know, wasn't..I feel like I needed kind of remould myself psychologically to actually get some encouragement, like a nurturing environment almost, Like I haven't had that since I was 12 at least. Even before that. My Mum's not, she can be nurturing but she's often not. it feels like I just got missed. It almost feels like emotional neglect. (James)

Oh I'm not very good at dealing with it. Like sometimes we talk about it and stuff it's good cos Mum likes to talk about it a lot which is good but yeah I'm not that great at comforting people so I kind of leave that to Sophie (laughing). It's kind of like it's fine for her to be upset cos I don't want to be annoyed at her being upset cos she has a good reason to be upset and I wanted to try and help her and stuff. I'm just not that great with dealing with it. (Harper)

Harper understands why her mother is upset and doesn't want to invalidate her own emotions, but equally does not want to be responsible for care-giving. Emotional caretaking was not prominent among the participants, but where it occurred it affected them deeply. It is understandable when a parent is experiencing a tumultuous time separating and setting up a new life that their ability to parent effectively may be impacted. Nonetheless the parents who appeared to find either the process of separating or shared care parenting particularly challenging exposed their children to additional emotional upset.

While several participants discussed their experiences of mental health issues, primarily depression and anxiety, it is questionable whether parental separation and emotional issues around shared care were directly responsible. Mental health is

increasingly being viewed on a continuum and the extent to which the participants have examined and reflected on their emotional and mental wellbeing is arguably a positive side effect of living a life more examined. The next aspect of the well-being theme is 'financial wellbeing' and for some this changed as a consequence of shared care.

Financial Wellbeing

I think that right now Dad's better off. (Henry)

Reduced financial circumstances are frequently an unfortunate consequence of separation. (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003). Some have acknowledged that adverse risks associated with parental separation were in fact often due to socioeconomic disadvantage which can exist prior to parental separation (Cherlin, 1988). Many studies indicate the single factor most likely to result in poor outcomes for a child is poverty not separation (Fergusson & Horwood, 2001). It is palpable to see that in shared care families, running two households is more expensive than one.

According to Smyth (2005) shared care parents have a particular profile with conspicuous features which include a degree of financial independence as they are usually in paid employment with a degree of flexibility around work-home balance. This would challenge the notion that separation has a detrimental effect on a child's financial wellbeing. Certainly anecdotally shared care residences are often portrayed as metropolitan; middle or upper class and educated. There are no studies that have asked young people what they made of their own financial circumstances since doing shared care. The participants in this study were all too aware of how their financial circumstances had changed and especially if there were differences in each household. Several participants noticed dramatic changes to their financial wellbeing, particularly at their mother's house:

Mum had to say no to us and she would find that quite hard whereas Dad would take us horse riding and take us out for takeout a lot and we would eat out quite a bit and go to Wellington and go to TimeOut and do all these fun things and Mum found that quite hard I think cos she wasn't able to do the same things. (Madison)

Dad probably had a bit more money than Mum did. Dad would take us to more things cos he could afford to and I think Mum got a bit upset about that – but that was probably the only difference between the two families. (Olivia)

And I always saw that Mum was under a lot of pressure, we didn't have any money, Mum worked fulltime, she struggled as a solo Mum majorly. I think I saw that and I didn't want to be a burden so I didn't cause any problems ever. (Jennifer)

As well as being very aware that her mother was financially burdened Jennifer and Olivia were cognisant that financial inequality was also used as a tool or bargaining power between parents:

Yep and I don't think he helped my mother a lot cos she left him and I think he had always been angry towards her. He paid the amount he was supposed to pay and nothing more. He didn't actually help with like school costs or anything. Kind of, his house was big; Mum's house was small. I knew that he was more well off than her but I knew that it was like inaccessible as well – money- I knew that he had it but I knew that we weren't going to benefit from it. He never brought us clothes or anything or spent money on us or gave Mum money. We were really poor for a couple of years. We got presents from the Salvation Army one Christmas. Never had Santa stockings or anything like that. Yeah Dad didn't seem to be...he was a bit stingy I guess. I think he's angry at my Mum and still is cos she left him. (Jennifer)

Well yeah once, I just remember this one bad experience, it wasn't even that big a deal, but Mum always said that she wanted to take us, to the new movie Avatar when it came out. And then Dad, we went to stay at his on the weekend and he took us to it and we were like oh Mum was going to take us to it, but he was like 'that's ok you can go a second time it doesn't matter'. And then he took us to it and then it was just because he wanted to see it and when we got dropped home we told Mum that we saw it and she was so mad and she was like, I remember her crying to me and she was just saying that she didn't have a lot of money and that she wanted to take us out to that and that was like the only thing she could do but like Dad had more money so he could take us on trips and holidays but she couldn't do that, but she did and like I never saw that we did a lot more with my Dad than my Mum than with her but I just remember her crying and I felt so bad then she refused to watch the movie. (Olivia)

Both Jennifer and Olivia were aware that money was a symbolic reflection of power in the relationship between their parents. Despite Jennifer's father being financially better off she was very cognisant that it was unavailable to her and used as a form of punishment towards her mother. As commented by Lacroix (2006) it is rare for financial imbalance to be redressed in shared care situations and for mothers financial inequality was what they lived with to 'keep the peace'. Frequently participants discussed situations where one parent was able to provide more financially than the other although they did not see this as a barometer for preferring one house over the other but accepted the financial inequalities between homes and in some instances were grateful to learn about socioeconomic differences:

Financially it was all weird cos we had gone from having lots of money, you know not like majorly affluent just like pretty comfortable to Mum having not as much money because she was suddenly paying rent on a new house and still paying off the mortgage on this house.. so yeah so I remember the travel wasn't so bad in the beginning but then he moved to Upper Hutt to a cheaper house basically.. yeah it was kind of a shitty house, it was shit and it was kind of falling about and I was like 'we have always lived in nice houses' you know and then when Dad moved to Upper Hutt, like talking to him about it retrospectively he was like really on the bones of his arse. I would kind of be vaguely aware that he was saving up his meal, meals to have with us and he would be having baked beans or something when we weren't there and the house in Upper Hutt like moving to Upper Hutt we had grown up in Seatoun it was like what like this is rough. Yeah. Which is actually now that I think about it a really good experience. (Lucy)

Changes to emotional, mental and financial wellbeing were documented by the participants. Grief and loss were prevalent adjustment emotions experienced by most of the participants in relation to the shared care arrangement with some of them deciding to 'tough it out'. Depression and anxiety were reported by around half the participants but they generally worked through these issues when they were developmentally ready and were resolved and insightful about the process of therapy and self-actualisation. If one parent was perceived to be struggling emotionally with the changed family circumstances, participants found it difficult to know how to support them and felt burdened by having to take on an adult role in looking after

them. It cannot be assumed that shared care results in an economically better situation for the children. In many cases the shared care homes were vastly different in terms of financial resources.

In the next chapter, the final theme ‘reflections’ examines two sub-themes: ‘It’s made me the person I am today’ and ‘Love, marriage, family: yeah, nah, maybe’. The first sub-theme adopts a strength based perspective to examine how participants view their identity development as shaped by their shared care upbringing. The last sub-theme explores how their living situation is reflected in their value system around love, marriage and family.

Chapter Eight: Reflections

It's made me the person I am today

It helps you grow up. (Michael)

Young adults from separated families often grow up more quickly as they have had to examine their two worlds carefully to make sense of their lives (Wallerstein, 2005). Wallerstein argued that the effects of divorce on a child existed regardless of the type of post-divorce parenting arrangement and that shared care did not teach children how to create adult intimacy, mutual affection nor conflict resolution. The participants in the current study would dispute these findings in terms of their current social and cultural context. They were able to examine their lives and explain how their living situation enabled them to develop personal qualities, skills and intelligence around relationships.

Irrespective of family structure, families are sites for identity formation (Francis, 2012). Shared care family life promoted autonomy and interdependence for the participants and they were able to articulate a range of qualities they believe they have acquired as a result which included: being well-rounded; mature; compassionate; resilient; versatile and adaptable:

I think I have come out quite a well rounded person with.. when I meet someone that has been very privileged and had this nuclear family stuff I sometimes think well I know a lot more than you about life. (Jennifer)

Yeah, some of the friends that I've grown up with haven't had that stuff like I don't know, they seem so self-centred almost. They are not aware of any of suffering or the bad stuff that happens in life, they just live for the trivial stuff. Sport's really important to them. I feel that there's so much more to life. (James)

The participants make reference to peers to reflect their sense of maturity and worldliness. By comparison they consider some of their peers as 'very privileged' but not as knowledgeable about the 'school of life'. In a Persephone type experience they believed they had it tough but are all the better for working through valuable life lessons. Both Jennifer and James articulate "we know more about life". The

following extracts introduce other qualities that participants attribute to their upbringing:

You're more versatile to change I think. And..I do wonder if kids raised in shared custody, in particular those with more siblings would be more driven to do something with their lives because things are not just handed to you on a plate, you have to make it work. (Emma)

I feel like I am going to be a lot more, yeah able to adapt to stuff which is good. (Sophie)

I think it's made me a quite a compassionate person. I think I've got awesome friends who are similar to me and who are open and nice people. So I think it's kind of made me into a good person. Compassionate for people that have really hard lives. Cos I've been through a few struggles. (Jennifer)

I hang out with a lot of young professionals here and stuff and I've flatted with a quite a few different people. Some of them I see just don't have the same values as me at all and have kind of had everything handed to them and what would they do when things don't go well for them. How do they deal with hardship which is bound to happen in a lifetime? (Jennifer).

Articulated strengths include being versatile, diligent and hard-working, adaptable and compassionate. A strength based approach is relevant here as the participants were able to examine their lives and see how they successfully adapted to their changed family dynamic.

Participants commented on how they developed a closer bond with their siblings through the shared circumstances of their upbringing:

And I think I'm closer to my sister because of it and it's great..it almost felt like home was where my sister was. (Henry)

Participants found they became adept at managing many different relationships and networks of people in their lives and developed a closer bond with many:

I do think I've had to form that many more relationships with people, close people..I have a lot of rich relationships which when you think about the stock standard kind of functional family of two parents and however many siblings it's so limited whereas I've had these strong relationships, despite all the crap when I was a child and being the outcast and all that stuff. As you get older it all seems to dissipate and yeah. You just find its rich. (Emma)

Emma, similar to other participants, noticed that juggling many relationships resulted in appreciating the value of close relationships; developing a rich social tapestry. Sometimes acquiring emotional intelligence and relational skills wasn't easy and some commented that they became good at monitoring the emotional weather in each household and managing the conflict between parents to the point where they feel it has developed into a particular strength as reported by James:

I feel like I've always been quite good with conflict. But I still feel like I don't want life to be about conflict. I feel like I'm quite good at resolving conflict now. I see other people getting into conflict and I am just do this, do this and it will resolve. Yeah, I feel like it comes quite naturally to me like, intuitive like a problem solver. Like, why have conflict when you don't need it?(James)

The relational and emotional intelligence they obtained was frequently mentioned in terms of appreciating their family more:

Valuing home, cos you'll not always constantly in one home you don't really take it for granted. I know being split between two homes, you acknowledge what's around you like you appreciate it a lot more. Especially having two families, it was a big thing for me and my brother having four people that dearly loved us and tried to look after us as much as they could that was like a big thing cos we both appreciated it a lot. (Olivia)

Specifically participants discussed that observing their parents and what they went through was a learning experience for them; they were able to see how they would be in similar future situations:

You don't find the idea of growing up as daunting cos you realise they are actually quite a bit more like you, like you never really see your parents cry normally or get

really upset or really angry cos that's not normally something I would see but when you do it actually makes you feel better in the end cos you are not too far off and it's not too bad. (Sophie)

Finally, participants commented that their upbringing had promoted an alternative world view; one that encouraged them to see multiple perspectives. They felt more observant, mindful and questioning about life experiences as the following comments demonstrate:

I found that coming from two homes and seeing two completely different ways of parenting I feel it's actually equipped me really well as a parent.. I had a much more wider perspective than when you have only seen one way. (Emma)

I mean just in terms of getting more plurality like having a kind of more of a deeper understanding about different socio-economic backgrounds and like that was a very cold way of looking at it but I do think that a major thing of them splitting up was having to see what it would be like to have less money. (Lucy)

I feel like it's just sort of helped to like more in a positive way, like if I were in a relationship I feel like I would pay more attention..I think I could stay in a better relationship and sort of see what happens. (Sophie)

I might think about things differently, my view of the world might be different. (Andrew)

A strength based perspective is relevant when examining the qualities and abilities of young people raised in shared care families. Participants articulated many merits of the arrangement for personal growth including: autonomy; interdependence; being well-rounded; maturity; compassion; resilience; versatility and adaptability. They developed excellent interpersonal skills through managing many different relationships and networks of people in their lives. They valued enormously the opportunity to create close and meaningful relationships with their parents and often admired how their parents had responded to their reformed lives post-separation. Their living situation, and specifically having two different living situations encouraged them to observe, reflect and question all aspects of their lives more fully.

Love, marriage and family: Yea, nah, maybe

I'm not some kind of relationship anarchist. I think I have a bit of a political problem with the idea of the whole nuclear family set up as well like it's so hetronormative.

(Lucy)

The divorce literature highlights that parental separation impacts on the young person's ability to trust and love in intimate relationships (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Packer Rosenthal, 2013). According to these authors, when children from divorced families go on to form their own adult relationships they remain developmentally stunted by fears of failure and lack the knowledge of give and take; dealing with differences and how to resolve conflicts that children from intact families can take for granted. Many are pessimistic about marriage; their fear of commitment shadowing their relationships and thoughts of marriage.

Surprisingly participants' were not cynical and mistrustful about intimate relationships. They valued having a partner to be close with and endorsed coupledness. What they did not value was what they considered out-moded institutions attached to the concept of marriage as outlined by Ava:

I sort of have mixed opinions about marriage, I think it's possible definitely but I don't know that it's for me necessarily, I have a few problems with the institution of marriage, mostly in that I think that it's not really necessary if you are already in a stable relationship and I have what I call the wedding industrial complex yeah you know the societal obligation to spend thousands of dollars on everything, that doesn't appeal to me at all and also like I'm a bit of an angry feminist about wedding traditions that are a bit you know outdated and misogynist and stuff. I'm not ruling out getting married in the future but it would have to be quite a specific you know, it wouldn't be a traditional wedding. (Ava)

The participants discarded notions attached to the traditional view of the wedding spectacle including the white wedding and the white picket fence. They don't want their partnerships to be split along traditional gender expectations as Jennifer clarifies:

I am not a big wedding person, I don't care if I have that or not. But yeah I really want a partner that like stands beside me like for the rest of my life kind of thing. I want a partnership where gender roles aren't a big thing. I wouldn't mind working and having a stay at home dad, whatever, kind of a modern version of that. You know? Yeah I definitely want kids. (Jennifer)

While coupling is important, marriage is optional, and participants view uncoupling or separation as an occupational hazard of living a full and varied life:

Both of my parents have remarried, and their relationships are so good that even though theirs didn't work out I've got two like good examples in front of me. But I dunno, my mum always kind of jokes that your first marriage isn't going to work and you have to wait until your second marriage just cos she got married twice. And she was like 'it doesn't matter about your first marriage, just wait until your second'. So I don't know, I think I would really like to get married, I would probably like to only get married once but if things didn't work out and I had to get married again, well not had to, you know what I mean like, split up and then remarry, I don't think I would see it as a bad thing, I would just see it as being the way it went. (Olivia)

In mainstream culture a family that has gone through separation or divorce has been referred to as 'dysfunctional' or 'broken'. Parental separation, a prevalent and persistent occurrence within families has traditionally been pathologised by vocabulary that reflects common understanding of the phenomena. The nostalgia for family stability may be losing impetus as the need for managing the chaos of social processes grows. Family changes are then an existential dilemma that is part of the human condition and a catalyst for positive as well as negative change (Hare-Mustin, 1978). Participants seem very comfortable with the changes they experienced in their families and don't expect family life to be consistent and static:

I don't know about happily ever after. Like I said I don't actually know many people that are happily ever after. (Jennifer)

Oh yeah cos there's so much around divorce now you sort of think how common is this, you sort of expect it. (Henry)

I don't find you need to have a perfect family. (Harper)

Although there is little research on how young people view families, Pryor (2005a) cites two studies to show that most children and adolescents view families in an all-encompassing way; they see single-parent households; non-resident parents; grandparents; same-sex parents and children as family. The main criteria they use to define family life were affective factors such as love and support rather than structural definitions. Similarly, Campbell (2008) discussed how children understand the concept of 'extended family' and use the notions of blood ties and emotional bond to define family therefore they accept step-siblings and half-siblings as integral to family membership. The quality of relationships is clearly viewed as the most significant component of family and participants endorsed this relational view when defining family:

I don't relate to or identify with the nuclear family idea at all. I'm really open to all different interpretations of the word. I talk to my Mum about the whole gay marriage idea and she said that, they live in a really sheltered community obviously, she said that there is going to be a child coming to her school with lesbian parents and what kind of upbringing is that child going to have and I said hell-of-alot better than mine and she was taken aback. I said, imagine having two loving parents instead of just one? What more could you want. So, I think family means anything. I still call my Dad my Dad and think he is, even though I know we are not actually blood related, and that doesn't matter to me and I like having stepsisters and I think, extended family, the more the merrier, because I don't have grandparents and stuff I like having nephews and nieces through them and claiming that as mine. (Jennifer)

It's kind of like people who surround you and kind of support you I guess love and support I don't really think it needs to be the picket fence and man and wife and two children. (Madison)

As diverse family compositions become more mainstream one of the implications is the changing perspectives of family members. Participants in this study reflect a post-modern shift; not only are they comfortable with a multiplicity of perspectives, they expect it. Family is viewed as a series of networks. The participants confirm where the post-modernist view of family is heading: many different families are legitimate for successfully thriving and they are all the better for the development. They are neither cynical nor sceptical of traditional family

values, rather the concept of union, marriage and nuclear family are all viable options among many:

Family is really important to me, even when things weren't great at home and stuff my parents said it was always very clear that family, and having the whole family there and all their needs met were what made me tick. So big social gatherings and ensuring everyone was catered for and family reunions and all that jazz. (Emma)

Their view of marriage and family is liberal, abundant and inclusive. They share a hope that families of the future are freer to explore other ways of being a family:

My Mum has got a really strong thing about genes she calls it genetic resonance when she's around her brothers and us there's about 20 of us and there's like this thing between us that's really strong and I get that but I also think that family for me is quite a bit more inclusive than that.. I think I saw my life in the fairy tale kind of, like this is a paradigm and it's bad and I'm allowed to hate it, but I would hope for other families in the future to not be stuck inside that. (Lucy)

This chapter explored participant reflections on how being brought up in a shared care living arrangement shaped their view of self, family and important relationships. Participants discussed many personal attributes they acquired as a result of living in two homes primarily interdependence and interpersonal skills. The last sub-theme explored participant views on the concepts of love, marriage and family. Participants valued romance and loving relationships but they discarded traditional notions of marriage which must endure 'til death do us part'. They were accepting of fluid, changing and diverse forms of partnership. Family life was very important to all participants who endorsed an all-encompassing and relational view of family.

Chapter Nine: Discussion

Background

This study explored the accounts of 12 young adults who have lived in shared care; moving between parents in two separate homes. When parents separate, it is widely agreed that the children's best interests are paramount and it is increasingly considered important for both parents to remain active in their lives. However, these principles governing post-separation living arrangements are highly subjective and little is known about a young person's perspective on living shared care. This study seeks to address this imbalance by exploring how these young people experienced shared care and what they believed were the strengths and weaknesses of the arrangement. Did the participants prefer one home over the other and did they feel their parents competed for their affections? How did their shared care upbringing affect their values around family life? A qualitative exploratory approach was adopted to reflect a variety and diversity of perspectives on shared care. As well as the diversity of views there are often shared truths that span individual experiences and connecting with these truths contributes to our understanding of their living arrangements. Participants commented they found it interesting and useful to discuss their upbringing.

The literature review outlined what previous research examined about divorce, separation and post-separation living arrangements. Deficit focused, the literature compared children from separated and divorced families with those from nuclear families and focused on negative consequences. The construct of the divorced or separated family as deviant or broken has potentially denigrated any positive and resilient attributes of families experiencing a different structure from the normative and romanticised nuclear family. If research has a responsibility to inform, then parents separating and searching for ways to best cater to their children's needs have been poorly served. What they would have encountered was a body of knowledge that focused on negative outcomes for children unless they remained unhappily married. Also lacking in the literature are the voices and views of children experiencing changing family life. It is hoped that the participant views in the current study will contribute to the limited body of knowledge available on the experiences

of children in shared care and elucidate some aspects of contemporary family life in New Zealand.

Discussion of findings

In some regards participants echoed the earlier research findings of (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004) when they recalled vividly the day of their parents' separation. Participants strongly believed that their response to the separation process was a direct consequence to how their parents behaved. Initially most felt some distress although once the separation occurred they were very realistic and accepting about their new family structure. For the most part and unlike what has been reported in the literature, they did not feel in any way blamed for the separation and according to participants most parents were careful to absolve the children of this responsibility. It would appear that parents are aware of the importance for their children not to carry any guilt around the event. Participants were adamant that it was better for their parents to be happily separated than unhappily married and reconciliation fantasies did not feature.

Most participants discussed their post-separation living arrangements with their parents but parents had the ultimate decision. As mentioned by Warshak (2003), whether children should be involved in their post-separation living arrangements is fraught, as they are emotionally invested in the outcomes and generally they do not want to be seen as favouring one parent over the other. The participants stated that their parents were the best ones to decide what happened to them but they appreciated the chance to discuss their views and being given an opportunity to express them. Participants were unequivocal: they only wanted to talk to their parents and close family members and friends. They did not want experts or interventions from outside their family.

Participants strongly identified with having two separate and valid homes. One of the early issues addressed in the limited literature on shared care was if the children felt 'bounced back and forth' (Warshak, 2003, p. 378) which could lead to insecure attachment. For the most part, participants adapted easily to new routines, schedules and traditions which were upheld in different but meaningful ways. The major gripe by participants was the inconvenience of frequent moves and having to pack

regularly. The bag, suitcase and/or overstuffed school bag were symbolic and evocative representations of shared care.

Family ritual activities still held special meaning for participants. New traditions were established and events such as birthdays, Christmases and holidays continued but in different ways. Rotation was frequently mentioned as a strategy for special occasion days and they became used to switching between homes and different family ways of celebrating. What was retained was the importance of connecting with extended family and maintaining their sense of family identity. Costa (2013) highlighted that the postmodern family is frequently represented as fast paced, unstable and structurally isolated leading to a breakdown in kinship ties. In the participants' portrayal of post-modern family life, family relationships have not become weaker. Their ongoing engagement in family rituals demonstrate that kinship in families still exist and are highly valued. Rituals and celebrations provide linkage with the extended family and a common heritage.

Each house had different culture and implicit rules of engagement that were found to be located in the gender of the parent. Generally the mother's house was more structured, organised and less spontaneous. At the father's house the young people generally had more independence, fun and fewer rules. Economically gender was also apparent with several of the shared care homes vastly different in terms of financial wellbeing. Although not in every situation, the mother's home was often less financially equipped. The young people appeared to accept the differences in each home and adjusted accordingly. They accepted that shared care was their normal; it was what they knew and what they became used to. There was an acceptance, resilience and pragmatism with their views.

Some participants reported that they were required to be emotional care-givers for one of their parents and this new role was a burden. Participants were also sensitive to loyalty binds and specifically adverse to when one parent made disparaging remarks about the other parent. As pointed out by Kenny (2000) children are attuned to their parents' emotional states and participants in the current study were extremely insightful and perceptive about their parents' emotional wellbeing.

Managing time fairly between parents and having heightened awareness at events where both parents were present caused apprehension and discomfort. On balance the inconvenience appeared an acceptable 'price to pay' for the young people to have experienced two valid family homes and to retain a relationship with each parent. Participants appreciated that their parents needed to be actively aware of their needs when co-parenting and for the most part believed their parents managed this role with sensitivity.

Overall participants enjoyed close and warm relationships with each of their parents. For many the separation process developed a resilience which led to a better understanding and appreciation of their parents. They remained aware of being fair to both parents but they felt able to explore deeper relationships with each parent separately.

For some the most challenging aspect of shared care was when one or both of their parents met and formed a relationship with a new partner. The stepfamily is complex in structure and functioning and can create new tensions for family members (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). The participants concurred with other research (Families Commission, 2014) which found that relationships in stepfamilies are generally more problematic. The study by Planitz and Feeney (2009) reviewed stereotypes that featured in stepfamilies and found that stepparents are perceived less favourably than biological parents. This study discussed how the introduction of a new adult into a household can result in a hostile reaction from children which can remain unresolved. Little is known about how stepparents go about developing a relationship with their stepchildren but what we know from the current study is that when participants had a disagreeable relationship with a stepparent it profoundly affected their relationship with their parent. Shared care did not protect the parent-child relationship when a stepparent relationship was acrimonious.

Grief and loss were prevalent adjustment emotions experienced by most of the participants in relation to the shared care arrangement. Mental health issues, notably depression and anxiety were also reported by around half the participants. It is difficult to determine to what extent parental separation and emotional issues around shared care were directly responsible for issues with wellbeing or attributable to other compounding variables. What was noticeable was that participants were open

to discussing and working through these issues when they were ready. They were resolved and insightful about the process of therapy and self-actualisation. They examined and reflected on their emotional and mental wellbeing and this is arguably a positive side effect of living a life more examined.

A strength based perspective is relevant when examining the qualities and abilities of children raised in shared care families. The participants articulated many merits of the arrangement for personal growth including having the attributes of: autonomy; interdependence; being well-rounded; maturity; compassion; resilience; versatility and adaptability. They also believed they acquired superior interpersonal skills through managing many different relationships and networks of people in their lives. Having two different living situations encouraged them to observe, reflect and question all aspects of their lives more fully.

Participants discarded the traditional trappings of a conventional marriage, considering the spectacle outmoded. They were accepting of fluid, changing and diverse forms of partnership and still envisaged romance and intimate relationships as important aspects in their life. Family life was very important to all participants who endorsed an all-encompassing and relational view of family. Participants commented that their upbringing had promoted an alternative world view; one that encouraged them to see multiple perspectives and adopt an abundant philosophy. They felt more observant, mindful and questioning about life experiences.

Limitations

Small sample sizes need to be interpreted with caution and as there were 12 participants interviewed the research cannot be generalised to the wider population. Most of the participants came from the Wellington region (apart from one based in Auckland) and therefore small provincial towns and rural areas are not represented in the sample. Despite there being growing numbers of children being raised in shared care it did not prove easy to find them for the research purposes. Those that did volunteer their time were self selecting and may differ from a random sample in terms of their motivation and reasoning for choosing to do this research. None of the participants had been involved in conflicted parental separations with protracted

dealings in the family court therefore their experiences are not representative of those exposed to ongoing high levels of parental conflict.

The young people were asked to reflect on their experiences of shared care therefore provided retrospective accounts. Some researchers are sceptical of retrospective reports as they can be biased due to the tendency for people to seek meaning in memories and therefore are not always accurate. Despite the methodological issues associated with retrospective accounts a review of the evidence by Hardt and Rutter (2004) found that retrospective studies are convenient and worthwhile. The transcriptions are open to interpretation therefore the findings and conclusions are one representation of the participants' truth.

Although the interviews generated extensive data there is a limited amount of information that can be obtained in a one one-off interview. The participants appeared very willing to share their experiences with the researcher but it would be prudent to consider that they may have not have revealed relevant material of a very personal nature. As Smyth (2009) commented any qualitative research should be cautious with its conclusions. There are undoubtedly more differences than similarities between shared care families.

Future research

It would be beneficial for future family research to emphasise factors that improve child outcomes, irrespective of the family structure they live in. This could helpfully include what constitutes good parenting. Boney (2003) noted that despite evidence for the quality of postseparation family functioning being the most salient predictor of individual outcomes, few studies have examined specific family processes. For instance, why are some shared care families more successful than others? We need to learn about the protective factors that contribute to successful outcomes and move away from unhelpful comparisons between children from different family structures. A strength based perspective is congruent with the postmodern paradigm and usefully adopted when looking at different family types. Future studies could explore non-traditional family households including the new 'nesting' postseparation living arrangement and other cross cultural examples of postmodern family arrangements.

The term family resilience is arguably a useful concept to apply in future research and to explore how it applies to different families of separation (Walsh, 2003). The term ‘family resilience’ refers to a family’s ability to adapt to adversity by drawing on protective factors and resources from individual family members, the wider community and/or the way that the family functions (Superu, 2015). The way a family functions is as important as the structure for building resilience in families. Families differ in how they respond to separation. Future research could explore how family resilience contributed to family recalibration following separation.

Post-modern children are very sophisticated. Their use of media means they are exposed more than ever before to the adult’s world. It would be interesting to explore how new technologies such as mobile phones for young children, skype and social media impact on their views of family life. Research needs to continue to examine family life and processes from the child’s and young person’s point of view and integrate the new influences, technologies and social media they are immersed in.

It cannot be assumed that there is no ‘spirit trauma’ for the children experiencing parental separation (Kruk, 2013b). This author argues that children can experience a deep inner wounding from the threatened or actual separation from an attachment figure which he refers to as a ‘violation of something sacred’. While recognising the young people adapted well to new family circumstances it would be prudent to ensure that their adaptability was healthy not a maladaptive coping mechanism. It would be interesting for future research to review the concept of spiritual wounding in relation to family changes.

Recommendations

The young people in this study commented on how their parents coped with the changes directly impacted their own adjustment to the separation and altered living arrangements. There is much at stake for parents going through a separation and establishing an effective co-parenting relationship is not easy. Understanding the feelings of pain and loss experienced by separating parents has to be acknowledged along with the self actualisation that occurs with a new beginning. Parents need support to ensure that they can determine the needs of their children during a

transformational period in their lives. The recently introduced family court and mediation processes are very rational and assume parents are capable of accessing rational thinking processes to determine what is best for their children at a time when they are frequently feeling highly emotional. Parents need support to work through how to act in their child's best interests. Their responsibilities for parenting continue after separation and the difficulties that go with the new terrain need to be acknowledged. Most participant parents in this study did not access family court services but they were still extremely sensitive to their parents' emotional wellbeing. It is important to consider that as with the young people in this study most separating couples decide about the care of their children without engaging with any court interventions but emotional support needs to be readily available. Parents will benefit from resources that help them work through what might work best for their children. Counselling support to help deal with the emotional issues is an effective and fundamental service to separating parents and needs to be reinstated.

No one post-separation living arrangement option is 'best' for all children. Shared care does not suit all children. Participants wanted access to both parents and but this did not necessarily mean living with them 50/50. Some prefer the consistency of one home along with access to both parents. Other post-separation arrangements are available and sometimes preferable. Parents need to be creative and flexible when thinking about their children's needs. Shared care is dynamic and arrangements need to be regularly reviewed as children develop.

Transition time between homes is important. Most participants found it inconvenient to pack up and move and needed time to adjust to being in a new home. Not dissimilar to how adults feel when they have been in a different environment for several days, such as being on holiday or away on conference, it takes awhile to adjust to a different place. Shared care is tiring for kids. They may need more 'down-time' and they may not have enough time to themselves.

Gender differences exist in shared care families. Participants know that each home is different. Gender and power issues still exist and gender neutral terms currently finding widespread adoption in policy changes do nothing to challenge this. Mothers and fathers are not equal and participants in the current study understood this and accepted the differences in each home.

Conclusion

Participants did not unconditionally approve of shared care but essentially they found it unexceptional; it was what they knew. The traditional concept of family life represents some aspiration which is sentimental and in stark contrast to the reality. Behind the facade of normality families are a mixture of dysfunction and their own quirky ways of being their family. In post-modern families a variety of alternative family structures are legitimate. Each family is influenced by the interactions of family members and it's these interactions, vested with personal significance, that define each family. The participants are clear that the changing face of family life and breakaway from the nuclear family is not a damaging, disintegration of the family unit, but a reflection of an increasing social need for an alternative to the nuclear family. The mathematical concept of chaos theory has found its way into family interactions for good reason (Ward, 1995). Chaos refers to family systems as complex and unpredictable but with some kind of form and structure. Participants were comfortable with this chaos and expected it to be so.

With parental separation there is a loss of innocence and adaptation to shared care was at times painful and disorienting. Mythology from many cultures tells us of the special child, abandoned by its parents, is exposed to new experiences. This child becomes powerful and knowing through claiming its vulnerability not by ignoring it. These young people acknowledge they have been through a life defining experience and are emerging wiser and more perceptive with increased social competence. Their shared care experiences provided meaningful substance to family life.

Psychologically, their families are the fount from which their personality flourishes. These young people have spoken; they will create their own script about their family life.

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Appendix A: Information Sheet

Were you brought up living in two homes?



If so, I would love to hear about your experiences.

My name is Tracy Merson. For my Master's research project I am interested in speaking to young adults who grew up with joint custody or shared care parenting. If you had two parents living in two separate homes and you experienced time in each house, I would like to talk to you.

Your experiences and recollections will be important to improving our understanding of how children find living in two homes. Your commitment and time will also be acknowledged with a movie voucher and the knowledge that you are contributing to valuable research.

To talk to you about your experiences of joint custody I would like to interview you for approximately one hour at your home, or at Massey University Wellington campus, whichever is more convenient. I will be recording and transcribing the interview and a copy

of the transcript will be sent to you for checking. All personal information will be kept highly confidential.

To be eligible to take part please check that you:

- Are at least 16 years of age
- Have experienced a shared care parenting arrangement for at least two years
- Spent at least three nights a fortnight with each parent.

If you would like to seek more information about the project or express your interest in being a part of this project, please feel free to **contact me at** tracymerson@xtra.co.nz

Project Contacts

Researcher: Tracy Merson

Supervisor: Dr. Keith Tuffin

Your help with this fascinating research would be greatly appreciated!

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Working title: A qualitative retrospective study exploring how children experience shared care parenting.

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree/do not agree for the researcher to use the original transcripts for data analysis if I fail to respond with the amendments after 21 days.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

.....

.....

Full Name - printed

.....

Appendix C: Question Guide

Opening questions

- When we first discussed this interview, what was the first thing that came to mind?
- Describe how your shared care arrangement came about?

(cover and/or probe: When did your parents separate?; How do you recall the decision for shared parenting being made; Were you consulted or involved in the decision making stage?; Were there any changes to the shared parenting and if so, why?).

Key questions

- What thoughts, feelings and behaviours did you have in relation to shared parenting?
- How do you recall feeling about the change to your living arrangements?
- What were the pros and cons of living in two homes?
- Looking back, how did you make sense of the changes?
- How did shared parenting affect your relationships with others eg friends, extended family.
- Who did you discuss the change to your family structure with?
- Describe your relationship with your mother over that time?
- Describe your relationship with your father over that time?
- How would you describe the relationship between your parents during the shared parenting period?

Closing questions

- How is your relationship with each of your parents now?
- Thinking about your life now how do you think your shared care experience has impacted your life? And your views on romantic relationships?
- What advice would you give to parents who are separating now in regards to their children?
- What advice would you give to children going through divorce of their parents?
- Is there anything else you would like to add to reflect on?