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Conflict and co-parenting: the constructs of non-resident fathers

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International trends over the last few decades towards increased rates of parental separation and divorce are reflected in the profile of family life in Scotland, where the percentage of children living in one-parent households rose from 19% to 25% between 1991 and 2001; in 92% of those families in 2001, the non-resident parent was the father (Morrison, Headrick, Wasoff, & Morton, 2004). The recently passed Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006, seeking to respond to changes in social norms, has extended automatic parental rights and responsibilities to unmarried fathers registered at the birth of their child, which should have the effect of greatly increasing the number of men in Scotland with a legally defined role as non-resident co-parents (Dey & Wasoff, 2006). However, the rights of any separated parent as instituted in Section 2 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 exist “only to enable him [the parent] to fulfil his parental responsibilities in relation to his child” (Section 2.1); in other words, they exist for the child rather than for the parent. For many non-resident fathers fighting through the courts for contact with their children following a separation, the idea that they do not have a legal right to time with their children *per se* is difficult to grasp, and has led to high-profile campaigning and direct action from fathers’ rights groups in the UK (Collier, 2005). Yet while contact orders can be used to enforce time spent by the child with a non-resident parent, the “no order” principle of minimum intervention embodied in the 1995 Act means that Scottish courts expect parents to decide and maintain contact arrangements themselves. In Scotland during 2002, only 1,138 ordinary causes were initiated concerning residence/contact disputes (Scottish Executive Justice Department, 2004). Most separating families, then, do not resort to court to arrange how their children are to be looked after; the pressures on the court system created by those who do enter into disputes might be addressed by reaching an understanding of how such ‘successful’ contact works.

While Scots law, like other legal systems around the world, now prescribes a co-parental role such that separated, non-resident fathers should still engage in family life in such a way as to support their child's best interests, what is less clear is how that role can best be enacted. There is evidence to suggest that being together with a child oftener or for longer might not in itself guarantee things will be better for that child (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Spruijt, de Goede, & Vandervalk, 2004; though see Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004). What has been seen to count is the quality of the father-child relationship (Burghes, Clarke, & Cronin, 1997; Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001) and the nature and quality of the relationship between the parents (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Whiteside, 1998; King & Heard, 1999; Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001). The expanding body of quantitative research into these factors has identified some positive predictors. The fathers with the strongest paternal relationship will be those whose non-resident children stay at their house for some of the time but who are very close to the mother as well; these men will still get together frequently with both mother and children (Stone & McKenry, 1998; Dunn, 2004). Those with the most positive relations with their child(ren)'s mother would also have proximity, high socio-economic status, and residency of one or some of the children. Neither of these idea co-parents having a new partner, they would talk quite frequently together at some length with no conflict, being content with how they had agreed their separation and arrangements for their child(ren) (Ahrons, 1981; Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Christensen & Rettig, 1995; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995; Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams, 1999; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Any one father, however, is unlikely to fulfil all these criteria, and it falls to the less prolific, qualitative studies of non-resident fatherhood (Arditti & Allen, 1993; Umberson & Williams, 1993;

Simpson, McCarthy, & Walker, 1996; Bradshaw et al., 1999; Smart & Neale, 1999; Stone, McKenry, & Clark, 1999; Trinder, Beek, & Connolly, 2002) to map the diversity of non-resident fathering as it is lived. Non-resident fathers describe having to come to terms with unfamiliar and unsettling duties, requirements, environments and feelings in order to maintain relationships with their children after separation. The role highlighted in this literature is again centrally determined by how, or to what extent, parents get on with each other: non-resident fathers often feel they have little or no influence and see themselves as actively discouraged from staying involved with children. Staying involved as a parent can have a negative effect both on the non-resident father himself, depending on the support he can access through services or family members, and on his ability to think in terms of the children's needs and wishes rather than in terms of parental equity.¹

This research adds some depth to the legal construct of the co-parenting non-resident father; however, if the role is to be understood effectively it is particularly important to take a long-term view. Most studies have gathered data at one point in time. Yet the separated family is a distinctly fluid grouping (Smart & Neale, 1999), no longer subject to one ongoing set of household rules or norms. Because relationships within such a family are no longer restricted to members of a common household, they are subject to endemic change. Furthermore, the theoretical bases of much existing research cast fathers' behaviour as an outcome of separable characteristics, rather than considering fathers themselves as agents for change in their fathering. Personal Construct Theory (PCT), however, allows roles to be conceptualised and measured in a way that recognises change and individuality, and is therefore particularly suited to understanding non-resident fathers (Kelly, 1955). Kelly's theory and methodology were designed to allow clinicians to understand their patients'

behaviour as the outcome of individual choice, rational in terms of that person's own particular criteria for living, and to model how that individual might change their choices. The theory posits that each person forms unique expectations to distinguish what they encounter, based on previous experience. These distinctions, or personal *constructs*, can be meaningfully applied to certain events or entities, termed *elements*, guiding that individual's actions or responses; any particular role will have its corresponding *system* of constructs to deal with the relevant elements.

Personal Construct Theory would suggest that a separated, non-resident father adapting to being a co-parent must develop a distinct system of constructs to function in that new role, which he does through encountering a whole new set of parental situations. As he successively negotiates co-parental situations, he may try out and acquire ways of anticipating those situations that allow him to interact successfully with his children or their mother. However, the theory also holds that constructs must be refined or replaced through trial and error; they are only useful if they allow us to function in situations we encounter. If a separated parent is encountering 'error' in family interaction, they must try out their own new ways of thinking and adopt or retain those that let them cope.

The quality of relationships between separated family members depends, then, on this adaptability. Some ways of viewing family situations may become inappropriate as the family changes, but are still adhered to because they are important, or central to an understanding of self; the inappropriate actions or decisions that result will generate hostility. This model represents a useful way of considering separated parental roles. It suggests that if parents find themselves in a family system subject to persistent change, they are more likely to run into persistent conflict than parents who can expect consistent ways of life among all family members. If, for

instance, a non-resident father continued to hold a previous ‘breadwinning’ idea about his paternal role, perhaps choosing to stay on at work in the evening rather than keep an appointment to take his children swimming, he would find his actions much less likely now to meet with the approval of mother or children. A new priority needs now to be uppermost in his thoughts for him to succeed, such as ‘This will/won’t upset the children’. However, changing a construct system that has been working for some time may be a considerable challenge. The father may seek instead to support his old views, perhaps by believing that conflict is being caused simply by the mother egging the children on to resent him.

To illustrate what fathers’ co-parental constructs may be like, we can look to non-resident fathers’ accounts of themselves and their families. Keith,² one of the participants in a focus group study of Scottish fathers (Wilson, Mayes, & Gillies, under review), had recently started seeing his child, Danny, whom he had never met during the first four or five years of Danny’s life. In extract 1, he describes the situations in which he has found himself as a result of the new experience of contact time:³

Extract 1

*Keith. ... I know he’s only five years of age and I’m 33, but I’m just starting to **feel comfortable**, I’m **really nervous** in his company you know and I – sometimes, I don’t say ‘son’ and I can’t say that yet because it’s actually affected me that way ... Although I’m his father I **don’t feel like his father**, you know, I just feel as if that’ll gradually build I think over the next few years. I think between one and five or six or seven is the most **precious time** in somebody’s life to know their family, to know their parents and obviously Danny’s – Danny doesn’t know me. He’s just starting to get to know me but I only see him twice a month*

*now, you know, so it's gonna take a long long time for me to **be a father to him**, and for him to realize I'm his father. But, hopefully those four years will stand me in good stead, and I'll never ever, ever take him **for granted** or take anything like that for granted again, you know?*

The emboldened phrases in extract 1 outline a series of contrasting qualities in Keith's descriptions of contact situations. When with Danny, he could *be a father to him* or *[not] feel like his father*; he could *feel comfortable* or *really nervous*; and he could value that time as *precious* or else take it *for granted*. These are among the new constructs Keith has begun to use in his new role as a non-resident father. Given that he is on the whole positive about the transformation in his family relationships, we might expect some change to have taken place in his construal of them. In extract 2, an exchange between Keith and another participant in the focus group illustrates Keith's constructs in relation to another person – his child's mother (again, emphasis added):

Extract 2

Keith. ... But I think it was all down to my ex-partner really, stopping me seeing him.

*She was **very bitter**, and obviously we broke up in circumstances – things happened, and obviously she could **use that against me and my son**, and she **stuck her heels in** for four years, five years, you know? And it wasn't until he asked, "I want to see my Daddy", that she eventually **relented**. So it's been a hard four and a half years, five years, you know... And she did say, "Only reason I'm **doing it is 'cos he's asking** for you. If he didn't ask for you, you wouldn't be seeing him."*

Jim. Is she with someone else?

*Keith. Aye, they're together. She's with somebody else but there's no other kids involved or anything but – I don't know if she **thinks that I'll upset things** if Danny keeps asking for his Daddy.*

Keith can now apprehend his experience of Danny's mother as someone who has *stuck her heels in* on some occasions but *relented* on others; she has been *against me and my son* but is now doing things 'cos he [Danny] 's asking. In response to Jim's query, he tentatively suggests that she *thinks that I'll upset things*, an alternative motivation for her behavior to her simply being *very bitter*. The novel experience of being invited to participate in his child's upbringing has allowed Keith to introduce new constructs to frame his changed relationship to his ex-partner as meaningful: someone whose actions arise out of concern about another person "upsetting" things can after all seem more reasonable than someone driven by bitterness.

STUDY

To explore this PCT model of the co-parental role, data were gathered longitudinally from 17 separated, non-resident fathers recruited through media advertising, key individuals in service organizations, and snowballing conducted in the area around Glasgow in Scotland. This qualitative study aimed to find out what being a co-parent was like for these participants, to consider how the role they saw for themselves changed with family circumstances, and in particular to try to understand how conflict might arise between co-parents. All the participants had seen their children within a month of recruitment; they had been separated for between two and a half and twelve years, and most had only one child. Each participant completed repertory grid interviews at three points over one year (apart from one father, who declined to complete one of his interviews). These interviews represent a standard technique within PCT (Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2003), requiring the interviewee

to consider a number of familiar elements. In this case the elements were descriptions of 8 common post-separation parenting situations:

Talking to your child about

- a school or health issue relating to them
- how they have spent the previous week at their mother's house
- how they want to spend their next contact time with you
- something they want that is beyond your resources

Talking to their mother about

- whether a toy, game or activity is suitable
- a temporary change *she* has requested to the contact arrangements
- a temporary change *you* have requested to the contact arrangements
- a school or health issue relating to your child

The above situations, derived from previous focus group interviews (Wilson, Gillies, & Mayes, 2004), were taken to define a realm of activity particular to the co-parental role since all are experienced, or take on new significance, after separation, and since the literature suggests that relations with both child and mother are integral to the success of contact relationships. The interviewee was asked to remember the last time they had been in these situations; they were then given random groups of three situations to consider. For each triad, they supplied descriptions of how two seemed similar and one different. In this way, each individual outlined, in their own words, a series of contrasting aspects of the co-parental situations; these personal distinctions are their *constructs*. Finally, treating the constructs as a series of scales,

the interviewee rated each element between 1 and 7 on each scale. Thus if a construct distinguished, for example, *joyful* situations from those that were *depressing*,⁴ a score of 1 on that construct would indicate a very joyful situation, while a score of 6 would indicate a quite depressing situation. Via this procedure, each interview resulted in a matrix of numerical data relating the situations used as elements to the constructs supplied by that interviewee (the repertory grid).

In the interviews, participants were also asked to quantify the average length and frequency of contact episodes in the previous six months, and how often on average they were in touch with the child's mother during the same period. At waves 2 and 3, they were additionally asked to talk about how they thought things were going overall, and their responses were later coded as 'better', 'the same' or 'worse'. Any major events they reported as recently impacting on family life were noted: for instance, moving house, a death in the family or the beginning or end of a relationship for either parent. Two aspects of the grid data were considered in relation to this background information: the qualitative descriptions of constructs, and statistical relationships between construct scores. The construct labels were analyzed thematically, and values of Somer's D were computed for all pairs of constructs within each grid. Following Bell (2004), these asymmetric coefficients were used to identify the most important construct in each grid as the one whose scores were predictive of most others in the grid.

RESULTS

Over the 50 interviews carried out, participants described 429 constructs in their own words; these were coded into five emergent categories by the researcher and an independent coder, with 90.1% agreement (Table 1). A few constructs were denotative, that is they described only who was present. The largest category of

constructs dealt with dimensions of participation and control, describing how the respondent saw himself taking part in a situation, or how it was controlled: the mode of interaction.

Table 1 Categorization of all constructs supplied

Construct category	Examples		% of constructs
	First description	Contrasting description	
Participation and control	<i>I'm in charge</i>	<i>I'm relying on mother's good offices</i>	29
	<i>mutual input</i>	<i>foregone conclusion</i>	
Significance and import	<i>will make a difference in 20 years</i>	<i>will not make a difference in 20 years</i>	27
	<i>relevant to me</i>	<i>only involved because I have to</i>	
Father's feelings	<i>on guard</i>	<i>relaxed</i>	24
	<i>frustrated</i>	<i>feel you're letting them down</i>	
Conflict and disagreement	<i>would go ballistic</i>	<i>would be nice enough</i>	14
	<i>confrontation</i>	<i>clearer picture</i>	
Who was present	<i>children involved</i>	<i>between mother and father</i>	6

Around a quarter dealt with how important, significant or interesting the respondents saw things as being: what the situations were about for them. Another quarter outlined the different feelings the participants associated with various situations (though, notably, not the feelings they thought other family members might be experiencing). Finally, a smaller category of constructs explicitly mentioned conflict or disagreement, expressing the expectation or prediction of friction or

antagonism in some situations. Conflict emerged as having varied implications. It was sometimes seen in opposition to active involvement in family processes: some definitions supplied as contrasts to ‘conflicted’ situations included *consensus*, *plenty input from me*, *what I say’s accepted*. However, at other times conflict was seen as the opposite of exclusion from family processes, contrasted with *not really a choice*, *no issues*, *apathy*, or *seen as definitely none of my business*. Thus, conflict could be seen as an alternative either to harmonious family participation or to being excluded or controlled; its implications were not always negative.

These fathers, then, discerned separated family situations in terms of how they could be involved in them, how the situations were important, what they were likely to feel in those situations, and, sometimes, whether they were likely to lead to antagonism. For each given participant the proportions of these categories were different at each wave of the study. For example, one father who was quite happy with the way things were going at the first interview only introduced constructs of conflict at the second wave, when he reported that a dispute had arisen over his attempts to increase contact time. At his third interview, by which time he was talking about approaching a lawyer, he provided more constructs of how he was feeling than on either of the previous occasions. In this respect, the types of construct provided were seen to correspond to how things were, rather than reflecting a consistent property of the interviewee; in keeping with PCT, fathers did not emerge as, for instance, ‘conflicted’ types or ‘feelings’ types, but rather as having flexible resources of ideas concerning their role.

From the PCT point of view outlined earlier, deterioration in co-parenting relations might be expected where things have changed for a family but one or both parents have not relinquished an important construct that no longer serves them. At

both the second and third waves, three and four interviewees respectively reported no transitional family events since their previous interview; most of the sample had therefore experienced change between waves. Their accounts of how things had gone were compared with the most important constructs they supplied to enable consideration of whether the PCT model offered a useful explanation for the data. Four patterns emerged from the 33 interviews at waves two and three, which were labeled: *stability*, *hostility*, *transition* and *distancing*. These are discussed in turn.

Stability. At six of the interviews at which no events were reported, fathers indicated that things were going ‘the same’ or ‘better’, and showed little change as regards their most important construct. For one of these interviewees, for instance, the most predictive construct at successive waves was whether he felt *involved, part of life* or *intrusive, interfering* in a situation; his having such a primary consideration in his co-parenting seemed to allow him to interact successfully with his ex-wife and son.

Hostility. At five of the interviews, participants reported experiencing major family upheavals in the preceding months, and reported that things had got worse; in each case the important construct in their interview grid was retained. One father, for example, felt that his contact time in the five months before the third interview had got shorter and shorter. He had contacted a mediation service but had failed to tell his child’s mother that he had done so. When she had received an initial letter from service she had ‘seen red’ and given him ‘dog’s abuse’, in his words. This had ‘actually made things worse’, and he hadn’t ‘really spoken’ to her since. His most important construct before and after this incident was whether he would *like to know about* a family situation or would not *like this*. Centering things on one’s own likes or dislikes in this way is more likely to generate conflict in family situations. Had this

participant approached the mediation event with another of his constructs uppermost (e.g. whether a situation was *important to one* or *both of us*), he might have made sure he had spoken to his wife before the service did, and not encountered such a reaction.

Transition. In 16 of the interviews at waves two and three, the most predictive construct had changed. Prior to all but one of these interviews major family changes had been experienced, and in all but three cases interviewees described things as having stayed the same or having got better. One father, for instance, was proud that he had been able to react calmly to his wife ‘calling in’ the Child Support Agency, forcing him to begin contributing maintenance through this channel. Following this incident, his important construct had changed from whether he was *involved because I have to* or *really interested* in a situation, to whether a situation made him *really angry* or not. He stated in his interview that

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

His seeing his anger as a choice rather than an outcome allowed him to feel capable of continuing as an involved parent in the face of sudden change. Viewing his anger as a predictive rather than a subordinate construct in this way, he was able to apprehend a co-parental encounter that might previously have led to bitter arguments as one during which he could keep his cool.

Distancing. At the remaining six interviews from the last two waves, fathers reported that significant events had taken place and that things had got worse. However, they supplied constructs that were largely interchangeable; no construct emerged as more predictive than others, since most situations received similar scores. These results appeared where a father had been seeing very little of the family. For instance, one father, over the course of the year, had found that both his ex-wife and

his daughter had been increasingly reluctant to see him; following the break-up of his most recent relationship he had also moved away to a job in another town. Where opportunities to enact the co-parental role were very limited, then, construct systems showed no appreciable hierarchy of importance or differentiation.

DISCUSSION

This article has considered the co-parental role set out in law for non-resident fathers in terms of personal construct theory. From this point of view, fathers who continue to see their children after separation or divorce must acquire new expectations of family interaction in order to allow them to cope with a transformed parental role. The constructs elicited in the study showed that fathers who were maintaining contact were thinking about situations particular to that role in terms of their potential for paternal involvement, impact, emotion or antagonism. These are indeed the concerns that one might expect to be particular to living apart from one's children. Involvement with the children can no longer be taken for granted. New constraints on time together, and relations with the children's mother, should foster a strong awareness of what the outcome of such interactions might be. Many of the feelings these fathers described are feelings they will not have experienced as resident parents; fathers in previous studies have described a considerable emotional impact from separation. And while conflict or disagreement may also have characterized family life in the same house, they take on a new significance as regards their potential to upset contact regimes. Interparental conflict, particularly where unresolved, has been identified as one of the most damaging aspects of parental separation for children. Yet in many of the constructs supplied in this study, conflict was an alternative to detachment or exclusion from paternal involvement; it may

therefore be viewed by some fathers as a necessary evil, an inevitable by-product of their continued participation in family life.

Findings from the study were also consistent with the PCT model of the emergence of conflict between separated parents. Where fathers had not encountered change in family circumstances, their constructs remained stable and things did not get worse for them. Where participants had encountered a consequential event, the majority had changed their most important construct and likewise had found that things had got better or had stayed the same. This flexibility, or facility to adapt parental ideas, represents the mechanism by which most separated parents organize and maintain contact without recourse to the courts. But some of those encountering transitions had clung to their established central ways of thinking about their role and had found their family life deteriorating; or else their constructs had become interchangeable as they drifted apart from their family, suggesting that the role had become less meaningful for them. This supports the view that the frequent onset of destabilizing events in the separated family, the sheer rate of change, results in a greater potential for non-resident fathers either to experience hostility between parents or to distance themselves from their family as a means of coping (cf. Smart & Neale, 1999). With the physical break from the household, a constant effort has to be made to keep up with being a parent (Trinder et al., 2002). If a non-resident father struggles repeatedly to find new ways of seeing himself as a parent, and taking part in family life thus appears inevitably hostile, a readier option for him may be to reason that he is increasingly at odds with the co-parental role, so that it seems less relevant. Rather than finding a way of resolving conflict over and over again, he may in time find that one solution for him is to orient towards other more accessible roles, such as that of father to a 'new' family.

As a qualitative in-depth study, this research has drawn rich data from a small sample. The heterogeneity of separated families is such that generalizing from even large representative samples, for instance across cultures, may still be an uncertain business. In keeping with the principles of qualitative investigation, analysis here has sought instead to explain all the data, rather than regarding inconsistent data as noise or confound (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2004; Marecek, 2004). In seeking to establish a theoretical position consistent with the diversity among these data, the intention has not been to infer and demonstrate an underlying universal characteristic; the analysis would therefore be enriched rather than negated by contrary findings from elsewhere, since this would allow further development of theory (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1998). Previous work on separated fatherhood has examined measurable behaviors and attitudes or descriptions of experience, yet these are external indicators of co-parenting. One problem in considering the legal role as co-parent for non-resident fathers has been in conceptualizing it as a process: that is, understanding what it means to perform the part of a non-resident father, rather than isolating what is or should be the outcome of such parenthood. By taking a role to constitute a system of beliefs centered on a particular role or identity, rather than a set of behaviors or duties, the PCT approach adds fine grain to the picture of this role, illuminating what matters and occurs to the fathers themselves on a day-to-day, ongoing basis as they act out non-resident fatherhood.

Problems with cooperation over contact are also seen in this perspective to be contingent on family experiences, with conflict being a response to changing circumstances. This systemic view has significant implications for how problems with contact can be approached. If conflict is understood in this way rather than as being the product of the inbuilt attributes of some individual or individuals within the

family, then it can be apprehended as a process that can be worked with to the benefit of all members. Personal construct methods have been used in family therapy (Procter, 2005) but this literature only discusses interventions with families who live together. Yet the theory is specifically designed to facilitate coping with change, and change is the *modus operandi* of separated families. If one parent takes another partner or if their patterns of work change, or if a child decides they want to spend more of their weekends at the resident home, that individual is no longer tied to just one household that they can expect to accommodate this. Another of Kelly's terms for PCT was 'constructive alternativism': separated parents must continually find constructive alternatives to their parenting in order to maintain a businesslike association through such family transformations. Non-resident fathers who choose to disengage from their family tend to justify their decision on the grounds that they could not see any alternative; however, alternative ways of being a parent may exist that they have not developed constructs for. They may, for instance, not conceive of parenting as something that can be done only in the daytime or during holidays. Nevertheless, Smyth (2005) and others have shown that these are operable patterns for some parents, and may offer a pragmatic means of continuing involvement.

Separated co-parents have to be able to consider whether they can find new ways of thinking about their family relationships that will let them continue to interact with each other. For instance, if the child's schedule becomes busier, a non-resident parent might need to start focusing primarily on the priority of situations rather than on how much they feel like a father in order to keep separated family relations healthy; and PCT methods (Fransella, 2005) offer a useful resource to let services for divorced or separated parents facilitate these changes. Interventions providing information are frequently endorsed as a means of helping separated parents discharge

their parental responsibilities (e.g. Mayes, Wilson, MacDonald, & Gillies, 2003; Walker, McCarthy, Stark, & Laing, 2004; Braver, Griffin, & Cookston, 2005; Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005). Yet some evaluations have identified the difficulty of ensuring that the information provided affects behavior, of knowing that a participating parent has not simply learnt the message but seen how to realize it in their own lives (Kramer & Kowal, 1998; Douglas, 2004); an interactive component in programs may be important in this respect (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996). One of the great strengths of construct elicitation lies in getting individuals to put what they think they are doing into their own words, and working from there; PCT techniques therefore represent an excellent means of helping parents apply program content. An exercise looking at individual constructs and considering each person's own words for being a parent in relation to the content of an information program might greatly increase the impact of that program's message. The findings from this study remind us that challenges can arise even in families where contact appears to be working; while early intervention may be effective, it would also be beneficial to ensure that services to support such families are available at any stage of a separated childhood, and not just in the year or so immediately succeeding the family break-up.

The expectation in law that separating parents should transform themselves into partners cooperating in child-rearing is certainly a worthwhile ideal, but one which still has considerable scope for being informed by the practicalities reported from the front line. Such an ethos requires parents to be at their most selfless, doing whatever will have least impact on their child whatever that implies for themselves, at the same time as trying to renew their identities and adjust to fundamentally distinct roles according to residency and non-residency (Smart & Neale, 1999). All those who successfully achieve this describe the constant effort involved in maintaining a

working relationship. To this end, measures such as the draft Parenting Agreement recently made available to accompany the introduction of the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 can offer an initial basis for cooperation. However, it is vital that any such agreed plan for contact is made with an acknowledgement of the need for it to be reviewed if family circumstances change. Some fathers groups in the UK have called for a legal presumption of fifty–fifty contact allocation; but findings here support the belief in many other quarters that this would be counterproductive (Smart, 2004). Such a move would impose rigidity on contact arrangements, while the analysis in this study suggests that non-resident fathers need to be able to change their ideas about themselves and their role if persistent, long-term family conflict is to be avoided. If they can be helped to view their role as something that might be in need of overhaul, they may be less likely to distance themselves from it in the face of successive family crises, and better able to sustain a successful paternal relationship in the long term through contact.

NOTES

¹ For a full review of both quantitative and qualitative literature in this area see Wilson, 2006.

² All names of participants have been changed.

³ In the material quoted in extracts 1 and 2, punctuation conventions have been used to represent actual speech patterns rather than grammatical convention. A comma indicates a brief pause within continuous speech, a hyphen indicates a longer pause or hesitation, and a full stop is used where intonation and timing suggest that an utterance has ended. Quotation marks enclose material that is voiced as being spoken by another person and question marks are used where intonation suggests a question. Ellipsis indicates that material has been omitted for clarity.

⁴ Where quoted in the body of the text, participants' verbatim labels for constructs have been italicized, as here.

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