Women's experiences, social support and adapting to the offshore lifestyle: my life, my house, my bed..., not my life, shared house, shared bed, shared..., to get yourself back into sharing, because it takes a bit to work out the two.

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Research Masters with Training

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Murdoch University, 2008
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

[Signature]
Abstract

In the past two decades the growth of the offshore oil and gas industry of Western Australia has resulted in an increased number of families experiencing the intermittent absence of a partner/parent. The gendered nature of the offshore oil and gas industry means workers tend to be male and the partner left at home tends to be female. This was the case for the participants in this study. For two/three weeks the family experience the absence of the male 'breadwinner', creating a gap within the family as the women and children experiences the loss of the partner/parent. Two/three weeks later the male worker returns home for his rest period and he reengages in his roles and the family is reunited. When the worker is absent the partner at home takes on the worker's gendered roles, tasks and responsibilities; upon his return she surrenders (sometimes willingly) his gendered roles, tasks and responsibilities.

Solheim (1988) state families of offshore oil and gas workers experience three social realities; his life at work, her 'single' life when he is at work, and their couple life when the worker arrives home. The families can develop a range of methods to adjust to the flux that occurs within families due to the work schedule (Forsyth and Gramling 1989). The repeated cyclical patterns of parting and reunion, weaving and balancing their three lives, and renegotiation of family work contribute to the stressors and strains the partners of offshore workers experience.

This study investigated how the offshore lifestyle impacts the at home partner of offshore workers and in addition, how at home partners use their social networks as means to help adapt to the offshore work schedule, and makes two major findings. Firstly, the at home partners of offshore workers participate in exchanging, at various levels, social support with family, friends and neighbours, although the most important
form of support which helps the at home partner adapt to the offshore lifestyle is the support they receive from the offshore worker. Secondly, adapting to the offshore lifestyle is highly influenced by a process consisting of four reactions. The reactions are: the beginning; normalising his presence; normalising his absence; and balancing two lives. The identification of the four reactions can provide a greater understanding of how the offshore oil and gas industry impacts on the daily lives of partners of offshore workers as it helps make visible the day-to-day lives of partners of offshore oil and gas workers.
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I don't know how you can live a normal life and have a great relationship, it's unusual, it is hard to balance (Cara).

On the face of it, offshore work offers both the opportunity for the development of greater female independence and greater male involvement in the home. But in practice, the pattern of continual absence and presence mitigates against both. Men must move between two environments which are at present hopelessly estranged in terms of their respective culture and it falls to women to adjust (Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988, 111).

When the husband is offshore, women must cope alone with parenting, domestic labour and in some cases paid labour, with varying degrees of support from kin and community... men and women must make adjustments to offshore work patterns both as individuals and as couples... this double adjustment, which is particularly acute for women, requires both the enhanced awareness of the respective partners' experience of offshore work patterns, and communication between partners (Storey, Shrimpton, Lewis and Clark 1989, 91).
Chapter One

Introduction

The work schedule used in the offshore oil and gas industry creates a particular lifestyle for the workers and their families that are highly influenced by the intermittent absence and presence of the offshore worker. The offshore oil and gas worker has periods at work followed by continuous periods of time at home. As a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker I experienced the offshore lifestyle for many years and I understood how the offshore lifestyle impacted the life of my family. As a student of sociology I had a desire to understand how social circumstances influence other families’ experiences of the offshore lifestyle. Furthermore, I wanted to discover if the experiences of contemporary offshore families in Western Australia were similar to the experiences of offshore oil and gas families of Northern America, the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe as identified in research from the late 1970s onwards.

In addition to an investigation into how the offshore lifestyle affects families, I was curious to understand how the families of offshore workers used their social support networks as an aid to help them to adapt to the offshore lifestyle. An interesting social support theory was created by Morrice and colleagues (1985, 483) who stated that the female partners of offshore oil and gas workers need ‘good support’ if they are to adapt to the intermittent absence of their partner, the worker. This statement prompted me to ask questions such as, ‘what kind of social support do partners of offshore workers have?’ and ‘what kind of social support do Morrice and colleagues suggest the partners of offshore oil and gas workers should have?’ and ‘can good social support help the
partner of the worker to adapt to the intermittent absence of the worker?" Thus, the aim of the study was to gain an insight into if, and how, the partners of offshore oil and gas workers in Western Australia (WA) engage in social support in their day-to-day experiences; furthermore, does having good social support help the partners of offshore workers to adapt to the intermittent absence of their partners?

To gain a greater understanding why Morrice et al.(1985) suggest partners of offshore workers require good social support in order to adapt to the offshore lifestyle I have drawn from the literature on the impact of the offshore oil and gas industry on workers and their families. However, much of the available literature on how the offshore oil and gas industry impacts the family is now dated and originates overseas. The majority of studies were undertaken with workers from the oil and gas fields located in the seas surrounding the United Kingdom (UK), Norway and Canada. This current research aims to discover if the overseas and somewhat dated literature on the impact of the industry on partners is relevant to contemporary partners of offshore oil and gas workers in WA. The early literature is dominated by articles from the discipline of psychology. Here, the impact of the intermittent absence of workers on their wives/partners is viewed as problematic. Furthermore, the reaction to the offshore lifestyle by partners of offshore workers is seen as polarised, resulting in the use of two categories 'copers' and 'non copers'.

The offshore oil and gas industry is global and has been harvesting these hydrocarbons for more than four decades. Expanding world markets and technological improvements in locating and accessing oil and gas reserves expose an increasing number of world wide communities to the offshore oil and gas industry. In Western Australia, the
current resources boom and associated skills shortage\textsuperscript{1} has increased the availability of employment opportunities in the resource industries such as remote mining and the offshore oil and gas industry. The growth in the resource industry in WA, a continuation and expansion of fly in/fly out operations in the mining sector, and the availability of jobs that are not ‘resource industry specific’ exposes more Western Australian families to work schedules that separate the workers from their families for extended periods of time.

The fly in/fly out (FIFO) work system is used in resource industries such as oil and gas, hydro, forest and mining industries (Storey, Shrimpton, Lewis, and Clark 1989, xv). Currently, in Australia, FIFO work schedules are used in the offshore oil and gas industry in the Bass Strait, on the Northwest Shelf, Western Australia, and in remote mining developments (Beach 2000, 191; Pattenden 2005; Yrke 2004). FIFO and drive in/drive out (DIDO) work schedules are often referred to as long distance commuting, and the work patterns call for workers to spend extended periods (one or more weeks) at their work place returning home for a non-work period of one or more weeks (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, iii). The work schedule of the offshore oil and gas worker causes a physical separation, of two or more weeks, between offshore workers and their families and creates unique experiences for the worker (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 185-6), and their families (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005). Surrendering available time to spend with family, when the worker is absent, is considered to be repaid by high income and continuous time at home. ‘In return for sacrificing two weeks offshore, workers in the offshore oil and gas industry enjoy higher than average earnings and two continuous weeks of free time’ (Collinson 1998, 307). In addition,

\textsuperscript{1} Beyond the resources boom. (Government of Western Australia 2007)
the offshore work schedule is one that is envied by ‘many normal nine-to fivers’... for many families, having two whole weeks together every month ...is ample compensation for their time apart’ (50 Years of Woodside’s Energy 2004, 181).

Within the available sociology and psychology literature there are three major theories regarding the experiences of the partners of offshore oil and gas workers. The first relates to Solheim’s (1988) assertion that the intermittent absence of the offshore worker creates three social realities for offshore workers and their families: his life\(^2\) when he is at work, her single life when he is absent, and their couple life when he is at home. Solheim (1998) states that it is essential offshore workers and their families adapt to the three social realities. The second major theme suggests the ‘traditional’ pattern of family management is impossible to maintain due to the intermittent absence of the offshore worker and Forsyth and Gramling (1990, 184) argue the families of offshore workers must develop other familial strategies. The third relates to the patterns of polarisation of adapting to the intermittent absence of the offshore worker.

The reaction by wives/partners of offshore oil and gas workers to the offshore work schedule has regularly been noted as polarised; they either adapt or fail to adapt (Morrice et al. 1985). The partners who adapt to the intermittent absence of the worker and the offshore lifestyle are defined as copers or veterans, whereas the partners who do not adapt are defined as non-copers or novices (Clark et al. 1985; Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988). A snap-shot view of the partners of offshore oil and gas workers appears to have been used to develop the two-fold approach. The reasons projected to why women were able to cope or not cope with the intermittent absence of the worker was based on an individual’s ability to ‘be alone’ and their coping or non-coping state

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\(^2\) The majority of the workforce in the offshore oil and gas industry are male, thus in the literature available, this leads to workers being defined as male.
at the time of the research. To provide an alternative understanding of the dichotomised view that the partners of offshore oil and gas workers are copers or non-copers a four-fold model was developed in this thesis. The model in the thesis presents an understanding of the social world of the partners of offshore workers. It takes into consideration the development of adapting to the offshore lifestyle and the flux of lifecycle stages to understand the process of adapting to the offshore lifestyle.

The impact of the offshore industry on its workers and their family and familial methods of adapting to the offshore work schedule are discussed in Chapter Two. While the thesis is not specifically about the worker, it is important to note how the worker is affected by the offshore work schedules as it ultimately impacts upon their family members. The impact of the worker's work schedule on their partner and family is identified in several areas such as: helping the worker to readjust to family life; parenting; her paid work; division of family work;\(^3\) and marital authority. In addition, Chapter Two includes a review of the literature on how the female partners of workers 'adapt' to the offshore work schedule.

This study is essentially qualitative and draws from a feminist methodology. Face-to-face interviews with women,\(^4\) the positioning of myself as a researcher, and the notion of shared understanding and meaning of experience among women are essential aspects of the methodology. In Chapter Three the process of data collection, including a questionnaire and interviews, designing the study, finding participants and analysis of the data is discussed in detail.

\(^3\) In the context of this study, family work consists of domestic household labour and childcare, as there are different interpretations of the definition of family work within the literature.

\(^4\) The offshore oil and gas industry is a male dominated workplace, thus most partners tend to be female, something reflected in this study.
In Chapter Four I discuss how the research data obtained from this study has provided additional knowledge about the impact of the offshore oil and gas industry on the at home partners of offshore workers. By building on the three major themes of how partners/wives are impacted by the intermittent absence of the worker from previous research I have developed an alternative view of the reactions of the at home partner and, in turn, how these four reactions impact on how women adapt to the offshore lifestyle. The four reactions have been developed by using the data obtained from the questionnaire and the face-to-face interviews in addition to the literature on familial management techniques (Forsyth and Gramling 1987; Forsyth and Gauthier 1991) and on the polarisation of ‘adapting’ as coper/non-coper and novice/veteran (Morrice et al. 1985; Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988).

The four reactions are: innocence, normalising his presence, normalising his absence and balancing two lives. The four reactions are not methods of adapting, but a process of adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker. In the study by Storey et al.(1989) offshore oil workers positioned adapting to the offshore work schedule solely with their at home partners. However, adapting is also influenced by the worker’s reaction to the work schedule.

Chapter Five contains a section on social support and spousal support as an introduction to the data on social support generated from the questionnaire. Morrice and colleagues (1985, 483) argue that good social support helps wives/partners of offshore workers adjust to the offshore lifestyle. Following them, the patterns of engagement in social support by partners of offshore workers are illustrated and discussed in Chapter Five. The quantitative data from the questionnaire has been
interpreted and is presented in a graphical format. The qualitative data, from the interviews, is threaded throughout the chapter. This provides an insight into the exchange of informal social support by partners of offshore workers and members of their personal network of family members, friends and others.

In this chapter, and in the following Chapters Six and Seven, the voices of the women also provide an understanding of the process of adapting to the offshore lifestyle. As women recalled their experiences it becomes evident that women do not simply cope or fail to cope with the offshore lifestyle. It is illustrated how lifecycle changes can influence different patterns of perception to the lifestyle and thus different reactions to the intermittent absence of the worker.

One of the impacts of the offshore work schedule is the influence on the daily lives of the at home partner and family. The families of offshore workers experience shifts in their social realities in that they experience two lives, one when the worker is present and another when the worker is absent. The two lives of the offshore family are interspaced by a period of transition. These are the days in which the worker enters and leaves the family. In Chapters Six and Seven the voices of the women who were interviewed are used to depict the day-to-day lives of the offshore worker’s family during their ‘normal’ lives and the transition phase. In Chapter Six, the women's voices provide an understanding of the tension and anticipation families and workers experience when the worker returns home from his offshore tour of duty. In addition to the tension experienced when the worker returns home, tension and sadness occur when the worker makes his subsequent return to work some weeks later. Sandwiched between the transition days are the ‘two lives’ families of offshore workers experience.
The day-to-day experiences of the two lives of partners of offshore workers are presented in Chapter Seven. The development of two lives by the partners of offshore workers and the impact of their reaction to the offshore lifestyle upon women’s adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker is illustrated and discussed.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, presents a summary of the research and the findings of the research. It was found, in this study, that social support provided to and exchanged with the at home partner from family and friends can impact the reaction of women to the offshore lifestyle. However, the at home partners are often reluctant to ask for help when it involves help with tasks that they and their partner have negotiated as his gendered work. Perhaps more relevant for the at home partners of offshore oil and gas workers is the provision of spousal support from the workers. Spousal support helps the at home partner feel validated and esteemed, which reduces her sense of dependency on others for emotional support.

Overall, the thesis presents an overview of the impacts of the fly in/fly out nature of offshore oil and gas industry on the families of offshore workers. Some of the aspects of the offshore lifestyle that create flux for families of offshore workers are identified. Also identified are the strategies the partners in this study use to accommodate the offshore work schedule. In addition, four reactions by the partners of offshore workers are suggested.

In the thesis a number of different terms are used as alternatives for ‘the worker’ and ‘the partner of the worker’. In a review of the literature, the worker is universally defined as male and the partner as female and they are usually referred to as husband and wife. Today, the offshore oil and gas facilities remain a male dominated
workplace, and most partners of offshore workers are female. This of course does not preclude the existence of, first, female offshore workers and, second, offshore workers with same sex partners at home. In this study there was one male respondent, all the rest were female. Therefore, in Chapter Five, for which the primary source of data is the questionnaire, members of the sample population are simply referred to as respondents. In Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, in which data obtained from the interviews is discussed, all the interviewees were women and are therefore referred to as women, the at home partner, the partner, the interviewees, mother, partner/wife, and 'she'. The offshore oil and gas worker is referred to as the offshore worker, the worker, father, partner/husband and 'he'.

Chapter One

9
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

While the offshore oil and gas industry is a global industry, much of the available research on the social impact of this industry comes from studies focused on the oil and gas fields of Canada (Atlantic Ocean), the UK and Norway (North Sea), and North America (Gulf of Mexico).

The purpose of this chapter is to review the available literature on the impact of employment on offshore oil and gas facilities on the workers and their families. Much of the literature has been sourced from psychology articles; there was little done by sociologists. The literature that addresses the impact of employment on offshore facilities in the offshore oil and gas industry bifurcates. The first branch usually relates to the impact of the industry on offshore workers in their work place. As such, studies assess personal and organisational factors relating to the perception of risk, safety and stress (Steinvsag, Bratveit, and Moen 2006; Mearns et al. 2001; Mearns, Whitaker, and Flin 2003; Mearns et al. 2004; Hart 2002; Chen et al. 2003; Flin et al. 1996; Rundmo 1992a, 1992b; Sutherland and Cooper 1996a; 1996b; Wong et al. 2002; Sutherland and Flin 1989; Parkes 1993), and the health and injury of offshore workers (Collins, Matthews, and McNamara 2000; Sutherland and Cooper 1991; Gardener 2003; Parkes and Swash 2000; Parkes 2001).

The second branch of the literature, while sometimes considering the impact of the industry on the offshore worker, specifically relates to how employment in the offshore
oil and gas industry impacts families of offshore workers. Shrimpton and Storey (2001, iii) state there have been few influential studies (Solheim 1988; Storey et al. 1989) on the impact of the industry on offshore oil and gas workers and their families. The studies are now relatively dated and the relevance of these studies to the current offshore oil and gas industry, the offshore workers and their families is questioned by Shrimpton and Storey (2001, iii). There is evidence, in the last decade, of a resurgence of interest in the impact of the industry on families (Mauthner, Maclean, and McKee 2000; Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005; Collinson 1998).

This chapter is presented in two sections. The first section refers to the impact of the offshore oil and gas industry on offshore workers. This is included as it has been shown that workers are affected by work place policy and practice, such as 12-hour shifts, rotational shift patterns and work cycles. Such factors are cumulative and can influence the mental and physical well-being of offshore workers that may, to some degree, have a bearing on family life. In addition, the literature on environmental factors endemic to the offshore oil and gas industry is reviewed for similar reasons, in that workers are impacted by the environmental factors of the offshore oil and gas industry.

The second section considers the possible ways the intermittent absence, a condition of employment in the offshore oil and gas industry, of a partner/parent affects the family members who remain at home. As there appears to be a dearth of available literature on the impact of intermittent absence of the offshore oil and gas worker on the family, I have drawn from literature that addresses the intermittent separation of the worker from their family in industries such as seafaring and mining in remote locations. While these
industries are intrinsically different to the offshore oil and gas industry, the families of seafarers, miners, and offshore oil and gas workers share the experience of the intermittent absence of the worker. Industries such as seafaring, mining and the oil and gas industry are male dominated; as such, the majority of workers in these industries are male. The nature of the work means that stay at home families experience a period of time when the husband/father is present at home, and another period of time when he is absent from home. The absence from home of the worker/husband/father, and his continual presence when he returns home requires some adjustment by families. As such, while the type of work and work patterns of the worker may differ, the families in which the worker is intermittently absent have experiences that are comparable. The family life of such workers can be experienced as what Solheim (1988, 148-50) describes as three social realities: the worker’s life while he is at work; the family’s life when the worker is absent; and a life together when the family is reunited.

*Impact of workplace factors on offshore workers*

The majority of offshore work rosters are ‘symmetrical’, such as the 14-days on/14-days off rosters that dominate the British oil and gas fields of the North Sea (Cullen 1990, 11; Parkes 1993, 61). However, the length of rosters vary (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005), and rosters such as 21-days on/21-days off or 7-days on/7-days off are used in the oil fields of Canada (Storey et al. 1989) and in the Gulf of Mexico (Austin et al. 2002). Such work rosters are currently used in the oil and gas fields in Australian waters; on the Northwest Shelf in Western Australia 14-days on/14-days off cycle (APPEA 2006), in the Bass Strait, a 7-days on/7-days off cycle (ExxonMobil nd), and 500 kilometres north of Darwin, a 21-days on/21-days off cycle prevails (TerritoryQ 2007).
The geographic location of resources not only dictates that workers live and work in the same ‘away from home’ environment, but has been a major influence on work patterns and length of work cycle (Parkes and Clark 1997b, 3). Other factors now play a more important part in determining the length of the work cycle (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005). Longer cycles, for example, reduce expenditure associated with travel to and from offshore facilities (for a review of changes to work practices in the North Sea, see Collinson 1998). Although work cycles longer than 14-days have been argued to impede productivity, safety and the health of offshore personnel (Parkes and Clark 1997b, 27; Parkes and Swash 2000, 99), increasingly more workers are employed on a 21-day work cycle (Collinson 1998, 302; Shrimpton and Storey 2001). Regardless of the length of the work cycle, in the offshore oil and gas industry most cycles remain symmetrical or ‘equal time’ rosters. In the remaining work cycles, the ratio of work to leave time shifts from equal time to asymmetric rosters. For example, in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea the work cycles follow a pattern of 14-days on board followed by a period of non-work for 21-days, giving workers more time at home than at work (Clark and Taylor 1988, 113). The move to an asymmetric roster is, in part, a corollary of the European Social Charter that limits the number of hours of paid work employees are permitted to work per year (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 21), although Norwegian cultural norms of ‘family togetherness’ and family-friendly policies contribute to facilitating low levels of work-life conflict (Crompton 2006, 134).

In Australia, many onshore mining operations use a fly in/fly out work system such as 14-days on site, followed by 7-days at home. Remote mine site workers have asymmetric work schedules. The asymmetric fly in/fly out work schedules in Australia differ to those used in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea. Workers in the
Norwegian sector spend more time at home than at work, while the workers in remote mines in Queensland and Western Australia spend more time at work than at home (Beach 2000; Watts 2004, 30).

There are a number of similarities in the day-to-day experiences of workers on offshore oil and gas facilities and remote mine workers. While at work, both groups of workers experience a separation from their family and friends. Social interaction is restricted to fellow workers and access to activities, such as a gym, or wet mess\(^5\) (not available on offshore oil and gas facilities) is provided by the operator of the offshore facility or mine site. The remote location of both offshore oil and gas facilities and onshore remote mining sites confines workers to their workplace. The everyday experiences of the offshore worker occur in a restricted area on a mass of steel that is anchored to the ocean floor many kilometres from shore; there is no escape from the steel island for the offshore worker until the arrival of a helicopter. Likewise, there is often limited opportunity to leave remote mine sites without transport arranged by the employer.

Isolation from family and friends and an enforced membership to a confined community has resulted in offshore workers comparing life on an offshore facility to that of a prison (Storey et al. 1989, 92; Collinson 1998, 303). Time, space and social activities on offshore facilities are highly structured and regulated (Solheim 1988, 145; Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 5; Watson 2000, 10). Life on board an offshore facility is institutionalised in that the daily lives of workers are controlled through formal rules and rigid scheduling of work, sleep, meals and meal times, to wearing of uniforms, and sharing cabin and bathroom facilities (Collinson 1998, 303). In these circumstances

\(^5\) A wet mess is a communal area where workers can purchase and drink alcohol.
workers are ‘embodied in closed and socially constructed communities’ (Pattenden 2005, 5). Furthermore, the worker can experience additional isolation offshore; the limited space on offshore facilities and the subsequent ‘close living’ in a ‘tough male world’ restrict expressions of emotion (Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988, 172), and personal problems are ‘left at home’ (Storey et al. 1989, 93; Thomas 2003, 53). The geographical isolation of the work place and an apparent non-existent social support network within the workplaces have the potential to make workers feel socially isolated (Thomas 2003, 17).

The harsh environment and the heavy work load in the offshore oil and gas industry has resulted in a male dominated workforce (King Oil 1999). In the early years of the industry, the limitation of space and the masculine culture on offshore facilities discouraged women from working in the industry (Fuchs, Cake, and Wright 1983, 96-106). Furthermore, when women are employed in the offshore industry they tend to work in traditional female gendered occupations such as administration and catering/cleaning, and only a few work in non-traditional occupations associated with the extraction and processing of energy resources (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 6). Globally, the employment rates of women in the industry are extremely low; in the UK, Canada, Australia and USA rates are often below five percent, and although Norway has equal opportunity policies the employment of women in the Norwegian sectors of the North Sea is only slightly higher at 16 percent (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 7). Storey et al. (1989) argue that employing women on offshore facilities provides a means of reducing the contrast between the culture of the work place and home, thus making it easier for men to slip back into the ‘home’ culture. However, the employment of
women offshore is not always appreciated by the female spouses of offshore workers (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 7).

Work schedules, including the work cycles of offshore oil and gas workers, have potential advantages and disadvantages for workers and their families (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 8-16). Workers frequently noted advantages such as high income⁶ and employment flexibility (second job or self employed during off time). The separation of their two worlds, work and home, can offer the worker a total escape from work when he is at home. For some workers, the work schedule enables them to spend quality time with family (Collinson 1998, 307-8) and friends (Jenkins 1997, 19), while others feel the fly in/fly out work roster ‘puts pressure on forming and maintaining personal relationships’ (Venables, Beach, and Brereton 2002, 7; Collinson 1998, 314). While the high income is an initial attraction for many workers (Beach 2000, 140), it creates economic ties to the industry and makes leaving a highly paid job very difficult as similar work outside the industry does not generate the same high income. Thus high incomes available in the offshore oil and gas industry facilitate worker retention (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 12).

The offshore work schedule involves time/space management and while there are options and trade-offs involved in being situated in one place at one time, to the exclusion of other options, it limits and constrains human interaction (Gramling 1989, 48). The total separation of the workers’ two worlds requires workers to make a significant shift from one sphere to the other and this transition from one culture to

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⁶ In February 2008 the average Australian annual salary was listed by Mycareer.com as $78,628. In comparison, the average annual salary of offshore workers in the offshore oil and gas industry was listed as $125,348
another can prove difficult for offshore workers (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 175; Thomas 2003, 43) as it involves more than changing from one rhythm to another:

It is the whole social and personal context of the offshore worker that has to be recognised [as the worker experiences a] total reorientation of the person from one state of being to another, from being ordered, to creating one's own order, from routine actions and personal withdrawal to active participation and personal involvement (Solheim 1988, 147).

Offshore workers become more dependent on their families as ‘finding one’s place in the family and local community becomes difficult’ (Storey et al. 1989, 119; Thomas 2003, 76). Their intermittent absence contributes to workers being out of step with society and they experience a level of alienation that ultimately places greater strain ‘on the family system as the sole support structure’ (Solheim 1988, 156-9). When the worker arrives home his presence at home is continuous. The time at home for the worker is not usually interrupted by commitments to paid work. However, family members often have day-time commitments. For example, children are at school and wives at work. The age of the children, the amount of time his partner is employed in paid work, and the work patterns of extended family members and friends, all impact on the amount of time the worker spends at home alone (Gramling 1989, 55). Therefore, although the offshore worker’s schedule has the potential for a concentrated co-presence with family and friends, his recreational and social interaction is often confined to weekends and evenings (Gramling 1989, 55).

It appears the workers’ non-work time, notably their leave time and subsequent reintegration with family, friends and community, has received less attention within the literature available than the workers’ work time, although some family issues surrounding the return of the worker are illustrated by Storey et al. (1989, 119-31) and Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer (2005). Collinson’s study (1998, 317-8) supported findings
from a previous study about alcohol abuse among offshore workers that highlighted a
culture of consuming high levels of alcohol as a release from the pressures of working
in the offshore oil and gas industry (Aiken and McCance 1982).

Offshore work rosters can cause a fractured social life for the worker and they often
give up community activities (Storey et al. 1989, 99; Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 11).
In addition, the intermittent presence of the worker impacts on friendships, making it
more difficult to maintain friendships (Argyle and Henderson 1984). Thus workers
become more dependent on their wives’ social networks as a basis of friendship and
social contacts (Thomas 2003, 55).

Shiftwork and offshore workers

Similar to other contemporary industries that use shift work to facilitate the continuous
production of their product, the offshore oil and gas industry requires the use of a
system of shift work to maintain the process of continuous production (Parkes 1993,
61). Travel distances to and from offshore facilities preclude the use of ‘onshore’ fast
rotation systems, and limitations of accommodation on offshore facilities allow only
two crews (day shift and night shift) on board at any one time (Parkes and Clark 1997,
3).

Shiftwork impacts the circadian rhythm of shift workers and disturbs sleep patterns
(Monk and Tepas 1985; Costa et al. 1989; Akerstedt 1980; 2003), and can impact
negatively on productivity and safety (Folkard and Tucker 2003; Di Milia and Bowden
2007). There has been limited research undertaken on the way shift work affects

7 Four 12-hour shifts at work followed by four days rest period.

The 12-hour shift system used in the offshore oil and gas industry requires workers to be rostered to work either day or night shift, or a combination of both shifts. Typical shift patterns are 14 shifts of either day or night shift, or seven night shifts followed by seven day shifts. This pattern of work results in a loss of sleep (see Figure 1), low alertness levels, and a slowing of cognitive performance effecting both mood and performance (Parkes 1993, 89). A tour of duty which includes a day/night rotation not only has adverse implications for sleep resulting in sleep deficits for the offshore worker, but can impact on workers’ health (Parkes 2001, 4).

The identification of possible consequences of lack of sleep due to rotational 12-hour shift work is relevant for both workers and management (Collinson 1998,99). Ironically, some aspects of the offshore environment appear to assist the adaptation to the night shift (Bjorvatn, Kecklund, and Akerstedt 1999, 111). Around-the-clock activities such as access to meals, social and recreational activities, and windowless accommodation assist workers to adapt to night shift (Parkes 1993, 15-30, 90). However, many offshore workers also need to adapt from night shift to day shift while at work. Treatment with bright light has been tested as a means to help workers readapt
to day shift (Bjorvatn, Kecklund, and Akerstedt 1998, 1999; Boivin and James 2005). The effects of shift work are complex and ‘no single ideal pattern exists, as individual differences, demographic factors, job characteristics and organisational factors are all relevant to shift schedule optimisation’ (Akerstedt and Torsval 1981 cited in Parkes 1993, 64).

**Figure 1. Estimated sleep deficits in relation to shift rotation patterns.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12-hour shift rotation pattern</th>
<th>Estimated sleep deficit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day shift (hours per day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 night shifts/7 day shifts</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 day shifts/7 night shifts</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 day shifts</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 night shifts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The highlighted data in the final column represents the total sleep deficit (in hours) over the two-week offshore duty period relative to sleep during shore leave.


**Personal safety, anxiety and stress and offshore workers**

The loss of sleep is, however, only one stressor for the offshore worker. The offshore oil and gas industry has a reputation for danger (Clark et al. 1985); both workers and their families frequently think about the dangers associated with the industry (Storey et al. 1989, 65). Serious accidents offshore such as *Ocean Range*, 1982 in which 84 workers were lost (Hart 2002, 486); *Alexander Kielland* capsized and sank in 1980 with 123 lives lost (House 2002, 18); and the largest loss of life accident in the offshore oil and gas industry to date, with the loss of 167 lives on *Piper Alpha* in 1988 (Cullen 1990) reinforce the reality of potential danger of employment on offshore oil and gas facilities. Although implementation of the recommendations of the Cullen Report*

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*8 The Cullen Report was instigated to discover the cause of the *Piper Alpha* disaster*
(1990) significantly improved safety regimes, procedures and regulations in the industry, it remains unclear if the measures taken alleviate spouses’ serious concerns about the potential hazards of the offshore oil and gas industry (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 416). In addition to potential workplace danger, the helicopter flights to and from the workplace are generally perceived as unsafe (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 5), thus work related helicopter flights are a source of stress (Parkes 1993, 30; Storey et al. 1989, 100).

The harsh working environment of the offshore oil and gas industry creates a stressful workplace (Sutherland and Flin 1989; Sutherland and Cooper 1996a). While it is agreed that the workplace is stressful, there is disagreement over whether the level of anxiety experienced by offshore workers is higher than that of onshore workers doing comparable jobs (Sutherland and Flin 1989; Gann, Corpe, and Wilson 1990; Parkes 1992). Nevertheless, working and living in the same environment creates stressors not normally experienced in onshore industries. Problems associated with noise, ventilation and lighting, lack of or disturbed sleep, and concern about personal safety are continually present during work and rest periods (Sutherland and Flin 1989; Sutherland and Cooper 1996a; Flin et al. 1996; Parkes 1992; Rundmo 1992a; Wong et al. 2002). The management and/or prevention of such factors are extremely important (Sutherland and Cooper 1996b; Chen et al. 2003; Parkes 2001).

It has been argued by Parkes (2001, 3) that anxiety may not be job specific, as factors such as time pressures, workload and job insecurity, as experienced in all jobs, are linked to psychological wellbeing (Parkes 2001, 3). Factors such as the influence of personality (Parkes 1993, 34; Sutherland and Cooper 1991) and cultural background
(Wong et al. 2002, 226; Spradley and Phillips 1972, 518) also influence individual stressors.

Changes to workplace employment practices and the resulting increase in contract work and outsourcing in the industry means that stress related to the offshore oil and gas industry occurs both at work and home (Collinson 1998, 301). Although there is a general sense that offshore workers have a high income, this does not mean that they have a steady income as employment can be irregular and insecure. When workers are contract or on call, the irregularity and insecurity of work can be problematic for workers and families as they experience difficulty in making plans or getting a mortgage, in addition, they experience tension related to the income security, which has limited health and vacation benefits (see Collinson 1998, 309-312). Workers who are not staff, such as contract or on call workers, can also experience being ‘bumped’ from flights (their allocated seat on the helicopter is given to a higher priority individual or freight, which, in turn, delays the worker’s return home) (Shrimpton and Storey 2001, 14).

The identification of individual stressors and workers’ perception of stress plays an important role in the health and lifestyle of offshore workers and, as such, can have serious consequences for employers (Sutherland and Cooper 1996b, 2). Workplace stress can also impact the families of the worker (Rundmo 1992b; Gann, Corpe, and Wilson 1990; Rundmo 1992a; Sutherland and Cooper 1991; Morrice et al. 1985; Ulleberg and Rundmo 1997). The intermittent absence from family life imposes stresses and strains on family relationships and the individuals involved, and this has a follow on effect on the well-being of the individuals. If a family problem occurs when
workers are offshore workers can feel guilty and they become stressed that they are not at home to resolve the problem. Family problems may cause workers to become distracted and not concentrate on their work, thus problems at home can lead to safety implications within the offshore workplace (Thomas 2003, 21). In addition, the emotional deprivation between partners when the worker is absent can lead to psychological deterioration and increase rates of emotional tension, and thus cause increases in stress, emotional alertness and aggression, which threatens individual and work place health and safety (Horbelewicz 1978 cited in Thomas, Sampson, and Zhao 2003, 72).

**Impact of offshore oil and gas industry on families**

There is little disagreement that family life is impacted when a partner/parent is employed on an offshore facility in the offshore oil and gas industry; the intermittent absence of the worker creates a different way of experiencing family life that has both positive and negative aspects (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005; Solheim 1988; Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988; Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988; Collinson 1998; Austin et al. 2002; Austin and McGuire 2000; Wooddell, Forsyth, and Gramling 1994; Mauthner, Maclean, and McKee 2000; Watts 2004). There are, of course, other industries and/or careers that require workers to spend a period of time (a few days, a number of weeks or several months) separated from their families, such as: military occupations (Bowen 1985; Wood, Scarville, and Gravino 1995), the fishing/seafaring industry (Thomas, Sampson, and Zhao 2003; Thomas 2003; Dixon, Lowery, and Sabella 1984; Hagmark 2001b, 2001a; Thomas and Bailey 2006), submariners (Isay 1968), air crews (Rigg and Cosgrove 1994), Great Barrier Reef pilots (Parker, Clavarino, and Hubinger 1998), the mining industry (Gallegos 2006; Arnold 1995;
Beach 2000; Storey 1989; Watts 2004; Pattenden 2005; Yrke 2004), frequent business travellers (Dimberg et al. 2002; Espino et al. 2002) and other industries with non-traditional work patterns (Gramling, Wooddell, and Forsyth 1998; Gramling and Forsyth 1987; Gramling 1989; Presser 2000). The very nature of some industries, such as seafaring, date back four millennia (Canby 1964, 114), and in some communities generations of families have experienced the cyclical absence of the worker as routine and normal (Hagmark 2001a, 99).

The cyclical absence of male workers can promote the redefinition of the father role. Seafarers in England at the turn of the 19th century who spent many months ‘at sea’ rejected the traditional authoritarian patriarchal role in preference for a friendship role with their children (Lummis 1982, 49).

The social realities of family life for the families of offshore workers differ from families that do not experience the intermittent absence of partner/parent as they experience two social constructs (social realities), one when the partner is at home, and another when he is absent (Gramling and Forsyth 1987, 169). The effect of two social realities is that ‘the wife/mother can be one person when one construct is in effect,’ such as when the worker is at home, and ‘a different person when the other construction is operational’, when the partner is at work (Gramling and Forsyth 1987, 169). For example, when the worker is at work the wife/mother is like a ‘single parent’ she assumes family responsibility and decision making, yet when the worker returns she becomes part of a couple and shares family responsibility and decision making. In other words, she acts and thinks differently in each of her social realities.
The families of offshore workers negotiate three social realities: 'her single life, his life offshore, and their joint life of togetherness [which] have to somehow fit each other if the offshore family is to survive' (Solheim 1988, 159-60). Women express their experiences of two social realities as living 'two lives', one when the worker is at work, and another when he is home (Solheim 1988, 148; Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 419-20; Watts 2004, 56). Work related intermittent spousal/parental absence fractures the home life of families as the repeated cyclical partings and reunions require family members to readjust to the worker's absence from and presence at home (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 413). The identification of her two lives is important as it illuminates the 'process of discontinuity' that partners of offshore workers experience (Solheim 1988, 149-50). In addition, it provides a framework by which family issues that surround the offshore work schedule are better understood (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005; Collinson 1998, 308).

The two social realities that offshore families experience, and a period of transition from one to the other, result in three distinctive phases: the transition days prior to the worker's arrival home or return to work, and the two periods of 'normality' that are sandwiched between the each transition phase, that is, when the worker is at home and when the worker is at work. The following section uses the available literature to briefly illustrate the issues faced by offshore families during these distinctive phases.

**Experiencing the transition days**

The transition periods tend to be tension laden for both the returning worker and his partner. The partners can feel anxious while preparing for her husband's return home (Thomas 2003, 36-9; Foster and Cacioppe 1986, 75). The imminent arrival home of
the worker is looked forward to by all the family members; women immerse themselves in their gendered work, often engaging in ‘an orgy of house cleaning and the preparation of special meals’ (Storey et al. 1989, 101; Austin et al. 2002, 56). The woman also prepares to handle her husband’s relationship with their children, and the couple’s sexual re-acquaintance (Wood, Scarville, and Gravino 1995, 224).

Meanwhile, workers are also excited about returning home,9 but excitement gives way to feelings of being ‘grouchy and tired’ (Storey et al. 1989, 96-7 and 122), especially when they return home immediately after night shift (Collinson 1998, 315). Workers can experience the shift from the role of worker to that of a partner/parent as confronting (Storey et al. 1989, 98); they don’t want to discuss ‘family’ issues as anything within the domestic realm is considered to be ‘her’ responsibility (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 174). There is the expectation by family members of workers ‘fitting in’ to family life, but the cultural differences between work and home can make the worker’s adjustment to family life more difficult as he brings authoritarian work behaviour home (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 187).

The prison-like quality of the offshore workplace sustains high expectations of family life (Solheim 1988, 146) that are often not realised (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 419-20). The return home of the worker is influenced by their fatigue (Parkes and Clark 1997a, 25; Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 174) as many workers are often not in good physical or mental shape (Clark and Taylor 1988, 127). Thus, while the worker and partner anticipate a positive reunion, they frequently experience feelings of anger, resentment, marital conflict, and behaviour problems with children (Wood,

9 The complete separation of public/private spheres idealises home as a refuge for offshore workers (Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988, 13).
Scarville, and Gravino 1995, 218), such as younger children rejecting their father, or being reluctant to allow him to be a part of their lives (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 426).

When the offshore worker returns home they have expectations that the world of home and family will meet their ‘idealised’ needs and expectations (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 175). The workplace culture enhances the image of the ‘breadwinner’ who not only is doing an important and dangerous job in difficult conditions but is making significant personal sacrifices. They believe they should be ‘accorded certain family indulgences’ (Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988, 187). Thus, the work surrounding the reintegration into the family of the returning worker is done by the worker’s partner who prioritises his needs while deferring the needs of herself and their children (Storey et al. 1989, 136; Austin et al. 2002, 56). Some of the strategies developed to manage the possible tension at this time consist of keeping the first few days at home as stress free as possible, and avoiding argument and not discussing problems or family issues (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 421). However, it is common for couples to argue in the first few days of reunion (Storey et al. 1989, 102; Clark and Taylor 1988, 129).

Tension and adjustment are present when the worker returns home and when he prepares to return to work. Wives can experience more stress prior to the workers’ return to work than they do when their husband is absent (Tanaka, Nakazawa, and Nakazawa, 2000 cited in Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 421). The family also experiences change in their emotional state during the transition days before workers return to work. Workers express a feeling of irritability during the last few days of
their leave; their sense of freedom associated with the two weeks at home is starkly contrasted against the return to work (Collinson 1998, 317). Mood changes are also noted by wives who report their husbands are ‘grumpy, tense and oversensitive’ as the return to work nears. However, wives state that they begin to ‘psychologically detach themselves’ from husbands (Parkes and Clark 1997a, 25). Some wives who are also mothers find it difficult to manage their own tension and their children’s anxieties as the worker returns to work (Storey et al. 1989, 113). During the transition days surrounding the father’s return to work mothers frequently provide additional emotional support to their children (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 432), while fathers find parting from their children particularly difficult (Collinson 1998, 317; Storey et al. 1989, 99).

The shift from work to home amounts to a reorientation of the worker from a state of ‘being ordered, to creating one’s own order’ (Solheim 1988, 147), thus, workers find it difficult to establish a routine (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 140) and tend to procrastinate in regard to home jobs (Storey et al. 1989, 99). Although workers often return home to a list of ‘his’ jobs that have accumulated during his absence, there is often a ‘flurry’ of work as the worker tries to complete the list of his jobs before his return to work (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 141). This pattern of behaviour and the tension which it creates, and the anxiety that both partners have about parting, contributes to the sense of relief some women experience after their partner returns to work (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 421).

As their understanding of the impact of offshore work rosters increased researchers found that the absence of the partner was not the most challenging aspect that families
faced, but rather, the pattern of intermittence. The continual change from one social reality to another is more challenging than the periods of absence (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 419; Clark et al. 1985; Thomas 2003, 43). The process of recurring partings and reunions encapsulate the central dilemmas for many spouses and offshore workers (Clark and Taylor 1988, 138).

*The continual partings and reunions are problematic in so far as they continually interrupt the reserve of emotional states. It is neither the absence or the presence which causes the difficulty but rather the regular shift from one to another* (Clark and Taylor 1988, 129).

Solheim (1998, 149) argues the family is considered as a ‘natural organic system’ in which women’s unpaid labour is often unquestioned. Thus the work undertaken by women in the transition from one reality to another is usually not recognised by their partner, their community or society at large. Thus the family is seen as ‘normal and self sufficient’ and the real discontinuity of the wife’s situation is made invisible (Solheim 1988, 149-50).

**Readjusting to family life**

*The offshore worker lives two lives which are incompatible where social experience is difficult to translate from one context to another. The wife is to some extent doing the same, the commuting between single and married state which entails different forms of behaviour, different social networks and activities and different values (Solheim 1988, 159).*

Readjustments to the alternating presence and absence of the worker involve changes surrounding each of the partner’s social realities; these revolve around decision making, division of domestic labour, parenting, ‘single’ and ‘couple’ social lives, her paid work, his presence (when he is home) and her coping strategies (when he is absent) (Storey et al. 1989; Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 424). The following illustrates how the wife/partner of an offshore worker continually experiences a
fundamental transformation to her social reality and how this can often relate to a shift between autonomy and dependence as part of how she experiences her two lives.

The offshore pattern influences the way women structure their lives; it elicits from her additional family work often in the form of family responsibility which, for some women requires them to ‘exercise a greater degree of independence that they consider appropriate or desirable’ (Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988, 109). In addition to the increased independence other aspects of day-to-day experiences also differ. Sharing day-to-day experiences is impaired as women are reluctant to inform their partners about problems and issues they experience when the worker is offshore; thus the workers tend to have little understanding of what their wives ‘went through’ while they were at work, resulting in husbands not being able to provide their partner sufficient emotional support (Storey et al. 1989, 106-7).

**Parenting**

Many women with dependent children stated that when their partner was at work they felt like a ‘single parent’ (Storey et al. 1989, 114). The choice of familial strategy used by parents (see section on families accommodating the offshore work schedule in this chapter) can influence parenting patterns and thus mothers may experience more difficulties parenting as a single parent when fathers are offshore (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 425). Parents can experience difficulties in parenting in relation to the intermittent absence of the worker, and although parents may agree on the rules and disciplining of children, these are often relaxed when the worker is absent as the at home partner experiences an increase in levels of fatigue (Gallegos 2006, 43). In addition, children miss the presence of their father, particularly when he is absent for
birthdays, Christmas and other family celebrations (Storey et al. 1989, 111-3). This can cause anxiety for some mothers (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 426). Gallegos (2006, 104) suggests developing social support networks to enable the establishment of mentoring schemes to help parents cope with the parenting difficulties related to FIFO work schedules.

**Social life**

The worker’s presence at home tends to reduce his partner’s ability to socialise with her friends; while they may still talk on the phone they tend to meet less frequently (Wood, Scarville, and Gravino 1995, 227). When the worker is at home the social life of the worker and his partner is couple based and they socialise with other couples. This, Parkes, Carnell and Farmer (2005, 422) suggest, increases her dependency on the worker for her social life. However, Thomas and Bailey (2006, 141) hold a contrary opinion. When the worker is at home, socialising as a couple occurs with ‘her’ friends and the partners of her friends, which increases the worker’s dependency on his partner and her social network for his social life, and if he does not like the partners of her friends, this may prove unsatisfactory for the worker (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 141).

Social activity for the worker when he is at home appears to focus on the immediate family relationships and home based activities (Storey et al. 1989, 121), and any hobbies are ‘exclusively those that could be pursued alone’ (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 141-2). The intermittent home presence, at home, of offshore workers can make their personal community ‘fragile’ as time to nurture friendships is also intermittent. As a result offshore workers can become ‘vulnerable because they have no locally based significant ties, apart from their partner’ (Spencer and Pahl 2006, 201). The
intermittent absence of workers restricts the availability of external social outlets; workers’ use of social clubs is low as workers struggle to negotiate and justify this additional absence to pursue their own interests while ‘at home’ (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 142).

When their partner is absent from home the source of social interaction for women changes and women with dependent children at home are restricted by the needs and demands of their children. Some mothers give little priority to their own leisure needs as these conflicts with their ideologies of being ‘a good mother’. Thus they are reluctant to pay the cost of child care (Deen 1986 cited in Thomas 2003, 59-60).

Commonly held expectations of behaviour of at home partners of offshore workers by community, family and friends, and the strategies families of offshore workers develop to manage their families can influence the extent to which the female partners, especially those with dependent children, experience two different lives in terms of parenting and social activity.

The partners of offshore workers frequently feel unable to participate in social activities such as going to club/bars, dancing/movies, or entertaining at home while husbands are offshore. As a result, women’s socialisation with others occurred more with relatives and/or friends based around family or children’s activities (Storey et al. 1989, 108-9). The social isolation that many women experience while their partner is offshore is often beyond her control as friends are reluctant to invite a ‘single’ woman to couple based social functions (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 422); their temporary single status
can result in the partners of offshore workers being thought of as a ‘sexual predator’ (Thomas 2003, 60).

**Social networks and support**

Social support and engagement in activities are important factors in promoting well-being (Campbell 1999 cited in Thomas 2003, 58). Close and frequent social contact with family and friends (social support network) can help ‘protect women from emotional problems such as loneliness and depression whilst her husband is away’ (Thomas 2003, 97; Morrice et al. 1985, 99).

Women’s friendships are important as they are usually based on high levels of confidence (Duck and Perlman 1985). However, Thomas (2003, 61) states few seafarers’ wives had close friendships. She suggests the lifestyle attached to the intermittent absence of a partner impacts both the ability and desire to pursue close friendships. The wives/partners of workers who are intermittently absent from home, especially those with young children found managing the home and family exhausting while their partner was away; they did not have the additional energy to maintain close friendships (Thomas 2003, 61-2). However, women who also have experience of the intermittent absence of a partner and are able to understand the unique way of life are a welcomed friend to partners of offshore workers (Thomas 2003), a sentiment echoed by (Gallegos 2006, 104).

The type of support most frequently used by partners of offshore workers when their partner is at work relates to instrumental help. This type of help often relates to a problem or issue such as mechanical car problems, and in such cases, wives of offshore
workers will, to some degree, seek support from relatives (Storey et al. 1989, 109). If a problem occurs while the offshore worker is at work, the left at home partner can ask for instrumental help from extended family members or friends, or decide to manage the problem (Thomas 2003, 61). Alternatively, most women prefer not to rely on others for emotional support, instead, preferring to be ‘self-sufficient’ (Thomas 2003, 61).

**Her paid work**

There is a direct relationship between men’s employment in the offshore industry and their partners’ participation in the labour market (Clark and Taylor 1988, 113). After spending two or more weeks separated from their families, offshore workers want their wives to be at home for the duration of their time at home (Storey et al. 1989, 137). The intermittent absence of the offshore worker tends to constrain the employment patterns of spouses; she becomes ‘married to his job’ because of her additional family responsibilities (due to her partner’s absence), or she finds it difficult to reconcile the demands of the offshore worker with the demands of her own job (Clark and Taylor 1988, 115). Her paid employment provides her with an opportunity for social contact and a means to avoid loneliness (Thomas 2003, 58). Offshore workers consider their work offshore has priority over any paid work his partner may engage in, and they consider her work deprives the couple of important time together and restricts activities they could do together (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 141).

A solution for some women to fit their paid work around a partner’s work schedule is to take temporary jobs or become self employed (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 141; Shrimpton and Storey 2001,99). Although Parkes, Carnell and Farmer (2005, 427) found that the employment rate for spouses of UK offshore workers (67%) was close
to the national figure of married\textsuperscript{10} women in paid work (69%), they found that many spouses of offshore workers tend to work part-time rather than full-time. Part-time work places fewer constraints on time spent with their partner during leave weeks, and the high income of offshore workers can negate any financial reasons for spouses to seek full-time employment (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 427; Clark and Taylor 1988, 115).

While the care of young children is attributed as a reason for not being in paid work, contemporary mothers also face a similar pattern of difficulties of balancing his work and their lives (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 429-30). Mothers’ with dependent children choice of participating in paid work is encumbered by barriers such as:

[The] \textit{reactions of children having a father flying in and flying out and a mother in the paid workforce, the lack of flexibility due to their partner’s work situation, costs and availability of child care, lack of support network} (Gallegos 2006, 85).

\textit{Communication}

Improvements in telecommunication technology over the last two decades have improved the capacity of families to keep in touch when the worker is offshore (Austin et al. 2002, 57). In addition, better telecommunication facilities aid families to adjust to absences and assists the reintegration of the worker when he returns home to the family (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 419). Maintaining contact by telephone is important for couples when the worker is offshore; workers can confirm their personal safety, while their partner provides the worker with a sense that all is well at home. In some families the worker would get a ‘sense’ that all was well at home as some women do not discuss family problems with their partner when he was at work as they do not

\textsuperscript{10} This figure also includes women in a de facto relationship
want to cause him additional stress (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 423-4). Alternatively, some women receive daily telephone calls from their partner, and while organisational factors sometimes constrain access to the telephone, it helps to ease the loneliness that women experience and also helps to keep couples ‘in touch’ by allowing them to discuss everyday events, thus enabling the worker to be part of household decision making (Parkes and Clark 1997b, 26; Wood, Scarville, and Gravino 1995, 223). The improved accessibility of telecommunication between workers and their families has been argued to have diminished the impact of the industry on families, so much so, corporate decisions within the industry are now considered to effect the community more than they impact families (Austin et al. 2002, 136).

_Domestic labour_

When workers are absent their partners have total responsibility for the family and family work. While the worker’s return provides him the opportunity to be more involved in family work, such as household chores and child care, many workers want a ‘holiday’ when they arrive home (Storey et al. 1989, 119-20). Family work remains traditionally gendered women’s work, and although workers are willing to ‘help out’ when they are at home, they are reluctant to resume responsibility for specific tasks (Thomas and Bailey 2006, 141). Wives anticipate a break from responsibility when the worker returns home, but rather than alleviate her work load he tends to increase it (Storey et al. 1989, 117), which becomes a source of frustration for women (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 420).
Loneliness and stress

Family celebrations, such as birthdays, anniversaries and graduations, and major holiday times (Christmas, Easter, and long weekends) are times when families particularly experience loneliness associated with the absence of the worker (Storey et al. 1989, 113). Keeping busy, having paid employment, providing care for children, participating in recreational activities, maintaining contact with extended family and having telephone contact with the offshore worker are a number of strategies used to mitigate loneliness (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 422-3). Although children are a source of comfort and aid in mitigating loneliness, mothers of very young children and babies found that they were very tied to the home and became very lonely (Thomas 2003, 59).

Informal social support in the form of membership and participation in church or community groups, having a social network of family and friends, marital stability and adequate financial resources play an important part in adjusting to the absence of the worker (Wood, Scarville, and Gravino 1995, 228-30). School and church based activities provide a source of social contact and the means for mothers to increase their friendship networks (Thomas 2003, 59). During the early 1970s, a number of wives of offshore workers in Aberdeen formed a social group for women who had partners working in the offshore oil industry. The aim was to promote understanding and friendship among wives of offshore oil and gas workers (http://www.pwcos.com/main.htm). Today there are a number of ‘sister’ groups worldwide. In a study by Parkes and colleagues (2005, 423) it was discovered that few women participate in or have knowledge of any form of social support networks that are available to them.
Women can experience stress during the absence of their partner. Such stress can manifest in altered eating patterns. Approximately two-thirds of wives reported changes in their eating habits (Parker, Clavarino, and Hubinger 1998; Taylor et al. 1985). Other changes in the physical well-being of wives can include headaches, menstrual irregularity, weight change (no doubt linked to changes in eating habits) and sleep disturbances (Wood, Scarville, and Gravino 1995, 218). Eight percent of wives reported taking medication to assist them to cope with the intermittent absence of their partner (Foster and Cacioppe 1986, 75).

Marital authority

As the section on family management strategies shows, families develop strategies to cope with the intermittent absence of the worker. Some women who assume control when their partner is absent can resent relinquishing the control and have to adjust to sharing the decision making process. This accentuates the ‘two lives’ that some women experience and can cause tension between the couple (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 419-20)

Solheim (1988, 148) suggests the ‘burden of responsibility’ experienced by the at home partner does not relate to the practical work surrounding domestic or paid work, but is more a question of being ‘morally responsible’ as she bears the ‘whole burden of organisational management of the family’. In some sense she can also bear the responsibility of finding a place for her partner when he returns home. While the worker is absent from home the wife manages the house and family without him, and this can lead men to feel both unnecessary and unwanted when they arrive home (Thomas 2003, 76; Thomas and Bailey 2006). To alleviate the workers’ sense of loss
of place in their family some women actively seek to reengage his sense of family responsibility by including him in household routines and the day-to-day running of the home and family (Thomas 2003, 82).
Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

The methodology of this empirical research is essentially qualitative and draws from feminist methodology and epistemology to develop a method for generating data.\textsuperscript{11} To gain an understanding of how ‘relations of ruling’ (Smith 1987, 179) affect the everyday experiences of partners of offshore oil and gas workers I chose a qualitative approach as it offers a method of capturing the perspectives of individuals (Sofaer 1999, 1106). Furthermore, as DeVault (1996, 33) suggests, when qualitative methods are practised in a non-feminist way it is easy to reproduce the mainstream failure to notice women and their concerns. Therefore, supplementing a general qualitative approach with a feminist perspective works to increase the possibility of women’s voices being heard.

The criterion for people to participate in my study was not based on their social actions, race, culture, ethnicity, education qualifications, employment, or parenthood; it was simply that their partners worked offshore in the oil and gas industry. The high rate of male employment in the offshore oil and gas industry means the majority of ‘at home’ partners are female. By using a gender construction model (Potuchek 1997, 13) this study recognises the gendered relationship between women’s work and men’s ‘breadwinning’. The notions of ‘breadwinner’, choices of paid work and the gendered reciprocity of social support are explored in this study. In order to shift from traditional ‘male’ methods of research, and as a way of acknowledging the importance of gender

\textsuperscript{11} For a review of feminist methodology and epistemology see Stanley and Wise (1990).
in human relationships and societal processes (Smith 1987; Reinharz 1992; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002), I chose a qualitative approach with a feminist methodology.

**Finding participants**

I used three different ways of advertising the study to the targeted population of partners of offshore oil and gas workers. My aim was to find a range of participants that illustrated a high level of heterogeneity (age, race and ethnicity). In doing this, I avoided problems associated with purposive sampling methods, such as ‘snowball sampling’ that tend to produce participants with similar attributes (Kumar 2005, 179).

Initially, I considered the potential participants to be the partners of workers who have experience of a FIFO symmetrical work roster such as the two-weeks on/two-weeks off, typical of the Northwest Shelf. However, there are other locations, local and international, where West Australians are employed in the offshore oil and gas industry. Geographic locations can make a two-week on/two-week off roster impractical due to the length of time to ‘travel’ to work, and a three-week on/three-week off roster means less frequent flights have the potential to reduce the travel costs to the company compared to a two-week on/two-week off roster. In addition, extended roster lengths also reduce the overall air travel time; air travel is a large proportion of risk to offshore workers (Zeus Project). As a result, I revised my criteria. Consequently, some participants were partners of workers in the offshore oil and gas industry that had experience of other forms of the symmetrical roster, such as three on/three off, five on/five off, or six on/ six off.
Potential participants with partners who worked asymmetric work schedules, frequently used by FIFO operators of remote mines in Australia were not included. Mine workers who work a four-week on/one-week off schedule have the potential to be at home for ten weeks per year, whereas, workers on equal time rosters have the potential to be at home for twenty six weeks per year. Although the FIFO system is a commonality between the cohorts of workers I considered a significant difference exists between the symmetrical and asymmetrical roster; there is a disparity between time spent at work and time spent at home, and this, I believed, may have produced unwanted variables within the study (see Beach’s 2000 study of asymmetric long distance commuting in the Australian mining industry).

My initial means of advertising the study to potential participants, via offshore oil and gas operating companies, was not as successful as I had anticipated. As a result I used two additional means of advertising the study. The following three methods were used to advertise the study to the partners of offshore oil and gas workers: contacting operating companies employing people offshore in the oil and gas industry (the initial method); advertising the study in an article in local community newspapers; and through the personal networks of my partner, an offshore oil and gas worker, and myself. Each of these methods raised particular issues as the following reveals.

The search for potential participants commenced when I contacted a number of the oil and gas companies who operate on the Northwest Shelf. As an unknown postgraduate student, walking in off the street, as it were, the process of finding the most appropriate person to authorise company promotion of the study was frustrating. The initial request to speak with the relevant person was plagued with what I perceived as effective
stalling tactics. For example, each request to speak to the most appropriate person was met with 'yes, the study sounds interesting' and I was assured that my call would be returned; the calls were never returned. I felt that these tactics hindered my access to the 'appropriate' person in each company. Eventually, I decided to contact the company where my partner works. I introduced myself as the partner of a fellow worker and explained my research and asked for their assistance in advertising the study to partners of their offshore workers.

The company that my partner works for provided support in advertising this study by inviting me to attend two information/health days for its offshore employees and their partners. At intervals throughout the day, the partners of the offshore workers were able to discuss the study with me and collect a questionnaire. Over the two days, 75 questionnaires were handed directly to the partners of offshore workers. An additional 30 questionnaires were made available on the offshore facilities to allow workers to take a copy home. Some people also took extra questionnaires on behalf of others who were unable to attend the information day.

To advertise the research study offshore I developed a simple poster (see Appendix I). The poster identified the aims of the study, how partners of offshore workers could participate, and my contact details. Approximately one month later, I distributed the poster to the companies assisting in promotion of the study. It appears the poster worked well in publicising the study. In the first few weeks the poster was displayed on offshore facilities I received several requests for additional copies of the questionnaire. Some requests came from offshore workers on behalf of their partners, while the partners of other workers contacted me directly. The poster also acted as a
reminder that the study was still active, that participants were required, and it was not too late for partners to return completed questionnaires. Judging by the response instigated by the poster on offshore facilities, it seems the visual media of a poster created positive interest in the study.

I offered to provide the companies who assisted in promoting my research topic an executive summary of the findings of the study. In addition, I discussed with one company the possibility of presenting the findings of the study to the partners of offshore oil and gas workers at the next ‘partner day’.

My initial contact’s generous support enabled me to contact a further two companies. Both companies offered to promote the study to the partners of offshore workers by mailing out questionnaires to the home address of their partnered employees. These companies provided tremendous help in advertising the study; however, as stated earlier, other companies that I approached appeared to be less accessible.

The second method of advertising for potential participants drew on local community newspapers. I gave the information about the study over the phone to an editor at Melville Community Newspapers. The ensuing article described the aim of the study, criteria for participants, and provided contact details for those wishing to participate. The editor informed me that there wasn’t any requirement to contact all branches of the newspaper as articles such as mine are ‘picked up’ and printed at other branches of the newspaper. Judging by the responses I received after the article was printed, at least one other local community paper had ‘picked up’ the article. When people, who had read the article, contacted me for a questionnaire, I asked, ‘in which paper did you read
the article?' (see Figure 2). The article may have been reproduced in other branches; however, the requests for questionnaires came from only two branches of the Community Newspaper.

**Figure 2. Distribution of Questionnaire.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution Points</th>
<th>Number of questionnaires</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company A</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company B</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company C</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Newspapers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midland Recorder</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melville Times</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number</strong></td>
<td><strong>237</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Number of completed returned questionnaires | 60 (25%) |

The final method in the search for potential participants for the study focused on the personal networks of my partner and me. Being a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker meant I was able to use my relationship with some partners to gain access to other partners of offshore workers. My strategy in this method of contacting potential participants was to talk face-to-face with as many people as possible (I drank far too many cups of coffee during this process). I preferred the face-to-face method of contact, rather than the telephone or email, as it meant less distractions and it was an opportunity to express my enthusiasm for the research (especially after the coffee!).

The face-to-face contact allowed people to make a more informed decision as to whether to participate, or not. I was also aware that it might place some people in a difficult situation if they preferred not to participate. I suggested that the questionnaire could be completed later; allowing them privacy to decide on their participation. The purpose of contacting partners of other offshore workers known to me was twofold,
first, to elicit their support, and second, to talk about the study to other partners of offshore workers, thereby gaining publicity for the study. I was aware of the possibility that this method of gaining publicity could produce a form of snowball sampling. I decided the number of potential participants accessed by this method would not yield a significant number of participants, in relation to the study as a whole, and therefore, it would not produce a sample population with similar attributes.

The above process of finding participants resulted in the return of 60 completed questionnaires. The demographic data from the questionnaire illustrated that the participants represented a wide range of demographic difference.

**Designing the study**

I used two methods to generate data, a short questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire (see Appendix II) was designed to obtain information about social support, the perceptions of the advantages/disadvantages of being a partner of an offshore worker, and demographic information of the participant. The interviews enabled the participants to express their experience of being a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker.

**The questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions and was divided into four discrete sections. The first section related to the three main forms of social support: companionship, instrumental help and emotional support. The three main types of everyday informal support are:

- companionship, as ‘enjoying each other’s company’ or ‘sharing activities’;
• instrumental help, in the form of small services, such as occasional child minding, minor repairs to homes and cars, or leading/giving tools and/or food; and

• emotional support, such as providing a safe environment to discuss issues such as marital, family work and other general issues. ((Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988), 159-165).

The definition of social support by Wellman, Carrington, and Hall (1988) is used to define the three questions of the first section on the questionnaire. In the study of personal communities and support among East Yorkers by Wellman, Carrington and Hall (1988), a number of strands of support were identified to obtain the exchanges of and the types of support among the East York community. These strands of support were employed in this study. Similar strands of social support, as identified by Wellman, Carrington and Hall (1988), have been used in other studies.

The section on social support measures the multidimensionality of relationships (i.e. persons providing multiple types of support) and reciprocity of support. It is pertinent to clarify at this point that people may belong to more than one social group. For example, a person who is a neighbour may also be a friend. Wellman, Carrington and Hall (1988) and Schragg James (2000) identified that people tend to identify themselves and others to one social group rather than to two or more. Schragg James (2000) asked the people she interviewed if they did not have a good relationship with their neighbours as neighbours were not mentioned during interviews. The response to this question was that their neighbours were friends; people who may be neighbours become friends and this negates their label of neighbour. Wellman, Carrington and Hall (1988) experienced a similar issue in their study of New Yorkers.

The section on social support measures the multidimensionality of relationships (i.e. persons providing multiple types of support) and reciprocity of support. The questions
therefore related to the types of support people provided and received, and with whom they exchanged these forms of support. Participants were able to nominate their answers by placing a tick (✓) in the appropriate box. The second section of the questionnaire included a number of open-ended questions and three that were answered by a tick (✓) in the appropriate box. The open-ended questions related to the types of formal support partners used, how social support differed when their partner was at home compared to when they were at work, and two questions aimed to discover the partners’ perceived advantages and/or disadvantages of being a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker. The final section included questions to generate basic demographic data. Included in this section were a series of questions about participants’ age, education level, place of birth, date when they arrived in Australia if not born here, the number and age of any children, paid employment patterns and length of time their partner had worked offshore. Some questions in this section could be answered by placing a tick (✓) in the appropriate box. The remaining questions required participants to write information in the space provided. The information generated from this section illustrated a high level of diversity among those who completed the questionnaire, for example, one participant had more than forty years as a partner of a FIFO worker, while another had experienced the lifestyle for just one year (see Figure 3). The final section included space to make further comment about their experiences of an offshore lifestyle and a final question asking if they would like to participate further in the study by being interviewed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Age          | <25 years | 1 | 25-34 years | 5 | 35-44 years | 33 | 45-54 years | 15 | 55-64 | 1 | No data | 1 |

| Place of Birth | Australia | 32 | Western European Countries | 17 | Africa | 2 | Asia | 3 | Americas | 3 | New Zealand | 2 | No data | 1 |

| Highest level of formal education attained | Year 8 | 1 | Year 10 | 8 | Year 11 | 2 | Year 12 | 13 | Certificate/Diploma | 16 | Undergraduate degree | 17 | Post graduate degree | 3 |

| Parenthood | Respondents with dependent children | 32 | Respondents with non-dependent children | 14 | Respondents with no children | 14 |

The majority of questions were answered by ticking (√) the appropriate box. This method was chosen for two reasons. First, the data could be easily transferred from the questionnaire to an Excel spreadsheet, but perhaps more important was the second
reason. It was anticipated that the short simple questionnaire may influence a higher return rate of completed questionnaires (Ary et al. 2006, 427).

Two friends who, at that time, had a partner who was an offshore worker, and another friend who was not a partner of an offshore worker piloted the questionnaire. The aim of piloting the questionnaire was to gain knowledge about the level of understanding the questions and the ease of completing the survey. Each person piloting the questionnaire thought it was easy to understand and complete. As a result of piloting the questionnaire, one minor alteration was made to the wording of question 5.

In total, 237 questionnaires were circulated to potential participants (see Figure 2). The number of returned completed questionnaires was 60. This is a return rate of almost 25 percent which, while low, is acceptable as the return rate of a mailed out\textsuperscript{12} questionnaire is inevitably low (Ary et al. 2006, 414). The return rates for every distribution point are not available. This is due to my initial understanding of how I would promote the study to each operating company. I had no inclination of the difficulty I was to experience when trying to contact the ‘right’ company employee who had the authority to give me access to ‘sell’ the project to potential participants. Thus, I had included only one question, ‘On which offshore asset does your partner work?’ It was anticipated that the reply to this question would allow me to generate the return rate for each company. However, it could not be changed as it had already been approved by the ethics committee and several hundred copies of the questionnaire had been printed. The necessary changes to advertising the study ultimately made the question ‘On which offshore asset does your partner work?’ redundant. In retrospect,

\textsuperscript{12} More than 50 percent of questionnaires were mailed out.
the original question could have been replaced by 'Where did you hear about the study?' This question may have brought valuable data regarding the collection process to the study and resolved the issue of being unable to record the correct return rate for each distribution point.

The majority of the data generated via Microsoft Excel from the questionnaire provided statistical evidence of how partners of offshore oil and gas workers exchanged social support, and with whom they exchanged that support. The data provided information on how the patterns of engagement in social support are generated.

The interviews

At the end of the questionnaire, I included the question 'Would you like to participate further by agreeing to a face-to-face interview?' thus enabling those who had completed the questionnaire to 'self select'. While the women who agreed to the interview process cannot be seen as representative of partners, they represented a variance within the cohort. I interviewed women from all age groups; some were in their early twenties while others were in their sixties. Some women had no children, while others did, a few women had grandchildren. Country of birth also varied within this group. The majority (15) of women who were interviewed were born in Western Australia; three moved from the Eastern States to Western Australia; three moved to Western Australia from overseas. Many of these women had extended family members living in the Perth metropolitan area, while the remaining eight did not. Difference in aspects such as length of time as partner to an offshore worker; length of time the worker had worked offshore; age; number and ages of any children; married or a de-facto relationship; employment patterns; education levels and place of birth was high.
among the women interviewed. Some of this data is illustrated in the following figure (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Demographic data of interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth</td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eastern States (Australia)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time as a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker</td>
<td>1 – 5 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 – 10 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 – 15 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 – 20 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 or more years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenthood. Ages of interviewee’s children</td>
<td>Women who have children from a previous relationship and none from relationship with offshore worker (all non dependents)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women with no children</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women with dependent children</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women with non dependent children</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment patterns of interviewees</td>
<td>No paid work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part time paid work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full time paid work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the interviews were with women. The solitary male who completed the questionnaire, and agreed to an interview, later commenced work as an offshore worker. His employment in the offshore industry meant he did not fit the criteria as a partner who remains at home, in addition, he did not answer a number of questions on the questionnaire, and thus he was ruled out of the interview sample population. The majority of the interviews took place in the homes of participants. The remaining interviews were conducted elsewhere. Two were undertaken at their workplace, one at a local library, one at my home and one at Murdoch University. One interview had to be rescheduled due to a sick child needing to be collected from school, so while it began at the home of the participant, it recommenced a week later at a mutually
convenient café. Regardless of where the interview took place (home, workplace, library or cafe), all participants welcomed me into their environment and, as a novice researcher, I appreciated their hospitality.

The interviews varied in length, from one to two hours, although most were approximately one and a half hours. I decided not to take field notes during the whole interview: I wanted to concentrate on the interviewees’ spoken words during the interview, and rather than scribbling away taking notes I preferred the accuracy that a tape recorder provided over handwritten note taking. All the interviews were tape recorded. Some handwritten notes were taken at the beginning of the interview on how long they had been married, how many children, ages of children, and any other information they gave without any prompting.

As a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker, over the years I had heard a number of stories of the experiences of other partners of offshore workers; these experiences had been relayed to me via a number of men’s voices. I had experienced the retelling and reinterpretation of women’s stories by others and heard how women’s individual experiences were presented as a homogenous voice, thus hiding women’s experiences (Pugh 1990, 109). The vocalization of the diversity of women’s experiences is an important aspect of a feminist methodology, and understanding the specific gender relations of this setting enables the commonalities and differences of women’s experiences to be made visible (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002, 65).

Because of my experience as a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker and as a postgraduate researcher using a methodology with a feminist focus, I felt I needed to
present myself as both a researcher and as someone who had shared the experience of the offshore lifestyle. It was, as Janet Finch (1984, 79) suggested, 'a better strategy than having to attempt to explain how intellectually I found their situation' (my emphasis). The juxtaposition of my position as a partner of an offshore worker and a post graduate student helped to create a non-hierarchical relationship between the female interviewees and me, the researcher. During the interviews, the interviewees 'placed' me as someone with whom they talked and shared their experiences (Oakley 1981), as many women were happy to ask me if I had similar experiences to their own. I believe shared experiences influenced the 'flow' of each interview. With this in mind, I felt that I had achieved the 'special character of the woman- to-woman interview' (Finch 1984, 78).

I conducted face-to-face interviews to 'gain a deeper understanding of the everyday experiences' of being a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker (Metz 2000, 62; Silverman 2000, 89). Before commencing each of the 21 face-to-face interviews, I reminded participants that I intended to record the interview and confirmed their permission to do so. In theory, the interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. In practice, they were more like 'pseudo-conversations' (Oakley 1981, 32), as participants talked to me about their experiences. I wanted the women to talk about what was important to them, so when I asked questions it was mostly to facilitate a deeper understanding of the issue at hand, or to ask how they felt about that issue, or how that issue affected them. Occasionally I used 'prompt' open-ended questions (see Appendix III to obtain additional data about other aspects of the day-to-day experiences of being a partner of an offshore worker).
Fortunately, I discovered early in the research process to position the tape recorder in the ‘right’ place. One interview was so muffled I was unable to transcribe it and thus lost that data. I personally transcribed the recorded interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and included the apparently trivial, but often crucial, ‘ums’, ‘ers’, pauses, and overlaps as a way of addressing the issue of reliability of the interpretation of transcripts (Silverman 2000, 187). Owing to the above-mentioned problem with one interview, twenty recorded interviews were transcribed and used as research data.

The positioning of the researcher

The positioning of the researcher is a necessary component of both qualitative and feminist methodologies. From a qualitative view, the researcher is an ‘instrument’ that must be positioned within the research (Patton 2002, 566). The feminist view shifts focus from the ‘objectivity’ found in male dominated traditional methods of inquiry to a more transparent research process in which the researcher has become part of the text. As the researcher, I have become part of the text and as such should also be taken into consideration within the study. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002, 199) state the best way to study oneself is by being reflexive.

As a researcher, I necessarily transport my experiences as a woman, mother, wife, student, worker and, in this case, a partner of an offshore worker, into the research. By being reflexive, I was able to address my own position and analyse how my personal histories influenced the interpretation of the data (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 4-5). At times this was quite difficult. On a number of occasions when I listened to the voices of women recalling their experiences it transported me to a time when I had
experienced a similar situation and I was required to recall my feelings and deal with them again.

As any research is not value free, the positioning of myself as the researcher helped to make visible the choices I made, including the subject to be investigated, the method chosen to investigate, and how I interpret the data. Rather than trying to eliminate any bias that I may have as a researcher, I made it visible; it was ‘identified and monitored and considered in how it can affect data collection and interpretation’ (Ary et al. 2006, 451).

For a number of years I experienced the offshore lifestyle as my partner worked in the offshore oil and gas industry in Western Australia and the North Sea. It can be argued that as a postgraduate student engaging in a feminist or woman’s standpoint, it was an ideal way to locate myself as part of both worlds, the academic and the studied (Lohan 2000, 107), while also providing a place to find a voice for myself and for women who share experiences that have meaning for them (Stanley and Wise 1979, 362). My position as a partner of an offshore worker means that I have a shared understanding and meaning of experience with others who have a partner whose work regularly takes them away from home. The following section attends to the notion of shared understanding and meaning of experience in the context of this study.

**Understanding and meaning of experience**

To illustrate this notion of shared understanding and meaning of experience, let me transport you to the ‘information/health day’ that I attended where I ‘physically’ located myself in both worlds, the academic as the researcher, and the studied as a
partner of an offshore worker (Lohan 2000). The day was an initiative by offshore personnel to promote health and well-being for offshore workers and their families. There were two separate dates and to facilitate the attendance of both ‘swings’, I attended both days. While I was promoting my research to those who attended the information/health day forum I stated ‘we’ all know what it is like to have a partner working offshore, and although we may all experience it differently, we do share some experiences. Illustrating this, I mentioned that we know what it means for us when the washing machine breaks the day after our partner returns to work for two weeks, and as I did, a communal moan echoed around the room, acknowledging the shared experience and shared meaning between these women.

In this context, the shared experiences I speak of here are perhaps not quite the same as those discussed by Stanley and Wise (1990, 21) and their generalised view of ‘women’s common experience of oppression’. Nevertheless, they are shared experiences because his work binds them to the same relation of ruling (Smith 1987). While many of the women may not have experienced a broken washing machine - it may have been any broken household appliance, or worse, the car (men’s ultimate domain) that breaks down - what was evident was a common understanding of how events like this impact on these women.

**Analysis of Data**

The data from the questionnaire was entered on to a Microsoft Excel spread sheet. A code book was constructed from the data and a scoring matrix was developed. A coded number corresponding to each question in the questionnaire was recorded in the scoring

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13 Swing refers to the back to back roster worked in the industry, so while one swing is at work, the other swing rests.
matrix. The three open ended questions were processed using content analysis to identify the themes. The themes were then coded and entered on the scoring matrix. I present some of the data from the questionnaire as graphical representations to pictorially illustrate patterns within the data. The data obtained from the questionnaire was used to support the stories told by the interviewees. Analytical themes from the interviews were identified by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts (Feilding 2001, 159). The data was coded using the identified themes.

While I processed the massive amount of data gathered during the interviews, I noted the similarities and differences of experiences and ways of adapting to the offshore lifestyle related to stages of the family life cycle. The Hood and Golden (1979, 576) study illustrated how ‘the impact of men’s work schedules on families can vary depending on their wives’ employment status, other family member’s schedules, children’s ages and the priorities given to occupational and family roles’. I used two of these variables such as children’s age and the employment status of the at home partner. The main variable used to sort data was the presence of children and if couples have children age groups were then determined. Hence, the data was sorted into the following three groups: women without children; women with dependent children (<18 years of age); and women with non-dependent/adult children. A number of women in this study have children from a previous relationship/marriage prior to their current relationship with the offshore worker; some offshore workers also have children from a previous relationship/marriage. For clarity within the study, women and their partner who have no children from a previous marriage/relationship are termed as ‘first families’, while families in which either or both partners have children from a previous
marriage/relationship are termed as ‘second families’, overlapping the two identifying groups highlighted that all women with dependent children belonged to ‘first families’. The following illustrates the groupings used within the following chapters. It is noted that most first families had dependent children, while most women from second families had independent/adult children, the exception being Leonie who did not have children of her own. In order to provide anonymity for the women who were interviewed I gave each a pseudonym

**Women with no children:**
Susan, Karen and Leonie

**Women with dependent children:**
Cara, Gail, Sonia, Jodi, Francis, Denise, Kim, Nadine, Vicki and Gwen

**Women with non-dependent/adult children:**
Barbara, Allison, Betty and Margaret

**First Families:**
Susan, Karen, Cara, Gail (separated), Sonia, Jodi, Francis, Denise, Kim, Barbara, Allison, Nadine, Betty, Vicki and Gwen

**Second Families:**
Emily, Narelle, Megan, Margaret and Leonie

**Ethical considerations**

The practice of being reflexive was part of the ethical considerations given to this study when considering potential power relationships and their effect in the research process. It was important that the women who participated in the study felt safe and at ease when talking about their personal and private lives. While I cannot ignore my gender, I made a sincere effort not to ‘trade’ my identity as a woman, although it did provide an entrée into the interview situation. Finch (1984, 80-81) argues that being a woman can create ethical issues, as ‘the basis of trust for the interviewees is the female

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14 None of the ‘second families’ had children from their current marriage/relationship.
researcher’s status and demeanour as a woman’. The level of trust given to me was evident when I offered each participant a copy of the transcribed interview - each declined the offer. I understood their decision to mean the women ‘trusted’ I would use their information in the ‘right’ way.

Ethics clearance from Murdoch University’s Human Research Ethics Committee was sought and given as indicated on the covering letter of the questionnaire. As this research uncovered the private world of women (Oakley 1981, 31), I anticipated that the impact of the interview might evoke some reticence once it was completed. I assured all the women I interviewed that they would remain anonymous within the published research; I also informed them that they could change their minds about participating in the study and, therefore, could withdraw the information they had provided at any time. None of the women who were interviewed withdrew from the study. All the women described vary levels of delight with the opportunity to talk about their lives with someone who understood the issues surrounding the offshore work schedule and was interested in their stories. The covering letter attached to the questionnaire also confirmed that participants were able to withdraw, at any time, from the study (see Appendix II).
Chapter Four

The offshore lifestyle and the family

Introduction

Previous research on the impact of the offshore oil and gas industry on the partners/wives of offshore workers has produced a number of different notions of how the offshore industry impacts the at home partner. From research in the 1960s and 1970s the work-related cyclical absences of workers was identified as problematic for the at home partner (Morrice and Taylor 1978; Isay 1968). A shift from research from the discipline of psychology (Morrice and Taylor 1978; Morrice 1981) suggested factors other than the coping mechanisms of individual women needed to be considered when discovering how the at home partner and other family members of offshore workers are impacted by the intermittent absence of the worker. It is at this point that terms such as ‘the impact of the offshore oil and gas industry’ and ‘adjusting and adapting to the offshore oil and gas industry’ are found in the literature.

Impact of the offshore lifestyle on at home partners

At the beginning of the research on the impact of the industry on the wives of offshore oil workers it was considered that women responded to the intermittent absence of their partner in one of three ways. The wife:

- found it impossible to adapt to intermittent absences and she felt lonely, incomplete, anxious and depressed; or

- learnt to cope, extended her own interests and enjoyed a sense of freedom and responsibility; or
resented both husband’s absence and his return; she rejected his demands made on her, and felt angry her own needs were largely discounted. (Morrice et al. 1985, 479)

In addition, the triad of symptoms - anxiety, depression and sexual difficulties - experienced by some wives of oil workers was identified as ‘intermittent husband syndrome’ and was considered to be endemic to the offshore oil industry (Morrice and Taylor 1978). The literature held that some women, when their partner is at work, experience a ‘sense of separateness and loneliness’ which Rigg and Cosgrove (1994, 655) state occurs because women are unable to cope with the aloneness of not having their partner return home each day. In some instances, women experience a sense of ‘bereavement’ each time their partner returns to work offshore (Morrice 1981 cited in Morrice et al. 1985, 479). While it appeared that all women were at risk of not coping with the intermittent absence of their partner, it was thought women without ‘supportive social networks’ would find adjusting to the absence of their partner more difficult (Morrice et al. 1985, 479).

Subsequent studies found that intermittent husband syndrome was not endemic to the offshore industry (Storey et al. 1989) and the offshore work schedule was not problematic for the majority of wives (Morrice et al. 1985, 479). Morrice et al. (1985, 479-80) argue there are flaws in the stereotypes identified; they were oversimplified. Despite this, they identified the ways in which the at home partner’s mood can be affected by the impact of a continuous pattern of partings and reunions along the continuum of the cyclical pattern of the offshore work schedule.

Furthermore, the process of adapting to the offshore work schedule needs to be understood beyond individual coping mechanisms; a wide range of socio-structural and individual variables need to be recognised (Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988, 105).
These include social and economic circumstances, and the influence of personality and power relations between the couple on their expectations of marriage and their capacity to negotiate their marital roles (Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988, 107). As research by Clark and Taylor (1988) found, partners of offshore oil and gas workers can in fact, find benefits from the offshore lifestyle.

- having a positive attitude to the work schedule can create an environment in which there is greater understanding and appreciation of one another.
- it can have a positive impact on marital relationships, as the periods of separation provide more time to reflect within the relationship and to place difficulties into perspective (Clark and Taylor 1988, 131-2).

In a study on how wives adapted to the offshore work schedule, Morrice et al. (1985, 482) identify wives as either non-copers or copers. Non-copers were identified as those who were new to the industry and who had young children; these women were considered to be more vulnerable to stress. Alternatively, copers were defined as women with older children and who had previous experience of husband absence and made the ‘most’ of the intermittent absence of their partner (Morrice et al. 1985, 482). Morrice et al. (1985) provided a ‘snap shot’ of how the partners of offshore workers ‘coping’ to the offshore work schedule, they did not identify a notion of adapting to the offshore work schedule.

Subsequent research identified the responsibility of adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker as shifting from being solely delegated to women to become a family issue, and consequently both worker and partner were seen to make adaptations to accommodate the offshore work schedule (Forsyth and Gramling 1987; Forsyth and Gauthier 1991; Forsyth and Gramling 1990; Gramling, Wooddell, and Forsyth 1998; Wooddell, Forsyth, and Gramling 1994). Forsyth and Gramling (1987) argue that non-traditional work schedules such as those requiring extended cyclical worker absence
influence a shift from conventional familial management techniques and familial roles to alternative familial roles and methods of family management. These authors identified that the intermittent absence of the worker, caused by the offshore work schedule, creates issues more complex than whether the at home partner copes or does not cope with the intermittent presence and absence of their partner. Rather, there are intricate issues concerning family management. Family members adapted or changed their familial management techniques as a means to adapt to the work schedule and the intermittent absence and presence of the worker.

When couples spend time together they construct the reality of their lives together. Berger and Kellner (1964, 7) describe the construction and reconstruction of the married world as occurring principally through a ‘marital conversation’, that is, the interaction, communication and actions of the couple. Furthermore, the lives of married couples are kept in a state of repair and ongoing refurbishment by participating in the marital conversation (Berger and Kellner 1964, 7). The result of this ongoing process is a set of continually updated guidelines, norms and rules which contribute to the notion of the self and each partner’s position within the family (Gramling and Forsyth 1987, 165). The relationship becomes endangered when non-traditional work schedules impact on the couple’s ability to maintain a continuous marital conversation; the conversation becomes disjointed (Gramling and Forsyth 1987, 164).

Non-traditional work scheduling is disruptive for families because it reduces the time available for intrafamily negotiations, and thus creates an environment where a loss of shared meaning can occur. Family life continues while the offshore worker is absent from home. The worker’s absence from home makes it difficult to obtain a consensual
definition or agreement on family rules. On his return home, because he has not been present for intrafamily negotiations, the worker may not understand the how’s and why’s of family decisions. The worker’s absence from home also means the family members, who remain at home, do not experience the family’s social network as a whole, but as either an individual or as portions of the nuclear family; the absent worker misses ‘experiences and/or the constructs that emerge from them, and as a result they develop individual biographies while their relationships to the family’s social networks change and this exacerbates the loss of shared meaning’ (Gramling and Forsyth 1987, 166-8).

Standard work scheduling co-exists with conventional familial management strategies, namely traditional, egalitarian and role reversal, that were developed from the traditional family/work model in which the husband is responsible for providing an income for the family, and the wife is responsible for the family and home (Rathbone 1927). It has been argued by those such as Forsyth and Gramling (1987, 190) that families which experience a non-traditional work schedule cannot be expected to use a traditional familial management strategy. Families experiencing repeated patterns of separation and reunion make adjustments in response to their unique circumstances (Forsyth and Gramling 1990, 185). If the offshore family (worker and partner) hold traditional views of his role of father/partner, while the worker is at work an absence or un-attendance of his role occurs. The absence or non-attendance of the role results in a dysfunctional family (Boss 1986, 148) and as such Forsyth and Gramling (1990, 184) argue families who experience the intermittent absence of the husband/partner should not attempt to use traditional familial strategies and role.
Workers who experience a non-traditional work schedule are employed in ‘working class’ careers (Forsyth and Gramling 1987, 184), and thus tend to have patriarchal views of the family (Komarovsky 1967, 222). Building on the notion that offshore workers tend to have views that reflect traditional sex role ideology and distribution of authority, and McDonald’s (1980) multi-dimensional concept of familial power/authority, Forsyth and Gramling (1987) suggest five ‘adaptive responses or management techniques’. Placed on a continuum (see Figure 5) from most traditional to least traditional, the strategies are:

- **replacement husband/father**: when the absent worker is simply replaced by a male relative who takes on family responsibility and authority of the absent worker

- **contingency authority**: when the husband hands over some authority to his wife for the period of his absence, though he decides which areas of responsibility he hands to his partner while he remains responsible for primary decisions

- **alternate authority**: partners agree to alternate authority, when the worker is absent the wife assumes authority, when the worker returns the wife relinquishes authority to her partner

- **conflict**: when the worker is absent the wife assumes authority, she becomes adept with authority and does not want to relinquish authority to her husband

- **periodic guest**: most common in long absences, this is when the wife assumes all authority and on his return the husband has been positioned, or positions himself, outside the family and has no ‘place or function’ within the family.

The types of strategies presented by Forsyth and Gramling (1987, 190-1) are ‘ideal types’, and although they consider that there is a theoretical position on the continuum for a ‘true’ egalitarian relationship, it was omitted by Forsyth and Gramling (1987) due to not being evident within families of offshore workers. For a more in-depth description of the five familial management techniques see Forsyth and Gramling (1987).
Forsyth and Gramling (1987, 190-1) suggest that 'a non-traditional work schedule leads families toward an inevitable path to a non-traditional strategy'. They also argue there is evidence of more than one strategy being used by families, and that families may change their adaptive strategies over time. For example, among seafarers, who spend much more time 'away' from home, Forsyth and Gramling (1990, 188) predictably found that many families used a replacement husband/father strategy; having family close by eased the worry about their families while they were absent for extended periods of time. At the opposing end of the continuum, the 'periodic guest' was identified as the only viable technique among seafaring families in the absence of available kin (Forsyth and Gramling 1990, 193). In such families the authority of the father decreases while the mother's authority increases.

Alternatively, a study two decades later by Parkes, Carnell and Farmer (2005, 424) found evidence of three management strategies among offshore families; periodic guest and alternate authority (as per Forsyth and Gramling 1987), and egalitarian (more frequently associated with traditional work schedules). Within the study, Parkes et al.(2005, 424) found that the periodic guest strategy was 'strongly represented', with many workers abdicating authority while at work and at home. Some families used alternating authority with wives happily handing back authority to the worker on his
return home, however, there was evidence of conflict, (in the form of frustration experienced by some wives), about authority when the partner returned home. The third strategy, egalitarian, describes a situation in which family work is not divided by ideology of gendered work, but is a sharing of tasks associated with domestic work and childcare. In an egalitarian family there are no his or her specific tasks. Improvements in telecommunication and the subsequent increased availability of telephone communication has the potential to allow more egalitarian strategies as communication between the worker and his spouse enables shared decision-making possible for couples/families (Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005, 424-5).

Adapting to the offshore work schedule

The three main theories regarding the impact of the offshore lifestyle on the at home partner are: Solheim’s (1988) three social realities, Forsyth and Gramling’s (1987) familial strategies of adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker and the dichotomous ‘coping or non-coping’ ability of female partners and Morrice et al’s (1985) study on ‘coping’ ability of offshore wives. Initially these three theories were used to develop an analytical framework for this study. However, once analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire and the face-to-face interviews began, I realised that this framework, while it presented a number of ways of how women may adapt to the offshore lifestyle, raised more questions than it answered. The original framework exposed the reactions of the partners of offshore workers, but led me to question why do the partners of offshore workers have different reactions to the offshore lifestyle. The framework developed in this study posits the possibility for a greater understanding of why and how the at home partners react to the offshore lifestyle. Therefore, using the work by Solheim (1988), Forsyth and Gramling (1987) and
Morrice et al (1985) as a foundation, the stages or a process of adapting - a continuum of adapting - emerged through analysis of the questionnaires and interviews. Analysis of the face-to-face interviews revealed links between how women perceived their social world and how they used their social networks. For example, it was noted when women are newly exposed to the offshore lifestyle the temporary loss of the worker, while he is at work, is considered unusual and these women tend to receive more support from family and friends when the worker is absent from home. It was also noted during the analysis of the interview data that women experienced changing perceptions of their social world, often this was associated with changes in lifecycle stages, such as the birth or a child, children going to school. Such changes in lifecycle stage were accompanied by changes in how the women used their social support network. By combining the analysis of the data with the previous literature, an alterative framework has been developed. This framework allows a more complete discussion of the impact of the intermittent absence of workers in terms of the at home partners’ reactions and provides a link between the use of social support to adapt to the offshore lifestyle with the women’s perception of their social world. The framework consists of four categories of reactions, namely innocence; normalising his presence; normalising his absence; and balancing two lives. The four reactions are used throughout the thesis to help illustrate how and why partners react to the offshore lifestyle.

The process of adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker has traditionally focused on the at home partner, although the process of adapting to the offshore work schedule and the lifestyle it entails is not something that at home partners do in isolation. Adapting to the offshore work schedule requires the at home partner and the
worker to negotiate and agree on the expectations and roles of their three social realities (Solheim 1988). The at home partner shifts from a state of ‘single-hood’ to ‘couple-hood’. As a result, the at home partner has to negotiate ‘her’ life with her partner, family, friends and neighbours when the worker returns home and then renegotiates her life when the worker returns to work.

Innocence

The initial stage, *innocence*, occurs when the relationship to the industry is new. This takes place when a person enters a new relationship with a current offshore worker or, when one person from an established couple commences employment offshore in the offshore oil and gas industry for the first time. At the beginning of the ‘new’ relationship the partner at home continues her/his normal routine. To the observer, at home partners, when the partner is absent, continue their day-to-day lives as they did prior to the new relationship. Women without children go to work and engage in social activities with family, friends and others. Women with dependent children provide care for children, they engage in social activities with their children, other family members, friends and others, and some participate in paid work. However, at home partners miss their partner, and they happily look forward to the return of the offshore worker. When the worker arrives home the day-to-day lives of at home partners are impacted by the continuous presence of the worker. Both members of the couple want to spend time with each other so plans and activities with others outside of the couple are postponed or cancelled.

Family and friends understand couples want to spend time together and are content to postpone plans they may have had with the at home partner as they are happy to see the
couple reunited. The exchange of social support during the initial stage is often asymmetrical: others provide more support to the at home partner than the at home partner provides to others.

The length of the ‘new’ relationship varies. The length of the initial stage can influence the adaptive methods used. The longer the initial stage continues the greater the impact on the diversity and level of friendship experienced by each member of the couple as individuals and as a couple. If friendships are to continue they require equal reciprocation between friends. At the initial stage this does not occur. There are four possible consequences when the couple spend more time with each other to the exclusion of their individual friends. Firstly, friends of the at home partner feel their friendship is not reciprocated and the at home partner is ‘dropped’ as a friend. Secondly, the at home partner becomes disinclined to pursue friendships because they cannot reciprocate friendship when the worker arrives home. Thirdly, the couple becomes more dependent on one another for friendship and companionship. Lastly, the couple socialise more with family members.

*Normalising his presence*

In some respects, this reaction/stage of adapting to the intermittent absence of the offshore worker is the most difficult for the at home partner and the offshore worker. The newness of the initial stage eases to become a routine of partings and reunions. An extended period of the ‘initial stage’ can lead to social isolation of the partner at home and the worker, as a couple, and as individuals. The at home partner limits their access to social activities and interaction when the worker is absent, they tend to defer participating in social activities until the worker returns home. While the at home
partner will participate in personal celebratory events, such as birthdays, weddings, christenings, anniversaries, and social celebrations on days such as Australian public holidays, Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Hanukkah, and so on, their enthusiasm to celebrate when the worker is absent is low. As a result, when possible, celebrations are held before or after the date, so that the couple can celebrate together. As a result the partner at home normalises her life around the presence of the worker, she tends to see her life as being normal only when the worker is at home. The at home partner considers themself primarily as part of a couple; ‘couple-dom’ is very important for the at home partner.

The level of participation in social support in this stage can be quite low. As the at home partner withdraws from the outside world when the worker is absent the opportunity to engage in social support with friends or others is reduced. Family members, such as parents, on the other hand, provide more support to the at home partner, when the worker is absent. High levels of spousal support are anticipated by the at home partner during this stage.

*Normalising his absence*

Independence and self sufficiency is the key to understanding this reaction/stage of adapting to the intermittent absence of the offshore worker. The at home partners develop or expand their ability to manage their life and the lives of their dependents. At home partners in this study and elsewhere (Storey et al.1989; Parkes, Carnell and Farmer, 2005) have stated when their partner is an offshore worker it is like being a single parent without the financial concerns. The at home partner happily makes family decisions and participates in social activities and interaction. The absence of the
worker is accepted as a normal part of their and their family's lives. The at home partner can become so self sufficient that the returning worker can feel redundant. When the worker is absent the at home partner 'gets on with their life' and develops their own interests and hobbies. Friendships between the at home partner and others form and as such the at home partner can develop a life to which the worker is not privy. Participating in social activities as a couple reduces and thus the number of their 'couple friends' decline. The at home partner becomes adept at participating as a 'single' person in celebratory events. The absence of the worker does not make the family incomplete as experienced by those who normalise the presence of the worker.

The reciprocity of social support by the at home partner in this stage is also asymmetric. The at home partner provides companionship, instrumental help and emotional support at a higher level than they receive. In part, this is due to their belief in their self reliance, and providing help to others reaffirms this. The anticipated level of spousal support, of the at home partner, from the worker in low is this stage.

**Balancing two lives**

The literature from previous studies (Morrice et al. 1985; Storey et al. 1989; Parkes, Carnell, and Farmer 2005) would suggest the at home partners situated in this stage are copers/survivors. In some terms, the length of time exposed to the offshore lifestyle has allowed the at home partner and the worker to understand the impact of the offshore work schedule on the worker and the at home partner, which has enabled the negotiation and balancing of their three social realities (Solheim, 1988).

The at home partner in this stage often has older or non dependent children, participates in paid work, and would agree that they have arranged their life to accommodate the
absence and presence of the worker. The at home partner has ‘single’ friends and the couple have ‘couple’ friends. Celebratory events are participated in, regardless of whether the worker is at home or at work, even though the at home partner missed the presence of the worker at social events; it does not prevent their attendance and participation. Balancing the two lives can be made more difficult for the at home partner if they appear to enjoy life too much while the worker is at work. Negotiation between the couple about expectations and roles are necessary to enable at home partners to balance their two lives.

In this stage, the at home partner does not provide support to others as proof of their self-reliance. The exchange of social support for at home partners is frequently reciprocated at similar levels with their family,\textsuperscript{15} friends and others. In addition, the at home partner anticipates, receives, and provides spousal support from the worker at similar levels.

The stages of adapting to the intermittent absence of the offshore worker are not independent of one another. In other words, it is possible for partners of the workers to experience some aspects of two stages at the same time. This presents the notion of a continuum of adapting. As such, the partners of offshore workers may find that they can easily move from one stage to another stage without significant changes in their social world. However, small changes in that social world may subtly shift the women from one stage to another, leaving women with the task of readjusting to the different stage.

In later chapters, the voices of the women who were interviewed illustrate the different stages they experienced. The women sometimes noticed that the changes were

\textsuperscript{15} Support between family members may differ depending on family lifecycle stage.
occurring while others can now reflect and understand their reactions at that time. As such the women’s stories presented here are not a snap-shot view of their current lives; they are the reflections and personal histories of their social world. Using the women’s stories in this way also helps to illustrate that adapting to the offshore lifestyle can be described as a process rather than a simplified dichotomy of adapting or failing to adapt.
Chapter Five

Social support, family, friends and neighbours

Introduction

The some of the early literature the impact of the offshore oil and gas industry was considered to be problematic for the partners of workers. The female partners of offshore oil and gas workers were thought to be unable to cope with the intermittent absence of the worker (Morrice and Taylor 1978) and in order to cope offshore wives needed ‘good social support’ (Morrice et al. 1985, 483). This chapter provides a descriptive insight into the ways partners of offshore workers reciprocate informal social support.

Social support

Benefits associated with social support in everyday aspects of contemporary life have been noted in regard to mothers, work and parenting (Stoloff, Glanville, and Bienenstock 1999; Bost et al. 2002; Aycan and Eskin 2005; Suldo and Huebner 2004; Oakley 1992; Cotterell 1986). Social support has also been consistently linked to being beneficial for one’s health and well-being (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 87; Oakley 1992, 1; Cohen and Wills 1985; Wellman and Wortley 1990; Hurdle 2001), in decreasing the rate of depression (Aneshensel 1986, 109) and helping individuals to live longer (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 86). In addition, social support is one of the most important resources for coping with life stressors (Hobfoll 1986b, 12) as it can help alleviate the stressors and strains of work-family conflict (Carlson and Perrewé 1999), and, it helps
individuals manage the insecurities and emotional flux that are part of contemporary life (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001, 20-1).

There are a number of descriptions of everyday forms of informal social support. Wellman, Carrington and Hall (1988) suggest three main types of everyday informal social support. They are:

- companionship, as ‘enjoying each other’s company’ or ‘sharing activities’;
- instrumental help, in the form of small services, such as occasional child minding, minor repairs to homes and cars, or lending/giving tools and/or food; and
- emotional support, such as providing a safe environment to discuss issues such as marital, family, work and other general issues. (Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988, 159-165).

Individuals give and/or receive informal social support in the form of companionship, instrumental and emotional support (Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988, 162).

Informal social support is given, received and reciprocated in different ways, in various amounts and frequency; for some, social support can be so entrenched in their lives that it is taken for granted (Bruhn 2005, 187).

The social support (companionship, instrumental help and emotional support) received from one’s social network, or personal community, provides individuals with a guard against stress, in the form of a stress buffer (Stein and Rappaport 1986, 47; Vanfossen 1986, 70; Oakley 1992, 30). The alternative view is that social support acts as a moderator of stress as it fulfils a person’s need for affiliation, belonging and respect; in addition, lack of support in the form of a moderator is itself a stressor (Aycan and Eskin 2005, 467).

Men and women differ in the types of social support they give and/or want. As Wellman and Wortley (1990, 582) argue, gender is the only personal characteristic that
is directly associated with providing and receiving social support. The socialisation of females and males influences the type of social support that men and women give and require. Women are more likely than men to be socialised into ‘expressive roles’ which emphasise nurturing and emotional sustenance, while men are more likely to be socialised into ‘instrumental roles’ emphasising achievement and accomplishment (Parsons 1954 cited in Vanfossen 1981, 130). Identification of gendered socialisation provides a greater understanding of the differences between women and men in the type of support aspired to and/or received (Jung 1997, 78), and the level of support provided and expected (Bankoff 1986, 218), and highlights the difference between women and men and where they source support (Aycan and Eskin 2005,99).

It is argued by Liebler and Sandefur (2002, 367) that married women have limited opportunity and resources to interact and help people outside the home because their time and energy are focused on caring for those within the immediate family. When women provide instrumental help it is normally in areas of ‘homemaking, childcare and health care’, whereas men provide support by ‘repairs to cars, homes and help in dealing with bureaucracies’ (Wellman and Wortley 1990, 582).

Women are more likely than men to provide emotional support (Liebler and Sandefur 2002, 388; Jung 1997). The provision of emotional support to friends and family of both sexes, by women, is seen as the product of their work as domestic relations specialists (Wellman and Wortley 1990, 582). Emotional closeness is an important aspect of women’s relationships; men’s relationships, on the other hand, focus on shared activities. This means that women are more likely to talk with family members and friends about issues that concern her and reciprocate talking with friends and
family members about their concerns, whereas an important aspect of men’s relationships is the shared activity. Therefore, this may explain why women are more likely than men to exchange emotional support (Bell 1991 cited in Liebler and Sandefur 2002, 366). Women tend to be more sensitive than men in their social interaction, thus they develop extensive social networks and therefore have more people in their social network that they ‘care’ about (Hobfoll 1986b, 6). Kessler, Price and Wortman (cited in Jung 1997, 78) suggest women place more value on their social ties (relationships with others in their network, such as family, friends and others), and as such women gain strong support from their personal network. Although Bott (cited in Wellman and Berkowitz 1988, 36) would argue it is the pattern of ties, rather than the value women place on their social ties, that significantly affects the flow of support.

**Social support between couples**

The spouse can be the greatest contribution to one’s feeling of being valued, however, because of their importance, the same partner may, in strained relations, or in times of strained relationships, be one of the most painful contributors of stress (Hobfoll 1986c, 252; Liebler and Sandefur 2002).

Men and women both gain from quality social interactions, especially intimate ones, because it increases their feelings of being valued (Hobfoll 1986b, 7). Spousal support consists of emotional and instrumental support; emotional support includes empathetic understanding and listening, affirmation of affection, advice and genuine concern for the welfare of the partners; instrumental support is the tangible help in household chores and childcare (Aycan and Eskin 2005, 455). Married women are less likely than their husbands to receive the spousal support they need as the nurturing aspect of social support is seen as women’s work. This may leave women feeling deprived of nurturing support (Vanfossen 1981, 69; Hobfoll 1986b, 7). The way men and women
communicate their needs also impacts the support they receive (Cutrona 1996, 199). Women are better at reading indirect requests for help and are able to provide support to their partner when he is under stress (Neff and Karney 2005, 88). Thus, men receive unsolicited support that can help promote coping and well-being (Cutrona 1996, 200). It can be argued that women read indirect requests for help because they ask for help in indirect ways; women describe the situation or talk about an emotional response rather than directly ask for help (Neff and Karney 2005). However, Vanfossen (1986) suggests two reasons as to why women do not receive the social support they need. Firstly, women have ‘production’ roles which have delegated them to provide nurturance and emotional support, while men are required to seek achievement and accomplishment in the external environment, often through the work place. Secondly, women receive lesser social support due to the institutionalized male dominance prevalent in industrial society.

In contemporary society there is a plethora of literature that discusses the issue of balancing the demands of family life and paid employment. Work-family conflict occurs when the demands of paid work affect the amount and/or quality of time the worker spends participating in family life. Alternatively family-work conflict occurs when the demands of family life affect the worker while at work. Spousal support is the most important source of support in reducing family to work conflict for women; however, organisational support helps men to reduce work to family conflict (Aycan and Eskin 2005, 466). Spousal instrumental support can decrease the level of work-home conflict and improve well-being and life satisfaction as tangible help from the partner in household chores and childcare eases the burden of family demands (Aycan and Eskin 2005, 455). Emotional support from a partner can enhance feelings of self-
efficacy at work and at home (Aycan and Eskin 2005, 455). Employed wives engaged in their frequent struggle with 'role overload' (Higgins, Duxbury, and Lee 1994), the notion of having a supportive spouse is additionally important for these women. Traditional gender roles have significant influence on which life events affect men and women; husbands are more likely to feel depressed by stressful conditions at work and less stressed about parenting problems, whereas wives are more likely to be upset by parenting problems than work related issues (Vanfossen 1986, 81-2). In addition, Vanfossen (1986, 81) argues reciprocity and equity of support within a marriage are perhaps more important to employed wives as it affects their feelings of mastery as well as their levels of depression. Meanwhile, Acitelli (1996 cited in Xu 2001, 566) and Aneshensel (1986, 103) state women who stay at home to care for family have reduced access to emotional support from others, thus the wives who have higher levels of engagement with the family than their partner, appear to want more support and affirmation from their husband.

Mutuality or reciprocity of support is the key ingredient in successful supportive relations (Aneshensel 1986, 81). Support from one's partner has been shown to help individuals cope with personal difficulties and stressors (Neff and Karney 2005, 79), and the lack of support from a partner cannot be compensated by support from another source (Coyne and DeLongis 1986 cited in Neff and Karney 2005, 79). It has been argued that the exchange of social support in close relationships such as marriage is dissimilar; women's desired levels of spousal support exceed the level of support received, whereas men receive more spousal support than they expect (Xu and Burleson 2001, 555). Although women and men experience roughly the same amount of varied support types from their spouses, a 'support gap' occurs when the received
support 'exceeds what most men want or desire', while the support received by women 'fails to fulfil their expectations' (Xu and Burleson 2001, 559). The support gap hypothesis argues that in terms of spousal support, men are over-benefited and women under-benefited (Xu and Burleson 2001, 536). While it has been argued that women provide more support than men expect or want, and that a 'support gap' exists because of different levels of anticipated spousal support, Neff and Karney (2005, 86-88) argue the point may not be 'how' support is exchanged between the husband and wife but 'when' husbands and wives provide support.

Social support and partners of offshore workers

The partners of offshore workers who were interviewed expressed themselves as independent individuals who do not think their partners' work schedule should position them as 'in need of good social support'. Although the partners of offshore workers do agree it helps when family members, friends, neighbours and others understand the nature and difficulties of the offshore industry.

_I think that it is a hard life to get used to and you just have to accept it if that's what your husband wants to do for a long time and I think it would be helpful to know people whose husbands do work offshore, because [if] you have got some problems maybe they have the same work pattern and when their husband is away yours is away and you can support each other. It would be good for those who don't live near families, or haven't got families to help them_ (Gail).

_A friend across the road, her husband is working 24 hours a day, so she understands that when we [Sonia and her partner] are together our time is important as I understand her time [with her partner] is important_ (Sonia).

When I met with each of the women who were interviewed, all proudly spoke about being an independent woman during the recording of the interview or during the conversations that occurred before the interview process commenced. It was during these conversations that I gained a tacit understanding of how women considered social
support as the help you receive from others because you are unable to cope in a given situation. The women also projected a sense of personal pride that they dealt with ‘situations’ by drawing from their own independence and self determination.

I guess everybody’s personal situation is different and it’s the way you deal with it, I mean, I guess I could reach out to a lot more people if I wanted to, but I chose not to, because I have always been an independent person (Francis).

I’m the sort of person given any situation will look at it and think, what’s the best thing that I can do here? And that’s what I am for. So even if it’s not a great situation or always, or, I’m a survivor I will survive, there is no doubt about (laugh) given that, like I say, everyone has dips and curves but given a situation I will overcome the difficulties and that’s just determination I think and single mindedness to a degree and also the independence (Megan).

It’s a personality thing, how strong are you in managing your own affairs and how independent you are you can get by with a minimum of self pity (laugh) (Emily).

I’ve always been independent anyway, and have been able to cope with most things myself (Vicki).

Some women (Narelle, Kim, and Karen) consider themselves as independent individuals who prefer to offer help to others rather than receive help.

I’m an independent person and my husband is also a very independent person we don’t like to have to call on other people. Yeah, we don’t like to, we like to help other people but we don’t like to call on them (Kim).

I’m probably more of a support network for other people, than them to me, basically touch wood (touches table) nothing really bad, nothing major has happened where I’ve fallen into a heap and go, I need someone to help me. There hasn’t been anything that happened that I couldn’t deal with myself um and so, I tend to use my friends just as friends and I would probably use them that way if he was offshore or not. Um so I would say, I would probably say I’m more of a support for them, rather than they are a support for me. In fact one time when I did need support I was too embarrassed to ask for it, so as, but um at one stage I had left work because I had some really bad issues at work and I had sort of a mini I suppose, I couldn’t face the world because of what happened at work and I was too embarrassed to go out and ask people, because to me I was the strong person who was everybody else’s help, but having said that lots of people rallied around (Narelle).

Karen’s experience of support from one person was excessive and invasive, and it became difficult for her to manage.
One of our friends felt that he had to take on the role of being my protector, (laugh) which caused quite a lot of frustration and that was very difficult and X tried to take him to one side and politely say ‘look it’s ok X you know, we know you guys are there and Karen knows if she ever needs anything she has only got to pick the phone up and we really appreciate that and he just couldn’t get that for a long time. And it was awful, if he couldn’t get hold of me at home, he would ring me at work the next day to make sure I was ‘allright’ and it was just, you know, it was quite a difficult situation we went through for a while, but thankfully he has kinda come round, and now understands (Karen).

The patterns of social support exchange

The partners of offshore workers experience two lives; one life when the worker is absent and another when the worker is present. The presence of two lives influences patterns of engagement in social support for the at home partner. Question 5 on the questionnaire asked respondents ‘In general terms, do you think that the support that you give and receive differs when your partner is at home, to when he or she is at work?’ Four of the sixty questionnaire respondents did not answer question 5. Six respondents considered the social support in which they engage remains the same when the worker is at home or at work. The remaining fifty respondents stated support was ‘different’ when the worker is at home from when the worker is absent. The worker’s presence at home allows the worker to provide more support to his partner as well as enabling his partner to provide support to others. Twenty-three respondents reported they receive more support from family members, friends and neighbours when the worker is absent, and nine reported they are able to provide support to others when their partner is absent.

The data from the questionnaire indicates the partners of offshore oil and gas workers engage in three types of day-to-day social support; companionship, instrumental help and emotional support. This section is an overview of the various types of social
support in which the partners of offshore workers engage. The quantitative data from the questionnaire is presented in graphical format to allow a visual comparison between the types of social support and with whom social support is exchanged.

The exchange of companionship between the respondents and the support groups is illustrated in Figure 6. The level of engagement in companionship support varies among the support groups. Notably, the questionnaire respondents and support groups exchange companionship at similar levels.

Figure 6. Patterns of social support - companionship

The next graph (see Figure 7) illustrates the exchange of instrumental help between the respondents and the support groups. Data regarding the providing and receiving

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16 Comparison between the three forms of social support is possible due to the data being presented as a mean. These calculations are necessary as the questions (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b) have a different number of response categories.
instrumental help by the respondents and the support groups indicate a fluctuating exchange pattern. The partners of offshore workers provide to siblings, children, friends, neighbours and work colleagues more instrumental help than they receive, while they receive more instrumental help from the offshore worker and parents than they give.

**Figure 7. Patterns of social support – providing instrumental help**

The third graph (see Figure 8), illustrates the exchange of emotional support between the respondents and the support groups. In general, the data indicates the participants of the study provide more emotional support than they receive from all their support groups. However, the exchange of emotional support between the respondents and their partner is almost equal.
The above graphs represent the data from the questionnaires and illustrates there is a variance in the level of engagement in social support between respondents and each support group. The partners of offshore workers engage in social support predominately with four support groups: their partner (the worker), family members (parents and children), friends and neighbours. The engagement in social support by partners of offshore workers and each of the four support groups is used to discover if social support can help the partner to adapt to the offshore lifestyle. The four support groups are divided into the following sections; social support and the offshore worker, social support and the family (parents and children), social support and friends, and social support and neighbours.
Social support between the at home partner and the offshore worker

The data from the questionnaire illustrates the respondents engage in more social support with their partner than they do with any other support group. The respondents and their partners engage in more companionship and emotional support than instrumental help. The exchange of both companionship and emotional support between the couples are almost identical, with the respondents providing slightly more companionship ('companionship you give' score of 198; 'companionship given to you' score 196) and emotional support than they receive ('emotional support you give' score 416; 'emotional support given to you' score 412). The exchange of instrumental help between couples indicates the respondent receives more instrumental help from their spouse than they give.

Women adjust to the absence of their partner and his inability to provide instrumental support on demand by becoming self reliant or developing strategies to combat his absence. Relying on their personal strength and independence women manage strategies of either resolving the problem herself or make the decision to call for expert help. Developing strategies to deal with issues while their partner is absent appears to develop over time. However, partners who belong to second families have experienced a family life without a partner before their relationship/marriage with the offshore worker and as such they have, when they were single mothers, developed strategies to deal with issues and problems without the aid of a partner. Therefore, those new to the industry do not need to develop new strategies. On the other hand, partners from 'first families' need to develop strategies to deal with family/home related problems when their partner is absent. When the at home partner normalises his absence, or when they
are balancing two lives, they have established strategies to deal with problem/issues relating to family and home.

I impress my friends, I'm quite good... finding out what has tripped the switch and I've learnt things like that. I'm quite good at taking the car in for a service, or changing the windscreen wiper blades or washing the car... I would always mow the lawn, chop the wood when we had a pot belly, I just take on quite a lot of the male jobs anyway... I don't feel like I fail miserably there at all (Kim).

I'll really dig deep into my own dependence, so try to fix it, or I may have to bite the bullet and have someone [tradesperson] to come in, but I would probably not tell him, I might if I have fixed it, even though I would be dying to – to share the load, and I sort of think if he can't do anything I think it would frustrate him that he couldn't [help] (Leonie).

A crisis is only a crisis when you allow them to be a crisis... I have this thing that, cos I'm old as you have noticed, that while I wasn't out in the street waving my bra there were a lot of women who went to a lot of effort to get me and many others equal wages and equal opportunity and I think what goes with that is full responsibility (Betty).

If you can't do things for yourself, you are in trouble (Emily).

I talk to myself, and say, you can do this, and I put things, and... I read a book once where they said that [the] Chinese put all the problems into little boxes like matchboxes and the matchboxes into a bigger case and you just pull out one drawer at a time, don't look at the whole case, if I have a problem, a huge problem, I tend to look at it and say, we will work in five minute slots here: the cat is dying, the cat is dead, I have to get it off the carpet. I tend to remove, step outside of myself and do things mechanically. If it's the washing machine or something like that I tend to get very angry initially and bloody thing, it always happens when I am on my own. Then deal with it. It's a problem, get the book, out phone the repair man and you have to rearrange your schedule for the repair man, but I just say to myself, I used to have it on my fridge 'Deal with it, just do it'. And then it's ok, I try not to get very [sharp intake of breath] very emotional (Barbara).

Most of the women feel their partners engage in many hours of work while they are offshore and by working offshore the worker makes personal sacrifices. In return, some such as Denise feel obligated to cope with her partner's absence. As she states 'I sort of feel like it's my obligation to him to be the best I can while he's away because
he's away usually earning a lot of money and working a lot of hours working very hard.'

As individuals we choose the type and frequency of support we want to engage in and also with whom we want to engage social support. Emotional support can be an intimate form of support, and as such, women choose to source emotional support from those in their social network who will provide her with the support she desires. Although most people have family, friends or neighbours who can provide some emotional support, there are some occasions when the 'right' person to provide emotional support is their partner (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Social support between the respondents and offshore workers

![Comparing support - Partner](image)

Adjusting to the intermittent loss of emotional support from their partner is more difficult. When the partner is absent and unable to provide emotional support at the time it is required, it can make the partner left at home feel quite lonely. 'I remember feeling very alone, because the only person that I really wanted to talk to about it was

Chapter Five
him (Denise). She felt that others who would normally be supportive would not be able to provide the support she really wanted in the situation.

_**Mum would gloss over it and a girlfriend perhaps would gloss over it or say ‘oh, how terrible’. I really appreciate that he’s very down to earth so he would either say ‘oh, well, you know don’t worry about it because of this and this and this... you’re silly to get yourself upset’, I needed to hear him say something like that**_ (Denise).

As couples get older, their partner becomes their ‘closest friend’ (Pahl and Pevalin 2005, 446), and as such, partners exchange high levels of companionship. While women exchange support with others, such as family, friends and others, the most significant exchange of support is between couples, with higher levels of reciprocity in the area of emotional support (see Figure 8). There are a number of ways in which couples engage in social support. Companionship and emotional support can be exchanged on the telephone when the worker is at work. The couple provides companionship when they talk to each other, talking about their respective days and discussing problems or offering advice. Support to the worker can be as simple as letting him know what is happening in the family before he arrives home, and giving him time to readjust to home life when he returns home before they discuss important family issues.

The social support between couples occurs when the worker is at work and at home. However, the way support is exchanged differs when the worker is at home to when the worker is at work. Offshore workers when they are at work cannot provide the immediate social support that the at home partner wants. Coming to terms with this aspect of the worker’s absence influences the at home partner’s reaction to the work schedule. When at home partners feel that they are unable to cope without the help and support of the worker they begin to normalise the presence of the worker at home. This
occurs because the presence of the worker means that they are able to provide the immediate support she desires. Having a personal network that provides good social support which moderates the stress of everyday life can assist the at home partner who ‘normalises the presence’ of the worker. Good social support from one’s personal network may negate the necessity of immediate social support from the worker by the partner who normalises his presence. Those partners that accept the lack of immediate support from the worker, when he is at work, as an aspect of the offshore work schedule develop personal networks. The support the at home partners receive from their personal networks works as a moderator of stress and thus the at home partners feel more able to cope with the flux of daily lives.

**Social support between the at home partner and family**

In this section the concept of ‘doing motherhood’ (Garey 1999, 26-7) by providing help to dependent and non-dependent children, and the changing pattern of needs in response to the family’s life-cycle (Lang and Brody 1983, 194-5) is presented to explain the different patterns of engagement in instrumental help (see Figures 9 and 10). Within the sample, 49 respondents are mothers. Garey (1999, 26-7) suggests one of the ways mothers participate in mothering is by providing help to their children.

The provision of help by mothers to children explains why respondents provide more instrumental help to their children than they receive from their children. Obviously, the age of the respondent’s children also plays a role in exchange of support between parent and child. Participants with dependent children may receive more instrumental help from parents than they are able to reciprocate because of the demands placed on them as mothers. In addition, when the parents of respondents are independent and
healthy they may not need instrumental help from their children, however, ill health and ageing may increase the instrumental support some respondents provide to their parents.

Figure 10. Social support between respondents and parents

![Figure 10: Social support between respondents and parents](image)

Figure 11. Social support between respondents and children

![Figure 11: Social support between respondents and children](image)
Karen, who has no children, provides help to her ageing mother and her ageing mother-in-law. Cara and Jodi have young\textsuperscript{17} dependent children. Cara provides help to her mother who cares for Cara's sick ageing father, while Jodi helps her ageing mother. Cara and Jodi describe themselves as late starters; they had their children while in their late thirties. Partners of offshore oil and gas workers, such as Cara and Jodi, have combined and sometimes competing demands placed on them by their 'intergenerational roles as parents and children' as members of the 'sandwich generation' (Ward and Spitze 1998, 648). Thus, mothers in the sandwich generation experience the demands of mothering children while at the same time they have additional demands placed on them by providing help to ageing parents.

Cara provides a range of support to her extended family; and Karen provides emotional support to both her and her partner's ageing mothers. Meanwhile, Denise is acutely aware of wanting to provide her mother with friendship rather than just being a recipient of her mother's support. However, this only happens when Denise's partner is away, as her mother and her partner do not like one another. Cara, Kim and Denise agree that it is easier to provide support when their partner is away. When Betty's children were younger Betty also found it easier to provide instrumental support to friends and neighbours.

\begin{quote}
With him away it gives me that freedom and if he was home all the time I don't know how it would go, cos it's hard you know, when you come from these big families, their demands take time (Cara).

I can remember odd times... I only had a copper and she had a washing machine so I used to boil her whites and she used to wash [my family's] clothes (Betty).

Really, it's just that bit easier to do those things like mind a friend's children and that sort of stuff when he is away (Denise).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Children aged 12 years and under.
Only one woman (Nadine) spoke about receiving support on a long term basis (several years). The work related intermittent absence of Nadine’s husband at the beginning of their marriage and a move into a new home led to a family agreement that Nadine’s younger (single) sister would live with Nadine during the weeks her husband was offshore. Nadine recalled the early years of her marriage and the intermittent presence of her younger sister as a time when they gave one another companionship and emotional support. Although Nadine’s intermittent visitor was her sister, Nadine did not presume an obligation, often ascribed to kinship relations (Hoyt and Babchuk 1983, 85), by her sister to provide instrumental help, for example baby sitting Nadine’s children. ‘I never really used her as a baby sitter only if I really needed her when I had no one else’ (Nadine). Similarly, while her mother was older and sometimes unwell Jodi does not want her mother to feel obligated to baby sit her children. Therefore, Jodi prefers not to ask her mother to mind her children; she chooses to wait for her mother to offer help, ‘I don’t even ask my mum to baby sit; I wait for her to offer’ (Jodi).

Family support, in practical terms, from her in-laws was immensely valued by one young mum who had two children under the age of two and no family in Perth. She was very grateful for their help. Gail, who also has no family living in Perth, chose to talk about problems with friends, especially those from her country of birth (Gwen and Gail).

It is evident that the notion of motherhood influences women’s patterns of exchange in social support; support to family members is seen as an obligation of motherhood. The exchange of support between family members and the at home partner is also influenced by the reaction of the at home partner to the offshore work schedule. Those
who normalise the presence of the worker receive more support from family members than they provide to family members. The at home partners that normalise their partner’s absence from home tend to provide more support to others than they receive from others. As will be illustrated later, women such as Kim, Jodi and Cara often shun from support from others (partner not included) as a way of illustrating that they cope with the absence of the worker. Those that balance the two lives engage in a more equitable level of social support with family as they are happy to both provide and receive support from family members. The at home partners who are new to the industry remain innocent of the impact of long term exposure to the offshore work schedule as their focus is on their reunion with the worker as shall be shown later.

**Social support between the at home partner and friends**

*Friendship is a choice process that has two components, an initial choice of an individual as a friend and the decision to continue the friendship (Hallinan and Cubitschek 1990, 517)*

*In modern society most people... live through very similar experiences of insecurity and emotional flux at various times of their lives, and relationships based on friendships and choice often become indispensable frameworks for negotiating the hazards of everyday life (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001, 20-1).*

Friendships are formed for different reasons, usually it is either the enjoyment of ‘spending time’ with one another or the friend has a particular skill or activity on which friendship is based. Friendships vary in their complexity, from the simple friendship such as an associate who is typically a person who may share common activities, to the soul mate, at the opposite end of the friendship continuum. Complex friendships such as a soul mate provide a high degree of commitment and emotional support to one another (Spencer and Pahl 2006, 60).
Individuals may have a friend to exercise with, but that friend may not be someone with whom she would socialise at another time. Within the study, a number of women referred to friends who they based an activity around, and some that they ‘just spend time with’ (Betty), ‘we take a couple of chairs out the front of the house and have a wine while the children play in the street’ (Jodi). Jodi spends this time with her friend but maintains distinct boundaries around her friendships; she does not accept her offers to babysit, ‘no, I prefer to pay other neighbours to do that’. This pattern of having a number of friends for different purposes, as described by Pahl and Prevalin (2005, 448), was also evident in Allison, Emily and Barbara.

A number of women (Emily, Kim, Betty, Barbara, Allison, Karen and Sonia) make a conscious effort to build a personal network of people who were understanding and supportive. The personal network may not always provide instrumental help, but the support they offer, usually through companionship and emotional support, acts as a moderator to the stresses of the everyday experiences of being a mother and a partner of an offshore worker.

*I've had the strength to be able to do that [resolve problems] without relying on someone else providing it for me ... you just learn to do things for yourself, or you build up networks with friends who are in similar situations as, you know, help you chatter up kids or whatever* (Allison).

In these cases social support was seen as something more related to companionship, friendship, emotional support, and having someone who understands with whom one can share a problem. Although help was often talked about in terms of dealing with an emergency or a problem, it can also be simple day-to-day assistance such as taking and picking up children from school (often done by fathers when they were home). Often assistance can be sought because the task in which help is required is gendered male work. *Even things like moving furniture around the house, because I want to do*
something in the room... I generally call on my male friends (Narelle). Knowing that the partner at home has access to support is important to the worker as well as the partner at home.

If x is at work, and if I couldn’t rely on my family or friends, I could pick up the phone and any one of a number of people [from his work] would be on my door step to help me, if I needed that. And x knows that too and that is good for him to know too (Karen).

Only two women spoke about types of support from friends in a negative sense. Karen experienced too much support from one friend who became her ‘protector’. Meanwhile Jodi asserted she was fiercely independent and disliked the idea of relying on friends or neighbours for everyday activities regardless of the situation she found herself. Jodi preferred the freedom to do what she wanted without the obligation to other people, she doesn’t like to ‘feel needy to people’, or, restricted by the expectations of others. However, she will not ask her mother to baby sit, she waits until her mother offers.

I found it a bit overwhelming that they had this support system, like you mind such and such on Tuesday and that’s your turn to take them on Thursday. I like to be more flexible (Jodi).

Similarly, Karen too felt the negative side of support from one friend.

Interestingly one of the friends we knew him as a single man and then he married, but he for the first, but it’s only actually been for the last couple of years that this has stopped, but for quite some time he felt that he had to take on the role of being my protector, (laugh) which caused quite a lot of frustration and that was very difficult, and X tried to take him to one side and politely say ‘look it’s ok X you know, we know you guys are there and Karen knows if she every needs anything she has only got to pick the phone up and we really appreciate that and he just couldn’t get that for a long time. And it was awful, if he couldn’t get hold of me at home, he would ring me at work the next day to make sure I was ‘alright’ and it was just, you know, it was quite a difficult situation we went through for a while, but thankfully he has kinda come round, and now understands X does keep in touch with me when he is away and I can speak to him if I have to and he has become a bit more accepting of the role (Karen).

There is no doubt that the offshore lifestyle enables women to have more freedom in their day-to-day contact with friends when her partner is away. There are many ways
women keep in touch with friends, such as face-to-face, email and by phone, especially at night when younger children have gone to bed. Women with children, particularly younger children, as illustrated earlier have more contact with family, whereas women with no children or non-dependent children socialise more frequently with friends. When he is away it is her time when she can engage in ‘intimate’ girl talk (Susan); it is a time that affords a woman the opportunity to see ‘her’ friends. As one woman strongly pointed out, ‘they are not his friends, my friends, they are nothing to do with him or work, they are my friends’ (Kim). Friendships are a way of ‘getting a break from the kids’ (Jodi), and a place to talk about common issues ‘regardless whether your husband works away or not... it clears the air for a while’ (Francis). It is evident that Susan, Kim, Jodi, and Francis are developing strategies to balance their two lives.

Friends are often the greatest provider of support in terms of companionship and talking about issues (see Figure 12). Friends, who have similar experiences of FIFO, or extended periods of separation due to their partners work in the army or navy, enjoy that shared understanding and an exchange of emotional support with one another. Sonia stated that while she had lost friends because the friends didn’t understand the impact of the offshore roster, she now has friends and neighbours who also have a partner who works a FIFO roster. As she says, these friends understand when she refuses invitations to ‘get togethers’. When her husband is at home Sonia wants to spend as much time as is possible with him. In this sense, Sonia is ‘normalising his presence’.

Support may not always be from those who are geographically close. A number of women (Megan, Gwen, Gail and Vicki) spoke about how their families from their
home state or country helped them settle in Perth; support (often emotional support) was something that was given over the telephone. There was a sense of reciprocity of emotional support over the phone, friends offering support and advice, or just listening when the other needs to talk.

**Figure 12. Social support between the respondent and friends**

![Comparing support - Friends](image)

Women felt that they had support from friends in terms of talking to each other and doing things together (Cara). Thirteen of the sixty people who completed and returned the questionnaire relocated their family due to their partners' work commitments in the offshore oil and gas industry. Three women (Megan, Vicki, and Allison) who moved to Perth when their partner took up new employment in the offshore industry, and Gail, who moved to Perth for her work, found that friendships took a couple of years to develop to the stage that they felt that they 'could' ask for help. These women recognised the notion of 'support' in talking to some one, or spending time with others as being a part of a supportive friendship, and with that in mind (as well as the loss of
their social network when they relocated), they tended to feel ‘needy’ and were reticent to ask someone to talk to them. The women who relocated to Perth felt the social isolation due to a lack of ‘friends’ or family with whom they could just spend time was stronger at weekends, public holidays and significant family events if their partner was at work. Megan praised one Perth school for the ‘buddy system’ used to help new students and their families to integrate into the community; the system helped her family to feel less social isolation, and although her children left school a number of years ago the friendships established as a result of the buddy system remain strong.

*It was like a buddy system, but it was the whole family, and we hit it off with the whole family, so within no time at all we had a family that was only a couple of streets away that we could socialise with and the kids went to school together and that sort of thing* (Megan).

Most of the women considered friends as someone to talk about issues in general, to pass time and to share a specific activity, rather than as someone there to provide help. However, women who didn’t have family in either the state or in Australia made a point of finding good friends just in case of a ‘complete disaster’ (Kim) or ‘just building up that support network’ (Allison). The relocation to Western Australia highlighted to Kim and Alison the need for them to create a personal network of friends when family members do not live close.

Social support is not just about having someone to talk to; it’s also about having the right person to talk with. This is illustrated by the stories from two women who chose with whom they wanted support; one woman wanted to talk only to her husband, and another chose not to talk to her parents about her concerns, because it would only worry them. Gail stated ‘it’s not easy talking on the phone’, but found it easier to talk to her sister and sister-in-law. Gail could confide with her sister and sister-in-law, but when she migrated to Australia, she decided that she didn’t want any of her friends in
her home country or relations to worry about her; for a period of time Gail felt quite isolated as she didn’t talk to anyone about her problems. Another two women (Betty and Cara) spoke about particular emotional issues, one where her husband had been abducted while working overseas and another when she was told her mother-in-law was dying in hospital. Each made a conscious decision about which friend they contacted; they chose the friend that would understand the situation and their concerns and as a result the friend provided the best emotional support.

The other day I had a phone call from the hospital in Melbourne um, the doctor was really nice trying to tell me that my mother in law was dying and that he needed to know what her wishes were, cos of family dynamics … she has no next of kin except the ones who live in WA … so by the time I had rung everybody got someone there to go up to the hospital dealt with all that, I thought I was ready to go to bed, and now I’m hyper, I’m really peeved (laugh) who can I talk to (laugh) my friend X who lives in [town] will talk to me, so I rang her up and I chatted to her for about an hour. There have been lots of times when I’ve really been a prop up for X. I knew her sense of humour would appreciate where I was coming from, and the old bugger didn’t die, the next morning when I rang at half past five when I rang the hospital, before I’d even been to the toilet, oh she is bright and chirpy and sitting up in bed and eating her breakfast (Betty).

When I found out that X had been abducted it was late here, and I thought who can I contact, and I’ve got a cousin overseas, it wasn’t late there, so I emailed her and said X has been abducted. She is on the phone within (click of fingers) for two hours (Cara).

Friendships vary in their complexity and as such the type and level of social support exchanged between friends can have a great amount of variance. However, the data from the interviews illustrate that at home partners who are at the innocence, normalising his absence and balancing two lives have friends, or have developed friendships that provide the social support that they desire. However, the people at the innocence stage who isolate themselves from friends when the worker is at home risk losing friends if they remain in this stage for too long. The at home partners at the normalising his absence and balancing two lives reciprocate social support with friends that they feel can also reciprocate support that provides for their needs and the needs of
their friends. The at home partners situated in the *normalising his presence* have fewer friends to reciprocate social support, as friends are culled because they do not understand the pressures that the at home partner faces, or the at home partner is dropped by the friends because the friendship is not being reciprocated.

**Social support between the at home partner and neighbours**

The Australian study on community by Dempsey (1990, 99) suggests neighbouring is fostered by long term residence and people engage in ‘neighbouring’ on a day-to-day basis, in a variety of ways, with people who live quite close to one another. The qualification of being a neighbour is geographical location; living close to others. The neighbourhood was considered to be the source of community, but this seems to be shifting to the work place as many families in the community are now dual-earner families. More partners of offshore workers are not employed in paid work or work on a part-time basis. Theoretically, this allows for their greater participation in community with the neighbours, that is, if the neighbours are not at work.

Cotterell (1986, 368) states the personal communities of women with intermittently absent husbands contain proportionally more neighbours than women whose husbands have normal work patterns. The qualitative data illustrates a similar pattern in the exchange of social support between neighbours and partners of offshore workers. A closer look at the data reveals the exchange of support with neighbours is slightly higher in the category of providing instrumental help than companionship, while exchanging emotional support with neighbours appears to be less frequent (see Figure 13). In most cases, the exchange of instrumental help between neighbours is related to
geographical location. People exchange help with their neighbours in part because ‘they are the first people at hand’ (Sonia).

*We were the first to move into the street, so I know there are people here who will help, you know, neighbours have helped when the kids have fallen from bikes and this, running them to the doctor or the hospital* (Nadine).

Jodi was the only mother who expressed a feeling of being restricted by offers from other mothers to share the task of ferrying children to after school activities ‘I don’t want the I’ll take your daughter to guides, or such and such will say I’ll take your son to swimming on a Tuesday if you...’ Other mothers, such as Sonia and Denise however, approach sharing the task of taking children to school with a neighbour as beneficial for herself and the other mother.

*Figure 13. Social support between respondents and neighbours*

Instrumental help is usually not sought from neighbours if the partner’s problem relates to something that the worker would normally resolve if he was at home.

*I’ll wait for X to come home, because X is so handy I will wait for him to come home, you know, rather than pay somebody, cos [he says] ‘don’t get someone in to do it I can fix it when I get home’* (Kim).
On occasions when women required additional help they are reluctant to seek help from others outside of the family, rather, they develop strategies to deal with situations of this kind.

*I'm pretty independent, I can do a lot of things myself um over the years, before we came to Perth we had family to help, but here I don't have that so much, so um friends of my husbands, who are in the same industry... it depends on what it is... my oldest son, he's 18 - he is pretty good, he has learnt from his dad, so there are a lot of things that he can or we can do together - we'll fix it. Although if it's out of our league, we will call a repair man for sure* (Vicki).

The support that women talked about tended to be ‘one off’ rather than continuous or long term support; help was attending to an emergency or something that they cannot do for themselves or on their own. However, two women spoke about the continued emotional and instrumental support they provide to others. Betty, during the early years of her marriage, helped a friend who was a ‘single’ mum. Today, Betty and her friend of many years ago remain friends. Kim helped and continues to help her neighbour/friend.

Social support in terms of ‘being there’ for some women was important. Two women recalled that when their children were young, they each had a neighbour who became a friend that they could rely on to ‘have’ their children for a couple of hours while she had errands to run, and vice versa, and they would look after their neighbour’s children (Betty and Kim). And over a period of time, Betty and her neighbour developed their relationship from that of neighbour to a friendship.

*There is a lot of reciprocal stuff with a lot of friendships not just the support. There is a lot of friendship and doing things together and talking about different issues, a lot of that sort of stuff* (Betty).

The most frequent form of social support exchanged with neighbours is companionship, talking to one another, discussing the weather, news events and
neighbourhood issues. The provision of help in the form of the ‘taxi’ drive to and from school and minding pets and generally being a ‘good neighbour’ are ways neighbours exchange instrumental support. Offering help during emergencies is also a way of exchanging support among neighbours. Emotional support is the least exchanged form of social support with neighbours; when emotional support is exchanged neighbours have shifted to being friends, as indicated by Betty.

The exchange of social support by partners of offshore workers to the members of their personal networks appears, in this study, to suggest that partners provide more social support than they receive. The partners while at the innocence and normalising his presence stages receive more support than they provide. Those women who normalise his absence provide much more support than they receive. This is in part due to the partner at home’s belief that they are independent and thus do not need help from other people. Partners at the normalising his absence stage recognise that they are able to provide support to others while the worker is absent. Finally, families at the balancing two lives stage have more equal exchanges of support. There is no longer the desire to show they cope by supplying copious amounts of support to others, rather, they tend to balance their use of social support.
Chapter Six

Traversing the transition days

Introduction

*Men's work schedules are the revolving doors through which men leave and enter family relationships* (Hood and Golden 1979, 575)

The geographical separation of the offshore worker and family during the work period means the transition days represent a unique example of how the offshore worker schedule has become the 'revolving door' through which offshore workers leave and enter family relationships.

As illustrated in Chapter Two, one of the consequences of the work rosters used in the offshore oil and gas industry, or any form of work which requires the frequent intermittent absence from home by the worker, is a 'transition' period for both the worker and their family. For the family members who remain at home, the transition period is the few days before and after his arrival home, and, a day or more before and after his return to work. For the family, the transition days can be the most difficult to adjust to.

*That's the hardest, I can handle him being away, it's the time, the first week he comes home and the last two to three days that he's home* (Susan).

Some of the women interviewed have a prior exposure to the offshore oil and gas industry. The women have experience of the offshore work roster as a friend of an offshore worker (Leonie), as a friend of a partner of an offshore worker (Narelle), as a close family member of an offshore worker (Jodi and Susan), or as an onshore worker in the industry (Margaret and Leonie). Second-hand experience of the offshore work
roster did not provide women such as Leonie and Margaret with the tools to adjust to the work schedule, whereas Susan and Jodi, who have experienced first-hand family experience of the industry ‘gravitated’ to what they knew and entered a relationship with an offshore worker.

*I’ve friends who have worked offshore, so I knew about offshore shift work etc, so I was completely surprised by reactions and the actual cut and etc, so I thought I was far more prepared for it and tolerant of it than I actually was* (Leonie).

*I’ve experience of being on the other side of the industry [working for resource exploration company] but it took me a while to get used to it, but you just do, there’s a general acceptance of it* (Margaret).

*My mother is used to the system, she loves it, she enjoys having a partner working away, I’ve grown up with her as a role model, so I have a very similar view of the experience being a positive view* (Susan).

*I’ve got one brother who is in the mining industry, and I’ve also got another brother who works offshore as a skipper, so it’s our family environment, so it’s always been accepted I guess, and my dad, when I was a kid, the same thing, you know, he was always off, he was in the mining industry so he was always away, so I guess it’s always been a part of my life* (Jodi).

When women talked about their experiences of the transition days, they did not talk about other people being part of the transition process. The excitement and anxiety of his return home, and the tension and sadness felt as he returns to work are experienced as a nuclear family. ‘Getting used to’ the transitions associated with the work schedule can take time. Several women (Gwen, Susan, Barbara, Allison and Narelle) however, did talk about receiving emotional support from friends and family members when they talked about some of the difficulties they experience during the transition days. ‘*I’ve talked to my mum a lot, she knows what it’s like, she has helped me a lot*’ (Susan), ‘*Just knowing that others had the same experiences as me made a difference*’ (Gwen). Talking to others, especially those who also have personal experience of the offshore work schedule can provide women with emotional support. Women who share experience of the intermittent absence of a partner help one another as they listen to and
empathise with one another. In other words, as women talk about their experiences to others who share similar experiences they provide and receive emotional support.

The partners of offshore workers gain emotional support when they talk to others about the transition days, but frequently this does not occur during the transition days. It appears there is little emotional support provided to the nuclear family during the transition days. Many women, as discussed later in this chapter, would agree that they don’t get support from the family at this time as they are the ones who provide support to other family members. It also appears little or no instrumental support or companionship is given to the partners of offshore workers by extended family members, friends and others at this time. Women are focused on their family and their partner’s arrival home or the return to work and may not have the time to include others. The women who were interviewed did not include other people when they talked about their experiences of the transition period. It is possible to draw the conclusion that people outside the nuclear family are not invited to be present and, therefore, not able to provide any support during this time. People outside of the immediate family may see this time as ‘family time’ and, as such, not want to invade personal time. ‘Friends said, oh your husband is coming home that’s your time’ (Denise). Furthermore, as people engage in their own lives ‘keeping up’ with the offshore work schedule is not important and the partings and reunions become invisible to others outside of the family unit.

Most of the women from first families who were interviewed discussed the transition days as problematic at some level, while women with dependent children (Barbara, Allison, Cara, Jodi and Sonia) described transition days as more difficult. Women who
had children from a previous relationship/marriage did not talk about their experience of the transition days as problematic. Prior to their current relationship with an offshore worker, Megan, Margaret, Narelle and Emily were independent single mothers who had a supportive network of friends and had experienced a period of positive independence before they re-partnered. Thus, the arrival home of their partner was viewed as ‘the icing on the cake’ (Emily). Meanwhile, Margaret, who had a sick child and an ageing mother, when she and her partner were first together, felt the return home of the worker was a release of some of the pressures of coping with her day-to-day events.

*I had actually gone through a marriage break up and had lived on my own for a year, and was already very independent and in actual fact, took independence by the bit between the teeth, it was a real buzz for me. So to move into an environment where my partner was working offshore, I have to say, wasn’t difficult at all for me because I was already functioning quite well without a male person in the home. I had already learnt to build on my support networks I suppose, X was only a phone call away, he was also only away a week at a time, it wasn’t as though he was gone for any great length of time so most problems could wait until he got back (Megan).*

*I was already a fiercely independent person, because I’d been by myself for a long time. I had no family here, from the time I’d moved over here. When my first marriage broke up he went back [to the eastern states] so I was here by myself, with the children, with the responsibility of those things, so I’ve always had it. They were quite young, then, and so it was always, having X was a bonus rather than oh no he is going to start going away or he is away and what will I do? Because having him there for two weeks was a bonus, I was used to doing all by myself (Narelle).*

These transition days are particularly significant as it’s a time when many women ‘adapt’ to the changes in their lives that are created by the returning partner. Narelle experiences her partner’s work roster in a way that divides her life ‘you have two separate emotions, two separate parts of your life’. The arrival home of their partner means that women have another person other than themselves to consider as many aspects of everyday life now include two people.
I love the independence, when he is away, so when he comes home that’s gone, so you know from what we are going to have for dinner, to when we are going to sleep or where, or what we are going to do tonight, I’ve got to decide with someone else (Susan).

The arrival home of the worker

The worker’s imminent arrival home ignites feelings of tension, anxiety, excitement and anticipation in many women. When the relationship with the worker is new, and without children, most women spoke about the excitement they felt and the preparations they made for the arrival home of their partner in terms of preparing themselves and their home. The women engaged in gendered work as they prepared their home and themselves for the anticipated intimacy of the reunion with their partner.

I suppose when I was young and didn’t have kids, I would do my hair, paint my nails and pick him up at the airport (laugh) I would be all excited (Kim).

In any relationship in the beginning, very exciting and passionate and exciting and wonderful, so him going away um, we missed each other terribly and emails, we had so many long emails every single day, and two phone calls a day, every day, for half an hour and we just constantly communicated with each other while he was away, and getting ready for him coming home, I would get so excited and I’d get waxed, and buy new clothes and I’d clean my house completely and I’d do everything perfect for when he comes home, and I would make sure I had three days off work for the first three days he was home and all of this kind of stuff. Um, that when he came home that was so exciting, the whole world evolved around that moment (Susan).

The intermittent absence of her partner appears to contribute to maintaining the intimacy and the ‘newness’ of their relationship.

It was like a honeymoon each time he came home (Megan).

Because he works away, and it’s still a new relationship, after a year and a half, it still feels like a new relationship because he works away, um, it’s very intimate and very satisfying, because when he comes home we make the most of the time together and it’s more exciting about being together, because he is away half the time (Susan).
However, the reunion becomes a familiar routine and the newness of the reunions slowly eases away. Familiarity with the roster and the arrival of children seem to change women’s perspective towards the imminent arrival of their partner. The excitement level dissipates.

\textit{I shave my legs, that sort of thing, all the things you let go of I suppose, and um then he comes home} (Denise).

\textit{I might still wax my legs, but I don’t buy new clothes, and I don’t take three days off work, or any thing like that} (Susan).

\textit{I shave my legs before he comes home, but even now I have to say that even that doesn’t even worry me, even just lately that sort of thing doesn’t worry me, ok even like, the house again, but it would have to be all spotless and stuff and now I think stuff that, I’ll do it when he gets home, why should I kill myself, (laugh), I’d much rather say what if it’s dirty.. you know maybe I’m being a big head but I just think he is glad to see me, he doesn’t care if I’m hairy, I guess after 70 guys on the rig I look pretty good eh... (laugh)} (Sonia).

Sometimes preschool children travel with their mother to the airport to pick up the returning worker. Denise frequently took her young children out of school early to drive to the airport. But the early days of driving to the airport give way to the worker coming home from the airport by taxi. Paid work or family commitments also restrict the ability of the partner to be at home when the worker returns.

\textit{Now..., he comes home by taxi, and it’s oh yeah, you are home, can you run son here or can you...and then can you... (laugh)} (Kim).

\textit{I would ‘try’ to be home when he got home... he used to get here about half past one, two o’clock, and yeah I tried to work it so that I could be here, but I couldn’t, my shift doesn’t finish until 3 o’clock that day, and I would try and not work the next day, so he would get home about half past one, two o’clock on the Wednesday and I would try not to work the next day, or work an evening shift the next day, so we would have all the Thursday morning with him} (Nadine).

Many women, regardless of life cycle, talked about the household work they did before he arrived home; for most, it included housework and grocery shopping in preparation
for favourite meals. Grocery shopping and extra housecleaning were often a signal for children that their father was due home.

And the girls would know because you would be buying more food – stock the cupboards so that you wouldn’t have to be running to the shops after school all the time (Barbara).

It’s kind of weird before he comes home, they were laughing at school last week, Tuesday was the list of the particular meats that he particularly likes so I make sure I plan three weeks of menus so that it’s ultra special and I’ll drive everywhere, the bread is from either Jean Claude, or Barrett’s, the cheese is from Blue Cow, the meat was from ... and then it’s all brought in and the vegetables are from metro fresh so it’s all like he has a gourmet .. Time, it’s kind of weird, so that’s why I’m occupied (Cara).

I would have to do more shopping, I would usually clean the house and that sort of stuff, but that’s about it (Gail).

A few days before they come home, from what I’ve heard from a lot of people, they are madly running around doing house work, getting everything spot on. I always liked everything done when he comes home (Margaret).

I always do major cleaning I get all frenzied and do a big clean, kids to clean their room and um gardening and that sort of thing so try and get everything nice and tidy because we have, have got a lot of painting and things to do outside as well it’s just what we’ve got to try and make it look nice as possible for when he gets home so he doesn’t grumble on how much work there is to do the day he gets home (Denise).

When the couple have children there is generally a shift from couple intimacy to family love, affection and an expectation of family life together. Some mothers with younger children prepare the children for the return home of their father by building the children’s excitement as they count down the number of sleeps before daddy comes home, although as Gail points out, the children have to be old enough to understand, at some level, the concept of time.

If he was coming home on the Thursday I would start on the Monday, I would start with three more sleeps before daddy’s home (Barbara).

With my oldest, we would say, it’s ten days before daddy is home (Nadine)

He [son] is nearly seven so he [his dad] will say I’ll be back in a week and he knows what a week is now, whereas before I would just leave it to the
day before or something. I wouldn’t really have done that when they were young, because I didn’t want to get them too excited. (Gail)

As the return of the worker draws close, wives look forward to the arrival home of their partners.

It’s quite good when he is coming home, everything seems a bit easier, you think things are weighing you down a little bit and he is coming home, good, a bit of relief (Vicki).

I make sure that certain things may be done or this... sort of relax a little bit because you think oh good, he’ll be home soon. You know, I began to mentally relax (Francis).

Although mothers with dependent children express a sense of relief that their partner would soon be home and that help is on the way, they have also identified, by experience, that it would be a few more days before he unwound and overcame his grumpiness and tiredness. And while mothers are often tired, and the return home of the worker was met with expectations of him to provide support to his partner, mothers with dependent children continued as they had while he was away, being responsible for their house, their children, her self and now him.

I’ve had everything to do; they don’t appreciate that (Barbara).

Mothers with younger children create an air of excitement for the children’s reunion with their father. When the worker returns home, younger children display their affection and their pleasure at seeing their father again. On his return home, mothers with younger children often stood back to allow children and their father to reacquaint. By ensuring younger children are excited and happy to see their father, women are creating an additional burden and responsibility in accommodating her partner’s return home.

When he comes home, he does need a little time to wind down, he usually has a headache, and he is thrilled to see everyone of course. But em I never, I never never get, the kids pounce on him and talk about others. I just wait for a day or two so if there is anything I want to talk about or
whatever I wait for the right time and I just have, cos the kids go crazy when he gets in, you just can’t you know, you’ve got to wait your turn sort of thing (Francis).

The kids were just so excited about having their dad come home, I suppose it would be, he would come home and we would have a quick kiss, and it would only be a peck a ‘hi love’ and each child would sort of clamber over him and it used to be and when we got the dog it used to be the dog, laugh, he was first of all, happy that Dad has come home and then each child and then it was me, and I just stood back and let that all happen, because it has to happen (Nadine).

I’ll pick them [the children] up early to take them to the airport or depending on which time he’s coming home and we always get to the airport early and the kids wait so they can see the plane come in. Um it’s always a little bit unreal when he comes home. It’s like looking at the person that you haven’t seen for a month and not forgotten what they look like but it’s almost (silence) oh it’s just errr there’s an air of expectation for some reason. You are on your toes a bit um with him coming home and the children always have to sit on his knee and in his face and telling him everything, and he’s usually the last three times he’s come home he’s not slept for 24- hours, so he’s exhausted and you can see it he’s exhausted so it’s quite interesting because the children so in his face and he’s like you know trying to keep his eyes open …. We usually stay up quite late the night he comes home (even though he’s tired) just to catch up just little things little bits of maybe gossip or what the kids said. And if he’s still awake, I just keep talking, depends on what’s happening the next day um like I said I’m working so I’m usually pretty tired by 10am (laugh) anyway so usually a special dinner maybe cook his favourite dinner maybe a roast or something like that (Denise).

Some two decades ago, Storey et al.(1989, 142) highlighted the fact that the ‘burden and responsibility’ for aiding the transition of the worker back into the family was viewed, by offshore workers as the ‘duty’ of women. It appears little has changed for some partners of current offshore oil and gas workers. The partners of the workers carry the burden and responsibility of the transition from work to home for the worker. The worker’s tiredness is used by women to understand and excuse the worker’s unsocial behaviour when he returns home. His grumpiness, irritability and argumentative behaviour are attributed to his tiredness. Accepting this behaviour as the consequence of lack of sleep, the partners of offshore workers absolve the worker of his responsibility regarding his unsocial behaviour. For some women his grumpy attitude
when the worker arrives home has become both acceptable and expected: ‘We usually have an argument the two days he is home and then we are okay for two weeks’ (Denise).

The reality, however, for Denise is she doesn’t have two weeks that are okay. It takes three days for the argument between herself and her partner to brew, explode and to reconcile; she also experiences two days of tension prior to her partner’s return to work. The worker is home for 14-days and five days are lost to the tensions and arguments surrounding the transition days. Thus, women such as Denise have nine days when she and her partner are ‘okay’. Wives who have normalised the partner’s presence at home experience only the time that the partner is at home as normal family life. In addition, if they have similar experiences as Denise, they may find they experience nine days that are okay and normal each month.

In Chapter Two the lack of sleep was identified as problematic for offshore workers. Most women who were interviewed, especially those who are at home when he returns from work talked about their partner’s tiredness. The worker’s tiredness can have a huge negative impact on the partner when he returns home as the couple prioritise his needs over her needs.

*He is always tired at the end of his hitch, and he needs to come home and he needs to recharge his batteries. My expectations often when he comes home probably are a bit high. And he is so tired, and I think no just leave him, I’ve got to carry on doing everything for the next two days and then he will start helping a bit (Kim).*

*He always puts the effort in to try and be awake and not be tired, but he is tired. For us, it’s two days, he needs to go to bed early (Susan).*

*He would be tired, he would get headaches, but he would not be grumpy. He is not a grumpy person, so I think grumpy also comes up as part of the personality. I think the flying would knock you off, because when I used to*
do that and then come home I would be knackered myself, because somehow the altitude and the distance and all that and travelling (Emily).

He can be quite tired so it might be a couple of days. We get along pretty well so it's not a big issue. He's just sort of a bit tired, and now that I'm at work he just has a couple of days sitting around not doing a lot (Vicki).

Um you look forward to them coming home and they're home and he and I can only talk about him specifically, he's grumpy because he has been at work, ... so yeah, I look forward to him coming home and he is grumpy for a couple of days, and picks holes in things and stuff, picks a few holes in things and we have this big fight and the air is cleared (Sonia).

He comes home mid week. He's usually rested by the weekend, if he comes home on a Friday afternoon he still needs a couple of days to get his feet back on the ground unwind a little. He is usually quite irritable when he comes home, not the first day, but maybe 24-hours after he becomes irritable he's tired, so I make allowances for that. I appreciate that he has worked 12-hours a day seven days a week for a number of weeks, um and then by the time that he has unwound (Denise).

He definitely needs a couple of days to unwind, and um it's just a matter of give and take really, when he does come home again, just getting used to each other again (Nadine).

He flew in Friday afternoon. Friday night was actually my birthday, um. He didn't want to go anywhere, he didn't want to take me to dinner anywhere he didn't want to do anything he didn't want to see anyone. So I organised my whole family during the day, but we didn't plan that his family would show up. We were coming home from the airport and they were waiting when we got here. It wasn't planned, and he couldn't get angry with me. I was angry; he could have taken me to dinner. If he had took me to dinner he wouldn't be here (laugh), so he got paid back. Yes, you have the time of feeling tired, yeah, by Sunday the bags under his eyes are terrible, cos he is doing like, 18 – 20, 18-hours a day at the moment cos, he is only having six hours sleep it's not good, he is always tired, when he wakes up ... how are you... tired... that's just life (Cara).

Meanwhile, women who have experience of many years of the partings and reunions that are associated with the offshore work schedule also accommodate the offshore worker’s return to the family home. They devise strategies to manage the family to alleviate some of the problems associated with his tiredness and the reintegration of the worker with the family.

The first weekend even though he was always tired I would try and make it that it was a house free weekend, where we would go on a picnic or go to
the beach or just not do ‘house things’ even though the list would be by the fridge like that (expressing length of list) this needs fixing, (laugh) (Barbara).

Well we obviously talk to each other every day when he is away anyway. You know functions are coming up, outing or whatever I let him know, so, this is when you come home we have been invited here there or everywhere, so we’ve got a reasonable idea and we have a diary by the phone that we both use, so we know what is happening (Francis).

I still work the day he gets home, and start work at seven o’clock the next morning, which is good in another way, which gives him that time just to settle in and not be overwhelmed with anything, because even though we communicate a lot on the phone now, it’s still a lot being going on (Nadine).

So I find that the first couple of days when he comes home that it’s exciting, it’s interesting but it’s also quite difficult too, because X wants to come home and it’s his position in the family again, and we might differ, someone said that you have to go through this little tussle and then everyone settles down and is right again. So I actually find that it works better if we talk about it before he comes home, if we talk about it before he comes home it actually works better (Allison).

When they were little, I used to give him those ...(laugh), his therapy, we used to say, here are the seccateurs go out and have your therapy (laugh). You know he used to go and prune the garden (laugh), and that was his therapy because he was on a boat – with four other men and the sound of the engine going, so there was no little noises going on so he would come home to all this family situation and all the kids wanted was daddy daddy daddy, and you know it was, he was very good with them, but you could see he was a bit tense, because he was not used to having little noises for five weeks so that was when we used to say that was his... yeah it took about three days sometimes up to a week to become re-civilized laugh, get back into being a family man again, and that’s when we said his therapy like we said pruning was his therapy (Nadine).

In this study, it appears to take time or previous first hand experience of the offshore work schedule for couples to develop strategies to facilitate a smooth transition of the worker’s arrival home and his return to work. Talking about the transition phase with others who have experienced similar transitions provides women with the knowledge that their partner’s tiredness is similar to other workers. In addition, talking about a problem with others who have experienced the same issue can help produce solutions or strategies to deal with the issue at hand. However, often a strategy exists because
women prioritise the needs of their partners before her needs. Thus, it appears contemporary female partners of offshore workers take responsibility for workers’ transition from work to home. Mothers with dependent children aim at providing a home environment that is as stress-free as possible. The domestic/family work that couples have determined as being ‘his’ work is put on hold until he has recovered from his tiredness. In addition, family and/or couple discussions are also left until the worker feels rested. The strategy facilitates an easier reengagement for the offshore worker to their family.

Developing strategies to ease the worker’s return home may be more difficult to achieve when the partner at home is exhausted after single-handedly caring for a family with young children. The female partners of the workers acknowledge the worker’s tiredness and the high number of hours he has worked in the preceding weeks. However, the partners also want some recognition from the worker of the work she has done in the previous two or more weeks. While the worker is absent, mothers are managing the home, providing care, parenting and in some instances participating in paid work. The reunion between the worker and a partner with young children is a reunion of two very tired people.

_I’ve had 14-days of tiredness too, and I don’t have my meals cooked for me, and I don’t have someone washing my clothes or doing my cooking, I have to do all that, plus run the house and go to work, and then have the sleepless nights. I don’t think that men choose to be that ignorant with domestic life, all the time, but sometimes you just need to point out a couple of things_ (Barbara).

_The last four or five [days] I really can’t wait for him to come back as I’m really tired too_ (Sonia).

_I find discipline with the children extremely difficult when I am on my own and getting them to do things. I work very hard at that um, but I just feel exhausted_ (Francis).
The worker’s return to work

The time at home is a period of recuperation and some workers think of this time away from work as a ‘holiday’. The sense that the leave period between offshore tours is a holiday creates a stark contrast between the leave period and the highly structured routine on offshore oil and gas facilities. Workers frequently struggle to structure their free time during their leave period. As a result, when the leave period draws to an end some workers find themselves rushing to complete the family work previously negotiated as ‘his’ work. The wives/partners feel that workers consider the work that they complete as providing help so that they can cope with his forthcoming absence. Meanwhile, his partner provides the worker with instrumental help in making sure he is prepared for his return to work, which can be unsettling and cause tension within the family. The family repeatedly experiences this form of unsettling and tension, and for some families, they may repeat his return to work up to 26-times each year.

Before he went away, he’d have things that he wanted to do and he would be rushing around and always leave it to the last two days before he went, um. And we would like have to run around after him, until he went and then it would be like phew, he has gone, thank god for that. Then he would be back again. Those few days before he went and the few days when he got back yeah, were a bit unsettling (Gail).

Um I usually start to fret a bit um think he’s not gonna be away from home for four weeks and I’m going to miss him so much and um I tend to get a little bit um agitated because he’s not a great planner of what he’s going to take and things like that, usually I’m sewing labels and taking up hems or counting underpants and socks and things with him but he usually leaves it till a couple of hours before he’s meant to be at the airport to pack his bag (ha) so that becomes very tense (Denise).

The heightened levels of tension experienced during the worker’s transition from work to home is also evident in families and between couples during the transition of the worker from home to work. One of the issues that gives rise to the tension is the worker’s feelings of guilt that his family will have to cope on their own once he returns to work. The stress he experiences prior to his imminent separation from the family
can cause friction between couples. It was not a time to make important decisions either.

I used to call it ppb, pre platform blues, the household has a sort of atmosphere before he goes, especially 24-hours before he goes, every one is a bit itchy, a bit testy, a bit short with one another, little things can become major things... umm nothing of importance should be discussed that day (laugh), cos it can turn into a massive argument (Barbara).

I know that last night he is awake and he starts to get stressed a couple of days before and he is saying, I've got to go back to work (Karen).

It's almost like there's a finality about it [his return to work]. It's like tying up loose ends (Denise).

We start getting cranky with each other, then he is gone (Sonia).

The offshore work schedule is the only form of work roster some of the children of offshore workers have experienced. Most mothers didn't feel that the children were really affected by their partner's work schedule, although Sonia became a little concerned when her children were younger because her children did not seem to be bothered about the absence of their father. She worried 'Are my children ok? Have they not bonded with their father? But you worry about things like that. You worry how those things affect them and stuff' (Sonia). Barbara, on the other hand, said that this study had prompted her to think about how the offshore work roster had impacted her children; she felt that it had made them quite independent; both daughters were now travelling, independently, overseas. However, she did recall how the daughters had reacted to the work schedule as they became adolescents. The girls began to express their disapproval that their father had to return to work as they were able to understand how the subsequent separation from their father affected them as individuals.

I can remember them [the children] saying 'Oh you wont be here' a couple of times, umm, the younger one the lack of display of ummm hugs and stuff like that, just shrug the shoulder, like that. So you're not going to be here, so don't expect me to run into arms and hug and that sort of thing, but that
was sort of how it would be when the bag would come out and the taxi is called (Barbara).

While another woman (Cara) happily talked about her young daughter coping with the lifestyle. She is more worried about her partner, who was abducted while working in the industry overseas (an increasing risk for offshore oil and gas workers working in some overseas locations). Cara experiences additional tension and stress because of her partner’s previous experience while going to work overseas in the offshore industry.

*It doesn’t worry me she [daughter] is fine. She just knows that’s life she has not known any different, so she doesn’t think it when he has gone. Sometimes she wants to say goodbye to the taxi but she can’t keep her self awake. Um and for me, it depends, I’m probably a little bit more paranoid now with him going, and it’s like this big lecture, don’t go out, don’t drink with him, don’t…* (Cara).

Conversely, the routine departures of the worker are just part of the offshore families’ experience of normal, and this sense of normality was evident in what was not spoken about during interviews with women who had experienced the offshore roster for a number of years. For some women the frequent departures and returns have become routine for them, *‘It’s just like the tide comes in; the tide goes out’* (Allison); *‘He comes; he goes’* (Barbara). As children grow older and the partings and reunions become a part of everyday life the reaction of children to the return of their father tends to lessen. Barbara said that her partner misses the reunions he and their children had when the children were young; *‘It was a special time for him’* which doesn’t happen now the children are young adults. Vicki also talked about how children getting older and having their own lives impacts on her partner’s return home saying she thought the transition to home was more difficult now *‘than a few years ago, I think X finds it really hard at times now that the children are older, they do their own thing’*. Both these fathers were experiencing a displacement of the father role as their children grew older; however, as this in itself is another topic of research it cannot be developed here.
The offshore worker’s work schedule becomes normal for the family and as children grow older and develop their own interest the return home of their father is no longer ‘the highly anticipated event it was when the children were younger’ (Barbara).

The normalisation surrounding the routine process of separation is different when it is not the worker who leaves. When the partner of the worker becomes the person who leaves for extended periods (due to work commitments or visiting family interstate or overseas), rather than the worker, the routine process of separation does not occur. Instead, couples experience separation as if it is a new experience. The couple revisit the stress and emotions they experienced prior to when the return of the worker became routine.

*In all the years we have been married he has always been the one who has gone away, I have always been the one to stay home. And in that time I had two weeks in the States for training and just as he was going back to work, I had a week in Canberra and it was funny because the day he took me to the airport when I went to Washington we were both quite emotional, we do this every fortnight, so why was it so different? But it was just a whole role reversal and something that we had never had to deal with before, so that was a bit difficult, and the time he had a home was a bit stressful not because he was home, but because it was frustrating for him with his finger [work related injury to his finger prevented him from returning to work offshore] and I think he was a bit anxious about how the company was going to deal with this, ‘I should be back at work and I’m not’ and he ended up having to go into the office to do work, and they all hate that, you know what that is like, it’s their worst nightmare. So that was a little stressful on the home front just because he was anxious (Karen).*

As the offshore worker returns to work, the partner’s focus is preparing herself and her family to live their lives for the next few weeks without the worker. One method mothers use to adapt to the absence of their partner is by acknowledging the impact, of the worker’s absence on themselves and their children. Mothers allow children to express their feelings about the loss (albeit temporary) of their father. Older children are more able to voice their displeasure that their father has returned to work, whereas
younger children may ‘act out’ by being ‘naughty’, as they are unable to vocalise their feelings. Understanding the reasons behind the changes in children’s behaviour when their father returns to work and giving children time to ‘vent’ their feelings helps mothers manage their children during the following weeks while the worker is absent.

*I find when he first leaves, they [the children] are usually a bit naughty so I find parenting a lot harder because there’s the one parent the majority of the time* (Jodi).

Mothers, such as Barbara and Sonia, adapt to the absence of the worker by acknowledging the impact of the workers’ absence and continuing to live ‘their’ normal life for the following two weeks. They experience the offshore lifestyle as bifurcated worlds, one that has the worker present and one in which the worker is absent.

*And when he has gone, it would be a quiet 24-hours, it [the children] could be a little bit sulky, picking on me, very much so, and then the pattern goes on. Every now and again you might have the remark of ‘dad won’t be here anyway’ so what ... anyway, it was like it was my fault, cos you are the one who is left behind, everything is your fault... when he went, um I used to, whether it was my feeling, no, it may have been like flogging a dead horse, I didn’t want to be anywhere, I didn’t want to socialise that first night, so whether the girls picked up on that. So we would spend the night quiet, if there were school things on and that sort of thing, but no. It would be later in the week when it’s ok, (chirpy voice). It’s pizza night tonight come on what are we going to have?* (Barbara).

*For the first day you feel quite lonely and what have you. The girls will say oh we miss daddy and what have you, but then we get over that, (sigh) and things are fine for awhile cos it’s only two weeks* (Sonia).

While most women talked about putting their lives back in order and reacquainting themselves with their other ‘normal’ life, two women spoke about the tension they had felt prior to their partner’s return to work and the effect the work schedule had on them as young mothers. Sonia recalled when she would put her life on hold when her partner was at work. *I sort of withdrew from the world a bit*. Sonia’s withdrawal from the world is linked to how she normalised her life around the presence of her partner. Sonia did not change her reaction to the offshore lifestyle until her eldest child started
school, some six years after her partner began working offshore. Working offshore was a decision made by Sonia and her partner to enable them to provide a better life for their family. Following a traditional family model of mum at home with the children and dad engaged in paid work, Sonia and her partner agreed the offshore work schedule and the associated high income had a number of advantages for a young family. Sonia did not need to return to paid work and her partner did not have to work six or seven days each week. The choice of the father to work in the offshore oil and gas industry gave this new family the opportunity to spend more time together as a family than had he remained working in Perth. Sonia did not expect her reaction to the offshore work schedule and the intermittent absence of her partner. In a similar respect, Francis also had not anticipated her experiences as she tried to blend motherhood and the offshore work schedule.

*I'd just find em, before he is about to go the day or so I did get anxious. I'd think what haven't we done or what hasn't been done or what haven't I done in that time that I thought I might get done when he is at home and I just saw this pit of black in front of me. I just saw this dark hole of two weeks and I think oh god, I've got to get through the next two weeks on my own, and I did get a bit anxious yeah, and I think oh yuk you know* (Francis).

It would appear that both Sonia and Francis have experienced difficulties in adjusting to the absence of their partner when their children were very young. Today, Francis and Sonia see their lives differently, both are aware that they need to develop their own lives while their partner is at work, for Sonia and Francis the challenge will be balancing the two lives.

The return to work also means that women experience home life without their husband/partner. Being at home on their own is something women *'get used to'* (Gwen). Some women said being in the house on their own at night can cause them
some distress. However, they also acknowledge that for their own sense of well-being adjusting to the absence of their partner was something they needed to do.

I was very afraid to be in the house on my own, still can be scary sometime. Occasionally we are all vulnerable which lures in the night um I can remember the first time he went offshore the cat was out the door at 6 o’clock and um the curtains were drawn and the doors were locked you know, the light bulb was changing (laugh). I used to leave all the males jobs but (laugh) you just learnt to cope (Allison).

I always take him to the airport and that morning is always hard, that’s the one and funny enough as silly as it sounds for the time that he has been doing the job, when I come back I am my own worst enemy, I always go back to bed, which I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t just stay up, because it’s always harder to get up when I have to get up. But I always find it hard to come back into the house. And when he is away and if I go out I come home I come into a house and we always leave the lights on and it doesn’t phase me. But that first morning, particularly in winter when it’s dark when I come back into the house it’s like .... And once in the house, I don’t know why I should be spooked about it but by the time I get upstairs, I say I do this to yourself every time, but it’s something, psychological thing, but always that first morning and probably that first day, I guess and then it’s back into that whole drill again and it’s fine again (Karen).

When I am on my own I’m much more aware of noises etcetera, and I do get a bit scared, so yeah. We were broken into a few years ago and I was on my own at the time and he wasn’t here, and that’s affected me more I think than he has any idea about. Cos I heard them trying to get in [the house]. So I’m really scared, aware that it can happen and I was pretty stressed about it. I just, I just worry about what would I do, I don’t know I always make sure I’ve got the phone by my bed and the numbers and all that sort of stuff (Francis).

We had a lot of trouble in the street and yes, I did feel very vulnerable then living alone, because it wasn’t a usual neighbourhood dispute it was a very violent you know with knives and guns and you know, I mean it was a siege it went on, well it is [name of suburb] they do have those pockets. You can speak to your husband on the phone but he is out at sea. There is not a great deal that he can do. All he can say on the phone is that he wished he was not on the phone and I hope nothing happens to you but having to deal with you know the police, and taking your children. But I don’t think many women whose husbands work offshore actually have to go through that situation, that just happens to be because of the area that we have chosen to live in to make the money on the house. So we have chosen a housing commission housing area which is improving. So we were doing it for the financial gain as well, you know so yes, we could very easily move as well, mind you ... so the impact that way was very hard to tolerate myself, I was very frightened (Jodie).
Women who have no dependent children appear to experience transition days with less tension than women who have dependent children. They do not need to reassert total responsibility for dependents. Indeed, they may experience the worker’s return to work as a sense of freedom; they revert to their ‘single’ life in which they do not need to give consideration to their partner in planning their everyday activities.

_The first day he leaves is great, what I do to deal with that, every time is I go shopping, I buy the groceries I like I probably buy myself something nice, if I’ve got any money, like a new T-shirt or something. I clean the house, I buy some flowers, I do all these things to make myself feel better, I probably ring a friend, or a few friends and put the date in my diary of when I’m going to have coffee with them, and make other plans for more work so I get everything organized for my time to myself_ (Susan).

_I don’t want to think about him going away again, but it’s his job. It’s the job he likes, and I’m not going to interfere in his work because I don’t think that is a good thing, so I just tell myself, well, we are off again, and usually the day he goes I go straight to Burswood and I’ll sit on the machine, the twenty cent poker machine and I... usually I’ll bump into some one I know, but that’s it, you think, oh well, life is back to what it was before_ (Margaret).

Leonie spoke about the emotional yo-yo she experiences during the partings and reunions with her partner. Her attachment to her partner when he is at home is strong and when he returns to work the separation she experiences is strong too. Leonie feels a sense of grief for the loss of her partner when he returns to work. It takes Leonie a few days before she feels that she is capable of resuming her ‘normal’ life without him.

_We are both old enough to have our own hobbies and lots of interests and we are very similar in our likes and dislikes, so er, we do everything together. So the first couple of days when he is away I generally walk around in circles, not know what to do. It feels like even a grieving process of I look for him, I talk to him, and I generally don’t do much at all the first couple of days – walk around just sitting from one spot to another...when you get out of your environment you focus on other things etc. but when you know, it was all fun happening here and then all the fun has gone and it’s just you in the house. Its, nothing has changed, everything has changed, you haven’t changed, the environment hasn’t changed so um yeah, you know sometimes I can get quite I feel like I’ve been abandoned or what’s so great, and today it’s all gone, so it’s yeah, I hate it. I hate that two days of feeling awful, a couple of days of feeling ok. And then I get into_
a routine. I know he does the same; he has his own little thing when he gets offshore to take him to settle down. I settle down, I finally start to sleep properly, I finally start to become a little more sociable. I’m certainly more productive at work, because it’s only me that I’m having to address ... and then it’s the couple of days knowing that he’s coming home and it’s just it’s just phew it’s just emotional yoyo and still trying to live a normal routine of work, and get up and do those sort of things. (Leonie)

The voices of the female partners of offshore workers have described the ways in which the transition days impact on their lives and on their family life. The women are required to manage their own reunion and subsequent parting with the worker and their children’s reunion with and parting from their father, and manage the worker’s re-engagement in and departure from the family unit. Furthermore, the partner at home is also managing the worker’s reengagement with and departure from the family. In addition, her yo-yo of emotional experiences of excitement, anxiety, tension, sadness and grief, make the transition days a difficult time for women in first families.

It is evident that first families with dependent children experience the transition days as quite stressful, while second families and women without children or with no dependent children experience the transition as less stressful. There are certainly women and families in this study that have or do struggle, at times, with transition days. Just as Storey et al.(1989, 142) noted women, from their study, bore the responsibility and the burden of re-engaging the worker back into the family, it appears the women in this study are also taking the responsibility and burden of the transition days. However, it seems the most affected group of women are those in first families with dependent children. Women in second families, who have children from a previous relationship, do not carry this burden. For this group of women, their task appears to be facilitating the shift from ‘single-hood’ to ‘couple-hood’ life. Narelle’s ritual says it all. After she has taken her partner to the airport, as she drives home her
ritual is to repeat ‘my life, my house, my bed, my…’ As she drives to the airport to pick up her partner when he is returning home, she repeats to herself ‘not my life, shared house, shared bed, shared, to get yourself back into sharing, because it takes a bit to work out the two’ (Narelle).
Chapter Seven

The day-to-day experiences of family life for families of offshore workers

Introduction
The offshore work schedule exposes the families of workers to repeated patterns of the worker’s continuous absence from home followed by the worker’s continuous presence at home. Some of the difficulties families experience due to the work schedule includes the reintegration of worker and family, and the worker’s temporary absence from the family that occurs during the transition days (as illustrated in Chapter Five). In addition, the repeated patterns of absence/presence create the possibility of families developing two lifestyles, one when the worker is present and another when the worker is absent. Some families develop strategies of adapting to the cyclical presence and loss of the worker, while others ‘fall into’ a pattern of adjustment.

In this chapter the everyday lives of those who experience the intermittent absence of the worker is discussed. The four reactions to the intermittent absence of the worker (Innocence, Normalising his presence, Normalising his absence and Balancing two lives), as discussed in Chapter Four, are illustrated in this chapter. Data obtained from the questionnaire (questions 19-22) and the voices of the women who were interviewed illustrate the impact of the offshore work schedule on the at home partners.

The chapter commences with the impact of the worker’s work schedule on the at home partner’s paid work commitments and choice of paid work patterns. The following
issues are discussed: division of domestic labour; children and parenting; socialising; and communication while he is at work. These five topics highlight not only the reaction to the offshore work schedule by the at home partner, but also illustrate how the family lifecycle influences the experiences of the at home partner.

The impact of his work on her work

When exposure to the offshore work schedule is new to the at home partner, the amount of free time available to the worker during his continuous presence at home impacts the at home partners’ attitude to their work patterns. Women who work full-time, in a Monday to Friday, nine-to-five work pattern experience conflict when juxtaposing their work pattern with the offshore workers’ work pattern.

During the early days of exposure to the offshore roster (Innocence stage), Karen, Leonie and Kim sometimes felt reluctant and annoyed that they had to go out to work when their partner is at home on leave. Her paid work, particularly full-time, reduced the availability of time the couple could be together during his leave periods. In addition, the women felt that the offshore worker’s schedule gave the workers choices that they, because they were employed on a full-time basis, did not have. These three women wanted to spend time with their partner; they wanted to share his free time as a couple. This is experienced by women in the first family group (Karen and Kim) and Leonie, a member of the second family group.

The hardest thing, which I have got used to now, he has been doing the job for nearly eight years. But certainly in the beginning it was difficult, you’re working full-time, and he would come home and you would think gee I want to have that time at home, I don’t want to go off to work. So there was sort of a pull that way initially when he first started and that did take probably a couple of years to get used to and that whole role of him coming home, and I think too, initially he kind of was finding things to do in his time, but now we are in more of a routine when he is home (Karen).
I hate it, I hate it. I am probably getting to an age where I have been working, I feel that I have been working long enough, bit of a quandary, if I was on my own, you would just have to get on with it anyway, but when someone is having the time off that they have, the freedom to make choices as they wake up and do things, and the hobbies that we have that he can do on his own. So I actually get quite frustrated in my complete routine, which is you know, all day every day, every year and has for the last umm 20-25 years, and I’m just like, I’d love a break too. And it is very difficult I’m surprised that I haven’t been reprimanded at work, my attitude changes, I’m quite negative, I’m late, and I leave early, (laugh). Um, don’t cope with it at all well. And er, as he said, he is going back on the offshore roster, but at the moment he has been in town for a few months, it’s great, I get up and go to work cos he gets up and goes to work. Um, but it will be an issue when he goes back offshore. I’m very aware of that, and sigh I don’t know really yeah, I’ve got to find something, or how to manage that but it is a distinct difference at work, my production is down, my enthusiasm, it’s minimalistic; it’s not good (Leonie).

At the beginning I was working full time, we had no kids, I was working full time and he was working up north. I used to love it when he came home, loved it. And that was a bit hard going off to work, working full time when he was at home, I found that difficult (Kim).

Changing to part-time work may give Leonie, and others, the opportunity to spend more time with their partner. Although part-time work is one of the most frequently used flexible work arrangements in Australia, there are a number of factors which make part-time work less attractive than it could be, and this can mean it can sometimes be difficult for employees to find ‘quality’ part-time work (Morgan 2005, 1). Leonie, currently a full-time worker, had given some thought to changing from full-time to part-time work. At present, she considers the choice of part-time work would not only impact her financially, but also in the type of work that would be available to her on a part-time basis.

I’d love to [work part-time], I suppose the reason why, financially er, I can’t afford to do it. But that’s probably the biggest catch, although it may be the first excuse that you can think of. Definitely thinking about options of maybe job sharing where, while he is offshore I would be working, and then I would have some time off when he is home. Um, yes, that underlying, it’s always the cash issue. Whether I could be prepared to change my lifestyle to reflect the lower income or not, but yes, it’s something that I
would like to think more seriously about. And try and put in some sort of opportunity. I think anyone who works part time is not really an innovative, inspiring team leader. I don’t think even that role would allow you to do that. You need to be there to motivate, coach, [and] support the crew, so being a part time bash I think that’s not even fair on the organisation, so I have a few other issues with doing that. Even though it suits me personally, it wouldn’t bring the best out of my group or out of the service that we provide. I would be going and doing the day-to-day basics and that’s all you would be able to manage to get through. I think even the company would probably have a concern about it and rightfully so. Yes, that’s why I haven’t really come to any conclusions about how to manage that, I think that it’s all a bit too hard and I would actually have to leave to go and do it I have to go and do something else to do the part-time work. I have quite a busy position and a bit of responsibility um and expectation. I probably would have to go and just go, if you are prepared to give that up and just enjoy the life rather than a bit of both, so yeah a big decision to make (Leonie).

In this study, the work patterns of partners of offshore workers, illustrate approximately one third (the majority of respondents) are employed on a part-time basis and less than a quarter (23%) of respondents are in full-time paid work. The remaining partners are employed on a casual basis (11%) and almost one third (30%) did no paid work. In addition, one participant stated her employment pattern as ‘self employed’ without indicating her time commitment levels to her business (see Figure 14).

Before the patterns of full-time employment of female partners of offshore workers are discussed two points are mentioned. Firstly, the data from the only male respondent has been removed, so that a comparison between national data on women’s full-time work patterns and the full-time work patterns of female partners of offshore workers can occur. The group representing the <24 years of age contains only one representative, as a result, this age category is not used when comparing employment patterns across age groups, as data from one person cannot represent a group.
Figure 14. Respondent’s patterns of paid work.

Sourced from data obtained from questionnaire.

The work patterns of full-time employment among the respondents of the questionnaire illustrate some differences to Australian national patterns (see Figure 15). Fewer partners of offshore workers, in the following age groups, 55-64 years of age; 35-45 years of age; and 25-34 years of age are employed in full-time paid work compared with the national average of full-time female workers in the same age groups. Contrary to the pattern of full-time employment, in this study, more partners in the 45-54 years of age group are in full-time employment than the national average of women working full-time in the same age group.

Another factor in the participation rate of full-time employment may also be the influence of membership to first and second families. For example, except Margaret, who initially worked full-time and has now retired, all the interviewees identified as members of ‘second families’ participate in full-time work. Mothers in second families had children from the previous relationship, and at the time of the interviews had no dependent children. Meanwhile, all mothers from ‘first families’, who were interviewed, engage in part-time employment, or do no paid work. None of the ‘first
family’ mothers was employed on a full-time basis. The impact of motherhood on participation rates in employment is considered in greater detail later in this chapter.

Figure 15. Comparing women’s full-time work patterns by age group

![Full-time work pattern comparison by age group](image)

Sourced from questionnaire and National Women’s Employment Statistics (ABS 2007).

The previous section illustrated, that on average, partners of offshore workers participate in full-time employment at a lower rate than the national average. It follows, all things being equal, if fewer partners are participating in full-time employment there are therefore more partners who are available to engage in paid employment, in a part-time capacity. However, when the patterns of part-time employment of partners of offshore workers in this study are compared with those of the Australian national statistics of women’s part-time employment, the contrary seems to be indicated. Fewer partners of offshore workers participate in part-time employment than the national average (see Figure 16).
Figure 16. Comparing women’s part-time work patterns by age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Part time</th>
<th>National stats P/T</th>
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<tr>
<td>25 - 34 yrs</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>35 - 44 yrs</td>
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<td>45 - 54 yrs</td>
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<tr>
<td>55 - 64 yrs</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>50</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sourced from study questionnaire and National Women’s Employment Statistics (ABS 2007).

In this study, the majority of partners of offshore workers participate in part-time and casual work. Participating in part-time work is becoming more evident in western societies (Duncan et al. 2003, 310). The second highest work pattern is no paid work, followed by full-time employment. A desire to spend time with the offshore worker during his leave period, and the high income associated with employment in the offshore oil and gas industry can be suggested as contributing to the low employment rates of partners of offshore workers. The impact of motherhood on patterns of employment is considered later in this section. It is worthwhile mentioning here that women who have traditional views of family roles, that is, a male breadwinner and a female carer, are assisted, by the worker’s income, to choose the traditional gendered role of nurturing and childcare rather than paid work (Bielby and Bielby 1989, 784).
The high income of the offshore worker enables women with a traditional ideology of family to prioritise a family primary caregiver role.

*The return of the worker*

During the *Innocence* stage the return of the worker creates a reunion between the partner and the worker. It is a time when they enjoy the benefits of the high income. His high earnings facilitate holidays and more socialising with friends when he is at home.

*When he came home, we did things together, went out with our friends, went on holidays and that sort of thing* (Gail).

Women who have no dependents at home experience a greater shift from ‘single’ status to ‘couple’ status when they plan simple day-to-day activities. When workers are absent, the women do not share the minor day-to-day decisions with another person. When the worker returns home, this group of women have to readjust how they think and plan day-to-day activities. There is now another person who is part of her personal life, and decisions she has previously made, when alone, about day-to-day activities such as, what to watch on television or what to eat for dinner are now made with thought given to the partner or the partner sharing the decision making process. The awareness of their two lives positions both Susan and Betty in the ‘balancing two lives’ stage.

*I love the independence (when he is away), so when he comes home that’s gone, so you know from what we are going to have for dinner, to when we are going to sleep, or where, or what we are going to do tonight, I’ve got to decide with someone else* (Susan).

*You would just get your life more organized (phone rings) and he’d be back ... pinching the telly controller and making decisions about what telly program you were going to watch, um and then he would go and you would just get your house back into how you like it and the meals how you liked them and then suddenly you have to consider this other person, who although in all fairness to him he is not deliberately difficult but in the same way as I got used to living by myself* (Betty).
Gail, the only women interviewed who is currently separated from her husband, spoke in depth about the difficulty she experienced when she attempted to weave their life together after she and her partner had children. Gail exemplifies the ‘normalising his absence’ stage. She and the worker have developed two lives, their own interests and their own friends, and her expectations of spousal support from him are reduced.

When he used to come back when they were just tiny babies it was fine, because they don’t have a routine or anything, you just feed them and they go to sleep and stuff, um but when they started getting older and they had routines of going to places I think X felt a bit left out, because he used to come back and say he felt he didn’t think that he fitted in, so I used to feel guilty that I was doing stuff with them when he wasn’t there (laugh), it was just really difficult and he’d still want to go [offshore to work] and cos when he was back he was off, so it was, not like a holiday, but, you know, you’ve got those 2 or 3 or 4 weeks off everyday cos I was working and the children had those routines and he wanted to do things that he wanted to do, like he, he was very sporty so when we got here, he would go and do 4 wheel driving and that sort of thing and a lot of the time I couldn’t take the kids cos it wouldn’t have fitted in cos it was either late nights or out in the middle of no where and all that sort of thing, so then I’d say, I’ll stay at home and he would go off, and it never used to bother me, but gradually it does and you think, why don’t you say no I’m not going I’ll stay, and you know, over the years when he is away you kind of get your own life, that he doesn’t necessarily see and then he has his own life when he is away with people that I don’t know because a lot of them live in different places when they work offshore so you might not know a lot of their friends and stuff so he, then he would come back and I would still be seeing my friends that I’d see when he was away and he didn’t know what was going on .. so you just kind of get two separate lives and then your lives together, so that’s like three lives that you are living and unless you keep talking it just kinda separates you (Gail).

Michele, who no longer fits the (Normalising his presence) stage, but had, during the early years of her exposure to the offshore work schedule, slipped into a pattern of waiting till her partner arrived home to ‘do’ things as a family; she withdrew from the world and tended to put the lives of her and her children on hold until her partner arrived home. She recalls the early years and compares them to how she feels about doing things while her partner is absent.

Now I definitely do my own thing a lot more. I get you know, I guess with the girls, I have, well one is at school anyway, and the other goes to kindy
one day a week but I’ve got them gymnastics and things. Whereas before, I
didn’t join those things at the start because it was important that we spend
our time together, but now you can’t spend your whole life waiting for them
to come back so you have to get on and do things (Michele).

Motherhood, his paid work and her paid work choices

Motherhood reduces mother’s participation in paid work (Kaufman and Uhlenberg
2000, 933) and data obtained in the questionnaire suggests the offshore worker’s
employment patterns also impact the choice of paid work by the partners of offshore
workers. When asked, ‘what are the factors that prevent you from achieving your
preferred form of paid work?’ (Question 22 on the questionnaire), fifteen respondents
(25%) indicated their partners’ employment offshore was a factor. Difficulties with
child care were a factor for fifteen respondents (25%), and being primary carer was a
factor for thirteen respondents (22%). The following illustrates how factors such as
mother’s assuming the primary carer role, difficulties surrounding child care, and their
partner’s employment offshore are experienced by the partners of offshore workers.

In this study, women with dependent children are more likely to engage in part-
time/casual employment patterns. For women who have either no children or who are
‘empty nesters’\[18\] having partners who work offshore does not appear to influence the
patterns of employment significantly as similar levels of engagement in full-time, part-
time work and no work occur (see Figure 17).

Most women with children who were interviewed saw the all encompassing role of
mothering as their primary role regardless of the presence or absence of their partner.
Three mothers returned to work after the birth of their first child. Two mothers

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\[18\] Children of empty nesters are independent and no longer live at home.
(Francis and Jodi) found the offshore work schedule of their partner impacted their ability to have paid work and provide care for their child, thus both mothers obtained additional help from outside their families. Francis could not find a child care facility that could provide care for her child outside of ‘normal’ work hours. The inadequacy of out of ‘normal’ hours child care facilities resulted in Francis and her partner employing a live-in nanny. The second mother, Jodi, rented out a ‘granny flat’ behind her home to students. Jodi enjoyed the company of the students; they became ‘a source of intelligent conversation’. As Jodi got to know her tenants she employed them, on a casual basis, to work for her in her small business; this helped her if her child was sick. On occasions, Jodi paid the students to baby sit her child.

Figure 17. Respondent’s work patterns and dependent children

![Paid work patterns chart]

Sourced from data obtained from questionnaire

The birth of their second child caused women such as Francis and Jodi to reassess their work-family balance. Francis resigned from work, and Jodi sold her business, and both women became stay-at-home mums. The third woman, Gail, because of her ‘normal’ work hours was able to use day care facilities for her first child. However, after the birth of a second child, she decided to work-part time. Her decision was influenced, in
part, by her partner’s work schedule. Although Gail wanted to spend more time with her children, she also felt she wasn’t projecting a professional attitude at work when she had to take time from work to care for her children. The location of the offshore workplace, availability of transport from the workplace to home, and locating a replacement for the worker leaving the offshore facility are major factors that make it difficult for offshore workers to leave the offshore facilities outside the normal roster. Serious family emergencies are an exception. Partners of workers understand that the offshore worker does not have the opportunity to take ‘a day off’ to take care of a child who is unwell in the same way as other ‘home based’ workers may. As Gail has no family living in Australia, she was unable to share the responsibility of providing care for her children with family members. Children’s illnesses and father’s leave periods do not always coincide.

*I went part-time because I wanted to spend time with them* [her children] *because he was away. I just thought that they needed more time with me, because I didn’t want to be working five days a week and him not be there as well... say they were ill and you were off work, it was a case of it’s always me who has to have the day off. Because I’m in a profession as well, I take it seriously because if I don’t show that I’m willing to work and willing to learn all the time then you don’t progress in your career. And I though he never has to take a day off his work, he is always there, not that he could (laugh). Yeah, it just, that made me feel a bit funny about work* (Gail).

At the time of the interviews, Denise, was the only mother from ‘first families’, with young children who was employed on a regular part-time basis. Denise’s motivation to have part-time paid work was influenced by her partner’s ‘contract’ employment status, and the possible threat of unemployment as contracts end. However, her desire to be at home for her children after school and during school holidays influenced her choice of work; Denise works as a teacher’s aid in a local primary school. Sonia also plans to work as a teacher’s aid when she returns to work. Francis works on a casual basis, and while Cara did no formal paid work, she works on projects (house renovations) that she
shares with her partner. The remaining three mothers with young children (Jodi, Gwen and Sonia) currently do no paid work. These mothers felt no financial pressure for them to return to work. They did, however, talk about returning to paid work as children got older. Jodi’s desire to return to paid work is not related to financial gain but to mental stimulation that is unavailable while she remains as her children’s primary at home carer.

I am not under pressure to get a job, for me it would be the mental stimulation, because my brain as you can understand doesn’t seem to function as fast as it used to (laugh), because I don’t get that mental stimulation anymore (Jodi).

All the women with older children interviewed had part-time paid employment. The reasons for working were not always discussed by the interviewee, while others indicated they chose to work to be financially independent and able to contribute to the family. It was, however, acknowledged that their income from part-time employment did not compare to their partners’ high salary. A number of women that worked part-time described themselves, in comparison to their partners, as less skilled and, therefore, unable to earn similar high salaries. Women, such as Allison and Barbara, have a history of different part-time jobs while their children were younger. As children grew older and perhaps left home both women continue to work part-time. Barbara and Allison chose to work part-time throughout their marriage to their partner. Part-time work gave them an outlet away from family work and it provided them with some financial independence.

When couples have children, mothers make choices about paid work. They return to paid employment, reduce the hours they work, increase their commitment to paid work, or they decide not to return to work (Garey 1999, 166). Alternatively, fathers, especially young fathers, increase their paid work hours when their first child is born.
(Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz 1992, 54). Sonia and Denise, both mothers of young children, each decided not to return to work after they became mothers. For each family to facilitate new mothers to remain at home after the birth of their child Sonia and Denise’s partners decided to take a job away from home to increase their earnings so that their wives could become ‘full-time’ mothers. The partners of Gwen, Francis, Jodi and Kim all worked in the offshore oil and gas industry prior to their relationship/marriage. While not all these women exited the world of paid work when they first became mothers, but by the time the children were pre-school age, all women were full-time mothers. Alternatively Gail, whose partner had worked in the offshore oil and gas industry prior to meeting her, felt working full-time with two young children, when her partner was intermittently absent, didn’t allow her the time to mother her children in the way she preferred. Gail decided to change from full-time to part-time paid work. As children get older, mothers renegotiate their engagement in paid work. Denise has part-time employment and Sonia is waiting until her youngest child starts school and plans to work part-time, and Cara’s intention is to continue to renovate houses.

*Motherhood, parenting and the offshore work schedule*

The partners of offshore workers participate in ‘everyday’ activities in addition to paid and unpaid labour, and women also spend some time in social interaction, talking with acquaintances, neighbours, visiting friends and family, and sometimes helping others, by volunteering their time and skills to charity organisations or helping at their children’s school. When the partner is at work women make the day-to-day family decisions and they take control of family activities. The family routines, when the worker is absent, are often different to when the offshore worker is at home, as the
absence of the worker means that the family do not need to plan their day-to-day activities around the work routines of the worker. Whereas, other families that include a home based shift worker often have difficulties trying to schedule family activities around shift work (Staines and Pleck, 1983 cited in Fenwick and Tausig 2001, 1181-2). The lack of day-to-day constraints when offshore workers are at work provides the at home partners a sense of freedom and independence in how they organise their lives when their partner is absent.

I'm probably more um open to the kids having friends over when X away um because I don't feel um um so stressed out about getting dinner you know to throw two minute noodles (laugh) on when he's away get salad and fruit and that sort of thing when he's home all sorts, not like that, he doesn't eat two minute noodles (laugh) (Denise).

We've got lots of friends that have got kids of the same age. So you know, my house, was like a play group, I mean I always had lots of mums round, lots of kids round, and because X was away I didn't have to cook an evening meal and it was really nice, really free, it was lovely, and plus I had the financial backing, so it was just like, a bit of a charmed life here (laugh) (Kim).

I help my sister when X is away, I'll perhaps pick her kids up when she is working, and keep them here and cook dinner, it's harder to do when he is here (Cara).

The best part when he is away you are totally in control and I found when the children were young especially you could be very organised and you just took charge and right kids we are off and off we went (Allison).

Mothers from the group identified as first families compared the impact of their partner’s work schedule on their lives before and after they had children. Before they had children, when their partner was at work offshore, women were able to shift from couple to single life easier than after they had children. The birth of children appears to impact on women’s day-to-day lives by making it a bit more difficult.

I think once we had kids, I suppose, for me, although I’ve got nieces and nephews, I didn’t realise how hard it would be, really hard on your own, bloody hard actually (Francis).
I have been working in the past ... regular hours and when he is not here it has been a nightmare getting ready in the morning and going to childcare or what ever. And I just think how do people do it everyday? I just couldn’t (Francis).

I tried to do everything myself... it just felt like there was so much to do and he wasn’t helping, but he couldn’t help, he was at work, so I couldn’t blame him for any of it (Gail).

While contemporary Australian women are now ‘doing’ less household labour\textsuperscript{19} than earlier generations, they continue to do the majority of household work (Baxter 2002, 399). Most of the women interviewed for this study also did the majority of household work. They have similar experiences in regard to the allocation, responsibility and the ‘doing’ of household work in that the offshore partner is likely to have a low level of participation in housework when they are at home. The partners of offshore workers engage in housework, gardening, shopping and, for some, paid work. Furthermore, mothers who have dependent children have additional, and frequently stressful, work in parenting and providing care for their children, such as preparing children for their day, taking them to kindy or school, attending meetings with children’s teacher, supervising children’s homework, chores and after school activities, organising birthday parties, visits to dentists, doctors, hairdresser and, shopping for clothes and footwear. Furthermore, as primary carers, mothers also provide care for their children when the children are sick and unwell. When the worker is absent, the day-to-day responsibilities of providing care for children and managing the family are similar to other mothers who do not have partners who work away from home and who are also ‘doing motherhood’. Motherhood is not simply the activities done by women with their children; it also refers to the phenomenon by which women with children are constituted as mothers in the performance of certain activities (Garey 1999, 27). When mothers engage in activities they consider part of the mother role, such as

\textsuperscript{19} Household work, in this instance, is housework and childcare.
teacher/parent meetings, they are ‘creating and constituting themselves as mothers through their interaction with the teachers, the schools and their children’. The following women’s voices illustrate some of the ways they engage in doing motherhood.

*My oldest daughter is usually (cough) awake sometime around there seven to quarter past seven, so I get her breakfast and that sort of thing, I have to wake my five and a half year old up and I wait until about quarter to eight, eight o’clock to do that. Wake her up and then it’s like um madness because there is giggling, lots of yelling, get your shoes on go and have a shower, etc, and you have that sort of thing, and that’s always very stressful think it’s my most stressful part of the day… At the moment, I work three mornings so I’m trying to get myself ready as well and then it’s out the door and that’s fine. I come home around lunch time, I do my house work as much as I can and a bit of shopping and I car pool with a neighbour so during the days that I take our children, are the days that I work, and she will bring them home from school and then two afternoons I work and I get the children out of the door by eight thirty. I stay home and do my chores and get ready about half past eleven and go off to school [Denise works as teacher’s aid] and bring them home, afternoon tea, after school they usually play (Denise).*

*This year she [daughter] has started kindy so it makes it more different from before, so now in the morning I’m up to get her to school by 8.45 am. So generally we have to get up at 6.30 am and um it’s a drama to feed her get her ready but now that she is at kindy I probably have more time to look at things myself at things that I would like to do myself. This kindy that she is at is already five days full days, so I’m really in the school routine. One thing that I have noticed the school has, in these few short weeks it’s very demanding I mean, so um, the play dates [parent help roster] I didn’t realize it would be that much, so that’s my role, so picking her up (Cara).*

*The kids’ birthdays you make it something, you organise a party for them and you tend to involve yourself in that, go to different environments, the children like. I’ve had a few of them at home, but generally the kids like to do something a bit different like roller skating parties (Jodi).*

*I’m busy when he is away, taking the kids here or there, even though a couple of them got their licences now, but there are still things you go to with them (Vicki).*

Women experienced parenting differently within each life cycle stage. Two mothers with younger children have attended a parenting course (Cara and Sonia). Sonia’s partner attended the first session but due to his work roster he was unable to complete
the course. Sonia suggested ‘condensed’ courses in the form of one full day course would suit offshore workers and perhaps offshore companies could help community organisations to run courses in this format. Parenting is a continuous activity for the mother as she is continually present. The father is intermittently absent from his role of father, and while he is absent mothers may assume his ‘father’ role.

The assuming, by the mother, of the father’s role tends not to occur when the mother is at either the innocence or normalising his presence stage. In each of these two stages the role of father is not attended to. This means the mother does not take on the tasks and responsibilities of the absent partner/father. All father related tasks are put on hold, children are told ‘daddy will mend that when he comes home’ (Gwen) or, ‘when daddy gets back, he will help you’ (Sonia, during her early years). Jodi spoke about how her children wait for the return home of their father to help them prepare their cycles for a dress-a-bike competition.

This year at the school fête, they are doing a dress up your bike, and of course dad is out at sea, being the engineer, a thousand things going through his head. He has already designed the dinosaur that my son wants. It’s a wire frame thing you know that he is going to make. He has got it all and he has got the first week and a half of himself being back here that is his mission to turn the children’s bikes into the winning bikes (laugh) (Jodi).

Meanwhile the father is psychologically present. The ambiguity surrounding the physical absence and psychological presence of the father has been argued as a source of family dysfunction, although Boss (cited in Forsyth and Gramling 1990, 186) argues it is the ‘absence of or unattendance to his role that has resulted in a dysfunctional family’.
Alternatively, in families where the mother is at either the normalising his absence stage or balancing two lives stage, the tasks and responsibilities of the father role are attended to. This may occur in different ways as discussed in Chapter Two (Forsyth and Gramling 1987). Families may decide a strategy to manage the family, or they may ‘fall into’ a pattern of behaviour regarding family authority. The difficulty that arises for offshore families is how the worker and family readjust to the worker’s presence and whether family authority is reclaimed, relinquished or shared when the worker returns home.

The families of offshore workers can experience differences in parenting while the worker is absent and present. Thus, this section has been divided into two parts to illustrate the different experiences families have when the father is at home and when the father is absent.

**Parenting when he is home**

In western contemporary families there appears to be a blurring of the mother and father roles into a ‘parent role’ (Warin 1999, 38). It appears mothers from ‘first families’ have traditional views of their roles, and while they become responsible for disciplining and decision making regarding their children’s activities regardless of whether the worker is at home or at work, they define the parenting of children in terms of mothering and fathering. Mothering means the provision of love, care and nurturance, while fathering often relates to disciplining children for inappropriate behaviour.

*I am the sole parent disciplining, sometimes I just feel like that I would love to be spending more time with them telling them how wonderful they are, and instead of telling them off. Someone has got to teach them to be socially acceptable, and I am that person and I also feel that my mum has a*
big in put and I have said to my mum, mum there has to be someone in the kid's lives who is going to ignore those naughty little bits and pieces and just gives them sheer love and acceptance yes, I know that you would like to teach them etiquette and you know all that sort of thing, but there is a time that it's really important for them to understand that they don't always have to be told off and they don't have, because daddy's not there, do you know what I mean? (Jodi).

I would be the one who does the discipline and I do find that this is a bit of a problem because when X comes home and I want back up he doesn't give it to me because he feels guilty that he has been away, and when he comes home he doesn't want to be shouting at them. So that probably does become a bit of a problem sometimes, but what I end up doing I sort of slink into the back ground and think well you know I've had a gut full of the kids it's your turn now. And I just sort of stand back and if he is not going to discipline them, you know why should he shout at them (Kim).

I think it's [discipline] always been an issue. I don't think he has ever, I've said to him, you know X for goodness sake they are doing this they are doing that, but he hasn't had them for two weeks. And he can't see that they are driving me demented and he comes home, oh they are my lovely children (laugh) attitude, but I can see, I think my son, who is the oldest is going to be fine through his teenage year and he does, and they both do respect me, they don't walk all over me. I'm not a real disciplinarian I mean, I'm not very strict with them, they have a very easy going life I've just got to hope that they are going to be ok. Don't know, don't know if X would be any better at disciplining them than me, he is probably not (Kim).

For Gail, who we recall is separated from her partner, the blurring of traditional mother and father roles is more apparent because she feels she is the only parent.

I generally always am the disciplinarian anyway um I seem to take my parenting role more seriously I guess because I figure I'm the only one to do it (Gail).

Acceptance of their partner's participation in parenting saw 'first family' mothers in this study focusing on men's contribution to parenting as part of a 'doing' activity such as taking children to and from school, bath time, helping with homework, participating in roster help at school or kindy, school excursions and being involved in after-school sports.

X has always been the type of person when he came home that he would devote a lot of time to the children, and still does, which is fantastic. When the children were younger, he would come home and the kids would pounce on him and he would be down on the floor playing games and he has been
great like that. Now that they are older, when he comes home he runs, in actual fact it’s easier when he comes home, because he takes over the running of the picking up and the dropping off and that sort of thing (Allison).

I mean in some ways they are very lucky because they have a dad who will take them to school, pick them up from school when he is here he takes them to sport, he picks them up he can get quite involved with school, I mean, he’s a good dad, he is, he is a good dad... he likes to take the kids to school, he likes to pick them up he likes to take (son) to the golf range (Kim).

Spending time with their children was seen as a positive aspect of fathering by most mothers. Being actively involved with children was particularly important for Gail, who is separated from the father of their children.

He was really good with the children, he was involved with them taking them places and doing stuff with them when he was back. Even now when he is back he takes, he’d pick them up from school and take them swimming and all whatever they do, he was good with that, he liked doing that being involved with them (Gail).

Mothers with younger pre-school children are appreciative of the support their partners provide them when fathers reinforce her decisions.

Listen to what mummy is saying (Cara).

He’s usually um (laugh) getting on at the kids on how to behave and that sort of thing, and I mean really we don’t have a huge problem but I think it’s more him saying you need to do as your mother asks you know, that sort of thing (Denise).

However, some mothers with younger children expressed frustration over some parenting issues, such as a child’s routine and bed time when the offshore worker was home or when they don’t agree on the frequency or type of treats given to children.

I think the main thing is the things that they can and can’t do. Like giving them sweets and that sort of thing, like my opinion may be a bit different to X’s and say for three or four weeks they wouldn’t have had anything to eat after tea, and then X would come back and maybe give them something and I would say they don’t have that, and then he would get all, you know, probably because he wanted to treat them because he hadn’t seen them for those four weeks. Or I would say, bedtime is half seven and he would have them up until half eight. But it was, I hope they go to bed when you go back, you know that sort of thing, but that’s because they are only two and
six. Even discipline problems they are not so bad when they are only up to six, it’s just that kind of thing, it’s just having that different er routine, I needed him to try and get into their routine (Gail).

I usually have a struggle to put the children to bed, struggling to get them to bed at eight thirty when he is at home. Generally when he is home, because he watches quite a lot of telly and um he is a great fan of the Simpsons, the kids love the Simpsons, so the Simpsons, Monday Wednesday and Friday at seven thirty, the Simpsons go on, if I’m trying to do homework or try to get the kids to do something on Monday or Wednesday everything stops because the Simpsons are on. So we come to loggerheads over that, just a little bit, it’s not a huge issue but I get pretty frustrated (Denise).

Most of the time we agree, sometimes he thinks I give her too many chocolates or something, but to me that’s only a treat and it doesn’t happen every day. We are that type of people, so it’s not that she can have a lolly every day (Cara).

As illustrated earlier, mothers with older children declare their partner as a ‘good dad’ usually because of the time he spends with the children and the relationship he has with their children. Some mothers, however, did recall when they felt their partners were not engaged in the way mothers wanted. Mothers felt that their partners were fathering in a ‘passive’ manner, which is not acceptable to some mothers.

You just seem to slot into patterns and it’s not until something really hits you or really goes wrong that you hit the roof, I just remember one time, I was always referred to as the big bad wolf, he wouldn’t discipline them. I stood, one particular, it was a summers day, I just got the keys and I got in the car and I just had to go. When I came in, he said ‘Oh’ And I said, but why am I the one that has to say no, when you are home. Don’t look at me for approval whether they can go to a birthday party or whether they can go to the swimming pool with their friends, YOU (emphasising the word) have to take on some of the responsibility too. It was over very loud words and I don’t think that he quite realised that I had just sort of reached the peak where he was reading the newspaper, and it was ‘go ask mum’ and I said... what! go ask mum? No, that’s not on (Barbara).

I find disciplining the children extremely difficult when I am on my own, so when he comes home I think great, he can help now, but I get annoyed, even helping with the children on the morning doesn’t happen, because half the time he stays in bed anyway and I get his breakfast, I shout at him ‘Are you going to get up and help me or what?’ (Francis).
Overall, there was a tendency for mothers to feel their parenting was not supported by their partner as many fathers fail to discipline their children. Women with children from first families stated disciplining their children was part of her parental role and they did not want the worker to discipline her children. Lummis (1982, 47-8) suggests fathers can employ pragmatic reasoning in regard to disciplining their children. When the worker is absent, mothers take on the ‘father’ role when they discipline their children. Fathers see the continuation of this practice when he returns home as in the best interest of the children. Children learn they must obey the mother at all times, thus his abdication of this traditional aspect of his father role is for pragmatic reasons rather than a rejection of the role (Lummis 1982, 48). However, some fathers may be so disconnected from their family that they ‘sit on the fence’ when children need disciplining and/or fathering. When some fathers return home they take up the role of the ‘periodic guest’ who is not involved in family activities, decision making and fathering (Forsyth and Gramling 1987, 190).

Mothers, from first families, were often frustrated at being the disciplinarian and the person who made decisions regarding their children when the worker is absent and present. Barbara, Kim and Allison just wanted their partner to be ‘involved’ more in what the children were doing while Kim ‘started to sink into the background’ when children needed to be disciplined when her partner was at home, but realised ‘he was never going to discipline them’. Meanwhile Jodi found it difficult to combine her role as mother with the role of disciplinarian. She found that she wanted to tell her children how wonderful they are, yet, found that she was ‘telling them off’ more than she wanted. Teaching her children to be socially acceptable was her responsibility, which she sometimes helped out by her mother who gave her children the unconditional love
she wanted to give them, but felt that being the sole disciplinarian hindered her ability to do so.

All four mothers from the group called ‘second families’ expressed a similar view that the offshore worker was not the father of her children and as such she placed no sense of responsibility for parenting in his role as her partner. The mothers do, however, appreciate the support their new partners gave them in their role as mothers. Narelle described her appreciation when her partner supported her and her role as mother by being a sounding board for her parenting issues. Moving to Western Australia was a difficult time for Megan’s family. Her partner’s involvement in finding a new school and new friends for their children helped Megan and her children to eventually settle in Western Australia. Emily and Margaret from second families appreciated that their partner spent time with her children. When Emily’s children were younger, her partner supported her in a number of ways, one of which was not only attending parent/teaching nights at school but actively participating in the meetings.

**Parenting when he is not at home**

In general most mothers with younger children felt that there were no ‘real’ issues that they were unable to cope with at that time, although they had one or two smaller issues regarding discipline.

*She is not giving me a hard time, or answering, oh she may answer back, but she’s still small, apart from the clothing issue and her eating habits there are no real problems, maybe later* (Cara).

Denise and Narelle, both mothers from the first family group, had, on occasions, asked their mothers to ‘speak’ with one of their children because the mother was experiencing difficulties in disciplining the child. *‘When I’m finding that I’m speaking to the children and they are not listening because they are a bit resentful, grandma steps in as*...
*the authoritarian* (Jodi). The mother felt the child was not listening to her and she found it difficult to talk to the child at this time. Francis' family is developing a 'substitute' father figure for their children. Francis and her partner have developed a relationship between their children and their uncle (her partner's brother) who would spend time with the children when their father was at work, sometimes just taking them for mundane tasks such as a hair cut. Essentially, this provides the children with an alternative 'adult'. This method of obtaining support from a family member may have been implemented to help Francis as she has difficulty in dealing with discipline issues with her children.

*I've been trying to nurture a relationship with my boys and one of my brother-in-laws who lives in (here) too. Occasionally he has taken them to do things, like a hair cut it's a big outing they have a milk shake and a lunch or something. Or they went to some motor cycle show or whatever, so yeah. It's not a regular thing. On one occasion it was like a dad's night at the school, pre-primary thing, and X was away, and he went and that was so sweet.... It's a bit of a downward spiral and I get depressed I find discipline with the children extremely difficult when I am on my own and getting them to do things* (Francis).

**Division of domestic labour/family work**

When children are born, the division of labour between couples abruptly shifts as couples revert to a traditional family formation with women at home and men as the breadwinner (Popenoe 2004, 173). Contemporary women expect their partners to play a larger role in family work (housework and childcare) than earlier generations of women (Popenoe 2004, 172). Indeed, more men are now participating in more childcare and housework, though women are still doing the bulk of family work (Pleck 1987, 83). Family work for men tends to focus around 'specialised work' in repairs and do-it-yourself (DIY); they put children to bed, play with children, and generally prefer not to be involved in time consuming mundane and socially subordinate tasks of
cleaning, shopping, washing, ironing, cooking and the routine care of children; men participate in tasks that can be finished when men decide, rather than the task dictating; fathers can say 'that's enough play for now', or 'I will finish the repair later' (Oakley 1985,99). Thus, men 'help out' rather than take responsibility for specific tasks, leaving women with the bulk of family work. When men 'help out' by undertaking specific tasks while women do the bulk of family work, the men's role in family work is identified as secondary and marginal (Gerson and Peiss 2004, 117).

When women have a traditional gendered ideology about domestic labour, they assume total responsibility for housework and child care. Partners of offshore workers who have more traditional ideas about division of labour do not depend on their partners' participation in housework (as she classifies housework as her work) when he returns home (Wooddell, Forsyth, and Gramling 1994, 132). They do, however, expect their partner to do 'his' gendered work, such as taking the car for a service, repairs around the house, doing the tasks that she is unable to, and those tasks that have been negotiated as being his that she prefers not to do. A change in the expectations of men's participation in family work has influenced changes in the definition of the father role; higher education and occupational status is associated with greater parental involvement (Jump and Hass 1987, 99-100). Barbara, a mother of non-dependent children, noticed the change in expectations of fathers by younger mothers when she attended a meeting a year or so ago. Barbara stated she has noticed younger partners of offshore workers have different expectations about the role of fatherhood and men's work. Younger mothers expect their partners to execute the role of father by participating in the everyday, not by being a breadwinner; the breadwinner role is secondary for younger mothers.
As illustrated earlier, mothers with dependent children help or supervise children’s activities and preparing them for their day, be it at home, childcare, kindy or school. However, the everyday chores of mothers in offshore families can also include tasks associated with the role of husband/father. ‘When you have a husband offshore, you are then taking over the male role as well as the female role’ (Kim). When the partner is away, women who have an egalitarian attitude to the division of labour take up the male gendered tasks such as being the disciplinarian, gardening, taking vehicles to be serviced and repairs around the house. In families that have unusual work schedules the shift in division of labour in the direction of the at home partner benefits the husband (Woodell, Forsyth, and Gramling 1994, 131). In other words, the offshore worker does less domestic labour than workers in more traditional work patterns.

At home partners who hold egalitarian views about domestic labour expect the returning offshore worker to share the responsibility of domestic labour, while partners who have traditional views want the returning worker to focus on ‘his’ domestic task, particularly ‘fathering’. Many women claim that when the worker returns home he adds to her domestic work. There is more washing and cooking to do (Francis, Denise, and Betty) and her routine is disturbed by requests such as ‘shall we go out for lunch, let’s...and going out for a coffee’ (Francis), or setting ‘the alarm for five o’clock in the morning so that he can go rollerblading’ (Betty). The presence at home of the returning worker is seen as positive by all partners, although he ‘creates’ more housework. Regardless of their ideology toward domestic labour, most mothers are happy when their partner/husband engages in fathering by spending time with their children.
The worker's participation level in household labour varied. Women without children did not talk about the division of household labour in terms of housework. Following traditional trends (Popenoe 2004, 173), the arrival of children coincides with changes in men's participation in housework; men reduce their participation in domestic labour when children are born. After some women gave birth they developed routines and child care skills that left little room for their partner to contribute to any work related to childcare (Gail and Cara) or any housework (Cara).

Some women with younger children discussed household labour in terms of it being her work. One woman described her life in terms of family and household responsibilities 'my life, is with the children at home, home duties... school duties...that's what it's all about' (Jodi). When children are younger, mothers appreciate 'help' from fathers at 'bath time' (Francis) and participating in the kindy roster (Gwen, Sonia, Denise and Nadine).

Gail was the only mother to discuss her partner's change in domestic labour after her first child was born. Gail returned to work after the birth of each of their children. Prior to the birth of their children domestic labour was not an issue for Gail and her partner

_He was quite good at it, he had lived on his own for quite a while so he could clean and stuff, and he would do the shopping. It was just who was home would do it, if I was home, I would do it, if he was home he would do it_ (Gail).

After the birth of their first child Gail's husband stopped doing housework and the shopping. There are a number of hypotheses as to why Gail's partner reduced his participation level in domestic work. Relative resource hypotheses - the parent who has the greater resources (e.g. socioeconomic characteristics) over the other parent does
less domestic work; sex role ideology hypothesis - the father believes in a traditional sex role ideology; and, finally, demand/response hypotheses - when more demand is placed on the father his capacity to respond will increase his participation rate in domestic labour. These are common hypothesis as to why fathers have lower participation rates in domestic labour than mothers (Coverman 1985, 81). Warin (1999, 7 and 23), suggests that fathers define the role of father by their paid work, not domestic work. Furthermore, virtually all men believe being a good father means first and foremost being a good provider (Thompson and Walker 1989, 861). Thus the high income earned by offshore oil and gas workers, beliefs of traditional sex role ideology and the way fatherhood is defined influence the offshore worker’s participation in domestic labour.

Women with older children tended to discuss household labour in terms of parenting. Kim, Lynn, Allison and Betty all expressed their pleasure and pride in their family and that their partners participated in the lives of their children. Allison, Barbara and Kim consider when their partner drives their children to and from school, and to and from after school activities, he is being a good father. In addition, when fathers and sons share activities (golf and camping) mothers such as Kim and Betty understand the sharing of activities as an expression of fathers being good dads. As Barbara summed it up, it was more important for her that her partner participated in their children’s lives than ‘arguing about who washed up’.

When he is home, the offshore worker can become involved in his family again. This may come in the form of just ‘being there’, spending time with children, taking them to school, picking them up from school, being involved with after-school events or even
going on tuck shop roster or helping in the classroom, reading or cooking. For some offshore workers, their time at home also affords them the opportunity to provide support to elderly parents.

Women without younger children at home discussed how much easier life was with their partner at home,

He does the domestic work, he makes things easier for me, he lightens the load, so I can concentrate on work (Narelle).

When he is home, he takes on the yard thing, which only leaves me the house thing and it’s more enjoyable, cos then he will pitch in and help too (Barbara).

He does the pick up runs, he is able to help with chores and trim the trees and things, I did a lot of that, but it’s really good when he is here to share in that (Allison).

He still brings in the washing from the line, he still does the washing up and he will do the shopping (Betty).

One may suggest that ‘helping’ has developed with experience and time (all couples were aged forty and over). The above women all engage in paid employment on either a part-time or full-time basis, which means the workers spend periods of time without the company of their partner. Thus the displacement and lack of social integration some men experience when they return home may influence their participation in domestic labour; it is better than doing nothing (Collinson 1998; Thomas 2003).

Socialising

Coping with two social identities, ‘single-hood’ while their partner is at work and being part of a couple when the partner returns home is sometimes difficult for women to adjust to. Having close personal friends, a network that includes both single and
coupled friends, and adult children appears to help some women cope with their dichotomous single/couple status within some, but not all, social settings.

*I’ve got a lot of friends being that we were older when we got married, we had a lot of friends that were my friends, so I have a lot of female friends, where their partners and mine are not friends, it’s just our friendship. I’ve been to two weddings of friends without my partner. At one, she was my friend anyway, X really didn’t know her, and a lot of the people there were single people, rather than couples. I guess there were some couples. I actually went with a girl I worked with, she was by herself as well so we went together, and my really good friend, when she got married, I really knew all the people there anyway, your friends and stuff so, it wasn’t a um and my daughter knew her too and she came. So yeah, I was there, sometimes I take one of the kids if I need a partner or something, but most of the time I’m quite happy to go by myself. But I was a lot of years by myself. Between my first marriage and my second marriage, I was a lot of years by myself, so I was used to doing things by myself and I had friends who were by themselves as well. So we did things together, and still do (Narelle).

*I think that’s another interesting thing, about some social behaviours, if you are solo, why, so I tend to gravitate around friends that I really know well, and probably knew before X so therefore, that’s about as far as I go. I feel awkward going to a wedding, or a birthday... I would probably decline, social things, socially to go solo (Leonie).

Friendships with single friends were often formed during adult single-hood, therefore, women who married and had children relatively young tended not to have many single friends, especially those of the opposite sex (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). Cara and Jodi, on the other hand, are mothers who chose to have their children later in their lives and both feel they have contact with lots of friends from their ‘single’ life, but they choose contact with them on ‘friendship’ terms rather than a source of support.

*I’m used to going out on my own, so if I’ve got a function to go to while I’m on my own I go, even when there are things on at school, they had dinners for the parents, I’ll go, I don’t take anyone with me (Cara).

Jodi’s experiences of attending functions at her children’s school are different when her partner is present and when he is absent.

*He [partner] has turned up to a couple of social occasions there. It was very interesting watching the response from the other parents when I was standing with my husband, you know, it was much more approachable.
They [the other parents] felt more at ease to come and talk to me than what they would usually, because I think they thought I was a single mother. I'm always there, taking my kids to the school functions. There was a wine and cheese tasting night that was on at the school, I would have dearly loved to have gone, but I knew if I went, I would, you know, just end up looking as though I'm a single mum and I'm not! I am a married, very happily married mother, so yeah, I guess I avoid occasions like that (Jodi).

Women with younger children tend to socialise during the day with family members, close friends or neighbours when their partner is at work.

I've got girl friends and you know we do catch up and you know and have a few drinks and get together for the kids to have a play, we go to King's Park and that type of thing (Jodi).

My mum used to live five minutes away and my husband's family lived five minutes away (laugh), so I used to see them a bit more than my friends (Nadine).

As children get older and develop their own interests and social lives the social life of mothers also change.

As the kids got a bit bigger and their sporting clubs, we socialised a bit more via their sporting clubs (Nadine).

My daughter we've been to the movies once together, but they have their social lives, and I don't like to interfere they have got to have a social life. Through the years, I suppose when they were fifteen yeah because, if we got invited to a barbeque which wasn't an awful lot. I think when they are fifteen and fourteen and sixteen or whatever, they were playing soccer and baseball and t-ball, and so that it became a Saturday event, and we all went together, and then it was stay for drinks afterwards they would be there with me (Nadine).

Women with older children probably have more opportunity (via work, further education, mothers of their children's friends or sport activities) to make friends who may not be part of their 'coupled' friends. These women usually socialise with 'her' friends when their partner is at work, and when their partner is at home they socialise as a couple with their friends.

I reckon I have got the best of both worlds. I've made a lot of my own friends and when X is away I see my friends... they are friends that I've just
made, they are nursing friends, they are my friends, they are not X's friends, they are my friends, they are nothing to do with him or work, they are my friends (Kim).

Adjusting to their 'single' social identity when socialising can be irksome. Jodi's experience of attending functions at her children's school illustrates without the companionship of their partner women can feel out of place, while other women (with husbands) see them as a threat (Karen, Emily and Jodi).

[when] there is no husband, we don't really want to socialise ... you are seen as being a bit of a threat because you are on your own, so you are this 'wanton woman'... maybe it's human nature, but it changes the dynamics, and the socialising a bit too (Karen).

One of the things I have always found a little more difficult, without having a family, as in children that you tend to be the 'single' female for two weeks and interestingly our married friends don’t kinda want to know about you during that two weeks. (mmm) And again it's something that I've got used to. Fortunately, I am, I suppose a bit of a loner, so I don't desperately seek to have company so that is probably a good thing. But it is very difficult, because that is one of the dynamics, they'll invite you to a child's birthday, (something that you would normally be involved in but otherwise it's like, there is no husband so we don't really want to socialize, I don't think that they consciously think that, but subconsciously that's what's going on (Karen).

You know I can tell you it's like a divorced woman, everyone stays away from her just in case she snatches your husband, you know (laugh) (Emily).

Socialising when he is home

When the partner arrives home her social life broadens as she becomes part of a couple and socialises with other couples. Socialising as a couple is available now that the partner is home. Some women experience socialising as frequent meetings with friends and family, while for others it can be just spending time together, going to the movies, or going out to dinner. For women such as Emily, Leonie and Jodi spending time with their partner means participating in sporting activities such as motor bike riding and sailing. 'I don't use a baby sitter when he is not here, I'd rather wait and spend money on a baby sitter when we can go out together' (Gwen) and 'I tend to use a baby sitter more when my husband is at home' (Jodi).
Women with younger children say that they would rather spend money on babysitting when their partner is home so that they can go out together. Although going out for dinner or to see a movie is available to most women when their partner is away, they tend to wait until their partner is home, to make it special (Jodi, Nadine and Gwen).

*In the five weeks that he is away I might go out once or twice, I don’t go out more because I feel that that is really a luxury. It’s something that I enjoy doing with my husband, yeah it’s special with my husband, and if I go to the movies it’s usually to see a kid’s show (laugh), so I take the children (Jodi)*

This seems to be a common thread with women with younger children who say they don’t want to pay for baby sitters ‘just’ for themselves.

*It affects like social life I guess I prefer not to go out and to pay for baby sitting when it’s just me. I’d rather save that for when X can come out as well. Social life at night is almost nil when he is away (Gwen).*

Catching up with family and friends is something most couples try to do, although there is often a sense of obligation to ‘catch up’ with friends. Some women (Cara, Karen, Jodi, Denise and Gwen) spoke of losing friends. Friends have been lost because they ‘slipped under the radar’ (Karen). Friends have also been culled because couples could not keep up their hectic social life and the persistent requests of ‘when x gets home we will…..’ (Cara). For example:

*The hardest thing I find is that too many people ask us to catch up... I give him a list of people who want to see him, cos generally I've had people contact me before and say, 'oh we must have you for dinner'. It drives him insane cos he reckons he never has a minute to chill out, and I'm always constantly embarrassed because I'm trying to shuffle people away until maybe the next trip (Cara).*

*Probably the hardest thing initially, was getting used to that routine of the two, two and two, working full time and er disruptions, not really the right word, it was hard... We found that was exactly what was happening for about the first three or four years that he did the job. He would come home and he would literally hit the door and we were just out, we have to go here because we have been invited here, we have to go there because we have been invited. It got to the stage that at the end of the year we would just look at each other. He would come home and he would be absolutely pooped. Because we hadn't been kind of putting the effort into 'we'll come and see you' a few people kind of conveniently slipped off the scene as it*
were. We just sort of decided that we had to get a bit more selfish with the
time that we do have when he is at home. So probably that was in some
ways it was a good thing that we did turn things around where we do
actually have time for us now when he comes home, and that’s not even a
conscious thing anymore, it’s just something that just happens you know....
I get sucked into yes yes, we have to go here. I feel totally obligated all the
time to fulfill all these things; it’s like if people want to come and see us,
they can come and see us too and that has actually been for the better for
us. As I say, in the beginning it was this huge feeling of having to socialize
because people were saying we will catch up with you and we, were
missing out together as a couple as having some quality time to do things
(Karen).

It has happened with newer friends, yeah, not the ones that I call grass root
friends that I have known since my babies were babies, newer friends yes,
it’s next time he is home, let’s catch up, and I think yes.... That’s fine, I
suppose.... Laugh. What I tend to say to them now is yes, we can catch up
when he gets home, but it won’t be the first weekend. If they are busy
planning something, I tend to jump in and say, it won’t be the first weekend,
and a couple of them have been a little bit affronted, because I am then
dictating when we are going to get together (Barbara).

**Missing those special events**

Working away from home means that there are times when the offshore worker is at
work for special family events such as birthdays, Christmas, weddings and graduation
ceremonies. The women spoke about what they do when birthdays and special family
days occur when their partner is away at work. Mostly, these women were mothers
who told me what it was like for them to be on their own for special events. The
opinion of most women, even though their partner was absent, is to make the most of
the celebration for the sake of their children. In response to question 12 ‘What are
some of the difficulties, if any, you have experienced due to your partner’s employment
in the offshore oil and gas industry? The most frequently indicated response was the
worker missing family occasions/celebrations. (see Figure 18).
Birthdays were a reoccurring ‘special event’. Sonia, a mother of young children, solved the problem of children’s birthdays without their father: she would give them two birthdays, one with ‘family’ and a children’s birthday party when he was home; she told the young children they were special because they got two birthdays. Gail, however, changed the day they celebrated their children’s birthdays as the children were too young to understand ‘birth dates’. As children grew older mothers made an effort to organise a special party, ‘involve yourself in that, or go to different environments, which the kids like’ (Jodi). A couple of women (Barbara and Leonie) also spoke about significant birthdays (40th and 50th) that their partners missed because
he was at work. The women expressed sadness that their partners are not able to share
with their friends such significant milestones that cannot be replaced (Barbara), or how
rosters are juggled to try to be home for children’s significant birthdays (Nadine).

Last year we were in a dilemma because it was his dad’s 70th birthday, they live [name of town] now, and it was a chance for him being home for that, and not being home for Christmas, and not being home for his daughter’s 21st and his sons 18th and our 25th wedding anniversary, all this sort of thing. Or did he miss his father’s 70th and be home for all that, and we were in, well he was in more of a dilemma because he wanted to do the right thing for everyone, but it just can’t happen. So in the end, we said, well your father doesn’t turn 70 every year, and so we will do that, which means he wasn’t home for Christmas, which, well it ended up he was home for our 25th wedding anniversary, he will be home for our daughter’s 21st he was home for our son’s 22nd but he won’t be home for son’s 18th birthday, and you know, .. He will be home for his birthday I’ve worked out that far, and I know that he won’t be home for Christmas this year, so I know that, unless something happens this year with the roster or something. (Nadine).

Partners who ‘missed’ special family celebration not only missed the event, but later
when he is home and participates in family conversations about the event, the worker is
unable to share the experience in the same way, thus increasing the disjointed
continuum of marital conversations (Gramling and Forsyth 1987, 165).

Sometimes I would go on my own, but there have been a few times when I
haven’t gone because X wasn’t there, and he knew the people not me. So I
just got a bit, um, I am not going without him. Yeah, usually I’d go, but I
would feel guilty, yeah... I probably didn’t enjoy it as much because
obviously you know he would have really enjoyed it but he can’t be there so
when you all, say it’s a family thing, you all get together then after it and
talk about it, and he is left out because he wasn’t there and things like that
are talked about a lot because everyone gets together and things happen
and yeah, which probably made he feel a bit left out (Gail).

For many Australians Christmas is usually a time when families get together to
celebrate the festive season. When the worker is absent for the Christmas season,
particularly Christmas day, the family is disappointed. The mothers try to make
Christmas a pleasant time for children but feel the absence of their partner stronger.
‘You just go through the motions, but it’s like you are only half a person’ (Kim), and
‘it’s just not the same when he is not here’ (Sonia). When children are young, mothers who have extended family members living within driving distance celebrate with their family. They create Christmas as special as they can; Barbara’s solution not to be alone with her children at Christmas was solved by ‘going over to my mother’s house on Christmas Eve’. Cara’s story highlights that the partners of offshore workers need to be involved in the process of socialising if they want to be with other people, they cannot assume other people will ‘do’ the inviting. Cara and her child joined her extended family on Christmas Day for the ‘family thing’ on the morning, but in the afternoon they ‘just sat down and watched videos and stuff with (daughter) which normally I don’t have time to do, we were just very quiet, we didn’t go anywhere, cos it was like, well no one asked us, it wasn’t done’. Alternatively, had Cara’s partner been at home, their Christmas Day would have been very different, ‘oh it would have been manic, there would have been breakfast, lunch and dinner organised, from either my family, from his family, his work colleagues, all trying to catch up’.

More respondents to the questionnaire noted a disadvantage to the offshore work schedule was that their partner missed events and celebrations because he was at work. The voices of the women who were interviewed suggest that while the women do feel a disappointment on behalf of their partner who misses events, it appears the greater sense of loss is experienced by the family. It is at times such as family events and celebrations that the absence of the worker becomes more significant to the family members left at home.
Communication while he is at work

When couples live together their interaction is based on sharing their day-to-day experiences of life. Sharing of one’s life ‘validates and nurtures the roles and selves of spouses... living together allows couples to share space and organise their daily time commitments around each other’s schedule’ (Gerstel and Gross 1984, 160). The intermittent absence of the offshore worker means couples have periods of time when they do not share space or time commitments. The worker is not present for many aspects of family life, thus communication, usually by telephone, is a way for partners to keep the worker informed on family life. Communication between couples is necessary to maintain a ‘marital conversation’ (Forsyth and Gramling 1990).

I have quite a lot of communication with him, which is quite important too. He has always been good at ringing home when I didn’t have instant, when I couldn’t just pick up the phone and ring him up in the earlier days. He always maintained regular contact, but he didn’t like to have, he didn’t like to hear about bad news he didn’t like to know about anything that was causing complications or problems and I used to try to shelter him from anything, you can guarantee if something was going to go wrong it would happen. I’m sure you have heard that tale before, the dog died and all those things would happen when he was away. And he didn’t like to hear about those things, no, if something happened I had to tell him,(laugh), I let him know about that, I just think for a start it prepares him and lets him know what is happening at home (Allison).

Each woman interviewed in the course of this study spoke about how it was important that they talked with their partner when he was at work. Although women experienced different patterns and frequency of contact with the worker during his time at work, the topics of conversations between the worker and partner were unanimously family orientated; the women kept the worker updated on family events, about children, what they did and what they were going to do. The women (Betty, Barbara, Jodi, Nadine and Vicki) who have many years of experience of the offshore lifestyle reminisced about using radio or satellite phones, or writing letters to their partners and then waiting
by the letter box for his letter to her to arrive. Although the idea of letter writing and waiting for a hand written reply may appear romantic today, it highlights a lack of daily contact between couples. If the at home partner wanted to share or ask for an opinion/advice/decision with the worker, it would be several days or longer before the reply arrived.

Today, improved technologies have enabled most women to communicate with their partner more easily, either by telephone, email or a facsimile machine. When the offshore worker has access to a telephone, it becomes the most frequently used communication tool. Few partners of offshore workers have direct access, by phone, to the offshore worker, thus it is the worker who usually instigates communication by phone to his partner and family. The partners of Karen, Cara, Allison and Gail have worked in a number of different locations in addition to working in the Northwest Shelf oil and gas fields. Karen, Cara, Allison and Gail said that they had more frequent contact, usually daily, from their partner when he is working on production facilities in the Northwest Shelf. Whereas, Margaret, Gwen, Nadine, Vicki and Jodi, whose partners work on sea going vessels that support offshore facilities and/or supply tankers, have intermittent contact with their partners. A number of variables, such as ‘radio air time’ and being ‘in communication range’, influences the frequency with which workers contact their family by telephone. When telephone contact is limited some partners, such as Vicki, use email to keep in touch with her partner.

There is always email, so that’s nice we can always keep in contact. And that’s what I’ve found harder when he’s not here. So that contact if something does happen, or something, I can let him know what’s happening everyday, you know. This is what we did today, but when he was on the last trip away, it was two weeks we didn’t have any contact. So that gets a little bit difficult at times, because we do talk a lot and I tend to chat to him and just tell him what’s going on like you do, and I do miss that (Vicki).
It appears the partners of workers on production facilities on the NWS have the potential for more regular and frequent contact with their partner than workers on supply vessels, or oil and gas facilities in other countries.

_He rings me at four thirty a.m. It’s my wake up call, and usually we talk for about half an hour because he starts at five, and I leave home about five thirty so then he goes to work and I get ready and I go to work about five thirty so we have about half an hour there, and that’s really good because it’s uninterrupted... It’s always been four thirty even when I was working shift work, he would ring me at work. Even on a Saturday morning he will ring me at four thirty have that half an hour and I’ll put the phone down and go back to sleep. Or if I have things to do get up and start doing them. Nine times out of ten I put the phone down and go back to sleep. So even when I was on afternoons, he would still ring at four thirty in the morning have that talk and either go back to sleep or whatever. So that’s always the time, that you absolutely know that you can have that conversation_ (Narelle).

The frequency of daily contact from their partners can also be the cause of concern if the at home partner does not receive a call from the NWS worker. Leonie, Narelle, Francis and Sonia all said they had regular, daily contact with their partner, and each expressed varying levels of worry if their partner did not telephone them.

Leonie, who has been a partner of an offshore worker for about a year, found she worries about her partner’s safety if she doesn’t receive a telephone call from him. Narelle also feels some concern if her partner does not contact her, but over time she says she is learning to understand, at times, work commitments can prevent the ‘expected’ telephone call, and she knows he will contact her as soon as it is possible. Sonia and Francis have been partners of an offshore worker for a number of years. While they understood the worker may not always be able to telephone them, they both wonder if the worker is safe and well, but try not to think about it too much, and tell themselves they will get a telephone call the next day. Nevertheless, their partner’s safety remains a concern. The return home can also be a cause of concern. Francis
spoke about a time when her partner’s flight had been delayed, which subsequently lead to a later than normal arrival time in Perth. Due to problems and delays her partner had been unable to contact her, so she expected him at the usual time. When he did not arrive home at the normal time she began to worry.

*You think, good he is going to be home any minute now to the youngest one, daddy will be here shortly or whatever. And he still wasn’t here and I went to school got the other one, still he wasn’t home and I thought, immediately I thought something terrible has happened and then I thought no, if something terrible has happened, someone would have told me. I rang the airline to find out, if there had been a delay or anything what was going on. I found out that there was a delay, and she said, and er he should be home any minute shortly and within ten minutes he was at the front door... but once I had spoken to the airline I was okay, but of course I had had everything ... really anxious, so it's quite, it's not good* (Francis).

Those in newer relationships tend to make more frequent contact if possible. Women such as Narelle, Leonie and Susan, who are in relatively new relationships, talk about how they miss their partner, and while he is away they communicate through email and telephone calls.

*Many long emails every single day and two phone calls a day, every day, for half an hour and we just constantly communicate* (Susan).

*I feel that when he does ring um, and I probably never checked this with him whether he rings for my benefit, or he rings just to get a diversion, so we do generally talk for a long time... about an hour, an hour and a half, the sort of thing I say to him, is I’d like him to ring if it’s just for a minute just to say you’re all okay. I understand the dangers of the job and that is a concern for me* (Leonie).

While the frequency of communication between couples varies, the calls are regular and expected. Intermittent telephone calls from workers were probably the most difficult to adjust to. Not knowing if or when the phone would ring, or how long the call is going to last can cause some anxiety for the at home partner who waits for a phone call. In addition when important information needs to be shared, the partner worries if she can recall the relevant information or seek the right information when the call arrives.
I'm waiting for the phone call, so I'm always feeling slightly anxious. Maybe not as much freedom as you would think that you have because I'm waiting for the phone call, and if it doesn't happen I worry. So I tend to feel like I'm kept in the house as such, take the phone wherever I go. When he is here, I don't answer the phone I you know. I'm not that fussed about being that sociable as such, but when he is not here, and I go down to the shed to work I take the phone with me, whereas I wouldn't do that if he were here, I would just let it go onto the answer machine (Leonie).

I would wonder around the place with a piece of paper stuck in my bra (with everything written on it that I wanted to tell him) just in case he called and I could take out the paper and reel off the information (Cara).

Sending emails to partners every day is something that is quite common, and the women who do this say it sometimes may not be such a good thing because you don't have anything to tell them when they get home. ‘For the first few days, you go to tell him something and then, you say, oh, I've already told you that (via email) (laughing) (Jodi). A number of women spoke about sending their partners long emails everyday telling him what the family has been doing, and what the children have done; however, Cara and Jodi wondered if their partners had time to read all of their emails because the workers are so busy at work.

You put [daughter] to bed you come up and email X about your day. I like to tell him to keep him part of the family, what daughter said or what we have done or anything, even though he might not have time. I wonder if he reads the whole thing (laugh), I have a diary going to him to tell him how life is (Cara).

The day-to-day events of family life of the offshore worker exist on two planes. His work schedule has an impact on family life. The impact on family life is influenced by the reaction to the work schedule of the at home partner. Although, in saying this, the worker attitude to his work schedule influences his partner; the at home partner’s reactions do not develop in isolation. Those families situated in the innocence and normalising his presence stages experience a sharper distinction between life when the worker is home and when the worker is absent. Families situated in normalising his absence may experience the least distinction in life with and without the worker. This
is due to the attitude of taking on the responsibility for family and household work when the worker is absent. The return of the worker to a family which normalises his absence can attribute to the worker feeling redundant, as the partner at home deals with decision making, solves family issues and generally copes without it. The fourth stage balancing two lives sees a smoother shift from one lifestyle to the other. The at home partner acknowledges differences in the family routine occur and accepts the change.
Chapter Eight

Adapting to the offshore work lifestyle

The thesis set out to gain an insight into the issues that face contemporary partners of offshore oil and gas workers, and to understand why ‘good social support’ helps the partners of offshore workers to adapt to the intermittent absence of the worker (Morrice et al. 1985, 483). The data obtained from the research has enabled the production of an overview of the issues that partners of offshore workers accommodate as part of adapting to the intermittent absence of their partner and how the at home partner engages in social support. In addition, the data from the research study has led to the identification of a new four-fold model. The four-fold model proposes a process of adapting occurs, rather than the previous dichotomised view that the partners of offshore oil and gas workers either adapt or fail to adapt. This finding is important in understanding the ways partners of offshore workers, or to that matter any FIFO worker, adapt to the intermittent absence of the worker.

The research undertaken reveals that partners of current offshore oil and gas workers have similar experiences to those illustrated in research dating from the late 1980s (Morrice et al. 1985; Storey et al. 1989; Solheim 1988; Lewis, Porter, and Shrimpton 1988; Lewis, Shrimpton, and Storey 1988; Forsyth and Gramling 1987; Gramling and Forsyth 1987; Gramling 1989; Clark and Taylor 1988). The families, at specific phases, experience similar stressors such as the emotional highs and lows associated with the arrival and return to work of the partner. It appears that many at home partners experience or have experienced the responsibility and burden surrounding the
return of the worker, the integration of the worker and family, and coping with the sadness when the worker returns to work. Women who normalise his presence experience the impact of the transition days of the arrival home and return to work to a greater degree.

In this study it appears there are two variables that influence the experiences of the at home partner; being a member of a first or second family, and their reaction to the offshore lifestyle. The first families are those in which both partners have no children from a previous relationship/marriage. Second families are those in which one or both partners have a child/ren from a previous relationship/marriage. The reaction to the offshore lifestyle as discussed throughout the thesis can be innocence, normalising his presence, normalising his absence and balancing two lives.

Partners who belong to first families experience difference as their family lifecycle stage changes. At the beginning of the relationship (with the worker, or the offshore oil and gas industry) there is a naiveté surrounding the long term impact of the offshore work schedule. Couples new to the industry enjoy the financial freedom the high income of employment in the offshore industry and although they have an established personal network, this network can start to disintegrate as couples focus on themselves when the worker is at home. Of course I am speaking here in terms of the at home partner, and a study that considers how both members of the couple use their social support networks would add to this study and gain a better understanding of how the offshore worker reintegrates with the family, extended family, friends and community. At the innocence stage, the at home partner focuses their lives when the worker has returned home completely on the worker.
The time at home allows the worker to recuperate from the previous weeks of work, and the continuous time at home creates the opportunity for workers to participate in family activities and family labour. Remaining with first families, in this study, it appears there is a generational divide in expectations of division of labour, which is found in the shift in ideology of motherhood and fatherhood among different generations of women. It has been illustrated in Chapter Seven how motherhood creates an additional facet to the adapting process for most women. Many of the women became socially isolated during the time they were the primary care providers for babies and young children. The frequent social isolation of women at this time can exacerbate the difficulties of the adapting process.

Women who were interviewed and who have adult children had little expectation of their partner participating in ‘her’ gendered domestic work. Whereas younger mothers have a higher expectation of their partner participating in domestic and family work; traditional gendered work tends not to exist in families with younger children. In some sense younger women with younger children who have more egalitarian views of domestic labour are more willing to take on ‘his’ domestic labour while he is at work. The support they desire from their partner when he is absent is not instrumental help, but emotional support.

Women, in first families, with traditional views on the division of domestic labour develop strategies on how to deal with ‘his work’ that needs attending to when the worker is absent. As women with traditional views on domestic labour experience the offshore lifestyle, many develop more egalitarian views in that they are happier to take control of ‘his’ work. There is, however, an expectation of him reciprocating, though
the reciprocation preferred by the partners is the workers tends to be around active fathering and taking a greater participation role in the lives of their children.

On the other hand, the at home partner in second families seems not to have the same issues adapting to the intermittent absence of the offshore worker. In this study, the mothers who were interviewed classified themselves as independent, self-sufficient mothers before they met the offshore worker. As such, the expectation surrounding family work, in the form of parenting, was not an aspect that this group of mothers faced. On the whole, after being a single independent mother the adapting to the intermittent absence of a partner appears to bear little or no burden on the at home partners in second families.

How the at home partners use their social support network is interwoven with how they react to the offshore lifestyle. The patterns of social support tend to change when women become mothers. When mothers experience their lives as being normal when their partner is at home, in other words, she normalises his presence, she tends to get more support from family than friends. The at home partners that normalise his absence provide the greater amount of support. This could be interpreted as a way to illustrate to others that they cope with the absence of the worker. Those that balance the two lives engage in a more equitable level of social support with family as they are happy to both provide and receive support from family members. Meanwhile, the at home partners who are new to the industry remain innocent of the impact of long term exposure to the offshore work schedule as their focus is on their reunion with the worker.
Social support between friends also varies because of the complexities of friendship. It appears that at home partners who are at the innocence, normalising his absence and balancing two lives stage have friends, or have developed friendships that provide the social support that they desire. Although the people at the innocence stage risk losing friends if they remain in this stage for too long. The at home partners at the balancing two lives reciprocate social support with friends that they feel can also reciprocate support that provides for their needs and the needs of their friends. The at home partners situated in the normalising his presence tend to have fewer friends to reciprocate social support. Friends are often culled because they do not understand the pressures that the at home partner faces, or the at home partner is dropped by the friends because the friendship is not being reciprocated.

Geographical location is a necessity in neighbouring. The most frequent form of social support exchanged with neighbours is companionship, and the next support most frequently given is instrumental help. This can be in the form of the ‘taxi’ drive to and from school and minding pets, offering help during emergencies, and generally being a ‘good neighbour’ are ways neighbours exchange instrumental support. Emotional support is the least exchanged form of social support with neighbours; when emotional support is exchanged with neighbours the neighbours have become friends.

Families newly exposed to the offshore oil and gas industry, or any of the popular FIFO work rosters currently experienced in Western Australia face situations not experienced in other work schedules. Families may find it difficult to get to know others who are also experiencing a similar lifestyle with whom they can share an understanding of the ‘problems’ that families face with FIFO work schedules. It may
prove easier to find others who know the issues surrounding the intermittent absence of a partner due to the growing number of people working FIFO in Western Australia. Perhaps the most problematic situation is when a family arrives in a new town to take up FIFO work. They have left behind their established support systems and the process of ‘finding’ new friends may be more difficult with the intermittent absence of their partner.

The early research determined partners of offshore workers as being able to cope, or not cope with the offshore lifestyle and the intermittent absence of the worker. The at home partners were classified as novices or veterans and having young children and paid work influenced, both positively and negatively, the ability of the partner of an offshore worker to adapt to the intermittent absence of the worker. In addition, a number of methods of adapting were suggested by Forsyth and Gramling (1987; 1990). I suggest that it is the reaction to the absence of the worker that influences how the at home partner adapts and how she uses her social support to provide her with the necessary support that she cannot get when her partner is absent. In recognising that two lives exist for the families of offshore workers, women who have good support from their partner, family, friends, and others are better able to adapt to the offshore lifestyle.

This research illustrates that exposure to the offshore lifestyle may create a greater awareness of the need to have a personal network of family and friends who understand the complexities of the offshore lifestyle and having a partner who is intermittently absent from home. It is hoped that this thesis and the publication of a pamphlet that illustrates the four-fold model of the process of adapting will assist the partners of any
FIFO work roster to understand the process of adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the worker, family members, friends, companies that employ FIFO work schedules and the wider community may become more aware of the complexities of adapting to the intermittent absence of the worker.

While the notion of social support, from family, friends, neighbours and the like, reciprocated with partners of offshore oil and gas workers has been considered in this thesis, it is the offshore worker who provides the most important support to their partner. Spousal support is very important because no matter how much support one gets from a personal social network, it cannot replace social support that is not provided by one’s partner. In general terms, having good social support from their partner does help women adapt to the offshore lifestyle. When offshore workers provide good social support to their at home partner it helps the at home partner to feel validated and esteemed (Hobfall 1998, 23).
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APPENDIX I
WANTED

Participants to assist in a study on the impact of offshore work.

Jacinth Watson is a Postgraduate Student at Murdoch University. She is studying the impact of offshore work on the partners of offshore workers.

She is looking for partners of offshore workers to complete a short questionnaire.

If you have a partner at home please consider taking a copy of the questionnaire home.

The aim of the study is to develop a broad picture of the impact of offshore work, and gain an understanding of how your partners use their social networks as a coping strategy.

For more details see the questionnaire’s coversheet, or email Jacinth on [redacted]
Project Title: Adapting to the 'offshore lifestyle'

The oil and gas industry of the Northwest Shelf off the coast of Western Australia is a growing source of employment. Employment in the offshore oil and gas industry often means spending equal amounts of time between home and work. Many of those employed offshore spend two or three weeks 'at work' offshore and an equal amount of time at home. While there are advantages and disadvantages to this lifestyle, the partners and families of those employed in the oil and gas industry have to adapt to a unique lifestyle.

As a Research Masters student at Murdoch University, I am investigating the impact of offshore oil and gas industry on families in Western Australia. The purpose of this study is to understand how the partners of offshore workers adapt to the offshore lifestyle. The study also aims to discover if partners of offshore workers use their social support networks as a way of adapting to the lifestyle associated with offshore employment. It is anticipated that the study may provide a greater understanding of the adaptations families make to accommodate the offshore lifestyle.

You can help in this study by:

1. Completing the attached questionnaire only (no further involvement) and returning it to me in the stamped addressed envelope provided.

Or,

2. Completing the questionnaire and returning it to me, and consenting to a face-to-face interview.

The questionnaire should take about 30 minutes to complete. It contains questions about level of education, country of birth, and other questions, which may be seen as personal and private. There is no obligation for you to complete the questionnaire if you feel that the questions are too personal and private. Participation in this study is voluntary.

Should you decide to participate in the study all information that you provide will be treated as confidential and will not be released by the investigator unless required to do so by law. The research data gathered for this study may be published (in an academic journal or newspaper), however, no names or other information, which might identify participants, will be used.

Participants in the study are able to change their mind about being part of this study. If you decide at any stage of the study that you no longer wish to be a participant, please contact me and I will remove all your information, which you have provided, from the study.

If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, Jacinth Watson or my supervisor, Dr Loraine Abernethie, on [contact information]. My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have on how this study has been conducted, or alternatively you can contact Murdoch University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 9360 6483.

Your help is very much appreciated.

Jacinth A Watson
Questionnaire

In our day-to-day living, most of us participate in giving and receiving various forms of informal support with family members, friends, or neighbours. The questions in this section relate to what sort of support you give and receive, to whom you give support and who gives support to you. Support can be defined as companionship, providing help, and emotional aid.

Companionship
Companionship is often used to describe a relationship between people. We can provide companionship to others by being a friend, discussing things, and doing things together.

1.1 Please tick ✓ the boxes to show to the type of companionship you give and to whom you give it.

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1.2 Please tick ✓ the boxes to show who gives you companionship and the type of companionship

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<tr>
<td>Partners of offshore workers</td>
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<td>Others (specify)</td>
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</table>
Providing help
We help one another in many ways. Examples of help can be occasional childcare, car-pooling children to and from school and activities, minor repairs, etc.

2.1 Please tick √ the boxes to show the type of help you give and to whom you give it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Childcare</th>
<th>Car-pooling</th>
<th>Pet minding</th>
<th>Help in crisis</th>
<th>Occasional chores</th>
<th>Errands</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner, husband, wife</td>
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</table>

2.2 Please tick √ the boxes to show who gives you help and the type of help given.

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</table>
Emotional aid/support
Emotional aid provides a safe environment to discuss personal issues. Personal issues can include such things as discussing family issues, raising children, marriage issues/problems and general concerns or problems, etc.

3.1 Please tick ✓ the boxes to show the types of emotional support you give and to whom you give it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussed family issues</th>
<th>Concerns about children</th>
<th>Marital issues</th>
<th>Financial concerns</th>
<th>Work/employment issues</th>
<th>General problems</th>
<th>The future</th>
<th>Other</th>
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3.2 Please tick ✓ the boxes to show who gives you emotional support and the types of support given.

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The above questions related to various types of informal support. However, there are other types of support that are considered 'formal' in that we pay for services. Examples of these are childcare, after school care, garden services, GP, alternative health care practitioner, counsellor.
4. Can you list the types of ‘formal’ support you use?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Some of the following questions may require extra writing space. The last page on this questionnaire is blank. Any further comments can also be made on the last page.

The presence, when at home, or the absence, when at work, of the offshore worker may affect the support that you give and receive.

5. In general terms, do you think that the support that you give and receive differs when your partner is at home, to when he or she is away at work? If so, can you explain how it differs?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

6. Did your partner’s employment offshore mean relocation for the family?

Yes □ No □

If so, did you move

Within Western Australia □

Within Australia □

From another country □ (please state)
7. How long has your partner been employed in the offshore oil and gas industries on the Northwest Shelf?

______ years  ______ months

8. Has your partner worked in offshore oil and gas industries other than those on the Northwest Shelf?

Yes □  No □

9. Is your partner’s employment contract

permanent □  contractual □  casual □

10. On which offshore facility does your partner work?

__________________________________________________

11. What are some of the positive things about your partner working in the offshore oil and gas industries?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

12. What are some of the difficulties, if any, you have experienced due to your partner’s employment in the offshore oil and gas industries?

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
Details about you. Please ✓ the appropriate boxes

13. Gender
   Male ☐   Female ☐

14. Age
   24 and under ☐
   25-34 ☐
   35-44 ☐
   45-54 ☐
   55-64 ☐
   65+ ☐

15. Country of birth ☐ If not born in Australia state year of arrival ☐

16. What is your postcode? ☐

17. Highest Education Level
   Year 10 or equivalent ☐
   Year 11 or equivalent ☐
   Year 12 or equivalent ☐
   Certificate or diploma ☐
   Degree ☐
   Other (Please specify) ☐

18. Children
   Please write in the boxes below how many children you have, their ages, and indicate if they live with you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Age/s</th>
<th>Do they live with you? (please circle response)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No / Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No / Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No / Sometimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Yes / No / Sometimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 or more</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes / No / Sometimes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

19. Are you employed in paid work? Yes ☐ No ☐

20. What type of work do you do?
    ☐
    Do you work Full time
    Part time
    Casual
21. Is your present form of paid work your preferred choice? Yes ☐ No ☐
If not, would you prefer to work Full time ☐
Part time ☐
Casual ☐
Not to work ☐

22. What are the factors that prevent you from achieving your preferred form of paid work?
Your preferred form of work not available ☐
Difficulties with childcare arrangements ☐
Partner’s employment offshore ☐
Primary care giver ☐
Not financially practical ☐
Too busy ☐
Other (please specify) ________________________ ☐

23. Do you do any voluntary work? Yes ☐ No ☐
If yes, what types of organizations are you involved in?

Thank you for participating in this research study.

If you would like to participate further in this study, you can do so by agreeing to a face-to-face interview. Details are attached to this questionnaire.

Please return completed questionnaires to

Jacinth Watson
C/o The Sociology Programme
School of Social Inquiry
Murdoch University
South Street
Perth, WA 6150
Additional space. Further comments can also be made here.
Questions for face-to-face interviews.

Demographic questions.
How long has your partner worked offshore?
How long have you and your partner/husband been together?
Do you have any children? How old are they?

Can you talk about your experiences of being a partner of an offshore oil and gas worker?

Prompts
- day to day experiences
- social life
- minor crisis
- companionship/spending time with partner, family, friends, neighbours etc
- concerns – with whom do you talk about concerns – their concerns and your own concerns
- work patterns/choices – does your partners work patterns influence your work choices or work patterns, if so in what ways
- transition days, what are these days like, how do they compare to the early days, what strategies have you developed to deal with transition days
- negotiating power shifts – does power shift, or remain the same
- partner taking on parental role
- being on your own – Single vs couple life
- getting used to the offshore lifestyle – how long did it take and did you make changes to the way you adapted to the lifestyle over time
- life changes (ie birth of children) and how this influences how you deal with the offshore lifestyle (are changes made, if so what)
- in what ways do you feel family, friends, neighbours etc help or hinder the way you adapt to the offshore lifestyle