

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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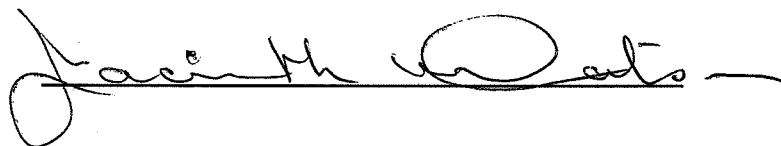
Sociology Murdoch University

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

(Sociology)

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jacobus Oats". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

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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Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my supervisor Dr Loraine Abernethie for her continuous personal and professional support and encouragement throughout the thesis process. My thanks go to Dr David Collins who gave great advice in devising the layout of the questionnaire. I would also like to thank Associate Professor Bev Thiele for the guidance she gave at a particularly pertinent point during the production of this thesis.

My gratitude goes to the sixty people who kindly participated in this study by completing a questionnaire. I am indebted to the twenty-one women who graciously gave of their time to talk about their experiences of the offshore lifestyle. In addition, my appreciation to the following companies who assisted in promoting my research to the partners of their offshore workers: Apache Energy Ltd., TAD Technologies and Woodside Energy Ltd.

To Dr Elizabeth McCardell, thank you for your friendship, support and encouragement. My appreciation goes to my children for their love, support and many distractions during the writing of the thesis. Finally, to my husband, Edward, thank you for the enduring love, support and commitment you gave to me during my journey of post graduate study.

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).