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Mothers' Understandings of 'Home' After Relationship Separation and Divorce

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Abstract

This paper explores 35 mothers' understanding of home after relationship separation, along with barriers and facilitators to creating home post-separation. No previous research has done so. We found that for mothers, like their children, home was complex and multidimensional, and rarely defined just in terms of physical space. Rather, it was a relational concept, with physical space providing the context for relationships with family, neighbourhood and community, to feel safe, and the opportunity to be oneself. More than half the mothers in the study reported experiencing domestic and family violence by their former partners and, for some, this had continued after separation. While the ongoing impacts of domestic and family violence significantly challenged some mothers' ability to create home, separation and a level of liberation from violence could also mean that they were able to create home for the first time for themselves and their children.

Key words

Home; mothers; post-separation parenting; domestic and family violence; divorce; separation.

Introduction

How do mothers conceptualise and create 'home' for their children after relationship separation?

What do they see as the barriers and facilitators to creating home? This paper draws on the responses of 35 mothers interviewed in Australia in 2018 and 2019 as part of a larger study of the meaning of home for children and young people after their parents separate.

Our discussion relates to, but can be read independently from, a recent paper from the same project (Campo *et al* 2020). In that paper, we presented 68 children and young people's interpretations and experiences of home. Those data indicated that home was rarely defined by children and young people solely in terms of a physical residence; rather it was a fundamentally relational idea and experience, largely created through everyday interactions with significant others, and had a sense of ease and comfort and an existential significance for children and young people that mattered deeply to them. While the key focus of the larger study is on children and young people's understandings of home, the ways in which mothers conceptualise and create home for their children after separation is an important perspective in its own right: the possibilities and challenges frequently accompanying relationship separation are relevant to separated mothers' sense of home and their capacity to make a home for themselves and their children.

There has been no previous research focusing on how mothers understand and pursue home for themselves and their children when a relationship ends, although there is certainly prior work on how changes in families and wider social processes might influence an individual's sense of home (e.g., Mason 1989, Gurney 1997, Wardhaugh 1999, Leith 2006, Christoforetti *et al* 2011, Holdsworth 2013,). Thus, our focus on home builds empirical and conceptual knowledge of the meanings and dynamics of relationship separation – an important contribution given the cultural and psychological significance of home as not only a physical dwelling but a place of retreat, psychological and emotional wellbeing, meaningful relationships, and security built through routines and rituals (Mallett 2004, Natalier & Fehlberg 2015).

For the majority of mothers in this study, home was a multidimensional space and experience, constituted through meaningful relationships, shared experiences, comfort, predictability and a

sense of safety. For most, home was deeply valued, but for some mothers the positive elements of home could sit in tension with ambivalence generated through specific experiences or the possibility of its erosion through a violent former partner's continuing controlling practices. These moments of feeling 'homeless at home' reflected Wardhaugh's (1999, p.93) argument that ideas of home and homelessness are 'complex and shifting', and experiences that may be understood as binaries ('safety and risk, security and fear, privacy and invasion') can exist together and in tension in women's lives (see also Blunt & Dowling 2006, pp. 15-16, 125-128). Our analysis also highlights women's *work* in making a home for themselves and their family. For many of study participants, homemaking was an important part of mothering practices and the gendered work of caring for children. This work was – and remains – shaped by gendered social and economic structures and processes. Our analysis conveys the importance of economic resources in facilitating separated mothers' agency across multiple dimensions of their lives. Single mothers have greater financial difficulties and more care responsibilities for their children, compared to single fathers (de Vaus *et al* 2014), and often retain logistical responsibilities for the care of children even when children are with their father (Fehlberg, Millward & Campo 2009) – patterns that are likely to centre the importance of home in mothers' post-separation lives and shape the material resources necessary and available to achieve it. Domestic and family violence is of central relevance to this study. Understood as an expression of gendered control (Anderson 2009), past research has highlighted its post-separation manifestations in threats, harassment and physical violence (Towes & Bermea 2015), abuse of family law systems (Miller & Smolter 2011, Elizabeth 2017) and withholding financial resources (Natalier 2018). These behaviours were described by mothers who experienced domestic and

family violence and shaped their capacity to create homes even when they had left their former partners.

In these ways, the study highlights both the meaning of home and the gendered processes and resources which shape how it is made.

The study

Our analysis draws on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 35 mothers who were parents of the 68 children and young people interviewed in the larger study (Campo *et al* 2020).

Participants lived in mostly metropolitan and some rural and regional locations across three Australian states and territories. They were interviewed between September 2018 and April 2019. Parent participants were recruited through social media advertisements (mainly Facebook), family and relationship support services, researchers' professional networks, and through a previous study of shared parenting by one author (Smyth). Parents who contacted us and who were eligible to participate in the study were asked to discuss with their children whether they would also be willing to be interviewed. In accordance with ethics approvals obtained from all researchers' institutions, consent of parents and children was established by the interviewer before interviews commenced, and on a continuing basis throughout.

To be eligible for inclusion in the study, parents must: have separated after 7 June 2012 when the most recent amendments to the parenting provisions in Australia's *Family Law Act* came into effect through the *Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011*; not be in family law proceedings at the time of the interview; and be spending some time with their child/ren aged between 8–18 years. Children and young people did not need to spend time with both of their parents to participate.

We interviewed parents and their children separately. Consistent with previous research (Campo *et al* 2012, Kaspiew *et al* 2015, Carson *et al* 2018) we interviewed only one parent (the parent who had volunteered to participate in the study) but all siblings aged 8 years and over were eligible to participate. Interviews typically occurred in participants' residences, with a minority occurring in another location convenient for the family. Parents and children were each thanked for their time with an A\$30 gift card.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Slightly different interview schedules were used to guide parents' and children and young people's interviews, but each addressed the meaning and experience of home, daily living, care arrangements and relationships in each parent's residence. Parents were also asked to provide some basic socio-demographic data, and information about care arrangements and family relationships. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to an hour.

We applied primarily inductive thematic analysis to the data, using NVivo to develop initial codes and then moving out of NVivo to identify themes and develop high order analyses, which were then refined with reference to the literature on home and post-separation parenting. Coding frames were developed, applied and revised throughout by multiple authors.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to capture the diversity of experience, meaning and process, rather than generalisability, relating to homemaking after separation. While we sought to include mothers and fathers in the study, only four fathers participated. The small number of fathers means we cannot meaningfully write about home in separated fathers' lives in this paper and

thus we focus on the data from the 35 mothers we interviewed. We anticipate returning to fathers' data in a later paper.

Most mothers were Australian born (with one born in New Zealand and one in Malaysia) and three identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women. Mothers were aged between 33 and 54 years, with an average age of 40 (two mothers did not disclose their age). The length of time since separation from the other parent ranged from six months to six years, with an average of 3.5 years since separation. Most mothers reported yearly personal earnings between A\$41,000 and A\$80,000 before tax, and a significant minority ($n=12$) reported an income of under A\$40,000; the Australian median income is a little under A\$53,000 (ABS 2017). Thirteen of mothers described social security as their main source of income; the remaining mothers reported wages, self-employment, or other sources of income, or did not disclose an income source. Most mothers lived in an owner-occupied ($n=17$) or privately rented ($n=15$) residence, two lived in the residence of an extended family member and one lived in public housing. Mothers lived in a diverse range and standard of accommodation.

Most mothers ($n=19$) had 'majority mother time' arrangements (that is, more than 65 per cent of time with their children). Of these, seven had sole care of their children ('mother time only'). Of these seven, five sole care arrangements were due to domestic and family violence, permanent family violence orders or 'no contact' family court orders. Ten mothers had 'equal shared time' arrangements for their children (spending at least 46 per cent of the time with each parent) and four had 'substantial shared time' (spending 35–45 per cent of time with each parent). One mother had minority care of her son and another mother spent some nights with her child but the child lived mostly with a grandparent and the father. Most parenting arrangements had been decided without involvement of family law system professionals or formal processes ($n=18$),

with others determined by parenting plans or mediation ($n=9$), court orders ($n=7$; it was not always clear whether orders were by consent or adjudicated), and one in accordance with the young person's choice. These patterns are broadly consistent with those of the wider separating population (Kaspiew *et al* 2015).

More than half ($n=21$) of the 35 mothers interviewed had experienced domestic and family violence, consistent with patterns in larger Australian studies of post-separation parenting (e.g., Kaspiew *et al* 2015). Parents were asked to indicate in a questionnaire whether domestic and family violence had been experienced, defined as behaviours characterised by coercive control and including physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse (Australia: Family Law Act s 4AB, Kaspiew *et al* 2017; England and Wales: Crown Prosecution Service and the Domestic Abuse Bill s 1). The majority of mothers described ongoing conflict with their ex-partner: thirteen said they avoided contact or had no contact with the other parent (sometimes due to permanent family violence protection orders) and seven did not get along with the other parent. Thirteen mothers reported getting along 'generally well' or 'really well' with their former partner. While two did not answer this question, both indicated ongoing domestic and family violence at other points during the interview.

Mothers' understandings of home

For mothers, like their children, home was not a collection of individual characteristics; rather, it was multi-dimensional, with tangible and intangible elements interacting to create a complex whole. In common with children and young people, mothers rarely defined home solely in terms of physical residence; it was a relational idea and experience. The constellation and inter-relationship of factors that contributed to a sense of 'home' was well conveyed by Cynthia:

Yeah, I mean, I think it's important to have a connection to your community – I think you need to – it's the wider community that's important for me – but the home is not unimportant – the physical setting of the home is still important because there's things that make it beautiful and useable...make you feel more settled and like you can entertain people and you can bring people into your space...yeah it is, it's about entertaining, it's about sharing things with the kids, having meals together – it's about – it used to be about sitting on the couch and watching the TV but [ex-partner] has taken the TV so I don't do that anymore.

(Cynthia, equal shared time).

Cynthia's comment highlights how a physical place was important for her because it created the context for relationships and shared experiences, stability and routine. However, as Cynthia's final comment suggests, making a home could be constrained, especially by former partners and a lack of resources – issues we explore later in this paper.

Home as positive feelings and relationships

Similar to their children, home for mothers was usually associated with love, comfort and togetherness – a place that offered physical and emotional ease. These emotions arose through sharing and attentiveness to each other, mirroring children and young people's awareness of their parent's attentiveness to their needs (Campo *et al* 2020).

I suppose love and being comfortable and together – sharing food and conversation – I think it's about sharing, trust, and yeah, and feeling safe and nurtured, and yeah – love would be the first thing that would come to mind when I think of home.

(Thea, majority mother time).

Like their children, mothers often described safety as a key dimension of home: home offered ‘a sense of refuge’ (Robyn, majority mother time). This dimension was mentioned by almost every mother who had experienced domestic and family violence. Veronica, for example, who had a family violence protection order against her ex-partner, described home as:

a safe space, being comforting, comfortable and belonging to where we are. Yeah, and stable.

(Veronica, majority mother time).

Similarly, Julie, a survivor of long term domestic and family violence, repeatedly returned to the idea of safety in her description of what home meant to her:

Safety, a home that is in a nice environment, so I like a house that you can see nature from, light... security – good neighbours, so neighbours on either side that you know if you get into trouble you can call on, that you can pop over and check on them ... Safety – as I said, once again safety is really important; knowing that you can leave and come back and everything’s how you left it and nothing is going to threaten that.

(Julie, mother time only).

We did not directly ask mothers or their children to define safety. However, comments suggested that women associated safety with a sense of comfort and relationships of support and belonging in their home and with others in their wider community.

Mothers, to a greater extent than their children, also associated home with stability and predictability:

For me, home has been feeling safe, comfortable with the house that you live in, that it has everything that you need... we come back here and you know, isn't it that nice feeling; you walk in the door and you're like 'Oooh I'm home', find my bed, you know, find my favourite snack in the cupboard. I know where to go sort of thing, and get my favourite towel for my shower.

(Annie, mother time only).

Annie's emphasis on constancy was possibly magnified due to an adult life shaped by domestic and family violence, mental illness, many moves across states, cities and smaller towns and a lengthy period during which her children had lived in state care. Over the course of Annie's interview, it became clear that routines were central to her homemaking (though with several children including pre-schoolers, perhaps routines were a necessity for Annie, as they were for many mothers). It seemed that Annie strove to create a home for her children that provided the stability previously absent from their lives. Even for mothers whose pasts were not marked by such upheaval, the reliability of mundane routines and small pleasures strengthened a sense of the constancy of home.

Mothers also frequently referenced activities and events with family and children as contributing to their sense of home:

Home, oh I think of just bedtime stories I suppose. Food, family gatherings, I think about the letterbox, bikes. Yeah, I just think of togetherness and happiness.

(Megan, mother time only).

Relaxing, you know, music, eating, talking, sleeping.

(Brooke, equal shared time).

For Helena, an Aboriginal mother, going ‘On-Country’ (visiting the traditional area of her kin and engaging in Aboriginal cultural practices, David *et al.* 2018) was a key aspect of her own and her children’s sense of home:

So, we do a lot of, like, we’ll go out On-Country every, probably every weekend that I have the kids we try and do something...last fortnight we.... canoed up the river and looked at scar trees and everything and yeah, you know, Uncle takes them out On-Country and shows [my son] how to throw spears and stuff like that.

(Helena, substantial shared time, majority mother).

Mothers’ definitions of home reflected many of the key dimensions described in the literature: safety, stability, meaningful relationships and shared experiences. These positive dimensions of home existed alongside the work of building and maintaining a home. Mothers described the financial, physical, logistical, and emotional work of single motherhood in ways that reflected the continuing gendered division of labour after relationships end (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019). Thus, the responsibilities of mothering meant that home encompassed both comfort and work:

Home means where you just ... wear these [comfortable] clothes and don’t have to do anything, so it’s relaxation. But also, it’s work, home, when you’re the mummy, I think – it’s not all just relaxation; it’s where you come home and do your second shift and housework and logistics and organising and cleaning.

(Amy, majority mother time).

Mothers often shoulder the bulk of organisational responsibility even in shared time arrangements (Fehlberg, Millward & Campo 2009), and this was also evident in this study, including in Amy's observation that when her children spent time with their father, 'the tasks are different but they're still revolving around them, you know?' (Amy, majority mother time).

For several mothers, the work of home-making led home to be associated with stress and chaos, meanings that did not align with dominant cultural images of home, as Heidi (majority mother time) pointed out: 'initially it's a feeling of being overwhelmed and that it *should* be a sanctuary, and that it is responsibility and nothing else'. Thus, while home held mostly positive meanings for mothers, the work of caring for and creating a home for children could inflect their experiences in ways that rendered home a more complex idea.

The ambivalence and absence of home

The complexity of home as an idea was particularly evident in several mothers' descriptions conveying an absence of home after relationship separation, or a strong sense of ambivalence about its meaning and place in their lives.

The observations of Aboriginal mothers suggested an ambivalence shaped by colonial processes of racism, dispossession and removing people from their families – processes that 'pose crucial questions about home and belonging' (Blunt and Dowling 2006, p. 179). For Helena (introduced in the previous section), home was also a place, a set of practices and relationships removed from her daily life. For April, taken from her parents as a child by state welfare authorities, a childhood spent in unstable institutional care and a lifetime of systemic racism and instability had eroded stable family connections, leaving her without a sense of belonging. When she had

lived in a ‘beautiful’ house with her violent ex-partner, she felt like a ‘bird in a golden cage’. The property April rented from a charity offered her, for the first time, a clearer sense of home:

Well, it’s the only place like I can – I feel safe – because the [charity] told me I don’t ever have to worry about leaving; they’d never kick me out.

(April, majority father time).

Housing instability was mentioned by several mothers as resulting in an absence of home. Jade had moved through several rental properties and spent time in a women’s refuge after leaving her violent ex-partner; at the time of interview, she was living with her child at her parents’ residence in a town she did not like. Jade did not feel at home anywhere because she had not stayed in any place long enough to feel that she ‘belonged’: ‘I’m actually still looking for home ... because I don’t ever feel very secure where I live’. Susan had experienced significant personal challenges and, at the time of interview, was living in temporary and emotionally strained circumstances with a controlling family member and spending some weekends at her ex-husband’s dwelling. Susan described safety as central to her sense of home but felt unsafe: ‘[Home is] somewhere that’s safe. At the moment I don’t feel safe where I am’ (Susan, minority mother time).

April, Jade and Susan had shelter, but key elements of home were absent from their lives: stability, security, belonging and safety. The absence of home they described was shaped by broader social structures and dynamics that eroded their capacity, and the capacity of other mothers we interviewed, to make and maintain homes for themselves and their children. We now explore those barriers in more detail.

Barriers to creating home post-separation

Mothers most commonly specified domestic and family violence and financial difficulties as barriers to making and sustaining a home after separation. These existed in addition to, and in interaction with, other challenges which did not relate specifically to home, including negotiating parenting arrangements when parental relationships were not amicable, dealing with children's and their own responses to the separation, and adjustment to the responsibilities of sole parenting, particularly when children had complex needs.

Domestic and family violence

Although we did not ask parents directly about domestic and family (during the interviews) violence, physical, emotional/psychological and economic abuse and controlling behaviours were voluntarily disclosed by more than half of mothers in this study. Their descriptions provide important insights into the impacts of domestic and family violence on home, and the reach of domestic and family violence long after parents separate.

Christina, for example, who had an equal shared time care arrangement, described her former partner as emotionally abusive during their relationship, belittling and undermining her as a person and as a mother in front of the children. Her observations reflected prior research on abusers undermining their partner or ex-partner's parenting capacity and relationship with their child (Campo 2015, Kaspiew *et al* 2017). Christina described a tenuous relationship with her daughter who would emulate her father's behaviour and was sometimes physically violent toward her. Christina's former partner was financially controlling at the time of separation, pressuring her to agree to a financial settlement under which she would not seek child support from him, and this was followed by his taking low-paid employment so that she was assessed to pay him child support. The impact of the violence had been a continuing challenge for Christina in attaining a place that could be home and building a sense of home after separation:

So [the separation] has helped her settle but...I feel like it will be a few years before we've made big headway and I do feel a lot more connected to her, yeah. But it used to be very difficult because a lot of her behaviours reflected him so much and I had to remember that she is not him...Now that I'm not around him, there's not that kind of angst so it's a lot easier to calmly deal, like she might be hitting me or punching me or biting me but I can keep a lot calmer now and say 'That is not okay. I'm going to protect your sister'.

(Christina, equal shared time).

Heather also described the emotional and financial impacts of domestic and family violence. At the time of interview, the children lived with Heather and were spending one day a fortnight with their father. Heather and her children had escaped life threatening violence that had been witnessed by her children. In the initial aftermath, the crisis accommodation and homelessness were obviously circumstances in which home was difficult to achieve: the stability, security and capacity to share things together were drastically limited. Now, having found a stable and appropriate dwelling, Heather was aware of the continuing financial and emotional impact of the violence. One of Heather's children was emulating the father's violence towards Heather and their younger sister, who Heather described as deeply fearful and emotionally demanding as a result of the violence.

Ongoing impacts of the violence for Heather included physical pain, medical complications and costs from her physical injuries, and the financial insecurity that had come from leaving the family's sole breadwinner. Trying to create home under these conditions was challenging. Heather's words echo other mothers' comments about the work of creating home for children after separation:

You know I'm working my butt off to make myself better and deal with it. I'm working my butt off to help them deal with it and stuff, and for them to get better. But he still causes conflict in regard to the kids because he doesn't care.

(Heather, majority mother time).

For some mothers, the challenges of homemaking after violence were intensified through institutional processes that eroded agency and demanded ongoing relationships with abusers. Mothers who described domestic and family violence and who had court orders for parenting time with the other parent commonly spoke of the continuing emotional toll on themselves and their children of facilitating shared parenting arrangements when their children refused or resisted this. Helena, for example, described emotional and physical abuse by her ex-partner of herself and children before separation, and her children's ongoing distress regarding spending near-equal time (6/14 nights) with their father pursuant to consent orders. Helena had felt pressured to agree to the orders after an independent children's lawyer (ICL) said that if agreement was not forthcoming the ICL would seek orders that the children live with their father. Helena's reluctance to pursue further family law processes echoes the recognised disinclination of Aboriginal people to engage with legal systems due to Australia's history since white invasion of State intervention in Aboriginal people's lives and families and ongoing discrimination within those systems (Davies 2006). The resultant emotional state of her children and her home was:

...horrific, absolutely horrific, the first time they went, and ... even now they sometimes still cry when they go, so, and this is [even though] we've had the court orders in place now for 3 years.

(Helena, substantial shared time, majority mother time).

Helena's ex-partner had an enduring impact on the emotional climate within her dwelling as a result of the build-up to, and recovery from, the time their children spent with him, leading to her and the children's sense of lack of control over their lives. As a result, Helena's capacity to create a home separate from these dynamics was compromised:

[T]hey don't feel that they've got control of their life. And I think that impacts, especially the older kids I think that impacts them massively. And you'll get [my older child] ... is probably the main one that will quite often break down and go, 'I hate my life'. ... [My youngest child] just sort of melts down a lot of the time [when he] comes home, which is why he's got to see a psychologist.

Another mother, Dana (substantial shared time, majority mother time), described her ex-husband's ongoing stalking and intimidation despite a domestic and family violence intervention order being in place. This undermined her family's sense of safety at home. Dana's ex-husband also continued to exercise control over their lives through one of their children's sporting commitments and medical appointments. At the time of interview, Dana was trying to extend her family violence intervention order and re-open her family court matter to reduce the time the children spent with their father due to ongoing violence. For Dana, the direct impact of her ex-husband's controlling behaviour was exacerbated by the impact of court dates and appointments with family law professionals on her ability to work, reducing the financial resources available to meet the costs of living stably and comfortably post-separation.

Financial strain

Mothers frequently described financial strain as inhibiting their home-making efforts. This could be the result of a violent former partner's control over their finances, as described in the previous

section. The financial strain could also be generated through continuing dynamics of domestic and family violence. For example, Thea (majority mother time), who described domestic and family violence including economic abuse in her former relationship, agreed to a financial settlement that significantly disadvantaged her and her teenage children. She did so to avoid court costs that she feared would accrue through her former partner's likely systems abuse if she did not accede to his demands. As a result, her former partner remained in the large family home in a wealthy suburb close to the children's schools, seeing the children once a week. Thea and her children experienced the upheaval of moving to a small unit in a suburb some distance away. Other mothers said their capacity to work was limited by the need to be more present for their children following escape from domestic and family violence:

And so [my child]... started to really, he's had a lot of issues, emotional issues around going to his dad's ... So, taking time out to deal with all of that stuff and having the energy to do that I had to quit work, I'm like, 'I can't keep all the balls in the air anymore'.

(Veronica, majority mother time)

Financial strain was not limited to survivors of domestic and family violence. Mothers' financial issues commonly related to the difficulty in finding affordable housing. Some mothers moved in with relatives following separation until they were able to become more financially secure, while others spent time in emergency accommodation including refuges. Nearly half of mothers were in rental accommodation.

Whether mothers rented or purchased a new house, finances limited their housing choices and their capacity to build a home. For those who were renting, the constraints of creating a home

could feel tighter. Some described the erosion of stability and continuity when they could only afford to rent in suburbs that were distant from their children's schools, their previous community, or that were geographically isolated. Mothers sometimes described feelings of impermanence due to a lack of long-term housing security associated with the Australian rental market. They felt their limited agency in not being able to hang pictures and photos or have pets, which are common restrictions imposed by Australian landlords. A sense of constrained homemaking was also described by mothers who were able to buy a new place to live. Deb, who had moved from the large family home and purchased a more modest place, described these:

So when you say, 'What does home mean?', like it used to mean something where the place mattered because it needed to be this place that we had a history with and we had chooks and a big garden, yeah, but it's kind of changed like that for me now: it just has to be something that's actually just more manageable and affordable and comfortable.

(Deb, equal shared time).

Mothers' descriptions of homemaking in contexts of domestic and family violence and financial constraint highlighted gendered dynamics and structures that could erode mothers' agency to create homes that were safe, stable and enjoyable. This is not to say that home was unattainable for these mothers and their children but rather, mothers felt they were doing the work of homemaking in difficult circumstances that demanded adjustment, loss and adaption.

Facilitators to creating home

While we didn't specifically ask about factors that facilitated mothers' sense of home and homemaking, it became evident during the interviews that certain conditions enabled these. Specifically, some economic security, flexible employment, amicable relationships with ex-

partners and links to community assisted mothers to create the kind of home they wanted for themselves and their children. This is not to say that *absence* of these conditions prevented homemaking; rather that these conditions made it easier. A further theme to emerge was that survivors of domestic and family violence described the absence of violence as providing the opportunity to make home where it was not previously possible.

Economic resources and associated work and care practices enabled mothers' homemaking in several ways. For example, Gina had an amicable equal shared time arrangement, whereby she and her ex-partner cared for their two children 'week-about'. Both parents were professionals, worked full time, and lived in close proximity. Before separation they had been equally involved in parenting their children, allowing an easier transition to shared time (Smyth *et al* 2005). Both Gina and her former partner used flexible work hours to accommodate equal time. At the time of interview, Gina was living in the family home (which was to be eventually sold) and her ex-partner was renting nearby. In this context, the parents were able to give their children a continuing sense of home:

[T]here are rituals, like the way we walk to school, the things that we do and all the sort of memories in that, but she's adapted very readily to [my ex-partner's] new neighbourhood partly because there are some other families that they know around there but also, I guess, because of the things that he's been doing with walking the dog and going on the creek and going to [a new market] instead of the [market we used to go to].

So, I think that I wouldn't overestimate the importance of the actual neighbourhood.

Gina's description conveyed a sense of agency and relative ease and privilege regarding her post-separation living arrangements. Financial security underpinned Gina's capacity to manage her work and care responsibilities to create continuity for her children. The impact of Gina's

financial resources was strengthened by a supportive relationship with her ex-partner – and his own resources to make a home for their children.

These dynamics were evident in the life of Erin, who worked part time and did not have a large income but owned her own house. This allowed her to stay in the former family residence and create a home for her school-aged children:

I feel lucky – it is important to me personally, like I really respond to living in a really, kind of environment like this, and conscious of having the lounge room in with the kitchen so it's all in together means we actually spend a lot of time altogether and then you have the yard is very open so they've got that opportunity to play out there or go into the bush yeah – so yeah it is important.

(Erin, majority mother time).

Thus, economic resources and other linked capacities to manage their work and care responsibilities facilitated mothers' ability to keep or create homes that aligned with their sense of what was best for their children.

The absence of domestic and family violence as an enabler to creating home

Earlier in this paper we described how past and ongoing domestic and family violence constrained mothers' homemaking after separation. Despite this, for some mothers, separation offered a level of liberation from violence and meant that they were able to create home for the first time with their children. They described a sense of optimism, relief and freedom.

For example, Jennifer linked the ending of an abusive relationship to changed meanings and practices of home. When she had lived with her former partner, the house had been a site of

isolation, fear and domination, a place that was ‘chaotic, it was very loud, there was a lot of yelling and abusive behaviour from his behalf’. At the time of the interview, a permanent ‘no contact’ court order had built the foundations that supported Jennifer’s and her children’s capacity to build a new sense of home. Jennifer’s homemaking centred on creating routines and rituals which her ex-husband had never allowed:

I think it’s quite good – it was, before, quite a bit of anxiety but now it’s a happy environment where the kids feel free to talk and we’ll sit at the dinner table and now and chat and they’ll have a bit of a joke. So they’re quite free to feel that they can say whatever they want, so it has changed completely to what it was like... two years ago was the first time I ever celebrated Mother’s Day ... I’ve had the family come over and so we’ve had gatherings here and it’s made a nice happy environment – so the kids respond to that, yeah.

(Jennifer, mother time only).

Rosie, who had majority care of a large family, said that leaving her abusive partner allowed her to create a life for her children that she was now able to properly enjoy. The family were spending more time together in shared living areas which Rosie put down to the fact she was now less ‘grumpy’ and no longer ‘giving off bad energy’ as result of the abuse and managing her ex-partner’s behaviour. Her emotional state had changed, and that change had influenced the emotional atmosphere of home life.

It seemed that for survivors of domestic and family violence, the key dimensions of home identified by mothers – safety, family, togetherness, stability, security – were acutely understood and there were concerted efforts to achieve them, often in modest but emotionally and

symbolically significant ways. Mothers who were beginning a new chapter in their lives after extricating themselves from violent relationships very consciously articulated the multiple dimensions and the value of home and their commitment to creating a home for themselves and their children that offered what they had not had previously.

The facilitators of homemaking reflect the importance of a sense of agency and control. The material dimensions of this agency were clear in the lives of mothers with financial resources – they were able to maintain or create the spaces, relationships and routines they believed best met their children’s emotional and logistical needs. For mothers who had been victims of domestic and family violence, the capacity to have some control over their space and the relationships within it threw into relief the importance and possibility of home in ways that were previously denied to them.

Discussion and conclusions

The meaning of home for parents after relationship separation, and how separated parents create home for their children, have not been the focus of previous research. This paper, by focusing on the experiences of mothers, begins to address that gap.

The descriptions of the 35 separated mothers who participated in this study conveyed the complexity of home. Home was a multidimensional space and experience, constituted through meaningful relationships, shared experiences, comfort, predictability and a sense of safety. Home was also shaped by gendered social and economic processes, especially financial disadvantage arising from gendered patterns of care before and after relationship separation, and domestic and family violence. While home was deeply valued, Aboriginal mothers, and mothers who had faced significant housing instability, sometimes described the absence of home or ambivalence

about its meaning for them. For other mothers, the responsibility associated with homemaking countered notions of home as a haven. The challenges faced by mothers in the creation and maintenance of home after separation could result in positive and more difficult emotional and material experiences existing together and in tension.

Viewed within the context of the home literature, mothers' descriptions closely aligned with the key emphasis on the importance of home as a site of ontological security, that is; the sense of wellbeing that arises out of a person's trust in the constancy in the people and things that constitute their social and material environment (Giddens 1990, 1993). This was reflected in mothers' emphasis on stability, consistency and security including security of tenure as central to their sense of home, in ways that reflect definitions of home in other contexts (Dupuis & Thorns 1998, Hiscock *et al* 2001, Cairney & Boyle 2004, Fox 2006). Mothers also valued the role of interactions, activities and routines, not just with members of their household but with extended family and community. This resonated with previous descriptions of home and 'homemaking' as something that is 'done' through practices, routines and togetherness (Wardaugh 1999, Mallett 2004, Blunt & Dowling 2006, Leith 2006, Morgan 2011, James 2013).

However, alongside these positive associations with home, mothers' experiences and views also conveyed that home was a site of work, stress, responsibility and burden. Their observations sometimes conveyed an ambivalence that seemed to conflict with the theme in the literature of home as a 'sanctuary' or 'haven' from the demands of the outside world (Mallett 2004).

However, they were consistent with feminist analyses of home for women that question the 'public/private' divide and convey women's ambiguous and complex experiences, conveying 'the fluidity of home as a concept, metaphor and lived experience' (Blunt & Dowling 2006, p. 21). There was less ambiguity for those mothers living in temporary and insecure

accommodation belonging to others (usually relatives): for them, the key elements of home referred to in the home literature – stability, security, belonging and safety – were absent, leading to a sense of homelessness.

More than half of the mothers we interviewed had experienced domestic and family violence and this was continuing for some. The ongoing impact of violence and abuse appeared to influence mothers' ability to create home, even sometimes long after separation. Yet despite this, separation and a level of liberation from violence could also offer the opportunity to create home for the first time with their children. Similar to Wardaugh's (1999) findings regarding homeless women who had escaped domestic and family violence, we found that relationship separation often provided a limited escape to freedom. Several mothers achieved this freedom by removing themselves from the visibility of their violent ex-partner and engaging in 'identity work' (Wardaugh 1999, p. 104), through their continuing and positive commitment to making home for themselves and their children, in the face of significant challenges. The new identity was made real by their homemaking activities. However, while mothers often had greater agency to create home, it was bounded by the ongoing impacts of domestic and family violence, whether the violence was ongoing or had ceased. The continuing impact of domestic and family violence on mothers' relationships with their children, on their financial positions, and their emotional recovery is consistent with previous research (Hooker *et al* 2016, pp. 18-19, Kaspiew *et al* 2017, p. 5). This study adds to that research by demonstrating how overt and subtle forms of control and abuse post-separation form a barrier to mothers' agency to create consistent, stable and safe homes.

Future research

The data from this study suggest several directions for future research. First, as most participants were Australian born – with a minority identifying as Aboriginal – and all were English-speaking, the data cannot speak to culturally and ethnically diverse meanings of home. Research that takes greater account of diversity in the context of parental separation is clearly needed in this emerging area. Second, there is a need for research on father’s understandings of the meaning of home after relationship breakdown, along with the barriers and facilitators they face to creating home post-separation. Given that mothers’ experiences are shaped by gendered social and economic processes, fathers’ descriptions of home and home making are likely to differ in significant respects from those of mothers. Third, while this paper provides a detailed account of mothers’ experiences, there would be benefit in extending this analysis through larger-scale research that explored whether separated mothers’ understandings of the meaning of home vary by key sociodemographic factors (e.g., income, education level, urban/rural location, housing tenure/type). Finally, the extent to which mothers’ and fathers’ understandings of home mirror or depart from those of their children warrant careful exploration. Understanding points of convergence and disparity would be of considerable practical assistance in supporting separated parents and family law professionals to really see how ‘home’ looks from the perspective of children and young people.

While there is certainly further research to be done, our study reminds us of the gendered impacts of relationship separation and divorce on mothers, viewed through the lens of home. Mothers valued home but faced significant barriers to its re-establishment after separation and divorce, with longer term impacts on their lives and the lives of their children. The findings in this paper are a reminder that mothers and their children are likely to struggle financially, emotionally and in other ways after separation, especially where there has been domestic and

family violence. While separation offers a degree of liberation for some, it is constrained by systemic and interpersonal gendered power imbalances. Such struggles and constraints extend beyond the more commonly debated issues of care arrangements and post - separation property and financial arrangements to shape a fundamental source and site of wellbeing and stability – home. As we noted at the beginning of this article, home as an idea has not been the focus of family law and it is beyond the scope of this article to explore how home might be introduced into family law processes. However, we suggest that its significance in the lives of mothers and their children and its relationship with both pre- and post-separation experience and relationships render it a potentially useful – and potentially contested – consideration; an important way of understanding post-separation life with greater sensitivity, as well as assisting us to develop our thinking in new and more child responsive ways.

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No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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