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# **Exploring separated fathers' understandings and experiences of 'home' and homemaking**

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## **Exploring separated fathers' understandings and experiences of 'home' and homemaking**

This paper considers fathers' understandings and experiences of home after relationship separation – an issue that has received little research attention to date – through interviews with four separated fathers conducted as part of a larger qualitative study. Key themes to emerge were: the significance attached by participant fathers to home and homemaking through their focus on everyday interactions; the concern that their home might be viewed by children as secondary; and a sense of the vulnerability and transience of home arising from their children's presence and absence. Viewed overall, the fathers in this study conveyed their determination to offer their children a loving, stable, and secure home life as a fundamental dimension of their commitment to post-separation fathering while also describing key challenges they experienced in doing so.

Keywords: divorce; fathers; home; post-separation parenting

## Introduction

The experiences and views of fathers after parental separation have been less explored in qualitative research than those of mothers. As noted by Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaranemi (2019, p.24), '[i]nternationally, in the social sciences, divorce has mainly been studied from the viewpoint of women and children, to the relative neglect of the position or experiences of fathers'. This empirical gap contributes to a truncated understanding of post-separation familial relationships and practices and limits the conceptualisation of post-separation fathering.

This paper is one response to the empirical and conceptual opportunities of post-separation fathering. It explores how a small group of fathers interviewed for our larger study on the meaning of home for children and young people after parental separation (see Campo et al. 2020a, Campo et al. 2020b) understood and enacted the idea of home for their children after separation from their partner. In doing so this paper contributes to the growing scholarly literature on home when families separate, which has not as a rule specifically focused on fathers' definitions and experiences (Natalier and Fehlberg 2015, Berman 2019, Francia and Millear 2019, Merla and Nobels 2019, Nimmo and Schier 2019, Campo et al. 2020a, Campo et al. 2020b, Walker 2020 cf. Macht 2019).

Our discussion also speaks, to the extent our data allow, to wider questions of post-separation fathering as 'a complex relational and moral process, shaped deeply but not straightforwardly by gendered patterns of caring for children' (Philip 2014, p. 220). Contemporary ideas of fatherhood have shifted in the last few decades and have moved away from an emphasis on a breadwinner role to a growing expectation and valuing of fathers' emotional connection and practical care-giving in cohabiting and separated families (Wilson 2006, Dermott 2014, Andreasson and Johanson 2019). There remain, however, debates over the extent to which discursive shifts are evident in fathers'

practices (Lacroix 2006, Philip 2013, Natalier and Hewitt 2014, Dermott and Miller 2018, Andreasson and Johansson 2019). Our findings suggest that understanding how fathers think about and act to create home offers new insights into post-separation fatherhood. They suggest the centrality of care, intimacy and child-centeredness in participants' interpretations and practices of home, in ways that align with emergent understandings of fatherhood.

### **Separated fathers and 'home'**

Home is a familiar and complex, multi-faceted concept of great personal and social significance for individuals, families, and other groups (Campo et al. 2020a, p. 299). It is critical for the 'development of trust in the constancy of people and things, a sense of self and belonging, the capacity for agency, and psychological wellbeing' (Campo et al. 2020a, p. 299). Home is an essentially subjective phenomenon, albeit shaped by cultural meanings, has spatial, social, psychological and emotional attributes that interweave and change throughout the life course (Fox 2002, Easthope 2004). Its complexity renders it:

an emotional warehouse wherein grief, anger, love, regret, and guilt are experienced as powerfully real and, at the same time, deposited, stored and sorted to create a powerful domestic geography, which, in turn sustains a complex and dynamic symbolism and meaning to rooms and spaces (Gurney 2000, p.34)

Thus, home is not always a haven: it is frequently a site of fear, emotional abuse, and family violence – primarily for women (Wardhaugh 1999) and children (Alexander et al 2005, Wilson et al. 2017, Gottzén and Sandberg 2019). Generational power differentials can also erode many of the positive elements of home for children (White 2002, James, 2013).

Despite the existence of a rich body of research across disciplines (Fox 2002, Easthope 2004, Mallet 2004), home has not been a focus in family law (Natalier and Fehlberg, 2015), including discussions of post-separation fathering. There is some Australian research on post-separation fathering and housing (as opposed to ‘home’) but it has primarily focussed on the costs of contact for non-resident parents, particularly the provision of suitable accommodation for children to stay overnight on a regular basis (see e.g. Fehlberg and Smyth 2000, Henman and Mitchell 2001, Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support 2003, Fehlberg and Millward 2013 – and in the UK, see Philip 2014 and Gingerbread 2020 on the so-called ‘bedroom tax’ – a tax on unused spare rooms, with implications for shared and minority time parenting). This work has primarily attempted to monetize the costs that accrue when children stay overnight with a non-resident or shared-time co-parent without engaging with the interpretive and relationship dimensions of home.

Philip (2014) offers a notable exception to the absence of home in research on post-separation fathering. Philip interviewed 23 separated fathers in eastern England about how they sustained and re-created their fathering roles, identities and relationships after relationship breakdown, including their ‘idea of, and feeling attached to, “home”’ (Philip 2014, p. 221). She found that leaving or selling a home often carried both painful and positive symbolic meanings for separated fathers, demarcating the ending of a relationship with a partner, and also heralding in a new chapter of life. For fathers, making a new home for themselves and their children was important for many reasons: to be seen to be a ‘good’ father; to create a space in which they ‘could “be” fathers and “do” fathering’; and to secure an ‘active role for themselves in their children’s lives and hearts’- an ‘ordinary space to do ordinary things’ (Philip 2014, pp. 223–224).

Other researchers, while not focusing on the idea of home, have alluded to aspects of fathers' home and homemaking. These include the importance of children's presence in making a residence feel like home (Hachet 2019, Schier, 2019), fathers' increased reflection on their role and the role of their home in their children's lives (Schier 2019), wanting to use limited time with children 'qualitatively well' and 'effectively' (Schier 2019, p. 173), prioritising children's needs (Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaranemi 2019), and fathers' 'practices of love' (Macht 2020, p. 65). The limited research gestures to the importance of home in informing separated fathers' attempts to create meaningful relationships with their children. The following analysis builds on and extends this foundation.

### **The study**

Our analysis draws on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with four fathers, a sub-sample of the 39 parents we interviewed as part of a larger study exploring children and young people's understandings of home after parental separation, and whose interviews have not been discussed in our previous work emanating from the study (Campo et al. 2020a; Campo et al. 2020b). The number of fathers participating in the study was very small and no claim can be made as to representativeness of the sample or the generalisability of the findings. However, the richness of the data, the under-explored terrain of fathers' understandings and experiences of home after a separation, the importance for children, parents and family law professionals of better understanding those experiences, and our engagement with other research on home that has taken a similarly close approach (James 2013, Macht 2019), have fuelled our commitment to writing this paper as an initial step in better understanding the meaning and significance of home for this understudied group.

Parent participants were interviewed between September 2018 and April 2019, having been recruited through social media advertisements, family and relationship support services, researchers' professional networks and a previous study of shared parenting by one author (Smyth). Parents were eligible to be part of the study if they met three criteria: they had separated after 7 June 2012 when the most recent amendments to the parenting provisions in Australia's Family Law Act came into effect; they were not involved in family law proceedings when the interview was conducted; and they were spending some time with their child/ren who were aged 8–18 years old. We interviewed only one parent of the children participating in the study, an approach consistent with prior research (Campo et al. 2012, Kaspiw et al. 2015, Carson et al. 2018). We interviewed parents and their children separately.

In the larger study, purposive sampling was used to capture the diversity of experience, meaning and process, relating to the meanings of home and homemaking after separation. Our sample was designed to generate insights on home across social positions, but our findings may not be generalisable. This is particularly true of this sub-sample of fathers. We aimed to interview roughly an equal number of fathers and mothers but only four fathers volunteered – an outcome that reflects previous research reporting difficulties in recruiting minority time parents (Hunt and Roberts 2004). The four fathers who participated were highly articulate, self-reflective, and child focussed. Separated fathers who were less involved in their children's lives or who had less-than-ideal home environments for children are unlikely to have volunteered to participate.

The fathers were Australian born and aged in their 40s and 50s. They had separated from their ex-partners between two to five years before the interview. All lived in metropolitan locations across three Australian states and territories. Fathers reported yearly personal earnings between AUD\$41,000 to over \$100,000. Three

fathers reported wages as their main source of income; another was self-employed. Three fathers were renting, and one owned his own home. Three fathers had shared time arrangements of their children (ranging from 5–7 nights a fortnight) and one had minority time (two nights a fortnight). For context, among the Australian separated population, 21 per cent of children are in shared time arrangements (i.e. children spend at least 35 per cent of nights with each parent) and 73 per cent live with their mothers for the majority (66 per cent or more) of the time (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019). Three fathers reported informal parenting arrangements; another described adjudicated court orders. One father reported a distant but business-like relationship with his ex-partner, another described getting along generally well with his ex-partner, while two reported a high level of ongoing acrimony.

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 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. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

We applied primarily inductive thematic analysis. After coding the interviews manually, key themes were identified, agreed upon and developed by all authors. As our group of father participants was very small, we were concerned to examine each interview on its own terms as well as thematically in relation to the sub-sample. This reflects the approach taken in other focused accounts of home (James 2013, Macht 2019).

### **Fathers' understandings and experiences of 'home' and homemaking**

Three insights emerged from our interviews with fathers. First, the fathers in our study described a strong commitment to home and homemaking. This was evident from their considered definitions of what home meant for themselves and their children, and through child-centred homemaking practices that prioritised nurturing, togetherness and shared experiences. Second, they were sensitive to the possibility that their residence was a less important home for their children, a 'secondary home' their children may opt out of. Third, fathers' descriptions suggested transience in their own sense of home, with their residence feeling less of a home during the periodic absences of their children.

### ***Fathers' commitment to home and homemaking***

Fathers' understandings of home echoed those described by mothers and children in our study (Campo et al. 2020a; Campo et al. 2020b) and included the elements of relationships and belonging, safety, and emotional and physical comfort that define culturally dominant understandings of the term (Easthope 2004).

[C]omfort, food, ... family ... togetherness, respite... from the carry on that goes on in the world. ... [and] warmth. (Stephan)

[H]ome is not always necessarily just a place, right? It's also a sense of being and a sense of warmth. (Craig)

Home is, you know, your sort of secure place. ... It's like where ... you can come and be safe. And it's where your family is, or the people that love you and/or you love. And it's a place to relax and be safe. (Greg)

Similar themes were evident in fathers' consideration of what home meant for their children, suggesting a commitment to child-centredness and intimacy that aligned with the emotional dimensions of contemporary fatherhood (Dermott 2008, Dermott and Millar 2015). The fathers we spoke to recognised the importance of home for their children and by implication, their post-separation fathering:

I hope it's comfortable for them and I hope it's familiar and ... relaxed and once again a bit of a respite from all of the carry on that goes on out there. They come back home, and they can feel like they can just relax and ... unwind. Yeah, I hope they find it a safe place. (Stephan)

[T]hey probably have a similar idea [to me] about it .... It's a place where things are familiar. You know it's a place where you can be comfortable in the surroundings of it.... [I]t's just about, you know, making it a place that feels comfortable. It feels familiar and it feels safe. (Greg)

All four fathers conveyed a commitment to creating a home after separation where relationships would flourish, primarily through what might be termed 'mundane' or 'everyday' experiences: conversation, spending time together doing everyday activities (such as bike riding, walking, gardening, cooking, doing chores and watching movies) and the importance of community and friends close by. While often taken for granted elements of life, such practices suggested the pertinence of 'being-in-the-moment time' (Smyth 2005, p. 9) – time that involves 'unstructured, spontaneous, intimate time where a parent and child are free to "hang out", talk about things, or engage in activities that are important to them ... [time that is] natural and unimpeded to create the conditions for free-flowing interpersonal engagement'. This emphasis reflected Philip's (2014, p. 223) findings that 'domestic space and routine activities [were] a resource for emotional closeness and a resource for the exercise of paternal authority'. It spoke to fathers'

awareness of ‘normal life’ and relationships to a sense of home for both themselves and their children.

The centrality of relationships and everyday interactions to home was conveyed strongly by Stephan. He and his ex-partner had separated about two years prior to interview, and he reported their relationship as amicable. The shared time parenting arrangement was stable and decided informally: their two primary-school aged children spent six nights each fortnight with Stephan. Stephan lived in the rented former family home, a decision informed by his desire to maintain consistency and continuity for his children despite the rent being difficult to cover on his wage; his ex-partner moved into a residence nearby. Both parents were child-centred with Stephan noting that ‘a lot of the decisions are guided by what’s best for the kids’.

Stephan was very conscious of the diverse relationships that facilitated his children feeling at home:

I think the dog really contributes to a home ... the feeling of comfort and connection ... Sometimes I’ll have my sister over for dinner and [the children are] very connected to her and so you know, that has a sense of home. There’s neighbours as well around who they’re very familiar with and so when they come here, they’ll often go up to visit their friends up the road or the friends up the road will come here. So ... there’s like a connection to the neighbourhood which contributes to their feeling of feeling quite comfortable.

Stephan emphasised the importance of his relationships with the children. He conveyed a sense of closeness, nurturance and attentiveness to his children’s emotional needs:

... we do a lot of cuddling and hugging and hanging out and doing activities and things, and it's usually pretty good. The two [children] squabble pretty consistently...but like in some ways that's an indication that they do feel comfortable...expressing their emotions...at whatever you know. If they didn't feel comfortable expressing their emotions, I would be worried.

The emotional comfort embedded in Stephan's homemaking appeared to encourage smooth transitions between parents' households:

I mean they walk in here and they just, you know, they just flop, come straight in and they'll flop down and they'll just start reading a book you know, it's not like they kind of, there's an adjustment process really.

In Stephan's child-focused approach, supporting his children to feel safe and secure was central to creating a home.

Aaron similarly conveyed the importance of having a place where the children experienced stability and emotional safety: 'they needed a place where they could come and just be'. Aaron had minority time with his two teenage children who spent two nights a fortnight and one evening per week after school with him, in the context of ongoing conflict with his former partner and her troubled relationship with the children. Around a year prior to interview, he had purchased a house, having rented since separation. More important than ownership was his ability to configure and use of space in ways that physically and emotionally connected Aaron and his children. The living room in the house where he and the children spent most of their time was central. This room was well used, filled with shared and personal projects and treasures:

It's just a place where the three of us can be together – and do whatever we want to do – and it's big enough that you know so [the children]... could watch a movie together... Usually we do things separately but if there wants to be a conversation

about something it's sort of available. They don't have to come and find me. I am not sort of anywhere else. It doesn't matter what I do in there as long as I'm there – that's it. We don't have to talk – don't have to – that's not what it's about – it's weird, and there's no road rules for this. This is just something that's kind of like – yeah this is actually just right. Don't try and change it; it's good.

Aaron's description also suggested a strong sense of the importance of 'being-in-the-moment time'. Initially he had felt he should plan activities for when the children were with him, but 'the kids were just tired, they didn't want to really – so I stopped that pretty early'. He was particularly attuned to the importance of unstructured time as an alternative to the more tense and pressured atmosphere of his former partner's residence. This extended to reflecting on how unstructured time encouraged a connection between himself and his children. His responses convey the hope, shared with other father participants, that shared, mundane uses of time, in shared, mundane places could counter the corrosive effects of 'not enough time' on the relationships that were a central focus of home.

Fathers were attuned to the physical environment of their homes, seeking to create a welcoming environment for their children in ways that linked the physical and relational elements of home. Like Aaron, Craig emphasised the importance of creating a space that acknowledged the presence and belonging of his children. Craig had a shared time arrangement spending five nights per fortnight with his three young children. Separation had occurred three years prior to interview and the parenting arrangement was decided informally at that time and had not changed. Craig lived in small, rented apartment, while his ex-partner was renting a house in a nearby suburb. He observed that his current home was 'a little more barren ... quite minimalist I guess compared to my previous house where we had like years and years of stuff accumulated'. To counter

the potentially alienating effects of this sparseness, Craig had printed photos of family holidays to pin up in the kitchen to help the children feel at home and had spoken with them ‘about what they wanted in the house... certain books and certain, yeah just lots of different things I guess, just because they didn’t really have much here in the way of toys and stuff’.

Greg’s account offered a slightly different perspective on attending to children’s needs and preferences when creating a home. Greg, who described an equal shared care arrangement, emphasised the importance of his children knowing and appreciating what home meant for him. Home, for Greg, was simultaneously a place of connection and part of what he as a parent could teach children about building a good life as he saw it:

I wanted to make sure that the things that, you know, I wanted them to see what a home looked like from my perspective, and whether that was about being – and I guess you could sort of bring that all up to what a home looks like, but it’s about what a life looks like, you know this is what I think a ‘good life’ looks like and this is sort of how you go about making a good life.

Greg’s comments are a reminder that fathers’ child-centredness may exist alongside their own expectations of home and a more authoritative approach to fathering. His description of the pedagogical element of fathering reflects Philip’s (2014) comments that a home shared with children offered fathers the opportunity to reclaim paternal authority and influence over their children – something they perceive to be a necessary element of fathering.

The study’s first insight – that fathers were committed to creating a home for children after separation – highlights the pertinence and strength of child-centredness and intimacy key fathering practices post-separation (Philip 2013, Andreasson and Johansson 2019). Home was not only a site of emotional comfort and belonging for their children

and themselves; it was an important site and set of practices for being the fathers they wanted to be to their children.

***Fathers' homes as less important homes***

Some fathers expressed uncertainty about whether their children viewed the home they had created as secondary or less important than their former partner's home. For example, Greg had separated four and half years ago after a 15-year marriage. His four children aged between ten and 18 had been living with him in a week-about equal shared time arrangement until recently when the eldest child decided to live with the mother and visit occasionally; equal time remained in place for the three younger children. The parenting arrangement was determined through an adjudicated court order, which Greg said he had to 'fight' for. Greg described ongoing significant conflict over parenting, which he attributed to his ex-partner's approach: 'there's this constant thing about ... she's like *the mother*; in her mind, she's the mother; she knows best about everything and I just get informed after the fact'. Greg's interpretation of his former partner's behaviours suggested he saw her mothering as a manifestation of 'situational authority' (Smart and Neale 1999), rooted in her everyday care of their children, and denying and limiting his capacity to father and thus to create a home.

In this context of conflict, Greg described his former partner as encouraging the children to view her residence as their main home. His former partner continued to live in what had previously been the family home, complete with the familiar material possessions. Greg frequently pointed to behaviours which he feared put the children in a position where they would be less likely to feel at home with him. For example, he described his ex-partner not allowing the children to bring personal items to his house,

undermining their sense of security across household transitions and marking Greg's house as not a place in which to invest time and possessions:

[O]ne of our interim court orders said that they were supposed to be able to bring half their books and toys and things like that, and their mum didn't really facilitate that, so they just, I think they felt a bit threatened about what they were allowed to take or not.

Greg said his ex-partner also suggested to the children that his home was inferior to hers because it was a rental property:

I think there was a lot of, like there's sort of a lot of manipulation and stuff, like there's a lot of trying to drive wedges... that sort of thing, so I think that a little bit plays on their minds in so far as this being a rental property and not an owned home. But I've tried to make that a little bit more secure by taking out a longer-term lease rather than just an annual sort of lease, but also talked about the idea that for us we get to choose where we live, you know we're not stuck in any one place. If we like it, we can stay. If we don't like it, we can go wherever.

Philip (2014) has noted that inappropriate housing can be a particularly challenging issue for separated fathers. Housing offers a private space for being with children in meaningful ways and signifies fathers' capacity to be 'good' fathers – as the providers of shelter in ways that reflect breadwinner roles and their capacity to meet their children's non-material needs. Claims that challenge the desirability of a house can thus be read as aspersions on the possibility of home, even in the context of men's attempts to offer alternative interpretations that reinforce the existence of home. Greg's account suggests that he had worked hard to counter the negative implications of living in a rental property, emphasising its possibilities not its instability. However, the continuing conflict corroded his confidence that his children valued his efforts to create a home.

Ongoing acrimony and fear also seemed to underpin Greg's belief that divergent parenting approaches could render his home less desirable – indeed, as less of a home – so that the children no longer wished to live there. This was intensified by one child's decision to do just that.

But yeah I think there's always this tension between two homes when people aren't cooperatively parenting that there's this idea that, 'Oh, if I'm having a shit time here I can go and live with the other parent'. And so, there's sometimes that sort of a threat.

Greg's comments suggest that he interpreted the children's potential reluctance to live with him as a reflection of his former partner's parenting style. It may also highlight a tension between his child-centred focus on home and his discomfort at acknowledging the possible misalignment between his and his children's understanding of the practices and relationships that constitute a home. Thus, a child-centred approach to home may generate ambivalence and conflict in accommodating fathers' and children's expectations for home.

Although in an equal shared time arrangement, Greg suspected that his home would be viewed by his children as secondary:

I suspect that they view this as a secondary home and their mum's place as the primary home, because they – and one of the really interesting things actually when we first moved out and I had nothing, like I was basically starting from scratch. I got kicked out of my house and I didn't have any, I wasn't allowed to take anything.

For Greg, the fear of being a 'secondary' home reflected the material implications of the separation and, again, what he understood to be his former partner's unreasonable actions.

Craig was also sensitive to the possibility that his home was a secondary home – but he framed this in more positive terms:

I don't know, I would hope that they think that it is kind of like a secondary home to them, a home away from home, maybe I wouldn't say that I'm ... it's necessarily more like a holiday here compared to their mum's place.

Conflict was not a defining characteristic of Craig's relationship with his former partner and we suggest this shaped his interpretation of what being a secondary home might imply. Rather than a fear that his homemaking was somehow lacking, he understood his children's potentially different engagement with his home as a reflection of its different possibilities and joys.

Both Greg and Craig worked to reconfigure the risk of their home being viewed as not only secondary but lacking. Greg turned his limited possessions into a positive, observing of his children that 'they liked that it didn't have anything, because the house, their mum's house was probably overcrowded with stuff and so they liked the simplicity of not having anything', while Craig saw his home as offering his children something 'more like a holiday'. In this way, fathers conveyed a sense of vulnerability but also claimed the value of their home in their children's lives.

### ***Fathers' transient sense of home***

When discussing home, fathers touched on the transience of their own sense of home in their absence of their children for extended periods of time. Researchers have noted that many fathers experience significant loss and grief when they are no longer part of their children's daily lives (Hachet 2019, Schier 2019), so that 'home is only a lived place when the children are there' (Hachet 2019, p. 166). This loss could require considerable

adjustment and was something fathers continued to struggle with, to the extent that home without the presence of children required redefinition.

Craig, whose children lived with him for five nights each fortnight, struggled with not seeing his children daily, said home was now:

... a very different kind of thing... Ever since my children were born, I had been around them every day pretty much. I've never been apart from them. So coming home to an empty house, that was very difficult and sort of like, I had to kind of really redefine home for me personally as to what home was like. And it ... was very, actually quite difficult to come to a house where you couldn't hear the kids playing, fighting whatever. It was just [a] very odd feeling.

Without the children, Craig experienced his home as being in state of flux that was dependent on who was present. Home was now characterised by fluidity and transience, with Craig as the only permanent presence:

[It's] kind of fluid because in the sense that sometimes my kids are here, sometimes they're not, sometimes my new girlfriend ... partner is here, sometimes she's not, sometimes they're here and she's here as well. So I guess this household sort of, I'm the regular person here but ... the dynamics sort of chop and change quite regularly.

Aaron also described a sense of transience arising from the loss of children's daily presence. After a long relationship, Aaron and his partner had separated four and half years prior to interview. The current, rigid parenting arrangement had been decided after considerable conflict with his ex-partner, including attempted mediation. Aaron would have liked more time with his children but after a period of feeling 'pretty resentful' had accepted that 'I wasn't going to get more care'. He had concluded that, 'going to court was just mad for everybody, it wouldn't help, and you know the benefits

for [the children] would've been – it would have been terrible for them'. The minority time arrangement thus reflected Aaron's child-centredness in stepping back from further attempts to receive more time.

Throughout Aaron's interview there was a sense of grief over the lost time with his children. This informed Aaron's sense of home: he observed that 'home is kind of here with them, but when they're not here it's just a place'. He was keenly aware of the limited time he and his children spent together each week:

I see them for like 24 hours a week, it's like, and some of that we're asleep so – it's not a lot ... from a father's point of view it went from participating in pretty much everything to like just huge gaps of their lives that I have nothing to do with to this day.

Aaron did not want to be perceived as a father who was 'abandoning' his children because he could not be there for them most of the time. He was explicit in his child-centredness, doing his best to meet his children's needs: welcoming, relaxed, and a place to 'chill'.

Hachet (2019, p. 159) has described shared care as a 'pendular existence', primarily discussed with reference to children's experiences. However, the fathers in our study suggested the importance of broadening our focus to the experiences of parents. Fathers' comments highlighted the centrality of physical proximity as well as emotional intimacy in constructing parents' experiences of home – and the potentially intermittent experience of home for fathers – and mothers, too – when children are absent from the space.

## Discussion and conclusion

How do separated fathers understand and experience ‘home’? What do they think the concept of ‘home’ means to their children? How do they create a sense of home for their children after separation? Our paper has begun to explore these questions.

The four fathers we interviewed were articulate, self-reflective, and child focussed. They understood home in ways that align with culturally dominant interpretations of the concept: as an expression of intersecting relational, emotional, practice and physical elements (Easthope 2004, Mallett 2004). They defined home in similar ways for their children. Their understandings also reflect those of children and mothers in our study (Campo et al. 2020a; Campo et al. 2020b). Together, these analyses suggest that there are strong themes in the meaning of home across multiple contexts (Easthope 2004, Mallett 2004, Natalier and Fehlberg 2015) – it is the materiality and practices of home that alter.

Our findings resonate with broader discussions about changing fathering identities, roles, and practices. Much of this work has highlighted an increasingly strong emphasis on intimate fathering (Dermott 2014), emphasising emotional connection, the quality of father–child relationships and the importance of communication, of ‘talking, listening and understanding’ (Dermott 2003, 8.1). These values and practices are evident in other recent work on post-separation fathering (Philip 2013, 2014, Andreasson & Johansson 2019, Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaranemi 2019). The present study supports such findings through the particular context of home. The fathers we interviewed conveyed their attentiveness to homemaking, with significant awareness of the emotional and physical dimensions of space and place. For them, home was a site for fathering through valued, everyday interactions. Their descriptions of home and homemaking were consistent with Macht’s (2020) observations that fathers’ love and

intimacy can be ‘primarily defined as a form of action ... expressing love in practical and embodied ways: through playing, through hands-on care, holding, kissing or cuddling their children’ (Macht 2020, p. 41).

Home was not, however, simply a container for intimacy and love. Fathers participating in this study were aware of how physical space could facilitate or impede meaningful interactions and connections with their children. This could occur through co-occupancy designed to facilitate ‘being-in-the-moment time’ with valued, free-flowing and harmonious interactions in a single room (for example, Aaron), or an awareness of a new residence being ‘barren’ and in need of welcoming additions such as family photographs, children’s artwork and age-appropriate books and toys (as described by Craig). Home offered them the opportunity to practice the kind of fathering – child-centred, connected, intimate – that they valued.

Fathers in this study also described home and homemaking as being shaped by the post-separation context. For children, home may – and sometimes may not – be experienced across two residences (Francia and Millear 2019, Campo et al. 2020a, Walker 2020). This appeared to inform fathers’ emphasis on the importance of providing a secure and emotionally safe home, not primarily to achieve housing stability per se but enhance their children’s wellbeing after separation (see also Philip 2014).

The post-separation context also gave rise to children’s absences, which highlighted the importance of time in fathers’ definitions and practices of home. Dermott (2014) has noted that intimate fathering can be uncoupled from the amount of time fathers spend with their children; our research suggests that time was important – but the quantity of time was less important than its quality. Fathers in our study emphasised the value of ‘being-in-the-moment time’ (Smyth 2005) and mundane,

everyday activities for supporting intimacy, connection and children's sense of belonging. Philip (2013, p. 14) similarly describes the fathers in her study combining special with the ordinary, to provide and receive what they described as 'the real dad experience'. This was important to retain what they saw as 'normal' and 'good' fathering, which included routine care, and emotional closeness but also the ability to maintain some level of authority over children's lives.

Home was clearly important to the fathers in this study, but its value was accompanied by ambivalence. They conveyed a sense of vulnerability and transience in relation to home. This was largely related to their children's comings and goings in shared time or minority time parenting arrangements – intensified in contexts of high conflict and mistrust between parents – and expressed in fathers' sense that the home they provided may be viewed as a secondary home by their children. This concern echoes findings of our interviews with children and young people: very few saw themselves as having two homes and most said they felt more at home at their mothers' place regardless of the parenting time arrangement (Campo et al. 2019). However, this did not necessarily prevent children and young people from having a meaningful relationship with their other parent when parents focused on them in ways that facilitated meaningful connection. We suggest that sensitivities expressed by fathers in this study about whether their children recognised their residence as home reflects Philip's (2014, p. 223) findings 'that home was significant as a context in which they [fathers] could 'be' fathers and 'do' fathering''. Concerns about being a 'secondary' home or not a home were also fears that they would not be able to be fathers in ways that mattered to them because what they did might not matter enough to their children.

Home could also be entwined with a sense of loss for the fathers we interviewed, who described its transience when their children left. Schier (2019) has similarly

described fathers' grief when they cannot participate in children's daily lives after separation. The relational nature of home means that it may be contingent on children's presence – as Hachet (2019, p.161) has observed, for parents, 'the home is only a lived place when the children are there'.

Our discussion of home and fathering post-separation has focused heavily on our participants' interpretations and experiences. It is also important to acknowledge, however, that their fathering occurred in a widely debated social and cultural setting. In a context where gendered patterns and meanings of pre- and post-separation caring continue to prevail (Haux et al. 2017, Smyth and Chisolm 2017), these debates encompass questions of how care responsibilities are determined and shared (Fehlberg et al. 2018), the implications of fathers' sometimes larger role in their children's lives post-separation (Holt 2016, Raley and Sweeney 2020), the resources available to mothers and fathers post-separation (André et al. 2019, de Vaus et al. 2017) and the benefits and challenges of parents' ongoing relationships with children and former partners (Holt 2015, Francia et al. 2019, Natalier and Dunk-West 2019, Smyth and Moloney 2019). While the fathers in this study were creating home in this context, the scope of our study left us unable to attend to its impacts on understandings and practices. This, and the need for further work on post-separation fathering including in relation to home, we suggest, provide much fertile ground for future research.

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No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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