

WELLCHI NETWORK WORKSHOP 6  
'THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR NON-RESIDENT FATHERS  
AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE'  
FRIDAY 1st DECEMBER 2006, OSLO

# **Fathers' experiences of negotiating and managing shared residence in Britain and France**

**Alexander Masardo**  
**Dept. Social & Policy Sciences, University of Bath**  
**ssmfam@bath.ac.uk**

*Please do not cite or quote without permission of the author*

# Shared residence

- Non-resident parents are not an homogenous group.
- A form of family life in which children reside with each parent for roughly equal amounts of time by alternating their home life across two households.
- A 30–70 division (e.g. Baker and Townsend, 1996) provides a useful framework with which to explore the intersection of resident and non-resident parenting.
- Shared residence brings the nomenclature of a ‘resident’/‘non-resident’ parent divide into question.

# Methods

- Qualitative in-depth interviews.
- 20 British fathers and 15 French fathers.
- Snowball sampling.
- A comparative approach:
  - *‘we can understand social phenomena better when they are compared in relation to two or more meaningfully contrasted cases’* (Bryman, 2001:52).
- Britain and France provide a relatively homogenous field. A ‘most similar systems design’ (Przeworski and Teune, 1970) can help us best appreciate causal relationships and evaluate marginal differences.

# Respondent characteristics

- Average age of respondents: mid-30s–40s. Mothers only marginally younger.
- Older fathers may be better able to negotiate, manage and sustain this type of arrangement.
- Shared residence can be costly.
- Children:
  - aged 4–22.
  - In SR arrangement from between 2–13 years.
  - All but one child under 11 when SR started.
- Importance of geographical proximity of homes.

# Models of shared residence

Cycles of care defined by the number of overnight stays

**M** = Mother

**F** = Father

## The one-week cycle

Chris (aged 36) and Sue – Joel (aged 7) and Sam (aged 4)

<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat

## The two-week cycle

Jacques (aged 44) and Mari-Lou – Julian (aged 12) and Sophie (aged 9)

Week 1							Week 2						
<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat

# Parenting schedules

- Need for a comprehensible rhythm.

‘There’s a minimum stay and there’s a maximum stay. I think a pattern that left children moving from one night here and one night there on the odd fortnight would just ... no one could keep track of that and confuse them. There needs to be a comprehensible rhythm [...] and that usually means that you’re dealing with more than a single day unit. On the other hand, I don’t think that more than four or five nights without seeing your mum or your dad is good.’

- Other models include a four-week cycle and ‘nesting’, where parents alternate their own residence to accommodate the child’s one home.
- A great diversity apparent within these ‘cycles’ of care, not only in the days on which changeovers occur but in their timing and logistics.
- Cross-national differences apparent in the length of residence:
  - In Britain: shorter blocks
  - In France: longer blocks
- Consistency *vs* flexibility:
  - In France: consistency provided by developing arrangements that did not leave children in a continual state of flux.
  - In Britain: the actual pattern or length of care was not as important as the routine itself.
- Arrangements varied and could change over time, though actual levels of care tended to be sustained.

# An alternate days approach

Kyle (aged 35) and Freya – Roly (aged 8)

Week 1							Week 2						
<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat

‘The format we both understand! We don’t have to talk to each other about the two-week cycle. We both have been doing it for so long that we don’t have to ask any questions there. [...] [It] has worked for quite a few years now and has worked successfully. Roly seems very happy and well adjusted to both environments and he sees both places as his home now, which is good I think. Roly seems really, really happy in all ways.’

# The relational dimension

- Respondents pointed to the need for ‘a time to heal’ without fear of being sidelined in their children’s lives.

‘To start with tensions run very high, you know, there’s a breakdown of trust in relationship. Typically people sort of fall into trying to score points or score victories, or hurt the other person, you know, because they’ve been wounded or whatever, and you have to go through that phase where you “bed-down” basically and begin to work together again as parents in the interests of the children, rather than trying to score pyrrhic victories.’

‘Time heals lots of wounds [...] as you move on, you become more trusting that no one is, you know, keeping score anymore. ... There were times when [the children’s mother] would have seen it as disadvantageous to her position, or case, to allow me to look after the children when they were ill, and have an extra night. Now, no one’s counting any more.’

# The co-parental relationship

- *Cooperative co-parenting:*
    - reflected in some form of working relationship.
  - *Parallel parenting:*
    - where little or no communication took place, each essentially doing their own thing.
- (see Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Ricci, 1997).
- Parallel parenting stemmed from unresolved contact issues.
  - These approaches were not set in stone.
  - In respect of the relational dimension, fathers' narratives also revealed two other main areas of inquiry:
    - the role and influence of children;
    - wider family support and recomposition.

# The legal framework

- Private ordering
  - Three quarters of British sample had no recourse to lawyers or family courts. The French sample were more evenly split.
- The legal process
  - An inability to agree about care arrangements separated these two differences in approach.
- Feelings of vulnerability and the need for ‘certainty’:
  - key to understanding the motivations of respondents and the ways in which negotiations proceeded.
- Mediation

# The policy framework

- The issue of where a child is registered as having their principle or ‘permanent address’ lies at the heart of policy management in both Britain and France.
- This administrative division forced many parents into becoming proactive in seeking imaginative ways of turning the system to their best advantage.
- A ‘resident parent’ status could be dynamic.
  - The registered address of the child could vary according to the particular welfare mechanism or policy under consideration.
- A ‘non-resident’ status could be a particular source of hardship for low-income families.

# A 'residence' status could be dynamic

'Actually the children are registered as living with me. And the reason for that is as much tactical and practical as anything, because I happen to live in a school catchment that is more favourable for their secondary education than [their mothers] is ... So again, that requires a certain level of cooperation, understanding and trust on [her] part that I'm not going to go trotting off to the courts and say ahh, look, you know, the other party accepts that I'm the primary carer because the children are resident with me.'

‘As far as taxes go there’s no recognition that I have children at all. What some parents do is to say, “O.K.! Since we both have the children for one week each,” they say; “I’ll have one child” and the other parent says “I’ll have the other child”. [We] would have been able to do that. On the other hand, however, you’ve also got to look at the allowances – the social security. And in fact, since I don’t earn much money I don’t get taxed. So because of that I say that I don’t have the children while Sandrine says that she has both of them. Consequently she ends up paying less taxes. And, because she earns a certain amount of money she’s not entitled to social security anyway, whereas I am. So in order to get social security I had to say that I have the two children, so it all links up. You have to be a bit crafty! She wrote a letter saying “I the undersigned, Sandrine ... the mother of Thomas and Sarah ... confirm that the social security benefits are for Stephan”.’

- Parents could feel frustration with an administrative apparatus that was unable to accommodate the lived reality of their family lives:

‘Going back to the forms, when [we] asked to get [the child benefit] transferred to the other parent, it says on there: “when did the child stop living with you?” All these questions, there was about seven or eight boxes you had to tick, *and there was not one box on there which said our circumstances*. So we basically didn’t tick any boxes and just wrote: “still living with both parents”, that’s what I wrote, “still living with both parents but I’d like the money now to be paid to [my son’s mother].” And they sent the form to her as well, and she wrote the same look, “the circumstances haven’t changed, he’s still living with both parents but I’d like the money to be paid to me,” and we haven’t heard nothin’ back.’ [*emphasis added*]

# Conclusion

- Looking at the intersection of resident and non-resident parenting may also help us to understand more about post-separation dynamics more generally.
- What have we learned from a comparative approach?
- Further analysis (*La loi du 4 mars 2002*). Recent French reforms legitimise and support the practice of co-parenting in ways that Britain does not.
- A ‘resident’–‘non-resident’ parent dichotomy may not be helpful where children have a ‘dual residence’. In some instances, it may also serve to discriminate against this model of family life taking place at all.
- Research should focus on the ‘quality’ not ‘quantity’ of parent–child relationships (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Nevertheless, these relationships take place within different structural frameworks that also need to be understood if we are to respond adequately to children’s needs.
- Directions for future research: despite inherent difficulties, a need arises to appreciate (measure) the incidence of shared residence.