

# The Australian Community Psychologist

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College of Community Psychologists



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## General Information

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## Editorial

### Special Section on Fly-in/Fly-out

Anne M. Sibbel  
*Edith Cowan University*

Welcome to the second issue of the *Australian Community Psychologist* for 2009. This issue has a special section of papers reporting on the systemic impacts of fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) employment practices on communities, families and individuals. There is also a general section with two papers and a book review. This issue was originally proposed to focus on FIFO employment as it is practised in the resources industry, however, I am pleased that the scope of articles submitted clearly illustrates the diversity of FIFO and DIDO<sup>1</sup> (drive-in/drive-out) employment practices and services.

#### *FIFO Section*

FIFO employment practices are "those which involve work in relatively remote locations where food and lodging accommodation is provided for workers at the work site but not for their families" (Storey, 2001, p. 135). Workers spend a fixed number of days at the work-site followed by a fixed number of days at home. The employees usually commute from a home base located in a large city, coastal community or large established town (Gillies, Wu & Jones, 1997). Although flying is the most common form of transport for these commute arrangements, some employees drive-in and drive-out (DIDO) using either company provided or private road transport. FIFO has been used by the offshore oil industry since the 1940s and has become common in the Australian land-based mining industry since the 1980s (Storey & Shrimpton, 1991). FIFO is also used by the human services sector to provide services to rural and remote communities.

Despite the number of years FIFO has been employed in Australia, only a small number of studies have been undertaken to understand its psychosocial impacts on urban and remote communities and individuals. Greater understanding is needed to ensure that

government and corporate policies and practices, and service provision are evidence based and appropriate. The papers in the FIFO section of this issue add to our understandings of the systemic effects of FIFO employment and service provision on communities, families and individuals.

In the first paper Pauline and Bernard Guerin draw on their extensive experiences, mainly with remote Indigenous communities in South Australia, to discuss the positive and negative social effects of the use of FIFO and DIDO in the provision of human or social services on those communities. Despite some of the challenges associated with the practice, Guerin and Guerin argue that FIFO/DIDO service arrangements can be appropriate and successful if care is taken with the implementation and use of such services. They provide a matrix of guidelines for the implementation of FIFO services in a number of different contexts.

The impact of FIFO employment on family systems has been the subject of much public debate (e.g., Bowler, 2001; Loney, 2005; Watts, 2004) and is the focus of the second paper in this section. Jill Taylor and Janette Simmonds present their research investigating the levels of family satisfaction and family functioning of a group of FIFO families. Positioned within a framework of Olsen's Circumplex Model of Family Systems, their findings challenge negative stereotypes of FIFO families, and have implications for employers who use FIFO schedules and for services that offer support to FIFO communities.

The resources sector has traditionally been a male dominated workplace. In Western Australia, women currently comprise approximately 19% of the industry (Chamber of Minerals and Energy, 2008). In the third paper of this special section, Julie Pirota

reports on the experiences of 20 women working on FIFO minesites. Pirotta found that although the lifestyle provided these women with financial security and employment satisfaction, they also faced the challenges of working FIFO and living and working in a male dominated environment. In contrast, the final paper in the FIFO section investigates the experiences of male FIFO employees aged between 18 and 28 years (Generation Y) working in the offshore oil and gas sector. In this paper Tayla Carter and Elizabeth Kaczmarek provide insight into the impacts of offshore FIFO employment on self-identity and relationships.

#### General Section

Both papers in this section focus on the theme of creating more culturally respectful communities. In the first paper Eleanor Wertheim, Elizabeth Freeman, Margot Tinder and Glenda MacNaughton describe Phases 1 and 2 of *The Enhancing Relationships in School Communities* (ERIS) project which began in 2005 to develop better processes for cooperative conflict resolution in primary school communities, and to create more culturally respectful school communities. They provide a framework for building and restoring relationships in schools. Anne Pedersen, Anne Aly, Lisa Hartley and Craig McGarty's paper reports a nine week anti-prejudice intervention based on in-depth cross cultural analysis and learning. Their positive findings provide evidence that such interventions can contribute to bringing about change in attitudes to marginalised groups in Australia.

#### Book Review

The final article for this issue is Dawn Darlaston-Jones' review of the booklet *Support for mum while dad works away*. This booklet was produced by the Western Australian Government's Department of Communities to provide support and advice for families with children whose father works away from home.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this editorial FIFO refers to both FIFO and DIDO practices.

#### Address correspondence to

Anne Sibbel

Email: [asibbel@westnet.com.au](mailto:asibbel@westnet.com.au)

## Social Effects of Fly-in-Fly-out and Drive-in-Drive-out Services for Remote Indigenous Communities

Pauline Guerin

*Flinders University of South Australia*

Bernard Guerin

*University of South Australia*

*The use of fly-in fly-out or drive-in drive-out (FIFO-DIDO) arrangements for health, human or social service provision in remote Indigenous communities has a wide range of social effects on those communities. These types of service provision are markedly different from those in urban and town environments in which service users go to the service providers and usually have more choices. In this paper we outline some of the forms FIFO-DIDO services, briefly compare the problems to urban regions, and then review the positive and negative social aspects of FIFO-DIDO services in remote regions of Australia. We provide a preliminary matrix of different contexts in which such services might arise and ways of improving them. We argue that despite problems, FIFO-DIDO services can be improved with changes in how the service providers approach the task, how the community make use of the service, and, perhaps most importantly, how the relationships are negotiated.*

Nearly half a million Australians, or 2.6% of the total population, live in remote or very remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). Their demographic, health and social characteristics are diverse and different to those of urban or regional-dwelling Australians. For example, remote Australians are geographically dispersed within remote regions, and have differing age and gender structures depending on ethnicity. Non-Indigenous rural and remote Australians are generally older and male while Indigenous people living in rural and remote areas are much younger. Rural and remote Australians also have higher unemployment rates, greater disease burden (e.g., diabetes mellitus, accidental drowning and submersion, transport accidents and intentional self-harm), and lower educational attainment (ABS, 2001).

Clearly, the provision of health and social services for Australia's rural and remote populations is more difficult than for those in urban and regional Australia, but the statistics above also show that there is also a greater need of services. The challenges of providing those services, particularly from the wider dispersion of the population and the remote

locations, have often resulted in less than acceptable service provision. While there is some literature relating to *in situ* health and social service provision to residents of rural and remote communities (e.g., Kelly, 2000; Haslam McKenzie, 2007; Loveday, 1982), in this paper we will focus on exploring the social dynamics related to providing health and social services in a 'fly-in/fly-out' or 'drive-in/drive-out' (FIFO-DIDO) fashion to remote Indigenous communities.

### *A Note on Evidence and Research*

There is almost no research published on the effects of human or social service delivery through FIFO-DIDO. There are literatures relating to FIFO-DIDO-run health services, particularly regarding GP, specialist services or mental health services, but usually without systematic reference to the effects of FIFO-DIDO (e. g., Harris & Robinson, 2007; Haswell-Elkins et al., 2005; Santhanam, Hunter, Wilkinson, Whiteford & McEwan, 2006). For this reason, we have drawn evidence from many sources but do not wish to imply that our sources prove that an effect always occurs. Our aim is to note many effects of FIFO-DIDO that occur but they do not occur always nor do they

occur in every location. We are not trying to prove that all the effects we mention occur every time, but rather our aim is to exemplify the different effects with real examples so they can be anticipated and recognized if they do occur in particular contexts.

Much of what we draw on, therefore, are examples and anecdotes from our own fieldwork over a number of years. These are again meant to *illustrate* effects that have occurred in particular communities without implying generality. Our fieldwork has involved many remote, mostly Indigenous, communities in South Australia. We have not provided a *Methods* section for this since our observations are based on participatory work and informal interviews (yarning) that extend over several projects and communities that have not explicitly explored implications of FIFO-DIDO. While our examples come from primarily Indigenous communities we believe the same effects can occur for any remote communities whatever the ethnic or cultural identity of the residents. Remote communities comprise a mix of people within them and there are not generally communities in Australia with completely homogeneous populations. However, for brevity we have not considered communities or stations with primarily non-Indigenous residents, nor have we discussed the interactions within communities comprising of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, since that would take us too far from our main aim (but see Guerin & Guerin, 2008 for more on these). *FIFO-DIDO Service Provision in the Mining Sector*

Our focus in this paper is on the social effects on residents of remote communities of FIFO-DIDO health, human or social service provision, and not on the issues of FIFO/DIDO in the mining or other resource industries. However, to understand where the concept came from and how it evolved involves the mining sector. The concept of FIFO-DIDO employment in Australia (also known as “long distance commuting”; see Houghton, 1993) originated to meet the needs of the mining industries, particularly in Western Australia. With work sites often located in very

remote areas with a lack of a local workforce, mining companies needed to find solutions. Originally, due to difficulties with transport, building towns close to the mining sites for a ‘transplanted’ workforce was the solution to providing the workforce for the mines. Typically, the mining company would provide many or all of the town’s facilities including health and other services.

In more recent times, with improvements in transportation, the building of towns explicitly for the purpose of the workforce of a mine is seen as costly, having too much of an environmental impact, and inappropriate, particularly if the mine life is projected to be short. Providing the workforce with an option of FIFO-DIDO is one way of achieving a number of benefits for the mining companies, particularly in terms of lower cost. Mining companies argue that there are a number of benefits of providing FIFO-DIDO options to their employees, and indeed, employees may find these options attractive. Employees benefit by being able to live where they want, with friends and family, and have access to city amenities when not at the mine site. The mining company benefits economically because it is overall cheaper to hire employees on FIFO-DIDO work. FIFO-DIDO arrangements cause less of an environmental footprint—accommodation is temporary rather than building a town—which is also cheaper. However, there are some concerns about the potential negative effects, socially and economically, of this employment arrangement, particularly for the local region in which the mine is located (Storey, 2001), but more research is needed in this area. For example, Storey (2001) discusses how the FIFO arrangement can mean that the social and economic benefits of a mine do not transpire as the employees are urban-based—taking the social elements and economic growth with them.

#### **FIFO-DIDO Service Provision in Remote Indigenous Communities**

The wider delivery of social, human or

health services in remote communities that are not part of the mining industry have a few similarities to FIFO-DIDO, in that individual service providers fly-in/fly-out or drive-in/drive-out of various communities to deliver or provide social services, rather than being based there either permanently or on a long-term basis (Haslam McKenzie, 2007). However, it must be kept in mind that this is different from the FIFO-DIDO used in the mining industry. For example, FIFO-DIDO employees in mining may be based at a particular mine for a longer period of time, for example, on a two week on/ one week off work rotation, whereas employees of health, social or human services who FIFO-DIDO in remote communities may not be 'based' in those communities, but rather, they may be based at a different location, remote from the remote community, and make occasional, even if sometimes regular, visits to the remote community. Overall, with a few exceptions, it is also difficult to determine what models, if any, drive various service delivery models to remote areas, except that they are likely delivered in a very ad-hoc fashion.

FIFO-DIDO employment is not a new method of service provision in remote regions of Australia and there has likely been an increase in DIDO services since four-wheel drive vehicles and improved roads have replaced planes (Lea, 2006; Redmond, 2006). From the perspective of residents or service users in remote communities, there have always been concerns that services are being delivered in a FIFO-DIDO manner that may not be entirely appropriate or effective, and this has led to slang terms over the years such as 'blow-ins' (Cowlshaw, 1988), 'Four-Wheel dreaming' (an expression heard during our fieldwork), or living in 'remote control' communities (Drewery, 2009). Originally, the concept may well have been 'camel-in-camel-out' before both planes and vehicles were able to negotiate the desert terrain. Another somewhat related concept that may well apply to service provision is that of the seagull

imperative, which has been described as: "a researcher or consultant who flies into a community; craps all over everything then leaves the community to tidy up the mess" (Drew, 2006, p. 40).

#### *Varieties of FIFO-DIDO Services in Remote Australia*

In this paper we are restricting our discussion to areas of remote Australia that are dependent on the remote human, social or health services flying or driving in, but there are still many varieties of this. Indeed, the Royal Flying Doctor Service is the epitome of FIFO and has been servicing rural and remote Australia since 1928 (Haslam McKenzie, 2007). Other human and social services, however, such as Centrelink and social work services, have taken on elements of FIFO-DIDO, although not necessarily identifying it as such.

FIFO-DIDO service provision comes in many forms. Individual service providers might travel (fly or drive) from a large city to the remote location and stay there for a short period—a day or a week; sometimes there is a government service town closer to the remote community than the major city and providers may stay there for short periods while travelling back and forth to the remote location; sometimes they stay in a government location and travel to many communities, maybe spending only a day, an afternoon or even just an hour in each community; and sometimes service providers may even fly directly from a major city and only spend an hour or two in one single community and then return back to the city.

Each of these variations has its own complications and advantages, but our point here is that the exact models are often not thought through but are determined by staff time demands, workloads, urgency, financing, short-term government accountability, political imperatives, and other considerations, rather than the needs, capacities and cultural appropriateness for the communities. Our view is not to blame the services, the individual service providers, or the community for

mismatches, but to spend some time thinking through the social pros and cons of different models from all sides and to consider that perhaps past failures have related more to a failure to consider the various social implications rather than failures of any particular model in and of itself. One senior Aboriginal leader pointed out his observations of the way in which services have been provided to remote Indigenous communities. He commented on how services and programmes that could be done with the least amount of money and in the shortest amount of time would be the ones to receive funding. However, after 40 to 50 years of failed programmes and ineffective services, the collateral costs have been greater than would have occurred if more time and money had been invested originally thinking through the community's needs and capacities and including these in what might overall be more costly and time intensive in the short term, but more effective and perhaps even cheaper in the long run.

#### *A Comparison to Urban Service Provision*

Two elements of service provision in urban areas are worth noting partly because there are substantial contrasts between service provision in remote areas and urban areas. It is also important to acknowledge here that by focussing on service provision in remote areas we are not suggesting that there are no problems with service provision in urban areas, but remote service provision often does not gain the attention required to make substantial improvement (or it gains ill-informed attention).

The first element of urban service provision relates to who moves. In an urban setting, people generally travel to the urban service rather than the service going to the service users, except in specialist cases of home care and home visits. When someone is unable to travel to services then they generally are taken to a hospital that has all the services or to a specialist home that likewise provides a wide range of specialist services on the spot. Second, in the major cities of Australia, travelling to services also means that there is at least some choice of service

providers available (Gething, 1997) and the person could travel elsewhere to get better or new services or to access different service providers (even if further away from their home). If a person is unhappy with an individual service provider, he or she can go elsewhere. So, in an urban setting, service users usually go to their service providers and service users usually have some choices about where to go or who to see.

While some aspects of these two points are positive, there are also negative aspects. The system places a large onus on people to organise their own services and travel there, which many are not in a position to do easily. For example, Williams (1995) in the USA studied the parents of 202 children with cancer, focusing mainly on their financial problems. She found that there were many hidden costs for these parents, such as regular transport to medical centres (up to 300 miles), meals while at hospital (3-5 hours waiting), parking fees, petrol, new tyres, special foods for their children, baby-sitters for other children, treats, and even videos for the other children to watch while the child with cancer was having treatment. This study is just one illustration of possible problems with needing to travel to access sedentary health services, but there are, of course, many more. For example, consider that there is a specialised literature in behavioural medicine that focuses on how to get people to remember to come for their appointments, placing the responsibility on to the service user (e.g., Cohen-Mansfield, Creedon, Malone, Kirkpatrick, Dutra & Perse Herman, 2005).

Another problem in urban services is that specialist services are often located in centralised areas, which does not necessarily make it easy for urban or regional-dwelling service users to access. Moreover, in recent times many services have devolved from the suburbs to the CBD regions making it difficult for many people to travel to services, especially the more specialised services. Disadvantaged or vulnerable populations may have trouble

accessing services even though the services are close in comparison to those in remote regions (Guerin, Abdi & Guerin, 2003).

### **Positive and Negative Social Effects of FIFO-DIDO Services**

We now tentatively document a wide range of social effects that FIFO-DIDO service provision has on those residents of Indigenous communities that rely on this type of service provision, based both on fieldwork talking to members of remote communities, individual service providers, and key stakeholders, as well as reviewing the small relevant literature. In looking at the positive and negative social aspects of FIFO-DIDO service provision, we have identified seven categories of issues, and we will illustrate some of the positive and negative outcomes within each of these categories:

- ✦ convenience and cost of services
- ✦ social diversity of the service personnel
- ✦ quality of the service personnel
- ✦ quality of the service provision for the providers
- ✦ quality of service provision for the community
- ✦ communication
- ✦ the nature of social relationships

These are not meant to be exhaustive or even exclusive, but are merely a way of organising many hundreds of observations and ideas into a manageable form. Others can no doubt come up with further categories and subcategories. The seven categories are presented in Table 1 along with the specific positive and negative aspects, as well as some suggested solutions that have or could be tried. Our discussion will work through these and provide illustrations.

#### ***Convenience and Cost of the Services***

When services are delivered to communities in FIFO-DIDO fashion, community members usually do not have to travel as far to access the services. In some ways this can make it easier for them than for those in urban centres accessing services.

The individual service providers, however, need to do the travelling for long distances and/or to visit multiple communities, so most of the

service provider's time is spent in travelling. This is both an inconvenience to the individual service providers and also a waste of expertise and resources, since paying for the time involved is very costly. We have heard in some communities this arrangement described as 'sit down and drive around money' in response to how some welfare recipients have been criticised as being paid 'sit down money.'

As an example, consider the geographic location and transportation requirements for going to the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands) in remote South Australia. For an individual service provider who may be based with their agency or organisation in Adelaide, there are a number of travel options to the APY Lands. Driving from Adelaide to the APY Lands is approximately 1,400kms or about 20 hours' driving time. This option would usually involve driving a full day and stopping in Coober Pedy to spend the night and finishing the drive on the second day. So, the driving option takes at least four days round trip and two night's accommodation *just for the travel time*. If a traveller to the APY Lands were to fly, the options would be to fly to Coober Pedy and then hire a rental four wheel drive to drive approximately 10 hours into the Lands. Alternatively, a traveller could fly to Alice Springs from Adelaide and hire a rental four wheel drive to drive approximately six hours down into the APY Lands. Both of these flying options also usually require overnight accommodation during travel because of the scheduling of the plane flights. Another option is to fly to Alice Springs and get on the mail plane that goes two days per week into the Lands. A final, but very costly, option is to hire private jet services into the APY Lands. Despite the extremely high cost, this option is not unheard of for some Government agencies and services.

The point of these illustrations is that the FIFO-DIDO option can be costly, wasteful of the individual service providers' time, or both, and all this occurs before the service provider has even provided any service. Consider that,

Table 1  
Issues for FIFO-DIDO Service Provision

| Issues  | Positive Effects  | Negative Effects   | Solutions  |
|---|---|--|--|
| <i>Convenience and Cost of the Services</i>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community members do not need to travel as far as they would if they had to go to an urban centre</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficult for both service providers and users to organise visits</li> <li>Sometimes extreme travel time for service providers which may be wasteful of service providers' time</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service providers need to invest in planning</li> <li>Engagement with, e.g., a 'cultural broker' or community liaison to facilitate effective service provision</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Social Diversity of the Service Personnel</i>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More people for new ideas and social contacts</li> <li>If the service provider is not wanted or not of high quality then they can leave soon</li> <li>Service providers may be less parochial</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New personnel may result in disruption and depersonalised services</li> <li>Inconsistencies in service provisions</li> <li>Some issues such as medication need longer periods of treatment</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure service providers have been adequately briefed on individual cases, on community and its history</li> <li>Services need to have better monitoring of the services provided</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Quality of the Service Personnel</i>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service providers keep more contact and influence with policy analysts and managers</li> <li>Service providers get more support</li> <li>More contact with service providers' family than permanent residency</li> <li>May be better than having to stay for long periods</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time away can put personnel off and those self-selecting into position might not be as qualified</li> <li>Those chosen might be less specialised and more generalists</li> <li>Those chosen might be less settled personnel</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate community input into staff selection and monitoring – this will contribute to community ownership of staff employed there or working there on a regular basis</li> <li>Ensure staff have adequate training- e. g., 'black cards'</li> </ul> |
| <i>Quality of the Service Provision for Providers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less time away from own families and friends</li> <li>Access to professional support, management</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If meetings are missed then long time until next appointment</li> <li>If not planned and organised well much time can be wasted or unproductive</li> <li>Some treatments, training or support just take a long time and there is no opportunity for this</li> <li>No time for personal or community engagement, if this is important</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency or organisation needs to ensure adequate professional development, support for providers</li> <li>Consideration of flexible service delivery options that match the service being provided</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Quality of Service Provision for Community</i>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less disruptive than building entire service towns</li> <li>More changing context so more flexibility at distance so rules can be bent</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More changing context can be disruptive</li> <li>Little choice for community over personnel</li> <li>Might be no one there for emergencies</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As above: include community members in recruitment of staff</li> <li>Recruit liaison staff within community to assist with transitions when staff turnover</li> </ul>   |

Table 1 cont.  
Issues for FIFO-DIDO Service Provision

|  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Communication</b></p>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having time away between visits may allow time for reflection, consultation with other professionals between visits may improve service provision</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If communications go wrong it can have a bigger impact</li> <li>• Timing and notification of visits likely to be miscommunicated</li> <li>• Services might be duplicated across services without knowing</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved coordination between various service providers</li> <li>• Explore creative ways of improving notification of visits</li> <li>• As above: ensure all staff have cultural / communication training</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>The Nature of Social Relationships</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the anonymity and confidentiality required may be easier with FIFO-DIDO</li> <li>• Longer stays do not necessarily mean stronger relationships are built</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If cultural safety and community engagement are important for the service then these may be difficult</li> <li>• Too many strangers around can change or ruin community life</li> <li>• Little time to know people and learn about the community</li> <li>• May be difficult to develop trust and relationships</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest the time to learn about the community, previous services, handover from previous staff or information sharing with other staff, other agencies</li> <li>• Accept limitations with development of trust- take a stance of cultural humility and don't try to be 'missionaries'</li> </ul> |

for example, a two hour 'consultation' in a community may involve five work days of a service provider's time. This in turn means that service providers are most often under tight constraints about when they spend time in communities, and how much time they can spend when working under FIFO-DIDO arrangements. They usually need to specify to community members specific times and places they will be travelling through, because otherwise, travel would waste even more of their time. As we will see below, this is not how most communities work.

#### *Social Diversity*

With FIFO-DIDO arrangements, it is usually the case that a wide variety and diversity of people travel and stay (perhaps briefly) in the communities (Guerin & Guerin, 2008). The reality is that there is high turnover in such positions so almost invariably many different people fill the same brief position over a period (Haslam McKenzie, 2007). There are also a wide variety of services that come and go in FIFO-DIDO arrangements. This can have both positive and negative social outcomes.

The variety of people going to communities to provide services might potentially be socially beneficial by providing people living in remote communities more diversity in their social contacts (but see below). Meeting new people can be refreshing and can help to foster new insights and new ways of approaching issues and finding solutions. It can also reduce the pressure on the individual service provider to 'become local' and parochial (as opposed to becoming local in a positive way by gaining trust), which can happen if someone stays for several years or more in the one position in one community. Also, always having the same person on a permanent basis may not be positive if, for example, that person is not well-liked or, indeed, if he or she is not good at the job. Without FIFO-DIDO arrangements a community might be 'stuck' with that person for a considerable time!

Diversity of providers employed in FIFO-DIDO fashion can, however, also be negative. If the service providers coming to a community are always different, this can result in de-personalised services if community members constantly have to deal with a new person who does not understand their situation, does not have their trust, and does not know the histories—both of the community and of service provision for particular individuals. We have many times heard community members greet news of a new person with, "Oh no, we have to train up someone else now!" It can also lead to inconsistencies in service provision—which can be positive if it is an improvement, but negative if service provision gets worse. There are also some services for which longer-term care or monitoring are necessary, and having diverse and ever-changing staff can be a problem. Maintenance of medication, for example, requires long-term monitoring and knowledge of the history and issues of particular people over a long period. This can be problematic with constantly changing staff and new staff.

#### *Quality of the Service Personnel*

The nature of FIFO-DIDO arrangements heavily determines the type of staff who comprise the service providers. A commonly-repeated phrase, albeit unjust in many cases, is that the personnel who will work in remote areas are the '3Ms'—maniacs, missionaries and misfits, or mercenaries, missionaries and misfits. Our point is not that such personnel are always so bad, but rather, that more attention needs to be paid to how personnel who work in rural and remote areas self-select into employment interviews and are then selected for those positions (we will argue below that communities should have more say in these processes). Improved recruitment and selection methods are necessary to ensure that appropriately qualified and skilled personnel are employed in these positions.

Working under FIFO-DIDO arrangements may not be attractive to many, with excess travel time, difficult conditions not of your

making, often poor housing and accommodation arrangements, and time away from your own family if that is relevant. These conditions might lead to getting younger (and therefore less experienced) personnel, who also might be less likely to continue and therefore lead to high turnover. Finally, if such positions are unattractive it can lead to service providers who do not really want to be in remote communities but who have taken the position as a 'foot in' for other positions, and this can lead to very poor service. Monitoring of individual service providers and service quality, under any of the models, can be difficult for agencies and organisations, which further compromises the rigour of quality service provision.

Another point we have heard is that agencies may aim to employ someone who is more of a generalist since there are usually multiple issues to be faced, which in turn might lead to fewer specialists travelling to the remote regions. The service or agency may employ a 'jack of all trades' and this can result in poorer quality of specialist services, particularly if the individual service provider does not have easy access to other workers to provide supervision or guidance on how to address new and different issues. Gething (1997) wrote that "low staff numbers and inadequate representation of the professions meant that unrealistic expectations were placed on those service providers who were available" (p. 217). This is an interesting contrast to services provided in urban areas where a person may provide specialist services and if confronted with a situation that they are not familiar with, they can refer the case on to someone else who may have more experience with that particular issue and ask the client to travel to a new location (although earlier in this paper we noted some issues for disadvantaged people living in urban areas).

One solution to some of these issues is the 'village Gondnok or caretaker' in remote communities in Hungary (Halloran & Vera, 2005) which was developed as a way to fill

service gaps in remote Hungarian communities. In this model, village caretakers from the communities are provided generalist training, and they live in the village they work in and are elected by the village assembly (cf. the point below about communities in remote Australia having no voice in personnel selection). While they only provide basic social and community services, and not specialist services, the service fills a gap and acknowledges the value of social services which are often provided in communities with little or no recognition.

There are also some positive features about personnel in FIFO-DIDO arrangements, especially if new solutions are pursued and selection is improved. In particular, having people who travel from urban regions on a regular but short period means that service providers are likely to be more in touch with current practices and procedures, since the majority of their time is spent in specialist facilities in hospitals or elsewhere, and have more regular contact with their managers and co-workers. The greater contact with managers can mean that service providers will be able to better argue with managers for changes than someone who has been in one remote community for several years and travels back to headquarters only once or twice a year. Also, greater contact with managers and peers can improve the identification of individual service providers who are providing less than quality services.

Most importantly, though, there are probably better ways and schemes to attract highly qualified and experienced personnel to remote regions with FIFO-DIDO arrangements. Similar to the mining FIFO-DIDO arrangements, health, human and social service personnel who are employed permanently in an urban centre (e.g., hospital or main office), might find it attractive to have occasional forays into remote regions rather than moving to a resident position in a remote area, especially if it is financially attractive. While occasionally distant from their own family and life, FIFO-DIDO arrangements have more attraction than

moving house and life for one or two years into a remote position. This could be seen as providing some change and new life into their regular and structured work-life. We are arguing that if highly skilled service personnel find the prospect of moving for a longer-term basis in a remote region not attractive, then having regular but short visits might. In this way FIFO-DIDO arrangements could be an advantage in attracting the best people if they were packaged in more attractive ways.

Another problem of personnel selection, though, is that community members almost never have any say as to who is employed in these positions. In our knowledge, rarely are community members involved in the selection of employees who will work in their communities. Those decisions often, if not always, rest with staff of the agencies or organisations based in urban centres and who may have never even visited the communities. As mentioned above, there is also the potential problematic issue of self-selection of applicants who may not be appropriate. At least in Queensland, some Indigenous leaders have suggested that anyone going to work in Aboriginal communities should have to pass a test on cultural awareness and that this could be proven by having a 'black card' (ABC News, July 29, 2009).

#### *Quality of the Service Provision for the Providers*

We have already stated that we should not entirely blame the individual service providers on the ground for these issues, since the FIFO-DIDO arrangements are not of their making and are very complex. There are issues that arise that interfere with good practice that reduces the quality of service provision for the service provider as much as the community members.

We have already mentioned that travel constraints usually place further constraints on the timing of services, which is as much a disruption for providers as recipients. The irregular nature of visits can make service provision difficult, and many service providers

have told us of their frustration with this. Also, if service providers do not time their visits well, then the visit may be unproductive. For example, on one occasion when an organisation arranged for a team of specialists to go to a remote community, via a very expensive chartered flight, they arrived in the community to find that the majority of community members who needed to be seen had gone away for the school holidays. This was a very expensive lesson in better planning and communication, and those in charge of the organizing should be held accountable. For the providers personally, we know this can be frustrating and most everyone in remote services has their own version of this horror story. Moreover, when a service user 'misses' an opportunity to meet with a service provider, it can mean a long time before the next opportunity arises and it can be dangerous in some cases to delay accessing services.

It can be suggested that service providers going to remote communities need to coordinate with each other better and share information. However, this sort of coordination is not easy, particularly with so many people working on different schedules, different availabilities, and differing demands on the services. Duplication of services, even in the same week, is not uncommon. It can be a case of 'the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing.' Communities and community leaders also have to be involved in the coordination, as we will see below.

Another frustration we have heard from service providers is that there is little time usually to take the clients through any sort of longer training, therapy or support. Some service provision seems like just 'hit and miss' as to whether it works during a one-hour window of opportunity and then the 4-week or more gap before the service provider visits again. Another service provider pointed out to us that many types of service provision needs flexibility, alternative styles of meeting, contact with extended family, and community engagement for the service or treatment to

work, but that these cannot be done on the usual FIFO-DIDO arrangements. With infrequent visits and high turnover there is usually no sense of long-term understanding of personal and community issues by either individual service providers or with the agencies themselves.

#### *Quality of Service Provision for the Community*

Many of the frustrations and issues for service providers mentioned immediately above are also true for the community. From the community perspective, services may be disrupted, inconsistent, and unpredictable. Service providers come and go and the services get 'chopped and changed' on a regular basis. Since services can be so transient, service users find it difficult to keep up with changes. So while the chopping and changing of services that invariably go with FIFO-DIDO arrangements can provide some flexibility for one party in the equation, for the other party it may become a source of disruption.

Community members also may be concerned about the lack of services between visits, and especially as to what happens if an emergency case occurs between visits. Typically, in a variety of health or mental health emergencies, the police are called in to deal with the situation even if they have little training in such matters (they are a convenient 'jack of all trades'). It has also already been mentioned that communities rarely have a voice in who is selected to come and work in their community, even if on a temporary FIFO-DIDO arrangement, and they have very little choice in the type or quality of services that are provided to them—they have to accept what is offered.

A recent typical example illustrating many of these points is that of a remote community which had a visit from a GP (generalist rather than specialist) once a fortnight. Two women told us that they did not like the way this GP (whom they had not chosen to be their GP) treated them, in that he seemed condescending and they felt he did not listen to them. They really wanted another choice so they had been making a 10-hour round trip (plus overnight accommodation) to a regional centre in order to

access a female GP they liked much better—every time they needed a service. They did have some choice but it was costing them dearly.

#### *Communication*

We have already seen some examples of how FIFO-DIDO arrangements exacerbate communication problems. For example, we have talked to individual service providers on FIFO-DIDO arrangements who claim that they turn up and the people they had arranged to meet are not there, possibly away on *sorry business* (funeral). We have also talked with community members who tell us that they only find out at the last minute that a service provider is arriving, since the visits are never on the same date and time, and that when they have managed to get to town to meet the service provider, he or she has already left.

In our experience, then, both groups get very frustrated with this lack of communication, and for Indigenous communities it is usually seen as another example of lack of respect for protocol and appropriateness. However, the unpredictable, intermittent, and irregular bases of appointments, which, as we have seen, are inherent in FIFO-DIDO arrangements, make communication very difficult. Most communities receive notifications by mail or fax of impending visits, but the individual service providers do not necessarily know that recipients have gotten that information rather than just the community office. In one community, we have seen out-dated, small, torn notices pinned (amongst many other notices) on a community board announcing a visit by the "X" department on such-a-such date. This is also not to blame the community offices. They are usually overworked and also do not know when community members might be coming into town, and in a lot of cases cannot contact people due to lack of phones.

The situation is also not helped by individual service providers (especially coming from large central agencies) assuming that community members know exactly who they are and why they are there, and even more especially when agencies change their own

name, acronyms, and personnel. Finally, we have also referred elsewhere in this paper to the problems of communication between service providers and government and non-government agencies, which can mean records or documentation of service users are duplicated across services and that there is possibly unnecessary replication of service provision by different agencies.

However, all of these problems and issues have solutions. For example, one social service provider we talked to has developed ways to maintain case management records and actions across many departments all with personnel under FIFO-DIDO arrangements in a remote community, despite the massive issues. This requires careful thought and planning and, most importantly, requires a strong commitment to engaging the community with the process.

#### *The Nature of Social Relationships*

Another issue with FIFO-DIDO arrangements is the nature of the social relationships that develop between community members and service providers on FIFO-DIDO arrangements (Guerin & Guerin, 2008). First, the common self-selection of personnel discussed above has been known to throw '3M' personnel into communities who may not want them. Again, most communities can tell you horror stories of relationships going sour even if the majority of service providers are competent or at least well-intentioned. Second, we have also seen above that many forms of service provision, for example, mental health, probably require relationships to be built, and this is difficult with FIFO-DIDO arrangements (but see Taylor, Edwards, Kelly, & Fielke, 2009). When cultural engagement and cultural safety are important then short visits are not optimal, and for Indigenous communities this is almost always.

Third, the majority of personnel employed under FIFO-DIDO arrangements will be strangers to the communities, meaning that they will know little about the history, culture or politics of the region and people. We have been surprised at how many service providers visiting remote regions have not spent any time finding

out even a little bit of background, much of which is now available through the internet. Some have suggested that improving the knowledge base of all people going to work in remote Indigenous communities should be a mandatory requirement.

In general, then, most service providers on FIFO-DIDO arrangements are strangers to the communities and this makes it difficult to develop any social relationship or trust to help facilitate the service provision. Having said this, though, we have met many dedicated service providers who have been visiting the same remote regions under FIFO-DIDO arrangements for many years, and who know the families, individuals, and context as well as any community member. On the other hand, we have also met individual service providers who have been based in a community for many years, but who do not really know anyone in the community beyond a very superficial level. We have also met a regular FIFO-DIDO service visitor, however, who expressed that there was no *need* to develop any sort of relationship with the clients, although in that particular case the type of service provision did not really require a relationship since it was built on clearly defined auditing. But, in general, it is very difficult to develop trust or a relationship with a service provider who is constantly coming and going. At the very minimum, it takes longer to develop trust and relationships in these sorts of contexts.

Once again, however, we must point out that there are areas of service provision in which stranger relationships might actually be thought to be beneficial, at least according to the letter of the law. Some western aspects of the legal system and child protection need to be seen to be done without great community engagement and personal relationship building. We are not referring to counselling and caring aspects of the legal system and child protection, but areas in which strict anonymity and confidentiality are necessary. For example, in urban centres a judge would not sit in trial over a relative. There is a trade-off, here, however. For instance, a judge living permanently in a

small remote community would learn much more about the contexts for whatever misdemeanours occur, but at the same time could not guarantee to a court their impartiality or anonymity as easily, as is often required in that role. In terms of child protection, it may be more difficult for a social worker who has developed a close, long term relationship with a family, to then have to report them for neglect or abuse.

This is a vexing issue and we have heard justice service providers almost boast of how they keep at a distance from any personal relationships so that it does not interfere with their work and their judgements. We have also seen, however, as have most in this area, that *not* developing relationships means that you never fully understand what is happening and so your judgment is impaired in very different ways leading to potentially disastrous outcomes.

After considering the negative aspects of building relationships and trust under FIFO-DIDO service provision, some readers may be thinking that the answer is to have all services based permanently in communities with service providers living in the communities that they are working in. Many services are provided in this way. For example, many remote communities have a primary school, tertiary education facilities (e.g., TAFE), and a health centre, with service providers who work and live in the community.

This arrangement, however, does not necessarily result in improved trust or relationships with the service providers. Many service providers live and work in remote communities but after work go to their home and do not interact with or socialise with other community members. They also may go out of town on weekends and holidays and only live in the community during the working week. Some service providers may only socialise with other service providers and not the local residents. In one remote community, all the service providers live in accommodation in one section of the community, while the long-term residents live in another section of the community, effectively

segregating the living arrangements of 'service users' and 'service providers'. We have also known one service provider and family who lived for two years in a house surrounded on all sides by local community members' houses, but who did not ever interact or socialise with them. The point, then, is that mere proximity does not guarantee more trust and relationship building than under FIFO-DIDO arrangements.

Finally, a concern of community members is that having many service providers coming in and out of the community changes the nature of the community. Whereas once community members might have felt like they 'owned' their town centre, with many service providers driving in and out all the time, the town centre feels more like a place for 'outsiders' to come and congregate. This can decrease the comfort and safety of community members. It would be like letting the front yard of someone's suburban house become a walk-through clinic for strangers on the street. Your own front yard becomes full of strangers you do not know yet who act as if they own it.

With so many service providers coming and going, community members also may not know what most of the people are doing there, or where they come from. An extreme recent case is that of a remote Aboriginal community that recorded one of the first 'swine flu' cases in Australia. If 'visitors' bring with them illnesses and diseases, or even 'bad' behaviour, there is risk to the resident community.

### Conclusions

While there are many inherent problems in FIFO-DIDO arrangements that we have tried to outline here, we believe that providing services in FIFO-DIDO fashion, with expert service providers based in urban or large regional settings but *travelling to remote settings on a regular but short-term basis*, can be done well. For every dozen problems we have seen or heard about, there is at least one good case that is working. We have also had community members telling us about the different government periods (from 1950s through to the present time), and which worked

best for them. Makinti Minutjukur, a senior woman from South Australia, has written about how things were so much better 30 years ago: "I believe *the* reason why all our lives out here have become so difficult and painful over the last 30 years is that governments, who have the power over us because they have the money we need to make the changes from old ways to new ways, have stopped listening to us. Listening properly. Taking the time. Working with us. Trusting us to be responsible for our own lives - since we know them best." (Minutjukur, 2008).

Through the paper, we have suggested a number of ways that agencies or organisations can improve their structures that consider the social influences of FIFO-DIDO services. These are summarised in Table 1. Unfortunately, the main way we have seen service providers performing well under FIFO-DIDO service provision out in the field, is from the result of individual effort or personality. While this is good, and needs to be applauded, it does not bode well with such high personnel turnover. A community might have one good and dedicated person but if they leave after a short period, never to return, then the community suffers. We have heard community members talk about a sincere person who puts in a lot of effort for the community, and then remark sadly that they are likely to disappear quickly.

In terms of viable solutions, there are a few key ways forward. First, finding ways of attracting staff with expertise for short periods would help in several ways we gave earlier. Second, spending more time on recruitment and selection into such positions, would be beneficial, however, this almost certainly needs some community input and needs a more careful consideration of the social impacts we have outlined in this paper. Third, engagement of the community would be of great benefit to all areas of staff selection, support of staff, assistance with transition of new staff, and assistance with communication, and would result in a number of improvements as well as potentially contributing to capacity building in communities.

A fourth general way forward we have

discussed is the importance of focussing on and considering the social and relationship implications of FIFO-DIDO service provision, rather than making assumptions about these aspects of service provision. We have emphasised both positive and negative aspects of most of the issues in this paper precisely because both sides are not usually considered by service providers, their senior management, or often the community as well. We believe that even in areas for which impartiality is emphasized, building relationships is the only way to really understand what is going on so a decent judgment can be made.

Finally, we hope we have made clear to all parties that the serious communication problems in setting up and fulfilling appointments and meetings built around FIFO-DIDO service provision is inherent and not the fault of either party. This is perhaps one area where many solutions can be tried, but the solutions will need the involvement of everyone and will also need specific solutions for specific communities and services. It is unlikely that any generic solution ('one size fits all') will work. This goes against the grain for social policymakers and senior management, however, who want a single describable solution, but we cannot emphasise enough that all communities are very different.

While it is well-known that there are many 'problems' with service provision in remote communities, there is not as much known about 'solutions' or the social implications of various options of service provision. More research is needed to get an understanding of what has worked and what has not worked well in terms of service provision in rural and remote communities. Also, that research needs to incorporate an analysis of the social contexts under which various models work or not. Policy formulations or service provision that takes a 'one size fits all' approach will only maintain the 'not quite right' dilemmas that currently exist.

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accessibility rather than physical distance, but we will not pursue that here.

#### **Address Correspondence to**

Dr. Pauline Guerin  
 Flinders University  
 School of Nursing & Midwifery  
 Adelaide 5001  
 South Australia  
 Email: [pauline.guerin@flinders.edu.au](mailto:pauline.guerin@flinders.edu.au)

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2. There are definitional arguments about what is urban, remote or rural (or other terms). We will not go into this as it differs between countries as well, with some countries counting 'remote' as much closer than would be done in Australia. We think that the approach of Hugo (2005) is the most sensible option: defining in terms of

## Family Stress and Coping in the Fly-in Fly-out Workforce

Jill Clover Taylor  
Janette Graetz Simmonds  
Monash University

*Fly-in fly-out (FIFO) work schedules can present difficulties for families and yet others can thrive despite the constraints and transitions inherent in the lifestyle. This study investigated family system dimensions that perform central roles in family coping. Additionally, the relationship between work and family factors and levels of family functioning and satisfaction were explored. The sample included 63 FIFO workers and partners of FIFO workers who completed scales from selected family assessment inventories. The results provided support for Olsen's Circumplex Model of Family Systems; high family functioning was strongly associated with healthy family cohesion and flexibility, and effective communication. Implications of this research for companies that use FIFO schedules and for counsellors, companies and communities are discussed.*

Fly-in fly-out (FIFO) work practices are an integral and growing part of the mining, and oil and gas industries in Australia (The Chamber of Minerals and Energy, 2005). Increasingly, companies transport workers long distances to remote work sites where they work a set number of rostered days and return home for a set number of days (typically 14/7 denotes 14 days on roster in the workplace and 7 days off roster away from the workplace). Workers are consequently away from home and family for block periods on a regular basis, working extended hours often in demanding work conditions and with little flexibility in their roster schedule.

FIFO work schedules inherently involve constraints and recurrent transitions for families (Lewis, Shrimpton, & Storey, 1988) that are different from typical non-FIFO work. There is a common perception in the community that FIFO work schedules place strain on marriages and families, and are a cause of marriage break up. This is supported by research literature reporting that the degree of success in balancing work and family affects marital satisfaction and stability (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998; Pittman, 1994; Presser, 2000; Saginak & Saginak, 2005) and is made more difficult when working non-standard and inflexible hours (Heiler, Pickersgill, & Briggs, 2000; Presser, 2000; Staines & Peck, 1983;

White & Keith, 1990).

Overseas research on 'long distance commuting' in mining (Storey & Shrimpton, 1989), offshore work in the oil industry (Clark, McCann, Morrice, & Taylor, 1985; Collinson, 1998; Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Lewis, Shrimpton et al., 1988; Parkes, Carnell, & Farmer, 2005; Solheim, 1988), and Australian studies on fly-in fly-out employment (Beach, 1999; Gallegos, 2006; Gent, 2004; Reynolds, 2004; Sibbel, 2001) have investigated the impact of work schedules on workers and their families. The authors of an early study (Storey & Shrimpton, 1989) ascertained that generally families accepted the work cycle and were able to cope "... though not without incurring what may often be considerable personal and family costs" (p. 159) and concluded that the opportunities of long distance commuting generally made up for its constraints.

The aim of this research was to examine family qualities that enable FIFO families to function and experience satisfaction in a lifestyle that can present distinct stressors. The Circumplex Model of Couple and Family Systems was chosen for this study as the theoretical framework to investigate family stress and coping because it is a systems-based approach and, through its self-report inventories, made it possible to measure the relationship dimensions of family interactions

deemed essential to coping, these being cohesion, flexibility, and communication.

#### *Impact of FIFO on Family Relationships*

FIFO work schedules are described by the rostered number of days “on” and “off” and they vary within and between work places. Some rosters are more family friendly than others (Beach, 1999) depending on length and symmetry (symmetrical such as 14/14 or asymmetrical such as 14/7), nevertheless, the subsequent recurrent absence and presence of the worker impacts on family relationships. In the FIFO lifestyle the worker and his family move back and forth between different lives (Solheim, 1988), that being, their lives apart and lives together. While there would be considerable variation in families’ experiences of FIFO, some experiences appear to be shared.

For the worker, the difference between the culture at work and at home can be significant. Generally the work is physically demanding and in a hazardous environment (Sutherland & Cooper, 1996), routines at the workplace are structured (Parkes et al., 2005), there is little scope for self determination, and social interaction is limited (Solheim, 1988). The worker is often away for family celebrations and significant events in their children’s lives, and managing family problems and sharing in family decision-making is dependent on access to frequent and private means of communication with their partner (Collinson, 1998; Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004). They arrive home tired often having come straight off shift and having travelled numerous hours (Collinson, 1998). Although the reunion is eagerly anticipated, it can be marred by unmet expectations (Clark & Taylor, 1988) and subsequent arguments. Reunions and partings have commonly been identified as the most difficult times emotionally for couples and families, and for communication (Gallegos, 2006; Lewis, Shrimpton et al., 1988).

In any couple relationship, there is an expectation by the individual of what their role is in the relationship and of their partner. Role expectations may be embedded in a perception of the type of relationship such as (and not limited

to), the more traditional homemaker/breadwinner (where role is based on gender), or the more contemporary and egalitarian model in which both work. The FIFO lifestyle may cause strain and subsequent change in roles that can be in discord with expectations. In the FIFO workers’ absence, the partner carries most of the responsibility of managing the home and children, maintaining relationships with extended families and friends, and often making independent decisions (Lewis, Porter et al., 1988). Furthermore, the burden of the unequal share of family responsibilities on the partner at home is exacerbated for those who also work outside the home (Taylor, Morrice, Clark, & McCann, 1985). Depending on the type of relationship and role expectations of the couple (Lewis, Porter et al., 1988), the greater independence of wives has been reported to have negative ramifications, such as conflict over authority or distrust (Clark & Taylor, 1988; Collinson, 1998; Solheim, 1988). Alternatively, it has been reported as a positive opportunity for the wives to develop coping abilities, personal confidence and perceptions of themselves as individuals (Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004).

Division of labour can be a source of conflict during the home period if couples have not developed an agreed strategy to deal with the sharing out of housework and childcare tasks and responsibilities (Clark et al., 1985; Reynolds, 2004). In this regard, experienced couples develop strategies to manage the positioning and transition of the role of authority and decision making on parental, financial and other issues (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Gallegos, 2006). Until these strategies are developed and mutually accepted, tension in the family is likely. Furthermore, the strategies and related behavioural patterns (rules, routines) may become problematic over time if they are not resilient to changes in circumstances (for example, birth of baby, partner starting or ceasing work, or children growing up and sharing in household tasks).

In summary, a number of relationship

issues emerged from the above review of the literature. These included: the transition by both worker and partner between two different lives, difficulties in couple and family communication, unmet expectations by both partners following reunions, the burden of unequal share of family responsibilities on the partner at home, role conflict as women gain greater independence and personal confidence, and ambivalence partners feel toward the lifestyle. Furthermore, variables that may influence the effect of stressors are indicated by the review and include role expectations, stage of the family life cycle, presence of dependent children, quality of communication in the relationship, the pattern and duration of the workers absences, previous experience with FIFO, and partner's work status.

International research and recent Australian research indicated that couples sampled generally accept and cope with FIFO (Lewis, Shrimpton et al., 1988; Taylor et al., 1985). Commonly cited benefits of the work and lifestyle included high salaries, extended time at home, and families can choose where to live (Pollard, 1990; Storey & Shrimpton, 1989). For some couples time apart helped them to reflect more on their relationship, place relationship difficulties in perspective, and create a better understanding and appreciation for one another (Clark & Taylor, 1988). For some wives their husband's absences brought greater independence, freedom, and sense of competence and ability (Beach, 1999; Clark et al., 1985; Clark & Taylor, 1988; Parkes et al., 2005; Pollard, 1990; Reynolds, 2004). Lastly, the lifestyle enabled improved communication in the relationship because time was set aside for daily telephone calls when the days events were shared (Reynolds, 2004).

#### *Family Systems and Coping with Stress*

As one of the foremost approaches in the study of families, Family Systems Theory was used in the present study to describe and understand FIFO families and their ability to cope. Olson's Circumplex Model of Couple and Family Systems is a clinical and theoretical model that offers a systems theory based description of the relationship dimensions, or

qualities, that enable families to respond effectively to change and stress. Healthy families, that is, families that function well, are those that manage stress and change effectively which otherwise would impede the family achieving its goals (whatever those goals may be).

According to the Circumplex Model, the family relational dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and communication are critical for understanding and treating family systems (Olson & Gorall, 2003). Cohesion is "the emotional bonding that couple and family members have toward one another" (p. 516) and relates to how families balance separateness and togetherness. Extremely low levels of cohesion describe families and couples who are emotionally disconnected or disengaged, and extremely high levels describe families and couples who are overly connected or enmeshed.

Flexibility is "the quality and expression of leadership and organization, role relationships, and relationships rules and negotiations" (Olson & Gorall, 2004, p. 5) and relates to how families balance stability with change. Extremely low levels of flexibility describe families and couples who are inflexible or rigid, and extremely high levels describe families and couples who are overly flexible or chaotic. In this model, extremely low and high levels of cohesion and flexibility are problematic for families over the long term (Olson & Gorall, 2003, p. 518). Therefore, cohesiveness and flexibility of healthy families are balanced, that is they fall around the middle of the continuum.

Levels of cohesion and flexibility of a healthy family adjust in response to (a) predictable stressors related to its transition through the different life stages and (b) in response to unpredictable stressors and crises (Olson & Gorall, 2003; Olson & Lavee, 1989). It is by means of positive communication skills that couples and families are able to change their levels of cohesion and flexibility to deal with stress. Families with poor communication and consistently unhealthy levels of cohesion

and flexibility will tend to be prone to stress and crisis.

#### *The Present Study*

The present study sought a measure of the health of FIFO families as defined by their ability to manage stress and change, and to measure their level of family satisfaction. It drew on the Circumplex Model of Couple and Family Systems to test the hypothesis that participants who perceived their families as having good levels of satisfaction also experience healthy levels of cohesion and flexibility, and report good family communication and healthy family functioning. Because of the long periods of separation, which is in itself a barrier to communication, and the acknowledged stressors of FIFO living, it was further hypothesised that FIFO families would have stronger communication skills than the average family. In addition, this study explored the relationship between different family and work factors, with family satisfaction and family functioning. These factors included partner's work circumstances, stage of the family life cycle, roster type, and previous experience of FIFO.

#### **Method**

##### *Procedure*

Data were collected from FIFO workers and partners of FIFO workers by means of selected family inventories and a Family Information Questionnaire. Self-administered instruments were used in this study because it enabled the collection of information from a potentially large number of people from a population that is spread over a large area. Approval to conduct the research from the Monash University Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans (SCERH) was obtained.

To obtain a convenience sample of FIFO employees from across different industries, companies, worksites, and rosters, letters were sent to numerous mining companies and contractors to the mining industry, and an oil and gas company. Following a low response rate from the first stage of recruiting participants, two privately managed accommodation facilities were

approached for assistance. The facilities were located in a northern WA town and used to accommodate FIFO workers mainly on construction jobs at nearby sites.

##### *Measures*

The inventories completed by participants included the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES IV), the Family Communication Scale and the Family Satisfaction Scale.

##### *FACES IV Scales.*

The six FACES IV scales assessed the balanced and unbalanced dimensions of cohesion and flexibility. There were seven items in each of the 6 scales that have a 1-5 Likert response format ranging from "does not describe our family at all" to "very well describes our family". The raw scores of the Balanced Cohesion and Balanced Flexibility scales only (range of possible scores being 7 to 35) were converted into percentage scores; the higher the score the healthier the family.

In addition, this study used an overall measure of the health of family functioning. Olson and his colleagues developed a Total Ratio score to summarise the relative strength and problem areas into one score (Olson & Gorall, 2004). The higher the ratio score, the more balanced the family system, meaning the family has healthier processes which enable and the family to function better. Scores less than one are considered to represent unhealthy functioning and scores greater than one, healthy functioning.

##### *The Family Communication Scale.*

The Family Communication Scale (Olson & Barnes, 2004) consisted of 10 items that have a 1-5 Likert response format ranging from "does not describe our family at all" to "very well describes our family". It assessed the degree to which family members feel unconstrained and satisfied with the communication in their family. Categories dependent on a range of scores described the family's level of communication: the family has very good communication (40-50), the family generally has good communication (35-39), the

family has some good aspects in communication but also some areas could improve (25-34), the family needs to talk more with each other about how to improve communication (10-24).

#### *The Family Satisfaction Scale.*

The 10-item Family Satisfaction Scale was used to assess how happy family members are with their family system, this being how family members interact with each other. The scale has a 1-5 Likert response format ranging from "Very dissatisfied" to "Extremely satisfied". Categories dependent on a range of scores described the family's level of satisfaction: family members are very happy about their family (40-50), family members are generally happy about their family (35-39), family members are somewhat happy about their family (25-34), family members are unhappy about their family.

#### *The Family Information Questionnaire.*

A Family Information Questionnaire was developed in order to gather demographic information about the respondents, and data about work and family factors that may have an influence on the dependent measures. Respondents were asked that for each couple one questionnaire be completed and returned with the response sheet.

#### *Participants*

Responses were received from 28 couples (14 male, 14 female) and 7 individual respondents (6 male and 1 female), making a total sample of 63. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The sample consisted of 33 workers ranging in age from 26 to 60 ( $M = 44$ ,  $SD = 8$ ) and 27 partners of FIFO workers ranging in age from 24 to 58 ( $M = 42$ ,  $SD = 8$ ). Families had an average of two children, 36 % ( $n = 23$ ) of respondents' families were categorised as early stage with young children, 38% ( $n = 24$ ) as middle stage with teenage children, and 21% ( $n = 13$ ) as long-term relationships with adult children. The most common roster cycles were 14 days on / 7 days off (14/7) and 14 days on / 14 days off (14/14), representing the rosters of 38 % and 33% of the sample respectively.

### **Results**

#### *Analysis*

Data analyses were performed using SPSS, Version 14. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic was used to assess the normality of distribution of responses on the dependent variables and to determine the use of parametric or non-parametric tests. The statistical methods used included frequency analysis to measure numbers, percentages, means, and medians of variables in order to describe the sample, Spearman's Rank Order Correlations to examine relations between pairs of continuous variables, the independent-samples t-test for comparing means, and the Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance to examine the impact of several variables on the family system measures.

It was noted that because of the small group sizes there was the possibility that non-significant results may be due to insignificant power. Therefore there was an increased likelihood of making false negative errors or Type II Errors (Pallant, 2001).

At times the distinction will be made between those variables that are family dimensions or processes (cohesion, flexibility and communication), and effect variables (family satisfaction and family functioning). The family dimensions tested in the present study are considered internal family resources essential for coping, while the effect variables will be used to assess the level of family coping.

#### *Screening the Data*

Before starting data analysis, the demographic data and test scores were examined for errors, fit between their distributions and the assumptions of univariate and multivariate analyses, and outliers. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) statistic was used to assess the normality of distribution of the dependent variables (Pallant, 2001). Violation of the assumption of normality was suggested by this statistic (based on a significance value of .05) for the Balanced Cohesion, Balanced Flexibility, and Family Communication Scores. Based on the K-S

Table 1.  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

| Factor                     | <i>n</i> | %  |
|----------------------------|----------|----|
| <i>Gender / role</i>       |          |    |
| Male Worker                | 32       | 51 |
| Female Worker              | 1        | 1  |
| Female Partner             | 30       | 48 |
| <i>Family stage</i>        |          |    |
| Early – young children     | 23       | 36 |
| Middle – teenage children  | 24       | 38 |
| Long-term – adult children | 13       | 21 |
| <i>Employment</i>          |          |    |
| Worker                     |          |    |
| Manager                    | 3        | 9  |
| Supervisor                 | 11       | 34 |
| Technician                 | 3        | 9  |
| Machine/plant operator     | 3        | 9  |
| Trade                      | 8        | 25 |
| Vehicle/crane driver       | 3        | 9  |
| Office based               | 1        | 3  |
| Partner                    |          |    |
| At home                    | 8        | 27 |
| Part time employment       | 11       | 37 |
| Full time employment       | 10       | 33 |
| FIFO employment            | 1        | 3  |
| <i>Education</i>           |          |    |
| Worker                     |          |    |
| Some high school           | 5        | 15 |
| High school certificate    | 10       | 30 |
| TAFE qualification         | 13       | 39 |
| University degree          | 5        | 15 |
| Partner                    |          |    |
| Some high school           | 6        | 20 |
| High school certificate    | 11       | 37 |
| TAFE qualification         | 7        | 23 |
| University degree          | 4        | 13 |
| Higher degree              | 1        | 3  |
| <i>Income level</i>        |          |    |
| \$50-70,000                | 3        | 5  |
| \$70-100,000               | 14       | 22 |
| \$100-120,000              | 16       | 25 |
| >\$120,000                 | 29       | 46 |

Table 1. (cont'd)  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

| Factor                          | <i>n</i> | %  |
|---------------------------------|----------|----|
| <i>Roster type</i>              |          |    |
| 35/7                            | 6        | 10 |
| 28/14                           | 2        | 3  |
| 21/9                            | 2        | 3  |
| 14/14                           | 24       | 38 |
| 14/7                            | 20       | 32 |
| 9/5                             | 5        | 8  |
| 5/2                             | 1        | 2  |
| 8/6                             | 2        | 3  |
| <i>FIFO workplace</i>           |          |    |
| Offshore                        | 26       | 41 |
| Land based mine                 | 26       | 41 |
| Construction                    | 11       | 11 |
| <i>Previous FIFO experience</i> |          |    |
| <1 year                         | 3        | 5  |
| 1-5 years                       | 27       | 43 |
| 6-10 years                      | 11       | 17 |
| >10 years                       | 21       | 33 |

Note. Missing data omitted

results, and small and often uneven sample sizes, it was decided that non-parametric tests be used when analysing the data.

#### *Describing FIFO Families*

The means and standard deviations of the respondents' scores on the different measures are listed in Table 2. On average, the workers and partners were generally happy with how members of their family related to each other and described their families as having very good communication, healthy functioning, and very good levels of cohesion and flexibility.

The distribution of scores on the Balanced Cohesion and Balanced Flexibility Scales were not normal making the median a more meaningful measure of central tendency. The median score on the Balanced Cohesion Scale ( $Mdn = 67$ ) denoted a high level of healthy cohesion and similarly the median score on the Balanced Flexibility Scale ( $Mdn = 65$ ) denoted a

high level of healthy flexibility. The mean of the Total Ratio Score ( $M = 1.3$ ) indicated the respondents in the sample perceived their family as having healthy functioning. The average score on the Family Satisfaction Scale ( $M = 37$ ) places families in his study in the category 'generally happy'. Similarly, respondents on average reported their family communication as 'very good' ( $M = 40$ ). An independent t-test between the mean scores for the present sample and that of the test norm found the difference to be very significant  $t(1314) = 3.95, p < .00$ .

#### *Association between Variables – Support for the Circumplex Model*

Spearman's Rank Order correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationship between scores on the Balanced Cohesion, Balanced Flexibility, Family Satisfaction, Family Communication Scales,

Table 2.  
Means and Standard Deviations of FIFO Respondents on Dependent Variables

| Measure                          | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i>   | <i>Mdn</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|----------------------------------|----------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Balanced Cohesion                | 63       | 61.49      | 67.00      | 23.82     |
| Balanced Flexibility             | 63       | 56.60      | 65.00      | 28.82     |
| Family Satisfaction Scale        | 63       | 37.19 (33) |            | 5.63 (9)  |
| Family Communication Scale       | 63       | 39.68 (31) |            | 5.73 (9)  |
| Total Ratio (family functioning) | 63       | 1.26 (1.2) |            | .68 (1.1) |

Note. Figures in parentheses are the reported means and standard deviations based on norm studies (Olson, Gorall, & Tiesel, 2004). NSS = Family Satisfaction Scale; NCS = Family Communication Scale.

and the Total Ratio Scale measuring family functioning (see Table 3). As predicted by the Circumplex Model, the results suggested all variables were significantly positively correlated; six coefficients were strong, and four were moderate.

#### *The Effect of Role on Perception of Family Satisfaction*

An independent *t*-test was conducted on the mean Family Satisfaction Scores for workers as a group and partners as a group, with no significant

difference found  $t(61) = -1.13, p = .26$ . On average, FIFO workers and partners of FIFO workers in this sample had similar perceptions of family satisfaction. Is there a significant difference within individual couples on their perceptions of family satisfaction? A paired-samples *t*-test was used to examine this but again, there were no significant differences in the scores of workers and their partners  $t(27) = 1.14, p = .26$ . The result indicated that there is agreement between workers and their partners

Table 3.  
Spearman's Rank Order Intercorrelations of Family System Dimensions, Family Satisfaction, and Family Functioning

|                      | Balanced Flexibility | Balanced Cohesion | Family Satisfaction | Family Comm. | Total Ratio |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Balanced Flexibility | 1                    |                   |                     |              |             |
| Balanced Cohesion    | .54 **               | 1                 |                     |              |             |
| Family Satisfaction  | .45 **               | .58 **            | 1                   |              |             |
| Family Communication | .62 **               | .74 **            | .73 **              | 1            |             |
| Total Ratio Score    | .76 **               | .79 **            | .59 **              | .69 **       | 1           |

Note. \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) and  $N = 54$ .

on their perceptions of family satisfaction.

#### *Work and Family Factors*

A series of analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between respondents' scores on the dimension scales and effect measures, and a number of work and family factors. The analyses produced no statistical evidence to confirm that partner employment, family stage, roster type, or previous experience alone influences family stress and coping. Rather than signifying that these factors had no effect it is reiterated that due to the small group sizes the results were likely due to insignificant statistical power and therefore may have reflected Type II Errors.

#### **Discussion**

Literature and previous research on the topic of FIFO repeatedly refers to the concepts of change, transition, adjustment, and adaptability (Clark & Taylor, 1988; Collinson, 1998; Gallegos, 2006; Lewis, Porter et al., 1988; Lewis, Shrimpton et al., 1988; Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004; Solheim, 1988). While all families face situational and developmental changes that require adjustments to the way they function and how their members interrelate, there is justification for believing the FIFO lifestyle demands more of families in this respect. Change is stressful for FIFO families who must find ways to respond and survive in the lifestyle.

This study has added to our understanding of stress and coping in FIFO families. First, the data provided a description, or profile, of the health of the family systems of the sampled population. Second, the results supported the hypotheses of the Circumplex Model of Couple and Family Functioning, which then permitted predictions regarding family functioning and more specifically coping in a FIFO lifestyle.

#### *Profile of FIFO Family Systems*

The profile of the average FIFO family in the present sample was a relatively healthy one. It had moderately high levels of Balanced Cohesion, which means it successfully balances separateness and togetherness. It also had moderately high levels of Balanced Flexibility, which indicated its members can readily adjust

their roles, and the system can adjust its rules and routines in response to changes; that is, it can successfully balance stability and change. Because of the strengths and protective qualities related to healthy cohesion and flexibility, it is suggested the average FIFO family generally functions effectively. Communication is a major strength of the FIFO family and workers and their partners are satisfied with the way family members relate to each other.

#### *Family Coping*

Coping, in the present study, was defined by healthy family functioning and reports of being 'generally' or 'very' satisfied with the family. Findings indicated that for the present sample, family functioning was strongly associated with healthy flexibility, healthy cohesion, and effective family communication. Family satisfaction is strongly associated with effective communication and moderately associated with healthy cohesion and health flexibility. These intercorrelations supported the Circumplex Model of Couple and Family Functioning.

The relationship between the family dimensions and effect measures facilitates predictions about family coping. Family cohesion enables family members to exchange social and emotional support, and flexibility allows family members to assume other's roles and cover for each other. Healthy families will adjust the intensity of their cohesion and degree of flexibility in response to stressors (dysfunctional families cannot adjust their family processes and are less able to cope with stressors, usually moving from one crisis to the next). To do this, families depend on effective family communication, for example, empathic listening, clear messages, supportive statements, and effective problem solving (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Families with healthy family dynamics, as just described, will cope better with developmental and situational changes that inevitably come their way, and continue to function effectively (Olson & Gorall, 2003). Members of such families feel happy or satisfied with their family system (Olson & Wilson,

1982).

In the same way that functional and satisfied families score high on the family dimensions, families that do not cope will have problematic levels of cohesion, flexibility or less effective communication skills.

#### *Communication*

It was hypothesised that FIFO families require better than average communication in order to successfully deal with the many adjustments inherent in the recurrent presence and absence of one of its members. The present findings supported this. First, a strong correlation was found in the present sample, between communication and the other family system variables. Second, the mean score for the family communication measure in this study was 40 out of the possible maximum score of 50, being significantly higher than the norm for the test (American, non clinical population).

Parkes et al. (2005) suggested that improvement in access to timely and private telephone contact between couples during the at-work period has made a great difference for couples since the early studies of the 1980s. In particular, timely and private telephone contact helps to maintain continuity of relationships and thereby family connectedness, and makes shared decision-making possible. To extrapolate, for families already struggling with family relationship issues, the lack of access to convenient and private telecommunication is very likely to aggravate problems.

#### *Roles*

Discrepancy between workers and partners perceptions of family satisfaction was investigated in the present study as a possible marker of the impact of FIFO rosters on families. Several early studies suggested that although husbands and partners mutually consider the benefits and costs of the lifestyle and the decision to continue working in the industry, the impact is felt more by partners with the burden of increased responsibilities and bulk of adjustments falling on them (Beach, 1999; Lewis, Shrimpton et al., 1988; Pollard, 1990). Other studies suggested that the greater sense of independence

felt by women resulting from husbands working away, did not fit with traditional role expectations with traditional homemaker/breadwinner type relationships being best suited to offshore work (Clark & Taylor, 1988; Lewis, Shrimpton et al., 1988; Solheim, 1988)

Contrary to the findings above, results from the present study indicated that both workers and their partners agreed on the perception of family satisfaction. The period since the research of the 1980s has seen a change in the role and expectations of women in the family and could be a factor in explaining the results. Other contemporary research (Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004) maintains that for women, the opportunity for increased independence was a benefit not a strain on their relationships and suited the more egalitarian relationships of the current times. Regarding the burden of responsibilities and adjustment, "Most spouses appeared to have adapted relatively favourably to the demands and challenges of having a partner working offshore" (Parkes et al., 2005, p. 432). Not limited to recent studies, (Clark & Taylor, 1988) observed that for many partners the advantages of the lifestyle outweighed the costs for them and the family.

#### *Influence of Family and Work Factors on Family Coping*

The present study explored partner employment, family life stage, roster type and previous FIFO experience and their interactions as possible influences on family functioning and satisfaction. Results were statistically non-significant and likely due to small group sizes (reflecting Type II Errors). Nevertheless, patterns in the direction of the results support further investigation.

#### *Theoretical Predictions*

Based on the findings of the present study and the theoretical hypotheses of the Circumplex Model (Olson & Gorall, 2003), it is possible to make the following predictions. Firstly, families will modify their levels of

cohesion and/or flexibility in order to deal with stress, and to successfully respond to situational change (transitions of FIFO living) and family life stage changes. Secondly, positive communication will enable families to make possible and maintain healthy (balanced) levels of cohesion and flexibility.

#### *Implications for Counsellors, Companies and Communities*

Better understanding of the impacts of a FIFO lifestyle on families can assist families considering and those already engaged in FIFO, counsellors working with families, the companies employing FIFO workforces and the communities in which they live.

Families having trouble coping with FIFO work schedules may benefit from Relationship Counselling to assist them to manage change and stress. The Circumplex Model, used in this study, is one such therapeutic approach that works with families to make changes to the way they interact with each other and the outside environment, and to move from problematic levels of cohesion and flexibility toward healthier levels, and improving communication skills of couples and families to facilitate change.

Implications for companies are firstly, the importance of access to private and timely communication for the worker at the workplace. Means of communication is not limited to telephone but includes internet-based communication (such as email and social networking platforms). Secondly, companies are encouraged to promote and provide easy access to employer funded supports such as family counselling. Thirdly, companies are well placed to make available information to workers and their families that promotes understanding of the issues and strategies to deal with them, and support services available within and outside the company. Although not demonstrated in this study, it would be prudent for companies to be mindful of the existing evidence suggesting the impact of roster types on family coping and consequently, workforce turnover (Beach, 1999; Beach et al., 2003).

Community support organisations are often

the first place families look to for assistance outside the family when having coping difficulties. Communities play an increasingly important and effective role in assisting families and mindful of the specific needs of FIFO families, of significance is the provision of parenting education and support services, child care, and relationship counselling. It is encouraging that non-government organisations working with families such as Ngala and Meerilinga in Western Australia support and participate in FIFO research, produce resources for FIFO families and provide parenting and professional workshops informed by FIFO research.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

The study had a number of limitations: the sample size and its representativeness, and lack of Australian test norms or control group. The 61 respondents to the questionnaire represented a small sample, therefore, caution must be used when generalising the findings to the larger population. The sample size affected the extent of the statistical analysis (violations of test assumptions) and conclusions that could be drawn related to moderating work and family factors.

While a review of demographic factors demonstrated a good cross section of FIFO workers and partners, there were reservations about its representativeness. The very low response rate may indicate the influence of a response bias based on the motivation of people to read and complete the questionnaire. One possibility for this came from a human resources superintendent at a large mine, "... the questionnaire looks quite complicated for some of our mining personnel. I am not sure how well received it will be. ... they may see it as too difficult for them." In view of the generally favourable scores on the dependent variables, it is possible that people who respond positively to the FIFO lifestyle were more willing to complete the questionnaire. In both cases, difficulty of the questionnaire and willingness to complete the questionnaire, the sample may have excluded relevant sections of

the population of FIFO families.

The research did not have a comparison group, either in the form of a non-FIFO control group or Australian norms for the scales. The decision not to have a control group was made because of the difficulty in controlling for extraneous variables, and accessing a reasonable sized ex-FIFO sample for comparison was too difficult for the scope of this study.

Consequently, the study could not draw conclusion based on comparison with a non-FIFO population. The choice of instrument, despite not having Australian norms, was made because it was Systems Theory based and the most relevant tool found that met the requirements of this study.

#### *Future Directions*

The number of people employed in FIFO workforces in Australia is anticipated to continue to increase with the growth of projects in the resources industry located away from major population centres. Accordingly, more families will be enjoying the benefits and managing the stressors that come with the lifestyle. Expanding on the research to date and the understanding of the impact of FIFO on families will assist in providing informed, adequate and appropriate support to families.

Limitations of this study highlight two possibilities for further attention. The workers and partners in the present sample were survivors of the FIFO lifestyle, as are their families. While their responses assist in the understanding of FIFO families it is important to proceed to compare FIFO survivors with families of workers that have left FIFO work. To this end, data obtained through exit interviews of FIFO workers would provide the valuable comparison. As noted above, the difficulty in achieving a good response rate for this study impacted on the conclusions that could be drawn in respect to the factors that may moderate coping (partner employment, family life stage, roster length and symmetry and previous FIFO experience). Further exploration of such variables with a larger sample is an area for future study in further understanding family stress and coping with the

FIFO lifestyle.

#### *Conclusion*

The present study was an addition to the catalogue of research articles investigating family systems using Olson's conceptual model of family functioning and the FACES IV instrument. It was exploratory, however, in its investigation of fly-in fly-out family systems. Its aim was to measure, describe, and make predictions about the internal systems resources that enable FIFO families to successfully cope with the unique stressors and recurrent transitions of FIFO living.

The profile of the sampled FIFO families was a relatively healthy one, that is a family with healthy cohesion (balancing separateness and togetherness) and flexibility (balancing stability and change), sustained by strong communication skills. While this positive description of the FIFO family is likely influenced by the limitations of the study, the results of the study clearly support its theoretical predictions related to family coping.

The relevance of this research for relationship counsellors is in providing support for a family systems model of stress and coping, a framework for clinical assessment and practice, and implications for how this might be applied to FIFO families. Recommendations for companies employing FIFO workforces were made and the role for communities in the support and service provision for FIFO families was highlighted.

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#### Address Correspondence to

Jill Clover Taylor

Email: [pjtaylor@westnet.com.au](mailto:pjtaylor@westnet.com.au)

## An Exploration of the Experiences of Women Who FIFO

Julie Pirotta

*Curtin University of Technology*

*Women who work in mining are clearly in the minority. This study aimed to give a voice to this minority group by understanding their experiences in order to better support them. The experiences of 20 women working at mine sites on a Fly In, Fly Out (FIFO) basis were investigated. A qualitative research method was used. Thematic analysis of data revealed several key attractions: Financial security, work satisfaction, career advancement, sense of belonging, satisfying a sense of adventure, and enduring friendships. Challenges included: Developing and maintaining friendships; community living; physical exhaustion and recuperation during leave; and successfully returning to Perth-based work. Challenges associated with working in a male dominated mining environment included: Lack of female contact; coping with male mine site behaviour; lack of privacy; being the focus of attention; having to prove themselves; and, coping with discrimination and harassment. FIFO is not a long-term option for most women, especially for those who wanted children and/or develop a sense of home and community in Perth. Psychological costs also emerged including: Professional and social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and, what the researcher has described as 'gender disorientation', in which women seemed to lose their sense of femininity. This paper outlines qualities and behaviours considered helpful for managing FIFO work, provides advice for women considering FIFO work, and makes suggestions for future research.*

### Background

In Western Australia, 17.1% of the mining workforce is female and Australia wide this figure is 13.6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2001). In 2007, the ABS Western Australian Labour Force Statistics of the Mining Industry indicated that females comprised 19% of the industry (Sibbel, 2008). These figures refer to the mining industry as a whole. The number of women working on actual mine sites is smaller. This is despite Equal Opportunity legislation and Affirmative Action policies, as well as other government and company interventions that have supported the introduction of women to mine sites (Eveline, 1994; Eveline & Booth, 1988).

Smith, Crowley and Hutchinson (1993) researched younger female mining professionals to better understand why so many were considering leaving a profession that they had strived so hard to enter. Three key problems were identified for these women: Feeling the need to blend into the dominant male culture by being less visible; experiencing ongoing pressure by being a member of a minority group; and a lack of role models to demonstrate whether, or how, it

was possible to combine work and family responsibilities successfully. Other researchers such as Pattenden (1998), Eveline (2002-2003), and Yrke (2004) also reported the numerous difficulties and pressures that these women encounter. Gender conflict and discrimination appear to be central themes, particularly for those women who choose to work offshore, or on remote mine sites.

### *Gender Issues faced by Women in Mining*

Many women in Australian mining report facing pressure in their workplaces by virtue of being in the minority and feeling that they must 'blend in' (Smith et al., 1993). Hence, despite some very public support of women in mining, there are some visible and not-so-visible barriers, some of which are structural and others, interpersonal or sociological (ABCTV, 17 October 2005; Anger, Cake & Fuchs, 1988; Eveline & Booth, 1988, 2002-2003; Gibson & Scoble, 2004; Heen, 1988; Steed & Sinclair, 2000; Yrke, 2004). Gibson and Scoble (2004) asked 50 professional women what hurdles to equality they had encountered while working in mining. A range of issues emerged: Balancing

work and family; a lack of role models and the related issue of barriers to promotion; the interrelated areas of 'mining culture', stereotyping, harassment, and discrimination; being a minority, and the connected issues of health and safety, and lack of facilities.

#### *Fly In, Fly Out Mining*

FIFO is used throughout Western Australia for mining and petroleum projects. FIFO is defined as "all employment in which work is so isolated from the workers' homes that food and accommodation are provided for them at the work site, and schedules are established whereby employees spend a fixed number of days at the site, followed by a fixed number of days at home" (Storey & Shrimpton, 1991). The Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia (CMEWA)(2005) indicate that 47% of mining operations utilise FIFO and 42% of mining industry employees are FIFO. Many mining companies state that the viability of continuing with remote mining actually depends on FIFO operations (Buckley-Carr, 2005; CMEWA, 2005; Penn, 2005).

#### *FIFO Research*

Until recently there has been a surprising paucity of research undertaken into the impacts of FIFO on Australian employees and their families. However recent research that has been undertaken has identified a number of benefits and challenges associated with the employment practice. Benefits include higher wages and the financial advantages of being accommodated by the company, continued access to facilities in the home community, more (quality) time for joint family activities when at home, separation of work and home/family life, and the at-home spouse's potential for independence and personal freedom (Arnold, 1995; Collinson, 1998; Keown, 2004; Sibbel, 2001; Storey, 2001; Watts, 2004).

#### *Challenges associated with FIFO*

A number of challenges have also been identified. Keown (2004) found a wide range of problems associated with FIFO, which include: fatigue, poor concentration and memory, anxiety, depressed mood, irritability, poor sleeping habits, consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol and

cigarettes, and the maintenance of sedentary lifestyles. He also noted that there can be reciprocal effects between work and home; constant worry about domestic issues can affect worker morale, production and safety, and workers can suffer from 'separation anxiety', that is, anxiety associated with being away from one's spouse and family. In her review of the literature, Arnold (1995) also noted psychological symptoms associated with loneliness and isolation, such as passivity, personal withdrawal and disinterest. In addition, there can be relationship restrictions and a limited opportunity for community involvement.

Much has been written about the negative effects of FIFO lifestyles on relationships and family life (Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004; Sibbel, 2004; Watts, 2004). Collinson (1998) reported that pressure is put on personal relationships and above average divorce rates are experienced. This is the result of the many problems that have been associated with regular partings and reunions for workers and their families.

#### *Women and FIFO*

Much of the current and past FIFO research has focused exclusively on male workers. A number of studies have specifically focused on female FIFO workers however these have looked at gender issues and the cultural aspects of women on sites (Anger et al., 1988; Eveline & Booth, 1988; Heen, 1988; Wybrow, 1988; Yrke, 2004) rather than at how women themselves cope with a FIFO lifestyle. Steed and Sinclair (2000) investigated the stressors faced by professional women in the mining industry in remote locations and concluded that gender and FIFO rosters are additional stressors on professional women in the mining industry.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some FIFO women experience psychosocial stress and that their experiences are different from those of men. These women are reportedly unable to develop satisfactory lifestyles, either at their home bases, or on the mine sites. Social isolation appears to be a key problem. Finlayson (2005) reported that approximately 80% of

FIFO women are not prepared for the lifestyle, in particular for issues associated with needing to live a double life, not being prepared for living on remote sites after living in the city, and not being prepared mentally for the 'glass ceiling syndrome'.

### *Conclusions*

Mining in remote Australia is fundamentally changing with the increased reliance on FIFO operations. The number of women in the mining workforce is slowly increasing and women are being actively recruited to join the industry, particularly for FIFO operations. Parts of the industry anticipate that more women in mining will improve the industry by introducing diversity and a more cooperative culture. Despite this trend, significant barriers to women's participation are not being addressed, which leads to many women leaving the industry prematurely, to either enter other fields, or to start families (Gibson and Scoble, 2004). There is growing evidence to suggest that women face strong pressures within the industry and that being employed on a FIFO basis exacerbates these pressures. Research on the effects of the FIFO lifestyle on men has identified a number of stressors and negative effects on both male workers and their families, in addition to the benefits of the employment choice. FIFO women face the combined challenges of working FIFO, of working in a male dominated culture, and, if they are mothers, of raising a family. This research aimed to explore the experiences of the FIFO lifestyle on female workers, and how they cope (or do not cope) with the special demands of this work lifestyle.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

The participants were women who work on remote Western Australian mine sites and were, or had been, working on a FIFO basis. A total of 20 women, based in the Perth metropolitan area, were included in the study. The sample group comprised a range of woman across all job types in mining, including the more traditionally male positions such as engineers and operators, as well

as those in traditionally more female oriented roles such as administration, safety and laboratory work.

The sample also reflected a range of ages and years of mining experience. Fifteen women were currently working FIFO, one was still working in mining but not on a FIFO basis, and the remaining four were no longer working in mining. Nine women were mining professionals, six were working in operator roles such as truck driving, and five had administration or other roles such as being an exercise physiologist. There was a mix of underground and open-cut workers.

Ages ranged from 23 to 49 years, with a mean of 31.2 years. Mining experience varied from four months to 20 years; the average length of time 6.2 years. FIFO experience varied from four months to 12 years, the average length of time 4.7 years. Fourteen participants were currently married or in a relationship, and six were single. Only one was a mother, reflecting the low incidence of mothers who FIFO.

#### *Design*

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to guide the collection and analysis of data. The aim of phenomenological research is to understand the internal worlds of research participants and how they perceive events and experiences in their world. The intention of such an approach is to deeply penetrate the person's mental world (Hayes, 2000). More specifically, an empirical phenomenological approach was employed in which transcripts from many subjects were used (Tesch, 1990).

#### *Procedure*

The researcher attended a Women in Mining Western Australia (WIMWA) social function held in Perth and informally promoted the study with that organisation's consent. WIMWA is an organisation that promotes the networking and interests of all women who work in mining within Western Australia. The WIMWA email list was employed to recruit participants. A letter was

emailed to the 420 women on the email list, informing them about the nature of the study, requesting the participation of those who were or had been working FIFO stressing the confidentiality for themselves and for their employer. The letter included reasons why such a study would be beneficial for these women and eligible women were invited to contact the researcher to arrange a face-to-face interview.

The response to the WIMWA email was far greater than expected. Interviewees were selected on the basis of obtaining a broad cross-section of ages, roles, and length of FIFO experience. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and two hours, with the majority being between one and one and a quarter hours' duration. They were conducted between 3 October, 2005 and 24 March, 2006.

#### *Interview Schedule*

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the interview schedule underwent minor modifications as the interviews progressed.

#### *Analysis*

A thematic analysis of data was conducted, which involved systematically sorting the data into recurrent ideas or topics drawn from the interviews in order to identify themes (Hayes, 2000; Smith & Langenhove, 2001). The overall aim of these analyses was to develop a conceptual overview of the participants' experiences and coping mechanisms. In addition, demographic details were examined to ascertain if there were any patterns in relation to the identified themes.

### **Results**

The following section presents the resultant themes, namely: FIFO related issues, gender related issues, reasons for staying or leaving FIFO, qualities and behaviours required for a FIFO lifestyle, and the psychological toll of the lifestyle.

#### *FIFO Related Issues*

*Attractions.* The women reported a number of attractions were associated with the FIFO lifestyle: the nature of the work, the lifestyle,

community aspects, and financial rewards. Many participants reported a love for the actual work and/or an opportunity to satisfy their adventurous side. Some participants reported that the FIFO lifestyle enabled them to have "the best of both worlds" in that they are able to get into the outback but also enjoy all the conveniences and/or social life of a large city.

Consistent with several other studies (Gent, 2004; Keown, 2004; Watts, 2004), remuneration was a primary motivator, as well as the relatively carefree domestic life on site. Given that all participants worked up to 13-hour days and often there was a two to 30-minute bus ride to and from work, it left little of the day for additional activities. After-work activities were focused on either preparing for work, or unwinding such as reading, knitting, speaking to people on the telephone.

Consistent with previous research (Arnold, 1995; Storey & Shrimpton, 1991; Watts, 2004), some women in the current study liked having work and home clearly delineated. Many were also glad to avoid the drudgery of 'nine to five' commuting. The regular leave allowed for 'quality time' with family and friends and/or working on projects such as renovating houses.

Some participants were attracted to the sense of community. They valued the mine site culture, often feeling as though colleagues were family. Some had made close friends during their mining career. A number were in relationships with men who worked at the same mine site and were on the same roster, they found FIFO advantageous in enabling them to be in a relationship.

*I reckon I've got the best job in the world. I like what I do, I like the people I work with, I get paid really well for what I do, I get frequent flyer points every week. There's a lot of good things about it, a good lifestyle. Could go away every break if you want to.*

*Challenges.* Participants reported a range of challenges with the FIFO lifestyle. These

related to relationships and friendships, community living, returning to a Perth-based life, and trying to fit in a full life during breaks.

For many, their social and personal life was work-focused because they worked with their partners and/or they chose to socialise with colleagues on leave breaks. However, on-site friends regularly shifted to other sites and then it tended to be difficult to stay in touch. Some women reported that it took effort to stay in touch, and they had lost contact altogether with old friends back in Perth. The loss of contact had been due to the difficulty of fitting in with each other's schedules, or because they no longer had things in common. Friends were often working when participants wanted to socialise while on break.

Several participants reported difficulty in developing friendships outside of the mining industry. Such participants, along with participants who had moved from rural Australia, or another major city, to be based in Perth for their FIFO job, lead quite lonely and socially isolated lives. This was especially so if they did not enjoy socialising with colleagues. Furthermore, it was regarded as impossible to regularly participate in community activities, sporting clubs, or attend courses.

Intimate relationships were reported to be also affected by FIFO. It was generally agreed that there were limited opportunities to meet potential partners in Perth, given the lack of social opportunities. The small number of participants who had relationships with men who were not working a FIFO roster, did not necessarily find it difficult for themselves, however, often they were aware that their partners were lonely without them. These participants often felt guilty that they were off doing adventurous things, while their partners played 'househusband'.

Many participants, but not all, enjoyed the benefits of community living. Some found it overwhelming to work and socialise with the same people, along with the lack of privacy and institutionalised nature of camp life.

According to participants, mine site work

culture is one that values working hard. Work team and community members strongly supported this work ethic and it was expected that workers 'give their all' on site. This was especially noticeable, but not exclusively so, among operational workers who worked in areas where the pressure of meeting targets was relentless. For women, this was exacerbated by a male workforce culture that keeps a close eye on the performance of female workers.

According to participants, adapting to the long hours, the roster and the type of work can be physically, intellectually, and psychologically challenging. In addition, professional women often spent the first years of their career on mine sites, so they had a steep learning curve. Many responded to the pressure by regularly working longer than their usual shift, although some non-professional women also worked longer hours. The majority of participants reported being exhausted at the end of a work roster. At least the first day (or more) of their break was spent resting. Leave breaks could seem busy with some feeling as though they were on a treadmill.

Motherhood is another difficult issue to navigate. Only one participant in this research was a mother and most believed that if you wanted children you could not work FIFO.

*Coping mechanisms.* Participants were asked what advice they would offer to other women to cope with the lifestyle. Advice to manage the practical everyday issues associated with FIFO as well as coping with the emotional and social were offered. Practical suggestions for coping with camp life included owning two sets of belongings in order to minimise what one needs to carry back and forth, and taking one's own food because of the lack of variety. Strategies to minimise the impacts of physical exhaustion included settling in back home as soon as possible so that one's rest and relaxation time was maximised, getting early nights, and exercising.

Interpersonal advice included being outgoing and sociable upon commencement of work to gain a sense of belonging and emotional support. It was common for participants to choose to walk home from work with female colleagues – if there were any – to talk off the day's stressors. Some participants went to the wet mess (on-site bar) to do this but, once again, this depended on how comfortable women were with the gender politics.

*You work so closely with these people and spend so much time with them. It's like a family relationship. So you tend to share things that you certainly wouldn't otherwise.*

A challenge and regret of choosing a FIFO lifestyle was a sense of isolation and loneliness. Participants believed that one must be self-reliant and create comfortable interpersonal boundaries. For some, this meant retreating to their donga (accommodation) after dinner for privacy. Mining professionals tended to take great care to present a professional persona. They were mindful about the people from whom they sought support and how they behaved with subordinates. Some participants relied on emotional support from home, including speaking to friends, family, or partners over the telephone or using the Internet, if accessible. The onus was often on participants to maintain Perth friendships. Those with off site relationships reported that it helped significantly if both parties made an effort to keep daily contact so that there is no catch-up period when they are reunited.

#### *Gender Related Issues*

Participants' experiences of working in a male dominated environment varied. At the one end of the spectrum, there were women who were comfortable with it and/or preferred to work with men. At the other end of the spectrum, there were women who had lasting 'psychological scars' from the experience. The majority of women were challenged by at least some aspects of the environment and, to some extent, had coped successfully.

*Some important variables.* Participants'

experiences seemed to be influenced by variables such as the type of job they did, the part of the mine in which they worked, the number of women with whom they worked, the size of the site, the type of culture already established, the amount of mining experience, coping abilities, existing attitudes towards men, and previous experiences of working or living with men.

The amount of contact the female miners had with male workers, and whether the work was office or operationally based, appeared to be a key variable. Managers and workers in operations areas were reported to be more extreme in their negative attitudes towards, and treatment of, women at mine sites. Hence, both professional and non-professional women faced similar challenges if they were directly dealing with operations workers.

The bigger the mine the more segregated the workers, so some participants from the larger sites knew little about the politics of the different areas. Conversely, on smaller mine sites, participants were more familiar with, and were affected by, many or all areas of the mine. Organisational cultures also varied. Some mine sites had women in very senior positions, and up to half of the employees in some professional departments were women. In contrast, other sites had few women overall, and none in senior positions. Interestingly, in the underground operations crews, the women tended to be separated into different crews. Hence, it was not usual for operational women to work alongside other women.

Another important gender aspect was awareness by female employees of whether a company would support any harassment claims, and whether male workers and management actively supported anti-harassment and discrimination policies. Participants' experiences fell along a continuum, from those women who felt totally supported, to those who had endured some truly demeaning, dangerous, and/or intolerable situations.

*Attractions.* It did not appear that working in a male dominated environment was a major

attraction for taking a FIFO job. Some of the younger, newer recruits to FIFO enjoyed the attention they received, however, this initial enjoyment often waned. Others found the attention difficult. Some described that men could be quite protective, ensuring that certain women were not exposed to unscrupulous men. Many research participants found that their male colleagues sought their counsel on personal issues. Some participants enjoyed this unofficial role, whereas others felt uncomfortable or resented it.

*Because I'm a girl, the guys will unload their problems on me about their wives... Obviously they are not going to go to other guys saying they are having problems with their missus. So they come to me.*

*Challenges.* A number of challenges of working in a male dominated mining environment were identified and included: The lack of female contact; coping with day-to-day male mine site behaviour; lack of privacy; being the focus of attention; proving oneself; and, coping with discrimination and harassment. In addition, some of the women were tired of being the focus of gossip.

All participants reported that they had to learn how to adjust to the male mining environment and male culture. The kinds of adjustments varied, with some women reporting a small number of issues, which were mildly irritating, and others experiencing significant problems. Overall, women who had been working in the industry for longer periods of time believed that attitudes towards women had improved. It was also not uncommon for this to be backed up by management, who sent clear messages that harassment would not be tolerated. Overall, participants believed that the larger mine sites were mostly harassment-free. Smaller mine sites were more likely to be 'old school' in that discriminatory practises were still present. Overall, women who worked in the operations areas were more likely to report that they have been subjected to harassment and discrimination. Women who were office based were likely to

report more subtle forms of gender difficulties.

The participants who appeared the most negatively affected by their experiences had worked underground. They seemed to be subjected to the most extreme forms of behaviour, (although this may be an artefact of the small sample size in this study and would be worthy of further investigation). The women spoke of being tested by the men to see if they could cope with the work and culture. Apparently, the men also tested the men, however, a crucial difference was that women were not familiar with male ways of testing and were often isolated from any same-gender support. Participants mostly noted steep learning curves in which they had to quickly learn how to "harden up" if they were to survive. They felt the pressure to "prove themselves" in a man's world. Extreme, but not uncommon testing behaviour included: verbally abusing women; aggressively defending their stated positions; giving women heavier work loads; patronising women; watching their every move; making suggestive or derogatory remarks; displaying inappropriate pictures; or, making negative remarks about women in mining, in the presence of a lone woman. Some women in supervisory operational roles reported being psychologically bombarded and worn down.

Women who drove trucks and worked on machinery were generally not given any favours. Adjusting to the physical side of the job was reported as being quite a challenge. These women often felt that they must outperform male colleagues if they were to be considered equals. Any sign of weakness was used against women, to further test them and drive them out. If women left, it was confirmation of the long held belief that 'women do not belong underground'.

These incidents highlight another important aspect of being a woman on a mine site: one must always be seen to be self-sufficient. If a woman expected or accepted assistance from the men, then this usually came at a cost, especially if one used her femininity

to gain favours. Generally, the cost was that they lost the opportunity to be considered an equal. All participants, except some of those who were very new to the industry, took great care to separate their femininity from the work place.

*You've got about a two to three favour leeway to use your femininity to get help but if you use it all the time then it won't get you anywhere. It'll be to your detriment...they can make your life hell.*

A less common problem reported by two participants was of female colleagues' underwear being stolen from the washing line and one of the women receiving lurid telephone calls. Although this type of incident did not occur frequently, it was disconcerting to all women on site. In one incident, apparently, all the men were on a keen look out for the culprit. One night they incorrectly caught a man who was innocently hanging out his own washing! This is an example of how some men will act to protect their female colleagues. Only one woman reported personally being accosted.

Less extreme but also challenging behaviour included: Constant sexual references in conversations; men seeking the professional and/or personal support of female colleagues but leaving the woman in the lurch when she was in crisis; and, men just not wanting to know about any problems that the women may have been having.

More benign, but nonetheless annoying to the participants, was the constant focus on sport, sex, drinking and other traditionally male topics of conversation, with little or no tolerance for traditionally female conversation topics such as fashion, health, beauty, and shopping.

The literature commonly refers to discrimination against women in mining with respect to job promotion (Gibson & Scoble, 2004; Smith et al., 1993; Steed & Sinclair, 2000) and this small-scale study supports these findings. Once again, women who worked underground experienced this form of discrimination most strongly. Underground female workers were the more likely to report that they had to exceed the performance of their

male colleagues in order to be considered professionally equal. This meant working harder and faster, and out performing the men. Importantly, these performance criteria applied whether it was the woman's first day on the mine site or her twentieth year.

The male competitive culture was strong underground. This culture, coupled with the pervading belief that 'women don't belong underground', made it extremely difficult for women who operated machinery to advance beyond truck driving. All reported watching male colleagues, whom they had often trained, being promoted over them, year after year. Another challenging aspect, particularly for machinery operators, was the tendency for women to pay more attention to detail and to be more cautious with equipment. This could be undervalued or treated with contempt.

There was one area of operations work however, where being a woman was reported as being inherently beneficial and where there was seemingly little resistance from male colleagues. Women are becoming valued in mine organising roles, such as operation of computer software, which manages the movement of all equipment on site. Women are also being increasingly recognised as being able to attend to multiple tasks concurrently and to do so for long periods of time. They tend to perform well under stress and are appreciated by colleagues for providing them with guidance (Gibson and Scoble, 2004).

Mining professionals were less likely to report discrimination with respect to job promotion although there was evidence that this does still exist. Impediments to promotion for female mining professionals, however, seemed more likely to stem from women not staying on site long enough to be considered for advancement. Often they did not stay because they wanted to have children and/or because of the challenges discussed previously in this paper. According to participants, little is done to support mothers staying on site.

*Coping mechanisms.* A variety of strategies were used by women to cope with

working in a male-dominated environment including: seeking advice, support and/or protection from family, friends and colleagues; changing one's behaviour and attitudes; and, a high degree of self-restraint. Besides two women who reported that they felt more at ease in a mining environment, the majority of women reported feeling constrained on site. Some felt mildly irritated while others felt stifled and angry. Most participants concluded that there are certain ways that women must behave in order to adapt. It was not unusual for women to report feeling as though they live two separate lives; having a "split personality" in which, "I put on a mask as I board the plane to go to work" and take it off once home.

*In the early days I would just take it. In the latter days I became very defensive because you get to stage of being sick of being treated like dog shit... In the end you tend to become one of them. You become a split personality, around home and your friends you're a normal person and then when you're back at work you tend to be exactly like them, and drink in the wet mess say the same words, and listen to the dirty jokes, and tolerate it. It just happens, you tend to become 'one of the boys'.*

These women reported dressing conservatively, or like a male, being very aware of whom they spoke to, where and for how long, and ensuring that they were self-sufficient - that they could "hold their own". Many women believed they had to suppress all signs of femininity: They could not dress in a feminine manner, wear make-up, or even do their hair. This suppression extended to curtailing female oriented conversations, not being seen as "emotional", or showing any sign of weakness. For most participants, it also meant not having sexual relationships on-site or, if so, only after having known the person for a very long time. If male friendships were risked, women were cautious with regard to gossip and that the man in question did not misconstrue the friendship for sexual interest.

Many women reported learning to "toughen up" on site: They tried to appear confident, and to ask firmly for what they needed and act as if they expected to get it.

*I don't tolerate fools anymore; if someone acts stupid then that's it. I tell them off.*

*I mentioned the problem to my supervisor and he said, "You're a chick on a mine site, get over it, deal with it". From that moment I said to myself that I just have to deal with it.*

*When I first started as a happy fresh-faced geo who had just started there and they'll push you and push you until you either break or you toughen up and when you toughen you they'll either call you a ball breaker or a bitch... It's tough for the girls and it doesn't matter which way you go you're going to end up with some kind of label.*

Most participants reported that they needed skills that ensured that men did not transgress their personal boundaries. Women in supervisory roles also learnt quickly never to let a man get the "upper hand". Participants reported that men would be constantly "pushing the boundaries", so if they did not firmly and immediately set them, the men would not respect the boundaries, or the woman. However, in other situations, participants reported that if the boundaries are too restrictive then women risk becoming alienated. For example, if a woman complained about girlie pin-ups or sexual comments, then the men may isolate her.

The researcher explored how the women handled the frustration they experienced resulting from these situations. Most participants reported that they did not show or express their frustration outwardly, as this would indicate weakness or, even worse, that they were "emotional". Many of the women suppressed their frustrations by using appropriate self-talk or distractions. Distractions included working harder or surfing the Internet for holiday destinations, or items to purchase.

Others waited for an appropriate situation to let off steam on site, or until they were on leave. Some found solace in the natural environment of the mine site.

It was not uncommon in the beginning of a woman's FIFO career, for her to go back to her donga at night and cry. Some participants called loved ones for support, however, many were self-reliant. Several participants were in relationships and some shared the same roster and lived on site with their partner and thus had their partners' support on a daily basis. Exercise, such as walking home or visiting the on-site gym, was also reported as being useful.

Some participants had the support of mentors or management. In the latter case it often depended on the company culture: If the culture was one of zero tolerance of discrimination and harassment, then women could confidently report incidents. Often women reported incidents as a precautionary measure: if they experienced a worrying incident, they want to make sure that if anything else occurred, someone in authority was aware and supportive. Support was much more likely to come in the form of mentoring or advice.

#### *Reasons for Staying or Leaving FIFO*

The majority of participants in this study had planned to stop working FIFO in the medium term, and some had already left. Those who had worked FIFO for more than five years were likely to have had breaks of several years. Most agreed that it was too difficult to indefinitely live a FIFO lifestyle. Reasons cited for leaving included: the novelty wearing off, wanting to live a "normal" life, and having a routine that fits in with friends and family in Perth. Some were tired of having no choice in what they ate or what time they ate. They wanted to change their own bed, sleep in their favourite sheets, and do their own cooking and chores. They were tired of the constant contact with colleagues and the restrictions of communal living. They wanted their home to feel like a home, rather than somewhere they just visited. They wanted to participate in sporting and social groups, or enrol in courses. Some had taken heed of their

partners' requests to be home permanently, to share their lives on a daily basis. Many felt tired or burnt out.

However, circumstances can make leaving difficult, either on a practical and/or emotional level. A small number of participants had been very stressed by the transition while others who were currently attempting the change felt trapped by their circumstances. Financial commitments such as mortgages, or believing that they couldn't live on an average "Perth wage", made the prospect of leaving scary, as did the loss of community.

There was also some uncertainty as to how they would cope with all that is associated with a nine to five job such as commuting, the potential blurring of work/life boundaries, less holiday leave, and being in a more gender-balanced environment. A couple of participants, who had worked underground for many years and were leaving the industry, spoke emotionally about the difficulties of learning how to "become feminine".

#### *Qualities and Behaviour needed for a FIFO Lifestyle*

The most common personal attributes, as reported by participants, that helped participants adjust to the FIFO lifestyle were being open-minded, independent, sociable, practical, and confident, as well as having a sense of humour. Another important quality was being persistent or "stubborn" in achieving what one sets out to do. Some participants believed that women must accept that they will be working in a man's environment, as well as adapt to the harsher physical environment and conditions. It was also important to be self-reliant, practical, and resourceful, while also being able to blend into the community. Being confident and adventurous, and enjoying challenges, as well as having a drive to prove oneself were also considered beneficial. Finally, many participants believed that being single is easier, although an understanding partner can be an asset.

Research participants offered a wealth of advice to would-be female FIFO workers,

covering areas such as: reasons for considering the work; how to deal with gender politics and community living; finding a suitable mine site; and, preparing for leaving the industry.

They advised against doing FIFO simply for the money, as this does not assist with enduring difficulties. Most knew of both men and women who had begun work for this reason and then felt trapped in what other research has dubbed the “golden hand-cuff” syndrome (Keown, 2004; Watts, 2004) in which workers become dependent on their high remuneration. One must be motivated and realise that FIFO work is demanding: everyone is expected to “pull their own weight”, time on site is almost solely work-focused. Furthermore, some believed that women should simply expect that sexism will exist, and accept it.

In addition, clearly planning one’s career and life, and seeking support can guard against the pitfalls of leaving FIFO. It was also advised that women should be realistic about the lifestyle: know that it is very difficult to balance work and family, and that there will be a lot that one will miss out on at home. In addition, before taking on the position, women should ascertain whether those who will be affected at home are comfortable with their decision, and will support them. If possible, get those significant others to visit and experience the mine site as soon as possible after commencing.

Support both at home and on the mine is critical. Participants advised that women should make the effort to be sociable and outgoing, and establish a support network quickly: strive to get along with everyone, like newcomers to a small country town, while clearly indicating to male colleagues what behaviour is and is not acceptable. Furthermore, women should always be professional at work, and not mix work and “play”. Special care needs to be taken in terms of dressing appropriately.

*Stand up for yourself. Stay sane by not taking things personally like the abuse or anything. Keeping your mouth shut, listening, working hard, doing that little bit extra, paying attention and staying*

*safe.*

#### *The Psychological Toll*

For many participants, there were psychological costs associated with working FIFO, including periods of feeling “low” or “depressed”. Anxiety and physical exhaustion were also experienced.

*I have gone up against the real extremes of my personality trying to cope with Fly In Fly Out. I have seen myself doing things that I don’t like about myself... It nearly broke up my relationship.*

*Sometimes I’d just go back to my room at night and cry on my own saying, ‘I’ve had enough of this, it isn’t fair.’ You go through bouts of depression being in situations like that too. I suppose I got through it by being determined that I wanted to make it work and prove that I could do the job.*

*I had to get aggressive, not aggressive, but had to become outwardly stronger whereas inwardly I was probably becoming weaker and weaker and weaker. Excuse my French but it was fucking with my head. I just couldn’t handle it any longer. It just got to the stage where they had beaten me.*

Times when participants seemed particularly vulnerable were at the commencement of FIFO, or when wanting to leave FIFO. If one has adjusted well to the lifestyle then it can be frightening to go back into a conventional life. Some participants seemed frozen in fear at this prospect. In addition, some women found the lifestyle a lonely one, which made experiencing depression a more likely outcome. Some had sought professional advice and taken anti-depressants.

The other ‘cost’ – which may be considered more sociological than psychological – was the damage to gender relations. Some women had developed empathy towards men and the male point of view.

However, many women had become jaded and disillusioned, as their opinions of men worsened: Sadly, for some, to the point where they were unsure or unwilling to seek out a relationship. They had listened in disbelief to the attitudes their colleagues had towards the women they dated, their wives, and women generally. At the end of day, these women wondered how any man could be trusted.

### Discussion

There were a number of strong attractions to working FIFO for women, such as the money, the nature of the work, the environment, and the travel. In addition, for the mining professionals, it was about career progression. The attractions of working FIFO, and a commitment to making their choice of work a success, meant that many women endured the challenges and obstacles. Yet, many participants intended to return to Perth based work in the near future given the associated drawbacks.

Upon commencement of FIFO, most women had been confronted by a foreign male environment and communal way of life, as well as a foreign physical environment. Furthermore, usually the job was new, and there was a steep learning curve. For some participants, the experience was generally a positive one: they gained confidence as they became competent at their work; they enjoyed the initial attention they received by being a part of the minority; and, they may have even found a sense of belonging or a 'family' within the community.

One of the most difficult challenges related to proving themselves on the mine site, particularly with regard to work skills. This was made particularly difficult for professional women because of the lack of mentors and female role models, while non-professional women were often faced with physically demanding circumstances and isolation from other females.

Many women experienced the additional stressors of: constantly being scrutinised; keeping appropriate boundaries with male colleagues; and, the lack of female colleagues. There were also non-gender related stressors such as the

restrictions of communal living and the difficulties associated with creating or maintaining a satisfying lifestyle in Perth. For example, many women reported difficulties maintaining friendships, taking part in community activities, running a household, attending various medical and personal appointments, as well as finding the time for rest and relaxation during leave.

Options for intimate relationships were limited and women who wanted to have children could not continue FIFO, unless their partner took primary responsibility for the children. Most participants did not expect to meet men outside of mining circles. If they did develop a relationship with someone outside of mining, then the challenges of maintaining such a relationship were great. The least problematic relationship was with someone who also worked in mining, preferably also working FIFO and, ideally, on the same site and same roster. If such relationships were established, they had the potential to work quite well. The partners could share similar lives, work towards ambitious financial goals, and provide mutual emotional support.

An additional problem for women was that they did not have the same opportunities to relax as men did on site: The main form of recreation revolved around the wet mess, which was not considered to be a safe place for many participants. Pattenden (1998) reported that women on mine sites can experience, "intense professional and social isolation" (p. 27). This research confirms this finding as well as indicating that there is also the risk of social isolation in Perth. This exposes women who work FIFO to depression and anxiety, which some participants reported.

A key finding to emerge from this study relates to how these women managed gender identity. The feminine is denied in traditional mine culture and participants were under great pressure to conform to the expectations of the dominant culture. The small number of women who did not feel pressured reported that they were more comfortable in the presence of men

than women, and tended to have been “tomboys” in their youth. The remaining participants repeatedly reported that any traits that were perceived as feminine were immediately derided. Those women who fought this culture found it difficult, if not psychologically damaging.

In order to survive, most women in this study complied with this gender pressure by masking their femininity: They dressed in a masculine fashion, stopped attending to their hair, stopped wearing make up, stifled any signs of emotion, restricted “girly” topics of conversation, and were careful about expressing any discomfort regarding aspects of the male environment in which they worked and lived. This was consistent with Steed and Sinclair’s study (2000) in which several participants reported that they had to, “alter their own way of communicating in order not to be perceived as too bossy or too feminine” (p. 20).

Some participants in this study actively showed support for the culture, such as the selling of girly magazines on site. Some played the masculine game and displayed their own male pin-ups. Most participants supported female solidarity by not criticising the actions of other women on site. However, privately, several reported that they wished some female colleagues would not challenge the status quo.

*It is their environment. You’ve chosen to enter a male dominated environment. If you go in with a lot of high expectations of the way that they should behave, then that’s when it creates dramas.*

It was emotionally demanding for some participants to constrain their natural personalities over such long periods of time.

*I’ve discovered I become a different person when I go up there. I become this tough, no nonsense, unbreakable, don’t-push-me-around person that I don’t like.*

*I was always torn between having to be tough and saying I’m not supposed to show my emotion at work and no, that’s who I am and if they can’t accept that then what hope is there for women in the*

*industry, going in and acting like men.*

Loneliness, isolation, and depression were reported. The researcher also found evidence that many women forgo, or became unsure of their identity as women, in the absence of an environment that affirms this and denies opportunities for free expression. It is as though some women become ‘gender disorientated’ as a result of their working FIFO.

*You’ve got to think like a man.*

*On my breaks I might be more feminine than I am on the mine site. I like to dress up and wear nice clothes. The shirts are all designed for men, the pants they design for women end up coming up under your breasts. They’re awful.*

The women who seemed to cope the best were able to clearly and consistently delineate their sense of identity from their work identity, and were able to have this affirmed by friends and family during their breaks.

### Conclusions

There are many reasons why women are attracted to working FIFO; however, there are many challenges to be faced. These challenges relate to the lifestyle and the male dominated environment. The lifestyle and work can be fulfilling for some women bringing them financial security, work satisfaction, career advancement, a sense of belonging, enduring friendships, and, possibly, a husband or partner whom they work alongside.

However, FIFO is not a long-term option for most women, especially those who want children and/or to develop a sense of home and community in Perth. This research also found that there are psychological costs for many women working FIFO. These costs can include: professional and social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, physical exhaustion, and, what the researcher has described as, ‘gender disorientation’, in which the woman loses her sense of femininity.

Women considering a FIFO job are advised to discuss their decision with those loved ones who will be affected, to ensure that they will have the emotional support they need.

Newcomers are likely to cope better if they quickly develop a support network on site, in addition to a home-based support network, as well as develop a daily routine that includes social interaction and support, adequate rest, and exercise. Other important aspects to consider include how the woman considering FIFO will retain a sense of femininity, and make a smooth transition to non-FIFO work when they want to discontinue.

#### *Research Limitations*

Finally, the limitations of the research must be kept in mind when considering the findings. The researcher's own biases may have influenced the findings, given the exploratory, interactive and interpretive nature of the qualitative research methodology. Another limitation is the small sample size (20), which naturally affects the generalisability of the study. Finally, a self-selection bias in the sample may exist, that is, these volunteers may have been motivated to participate because they had an agenda, such as wanting to complain about their experiences in the industry. This may have created an artefact in the findings of the present study.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

In the present research, there was some evidence that women's experiences vary depending on the size and culture of the mine site on which they work, and the nature of their job. Hence, it would be valuable for future research to investigate these variables. No clear pattern emerged from this research as to whether older or younger men were more sympathetic to the plight of female miners. Conflicting reports suggest that further research on this might also be useful, as would a comparison of male and female experiences.

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### Address Correspondence to

Julie Pirotta  
Email: [juliepirotta@inet.net.au](mailto:juliepirotta@inet.net.au)

## An Exploration of Generation Y's Experiences of Offshore Fly-in/Fly-out Employment

Tayla Carter  
Elizabeth Kaczmarek  
Edith Cowan University

*Offshore fly in/fly out (FIFO) employment creates unique challenges for personnel working in this capacity and the impact of these challenges on personnel who are navigating the social challenges of early adulthood, or those belonging to Generation Y (Gen Y) is relatively unknown and deserving further investigation. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Gen Y employed offshore in a FIFO capacity using a social constructionist framework. Ten male offshore FIFO personnel aged between 18 and 28 years old participated in this study. Thematic content analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed three broad themes; these included the challenges of FIFO lifestyle, Self-identity and Relationships. It was concluded that even though the men were satisfied with benefits associated with the lifestyle there were none the less many challenges which they were attempting to address that were specific to the lifestyle generally and not unique to Gen Y.*

The oil and gas industry with resources located in offshore locations has historically employed a workforce that has been required to fly-in and fly-out (FIFO) from the work location or oil and gas platform (Houghton, 1993). Together with land based mining, offshore mining plays an important role in Australia's economy, and employs 52,000 individuals directly and a further 156,000 people indirectly, in Western Australia. Overall the mining industry employs an estimated 21% of the WA workforce (Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia [CMEWA], 2006). Of this workforce 15,195 individuals are aged between 15- 34 years of age (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006) making the mining industry a significant employer of those currently navigating the challenges of early adulthood, colloquially known as Generation Y (Gen Y). (Eisner, 2005; McCrindle, 2006). Attraction to the industry and impacts of work based practices such as FIFO on the psychosocial well-being of this age group is poorly understood and generally is becoming a source of interest, particularly for the mining industry, who against a backdrop of negative community and political attitudes toward FIFO, are concerned with work place retention and maintaining a viable and skilled workforce to meet the resource needs of the community (Sibbel, Sibbel & Goh, 2006).

### *FIFO and Employment Practices*

FIFO operations have been used internationally by the offshore oil and gas industry since the late 1940s and in Australia since the 1960s for both onshore and offshore production (CMEWA, 2006; Houghton, 1993). FIFO employment can be defined as "all employment in which the work is so isolated from the workers' homes that food and accommodation are provided for them at the work site, and rosters are established whereby employees spend a fixed number of days at the site, followed by a fixed number of days at home" (Storey & Shrimpton, 1989, p.2). At present, such practices are used to service offshore oil and gas and also land based mining sites in Australia. While certain differences in employment conditions, e.g., employment roster, transport to the work place, exist between them (CMEWA, 2007; Parkes, 2007; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997), similarities can also be observed e.g., shift work, monotonous and repetitive work (Parkes, 2002; Sutherland & Cooper, 1996).

### *Offshore and Onshore FIFO Research*

Research into FIFO employment has demonstrated that this lifestyle can impact both positively and negatively on the workers overall psychological functioning (Houghton, 1993; Keown, 2005). Some positive aspects

associated with the FIFO lifestyle included high financial remuneration, work schedules that allow for a period of time at home which enables workers to partake in extensive leisure activities and provides residential stability and an opportunity to spend a solid period of time with family (Gallegos, 2006).

The impacts of the lifestyle on the family and the workers' partners has received considerable attention with some evidence that the stress created by this lifestyle can have negative effects on the employee's partner as they juggle the repeated comings and goings of the worker, loneliness and forced independence (Reynolds, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Watts, 2004). However, Parkes, Carnell and Farmer (2005), concluded that partners of offshore oil rig workers generally adapt to the lifestyle.

Recent research focusing on the children of land based FIFO workers has demonstrated that employment related absence does not impact on a child's depressive symptomatology, levels of anxiety or their perception of family functioning (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008). Additionally, similar research found that having a parent employed in a FIFO capacity was not typically problematic for children and that parents can implement certain strategies to help children successfully adjust and manage the FIFO lifestyle (Gallegos, 2006).

With respect to mining personnel, Venables, Beach and Brereton (2002) demonstrated that FIFO lifestyle was perceived as putting substantial pressure on forming and maintaining personal relationships and promoted social isolation as the worker was unable to participate in social and community activities due to their work rosters. Furthermore it has been highlighted that on site factors pertaining to the physical needs of the workers (food, comfort, use of drugs and alcohol) and fatigue that can be as a consequence of roster and shift length, can impact on the health and well being of the employee, and potentially their perception of long term involvement (or retention) in the industry (Beach, Brereton & Cliff, 2003; Sibbel et al., 2006).

Studies focusing on the specific psychosocial impacts of offshore employees have demonstrated that offshore workers experience an increase in symptoms of anxiety, more sleep problems and a higher workload. The offshore working environment is characterised by several elements that can create stress for individuals (Parkes, 1992, 1998; Sutherland & Flin, 1989). As highlighted above these elements include exposure to adverse physical conditions, the remoteness of installations, restricted working and living arrangements, lack of privacy, perceived dangers of the offshore environment including the requirement of helicopter travel, demanding shift schedules and the separation from support networks (Cooper & Sutherland, 1987; Parkes, 1998; Sutherland & Cooper, 1991). These negative factors have been shown to adversely impact on the psychological health and well-being of personnel, with employees experiencing pervasive tension and apprehension, decreased job satisfaction and minor health problems such as sleeping difficulties and stomach complaints (Parkes, 1992, 1998; Parkes & Clarke, 1997; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997).

#### *Early Adulthood and Gen Y Research*

The Australian population is ageing and one of the outcomes of this demographic shift has been an increasing interest in the social and economic role that Gen Y or the current cohort of young adults are assuming in our community (McCrindle, 2006). The available research on Gen Y appears to be limited; however what is available is primarily concerned with common characteristics exhibited by this group of young people, their work aspirations, perceptions and how to retain them in the workplace (Eisner, 2005; McCrindle, 2006; Sheahan, 2008). Sociological and human resource researchers have sought to identify the ecological forces that have shaped the characteristics and qualities of Gen Y. However, whilst it is problematic to generalise the characteristics of an entire generation of individuals, these generalisations and descriptions provide a foundation for further

psychological investigation particularly from a community psychology perspective as fundamental to this approach is a critical awareness of ecological and systemic factors that impact on the individual's sense of self identity and ultimately their well-being (Gridley, Fisher, Thomas, & Bishop, 2007; Keyes, 2007).

According to Eisner (2005) Gen Y has a strong sense of morality, are sociable, willing to fight for freedom and are arguably patriotic. They are the most technically literate, educated and ethnically diverse generation in history and tend to have more disposable income. However against this Gen Y have a reputation for poor job commitment and little company loyalty. They are three times more likely to change jobs in a year compared to older generations with movement being underpinned by their desire for variety, challenge, success, change and seeking out people who will further their development (McCrindle, 2006).

All generational cohorts pass through the formative years of early adulthood which entails the developmental tasks of connecting to others and their community, completing education or training, finding a job, establishing a home, potentially partnering and starting a family (Arnett, 2000). However, each generation possesses a unique set of experiences, attitudes, beliefs and expectations about a variety of situations, including personal relationships shaped by their community and socio-political conditions (Eisner, 2005; Prilleltensky, 2003). Such forces shape personal identity (Stets & Burke, 2003). The current generation of young adults, or Gen Y, have had opportunities to benefit in wealth and capital that has been accumulated by their parents. Furthermore they have also directly benefited from this as they are the most materially endowed, and entertained generation to date (Sheahan, 2008).

However, they may have also witnessed the cost of their parents' success in terms of absentee parenting and parental divorce (McCrindle, 2002; Sheahan, 2008). Arguably this may be instrumental in young adults commitment to relationships, known to be one of the key tasks

associated with early adulthood. Specifically Dafoe-Whitehead and Popenoe (2000) demonstrated that Gen Y's experience of their parents' relationship was instrumental in forming beliefs about permanence of relationships, and the need to cohabit prior to long term commitment. Additionally, the negative advice received from parents and relatives regarding marriage has made them cautious of committing to another (Dafoe-Whithead & Popenoe, 2000; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

#### *Gen Y and FIFO*

At present, literature focusing on generational issues within the FIFO industry appears to be scarce. Research in this area has characteristically focused on the effects of FIFO and families, as well as accident rates among workers, attrition, absenteeism and the effect of roster schedules on stress and physical health (Chen, Wong, Yu, Lin & Cooper, 2003; Gallegos, 2006; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Parkes, 1998; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997). This research has commonly been directed towards males who are in established relationships or marriages, and those employees who have children. However, little research has been undertaken on the new generation of employees entering the FIFO work force. Specifically the impact of the lifestyle, and the workers' perceptions of community support for the lifestyle on their well-being is deserving of further investigation.

#### *Research Aims*

In order to determine the overall psychological impact offshore FIFO employment has on Gen Y, their individual perceptions of this lifestyle need to be explored. Thus, gaining insight into how Gen Y involved in oil and gas based FIFO employment can successfully navigate developmental and psychosocial challenges while dealing with extended absences from community and support networks. This research will build on the current body of psychological knowledge that surrounds this area (Chen et al., 2003; Gallegos, 2006; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Parkes, 1992, 1998;

Parkes & Clarke, 1997; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997) and act as a foundation to further research focusing on generational issues for people working in a FIFO capacity. Additionally, this study could also provide valuable information to oil and gas companies on how to assist and support Gen Y workers facing these challenges, with the aim of creating a more productive young workforce. The question this study aims to address is what are the psychosocial challenges experienced by Gen Y when employed offshore in a FIFO capacity?

### **Method**

#### *Research Design*

Due to the exploratory nature of this study an in-depth qualitative research design was utilised to gain insight into the experiences of Gen Y workers employed on an offshore FIFO roster. The study adopted a social constructionist framework (Berg, 2001). This design enabled the unearthing of subjective meanings and interpretations that the FIFO workers assigned to their experiences (Daly & McDonald, 1992). It also acknowledged that the workers are active agents who construct their own way of understanding the world through social processes and interactions with others in their social world throughout their life and that the data that emerges is the result of a co-construction between the participants and the researcher (Burr, 2003). By using a social constructionist framework in the current study a greater understanding of how those belonging to Gen Y involved in FIFO construct and give meaning to their experiences as well as how they view their self-identity while working offshore and when back onshore during their rostered time off from work.

#### *Participants*

Ten adult male participants aged between 18 – 28 years of age who were currently employed offshore on a FIFO basis were recruited to participate in this study. The number of participants was sufficient to achieve saturation of content (Beanland, Schneider, LoBiondo-Wood, & Harber, 1999). The majority of participants worked on an oil rig in differing

capacities and as shown in Table 1, roster patterns also varied across participants, ranging from 2 weeks on/2 weeks off to 5 weeks on/5 weeks off. The amount of time each participant had been involved in FIFO employment ranged from seven months to eight years. Four of the participants indicated that they had been in a long term relationship, and three indicated that they were currently living with a partner. Only one of the participants had children.

#### *Materials*

A semi-structured interview schedule with open ended questions and a demographic information sheet were used to obtain information on the workers and their experiences of FIFO employment and lifestyle.

#### *Procedure*

Following approval from the Human Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University, participants were recruited through local media sources and interviewed. The information letter and consent form informed the participants about ethical considerations namely; confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and freedom to withdraw without prejudice from the study at any time.

#### *Data Analysis*

Each interview conducted by the primary author (TC) was transcribed verbatim from the recordings to ensure authentic records for analysis. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data in order to identify central patterns and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During the process of reading the transcripts salient words, phrases and passages were highlighted. These were translated into codes in order to give meaning to the descriptive information and facilitate the grouping together of themes. Themes representing the meaning underlying a group of codes were identified.

To ensure rigour was maintained while conducting this research several methods were employed; interpretive rigour, methodological rigour, triangulation and saturation. Interpretive rigour was ensured through providing extensive segments or complete primary texts in the final report, and also by allowing the secondary

Table 1  
*Participant Details*

| Pseudonym | Amount of time employed FIFO | Roster cycle |
|-----------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Alex      | 7 months                     | 2wks/2wks    |
| Anthony   | 18 months                    | 5wks/5wks    |
| Brett     | 3 years                      | 2wks/2wks    |
| Nick      | 8 years                      | 2wks/2wks    |
| Matthew   | 8 years                      | 2wks/2wks    |
| Peter     | 2.5 years                    | 2wks/2wks    |
| Robert    | 4 years                      | 2wks/2wks    |
| Christian | 2 years                      | 2wks/2wks    |
| Chris     | 6 years                      | 2wks/2wks    |
| John      | 3 years                      | 4wks/4wks    |

researcher (EK) to verify the conclusions drawn from the coding process (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Methodological rigour was achieved in the current study by outlining how access was obtained to participants, how the researcher presented herself to the participants, how data was collected and how the data was coded and analysed (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Furthermore, triangulation was utilised to ensure the accuracy of conclusions. This was achieved by emailing four participants an interim results sheet and asking them to provide feedback. The feedback that was obtained from the participants endorsed the interpretations of the study. Finally, interviews were conducted until saturation was reached; meaning that no new data was emerging, this ensured that all the information was captured.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The analysis of the experiences of this sample of Gen Y employees working offshore in a FIFO capacity revealed the presence of three dominant themes in the data. As shown in Table 2 these themes included: FIFO lifestyle, Self-identity and Relationships.

#### *FIFO Lifestyle*

Issues related to aspects of the FIFO lifestyle emerged as a dominant theme in the interviews. The majority of participants interviewed were unified in their identification of

the issues that arise for them as a result of their FIFO employment. Four main issues associated with the FIFO lifestyle included: financial rewards, workplace culture, adjustment and time off.

*Financial rewards.* The men in this study reported that financial remuneration was an important factor in both attracting and retaining them in the industry and that their wages enabled them to have a degree of financial freedom. This is similar to previous research which suggests that the financial gains generated by FIFO employment are considered one of the positive aspects of this lifestyle (Collinson, 1998; Gent, 2004; Houghton, 1993; Keown, 2005). For example, Christian commented:

*The money is good...obviously the money is what takes me that way, and Matthew also stated It's the main reason you do it really; I would say would be for the money.*

Consistent with the work of Shrimpton and Storey (2001) this study highlighted that while the offshore workers generally have a high disposable income they have few expenses or opportunities to spend the money during their time at work. This appeared to allow the majority of the participants to spend money on return from their work offshore on items for recreation. For example, Alex stated that I

Table 2  
Themes and Sub-themes

| Themes         | Sub-themes  |
|----------------|---|
| FIFO lifestyle | Financial rewards<br>Workplace culture<br>Adjustment<br>Time off  |
| Self-identity  | Aspirations<br>Others' perception of self and work<br>Beliefs and attitudes about self  |
| Relationships  | Trust and importance of regular contact within relationships<br>Difficulty forming and maintaining relationships<br>Influence of others experiences about relationships |

*spend a fair bit of money on just getting stuff I have wanted to get, and Matthew highlighted that he spent his income on toys, motorbikes and things... Holidays, drinking, things you don't really need. Just a waste of money, clothes. It's not really a waste of money but it could have been used a lot more wisely. Casinos...*

Although participants spent their money on items that enhanced their sense of well being, many of them also valued their income as a means for providing a stable future and used their money to invest in assets such as property and stock market shares. As Peter stated *I've got the houses as investments and some shares.*

*Workplace culture* The workplace culture described by the participants indicated that while there was a sense of camaraderie and mateship among employees there was also an element of trying to establish a social hierarchy within the workplace. Similarly, Ulleberg and Rundmo (1997) suggested that individuals seek support from colleagues while at work and found that social support from a supervisor or co-worker appeared to reduce employees' level of job strain. For example Brett commented:

*When I am out at work there are people there to support me because sometimes it can get lonely and I mean us guys we*

*speaks about everything out there... it's not unusual to feel counted out there when you are a couple of days into a trip you know, you're just getting used to being out there and a couple of guys come up and they will slap you on the back, just the contact you know, it helps.*

The need to get along with others was highlighted as important. Matthew stated that sometimes the work experience was *just like being with your mates a lot of the time*, and Chris indicated that *everyone gets along really well... if you don't get along with anyone out there you sort of get weeded out. It's a pretty close knit sort of thing.* The value placed on the social connection at work is consistent with McCrindle's (2006) observation of Gen Y as a cohort of people who regard highly a workplace environment where they can interact socially and work collaboratively with others. The unique environment of drilling rig and FIFO roster allows employees to potentially satisfy both of these facets as employees typically work in teams while on shift and socialise with others during meal times, in accommodation facilities and when engaging in recreational activities on the rig.

In contrast to the positive aspects of

working in such a close environment the men indicated that sometimes the environment fostered or intensified negative experience. Adjustments in group hierarchy, competitiveness and dominance amongst the workers could lead to difficulties in the workplace. For instance Nick stated,

*You know what guys are like... if they find a chink in someone's armour they will just keep chipping away at it until they break you, and especially in that environment (on the rig), it's just guys trying to stamp their authority on things and be the dominant male.*

The potential for competitiveness also featured in interviews as Robert highlighted that the guys get out there, they see what you are doing and then they ask you what money you are on. It all becomes a competition... they will be on the computer saying these are my toys and this and that.

At present, little research seems to exist exploring the social dynamics of the offshore workplace. This finding is important as they way workers interact with each other has the potential to significantly impact on their feelings of satisfaction and well being whilst at work.

*Adjustment* It was evident from the interviews that offshore FIFO employment was accompanied by the challenge of periods of adjustment for the workers both prior to departure and on arrival at work. This finding supports research conducted by Gallegos (2006) who identified that FIFO employees, particularly those with families and in relationships, can experience an emotional cycle that occurs when the worker arrives home and departs for work. Consistent with the findings reported by Gallegos (2006) participants in this study reported depressive feelings in the time leading up to their return to work and during the first few days of their trip. For example Peter remarked that *it's kind of depressing sometimes....* Robert also highlighted that returning to the work routine on the rig was also a significant challenge:

*.returning to work and living on the platform pretty much feels like you're going back to prison... You don't have any windows in your room. Just wall to wall, that's it. And you wake up a certain time, you have got to do things at a certain time, lunch certain time. However once the first few days were negotiated getting back into the swing as Anthony mentioned seemed to occur for all.*

The disappointment during their last few days prior to returning to work was exacerbated if the workers believed they were going to miss out on perceived important social events. Peter indicated that his negative feelings were often due to *missing out on things like parties or whatever*. Although this was viewed as an inevitable aspect of the job, it still generated unfavourable feelings for the workers in this study a finding consistent with research on mining personnel irrespective of stage of life (Gallegos, 2006). Furthermore, the participants tried to avoid thinking about what was going at home as a way to cope with this challenge, for example Nick commented *if you don't think about it, it doesn't bother you*. For the participants in this study important social events included weddings, concerts and other social gatherings with friends or activities that support peer socialisation characteristic of those in early adulthood or Gen Y (Eisner, 2005).

#### *Time off*

The amount of time off generated by FIFO employment emerged as a significant positive aspect of this lifestyle. This finding supports that of Gallegos (2006) who found that second to financial gains, time away from work was the most frequently reported reason for continuing with FIFO employment. The men in this study reported that this time off enabled them to engage in activities which increased their sense of well-being. These included opportunities to travel and partake in social activities without being concerned about work commitments. When discussing what he enjoyed about the FIFO lifestyle Brett stated:

*The time off and the time I get to spend with my friends is a big one for me... it's*

*given me the opportunity to travel and do things you don't normally get to do... the freedom to move and do what I like when I like when I'm not at work is the biggest draw card for me.*

Travel was frequently mentioned as an activity that was undertaken by the individuals in this study. Consistent with the research of Storey and Shrimpton (1989), the financial remuneration and lack of family commitments was highlighted as making this possible as Anthony implied; *Five weeks off paid for and yeah, living on your own watch, doing whatever you want... With five weeks I can travel... I can do a lot of things.*

In contrast to engaging in positive activities to increase well-being many participants reported using alcohol and illicit drugs during their time off as Christian commented, *I think I have been drunk just about every day.* Although they did not identify as drug users many commented that they consumed illicit drugs recreationally while at home. Peter provided a description of his use *I like to take drugs and stuff... [I use] pretty much anything I can get my hands on... because you are sort of doing nothing at home so yeah you just smoke pot all day... it ends up being every day and before you know it every trip... I would probably have pills on the weekend, probably every weekend... and ice if that's going around.*

While Collinson (1998) suggested that FIFO employees typically consume higher levels of alcohol during their time off compared to the general population, the available research that explores illicit drug use among offshore personnel appears limited. Keown (2005) has however commented that mining personnel will utilise substances such as alcohol to help them sleep and Frone (2008) reported that illicit drugs are more likely to be used in response to work stressors rather than induced by them.

Additionally, due to the exploratory nature of the present study it is difficult to distinguish between whether the participants' drug use is a result of their work practices or a generational effect that can be witnessed across all industries.

#### *Self-identity*

The development of a sense of identity is a

complex process and involves the formation of personality identity and identity constructed through social interaction with others (Stets & Burke, 2003). Self-identity was a significant factor that emerged from the interviews. Some common issues which could be characterised as belonging to this theme included: aspirations, others perceptions of self and work and beliefs and attitudes about self.

*Aspirations* The majority of the individuals in this study commented that they did not want to continue working offshore for a long period of time as Brett indicated, *it's not forever for me either... but it's providing a means to an end at the moment to help me get where I would like to be later.* Such statements are consistent with the current Gen Y research that suggests members of this generation have shorter tenure in jobs than the generations that came before them (McCrinkle, 2006). However it has also been recognised that FIFO workers, irrespective of age, generally may have aspirations for working in this role for a finite period of time (Watts, 2004). Some noted that they were unsure what the future held for their careers but many suggested that they did not envisage themselves being employed in a job that required them to work 9am to 5pm. Brett further elaborated that *I still would never envisage working full time 9 to 5 ever. I just can't see myself getting injected into that sort of life,* and Matthew also stated that *something I always said I wouldn't do is work 9 – 5.* In addition many of the participants also aspired to retire at an early age as Matthew implied. *I'll maybe retire when I'm 50 or something like that... I've got the option of doing that if I want to.* Comments provided by the men demonstrated that they believed the FIFO lifestyle facilitated their current goals and aspirations thus, influencing their construction of personal self-identity.

*Others' perceptions of self and work* The perceptions other people form and express about individuals influence the formation of the social self (Stets & Burke, 2003). Participants in this study felt other people not involved in FIFO

employment viewed their work and lifestyle negatively, with many choosing not to disclose their occupation to others in an attempt to avoid being judged unfavourably. When discussing how he felt others viewed his occupation Nick reported:

*I think some people are actually quite jealous of it, the fact that you know, you don't really go without anything.*

Additionally, Alex commented:

*I just feel like sometimes people are like oh yeah... you just go up there and are on holidays for two weeks.*

Some of the men in the study did not discuss their occupation with others for fear of others forming negative opinions about them. As Brett stated; *I don't like speaking about it because sometimes you get people thinking you are talking it up... so I just tell people I fix light bulbs or something like that.* Robert also supported this view when he said: *When people ask me what I do I just say "oh I deliver milk, that's all I do"... I don't like to tell them.*

The negative perceptions of the FIFO lifestyle by others appeared to have potential implications for the formation of identity for these individuals. Many of the men in this study indicated that people not involved in the industry, and the community generally, viewed the work as overly simplistic and often expressed feelings of jealousy and resentment towards them because of the work they do and their financial remuneration. This appeared to impact the participants as there is a discrepancy between how the workers view the lifestyle and how they feel others perceive it. *People think we are slack, we are just watching movies all the time... I have done a 16 hour shift on a drill before. It isn't an easy job* (Christian). Brett highlighted that he felt a social perception of FIFO workers creating problems for others was also apparent ...[others think] *that you have got no responsibilities, you just don't give a shit, you have got all this money, you are causing problems with all you guys spending hard and large and big and that's causing problems down here for*

*everybody else.* The sacrifices that the participants felt they were making were not being acknowledged.

*Beliefs and attitudes about self* The belief's an individual holds about themselves is an integral component of self-identity (Tyler, Kramer & John, 1999). Typically, the men in this study shared similar beliefs about themselves. They viewed themselves as relatively hard working, easy going and resilient and felt that it was these characteristics that enabled them to effectively cope with offshore FIFO employment. As Matthew stated, *I wouldn't say everyone could work offshore... I would say it takes a certain type of person... I mean you've got to be an easy going and pretty open and not offended too easily.* Robert also added to the importance of the need to be "easy going" when he commented, *well I'm just a pretty laid back person. I just get on with anybody because you have to.*

The ability to be able to deal with the pressure of the job was also highlighted as important and consistent with some studies (Gent, 2004). There was also evidence of positive emotions experienced at the work place too. As a part of negotiating the lifestyle successfully work pressure needed to be dealt with in a particular way as Anthony indicated, *you just take it on the chin. If you don't let stuff like that worry you, you will be alright.*

Many of the men also reported witnessing other people fail to effectively manage the pressures of the FIFO lifestyle. They attributed this to several reasons, some of which included; lack of knowledge around what to expect prior to arrival at the workplace, failure to get along with others at work and an inability to be resilient when confronted with obstacles. Watts (2004) also reported that those inexperienced with, or new to, the lifestyle were certainly at risk of poorer psychological outcome. Thus, it can be suggested that the beliefs and attitudes these individuals hold about themselves has enabled them to successfully overcome challenges that have arisen for them whilst working offshore.

### *Relationships*

The impact of land based and off shore FIFO employment on personal relationships has frequently been identified in the literature as a source of stress for personnel (Clarke, McCann, Morrice & Taylor, 1985; Collinson, 1998;; Reynolds, 2004; Shrimpton & Storey, 2001; Sibbel & Kaczmarek, 2005). Consistent with these studies, relationship issues emerged as a dominant theme amongst the men in this study. Less than half of the men in the study were currently in a relationship at the time of the interview, however were willing to recall their experience of past relationships. Some viewed the lifestyle as a positive for relationships such that, the separations generated feelings of appreciation for each other. However, the majority of men indicated that the FIFO lifestyle places considerable pressure on personal relationships. The main issues to emerge under this theme included: trust and importance of regular contact within relationships, difficulty forming and maintaining relationships and the influence of others' experiences about relationships.

*Trust and importance of regular contact within relationships* In this study, trust and regular contact emerged as a significant factor for the men. If trust was not apparent within relationships they felt that the relationship was unable to be maintained. Additionally, the contact between partners enabled the worker to cope with the periods of separation. When disclosing a time his girlfriend broke his trust Peter commented:

*She cheated on me once... the big thing was trust and especially while I am away it was really hard and I suppose that is one of the reasons why I ring her every day. Just to know where she is... If your relationship is going to work you have got to trust each other.*

The regularity of contact was also important for those in a relationship consistent with the research by Reynolds (2004). When discussing the issue of contact with his partner Anthony said:

*I am big on it, even if it is just talking about nothing... and it helps during the day as well to know that you have got like an email to read and reply to or a phone call or something like that.*

Alternatively, Chris felt that he had little to contribute when he spoke to his partner as his daily activities did not vary greatly, he stated:

*I don't like talking to her on the phone out there, not much happens during the day so it makes it hard.. it's just another day. Woke up went to work. You only ring up because you want to hear them talk. so it gets frustrating for her when you are out there and you just get in the zone and you are eating, working, sleeping and that's it.*

Even for these young adults the periods of separation resulted in the ability to spend extended periods of quality time with their partners when not at work. However if the relationship was characterised by little trust the FIFO employee was left ruminating about what their partner is doing at home, thus impacting on their overall feeling of well-being.

*Difficulty forming and maintaining relationships* The ability to form and maintain close personal relationships is a challenge that must be confronted in order for the young adult to successfully navigate the developmental stage of early adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The men in this study highlighted that the FIFO lifestyle places pressure on forming and maintaining relationships. It was frequently cited that this difficulty was a result of the recurring absences required by FIFO employment consistent with the research that generally supports the view that the lifestyle presents challenges for all in relationships (Parkes, 1998; Reynolds, 2004). Brett commented:

*Throughout the majority of my offshore lifestyle I haven't been in a relationship... the worst part is the um, going away... especially at the start of the relationship because you didn't know how things were going to turn out and you have got to be there to inject yourself into a relationship and people are very fast and frequent*

*nowadays.*

Furthermore, when discussing his experience with relationships Chris stated:

*It's hard to be single out there because you come home and especially try and establish a relationship and two weeks off goes so quick and then you are back at work and then you see them going 'oh,' you know, just freaking out.*

Some men thought that the FIFO lifestyle gave them a lot of time to reflect on their relationships and what their partners were doing at home and thus, chose to avoid them. When discussing his relationship experience Alex reported:

*I sort of tended to avoid them... I didn't want to have to think about what was going on down here and I didn't want to have my mind occupied even though it sort of was anyway but I did try to keep a distance in the relationship... it's just so easy for your mind to wander up there.*

The inability to establish close relationships in early adulthood can lead to feelings of isolation (Arnett, 2000). This has implications for FIFO employees as the difficulty experienced in forming relationships can potentially impact on the successful navigation of early adulthood and transition to the next stage of adulthood.

*Influence of others stories/experiences about relationships* The men in this study reported that the close nature of the working environment facilitated the sharing of others personal stories and experiences of relationships. These stories predominately revolved around negative experiences that were being passed on by those older than the participants. This had the effect of influencing the participants' attitudes towards relationships as Chris stated,

*You don't get a good view of marriage because they [the other men] are going 'oh we are paying this much for to about three kids' and your sitting there thinking oh fuck is this what I have to look forward to?*

Anthony also said:

*A lot of the guys out there are all split up and they have got stories and stuff like that... they love ripping into you about it as well, they tell you when you get home, knock on the front door and run around the back.*

Research has generally supported that information about longer term intimate relationships is often provided by parents. For example, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that young adults who had witnessed their parents' divorce were openly pessimistic about marriage and divorce and sought to avoid both. The men in their study had a desire for love but a wariness of being hurt. They were more likely to withdraw from involvement in current relationships and a significant number of young men avoided relationships altogether (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Additionally, as Dafoe-Whitehead and Popenoe (2000) have suggested, young people are receiving negative advice about marriage from parents and relatives and as a result they are becoming cautious about forming intimate relationships.

However, for the men in this study these negative stories and experiences were not coming from their parents or relatives but instead the "older" men at work. This sharing of stories among colleagues could be indicative of a generational effect across industries and not one specific to FIFO employment.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Gen Y employed offshore in a FIFO capacity to determine the psychosocial impact of this lifestyle. The utilisation of a social constructionist approach facilitated valuable insight into how these individuals constructed their self-identity and gave meaning to their experiences. A series of semi-structured interviews facilitated open and honest discussion about personal experiences and the men seemed enthusiastic and willing to convey their thoughts and opinions. As a result of this several themes were identified. These themes included the FIFO lifestyle, self-identity and relationships.

Overall the results obtained from this study support those obtained from other studies conducted on land based and offshore based personnel and their families in national (Kaczmarek, & Sibbel, 2008; Reynolds, 2004; Watts, 2004 ) and international contexts (Parkes & Clark, 1997; Storey & Shrimpton, 1989). Specifically the key finding of this study was that generally the men were satisfied with their employment and the lifestyle, despite the many challenges that FIFO presents. Overall, the men seemed to have adjusted well to the stressors associated with offshore FIFO employment and had positive attitudes and beliefs about themselves as individuals.

This study has implications for the current body of knowledge around how FIFO employment impacts on the psychosocial development of Gen Y employees. Firstly, it provides evidence to suggest that the men belonging to Gen Y are successfully navigating developmental issues and the current community perspectives to FIFO and Gen Y. Despite some of the negative community perceptions towards FIFO as an employment option, and Gen Y as having poor job commitment, many of the participants have successfully held their jobs for a period of time. Furthermore they have demonstrated ability to negotiate their employment, social networks and relationships (Arnett, 2000).

Secondly, this study contributes to current research highlighting that FIFO employment requires individuals to confront a unique set of challenges. Some of these include the confined work and living conditions, demanding shift patterns and isolation from community and social supports (Cooper & Sutherland, 1987; Parkes, 1992; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997). Previous studies (Chen et al., 2003; Clarke, McCann, Morrice & Taylor, 1985; Cooper & Sutherland, 1987; Parkes, 1992, 1998; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997) identified that the negative factors associated with offshore FIFO employment adversely affect workers psychological well-being. The

perspective offered by the Gen Y workers in this study did not entirely support this conclusion. Instead it was found that although these elements can be viewed as unfavourable, they are also considered an inevitable characteristic of the job. Furthermore the view was offered by these participants that the individual must be willing to effectively confront these challenges in order to benefit from the positive aspects that FIFO employment offers and to establish a community of fellow FIFO workers as part of their support network. However it must be considered that the fact that the majority of the workers had been engaged in this type work for longer than 18 months, with a few having spent more than 6 years performing this work could have influenced this perspective.

From this study it is evident that amongst the employees there is a perception that one must have a particular attitude toward offshore FIFO employment and that this is part of the coping strategy that is employed by personnel generally and not just Gen Y. If employees generally, do not have the right attitude and an effective coping style they are unlikely to remain in the industry due to the impact this can have on their psychological functioning. This finding is consistent with the view espoused by Watts (2004) who indicated that individuals and their partners are likely to experience a series of stages of adaptation to FIFO and that eventually through a process of redefining self, and changes in their emotions and relationships may be left to either accept or reject the lifestyle.

Lastly, social researchers have speculated that Gen Y is perhaps the most materially endowed generation (Sheahan, 2008) and that interpersonally they are cautious about long term relationships and commitment as a consequence of witnessing conflict in preceding generations' relationships (Dafoe-Whitehead & Popenoe, 2000). The financial rewards offered by FIFO employment was valued and appeared to suit the participants, consistent with the Gen Y research. Their high disposable income meant that they could afford regular expensive holidays and recreational pursuits.

Interpersonally the vast bulk of the young men in this study had previously or were currently living in a committed relationship, however in support of the research (Dafoe-Whitehead & Popenoe, 2000) on those navigating early adulthood, there was evidence that indicated that they were suggestible to the perspectives and experiences that those more senior to them had about relationships.

As this was an exploratory study, it was difficult to differentiate what was a result of FIFO employment and what was a result of generational effects that may be present across all industries. Consequently, further investigation into generational effects and FIFO employment is warranted. It is recommended that future research in this area utilise both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to gain a greater understanding of the issues confronted by this cohort. Specifically interviews and questionnaires that focus on the values placed on company loyalty, mobility in the workforce, and retention consistent with Beach et al. (2003) may be able to tap how those qualities presumed to belong to Gen Y actually impact on psychological (mental health and substance use) and occupational health of this emerging generation of workers. Longitudinal research would facilitate an appreciation of how Gen Y navigate the demands of the lifestyle, the changing community perceptions about FIFO and how these impact on psychological and social maturation.

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#### Address Correspondence to

Dr Elizabeth Kaczmarek  
 School of Psychology  
 Edith Cowan University  
 Email: [e.kaczmarek@ecu.edu.au](mailto:e.kaczmarek@ecu.edu.au)

## New Developments and Lessons Learned From the *Enhancing Relationships in School Communities Project*

Eleanor H. Wertheim<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Freeman<sup>2</sup>

Margot Trinder<sup>1, 2</sup>

Glenda MacNaughton<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *La Trobe University*

<sup>2</sup> *University of Melbourne*

*The Enhancing Relationships in School Communities (ERIS) project is an applied research project that began in 2005, to develop better processes for cooperative conflict resolution in primary school communities and to create more culturally respectful school communities. In this paper we first describe the background of the project and the approach taken with two cohorts of schools, comprising 12 primary schools in ERIS Phase 1 and then a further 10 primary schools in Phase 2. Also included are descriptions of how the way we presented the conflict resolution model was adapted to respond to school needs. Several developments are described, including (1) simplifying the conflict resolution model to encourage broader application, (2) systematically integrating elements of respect for cultural diversity into the conflict model to assist teachers to consider the broader cultural context, and (3) integrating the conflict resolution model into the broader external framework for building and restoring relationships in schools communities. Further lessons learned from the process of engaging in Phase 2 of the project are discussed, such as the importance of joining in a partnership with schools to better learn from and address their needs, and providing extended professional development with school support to increase implementation and program maintenance.*

The Enhancing Relationships in School Communities (ERIS) project is an applied research project that began in 2005, to develop better processes for cooperative conflict resolution in primary school communities and create more culturally respectful school communities. Its current form is a partnership among the Australian Psychological Society, specifically Psychologists for Peace interest group; University of Melbourne; La Trobe University; the Catholic Education Office Melbourne; and two primary schools (Haig St Primary School, Heidelberg West and St Anthony's Primary School, Alphington). Our overall aim for this paper is to describe developments across time for this project, including how the way we have worked with schools to understand and implement a conflict resolution practice model has evolved based on feedback from those schools.

In this paper we begin by describing the background of the ERIS project, the end of program findings of the project's first phase (ERIS Phase 1) in 12 primary schools and recent refinements arising from findings of that phase. We then illustrate several developments in the model arising from our collaboration with and feedback from the Phase 1 schools that influenced how we subsequently presented the concepts to schools in Phase 2. These developments include (1) a simplified conflict resolution model to encourage broader application, (2) integrating elements of respect for cultural diversity into the model to assist teachers to consider the broader cultural context when applying the model, and, later in the ERIS program, (3) integrating the model into a broader external framework for building and restoring relationships in schools (restorative practices). Finally, we describe other lessons we

learned out of the process of engaging in Phase 2 of the project. We hope, in providing this information, to encourage closer collaboration between researchers and schools, to inform future programs in conflict resolution and encourage reflection on practice in schools.

### **Background of the ERIS Project - Phase 1**

The ERIS project was originally an initiative of Psychologists for Peace (PFP), an interest group of the Australian Psychological Society, which was designed initially to promote PFP ideas and resources in schools. These ideas are based on a core collaborative conflict resolution model (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Wertheim, Love, Peck & Littlefield, 2006) in which individuals are encouraged to first consider the parties and issues involved in a dispute and to explicitly set the scene for cooperation (as opposed to competition, which is a common orientation to conflict). Next, the interests (needs, wants, concerns, fears) of each party are identified and discussed, a *range* of possible options for addressing each party's interests is generated, and parties arrive at a 'win-win' or 'integrative' solution to the conflict combining the options that best meet each party's interests. Other elements of the model include building positive relationships, handling emotions, looking at objective criteria that can frame solutions, and considering alternatives to a negotiated solution in case negotiations break down and developing the best one (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement or BATNA, Fisher & Ury). This theoretical model, based on Fisher and Ury's (1981) prescriptive advice, was recast by Littlefield, Love, Peck and Wertheim (1993) as a social problem solving approach.

Phase 1 of the ERIS project involved our working with 12 schools over a 16-month period. Core teams of 3-5 teachers (including leadership such as principal or assistant principal) attended full day workshops covering the conflict resolution model (Australian Psychological Society, 1997; Wertheim, Love et al., 2006). The core teams were taught the model and were responsible for taking what they had

learned back to their schools. That process included disseminating the information, providing professional learning for their colleagues, integrating the model into school policy and practice, introducing related curriculum and encouraging new processes for teacher conflict resolution and problem-solving practice throughout the school, that is, in the classroom, on 'yard duty' (in the playground), in staff meetings and with parents and carers. We evaluated the ERIS Phase 1 program in a quasi-experimental design using questionnaires at pre, mid and post program, and through field notes taken during four school visits by the ERIS team.

A primary research question in this initial trial of the program was whether two days of workshops would be sufficient in supporting schools to make important changes in their schools. While one or two days of workshops attended by individuals or small groups of staff is a model commonly used in school initiatives, many researchers argue that often there is too little adequate professional learning offered to staff to prepare them to implement changes effectively and for these changes to be maintained (Elias, Zins, Craczyk, & Weissberg, 2003; Girard & Koch, 1996; Jones & Compton, 2003; Stevahn, Kealey, & Munger, 2005; Walker, 2004). Therefore in the first phase of the ERIS project, this more standard two-day format (six schools) was compared with a longer-term format (six schools), in which seven days of professional development took place. Schools, comprising both Catholic and state schools, were randomly assigned to condition. At post-program four groups of school staff ( $n = 66$ ) were compared: full intervention core team members ( $n = 16$ ), partial intervention core team members ( $n = 17$ ), other staff from full intervention schools ( $n = 14$ ), and other staff from partial intervention schools ( $n = 19$ ).

### *Outcomes of Phase 1 of the ERIS Project*

At post-program teachers reported on impact and application of the ERIS program in the school, and hours taught of ERIS curriculum

(Trinder, Wertheim, Freeman, Sanson, Richardson & Hunt, in press; Wertheim, Freeman, Trinder & Sanson, 2006a; Wertheim, Freeman, Trinder, Sanson, Richardson & Hunt, 2006b). Phase 1 ERIS pre-post program changes were evaluated on the basis of teachers' responses to scenarios describing a student dispute (teacher responses were rated according to steps of the conflict resolution model used to resolve the dispute) and reports of teachers' conflict management styles. Field notes during school support visits supplemented questionnaire data.

Findings suggested that ERIS was positively received by participant schools, however, the full intervention (FI) was found to be more effective than the partial intervention (PI), with the greatest gains being made by FI core team teachers as opposed to other teachers in the FI schools or core teams and other teachers in the PI schools. Field notes suggested that FI schools more often embedded ERIS into policy and practice (6 full versus 3 partial intervention schools), had principal involvement in ERIS (6 vs. 3), and disseminated ERIS-related information to parents (4 vs. 2).

In FI schools 25% of classes included ERIS conflict resolution curriculum in the first year, increasing to 36% in the second half year; while in PI schools 20% taught ERIS curriculum in the first year, dropping to 11% in the second half year. The mean number of hours of conflict resolution reportedly taught to students ranged from 14.3 to 27 hours over a one-year period; a Kruskal-Wallis Test,  $H(3, N = 62) = 8.09, p = .044$ , indicated significant differences between the four groups and post hoc (Mann-Whitney U) tests showed FI core team taught significantly more than PI groups.

Pre-post program change analyses indicated that at post intervention, all groups of teachers, except non-core team staff in PI schools, increased use of the conflict resolution model steps in conflict scenarios, Kruskal Wallis  $Z(16) = -3.43, p = .001$ . Groups also differed at post-program on use of a general integrative problem solving style for managing conflict,  $c^2(3, N = 63) = 11.49, p = .009$ , with post hoc tests

showing FI core team teachers most often used a cooperative problem solving style.

Core team staff, particularly in FI schools, also reported ERIS to have had greatest impact in improving conflict management ability across a range of nine contexts such as managing negotiations or conflicts with students, staff and parents and resolving conflict between students, Kruskal-Wallis Test  $H(3, N=61) = 22.67, p < .0005$ . The mean impact across contexts on a 5 point scale (5 = *very much so* and 1 = *not at all*), for FI core team = 4.22, PI core team = 3.89, FI other staff = 3.01, and PI other staff = 2.16.

### Phase 2 of the ERIS Project

Following the first phase of the ERIS project, our aim in Phase 2 was to replicate and extend it in another round of 16 months of professional learning for other primary schools. Because of the superior outcomes in the full intervention group in the first ERIS trial, we decided to repeat the 16-month format, this time having all core teams attend 7 full-day workshops. In addition, our findings from ERIS Phase 1 that the core teams (i.e., teachers who attended the ERIS workshops) had greater levels of knowledge and implementation of curriculum and skills at post program than other teachers in their schools, led us to make one of the 7 workshops a full-school professional development day, which all teachers (and in some cases ancillary staff) attended. The aim was to encourage the whole school to become more involved early in the program and to introduce all staff to the program concepts and skills. The second phase of the ERIS project began in 2008 and has involved offering the program to 10 Victorian primary schools, including both state and Catholic schools. While some schools comprise mostly Anglo-Australian families, others include students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The 10 program schools are being compared to three control schools. Questionnaires and field notes during school visits are forming a major part of the evaluation of this field study. In addition after each

workshop participants completed an anonymous post-workshop evaluation in which they rated how useful each workshop component was (rated from *not at all* to *extremely* useful) and they suggested future topics and concerns to inform subsequent workshops. The full day workshop format and school visits enabled us to work closely with school staff over an extended period. These collaborative relationships were pivotal in enabling us to adapt and redevelop our resources to ensure they were useful to a diverse range of school settings and reflected the lived experience of the staff. The aim of the current paper is to discuss changes that took place in our practice of working with this new group of schools. As the evaluation process is ongoing, we will not describe final empirical outcomes of pre-post changes on participant questionnaires. However, we will refer instead to the post-workshop evaluations which gave indications of how well received these new approaches were.

*Developing a briefer conflict model to encourage greater application*

The first conceptual modification we made in Phase 2 was how we portrayed the conflict resolution process. In Phase 1 of the project, we had received feedback from some teachers that the full conflict resolution model was too complex to use regularly in a school context. Core team teachers described themselves as having little time to engage in putting into practice lengthy conflict resolution models or to teach an elaborate model to their colleagues during staff meetings. While we encouraged teachers to consider, when judging how much time to put into a conflict resolution process, the positive long-term outcomes of spending time doing that (e.g., preventing future conflict by resolving current conflicts thoroughly), we also understood the need for schools to have processes that were going to work in their context and acknowledged the practical constraints in schools.

On the basis of studies that examined which core elements of the conflict resolution

model are associated with improved negotiation outcomes (Davidson & Wood, 2004; Soltys, 2003), we developed an abbreviated version of the conflict resolution model called the SIB model (Setting the scene for cooperation, Identifying interests, and Brainstorming options) or two-minute model (since it could be done efficiently). Figure 1 shows the SIB model, which was taught initially during the full school workshop.

The SIB model was well received. Post workshop evaluations of the full school day indicated that of 203 school staff, 65.5% described the session in which we presented the SIB model as very or extremely useful, 24.5% somewhat useful, and 10% not very useful. We found, however, that a one session exposure to the simplified model (in the context of other material presented) still did not result in most core team members recalling the model readily in later professional development sessions. We therefore returned to the SIB model at subsequent core team workshops, engaging in role plays to practice using the model when negotiating with students, mediating conflicts, or coaching students to solve their own disputes. Schools that most fully embraced this model then adapted the approach as standard practice on yard duty for the whole school and taught it as part of student curriculum.

*Integrating ideas about respect for cultural diversity into the ERIS conflict resolution model*

A further development in ERIS Phase 2 was an increased focus on assisting schools to develop greater respect for differences associated with cultural diversity. Culture and multiculturalism have become increasingly viewed as important elements to consider when addressing conflict, since (1) many of the global and intra-state (i.e., within countries) conflicts today have ethnic or cultural elements to them, such as when a non-dominant group is marginalised by a dominant group and when the dominant group's actions pose threats to their identity, safety or security (Coleman, 2006; Peck, 1998), and (2) researchers have identified cultural misunderstandings as exacerbating

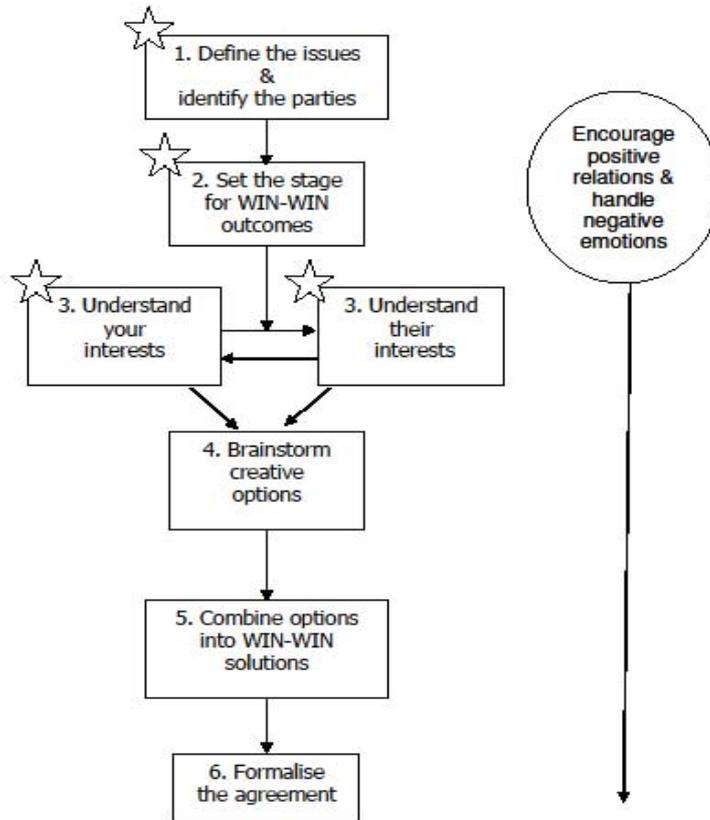


Figure 1. Simplified S.I.B. (or 2 minute) Conflict Resolution Model. Adapted with permission from Wertheim, Love, Peck, & Littlefield, (2006). *Skills for resolving conflict*. Eruditions Publ.

conflict (Kimmel, 2006, Pedersen, 2006). From these points of view, our initial conflict resolution model appeared to omit possible elements that could be important to consider when conflict takes place between members of different cultural or linguistic groups.

Pedersen (2006) has summarised numerous advantages of taking a multicultural perspective when resolving conflict, such as making more accurate assessments of conflict situations, reducing the tendency to misattribute causes of behaviours, understanding the source

of our own values, finding common ground across cultures, and providing a broader understanding of standards of justice. Pedersen further pointed out professional guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) about multicultural competencies (Sue et al., 1998, cited in Pedersen) that could be applied to conflict resolution, including (among other points): awareness of one’s own assumptions, values and biases; knowing about oppression, racism and discrimination; being skilled in self-improvement toward a non-racist identity; and

understanding the world view of clients whose culture is different from one's own. More recently APA's (2003) *Guidelines on multicultural education, training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists* also stress the importance of a commitment to cultural awareness and knowledge of self and others, and of employing constructs of multiculturalism and diversity in education and research.

In addressing issues of cultural diversity, in ERIS Phase 1 the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC - Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne) was invited to present some sessions to core teams. Then in ERIS Phase 2 we became full partners in an ARC Linkage grant called *Creating Culturally Respectful Primary Schools*.

The work of the CEIEC is grounded in post structuralist and postcolonial theory and research (MacNaughton, 2005; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009), and involves raising awareness about the discourses which are associated with, and perpetuate, a lack of respect for individuals from different cultures, races and backgrounds and that lead to prejudice and discrimination. Discourses in this context are the ideas, words, images and feelings that shape how we make sense of the world, what we value in the world and how we act in it. They shape what we believe is just or unjust and they shape how we exercise power in the world (MacNaughton, 2005). From this viewpoint, the source of conflict is not differences between cultures but rather certain discourses and behaviours associated with prejudice and discrimination. This assumption is consistent with a growing consensus in the conflict resolution field of the negative effects (in terms of destructive conflict) of marginalisation of nondominant groups in societies (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Peck, 1998). What is therefore advocated by the CEIEC is taking a socially just stance towards respecting cultural diversity, which includes being aware of our own attitudes, values and behaviours towards individuals and groups with

backgrounds different from our own; being alert to the effects of race and racism in everyday life; and taking action to reduce social injustice. These views have implications for how a school would approach their policies and practices, and how culture could potentially be approached in a specific conflict context.

Prior research suggests that professional learning about cultural diversity has most impact when programs: (a) overcome resistance to the cultural diversity program by exposing participants to diverse cultural groups and experiences; (b) increase the dominant cultural group's understandings about the effects of discrimination on 'other' groups; (c) provide strategies and extended time for participants to explore cultural diversity principles and pedagogical practices; and (d) allow time for participants to reflect critically on their present social location and their experiences (or lack of them) of cultural marginalisation (Brown, 2004; Brown, Cervero & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; Dee & Henkin, 2002).

On the basis of these past findings and the CEIEC concepts, during ERIS Phase 2 workshop presenters from non-dominant cultures (e.g., Phillipines, India) shared their experiences and participants were assisted in working with their own discourses, assumptions and values about cultural diversity. The stories students and staff tell about themselves and others in terms of culture and ethnicity were addressed through questions of 'Who am I?', 'Who are we?' and 'Who are they?' As part of this process new concepts were introduced that formed key components of these discourses. Specifically, discourses of injustice were seen as relying on dominant cultural and racial groups exercising their power to *homogenise, essentialise, other* and *silence* minority and non-dominant cultural and racial groups in a specific society (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009).

Participants were encouraged to consider these discourses, for example, looking at how

those in lower power positions may be *silenced*, so their true experiences are not given a space to be expressed. The importance of being alert to creating *safety* for people to express themselves was highlighted. Other concepts involved how we tend to *homogenise* other groups, assuming that all those in a particular ethnic or cultural group are the same (e.g., ‘all Americans are loud’). *Essentialising* involved perceiving that a particular group is defined by essential characteristics (e.g., ‘unless you know about cricket you can’t be a true Australian’). *Privileging* was described as the process through which those in higher status or power groups have greater access to resources and voice than those in lower power groups. Prejudice, racism and discrimination were further discussed with the aim of identifying when they take place, and of helping teachers and students to become motivated to talk about it, instead of ignoring it, and to take action when it is present.

These discourses were analysed through what the CEIEC calls *justice alerts* or *justice watchpoints*. Justice alerts were reminders during the conflict resolution process to consider how power may be exercised and experienced by parties (MacNaughton & Davis, 2001; MacNaughton, 2005; MacNaughton & Davis, 2009). Justice alerts were used as a basis to approach relationships in general, to explore existing school policies and practices, and to stimulate adjustment of these policies and practices.

After the general concepts had been introduced as general considerations in relationships in school communities, in a later session the justice watchpoints were mapped onto our conflict resolution model through key questions at each point in the conflict resolution process. For example, prior to beginning negotiations (when analysing who the parties are and what the issues appear to be), one would ask: ‘How might cultural differences play a role in how the parties and issues are framed?’, ‘What are potential value differences between parties?’, ‘Am I missing important parties, e.g., assuming all people from a particular culture are

the same?’, and ‘Are there secondary actors who might help us all understand better?’ The last question encouraged engaging or consulting with others who are familiar with, or preferably representatives of, the specific ethnic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds of the parties.

The first action phase of the SIB model involves *Setting the scene for cooperation*. While the method for doing this does depend on the context, our basic conflict resolution approach recommends making overt statements about one’s aim to cooperate and find a mutually agreeable (i.e., win-win) solution, and to encourage other parties to see the process as a problem being solved together. Adding justice alerts to this phase of the model was operationalised through inserting questions such as: ‘How can we create a safe and respectful space for discussions in this context?’, and ‘Who would be the best person to initiate the discussions?’, keeping the cultural and ethnic context in mind. In the next SIB phase of *Identifying interests* of all parties, negotiators and facilitators were encouraged to ask themselves questions such as: ‘What are my potential biases here?’, ‘How has my history influenced my views?’, and ‘How might gender, race or class be impacting on my views and approach?’

In practical terms we produced visual models of these justice alerts embedded into the conflict resolution model that core teams could take back to their schools. Visual models of these concepts aimed to assist the core team members to disseminate the concepts in their schools and make the concepts more accessible in daily interactions. The introduction of justice alerts embedded clearly as part of the conflict resolution visual model was responded to positively in evaluations; that session was rated as *very* or *extremely* useful by 88.8% ( $n = 31$ ) and *somewhat* useful by 11% ( $n = 4$ ) of the core team members attending the session.

The concept of justice alerts was

sometimes a challenging one at both a professional and personal level, as teachers were encouraged to reflect deeply on their own beliefs, values and assumptions as well as those of the institutions in which they work. Truly integrating these justice alerts into all aspects of teachers' work required time for reflection and discussion, as well as ongoing support for staff undertaking this journey.

*Integrating ERIS into other school structures and processes to increase implementation*

Other developments of the ERIS project have related to our aim of finding methods for enabling new initiatives to be accepted by and implemented in schools. The original ERIS program was designed with these considerations in mind, based on findings about factors that enhance program implementation and maintenance in schools (Gager & Elias 1997; Ishler, Johnson, & Johnson, 1998). For example, the program included a long-term partnership with schools (16 months) and use of core (professional learning) teams that were responsible for implementation in their schools. School visits by the ERIS team were embedded in the program to sustain motivation, assist in overcoming barriers, and support schools to tailor the project to meet the specific needs of their school community. Continuing professional development opportunities, with time for reflection on practice and networking with other ERIS schools, were built into the program (Wertheim et al., 2006a). These processes were continued in ERIS Phase 2.

Potential implementation problems (echoed by participants in our program) include competing agendas in schools, an already overcrowded curriculum, increasing accountability for students' literacy and numeracy skills, as well as reduced professional development time. To address these concerns, in the ERIS project we have sought to highlight ways in which a focus on constructive conflict resolution and cultural diversity supports schools to address concerns they had in these areas and also contributes to fulfilling required academic outcomes. Specifically, in the state of Victoria,

where the ERIS project took place, schools must be able to demonstrate satisfactory fulfilment of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS). Of relevance to the ERIS project is the strand of Physical, Personal and Social Learning (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2004). Included in this strand is the learning domain of Interpersonal Development which emphasises the importance of helping students learn to build positive social relationships, work and learn in teams, and manage and resolve conflicts. The other relevant learning domain within this strand is Civics and Citizenship which emphasises the need for students to "develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that enable them to take action as informed, confident members of a diverse and inclusive Australian society" (VCAA, 2005, p. 5). As a mandated systemic initiative VELS increased the potential to link the ERIS approach with mainstream curriculum. By explicitly building the links between these standards and ERIS content and curriculum we hoped to enable teachers to better defend to others the introduction of ERIS content into the school curriculum and practice.

Two types of curriculum were offered in Phase 2 of the ERIS program, one on conflict resolution and one on cultural diversity. By one year into the program, nine out of 10 intervention schools had taught some ERIS-developed curricula, and ERIS program core team ( $n = 19$ ) and non-core team teachers ( $n = 89$ ) reported teaching significantly more hours of curricula on these topics than comparison teachers ( $n = 31$ ) from three control schools that had applied to do the ERIS program and were given the curriculum but no program or support,  $Kruskal-Wallis Z(2) = 12.91, p = .002$ .

Another structural consideration for implementing ERIS is that schools often have had some prior exposure to alternative models and processes to address conflict, and interpersonal problems. While most of these processes do not contain the key elements of the ERIS approach, many of them are consistent

with such an approach (such as peer mediation or assertive discipline). However, core team members reported in workshops, evaluation feedback, and school visits that prior exposure to different approaches was potentially problematic for them when the relationship between the approaches and the ERIS program was unclear. In addition, school leaders reported concerns that we might expect them to set aside existing programs to make room for ERIS, or to 'start from scratch' by adding a completely new structure and set of processes in the school, which would be difficult and time consuming to implement.

Our solution to these teacher concerns has been to encourage schools to find links with, and embed the ERIS concepts and practices, into existing structures and frameworks, rather than seeing ERIS as yet another stand-alone program to add to, or replace, existing ones. As long as the different approaches are not contradictory, our feedback from teachers has been that a strategy of integrating new ideas into existing structures is generally more acceptable and achievable and therefore more likely to lead to implementation of the ideas; previous research in schools supports this view (Everhart & Wandersman, 2000; Stevahn et al., 2005)

*Integrating restorative practices and the ERIS conflict resolution model*

As Phase 2 progressed it became particularly apparent that we needed to address the Restorative Practices approach which has been promoted in schools by the Victorian State and Catholic Education systems in recent years. The Restorative Practices approach is based on the concept of restorative justice. Traditional western justice is based on a retributive (or punitive) approach to creating fair and just outcomes following crimes or offences. A retributive justice approach suggests that when people perpetrate offences, they should be punished for it to balance the scales again. In contrast, restorative justice processes view offences as harm to relationships and the process of attaining a just solution involves restoring the relationship. This outcome can be brought about

through a variety of methods which are referred to as *restorative practices*. For example, community conferences can be held, in which the offender and the injured party are brought together in a meeting, each with support persons present and a facilitator guiding the process. A facilitated discussion between the offender and the person harmed can also take place. Restorative outcomes may include apologies, compensation, restitution (i.e., fixing harm done), rehabilitation of the offender and so on, with the aim of fixing wrongs, ensuring offences do not recur and re-integrating the offender into the community (Wertheim, Love et al., 2006).

Programs have been developed to assist schools in adopting a restorative justice philosophy and implementing associated practices for repairing relationships after hurtful events and offences of students. The Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM), for example, has developed a model which incorporates preventive strategies and informal and formal practices to address situations in which relationships have been harmed. These include methods for assisting teachers to talk about harmed relationships with students through *affective questioning* that elicits empathy and focuses on repairing and avoiding future harm; formal or informal 'circle' time in which teachers assist students in discussing different issues; peer mediation; and formal restorative conferences. Embedded in the Restorative Practice model, although historically not as well developed, is also creative conflict resolution and problem solving.

Some schools participating in ERIS had previously participated in Restorative Practices programs. Teachers from these schools had questions about how to integrate the two approaches in practice, such as for which student incidents would one apply the conflict resolution model versus a specific restorative approach. In addition, teachers often asked how our conflict resolution approach could be used to address discipline issues. It was particularly

important to clarify that ERIS and restorative practices could indeed be integrated and were not 'competing' or inherently different processes. Partly as a result of these queries, along with our partnership with the CEOM, we decided to work with the CEOM Restorative Practices program to integrate aspects of the two approaches.

Our ERIS approach fits clearly into the cooperative conflict resolution and problem solving aspect of restorative practices. Furthermore, the affective questioning component of the Restorative Practices program appeared to be a parallel process to our own process when a dispute or problem arose.

With these parallels in mind, a new practice model was developed that described when to use each approach and a pictorial model was presented (Figure 2), depicting at what stage to use affective questioning, and at what stage to use the CR questions and prompts. The concept was that when an incident or conflict occurs, one first identifies whether to approach it as a 'problem to be solved and potential conflict' or whether there has been harm to a relationship. If the former is the case, the incident is seen as an opportunity to teach students to cooperate in solving interpersonal problems, consider everyone's interests, and then engage in generating win-win options (using the ERIS SIB Model). If however, an offence has occurred or a relationship has been harmed, restorative practices may be a first stage, in which each party considers, through affective questioning, who has been harmed. In effect this is an empathy eliciting stage of the process, in which an offending party is encouraged to look at the consequences of their actions both for themselves and those around them. Once this initial affective questioning phase is completed, then one can use the cooperative problem solving model (ERIS SIB) to find ways to consider how the harm can be repaired and how to ensure that it does not happen again. Once again, it becomes important to identify the interests (needs or concerns) that parties had which led to the problematic behaviour and if

there are other ways to more constructively meet those needs.

The new, integrated Restorative Practices and ERIS CR model was received very well on the core team day (towards the end of the Phase 2 program) in which we presented it. In post-workshop evaluations teachers ( $n = 30$ ) rated the session very positively, with 90% rating it as *very* or *extremely useful* (two teachers found it *somewhat useful* and one *not very useful*). In addition, 70% of core teams reported plans to take the model back to their school for further dissemination over the following weeks. These responses all indicated that the integration of Restorative Practices and CR was found to be helpful for teachers and in future programs we would introduce the integrated model earlier. The integrated flowchart has been disseminated in the Catholic Education system (Wertheim et al., in press). In addition we have taught the integrated model in the context of a CEOM Restorative Practices professional development program, further embedding the ERIS model into the CEOM Restorative Practices approach. *Featuring in the program the experiences of participating schools*

Our own status as university-based researchers, psychologists and academics can have both advantages and disadvantages when working with schools. While we bring expertise, knowledge of the research literature, and ability to evaluate program outcomes, school staff were keen to ensure that university-based facilitators truly understood their school context and pressures. Our team, in fact, included a number of former teachers, which assisted in raising our understanding of school constraints as well as our credibility to participants. However, in Phase 2 of the program we also had the advantage of involving schools that had completed the ERIS program in Phase 1 and who could speak more directly about their experiences with the program. Principals of two of the ERIS Phase 1 schools were therefore each invited to present at a core team day about how they had guided implementation of the ERIS program and what

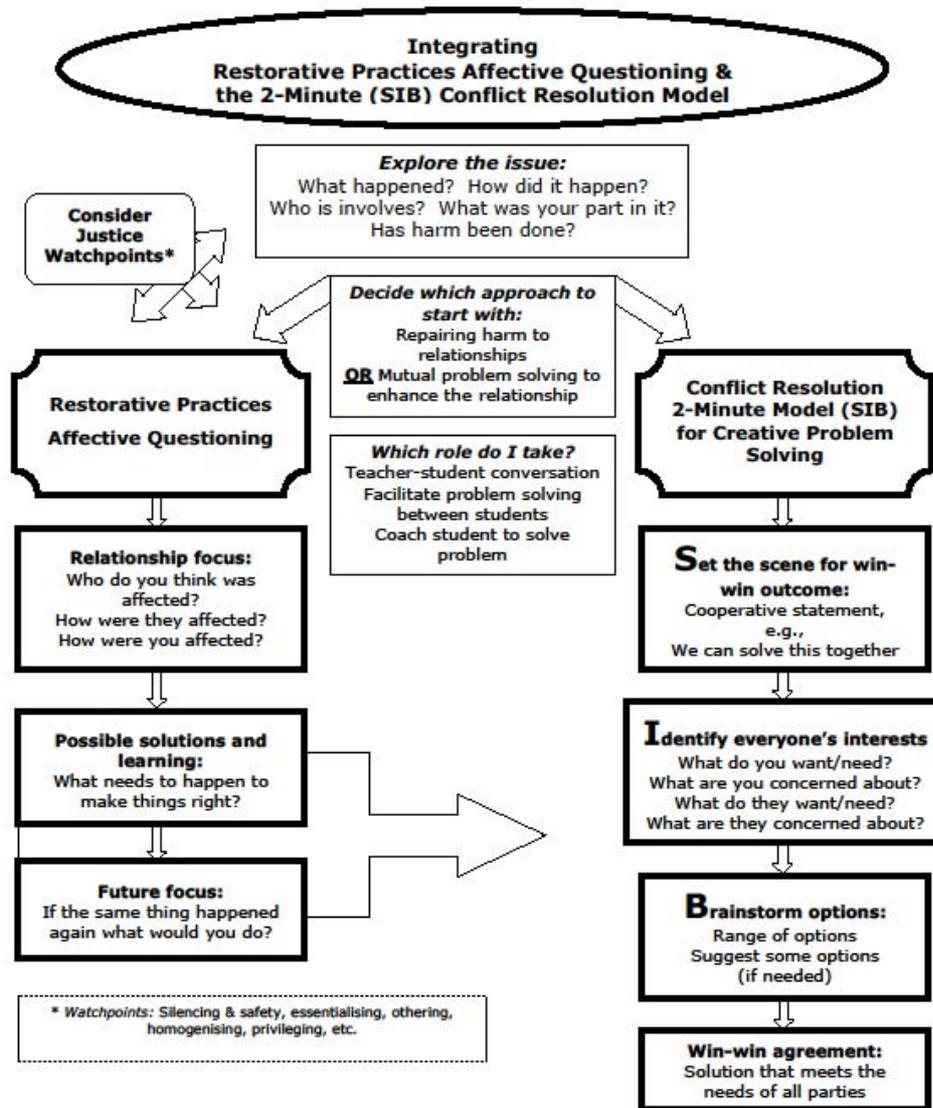


Figure 2. Combined model developed by Enhancing Relationships in School Communities project and the Catholic Education Office Melbourne. An alternative version of this model appeared in Wertheim, Freeman, & Trinder (in press).

they had seen as the outcomes for their schools. The principals were able to discuss how they had addressed implementation challenges in their different settings. A classroom teacher from one of these schools also came with her principal and talked about the work she had done with her students and how helpful the ERIS curriculum had been. Furthermore, by explaining the positive outcomes the principals' schools had experienced (including one principal showing a

figure displaying the school's reduced incidents in the playground over time), these presentations helped increase the credibility of the ERIS program. Post-workshop evaluations of these sessions indicated that the teachers found these presentations very useful.

In addition participants reported benefiting from hearing and learning from the experiences, challenges, perspectives and solutions to problems of a diverse range of

schools, which differed along dimensions such as demographics, size, school system, and history. Learning about other schools' experiences took place during small group exercises in which teachers from different schools worked together, in full group discussions, and also informally. In both Phases 1 and 2 of ERIS we also set aside time at one of the workshops for each school to present how they had been implementing the ERIS ideas in their schools. Phase 2 workshop evaluations suggested core team staff found the school presentations very useful (87% *very* or *extremely*, and 14% *somewhat* useful). There was particular value for schools in hearing about applications of the ideas in specific contexts, and how the ERIS concepts and resources were tailored to meet each school's specific needs.

#### **Other lessons learned**

A common pattern we found across schools that reported the greatest levels of change was that they reported having a 'champion' within the school who understood the change process and who was committed to the ERIS project values and aims. However, a champion on her own would not be sufficient, as change would not be maintained. For these champions to effect *sustainable* change, they needed to (1) work with their core team to become an effective working unit in which members developed a shared vision and understanding of the change process for their community, and (2) enable school changes at the level of policy and practice.

Schools with a pre-existing culture and process of collaborative problem solving and decision making fared well in putting the ERIS ideas into practice, as did schools that prioritised time for their ERIS team to meet – either as a separate ERIS-dedicated group or as part of an existing school team (usually the student wellbeing team). Many schools also cited the external support of the ERIS research team as critical to helping them address the obstacles they encountered when engaged in their change process.

Other lessons we learned were that schools

needed resources that are user friendly and school staff were very creative in adapting resources to suit the needs of their specific communities. Sometimes impetus for change was planned by the ERIS team, for example, we presented at a core team workshop the research data we had collected from the students in participating schools to assist participants in understanding their students' experiences of diversity. Other times, a particularly salient incident at a school produced acceleration of learning, and we were able to support the school in using the ideas offered to solve a current and important problem of the school.

Finally, an important consideration in supporting schools to implement our programs was the diversity represented both across and within schools. Participating schools varied along dimensions of size of school, socioeconomic status, cultural and linguistic characteristics of students and parents/carers, and school culture. Each school had a unique history of prior change; some had relatively stable environments while others had experienced numerous transitions that influenced school decision-making processes as well as staff and school leaders' enthusiasm for new initiatives and change. Given the diversity of project schools it is understandable that different rates and patterns of progress would be made by different schools. Each school needed to work through its own process of change management. Throughout both phases of the ERIS project, foremost in our minds was the importance of working with participating schools to promote effective change within their respective school communities. Each school was in reality an action research project in its own right and the end results were not always predictable at the outset, but emerged as each school identified and addressed their specific needs. The collaborative process was rewarding, yielding benefits not only for the schools but also for the development of our ideas as researchers.

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### Address Correspondence to

Professor Eleanor Wertheim  
 School of Psychological Science  
 La Trobe University  
 Bundoora VIC 3086  
 Phone: (03) 9479 2478  
 Fax: (03) 9479 1956  
 Email: [e.wertheim@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:e.wertheim@latrobe.edu.au)

## **An Intervention to Increase Positive Attitudes and Address Misconceptions About Australian Muslims: A Call for Education and Open Mindedness**

Anne Pedersen

*Murdoch University*

Anne Aly

*Edith Cowan University*

Lisa Hartley

*Murdoch University*

Craig McGarty

*Murdoch University*

*The present study describes a nine-week anti-prejudice intervention targeting attitudes towards Australian Muslims at a Western Australian university in 2008 using data from 19 Psychology students. Quantitative results found a marginal increase in reported positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims, together with a significant reduction in the reporting of negative media-related beliefs. Using a thematic analysis on reported attitudes and beliefs about Muslim integration and immigration, we found differences in the themes expressed before and after the intervention. Beforehand, themes included a cultural divide in values; a need for more cultural understanding; and aspects of Islamic ideology restrict Muslims from integrating. Afterward, themes included an increased awareness of structural issues affecting Australian Muslims; a re-framing of citizenship as a shared identity; an increased awareness of negative representation of Muslims in the media; an acknowledgement of Australia's inherent diversity; and a shift from homogenising Muslims as a group to constructing Muslims as part of a diverse society. Clearly, such interventions alone are not enough given historical and contemporary contexts. However, our study indicates that – in this context at least – in-depth cross-cultural analysis and learning can be used to bring about change.*

In Australia, negativity and hostility towards marginalised groups generally is a major problem and has been well documented with respect to Indigenous Australians (Mellor, 2002) asylum seekers (Klocker, 2004) and refugees (Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). More recently, there has also been an increase in negativity against Australian Muslims, in part due to the events and repercussions of September 11, 2001 (Poynting & Nobel, 2004). However, there are few published studies regarding the success or otherwise of anti-prejudice strategies in Australia; let alone with respect to Australian Muslims.

Some research suggests that the media contributes in developing a negative

perception of Australian Muslims, often portraying Islam as a religion in direct conflict with the values and traditions of Western culture, and deeming Muslims unable to commit to the values of liberal democracy on the basis of their religious beliefs (Aly, 2006, 2009; Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007). Indeed, this focus on conflict is reflected in the views of many mainstream Australians (Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007). There appears to be a widespread belief in the broader Australian community that Islam equates with terrorism and the threat thereof (Kabir, 2007); in fact, Griffiths and Pedersen (2009) found that the higher the level of prejudice in community participants, the higher the fear of terrorism ( $r = .46$ ). In

that study, participants reported their beliefs were due mainly to the personal values that they held – regardless of whether they were comparatively rejecting or accepting of Australian Muslims. Those data indicated that other relevant factors affecting beliefs about Australian Muslims were personal experience and the influences such as friends, family, and – relevantly for the purposes of the present study – the media.

Having outlined some possible social psychological factors influencing prejudice against Australian Muslims, an important question beckons: how would we go about changing such attitudes in a more positive direction? There have been a limited number of published social-psychological studies outlining evidence of the effectiveness or otherwise of such strategies in Australia with respect to Indigenous Australians (see Hill & Augoustinos, 2001; Issues Deliberation Australia, 2001; Mooney, Bauman, Westwood, Kelaher, Tibben, & Jalaludin, 2005; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). To date, however, there have been no published studies examining the reduction of prejudice against Australian Muslims with one exception. Specifically, Issues Deliberation Australia (2007) held a community forum which included a pre-test and a post-test on a number of issues relating to Muslim/non-Muslim relations. Some relevant outcomes from this forum were that there was a decrease in the number of participants wishing to curtail the number of Muslim immigrants, a decrease in the perception that Muslims have a negative impact on Australia's national security and social harmony, and an increase in political knowledge about Islam.

There have also been a number of cultural awareness programmes regarding Muslims and Islam that – while not explicitly including pre-test and post-test – give indications of success (e.g., Roberts & Fozdar, in press). Roberts and Fozdar suggested that there were three main issues that contributed to participants' positive change in attitudes: (a)

having participants give serious thought to the influences of their own culture; (b) including the stories of practising Muslims; and (c) allowing free and open discussion. Other authors also note the importance of free and open dialogue (Pedersen, Walker & Wise, 2005). In a similar vein to Roberts and Fozdar, Pedersen and Barlow (2008) argued that the following principles are important when attempting to reduce prejudice against Aboriginal Australians<sup>1</sup>:

- (a) including representations and voices of Aboriginal Australians, (b) encouraging open dialogue within the framework of mutual respect rather than simply lecturing to participants, (c) providing factual information; in particular, to combat false beliefs ... (e) creating a safe environment for discussions and (f) attempting to invoke empathy rather than guilt (p. 157).

While some research suggests that such interventions are effective in reducing prejudice, it is important to note that they can also increase prejudice in some cases and not others (e.g., Case, 2007); they can also have a primarily positive effect but not on all variables (Boatright-Horowitz, 2005; Mooney et al., 2005). Such interventions also have the potential to simply increase prejudice, although there is no published evidence in Australia to state this (although one could ask – who is likely to publish such findings?) In this regard, one can only imagine the amount of prejudice reduction interventions that have been conducted with less than satisfactory results that have not been published due to the “bottom drawer problem”; that is, studies that do not work not being published. This is problematic as it is possible to learn from non-successful interventions as well as successful ones.

### **Overview of the Present Study**

The data presented here are part of a larger study which examined positive attitudes toward both Indigenous Australians and Australian Muslims. However, for the purposes of this paper we report the findings regarding

Australian Muslims only (the Indigenous findings have been presented elsewhere; see Pedersen, Aly, Hartley & McGarty, 2008). In the present paper, we investigated attitudes toward Australian Muslims and media related negative beliefs. As noted above, the media has been linked with anti-Muslim prejudice in a number of studies (e.g., Aly, 2006; Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009; Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007). Can positive attitudes be increased, and media related negative beliefs reduced, after nine-weeks of a cultural psychology unit? We did not attempt to break down each individual component of the intervention, but examine the data as a whole; in other words, we do not attempt to compare – say – the giving of information versus the use of empathy. We also qualitatively investigated the themes expressed before and after the intervention regarding attitudes about Muslim integration and immigration.

### Method

#### Participants

Data were collected at two times. At Time 1, participants were 32 second and third year Psychology students undertaking an elective unit “Introduction to Culture and Psychology”. They were recruited in the first seminar by their (Caucasian) unit coordinator, where they were given the opportunity to complete a short 3-page questionnaire. This was not compulsory and all responses were anonymous. With respect to data collected at Time 2, 19 participants completed the questionnaire both times. From this point onward, we analyse the results of participants who completed both questionnaires. Participants were primarily female (74%) with a wide range of ages (18 to 47;  $M = 25.9$  years;  $SD = 8.6$ ). Just over half of the sample (53%) identified as being Caucasian/European with the remainder coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Asia; India, Latin America). Approximately one-third of our sample stated their religion as Christian and one third stated no religion, and the other third were comprised of Buddhists, one Hindu, Muslim, and Pantheist. Most (84%) of our sample self reported moderate political views, with only approximately one-fifth reporting

strongly left views; nobody reported strongly right-wing views. As noted, one participant identified as being Muslim; however, the inclusion of this participant did not affect results and he was retained in the sample.

#### Procedure

*Time 1 Intervention.* In the seminars, students were given nine (non-compulsory) three-hour seminars with respect to Australian Muslims, asylum seekers, and Indigenous Australians (although, as previously noted, for the purpose of the present paper we concentrate on attitudes toward Australian Muslims). Students were encouraged to acknowledge their own cultural biases – regardless of their ethnicity. They were also encouraged to respect the viewpoint of other cultures although not to the point of complete cultural relativity. In other words, while some cultural practices may be not what they would choose to do, this does not mean “their way” was necessarily “the correct way”.

A seminar of particular importance was the eighth seminar titled “Australian Muslim responses to public opinion and the media discourse”. This seminar was given by the second author of this paper who is an Australian Muslim. There were two specific readings for the seminar: Aly (2006) and Aly and Walker (2007). The seminar explored some common myths and misperceptions about Muslims in Australia and the perpetuation of stereotypes in the Australian media. The lecture drew on an analysis of Australia’s history of cultural anxiety and the construction of Muslims as a source of fear and anxiety both pre and post the September 11 terrorists attacks in the United States in 2001. Specifically, the following topics were covered. First, the students were given a brief history of representations of Muslims in popular media as a source of fear in Australia; for example, the “Moslem Menace” around 1912 to the “Veiled Threat” of the late 1990s. Information and discussion involved: (a) media-related writings about Australian Muslims (b) information about Islamic beliefs and practices (c) post 9/11 discourses in

Australia, including discourses on terrorism and the Muslim 'other' (d) negative media bias on Australian Muslims, (e) Australian Muslims engaging alternative discourses – hence subverting subject positions in the popular media; (f) Australian Muslims disengaging the popular media discourse and creating new narratives of belonging, (g) re-affirming Australian Muslim identity, and finally (h) how Australian Muslims are challenging popular stereotypes at personal level. Throughout the seminar, many media-related negative beliefs were debunked by the presenter.

To guide the intervention seminars, we put together and used a set of principles based on previous research (e.g., Roberts & Fozdar, in press; Pedersen et al., 2005; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). The principles used in the intervention were; (i) including Muslim voices and representations (in particular, those of the second author); (ii) the encouragement of free, open and respectful dialogue; thus, creating an environment where students felt safe to talk about the issue; (iii) giving factual information; (iv) encouraging students to make their own mind up based on the information given rather than simply accepting the lecturers' views; and (v) attempting to invoke other-focused emotions such as empathy, rather than concentrating on guilt.

*Time 2.* Nine weeks after distribution of the first questionnaire, we gave students the opportunity to complete a second three-page questionnaire the beginning of the three-hour seminar which was identical to the first one. As occurred at Time 1, students' participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous.

#### *Measures*

To assess the success or not of the intervention, both qualitative and quantitative data were used. Using more than one method is preferred to gain a thorough understanding of the research question being asked (Cohen, 2007). At both Time 1 and Time 2, the following quantitative information was asked.

#### *Socio-demographic information*

Respondents stated their age in years, their sex,

their cultural background, their religious beliefs, and their political orientation.

*Positive attitudes toward Muslims.* We used an attitude thermometer to measure attitudes to Australian Muslims. The prefacing question read, "In general how positive or favourable do you feel about Australian Muslims?" Participants could respond from 1° (extremely unfavourable) to 100° (extremely favourable).

*Media Driven Negative Beliefs (MDNB scale).* Participants filled out a 7 item Likert scale relating to negative media driven beliefs about Muslim people such as "Muslims are a threat to Australia's security". The list of items was compiled by the second author based on her qualitative research with Australian Muslims and members of the broader Australian community on the fear of terrorism and the 'other' (only one item of the MDNB scale, however, specifically dealt with terrorism). This research involved 10 focus groups and 60 individual interviews with 185 participants and highlighted several constructions about Australian Muslims that participants attributed to the Australian popular media (see for example Aly, 2009; Aly & Balnaves 2008; Aly & Green 2008a; Aly & Green 2008b). The range of scores was between 1 and 9 with higher scores indicating higher reporting of such negative beliefs.

However, questions were asked a little differently from Time 1 to Time 2 with respect to the qualitative data. At Time 1, participants were asked to supply a written response to an open-ended question before the quantitative questions. Specifically, they were asked to respond to the following question:

*Both students in the past, as well as members of the Perth community, have commented on what they perceive as the incompatibility of Islam and mainstream Australian. More specifically, it has been said that Muslims reject Australian values and that Islam is incompatible with Western democracy. Do*

*you agree, or disagree, with the notion that Muslims are unable or unwilling to integrate into Australian society? Do you think there should be limits on Muslim migration?*

At Time 2, 10 weeks after the first questionnaire was distributed, the first author again approached students to complete the second questionnaire in class. Specifically, participants were asked to supply a written response to an open-ended question asking “Lecture 9 involved an analysis of the issue of Australian Muslims. Do you agree, or disagree, with the notion that Muslims are unable or unwilling to integrate into Australian society? Do you think there should be limits on Muslim migration?” Students were then given the same quantitative questions as they were given at Time 1 (that is, socio-demographics, thermometer and media-related negative beliefs). Again, all participation was voluntary and anonymous.

## Results

### Quantitative Data

*Descriptive statistics.* As can be seen in Table 1, the reliability is satisfactory for the MDNB scale at Time 1 and Time 2. The mean for the positive attitudes scale is above the midpoint, even at the beginning of the intervention (that is; scores were comparatively positive toward Australian Muslims). The mean on the MDNB scale is around the midpoint at Time 1, and below the midpoint at Time 2. Thus, there was some acceptance of these negative beliefs, although this lessened at Time 2.

*Inferential statistics.* There were two noteworthy relationships between variables that emerged from our data. First, there was a marginal increase in reported positive attitudes from Time 1 ( $M = 66.9$ ;  $SD = 18.9$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 74.6$ ;  $SD = 17.0$ ) ( $t(11) = 2.0$ ,  $p = .07$ ). Second, there was a significant reduction in the MDNB scale from Time 1 ( $M = 3.6$ ;  $SD = 1.5$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 2.7$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ) ( $t(17) = 3.37$ ,  $p < .004$ ). There was a moderate negative relationship between the thermometer and the MDNB scale at both Time 1 ( $r = -.44$ ) and Time

2 ( $r = -.36$ ). That is, participants who reported negative feelings about Australian Muslims also scored higher on the MDNB scale.

Finally, given the importance of media influence with respect to the second author’s lecture, we also took one of the MDNB items to do with the media (“the media fills our heads with fear of the Muslims in our community”) and conducted a separate t-test to examine whether this item by itself changed over the course of the unit. There was a significant increase in the belief that the media influenced community attitudes from Time 1 ( $M = 7.33$ ;  $SD = 1.72$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 8.11$ ;  $SD = 0.96$ ) ( $t(17) = -2.07$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

### Qualitative Data

To analyse the qualitative dataset, we conducted a thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were used only for those participants who filled out questionnaires at both Time 1 and Time 2 ( $n = 19$ ). Two coders (Author 1 and Author 2) independently analysed the data. We were interested to see the level of agreement between them, and used the guidelines of Landis and Koch (1977) to measure reliability. After a first reading of the data, three major themes were identified at Time 1 which we now describe giving their Kappa reliability. In order of prevalence, the three themes at Time 1 were self-exclusion by Australian Muslims ( $k = .87$ ;  $p < .001$ ), a cultural divide ( $k = .86$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and dialogue and understanding ( $k = 1.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The four themes at Time 2 were integration and structural barriers ( $k = .86$ ;  $p < .001$ ); multiculturalism and religious diversity ( $k = .76$ ;  $p = .001$ ); citizenship and shared identity ( $k = 1.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and media discourse ( $k = 1.0$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In short, according to the Landis and Koch guidelines, one theme had a substantial match, three had a near-perfect match, and three had a perfect match. This can give us some faith in the reliability of our results.

## Discussion

### Quantitative Data

The significant relationship which was

Table 1  
*Descriptive characteristics*

| Variables                   | M/SD         | Items | Reliability | Range |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| Positive attitudes (Time 1) | 66.88(18.87) | 1     | -           | 1-100 |
| MDNB scale (Time 1)         | 3.57(1.50)   | 7     | .89         | 1-9   |
| Positive attitudes (Time 2) | 74.64(17.04) | 1     | -           | 1-100 |
| MDNB scale (Time 2)         | 2.76(1.22)   | 7     | .84         | 1-9   |

found between positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims and the MDNB scale replicates another large-scale community research project (Pedersen & Hartley, 2009). These findings combined suggests that that if anti-prejudice strategists wish to increase levels of positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims, an important place to start is the challenging of populist but negative media portrayals of Australian Muslims. That this can be achieved is seen in the significant increase from Time 1 to Time 2 in students acknowledging the power of the media. Also, there was a marginal increase in positive attitudes from Time 1 to Time 2 as well as a significant reduction of the MDNB scale.

But why the marginal effect rather than a significant effect on positive attitudes? When looking at percentages, this equated a 7.8% increase in positive attitudes. We suggest there are three possible reasons. First, it is possible that our results reflect the lower power of our small sample size. When comparing our 7.8% increase in positivity with the increase with Pedersen and Barlow (2008) with regard to Indigenous Australians, we had only slightly lower results. That is, in their study, there was a 9.4% difference between Time 1 and Time 2. Second, as noted previously, the cultural

psychology unit focused primarily on three marginalised groups in Australia – Indigenous Australians, Australian Muslims, and asylum seekers. There was more information given with respect to Indigenous Australians compared with Australian Muslims. It is possible that positive attitudes towards Australian Muslims did not increase as much as the previous study because there was less information given in the lectures about this group. Third, and linked to the second hypothesis, there was more discussion about Indigenous issues with students being very open about (some) negative viewpoints. This was facilitated by the fact that there were no Indigenous Australians present in the seminars. With respect to Muslim issues, because there were Australian Muslims present in the seminars, involving one Muslim student and the Muslim lecturer, students from the broader Australian community may have been more reluctant to verbalise their attitudes they may have had about issues to do with Islam and Muslims in general. As noted previously, a number of anti-prejudice strategists note the importance of frank and open discussion (Roberts & Fozdar, in press; Nagda, Kim & Truelove, 2004; Pedersen et al., 2005). We suggest that these three hypotheses together may explain the .07 effect rather than a <.05

effect (which we argue that in itself is quite arbitrary). However, given the small number of participants, it is still a positive attitudes increase that is meaningful even though it does clearly need further exploration. Other authors have also commented on the fact that changes, when they occurred, were something small in nature (e.g., Boatright-Horowitz, 2005).

As noted, there was also a significant reduction in the reporting of media-related negative beliefs. Given previous research linking the attitudes toward Muslims and the negative role of the media (see Aly, 2006; Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007; Pedersen & Griffiths 2009), this is not unexpected. It is also interesting in how it links to the study by Pedersen, Watt and Hansen (2006) which examined the role of politicians' rhetoric on attitudes toward asylum seekers who are often thought to be Muslim (Haslam & Pedersen, 2007). In this 2006 study, the three most common false beliefs about asylum seekers were linked to the public statements of well-known Australian politicians. This leads us to another question: "If attitudes are linked to negative media-related beliefs, how much does the Australian public actually question what they hear in the media?" Future research should investigate this.

The results of the present study provide some evidence that interventions to increase positive attitudes toward Australian Muslims can be effective. Our results are supported by previous research that suggests that the giving of accurate information about Muslims (e.g., Issues Deliberation Australia, 2007) is helpful in dispelling "urban myths" that exist in Australia's media, and that are linked to negative attitudes towards Australian Muslims. Our study also supports other research that suggests invoking other-focused emotions such as empathy, rather than self-focused emotions such as guilt, is effective in fostering more positive attitudes towards specific outgroups. Leach, Snider and Iyer (2002), for example, argue that because guilt is an aversive emotion, people tend to engage in strategies to avoid its experience, including cognitively minimising one's responsibility for

the outgroups' negative predicament. In the case of the current study, making participants feel guilty about the prejudice and discrimination experienced by Australian Muslims may have merely made them minimise their personal responsibility rather than motivating them to do something about the prejudice towards Australian Muslims (having said that, there is a fine line between guilt and empathy). However, it seems that fostering empathy may be a more effective strategy because it does not place blame on the individual, and humanises "outgroups". Interestingly, one student stated after the unit was completed that one important issue for her was the emphasis on encouraging students to make their own mind up based on the information given rather than simply accepting the lecturers' views.

#### *Qualitative Data*

At Time 1, the first theme involved *an expressed cultural divide between perceived Western values and perceived Islamic ideology*. In this theme, integration was seen to be affected by the perceived conflict between two opposing worldviews. For example, Participant 1 stated at Time 1: "I agree to a certain extent with the notion that Muslims find it difficult to integrate into Australian society. Their traditional values and ways of life are vastly different to Australia's ...". The reference to the importance of values supports past research; for example, Griffiths and Pedersen (2009) found when looking at the Perth community's attitudes towards Australian Muslims that the most significant function of attitudes towards Australian Muslims was value-expressive. In another Perth study, results indicated that nearly three-quarters of participants reported that their views on Australian Muslims were affected by their values (Pedersen & Hartley, 2009). One major theme that emerged from that study that of conformity; Australian Muslims need to conform to Australian laws and customs.

The second theme that was identified was an expressed need for *cultural understanding between Muslim and mainstream Australians*

and that a lack of understanding is detrimental to social harmony. For example, “I think education and open mindedness would go a long way for both Australians and Muslims” (Participant 8). Certainly, many studies find a significant link between prejudice against marginalised groups and education (e.g., Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009, with respect to attitudes toward Australian Muslims). Regarding open mindedness, again this has been found with others research. That is, the most prevalent theme which was reported qualitatively in Pedersen and Hartley (2009) was that of universalism; a large component of which is broad mindedness.

The final theme involved an articulation that *aspects of Islamic ideology restricted Muslims from integrating in Australian society*. Participants expressed a belief that aspects of Islamic ideology restrict Muslims from integrating in Australian society. This belief results in a construction of Muslims as a ‘problem’ group and assumes that integration is a matter of personal choice. Thus, in this theme, Muslims are constructed as being fully responsible for their own integration and there is no recognition of structural or institutionalised barriers to integration. For example, Participant 9 said: “I think maybe Muslims are more unable than unwilling to integrate into Australian society, due to the restrictions placed on them by their religion”. The integration theme, as noted previously, as been found in other research (Pedersen & Hartley, 2009).

At Time 2, four major themes were identified. First, there was *an increased awareness of structural issues to integration and an articulation of the impact of barriers on the ability of Muslims to integrate into Australian society, as opposed to the willingness (or lack) of Muslims to integrate*. This theme represents a shift in focus from self-exclusion practices of Muslims to the institutions and structures that impact on the ability of Muslims to participate fully in Western Australian society. Participants demonstrated increased awareness that socially excluded and marginalised groups need to be self empowered to exercise participatory

citizenship. For example, Participant 4 stated: “I disagree that Muslims are unwilling to integrate into Australian society, whether it is made easy for them or not is probably up to the Australian people”. As Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) note, for example, there are barriers to integration: employers are not “blind to ethnicity” (p. 206) (also see Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006). Also, it is clear that prejudice against Australian Muslims does exist (Dunn et al., 2007; Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009) and this appears to have pierced the consciousness of students.

The second identified theme *acknowledged Australia’s inherent diversity and a shift from homogenising Muslims as a group to constructing Muslims as part of a diverse society*. In this theme, participants articulated an understanding of Australia as a multicultural society and the need to respect diverse cultures and religions. For example, Participant 1 stated: “each individual in a society is different and this should be tolerated; especially since Australia claims to be an egalitarian society with equal opportunities for all”. The need to respect the views of other cultures, although not reverting to total cultural relativity, was a major focus of the intervention.

A third theme involved *re-framing Australian citizenship as a shared identity*. This theme represents a shift in the construction of Muslims as a separate ‘problem’ group to a beginning awareness of Muslims as Australian citizens who, theoretically, share both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Participants articulated a renegotiated conceptualisation of integration within a framework of shared citizenship and identity. For example, Participant 9 said: “I think that just moving to Australia is a partial integration into Australian society”. This links to work done by Every and Augoustinos (2008) with respect to national identity; they argue that national identity can be used to include groups or exclude them. However, it needs noting as Ho (2007) does that Australian nationalism is often framed in an “us” and “them” way; Australians against

dangerous Muslims. Grewal (2007) also speaks of this; however, she further notes the role of gender in the equation. As she pointed out, the “threat” of young Muslim men is often seen as being a “threat to national identity” (p. 131). However, in reality, many Australian Muslims do see themselves as being bi-cultural; that is, they see themselves as Australian and they see themselves as Muslim (see Kabir, 2007). Yasmeen (2008) also argues that Australian Muslims believe they can be both Australian and Muslim; however, they often feel that the community-at-large is less accepting of this. This would appear to have been recognised by the students.

The final theme that was identified was *an increased awareness of negative representations of Muslims in the media*. In this theme, participants articulated awareness that Muslims had been negatively represented in the media and the impact of this representation on popular beliefs among the broader Australian community about Muslims as a group. For example, Participant 1 stated:

Firstly, I do not agree with the notion that Muslims are unwilling to integrate into Australian society. I think this idea has gained popularity from the few Muslim extremists that are given media attention. Every society, culture and religion has extremists and it's highly unfair that a whole group be judged based on the opinions of few.

Other research also confirms the negative effect of media representations about Islam but there is little published research which explores how initiatives to dispel such negativity can be effective. As touched on previously, Roberts and Fozdar (in press) assessed an educational programme for emergency service workers; a number of their participants spoke of how original pre-conceptions and stereotypes about Islam, gained by through the mass media, were dispelled. As occurred in the present study, among other things, the researchers provided information about Muslim people, challenged

false beliefs about Muslim people, encouraged empathy, and provided opportunities to talk about these issues (as per Pedersen et al., 2005). Roberts and Fozdar also identified how racism works and how it affected the targets of such racism. As an aside, although the Roberts and Fozdar study did not involve a pre-test/post-test, the feedback on their intervention was generally very positive. For example, as one participant in their study noted: “I will be less likely to pigeon hole a particular group/religion or so quick to judge the actions of a few as representing those of the majority. Thank you or should I say “Shukran – Asalam Alikum”.

The thematic categories summarise the nature of the attitudinal shift expressed by the participants. These shifts directly related to the themes explored in the lectures such as barriers to participation; media construction of Muslims and popular misconceptions.

#### **Limitations/Future Research**

There are a number of limitations to the study which warrant further investigation with future research. First, the relatively small sample size is problematic with respect to the quantitative data; further research should attempt an intervention using more participants. Second, our participants were in the process of a university education, relatively heterogeneous, and actively chose to take part in the study. It is likely that there is a self-selection bias given that the unit was an elective. Similar issues were found in the Pedersen and Barlow (2008) study. As they noted, this does not mean that studies such as these are unimportant; first, because of potential flow-on effects; second, because it is possible to build up the capacity of students to oppose prejudice. The students who were more positive in their attitudes, thus signing up for the unit, are the very ones who may appreciate learning the skills contained in anti-prejudice strategies for post-university work. Third, participants were primarily women; while this is not a problem for the purpose of the present study (most psychology units have more women than men enrolled), a more even gender balance may

be informative, especially as women have been found to report more empathy (Davis, 1994; Pedersen, Beven, Walker & Griffiths, 2004; Toussaint & Webb, 2005) and are less prejudiced (Griffiths & Pedersen, 2009). Further research could take these findings into the community to investigate whether similar results would be found. These limitations withstanding, we believe the current study is a valuable contribution to the small body of research that has attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of prejudice reduction strategies.

### Conclusions

As noted previously, Participant 8 called for education and open mindedness. Our findings indicate that educational interventions can be helpful in increasing positive attitudes to Australian Muslims as well as opening students' minds to different ways of thinking other than that espoused by the mass media. Although there is a dearth of published research in this regard; to our knowledge only Issues Deliberation Australia (2007), our findings do support an increasing amount of work of prejudice reduction with respect to other marginalised groups such as Indigenous Australians (e.g., Hill & Augoustinos, 2001). Our findings also indicate the importance of Muslim and non-Muslim people working together. As noted elsewhere, a cohesive society is not one that involves prejudice, racism, and discrimination (Pedersen et al., 2005). Having said this, we also note that prejudice reduction is the primary responsibility of the wider society rather than the responsibility of Australian Muslims themselves.

Finally, we acknowledge the great importance of structural change with respect to problems concerning marginalised groups (see Donovan & Vlasis, 2006). However, we also believe that important issues such as these need to be tackled from a community level as well. There comes a time when individuals and their respective attitudes become a critical mass which can make major change. In our view, both top-down (e.g., structural change) and bottom-up (from the community) approaches are essential to interventions such as this. We hope that, in a

small way, our bottom-up, grass roots, intervention may be useful in learning how to carry out this process.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>Some anti-prejudice strategies need to be tailored to suit the context; for example, white privilege; contact. Conversely, other strategies should be used as a matter of course; e.g., the giving of accurate information; the use of respect (Pedersen & Dunn, 2009; Dunn & Pedersen, 2009). Thus, even though the present paper involves prejudice against Australian Muslims, it is useful to consider past research with other target groups, especially as there is so little Australian research examining anti-prejudice strategies.

**Author Notes**

We gratefully thank our research assistant Jarrod Turner for his administrative work. Finally, we note that a version of this paper was given at the Rights, Reconciliation, Respect and Responsibility Conference, Sydney, New South Wales, September (2008). It was also presented at the 11th Trans Tasman Community Psychology Conference, Perth, July (2009). Some ideas generated from the audiences were used in this paper.

**Address correspondence to**

Anne Pedersen  
Psychology Department  
Murdoch University  
Murdoch WA 6150 Australia  
Email: [A.Pedersen@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:A.Pedersen@murdoch.edu.au)

*Support for Mum When Dad Works Away*  
 Department for Communities  
 Perth, Western Australia: Author  
 Available from: <http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DFC/Resources/Parenting/>

Reviewed by  
 Dr Dawn Darlaston-Jones  
 The University of Notre Dame  
 Fremantle  
 Western Australia

I was pleased to receive the invitation to review this booklet because it is a topic I am personally interested in and affected by. My partner is currently part of the FIFO workforce based on a mine site in the North West. His current work context involves a regular roster of 2 weeks on and 1 week off which allows the opportunity for greater structure and planning of family functions and events. However, in the past he has also spent much of his working life in construction in South East Asia, resulting in long irregular periods of time away from the family. Both formats present opportunities and challenges for the FIFO worker and his or her family. Throughout this review I use the term FIFO to represent any form of working away from home – the more commonly understood form of ‘fly-in-fly-out’ in the mining sector; defence force personnel; truck drivers; and others whose occupations take them away from home on a regular or irregular basis for short or extended periods.

Having positioned myself in relation to the issue of FIFO work/lifestyle, my first impressions of the booklet were conflicted. On one hand I was pleased to see some recognition by the Department of the factors relating to FIFO work choices and yet at the same time I was disappointed that this opportunity to support families and to challenge the myths surrounding FIFO was lost. In addition, the booklet reinforces many socially constructed gendered norms associated with work life and parenting roles.

The title of the booklet is “*Support for mum when dad works away*” and this was the first instance of dissonance for me in that it is not only dads who work away from their families. There is a growing percentage of mums who work away from home both in the mining sector and in the defence force and other occupations yet this section of the FIFO community is rendered invisible by this title and the content of the booklet. There is some recognition of this fact on page 2 when the text box at the top of the page argues that the booklet “...provides families with practical support *when one parent works away*” (emphasis added). This is however, the only mention that it might in fact be mum who is away from the family and the very next line reverts to the stereotypical norm by saying “...where dad works away from home” consequently the underlying assumptions on which the booklet is based reinforce the position that it is dad who is absent and mum who holds the family together during this absence. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly this booklet is aimed at the traditional stay at home mum with pre or primary school aged children.

In terms of discourse the booklet makes for an interesting piece of analysis. The images and text all contribute to the notion that mum is the caring nurturing parent while dad earns the money; mum needs support while dad manages the lifestyle without difficulty; mum needs to create the structures and systems that support the family while dad is subject to these; and that that FIFO is a lifestyle choice that requires ‘managing’. All lifestyle choices require some degree of planning and structure in order for the participants to achieve individual and collective goals associated with the lifestyle choice that is made and yet FIFO is often singled out as being significantly different and requiring the assistance of professionals to help members of the community to ‘cope’. While I acknowledge that some people and some families do not cope with the absence of one partner there is no evidence that the lifestyle per se *causes*

significant trauma to those who embrace it. Furthermore, while the booklet does not explicitly refer to the mining sector there is an implicit assumption that it is mine workers to whom the text speaks and therefore the diversity of modes of working away is neglected. Many of the suggestions contained in the booklet are aimed at those workers who have a regular roster of home and away time. For example, encouraging children to count down the days until dad (sic) comes home. Consequently, those workers who have irregular periods of time away from home are not catered for because these suggestions are rendered meaningless due to the nature of their employment. It would be difficult for example, for defence force personnel to use this particular strategy because although the parent might be *scheduled* to return home on a particular date, national or international imperatives might cause a change of plans at a moment's notice. Similarly, those who travel for business reasons might have to respond to a crisis in another part of the company and plans change instantly.

To return to the booklet...it purports to offer *practical tips* and includes a few short quotes from FIFO families derived from a research project conducted by the Centre for Social Research at Murdoch University (2006). To some degree it succeeds in this by suggesting strategies such as 'accepting support from family and friends', 'counting down the days with children until dad (sic) returns', 'self care', and 'journaling' to record emotions and other responses in order to understand fluctuations. These are excellent ideas not only for FIFO families but for everyone. What I found missing from the booklet though was the actual advice on *how* to create the structures it was suggesting. For example, families are encouraged to plan their lifestyle by "...pictur[ing] what it will look like" (p.8) but if families have no experience of separation or of managing the reconnection then it is very difficult to 'picture' what the issues might be. Having more detailed quotes from the previous research and a range of different and *explicit* strategies and responses would provide a

starting point for families that might allow them to imagine the opportunities and challenges that they might experience.

In essence I found the booklet somewhat superficial but I realise that this could be a function of my experience with FIFO – perhaps as a new member of the FIFO community I would not recognise the gaps and omissions in this resource quite so readily. I also feel that the list of resources provided at the end of the booklet implies a negative response to the FIFO experience because they are all 'counselling style' support services (Relationships Australia, beyondblue, Kinway Red Cross etc). Therefore the assumption is that it is only this type of resource that is required by families involved in FIFO. The following page offers 'parenting support' resources which is excellent but again it reinforces the negative connotations of FIFO as well as the gendered parenting roles because it is accompanied by an image of a mum and young child; all families could benefit at various times from access support and advice on parenting and it is mums *and* dads who parent.

The booklet also includes a number of suggestions for sporting activities for children but these is limited to the boy/girl scouts and boys/girls brigade and the Department of Sport and Recreation. There is no mention of Community centres or the local Police and Citizens Club or other various activities that might be accessed through local government offices or libraries.

Perhaps one of my greatest criticisms though is that the only genuine mention that dads have in the booklet is towards the end (page 10), in fact it is a column included to one side of the first resource page and is titled '*Tips to keep dad connected while he is away*' with suggestions such as providing children with work related toys such as trucks ships and helicopters; communication via phone and e-mail; and planning fun activities from when dad returns. Not only do these suggestions fail to capture the breadth of occupations or roles they fail to recognise that dad might also struggle

with the separation from family and be challenged by how to reconnect on his return; and again it reinforces that it is only dad who works away!

What might have been more beneficial and what I would have liked the booklet to provide is advice for parents on how to connect with other FIFO parents, how to form a playgroup with other FIFO mums and dads, support strategies for families with older children, mechanisms for teen and pre-teen children to connect with peers, suggestions for the absent parent on how to reconnect with the family and opportunities to share the success stories and the positives aspects of FIFO instead of focussing on the challenges that this lifestyle can present. Perhaps the Department for Communities intends to develop these additional resources at some later date.....or perhaps it will be left to others to fill this void and to address the myths and stereotypes that are so entrenched in relation to FIFO.

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